Scott, Heidi C. M. "Black Gold." *Fuel: An Ecocritical History*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. 177–222. Environmental Cultures. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350054011.ch-006>>.

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Black Gold

I Oil ontology

Oil pulses through the carburetors of the industrial world. It is the fossil fuel of modern motion. Once oil became widely and cheaply available sometime between the twentieth century's world wars, various grades of diesel and gasoline drove engineering innovation toward the automobile. Old coal drove the locomotives and steamships of nineteenth-century moving industry; now, diesel and heavy fuel oil do that work. As a symbol of freedom, power, and recklessness, the automobile has left its tire tracks on many a literary page. We'll kick those tires and take them for a spin in this chapter.

Fossil oil is not only a fuel of motion; its carbon chains appear in a mind-boggling array of materials. Anything not explicitly metal or glass often has some petroleum component, usually one of the ubiquitous plastics of modern life. Its usefulness is not just convenient, it is equally terrifying. The architecture of late-capitalist consumerism would collapse without load-bearing oil. No computers or television without oil: no Amazon.com, Facebook, OK Cupid, or Candy Crush. No big box stores without oil. No recycling or garbage pickup. No landfills. No clean municipal water. No conventional agriculture, which uses fossil-based pesticides, and provides 95 percent of food sold in America (Greene).

Some claim that "Peak Oil"—the point beyond which supplies begin to diminish—is already upon us. Particularly, the Hubbert peak theory predicts that global supplies will diminish in the early twenty-first century, just as huge populations in India and China come online, intensifying demand. But low-grade sources like Canada's oil sands obscure the supply crisis and introduce an array of disturbing questions about just how desperately we need petroleum. The conversation evolves from "peak oil" to "tough oil." Losing the artificially cheap prices that have floated the twentieth century's big-growth economies seems

inevitable. He may not need those stores of water, rice, beans, beef jerky, and ammo your cousin stashed under his cabin after reading Hubbert's theory, but it is certainly worth pondering the glory days, decline, and demise of that pressed phytoplankton you pump into your tank.

Petroleum's creation story is a geological recipe for braised biomass. Crude oil goes through a geological diagenesis broadly similar to coal, in that both involve ancient biomass compressed and buried in oxygen-starved environments. However, crude oil's organic source point is mostly green algae from ancient seas, and coal is the slow-cooked bodies of swamp-side ferns and trees. Plant and animal plankton lived in oceans and, over the course of millennia, numberless hordes of them died, sank, and were covered by the next generation's dead. Deep swales of these sunken plankton bodies were kept in anaerobic conditions. In the next stage of catagenesis, the proto-oil was gently heated for millions of years until it reached the sweet spot between 150 and 300 degrees Fahrenheit (65–150 degrees Celsius). If it got too hot, the ancient plankton were cooked into natural gas.

Because ancient lakes and seas held variable species under an array of conditions, crude oil is now extracted in many forms, from the prized and diminishing "light sweet crude" to the abundant filthy "tar sands" that are, with much controversy, a large share of the petroleum industry's future. Crude oil is useless in raw form; it must be refined by superheating to separate the molecules by size. Crude stocks leave the refinery with only about half the oil in gasoline form, ready for our cars, with small molecules of four to twelve carbon atoms. About 40 percent of the remaining molecules have longer carbon chains that serve our needs as home heating oil, diesel fuel, jet fuel, and kerosene; 5 percent provide petrochemicals for manufacturing plastics and other petro-products like paint, aspirin, and chewing gum; another 5 percent of the heaviest and largest molecules will have a future life as lubricants, greases, and asphalt (Texas Energy Museum).

Literary critics call our modern state an "oil ontology," which is to say that it has become so omnipresent, we can't even see oil because we look through oil glasses, or oil eyes (Hitchcock 81). We are, ourselves, petroleum products, an intermixture of self-generating and manufactured parts. This makes us cyborgs, and not just because some of us have artificial hips and pacemakers made of petroleum parts. Materially, we are part petro because the food we eat is fertilized, harvested, processed, distributed, and sold using petrochemicals. Our car wheels are prosthetics for the legs we less often use; our computers are our hands and voices and the brain-like repositories of our habits and ideas.

