# UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

Faculty of Arts and Humanities

School of Humanities


**The Signs and Codes of Petromodernity: Genres of the Oil Encounter in Selected American Fiction 1927-2010**

**by**


**Dan Carter**


Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

September 2021

# University of Southampton

## Abstract

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This thesis considers how a selection of twentieth century and contemporary American literary fiction contributes to a wider understanding of the relationship between discourses of masculinity, race, and class, and the boom-and-bust cycles of oil extraction, speculation, and abstraction. Through a critical engagement with the thought of Stephanie LeMenager, Fredric Jameson, Andreas Malm, and Imre Szeman, it traces the different ways in which the literary fictions of Teddy Wayne, Winifred Sanford, Attica Locke, Raymond Chandler, and Upton Sinclair make use of generic conventions and literary modes such as the *bildungsroman*, American regionalist literature, and detective fiction to articulate the gendered, racialized, and class dynamics of oil extraction, consumption, and abstraction at particular moments in time. While the thesis is organised chronologically, it also traces the uneven combination and recurrence of certain generic modes across the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in ways that seem to complicate broad attempts to align genre and literary history. The recurrence of such generic modes is significant, I suggest, because it can help to illuminate the ways in which the formal conventions of fiction mediate the temporal cycles of oil extraction and speculation in particular times and spaces, and the specific social antagonisms that they set in motion. By foregrounding the energy unconscious in twentieth- and early twenty-first century American culture, in other words, the generic conventions of these literary fictions encourage readers to identify and question the predominant cultural norms of space, energy and freedom that underpin the 'common sense' understanding of petromodernity, and the dominant idea that oil is an energy form we cannot do without.

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# Research Thesis: Declaration of Authorship

Print name: Dan Carter

Title of thesis: 'The Signs and Codes of Petromodernity: Genres of the Oil Encounter in Selected American Fiction 1927-2010'

I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
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**Introduction**

In Gustav Meyrink's 'Petroleum, Petroleum: A Prophesy' (1903), a disgruntled and embittered scientist, Dr Kunibald Jessegrim, executes his carefully constructed plan to bring chaos and destruction upon the nations of the earth by detonating dynamite charges placed within vast networks of oil wells deep below the seas of the Mexican Gulf. As the world's oceans begin to suffocate, a 'panic fall[s] over mankind' as it braces itself for the aftermath, because, as Jessegrim explains, 'rainfall will never occur in the future as water cannot evaporate anymore – in the best-case scenario, when it rains it will rain only oil'.[1] The dark, apocalyptic subject matter of this story is perhaps unsurprising given Meyrink's keen interest in occultism and turn-of-the-century-black magic.[2] What is of particular note, however, is that a work of fiction conceived at the dawn of a technological era largely facilitated by oil, articulates an anxiety about the potential consequences of the mismanagement of this vital resource. The wide-ranging themes contained within this compact narrative exemplify issues which the readings in each of the following chapters of this thesis also seek to address. Ecocide by oil pollution is a key aspect of Ross Macdonald's detective novel *Sleeping Beauty* (1973); the way in which Wall Street bankers wait eagerly to assess how Jessegrim's act may best be exploited for profitable gain mirrors aspects of *Kapitoil* (2010) by Teddy Wayne, a novel which explores oil's relationship with finance capital. In the moments before Jessegrim executes his diabolical plan, a sense of the gothic and macabre is evoked through his

[1] Gustav Meyrink, 'Petroleum, Petroleum: A Prophecy', in *The Opal and Other Stories* Trans. Maurice Raraty (Cambridge: Dedalus Ltd, 1994), p.43.

[2] For more on Meyrink's interests in alternative religions and magic see P.M. Mehtonen, 'The Gothic Avant-Garde: A Confusion of Tongues in Gustav Meyrink and Hugo Ball', in *Gothic Topographies* ed. by P.M. Mehtonen & Matti Savolainen (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2013).

meditations on brutal military leaders, such as Genghis Khan. As Jessegrim puts it, 'The ghosts of these dead will be with me', he felt - and a different entity entered his body - like lightning. […] The way that the dark forces of nature fall into the blood of man - deeply and quickly' (39). The associations between the tropes of gothic fiction and a nascent oil-powered modernity, appear also, albeit to differing degrees, in Upton Sinclair's *Oil!* (1927), Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* (1939), and selected short stories by Winifred Sanford in the early 1930s. Clearly, the subjects and themes raised by Meyrink in 1903 have endured and resonated in fictional oil narratives throughout the long twentieth century and beyond.

The spectre of petroleum has also cast a long shadow over the formative years of the twenty-first century. The extent to which oil extraction was a motivating factor in the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, for example, has been widely debated by critics and commentators on all sides of the political spectrum. The relationship between resource imperialism and the 'wars on terror' have also provided the justification for controversial processes such as fracking in the oil sands of Northern Alberta. Persuasive and forceful arguments have been made about how the Iraq invasion was the new century's first instance of resource imperialism, while also qualifying such claims by emphasising how oil was but one of many elements that came into the view of a hyper-neoliberal expansionist strategy. Regardless of how the available evidence is interpreted, what is certain is that terms such as 'resource wars', 'oil colonialism', 'petroleum imperialism', and 'blood for oil' have been constant refrains, echoing and reverberating across the decade.[3] Rather than military violence, the Deepwater Horizon disaster in 2010

[3] See, for example: Michael Klare, *Blood and Oil* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2004); Retort, *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in the New Age of War*, (London: Verso Books, 2005); George Caffentzis, *No Blood for Oil!: Energy, Class Struggle, and War, 1998-2016* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2017).

exemplified a catastrophic form of ecological violence with apocalyptic images of marine species poisoned, dying, and drenched in oil. Much has been said about the way in which the vivid spectacle of ecological violence and the readiness with which public anger is directed toward visible corporate figureheads such as Tony Hayward deflected scrutiny away from BP's safety record and, more broadly, the economic relations and modes of production and cycles of consumption which underpinned the very reason for the rig being present in such an unsuitable location in the first place.[4]

A detailed consideration of these recent events is beyond the scope of this thesis. I mention them here to emphasise a sense of the urgency and timeliness of oil as both an object and a problem for research in the literary humanities – an object and research problem which also informs the wider research context for this thesis.

The recent emergence of 'petroculture' as a term within literary and cultural studies has been seen as a response to oil's dramatic re-emergence within specific national and global social imaginaries.[5] Put broadly, petrocultural theory applies close-reading strategies and the careful analysis of rhetoric and discourse to a diverse range of cultural texts from documentary-cinema to oil company marketing and promotional materials, in order to analyse the subject of oil and to explore the multiple meanings of this substance as they shift across time and space. The field of enquiry is necessarily interdisciplinary and draws on methodological strategies and interpretive frameworks from the social sciences, environmental studies, geography, economics, and literary studies to name but a few. The question of oil's place in fiction was first given significant

[4] See Adrian Parr, *The Wrath of Capital: Neoliberalism and Climate Change Politics*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 130.

[5] Imre Szeman, 'Introduction to Focus: Petrofiction', *American Book Review*, Vol.33, No.3, (2012), p. 3.

critical consideration in Amitav Ghosh's now highly influential essay 'Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel' (1992) published in the wake of the first Gulf war of 1991. Ghosh raises a number of pertinent issues as he speculates on what he sees as a scarcity of novels which engage with the subject of oil. As he puts it:

> The Oil Encounter […] has produced scarcely a single work of note. […] Why, when there is so much to write about, has this encounter proved so imaginatively sterile? […] Very few people anywhere write about the Oil Encounter […]. Oil tends to trip fiction into incoherence.[6]

After identifying this general dearth of what he calls petrofiction, Ghosh focuses on writers from America, the Persian Gulf and Arabian Peninsula. For the few American authors who have addressed the subject of the oil encounter, Ghosh suggests that oil 'reeks of unavoidable overseas entanglements, a worrisome foreign dependency, economic uncertainty […] thousands of dead civilians and children, risky foreign enterprises' and is laced with 'more than just a whiff of that deep suspicion of the Arab and Muslim worlds that wafts through so much American intellectual life' (78). In short, Ghosh speculates that for authors in the United States such subject matter is both literally and figuratively crude. For novelists in the Gulf and Arabic-speaking regions, Ghosh claims that—due to the way sites of oil production tend to be located in areas quite removed from centres of literary production—the topic of oil is somehow avoided

[6] Amitav Ghosh, 'Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel', *The Imam and the Indian* (New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 2003), pp.75-89, (p. 78).

by authors in these more cosmopolitan centres who prefer to 'return to the familiar [thematic] territories staked out by their literary forbears' (141).

While Ghosh presents a timely, provocative, and, at times, persuasive account of the potential reasons underpinning the relative scarcity of 'petrofiction', a number of problems arise following closer inspection of his argument. The omission of any reference to the novel *Oil!* (1927) is particularly surprising. For one thing, the Pulitzer-prize winning author of this novel, Upton Sinclair, was an American writer of significant literary stature. Sinclair explores a wide range of aspects of the early American oil industry from the practices of drilling and extraction to the way in which oil magnates manoeuvred themselves into positions of power securing the ears of senators and politicians. Similarly, *Giant* (1952), a novel that registers the rise of Texan oil speculation by another Pulitzer-prize winning author, Edna Ferber, seems conspicuous by its absence from Ghosh's essay. Ghosh's argument is undoubtedly provocative, but the narrowness of his prescriptive account draws him to make certain broad and sweeping claims which have not stood up to closer scrutiny. Bold assertions such as the claim that the novel, as a literary form, is in some way unable to represent oil due to a supposed predilection for 'luxuriating in a sense of place' or because, in some loosely defined way, the subject matter itself 'trips fiction into incoherence', present far too many opportunities for critics and commentators to provide ample evidence to the contrary (78). To take one such example, Ghosh's claims could be seen as running counter to Mikhail Bakhtin's influential understanding of the potentiality of the novel. For Bakhtin, the novel, as literary form can, as a matter of principle, transmit and represent any kind of discourse.[7]

[7] For Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia and double-voiced discoursed see Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Discourse and the Novel', *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Trans. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 259-422.

Moreover, for Ghosh, the idea of an oil encounter is restricted to a focus on an intercultural encounter between Americans and Arabs from oil-producing countries that also establishes a dichotomy, or, put slightly differently, an asymmetrical power relationship in which East meets West over oil.

A rethinking of this somewhat inadequate definition of the oil encounter and of the literary texts it excludes from its purview is clearly overdue. Such a rethinking would strive to accommodate the vastly different global perspectives, meanings and experiences of oil, in such a way that allows new lines of enquiry to emerge. In the years since Ghosh's now seminal essay, and particularly within the last decade, scholars, critics, and commentators within the burgeoning interdisciplinary field of the Energy Humanities have offered more fluid and porous definitions of the oil encounter, definitions which certainly acknowledge oil as a material substance that produces energy, but also the various stages of production, trade and use of oil, the global circulation of goods and commodities which would not be circulating *without* oil. Definitions which incorporate concerns over environmental despoliation and include the way oil has underpinned resource imperialism and shifts in the technologies of global capitalism as well as the various social conflicts surrounding those processes, even when the substance itself appears to be absent.[8]

If Ghosh's concern was with what he perceived to be the dearth of American novelists willing, or indeed able, to explore the oil encounter within narrative fiction,

[8] In 2014 Ghosh wrote in a blog entry on his website how he had been entirely unaware of the impact his article had made until this was pointed out to him by Stephanie LeMenager, a prominent scholar in the field of petrocultures: 'I learnt from Stephanie, to my very great surprise, that a review I had written in 1992 [...] has become a seminal text in a field that is expanding rapidly in the US and Canada [...]. I had no idea that *Petrofiction* had had this catalytic effect'. Amitav Ghosh, 'Petrofiction and Petroculture' (2014) <http://amitavghosh.com/blog/?p=6441> [Accessed online November 18th, 2018].

one might suggest a parallel scarcity of the voices of literary critics and academics either in support of or against Ghosh's strident thesis. Indeed, while Ghosh's essay is rightly regarded as something of an *ur*-text within the field of petrocultural studies, it is perhaps striking that roughly two decades passed between its initial publication and the plethora of responses it went on to generate. While the discussion of oil in fiction was, of course, not entirely absent from scholarly attention, such analyses were typically presented as discrete areas of focus within broader frameworks of more established schools of literary theory such as postcolonial studies and eco-criticism.

Efforts to establish petro-cultural theory as a multidisciplinary field of studies within the field of arts, humanities, and the social sciences, gathered apace in 2012, following the publication of both a special issue of *Journal of American Studies*, and *American Book Review*.[9] Writing as the guest editors of the former volume, Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden acknowledge the body of scholarly work since the turn of the millennium which has taken oil directly as its point of focus. And yet, while these texts may be 'insightful and useful' to a degree, Barrett and Worden suggest that this 'flood of books on topics such as the energy crisis, the Iraq War, and global warming [...] make no effort to deal with the larger cultural or ideological role that oil plays in the US [...] [and] do little to address the complicated political and epistemological problems posed by petro-capitalism'.[10] The idea of 'oil cultures' is proposed as a way to describe 'the broad field of cultural representations and symbolic forms that have taken shape around the fugacious material of oil in the 150 years since the inception of the US petroleum industry' (269). The collection of critical pieces in the *American Book Review* sought to

[9] *American Book Review*, Vol. 33, No.3 (2012).
[10] Ross Barrett, Daniel Worden, "Oil Culture: Guest Editors' Introduction", *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 46, Special Issue 02 (2012), pp. 269 - 272, (p. 270).

extend and develop the notion of 'oil cultures' with a specific focus on literary and narrative fiction. Writing in the introductory essay, Imre Szeman cited a shift in the public's perception of oil within the contemporary moment, and asserted that 'we are no longer as blind as we once may have been to the simple fact that oil matters […] a great deal […] [and] at long last, […] has become a conscious part of our social imaginaries'.[11] Szeman identifies how oil, as a crucial element underpinning the reproduction of modern life, has been taken for granted. It is precisely because the supply of oil has been taken for granted that its infrastructural significance has become repressed as part of our cultural unconscious. It is fiction, Szeman suggests, which might provide a resource both for better understanding the fetish character of oil as commodity and as a means 'to narrate points of encounter between societies and individuals produced by the trade of desirable commodities' (3).

By 2018, the collection of essays and critical reviews in *Oil Culture* (2014), *Energy Humanities* (2017), and *Fueling Culture* (2017) had made vital additions to this emergent field. Extending and developing ideas first explored in a collection of short essays in a special issue of *PMLA*, *Fueling Culture* is organised, broadly, around three areas of enquiry: the relations between a dominant energy source and a cultural text from a specific historical moment. In the issue of *PMLA*, these articles considered tallow as a light source in Shakespeare, and charcoal as a source of heat for Milton and how this important fuel was given literary representation in *Paradise Lost.*

This recent scholarship in the field of energy humanities emphasises the efficacy of a materialist critique as a way to direct attention towards what Brent Ryan Bellamy

[11] Imre Szeman, 'Introduction to Focus: Petrofiction', *American Book Review*, Vol. 33, No.3 (2012), p. 3.

and Jeff Diamanti have called the 'twin fields of social anguish that characterize the present: environmental catastrophe and capitalist crisis'.[12] For these 'twin fields' are, at present, inextricably conjoined and should not, and in a sense cannot, be thought of as independent of one another. The sociologist John Bellamy Foster has of course already established a connection between the history of the modern world economy and world ecology in his rethinking of Marx's idea of a metabolic rift created by the forces of capitalist modernity. [13] Understanding the implications of arguments such as these is important, Bellamy and Diamanti suggest, because it exposes the fragility of contemporary arguments which posit 'bad consumer habits' as the underlying cause of a looming global ecological disaster while it simultaneously gives the lie to the 'vague promise of a clean transition to a renewable economy' advocated by techno-utopians as a solution to the errant behaviours of energy consumers (xi, xxxii). Far from an inherent disposition for recycling or the driving of electric cars as explanations for the increasingly precarious condition of global ecosystems, Bellamy and Diamanti reflect on the historical trajectory of industrial capitalism and how this has been coterminous with environmental pollution. As they write, 'The very fabric of today's climate crisis is knit from the exhaust of intensive and extensive waves of capital accumulation. […]. [T]he environmental problem of energy is and always has been deeply bound to the material origins of the commodity form' (p.x).

[12] Brent Ryan Bellamy, Jeff Diamanti, 'Materialism and the Critique of Energy', in *Mediations*, Vol.31, No.2, (2018), ix - xxxvii, (p.xxxi).

[13] John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 2000).

The importance of historicising and paying close attention to the way in which moments of crisis and transformation in the longer cycles of capital accumulation and energy extraction, are registered in literary texts is a concern that underpins the discussions in each of the following chapters of this thesis. To develop this approach, I draw on the geographer Andreas Malm's account of how fossil energy provided the technological conditions of possibility for long-wave cycles of capital accumulation throughout much of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In a recent article published in the same edition of *Mediations,* Malm expands and develops a number of ideas that he previously presented in his historical materialist analysis of fossil capital. In this later article, Malm draws on Nikolai Kondratieff's theory of long-wave capitalist expansion in order to consider what this model of economic history might reveal when used as a lens through which to observe the development of the fossil-fuel economy. Taking the period between 1780 and 2008, Malm identifies five 'long waves' in which a distinctive 'constellation of technologies' can be identified.[14] For example, the first wave includes the early decades of industrial development when water power was harnessed to mechanise manufacturing processes, particularly cotton and iron. Crucially, however, each wave must contend with a falling rate of profit or contraction before it gives rise to a fresh wave that is propelled upwards – flattening out the contradictions and internal impasses which caused the near collapse of its predecessor. It is steam-power which drives the second wave upwards and, as it does so, the automation of labour processes serve to subdue and nullify certain restrictions placed on capitalist growth which had proven so fatal for the previous wave. In this instance 'the combativeness of key

[14] Andreas Malm, 'Long Waves of Fossil Development: Periodizing Energy and Capital', *Mediations*, Vol.31, No. 2 (2018) pp. 17-40 (p. 19).

segments of the British working-class' identified by Malm as, 'cotton-spinners, handloom-weavers, machine-makers, wool-combers' and whose confidence relative to the capitalist class had occurred through successes in the formation of labour unions, were, with the upsurge of the second, steam-powered economic wave, subject to an entirely new mode of nullification of these hard-won rights in the form of mechanised automation (29). Malm goes on to explore how this pattern is made visible in the later wave transitions and emphasises how, at each juncture, a fresh wave encompasses not only an assault on working-class labour, but also the discharge of hitherto unprecedented levels of CO2 emissions. Malm uses the striking image of a pair of bellows to illustrate this latter point: 'If one of the handles is the ceaseless growth that defines capitalism, the other is made up of coal and oil and gas; out of the nozzle comes a blast of CO2 that fans the flames of the fire of global warming. The more growth you have, the more forceful the push will be, and the stronger the blast' (17). Malm briefly explores a selection of recent scholarly works within this field and exposes weaknesses in arguments that cite advancements in technology as the primary instigators of new wave formations (such as that of Carlota Perez), related predictions by John A. Matthews, which consider how a sixth wave transition might be propelled by venture capitalists and hedge-fund investors keen to exploit the opportunities promised by a renewable energy revolution. Although mindful of capitalism's inherent capacity to survive through adaptation and evolution, Malm concludes his account with the stark and uncompromising summary that reminds us that energy cycles are bound up with capital's logic of accumulation. While investment in renewable energy may be a preferable alternative to fossil fuels, since it cannot deliver the same profit margins as fossil energy, it seems unlikely from the standpoint of capital that there will be a green

energy cycle.[15] Malm's account has important implications for predominant understandings and periodization of modern history and recalls the terms of Imre Szeman's argument that we consider 'the history of capital not exclusively in geopolitical terms, but in terms of the forms of energy available to it at any given moment'.[16] From this perspective, historical epochs conventionally described as the age of 'British Imperialism' or 'U.S Transnationalism', for example, might be re-named in order to account for the inextricable role played by the primary fuel source upon which these periods of accumulation depended. As Szeman writes, 'Steam capitalism in 1765 creates the conditions for the first great subsumption of agricultural labor [*sic*] into urban factories (a process of proletarianization that is only now coming to a completion), followed by the advent of oil capitalism in 1859 (with its discovery in Titusville, Pennsylvania), which enabled powerful and forceful new modalities of capitalist reproduction and expansion (p. 806).

By bringing energy sources to the foreground of modern world economic history, the collection of essays assembled in *Fueling Culture* also invites us to consider how we might reimagine particular epochs in history when we approach them from the perspective of energy. As Jennifer Wenzel asks, in her introduction to the collection:

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[15] In a related discussion, Tim Kaposy draws on analytic models formulated by the French historian Fernand Braudel in order to suggest that histories of oil might be written with a focus on their "longue durées". The advantages for such an approach is that it would circumvent the contemporary tendency to explain oil's histories in ways which limit the complexities of these histories and even 'elides knowledge that directly opposes the oil industry'. Kaposy writes how' 'the historian faces opposition made up of marketing firms, public relations officers, business operatives, and politicos who seek to occlude the realities of the oil industry'. See, Tim Kaposy, 'Petroleum's Longue Durée: Writing Oil's Temporalities into History', in *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture* ed. Sheena Wilson, Adam Carlson, Imre Szeman (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2017), pp. 389-405, (p. 392).

[16] Imre Szeman, 'System Failure: Oil, Futurity, and the Anticipation of Disaster', Imre Szeman, "System Failure: Oil, Futurity, and the Anticipation of Disaster," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol.106, No.4 (2007) pp. 805-823, (p. 815).

what happens to previous understandings of how history works when questions of energy become central […]?'.[17] Finally, the collection is concerned to explore how moments of historical transition might work in tandem or counter to, transitions in dominant modes of energy. Such transitional phases are not easy to map with certainty as Wenzel explains when noting an 'untidiness and unevenness inherent to a history according to energy. [...] [T]he oil era is also the coal era and, for millions around the globe, also the era of dung, wood, and charcoal [...]' (7). The work of Wenzel, and other petrocultural theorists and commentators, encourages us to consider how the access to particular sources of energy at particular moments across history has served to shape the form and direct the trajectory of those moments.

In structural terms, the chapters that form this thesis are organised chronologically, even though the texts themselves frustrate attempts to make broad generalisations about periodisation, genre, and literary form. I have found Stephanie LeMenager's influential discussion of petromodernity, or 'modern life based in the cheap energy systems made possible by oil',[18] useful as a starting point for understanding how modern literary culture makes sense of the importance of oil and petrocultures in the cultural and social transition to what is often referred to as the American Century. But I also push LeMenager's discussion further by asking how and why certain literary modes appear, disappear, and reappear at different points in this long and uneven cycle of extraction and accumulation. Part of this analysis also entails a consideration of how a gendered discourse of oil masculinity is mobilised and

[17] Jennifer Wenzel, 'Introduction', in *Fueling Cultures 101 Words for Energy and Environment* ed. by Imre Szeman, Jennifer Wenzel, Patricia Yaeger (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2017), pp.1-16, (p.7).
[18] Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) p.67, 102.

deconstructed across the range of literary texts presented in the thesis. By examining the construction and deconstruction of such masculine figures, I consider how the speculation on oil as both a resource and a commodity is registered according to a patriarchal logic that is often also self-defeating.

By tracing the appearance, disappearance, and reappearance of particular literary modes and tropes, this thesis looks specifically at how American literary fiction made intelligible the uneven and overlapping cycles of fossil energy extraction in particular zones of resource extraction across the American century. Just as the development of petro-capitalist modernity occurs in very particular ways, particular spaces, and at particular moments, so the literary modes that writers have drawn on to register the material culture of oil emerges out of these specific conditions, and also speaks to them in different ways. Consider Upton Sinclair's *bildungsroman*, *Oil!*, set in California, for example. In the early twentieth-century world of this novel, a new industrial bourgeoisie is exploiting fossil energy at this historical moment, but also thinking about the *bildungsroman* raises questions about that place and time. What do the protagonist and by association the readers of this novel learn about the social meaning of oil? And to what extent does this *bildungsroman* resolve the social antagonisms that the oil boom inaugurates? It is precisely the questions raised by literary form as it relates to a specific moment in the evolution of petroleum's *longue durée* that provides an overarching frame of reference for each of the chapters that follow. Why, for instance, is Literary Regionalism useful for thinking about the risks of energy extraction, as well as the possibilities of accumulation through 'striking it lucky'? Why is this particular literary mode a fruitful way to think about the oil boom in rural Texas in the 1920s and 1930s? Why is detective fiction particularly productive for

thinking about the gendered, racial and ecological dimensions of oil extraction in post-war America? Why is the outmoded genre of the *bildungsroman* recycled in the early twenty-first century to think about the relationship between oil extraction, energy futures markets, and global finance capitalism? To address such questions, I have sought to consider how specific literary forms register the waves and cycles that constitute the historical development of American petromodernity, while also acknowledging that some of these novels demand a revaluation of conventional literary periodization to account for the hitherto largely absent role played by energy 'as an *explicit* object in social life and thus a specific topic in and for cultural production'. [19] LeMenager's term petromodernity is valuable because it provides a shorthand term which expresses not only the physical petroleum infrastructures within which modern life in the economically-developed world is lived and experienced, but also gestures toward the cultural practices and value systems which arise from within them. In this respect, it is useful to think of the way in which modernity is so reliant on the consumption of petroleum products and its access to 'cheap energy systems' as akin to the kinds of normative processes Gramsci called the 'common sense'. Here, it is well to recall Jason Moore's point in *Capitalism and the Web of Life* (2015) that the development of capitalist modernity rests on a Cartesian view of nature as a disposable resource that can be exploited in the pursuit of cheap food and cheap energy (as well as cheap labour).[20] But how exactly has such a view come to be normalised? David Harvey provides one possible answer to this question in his account of how the idea of

[19] Graeme Macdonald, 'Research Note: The Resources of Fiction', *Reviews in Cultural Theory*, Vol.4, No.2 (2014), 1-24 (6-7).
[20] Jason Moore, *Capitalism and the Web of Life* (London: Verso, 2015).

'common sense' is 'constructed out of long-standing practices of cultural socialization often rooted deep in regional or national traditions.'[21] Because conceptions of a so-called 'good life' in the economically-developed world is one that is lived within petroleum infrastructures and characterised by elements such as suburban living, urban shopping, automobility, and commodity consumption, to name but a few, it is possible to suggest that the profligate use of oil is, in a sense, part of the shared 'common sense' of petromodernity. Yet, as Harvey explains, these normalised social and cultural practices can serve as a smokescreen because the 'common sense can be profoundly misleading, obfuscating or disguise real problems under cultural prejudices' (39). In relation to oil, these 'real problems' might include pollution, or labour and material relations that centre on class inequality or racial divisions**.** Because oil is so deeply embedded within the everyday reproduction of modern life, it has been and still is taken for granted. And it is precisely because the supply of oil has been taken for granted that its infrastructural significance has become repressed as part of our cultural unconscious. What is at stake in any project which seeks to understand the social relations and circuits of capital and power in which oil is embroiled is to first understand the need to bring oil back into social consciousness so that we might better grasp both its importance and its finitude. By using the term 'petro-fetishism' as a heuristic term that describes the modes and techniques by which the common-sense idea of cheap fossil energy becomes normalised, the following chapters track the various rhetorical codes, generic conventions, and narrative techniques that mediate the appearance and disappearance of oil in these selected American literary fictions. At stake in what I am

[21] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), (p.39).

provisionally calling petro-fetishism is a consideration of the limitations as well as the benefits of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism for reading oil's multiple modes of appearance in the selected American fiction of authors such as Upton Sinclair, Winifred Sanford, Raymond Chandler, Attica Locke, Ross Macdonald, and Teddy Wayne. How might a critical analysis of petro-fetishism in American literary fiction help to make sense of the complex and fragmented processes of dispossession, extraction, exploitation, refinement, accumulation, and speculation that underpin the globalizing culture of petromodernity? And what other ways of imagining petromodernity does twentieth-century and contemporary American fiction offer its readers?

It is well established in the energy humanities that oil has saturated modern life, as Peter Hitchcock puts it, and that it constitutes a pervasive presence within late capitalist modernity; the claim that oil appears as if it has slipped from view, both materially and conceptually, is also a constant refrain within petrocultural studies.[22] Yet a detailed consideration of the ways in which petro-fetishism has been mediated and challenged in narrative fiction has yet to be written. Malm does not use the phrase specifically, but he evokes Marxist ideas of fetishism when he describes the fossil economy as possessing 'the character of a totality'; for Malm, oil has the power to structure modern life in such a way that makes it appear as monolithic and immutable (21). In the chapters that follow, I make the case that a careful assessment of the rhetorical and generic strategies that narrative fiction has at its disposal can contribute to the demystification of fetishism, which frames our understanding of the role oil plays in modern life. By tracing the different ways in which the signs and codes of

[22] Peter Hitchcock, 'Oil in an American Imaginary', *New Formations*, Issue 69, (2010), pp.81-97.

petromodernity are registered in novels and short stories by Teddy Wayne, Winifred Sanford, Attica Locke, Upton Sinclair, Raymond Chandler, and Ross Macdonald, the thesis considers how literary fiction contributes to a wider public understanding of the relationship between oil and life in modern American capitalist society. In doing so, it also suggests that fiction can encourage readers to question the predominant cultural norms of space, energy and freedom that underpin the 'common sense' of petromodernity: that oil is an energy form we cannot do without and yet must**.**

The project seeks to address the following questions: What generic codes and narrative devices have American novelists mobilised to evoke the world of petro-modernity? How has American fiction imagined the transformation of oil from a viscous substance with specific material properties into an abstract form of value that is exchanged in modern economies? In what ways has narrative fiction made use of the metonymic logic of the fetish to register the oil economy? How do such literary techniques help to make sense of the relation between the fetishism of oil as a commodity and the logic of capitalist abstraction, which effaces the specific conditions and processes of oil extraction in America? And how might the symbolic forms of twentieth-century American fiction defamiliarize the common-sense understanding of petromodernity in ways that help to elucidate what Patricia Yaeger has called the energy unconscious? By approaching questions such as these with reference to specific American literary genres of modernity such as the detective novel and the *Bildungsroman*, the following chapters discuss the ways twentieth century and contemporary American literary fiction can help us to think critically about the way oil has been abstracted and rendered invisible within wider global cultures of petromodernity.

**1.1 Petro-Fetishism and the Common-Sense of Crude Realism.**

Readers of *Capital* will recall the critical strategy Marx deploys in order to grasp both the scale and complex dynamics of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism. Marx began by examining the transformation of useful objects into commodities and how the assessment of value in a commodity becomes more complex following its entrance into the capitalist marketplace. Marx claims that this is due to the way in which 'the commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material […] relations arising out of this'.[23] There is, then, a scission between the use-value of a commodity and the exchange-value imposed upon that commodity by the market. One consequence of the abstraction of a commodity's exchange value from the material circumstances of its production is that commodities become imbued with a 'phantom' quality, which effaces the circumstances of that commodity's creation. The material history of the commodity's production and distribution becomes obfuscated, leaving the buyer with little more than a price tag to inform their choice. Marx's key assertion is that this 'fetishism', which 'attaches itself to the products of labour', involves a supplanting of the 'social relations between men' with the 'fantastic form of a relation between things' (168). The end result of this process, Marx suggests, sees a commodity transformed 'into social hieroglyph' which a buyer must then, somehow, decipher in an attempt to ascertain its true value (169). The cultural historian Derek Sawyer explains how the 'universalisation of the historical' arises from such fetishistic confusion:

[23] Karl Marx, *Capital Vol.1* trans. Samuel Moore & Edward Aveling, (London: Penguin Classics, 1990), p. 165.

> To comprehend social properties of objects as deriving from their material attributes is at the same time implicitly to universalise them. Thus, value […] becomes a property products' possess transhistorically, irrespective of their particular modes of production. […] Capitalist conditions are thereby covertly taken as premises of any and all human sociation.[24]

In short, fetishism, according to Marx, centres on an inversion whereby the social is perceived as material and the historically-dependent is perceived as universal and immutable. Marx's critique is particularly relevant when considered in relation to oil and fossil energy more generally because fossil energy is also subjected to powerful forms of fetishism, abstraction, and reification, as I go on to explain.

Marx's theory presents a valuable critical resource for examining the multiple fetishized forms of petromodernity. Until recently, the implications of Marx's theory for understanding the economic and ecological implications of fossil capitalism have not been fully explored or understood. The work of petrocultural theorists, such as Andreas Malm, Jeff Diamanti, and Jack Kinder for example, have gone some way towards addressing this lacuna in Marxist political economy. Crucially, these thinkers have emphasised the differences between oil as abstract exchange value and oil as a natural material substance. In a related discussion, Matthew Huber has used the term oil fetishism as a way of explaining how the socio-ecological implications of the chemical processes which occur in refineries on the global periphery are obscured by the oil industry and petrocultures. As Huber explains:

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[24] Derek Sawyer, *The Violence of Abstraction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publications, 1987), p. 91.

> Refineries are an often invisible but massively consequential node of socioecological transformation and waste production. Refining inevitably leads to leaks, spills, and the flaring of greenhouse gases and other air pollutants. […] The products and wastes of the refinery include known carcinogenics such as benzene and arsenic that lead to […] chronic lung disease, psychosis, and elevated cancer risks amongst workers and nearby communities.[25]

It is partly because these sites of pollution and contamination are located far away from metropolitan centres where oil use is high, as well as the way these ecological and social relations are effaced yet further through sophisticated PR campaigns known as 'greenwashing', that Huber's term oil-fetishism seems particularly apt.[26] The 'magical' appearance of refined oil in petrol pumps or as a congealed polymer in many everyday objects is not only abstracted from the geographical and historical site of its extraction and refinement; it also abstracted from the extractive labour process itself and the often-damaging ecological effects of that process.

It is important to note the limitations of any project which takes as its objective the task of demystifying hitherto reified elements of the fossil fuel economy. Exposing the acts of environmental violence at sites of extraction which, as Huber notes, are

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[25] Matthew Huber, 'Refined Politics: Petroleum Products, Neoliberalism, and the Ecology of Entrepreneurial Life', *Journal of American Studies,* 46:2, (2012) pp. 295-312, p.297.

[26] See Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs The Climate*, (London: Allen Lane, 2014). Klein is particularly critical of elite figures such as Bill Gates and Richard Branson who, despite repeated declarations of their roles as global innovators of new, clean alternatives to carbon energy somehow always seem to revert back to the more familiar benefits provided by fossil fuels: 'The idea that only capitalism can save the world from a crisis it created is no longer an abstract theory; it's a hypothesis that has been tested in the real world. We can now take a hard look at the results [...] at the billionaires who were going to invent a new form of enlightened capitalism but decided, on second thoughts, that the old one was just too profitable to surrender'.

conveniently shielded from wider public scrutiny by dint of their, often remote, peripheral geographic locations, is, of course, vital and increasingly important at a time when powerful energy corporations engage in ever more sophisticated campaigns of greenwashing.[27] Yet, as Jeff Diamanti has noted in relation to two recent examples of both the BP Deepwater Horizon disaster and the WikiLeaks affair, the act of exposing a series of financially or ethically corrupted processes is unlikely to provide the motivation for the widespread politicisation or mobilization of oppositional forces. As Diamanti writes, 'making visible the economic and ecological contents of infrastructure, however indispensable a practice, does not necessarily generate a political counterforce, precisely because the economic and ecological contradictions of a world formed by fossil fuels are intimately bound together'.[28]

The social geographer Michael Watts has also used the term 'oil-fetishism' in an insightful assessment of the Niger Delta region in Nigeria. In addressing the question 'why is oil so frequently the epicentre of violence?' Watts begins his analysis by drawing

[27] While it is not difficult to understand why the oil industry would be keen to keep images of pollution and toxic poisoning away from the public's gaze, Sonia Shah explains the extent to which secrecy and opacity can accurately be regarded as primary defining characteristics across a range of its practices. A striking example relates to the way the oil industry is not compelled by legislation to disclose publicly their geological data regarding the condition and capacity of remaining global oil reserves. As she writes, 'their future livelihoods depend on the obscurity of the coming peak. If the industry wanted to stay in business for another century and beyond, it would do well not to let on that the world's favourite fuel is anything less than perpetually abundant'. Control over geological data is one strategy Shah identifies which assists in keeping this scenario delayed for as long as possible: 'every year the industry releases new, ever-larger estimates of their reserves, providing an illusion of growth. The bigger numbers do not result from discoveries of new oil, but from the fact that oilfields already found actually hold a bit more oil than the company had initially reported'. The language used in Shah's explanation of these practices resonates clearly with Marx's own descriptions of the fetish: the 'illusion of growth' manipulated data creates in order to ensure the 'obscurity of the coming peak' are strategies which divert attention away from imagining anything but the permanence of petromodernity.
Sonia Shah, *Crude, The Story of Oil*, (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), (p137/139).

[28] Jeff Diamanti, 'Energyscapes, Architecture, and the Expanded Field of Postindustrial Philosophy', *Postmodern Culture*, Vol.26, No.2 (2016) [online].

on Marx's idea of commodity fetishism in relation to oil prices.[29] As he writes, '[…] the pricing of oil is mysterious and bewildering, part of a world of appearances that obscures the operations of the system of which oil is part' (84). Watts goes on to offer a detailed analysis of the internecine conflicts between insurgent groups, oil company and state military security forces in the Delta region. Fetishism thus provides a way for Watts to articulate connections between the predominant market understanding of oil as exchange value or price, and the violence of the oil encounter in the Niger Delta. Yet a detailed consideration of the rhetorical operations of oil fetishism and its significance for understanding the cultures of capitalist modernity lies beyond the scope of Watts' argument.

Rather than focusing on these contested sites of extraction and refinement in the contexts of the Niger Delta, Iraq, or the Gulf states, the chapters that follow assess how this 'mysterious and bewildering […] world of appearances' extends not only beyond considerations of price, but can also be seen to exist in the national-economic space in which oil and petroleum products have been consumed on an unprecedented scale: the United States. In my argument, the form and structure of twentieth and twenty-first-century American fiction can help to make oil intelligible in ways that augment existing attempts to historicise America's oil economy. We have already seen how Huber uses the term 'oil-fetishism' in the context of refineries and their socio-ecological impacts. In his article 'Oil, Life, and the Fetishism of Geopolitics', Huber also usefully traces the historical development of petro-capitalist modernity in America. 'It is necessary', he

[29] Michael Watts, 'Oil Development and the Politics of the Bottom Billion', *Macalester International*, Vol.24. No.11 (2009) pp.79-130 p.84 <*digitalcommons.macalester.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1233.*> [Accessed online December 1st 2015].

says, to 'reveal the historical contexts and power relations that produce oil as a seemingly powerful thing-in-itself' (36). Huber goes on to offer a whirlwind exposition of selected moments in twentieth-century American history, which, he argues, proved significant in producing 'the *imaginar*y of oil as a powerful thing' (35). The first of these historical stages is the Roosevelt Administration's restructuring of the nation's economy under the New Deal policy where the 'capital-labour accord' increased and stabilised wages. The effects of this economic strategy meant that a 'widening […] spectrum of the white working class in the United States […] could actually afford homes, cars, and countless other things dependent upon petroleum products' (40). Huber identifies this moment as a transitional phase, which saw the creation of a normative model characterised by 'a profligate standard of living based around massive material and energy consumption and the production of waste' (43).

Huber's account of some of the ways oil became—what I will be calling with reference to both Gramsci and LeMenager's terms—the 'common sense' of American petromodernity, is valuable and, in part, provides useful historical context for some of my own discussions. Yet, there are some notable omissions from his truncated historical overview. For example, the perception of oil as fetishized and a 'powerful thing-in-itself' has a longer tradition in the United States than the late 1920s where Huber begins his analysis. For example, Rochelle Raineri Zuck has written of the way spiritualists and practitioners of so-called psychometry were regarded as credible contributors to early oil-field exploration, a fact that attests to the magical aura afforded to oil from its early beginnings in the mid-nineteenth century. More significantly, Zuck writes of how this

'practical spiritualism, which took mediums and spirits out of the parlour.[30] This marketing was achieved in large part through the mobilisation of these figures to establish 'a rhetoric of correspondence between the physical and spiritual worlds that allowed the excitement and pursuant dangers of drilling and speculation to be recast in terms of "discovery" and divine revelation, languages of frontier exploration that resonated with the […] American national psyche' (336). These mythologies of the oilfield are explored in several of the short stories from the Texan writer Winifred Sanford, whose work I go on to discuss in chapter two. Figures such as the oil-field spiritualists Zuck describes—and who might accurately be described as agents of petro-fetishism—are also present in Upton Sinclair's *Oil!* (1928). In Sinclair's novel, a powerful oil tycoon lives out his final years in the company of a self-appointed clairvoyant, only for the tycoon's son to discover that much of his promised inheritance had been surprisingly, and with more than an air of suspicion, bequeathed to that clairvoyant following his father's death. Such references to the supernatural are significant because they draw attention to the ways in which the rhetoric of the oil economy also depends on otherworldly forms of knowledge to shore up the uncertainty and risk associated with financial speculation on the future of oil.

Huber concludes his short historical account at the beginning of the 1980s when, 'the forces of neoliberal deregulation and financialization were set free in the energy sector' (43). Curiously, he does not reflect on how the term oil-fetishism might be used to describe certain consequences of these processes (43). The introduction of crude oil futures trading on the New York Mercantile Exchange in 1983 in effect created two

[30] Rochelle Raineri Zuck, 'The Wizard of Oil: Abraham James, the Harmonial Wells, and the Psychometric History of the Oil Industry', *Journal of American Studies*, Vol.46, No.2 (2012), 313-336, (p.335).

separate, although co-dependent, oil markets. The traditional market continued trading physical barrels of oil, while the newer marketplace centred on the trade of so-called 'paper barrels', speculative claims to future production.[31] The separation between the price of oil and its material, physical form, I would suggest, is a significant factor in the cultivation of mystery surrounding the 'effects and means of oil' that I am calling petro-fetishism. Unseen factors which lie behind the price of oil as it flows, digitally, through the sophisticated technologies of futures traders include violence and civil unrest at peripheral sites of extraction and refinement, as I go on to discuss in my analysis of Teddy Wayne's novel *Kapitoil* (2009). The digital capital accumulated in this novel, and the means by which it is accumulated is of course fictional, but it also articulates significant connections between oil extraction, political violence, and contemporary forms of financial speculation.[32]

One of the problems with the term oil-fetishism is that it has been used to describe oil's occlusion and abstraction within a narrow set of parameters. As we have seen, in social geography, the use of this term has been largely limited to a consideration of extraction and accumulation processes in the periphery of the contemporary world economic system. While it is important that these aspects are understood and analysed, the term petro-fetishism offers a more precise term for describing the challenge of grasping the complex material and environmental history of oil that is refined and

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[31] Lisa Margonelli, *Oil on the Brain: Petroleum's Long, Strange Trip to Your Tank* (New York: Broadway Books, 2007), p. 123.

[32] An interesting comparison could be made between *Kapitoil* and *A Young Man's Guide to Late Capitalism* (2011), Peter Mountford's debut novel published shortly after Wayne's. Employed by a powerful New York-based hedge fund, Mountford's protagonist is dispatched to Bolivia ahead of the election of Evo Morales in 2005 and is tasked with acquiring insider information on the new president's plans for nationalisation of the domestic oil industry. Peter Mountford, *A Young Man's Guide to Late Capitalism* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing, 2011).

abstracted into different commodity forms, such as petrol, in the literary culture of the United States. A consideration of petro-fetishism can also help to shed light on the ways in which our use and dependence on oil or fossil energy is repressed in modern capitalist culture, as the next section tries to explain.

**1.2 The Genres of Petro-Fetishism.**

By examining the narrative conventions and rhetorical codes in selected twentieth-century American fiction, then, this thesis aims to explore how genre mediates different aspects of petromodernity. More specifically, I consider how reading different fictional genres through the lens of the energy unconscious might help to defamiliarize and demystify the rhetoric of petro-fetishism that aids and abets common-sense assumptions about petromodernity. How, for example, does Upton Sinclair's recycling of the *bildungsroman* and the gothic in *Oil!* defamiliarize emerging cultures of automobility? In what ways does the use of regionalism in Sanford's short fiction work to illuminate the connections between the vicissitudes of oil extraction, white American masculinity, and the dynamics of capital accumulation and dispossession in the oil fields of Texas? What do post-war American narratives of detection, such as Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, Ross MacDonald's *Sleeping Beauty*, and Attica Locke's *Black Water Rising* reveal about the uneven political economy and political ecology of oil, particularly as it pertains to gender, race, and class? And how does the recycling of the bildungsroman in Teddy Wayne's *Kapitoil* elucidate the abstraction of oil in the contemporary Middle East, and the sometimes violent conditions under which it is extracted, in contemporary digital cultures of financial speculation?

**1.3 Outline of the Thesis.**

This thesis is structured as four chapter-length case studies, each of which consider the symbolic dimensions of selected twentieth-century and contemporary American fictions concerned with petromodernity. These case studies are assembled in chronological order; however, this is not to suggest that the historical development of American petro-fiction across the long twentieth century conforms to generic typologies that can be historicised in systematic ways. Perhaps because oil extraction and energy capitalism resist straightforward periodisation, so too petro-fiction combines different generic and narrative conventions to register specific economic, gendered, ecological, and socio-political pressures in different places and times. It is nevertheless interesting to note that the literary genre of the *bildungsroman* is recycled in Upton Sinclair's *Oil!* and makes a reappearance in Teddy Wayne's *Kapitoil*; it is also striking that Winifred Sanford draws on the conventions of nineteenth-century regionalism to explore the pressures and challenges of oil drilling and extraction in late 1920s rural Texas; it is significant too that some American petro-fiction makes use of narratives of detection to explore the violence, corruption, and depredations of petro-capitalist modernity. By mapping these broad tendencies in twentieth and twenty-first century American petro-fiction and examining how they shed light on the representation of oil masculinity, the specific nature of oil culture and its representations, including oil extraction, consumption, abstraction, and speculation, this thesis seeks to offer a new contribution to scholarship in the emerging field of the energy humanities. Chapter one offers a new reading of Upton Sinclair's *Oil!* (1928) and suggests that the novel functions as a pre-figurative text

that sets the stage for subsequent chapters. As a novel that is written from the narrative perspective of an oil magnate's son, *Oil!* is overtly concerned with the business of oil extraction, its commercial trading, and the politics of the oil industry. But it also draws attention to the ways in which the novel form has mediated certain fetishized economic, cultural, and environmental consequences of and responses to oil capitalism through the use of particular motifs and conventions that reappear in later novels, albeit in different ways. While a number of studies have examined Sinclair's depiction of the early American oil industry, these studies have not considered how genre, and in particular the shifts the novel makes between different generic conventions, shape and influence our understanding of Sinclair's representation of petromodernity. My discussion of the novel in this chapter reads *Oil!* within the formal codes and literary conventions typically associated with the *bildungsroman* novel. In doing so, it argues that the novel provides an inconsistent representation of oil and petromodernity's formative stages of development.