The sensuousness of oil assists in its aesthetics, making it alternately alluring and revolting. If earth is a goddess called Gaia, then oil is one of her fluids. When

drilled, it coats and permeates its environment in a suffocating black shroud. It is black and smelly like shit, and Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez, rich and politically empowered by the stuff, called it “the devil’s excrement” (LeMenager *Aesthetics* 73). It gushes from the earth voluminously, inspiring awe and ecstasy from onlookers, whether or not they have financial interests in the gushing well. Oil is extractive on two levels: it requires physical extraction from the ground as a nonrenewing resource produced by nature, and it requires value extraction from the laborers whose dangerous work supports the capitalist accumulation characteristic of big oil corporations (Hitchcock 85).

True, oil is a material commodity that we can identify outside of our skin, but in its harder-to-grasp state it suggests a cultural logic, a social convention that (when recognized) sparks moral debates about right and wrong behavior in economic and ecological spheres (Hitchcock 81). These layers of significance, economic, cultural, and personal, are formative in America’s cultural evolution and self-definition (Hitchcock 82). Our reliance on oil is overtly economic, but it also involves buried psychological layers of compulsion and resistance to alternatives. Peter Hitchcock has argued that the saturation of oil in every aspect of our daily lives “paradoxically has placed a significant bar on its cultural representation ... everywhere and obvious, it must be opaque or otherwise fantastic” (81, 87). Since literature serves to represent and critique cultural hegemony, literary oil is a double-sided trope. It both celebrates the troubling enabler, as when Jack Kerouac’s Sal and Dean roar through small Midwestern towns in a behemoth Cadillac limousine, and staunchly opposes its influence, as when Edward Abbey decries car-based tourism in the great western national parks. Petroleum is the star of a geopolitical parody: yee-hawing Texas wildcatters rub shoulders with slick self-pampering desert Sheiks skiing in air-conditioned malls and postcolonial African autocrats on oil thrones, clutching wads of dollars instead of scepters.

Since each liter contains about as much energy as a man laboring for five weeks, it is little wonder that when we buy this slave-in-a-bottle for \$1 per liter, it quickly becomes our master (LeMenager *Aesthetics* 60). Americans are used to the highest levels of energy consumption in the world; in 1988, the United States had 5 percent of the world’s citizens, but consumed 25 percent of the world’s oil and released 22 percent of global carbon emissions—an energetic calculus that is equivalent to seventy-three healthy slaves laboring for each citizen (Nye 6). In Bob Johnson’s trenchant analysis of modern oil ontology, the equation of mineral energy to slave labor is more than a striking analogy. The correlation between the petro-slave in the gas tank and the physical labor of our ancestors

provides a narrative of the “dramatic dislocations that came with transitioning from a low-energy world of hooves, feet, and hands to a new and unfamiliar one wherein work was increasingly disembodied ... a sign that the most elemental relationships among energy, work, and the body were being recalibrated” (41–2). As the human body consumes energy far beyond the confines of the skin, cultural critics consider how the industrial body was redesigned around the phenomenal energies of ancient sunlight-turned-carbon and the technologies that allow us to control and deploy that fantastic power. The body’s own matter is no longer built of annual sunlight, but of coal and oil, and this “embodiment of fossil fuels” correlates with the “disembodiment of labor” wherein an abstract thermodynamic calculus, actionable on much larger scales than humans and horses, substitutes for the somatic labor of a basic muscular economy (Johnson 43–5).