In early twentieth-century American literature and culture, the world of oil is framed as a man's world. If the extraction, abstraction, and fetishization of oil as a commodity depended upon masculine forms of labour, oil also became a sign of masculinity in an emerging industrial economy that was increasingly dependent on fossil fuels. This is not to suggest, however, that the rhetoric of oil masculinity and the promise of wealth that it appeared to symbolise were always as stable or coherent as it was claimed to be. A more careful consideration of the performances of oil masculinity in early twentieth-century American literature and culture reveals how the emergence of the oilman was partly a response to a cultural anxiety that traditional forms of

American masculinity had fallen into a state of crisis since the late nineteenth century. Throughout the oil industry's relatively brief lifetime in the United States, the figure of the oilman has been frequently deployed as remedy to patriarchal fears regarding the feminization of men, and a diminution of essential masculine qualities. The idealised image of the rugged, brave, even heroic, figure of the independent oilman has been deployed at different historical junctures in order to further particular agendas. The popular journalist and novelist Ida Tarbell's exaggerated depiction of the American oilman for example, was intended as a counter to what she regarded as the homogenisation of the industry following the introduction of corporate interest in the oilfields. Tarbell's predilection for hyperbole is evident in the introductory chapter of Paul H. Gidden's *The Birth of the Oil Industry* (1938), where she writes on the men who characterised her idealised image of the industry in its formative stages: 'we have here a cross section of the types of men who had grown up under the functions of the democratic experiment allowing individual freedom of action […] these men worked practically without regulation other than their own notions of honour and fair play'.[33] Elaborating further, Tarbell's idealised idiom might even be said to bear faint echoes of the type of colonialist tropes typically associated with the so-called civilising missions by Europeans into the global south during the Victorian era when she writes of how the increasing accessibility of petroleum-based fuels in American towns and homes is described as the 'giving of cheap and abundant light in quarters where light had been barely known in the dark hours'(xxxvi).[34] Such an act of servitude was made possible by

[33] Ida Tarbell, 'Introduction', in Paul H. Giddens, *The Birth of the Oil Industry (*New York, NY: McMillan, 1938), pp.xiii - xxxix (p.xiii).

[34] As David Evans has put it in relation to French Imperialist projects during the long 19th century, for example, 'the image of light versus darkness became an all-pervading metaphor, summarizing colonialism

the 'men of imagination who dared to risk all they had on the adventure of seeking oil' (xiii, xxxvi). If Tarbell's depiction was intended as a polemic against the monopolistic tendencies of corporate interests, the very same corporations were also quick to mobilise the image of the rugged artesian oil worker as an exercise in public relations designed to temper increasingly negative perceptions of the industry in the wake of a number of environmental disasters, as Ross Barrett explains in a vivid analysis of the Drake Memorial project—Standard Oil's tribute to Edwin Drake, the first American to strike a commercially viable oil-well in Pennsylvania in 1868.[35] Focusing on the memorial's centrepiece, an impressive and imposing bronze statue entitled *The Driller*, Barrett writes, 'Nude, heavily muscled, and crouching over a barren rock shelf, *The Driller* articulates a primitivist vision of petroleum extraction that addressed and reframed material conditions of oil capitalism that deeply unsettled turn-of-the-century Americans'.[36] Evoking a primitive, albeit imaginary, pre-history served a particular purpose for the corporation. As Barrett explains:

> Returning extractive industry to its imagined roots, *The Driller* reconfigured the violent and unpredictable process of oil production as an elemental contest between body and nature. This fantastic vision resonated with contemporaneous antimodernist arguments that decried the strictures of bourgeois society and

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as the battle of enlightenment values against despotism and feudalism'. David Evans, 'Documents Against Civilisation', in *Empire and Culture: The French Experience 1830 - 1940*, ed by Martin Evans (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) pp.71-91, p.72.

[35] Roger M. Olien and Diana Davids Olien, *Oil and Ideology: The Cultural Creation of the American Petroleum Industry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), p.199.

[36] Ross Barrett, 'Picturing a Crude Past: Primitivism, Public Art, and Corporate Oil Promotion in the United States' *Journal of American Studies*, Vol.46, Special Issue 02, (2012), 395-422, (397)

> urged Americans […] to rediscover primal energies and corporeal capacities smothered by "civilisation"' (397).

Barrett deploys the phrase 'petro-primitivism' as a way of describing how *The Driller* inaugurated 'a cultural discourse [which] recast the modern oil industry as a field of savage exertion that held the promise of personal and national renewal' (398).

The idealised and romanticised body of values and characteristics which both the hyper-masculine figure of *The Driller* and the noble and honourable oil men of Tarbell's polemic can be regarded as examples of what the critic Frederick Buell has called 'extraction culture'.[37] In Buell's short account of the cultural history of modern energy resources in the United States, he emphasises the importance of considering how the preceding dominant mode of energy, the period of 'Coal Capitalism', was configured in the wider public imagination. The potential coal-powered technologies presented for new forms of technological innovations and, of course, new avenues for capital accumulation, entailed that coal was quickly imbued with a sort of romanticism of its potentialities. Yet such notions depended on the effacement of the physical and material effects of coal extraction, the hazardous labour involved in its extraction, and the toxifying properties of its emissions. Of this dual-nature Buell notes that 'Promethean coal […] gave humanity its new modes of and uses for fire, […] [whereas] Stygian coal […] re-created the ancient fiery nether region as polluted industrial district and city' (280). Just as coal had initially been imbued with a mythology of progress and innovation, much of the new forms of romanticism centred upon oil were derived by

[37] Frederick Buell, 'A Short History of Oil Cultures: Or the Marriage of Catastrophe and Exuberance', *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 46. Special Issue 02, (2012), pp. 273-293 p.281.

way of apparent contrasting nature to coal. The extraction process was not 'a capital-intensive operation with a large labour force working underground in appalling conditions'; rather, 'oil […] promised immense reward for little investment and less hard labour […] the efforts of the few daring and lucky men' (281). For Buell, 'extraction culture' describes an origin myth in which oil extraction 'signalled a resurgence of the old, epic-heroic ideology of democratic, self-reliant, community-and-nation-building individualism' (281).

Such a representation of the heroic, 'men of imagination' may seem naïve in its use of hyperbole and idealism. Yet it is important to emphasise that such rhetoric is repeated in contemporary discourses of extraction culture. Promotional material on the official website of BP (British Petroleum), which recounts the historical origins of the company at the turn of the century, deploys tropes and rhetoric reminiscent of a boys-own adventure narrative. In a brief account of a seemingly futile and financially-crippling drilling expedition at an unspecified location in Iran, the website frames the discovery of oil in the terms of a heroic quest in a section that recounts the exploits of George Reynolds, a geologist hired by the businessman William D'Arcy, who would go on to form an early iteration of BP, The Anglo-Persian Oil Company. At the final moment of this expedition, when all resources available to the crew appear to have been exhausted, oil is finally found: 'Giving up was not part of George Reynolds's character, even if he might admit that this particular search had often seemed doomed. […] The smell was unmistakable. It was a smell you could see. The vapours rose clearly in the sunlight, and stank of rotten eggs. But to the explorer George Reynolds it was the best

thing he had smelled in seven years. He instructed the men to keep drilling.'[38] Tenacity, determination, and the will to succeed in the face of insurmountable odds work to characterize Reynolds as an 'explorer' rather than a geologist. Such a heroic narrative framing bears an uncanny resemblance to the gendered tropes of extraction culture in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century America.

Chapter two of this thesis examines the trope of masculine extraction culture as it is represented in a selection of short stories from Winifred Sanford's collection *Windfall* (1988).[39] Currently, Sanford has received relatively little literary recognition or scholarly attention. Her short fiction was published in a range of magazines and literary journals in the late 1920s and early 1930s, including *The American Mercury*, *The North American Review,* and *Household*, and three of her works were listed in J.O. O'Brien's *The Best Short Stories of 1926*, which brought her to the attention of several literary agencies.[40] Although Sanford never published a novel, her short story 'Windfall' has appeared in a range of anthologies. The events in 'Windfall', the first in the quartet of short stories, centre on the disruption to the daily routines on a rural smallholding following the discovery of oil on the farmland. As the events of the ostensibly fortuitous day unfolds however, a number of the focalising protagonist's observations implicate oil speculation, and the wealth which its extraction will generate, within a broader nexus of patriarchal and ecological violence. In 'Luck', Sanford draws attention to how the myth of 'dumb luck' is used to legitimise rash and ill-conceived labour practices or so-called

[38] Our History: First Oil', *BP.Com*, < http://www.bp.com/en/global/corporate/about-bp/our-history/first-oil.html> [Accessed online 27th October 2016]
[39] While Sanford's short stories were collected and published in 1988, they originally appeared across a range of magazines and journals in the 1920s and early 1930s.
[40] The Wittliff Collection, [Accessed online 17 November 2016, http://www.thewittliffcollections.txstate.edu/research/a-z/sanford.html]

business decisions. The constant references to bad luck in the narrative prompt the reader to consider just how malleable the idea of fortune and fate might be when set against decisions which expose how destiny is not a predetermined consequence of quasi-mystical forces, but rather a result of economic factors and access to material resources which provide a competitive advantage for oil speculators and prospectors. The third short story, 'Mr Carmichael's Room', explores the deleterious effects of these material advantages when they are consolidated by monopoly capital. Events preceding the recent death of the eponymous character, a once successful wildcatter, are recalled by the central protagonist and these memories serve to map his gradual descent into financial and physical ruin after he is unable to make a living in the oilfields. The final short story of the collection, 'Fever in the South' draws together several of the themes and generic conventions deployed in the preceding short fiction in a narrative presented from the perspective of four distinct characters with discrepant yet interconnected narrative trajectories that loosely connect with historical events at the East Texas oilfield in the early 1930s.

Chapter three looks at a range of American detective novels from Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* (1939), to Ross McDonald's *Sleeping Beauty* (1973), and *Black Water Rising* by Attica Locke (2008), in order to examine how the rhetorical and generic codes of the detective novel have mediated representations of oil at three specific moments in the *longue durée* of American petromodernity: the Great Depression, the Santa Barbara oil spill of 1972, and the city of Houston awash with petro-dollars at a moment that corresponds with the decade of turbo-charged neoliberal economic policies largely facilitated by the incoming Reagan Administration.

The fourth chapter examines how Teddy Wayne's *Kapitoil* (2009) re-frames certain generic conventions of the *Bildungsroman*. In many respects, Wayne closely adheres to the formal structure that critics such as Franco Moretti and Jerome Hamilton Buckley have identified as characterising both the 'classic' German *Bildungsroman* and the nineteenth-century English literary transformation of this genre. While keeping many of the structural elements of the form, the protagonist of Wayne's novel, an entrepreneurial Qatari software developer-cum-oil futures trader who migrates temporarily to Manhattan, undergoes a process of assimilation and acculturation into the corporate world of finance capitalism. My discussion of this novel centres on the petroleum-based commodities and modes of fossil-fuel powered mobility as they are represented through the abstract and esoteric focalisation of the narrator/ protagonist. I argue here that while these reflections and interactions with the products and processes of oil can be read as corresponding with the formation of the individual through self-education, they also invite readers to reflect on the way oil appears as an abstract and immaterial figure in everyday American capitalist petromodernity.

In drawing these different readings together, the thesis concludes with a consideration of the ways in which the generic conventions of each of these texts interrupt and defamiliarize the petro-fetishism of capitalist modernity, and thereby encourage readers to reflect on the extent to which the material conditions of oil extraction and accumulation are made intelligible in and through the specific stagings of petroleum's *longue durée* within the fictional worlds of these texts.

## Chapter One: The Apprenticeship of a 'Little Oil Prince': Upton Sinclair's *Oil!* as Petro-*Bildungsroman*

There has been a renewed interest in Upton Sinclair's *Oil!* in recent years. Broadly speaking, this interest has occurred in tandem with the gradual establishment of petro-cultural theory, the energy humanities, and 'petrofiction studies' as academic disciplines. Within these disciplines, *Oil!* has come to be regarded as something of an *ur*-text with reference made to it in the introductory sections of numerous scholarly articles and publications. In addition, this renewed interest in what was arguably a largely forgotten novel, has been prompted by the critical and commercial success of the Paul Thomas Anderson's multi-prize-winning film *There will be Blood* (2007) which credits Sinclair's novel as the basis of its source material.[41] A number of recent studies have examined Sinclair's depiction of the early American oil industry; however, these studies have not considered how genre, and in particular the cross-genre references in the novel, might work to shape and influence our understanding of Sinclair's representation of petromodernity. Critics have variously classified *Oil!* (1927) as an 'industrial novel', a 'strike novel', a 'road novel', an example of 'proletarian fiction', and 'exemplary literature'.[42] However, aside from Peter Hitchcock's brief reference to the way Sinclair 'squeezes [his narrative] into the confines of the social-realist *bildungsroman* based on

[41] In actuality, the novel and film bear very little relation to one another. See Alan Gregory Phillips, 'Making the Milk into a Milkshake: Adapting Upton Sinclair's *Oil!* into P.T Anderson's *There Will Be Blood*', *Literature Film Quarterly,* Vol.43, No.1 (2015), pp.34-45.

[42] Leon Harris, *Upton Sinclair: American Rebel (*New York, NY: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1975)
Christopher Taylor, '"Inescapably Propaganda": Re-Classifying Upton Sinclair Outside the Naturalist Tradition', *Studies in American Naturalism*, Vol.2, No.2, (2007) pp. 166-179.
Jon A. Yoder, *Upton Sinclair,* (New York, NY: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1984).

Bunny's coming of age', the novel has not been discussed critically as part of the *bildungsroman* tradition (p.90). Such an omission seems curious in view of how the central events of the novel focus on the experiences of the son of a wealthy oil prospector as he moves through childhood, adolescence, and into young adulthood. In one respect, the novel's use of the *bildungsroman* seems highly orthodox in that it adheres to many of the codes and formal elements which have been outlined in seminal studies of the *bildungsroman*. Indeed, at times, Sinclair appears to rehearse the patriarchal origins of this genre quite strictly, most notably in the way that the narrative trajectory of Bunny Ross, the novel's young protagonist, is punctuated at regular intervals with romantic encounters which assist the process of self-formation before concluding with marriage as it coincides with adult maturity. Yet the novel does deviate from both the so-called 'classic' German and English models in which a young protagonist rebels against his father; instead, Bunny is loyal to his father throughout the narrative despite holding widely divergent political views.

The novel also seems at odds with early twentieth-century models of the form, which is defined by the protagonist's rebellion against formal institutions such as schools and universities. Far from displaying the rebellious impetus of a young man such as Joyce's Stephen Daedalus in *Portrait of the Artist as Young Man* (1916), Bunny remains a largely passive and inert observer of events as he transitions through the stages of adolescence, a point made all the more glaring when compared with the narrative trajectory of his close friend Paul Watkins who becomes a prominent figure in radical left-wing activist movements**.**

Conventional literary histories of the *bildungsroman* have suggested that this literary mode reaches a high point in the nineteenth century, and begins to wane with the rise of modernism. In his well-known history of the *bildungsroman*, for example, Franco Moretti argues that the First World War serves as a historical marker which signals a crisis for the broad ideas of youth and the coming of age that are conventionally associated with this form.[43] After the war, Moretti suggests that European and American modernists abandoned the motifs of assimilation and apprenticeship associated with the *bildungsroman* in favour of more experimental forms. This is not to suggest that the form of the *bildungsroman* disappears entirely from the literary historical map. As Tobias Boes points out, 'the novel of formation continues to thrive in post-colonial, minority, multi-cultural, and immigrant literatures worldwide. […] As a result, it has become obvious that the critical commonplace of a decline of the genre during the modernist period is a myopic illusion'.[44] Contemporary examples of the *bildungsroman* such as Joe Dunthorne's *Submarine* (2008) or *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away* (2011) by Christie Watson for example, may indeed seem to question the legitimacy of Moretti's literary historical narrative of decline. Yet such criticisms also overlook the ways in which the global history of literary forms and genres develop unevenly at different times and in different places. If we consider Moretti's claim about the vicissitudes of the *bildungsroman* genre and the realist paradigm underpinning it in the specific context of nineteenth-century western Europe and the industrial core of the United States, this general claim may perhaps begin to seem less contentious.

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[43] Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso Books, 1987).

[44] Tobias Boes, 'Modernist Studies and the *Bildungsroman*: A Historical Survey of Critical Trends', *Literature Compass,* Vol. 3, No. 2, (2006), pp. 230-245 (p. 239).

The danger with such literary-historical generalisations is that one can always find exceptions, which threaten to undermine the explanatory power of such claims or at least demand significant qualification and rethinking. Yet, if there is a grain of truth in the suggestion that the *bildungsroman* was not entirely representative of the literary forms that prevailed in American literary culture during the 1920s, why did a writer such as Sinclair continue to make use of it? To put it another way, if Sinclair's deployment of the *bildungsroman* form seems striking, unusual, or perhaps clichéd, what do such formal techniques imply about the condition of oil masculinity in early twentieth-century America? And how might the crisis of oil masculinity itself be understood as part of a broader crisis in generic understandings of time and history as well as conventional historicist understandings of genre?

The temporal coordinates of conventional literary histories of genre are further complicated when considered in relation to Lauren Berlant's recent account of the 'waning of genre'. [45] In her book *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Berlant adapts and modifies Fredric Jameson's well-known term the 'waning of affect' as a means of explaining how events in a particular historical conjuncture can be thought of as 'becoming-events', a condition which acknowledges a constant state of precarity and unravelling of stability. For Berlant, genre presents a useful way of conceptualising the process of perpetual transition because it 'provides an affective expectation of the experience of watching something unfold, whether that thing is in life or in art' (6). Berlant's rethinking of the 'waning of genre' has profound implications for conventional historicist understandings of genre. For if the present is a moment of perpetual change, then the genres which

[45] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), p.6.

organise and direct our responses to and expectations about temporality are, in a sense, forever inadequate, with their efficacy always 'waning'. As Berlant puts it, 'the waning of genres frames different kinds of potential openings within and beyond the impasse of adjustment that constant crisis creates' (7). By examining the use of the genre of the *bildungsroman* in Sinclair's *Oil!*, this chapter explores how the coming-of-age narrative in this novel is staged as a crisis in masculinity. The chapter suggests that particular points of crisis, articulated through the main protagonist's struggles over what it means to be masculine in the age of petromodernity.

If Berlant's idea of the 'waning of genres' is intended to augment Jameson's notion of the 'waning of affect'—a term he uses as part of a broader argument centred on the impersonal and free-floating qualities of de-centred postmodern life— it also recalls Raymond Williams' conceptual framework of the dominant, residual, and emergent. Like Berlant, Williams emphasises how cultural formations are dynamic processes in which different modes of production co-exist. For Williams, a dominant culture can never be regarded as complete as it always bears within it traces of processes and practices formed within earlier historical moments which are 'still active in the cultural process, not only and not often at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present'.[46] This process ensures that any given dominant culture contains within it 'certain experiences, meanings, and values' which are 'lived and practised on the basis of the residue […] of some previous social and cultural institution or formation (122).

[46] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), (p.122).

Considered together, Williams' idea of residual cultural forms and Berlant's account of 'the waning of genre' provide a useful conceptual framework through which to examine how the crisis in oil masculinity is also at the same time a historical crisis in the narrative of petro-capitalist modernity. It is important to emphasise that neither Williams nor Berlant make explicit reference to the culture of petro-modernity or to the role of oil in fuelling the expansion of capitalist modernity. Yet their analytic categories provide a useful way of thinking in more precise detail about how the generic codes of the *bildungsroman* are employed in the early twentieth-century American novel. More specifically, as I go on to suggest, the mobilisation of older literary genres in this context works to foreground the way in which the optimism associated with the promise of petro-modernity in the late nineteenth century is called into question.

This chapter assesses the claim that *Oil!*, when read within the terms of the *bildungsroman* novel, depicts petromodernity as lacking in a structural foundation that is able to promote traditional masculine ideals towards which the male adolescent might turn. This can be seen through the emergent cultures of automobility, consumerism, and commodification of material spaces. Looking closely at some of the ways Sinclair's novel follows the conventional narrative trajectory of *bildung* together with the departures from convention reveals a tension between tradition and progression which mirrors the choices the young protagonist must make but also, how this invites readers to reflect on the dynamics of petromodern life as they are symbolically expressed through the genre of the *bildungsroman*.

Developing and extending the work of literary and cultural critics such as Annette Kolodny and Kenneth Millard, the following discussion is separated into three distinct

but interrelated sections which correspond with the three central areas of focus explored throughout the chapter: gender and the *bildungsroman*; the influence and impact of spatiality and the geographies of petroleum on the formation of the *bildungsheld*; and finally, the structural chronology of the *bildungsroman* as an analogue for the development of petro-modernity.

The first section looks closely at a number of examples from the novel's much-discussed opening chapter. Previous critics have suggested that this chapter celebrates cultures of automobility; however, such readings overlook the codes and conventions of the *bildungsroman*. By focusing on the significance of this opening chapter in terms of Bunny's narrative of education, I try to offer a more nuanced reading that traces the way in which this opening is sharply critical of automobility and driving culture. More specifically, I consider how the language and imagery of driving in this chapter complicates the established convention of early twentieth-century car culture, which gendered automobility as an exclusively masculine endeavour. Regarding the *bildungsroman*, Nigel Harkness has noted that as well as the more familiar and explicit narrative trajectory centred on the coming-of-age, the process of '*bildung* is also an initiation into masculinity'.[47] The young male does not simply age while discarding the foolish and immature desires and strategies of youth, but also engages with a system which 'invites men to regulate their own identity in conforming with norms of hegemonic masculinity, as a precondition for enjoying the power and privileges of patriarchal man' (72). In the final part of the section, representations of cars and driving from later stages in the narrative are examined in order to consolidate the claim that

[47] Nigel Harkness, *Men of Their Words: The Poetics of Masculinity in George Sand's Fiction* (London: Legenda Books, 2007), p.72.

Sinclair deploys a narrative strategy which codifies automobility as unmanly and, as a consequence, detrimental to the development of the young protagonist.

The second section traces a symbolic relationship between the chronologies of Bunny's personal trajectory of progress with that of a broader, materialist conception of the trajectory of capitalist modernity. Through a close analysis of Bunny's romantic encounters, I develop the case for an allegorical reading of the text in which these encounters represent attempts by traditional, established American industries such as manufacturing and banking to converge with the relatively recent addition of oil extraction and car manufacturing to the nation's economic infrastructure. As I go on to show, that these encounters are unsuccessful in various ways can certainly be seen as a critical commentary on contemporary corporate America, but they can also be read as significant junctures in the coming-of-age narrative. Not only do such encounters conclude with assimilation and acculturation, but also with the refusal and rejection of the bourgeois society that Bunny's father's oil wealth has helped to maintain.

The final part of this first section of the novel focuses closely on passages towards the end of the novel which mark Bunny's passage into adult maturity. Here, I suggest that this coming-to-maturity is Bunny's proto-socialist approach to land and physical space – a development which follows the death of his father. To further clarify the significance of this representation of land and space in the novel, the chapter refers to representations of oilfields, freeway networks, and private enclaves of the wealthy elites from earlier stages in the narrative. The discussion concludes with a detailed consideration of Kolodny's analysis of American pastoral literature and suggests that certain tropes associated with the pastoral genre are evident in *Oil!* These cross-genre

references not only encourage new ways of thinking about the structure and content of the *bildungsroman* in the context of the early twentieth-century American oil encounter; they also help to shed light on the novel's mediation of the relationship between capital, land, and oil in early twentieth-century America.

**1.1 Automobility in *Oil!***

Critical discussions of *Oil!* typically centre on the novel's opening chapter in which Ross and Bunny journey by car across a range of spaces on their way to a business meeting where Ross hopes to convince the residents of a hitherto nondescript community to allow him to manage the extraction processes of newly found oil underneath the streets and houses. When considered in relation both to the remainder of the novel and Sinclair's considerable body of published work more broadly, the range of formal literary techniques deployed in 'The Ride' seem to bear more in common with the experimental style of his modernist contemporaries than the social realism of much of his oeuvre. Some critics have tried to account for this ostensibly uneven style by suggesting that political concerns were a more important consideration for as Sinclair as a writer. William A. Bloodworth writes that Sinclair was 'never a great writer in the terms of style and structure […] those who read much of Sinclair will undoubtedly be bothered at times by his unsophisticated style […] some will regard his literary efforts as overly utilitarian, servants of causes now gone'.[48] The use of a metonymic style in the first chapter of *Oil!* to evoke the consciousness of a young boy and the experience of a high-speed car journey might help to account for the renewed critical interest in *Oil!*. It may

[48]William J. Bloodworth, *Upton Sinclair* (Massachusetts: Twayne Publishers, 1977), pp. 155, 158.

not be surprising, in other words, that a chapter in which petrol-powered high-speed mobility is represented through, at times, a dazzling array of stylistic techniques would draw the attention of scholars and commentators in ways that the 'unsophisticated style' that arguably characterises the remaining five hundred pages does not. If *Oil!* is read within the context of the formal codes and conventions of the *bildungsroman,* and even when it is acknowledged that strict definitions of such conventions have been subject to debate, the protagonist's journey begins in his youth when, however exuberant or animated he may be, he is necessarily immature and naïve to what Moretti calls the 'way of the world' (Moretti).

In his historical account of the early years of American automobility, the sociologist David Gartman notes how cars 'symbolised and legitimated […] the inequality of gender'.[49] If prevailing patriarchal gender norms in early twentieth-century America relegated women to a passive role in the domestic sphere or at least the passenger seat, they also positioned men firmly in the driving seat. Gartman notes how, 'In general, automobiles were defined as masculine, both because they provided mobility in the public sphere and because they were utilitarian and mechanical objects of production' (174). While these accepted conventions would undergo significant revisions in later years, in the first decades of the twentieth century 'car ownership and operation were considered culturally appropriate for men' (174). On a first reading, the opening chapter of *Oil!* appears as a heady endorsement and reiteration of just such a view. Numerous references to Ross's skill and proficiency at the wheel precede or follow descriptions of his physical appearance that linger on overtly masculine features or traits. Indeed, at

[49] David Gartman, 'Three Ages of the Automobile', in *Automobilities,* ed. by Mike Featherstone, Nigel Thrift, John Ury (London: Sage Publications,2005), pp.1 69-195 (p. 174).

times in the chapter, the very act of driving is portrayed in terms of combat or a three-way contest between the car, the landscape, and Ross, the driver.

On the one hand, the speeding car traversing the rocky inclines of the Guadalupe Pass with Ross, the epitome of sober focus and control, at the wheel might seem to exemplify gendered automobility in its formative stages. The spaces of nature have been shaped and fashioned according to the needs of the road builders while the act of driving around the sides of a mountainous range is a performance of unparalleled masculinity. The reference to the car horn, for example, exemplifies this rhetorical technique in which a feature of the car becomes an expression of Ross's social status:

> It was a big, commanding horn, hidden away under the capacious hood of the car; a horn for a man whose business took him on flying trips over a district big enough for an ancient empire; who had important engagements waiting at the end of the journey, and who went through, day or night, fair or foul. The voice of his horn was sharp and military; there was no undertone of human kindness. At fifty miles an hour there is no place for such emotions – what you want is for people to get out of the way, and do it quick, and you tell them so (4,5).

In addition, at a later point in the journey, an oncoming car is described as a 'mighty projectile hurled out of a six-foot cannon' (7). The evocation of warfare together with the figurative rendering of the car as a military weapon work to frame automobility as a masculine endeavour; it also serves as a counterpoint to Bunny's hyperbolic narrative of the journey, which serves to emphasise his childlike imagination. Indeed, the relation between mobility across hostile landscapes and masculine violence is an established pairing which holds a specific resonance within the American historical imaginary as a

result of the European settlers whose colonial project required not only the subjugation and dispossession of the indigenous population, but also the devastation of the physical spaces of nature.[50] Writing on this dual objective, the environmental historian Donald Worster describes the settlers 'marching across a continent not only to dominate other human beings, in the traditional pattern of imperialism, but to subdue "the wilderness", or "the land"'. [51] Worster also tantalisingly describes this process of colonial expansion as a form of abstraction: '[….] the single significant theme was the abstract struggle between the unnamed forces of Nature on the one hand and the individual pioneer on the other' (242). The connection Worster draws between mobility and crusading violence provides a useful way of understanding the environmental and economic significance of specific textual details in *Oil!* The reference to the 'sharp, military horn' of Ross's Ford evokes a connection between the culture of automobility and the imperialist wars of the early twentieth century, which made increasing use of the combustion engine; it also foreshadows the novel's later preoccupation with the arms-industrial complex, discussed below. The use of this comparison can certainly be seen as an instance of bathos or overstatement which underscore Bunny's active imagination. Yet perhaps more pertinently these references underscore how mobility and masculine power are an established pairing in the American cultural consciousness.

While these references acknowledge the normative understanding of mobility and masculinity, for the remainder of the discussion I want to explore a reading of

[50] As the historian William Cronin puts it, 'land taking meant violence. Violence was central to the frontier experience. [...] It drew dark lines on a landscape whose newly created borders were defended with bullets, blades, and blood'. William Cronin, *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1993), p.15.

[51] Donald Worster, *Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) p.242.

automobility in 'The Ride' which stands in marked contrast to that of most critical accounts of the novel's first chapter. Michael K. Walonen exemplifies this critical consensus when he writes of how this section of the novel 'revels […] at the freedom of mobility and speed afforded by the oil-powered automobile'.[52] At first glance, such descriptions might seem accurate, particularly in relation to examples from the text quoted earlier. But these descriptions ignore a key structural convention of the *bildungsroman* novel; that the events of youth are later understood as folly. Indeed, such events *must* be so if the final objective is the arrival at adult maturity. From this perspective, certain references in 'The Ride' might be read as a form of irony which serves as part of a technique which frames the road, and the high-speed mobility it facilitates, as sanitized, regulated, and highly controlled. Reframing the driving experience by recognizing its place within a broader 'apparatus of automobility' that is regulated and configured to encourage consumption detracts from the gendered associations with masculine individualism.[53] Writing on the rise of mass automobile ownership in the first decades of the twentieth century, the cultural theorist Cotten Seiler uses the term 'apparatus of automobility' as way to draw attention to the wider assemblages within which the private car is situated. Seiler argues that a widening of perspective is necessary in order to counter mythologies born out of how the act of driving, historically, was promoted in such a way as to chime with certain deeply entrenched American narratives in relation to individualism, and autonomy that Seiler notes Seiler highlights how the bureaucratic management practices of Taylor and how

[52] For example, Michael K., Walonen 'The Black and Cruel Demon and Its transformations of Space: Toward a Comparative Study of the World Literature of Oil and Place' *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, Vol.14, No.1 (2012) pp. 56-78, (p.62).
[53] Cotten Seiler, *Republic of Drivers: A Cultural History of Automobility in America* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2009,) p. 30.

their implementation worked to atomise and de-skill the factory workers severing long established links between productive labour and American male identity. In order to preserve such powerful myths which define pure American maleness in relation to the rugged frontierism, autonomy over production and self-sufficiency, in an era when consumerism and the de-skilling of the labour force threatened to emasculate and feminize the American male, driving was carefully and expertly promoted as part of the natural lineage and manifestation of these narratives. As Seiler puts it, 'to middle-class and working-class white men, driving appeared able to deliver an analogue of the sovereign selfhood attenuated by Taylorization and bureaucratic regimentation, and to masculinize consumer identity more generally' (41). Automobility and cultures of driving are presented as a solution to the increased mechanisation of the workplace and dissolution of worker autonomy through the way speed and mobility are imbued with a (quasi) liberatory power and framed as essential male characteristics. But as Seiler also notes, this compensatory form of substitution is problematic as the car, road, and driver are all subject to multiple forms of bureaucratic management and control which undermine associations between male individualism and cultures of driving. As he puts it, 'the driving subject moves along grooves created, surveyed, and administered by the apparatus of automobility, and is also legible to it through the various modes of enumeration – driver's licensing and insurance for example – connected to the nation-state and corporate capitalism' (9).

The opening sentences of the novel are quoted in full in order to begin the discussion:

> The road ran, smooth and flawless, precisely fourteen feet wide, the edges trimmed as if by shears, a ribbon of grey concrete, rolled out over the valley by a giant hand. The ground went in long waves, a slow ascent and then a sudden dip; you climbed, and went swiftly over – but you had no fear, for you knew the magic ribbon would be there clear of obstructions, unmarred by bump or scar, waiting the passage of inflated rubber wheels revolving seven times a second (1).

The first thing that readers might notice is the simple yet effective way in which the spatio-temporal structure of the sentence is used to evoke the movement of the car as a subject of the sentence. The judicious use of commas as a means of interrupting the flow of the sentence and manipulating the speed with which it can be read is perhaps analogous with the similarly interrupted trajectory of the speeding vehicle as it negotiates the sharp curves and contours of the road. The sentence which follows is considerably longer and appears as though it may prefigure the prose style exemplified by later writers such as Jack Kerouac in *On the Road* (1957) where the long, free flowing sentences are used, in a sense, to mimic the experience of high-speed mobility across seemingly endless highways and the ever-shifting perspective of the American landscape as it is viewed from behind the car's windscreen. While Bunny and Ross's journey in *Oil!* may indeed seem as if it anticipates this literary technique that made the later novel so distinct, the extended sentence describing the rattling Model T's navigation of the dips and peaks of the Guadalupe Mountain pass is denied the opportunity to speed away as Kerouac later permitted. As Sinclair extends the length of his sentence the judicious use of commas, a semi-colon, and em dash are deployed to restrict and limit the flow of the sentence in precisely the manner of the 'speed cop' which the travellers encounter on the other side of the mountain. The car's progress as it climbs and descends the uneven terrain is, again, echoed in the structure of the syntax where the comma enforces slight

pauses on either side of the ‘slow assent’ and the ‘sudden dip’ in a way that imitates the car’s pattern of acceleration and braking as it negotiates these shifts in the road’s design. The semi-colon and em dash which follow apply a more emphatic method of control to the sentence at the same moment as the second-person pronoun is deployed to heighten readers’ sense of sharing the experience. The use of the former creates a brief moment of respite after the ‘sudden dip’. Now the car is ascending once more while the extended pause applied by the em dash creates a momentary vacuum into which the possibility of threat and danger enters as the car goes ‘swiftly over’, placing itself entirely at the mercy of whatever may be on the other side.

In addition to the use of such techniques which one might typically associate with verse forms or the poetic line, the way that ecological references are woven seamlessly into the passage so they sit alongside mathematical terms and units of specific measurement are further evidence of the distinct quality of the prose style in this opening chapter of the novel. The reference to horticulture together with the evocation of ‘waves’ to describe the pattern of the road could be seen as registering the aspects of a feminised natural world that must, according to the patriarchal symbolic logic of Sinclair’s representation, succumb to violence through mobility in order for this mobility to be defined as masculine. If, in the settler-colonial mind set, it was rugged pioneers whose bravery must win out against the forces of the natural world deep within a hostile wilderness, such a settler-colonial trope provides a spatial frame of reference for these mythologised cultural narratives centred on gendered mobility and violence. Rather than the wild vegetation of inhospitable wilderness, this is a more genteel reference that evokes the grooming of a well-kept garden. If the assertion of

dominance over nature was equated with the Jeffersonian-male, then Sinclair's references are instances of irony which works against and undercuts the idea of a dangerous encounter with wilderness and raw, untamed nature and presents instead an altogether more sanitised experience devoid of risk and danger. In other words, Sinclair resists the transposition of this traditional culture on to driving and automobility by highlighting how, for him, the latter is part of a complex form of highly engineered and managed apparatus designed for safety and utility.

The high-speed journey, so vividly depicted in 'The Ride', can then, be seen as consistent with the overarching critique of petro-capitalism for which the novel is most widely known because it is focalised through the consciousness of an excitable and skittish young boy. Indeed, the experience of driving loses some of its potency as a symbol of masculine authority and this is further underscored as Sinclair resists the notion that the petroleum-infrastructures of automobility are in any sense a contemporary reimagining of collective archetypes which pertain to frontierism and rugged masculinity. Curiously, perhaps, critical accounts of this section of the novel have not considered how the representations of driving here contrast with those at later stages in the novel or, more specifically, at later stages of Bunny's development. Making such distinctions help contextualise further the events of the opening chapter by developing the critique of automobility as it relates to the protagonist's stages of moral and intellectual development on the path to maturity. Consider, for example, the wide-eyed, stream-of-consciousness double-voiced narration in the early scenes exemplified in passages such as 'Any boy will tell you that this is glorious. Whoopee! You bet! Sailing along up there close to the clouds, with an engine full of power, magically harnessed'

(5). Later, as Bunny becomes attracted to the socialist activism in which his friend Paul Watkins is involved, he is also confronted with an ethical dilemma centred on the choice between family loyalty or expressing solidarity with Ross's oilfield workers whom Paul has helped to organise. After attending a rally at which Paul addresses the workers on the importance of strike action in return for improved labour conditions, Bunny 'went away feeling cheap, and utterly out of harmony with life. He had time to think it over on the long drive back to Beach City by himself […] all the way he heard Paul's voice above the hum of the engine, challenging everything that Bunny thought he believed!' (184). The thoughtful and introspective reflection undertaken while driving here contrasts starkly with the breathless narration of the early scenes and encapsulates the degree to which a new political awakening is throwing the world his father has created into sharp relief and is dominating his thoughts. More significantly, however, is the reference to how Bunny seemed to hear 'Paul's voice above the hum of the engine' and, specifically, the way that the disembodied voice – a voice extolling unionism and worker collectivism – is so present in Bunny's consciousness that it drowns out the sound of the car and, by association, the culturally and historically idealised notions ascribed to it. Although not mentioned explicitly in the narrative, this is a key stage in the trajectory of the *bildungsroman* as it provides a vital moment of education for Bunny. In connecting the pleasures afforded by autonomous, petrol-powered mobility which Bunny enjoys as wholly contingent upon the immiserating and precarious labour in the oil field, in this passage Sinclair distils the dialectical struggle between capital and labour into the image of a muted combustion engine.

**1.2 The Role of Romance in Upton Sinclair's Use of the Petro-*Bildungsroman*.**

The way in which the narrative is punctuated at regular intervals by a series of romantic encounters is a structural element typically associated with the formal genre conventions of the *bildungsroman*. Writing on the peripheral function of women as narrative facilitators in the patriarchal structure of coming-of-age narratives, Gregory Castle explains how 'women are primarily important for their secondary status, their instrumentality in forwarding the desires of the male'.[54] In Castle's account, romantic encounters should not 'derail the *Bildung*-process'; instead, 'women are supposed to be helpmates and selfless partners' from whom the young *Bildungsheld* can learn (681).

In one respect *Oil!* may seem quite conservative and unremarkable in the way it adheres to this convention. Bunny engages in a number of romantic encounters throughout the course of the novel and each time a clear, often unambiguous, moral lesson concludes these affairs. In *American Rebel,* Sinclair's biographer Leon Harris emphasises his subject's somewhat puritanical perspective on sexual desire. According to Harris, Sinclair harboured a 'suspicion of and near contempt for sex needs', believing them to be 'primitive' and a threat to 'his Southern idealisation of the "good woman"' (43). Harris suggests that these attitudes informed the representations or, more accurately, the absence of representations of sex in his novels and writing. On this somewhat Victorian attitude to sexuality, Harris writes that Sinclair 'considered sex only unavoidable. It had to be recognized, and it helped to sell books; but it did not reveal character significantly nor play an important role in the plot (237/239).

[54] Gregory Castle, *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2015), p.19.

Sexual encounters and romantic affairs are indeed uncommon in Sinclair's fiction, and the biographical details Harris notes certainly provide one explanation for this absence. Yet, to the extent that they are present in *Oil*, I do not agree entirely with Harris regarding the relative significance of these encounters. We have already seen in the previous section how an alternative to the conventional interpretation of the road trip in *Oil!* occurs when the events in the chapter are considered in relation to the structure and formal chronology of the *bildungsroman* l. Similarly, I would suggest that the significance of Bunny's romantic and sexual encounters extend beyond that of the bluntly commercial manner in which these scenes might 'help to sell books'. Viewed within the conventions of the *bildungsroman*, such encounters provide crucial points of punctuation in the protagonist's narrative of self-development and identity formation as those such as Castle, Millard, and Moretti have shown. By looking closely at examples of Bunny's romantic encounters, this section contends that far from being irrelevant in the way Harris describes, the female characters also fulfil an allegorical function in the narrative by representing powerful elements of the American economic infrastructure at different stages of development. Reading Bunny in a similar way—as a symbol of the emergent petroleum industry—I suggest that his dalliances with the daughter of a financier, the widow of a steel magnate, and a Hollywood actress, can be thought of as symbolic vignettes within the novel's larger frame. In the novel's rhetorical structure, the women who vie for Bunny's attention are depicted as vehicles that symbolically express the desire of specific American industries to harness and exploit the source of energy that will define the coming century. In addition to this avenue of enquiry, I continue to develop and extend the examination of gender in relation to the *bildungsroman* as well as paying close attention to the spaces and geographies in which

the romantic encounters play out. By doing so, I extend the discussion from the previous section to focus on the way the novel substitutes speed and automobility with sexual and romantic encounters as experiences requiring the *bildungsheld's* careful navigation in order to progress the journey into adult maturity. Because these encounters are unsuccessful in different ways, the discussion here prefaces the analysis in the next section of the chapter which shows how Bunny's journey is brought to its conclusion with marriage and the arrival at a physical space seemingly outside of the environments defined by capitalism, as we will see in the final section.

Bunny's first significant romantic dalliance is with Eunice Hoyt, a student, like Bunny, at 'Beach City High School', where the student fraternity is characterised by 'wealth and the pleasant things which wealth buys – well-nourished bodies, and fashionable clothing, and easy manners, and a playful attitude towards life' (108). While Bunny largely enjoys his student days at the school, he is never able to assimilate entirely within the student culture as, 'all the time there was something which set him apart from the rest […] It came, no doubt, from his knowing so much about the oil business […] He would never share the idea of the other darlings of luxury, that money grows on trees; he knew that it comes by hard and dangerous work' (110). The limitations of formal education as a means of advancing the protagonist's self-development has been cited as a recurring feature of the *bildungsroman* in the early twentieth century.[55] Described somewhat unambiguously here is Bunny as a descendent

[55] School and formal education has provided the main point of focus for scholarly enquires into bildungsroman novels by Joyce and Fitzgerald, as well as Henry Adams' semi-fictional autobiography. See Andrew West 'The Education of Henry Adams: A *Bildungsroman*', *South Central Review*, Vol. 25, No.2 (2008), 91-108. Pearl James, 'History and Masculinity in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 51, No.1 (2005), 1-33. The critical studies by Castle and Moretti previously mentioned both focus extensively on Joyce's representation of school in *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man.*

of the manly world of wildcatters where financial reward was inextricably bound to the 'hard and dangerous work' of physical labour. Eunice is precocious far in excess of Bunny with a sexual confidence grown out of the fact that she 'knew about things' (194). In this statement, 'things' is used euphemistically to describe the various ways and means of contraception. Eunice epitomises the so-called Flapper of the 1920s: she is sexually confident, fashionably hedonistic at all-night jazz parties, and has a voracious appetite for liquor. Eunice's voracious hedonism is far in excess of Bunny's reserved constitution. As the narrator explains: 'She was insatiable, ravenous for pleasure; she never knew when to stop, whatever it might be. "One dance more! Just one! She would plead; and then it would be one more kiss, or one more drink"' (201). By detailing the intoxicating effect that Eunice has on Bunny, the third-person narrator implies that Eunice is an entirely unsuitable companion for Bunny. At one point, the narrator explicitly states that Eunice causes 'all Bunny's senses to be filled with her […] and he would have to stand and argue and plead, trying to keep his reason while his head went round' (209). In short, Eunice is detrimental to the process of male identity-formation. In the patriarchal logic of Sinclair's *bildungsroman,* Eunice is framed as a threatening feminine figure that represents the disruptive aspects of capitalist modernity. The qualities of a lack of restraint, hedonism, self-indulgence, and intemperance associated with the emergent culture of the so-called roaring twenties are also framed as feminine: the 'manifold intoxication of his senses' robs Bunny of the male characteristics of restraint, reason and considered reflection.

Eunice's extravagance is a result of her father's successes through investment banking. This detail is significant because it identifies the family as part of a *nouveau*

*riche* class of bourgeois entrepreneurs whose wealth depends on the circulation of capital rather than more traditional processes of production or trade. Because Eunice's father, Tommy Hoyt 'of Hoyt and Brainerd', works in the field of investment securities, he can be said to exemplify the detachment between forms of physical labour or manual production with that of financial gain (p.198). His attachment to Bunny would seem to be detrimental to the *bildungsheld* which requires noncapitalist work as part of the final objective. At later stages in the narrative, when the journey to maturity is more developed and, consequently, at greater risk from derailment, Bunny encounters certain characters of a similar financial and social status whose threat to the process of acculturation and maturation are less easily discerned. By contrast, Tommy Hoyt is represented in a cartoonish manner which makes him easily identifiable to both Bunny and readers as a figure that is incompatible with the protagonist's journey. This caricatured representation is exemplified in the narrator's initial description:

> Tommy' Hoyt of 'Hoyt and Brainerd', whose advertisements of investment securities you saw on the financial pages of the Beach City newspapers. Tommy you saw at racing meets and […] generally you noticed that he had with him a new lady (198).

That Hoyt is known as 'Tommy' suggests a degree of informality that one might not expect from a businessperson of his social standing; what's more, the fact that his company is advertised in a local newspaper suggests that his clients are far from established industry players or professionals. As the narrator goes on to explain, Hoyt's work centres on the circulation and accumulation of capital in various ways, yet it does not involve the production of tangible products. Such a detail is important not only because it emphasises how an emergent global market of financial speculation operates

in a sphere that appears to be increasingly abstracted from the material spaces of industrial production, but also because of the light it sheds on how the narrative tries to contain the force of financial speculation by equating it with effeminacy and unmanliness. The separation between labour and wealth is entirely at odds with the predominant norms of masculinity associated with industrial production, and this is manifest in the narrator's account of Hoyt's inability to discipline his daughter or serve as a patriarchal role model in any meaningful way. As the narrator points out, '[…] when [Tommy] happened in on a tantrum, there a came a frightened look on his rosy, rather boyish face, he turned and skedaddled' (210). The narrator represents Hoyt as unmanly, and in so doing, suggests that he cannot serve as an adequate father. Indeed, this is further borne out by the reference to his 'boyish face'; such a physiognomic stereotype further associates finance capitalism with degeneracy, weakness, and the moral collapse of the patriarchal family. The narrator also suggests that Hoyt's values of capital accumulation and commodity culture are antithetical to the socialization and education of children. We learn that Hoyt and his wife '[…] had raised a wild young creature, giving her everything in the world' (209). The framing of Eunice as 'wild creature' illustrates the novel's use of the contrasting idea of a failed or failing education, as implicitly linked to finance capital, in order to construct an implicit ideal of what a moral education/*bildung* should, or could, be.