No wonder American culture has always resisted the Malthusian logic of ecological (and therefore economic) limits. Its 250-year history has been defined by using extraordinary stores of natural resources—first dense, vast forests and fertile soil, then coal, then oil—to defy Malthus’s checks on population and quality of life. The American twentieth century was the most energetically rich in human history. Before the created crisis of the oil embargo in the 1970s, America never experienced the crushing limitations of energy that were quotidian in older, highly populated, deforested European locales (Johnson xix). Though American exceptionalism cites a Protestant work ethic that drove industrialization and productivity, a diverse and talented immigrant population, and a Christian faith-based sense of manifest destiny as features of a unique nation, the material conditions these Americans inherited were the truly exceptional factor. The United States had virgin forests *and* fertile land *and* coal *and* petroleum; infrastructure could be created *ex nihilo* and cities chartered without concern for preceding centuries of entrenched culture and design. In many ways America defined itself against the European model—of course in the sociopolitical sphere, but also in valences of planning and infrastructure, valuing dispersal and decentralization.

The upside’s downside was the binge of energy that encouraged policy choices favoring consumption and rapid expansion over efficiency and wise growth. Part of the legacy of that fossil-fueled mania is that Americans now consume much more energy per capita than European counterparts, without gains in quality of life. Americans may even be said to suffer from their energy appetites, as the norm of the twentieth century became embodied in soulless suburbs, the car commute, sedentary lifestyles, and abundant, cheap, low quality, un-local food. This strange situation has come to seem normal. Paradoxically, America’s

energy riches have led to a cultural devaluation of that energy, as abundance and dependence cheapen our perception of the value of energy (Johnson xxi).

Oil's extraordinary chemical energy density encourages cultural excesses that mark the consumerist fetish of energy overabundance: yellow Hummers and the McDonald's "Dollar Menu." Shame and celebration are the inhale and exhale of a bipolar oil culture. The developed world has reached a point at which the obscene display of excess energy is met not only with grassroots opposition, but also with major subcultures favoring walk and bike communities, local and slow food, and an array of repurposed and recycled consumer goods. Petroleum is varied enough to support these trends, and we have not lost our muscles altogether. The sun, the wind, the rivers, the tides, and the earth's hot heart all still work without oil. But in the second decade of the twenty-first century, this is still a well-oiled world—designed, erected, and maintained by oil conglomerates—with several billion avid buyers.

America's history of energy use is phasic: biomass (wood) was the almost exclusive fuel source until the discovery of domestic coal in the mid-nineteenth century. America's industrialization after the Civil War was fueled by coal; Bob Johnson cites the year 1885 as a pivot point between reliance on biomass and fossil fuels (xviii). Once large oil fields were opened in Texas, Oklahoma, and California in the first years of the twentieth century, coal use plateaued and soon declined. The twentieth century would be defined by America's modern industrial economy designed to flow on petroleum, with roads replacing rails. By the end of the Second World War, oil fueled more energy demands than declining coal, and the trend continues to this day. The renewable energy market has made significant gains in today's economy, but it is still a small fraction that suffers in the competition with low oil and natural gas prices.

With the United States leading the world both in the history and pace of oil consumption, it makes sense that a lot of literary oil pumped through Yankee pens in the twentieth century. The national creed of liberty and self-reliance feasted on oil in the era of the wildcatter, the fabled individual roughneck who makes a fortune through his pluck and good luck. That individualistic enterprise soon translated to the oil corporation, a legal individual permitted to defend its interests as though it were a person.

The richest man in history, John D. Rockefeller, was buoyed to the top on a series of good-time gushers and merciless corporate predation. With its rich endemic supplies of oil, the United States showed the world how to extract and use oil to support sprawling industrial transportation—the national highway system. As we saw with coal, the nineteenth century established the world's first

commuter suburbs along railway lines, but it was oil that enabled the United States to drive a paradigm shift in the geography of residence. As US domestic supplies have long been on the wane, the superpower flexed military muscles to claim oil supplies on other continents, beginning an era of corporate colonialism that has had particularly strong effects in Africa and the Middle East. If the first colonial era, managed from European metropolises, targeted locales rich in agricultural resources and cheap labor to supply raw materials to coal-driven manufactories, the second era of corporate colonialism began under American management with a clear target of mineral resources and a capitalist imperative to create market desires that oil would fulfill. The cultural Americanization of the world is a tale of a barrel of oil.