That Bunny's first serious experience of the opposite sex ends in failure is unsurprising as it is in accordance with a pattern typical of the patriarchal logic of the classic *bildungsroman*. As T. Jeffers puts it, 'To some degree […] it is a convention of the *Bildungsroman* to have a young man go through several love affairs, in order to make

him aware of what kinds of female presence satisfy what kinds of male needs […]'.[56] Bunny also has a significant romantic encounter aboard a luxury yacht called 'The Siren', a 'floating mansion in the ocean' owned by the widow of a steel magnate, Thelma Norman. The significance of the designation quickly becomes apparent when over the course of a weekend Bunny is required to spurn Thelma's repeated advances and attempts at seduction. Unlike the later encounter, however, Thelma finally confronts him in his cabin quarters and explicitly professes her feelings for him, telling him he could have everything she owned. Bunny is pressed into making it clear that such feelings are not reciprocated. It is during this exchange that an almost self-conscious reference to the *bildungsroman* convention is used to describe the effects of this failed romance in the way '*Bunny learned something from this incident*. He knew that he had only to stretch out his arms and take her […] and from that hour forth she would have been his slave, he could have had everything she owned' (308, my italics). On the one hand, if Bunny 'learns' anything from this encounter, it is that accepting Mrs Norman's advances would mean access to instant wealth and privilege in a way that severs the relationship between labour and financial rewards, which underpins the protestant work ethic and could even be said to parallel the strike-it-lucky ethos of oil speculation. Indeed, as the widow of the once powerful founder of a steel corporation, there are a number of brief, yet suggestive references to how her own fabulous wealth has been accumulated vicariously and continues to be sustained through bonds and stock options, which are abstracted from the circumstances of productive labour and manufacturing. An alternate explanation for Thelma's rejection by Bunny, I would suggest, is due to how

[56] T. Jeffers, *Apprenticeships: The Bildungsroman from Goethe to Santayana* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p.53.

the proposed relationship is framed in terms of domination and submission. Thelma cuts a rather tragic, even pitiable, figure as she offers every aspect of herself to Bunny unconditionally, as is seen for instance when she declares: 'I would do anything for you, give you anything you wanted. […] I would marry you if you wanted me to. I would give you everything you asked for' (309-310). Thelma's proposal is couched in the gendered terms of patriarchal ownership of women and therefore simply incompatible with the socially progressive values Bunny is developing. Bunny reflects briefly on the implications of this proposal and how it would amount to a form of ownership: '[…] from that hour forth she would have been his slave, he could have had everything she owned; he might have mistreated her, used her money to keep other women, but she still would have been his slave' (309). Bunny understands the inequalities inherent within traditional terms of marriage in which the female submits her sovereign status to the male as equitable to a master and slave dynamic. While Bunny does not trace such connections at this stage, readers may notice how this dynamic centred on power and obedience is a development and continuation of a paradigm which Sinclair has used to frame the logic of the oil-industry and has structured the key events of Bunny's life. The Watkins ranch was acquired in large part through dishonesty and exploiting the family's economic precarity. The oilfield workers' attempts at organisation and unionism were set against the vast and powerful resources available to Ross and the members of the syndicate. Reflecting a while longer on an imagined future scenario in which Thelma is his slave – the term 'wife' is not used throughout the passage – Bunny ruminates over questions of temporality, mortality, and how the woman stood before him was the physical manifestation of labour and wealth accumulated over years by a person now absent: 'How many years had old August Norman slaved to build a great steel plant, and

a floating mansion in the ocean, and a ten times bigger one on the shore; and here all those treasures were magically incorporated in one feminine body […]?' (310). Significantly, certain phrases that are associated with Bunny and which underscore a maturity not yet reached are repeated here. The description of Thelma's wealth as August's 'treasures magically incorporated in one feminine body' echoes any number of instances from 'The Ride' where driving and automobility are described in relation to 'magic', while 'treasure' is a much-used term deployed by Bunny when referencing the raw material of oil. The recourse to these phrases shows that Bunny remains on a trajectory towards adult maturity. In addition, using these terms to refer to a specific person, as opposed to a road or oil-well, for example, underscores the parallels between the logic of industrial capitalist petromodernity and the politics of patriarchal gender relations.

That Mrs Norman represents American steel is significant and suggests that a much older stalwart of American industry will come to rely heavily on the newer industry for survival. Yet Bunny spurns her advances, and it is not incidental that while on board the luxury liner, Bunny retires to his cabin to read an article about the suppression in Hungary of a 'social revolution by the simple plan of slaughtering everybody who believed in it using, as always, machine gun bullets made in American steel mills, and purchased with an American loan' (308). By suggesting that American steel is implicated in the violent suppression of the international workers' movements, the narrator also implies that Thelma Norman is similarly implicated in the arms-industrial complex. In so doing, the narrator makes it clear that Norman is unsuitable for Bunny's ethical development. If Eunice Hoyt is read as the symbolic expression of an

emergent finance capitalism, which is both voracious and insatiable, Norman, as the widow of a steel magnate, represents the heavy industry of the second industrial revolution: still vital and necessary but fading, perhaps, from the popular imagination in the face of the emergent force and energy of petro-modernity. This sense of fading or waning vitality is emphasised throughout this short section through slight references to western mythology and antiquity. This is seen most explicitly in the yacht's name, the 'Siren', but also in the evocation of the classical Greco-Roman periods through Thelma's late husband 'August Norman, founder of Occidental Steel' whose substantial personal wealth has ensured that after his death his son is as 'rich as Croesus' (303). While these references ostensibly serve to amplify the Gatsby-esque opulence that characterises life aboard the 'floating mansion', by drawing parallels with examples from similarly opulent figures of antiquity, these references also undermine, implicitly, this affluence by noting the transitory nature of these epochs, ancient Greek and Roman respectively (303).

The most sustained of Bunny's romantic relationships comes from an attachment to the well-known starlet of the burgeoning Hollywood star system, Vee Tracy. As we have seen, Tracy and Bunny become a celebrity couple, a development which enables Sinclair's narrator to rally against the vacuity of popular cinema and the contemporary celebrity culture with which it was associated. The novel incorporates this romance narrative into its wide-reaching social critique of oil-capitalism by noting how Tracy's rise to fame was dependent on the investments of Vernon Roscoe, an oil magnate, and it quickly becomes apparent that their romance is doomed to fail because of this. Yet, as a part of the broader pattern of Bunny's path to maturity, Vee is unsuited for Bunny in three main ways. First, she, like the representation of cinema Sinclair presents, stands

for escapism and retreat into the comforts of a privatised consumer culture at the expense of political engagement. She becomes 'the ideal playmate for a young idealist running away from other people's troubles' (348). What's more, Vee herself makes the notion of escape explicit in the following address to Bunny: 'I say, Oh my God! And jump into my car and drive fifty miles an hour to get away from my troubles and from people who want to tell me theirs' (342-343). The car, with all of its numerous symbolic connections to oil, provides one means of retreat from the social world for a young woman whose profession is to provide the masses with distraction and escape from their problems. Vee's expression of desire to drive also stands in marked contrast to the masculine discourse of automobility, which Ross represents in the opening chapter. Indeed, the very notion of a lone female driver in the early decades of the twentieth century was considered by many as a disruptive element to traditional gender models as the cultural historian Virginia Scharff has noted, 'control over an automobile signified new and flexible possibilities for women's entry into the public realm […]. In a nation where middle-class people had long believed women belonged literally at home, female automobility seemed […] a real threat to the order of things'.[57] Yet this rather brief subversion of patriarchal gender stereotypes is complicated by Vee's expression of a desire to withdraw to the private sphere – a desire that is also linked to the wealth and privilege associated with Hollywood celebrity culture. The narrator's moral criticism of Hollywood, with its excess and extravagance, is perhaps unsurprising.

A consideration of the romantic narrative between Bunny and Vee can also help to account for the way in which the novel suggests a symbolic relationship between the

[57] Virginia Scharff, *Taking the Wheel: Women and the Coming of the Motor Age* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1991), p. 171.

emergence of a depthless Hollywood celebrity culture and the wealth generated by petro-capitalism. In this respect, *Oil!* can be seen to appropriate the generic resources of popular Hollywood novels. In an account of the evolution of Hollywood and Los Angeles more broadly, David Fine identifies a short-lived but incredibly popular strain of genre fiction which took the film industry as its topic. Of these Hollywood genre novels Fine writes, 'the plots are often contrived as fabulous, fantasy-like adventures and sudden, magical transformations. One day you are a nobody, the next a star – or vice versa; one is on the way up or down […] fame and fortune are gained – and lost just as easy'.[58] Fine's description of the 'magical transformations' which the Hollywood star-system enables can be said to share similarities with the boom-and-bust logic of the oil industry. Of greater significance to the current discussion, however, is that overnight success or the sort of 'magical transformation' that comes from Hollywood fame or comes, by proxy, from being one half of a celebrity couple, is entirely contrary to the slow, measured, and quite specific trajectory which the *bildungsheld* must follow to ensure their successful coming-to-maturity. Furthermore, the successful completion of the coming-of-age process and arriving at adulthood allows the protagonist to look back on the folly of their younger days. Yet permanent youth is the desired condition for Vee Tracy whose career and success is dependent upon promoting an image of vitality and exuberance; the reflective maturity of older age equates to professional decline for Vee in a way that is entirely at odds with Bunny's journey beyond the inexperience of youth.

As the coming-of-age process draws to a close, the two potential female characters available for Bunny are Paul Watkins's sister Ruth or a fellow student and

[58] David Fine, *Imagining Los Angeles: A City in Fiction* (Reno, NV: University of Nevada Press, 2000), p. 64.

socialist campaign organiser, Rachel. While the unsuccessful encounters with Vee, Thelma, and Eunice served Sinclair's narrative strategy of critiquing various elements within the structure of capitalist petromodernity, the final romantic affair required to conclude events and lead to marriage is, here, centred on fomenting a political code of values suitable to sustain Bunny as a mature adult. As Jerome Buckley notes, two romantic relationships are conventionally required for the male protagonist throughout the course of the narrative with 'one debasing and one exalting' (97). The narrator summarises the remaining barrier to Bunny's successful completion of the process of adult identity formation by asking, 'Were you going to overthrow capitalism by the ballot or by direct action?' (524). It is through a romantic partnership with the working-class girl Rachel Menzies, a fellow student and active member of the Young People's Socialist Party, that the narrative brings the 'exalting' experience required to overcome this final problem and it occurs during one of the climactic scenes towards the novel's conclusion.

The dichotomy between direct action or negotiation as organising principles is shaped at an earlier juncture in the novel when Bunny watches the hitherto stable operations of Ross's most recent drilling enterprise descend into chaos as a result of a strike by the oilfield workers. The strategy the workers adopt in order to instigate change in the conditions of their labour are rooted in non-violent protest with recourse to democratic entitlements to advance their aims. The strikers would ensure 'they maintain their legal rights, but not weaken their case by committing the least breach of the law, and giving their enemies the chance to put them in the wrong' (184). The oil workers find their strike on the brink of collapse however after it is subject to underhand

tactics from the oil companies who deploy 'the whole power of their industrial system, with all their millions in the banks, their political machine and their strike-breaking agencies, their spies and gunmen, and their state militiamen with machine guns and armoured cars' (196).

Upon arriving at the location where Paul is due to deliver a keynote speech to fellow members of the Communist party, the couple view from their car as a 'crowd of fifty men, carrying weapons of various sorts […] made a rush for the entrance' of the building (529). Instinctively, Bunny is drawn to the scene knowing Paul's life to be in real danger, but Rachel prevents him from leaving the car:

> 'They're raiding them!' cried Bunny, and would have run to the scene; but Rachel's arms were flung about him, pinning him to the seat […] Bunny was almost beside himself, struggling to get loose, and Rachel fighting like a mad thing – he had never dreamed she had such strength. […] She knew in those dreadful minutes [….] that some day in this hideous class war there would come the moment when it was her husband's duty to get himself killed. But not yet, not yet! (529, 530).

As Bunny has spent much of the narrative as a passive observer and seemingly unwilling or unable to assert himself in ways that would impact the course of events in a meaningful way, it is, perhaps, somewhat ironic that Bunny is held back and restrained by Rachel here. Nevertheless, in stopping Bunny from intervening in the melee, where his own safety would be in considerable jeopardy, Rachel fulfils an important narrative function regarding the role of the female partner in the process of *bildung*. In restraining Bunny and tempering his heated instinct to participate in violence, even if his motive

was to help take a stand alongside his friend Paul, Rachel enacts a non-violent form of action and solves for Bunny the final ethical dilemma he had grappled with in the latter stages of the narrative, which hinged on the ethics of action or ideas.

**1.3 The Temporality and Topographies of Oil.**

The material significance of space and place, as it relates specifically to the formation of the young protagonist, is an area which appears to be largely unexplored in the critical and scholarly literature on the *bildungsroman*. The protagonist-hero is, of course, mobile throughout the course of events. In the 'classic' structural pattern of the *bildungsroman*, the 'journey away from the father' is later concluded with 'a symbolic return' as self-fashioning through apprenticeship, education, and romantic encounters bring the hero home older and wiser.[59] Similarly, while modernist *bildungsromane* may deviate somewhat from this pattern by highlighting the protagonist's dissent and alienation as a response to 'a broad crisis within the state-sponsored ideological apparatuses responsible for producing models of normative socialisation', it is the laws, rules, and human relations within the spaces and locations which effect the hero rather than their relations to the physical topographies in and of themselves.[60] Yet in the light of *Oil!*'s conclusion, in which the protagonist's transition to adult maturity and the completion of the process of self-formation are intricately associated with particular spaces, it would be remiss not to consider the importance of locations, landscapes, settings, and dwellings as elements of the petro-*bildungsroman*. Reflecting on the potential symbolic

[59] Jerome Buckley, *Seasons of Youth*: *The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1974).
[60] Gregory Castle, 'Coming of Age in the Age of Empire: Joyce's Modernist *Bildungsroman*' *James Joyce Quarterly*, pp. 665-690 (p. 676).

dimension of physical space and environment and, more specifically, the protagonist-hero's engagement and interactions with them, offers a similar analytical approach to the *bildungsroman* novel to that which the eco-feminist scholar Annette Kolodny offers in her readings of American pastoral writing. Kolodny draws on theoretical models from the discipline of cognitive and behavioural psychology as a way of developing her analysis of what she calls the 'American pastoral impulse'.[61] More specifically, Kolodny is interested in the potential parallels between how the perceptual configurations of children, or 'symbol systems', establish a framework for later adult development, and how this process might help to explain the persistence of the land-as-woman metaphor within the collective American cultural consciousness. According to conventional cognitive theory, ideas of safety, security, comfort, and gratification are associated with the notion of the 'home', a term which encompasses both geographic space and the connection to the space of the mother's physical body (p.153). As mentioned above, Kolodny's suggestion that the maternal body is the site of safety, security, comfort and gratification may run the risk of reinforcing certain essentialist ideas of a gendered division of labour, which regard child rearing and socialization as women's work. Yet even though her work may seem somewhat dated when it is considered in relation to current feminist critical scholarship on the environment, her account of gendered spaces remains valuable for understanding the gendered spaces of petromodernity in early twentieth-century American fiction. As she puts it, 'the progress from infancy to adulthood […] may be seen in part as a progress through larger and larger perceptual configurations of "home" from the maternal embrace to the neighbourhood, to a

[61] Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), p.4.

country, a continent […] (p.152)'. It follows then, that 'the world visualised as one's home takes on the positive elements of what were previously the parameters of the original home, the maternal embrace (or even, perhaps, the womb) (152). It is because the 'maternal embrace' is associated so powerfully with an ideal state of existence that 'the mother's body, as the first ambience experienced by the infant, becomes a kind of archetypal primary landscape to which subsequent perceptual configurations of space are related' (156). From this perspective, the passage into adult maturity is dependent upon successfully rejecting the security and comfort of the maternal body, in whichever way it may be manifest, and becoming independent and self-reliant. If Kolodny's discussion is restricted solely to the interconnections between the gendering of nature and its literary representation in pastoral writing, the theory of a developmental process structured around a tension between the pursuit of independence and the necessary rejection of the security of the parental 'home' has broader implications, which extend to the literary conventions that structure the *bildungsroman*. Before considering the wider significance of this discussion for reading the *bildungsroman* narrative in *Oil!,* it is important to note the conclusion of Kolodny's argument in terms of the pastoral literature she examines. In her study of literary works ranging over a four-hundred year period, she notes that 'the dynamic of almost every piece of writing […] appears to repeat a movement back into the realm of the Mother, in order to begin again, and then an attempted (and not always successful) movement out of that containment in order to experience the self as independent, assertive, and sexually active' (153). The formation of the 'independent' and 'assertive' protagonist described by Kolodny can be said to parallel certain conventions typically associated with the *bildungsroman* in which a similar process of self-formation structures the events of the narrative. When Kolodny

refers to the 'movement back into the realm of the Mother', the 'realm' in question is that of the pastoral spaces of nature. An absence of critical commentary on such spaces in scholarly studies of the *bildungsroman* seems to suggest that the representations of environmental spaces and non-human geographies have not been regarded as especially significant or overly relevant to this genre of fiction. As mentioned already, the physical spaces more typically navigated by the masculine heroic protagonist of the *bildungsroman* are the urban centres of vice and commerce as seen in the case of Pip's London, or the spaces may be social institutions such as the university in which Stephen Daedalus finds hypocrisy and violence cloaked in the veil of education and religious instruction. Yet non-urban environments and spaces of nature are important within the historical context of the American *bildungsromane* as the literary critic Kenneth Millard has shown. Millard's historical account of the American adoption and adaptation of this European literary form is concerned primarily with an exploration of the radical potential of this literary form. Millard offers an illuminating analysis of the way the American *bildungsroman* deploys 'adolescence as a vehicle for social critique' as a result of its cross-genre composition.[62] Because the coming-of-age novel is 'the conjunction of two genres, the sociological and the literary […] [these novels] become an idealised fictional category which literary writers can use to give a particular urgency to representations of subjectivity and socialisation that highlight their own anxieties' (12, 13). This point seems particularly resonant in relation to Sinclair's *Oil!* because it clarifies further an interpretation of Bunny, and his many ethical predicaments, as a proxy for Sinclair and his own struggles with progressive activism. As Jon A. Yoder puts it,

[62] Kenneth Millard, *Coming of Age in Contemporary American Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p.13.

'Carefully setting up his character types, Sinclair turns Bunny into a sketch of the American liberal caught in the dilemma of an idealist who sees many of his social values as conflicting with the ultimate value –pragmatism'. [63] Paradoxically, however, Millard identifies a recurring tension across a range of examples in which this radical aspect is countered by a conservative, somewhat inward-looking appeal to nostalgia in which an idealised, pre-lapsarian past is presented as the solution to the ills and evils of the contemporary present which the protagonist's coming of age brings to the fore. As he writes, 'the narrative of coming of age permits writers to interrogate the historical circumstances that have separated their protagonists from an original innocence which is mythical, imaginary, or nostalgic' (181). The lost 'original innocence' refers to the origin myths which underpinned the colonial projects of the European settlers. Millard explains how, for these settlers, there was little desire to replicate the kind of societies they had left behind, instead this new land presented an opportunity to fashion entirely new ways of living. As he puts it, colonisation 'was widely understood in terms of fresh start for mankind, both economically and spiritually, by which new opportunities would lead to different future and a dynamic society that was innovative […] [and] based on personal freedom. This utopian vision often used the figurative language of adolescence to describe the New World's emergent autonomy […]. America is the rebellious teenager, impatient with the authority of its European parents' (181). For Millard, the idea of America as a colonial project in its formative stage of development makes for a striking parallel with that of the adolescent protagonist of the *bildungsroman*. Conventionally, the *bildungsroman* is regarded as an instructive, pedagogic literary form

[63] Jon A. Yoder, *Upton Sinclair* (New York, NY: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1975), p.71.

which emphasised the values of the socially mobile, European bourgeois middle class. For Millard, however, the notion of an adolescent's narrative of personal development also suggests a 'confluence of the genre of the coming-of-age novel and a particularly, or even uniquely, American narrative of national identity' (182). From this perspective, the American *bildungsroman* becomes, essentially, an allegory for the delayed, deferred, incomplete, or unachieved realisation of the utopian idea of colonial modernity. What Millard does not mention in his historical account is the significance of the material geography and physical space in which this colonial enterprise takes place. We have already seen how Kolodny's thesis of pastoral narratives goes some way towards foregrounding this important aspect. But it is through a critical reframing of these key ideas – that of the bildungsroman as 'a separation from an ideal state' and the pastoral as a 'return to mother nature's innocence' – that this chapter approaches Upton Sinclair's *Oil!.* For the early European colonisers, Kolodny suggests that the arrival in America meant leaving the tumult and upheaval of Europe behind them and in so doing reawakened 'archetypal patterns derived […] from human biology and the human condition' (154). Specifically, 'the European discovery of an unblemished and fertile continent allowed the projection upon it of a residue of infantile experience in which all needs – physical, erotic, spiritual and emotional – had been met by an entity imaged as quintessentially female' (154). Following Kolodny's compelling emphasis on the psycho-social relationship between adult male maturity and specific forms of geographic space, the discussion in the middle section of this chapter examines the gendered dimension of the space of the *bildungsroman* and how this might draw attention to the way in which the energy of desire that is projected onto a landscape that is figured as feminine can be

read as the symbolic expression of the exploitation of energy, which often lies hidden from view.

Having finally decided to leave his father's oil business, Bunny sets out to find a suitable location for what will be the site of the socialist college he intends to build. The process of assessing the various tracts of lands for suitability is described in terms of its difference from the types of topographical surveying with which Bunny is more accustomed:

> It was a much pleasanter job than seeking oil lands; you could give some attention to the view, the woods and hills, and other things you really cared about; also, it wasn't such a gamble, because you could really find out about the water supply, and have a chemical analysis of the soil (518).

This holistic consideration of an environmental space is markedly different from the work of oil prospecting in which an emphasis on the potential for processes of resource commodification supersedes all others. The environmental historian Brian Black explores the wider implications of approaching land exclusively as a resource for exploitation in his historical account of pre-twentieth century extraction practices. Black notes how a single-minded focus on extraction at all costs underpinned the motivation for a frenetic mobilisation of hundreds of competing independent wildcatters across regions such as Pennsylvania in the latter part of the nineteenth century. He explains:

> […] the entire landscape would be reconstructed to fit the process of extracting oil from its geological home. The valley became more a process than a place. […]

> Oil flooded out the meaning of local culture as it also usurped the values with which the valley's resources were judged.[64]

It is useful to consider how this reductive and singular perspective of natural environments as economic spaces typified the ethos of the oil industry in its anarchic early decades in relation to Bunny's encounters and relations with natural landscapes and rural space as they form part of his apprenticeship. An ever-present presence at his father's side, Bunny 'lived outdoors' in and around oil fields and sites of future fields and 'thus, day by day, Bunny got his oil lessons. He wondered about the field with Dad and the geologist and the boss driller, while they laid out plans for future sites' (70). This approach to natural space underscores how Bunny had been rigorously trained to understand the land in terms of economic potential as part of his apprenticeship. A short section that describes the Paradise oilfield from Bunny's narrative perspective reveals the degree to which his education is far from complete. The oil field and the refinery are described in ways that echo some of the childlike terms and phrasing in the novel's opening section. If, as I have argued, formal features in that section, such as references to magic and the stream-of consciousness narration, can be said to emphasise Bunny's immaturity and, therefore, his inability to understand the wider implications of the culture of automobility that he holds in amazement, then his visit to the Paradise tract is described through the use of similar techniques as a way to underscore Bunny's naivety at the mid-point of the novel and remind readers that, above all else, the narrative is focused on Bunny's journey towards adult maturity.

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[64] Brian Black, *Petrolia*: *The Landscape of America's First Oil Boom* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), p.52/59.

The overarching factor which determines that Bunny remains a way away from a passage into adulthood is his belief that the Paradise oilfield will operate in the manner of a workers' co-operative and, in so doing, dismantle the tensions between capital and labour and, 'thus, with one stroke, the knot of social injustice would be cut' (267). Enthused by this notion, Bunny goes on to tour the oilfield and refinery with Paul: 'They investigated the new refinery, that wonderful work of art. Before them rose a great building, made entirely of enormous baking-pans set one inside another – a stack halfway to heaven; the angels were making caramels for the whole world, dainties with a new, patented flavour, and sickish sweet odours that spread over the hills for miles and frightened the quail away!' (276).

The reference to the refinery as tower, attended to by angels and seemingly stretching up high into the heavens might even evoke the image of a Babel-like tower, the myth of which, of course, is intended as a symbol of humanity's hubris in believing it could transcend the earth and physically encounter God. In this respect, the description of the refinery marvels at its technology while encoding a veiled reference to Bunny's own hubristic notion of the worker owned oil field. The idea of angels preparing food has an aesthetic precedent in *The Angel's Kitchen* (1646) by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo. The painting depicts a Franciscan friar in prayer whilst winged angels and cherubin figures attend to a range of culinary duties. To the left of the image, two gentlemen view the scene in wonder.[65] We cannot know, of course, if Sinclair was in anyway familiar with this painting but the description of the refinery as a 'work of art', coupled with the way that Bunny and Paul are also two visitors to a site of orderly production, certainly

[65] <https://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/angels-kitchen> [Accessed online February 20th, 2019].

does invite such an interpretation. If we extend this reading of the passage further, the reference to the caramels being made 'for the whole world' would equate to the prayer which Murillo's friar offers in the painting which is for the produce of his modest pantry to expand so that it might feed the poor and destitute of the region.

The way Bunny's reconfigured relationship with natural space is used as a way to signify the transition into adulthood and, consequently, a repudiation of his father's extensive training, occurs in the final chapter of the novel where the site for the labour college is chosen. Following Bunny and Rachel's arrival at the remote site, the narrator describes the location:

> […] near a village called Mount Hope, in a little valley, with ploughed land running up the slopes of half a dozen hills. It was early November, and the rains had fallen, and the new grain had sprouted, and there were lovely curving surfaces that might have been the muscles of great giants lying prone – giants with skins of the softest bright green velvet. There were orchards and artesian water with a pumping plant, and a little ranch-house […] (520).

The pastoral setting described here contrasts clearly with the spaces and environments Bunny has inhabited, worked in, or passed through, at various points during the narrative. In place of the derricks configured to extract oil from the land, the water pumps are framed in this extract to represent a process of renewal and re-circulation, which begins with the November rains. The ploughed land on the slopes of the hills reinforces the contrast with that of the physical landscapes irreparably exhausted by the technologies of extraction. As eco-feminist theorists such as Carolyn Merchant and Val Plumwood (amongst others) have extensively shown, there is a long and established convention in which natural environments and non-human spaces are

gendered as female can be identified across a variety of historical epochs and socio-cultural traditions. These critics delineate the dynamic aspect of female-nature tropes and explain how, historically, this has functioned as a means of restricting the excessive exploitation of resources through the trope of Mother Earth, or, conversely, how the trope of Virgin Land served to normalise and sanction such ideas of exploitation. I return to these theories of gendered natural environments in greater detail in later chapters but mention them here briefly in so far as they help to contextualise this passage's reference to the valley's 'curving surfaces' and 'velvet skin' by registering how these representations echo well-worn feminized representations of nature associated with the 'mainstream Recovery Narrative'. Coined by the ecofeminist writer Carolyn Merchant, this phrase, which is interchangeable with the phrase the 'Recovery of Eden', is used to describe a mythology born out of the ostensibly unusual alliance between the modern, scientific and empirical worldview propagated by the emergent bourgeois classes, with that of an orthodox strain of Christian theology.[66] What is perhaps most alarming about Bunny's description of this near-utopian, pastoral vision of nature is the way references to 'velvet skin' and 'curving features' echo the gendered rhetoric of resource imperialism in a way that seems inconsistent both with Sinclair's progressive liberalism, and the overarching critique of contemporary capitalism which is made so central to the novel. And yet, as Lawrence Buell reminds us, the idea of the American pastoral must always be considered relatively and in relation to its appearance in a specific context. Its 'ideological grammar' can never be 'pure' as Buell explains through extensive examples in which the American pastoral has been deployed at different times, within in different

[66] Carolyn Merchant, *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 75.

contexts, to serve divergent agendas. Crucially, Buell notes the 'duality built into Euro-American pastoral from the start, for it was conceived as both a dream hostile to the standing order of civilisation […] and at the same time a model for the civilisation in the process of being built. So American pastoral has simultaneously been counterinstitutional and institutionally sponsored'.[67] '[V]elvet skin' does not have feminine associations in the way that might be expected as it refers to the valley as 'great giants'. This recalls the figurative technique deployed in the first chapter of the novel, discussed above, where the production of a road that extends far across the landscape, is attributed by Bunny to the work of a 'giant hand' in a way which foregrounds how nature and human labour are abstracted from the culture of petro-capitalist modernity. As we have already seen, the 'giant hand' also appeared as part of a broader rhetorical pattern in which magic and mythological references described automobility through the focalising consciousness of a youthful Bunny, while drawing attention to petro-fetishism. In the later description of the agricultural land around the labour college, the description of 'muscles of great giants lying prone' seems unambiguous in the way it ascribes to the land characteristics conventionally regarded as masculine. In so doing, Sinclair moves away from the tropes of female/nature and gestures towards an alternate gendering of nature. The image of 'great giants lying prone' recalls Marx's well-known reference to the proletariat as 'sleeping giants'; such a parallel seems particularly apposite when we consider the political education that Bunny intends for the students who attend the labour college he establishes at the end of the novel. As the narrator explains, this college will come to be constructed 'on a tract of

[67] Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination. Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 50.

land somewhere out in the country' and will promote 'a Socialist discipline, a personal life, with service to the cause as its goal […] he wanted to begin in tents, and have all the buildings put up by the labour of the students and teachers. Everybody on the place was to have four hours manual labour and four of class work daily' (511-512).[68] Clearly, *Oil!*'s cultural and historical context is entirely distinct from the classic European *bildungsroman* such as *Wilhelm Meister*, which Franco Moretti considers in *The Way of the World*. Nevertheless, Moretti's description of the effects of 'noncapitalist work' for Goethe's protagonist seems applicable to Sinclair's novel. Emphasising the importance of 'work' for the process of *bildung*, Moretti writes, 'work is fundamental in *Meister:* as *non*capitalist work, as reproduction of a "closed circle". It is an unequalled instrument of social cohesion, producing not commodities but "harmonious objects", "connections". […] It reinforces the link between man and nature, man and other men, man and himself. […] work seems to have as its end the formation of the individual' (29). The function that 'noncapitalist work' performs in the *Oil!*—the work which Bunny's college will perform and is removed from the business of oil speculation and extraction — can be seen as conventional and firmly within the tradition established by Goethe.

In the final pages of the novel just as all of the outstanding threads of the plotlines are being brought to their conclusions, there is an unexpected shift in the tone and style of the narration. The final scene begins with the funeral of Paul held in the valley where his family's ranch once stood but is now the site of the Roscoe/ Ross

[68] Yoder notes how Bunny's "plan is modelled on a similar school called 'Commonwealth' in Mena, Arkansas" (p.118). In a short historical account of 'Commonwealth', the historian William H. Cobb explains how the founding principles of the college stemmed from the belief that traditional educational institutions 'were incapable of honest worker education simply because they were controlled by middle class interests that were indifferent to or hostile towards the needs of labor'. William H. Cobb, 'From Utopian Isolation to Radical Activism: Commonwealth College, 1925-1935', *Arkansas Historical Quarterly,* Vol.32, No.2 (1973), 132-147, (137).

oilfield. Sinclair reintroduces Paul's ever loyal sister Ruth, who appears withdrawn and deeply affected by the loss. Seemingly traumatised severely, 'all she wanted was to wander over the hills, and call now and then for the sheep which were no longer there […] sometimes she called Paul, and sometimes she called Bunny, and so they let her wander; until one day she went calling Joe Gundah' (547). Through Ruth's calls, Sinclair draws together the various casualties of the narrative. Calling for the sheep 'which were no longer there' is a reminder that the land was once the Watkins's smallholding where rudimentary farming provided self-sufficient living. With the farmland now transformed into oilfields, the absent sheep evoke the trope of the vanishing pastoral in the face of industrialisation as it transforms the physical geography of the rural landscape. Leo Marx's seminal text, *The Machine in the Garden* (1964) maps the advent of the railway network and the mills and factories as earlier elements in American history that generated anxiety over the impact of an encroaching modernity.[69] Sinclair has not imbued the landscape, be it town or country, with any particular significance throughout the novel, yet here the trope of the machine in the garden is hurriedly rewritten as the derrick in the valley to update this symbolic expression of pastoral paranoia. The calls for Paul and Bunny are more explicit and the call for Joe Gundah is also unusual. Joe Gundah is a very minor reference from the early stages of the narrative; Gundah was a worker for Ross shortly after the oil fields at the Watkins's range were opened. Gundah is tragically killed through an accident on-site when he slips, unnoticed, down a well shaft and drowns in the thick mud and oil deposits. Gundah's death serves a number of functions in the brief section following his death. First, Ross's reaction is one of utmost

[69] Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1964).

seriousness because 'he really was interested in his men; taking care of them was a matter of personal pride to him' (153). As well as registering the inherently dangerous nature of the work, Gundah's death is an object lesson in the way dangerous physical labour is connected to the oil which provides his family with a good life. Ross is sure to use this as an opportunity for Bunny to consolidate an appreciation of this fact, making him read several personal letters from Gundah's family with a view to showing interconnectivity between the work and family. As the novel closes, Ruth Watkins, now seemingly irreparably traumatised, takes to wandering the oilfields calling out Gundah's name as well as those of other deceased characters before she is discovered later having drowned in an oil-well. This event may suggest parallels with the spectral wanderings of monstrous-feminine figures in more canonical literary texts, such as Cathy Earnshaw in Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* or the tragic end of Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. This unexpected narrative turn which finds Ruth wandering in search of a now vanished rural past is also a search for the lost values of a romanticised extraction culture typified by non-exploitative relationships between workers and employers, and an era in which idealised the oil man. As Bob Johnson has suggested, Ruth's untimely death as a consequence of her trauma can certainly be read as 'a heavy-handed gesture that links oil to physical and psychic violence [while] the scene plays out the loss of our former innocence by asking us to bear witness to one of modernity's casualties'.[70] Yet I suggest that it is better understood as a precursor to a more striking use of gothic literary techniques in which Sinclair, in a lengthy paragraph, personifies contemporary petro-capitalism as a demon stalking the earth that is responsible for the deaths of key

[70] Bob Johnson, *Carbon Nation: Fossil Fuels in the Making of American Culture* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2014), p. 144.

characters from the novel. The deployments of rhetoric and imagery associated with the Gothic are striking and mark such an extreme departure that I quote it here in full in advance of a closer examination, which follows:

> You can see those graves, with a picket fence about them, and no derrick for a hundred feet or more. Someday all those unlovely derricks will be gone, and so will the picket fence and the graves. There will be other girls with bare brown legs running over those hills, and they may grow up to be happier women, if men can find some way to chain the black and cruel demon which killed Ruth Watkins and her brother – yes, and Dad also: an evil Power which roams the earth, crippling the bodies of men and women, and luring the nations to destruction by visions of unearned wealth, and the opportunity to enslave and exploit labour (548).

The crippled bodies, lured nations, and exploited workers refer back to key events in the novel and alludes to Paul's murder, the Great War, the defeat of the Bolsheviks in Russia, and the strikes and protests at Ross's oilfields. Framing oil in this way prefigures a number of instances in the twentieth century when oil has been described in relation to hell and Satan, perhaps most memorably by the Venezuelan diplomat and politician, Juan Pablo Perez Alfonso, who referred to oil as the 'devil's excrement'.[71] Conversely, the novel's final passage can also be seen as part of a rhetorical tradition in which vampires have been used to represent capitalists, and the mechanised instruments of heavy industry have been cast as phantasmagorical monsters, a technique used to great

[71] 'The Devil's Excrement', *The Economist*, 22 May (2003) < http://www.economist.com/node/1795921> [Accessed online 11 August 2016]

effect at regular points throughout Marx's *Capital* Volume One. Indeed, Sinclair's concluding passage here could even be seen as following in a rhetorical tradition of writing which had used apocalyptic, Boschian imagery to refer to the material conditions within coal mines and the social, economic, and environmental effects of the coal industry more broadly. Writing in 1922, a few years before the publication of Sinclair's *Oil!,* Sherwood Anderson's 'My Fire Burns', recounts the various events and observations from a year spent travelling between various mining towns. Anderson explains how, 'the experience left on my sensibilities a kind of raw tender place that has never quite healed'.[72] The streets of those towns which exuded 'a kind of dreary horror of life unmatched anywhere' are recalled to him vividly in nightmares. Anderson's concluding section prefigures Sinclair's description of oil as the 'black and cruel demon' through an evocation of the powerful coal assemblages as a demonic and tyrannical monarch:

> […] the coal mines [are] now king here. The black giant, disturbed in his sleep, has set forth and has conquered. We all breathe his black breath. […] [I]n this king there is as yet little beauty. Having been disturbed in his bed in the hills he has set out, hun-like, to conquer and will conquer. Even as I write, he is on the march […] invading new towns, building newer and larger cities, breathing his black breath over greater and greater stretches of green country. The king is, I admit, King. What a laughter the word democracy must sometimes stir within his black bowels!

[72] Sherwood Anderson, 'My Fire Burns', *The Survey*, Vol. 47, (1922) pp.999-1000, (p.999).

The similarities between these phantasmagorical renderings of both forms of fossil fuels are striking.[73] Yet, whereas Anderson's metaphor configures the 'black giant' of coal as an unassailable juggernaut marauding across the nation and poisoning the land with the toxic fumes of his 'black breath', the 'black and cruel demon' of oil suggests a closer similarity with the manipulative and deceptive Satan of traditional Renaissance mythology. While coal capitalism is simply an all-powerful invading force, the Luciferian character of oil derives from its ability to deceive, 'to *lure* the nation's' into enacting their own forms of self-destruction through 'visions of unearned wealth'. The assertion that unearned wealth, of the type oil promises, is morally corrosive or ethically degrading is a refrain which is echoed throughout the short stories of Winifred Sanford, as we will shortly see.

Although curiously reticent on the stylistic shift of the ending, William Bloodworth notes that although 'Sinclair attempts ideologically to pin the tragedies of the story solely on capitalist greed' the paragraph in question is ineffective because 'by this point […] a reader is primarily aware only of the death, whatever its ultimate cause, of three convincingly developed characters' (106). Within the context of a crisis in maleness, which I have been arguing runs through this novel, the patriarchal idea that a future where women are happy and safe is dependent upon whether '*men* can find some way to chain the black and cruel demon' seems a significant detail in amongst the

[73] Indeed, it could be said that Anderson and Sinclair are extending certain tropes from an earlier phase in the development of resource commodity capitalism. As Mark Fiege has written of the antebellum cotton plantations: 'the slaveholders perpetually stood in danger of losing control. [...] [the cotton] did not automatically yield the quantity or quality of fibre that the growers desired. For various biological and environmental reasons cotton resisted complete systematization and thus weakened the farmers' and planters' power over their kingdom. [...] [the term] King Cotton, subtly acknowledged that the plant had mastered them as much as they had mastered it'. Mark Fiege, *The Republic of Nature: An Environmental History of the United States* (Seattle, WT: University of Washington Press, 2012), p.104.

overstatement. In other words, predominant patriarchal ideas of maleness, loosely yet powerfully understood as a set of characteristics including chivalry, honour, and action are under threat of erosion by oil-capitalism as petro-modernity forges a new idea of masculinity centred on expressive individualism. Who will protect the vulnerable women, Sinclair suggests, when the differences between men and women becomes harder to distinguish? The use of Gothic rhetoric and tropes here as a way of drawing attention to a crisis in masculinity shares a number of similarities with the way such techniques have, historically, been used as signifiers of a cultural anxiety about a crisis in the social order. In this way, the use of the gothic can also be seen to prefigure concerns about the profoundly uncertain future of oil speculation and accumulation, which also haunt the rhetoric and imagery of oil masculinity. The next chapter develops this concern with oil masculinity, with reference to the short fiction of Winifred Sanford.

# Chapter Two: The Crisis of Extraction Culture and Oil Masculinity in the Fiction of Winifred Sanford

In early twentieth-century American literature and culture, the world of oil is framed as a man's world.[74] If the extraction, abstraction, and fetishization of oil as a commodity depended upon masculine forms of labour, oil also became a sign of masculinity in an emerging industrial economy that was increasingly dependent on fossil fuels. This is not to suggest, however, that the rhetoric of oil masculinity and the promise of wealth that it appeared to symbolise were always as stable or coherent as it claimed to be. A more careful consideration of the performances of oil masculinity in early twentieth-century American literature and culture reveals how the emergence of the oilman was partly a response to a cultural anxiety that traditional forms of American masculinity had fallen into a state of crisis since the late nineteenth century.

Sanford's short stories of the Texan oil industry of the 1920s and early 1930s present an interesting point of contrast with *Oil!*. Whereas Sinclair attempts to map the vast and complex networks of US oil-powered capitalism as it unfolds over geographically distinct locations, Sanford's narratives largely maintain a fixity of location, and are typically played out in domestic spaces such as guesthouses, private farmland, or remote rural locations. Furthermore, where *Oil!* is populated by a dizzying cast of film

[74] As Katherine G. Morrissey writes more broadly on how the American west 'is most often associated with masculine images. Cowboys and soldiers, gold miners and fur traders – the cast of characters that peoples the stereotypical West is male-dominated. Many of the activities celebrated as central as central to the western experience - conquering a virgin land, subduing Indians, building railroads, ranching, farming, logging, establishing governments – are those perceived as "men's work". Imbued with these masculine images, the ideology of the west celebrates a particular, and gendered, form of American identity'. Katherine G. Morrissey, 'Engendering the West', in *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past* eds. William Cronin, George Mills, and Jay Gitlin (New York: W.W. Norton Books, 1992), pp. 132-144, (p. 133).

stars, politicians, oil magnates, religious leaders, and revolutionaries which jostle for the reader's attention, Sanford's stories tend to narrate the experiences of two or three characters as they unfold over a single day, evening, or afternoon. Far removed from the lavish Hollywood parties that Bunny Ross attends or the business deals between senators and oil magnates brokered in smoke-filled rooms, Sanford explores the cultural and social effects of oil through the domestic details of everyday life on the periphery of the oil-economy. The social and economic status of her characters is often marginal with respect to the power and wealth associated with the oil boom; instead, the narratives typically centre on out-of-work oil drillers, oil-field prospectors on the brink of financial ruin, rural smallholders, and proprietors of low-rent establishments. As Emerett Sanford Miles puts it in the introductory foreword to *Windfall*, 'she told her stories from the fringes of the oil business through the eyes of ordinary people caught up in it, not the millionaires […] or the "company" people, or the lawyers'.[75]

Despite the clear differences between Sanford and Sinclair in respect of their commercial success and public recognition, both writers explore the gender politics of oil masculinity and the emergent culture of petro-capitalist modernity in ways that invite further comparison. Both Sanford and Sinclair draw on the conventions of literary genres that may seem historically belated in respect of how both regionalist fiction and the *bildungsroman* are literary modes whose commercial and critical currency could, arguably, be said to have waned prior to the emergence of a petro-capitalist modernity. Yet it is precisely in this use of literary techniques conventionally associated with the

[75] Emerett Sanford Miles, 'Foreword', *Windfall and Other Stories* (Dallas, TX: Southern Methodist University Press, 2008), p. 11.

generic codes of American regionalist fiction that Sanford foregrounds the performance of oil masculinity, and the ways in which this performance threatens to break down. By examining the representations of masculine extraction culture in the stories that form the *Windfall* collection, this chapter considers how a crisis in the petro-primitivist notions which bind stereotypes of masculine identity to the oil industry can work to defetishize the rhetoric of petro-capitalist culture and articulate anxieties about the precarious condition of the oil industry in the 1920s and early 1930s.

## 2.1 Narrating the Periphery of the Oil Economy: Sanford and American Literary Regionalism.

Sanford's fiction narrates the experiences of working-class characters that populate the boomtowns and oilfields of American southern states. Yet, as mentioned already, she remains a neglected author who has evaded significant critical attention. The most substantial scholarly publication on Sanford is by the Texan academic Betty Holland Wiesepape, whose recent biography, *Winifred Sanford: The Life and Times of a Texan Writer* (2012), draws extensively on archival material held in Sanford's family's private collection.[76] Wiesepape's work certainly helps to shed light on this obscure writer, yet her account is largely biographical, and does not offer any textual analysis of Sanford's writing; there is no attempt to situate Sanford's work within a wider literary context; and nor is there a consideration of the formal aspects of her work. Such considerations are, however, the focus of the critic Elisa Warford's strident and somewhat narrowly

[76] Betty Holland Wiesepape. *Winifred Sanford: The Life and Times of a Texan Writer* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2013).

focused essay, 'Texas Petrofiction: Regionalism and the Oil Stories of Winifred Sanford', which is the most sustained work of scholarly criticism on Sanford available at present. While Warford makes a number of contentious claims in her piece, she also provides a useful contextual framework for approaching Sanford's fiction by locating it within the tradition of American regionalist writing that dates from the mid-nineteenth century. Yet, for Warford, it is precisely because Sanford writes within this tradition that proves so problematic. Regionalism, Warford argues, 'limits [Sanford's] ability to theorize an alternative to the abuses of the capitalist system under which her characters labour'.[77] For Warford 'regionalism as social protest' is simply an inadequate form which fails 'to lay bare the global economic forces working upon the characters' (66). Warford does make some convincing points regarding the potential limitations of certain generic conventions. For example, Warford identifies a tendency within American regionalist fiction to 'look to the past, valorising rural communities as pastoral utopias' (64). In addition, she writes that how these narrative conventions are apt to 'recapitulate the city-country binary in their suspicion of the city and its questionable modern morality [...] [and] view migration and rootlessness with trepidation' (66). While I agree that Sanford's work does not engage with the national, and even global, perspective on the oil industry in the way that, for example, Sinclair does, Warford's claim regarding the restrictions of genre rests on a rather narrow understanding of regionalist fiction that overlooks its significance as a form of writing that can shed light on the spatial and temporal dynamics of the oil economy. A more productive approach to peripheral literary forms is suggested by the critic David Jordan, who argues that perspectives from

[77] Elisa Warford, 'Texas Petrofiction: Regionalism and the Oil Stories of Winifred Sanford', *Southwestern American Literature*, Vol. 38 No.2, (2013), pp. 58-70 (p. 60).

peripheral locations can offer useful ways of re-thinking broad and sweeping national narratives. As he puts it, 'Because a region is by definition a small part of a larger whole, regionalism necessarily proceeds from a de-centred world-view' and in this way 'can challenge prevailing assumptions about cultural homogeneity'.[78] 'Thinking regionally' in the way Jordan suggests, offers a way of drawing attention to local or regional differences and provides a means of distinguishing between metropolitan life and older, more traditional agrarian cultures, and the modes of production they symbolise. In a further account of regionalism, Sherrie Inness and Diane Royer emphasise the importance of identity in relation to community. As they write:

> […] regionalism involves our investment in community, whether that community is a small town or large city and whether it means a group of local residents or people bonded through shared affiliations. […] Identity, it seems, is deeply entrenched in the conception of regionalism. We might identify with the region we live in or not, and there are a multitude of sectors within a region we can identify with – sectors based on class, gender, race, politics, religion, and a myriad of other constructs. Such multiple and multivalent alliances influence the relationship between self, community, and region.[79]

A heightened sense of an economic and social periphery is certainly evident in a number of the short fictions included in the *Windfall* anthology, where the sense of everyday life in a small-town is powerfully evoked. It is important to note, however, that there is a

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[78] David M. Jordan, *New World Regionalism: Literature in the Americas* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), pp. 7, 9.

[79] Sherrie A. Inness & Diana Royer, *Breaking Boundaries: New Perspectives on Women's Regional Writing* (Iowa City, IA.: University of Iowa Press, 1997), p. 7.

potential disparity between the locale presented in the fiction and both the site of its eventual publication and circulation, in addition to the implied or intended audience. As Phillip J. Barrish notes, while the stories themselves might narrate, for example, the experiences of 'Appalachian Mountain people, Cajuns and Creoles in Louisiana, farmers on the Great Plains, [or] declining fishing villages in the New England coast', in order that these fictional accounts reach a general readership they had to 'pass through editors and a publishing industry in New York and Boston'.[80] As Wiesepape explains in her biography of Sanford, influential figures in the contemporary publishing world − in particular H.L. Mencken whose magazine *The American Mercury* published many of her stories − held Sanford in high regard as a writer whose work was both literary and commercially viable. Indeed, Mencken appears frequently in correspondence with Sanford throughout her, relatively, brief literary career with persistent requests for further short works for his magazine. It is, perhaps, not difficult to see quite why Sanford's fiction would appeal to Mencken in his capacity as the editor and owner of the *American Mercury*. Established in 1923, the magazine was born out of the controversial end to Mencken's previous editorship of the literary magazine *The Smart Set*.[81] Together with George G. Nathan, Mencken had established the magazine as a champion for new and upcoming authors such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Aldous Huxley to name but a few. Following the refusal by the magazine's printers to allow a highly satirical piece on the recent death of President Harding to go to print, Mencken and Nathan resigned their posts and began the *American Mercury* where their editorial control would be

[80] Phillip J. Barrish, 'Democracy in Literature', *The Cambridge Introduction to American Realism*, ed. Phillip J. Barrish, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 20111), pp.74-94, (p. 76).
[81] Marion Elizabeth Rodgers, *Mencken: The American Iconoclast* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 260.

unchallenged. As Marion Elizabeth Rodgers writes in her extensive account of Mencken's life and career, as opposed to the topics designed to appeal directly to the literati and fashionistas of elite New York readership 'one of the principle aims of the *American Mercury* was to introduce one kind of America to another' (261). With a strong focus on journalism, essays, and fiction concerned with highlighting regional differences away from the cosmopolitan centres, Mencken 'was convinced that there were thousands of backwaters in America that remained to be explored' (Rodgers, 262). There is then, a clearly observable tension between the extent to which powerful figures in the publishing industry, such as Mencken, were responsible for influencing the shape of regionalism's generic framework, and how this came to bear on claims for this mode of fiction as offering authentic representations of American life rooted in agrarian traditions. As Mark Storey has put it, 'as regionalism lays claim to an authentic embodiment of a rural-republican past, it frequently employs irrealist registers and generic devices of older or local derivation within formal realist templates [...] dictated by the validating authority of urban publishing houses [...] to feed the appetites of their largely bourgeois urban readers'.[82] Yet for Storey, it is through this apparent tension between the seemingly contradictory forces of the commercial and the traditional which reveals the potential for regionalist literature as a valuable resource which can help to make legible the uneven dynamic between the nation's core and peripheral locations. Referring to the era in which regionalist fiction was regarded to be at the height of its popularity, the late nineteenth century, Storey writes of how its 'prodigious flourishing took place in a period when agricultural communities were not simply subject to a

[82] Mark Storey, 'Local Color, World-System; or American Realism at the Periphery', in *The Oxford Handbook of Literary Realism,* ed.by Keith Newlin, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp.101-118, (p.106).

belated after-effect of capitalism's contradictory impulses, but were the very sites in which those contradictions necessarily coalesced and surfaced' (107). The steps taken by powerful corporate forces to expand from hitherto national marketplaces and extend and insert themselves into global circuits of trade and production ensured that these geographically peripheral regions were placed 'at the front line of modernity's characteristically layered historicities' (107). In short, 'capitalist development meant that rural communities were at once a space of rapid modernization—the development of agribusiness, rationalized growing and harvesting methods, technological innovations in machinery and transportation, and so on—and the site where traditional social, environmental, and epistemological regimes did indeed persist with extraordinary tenacity' (107). As an irrealist form, Sanford's literary regionalism registers the combined and uneven development of a modern oil economy in the semi-peripheral world of the American South in the late 1920s for a petro-modern reading public located in the metropolitan core.

The four short stories comprising Sanford's oil quintet appear in print at a truly unique moment in the history of United States. Published in June of 1928 by HL Menken's *American Mercury*, Sanford's *Windfall* arrives a little over a year before events on Wall Street prove to be the final gasp of the economic surge of the roaring twenties. By the time *Fever in the South* concludes the quintet in November 1931, the severe economic precarity of daily life for many has resulted in food riots in major urban areas across the country. The period in US history between the Great War and the Great Depression is often characterised in the popular imagination as an electrified, neon-lit celebration of an exuberant consumer culture. To the well-known descriptions of the

decade as 'the roaring twenties', 'the jazz age', and 'the new era', one might also add David Nye's apt description of the period as the 'high-energy society' in which 'the ideal American way of life that had evolved by 1925 included a family car, a suburban house with a full range of appliances, a telephone, a phonograph, a radio, and leisure time for high-energy activities outside the home. Success and happiness implicitly meant control of large amounts of energy'.[83] Nye's phrase draws attention to the way these new, consumer-driven lifestyles were facilitated and underpinned by technological advancements reliant on energy forms, specifically the union of electricity and oil. In a related account of the establishment of this 'electric–oil–capitalism' nexus, Frederick Buell has noted how this nexus worked in two mutually reinforcing ways: on the one hand, it 'wrapped people within its many infrastructures – roads, pipelines, telephone lines, power cables'; on the other hand, it simultaneously began 'reaching into and restructuring peoples' private worlds, identities, bodies, thoughts, sense of geography, emotions' (284). Images of the Model T. Ford, the Hollywood starlet, and swinging jazz-halls may have colonised the popular imagination of the American twenties. But it was an emergent petro-capitalism that made possible the restructuring of social and cultural life that is often associated with American modernism. If this emergent age of petromodernity seemed to embody a certain high-energy ethos, it also engendered anxiety, unease, and apprehension concerning the impact of the profound social transformations in both urban and rural spaces. It is precisely due to these reasons that I want to suggest that, in opposition to Warford's assessment, the consideration of regionalist literature from locations peripheral to the metropolitan centres of power and

[83] David E. Nye, *Consuming Power: A Social History of American Energies* (Boston, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), p.183.

finance is crucial in order to gain a fuller, more nuanced perspective of this moment of nascent petromodernity.

**2.2 The Debunking Rhythm of the Short Story Form.**

Winifred Sanford's collection of short stories stands apart from the other chapters of this thesis by dint of its literary form. While an extensive survey of the many and varied attempts to theorize and classify the rules, characteristics, or defining features of the short story form would, of course, extend far beyond the limitations of this current chapter, it is nevertheless useful to preface the following reading of her stories with a short account of some particularly pertinent reflections on the short story form in this vast body of scholarly criticism. In doing so, I aim to compliment the following textual analyses of Sanford's work by drawing attention to the not insubstantial role played by literary form and, more specifically, how the form of these stories mediates an understanding of petromodern life.

It is unusual to find a collection or anthology of short story criticism which does not, in its introductory preface, acknowledge a debt to Edgar Allan Poe's writings on the subject. That his early attempts to theorize a series of classificatory boundaries for the short story are fast approaching two hundred years since their original composition in *Blackwood's* magazine and other literary journals of the period, does not entirely negate their value. Scholars continue to acknowledge Poe's review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* (1837) as one of the foundational texts of short story theory, and point to his claim that it is the brevity of the short story which allows for what he refers to in later reviews as its 'totality of effect'. Central to the notion of totality's singularity regarding the short story, Poe writes, is the time taken for its consumption by a reader. It is because the

novel, 'cannot be read at one sitting, it deprives itself […] of the immense force derivable for *totality*. Worldly interest intervenes during the pauses of perusal, modify, annul, or counteract in a greater or less degree, the impressions of the book'.[84] In the case of the short story, however, an apparent absence of 'worldly interests' intruding upon the reader ensures that 'the author is enabled to carry out the fullness of his intention, be it what it may. During the hour of perusal, the soul of the reader is at the writer's control. There are no external or extrinsic influences – resulting from weariness or interruption' (61). Poe returns to and develops this central thesis across a number of book reviews and essays throughout his published non-fiction writings. In addition to the breaks in reading which the length of the novel demands of its reading public, Poe asserts that the events which occur in a novel, and constitute the markers of a narrative trajectory, are too numerous and interdependent upon each other to engender the impact on a reader which is afforded by the singular effect of unity which he suggests is afforded to the short story. Critics have discussed and debated the prescriptive terms of Poe's definition since their publication in the mid-1800s and while certain weaknesses in his arguments may seem apparent, there is, perhaps, still much to be said of the impact of an uninterrupted narrative; and the impact that brevity may have on the attention of modern readers. Yet, as Norman Friedman, together with others who have critically questioned Poe's taxonomy of literary form, has written, this impact may indeed be lessened due to the shortness of stay in the narrative's world. As Friedman puts it, 'it has never seemed to me that a novel lacks singleness of effect simply because it cannot be read in one sitting. […] [the short story] may make *less* of an impression in the long run

[84] Edgar Allan Poe, "Review of Twice-Told Tales", in *The New Short Story Theories*, ed. Charles E. May, (Ohio, OH: Ohio University Press, 1994), pp. 59-64, p.61.

than the novel, simply because we spend less time with it'.[85] Ultimately for Friedman it is the very term short story that is lacking as a descriptor. As he writes:

> we can talk about the characteristics of the biblical short story, for example, […] or the epiphanic short story , or the difference that the imminence of the end makes, and so on, but we cannot logically or empirically use characteristics as defining traits of the short story […] they must be seen, rather, extrageneric characteristics, features which share with certain other genres whether because of period traits or because of the fact of shortness, but which nevertheless have assumed a particular importance in this genre as well (p.30).

In a related discussion, Thomas. M. Leitch has responded to Poe's insistence that every sentence of a short story's prose be directed toward the cause of 'the single unified effect on the reader' (62). Ultimately, for Poe, the story should be regarded simply as a vessel to carry the narrative to its conclusion, and it is only then that the revelation of the narrative's totality of unity will be felt by the reader. For Leitch, however, the 'short story is the narrative mode that foregrounds closure'.[86] Or, more accurately, 'short stories do not so much foreground closure as the audience's anticipation of closure. Short stories everywhere are shaped by expectation of an imminent teleology' (132). Leitch argues that an antithetical structure has provided the typical pattern for the American short story. An antithetical structure, he writes, tends towards two kinds of conclusion. One of these contains a 'stable sense of closure', which marks off the end of the preceding events and 'adumbrate(s) a new order that displaces the assumptions of

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[85] Norman Friedman, 'Recent Short Story Theories: Problems in Definition', in *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*, ed. by Susan Lohafer & Jo Ellyn Clarey, (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), pp. 13-31, p.25,26.

[86] Thomas M. Leitch, 'The Debunking Rhythm of the American Short Story', in *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*, ed. by Susan Lohafer & Jo Ellyn Clarey, (Louisiana, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), pp.130-147, p.132.

the exposition' (133). The other contains an inconclusive, ambiguous, or uncertain ending, which often disrupts the stability of closure and in this case the 'displacement does not correspond to a movement from ignorance to knowledge but simply indicates a debunking or unknowing of the illusions that the story began by encouraging' (133). These types of stories whose 'antithetical structure indicates movement towards disillusionment rather than teleological movements toward revelation and reintegration, constitute essentially a means of unknowing rather than a means to knowledge' (130). As such, these narratives 'do not so much enlighten audiences by means of authoritative revelations as disabuse them of their illusions about the world the story presents and represents without substituting any positive or more comprehensive wisdom' (133). In the remainder of this chapter, I explore how Sanford's short stories could be seen to evidence both tensions and synchronicity between the irresolution or denial of closure effected by the debunking rhythm, and that of the broader framework of American regionalist fiction which has historically presented a 'de-centred worldview […] [as a means] to challenge prevailing assumptions about cultural homogeneity' (Jordan, 9). If Sanford draws narrative representations of the spaces of oil extraction, and the characters which populate these places, for a largely educated, urban, middle-class American, whose material realities were increasingly enabled and facilitated by oil and petroleum products, in ways that invite reflection and evaluation upon their own position within the pipeline of an encroaching petromodern totality, then her irresolute conclusions, her debunked closures, deny her readers a comfortable way to excuse themselves from their privileged location at the consumption point of the pipeline. Regarded in this way, the critic Elisa Warford's objections, both to American literary regionalism and, specifically, Sanford's decision to write within the recognised

conventions of this mode, might not be considered as exemplifying Sanford's failure to 'theorize an alternative to the abuses of the capitalist system'. Instead, the lack of closure or irresolution in this collection of short fiction serves as an invitation to Sanford's contemporary readers to consider how they themselves, as consumers of oil and subjects of a nascent petromodernity, are implicated within an abusive system of exploitation of land, resources, and labour (Warford, 60).

To further clarify how these short fictions might have been received and understood by contemporary readers as a critical commentary on discourses of oil masculinity, a brief consideration of contemporary psychiatric discourse and its relationship to the development of America's industrial economy is in order. The condition known as neurasthenia, for example, rippled through the American middle-classes during the 1890s, affecting men and women in equal measure. This somewhat vague, umbrella term was intended to describe a heightened anxiety 'understood to be a reaction to the stimuli of modern life'.[87] The suggestion that the constitutions of contemporary men were of such a sensitive and fragile composition ignited calls for a return to vigorous exercise and physical activity undertaken outdoors as a way of alleviating the apparent over-exposure to modernity. Government campaigns by Teddy Roosevelt's administration advocated the 'strenuous life' as the antidote to end-of-the century malaise; to use the words of Roosevelt's programme, male citizens were instructed to 'boldly face the life of strife, resolute to do our duty well and manfully […] for it is only through hard and dangerous endeavour, that we shall ultimately win the goal of true national greatness' (McDonald, 16). Writing on Roosevelt's call-to-arms, Gail

[87] Gail McDonald, *American Literature and Culture 1900-1960* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), p. 23.

McDonald notes how this public address to the nation deftly linked 'the healthy body-mind paradigm to American expansionism and American superiority' while the warning against the dangers of complacency, McDonald notes, is a codified warning against the dangers of effeminacy (16). The following sections of this chapter will examine different representations of the hyper-masculine extraction culture of the oilmen in Sanford's fiction in order to establish how this culture is called into question as it is placed in conflict with nature, the landscape, and non-human ecologies more broadly. Part of this analysis will also consider a further motif which has supplemented the types of agrarian anxieties outlined above: the gendering and codification of the natural world as female or feminine.

Sanford's ostensibly modest collection of oil stories typically centre on the experiences of two specific character-types: the oil prospector driven to the edge of financial ruin and the seemingly peripheral female character who observes and narrates the lives of these men usually from the confines of a domestic setting. In her depictions of the failed oilman, Sanford's fiction represents a departure from the popular caricature of the masculine frontiersman whose skill, guile, and courage are part of a rags-to-riches narrative perpetuated by those in the industry from the mid-nineteenth century. In Olien and Hinton's historical study of the independent oil enterprises, which operated in Texas before the industry became dominated by corporate giants such as the Sun Oil Company, the authors draw on a range of examples from popular culture to show how characters from the industry are portrayed. In film and television, they note, Hollywood stars such as John Wayne, Clark Gable, and Spencer Tracy have featured as lone heroes, 'swashbuckling oilmen' standing firm against the unscrupulous forces of the corporates, fighting 'runaway wells and gushers on fire […] saving Oklahoma Indians from an unfair

oil lease […] (and helping an oilwoman) to fight the murderous Pan-Oklahoma Oil Company'.[88] The oilman is also seen as an exciting participant in a 'treasure hunt rather than a rational enterprise', where access to unimaginable wealth awaits the player, who is able to hold their nerve and strike at the right moment; as Olien and Hinton put it, this is the 'rags-to-riches tale of the grubby roughneck living on beans suddenly catapulted to wealth beyond his wildest dreams, to live happily ever after on champagne and caviar' (24). In this narrative, the oilman-as-chancer does relatively nothing 'to earn his wealth; he merely enjoys what amounts to a *windfall* of dumb *luck*. If he should be so hapless as to go bankrupt, that too is just a matter of luck – of luck that ran out' (my emphasis, 24).[89] Sanford's fiction, I will suggest, offers a more nuanced approach to these narratives of the lucky chancer or the rugged oilman of the frontier. Through depictions of debilitating injuries and the dissolution of families, Sanford complicates these caricatures propagated by both the oil and cultural industries. In 'Mr Carmichael's Room', the personal history of a deceased speculator is mapped out through the few remaining possessions left in his rented room. The landlady of the house attempts to reconstruct his recent history and reveals a deeply lonely figure, who died estranged from his daughter and in poor health not befitting his age. In 'Luck', the staggering business failures of an oil speculator drive him in desperation to attempt to drill in appalling weather conditions, with tragic consequences. These narratives offer a more nuanced depiction of the conditions of oil extraction that subvert conventional stereotypes of oil masculinity.

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[88] Roger M. Olien and Diana Davids Hinton, *Wildcatters: Texas Independent Oilmen* (Austin, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2000), p. 23.

[89] Two of Sanford's short fictions discussed below interrogate this narrative-type and are titled 'Windfall' and 'Luck' respectively.

But as well as this, I want to show how Sanford's short stories register a transitional moment in the development of petro-capitalism: a moment that registers the end of an era of an unregulated oil industry populated by characters such as Sinclair's Ross, and the beginning of a new era in which the oil-government-corporation complex is consolidated. At this transitory moment, as the United States pivots from the period in which rampant speculative economic optimism unleashed new mechanised modes of production capable of facilitating and propagating the consumerism which fuelled the 'high energy society' of the 1920s, and into a decade later distinguished almost exclusively in relation to the devastating social impacts of an extreme economic contraction.[90] Sanford's four short fictional accounts of the Texan oil industry's changing character at this historical juncture invites readers to consider the impact of this socio-economic shift upon those ostensibly marginal, or peripheral figures forced into penury, driven into mania, or beset by profound uncertainty over hitherto stable notions of self-identity or morality. As Ellis Hawley has put it, 'the 1920s are best understood not as the Indian summer of an outmoded order [...] but rather as the premature spring of kind of modern capitalism that would take shape in the America of the 1940s and 1950s'.[91] In other words, Sanford's stories register the contradictions of a transitional moment in the

[90] Jules Tygiel notes 'how 'the booster optimism and rampant speculation' that certainly described the practices in Los Angeles and on Wall Street at this time were also highly visible in 'virtually every section of the nation. The Florida land boom land boom remains the most celebrated of the mid-twenties speculative excesses, but suburbanization and high-rise building construction triggered smaller bubbles in urban areas throughout the United State. Oil discoveries in Oklahoma, Texas, and Louisiana attracted speculators from around the nation. Mining prospects in the Far West and Canada excited the interests of hundreds of thousands of investors. [...] American culture encouraged the acquisitive mentality'. Jules Tygiel, *The Great Los Angeles Swindle: Oil, Stocks, and Scandal During the Roaring Twenties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 8-9.

[91] Ellis W. Hawley, *The Great War and The Search for Order in Modern America: A History of the American People and Their Institutions, 1917-1933* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1979), p. vi.

history of modern fossil extraction that set the stage for what we now understand as petromodernity.

One of the central questions addressed in this section concerns how Sanford's collection of short fiction exemplifies a crisis in the authority of masculine extraction culture and the role played by nature and non-human actors in this crisis. It is important to acknowledge that in 'Windfall', the first story in the collection, ideas of a patriarchal extraction culture are naturalised and presented as inevitable. That is, oil culture is presented as the exclusive domain of a patriarchal power which limits female agency and promotes ecological violence. Yet, in later stories, this patriarchal logic of capital accumulation through extraction is called into question as the future of oil's profitability is also called into question. In this way, the sequence of stories in Sanford's collection seems to interrogate the temporality of petro-capitalist modernity through the deconstruction of oil masculinity.

Moreover, by reading Sanford's stories through the lens of American Regionalism, I suggest that we can begin to understand how Sanford helps us to understand the vicissitudes of the early twentieth-century American oil economy, and the ways in which the profoundly uncertain temporality of petro-capitalist modernity, with its boom-and-bust cycles of growth, accumulation, crisis, and recession, are mediated in and through different literary forms, genres, and tropes at different times and in different places.

**2.3 Petroleum in the Pasture in 'Windfall' (1928).**

Narrated in the third person but focalised predominantly through the consciousness of the smallholder Cora Ponder, the events in 'Windfall' (1928) unfold across a day when the discovery of oil on Cora's farmland has interrupted the patterns of daily rural life with the arrival of crowds of spectators who have descended on the farm to witness the spectacle of the oil well. The first of the narrative's three sections begin within the close quarters of the farmhouse where a focus almost entirely on a list of rather gruelling and routine domestic tasks Cora carries out makes for a stark contrast with the events occurring in the nearby pasture. In the second section, Cora arrives at the pasture but because she feels intimidated by the groups of men that have joined her husband around the drill site, she does not initially proceed to view the well herself. With her children dispersed within the crowd and her neighbours thinly veiling their jealousy through strained, congratulatory asides, Cora separates herself from the scene of frenetic activity to view proceedings from a nearby incline. From here, she watches as a previous resident of the area arrives and the history of his rags-to-riches story is recounted. We learn how the ex-resident, Jasper Gooley, amassed a fortune overnight following the discovery of oil underneath the family's struggling cotton plantation. From his humble beginnings, Gooley's reputation now precedes him as he is widely renowned as a philanderer and *bon vivant*. In the third and final section, Cora is accompanied to the drill-site by her enthusiastic eldest son; as the narrative draws to a close, Cora, once again peripheral to the main events, lingers a while in the pasture to reflect on the mess and waste which the visitors have left discarded in the hedgerows and on the farmland.

As already mentioned, proceedings begin when Cora decides not to join her family and the gathering spectators at the derrick. This detail is registered through the use of free indirect discourse. We are told that 'at first [Cora] was afraid she would be in the way'.[92] The narrator goes on to explain that she 'was too busy in the kitchen' (99). These short excuses are nonetheless significant for understanding the way the story mobilises a gendered discourse of space to define women's relationships to the business of oil extraction in the early twentieth-century American Southwest. As such, even though a number of references are made to the events at the drill-site just a short distance away, the first section of 'Windfall' unfolds within the hot and cramped space of the farmhouse and focuses entirely on the routine and largely mundane domestic work carried out by Cora. Considerable detail is given to describing Cora's domestic tasks such as organising her children's bedroom for instance, where she 'had to hang their pink nightgowns behind the curtain in the corner, and stuff their stockings in the dresser drawers' (100). This blinkered focus on the details of quotidian life in the domestic sphere may seem excessive when one considers that this is ostensibly a story about oil extraction. Indeed, that such a focus certainly works to create a striking contrast with the spectacle of the oil well unfolding out of view might explain the motivation for such an overemphasis on the *minutiae* of domestic work. In addition, drawing attention to a form of labour traditionally and typically associated with women might also invite reflection on the often-reified character of this work. Yet the suggestion that making visible the often-hidden world of 'women's work' in a narrative about the masculine oil-industry might be subversive is tempered by the range of additional references in this

[92] Winifred Sanford, *Windfall and Other Stories* (Austin, TX: Southern Methodist University Press, 1988), p. 99. Subsequent references to this text will appear in the body of the chapter.

section which work to undo such claims by rehearsing patriarchal stereotypes of Cora and her labour. For example, that Cora is unable to participate in the spectacle of the oil-well because of the need to complete her domestic tasks coupled with her reluctance to enter into the space she understands as masculine – 'she knew they [the men at the drill site] would be uncomfortable if she joined them – anchors her firmly within the sphere of the 'private' realm as it contrasts with the cars and people arriving across the pasture which is decidedly 'public' (p. 102). Further references in this section perform a similar function as they consolidate Cora's subject status: consider the references to the physical effects of the work which leave Cora 'tired, soiled, and sweaty' while her 'her bare toes felt as though they had been glued together' (101). This focus on the physical, labouring body as a site of exertion and exhaustion could be understood within the terms of a post-Cartesian dualism that frames the 'mind' as masculine and the 'body' as feminine.[93] It is not until Cora's arrival at the pasture, in the next section, that an example of the masculine/mind is presented with reference to the groupings of men

[93] Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993) p.42.
Plumwood describes dualism as 'an alienated form of differentiation, in which power construes and constructs differences in terms of an inferior and alien realm'. For Plumwood, oppressive dualistic structures underpin western thought and culture and centre on what she terms as 'master-subject relations' comprised of two contrasting pairs in which the former in the structure is always reliant upon but exerts control over the latter. The 'major forms of oppression in western culture' are identified as dualisms which correspond to the following pairings, 'male/female, mental/manual (mind/body), civilised/primitive, human/nature' (47). Where dualisms differ from distinctions or dichotomies is the imbalance of power in the relationship between the two members of the pair, as she puts it, 'In dualistic construction […] the qualities (actual or supposed), the culture, the values and the areas of life associated with the dualised other are systematically and pervasively constructed and depicted as inferior' with the consequence that 'equality and mutuality become literally unthinkable' (47). The efficacy of dualistic modes of control come as a result of their being embedded deeply within collective social values, as she puts it, 'dualism is a relation of separation and domination inscribed and naturalised in culture and characterised by radical exclusion, distancing and opposition between orders constructed as systematically higher and lower, as inferior and superior, as ruler and ruled, which treats the division as part of the natures of beings construed not merely as different but as belonging to radically different orders or kinds, and hence not open to change'(47/48). Considered in the terms of Plumwood's analysis, the hyper-masculine extraction culture of the early twentieth-century can be thought of as the master half of a dualism pairing which is completed by its opposite subject that is nature and non-human ecologies codified as feminine.

gathered around the derrick and, far from evidencing signs of physical exertion or toil, the gathering of men surrounding the oil well affect an air of gravitas through their rather self-satisfied mannerism and stylised affectations.

Numerous references to nature and the natural world are made as Cora proceeds with her domestic tasks. The 'cracked window shade' for example, bears a 'pattern of the sun', and although she pauses briefly to bathe with 'the cool water making her feel better', she lingers 'only as long as she dared if she were to see the well before supper' (97). In both instances referring to elements of nature—the sun by the bedroom and the cool water—the absent presence of the oil-well appears as the antithesis of rest and respite. The sun-pattern marks the bedroom where she cannot rest, and the soothing qualities of the water can only be experienced briefly to ensure there is time enough to visit the well and participate in the spectacle. A further aspect which underscores Cora's secondary status when considered within the terms of a gendered master/ subject power relation relates to the way social reproduction is afforded an inferior position to industrialised production. The various mundane domestic tasks Cora carries out can be categorised as reproductive simply because they ensure that the very reproduction of daily life is able to continue.[94] In contrast, it is the commodity-sign of oil which signifies the superior sphere of production. This value is

[94] Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (New York, NY: Autonomedia Publications, 2004). Federici identifies the historical transition of feudalism into capitalism as the moment which marked an acceptance of the diminution of domestic work. This was because, she explains, that such forms of work could not be readily transferred or traded within the profit-based marketplace: 'In the new monetary regime, only production-for-market was defined as a value-creating activity, whereas the reproduction of the worker began to be considered as valueless from an economic standpoint [...]. The economic importance of the reproduction of labour-power carried out in the home [...] became invisible, being mystified as a natural vocation. Such changes redefined women's positions in society in relation to men'. pp. 74-75.

registered in the location of the exterior, public space of the drill site where the men are gathered to extract—and to *produc*e—the oil.

This opening section of the narrative draws attention to 'women's work', and, through the emphasis on its physicality, might even suggest a form of equivalence with the masculine activities of oil work. However, this point is ultimately subordinated to a series of feminine gendered references that appear towards the end of the story. And yet the notion of this specifically masculine form of productive labour is wryly undermined in the beginning of the second section. Upon arriving in the pasture after making her way through the gathered crowd, she is unable to see the oil well 'because the men were in the way' (102). The narrator proceeds to explain that 'There were oilmen from town, with khaki breeches stuffed into their high boots, and East Indian helmets perched on their heads; […]. They were all laughing and talking and spitting on the ground […] and there were men in overalls, dodging the others while they worked with pieces of iron pipe' (102-103). Because of how their stylised attire and apparent lack of activity is clearly far removed from the popular image of the rugged oilman engaged in the dangerous work of extraction, it is possible to infer a sardonic undertone from the description of the oilmen gathered here, particularly following the detailed description of the physically demanding work Cora has recently undertaken. In addition, the reference to the men's 'East Indian helmets' evoke the imagery of patriarchal colonial military power. Significant also is the fact that the crowds that gather to observe the spectacle of the oil well has disrupted everyday life, so much so that is has even placed limits and restrictions on Cora's ability to navigate the farm. If such disruption is considered in relation to the oil-men's attire, one might consider the events of the day

as a form of colonisation of the agricultural pastoral by the industrial subjects of petromodernity.

Cora's labour is contrasted starkly with the non-productive forms of wealth generation which is manifested in the character of Jasper Gooley, an ex-resident of the area and infamous in the region as a cotton farmer turned rentier after the discovery of oil reserves beneath the cotton crops motivated a sale of the land. An ostentatious figure, replete with a glamorous young wife and sports car, Gooley's reputation for indulging in licentious behaviours serve to remove him far from his humble beginnings as a rural labourer. Reflecting on the disparity between the simple, agrarian life of the boy she once knew and the man he went on to be, Cora 'wondered sometimes what would have happened to Jasper if there had not been oil on his father's land. He would have had to stay at home then, and run the farm, and make a living, and no doubt he would have settled down like his neighbours, with a wife and a family. Instead of that he had rented the farm to tenants' (104).

The idea of a colonisation of the pastoral is further developed at a later point in the narrative in a passage describing scenes of near anarchy as the sheer volume of the crowd, ostensibly arriving to view the oil well, threatens to overwhelm and subsume the very infrastructure of the farm. Feeling excluded and alienated from these events, Cora pauses to observe the unfolding scene from the hillside and looks on as she 'watched the cars stream into the pasture from the main road'. She proceeds to recount how: 'There were Fords filled with farm boys […] they left the gates open and drove where they liked, breaking down the limbs of the mesquite, and staining the grass with drippings of black grease. The crowd was everywhere, trampling the cotton in the next

field, climbing through the barbed wire fences' (103). The reckless and callous disregard for the ecology of the farmland and the violation of the enclosed boundaries shown by the visitors could be read as a reworking of the motif of the machine in the garden. The anxiety of a technological modernity hostile to sanctified notions of the rural and pastoral seem analogous to the dissonant noise of the encroaching railway which Leo Marx famously emphasises in his discussion of Hawthorne's journal. If Sanford's narrative can be said to reimagine the idea of the 'machine in the garden' as something akin to the 'derrick in the pasture', then the arrival of the marauding automobiles might suggest that the phrase 'petroleum in the pasture' seems even more appropriate. This passage depicts a damning indictment of petroleum culture and technology as entirely antithetical to the traditional, agricultural pastoral.[95] In so doing, Sanford prefigures later writers such as Abdel Rahman Munif, whose novel *Cities of Salt* (1984), for example, emphasises how the degradation and despoilation of rural ecologies are far from an exclusively American fictional model.[96] In addition, this frenetic scene of violence enacted against the once sedate farmland also draws on and augments potent turn-of-the century anxieties over notions of the masses and the massification of culture. As Michael Tratner points out, conservative-individualist ideology saw the 'masses' as a consequence of capitalism with its 'focus on the economic man, on private life, and on a rationality supposed to transcend culture, [it] had broken up the social

[95] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973). Using what he calls an 'escalator', Williams moves from the mid-twentieth century back through western history drawing attention to the recurrence of the trope of pastoral anxieties in Victorian novels, texts from the Middle Ages, and even references to ideas of a vanishing rural in the Magna Carta (pp.9-12).

[96] Abdel Rahman Munif, *Cities of Salt* (1984), p. In the novel, a character describes the impact of American commercial oil interests on the fictional island of Wadi Al-Uyoun and how the region, '[..] has been obliterated. With the drilling of oil going on, local people often have to be relocated or travel with the company as their homes are torn down. Palm trees are uprooted as if they are butchered. Ships, trucks, and monstrous machines roar on the construction sites.'().

body'.[97] From this perspective, oil is quite literally the fuel for the 'crowd that was everywhere', the 'mob' of early twentieth-century individualist anxiety. But in his historical account of the politics of mobs and 'the masses' in the early twentieth century, Tranter also identifies a particular ideological strain in which these fears and anxieties over the breakdown of the social body through the actions of 'the mob' was linked to the fear of female equality. Tranter notes how such 'political, psychological, and aesthetic discourse around the turn of the century consistently and obsessively genders mass culture and the masses as feminine' (11). Considered in terms of this history of the modern crowd as a cipher for anxieties over the feminine and the rise of industrial capitalism, the representation of the mob that descends on Cora's farmland can be read as a more contemporary expression of alienation and discontent with late industrialism.

The gendering of the mass crowd as feminine can be seen to be inverted here. The reference to the 'Fords filled with farm boys' realigns the gendered idea of the crowd by linking this petroleum-powered mobile mass to an expression of masculine ecological violence. I return to convention of the land-as-female motif in greater detail in a later discussion of Ross Macdonald's *Sleeping Beauty,* but evoke it briefly here in order to suggest how the actions in the pasture could also be seen as an assault on the feminised body in precisely the manner which the 'Mother Earth' trope of pre-modern eras was configured to deter. From this perspective, the description of the trees' broken 'limbs' might evoke an image of assault on a feminised body as it appears within the lineage of the sorts of anti-deforestation and mining rhetoric outlined by Carolyn Merchant. This metaphor of physical violation against women might even be extended

[97] Michael Tratner, *Modernism and Mass Politics* (California: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 11.

further with the reference to the 'drippings of black grease', which leave stains on the grass evoking, perhaps, an image of blood stains or even the evidence of a sexual assault.

The reference to how the cars 'break the limbs of the mesquite tree' is important because of the deep cultural significance the tree holds in the collective cultural consciousness of Texas. The historian Jason E. Pierce has provided a compelling account of the inconsistent attitudes held by Texans towards this tree, which is a part of the Texan physical landscape and regional imaginary.[98] Pierce notes that in the second half of the twentieth century, the mesquite came to be regarded as something of an irritant due to its proliferation across the landscape; however, prior to this, Texans considered the plant 'as [a] symbol of a developing and mature state with an untapped economic potential' and their widespread proliferation was seen to 'fit with deeply held views of the ideal landscape and became symbols of progress and maturation' (347, 355). In light of this symbolic meaning, the damage caused to the mesquites on Cora's land can be read as a metaphor for the way in which automobiles, as the symbols of an emergent American petro-culture, are the antithesis of the agricultural and ecological ideals of progress and development that had hitherto animated discourses within regional and national collective consciousness.

As mentioned previously, a key motive underpinning the feminisation of nature was to provide a sanctioning restraint which placed moral and social limits on the exploitation of natural resources for financial gain. The events in the pasture suggest the

[98] Jason E. Pierce, 'Marvelous, and Misunderstood: The Strange History of the Mesquite Tree in Texas', *Southwestern Historical Quarterly,* Vol.117, No. 4, (April 2014), pp. 346-370.

complete breakdown in the authority of that sanction in this formative moment of petro-modernity. After all, the visitors in their petrol-powered Fords, have arrived ostensibly to witness the spectacle of an oil strike.

The damage to the environment caused by the marauding cars and crowds is freighted with a particular cultural resonance because of the symbolic currency of 'the farm' in American culture and, specifically, its relation to 'Jeffersonian Agrarianism'. As Stephanie L. Sarver has written, the notion of 'Jeffersonian Agrarianism' powerfully intertwines a particular idea of the national identity and shared political aspirations of white America with land and rural forms of labour. As she puts it, Jeffersonian Agrarianism describes a 'collective value that a nation of freeholder farmers, average men who would act as a cornerstone of democracy […] with the farm forming the basic unit around which an agrarian democracy would be organized'.[99] In light of its sanctified role within broader collective imaginaries of national identity, the reckless and disruptive presence of the crowds and cars moving across the pasture and farmland is a powerful image suggestive of democracy itself under attack.

Indeed, there is a degree of irony in the assumption that the casual vandalism against the land is analogous with an attack on democratic principles given how mass public spectatorship at drill sites was itself coded as a phenomenon attached to strong notions of participatory democracy. One might suggest that 'Windfall' vividly exemplifies the contemporary compulsion within a broader collective imaginary to witness the visceral, materiality of oil extraction processes at their source. As Stephanie LeMenager

[99] Stephanie L. Sarver, *Uneven Land: Nature and Agriculture in American Writing* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), p. 11.

has written, in the early decades of the twentieth century the spectacle of the gushing oil-well was understood as a potent symbol of an inclusive form of American democracy. Reflecting on the public's motivations for spectatorship, she writes of how a newly sprung well 'allows an audience to experience discovery with its own senses, confers an illusion of democratic access to such scenes, also an illusion that oil, and its profits, belong to everyone' (93). The idea that an oil discovery might benefit all of society is indeed illusory because, as she goes on to note, although 'in many American countries oil has been recognized as the property of the nation, in the United States oil rights almost always have belonged to private owners' (93).[100]

In the final stages of the narrative, Cora's attention is drawn to the waste items that the visitors have carelessly discarded on the farmland:

> She saw part of a newspaper impaled on a mesquite thorn, beyond the well. […] Then she saw a scrap of shiny brown paper and a wad of tinfoil, and beyond that, in a clump of cactus, a piece of sandwich wrapping, streaked with yellow salad dressing. There was an empty bottle lying under the wrapping, and bits of broken glass shining here and there all over the pasture. "Tomorrow", thought Cora, "after the washing is finished and on the line, I'll bring a bucket and gather it up before the cattle get to it (106-107).

The various forms of material waste unambiguously extend the threat of oil-powered environmental despoliation and the ecological violence of petro-capitalism from the cars and trucks that Cora observed earlier to include also the disposability underpinning modern cultures of consumption. Cora's reference to laundry here recalls the close

[100] This notion of the oil well as a quasi-public space denoting a shared sense of participatory democracy is undercut yet further when considered in relation to the stratification and differentia treatment of oilfield workers along racialized lines. LeMenager notes how, 'California oil camps were segregated and predominantly white, while U.S. companies in Mexico maintained a rigid racial caste system amongst their "white". Chinese, Mexican, and indigenous workers' (93).

focus on domestic work from the first section of the narrative. On the one hand, the reference suggests a return to a routine centred around productive and useful labour which, even though it may be mundane, is contrary to the aimlessness of the present day. The realisation that, because of the day's events, she now 'had nothing to do' is underscored by the sight of a 'red ant travel[ing] through the grass with a bit of wheat […] [and] a cricket scamper[ing] past on his high stilts' (p.103). Indeed, the reference to these insects might even infer a connection between useful, productive activity and natural state of being. On the other hand, Cora's suggestion that the patterns of her life will continue as before might seem fanciful or even naïve in view of the considerable wealth that the oil well will shortly begin to generate. Cora's good intentions and her genuine desire to maintain the upkeep of the land begins to feel somewhat Canute-like with the act of picking a discarded wrapper from a hedge set against the encroaching tide of the oil industry. It is because this awareness is withheld from Cora but not the reader that entails that 'Windfall' ends on a bleak note that is entirely contrary to that which one might have expected from a short story about a working-class family's apparent moment of good fortune. Cora cannot affect the events of the narrative in any way beyond the quotidian tasks she performs in the opening section and has gained no wider insight into just quite what the arrival of oil will bring. Indeed, the promise made to clean the rubbish reveals how Cora evaluates the day not as one of irreversible change for the family, but as a closed event, rounded off at the narrative's end. The insight here is, of course, with the reader who will know that the traditional way of life with its familiar routines are gone forever. From this perspective, 'Windfall' might be read as form of narrative 'whose antithetical structure indicate movements toward revelation and reintegration, [yet] constitutes essentially a means of unknowing rather

than a means of knowledge' (Leitch, 133)**.** The ironic 'debunk' in this instance is manifest through the disparity between the life changing fortune which will necessarily follow the eponymous windfall, with that of Cora's obvious dislocation and alienation from her previously stable sense of self. The rather bleak conclusion to the narrative for a character who is unaware of the full reality of their situation and, more importantly, unable to exert control over it is explored further in 'Luck', Sanford's next published short story, and the focus of this chapter's next discussion.

**2.4 The Unlucky Oilmen of 'Luck' (1930).**

Around two years after the publication of 'Windfall', the second of Sanford's series of oil-narratives, 'Luck' (1930) was published in the *American Mercury*. The title refers to the fate of one of the two main protagonists, Mr Cox, an oilman who consistently fails to strike a profitable well. We are told of how he 'drilled eighty-eight dry holes, one after the other, without bringing in a single producing well'; the narrator refers to this failure to strike oil as 'bad luck'.[101] The belief that chance and luck were essential determinants in a successful oil venture had been deeply entrenched in the industry from its early beginnings with considerable currency afforded to the folklore and mythologies of oilmen fortuitously blessed and cruelly cursed. Indeed, the extent to which notions of luck and chance contributed to an overarching discourse of gambling, gaming, and betting can be seen in the names of drilling and speculation businesses which operated in the early years of the twentieth century which included, 'the double five company,

[101] Winifred Sanford, 'Luck', in *Windfall and Other Stories* (Dallas, TX: Southern Methodist University Press, 1988), pp. 109-127 (p. 110).

the straight eight oil company, the lucky ten oil company, and the magic eighty oil company' (Olien and Hinton, 72). In the narrative, the risks involved in oil speculation are embodied in the narrative framing of the focalising characters: of Mr Cox, for whom 'nothing ever happened right', and Roy, an out of work oil worker who joins Cox in his latest drilling enterprise despite his suspicion that it will not be a success (pp. 110-111). A series of increasingly calamitous events occur as the narrative unfolds, beginning with the serious injury of one of Cox's drilling crew at the well-site; and in Cox's car upturning as he and Roy travel at speed to the derrick in snow and rain. Roy joins Cox's crew as the narrative draws to a dramatic conclusion as the men hit upon an oil seam, but in doing so, this precipitates a violent explosion as the seeping oil is ignited by Cox's unattended heating stove. Roy is badly injured in the explosion while Cox is left with horrific burns which will likely prove fatal. The narrative's final image is that of Cox manically declaring his intentions to press on with the work despite his condition and the chaos which surrounds him.

From the outset, Sanford presents several narrative signposts which hint and gesture toward a fatal conclusion. For example, the very topography of the town appears to cast a foreboding shadow over the events when the route Roy follows to meet Cox at the hospital takes him past 'the undertaking parlours and cuts through the filling station at the corner' (109). The location of the filling station positioned between the undertakers and a hospital registers the considerable danger involved in extraction processes and is suggestive of how death and injury figuratively and literally prop up the petrol pump from either side. Indeed, the reason Cox is at the hospital is due to the injury of a member of his drilling crew: this man has suffered severe burns as a result of

Cox's failure to implement rudimentary safety measures at the well. It is only later that this burned oilman is also revealed to be a narrative signpost which prefigures Cox's own horrific fate. Sanford extends this technique at further points throughout the narrative. On the journey to the oil lease, Cox drives recklessly at high speed along wet, muddy, and iced dirt tracks, where Roy notices a 'yellow Buick lying wheels up in the ditch' (117). This sighting occurs moments before their own car careers off the road, an event which seems to undermine both Roy's and the popular rhetoric of the oil industry's fetishization of luck.

In 'Luck', Sanford undermines the idealised archetypes of extraction culture by rejecting its familiar clichéd and sentimental tropes of plucky underdogs in rags-to-riches narratives, whose eventual success comes as a consequence of comradeship and manly honour in the face of apparent despair. Cox's persistence and tenacity when confronted with repeated failure goes unrewarded and survival at the lower rungs of the oil industry is depicted as desperate and precarious rather than noble or heroic. Far from fostering the oilman as the paradigm of early twentieth-century masculinity, through the depiction of Cox, the oil-business in 'Luck' is presented as antithetical to the heroic ideals of industrial capitalist masculinity.

A number of references throughout the narrative underline the degree to which Cox's repeated failures in the oil business are correlated with a diminution of traditional masculine signifiers, the most explicit of which is Cox's dishevelled physical appearance. For instance, Roy describes how, 'Mr Cox looked bad. His eyes were bloodshot, and his face yellow and pasty' (113). The loss of a discernible physical virility is amplified further when Roy outlines the overtly masculine qualities which defined Cox in the years before

his time as an oilman. Roy recalls how 'they said in the oil fields [that Cox] had been a prize-fighter before the war and he could take more punishment than any fighter in the Southwest' (111). The reference to Cox's past makes for a striking contrast with his condition in the narrative present but also connects him with a mode of masculine athleticism associated with codes of honour and order. But it is Cox's unwavering compulsion to persist with the oil drilling operation in the midst of a storm so severe that every other operator in the region had called a halt to their own proceedings. '[I]t was too cold for anybody', Roy reflects as they approach Cox's ramshackle drill site battered by freezing winds and rain (122). A generous assessment of Cox's tenacity could conclude that this is, in fact, an overt display of rugged masculinity, with Cox bravely confronting a powerful force of nature head-on in a near heroic attempt to succeed in the face of a seemingly impossible challenge. Yet it is precisely because proceeding in such extreme weather conditions poses a significant threat to the safety of his crew, as indeed proves to be the case, that Cox's efforts instead exemplify a diminished capacity for leadership and self-control, vital qualities in the make-up of the Tarbellian oilman. In other words, the dishevelled and degraded figure of Cox, as he doggedly pursues his irrational and illogical operation exemplifies how, for many, oil extraction in this region is waning toward a condition of terminal crisis but also why it remains profitable.

The suggestion that we might read Roy and Cox's tragic endeavour as an analogue for the ailing condition of the idealised heroism of extraction culture can be extended further in relation to the powerful storm which repeatedly frustrates the oilmen's attempts at mobility and largely dictates the course of events in the narrative.

Crucially, because the storm is an element of nature and, therefore, gendered as feminine within the terms of conventional master-subject dualistic structures, it is significant that the storm stymies the men's opportunity to exert their mastery over nature in the form of an oil strike. In so doing, the feminine/nature could be seen as resisting its conventionally assigned status of subjugation. The representation of the natural world here is clearly very different to that which is presented in 'Windfall'. In 'Luck', nature is realised as the storm whose own effects are violently and aggressively enacted against the oilmen. Reference is made to the rain 'cutting the back of [Roy's] neck', and as the intensity of the storm gathers, the men contend with 'snow which stung the eyes and took the breath away' (119, 126). More significant is the way the effects of the storm are able to control the trajectory of events. The rural roads are churned into muddy tracks precipitating Cox's car crash, while the final explosion is due to the oil spray being directed into the hot stove by powerful gusts of wind. In this way, the storm represents the antithesis of the passive and submissive rendering of the natural world characterised by the 'Mother Nature' trope and instead resembles Merchant's description of 'wild and uncontrollable nature that could render violence, storms, droughts, and general chaos' (2). Because Cox and Roy endeavour in the face of the unrelenting storm, it might appear that their fastidious journey is perhaps heroic or adventurous in ways which recall the early oil-seeking pioneers valorised by Tarbell. What the men's failure in fact reveals is the loss of rationality and the complete disregard for all the warning signs which hint strongly at a tragic end.