II Gusher gawkers

Compared to the dark, squalid horror of the coal mining disaster, the oil gusher is a disaster that excites and stimulates the onlooker, doubling as a figure of arousal and ejaculation (LeMenager *Living Oil* 93). It's the most explicit representation

Figure 6.1 Anonymous, *The First Oil District in Los Angeles, Toluca Street*, c.1895–1901. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons. Public domain.

of orgiastic power in oil's repertoire, a spectacle that, according to Michael Ziser, justifies "almost any degree of fetishization" (321). Upton Sinclair's industrial epic, *Oil!*, an urtext of any literary study of petroleum, ogles the gusher and its sublime destructiveness. Part bildungsroman, part declensionist oil narrative, part author's opinion column, the book traces the development of oil wells in southern California through the voice of young Bunny Ross, son of oil tycoon J. Arnold Ross. The novel explores capitalism versus socialism, the technical details of drilling and their environmental effects, the beautiful people of Hollywood and the poor ranchers of inland California, and, as the base of it all, the agony and ecstasy of a world blown open by petroleum power. Sinclair balances a boy's reverence for his oil magnate father with his awakening qualms about the social and ecological impacts of oil drilling. The novel does not address the larger issue of oil economics as part of America's imperial ambitions in the American century, but it does stay on-site to witness the extreme transformations oil produces wherever it is discovered (Hitchcock 90).

Bunny's father foreshadows the individualist baron that Ayn Rand would raise to worship status in the 1950s with her profit-driven heroes like Hank Rearden and John Galt. The fortunes of these two characters were built upon the railway, not oil, but Rand tolerates no tragedy in her polemical novels—her heroes win every time, after extended soliloquies on the virtues of free enterprise. Sinclair's J. Arnold Ross captures the spirit of the American twentieth century better than Rand does, with his story of hard work from modest birth, the death grip of the successful tycoon, and the tycoon's inevitable decline as the industry splinters due to troubles with labor and resources. Rand and Sinclair take perfectly inverse perspectives on the narrative of the esurient industrial baron. Sinclair composes the more balanced and textured account of the American story from a Socialist perspective, while Rand's simplistic no-apologies, no-prisoners heroism in which oligopoly is interpreted as free-market capitalism, has become gospel to some Libertarians. The point of unity between these diametric writers is their fascination with how the human desires for power and control trump the inherent human capacity to foster collective good and altruism. Rand seems not to believe in the latter, and pillories those who do. Sinclair believes in them despite all the evidence of selfishness he explores in nauseating detail in *Oil!* and *The Jungle*. In his naïve, childish thrall Bunny reflects, "Never since the world began had there been men of power equal to this. And Dad was one of them" (6). Bunny would also, in turn, be anointed by oil, and then traumatized by the conditions and costs of its production.

Sinclair begins with an ode to the open road, with events set in “automotive time” and distance felt as an abstraction (A. Wilson 34):

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, subject to the faintest pressure from the ball of your foot. The power of ninety horses—think of that! Suppose you had had ninety horses out there in front of you, forty-five pairs in a long line, galloping around the side of a mountain, wouldn’t that make your pulses jump? And this magic ribbon of concrete laid out for you, winding here and there, feeling its way upward with hardly a variation of grade, taking off the shoulder of a mountain, cutting straight through the apex of another, diving into the black belly of a third; twisting, turning, tilting inward on the outside curves, tilting outward on the inside curves, so that you were always balanced, always safe—and with a white-painted line marking the centre, so that you always knew exactly where you had a right to be—what magic had done all this?

Dad had explained it—money had done it. (5–6)

Soaked in black gold, 1920s America found itself rich, in geology and ambition. Bunny’s thrill comes from his translation of biomass power—the imagined train of horses that would impress even Santa Claus—into fossil power yoked to a mechanical drive train and enabled by the roads that pave a particularly American experience. In his glee, Bunny sails on ribbons and gallops over the bent backs of mountains. But despite all the potency of energy, the well-bred scion sits next to his weighty father, “silent and dignified—because that was Dad’s way, and Dad’s way constituted the ethics of motoring” (1).