As the men leave the urban areas of the city to set out to the vast rural plains where the drill site is situated, the men are frustrated when they are made to wait by a

rail crossing and watch as a train carrying oil tanks 'shunted back and forth on the railroad tracks' (115). The appearance of the railroad here is significant in view of its firmly established symbolism of networked corporate power. As Sarah Deutsch has put it, because the railroad 'link[ed] the city to city, coast to coast, countryside to markets, it symbolised national capitalism's triumph over local autonomy'.[102] The train 's appearance here is certainly consistent with the pattern of the narrative thus far which has seen Sanford increasingly confront her two protagonists with ever more inconveniences and disruptions, be it the aggressively bitter weather or harsh and jarring experience of Cox's erratic driving in his rattling car. Yet the way these two economically marginalised and desperate men are forcefully stripped of their mobility—and therefore of their agency—during this interlude, by a powerful icon of the very same economic system that bears a large responsibility for their precarious condition, can be seen to register acutely the disparity within the oil market's expanding networks of transportation and distribution at this time. Relative to the precarious condition of the two cold, wet men, whose journey is, after all, propelled almost entirely in an overinvestment in the belief that the abstract, ephemeral logic of luck will come to their aid, the shunting train laden with oil tanks, vividly brings into focus 'oil's increasingly depersonalised economies of scale and giant monopolies that seemed to be undermining [....] the liberating potential of the nation's transition to fossil fuels' (Johnson, 136).

[102] Sarah Deutsch, 'Landscape of Enclaves: Race Relations in the West, 1880 –1990' in *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past* eds. William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992), pp. 112-131, (p. 113).

The increasingly unreasonable and illogical demands issued to his ailing crew following their arrival at the drill-site serve to emphasise how he has almost succumbed to a full physical and mental collapse. As Roy observes, 'Mr Cox didn't look so good. He looked as if about all he wanted to do was lie down on the floor and sleep for a week. […] he had been standing by the stove, kneading his hands, and kicking his ankles, and spitting on the floor, and not paying attention to what was going on' (123). Shortly after this, Cox is indeed entirely at fault for the wall of flame that engulfs the rig and workers after failing to extinguish his heating stove at the well-face, despite repeated warnings by the crew to do so. There is, in the moment before the explosion, an unusual narrative aside in which Roy's status as the central focalising subject appears temporarily suspended and the perspective shifts to a hitherto unseen member of the crew working on the precariously assembled derrick rig. Apprehensive and ill at ease with Cox's drilling strategy, his perspective is narrated as follows:

> […] he didn't much like the idea. He was a family man with a reputation in the oil fields for never taking chances unless he had to and had once seen a gusher come in once […] when they were drilling like this, and burn ten men until nobody could tell which was which (123).

Certain details in the driller's history and perspective are significant here and seem intended as a contrast to Cox in every way. First, the driller is described as a 'family man', a detail which heavily implies patriarchal responsibility, obligation and care for others in ways so evidently absent in Cox. His aversion to risk is clearly informed by the fact, as an experienced and established figure in the oil drilling industry, he has a very different experience of the extractive processes in which safety and welfare are

controlling factors. Finally, his account of a similar drilling operation which concluded with a fatal ending is given moments before the explosion on Cox's rig is particularly significant in the way it marks the final reference to past events which proceed to repeat in the narrative present.

It is following the explosion that Cox's descent into primitivism is shown to have extended into madness. Fatally scorched and disfigured by the fire, Roy sees how Cox 'grinned and showed his teeth' before declaring to him, "son, I'm going to make a well out of it….'" (127). The violent conclusion to events is replete with the following grotesque, gothic imagery of 'Mr Cox, burned so bad he couldn't feel anything. When you were burned like that you were done for. You wouldn't know it, but you were done for just the same'. Passages such as these suggest a strong parallel with the dangerous and chaotic oil rush cultures of the Southern regions of the era.

As with 'Windfall', then, the conclusion to events reveals how this short story's title is also darkly ironic. This narrative debunking does not arrive in the form of a twist in the plot of the narrative but rather, in a sense, hides in plain sight. From the catalogue of calamitous events which build steadily and incrementally throughout the trajectory of the narrative, readers might reasonably expect that, after such a sustained overemphasis on the repeated folly of Cox and Roy's decisions, the dual protagonists might be afforded a form of resolution that is, in the least, satisfactory to them and place the prior events in a new light by recast these events as necessary travails they were required to overcome in order for the eventual catharsis of a happy ending. Such resolution is denied, and the narrative is revealed as bleakly antithetical, reduced as it is to a series of calamitous events simply leading towards a climax which is yet one more

grand calamitous event. In this respect, 'Luck' stages a debunking of the mythology of lucky oil in the starkest of terms. Romantic, quasi-mythological notions of plucky underdog courage and determination cannot compete with the far more mundane paths to economic success which an access to capital and material resources can afford.

**2.5 An Elegy for Extraction Culture: 'Mr Carmichael's Room' (1931).**

Around six months after the publication of 'Luck' in the 1930 edition of *The American Mercury* and following repeated requests for further submissions from the editorial staff at this journal, Sanford provided a third short story which, once again centred around the experiences of small-town, everyday life on the periphery of the Texan oil business. Written toward the end of 1930 and published in the April of the following year, 'Mr Carmichael's Room' is the account of a once-successful independent oil operator, in the mode of Sinclair's Ross, who lands in destitution as a consequence of market forces within the oil industry of the American south as large corporate interests consolidated their economic power via monopolistic strategies which ultimately worked to exclude the independent operators from participating in the local oil markets. From our contemporary perspective, in which oil is so often discussed in relation to scarcity and depletion, it is perhaps difficult to conceive of how American oil in the era of Sanford's narrative was characterised by excess, saturation, and overproduction. Olien and Hinton describe an 'industry faced with a mounting supply of oil that encouraged go-for-broke production in the field' which resulted in 'a relentless tide of crude oil […] which depressed prices and rates of return on investments […] diminished the value of a steadily growing volume of oil in storage and lowered the value of reserves' (91). With all but the larger, established oil corporations able to bear the impact of such severe

price fluctuations, swathes of independent and semi-amateur operators went out of business. Sanford refers to the social effects of this economic downturn in a letter to her publisher which accompanied the manuscript where she writes: 'There are, I may add, a vast number of Mr Carmichaels in our part of the country, now that the oil business has blown up' (Sanford cited in Wiesepape, 84). 'Mr Carmichael's Room' signals a notable shift in tone from Sanford's previous oil narratives. In contrast to the ominous atmosphere in 'Windfall' or the high drama of 'Luck', with its car crashes and exploding derricks, 'Mr Carmichael's Room' offers a social critique which is understated, reflective, often melancholic, and concludes with an elegiac sequence quite unlike those seen is Sanford's earlier works. As we will see, however, the narrative stages a curious tension between those it cites as responsible for the contemporary moment – Big Oil's corporate control over markets – and the resolution to this social problem which is, in effect, deferred through the use of a genre convention that cites the primacy of nature over the affairs of humankind. For in 'Mr Carmichael's Room', Sanford draws a parallel between cyclical patterns in the natural world as a way of explaining, and perhaps justifying, the social effects of the oil economy's boom-and-bust dynamics.

Largely narrated in the third person, but with an emphasis focalised through the consciousness of Mrs Phillips, the proprietor of a nondescript boarding house in an unnamed town in the deep South, events unfold within the house during the immediate hours after the death of the titular Carmichael, a resident and ex-oilman whose final months were spent in a state of both financial and physical ruin. The narrative shifts between the immediate present in which Phillips looks on as a local undertaker, Mr Haley, performs a forensic excavation of the deceased's possessions in search of items of value. As Hayley rifles through the disparate items and ephemera in the room,

recollections and memories of the oilman are stirred in Phillips. It is this series of analeptic accounts which provide the spine of the narrative and work to sketch a map of Carmichael's downward slide from successful and wealthy oil prospector into bankruptcy and alcoholism. Most notably, Carmichael differs from Sanford's previous representations of oil men who were largely unsympathetic characters. In 'Luck', for example, Cox's mania, with the violent and macabre conclusion it results in, is, in a sense, a consequence of the harsh economic conditions the independent wildcatters faced following Big Oil's dominance of the market. Yet, the appalling treatment and disregard Cox shows towards Roy and his crew's safety ultimately detracts from regarding him as a sympathetic character. Mr Carmichael however, is framed within the terms of particular tropes and archetypes popularised by writers such as Ida Tarbell, whose romanticised account of the mid-century industry is one populated by 'daring and resourceful […] men of imagination who dared to risk all they had on the adventure of seeking oil' but whose buccaneering escapades nevertheless did not detract from their essential qualities as 'fair dealers, self-reliant [and] self-respecting' (Tarbell, xxxviii). In this way, Carmichael strikes a number of similarities with Sinclair's Ross as an embodiment of extraction culture, the heady period during the initial oil booms of the mid to late century where extraction was equated with a 'resurgence of American individualism and frontier spirit' (283). In Sanford's short story, the death of the titular character, I would suggest, can be read as an allegory which marks the death of a heroic extraction culture and the model of American masculinity it creates centred on codes of honour, nobility, and a civic sensibility. As we will shortly see, the narrative registers a predatory type of individualism driven solely by a profit motive as the contrast to this

masculine paradigm. Such a form of individualism is manifested here in the figure of the undertaker, Mr Haley, as we will see.

As with 'Luck', the crisis in masculine extraction culture in 'Mr Carmichael's Room' can be read in the binary terms of a gendered trope in which nature and the effects of the natural world are imbued with a powerful agency which reverses the balance of the power dynamic in the human/ nature dualism. Unlike the previous short fiction, however, the move towards a form of apocalyptic narrative closure that is recognizable by the incontestable realignment of power – the oilmen are maimed, disfigured, and brutalised while the storm rages on indifferently yet victorious – is not played out through dramatic and violent conflict between the oilman and the increasingly hostile forces of nature. What makes nature an insurmountable adversary here is the way it is represented as part of a wider temporal transition, specifically the change from winter into spring, with its connotations of renewal and regeneration. Crucially, conventional ideas of gendered spatiality are reversed as the interior, domestic location is associated with terminal masculinity, while the external spaces of nature are defined as immutable through their circularity and cyclical patterning. However, I want to suggest that the apparent incongruity between the events inside and outside the space of the house also invite further reflection on the effects of the boom-and-bust cycles typical of the oil industry and how these cycles can be dramatically contrasted with perpetual cycles of rebirth and renewal intrinsic to the natural world.

Before offering a more detailed discussion of the similarities and disparities raised by the narrative's staging of both the death of an oilman and the end of winter, I turn first to the representations of masculinity in the narrative, as seen through the

figures of Carmichael and the undertaker Mr Haley. In contrast to the previous depictions of oilmen in 'Windfall' and 'Luck', Carmichael signals a marked departure from these unsympathetic and unambiguously villainous figures. Several of Phillip's recollections on the morning of his death centre on Carmichael's kindness, generosity, honesty, and absence of any discernible ostentation or affectation. Rather than the lasciviousness of Gooley or the manic Cox whose loss of reason and self-control reveal his unmanly attributes, Carmichael is presented in the manner of a Rooseveltian ideal of masculinity. The cultural historian Michael S. Kimmel describes Roosevelt as 'a robust, vigorous man who served as a template for a revitalised American social character'.[103] This robust vigour, so vital in the construction of an American ideal of masculinity that was adequate to respond to the vicissitudes of an industrial capitalist economy, is highly prominent in Carmichael in the years before his decline. Phillips recalls his hyperactive mobility as he journeyed the length and breadth of the region inspecting oilfields and working at drill sites without ever succumbing to fatigue or exhaustion:

> 'Take during the boom […] he never took a minute's rest. He'd sit up with a well all night, maybe, and then he'd no sooner get back to town then he'd start off for somewhere else…Tulsa, Fort Worth or, San Angelo, and he'd no sooner get back from there, plastered with mud […] then he'd have to tear out the lease again to see what had happened while he was gone. […] There were weeks at a time when Mrs Phillips never once had to make up his bed' (132-133).

[103] Michael S.Kimmel, 'The Contemporary "Crisis" of Masculinity', in *The Making of Masculinities: The New Men's Studies*, ed. by Harry Brod (Boston, Mass.: Allen and Unwin, 1987), p. 148.

This depiction of the frenetic and industrious oilman, eschewing all rest and repose contrasts starkly with the post-bust era of the near-narrative present in which Carmichael is forced to become stationary after his vehicle is repossessed as part of his mounting financial problems.

A later description of Carmichael's robust and virile masculinity is especially significant as it directly connects a physical characteristic to his status as an oilman. Following the death of her brother Phillips recalls Carmichael's awkward attempts at offering words of condolence. Phillips remembers Carmichael using 'his big hoarse voice [which] he could never tone down somehow. She always told him he talked like he was yelling to a roughneck on the other side of the derrick' (139). Carmichael's big, booming voice, a clear indicator of masculinity, is equated explicitly with the nature of his role as an oilman here and in so doing connects virile maleness with oilfield workers. Indeed, this characteristic once again draws on the sort of imagery seen in descriptions of Roosevelt where he is drawn as a paradigmatic figure of the twentieth-century American male. Such a reading is further reinforced by Kimmel's citation of a report from a Kansas newspaper in which the editor, 'hailed Roosevelt's "hard muscled frame" and his *"crackling voice"* as a model for Americans' (Kimmel, 148, my italics). Yet, the booming voice of Carmichael the oilman can be contrasted with a later stage in the narrative of Carmichael's descent into a condition of alcohol-dependency and immiseration is further emphasised by his apparent withdrawal from the world of linguistic expression. In a response to a benign request from Phillips, Carmichael replies in a rather gruff, taciturn manner and Phillips recalls how he 'hadn't answered her, nor looked her square in the face […] – just kind of *growled* as she walked out' (my italics,138). This loss of rhetorical

authority and mastery over speech recalls certain conventions popularised by turn-of-the century naturalist novelists such as Stephen Crane and Frank Norris where the evocation of the biological characteristics of human agents, who were once framed as sovereign subjects of industrial capital modernity, works to emphasise how these tragic protagonists, when unable to assert control over their own destinies and brutalised and abused by various mechanisms of early capitalist modernity, are reduced to primal, animal-like conditions. The literary critic Gavin Roger Jones notes how, in the fiction of these canonical naturalist writers, 'spoken language collapses when it is superseded by universal forces that pervade and determine the universe'; in essence, the power of articulation 'falls victim to a determining yet meaningless materialism'.[104] Here, however, it is Carmichael's enforced departure from the oil business — a result of 'the big companies (who) had quit buying what little (oil) production he had left' — which precipitates a similar decline and is manifest in the striking contrast between the booming voice of the oil field operator and the growling, near-animalistic utterances of Carmichael in the present moment (141).

If, as I have been suggesting, Carmichael's tragic decline and demise is a metonym for the decline and demise of the romanticised ideal of an extraction culture such as that popularised so effectively by writers such as Ida Tarbel, Sanford's narrative might also be said to provide a substitute model of masculinity that is manifest in Mr Haley, the town's undertaker who is tasked with managing the penniless Carmichael's funeral arrangements. Comparatively little detail is offered about the undertaker. Phillips is disdainful of his predatory approach to recouping the lost expenses Carmichael

[104] Gavin Roger Jones, *Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect Literature in Gilded Age America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), p.150.

presents to his business. Questioning Phillips intently in the immediate hours after the death with regards to potential assets or possessions of worth that Carmichael may have had, Phillips notes that 'you could say what you had a mind to about Mr Carmichael, but he sure wouldn't have tried to get a dead man's car away from him. He sure wouldn't' (131). In an earlier passage, Sanford again deploys her preference for detailed descriptions of physical appearances to convey ideas of masculinity and manliness. Upon meeting Haley, Phillip's describes him as follows: 'Mr Haley stood on the steps and took off his felt hat, which was as big as a cowboy's and a pale gray colour, almost white. Mr Haley was a little man, side of Mr Carmichael, anyhow, and his lip was hidden under a black moustache' (134). The reference to the hat is significant here in light of the way the cowboy, along with the industrial worker, is an established archetype of American male culture. The literary critic David Leverenz suggests that Owen Wister's novel *The Virginian* (1902) 'created the myth of the cowboy' through its fusion of 'frontier democracy with chivalric aristocracy, joining gentlemanly ideals of honour and rhetorical wit with frontier ideals of manliness'.[105] And yet, perversely, the emergence of the cowboy myth occurred at the very moment of its own obsolescence. Citing from the preface to the novel Leverenz writes, "[Wister's] book is an elegy for a rough nobility that must inevitably fade, in the transition to what has become 'a shapeless state…of men and manners" (34). *The Virginian's* legacy, Leverenz writes, is the 'face-to-face shoot-out between good and evil. That drama has shaped and simplified national self-perceptions […]. Giving closure to the recurrent saga of triumph and humiliation, a man of honour who is also a man of violence stands tall and alone against the darkening sky,

[105] David Leverenz, 'The Last Real Man in America', in *Fictions of Masculinity* ed. Peter F. Murphy (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1994), pp 21-53. (p. 35).

as elegiac counterpoint to the sunset of self-reliance and the rise of the corporate state' (35). This brief digression on the construction of the cowboy myth is relevant to the present discussion because it enables us to see how Phillips's reference to the cowboy hat might be considered as more than a simple instance of a literary reality-effect and instead be regarded as part of a broader critique of contemporary masculinity. While Haley's hat is described as being 'as big as a cowboy's hat', the narrator makes clear that it is not a cowboy hat; such a detail is significant because it offers a tacit acknowledgement that Haley is neither 'a man of honour' or even of 'rough nobility'. This minor textual detail connecting Wister's 'elegy' for the manliness of the frontier with Sanford's short story is noteworthy because of how each narrative stages a form of mourning for a romanticised model of American masculinity. Just as Wister's cowboy was eclipsed by the 'rise of the corporate state', as Leverenz put it, so larger economic forces beyond his control similarly determined Mr Carmichael's fate. While specific textual details are scarce, Phillips does make brief reference to Carmichael's position in the industry as an independent operator whose sales were dependent upon the requirements of the much larger organisations within the commodity chain. As she puts it, 'lately, […] times had been so bad, and the big companies had quit buying what little production he had left' (141). In addition to these comments on his clothing, Phillips goes on to make a more explicit comparison between Haley and the deceased oilman by commenting on the former's diminutive physical stature. Haley is 'a little man, side of Mr Carmichael, anyhow' (135). Within the context of her previous observations, Phillips' description here is an unambiguous comment on masculine virility; Haley clearly lacks the 'hard muscled frame' of the Rooseveltian male.

Finally, Phillips's description of Haley's 'lip [which] was hidden under [a] black moustache' might be seen as an indicator of his dishonesty. Because 'hidden' is preferred over 'covered', arguably the more obvious choice of verb, connotations of secrecy or mendacity are made the point of focus. In Philips' account, Haley's hidden lip suggests that Haley is a man who cannot be trusted: he is a figure who stands in direct contrast to the straight-talking manner of Carmichael. In this respect, the disparity between the models of masculinity embodied by the undertaker and the recently deceased oilman are consolidated further through the contrast between authentic speech and rhetoric. As an undertaker**,** Haley also stands as an ambivalent sign of mourning for a lost ideal of masculinity, which he also capitalises on through his necro-economic business dealings as an undertaker.

If Carmichael's tragic condition serves as a striking alternative to the archetypal figure of the hyper-masculine oilman to present a bleak, melancholic elegy for extraction culture, it is the text's references to the weather, specifically seasonal transition, which evokes a trope of temporal cycles of regeneration. Carmichael's death comes at almost the exact moment that a long and bitter winter gives way to spring. Phillips recalls how the prolonged spell of freezing weather had frozen the house's plumbing, which results in a disruption to the water supply. On the night of Carmichael's death, Phillips listens to the noise of the pipes as the ice inside them begins to thaw as a result of the warmer weather which marks the end of winter. There are, however, additional sounds of a more permanent sort which accompany the noise of thawing pipes. The narrator explains how Phillips 'had heard him coughing in the night, when the water started running and she had to get up to turn it off […] And then, in the morning, to walk in and

find him dead like that!' (132). The sound of the water running through the pipes marks the moment of seasonal transition as winter's thaw cedes to the warmer period of spring. In marking this transition, the running water becomes a metaphor for the processes of regeneration and renewal within the meteorological cycle. This, of course, makes for a stark and unambiguous contrast with the death of Mr Carmichael that accompanies this event. The way that these two events are related through a shared temporal moment might prompt reflection on the disparity between organic cycles of renewal and the terminal character of non-organic processes. Carmichael's death is, of course, organic in a biological sense but it is also largely a consequence of his position within a socio-economic process, specifically the boom-and-bust cycle that had characterised the oil industry since its inception. The manner with which the forces of nature proceed with indifference to the affairs of the humans might even be seen to recall the fateful car journey taken by Cox in 'Luck' where the narrative's overarching mood and atmosphere of fatalism was arguably enhanced by the raging storm through which its protagonists travel. Any gestures toward pathetic fallacy are entirely absent here; Carmichael's death is not accompanied by the histrionics of booming thunder or cracks of lightening but rather the simple sounds of thawing pipes as nature shifts gear in preparation for its next phase.

Sanford extends the pattern of contrast between stasis, inertia, or contraction with that of regeneration and renewal across a number of the narrative's short sections. For example, while Phillips stands on her porch awaiting Haley's arrival, the narrator notes how:

> […] now that the norther had blown itself out, it sure felt good to have the sun shining on her back again. It was the first pretty day they had had for going on two weeks. Well, if it kept on like this, the grass, what there was left of it after the hard freeze, would turn green, and the burning bush and sunflowers and one thing and another would come up in the vacant lots, and it would be time to plant turnip greens (130).

Here, the description of a warm and pleasant day strikes a clear contrast with the melancholic atmosphere inside Carmichael's room where 'the shades were down, and [it was] dark and cold and quiet as the grave' (135). The comparison between the interior and exterior spaces here certainly brings the relative finite and infinite character of the human and non-human starkly into focus. These horticultural and meteorological references emphasise temporal fluidity as a defining aspect of nature and the non-human in a way that can be said to problematize the traditional gendered rhetoric which motivates extraction culture's aspiration to dominate nature and emphasises a link between mastery over the natural world and the formation of masculine identity.

The representation of the weather is not then without its ambiguity because of how it both mirrors and distances itself in relation to the central events in the narrative. Renewal and regeneration symbolised by the transition into spring parallel the finality and conclusiveness of death; in so doing, the narrative offers a perspective on the efforts of the oilman to conquer nature. As Carmichael's death comes as the consequence of the normative cycle of boom-and-bust which characterised, and arguably continues to characterise, the oil industry, in a more nuanced way perhaps, the symmetry here invites reflection on the asymmetry between the two cyclical processes

of the human and non-human respectively, more specifically the destructive cycles of the boom-and-bust petroleum industry and the seasonal patterning of meteorological cycles.

In addition, Phillips's view of the neighbourhood she surveys from her porch is characterised by activity and she observes a 'plumber crawl out from under a house with a blowtorch in his hand' and 'a lady trying to get her car started in the driveway' (130). Inside the house, however, activity has ceased even though 'there was a good bit of work to be done around the house, it seemed like she couldn't do it. […] she could have started in on the dishes stacked on the drainboard, or she could have taken the broom and swept some of the sand which had sifted in on top of everything […] she could have stayed inside […] but she didn't like to, somehow – not this morning' (129).

Certainly, the effects of the weather as a dominating force over the human world seem to draw attention here to the limitations of technology and modernity. This passage also appears to recall the public/private space dynamic previously discussed in relation to the domestic tasks carried out by Cora Ponder in 'Windfall'. The exterior, public world, a space conventionally gendered as male, is active, mobile, and regenerative: a clear contrast with the interior of the house where tasks lie unfinished. Yet considered within the framework of extraction culture in which dominance over nature affirms masculinity through the capture of oil, drawing attention to renewal and regeneration as an intrinsic aspect of a natural, non-human cycle could be said to highlight a frailty in this gendered division of labour and ecology. The reference to the car's frozen engine evokes the memory of Carmichael's own difficulties with car maintenance during the previous winter. Such frustrations were set aside however,

when the beginning of Carmichael's incremental slide into penury is launched by the repossession of his car after 'the big companies [...] had quit buying what little production he had left' (141). Of note here is the reference to how Carmichael's financial ruin was initially instigated by the corporate control of the oil market. That his car was owned as part of a credit arrangement adds further to the sense of Carmichael as positioned precariously within networks of corporate economic dominance and a dependency on finance capital to provide what is necessary for him to exercise his means of employment. We have seen already how the automobile serves as a malleable symbol of masculinity providing Sinclair's Ross with an elaborate signifier of control and mastery, while the reckless and careless driving displayed by Cox in 'Luck' exemplifies the deterioration of these archetypal masculine characteristics. Phillip's confirms the dichotomy between static failure and mobile success in further recollection at a later stage in the narrative when she remembers how Carmichael, at the very peak of his success, 'never took a minute's rest. He'd sit up with a well all night […] and then he'd no sooner get back to town than he'd start off for somewhere else' (p.132).

The recurring pattern in which Carmichael was embroiled was, of course, an anarchic cycle of boom-and-bust which characterised the American oil industry's processes of speculation and extraction in its formative years before government intervention in the form of The Wagner Act in 1935. Towards the end of the 1920s, intense overproduction, aided significantly by the vast oil reserves located in the East Texas field—the subject of which provided the motivation for Sanford's final oil-narrative as I go on to discuss shortly—had plunged the market into an unprecedented level of chaos. As Huber puts it, 'the oil crisis […] paralleled conditions in most other

industries at the time – overcapacity and catastrophic deflation' (51). While the eventual solution to market stabilisation was eventually reached in 1933 through the application of government intervention in the form of various control mechanisms, the period in which 'Mr Carmichael's room was written and published — the first half of 1931 — a saturated market resulted in oil's exchange value plummet to a point of near collapse. Both the larger, established operators as well as the many wildcatters teetered on the brink of financial collapse due to the swollen and inflated market. Noting the contribution that the East Texas field played in amplifying the already precarious market conditions, Huber also notes how it 'threatened to render unprofitable not only the capital-intensive and highly integrated major producers but also the thousands of small independent producers whose rigs and wells were suddenly unviable' (48). Due to the nature of her husband's profession as a legal professional in the oil industry, Sanford was acutely aware of the economic impacts of the oilmen whose livelihoods had become 'unviable'. In a letter accompanying the manuscript of 'Mr Carmichael's Room' which Sanford submitted to The American Mercury for publication, she noted that 'there are, I may add, a vast number of Mr Carmichael's in our part of the country, now that the oil business has blown up' (Wiesepape,86). As cycles of boom-and-bust had previously described a normative state of affairs for the oil industry, from Sanford's perspective in the early 1930s one can understand how the possibility of a recovery from this period of extreme market depression seemed bleak if not inconceivable.

**2.6 The East Texas Oilfield in 'Fever in the South' (1931).**

Published in 1931 by the *North American Review,* 'Fever in the south' is the fourth and final of Sanford's quartet of oil stories. In her biography of Sanford, Wiesepape suggests

that 'Fever' was likely inspired by first-hand observation of events in East Texas during the latter part of 1930 where the discovery of oil across a vast region, largely constituted by pine forests, mobilised an oil-rush of the scale not seen since the earliest days of the industry in the mid-1800s (86-87).[106]

Structurally, 'Fever' differs from the previous narratives through the way its four short sections are narrated from the perspective of four separate protagonists. The use of this technique is an unusual addition to the modes of narration seen more typically across Sanford's body of work where narrative point of view is strictly limited to the main protagonist/ narrator such as Cora or Mrs Phillips. In a sense, the expansion of narrative perspective is accompanied by an extension in the spatial geography under discussion in the story. In a move away from the claustrophobic interior settings of cramped farmhouse kitchens, rattling automobiles, and empty rooms in boarding-houses, the locations in 'Fever' cover a much greater geographic range with the narrative's individual sections each set in a different part of a vast East Texas oilfield and its surrounding locations. In this respect, 'Fever' could be said to exemplify a development in Sanford's technical abilities as a writer of literary fiction because of how the multi-perspective, multi-location elements of this narrative are, perhaps, more typically associated with long-form fiction such as novels. In her biography of Sanford, Wiesepape notes how Sanford's interest in writing novels remained largely consistent throughout her relatively short career. Indeed, a completed novel-length manuscript

[106] In an account of the size and scale of the 'East Texas Oil Field', or 'Black Giant' as it came to be known, Roger Olien and Diana Hinton describe the reservoir as 'giant even by world standards. Some 134,000 acres in extent, it dwarfed the great fields of the twenties […] by 1940 it contained twice the number of oil wells found in all of California. […] By any standard in the industry, the field was colossal'.
Roger M. Olien, Diana Davids Hinton, *Wildcatters* (Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2007), p. 57.

was burnt by Sanford in a pique of frustration following the lack of interest from various publishers. One could suggest, however, that this shift might be seen as a response to a parallel shift in the physical scale of Sanford's subject matter at the turn-of-the-decade. In their historical account of the Texas oil business, Roger Olien and Diana Hinton describe the 'East Texas' as 'giant even by world standards. Some 134,000 acres in extent, it dwarfed the great fields of the twenties […] by 1940 it contained twice the number of oil wells found in all of California. […] By any standard in the industry, the field was colossal' (*Wildcatters*, p.57).

The events of the narrative centre upon the turnaround in fortunes of an oil prospector who, at the start of the narrative, appears destined to join the oilmen of 'Luck' and 'Mr Carmichael's Room' in a downward trajectory of social mobility and into financial precarity. The oilman escaping just such a fate here is Mr Donovan and it is around him that the first section focuses as Donovan arrives at the site of a recently formed boom town and, despite his intentions to leave the industry which has already left him in a near bankrupt position, is tempted to strike out on one final endeavour. To aid him, he seeks the services of the infamous oil-field spiritualist Madame Rita who has also arrived at the boomtown. Madam Rita provides the focus for the second section of the narrative where it is revealed that her capacity for clairvoyance is an elaborate ruse and her past success with guiding hopeful prospectors to bountiful sites has been due to little more than luck and guesswork. The third section returns to Donovan who, after visiting Madame Rita, arrives at the farmhouse of Moses and Lovie, an African American family with whom Donovan seeks to negotiate a deal to gain drilling access to their land. The encounter concludes with the family confused and uncertain over Donovan's terms. The closing section introduces a further character, Carrie, the proprietor of a guest

house occupied by oil workers from the nearby fields. In the last event in the narrative, it is revealed that the Donovan and his crew are the current guests, and as Carrie reluctantly accompanies him to his well-site, Moses's family is seen preparing to leave their home as Donovan explains to Carrie that rather than accept his offer, the family agreed to a far less favourable deal with other speculators which has resulted, ultimately, in the family being unable to keep both their property and their land.

In an opening section which recalls certain aspects of the high-speed car journey in *Oil!*'s first chapter, 'Fever' begins with a considerable emphasis on the technical aspects of driving. Just as the references to precise and highly specific forms of data can be interpreted as signifiers which reinforce Ross's essential masculine prowess and ability to succeed in the world of modern business, Sanford introduces Donovan in much the same way in a section dominated with references to a range of data:

> Donovan took one hand from the steering wheel and drew his watch from his pocket. It was twenty minutes after five. In an hour, or an hour and a quarter at the most, he ought to be in the capital of the East Texas oil fields. He had been driving, in the rain, since the middle of the morning. Well, he was used to driving, he had put more than sixty thousand miles on his car in two years; and he was used to mud, knew how to push through it. He hadn't spent twelve years in the oil fields for nothing. […] Luckily there were few cars going west; nineteen out of every twenty were headed east. […] he made out […] the ends of a trailer. Another load of drill pipe bound for the oil fields – six-inch drill pipe he saw'. [107]

Yet Donovan, it is revealed, is 'flat broke' and 'is ready to quit' the industry all together (148). This revelation instantly undermines the prior impression of Donovan created by

[107] Winifred Sanford, 'Fever in the South', in *Windfall and Other Stories* (Dallas, TX: Southern Methodist University Press, 1988), pp.147-163, (p.147).

the statistical references and his competency at the wheel. The cause of Donovan's dire economic status is attributed to 'the big oil companies [who] were down on him, and the government – now that you couldn't sell your oil even if you had it' (148). If Donovan may have initially seemed to recall the successful protagonist of Sinclair's novel, his marginal position, at the very outer periphery of the oil industry is more accurately reflective of that of Mr Carmichael from Sanford's previous short story. Indeed, the way Donovan's momentum is continually interrupted by the slow-moving trucks and trailers laden with heavy industrial equipment echoes the similarly stymied progress made by Cox and Roy who are cruelly made to wait while the train bearing oil freight passes before them.

We have already seen how the crowds that descended upon Cora's rural farmland in 'Windfall' can be said to recycle the literary trope of the 'Machine in the Garden'. In that earlier short story, the threat of an encroaching technological modernity is viscerally visible in the scenes of chaos Cora observes – with cars tearing across the pasture as the hedgerows are polluted with the disposable junk and detritus left by urban day-trippers – and is emphasised through the way these scenes follow the narrative's first section set entirely in the interior space of the domestic family home. In 'Fever', the bustling and frenetic activity in the East Texas town, is comprised of 'oilmen, geologists and lease hounds and mail-order promoters and drillers and, now and then, a roughneck […], and while there may be 'so many people on the sidewalk that [Donovan] could hardly push his way through', within moments of arriving, Donovan receives a friendly greeting from an unnamed acquaintance when 'a hand came down on his shoulder', leading Donovan to reflect that 'here were fellows he had known years ago, in

other booms, and forgotten. It sure seemed good to see them again' (149). Rather than foreshadow an irreversible disruption to the traditional ways of family life, of the form represented in 'Windfall', the crowds here can be seen to constitute a form of substitute, or alternative, to the traditional family or rural community (149).

This notion of a shared community is developed in the second section which focuses on the so-called clairvoyant, or 'oil spiritualist' of the kind Zuck has identified. It becomes apparent that the successes 'Madame Rita' had previously enjoyed – success achieved as a result of the apparently accurate information gleaned from her contacts from within the spirit-world of oil speculators – were the result of little more than luck. Her partner, Tom, describes the enterprise as 'a racket' and that 'some lucky guesses' is all that has been required to ensure her 'clients had a way of always coming back' (153). This is coupled with a somewhat less spiritual form of pragmatism whereby Rita advised her eager clients simply to drill in areas where oil was already assumed to be. The events in the section centre largely on Rita's observations as she sets out from her camp to find water where a panoramic description of the sights and sounds of the boomtown create a vivid representation of 'the excitement […] the crowds, and the phonographs, and the smell of the coffee, and the rangers sitting on their horses with their guns in their holsters' (153). The description of the boomtown as narrated through Rita's consciousness contrasts starkly with the widely proliferated stereotype of boomtowns as lawless regions where the lowest forms of vice and immorality were allowed to thrive without restraint.[108]

[108] See Brian Black, *Petrolia: The Landscape of America's First Oil Boom* (Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 2003). Black writes on the fascination with boomtowns from the print media of the 1860s and 70s and how sensationalist depictions of these regions became established in the national imaginary.

Section three returns the narrative focus back to Donovan and his encounter with Moses, the owner of twenty acres of deeply rural land across which Donovan intends to drill his well and compensate Moses with a small share of the eventual profits. Moses and his wife Lovie are notable as they are the first examples of non-white characters across the range of these short oil stories. Sanford shows, quite bluntly, the extent of the differential in social standing between the two men. Moses notes how Donovan 'sure talked fast. […] He didn't see how he was going to make a trade with Mr Donovan when he didn't understand what it was all about…an oil and gas lease… a wildcat …an eighth of the oil…' (157-158). The use of phonetic, regional dialect as it is both spoken by and through the focalising consciousness of Moses in this section evidences a consistent feature of regionalist literature. This discursive representation of Moses and Lovie is clearly intended to connote rural authenticity and its deployment is intended to provide a heightened sense of realism by immersing the reader in the authentic dialects and speech idioms of the, often rural, location. Yet there is a palpable sense of danger with regards to Moses's highly precarious position, emphasised through his repeated assertions over how 'scairt' he feels and how intensely nervous the situation makes him: 'Moses felt might low […] he didn't know what to say. Fact was he scairt to say anything. It seemed like white folks made you say whatever they wanted you to say' (155). This reminder of the Jim Crow South underscores how the couple are vulnerable to more than just the possibility of receiving unfavourable terms in a financial contract.

It could be argued that 'Fever in the South' draws certain parallels with 'Luck' in respect of how a debunking rhythm structures the trajectory of the narrative. As we

have already seen, readers might reasonably predict the outcome for Cox and Roy will be positive and serve, in the least, as a form of catharsis for both readers and characters after the extended and relentless series of calamities brought to bear on the men. The ending to that story creates a bleak circularity in which the harshness of the characters' material conditions is simply reiterated, albeit now with the addition of human casualties in the form of Cox's disfigured body. In 'Fever in the South', I would suggest, the narrative debunking derives as result of the many details in the text which would seem to prompt readers towards the expectation of a similarly bleak conclusion to events. The disparity between Donovan's admission that the combined forces of corporate oil and government regulation had all but ensured the unsustainability of surviving as an independent wildcatter, with that of the heady, wide-eyed optimism, stoked and kindled by the air of anticipatory excitement he experiences upon arrival at the East Texas, could be inferred as evidence of Sanford setting the foundations for another narrative of moral and physical decline with her protagonists, once more, seduced, deluded and destroyed by the pervasive allure of oil wealth. These expectations are likely confirmed yet further after we learn that Donovan will be entrusting the success of this already seemingly fatal enterprise on the guidance of confidence trickster. Indeed, although the third section starkly reveals how Moses would not pose an especially difficult obstacle for Donovan to overcome, because both Moses and Lovie are presented highly sympathetically, through the use of their phonetic, regional – and thus authentic – patterns of speech, coupled with socio-cultural position of the agricultural ranch and the rural farmer within the mythologies of nation and nationhood, there is arguably a strong assumption to be made that Donovan will not, in fact, succeed at Moses' expense. And yet, Donovan does turn around his fortunes. While

Rita is a charlatan, she is also correct in the advice she gives to the oilman. In a conclusion which, perhaps somewhat confusingly, confirms the quasi-allegorical aspect to his name, Moses does indeed lose his land and home. The debunking effect of the narrative then, is evidenced in the way reasonable assumptions of the story's likely trajectory are undercut at every instance and complicate and frustrate easy attempts to forecast, to speculate as it were, on the outcome of events. One could even suggest that the overarching pattern of uncertainty and unpredictability within the narrative might be seen as analogous to the unpredictability which characterised the anarchy and chaos of the frenetic oil-rush in locations such as East Texas. If the irresolute endings of Sanford's short fiction highlight the risks at stake in oil speculation, they also gesture towards the racialised and gendered dynamics of oil extraction. Such concerns may be latent in the narrative structure of Sanford's narratives, but they are explored more fully in popular American narratives of detection, as the next chapter makes clear.

# Chapter Three

## American Detective Fiction and Petromodernity.

From its early iteration in the genteel settings of English country houses in the dying days of Empire, to the bleak, rain-lashed urban spaces of mid-century America, to the contemporary commercial phenomena of so-called Scandi-Noir with its inordinate focus on the quotidian aspects of police work, the popularity and persistence of the detective genre has remained consistent. Sarah Crosby, for example, traces the genealogy of crime writing to the seventeenth century where execution sermons delivered publicly in the form of a lecture drew large audiences. While these sermons were ostensibly instructive, with a firm moral underpinning designed to heed the example of the guilty, crowds were often keen to hear the details of crimes with a prurient or salacious element. The popularity of these public addresses saw the texts published in multiple editions which remained bestsellers long after the crimes they recorded had faded from memory. In the following century, accounts of 'true-crimes' proved exceptionally popular with an emergent reading public. Again, these texts were intended as instructive and sought to 'protect a liberal moral system by worrying the fiend into palatable forms that could fit within a framework of sympathy'.[109] Crosby notes the rise of the 'novel of seduction' in the mid-eighteenth century which mapped the fall from society of women driven by passion and their eventual redemption, while a return to the style and form of the execution sermon is seen in the mid-1800s as advances in printing technologies gave rise to penny papers whose wide circulation was assisted by sensationalist accounts of

[109] Sarah Crosby, 'Early American Crime Writing', in *The Cambridge Companion to American Crime Fiction* ed. Catherine Ross Nickerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp.5-16, (p.10).

murder and sex-related crimes. In the case of twentieth- and twenty-first-century crime fiction, however, rather than moralising narratives of redemption where readers are invited to empathise with the guilty party, the crimes in the "cheap dailies' and city mystery novels tempted their readers to fall just a little in love with the sadistic monsters who murdered the elite agents of power' (14). Maureen T. Reddy's historical account of the roots of crime fiction in the United States also cites the influence of police report columns in daily newspapers.[110] Reddy extends the scope of this survey, however, through research into the representations of non-white perpetrators and victims of crime, as reported across a range of New York-based newspapers in the 1830s. Drawing on Carole Stabile's analysis of police report columns from a range of publications such as the *New York Sun* and the *New York Herald,* Reddy notes the editorial convention in which 'race was usually the sole identity category mentioned in reports about any crime involving a black person' (136). Reddy goes on to explain how the constant and consistent association between a specific racial group and criminality 'likely had some impact on "threat construction", as through sheer force of repetition the supposed connection between blackness and criminality was reinforced for readers' (136). Reddy concludes by noting how this informed the racial and gender codes of the detective genre as white, male, and heteronormative.

This condensed account of the genealogy of the American detective novel provides only the briefest of overviews of a genre which critics and readers alike have seemingly delighted in endlessly separating, dividing, and re-categorising into sub-genres. A detailed assessment of the debates and disagreements over the finer

[110] Maureen T. Reedy, 'Race and American Crime Fiction', in *Cambridge Companion to American Crime Fiction* ed. Catherine Ross Nickerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp 135 – 147, p.135.

distinctions between 'mystery novels', 'drawing-room thrillers', 'police procedurals', 'pen-and-paper detectives', 'hardboiled-noir', and 'crime fiction' lie beyond the scope of this thesis. Instead, this chapter examines how discourses of gender, race, class, and petro-modernity are mobilised in the narrative structure of three post-war American crime novels — *The Big Sleep*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Black Water Rising* — and how they use narratives of detection in different ways to tell another story about the patriarchal and racist foundations of post-war American cultures of petromodernity. By examining the ways in which cultures of automobility and petromodernity are registered in the symbolic codes of these narratives of detection, this chapter suggests that post-war American crime fiction can help to illuminate the racialized and gendered dynamics of the energy unconscious.

**3.1 The Energy Unconscious.**

In 2011, a special edition of the literary journal *PMLA* featured a range of articles centred on the representations of different energy sources in the work of canonical writers such as Shakespeare, Milton, and Blake. In the 'Editor's Column', which introduces the collection, Patricia Yaeger writes of the way 'thinking about literature through the lens of energy […] about energy's visibility or invisibility might change our reading methodologies'.[111] She goes on to briefly reference Fredric Jameson's highly influential account of the political unconscious in a book of the same title, before suggesting a compelling extension to his idea by asking, 'does this model of the political unconscious also describe an energy unconscious?' (309). Before looking at Yaeger's

[111] Patricia Yaeger, 'Editors Column: Literature in the Ages of Wood, Tallow, Coal, Whale Oil, Gasoline, Atomic Power, and Other Energy Sources', *PMLA*, Vol. 126, No. 2, (2011), pp. 305-310, p.308.

proposition more closely, a short summary of the 'model' to which she refers is useful in order that we might gain a better understanding of how an energy unconscious could be understood.

Readers of Jameson will recall how his 'model' centres, for the most part, on an interpretive system comprised of the following three 'horizons':

> […] first, political history, in the narrow sense of punctual event and a chronicle-like sequence of happenings in time; then of society, in the […] sense of a constitutive tension and struggle between social classes; and, ultimately, of history now conceived in its vastest sense of the sequence of modes of production.[112]

Jameson prioritises the third horizon and it is from here that he goes on to develop two key components of his system: the idea of 'cultural revolution' (95) and the 'ideology of form' (98). Because 'no historical society has ever "embodied" a mode of production in any pure state', Jameson stresses how every society throughout history 'has in fact consisted in the overlay and structural coexistence of *several* modes of production all at once, including vestiges and survivals of older modes' (95). Cultural revolution occurs when 'the coexistence of various modes of production become visibly antagonistic, their contradictions moving to the very centre of political, social, and historical life' (95). Jameson makes clear that he does not intend these 'cultural revolutions' to be indicative of 'so-called "transitional" periods, during which social formations dominated by one mode of production undergoes a radical restructuration in the course of which a

[112] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 75.

different “dominant” emerges’ (96). Rather, they should be thought of as a ‘permanent constitutive structure’. In other words, these moments of antagonism should be conceived as perpetual and ongoing and are not intended to denote a particular historical moment. The ‘ideology of form’ is what Jameson describes as the, now rewritten, text which emerges after it has been subjected to this method of analysis, a text characterised as ‘the determinate contradiction of the specific messages emitted by the varied sign systems which coexist in a given artistic process as well as in its social formation’ (99). As he draws towards the conclusion of his explanation, Jameson brings the discussion around specifically to literary analysis, citing ‘the area of literary genre’ as the place in which the ‘ideology of form’ can be viewed most clearly (99). Because genre can never be said to exist in a pure form but rather always carries within it the traces and persistent remnants of older forms, to study genre in a way that seeks to identify previous, but still embedded modes of cultural production, provides an analogue for thinking about the way modes of production, in the Marxian sense, similarly persist, overlap, and co-exist. As Jameson puts it:

> The analysis of the ideology of form, properly completed, should reveal the formal persistence of such archaic structures of alienation – and the sign systems specific to them – beneath the overlay of all the most recent and historically original types of alienation – such as political domination and commodity reification – which have become the dominants of that most complex of all cultural revolutions, late capitalism, in which all the earlier modes of production in one way or another structurally coexist (100).

Put briefly, what Jameson's model is encouraging us to remember is how history can be thought of as a series of tensions and antagonisms between domination and struggle, and while a particular historically contingent struggle may subside, its traces or 'sign systems' live on in the mode which succeeds it. Jameson is also suggesting that genre is a literary mode that can provide a formal means of making sense of this overlapping history.

But what are the implications of Yaeger's tantalising call for an extension of Jameson's interpretative method of reading to the field of energy studies, or the energy unconscious? Her article offers little elucidation and hardly extends beyond the following few sentences:

> […] perhaps energy sources also enter texts as fields of force that have causalities outside (or in addition to) class conflicts and commodity wars. The touch-a-switch-and-it's-light magic of electrical power, the anxiety engendered by atomic residue, the odour of coal pollution, the viscous animality of whale oil, the technology of chopping wood: each resource instantiates a changing phenomenology that recreate our ideas about the literary text's relation to its originating modes of production. […] [S]ince fuel sources hover in the background of texts, if they speak at all, to pursue an energy unconscious means a commitment to the repressed, *the non-dit*, and to the text as a tissue of contradictions (309-310).

Yaeger's reflections are thought provoking. In particular, her point that resources 'enter' texts in ways that make us aware of both the changing phenomenology of these resources *and* the text's relation to its own mode of production gesture towards a

model of how to pursue the energy unconscious as it is understood in the form and meaning of the text itself. By staging the ways in which fictionalised human subjects experience and understand energy culture in their daily lives, in other words, Yaeger suggests that the form of the novel can help us to understand the ways in which fossil energy is repressed in and through its transformation into a commodity that has become part of capitalism's logic of common sense. Like Poe's purloined letter, oil seems to hide in plain sight. And yet, Yaeger does not offer a concrete example of what a method of reading refracted through the 'energy unconscious' might look like. To clarify this emergent method of reading, it is instructive to return to Jameson's interpretive model. We have already seen how Jameson's three interpretive horizons emphasise the importance of a consideration of the 'ideology of form', and how in tracing the remaining vestiges of cultural forms we might also see the traces of forms of dominance. Following the logic of Jameson's method, in what ways might it be suggested that now archaic energy forms and the 'sign systems' specific to them persist in the present as traces congealed within the viscous and abstracted commodity forms of oil? To put it another way, what are the implications for understanding histories of capitalism in this way in light of how post-industrial modes of production are all but inseparable from oil, as Imre Szeman has argued?[113] By reminding us of how oil is just one more source of energy, albeit one with exceptional bio-physical properties, in a long history of alternate forms such as whale oil, wood, and coal, can a critique of the energy unconscious also work to counter the mystifying and fetishizing processes which aid and abet our imaginary dependence on oil? To address such questions, it seems appropriate that we

[113]Andony Melathopoulos with Brian Worley , 'Oil and the Left: An interview with Imre Szeman' *Platypus Review,* No.29, (2010), pp. 2-4.

re-frame Jameson's materialist approach to the rhetorical codes and conventions of literary genres in order to trace the ways in which they variously mediate, contest, and reinforce the petro-fetishism of capitalist modernity.[114]

In a short, insightful and explicitly Jamesonian analysis of *Into Eternity* (2010), Michael Madsen's documentary about Onkalo, the nuclear waste containment bunker in Finland, Brent Ryan Bellamy evokes the energy unconscious first in relation to Madsen's fusion of cinematic styles which result in a form of generic cross-pollination: '[…] the science fictional atmosphere remains in productive tension with the film's documentary elements'.[115] In the final analysis, Bellamy suggests that nuclear power as an energy source poses a conceptual problem in the way that 'the discursive system, "the field of force that have causalities outside the text" in *Into Eternity* is that no one can seem to imagine a sign or symbol that could last even a few hundred years, let alone 100,000 [the half-life period of nuclear waste] (p.157)'. Bellamy's brief reading is insightful and his reflections on nuclear power raise interesting questions about the temporality of oil, which may have spent the same period in gestation as nuclear waste will spend in its afterlife. If nuclear energy tests the limits of historical consciousness to imagine the future, oil's future is widely understood to be far, far more determinate.

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[114] Amongst others, the 'Energy Unconscious' is discussed in the following sources: WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), p. 98; Michael Rubenstein, 'Petro', *State of the Discipline Report*, May 2014 < http://stateofthediscipline.acla.org/entry/petro> [Accessed online October 25th 2015];
Graeme Macdonald, 'Research Note: The Resources of Culture', *Reviews in Cultural Theory*, Vol.4 No.2 (2013), 1-24.

[115] Brent Ryan Bellamy, '*Into Eternity*, on our Waste Containment and Energy Futures', *Paradoxa: SF Now,* Vol.26, (2014), 145-158, (146).

### 3.2 The Gendered *Topos* of Petrotopia.

In an account of the American detective genre during the twenty-year period between 1930 and 1950, M. Abbott summarises the figure of the hard-boiled investigator which provided the template for the protagonist of many of the novels and films that were circulating at this time. With occasional deviations from this model, the detective is a 'solitary white man, hard-bitten, street-savvy, but very much alone amid the chaotic din of the modern city. Generally lower-middle or working-class, heterosexual, and without family or close ties, he navigates his way through urban spaces figured as threatening, corrupt, and even "unmanning"'.[116] The idea that urban space is itself a threat to masculinity is significant for the wider argument of this thesis, for it makes clear how, in the process of investigating particular crimes, the detective symbolically registers the ways in which the totality of socio-economic relations, which form the system of petro-capitalist modernity, also test and threaten the authority and masculinity of that detective figure.

The way that the spaces of detection pose a threat to gender stability is for David Glover an important aspect of the genre's politics which has often been overshadowed by the vast body of critical commentary and analysis given over to classification and seemingly ever more nuanced attempts to divide the genre into subcategories, or to a consideration of the subversive and/or conservative politics of this literary form. As he writes, 'Between them, the myth of the Golden Age and Chandler's potent counter-aesthetic of the hard-boiled private dick still delimit the terms in which we write the

[116] M. Abbott, *The Street Was Mine: White Masculinity in Hard-Boiled Fiction and Film Noir* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), (p.2).

history and theory of the detective story, disguising some of its most important features'.[117] The 'important features' Glover is specifically referring to are those of sexual politics and how as 'social narratives' crime novels 'speak to our modern ideologies of masculinity and individualism' (75). It is violence, or the threat of violence, against the physical masculine body which Glover identifies as the primary factor animating the narrative of detection. As he explains:

> Justice has become a personal matter, the tension between the hero's own code of ethics and rules of the social order recurs again and again. Cut adrift from any code but his own, violence serves as the *telos* of action for the thriller's hero, that moment he is tested and thereby comes to know himself most truly (76).

In a sense, then, the very notion of detection or the solving of crime become a secondary concern to that of a process of masculine identity formation. The interaction with other men with whom these tests may be performed are enabled through the spaces and environments the detective is required to navigate. He must, 'pursue his search through a predominantly male-segregated milieu of work and leisure, returning obsessively to those public places like clubs and bars where men can enter alone and belong, places of camaraderie but also danger, networks of knowledge and support where nothing is ever really certain. […] Such settings provide for recognition of the hero as *primus inter pares* […]' (77). Glover's account of the gendered significance of the places and spaces within detective fiction genre is particularly germane to my own analysis of the vicissitudes of oil masculinity in post-war American detective fiction.

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[117] David Glover, 'The Stuff Dreams Are Made Of: Masculinity, Femininity and the Thriller' *in Gender, Genre and Narrative Pleasure* ed. Derek Longhurst (London: Unwin, 1989), pp. 67-83, (p. 67).

Differently from Glover, however, I consider how the performance and negotiation of masculinity and whiteness symbolically register the extraction and accumulation of oil as the repressed energy source for the reproduction of social and economic life in post-war American culture. To further clarify how this repressed energy source is articulated in the narrative form of the detective story, it is helpful to consider Stephanie LeMenager's idea of Petrotopia within this context.

LeMenager cites David Harvey's definition of 'utopianism' as the point of departure from which she formulates this idea. For Harvey, utopianism is a mechanism which regulates and promotes a condition of permanent stability such that 'the dialect of social process is repressed [and] no future needs to be envisaged because the desired state is already achieved' (74). LeMenager suggests that this fundamental logic underpins the spatial ordering and reproduction of spaces in many parts of the United States and these spaces are and have been dependent upon oil and fossil-fuel infrastructures for their condition of possibility. As she puts it, 'I use the term petrotopia […] signifying petroleum-utopia, to refer to the now ordinary U.S. landscape of highway, low-density suburbs, strip malls, fast food and gasoline service islands, and shopping centres ringed by parking lots or parking towers' (76). The spaces described here comprise the 'now ordinary U.S. landscape' are, from a contemporary perspective, unremarkable, unexceptional, and simply part of the fabric of modern life in economically advanced nations such as the U.S. Yet it precisely this kind of uncritical acceptance, the ease with which such spaces and structures are dismissed as 'ordinary', which LeMenager seeks to address by adapting Harvey's definition. The petrotopia LeMenager describes, 'represents itself as an ideal end-state, the service economy made

flesh repressing the violence that it has performed upon South Bronx neighbourhoods levelled for freeway development or the wetlands below New Orleans, which were filled to build suburban homes' (75). In summary, the logic of petrotopia is the way it 'represses the dialectics of social and ecological processes' while the 'relentless production of space creates problems of scale that, in turn, invite the return of repressed consequences, irreversible damage' (76).

The material, physical visibility of oil in Chandler's *Big Sleep* serves as something of an intermediary between the all-encompassing, suffocating presence of the oil spill-as- environmental disaster in MacDonald's *Sleeping Beauty* and that of the concealed, hidden reserves of crude hoarded under the urban spaces of downtown Houston, which Attica Locke presents. In Chandler's novel, oil is, in a sense, peripheral both spatially and as an organising element of the narrative. Yet, the references to the Sternwood's oil field at the novel's opening and the dramatic scene within it at the conclusion to events are significant in what they contribute to our understanding of oil's indeterminate visibility across the petromodern century.

**3.3 Raymond Chandler and the Petro-*Noir*: *The Big Sleep* (1939).**

Given Raymond Chandler's status as a canonical American writer, the range and extent of commentary and criticism afforded to his most well-known novel, *The Big Sleep* is extensive and unable to be covered within the limits of this current discussion. Suffice it to say that critics have not given serious or detailed consideration to the novel's references to the oil extraction industry or considered how the novel's detective plot is bound up with the culture of oil speculation. It is with this aspect of Chandler's novel that the following section is concerned.

Prior to his eventual successes as a prolific contributor of pulp-style detective stories to the popular *Black Mask* magazine, Chandler lived in Los Angeles working as an executive for the Dabney Oil Syndicate throughout the 1920s, a period in which 'the discovery of one new [oil] field after another propelled the area into its position as the state's leading oil-producing region'.[118] His decade-long association with the business was concluded acrimoniously however, after Chandler's reportedly irascible temperament proved a potent mixer for his regular bouts of mid-morning whiskey drinking, one too many times and resulted, inevitably, in his eventual dismissal from the company in 1932.[119]

In a recent essay focussing on a narrow historical period between, approximately, the end of the First World War and the early 1950s, the literary critic Glenn Wilmott goes some way to addressing this lacuna in the current scholarship when he includes *The Big Sleep* as part of a wider discussion of what he has called 'Oedipal oil'; a term which he uses to describe how oil was subject to a particular mode of representation across a number of narrative fictions from this era. As he put it, 'where oil erupts explicitly into the imagination of early petroculture literature, […] it does so in a consistent and peculiar way that I will call, because of its evocations of tragic miasma and social alienation, Oedipal oil'.[120] This term is useful for Willmott because it emphasises how 'early petrocultural narratives [function as] generic tragedies of Oedipal oil because they represent, in diverse cases, the destructive yet enlightening trajectory

[118] Nancy Quam- Wickham, "Cities Sacrificed on the Altar of Oil": Popular Opposition to Oil Development in 1920s Los Angeles', *Environmental History*, Vol. 3, No.2, (1998), pp. 189-209, (p. 191)
[119] Gene D. Phillips, *Creatures of Darkness: Raymond Chandler, Detective Fiction, and Film Noir* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2000), p15-16.
[120] Glenn Willmott, 'Oil Tragedy as Modern Genre', in *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture,* eds. Sheena Wilson, Adam Carlson, Imre Szeman (Kingston, ON: McGill-Queens University Press, 2017), pp.187-197, p.188.

of human beings alienated both from each other and from their natural world, as these are commodified as resources to fuel the production of an imagined personal sovereignty. Oil is always the sign of a pure otherness, of a human capacity for alienation […] that is its tragic, Oedipal *hamartia*, or error in judgement' (188). For Willmott, it is *The Big Sleep's* climactic final scene set in General Sternwood's oil field in La Brea where Marlowe learns the eventual truth about Rusty Reagan's disappearance and the Sternwood sisters' involvement in it. Drawing on Chandler's vivid description of the landscape in this final section, Willmott claims how it 'enables and reveals amoral power and violence, in this case in an empathy deficient child' while, in addition, 'oil is a synecdoche for a larger modernity, but one that points inwards, towards a dangerously alienated self and the exercise of a ruthlessly indifferent sovereignty that is marked and timeless but awoken by a dystopian petro culture' (191).

The eerie, the sinister, and the macabre, linger around the periphery of Chandler's narrative and certainly haunt the narrative frame of *The Big Sleep*. Indeed, the critic Edward Margolies suggests that the 'suspense and atmosphere [in T*he Big Sleep*] are fused into what might best be termed Los Angeles gothic' (109). Margolies' phrase is certainly apposite when considered in relation to several memorable scenes in the novel such as General Sternwood's sweltering greenhouse full of plants 'with nasty meaty leaves and stalks like the newly washed fingers of dead men'.[121] The General is himself described as having 'bloodless lips' and 'thin claw like hands' (6). The novel even concludes on the grim and macabre image of Rusty Reagan's corpse, concealed within the sump hole of the oil field, and now 'a horrible, decayed thing' (249). Margolies' idea

[121] Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep* (London: Penguin Books, 2011), p. 6. Subsequent references to this text will appear in the body of the chapter.

of the Los Angeles Gothic registers the way Chandler extrapolates elements typically associated with British romance and mystery writers and can even work to undercut the more popular images of Phillip Marlowe's world, which largely centre on the persona of the wise-cracking, hard drinking, no-nonsense, tough guy swathed in cigarette smoke. Yet the extent to which these hard-boiled tropes are seen as defining characteristics of Chandler's work also overshadow other elements of his fiction, elements which, arguably, share more in common with authors such as Anne Radcliffe and Bram Stoker than with Dashiell Hammett and Carol John Daly.

This is not to suggest, however, that more established, conventional readings of the Phillip Archer character are without merit. Lee Horsley provides an apt assessment of Marlowe when he describes him as 'a questing knight'.[122] Horsley claims that Marlowe is 'a sentimentalised figure [who] engages in encounters that simultaneously propel him on and test his skill in arms, challenging his fearlessness and integrity and leading him to a more sophisticated understanding of his moral makeup' (38). The reference to the 'questing knight' is especially apposite for describing Marlowe in *The Big Sleep* where, upon viewing a medieval tableau in a stained-glass window, he is critical of the apparent inefficacy of the knight in the image who 'didn't seem to be really trying' when tasked with rescuing the maiden in peril. [123]

[122] Lee Horsley, *The Noir Thriller* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p.38

[123] To emphasise Marlowe's chivalric qualities too much would be a mistake in light his somewhat exhaustive range of prejudices which extend across racial, sexual, and economic divides. Indeed, such is the extent of Marlowe's discriminatory prowess that in Mike Davis's historical account of the significant cultural figures from Los Angeles recent history, he does not consider Marlowe's knightly qualities at all but instead suggests him as "the avenging burgher [who] totters precariously on the precipice of fascist paranoia. Each successive Chandler novel focuses on a new target of Marlowe's dislike: Blacks, Asians, gays, 'greasers', and always women". Mike Davis, *City of Quartz* (London: Verso, 1990), p. 91, n. 42.

Placing many of Marlowe's highly problematic prejudices to one side and adopting the considerable critical consensus of Marlowe as the exemplary 'hard-boiled gentleman', why would Marlowe accept the General's commission when the wayward Sternwood sisters are so clearly the antithesis of all he believes in? The answer seems to cut directly to the source of oil in the novel, General Sternwood, who, as the near-obsolete patriarch, serves as a symbol for a similarly bygone era in which masculine codes and performances were active in organising and arranging social hierarchies centred on homosocial relations. This is, as we have seen, the same sentimental and idealised notion of a pre-capitalist, pre-modern, era from which Marlowe, chivalrous and gentlemanly, draws upon to define his own masculine identity. The opening sections of *The Big Sleep* establish the shared cultural if not economic milieu held by the employer and client. As well as the stained-glass window, Marlowe is impressed by the military portrait in the Sternwood mansion. While the General's fondness for Rusty Reagan is complex and perhaps multi-faceted, that Regan was also an ex-militant fighter seems not incidental. In addition, both men state an implicit respect for Reagan in his capacity as a successful alcohol bootlegger. This is a crime seemingly imbued with sufficient risk and danger to stand as a signifier of masculine credentials.

With such a clearly complex character as Marlowe, to focus on him in *The Big Sleep* is useful as doing so presents readers with a handful of opportunities to examine how he reacts, responds and performs those crucial tests of masculinity, whilst encountering, either physically or visually, the novel's spaces and geographies of oil. Before looking at specific passages where Marlowe directly encounters oil, I want to briefly discuss the signifying energy of oil in the novel more broadly. As has already been

mentioned, in these three detective novels, oil holds a dual status. It is present, to varying degrees, in its raw, viscous form, and it is present in the multitude of consumer products, cars, and petroleum infrastructures which organise life in petro-modern America. What's more, oil is bound up with a patriarchal culture of racialised extractivism that accumulates wealth for a predominantly white, male capitalist class.

In the early stages of the novel, it is revealed that the Sternwood mansion and the opulent lifestyles the General's daughters enjoy are the result of oil wealth. After the initial meeting with the Sternwoods, Marlowe surveys the geography of the family estate and reflects on the proximity of the source of the Sternwood fortunes:

> […] beyond the fence the hill sloped for several miles. On this lower-level faint and far off I could barely see some of the old wooden derricks of the oilfield from which the Sternwoods had made their money. Most of the field was public park now, cleaned up and donated to the city by General Sternwood. But a little of it was still producing in groups of wells pumping five or six barrels a day. The Sternwoods, having moved up the hill, could no longer smell the stale sump water or the oil, but they could still look out of their front windows and see what had made them rich. If they wanted to. I didn't suppose they would want to. (20)

In contrast to Upton Sinclair's Ross, or the wildcatters in Sanford's short stories, the Sternwoods are distant and removed from the physical extractive processes. The fortune has been secured, the ties between labour and financial reward are severed and the family live in the manner of feudal barons; this arrangement has allowed the family members to indulge in various vices with disastrous consequences. Indeed, we might even regard the elder Sternwood daughter Vivian's wild gambling sprees at 'The Cypress Club' casino as a mode of speculation which is a perverse imitation of the business ventures her father had made in the oil industry. The elevated position of the mansion,

at the top of the hill, mirrors the Sternwood's social status as an elite family, literally above the sights and smells of the industrial processes upon which they rely.

Repeated references are made to Chandler's physical appearance throughout the events of the narrative in ways that invite comparisons with Rusty Reagan. Yet, these parallels go both unnoticed by Marlowe, and are unexplained by the characters which draw them. One could argue that these consistently repeated references are an instance of what Freud termed the uncanny double. As I go on to suggest however, if an uncanny doubling exists between Marlowe and Rusty, it is a process which is mediated and made manifest, through oil. A close reading of Marlowe's dialogue with Carmen, shortly after his arrival at the Sternwood mansion, is instructive for exploring this claim. Upon meeting for the first time, Carmen prompts the detective to introduce himself when she asks, "What's your name?'. 'Reilly', I said. 'Doghouse Reilly'. 'That's a funny name […] are you a prizefighter?" (p.3). This early exchange between Carmen and Marlowe is effective in establishing the dynamic between these key characters and adheres rather closely to established conventions pertaining to the wisecracking, quick witted detective and the flirtatious, alluring, *femme fatale*. Marlowe's description of Carmen in this scene also contains undertones of the uncanny. Although Marlowe recognizes Carmen as being conventionally attractive, or 'cute' as she herself declares, there is something otherworldly, even monstrous about the additional details of her physical appearance which he proceeds to recount. In addition to her eyes, which he notes, have 'almost no expression', he describes how her 'face lacked colour', and the image of her apparently 'little sharp predatory teeth' serves to compliment the equally unsettling way that she 'walked as if she were floating' (2-3). Carmen is simultaneously attractive and alluring

while also unfamiliar, threatening, and monstrous; in short, uncanny in precisely the way Freud outlines. Yet it is the comedic and seemingly throwaway reference to 'Doghouse Reilly' that provides the first instance in the narrative of Marlowe's own uncanny doubling with Rusty Reagan, a doubling which turns on the absent presence of oil wealth in the novel. Carmen's incorrect guess that Marlowe/ Doghouse might be a 'prizefighter' is presumably on account of how the name seems to resemble those of well-known boxers of the period such as Kid Chocolate or Battling Batalino. Of course, the phrase 'to be in the doghouse' remains in contemporary usage and is widely understood as pertaining to 'a situation in which someone is angry at you for something you did or did not do' (*Cambridge Dictionary online*). Perhaps less well known, but would undoubtedly have been known by Chandler, is that the 'doghouse' also refers to a key element within the structure of an oil drilling rig. As Lisa Margonelli explains, the doghouse 'is the name for the trailer hanging from the derrick forty feet off the ground. […] From the doghouse, you can step onto the rig floor, a large platform that surrounds the turning drill pipe.[124] Evoking the terminology of the oilfield here may be seen as an instance of discrete foreshadowing which gestures towards the location of Rusty's body. The reference might even be suggestive of certain parallels between the role of the doghouse in relation to its spatial positioning within the drill rig, with that of Marlowe's own role as the focalising detective/ narrator. Just as the doghouse on the rig provides the elevated vantage point from which to observe and direct the drill bit and attendant drillers, Marlowe's narrative of detection centres upon an objective in which he too will

[124] Margonelli's account is taken from a visit to a derrick in the early 2000s. She goes on to describe the interior space of the doghouse as 'dingy - a sort of industrial clubhouse - [...] with a few lockers, and one of those indented aluminium stretchers used for immobilizing spine injuries' (p.73).

eventually achieve a privileged, elevated perspective on the events of the narrative by *extracting* the hidden details and clues which comprise the truth behind the murder-mystery. In addition to this, Marlowe's choice of 'Reilly' as the surname for his comedic disguise makes overt reference to an Irish heritage which, again, can be seen as developing yet further associative patterns with Rusty Reagan, the 'big curly-headed Irishman from Clonmel' (9).

The La Brea Tar pits where Rusty's body has been concealed is a significant location as it represents the site of the first oil rush in 1892, the period which led to the fortunes of Edward Doheny in the years following the annexation of land from Mexican jurisdiction. This location serves to confirm the Sternwoods' status as part of the establishment elite by virtue of the family's connections to that era. As we have seen in the previous chapters, the initial oil-boom era of the late 1800s had been framed in the terms of a masculine discourse of bravery, exploration, and a form of patriotic entrepreneurialism. In Chandler's fiction, the loss of honour and a sense of oil capital's amorality is registered through the suggestion that the site of the first oil rush has now become fetid, barren, and disused works to establish a sense of lost honour and amorality. That this is also the site where Rusty is buried is significant also when one considers Rusty's heroic status as a former military combatant during the Irish War of Independence, and hence a figure of honourable standing, which might suggest loose associations with America's own war of independence against the British. That Rusty was also a bootlegger during the prohibition era may also invite comparisons with the

heroic myth that developed around historical figures such as George Remus.[125] Like Remus, Rusty is presented as a loveable rogue who fought against unjust laws, and whose murder shocked those who admired him.

Against such heroic myths and memories, Chandler's narrative of detection makes clear how the consumer culture of post-war America is increasingly removed from the corrupt world of big oil upon which it also depends. Proceeding down the dusty, 'narrow dirt road' which leads to the oilfield, Marlowe notices how 'the noise of city traffic grew curiously and quickly faint, as if this were not in the city at all, but far away in a daydream land' (237). The way that the sounds of the city seem to fade away have a semi-hallucinatory effect on Marlowe and imbue the location with a surreal liminality. Interestingly, the distance between the traffic and the oilfield that is emphasised here is not really in relation to spatiality. The oilfield is only a ten-minute drive from the Sternwood's mansion and therefore not far from the city. Rather, what the quick dimming of the traffic serves to underscore is a disassociation between this site of production and the contemporary apparatus of automobility, noisy and active. Of course, the modern culture of automobility is entirely dependent upon oil drawn from working sites of extraction, which this once was. What is also significant here is that this oilfield was once the source of a private, family-owned enterprise. Although the novel does not explicitly draw such distinctions, we have already seen in the previous discussions of Sanford's wildcatters and Sinclair's independent oil operators, that by the

[125] Karen Abbott, The Ghosts of Eden Park: The Bootleg King, the Women Who Pursued Him, and the Murder that Shocked Jazz-Age America (New York: Crown Archetype, 2019). In her biographical account of George Remus, a lawyer-turned-bootlegger, Abbott writes how, in the prohibition era, 'people saw Remus as a hero. So many people lost jobs during Prohibition: bartenders, waiters, glass makers, barrel makers, transportation people. In Cincinnati alone, he employed about 3,500 people, which certainly make him a folk hero' (p. 18).

late 1930s, the oil that powers the modern infrastructures of North America was almost entirely controlled by a handful of corporate entities. Marlowe's phrase 'daydream land' also recalls Winston Churchill's well-known description of 'a prize from fairyland' which referred to a supply contract from the Anglo-Persian oil company on highly favourable terms for the British Navy which at, the time, was faced with spiralling costs of transitioning its fleet from steam to oil power. The similarity between these phrases may, of course, be coincidental, but as we have seen, after a decade spent at a senior level in the domestic oil industry, Chandler was well versed in the history of energy extraction. The echo of 'fairyland' in 'daydream land' might even be particularly pertinent to the discussion concerning corporate oil. For, as Timothy Mitchell has noted, Churchill's contract greatly assisted the consolidation of 'the monopolistic control of oil prices'; by 'hinder[ing] the development of Mesopotamian oil, the British government enabled Anglo-Persian to become one of the leading members of the emerging international oil cartel'.[126]

To counter this rhetoric of 'daydream land', Marlowe describes the detritus of the abandoned petro-apparatus in the following way:

> […] the oil-stained, motionless walking beam of a squat wooden derrick stuck up over a branch. I could see the rusty old steel cable that connected this walking-beam with half a dozen others. The beams didn't move, probably hadn't moved for a year. The wells were no longer pumping. There was a pile of rusted pipe, a loading platform that sagged at one end, half a dozen empty oil drums lying in a ragged pile. There was the stagnant, oil-scummed water of an old sump iridescent in the sunlight (237).

[126] Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London: Verso Books, 2011), pp. 60-61.

The sense of this space as an industrial graveyard is powerfully imagined here through the use of Marlowe's quite specific technical terms used to describe the various components. The descriptions of the 'rusty old steel cable' together with the 'pile of rusted pipe' are both oblique references to the body of Rusty Reagan buried here, close to hand but out of sight. While the derricks are still connected via the rusting cable, they do not function together anymore, as part of an interconnected circuit of production. It could even be said that Chandler's use of simple poetic devices in the latter part of the passage—the creation of patterns, parallel rhymes, and aural associations—that the use of these techniques create might be a way of countering the ideas of a fragmented and disassociated social world symbolised in the oil wells. Although far from being stylistically complex or sophisticated, the use of assonance, consonance, repetition, and even half-rhyme in the sentence, with the close similarity between 'sagged' and 'ragged', creates a number of identifiable patterns and internal connections, which seem to stand in contrast to the scenes of dislocated machine-parts. In other words, the abandoned oil field, containing decayed traces of former apparatuses of extraction, stages a tension between literary form and content, as Chandler presents a bleak scene of dislocated disorder which, nevertheless, is forced into a sort of order and organisation, by the way formal, perhaps conventional, literary techniques are used to provide Marlowe's focalising narration. The attempts to apply order to chaos is, of course, entirely consistent with Marlowe's role as the questing knight, but the urban environment of a ruined oil infrastructure in which this romance quest takes place gives the lie to oil fetishism at a moment in the cycle of energy accumulation when oil no longer seems to be profitable.

After driving past the scattered and disparate ruins of the derrick, Marlowe stops the car and pauses briefly to consider his surroundings. Exiting the car with Carmen he notes how 'the hum of the traffic was a distant web of sound, like the buzzing of bees' (237). The framing of an element of the non-human world to signify organised productivity recalls Cora's observations of the 'scuttling ants' and 'striding grasshoppers' which serve to bring her own sense of dislocation into sharp focus in the wake of the windfall. As I go on to discuss shortly, Marlowe's description also prefigures an observation made by the protagonist in Teddy Wayne's novel in which the view of Manhattan from a helicopter prompts reflection of the movements of cars through the urban spaces as analogous to that of ants in a colony. Indeed, Eric C. Brown has written on the long and established rhetorical tradition in which insects have been deployed to symbolise order and societal harmony. As he puts it, 'beginning perhaps with Virgil's Georgics, bees, ants and other social insects have been the poetic models for ideal, organised communities, clockwork colonies of perfect governance and efficiency'.[127] Chandler's use of this simile certainly works to emphasise the contrast between the productive activity of the city with the inertia, decay, and disorder of an abandoned oil field. Such a contrast also reminds readers of the connections between the corrupt world of fossil capital and the culture of American modernity, which is increasingly defined by automobility.

It is also worth considering the possibility that Marlowe's descent into this underworld reveals how the private detective is himself implicated in the corrupt and criminal world of petro-capitalist modernity in which he finds himself, and that he is a

[127] Brown, Eric. C, 'Insects, Colonies, and Idealization in the Early Americas', *Utopian Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2002), 20-37, (p.21).

beneficiary of the very racist and patriarchal world of post-war American petro-capitalism, which he also investigates. In this sense, the *topos* of the underworld in Chandler's post-war America can also be read as a symbolic space through which the gendered and racialised dynamics of the energy unconscious are articulated. To address this aspect of Chandler's fiction, I return to the question of race, oil, and detective fiction later in the chapter through a discussion of the black detective figure in Locke's *Black Water Rising*. The following section examines how the dynamics of the energy unconscious and oil fetishism are played out in the rhetorical structure of Ross Macdonald's *Sleeping Beauty*.

### 3.4 Oil Spills and Libidinal Blocks in Ross Macdonald's *Sleeping Beauty* (1973).

Considered as the novels and short story collections of the dime-store, hardboiled-detective fiction of the twenties and thirties were, in a sense, a major publishing phenomenon in terms of their commercial viability and widespread, mass-market appeal. Yet such works remained largely ignored by academic scholars and literary publications of note. It is with the arrival of Ross McDonald, and specifically his Lew Archer series, that American detective fiction began to break out from beyond the widely held belief that, while entertaining, such novels held little to no value in terms of their artistic or literary merit. Macdonald's appropriation of Freudian mythologies and techniques used in psychoanalysis as organising and structural components for his narratives are undoubtedly a significant factor in the scholarly attention afforded to his work. Ross's interest in Freudian models of the unconscious mind and his use of ancient Greek narratives, such as the Oedipal tragedy, provided ways of shedding light on

human motivations and desires, during his time as a postgraduate literature student in the 1940s. As Macdonald put it in an interview to *Newsweek* magazine, '[…] [Freud] was one of the two or three great influences on me. He made myth into psychiatry, and I've been trying to turn it back into myth again in my own small way'.[128] It is true of course that psychoanalytic modes of interpretation have always been associated with the detective genre. As Amy Yang notes, Freud himself was a keen reader of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes novels.[129] But it is perhaps only following the emergence of Ross Macdonald's fiction, and specifically his Lew Archer series in the early 1950s, that self-conscious and explicit attempts were made to incorporate ideas from Freudian psychology into the more conventional aspects of the detective genre. Yang explains how ideas from within the field of psychoanalysis were particularly alluring to authors of crime fiction who sought, for their criminal characters in particular, new ways to go beyond the 'obvious, surface motive' for their actions and allowed instead the opportunity to 'delve into the criminal's mind, teasing out the underlying driving force for murder, even if the criminal was not actively aware of it at the time. […] it dislodged the notion of free will from intent to commit crime' (Yang, p.597). Macdonald often spoke and wrote about his interest in the symbolism of psychoanalysis and Freud's appropriation of the Oedipus myth.[130] Indeed, by the mid-point of the Lew Archer series,

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[128] Jerry Speir, *Ross Macdonald* (New York, NY: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1978), p.7.

[129] Amy Yang, 'Psychoanalysis and Detective Fiction: a tale of Freud and criminal storytelling', *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, Vol.53, No. 4, (2010), pp. 596-604.

[130] Bernard A. Schopen acknowledges this influence in Macdonald's work but suggests that the critical consensus, in which Macdonald is indisputably and intractably associated with Freud's ideas, is overemphasised and potentially misleading. Schopen writes, 'While they make use of Freud, the novels are not fictionalized versions of psychoanalytical theory; neither are they a retelling of the Oedipus legend, for all the prominence of the exile-and-return pattern. […] Characters are clearly responsible for their actions, and for the suffering and sorrow they inflict on those around them. Most often the ultimate cause of evil in Macdonald's novels is love'. Bernard A. Schopen, *Ross Macdonald*, (Boston, Mass.: Twayne Publishers, 1990), p. 15.

one encounters plotlines structured around themes of abandoned children and violent patricide with increasing frequency. Yet if the psychoanalytic plotline is considered as a narrative vehicle for articulating the complex dynamics of post-war American capitalist society and its dependence on fossil oil, a different reading starts to emerge. This section of the chapter draws on but also extends concepts from Freudian theory in order to explore how the oil spill can be understood as the physical manifestation of a pathology in Archer. Understood in the terms of psychoanalytic theory, the oil spill can be seen as a representation of Archer's libidinal energy as it erupts to the surface as part of a dysfunctional process triggered by both the trauma and comforts of life in a post-war petro-modern American society.

To further clarify how this psychoanalytic mode of interpretation is mediated in the narrative structure of Macdonald's novel, it is helpful to consider the parallel between narratives of detection and the discourse of transference. In a discussion of Poe's Dupin in 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue', Ffrench suggests that the process of transference is essential to the success of the detective's investigation.[131] Rather than attempting to solve the murder through a close focus on the material objects and clues that constitute the scene of the crime in what would be an act of interpretation, Dupin attempts to inhabit the mind of the criminal in an effort to draw further insight into the event. By doing so, the process of interpretation which was hitherto blocked is enabled and the combination of material objects and psychic motivations guide the case to its resolution. A similar logic of transference underpins the structure of Macdonald's

[131] Patrick Ffrench, 'Open Letter to Detectives and Psychoanalysts: Analysis and Reading', in *The Art of Detective Fiction,* eds. Warren Chernaik, Martin Swales, Robert Villan (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000) pp.222-232, (p.227).

*Sleeping Beauty*.[132] Lew Archer's deft understanding of the need for a dual process that combines forensic analysis and transference is exemplary and occurs at numerous junctures in his investigation. Jerry Spier's suggestion that Archer's mode of detection through conversation, or 'style of revelation', are certainly accurate in this respect.[133] Yet, a closer consideration of the specific events in *Sleeping Beauty* (1973) requires this analysis of Archer's methods and motivations to be reconsidered in order to account for the complicity and influence Archer himself plays in the trajectory of the narrative. According to Spier's assessment, Archer remains one step removed from events and his expertise in attentive listening as a method of detection is carried out away from the main stage and in the relative obscurity of the wings. What I want to suggest is at stake in the search for Laurel, however, is Archer's own need to resolve his own psychological neurosis, which is perhaps triggered in response to his unconscious complicity in the culture of petro-modernity. Archer's detective narrative works through the psychic dynamics of his own desires and fixations in a way that leads readers back to his traumatic encounter with the oil spill at the start of the novel. In doing so, Archer's narrative of detection functions as a symbolic vehicle, which also makes the ideological function of the energy unconscious intelligible to its readers. The resolution required is dependent upon the series of conversational encounters which, when successful, result in a form of countertransference that allows progression to the next encounter. It is through these encounters that Archer, and perhaps also the reader, pieces together an understanding of the unequal hierarchies, and asymmetrical relations of power which organise race, class, and gender in contemporary petro-capitalist modernity.

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[132] Ross Macdonald, *Sleeping Beauty* (Glasgow: William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd, 1973)
[133] Jerry Spier, *Ross Macdonal*d (New York, NY: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1978), p. 123.

The significance of the oil spill which looms over events encroaching ever further inland has been largely ignored in scholarly discussions of the novel.[134] This is perhaps because it appears to stand outside of the psychic dynamics of the narrative of detection. Against such readings, I want to suggest that the spill stands in a surreal, psychosocial relation to Archer as a manifestation of cathexis. Abrams and Ellis write of how Freud used a metaphor of running liquid as a way of explaining how libidinal energy flowed. As they put it, 'Freud compared the process of fixation to the flow of fluid under pressure. Water or some other fluid will naturally flow from higher to lower pressure; however, if openings occur along the path or flow, the fluid will collect or leak in from these openings'.[135] Such a comparison has its roots in what James R. Solomon has called the hydraulic theory of the emotions. Freud first formulated this idea in one of his early papers, entitled 'The Project toward a Scientific Psychology' in 1895. Here, he argued that the psychic apparatus was filled with a fluid-like energy which he designated using the letter Q for quantity. This hydraulic theory of the emotions finds clearer expression in Freud's later writings. In the *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, for instance, Freud offered an account of how symptoms are formed when libidinal energy is displaced onto phantasies or fixations which are disconnected from their unconscious source.[136] In Freud's argument, these fixations become intelligible when one begins to talk through

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[134] Indeed, any extensive or extended discussions of *Sleeping Beauty* are notable in their scarcity. Otherwise valuable contributions to the body of scholarly work on Macdonald and his fiction by Jerry Speir, Bernard A. Schopen, and Pete Wolfe all touch upon this novel, to varying extents, but none of these writers, perhaps surprisingly, consider the symbolic dimension of the oil spill or consider its presence as an organising element within the novel's structure. Bernard A. Schopen, *Ross Macdonald* (Boston, Mass.: Twayne Publishers, 1990); Jerry Spier, *Ross Macdonald* (New York, NY: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1978); Pete Wolfe, *Dreamers Who Live Their Dreams: The World of Ross Macdonald's Novels* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Press, 1976).

[135] Albert Elis, Mike Abrams, Lidia D. Abrams, *Personality Theories* (London: SAGE Publications, 2002), p. 44.

[136] Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: The Psychopathology of Everyday Life,* Vol. VI (London: Hogarth Press, 1960).

the implications of everyday episodes, which may at first appear to be trivial. Consider the following anecdote regarding a minor accident in a college laboratory in which a student-technician, F., complains to a colleague about how their work as overrun and how he had many other pressing tasks to attend to which the current assignment was preventing him from completing. The colleague recalls how, 'I could not help agreeing with him and added half-jokingly, referring to an incident the week before: "Let us hope that the machine will go wrong again so that we can stop work and go home early"' (p. 174). When the work in the laboratory gets under way, F. mistakenly turns a valve on the technical equipment they are using in the wrong direction 'creating a strain for which the connecting-pipes are not designed, so that one of them immediately burst – […] enough to oblige us to suspend work for the day and go home' (p. 174). The crux of the anecdote comes in a final revelation that when the two colleagues were discussing the affair sometime later my friend F. had no recollection whatever of my remark, which I recalled with certainty' (p. 174). For Freud, this anecdote describes a case of parapraxis, an instance in which an unconscious motivation becomes manifest in an action or behaviour which may be clumsily, foolish, or even fatally harmful. The extent of the harm caused – a mild embarrassment or a serious injury – are essentially unimportant; it is in the act of carrying out the faulty action that the hitherto concealed, real or true intention becomes exposed.

Freud's account of the displacement of libidinal energy can also help to illuminate the dynamics of the energy unconscious, and the ways in which novelists have used the libidinal economy of the psyche as a symbolic vehicle through which to represent the socio-economic and environmental dimensions of oil extraction and speculation. This results in a fixation which can only be resolved through psychoanalytic

therapy. Drawing on this metaphor of liquid as it flows, blocks, and spills, I suggest first that it is Laurel who serves as the object of Archer's fixation, while the oil spill is a material effect of his own libidinal energy as it flows dangerously beyond his control. The symbolic logic of the novel thus suggests that the search for Laurel will not only bring resolution through counter-transference, but will also bring about a symbolic end to the spill. Such a reading is not to deny the materiality of the oil spill; on the contrary, it allows us to see how the crimes of the bourgeois family and post-war American capitalist society more generally are made possible by oil extraction and environmental devastation.

The 1969 Union Bell oil spill in the Santa Barbara channel was the largest offshore drilling disaster to date in the United States. The geographers Keith C. Clarke and Jeffrey J. Hemphill provide a startling account of how three million gallons of oil escaped from defective pipe casing for eleven days and, when carried by the wind and tidal currents, saturated the diverse marine ecologies on the Santa Barbara shoreline with catastrophic effects. They explain how, 'The oil muted the sound of the waves' and caused the death of, at least, '3,600 ocean-feeding seabirds […] poisoned seals and dolphins […] devastated kelp forests […] displaced populations of endangered birds.[137] The sheer scale of the disaster, unprecedented at the time, helped to mobilize burgeoning national consciousness of the, perhaps, hitherto unrecognised relationships between oil extraction, big business, and the delicate ecologies which provided the physical structures of these relationships. As they reference the Woodstock music festival and the moon landing of the same year, Clarke and Hemphill imply that the oil

[137] Keith C. Clarke, Jeffrey J. Hemphill, 'Santa Barbara Oil Spill: A Retrospective', *Yearbook of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers*, Vol.64 (2002), 157-162, (p. 159).

spill disaster should be afforded a socio-cultural parity with this more well-known event as 'a new attitude toward the environment was born in Santa Barbara, California' (157). A long-time resident of the area, Macdonald became a prominent figure in the aftermath as Jefferson Hunter points out in a recent article for the *Los Angeles Review of Books* when he notes how Macdonald 'participated in surveys of the damage done by the oil, especially to shorebirds, and also joined activist groups, even holding up protest signs at rallies'.[138]

As Jerry Speir notes, 'the oil spill ultimately became the organizing idea behind *Sleeping Beauty* (p.10). The events of the narrative unfolds over two days and nights and centres on the private detective Lew Archer's attempts to locate Laurel Russo, the daughter of a powerful oil magnate, who runs away from home in the wake of an environmental disaster, which sees the offshore rig owned by her father spill oil across the coastline of Pacific Point, a fictional stand-in for Santa Barbara. After a chance meeting on the beach where Archer finds Laurel assisting volunteers' efforts to quell the encroaching spill and rescue the oil-soaked birds, Archer finds himself inexplicably captivated by Laurel's enigmatic yet distressed condition and takes her to his apartment. After discovering Laurel has fled with Archer's powerful sleep medication, an act which he determines as a prelude to her suicide, he embarks on a journey to locate the missing girl through a series of interviews and encounters with Laurel's extended family and

[138] Hunter suggests *Sleeping Beauty* as a resource that might help readers to grasp the history of oil spill disasters in the wake of the Deepwater Horizon disaster. Jefferson Hunter, 'Black Blood: Ross Macdonald and the Oil Spill', *Los Angeles Review of Books,* April 22nd (2011), < https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/black-blood-ross-macdonald-and-the-oil-spill/#!> [Accessed online 13th October 2017]

range of tertiary characters who inhabit both the elite gated enclaves of Santa Barbara and the impoverished urban spaces of downtown Los Angeles.

In an opening scene which parallels that of Teddy Wayne's *Kapitoil* (discussed in the final chapter), Macdonald's *Sleeping Beauty* opens on board a plane with Lew Archer, the central protagonist/narrator, observing the alarming and unfamiliar sights from their elevated position. This use of an aerial perspective as a form of focalisation is significant because it provides a symbolic overview of the totality of the economic and ecological landscape of petro-modernity. Indeed, the seemingly superfluous detail included in this opening section which notes that Archer is returning from Mazatlán could even be said to draw a wider geography into the narrative frame; an element that is perhaps significant in view of the complex history of resource appropriation and soft forms of petro-colonialism enacted against Mexico by its neighbour.[139] Upon viewing the oil spill from the plane as it approaches Los Angeles, Archer notices how an 'offshore platform stood up out of its windward end like the metal handle of a dagger that had stabbed the world and made it bleed black blood'.[140] The description is richly symbolic in the way it evokes a classic image of crime fiction, that of a dagger-stabbed victim, and relates it to ecological catastrophe.

Following his arrival, Archer proceeds to the airport parking lot to retrieve his vehicle. Rather than driving home, however, he diverts to Pacific Point, ordinarily 'one of [his] favourite places on the coast', but presently the site where the oil that has spilled

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[139] *The Mexican Petroleum Industry in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Jonathan C. Brown and Alan Knight, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2009). The essays in this collection reveal the extent to which Mexico's domestic oil industry has been subjected to interference and the constant jockeying for strategic influence by foreign nations, in particular the United States, since the late 1800s.

[140] Ross Macdonald, *Sleeping Beauty* (Glasgow: William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd, 1973), p.5. Subsequent references to this novel will appear in the body of the text.

from the offshore drilling rig has concentrated. Archer expresses the psychological effect of the disaster while preparing to drive home in the following terms: '[I] made my way out to the airport parking lot, the oil spill threatening the city's beaches floated like a depression just over the horizon of my mind. Instead of driving home to West Los Angeles, I turned south along the coast to Pacific Point' (5). The affinity Archer claims to have with Pacific Point and the near-instant condition of depression that the oil spill triggers, suggests that he experiences the spill as a traumatic event. It is this traumatic event, I suggest, that contributes to his misplaced erotic fascination with Laurel upon arriving at the beach. To further clarify the significance of this event and the displacement of the trauma associated with it, it is worth pausing here to consider the correspondences between Archer's experience of the oil spill and Freud's account of the psychic dynamics of fixation. In addition to trauma, Freud writes of how overindulgence or excessive comfort can also instigate a process of cathexis that results in fixation.[141] The modes of mobility that Archer exploits in these opening sections work to frame him as modern, autonomous, and economically self-sufficient. More importantly, these modes of mobility, including carbon-intensive plane travel, as well as private car ownership, underscore his status as a sovereign subject of petro-modernity. As a white, heterosexual, middle-class male figure, Archer enjoys the easy comforts of petromodernity, which are readily available and accessible. And yet, the pollution and images of toxic ecocide he observes from the plane also serve to implicate him in the global circulation of oil and, as such, make clear how he is complicit in the spill. The extent to which psychic trauma is apt to elide or evade forms of expression is due to its

[141] See Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Karnac Books, 1988), pp. 62-5.

'exceptional nature', as Bob Johnson has put it (Johnson, xxvii). This makes it 'difficult to process psychologically and therefore decidedly problematic to represent to oneself or to narrate successfully to others' (xxvii). Identifying systemic social trauma as a response to fossil-powered capitalist modernity is a useful technique as helps us grasp how these traumas 'sunk – in at least an analogous way – below the register of the nation's collective consciousness […]. Because coal […] [and] oil […] became associated with […] damaged subaltern peoples and their peripheral geographies […] they fell discursively outside of the normative values, images, and self-conceptions of the nation's middle class. […]' (xxvii.). The result, Johnson explains, is anomalous and facilitates an inherent contradiction in which although fossil fuels take a central position within the 'nation's material core, they migrated paradoxically to the margins of its symbolic life, taking up residence […] [and] relegated to the basement of the world among the socially, physically, and geographically marginalized' (xxvii-xxix).