Bunny’s is the first generation to experience the annihilation of distance, of space and place, by petroleum. The Victorians felt the awful fossil power of coal, deployed by locomotives and steamships, but Bunny’s experience of oil is different. His is an individual power, individually experienced, and available at the individual’s demand: a new iteration of fossil superpower. The landscape they hurtle over, privatized by their automobile, signifies only a blank canvas streaked by oil. Mountains are no longer obstructions. The magic ribbon cares about one place: the individual’s destination.

From the heady mountain heights, Bunny and Dad descend into a new kind of snarl invented in long-suffering Los Angeles:

By dint of constant pushing and passing every other car, Dad had got on his schedule again. They skirted the city, avoiding the traffic crowds in its centre, and presently came a sign: “Beach City Boulevard.” It was a wide asphalt road, with thousands of speeding cars, and more subdivisions and suburban

home-sites, with endless ingenious advertisements designed to catch the fancy of the motorist, and cause him to put on brakes. (21)

Sinclair sniffs out oil's cultural geography a few decades before Eisenhower would pave the way with the interstate highway system: viral suburbia and inane roadside attractions. People in a petrotopia live by the sparkle promise of the billboard and subdivision. *Have everything now*, chirps the commercial bird. This kind of utopian vision of the automobile has a despotic underside: if utopias reflect spatial ordering imposed by industries (automakers, developers, oil companies) to serve their own need for profit, petrotopias signify economic and political will rather than an ideal state of civilization (LeMenager *Living Oil* 74). When everyone is a consumer within a petrotopia, new problems emerge, and the saleable utopian image becomes tread-marked with the realities of its false design: not to make people happy, but to make them continually less than happy, that is, continually consuming. The car-serving strip is an endless regression of franchise businesses, standardized images and logos, parking lots, and flattened, simplified landscapes (A. Wilson 33).

These are the major challenges of American civil infrastructure into the twenty-first century, particularly the car's blending of city economy with country leisure, adulterating both in the process. Within the first few pages of the book, Sinclair points out a startling paradox of the automobile landscape: it erases the spaces with inherent natural value while vulgarly highlighting places of vacuous commerce. The car elides and flattens deep spaces, where mountains and rivers dwell; it plumps up shallow spaces hocking recursive baubles. It could be argued that the automobile actually opens wild lands to access and therefore appreciation, but literary history is very skeptical of this road-trip mentality, as we will see with Edward Abbey.

Beyond question, the network of roads and interstates built to accommodate the automobile have enabled the existence of large-scale commerce on the American model, and the petrotopia is one of our more enduring exports. Homogenized goods, desires channeled through advertising, indicate the next paradox of petroculture: the individual freedom premised by the automobile actually cultivates mass normative behavior. Petropeople are forever stuck together in the traffic jam at the mall. Oil catalyzes a revolution of space and commerce in the modern state, and then it shackles our ability to imagine beyond its own enabling logic of mobility and accumulation (Hitchcock 91).

One little traffic jam is no match for Bunny's oil ardor, however; it merely enriches the spectacle unfolding outside the windshield. He is soon treated to

the seminal iconic image of the oil era: the gusher. Gushers became important symbols after the discovery of oil at Spindletop, near Beaumont Texas, on January 10, 1901. That first Texas gusher roared unstaunched for nine days before the prospectors could cap it. It brought tens of thousands of wildcatters to the pinewoods of east Texas, sniffing the ground for black gold. A week later, on January 17, the *New York Times* reported “the greatest oil strike in the history of that industry ... oil shoots out of a six inch pipe to the height of seventy-five feet ... nearly 50,000 barrels of oil have flowed into the ravines nearby. These ravines are being dammed as rapidly as possible, but many thousand barrels of oil have already gone to waste.” The black muck was enriching the ground it saturated; in those first weeks after the Spindletop discovery, “fabulous offers” on adjacent land leases poured in, and many claims were only as large as a derrick foundation. Depression follows close upon manic exuberance: the oil field was tapped out within two years.

Sinclair’s character J. Arnold Ross rushed through mountains and suburbs to reach his claims at Prospect Hill, where a gusher signaled the greatest new oil discovery in southern California:

The inside of the earth seemed to burst out through that hole; a roaring and rushing, as Niagara, and a black column shot up into the air, two hundred feet, two hundred and fifty—no one could say for sure—and came thundering down to earth as a mass of thick, black, slimy, slippery fluid. It hurled tools and other heavy objects this way and that, so the men had to run for their lives. It filled the sump-hole, and poured over, like a sauce-pan boiling too fast, and went streaming down the hillside. Carried by the wind, a curtain of black mist, it sprayed the Culver homestead, turning it black, and sending the women of the household flying across the cabbage-fields. Afterwards it was told with Homeric laughter how these women had been heard to lament the destruction of their clothing and their window-curtains by this million-dollar flood of “black gold”! (25)

Silly women worry about small domestic things. As they ogle the deluge unleashed by earth’s pressing crust, the mighty oil barons, gods on Olympus, laugh at the melee. The gusher is an awesome force of nature, an ejaculation of earth fluid that is too sublimely gross not to watch, and too valuable not to respect and envy the person with the drilling rights. The Culver homestead, once a place of clean curtains and cabbages, has in an instant become a soiled relic on “porcupine hill” where dozens of derricks will soon bristle. The hill has changed from a place of surface solar agriculture to a subterranean fossil pool, a shift

that is at once spatial, temporal, cultural, ecological, and economic. It will never return to its earlier condition. The suburbs will sprawl, the fossil pool will be drained, and the solar pastoral of cabbages will be trampled.

Sinclair does not pause to eulogize the downtrodden pastoral past, however. The tragicomedy of the gusher has the charisma to dominate the stage:

Meantime the workmen were toiling like mad to stop the flow of the well; they staggered here and there, half blinded by the black spray—and with no place to brace themselves, nothing they could hold onto, because everything was greased, streaming with grease. You worked in darkness, groping about, with nothing but the roar of the monster, his blows upon your body, his spitting in your face, to tell you where he was. You worked at high tension, for there were bonuses offered—fifty dollars for each man if you stopped the flow before midnight, a hundred dollars if you stopped it before ten o'clock. No one could figure how much wealth that monster was wasting, but it must be thousands of dollars every minute. Mr. Culver himself pitched in to help, and in his reckless efforts lost both of his ear-drums. "Tried to stop the flow with his head," said a workman, unsympathetically. In addition the owner discovered, in the course of ensuing weeks, that he had accumulated a total of forty-two suits for damages to houses, clothing, chickens, goats, cows, cabbages, sugar-beets, and automobiles which had skidded into ditches on too well-greased roads. (26)

Monsters are hard to love, but the avarice of these grease monkeys overcomes the obscenities of their work, and a toxic passion takes a toll on the devoted Culver, who is deafened by the roar of money. Litigiousness ensues on these uneasily shared pastures, where Culver's wealth and carelessness present an opportunity for others to cash in. Chickens and sugar beets are suffocated in oil and exchanged for oil money. The homesteaders' collective survival evolves into an economy of individual competition. The whole landscape is now oil, along with the frenzy and animosity that accompany fast riches. Behind oil's obvious representation of new wealth lingers a set of emotional histories that are scripted onto the oil: hope, fear, anxiety, and aspiration (LeMenager *Living Oil* 93). Stephanie LeMenager's final answer to her own query, "Why is oil so bad?" relates to the spectacle of oil best symbolized by the gusher: "We gather to watch" (*Living Oil* 101). What we watch begins with the gusher but flows out to the whole culture of voyeurism enabled by the anonymous, independent movement of the car and the spectacles of an energy-saturated culture.