The spill is of course an upsetting event to observe, but these connections between mobility in petro-modern America and the expectations of access to this mobility by an upwardly socially mobile, white, middle-class man, are not understood at this stage but are rather present 'just over the horizon of [Archer's] mind' (5). Such observations foreground how the novel's psychoanalytic language makes the gendered dynamics of the energy unconscious intelligible to readers. While they may not be understood until the process of detection enables Archer to begin a series of conversations with the residents of Pacific Point, the manifestations of the trauma are themselves positioned immediately after his initial encounter with Laurel Russo after he arrives at the beach in Pacific Point. Archer notes the apocalyptic scenes along the

polluted shoreline and describes how ‘a few people, mostly women and girls, were standing at the edge of the water, facing out to sea. They looked as if they were waiting for the end of the world, or as if the end had come and they would never move again’ (6). The way these stunned observers appear as if frozen like statues certainly registers the sublime, near-incomprehensible character of the oil spill. Crucially, their inert and immobile condition serves to interrupt the development of the modern detective narrative which is also dependent on fossil-fuel dependent modes of travel. Archer’s preoccupation with different modes of mobility and movement is further exemplified shortly afterwards when Archer describes Laurel’s ‘elegant footprints’ and how ‘narrow feet left beautifully shaped prints in the wet sand’ (6). Through the overemphasis and valorisation of Laurel’s footprints, we begin to see how Archer’s mobility makes him complicit in the petro-economy and, by association, connected to the oil disaster that also affects him so profoundly. In a related discussion, Stephanie LeMenager has written extensively on the inherent contractions which the responses to the Santa Barbara oil spill brought sharply into focus. While LeMenager certainly does not attempt to denigrate or disparage the clearly traumatic experiences of the residents who witnessed the distressing event unfold, she is critical of how the mainstream ecological activism that arose in the wake of the event sought the solutions to environmental pollution within the terms of the bourgeois ‘good life’ of the American middle-classes. As she writes, ‘privileged people, conscious of their happiness witnessed the violence of the cheap energy that made it possible. They were traumatized. Oil, on the one hand, and beaches, on the other, struck at the heart of middle-class aspiration. […] The radicalization of an elite frames Santa Barbara’s oil disaster. Some of the most privileged

people on earth at the middle of the so-called American century were exposed to the knowledge that their world was not safe, was not even theirs' (*Living Oil,* 30-31).[142]

LeMenager's comments provide a helpful contextual frame-of-reference through which to make sense of Macdonald's fictional representation of the middle-class environmental response to the oil spill. The way that Laurel attempts to engage directly with the events by rescuing an oil-soaked seabird after wading into the polluted surf contrast sharply with the response of Archer, who remains somewhat detached from the scene despite his many observations. Archer describes the rescued bird's 'orange-red eyes, which seemed to be burning with anger', and as Laurel returns to the shoreline with the bird, he notes her own 'dark eyes as angry as the bird's' before she proceeds to leave carrying the bird 'as if it were her child' (6). As LeMenager has noted in her brief account of *Sleeping Beauty*, the novel 'makes a weird hybrid of crime genre formulae and naïve feminism' (31). The representation of Laurel in these opening sections certainly recalls the gendered tropes of feminized nature of the type we have discussed earlier in relation to Bunny Ross and the agricultural spaces in Sanford's fiction. Laurel is rendered in the terms of a saint-like and paternal mother-figure and the reference which describes her eyes in the precise terms as the bird serves to exemplify this essentialist framing device. Indeed, essentialist ideas of nature and of the non-human world as feminine/ maternal have a sustained historical presence within Western and European culture dating back to pre-biblical eras.[143] The critique and interrogation of these ideas

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[142] Adrian Parr makes a related point in the context of the Deepwater Horizon disaster: 'The Spectacle of ecological disaster fetishizes "nature", and in so doing it invokes a form of obedience to the subjective violence documented by the image (of disaster). People direct their energies of rage toward an Other, all the while ignoring the real source of the violence: social organizations that perpetuate the consumption of large amounts of fossil fuel energy' (*The Wrath of Capita*l, p. 142).

[143] Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and Scientific Revolution* (New York, NY: Harper Row, 1980), p. 9.

underpinned much eco-feminist scholarship of the 1980s and 1990s. In *The Death of Nature* (1980) for example, Carolyn Merchant provides a fascinating socio-historical account of the earth-as-nurturing-mother trope, identifying how it served as a normative restraint by 'restricting the types of socially and morally sanctioned human actions allowable with respect to the earth' (10). This was possible, Merchant explains, because of how over-exploitation of natural environments or ecologies in the interests of logging, for example, were framed in relation to acts of violence committed against the female body. As she puts it, 'as long as the earth was considered to be alive and sensitive, it could be considered a breach of human ethical behaviour to carry out destructive acts against it. […] One does not readily slay a mother, dig into her entrails or mutilate her body for gold' (5). Merchant finds this figurative motif of the violation of the earth-as-mother as being particularly prevalent in the poetry of the English renaissance era, where violence and brutality are extended to include rape and sexual violation as ways of describing increasingly intensive extraction processes, such as those used in commercial mining. As Merchant puts it, 'the sixteenth-and seventeenth-century imagination perceived a direct correlation between mining and digging into the nooks and crannies of a woman's body. […] Digging into the matrices and pockets of earth for metals was like mining the female flesh for pleasure' (39). The authority of the 'Mother Nature' trope waned in tandem with the rise of industrial capital and its reliance upon the extraction industries. Conceptions of the non-human world gradually shifted from the emphasis on protection and safeguarding to the establishment of a shared recognition that nature's wild and unpredictable character needed to be controlled, tamed, and disciplined in order that maximum gains be taken from its resources. Merchant's historical account of the nature-virgin-mother motif presents a valuable lens

through which to consider the explicit parallel between the traumatised female body and the oil spill, which Archer later goes on to make. In an interview with Laurel's grandmother, he explains how she 'had made a deep impression on me […] I never met a girl who cared so much. What's happening out on the ocean here seemed to affect her as if it was happening to her own body' (59). Within the symbolic framework of the novel, then, the spill may be understood both as a manifestation of the psychic life of the detective-protagonist, and as an act of violence against feminised nature; it could even be read as a manifestation of the kind of psychic violence enacted against Laurel through her unhappy marriage and the overbearing and controlling elite patriarchal family of which she is a part. In keeping with the narrative conventions of the detective plot, Archer does not reveal the details of Laurel's family history prior to the spill until much later in the novel; indeed, his narrative of detection is largely defined by an attempt to accumulate these facts. Archer is able to glean a more nuanced understanding of this family history following an interview with her Connie Hapgood, the romantic partner of Laurel's grandfather. Hapgood explains that Laurel 'always lived in a world of her own, a not very happy world where not very nice things happened. [...] It's been obvious for at least fifteen years that Laurel is a schizoid personality. But her family go on treating her as if she were perfectly normal, and being surprised and dumbfounded when she turns out not to be' (109). If this testimony confirms Laurel's fragile psychological condition prior to the spill, it also highlights the way in which Laurel is framed as a passive vehicle for the ecological devastation that is wrought by the modern world of petro-capitalism. Put differently, it is the patriarchal trope of the mentally ill woman that provides a vehicle for the masculine detective to (mis)recognise his complicity in the ideology of petro-fetishism. And it is by staging this misrecognition

that the novel invites readers to comprehend the functioning of the energy unconscious as that which effaces the systemic connections between the modern world economy and the world ecological system, even as it seems to foreground them. Patriarchy is not of course the only social determinant that underpins the extractive industries, even if it is the one that *Sleeping Beauty* brings to the fore in its staging of the energy unconscious. The response to the oil spill in Santa Barbara that Macdonald fictionalises is a largely middle-class one, but it is also a response that is based on a historical system of white privilege, in much the same way that *The Big Sleep* is. The following section tries to address this racial blindspot in such narratives of detection with reference to Attica Locke's novel, *Black Water Rising* (2009).

### 3.5 The Return of Petrotopia's Repressed: Attica Locke's *Black Water Rising* (2009).

If Lew Archer's investigations in and around the well-heeled coastal villas of Santa Barbara marks a deviation from the urban, city spaces more typically associated with the *topos* of the detective novel, Attica Locke's novel, *Black Water Rising* returns us to the built-up urban spaces so vividly presented by Marlowe's Los Angeles. Yet, whereas Marlowe navigated the rain-lashed streets of the West Coast in the final stages of a protracted era of economic depression, Locke's Jay Porter is a resident of Houston, Texas at a moment before the hyper-neoliberal policies of Reaganomics transformed the nation's economic character once again. The global oil economy at this moment is also at a significant historical juncture. The latter part of the previous decade had been subject to various 'oil shocks' because of strategic manoeuvres by OPEC and, as Matthew Huber notes, the lingering sense of petrol scarcity and energy instability

remained resonant for many.[144] As the very heart of American oil, however, Texas, and in particular Houston, emerged as an economic powerhouse; the city's local economy was a beneficiary of a re-investment in domestic energy, which was necessitated by the events of the 1970s. As Locke's narrator puts it, Houston at this moment is the 'fastest growing city in the country two years running, the oil crises of the late '70s a boon for an oil town like Houston'.[145] Even if the city is ostensibly a beacon of contemporary petro-wealth, Locke explores the moment that the oil bubble is on the verge of bursting due to over-production and glut. In addition, the apparent utopia suggested by this modern and dynamic city is revealed, in the novel, to be one of stark inequality across social classes and racial divides. The Houston Locke presents in *Black Water Rising* can be seen as an example of 'Petrotopia'. A consideration of this narrative *topos* can help to shed further light on the repressed processes at stake in the logic of petrotopia. Drawing on conventional spatial elements from the detective fiction genre, Locke's central protagonist traverses a considerable terrain, moving through Houston's widely disparate locations in the service of simultaneous plotlines. It is in and through the specific engagements and encounters Porter experiences in these locations that the narrative exposes the reified character of petrotopia and raises questions about the racialised dynamics of extractivism. Like the detective figure in Chandler and Macdonald, Jay Porter's ability to navigate the different social spaces of Black Water Rising might

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[144] Matthew Huber, *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013). Specifically, Huber describes how riots occurred at the intersection of four gasoline filling stations in Levittown, Pennsylvania in 1979. An event, he suggests, as being particularly pertinent in light of the suburban, socially mobile demographic which constituted the region's demographic. As puts it, 'the riot expressed the underlying contradictions of the post-war class consensus based not only on cheap oil but also on high wages, an increasing standard of living for middle -upper-income blue-collar workers, and exclusionary geographies of suburban white privilege'(99).

[145] Attica Locke, *Black Water Rising* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2009), p. 36. Subsequent references to this novel will appear in the body of the text.

suggest that he stands as a figure of masculine authority, who knows, understands, and therefore controls the signs and codes of the urban spaces he investigates. Yet, Porter's situation differs considerably from his masculine detective counterparts in these earlier novels. Archer and Marlowe face danger of differing degrees and for different reasons but crucially both men remain involved with their respective cases and in the employ of their clients through choice. A number of Porter's decisions, the extent of his mobility, and the encounters he makes, come under duress, and are the consequences of the basic need for survival. If the other detective figures are afforded a symbolic reward for their heroic actions—whether it takes the form of satisfying the wishes of a frail old man or being seduced by the compelling allure of a young, attractive woman—Porter performs heroic deeds which ultimately place his life in jeopardy. By situating these narratives of detection in petrotopian spaces, *Black Water Rising* makes the complex relationship between crime and racialized dynamics of petromodernity intelligible to its readers by unveiling the white, elite oil culture responsible for sustaining and reproducing it.

During the early stages of his involvement in the conspiracy, the narrative centres on what should be a seemingly nondescript moment as Porter visits the shared waste bin that serves his building with the bags from his and Bernie's apartment. The scene Porter describes, in which two weeks' worth of uncollected rubbish in the form of food waste and domestic detritus that is overflowing from the bin, draws a sharp contrast with the mainstream image of Houston as a modern, dynamic city. As the narrator puts it, the inability to manage such basic social requirements is 'one of the city's dirty little secrets, that for all its recent economic prosperity – the fastest-growing

city in the country two years running, the oil crisis of the late 70s a boon for an oil town like Houston – the city can barely keep up with its own growth, it is literally bursting at the seams, its trashy insides spilling over everything' (36-37). This problem is not one shared city-wide, however, as the residents of the more affluent areas simply 'hire private companies to haul their shit away' (37). This passage registers the socio-spatial division across the economic classes in Houston and is an example of the reified process that characterises Houston as a petrotopia. Of particular significance are the phrases 'bursting at the seams' and 'spilling over everything'. While the revelation of the unsuccessful oil storage conspiracy is far away at this early stage in the novel, these references act to foreshadow those later events and, more importantly, contribute to an overarching textural or textual backdrop to the novel that is characterised by images and references to surfacing, breaking through, or making visible. The overflowing residents' waste bin is a somewhat literal rendering of material consequences to unequal distribution of the share of the city's petro-economy; yet, it is shortly after Porter has attempted to dispose of his bags that a key reference is made which steps back from the rather visceral and visible signs of the uncontained by hinting at much more that remains concealed behind the façade of the ostensibly dynamic oil city. As the newspaper Porter tries to discard comes sliding back down the heap to land at his feet, he surveys a page from it which introduces what will be a central plot thread culminating in the discovery of the hoarded oil. The paper reports of 'a slowdown at the main refinery near the Port of Houston; a shortage in barrels coming in from overseas is listed as the cause' (37). Of greater significance is how Porter reflects on what seemingly goes unspoken by this report. As he puts it, 'There's something lurking behind the words in print, a hint, a threat really, of another oil crisis on the horizon' (37). Porter's instinct

proves correct, and the report has a direct bearing on Cole Oil's plan to instigate an oil shortage and gain financially from the ensuing panic. The reference to a suppressed or repressed truth that lies just out of sight certainly reinforces the novel's identity as an example of crime fiction and it also, in a sense, pushes beyond the fundamental need for mystery required by the genre. In contrast to the way Chandler's Marlowe is tasked with the mystery of Rusty Reagan's disappearance, and how Lew Archer, similarly, seeks to resolve the mysterious vanishing of Laurel Russo in *Sleeping Beauty*, here the idea of mystery is dispersed across a range of areas in the novel and is expressed as a form of repressed truth or concealed knowledge. Yet more significantly, I would suggest, is how these intricately obscured facts and repressed forms of truth might, in fact, be regarded as manifestations of the energy unconscious within the world of Locke's novel.

One of the most striking realisations of this staging of the energy unconscious is seen in the way that Porter himself is regarded as a conduit of concealed knowledge at a later point in the narrative. Porter is given details regarding the murder at the bayou in which he has been indirectly implicated. Learning Elise Linsey's name and the details of the weapon used, Porter reflects on how his knowledge of the night's events could prove vital in tracing the murderer as he reflects, 'she [the mayor] could take the information to the police, start an investigation for the man's family. But he's afraid of what *leaking* the information would do to him or his wife, so he keeps it to himself' (184 my italics). If it is the case, as the critic Julian Symons has suggested, that the contemporary detective novel, 'shows us the world of crime as it truly is, revealing a society in which murder is not just a serious offence against a middle-class morality but an element built into the American social fabric', then it is the spectre of

institutionalised, state-sanctioned, racist violence which serves as a more potent source of criminality in the world of the novel than the corrupt bureaucrats and businessmen behind the conspiracy to control and manipulate the oil market.[146] Yet these two factors are not distinct and are in fact, entirely contingent upon each other as I now go on to explain.

**3.6 Racial Violence and the Detection of Double Consciousness.**

DuBois's idea of double consciousness is useful for helping us to see how Locke subverts an established convention of the detective genre by focalising the narrative through the consciousness of a black detective. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois discusses the psychic life of black Americans in the aftermath of slavery. As he puts it:

> After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.[147]

It is this sense of double consciousness which partly underpins the detective narrative of *Black Water Rising*. As a black American and a lawyer, Porter views himself being looked at through the eyes of dominant white Houston society, which, as Porter learns from a

[146] Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel* (New York, NY: Mysterious Press Books, 1993) pp. 308-309.
[147] WEB Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York, NY: New American Library, 1982), p. 45.

young age, has a long history of racial violence. This is underscored early in the novel in a section that recounts how Porter's father is run off the road by a gang of white thugs, ostensibly posing as a police-sanctioned vigilante group motivated by a spate of thefts from farms in the region. In describing this tense and violent account, the distinction between unaccountable mob violence and the legal processes of state law collapses as the narration notes that, were Alma to kill an assailant, 'there was no coming back from shooting a white man in Trinity County, 1949. If a mob didn't get you, the courts would' (71).[148] Recalling the events of the more recent future when Porter narrowly escapes execution at the hands of the state for his involvement in civil rights activism, he notes that his treatment is merely an extension of the fate meted out to his parents. Both events are underscored by a deeply entrenched history of racial segregation and violence. Writing of his own situation he notes, 'it was a courtroom instead of a country road' (72). At the level of the narrative, this account of the way in which racial violence has become historically embedded in the state structures of Houston is important because it helps to make the reasoning behind Porter's decision to remain silent with respect to his encounter with Elise intelligible. In so doing, it also makes clear how this decision can be seen as an example of what Du Bois calls 'double consciousness'.

[148] Bruce Glassard shows how 'race violence, that is, anti-black race violence was a constant and overwhelming threat and presence to black Texans during the first half of the twentieth century' (93). See Bruce Glassard, 'Anti-Black Violence in 20th Century East Texas', *East Texas Historical Journal* Vol.52 Issue 1 (2014), 87-99.

**3.7 The Automobility of the Racialised Driver, or 'Driving While Black'.**

If the short account of Jerome Porter's tragic end sets the contemporary scene within context by drawing Houston's violent past into a present-day focus, it is also helps to shed light on events in the narrative present because it brings the politics of automobility to the fore. The novel contains numerous references to Porter driving, being pursued, listening to the car radio, or simply discussing or reflecting on the economics of driving. Such textual details invite a more detailed assessment of the significance of narrative driving time and spaces of automobility in the urban world of the novel. If the narrative act of driving between places and neighbourhoods is increasingly fundamental to processes of detection in the sprawling urban world of contemporary crime fiction, it also helps to cognitively map the socio-economic and ecological totality of that urban space, as the following section tries to show.

Writing on the close relationship between notions of liberal subjectivity, automobility, and cultures of driving, Sudhir Chella Rajan notes the conventional understanding whereby the car functions as a trope for liberal capitalist individualism in the era of late modernity. As Rajan puts it, the vision of the motorist at the wheel:

> captures the salient features […] [of] a post-Enlightenment order: the experience of driving, identified by the quiet pleasures of the open road, speed, power and personal control, neatly compliments the functionality of covering distance, managing time and maintaining certain forms of individuation.[149]

[149] Suhir Chella Rajan, 'Automobility and the Liberal Disposition', in *Against Automobility*, eds. Steffan Bohm, Campbell Jones, Chris Land and Matthew Pearson, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), pp. 113-129 (p. 113).

Such common-sense notions of white liberal individualism on the road, as it were, are called into question in *Black Water Rising* following the incident with Porter's parents, Jerome and Alma, where, far from expressing a form of liberal individualism, the road is framed as a space of racial violence. Porter recalls how his father's eventual death came as a consequence of a vicious and unprovoked physical assault enacted against him by a gang of white men after they forced the car he was driving off the road. After a tense scene in which the beating meted out to Jerome is halted only after Porter's mother, Alma, aims a pistol at the attackers causing them to flee in their truck, Jerome dies on the way to a hospital located a significant distance from the site of the attack after the closest hospital refuse to attend to Jerome's injuries on account that it is not a designated 'coloured hospital' (71). Porter recalls the only detail of this tragic event that resonated beyond his immediate family as being, 'a red Ford was all anybody ever remembered. No licence plate, no names' (71). The reference to the 'red Ford' certainly foreshadows a number of instances in the narrative present when Porter's own car is followed by a white male driving a 'black Ford LTD' but, more significantly, the killing of Jerome Porter highlights how it was that for a black couple in mid-century Texas, to be on the road is to be vulnerable, and a highly exposed and visible target for the tacitly state-sanctioned, and racially motivated vigilante mobs. We are reminded here of how the apparent pleasures and privileges of petrocultures are not unconditional for those without white skin. Indeed, the crimes committed against Porter's parents could be said, in a sense, to undermine the very raison d'être of the detective novel, where bringing resolution often to a crime is so very fundamental to the moral logic of the detective plot. In this example, the crime is undetected, and it is suggested that the perpetrators are protected by the racism of social institutions, such as the police force and the

criminal justice system. In a departure, perhaps, from more conventional acts of murder motivated by money or desire for another character, the complicit role played by the hospital who did not treat Jerome despite his serious injuries together with the absence of a formal police investigation, point towards the state and state agencies as culpable for murder. Just as the crimes of the past echo through and strike parallels with the events of the present in Lew Archer's investigations, so too is the case here. In comparison to Archer, whose movements are limited to a relatively small geographic radius, Porter covers a considerable distance in his car. Indeed, these passages of narrative driving time are often used as an opportunity to draw the current threads of his investigations together or, more likely, express his increasing anxiety over his slender grip on the pace at which events are unfolding. Tension and suspense are arguably heightened during these passages by dint of the fact that they take place in the confined interior space of a vehicle. Of more importance to the argument of this chapter, however, is the way that Porter's experiences in this interior space bears notable traces of the events which occurred to his parents on the road. While Porter is not assaulted in such a stark and unambiguous way, his experiences sharply undermine the cultural mythology of automobility described by Rajan. Instead, these experiences reveal how such myths of white liberal individualism are an exclusionary form of petro-fetishism, as we will see.

Jay's vulnerability as a driver is registered at an early point in the novel as he drives Elise to the police station. The act of rescuing a drowning woman would undoubtedly be regarded as an act of heroism that confirms the masculine credentials of Archer or Marlowe. Yet, because Porter's sense of self is refracted through the prism of

double consciousness, he assesses the situation from the perspective of a passing police patrol car, which is to say, he sees the police seeing him as the central focal point of suspicion. As Porter travels to the station, he regulates his speed so as 'not to draw undue attention to himself. He's keenly aware of this irony, his fear of being stopped by cops on his way to a police station. But driving a strange white woman […] at this time of night, in *this* city, makes him edgy, cautious' (22). The fear Porter imagines exemplifies what Mimi Sheller and Judith A. Nicholson have identified as DWB or 'Driving While Black'. As they put it: '[Driving While Black] describes the frequency with which racialized automobile drivers are stopped by police, detained, and sometimes searched. This surveillance practice, which impedes the automobility of racialized drivers and ascribes criminal intent, is a familiar example of how mobility and race intersect'.[150]

Reference to the three horizons Jameson outlines in the *Political Unconscious* and to Mandel's analysis of the detective genre can help to further elucidate the significance of Porter's narrative movements through the spaces of Houston as socially symbolic acts. If narratives of detection are socially symbolic acts, which seek to resolve social contradictions, how might we begin to read Porter's narrative of detection in relation to the social contradictions of racial violence, discrimination and ecological devastation that it documents? And how might such a narrative work to complicate conventional ideas of the detective narrative as a genre that restores the dominant social order, and thereby preserves social contradictions? In his historical account of the evolution of the detective novel, Ernest Mandel notes how the social function the genre performed through the way it narrated a restoration of order following disruption. As he

[150] Judith A. Nicholson, Mimi Sheller, 'Introduction', *Transfers*, Vol.6. No.1, (2016), pp. 4-11 (p. 6).

puts it, 'Disorder being brought into order, order falling back into disorder; irrationality upsetting rationality, rationality restored after irrational upheavals: this is what the ideology of the crime novel is all about'.[151] We have seen how Chandler's Marlowe and the hard-boiled novel both affirms and complicates an analysis of this type. If the conventional milieu of the hard-boiled hero can be seen to reflect the fragmented and alienated society created through American industrial capitalism, Marlowe can nevertheless be seen as a chivalric knight, upholding the white patriarchal codes and values romantically associated with a fading past. Returning to Porter as an example of DWB who is therefore subject to surveillance, suspicion, and even violence, then, it can be said that he represents a parallel historical figure to Marlowe's knight when what is invoked here is the recent history of slavery and racial segregation in the American South. In addition, this method of analysis can be extended further in relation to Porter as both a subject of automobility, who is also aware of the effects of double-consciousness on his mobility. At a later point in the narrative, Porter reflects on the limited impact made by the civil rights activists with whom he was involved during his time as a student. Because the threat of violence continues to remain contingent upon the specific location in which a black person might happen to be at a particular time, the efforts of his political activism is clearly limited. Porter remains subject to similar treatment to that of his father. As he puts it:

> He's not proud of his fears, but there they are, pinching at him from all sides like too tight shoes, restricting his movements, limiting his freedom. A shame,

[151] Ernest Mandel, *Delightful Murder*: *A Social History of the Crime Story* (Minnesota, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1985) p.44.

> considering the real reason he marched so many years ago was to prove fear was dead (69).

The figurative description of a fear of racially motivated attack as akin to 'too tight shoes' connects the history of segregation and violence with restricted mobility that is applicable to driving and participation in cultures of automobility. Considered from a Jamesonian perspective in which traces of alienation and conflict are carried through into the present, the fact that Porter encounters limitations on the terms and conditions of his mobility as a direct consequence of institutionalised racist power structures might even be seen as a contemporary iteration of a dynamic, which the historian David Lambert has called the Master-Horse-Slave triad. This triad, Lambert writes, was a practice common in British West Indian colonies where a black slave was forced to run behind the white rider so that he was to hand if at any point during proceedings he was required, such as holding the horse steady when the rider alights. Lambert notes how Master-Horse-Slave 'articulated dominant relations between power and mobility' beyond the bare brutality it enacted in the way that the elevated position of the rider, the rear location of the slave, and the way the horse, as a routinely understood symbol of nobility, reinforced a racialized hierarchy of power.[152] While Lambert is not, of course, writing about automobility specifically, his analysis sheds light on a historical connection between mobility and white supremacy. For him, the most striking element of this phenomenon stems from the way it came to be regarded as commonplace, as a 'particular manifestation of slavery as an everyday practice' and how these 'quotidian practices of movement […] express and […] serve to reinforce dominant relations of

[152] David Lambert, 'Master-Horse-Slave: Mobility, Race and Power in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Caribbean', *Slavery and Abolition*, Vol.36 No.4. (2015), pp. 618-641 (p. 631).

racial power' (641). This is not to suggest a direct parallel between this practice from the eighteenth century and Porter's acute sense of restrictions to his mobility in the late twentieth century; rather, I would argue that Lambert's analysis places racialized modes of mobility within a longer historical frame of reference that can help to shed light on the historical dynamics at stake in the contemporary anxieties surrounding DWB.

Before Jay's encounter with Elise Lynsey plunges him into the world of corporate conspiracies, the opening scene of the novel is set on board a slow-moving boat making its way down the Houston Bayou. It is from his vantage point on the boat that Jay observes two distinct but connected and uneven perspectives on the petroleum geography of Houston:

> From the rear of the boat, Jay can see the lights of the high-rise buildings up ahead, the headquarters of Cole Oil Industries standing tall above the rest. To the rear of the boat is a view of the port and the Ship Channel, lined with oil refineries on either side. From here, the refineries are mere clusters of blinking lights and puffs of smoke, white against the swollen charcoal sky, rising on the dewy horizon like cities on a distant planet.[153]

The reference to the headquarters of the oil company as 'standing tall above the rest' symbolises its dominant position within the corporate sector of the city. In contrast, the refineries which generate the actual wealth upon which the grand corporate towers rely are distant and nearly invisible. That the refineries are represented figuratively, first with synecdoche then simile, creates a further distinction between the ways in which the two spaces are represented. The 'puffs of smoke' that obscure the 'clusters' of industry might even be suggestive of a smokescreen in the sense of a diversionary tactic. That the

[153] Attica Locke, *Black Water Rising* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010), p. 6.

lights in this area are ‘blinking’ is a further difference with the clear and visible lights of the corporate building and might imply a disruption to the act of looking. While charcoal is used as an adjective here to describe the sky’s colour, when thought of as a noun, ‘charcoal’ contributes to the pervasive landscape of carbon-energy forms that Jay observes. That the ‘charcoal sky’ is ‘swollen’ implies that it has been forcefully extended beyond its capacity suggesting atmospheric pollution. Most tellingly is the description of the refineries as ‘cities on a distant plane’. Crucially, while the site of industry is framed as alien and unknowable from Porter’s perspective, this detail arguably has the opposite effect on readers as it provokes them to think about the shadowy world of oil as the backdrop to the scene.

As the events in the novel begin to unfold, Porter is drawn to assisting his father-in-law with the case of a young dockworker who had been subject to a violent attack due to his union membership at the time when a strike threatens the city’s economy. As the current mayor is a girlfriend from his days as a student activist, Porter visits her in her office with a request to investigate the assault. The narrator describes the space as Jay waits outside the mayor’s private suite for his appointment:

> The mayor’s office is on the third floor of city hall, a squat limestone building dwarfed by steel and glass on all sides, high-rises that have come to dominate downtown Houston. In 1939, when city hall was built, the city’s dream for its future didn’t reach past eight stories. The state flag sits on top of the government building; it is several feet wider and longer than the Stars and Stripes flying alongside it. There’s a reflecting pool in front of the building, on Bagby. And across the street is a gilded archway leading to Cole Towers, twin office buildings that house the headquarters for Cole Oil Industries. The Cole

> name, in huge block letters, crowns the two towers, casting a heavy shadow across the city hall, falling, at this hour, right into Jay's lap (110).

Here the spatial organisation of downtown is used to show the waning authority of public officialdom in the face of corporate oil. The diminutive scale of the mayor's office in relation to the modern structures which represent the products of Houston's petro-economy are described in an aggressive masculine discourse as they 'dominate' the area. Indeed, the symbolism of this gendering of the spatial arrangement adopts a further dimension in light of how the mayor at this time is female and, as she explains to Porter, is reluctant to intervene as 'It'll be an indictment against me, proof that I can't control those men' (120). While the contrast between the sizes of the buildings indicates the dominance of petro-powered corporate power over public service, the disparity between the state and national flags signifies Texas's economic supremacy in relation to the rest of the country. As the lawyer Porter is pitted against in a civil court case brags crassly, 'Rest of the country ain't doing so hot. You get north of Oklahoma and it's a whole different story, boy. The rest of the country is on the verge of a goddam recession. Oil's the only thing keeping this god dammed city afloat. […] This economy is fool proof' (77-78). Even though the source of its unique economy is able to insulate Houston from the otherwise nation-wide recession, the redistribution of oil revenues are far from equal. This is seen in an earlier moment in the novel where Porter reflects on the burgeoning crisis with public sanitation workers. The consequences of being 'the fastest growing city in the country two years running' results in a near public waste epidemic which 'can't keep up with the new businesses and housing developments going up every week' (37). This does not affect the economically advantaged sectors of Houston, however, who 'hire private companies to haul their shit away' whereas areas

such as Porter's, 'are at the mercy of the city' (37). Again, this economic disparity between public and private is represented in the current depiction of the architecture surrounding city hall in the example of the 'reflecting pool in front of the building, on Bagley' (110). While the pool is certainly an opulent feature, which attests to the wealth and status, perhaps even narcissism, of those in the building to which it is joined, for some readers the reflective aspect of the pool in this context might evoke Jameson's ideas on the reflecting glass surfaces at the Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles as part of his wider analysis of postmodern culture and aesthetics. Jameson writes of how these sleek surfaces work to 'repel the city outside' and in so doing, creates 'a peculiar and placeless disassociation' from those around it.[154] While Jameson is drawing attention to the potential social perceptions of postmodern architecture, the alienating effect he ascribes to the reflecting glass seem similarly applicable to the reference under discussion. The 'disassociation' effect here extends the example of the sanitation workers by emphasising Houston's economically divided society and underscoring how oil wealth remains concentrated within a specific economic class separate and unconcerned with those who share the 'city outside'.

We have already seen an earlier reference to the Cole building at the beginning of the novel where Porter notes its height in relation to the rest of the city. Here, its specific designation as 'Cole Towers' may appear to recall the Trump Towers building in Manhattan—a choice of naming that stands as a symbol of corporate power. The way that the company's name 'crowns the two towers' reinforces the building as the primary centre of power in Houston as well as striking associations with patriarchal formations of

[154] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 42.

sovereignty. More importantly, I would suggest, is the 'heavy shadow' cast by these 'huge block letters'. In creating this shadow, the building temporarily blocks out the sun, which seems particularly significant in the context of the novel's conspiracy plot, in which Cole attempts to manipulate the oil price by hoarding vast quantities in underground mines. Indeed, this textual detail could be regarded as a pertinent example of the way oil capital attempts to render its power and effects invisible. Fundamentally, the conspiracy centres on the control of an energy source and, as such, could be seen as analogous to how the oversize letters atop the Cole building also take control, temporarily, of the light drawn from another energy source and similarly manipulate it into creating a shadow. This reference may act as an instance of oblique foreshadowing, so to speak, of events to come. Yet, in the context of the gendered spaces of petrotopia, it is significant that the shadow cast from Cole Towers falls 'right into Jay's lap' (110). This reference registers the emasculating energy of petrotopia through its visible effect on a specific area of Porter's body and, in doing so, the reference also calls attention to the internal contradiction of this emasculating energy which flows from Cole Industries, an organization whose phallic structures and acts of gender-based violence attest to its hyper-masculine, patriarchal power as well as its reproduction of white supremacy. This sense of emasculation and white privilege is not of course exclusive to Houston, but also to the culture of the oil economy more broadly. By using Texas as a fictional microcosm of the world energy system, however, *Black Water Rising* draws attention to the racial, as well as the gendered dynamics of the energy unconscious that is inscribed in the corporate structure of the multinational oil industry. The use of a detective plot to foreground the subjugated knowledge and history of black American cultures of automobility is not the only literary vehicle for exploring the systemic inequality of fossil

capitalism. As the following chapter suggests, the use of the *bildungsroman* in Teddy Wayne's *Kapitoil* provides a powerful if belated generic mode through which to understand the imperialist tendencies within the global oil futures market.

# Chapter Four: Extraction to Abstraction: Teddy Wayne's *Kapitoil* as Petroleum-*Bildungsroman*.

The absent presence of oil as a material substance in the social and cultural infrastructure of modernity may seem self-evident. What is perhaps less self-evident is the scale, magnitude and complexity of the process by which oil becomes reified as a commodity in the global economic system – a process that has become even more apparent in the increasingly fragmented contemporary world economy of space-time compression with its instantaneous electronic financial transfers across the globe.[155] If such a complex process seems more abstract or immaterial than the spaces of petromodernity evoked in the earlier twentieth-century fiction of Upton Sinclair, this is not to say that its effects are any less real or material. Nor is it to imply that the unprecedented speed, scale and virtuality of the contemporary transnational oil economy is simply beyond the imaginative resources of the novel, as this chapter will show. As Timothy Bewes points out in a suggestive commentary on Lukacs' *Theory of the Novel*: 'what Lukacs means by abstraction in the novel […is] not reification, but dematerialisation […] The novel enables a presentation to take place in the interval between intelligibility and unintelligibility – and it is the "abstraction" of its elements that makes this possible'.[156] Bewes' reflections on Lukacs are particularly apposite for thinking about the ways in which the formal elements of the contemporary novel can illuminate the material process by which oil is transformed into an abstract value in the global financial economy. In the novel that forms the central focus of this chapter, oil is

[155] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).
[156] Timothy Bewes, 'To Think Without Abstraction: On the Problem of Standpoint in Cultural Criticism', *Textual Practice*, Vol.28, No.7 (2014) pp. 1199-1220 (p.1207).

manifest most prominently in the fluctuating digits of a financial software programme designed to generate speculative estimates on future oil production.

As I will go onto discuss, Teddy Wayne's *Kapitoil* (2009) seems to complicate yet further the challenges of representing oil and its fetishized petroleum cultures because, in the contemporary era of digital finance capitalism, oil also needs to be accounted for in an abstract and immaterial form, as the digital data of software algorithms. It is precisely because the virtualised networks of futures trading perform a process of abstraction in the way it distances oil from both its raw and organic form as well as its processed and manufactured form that this practice can be thought of as a contemporary form of the kinds of petro-fetishism discussed in the previous chapters of this thesis. And it is through the use of the formal elements of the novel – particularly the rhetorical codes and generic conventions of allegory and the *bildungsroman* – that *Kapitoil* allows us to grasp the abstract process of space-time compression that transforms oil into a virtual commodity.

**4.1 *Kapitoil* and the 9/11 Novel.**

*Kapitoil*'s narrative centres on the three-month visit to America by Karim Issar, a Qatari banker who is transferred from the Doha offices of a US-based Hedge Fund to its headquarters in Manhattan. Karim is swiftly promoted and cited as a potential heir to the company following his creation of Kapitoil, a sophisticated computer programme which generates vast financial returns in the oil futures markets by accurately predicting when regional outbreaks of political and social unrest will occur. With the success of this software all but assuring his entrance into the economic elite, Karim sacrifices his newly-gained socio-economic status when his employer, the arch-capitalist Derek Schrub,

refuses to allow the technology to be used for ethical ends and denies Karim's request to re-configure its algorithms to speculate on outbreaks of disease in the Third World. As the narrative concludes, Karim is threatened with the cancellation of his work visa unless the software is given over to Schrub, a threat which prompts Karim to return to Doha with the design codes for Kapitoil. In doing so, he sacrifices both the slow-burning romance he had begun with his co-worker and his newfound status as a corporate executive.

Published in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis in a milieu in which the complex and labyrinthine mechanisms of financial capital were under intense scrutiny, *Kapitoil*'s setting against the backdrop of corporate America's hedge funds, algorithmic trading, and digital speculation, makes it particularly timely and prescient in relation to the events of this period. And yet, *Kapitoil* has been marketed as a post-9/11 American novel. The cover blurb on the Duckworth Overlook edition of *Kapitoil* is a typical example of such marketing: 'Why did 9/11 happen, and why do we continue to respond so blindly? Wayne answers these questions better than Mohsin Hamid or Joseph O'Neil, the best authors of this genre until now…Wayne has completely foreseen and transcended the exhaustion of the 9/11 genre'.[157] The way in which the novel has been both marketed and received by the mainstream media as a 'post-9/11 novel' appears to stem from the way that the Kapitoil software's reliance on the profits of oil sales at the expense of acts of violence in the Middle East might inspire parallels with the way western companies such as Chevron, BP and Total divided valuable oil fields in Iraq

[157] The jacket also quotes the novel's review from *Vanity Fair* which proclaims 'With *Kapitoil*, Teddy Wayne invents – and perfects! – the pre-9/11 novel'.

following the US-led invasion of 2003, or the influx of the Western private security firms that accompanied them.[158] This connection between financial gain and political violence and social unrest in certain geographic locations is made explicit following the initial design of Kapitoil where Karim pauses to reflect upon his creation: 'Only when I am nearly finished and my cursor is on the word 'casualties' do I evaluate the big picture of what I am creating. When violence occurs, especially in the Middle East, my program will attempt to leverage it for financial gain'[159] The economists Kathleen King, Ai Dengg, and David Metz provide specific, real-world examples of the types of violence Karim acknowledges here. After monitoring the fluctuations in the global price of oil throughout 2011, their findings concluded how 'political instability and acts of violence were the dominant fundamental events associated with daily oil price changes'.[160] The authors' research maps the way 'daily price increases coincided with escalating nuclear tensions with Iran, including a threat by an Israeli cabinet minister to attack Iranian enrichment facilities [...] [while] acts of warfare between Israel and Hamas […] were […] important in explaining large upward movements in oil prices' (26-27).

Considered within this context, we now see how Kapitoil's ability to produce accurate predictions regarding the times and sites in which outbreaks of such instability will occur would prove a highly valuable resource for furthering the interests of finance

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[158] Hassan Hafidh and Guy Chazan, 'Big Oil Jumps for Licences in Iraq', *Wall Street Journal*, (December 10, 2009) < http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052748704825504574585923769346910 >[Accessed online 17 December 2013].

[159] Teddy Wayne, *Kapitoil* (London: Duckworth Overlook, 2009), p.42.

[160] Kathleen King, Ai Deng, David Metz, 'An Economic Analysis of Oil Price Movements: The Role of Political Events and Economic News, Financial Trading and Market Fundamentals', BatesWhite Economic Consulting, 2012. In their analysis, the authors identify three categories which serve to influence, and in many instances dictate, the price of oil in international markets: Political events, economic factors, and natural events. It is the first category, in which a sub-category defined as 'political instability, violence and warfare', is revealed as bearing the greatest significance for oil prices.

capital. Indeed, the foresight Kapitoil provides into events of profound political instability entails that its user is afforded a degree of control within a tempestuous and turbulent market provided that, and for as long as, regional discord in oil-rich economies prevails. In the novel this correlation is first registered following Kapitoil's initial conception where an act of violence in Iran does indeed serve to generate a 'large upward movement in oil prices'. The morning after the event, Karim reads the scrolling news headline on the side of Schrub's building which reports: 'FRENCH EMBASSY BOMBED IN IRAN…NO CASUALTIES…SEVERAL INJURED….' (34). In response to this Karim remarks, 'I research today's crude oil futures ASAP. They have risen 77 cents. That is expected because of the news' (34, 39). This brief observation makes the relationship between political violence and the price of oil explicit for the reader and provides a clear explanation of the way in which such events might prove valuable for furthering the interests of financial speculators such as Schrub. Indeed, the foresight Kapitoil provides into events of profound political instability entails that its user is afforded a degree of control within a tempestuous and turbulent market provided that, and for as long as, regional discord in oil rich economies prevails; what Karim's software shows us is the way in which the speculative practices which occur on Wall Street and are abstracted from the material form and value of oil are, nonetheless, irreducibly linked to it. Such a fictional representation of the way financial speculators can benefit from movements in oil prices due to political and social instability parallels Neil Smith's account of what he terms the 'financialization of disaster'. Using the response of the United States' insurance industry to Hurricane Katrina in 2006 as a case study, Smith writes how, 'disasters provide extraordinary opportunities for highly profitable reconstruction. The financialization of disaster absorbs the politics of lives, who dies, and whose life is

utterly destroyed, displacing such raw power into the polite, privatized, anodyne multibillion-dollar calculations of boardroom denizens'. [161] The manner in which Karim's programme similarly profits from acts of suffering and tragedy − such as the death of the five oil workers in the Pakistan refinery which 'transformed loss into a financial gain' − might be considered as analogous to the insurance sector's exploitation of catastrophic environmental events that Smith has identified (229). In the starkest terms, Wayne's identification of war and disaster as part of a political technique in financial capitalism's search for new markets might be regarded as a powerful example of what Naomi Klein has called the 'Disaster-Capitalism-Complex'. This is a phenomenon in which an array of 'conflict and disaster related' occurrences present a financial boon for construction companies, weapons manufacturers, and private security agencies. The most notable inclusion in this list of benefactors is the oil industry, whose fortunes, Klein notes, 'improve with every war, terrorist attack, and Category five hurricane'.[162] To suggest then, that Wayne's novel is able to answer the kinds of questions posed by its marketing rhetoric may seem fanciful; and yet, Karim's software draws attention to the ways in which digital financial speculation on oil in Wall Street is connected to violence and exploitation in the peripheral zones of the global economy.[163]

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[161] Neil Smith, 'Disastrous Accumulation', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, No.106, Vol.4, (2007), 769-787, (p.784).
[162] Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), p. 356.
[163] This notion that a condition of permanent geopolitical instability is vital for the continued survival of capitalism is echoed by the critic Mark Simpson who writes how 'warfare provides one means of producing and reproducing the crises on which neoliberal economics thrives, decimating infrastructure and eviscerating sociability in advance of corporate takeover. […] [E]mpire quite literally cannot give up the volatile business of war'. Simpson's observations are germane to a reading of the Kapitoil programme because the ability of that programme to generate profits is precisely dependent on such volatility and the 'evisceration of sociability'. Mark Simpson, 'Attackability', *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 39, (2009), 300-319, (p.314).

After the initial creation and success of the software, however, Wayne appears content for the overt '9/11 plot' to take a subsidiary role within the narrative. Indeed, for much of the second half of the novel Karim's references to the software become increasingly infrequent, and even when they are made, offer little other than the brief mention of an event, such as a bombing, that is likely to affect the oil futures market. A far greater emphasis is placed on Karim's relationships with co-worker, Rebecca, and the powerful hedge fund executive, Derek Schrub. What's more, Karim's reflections and meditations on oil-based commodities and modes of transportation become more prolific and serve to punctuate the growing tensions between his gradual shift away from corporate culture and his desire to emulate and earn the respect of Schrub. Rather than thinking of *Kapitoil* as so-called 9/11 fiction, my reading of the novel considers it as a variation on the *bildungsroman* with an allegorical narrative dimension. This recycling of the sedimented materials of an older literary genre tells another story about how digital finance capitalism speculates on the future value of oil in abstraction from the commodity frontiers at which it is extracted.

**4.2 Reading *Kapitoil* as Petro-*bildungsroman*.**

If *Kapitoil* makes use of some of the narrative conventions of the *bildungsroman,* it does so in ways that also reconfigure the conventional understanding of that genre. As discussed previously in relation to Upton Sinclair's *Oil!,* the *bildungsroman* typically follows an individual character's progression into adulthood and their internalisation of the norms and values of bourgeois culture. This is not to suggest, however, that the formal conventions of the novel are fixed and determinate. A useful survey of the varying critical debates which have surrounded its use is provided by Tobias Boes who

delineates the nuances and difference between the widely-held understanding of the genre and its subtle and explicit transformations across historical periods and geographic locations.[164] Boes maps the critical history of the genre, touching on its recent history such as the way the genre became a point of interest for feminist cultural studies in the 1980s and the popularity of the form for non-European writers particularly those writing in peripheral nations. In *The Way of the World* (1987), Franco Moretti provides an extensive account of the generic codes and narrative patterns of European *Bildungsroman* fiction. Moretti suggests that the *bildungsroman* might be considered as the consummate genre of modernity due to the way it bridges contradictions in the formation of the individual in their transition into adulthood and maturity. These contradictions centre on 'the conflict between the ideal of self-determination and the equally imperious demands of socialization' (15). The protagonist of the *Bildungsroman* embarks on a journey through life in which the synthesis between individual desires and an assimilation of the demands of society will be achieved at the journey's end. Key to this process is the negotiation, followed by a wilful acceptance, of the constraints and pressures of the social order: 'one must internalize them and fuse external compulsion and internal impulses into a new unity until the former is no longer distinguishable from the latter' (16). According to the narrative pattern Moretti identifies, in the classic *Bildungsroman* social integration is achieved as a result of the protagonist's exposure to the world of work – albeit a specific kind of work which is satisfying to the individual − a romantic attachment leading to marriage, and learning to 'control the imagination' in order to safeguard against 'restlessness' and 'emotional conditions which can throw us

[164] Tobias Boes, 'Modernist Studies and the *Bildungsroman*: A Historical Survey of Critical Trends', *Literature Compass*, Vol 3 No.2 (2006) pp. 230 - 240.

off the path to maturity' (46). The literary historian Jerome Hamilton Buckley expands these categorises by citing the 'principal elements' of the 'classic' and Victorian *Bildungsroman.* These elements include childhood; the conflict of generations; provinciality; the larger society; alienation; ordeal by love; the search for vocation and a working philosophy.[165] Following the successful transition through these developmental stages, the formation of the mature, adult individual who 'perceives the social norms as one's own' is complete (17). While this formula describes the 'classic' *Bildungsroman* form, the critic Joseph Slaughter has written of the way attitudes towards its so-called instructive and pedagogic qualities have all but eroded in the contemporary era. As he puts it, 'The idealism of the classical, affirmative *Bildungsroman* seems to have lost much of its social and aesthetic appeal in the ages of modernist irony and postmodern suspicion'.[166] The narrative trajectory of *Kapitoil'*s Karim certainly chimes with the pattern identified by Moretti and Buckley. Yet Schrub's refusal to accept Karim's proposal to divert the Kapitoil software away from oil speculation and towards humanitarian ends also creates conflict that is not resolved by the end of the narrative. Karim's rejection of corporate America and his return to Doha make clear that the contradictions of modernity are not resolved by the end of the narrative. The implications of this unresolved ending are discussed later with reference to two distinct arguments by Daniel Worden and Georgiana Banita, who have offered differing interpretations of Karim's decision to leave the United States. I propose an alternative interpretation of the ending which aligns the novel more closely to the 'classic' formula

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[165] Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *Seasons of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding* (Boston: Mass.: Harvard Press, 1974), pp.17-18.
[166] Joseph Slaughter, *Human Rights Inc: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2007), p. 39.

where resolution is achieved. Aside from the ending, much of the textual analysis that informs the argument of this chapter centres on Karim's frequent digressions and reflections on oil-based consumer products and the petroleum energy sources that underpin modes of mobility. Rather than simply serving to develop Karim's idiosyncratic character, these reflections can be regarded as significant moments in his informal education in the culture of late capitalism. What's more, these reflections often conclude with oil appearing as unknowable or incomprehensible — a mode of appearance that could be said to exemplify the diverse forms of fetishism in petromodernity. In suggesting that these ruminations over commodities and mobility are significant because they relate to the structure of the *Bildungsroman* as instances of self-education, they also represent alternative, petroleum-based sources of mediation through which the individual subject confronts modern society in their journey towards socialisation. It is important to note that the oil purchased and sold by Kapitoil is not in a physical, material form at the time of the transaction. What the programme trades in are futures contracts, a speculative estimate regarding the extent to which the incidents of unrest will affect future production. Mazen Labban explains the dynamics of this process:

> [Futures contracts] commit trading parties to make or take delivery of a particular commodity on or before a fixed date at an agreed price fixed in the contract […] in financially settled futures contracts, only the difference in exchange value is traded, i.e. a price differential: the difference in the price agreed in the contract of the commodity intended for delivery and the spot price

> at the location of delivery agreed, [while] physical trade hardly ever occurs through derivatives traded on the futures market.[167]

This trading in differentials has liberated the process of exchange 'from the necessity of there being any "thing" to start with'.[168] Michael Bettancourt claims that this mode of 'digital capitalism' is 'a symptom of a larger shift from considerations and valuations based in physical processes towards immaterial processes'.[169] For the accumulation of capital this process presents a 'magical resource that can be used without consumption or diminishment' and leads to 'a belief in accumulation without production' in which the generation of wealth occurs 'without expenditure via the spontaneous creation of exchange value sans labour or consumption of resources' (Bettencourt, 4). As I go on to discuss in the next section, two specific moments in *Kapitoil* are particularly evocative with regards to thinking about how the value of oil is determined by immaterial rather than material processes; both instances centre on representations of the physical condition of Schrub's hands.

**4.3 Schrub and the Immateriality of Labour.**

During his initial meeting with Schrub, Karim comments on his employer's appearance, observing how, 'his tie is dark red like blood that has dried' (p.69). While Schrub's

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[167] Mazen Labban, 'Oil in Parallax: Scarcity, Markets, and the Financialization of Accumulation', *Geoforum*, Vol.41, Issue 4 (2010), 521-542, (p.526).

[168] In order to illustrate how the fictitious capital generated by futures commodity trading circulates independent of any basis in a physical materiality Labban writes, 'A cargo of oil may be traded several times over on the Singapore Exchange during the several weeks it travels from a well head in Saudi Arabia to refineries in Singapore. In fact, the oil may be traded before it is even lifted out of the ground' (534).

[169]Michael Bettancourt, 'Immaterial Value and Scarcity in Digital Capitalism', *Theory Beyond the Codes,* <http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=652> [Accessed online May 26th 2013].

business dealings may seem to be geographically removed from the violent conflicts to control oil resources in the Middle East, the image of dried blood on his tie could be suggestive of the way that these multinational business dealings are implicated in violent wars to control resources and oil markets. This recognition is extended through the similarity between the character's name Schrub, and that of Bush – a patronym denoting the father and son whose terms in office were defined by military violence in the cause of protecting oil interests.[170] The likeness between Schrub's Christian name, Derek, and that of the 'derricks' used in the process of oil extraction reinforces the 'Blood for Oil' symbolism. What is particularly significant for understanding the futures markets though are two different examples where Karim again describes Schrub's appearance. These descriptions make clear how Schrub might serve as an analogue for the way the value of oil is determined by immaterial processes.

It is during Karim's stay at Schrub's country residence where, late into the night, Schrub reflects on the death of his father and, in so doing, conveys how a pervasive sense of disconnection from his father has overshadowed his adult life. Recounting his father's features, Schrub recalls:

> […] He had these hands, these huge hands. Johnny Bench hands. Skin like a deer hide calluses everywhere. I always wondered when my hands would get to be that size, feel that rough. And they never did. Dainty little things'. He examined his hands more closely and laughed quietly. 'I get a manicure every two weeks' (185).

[170] This instance of word-play is not original. Molly Ivins and Lou Dubose recount how, during the Texas governorship elections of 1994, Ann Richards used the term disparagingly to mock her opponent, George W. Bush who went on to win the election. Molly Ivins and Lou Dubose, *Shrub: The Short But Happy Political Life of George W. Bush*, (New York, NY: First Vintage Books, 2002), p. 40.

Implicit in the description of these rough, 'callused' hands is the suggestion that his father was in regular contact with abrasive materials, tools, or engaged in a form of manual work. If Schrub symbolises the era of neoliberal economics, the portrayal of his father here evokes an era prior to the dominance of digital finance capitalism when manufacturing and heavy industries provided the dominant modes of production—an era which the novel, perhaps nostalgically, registers as diametrically opposed to that which Schrub represents. The comparison of the hands with 'deer hide', a product traditionally used to make clothing and footwear serves to reinforce the link with production. The contrast between the physical condition of the father's hands with those of the son therefore signifies the transition of the United States economy from a reliance on manufacturing and material production to electronic finance capitalism and consumerism. As Foukas and Goukay have put it, this transition can be understood as switching the United States' 'business template from General Motors to Goldman Sachs and Wal-Mart'.[171]

It is during his final meeting with Karim that the physical condition of Schrub's hands further reinforces the suggestion of a separation between production and finance capitalism. Following a series of threats that Schrub issues to Karim—threats that take the form of an ultimatum that Karim cedes control over his programme or face expulsion from the country—Karim is drawn to focus on Schrub's hands and observes:

> […] although he had no cuts or scars on them, his skin had spots and looked as fragile and wrinkled as a used banknote. It seemed like the only thing he could do

[171] Vassilis K. Foukas and Bulent Goukay, *The Fall of the US Empire: Global Fault-Lines and the Shifting Imperial Order* (New York, NY: Pluto Press, 2012), p. 85.

> with them was type on a computer or use a pen. […] I was very sad, as if I were watching somebody, or something, die in front of me (285).

In an echo of the scene at the country house, the absence of 'cuts and scars' on the hands suggests the demise of material production. The contrast between the 'skin like a deer hide' and Schrub's skin, which resembles a 'banknote', further contributes to a dichotomy between the noble producer and the morally bereft rentier — a dichotomy which may arguably be problematic in the contradictions it raises, as we have seen in the earlier discussion of Sinclair's Ross, yet nonetheless, is a dichotomy which structures the novel's framing of finance capital.

**4.4 An Education in Petroleum.**

As previously mentioned, the novel features a number of instances in which Karim is found to be reflecting on consumer products as well as energy sources that underpin modes of mobility. These frequent asides and digressions, I would suggest, not only develop Karim's idiosyncratic character, but can also be read as key moments in his education in the values of US corporate capitalism and consumer culture. Such a process also draws attention to the techniques of petro-fetishism that underpin these cultures, as I go on to show**.**

One such episode occurs in Karim's work colleague Jefferson's apartment, where Karim's eyes fall on his host's music collection. On looking at these shelves, he makes the following observation: 'two shelves like skyscrapers of CDs are near the stereo. From the plastic cases and the plastic materials in the CDs, I try to calculate how much petroleum they all contain, but it is impossible without knowing the precise material breakdown' (141). Karim's inability to calculate the petroleum content of the cases can

be interpreted as an object lesson in oil-commodity-fetishism. With little insight into the processes and procedures which constitute their condition of possibility, the cases appear in the way that Marx suggests is typical of all commodities: as 'opaque hieroglyphs'. CD cases may seem to be unassuming and benign objects in a world that is saturated with consumer products. Yet Karim's thwarted calculation provokes further reflections on the ways in which oil-fetishism extends to consumer commodities, and the implications of such an insight. We have already considered Huber's account of the way in which the production processes and practices which occur at refineries are kept far from any enquiring eyes. In view of this separation, it is all but impossible to know anything about the labour conditions for the oil workers or whether sourcing this oil resulted in spills or the pollution of fragile natural environments. Neither is it possible to say whether the plastic in these apparently nondescript objects began life in the oilfields of autocratic regimes characterised by tyranny and the abuse of human rights. This example centred on the inherent difficulty of knowing the petroleum content of a commodity draws attention to a form of petro-fetishism, and also serves as a formative moment in Karim's self-education as it develops through reflections and ruminations over oil-based commodities.

A later scene in the novel further develops Karim's ongoing attempts to decipher the opaque character of commodities as they present themselves as 'social hieroglyphs' when he attempts to assess the value of shirts during a visit to a clothing retailer. Initially, he struggles to make a choice between two identical shirts, for he describes how '[he] examine[s] them for differences in quality, but [he] truly cannot distinguish them, as they both feel soft, durable and attractive' (108). Upon closer inspection he

notices, 'the tag on one reads "Made in Italy" and the other reads "Made in Philippines"' (108). On the assumption that the standard of labour conditions and the welfare of the textile workers in Italy are likely to be superior to that in the Philippines, Karim remarks, 'I discard the second shirt' (108). Karim's decision serves to exemplify the concealment of the material conditions of production within the fetishized capitalist world market system by showing how a buyer in the marketplace is left with little insight other than, at best, a geographical index—the label—with which to inform their choice of purchase. This seemingly marginal event in the boutique may seem to offer an analogue for imagining a central aspect of the global oil economy: the manner in which the consumer encounters oil at the point of use. The global circuits of production and distribution that are congealed in the fabric of the shirt Karim buys in the boutique are not visible in the commodity itself. Just so, the daily oil encounters which structure our lives as petromodern subjects are abstracted from the international division of labour that led to the production and global distribution of oil; the consumer of oil will similarly struggle to trace the networks through which it flowed when they approach it at a petrol pump or the myriad plastic consumer products in which it is a vital component. In short, these examples serve to emphasise how the capitalist marketplace presents oil to us as an opaque hieroglyph. As a way of explaining how the exploitation of children in factories significantly underpinned the manufacturing industry in Victorian England, Marx noted that 'a great deal of capital, which appears today in the United States without any birth-certificate, was yesterday, in England, the capitalized blood of children' (920). Similarly, what *Kapitoil* shows us is the extent to which the price of the oil we use has been determined by the immiseration of others.

An example from earlier in the novel when the precise data pertaining to petroleum *is* known shows how petro-fetishism ensures that such knowledge does not necessarily translate into an understanding of the relationships between oil and its consumption. It is during the final stages of Karim's flight from Doha to New York that he attempts to distract himself while the plane begins the landing procedure. Karim strikes up a conversation with a fellow passenger where he poses 'an interesting math problem' centred upon the question 'Is an airplane a greater gas-guzzler per passenger than a car?' (6). Following a complex calculation, which exemplifies the extent of Karim's mathematical prowess, he concludes 'that a car must consume 21.2 miles per gallon to be as efficient with four passengers, and that a new hybrid car from Honda is more efficient with just two passengers. But there is no car as efficient if you are solitary' (6). It is possible to suggest that Karim's equation provides an example of what Roland Barthes called 'the reality effect'. For Barthes, seemingly innocuous or insignificant acts or descriptions within a narrative – aspects he calls 'notations' – can function as a way of reinforcing verisimilitude.[172] Of course, all novels construct a fictional world, but that fictional world is a representation of a certain idea of reality. Borrowing the language of environmental science and climatology in the way that Karim does here, presents such an instance of this 'effect' by conveying a version of 'reality' in which environmentalism is inextricably bound up with the consumption of petrol. What is more, equating solitary car travel with inefficiency here certainly invites reflection on the environmental implications of petrol-powered transport and might even draw attention to the links between inefficiency and the cultures of privatisation which automobility promotes. Of

[172] Roland Barthes, 'The Reality Effect', in *French Literary Theory Today,* ed. Tzvetan Todorov (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) pp. 11-18.

greater significance, I would suggest, is the way that the calculation can be viewed as a parallel example to that of the plastic CD cases. Explaining that an optimal measure of efficiency is arrived at when four passengers travel in a car that consumes 21.2 miles per gallon seems to be a strategy of demystification achieved by paying close attention to the links between inputs and outputs. And yet, it can in fact be considered as a form of petro-fetishism in two specific ways. First, it seems particularly likely that part of the reason for Karim's calculation at this very early stage of the novel is to establish both his esoteric character and his skill as a mathematician—characteristics which are developed throughout the narrative and serve a crucial function in relation to the plot. But it is precisely due to Karim's unique abilities of abstract mathematical reasoning that this example tacitly implies that in order to grasp a firm understanding of the relationship between energy consumption and the desire or need for mobility, a mathematical dexterity of the rare kind possessed by Karim is required. In other words, the implication is that understanding these important relationships is abstract-intellectual work best left to a technocratic imagination. Such a specialized form of abstract reasoning is also framed as antithetical to the predominant norms of energy consumption and mobility, and this antithesis provides a form of justification for sidestepping reflection on energy use more broadly.

When Karim concludes his speculations on the question of whether 'an airplane [is] a greater gas-guzzler per passenger than a car?', the teenage passenger to whom Karim is addressing his thoughts 'yawns' and declares that 'I suck at math' before turning to the in-flight magazine. By shifting the narrative focalization from Karim to the teenage passenger in the seat next to him, Wayne stages the challenge of

communicating the problems of oil dependency to a wider public in the specialized language of abstract mathematical reason. Georgiana Banita has written on the consequences of this kind of wilful disengagement with energy issues in relation to voter participation in American presidential electoral campaigns. She writes of how, 'awareness of petroleum as a tangible conditioning factor in […] daily life has dwindled. Consequently, voters are finding it increasingly easy to bracket themselves out of the duty to make a responsible choice, taking cheap oil for granted as an inexhaustible given of our times rather than a situated, material resource'.[173] Banita's findings have significant implications for understanding the novel's use of first-person focalization to foreground the lures of petro-fetishism, and the difficulty of imagining an alternative to the prevailing norms and common sense of petromodernity.

Karim's equation also reveals the limits of Wayne's ability to imagine an energy future without oil. By comparing the use of petroleum across two different modes of transport rather than two different energy sources, Karim seems unable to imagine a modern world without oil. For example, he does not ask how energy efficient could the same flight be in a solar powered plane whose energy reserves increase with altitude? In this way, Karim's calculation highlights oil's dominant status in the social imaginary by underlining how alternative energy forms are unable to even be conceived in relation to predominant modes of mobility such as transatlantic travel. What's more, while the work the jet-fuel performs is remarkable in comparison to other forms of petroleum fuel, the ecological implications of this measure of efficiency are absent from the

[173] Georgiana Banita, "Voting for American Energy: Elections, Oil, and US Culture" In *Electoral Cultures: American Democracy and Choice*, Ed. Georgiana Banita and Sascha Pöhlmann (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag 2015), pp. 99-125.

equation. Disregarding how this unarguably efficient substance impacts on natural ecologies, most obviously in the form of climate-altering atmospheric pollution—underscores the difficulty in assigning a measure of value to oil. [174]

What might be considered as a parallel event occurs at a later point in the narrative when an alternative perspective on the relationship between mobility and energy consumption is presented. After Karim leaves a nightclub with Melissa, the pair are intent on travelling across town as quickly as possible but are unable to find an available taxi. Melissa hails a pedicab which Karim describes as a 'white man driving a bicycle with an attached carriage' (125). As the journey proceeds, Karim notes, 'I couldn't believe the man was going to transport us with his legs all the way across Manhattan […] He looked like he was my age and wore a wool hat for the cold, but he soon perspired from the work. Melissa continued kissing and touching me. I looked at the driver's legs periodically and tried not to pay attention to people on the street observing us' (126). This representation of mobility differs markedly from the abstract formula conceived aboard the plane. Here the perspiration on the driver's face together with his legs, presumably pumping like pistons, provides a clear and distinct visual representation of a particular relationship between energy and mobility. The extraneous detail given to describing the figure of the driver might even be seen as way of reasserting human labour, so often obscured through techniques of petro-fetishism, back into considerations of energy and mobility. At the end of the journey, Melissa pays the fare while Karim, more than a little worse for wear due to drink, attempts to give the

[174] In economic theories of Market Failure such variables are called 'negative externalities'. See Rob Dietz, 'Negative Externalities are the Norm', *Centre for the Advancement of Steady State Economy*, < http://steadystate.org/negative-externalities/> [Accessed online 02/01/16]

driver a tip describing how, 'I gave him another bill whose denomination I couldn't read' (126). Karim's inability to focus on the money is a detail which certainly reinforces his intoxicated condition, but the uncertain value of the tip can also be read as an example of energy fetishism and abstraction. Within this context the unknown denomination of the banknote is entirely appropriate as a signifier of the way oil-fetishism disrupts and impedes attempts to draw clear connections between price, value, human labour and the labour performed by energy forms.

**4.5 Petroleum Objects and Oil Things.**

Karim's repeated reflections on and contemplations of the materiality of the products and commodities he encounters, places him in a parallel symbolic position to Schrub. Karim's numerous speculations and digressions on the origins of material objects interrupt the main narrative in ways that encourage readers to consider the symbolic significance of the object world. Such speculations correspond in interesting ways with recent critical discussions of commodity culture, such as Bill Brown's elaboration of what he terms 'thing theory'. As well as setting Karim in opposition to Schrub, reading Wayne through Brown can certainly elucidate the ways in which Karim's reflections on the material resources of the earth defamiliarise and interrupt the normalising rhetoric of petro-capitalist modernity. What's more, reading Wayne after Brown can illuminate the ways in which the novel's representation of the object world raises profound questions about the afterlife as well as the life of objects – questions which have important ecological implications for the condition of petromodernity, as we will see.

In plain terms, thing theory advocates attentiveness towards the physical objects which share and occupy our lived spaces and geographies. It is because so many aspects of modern life are reliant on a vast array of objects that the extent of such a dependency is often easily taken for granted or forgotten. What Brown calls the 'human-object' relationship becomes one grounded in complacency whereby objects are expected to be available and present when needed as well as able to fulfil our needs and desires unconditionally. Crucially, this complacency diverts attention far away from the complex relations which constitute the history of these objects and have enabled their existence. Brown suggests that it is at brief, often uncomfortable, moments when the human-object relationship breaks down that attention is forcibly drawn to the materiality of both objects and the human body: 'the suddenness with which things seem to assert their presence or power: you cut your finger on a sheet of paper, you trip over some toy, you get banged on the head by a falling nut […] They are occasions of contingency – the chance interruption that discloses a physicality of things'.[175] This reminder of the materiality of objects and bodies is a point of departure; it is when objects that once served a useful purpose become broken, obsolete or removed from their intended context that they become *things* and in this moment, Brown explains, 'we begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily' (6). What Brown is suggesting is that these interruptions, however fleetingly frustrating they may appear, are important because they remind us of the

[175] Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 28 No.1 (2001), pp. 1-22, (p.4).

materiality of the world of ever circulating commodities, that these commodities are products of human labour, and as such have material limitations. In remembering that commodities are not born on the shelves of supermarkets, we might reflect on our own complicity with and place within these circuits of 'production and distribution, consumption and exhibition'.

Although Brown is not talking about oil specifically, I would suggest that thing theory might provide a useful resource for confronting the types of ontological blind spots which oil-fetishism creates. Drawing attention to the material, physical forms of commodities, might engender reflections not only on our complicity as users and consumers but could present a challenge to the 'oil occlusion' argument by accounting for oil's presence in their condition of possibility and how, in sense, oil is able to hide in plain sight.

An example from the novel which might help to clarify my use of Brown's idea follows Karim's recollection of a childhood incident in which he and his friends break a neighbour's window during a game of football. While his friends flee from the scene, Karim stays and is compelled to study the aftermath of the damage:

> […] I forgot about the score and remained because the pieces of glass on the ground looked like icicles […] and I studied their shapes for several minutes as well as the patterns of cracks in the window that looked like spider webs and the parallels between the cracks and the arrangements of glass on the ground (18).

This passage establishes Karim's idiosyncratic characteristics, making it more believable that someone with a near-autistic fascination with production processes would be

capable of creating the Kapitoil programme. But by looking closely at the broken window through Karim's focalizing consciousness, it could be argued that readers are encouraged here to identify certain associations or 'parallels' between patterns. Indeed, it is through such patterns and associations that the novel makes intelligible the movement of oil through certain material processes and commodity chains. In this case, the parallel perhaps most readily drawn centres on the way in which the core elements required for the manufacture of glass, primarily silicon-based sand and metallic oxides, are the results of similar geological processes to those which form oil. But more significant than this is the imagery used to describe the shards. Comparing the cracked and broken glass to icicles and spider webs, creates an image-pattern which re-establishes the glass's connection to the nonhuman world and in doing so reasserts how seemingly everyday objects, such as glass windows, are dependent on natural resources as their condition of possibility.

A further example from the narrative which finds Karim's attention drawn to processes of transition as objects become things occurs during Karim's visit to a charity event for refugees of the Kosovan war. Here Karim describes watching a seemingly innocuous incident in which a guest takes a selection of *hors d'oeuvres* and 'after he consumed them, he had a remainder of three toothpicks, and since we weren't near a trash bin or table and the waiter had left, he dropped them on the floor' (259). It is only later that Karim finds himself compelled to remember these three discrete discarded items: 'I thought about the toothpicks […] on the ground, and I wondered how long it would take until someone located them and picked them up, and how they would probably remain hidden for weeks or months with small pieces of dates and bacon on

them and turn rotten' (262). Once again, reading this example through the lens of Brown's account of thing theory is useful because it helps to emphasise a kind of concealed material process. First, because the toothpicks are no longer 'objects' with a use-value they are transformed into 'things'. It is in this condition, and far removed from their intended context that their 'thingness' asserts itself—inviting reflection on the 'circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition' which provided the conditions of possibility for the object. In this example, one might perhaps consider the wood or plastic used to comprise its material form and reflect on profligate attitudes to such resources arising from this. I would suggest, however, that making a slight adjustment to Brown's idea would be useful here and could help direct attention to a further mode of oil-fetishism. This could be realized by affording the same consideration to material form which Brown advocates to 'things' when they have permanently left 'the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition' *but still maintain a concrete material presence in the world.* Extending Brown's critical perspective in this way could provide a way of drawing attention not only to the 'secret life of things', but to their afterlife also. If these are petroleum-based 'things', such reflections might centre on the extent to which their disposal presents considerable challenges to biodegradation processes, and the labour and energy expended in this process. In short, a theory of things that focused on a permanent state of 'thingness' and considered how petroleum-based material forms maintain their presence long after they have been severed from any kind of exchange or use value, might help shed light on the processes of waste management and in doing so serve as part of a wider strategy of demystifying petromodernity.

Considering the example of the toothpicks in the sorts of ways Brown suggests might even add a different kind of significance to the scraps of waste food. If, as I am arguing, the toothpicks provide a way of thinking about discarded products formed from natural resources, Karim's speculation that the food will probably remain out of sight for weeks or months, decomposing and decaying until it is found, could also be seen as a comment on the kinds of similarly concealed ecological impacts these products cause. In a related discussion, Rob Nixon uses the term 'slow violence' as a way to describe forms of ecological damage 'that occur gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction […] neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive'.[176] Because slow violence is contrary to the kinds of 'visceral, eye-catching and page-turning power' of 'falling bodies, burning towers, exploding heads, avalanches, volcanoes, and tsunamis', it 'presents formidable representational obstacles that can hinder our efforts to mobilize and act decisively' (3).

An earlier passage in the novel, in which Karim and Schrub travel across Manhattan by helicopter, provides a useful example through which to consider Nixon's idea. Much of the journey is comprised of Karim's descriptions of the city's urban features and petroleum infrastructures such as the road networks, high-rise buildings, and the striking example of a 'large ship exhaling black smoke into the air that was […] littered with garbage and was possibly heading to a landfill in Connecticut' (160). As Schrub and Karim near their destination, the scene concludes after Karim activates the onboard DVD player and *Armageddon* (1998), a Hollywood disaster film whose plot centres upon the impending destruction of the earth from a wayward asteroid, begins to

[176] Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, Mass.:Harvard University Press, 2011), (p.2).

play. At first glance, the reference to the DVD player might seem incidental and simply intended to reinforce Schrub's executive status by his showing how his helicopter is equipped with state-of-the-art technology of the period. However, at this point in the narrative, where Karim has been describing the features of contemporary urban sprawl, the intertextual allusion to a Hollywood disaster film could be seen as a way of drawing attention to a very real and far less spectacular threat to the planet: rather than destruction from an errant meteor, it is sustaining the continual expansion of oil-powered urban sprawl which poses the greatest threat to life on earth. It is in this way that that this textual detail can be read as a figurative manifestation of Nixon's idea of slow violence.

Another example in which the rhetoric and imagery of automobility are mobilized to highlight the centrality of the oil economy within capitalist modernity occurs at a later stage in the narrative when Schrub and Karim travel across Manhattan by helicopter. Their flight commences with Karim likening the sensation of ascent to that of 'a vegetable being pulled from the earth' (158). The tenor-vehicle relationship of this simile clearly foregrounds the way in which nature and the biosphere—symbolized by 'a vegetable'—is framed as a resource for industrial modernity. What's more, that this agricultural simile pertaining to natural resource extraction occurs at the journey's outset is significant as it parallels the process in which oil is also 'pulled from the earth' before it is processed and circulated into the infrastructure of modernity. This image also prefigures the aerial perspective on the urban petro-scape which Karim is about to witness. And yet the fact that these sensations are felt aboard a helicopter—a symbol of corporate affluence as well as state surveillance that is also dependent on fossil fuel—

draws together these seemingly oppositional poles of nature/ the manmade. As the men hover over Manhattan, Karim proceeds to comment on the appearance of the city from his elevated position; he observes how 'cars and people move through the streets like liquid through channels' (159). Since the modern city is increasingly 'dependent upon oil for movement', a perceptive reader might infer that the liquid which the inhabitants resemble is oil (Roberts, 49). The simile points to oil's omnipresent form by evoking a sense of the city as a living vessel or ecosystem with its lifeblood, the inhabitants and commuters, circulating through 'channels' of oil. As the helicopter passes over the downtown area, Karim observes how, down in the congested streets below, 'cars advanced in traffic like lines of ants' (159). Likening the movements of the urban commuters to those of ants in a colony evokes an image of a seething, teeming mass culture which has been made possible by the extraction oil and expands the notion of the city as a self-contained ecosystem with oil as the vital life-force enabling the movement of its workers. That Karim observes the city-as-ecosystem from a helicopter is also significant because it is from this privileged aerial vantage point that he can see the urban political economy. And yet the fact that the privileged vantage point from which he reflects on urban space is a helicopter – a symbol of corporate affluence as well as state surveillance that is also dependent on fossil fuel – suggests that this very vantage point is also a part of the political economy that he looks down on. It is perhaps by dint of Karim's elite status and privilege at this point in the text that he is unable to step outside of the totality of petro-modernity. Yet is through his focalising consciousness as the *bildungsheld* that readers are encouraged to question the common sense of petromodernity.

Karim's description of the city here can be located, in part, in a tradition of writing which imagines the city as a living entity. James Holston writes of how such depictions were commonplace two hundred years ago:

> […] the discourse of urban reform in the eighteenth and nineteenth century was often presented in terms of a metaphor of disease in an analogy between cities and the human body: the city was a diseased organism that required radical surgery in the form of planning operations to cut open its afflicted parks, to make incisions with broad avenues through congested quarters, to rehabilitate the city's lungs with new parks.[177]

Rather than the inertia of disease, the urban petro-landscape which Karim observes is an organism typified by kinetic circulation with movement flowing through designated 'channels' while the reference to its inhabitants as 'ants' emphasizes a sense of repetitive accumulation through labour.[178] Karim's depiction of the city here works to defamiliarize urban life and consumer culture; and the description of its inhabitants flowing through designated channels invites readers to consider how the city's condition of possibility is oil.

**4.6 Eco-Fetishism in *Kapitoil.***

The latter stages of the narrative see Karim moving further away from his original aspiration to succeed in the corporate world, a move consolidated through his eventual

[177] James Holston, *The Modernist City* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p.50.
[178] This perspective of the city recalls the work of urban theorists such as Neil Brenner and Peter Marcuse who write on the ways in which, under capitalism, 'cities operate as strategic sites for commodification processes […] [and are] major basing points for the production, circulation, and consumption of commodities'. *Cities for People, Not for Profit: Critical Urban Theory and the Right to the City* ed. by Neil Brenner, Peter Marcuse, Margit Mayer, (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 13.

rejection of Schrub. As the narrative draws steadily towards this key moment, Karim's close focus on commodities and modes of mobility as transformative factors in his journey of self-formation become redirected onto natural ecologies and the aspects of the non-human world. In these final stages of the novel, it is snow in particular that occupies his attention in the way previously given over to consumer products. For example, while watching a snow shower, Karim reflects on the processes of dissipation and evaporation and concludes with the statement that 'the world can be so elegant when it is left alone to itself' (265). Karim's use of this truism appears intended to cast doubt on the Kapitoil software which is not content for the world to be 'left alone to itself', but rather seeks to establish patterns and trends it can exploit. A further reflection on snow follows in quick succession and is used this time to extend the veiled condemnation of his role as a corporate oil speculator. Before returning to his apartment, Karim comments on how the thick covering of snow on the ground 'looked like a clean tablecloth. I didn't want to ruin it, so I walked only in the path other people had produced' (266). The decision not to create further footprints is suggestive of a desire to minimise the human presence in ecological processes in a way that is entirely contrary to his role as a trader, which assists the global circulation of oil. The reference to 'footprints' might even evoke the idea of carbon footprints, the shorthand for the impact on non-human ecologies caused by petroleum enabled patterns of consumption and mobility. Such a reading is assisted through the reference to consumption, indicated by the 'tablecloth'. These reflections on snow, together with further digressions on birds and fauna at a similar stage in the narrative, entails that encounters with the natural environment or non-human ecologies be regarded as stages in the formation process and because Karim eventually rejects Schrub, this stage is significant because it appears

to assert that such uncritical encounters, replete with truisms and broad generalisations on the otherness of nature are necessary in order to resist the lures of fossil capitalism. There is here, I would suggest, a marked incongruity in relation to the way the way the novel has mapped Karim's trajectory until this point. Because the diverse techniques of oil-fetishism presented so far have been focalised through Karim's abstract mathematical consciousness, these techniques have been de-familiarised and de-centred as part of a rhetorical strategy that enables reflection in different ways. The unconditional adulation of nature as pure and unspoilt in these passages and others could be regarded as form of fetishism directly comparable to the forms Karim has, until now, been so concerned to de-mystify. The consequence of this penultimate stage of formation in the way Wayne presents it means that the novel begins to perform the very techniques it had previously invited its readers to examine and critique.

**4.7 The Irresolution of Petromodernity in *Kapitoil.***

It is in the final stages of the novel that the narrative seems to shift away from the template of the *Bildungsroman*. At the end of Wayne's narrative, there appears to be, superficially at least, no resolution to the 'contradictions of modernity'. Karim is presented with a stark ultimatum in which he either remains in New York and pursues the kind of career to which he strongly aspires while remaining subservient to Schrub's unethical demands, or he returns to Doha and the father with whom he shares a tempestuous relationship but is nonetheless a figure of moral certitude. The unravelling of Karim's narrative apprenticeship in the laws of digital finance capitalism has drawn some attention from the few critics who have written on *Kapitoil.* Daniel Worden is untroubled by the didactic ultimatum Wayne constructs for his protagonist. For Worden,

Karim's rejection of Schrub is a noble act of self-sacrifice and one which might even instigate a degree of self-reflection in the reader. As he puts it, 'The novel asks us, through the dilemma posed to its narrator, if we would be bold enough to reject the life that has been offered to us by late capitalism, a life where all of our desires are bound up in and determined by the generation of profits for corporate financial systems'.[179] Worden is not specifically reading *Kapitoil* as a *Bildungsroman* here, although the way he suggests the novel presents an ethical question to the reader certainly resonates with the instructive quality of that classic form. As Moretti notes, 'the classical *Bildungsroman* has the reader perceive the text through the eyes of the protagonist: which is logical, since the protagonist is undergoing the experience of formation, and the reading too is intended to be a formative process' (38). While Karim's decision is certainly 'bold' and choosing to return to Doha rather than internalise the values of the corporate culture might suggest a victory of sorts, the implications of this didactic ultimatum are so severe that the victory is perhaps pyrrhic. There is a sense in which this corporate oil culture is, in fact, untouchable and appears as though it is impossible for an outsider like Karim to challenge it in any meaningful way. Karim is certainly a likeable character, and readers are encouraged to view his decision to sever ties with the manipulative and duplicitous Schrub Equities as the 'right' choice for a character so firmly defined by sincerity and honesty. And yet, if Worden imagines that readers may be inspired to follow Karim's lead toward an ethical idealism, posing the question is far simpler than offering concrete solutions to some of the tricky realities in which pension-funds are linked to weapons manufactures, life-saving medications contain petroleum sourced from despotic

[179] Daniel Worden, 'Oil Abstraction', *American Book Review*, Vol.33, No. 3, (2012), p. 16.

regimes, and consumer products are manufactured on the periphery of the global economic system by women and children, who often work under repressive and exploitative conditions. This is not to suggest that reflecting on these issues is futile, but rather that Karim's isolationist withdrawal seems like the most impotent form of response to the type of question Worden believes his actions raise. Georgiana Banita's assessment of the novel's ending is far less generous than that of Worden.[180] In Banita's account, the way Karim 'flees at the slightest setback' serves to 'confirm his docility' and 'when the status quo is restored at the end of the novel [it is] as if Karim had never existed. Short of dying, he could not have made himself more invisible' (193). While the possibility of challenging the ultimatum posed by Schrub, the threat of suspending his residency, 'people from your area of the world can encounter visa problems very easily' as Schrub puts it, clearly foregrounds Karim's relatively precarious position as a migrant worker in the global knowledge economy (284). In certain respects, Banita and Worden's critical assessments of the novel are both quite compelling. But because neither consider Karim's narrative trajectory in terms of a neoliberal apprenticeship in the lures of digital finance capitalism, they miss the way that Karim's choice can, in fact, be read as adhering to the 'ideal of the fundamentally self-interested individual' which Jason Read suggests defines that neoliberal ideology.[181] By 'fleeing at the slightest setback', as Banita puts it, any hope of realising the epidemiology project which could 'significantly enhance quality of life in the Third World', is dashed and, as such, Karim prioritises his

[180] Georgiana Banita, 'Writing Energy Security after 9/11: Oil, Narrative, and Globalization'. In *Beyond 9/11: Transdisciplinary Perspectives on Twenty-First Century US American Culture*. Ed. Sabine Sielke, Simone Knewitz, and Christian Klockner, (Frankfurt: Lang, 2013) pp. 173-98 (p.191).
[181] Jason Read, 'A Genealogy of Homo-Economicus: Neoliberalism and the Production of Subjectivity' in *A Foucault for the 21st Century: Governmentality, Biopolitics and Discipline in the New Millennium* eds. Sam Binkley and Jorge Capatillo (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), p. 7.

own self-interest over less-fortunate others. At an earlier stage in the negotiations, Schrub had justified his reluctance to Kapitoil being modified by claiming the risk was too great: 'Look, I want to help people, too. But I'm a realist. The program might work for predicting the spread of diseases. But it definitely works for predicting oil futures. You don't cut open the goose that lays golden eggs' (150). In foreclosing the very possibility of an enterprise that would not operate to accumulate profit, Schrub exemplifies the way neoliberalism powerfully 'curtails any collective transformation of the conditions of existence. It is not that such actions are not prohibited, restricted by the dictates of a sovereign or the structures of disciplinary power, they are not seen as possible, closed off by a society made up of self-interested individuals' (Read, 7). It is possible then, that Karim's trip to Manhattan might, in large part, be read as a narrative of a certain path to masculinity and manhood where, on this path, he is required to decide what he can achieve with his professional skills while his relationship with co-worker Rebecca introduces the trope of understanding the world more roundly through romantic attachment. As we see, however, despite Karim's best efforts to assimilate this new culture, he struggles at almost every attempt. He is uneasy with the sexist, materialist motivations of co-workers Dan and Jefferson while Schrub is revealed to be a manipulator whose own attachment to Karim is concerned only with the profits he can generate for the company. Indeed, Karim's unwavering desire to please Schrub and find happiness and acceptance in the world of corporate America might even be regarded as a narrative of substitution, which is to say that the masculine world of the office serves as a substitute family, in which Schrub, its figurehead, stands as a father figure. More significantly, due to the way that Schrub is a figurehead of corporate America, doggedly pursuing profits from oil speculation despite the ethical implications, it is possible to

suggest that, in this narrative, oil might even be read *as* corporate culture. The critique of this corporate oil culture plays out through the way Schrub is dishonest and his friendship with Karim depends on the extent to which Karim can continue to generate profits for the ailing corporation. But unlike the classic *bildungsroman*, in Wayne's narrative there is, ultimately, no resolution to the contradictions of modernity; the values of the corporate world are not internalised by Karim and are in fact rejected at the end of the novel when he faces an ultimatum in which either he remains in New York and pursues the kind of career to which he strongly aspires while remaining subservient to the unethical demands of his substitute father, or he returns to Doha and the father with whom he shares a tempestuous relationship but is nonetheless a figure of moral certitude. It is this binary framing of a relationship forged over oil by Karim, the Arab, and Schrub, the American that the central oil encounter of the novel may even seem to reinforce the simplistic terms Ghosh defines.

I have already suggested that allegory might serve as a useful way of understanding how the text's blood for oil imagery functions as a comment on the wider, more complex, global economic processes in which oil is embroiled. Further, if we read Karim's journey to the USA as a journey to find a new father figure, allegory can also help to illuminate the way in which the 'family' serves as a figure for the nation. In this way, *Kapitoil* might be said to stage a displacement of a larger critique of oil-powered capitalist culture onto private relationships and a conventional narrative of family. Rather than providing a solution to the contradictions of modernity in the way Moretti suggests is the primary function of the *Bildungsroman*, the contradictions of oil modernity in *Kapitoil* are left unresolved and are instead refracted and displaced

through a narrative of private relationships and the intangible software that represents oil.[182] In a similar way, then, Karim's refusal to even consider ways in which Schrub's threats might be countered reinforces the impossibility of 'any collective transformation of the conditions of existence'. Indeed, Karim's decision to leave is, fundamentally, an act of narrow self-interest when set within the context of the multiple lives which might be saved were he to contest Schrub's threat. It is in this way, then, that his choice could in fact be read as a sign that Karim ultimately internalises the neoliberal culture with which he has felt such unease throughout the events of the narrative. Yet the narrative's lack of resolution, like that of many of the narratives examined in this thesis, may also be read as a comment on the challenges of imagining and organising an alternative energy system that is not dependent on fossil fuels.

[182] This narrative approach, in which a critique of capitalism is introduced but then displaced onto personal, family-related morality, is consistent with a time-honoured literary convention in nineteenth and twentieth century fiction. Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848), for example, proposes a political critique of the economic inequalities in the industrial Manchester of the nineteenth century only for the narrative to veer away from such an exploration and offer resolution with a theme of romance. This template is also evidenced in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) where a resort to cliché and the deployment of stock-characters serves to dissolve or detract from the overarching critique of slavery in the deep south of the USA.

## Conclusion

This thesis has examined representations of petromodernity in twentieth century and contemporary American literary fiction. It has considered, more specifically, how the form and genre of the *bildungsroman*, the detective novel, and the American regionalist short narrative mode have not only shaped these representations, but also helped us to re-imagine the ways in which the extraction and commodification of oil has become a naturalised part of capitalist modernity. Twentieth and twenty-first- century American fiction has been the main focus of the thesis because it can help us to understand the relationship the largest and most advanced economy in the world has had with a substance which has provided the conditions of possibility for the existence and reproduction of modern American fossil-powered cultures. While the range of texts discussed is broad and may perhaps seem somewhat disparate, my aim throughout has been to trace the ways in which different genres register the pressures and contradictions of a 'modern life that is underpinned by and dependent upon cheap energy systems' (LeMenager, p.67). Differently from LeMenager, my approach to genre and history takes its lead from Jameson's well-known directive to 'always historicize' (*Political Unconscious*, p.1); by doing so, it attempts to make clear that a diachronic examination of the oil encounter in literary texts of the American century necessitates an understanding of how certain literary modes are combined or recycled to register transitions and/ or crises within oil's complex and uneven mode of production narrative.

Incorporating this historical approach with specific genres can show us some of the other histories that are, and have been, bound up and implicated in the history of petromodernity: histories of gender, race, and class. Whether there is an implicit

reinforcement of naturalised ideas of oil or, as is more often the case, an explicit critique of such ideas, or whether the political position of a text is ambiguous, the narratives discussed in this thesis help us to think about how the energy unconscious is inseparable from economic and cultural histories of modernity.

Of course, as the discussions within the previous chapters have shown, the extent to which the formal features typical of any given literary genre might assist in shaping fictional narratives in ways that are more or less amenable to the task of making sense of the carbon-capital complex is an open question. What do we learn from Bunny's apprenticeship in the culture of oil capitalism? The peripheral regionalism of Sanford's oil stories certainly provides an insight into the lives and livelihoods of those intricately bound up with the semi-peripheral world of oil speculation and extraction, but it is also reasonable to question how much these insights have been tailored to appeal to the specific tastes of a very particular class of reader. Are the metropolitan readers of 'Luck' moved to reflect on the human labour which underpins their own increasing reliance on the conveniences of a nascent petro-modernity, or do such concerns lose their urgency when the stories circulate as yet another piece of cultural capital to be wielded by those metropolitan readers as signifiers of class or social status? It is of course true that *The Big Sleep*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Black Water Rising* are set in quite different historical contexts, but in each instance, the status quo is eventually reasserted. The detective protagonists of these novels may embark on investigations which facilitate a particular quest for knowledge and truth, but the trajectories of these narratives conclude on the same terrain in which they began: with the forces of fossil capital still firmly held in their place. And does Karim Issar's eventual return to Qatar

represent a defeat at the hands of impenetrable corporate powers or is his abstention and refusal to compromise regarded as something of a quiet victory for morality and ethics?

The commodity frontiers at which oil is extracted are constantly shifting, as fossil capital constantly seeks new markets across the globe. In a recent essay, Graeme Macdonald has compared the oil frontier to a tidal system that 'can fade and return, re-establishing itself in different territories or economic moments, or resurfacing in new forms and striations within an established site of oil extraction or production'.[183] If the dynamic form of oil, the circumstances of its extraction, its transformation into a commodity, and its tendency to return in slightly different forms presents a problem for our categories of thought, it also presents a challenge to our categories and critical vocabularies of literary representation.

To take one example of a work of contemporary fiction that depicts the core-periphery dynamics of petromodernity from the perspective of a different peripheral commodity frontier, using some of the genre conventions discussed in this thesis, consider Helon Habila's novel *Oil on Water* (2009). This novel centres on the journey of two journalists as they journey across the Niger Delta as part of a mission to find the wife of a foreign oil executive who has been kidnapped and held to ransom by a regional militia. As the pair pass through remote regions of the Delta, the main protagonist/ narrator provides a stark and harrowing first-person account of how the overlapping and interconnected conflict between militia groups and state security forces contribute to

[183] Graeme Macdonald, "Monstrous transformer": Petrofiction and world literature, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, Vol. 53, No.3, (2017), pp. 289-302, (p .291).

the ecological violence of toxic oil spills and rapacious extraction techniques enacted against the region's local communists. Narrated through a fractured, non-linear series of analeptic and proleptic accounts, of the events of the journey, the novel can be read within the terms of the detective genre; the novel's main protagonist attempts to fashion a coherent and linear order to the fractured sequence of events. While, perhaps, not strictly a *bildungsroman*, a number of formal features within the text can be seen as resonating with certain codes and conventions typically associated with the form.

The novel's use of the *bildungsroman* is made most palpably clear in its representation of the intellectual and political development of the main protagonist, Rufus, who is educated in and through his friendship with the veteran journalist, Zaq. Rufus, the narrator and focalising agent, is a recent graduate of journalism school and a self-professed 'cub reporter' who volunteers to undertake the dangerous journey into the Delta in search of a kidnapped western hostage when he learns that Zaq, a figure Rufus greatly admires, will be present on the assignment.[184] The kidnapping plot at the centre of the *Oil on Water* also signals the novel's debt to detective fiction and the *roman a clef*. True, reviews of the novel have often drawn comparisons with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Readers acquainted with *Heart of Darkness* might find the way in which Habila's narrative centres on a journey down a long and dangerous African river in search of a missing European somewhat familiar. Yet, it is the novel's use of a kidnapping plot that underpins the journalists' neo-colonial quest narrative—a quest that turns out to be a quest for the complex global economic totality of the oil complex,

[184] Helon Habila, *Oil on Water* (London: Penguin, 2010), p.123.

and of the way it links together multinational oil corporations, military governments, journalists, villagers, rebels, and by implication, authors and readers.

If Habila's *Oil on Water* tells another story about the specific history of oil extraction and capital accumulation in the Niger Delta, it also exemplifies how literary genres and forms travel in ways that seem to parallel the uneven flows of the global oil economy.[185] A more detailed discussion of postcolonial world literature is clearly beyond the scope of this thesis, focused as it is on twentieth century and contemporary American literary texts. I mention it in this conclusion to emphasise the profound and far-reaching implications about the ideology of form and genre in American literary narratives of petromodernity. In *Oil on Water*, as in many of the texts discussed in this thesis, the world of oil extraction is at one and the same time a world of racial extractivism, a world of patriarchal values, and a world of ecological devastation. It is through the recycling and combination of particular literary modes that the texts discussed in this thesis push readers to think in different ways about the meaning, use and culture of oil extraction at particular moments in time. By tracing the construction and deconstruction of oil masculinity in and through the different literary genres of petro-fetishism and the energy unconscious, this thesis has sought to identify the ways in which certain texts challenge and/ or reinforce the romanticisation of such toxic forms of masculinity. If masculinity has conventionally served as a vehicle to justify oil's use

[185] The extent to which a literary genre could be said to "travel" has been discussed by the literary critic Margaret Cohen in her account of the history of maritime fiction. Cohen investigates how the American James Fennimore Cooper's novel *The Pilot* (1824), established certain narrative codes and generic conventions which came to distinguish the so-called nautical novel. A commercial and critical success, Cohen notes how the narrative framework enabled similar successes to the French and English authors who appropriated significant structural and thematic elements from Cooper's text. The reason for sea fiction's transatlantic popularity is a result of what Cohen calls its 'transportable significance'. Margaret Cohen, 'Traveling Genres', *New Literary History*, Vol. 34, No.3 (2003), 481-499, (495).

value and exchange value while obscuring its far-reaching ecological and social toxicity, the deconstruction of oil masculinity can work to register fault lines and contradictions in prevailing narratives and myths of petromodernity.[186] Such a critical approach may of course be limited by the ideological content of the particular literary form under consideration, as we have seen. Yet it is nonetheless crucial in order to question and challenge the patriarchal foundations of fossil capitalism, the predominant belief that oil is essential to the reproduction of the modern world, and our unconscious attachment to oil as a cheap form of energy that we cannot do without.

[186] For a further discussion of oil and masculinity, see Cara Daggett, 'Petro-Masculinity: Fossil Fuels and Authoritarian Desire', *Millennium* 47, no. 1 (September 2018), pp. 25–44. https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829818775817

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