Sinclair's long novel follows Bunny from his naïve adoration of the spectacle and his doughty father into his growing awareness of the victims of oil

culture—the nonunionized workers, the hapless landowners hoodwinked by barons, and the oil-giving land itself, which is defiled not only by the primary pollution of the gusher, but on a much larger scale the land is transfigured by the actions made possible and profitable by the oil: movement, settlement, and development. When Bunny and his father go oil prospecting under the false pretenses of an innocent quail-hunting trip, Sinclair brings nostalgia for lost preindustrial times directly into the maniacal path of the future: their actual oil-going motivations directly result in the death of the natural habitat they pretend to enjoy. Once Ross establishes his claim by outmaneuvering the landowners, the derricks, the gusher, and the black blight tumble in an inevitable narrative series. Tragedy and injury without humor are Bunny's impressions of the gusher the second time around. Sinclair pushes Bunny's witness from admiration to awe to sickened disaffection. An activist is born.

Sinclair's fiction is built of the elements of real history. Once the sheer use value of gasoline had established thirsty markets and spawned the American romance with the automobile, petroleum companies deployed the Texas wildcatter as an embodiment of the risk-hungry, wily, egotistical, free-enterprising, self-made man so readily worshipped in public discourse. This characterization gelled with gasoline ads that commonly depicted juiced-up consumers in thrall of their powerful cars, the new proselytes of the open road. The February 13, 1950, cover of *Time* magazine shows wildcatter Glenn McCarthy with a frontier suntan and tousled hair glancing back at a drilling tower ("Texas: King of the Wildcatters"). "Diamond Glenn" is wearing a Houston-brass pinstripe suit, and the anthropomorphic drilling tower sports a Stetson, cowboy boots, and a pair of bulging biceps. The derricks and the gusher are Glenn's sidekicks in the cartoony popular culture of the oil cowboy. Who needs cows, quails, or a ranch when there are gushers ready to blow?

McCarthy comes across as a wildcatter for the corporate postwar twentieth century: dressed like a businessman but harboring the adventurous soul of a cowboy in the old west. The *Time* story begins: "If it were possible to cap the human ego like a gas well, and to pipe off its more volatile byproducts as fuel, Houston's multi-millionaire wildcatter Glenn McCarthy could heat a city the size of Omaha with no help at all. Whether he would allow his rampant psyche to be dedicated completely to so prosaic a project, however, is doubtful—several million cubic feet would undoubtedly be diverted to a McCarthy Memorial Beacon which would nightly cast its glare as far west as El Paso" (1). So popular was his charm-smacking, egotistical persona that he was replicated in Edna Ferber's 1952 novel *Giant*, adapted into the 1956 film. The appeal of this iconic

wildcatter figure has not diminished in the intervening half-century: a version of the “Diamond Glenn” persona became a two-term American president in the twenty-first century. Though George W. Bush never soiled his boots at the derricks, his policies were rote recitations of big oil’s agenda. The continuum between the scrabbly wildcatter, the glitzy Texas powerbroker, and commander-in-chief falls within a surprisingly short arc of history, and oil washes off the hand more easily than off the land. In each of these personae is a narrative that tends to credit audacity and self-confidence as pure virtues, to appraise elements of luck and resource availability as earned opportunities, and to erase what is defaced and destroyed.

III Road trip!

The single most potent symbol used in the rhetoric of American freedom is the open road. Though most Americans spend more time in local traffic running errands, the frontier-piercing highway continues to work powerfully on the psyche. Equally powerful emotions of frenzy and animosity weigh heavily in American driver’s seats as the open road turns to the exurban imbroglio. These petro-propelled emotions are a psychological correlative to the fuel itself, the fantastically powerful fluid that contains, in a single liter, the same energy that a man would need five weeks of hard labor to exert. With such power at our fingertips and toes, after sitting behind the wheel, it is not surprising that petroculture quickly adopted ideals of speed and power in its machines.

The classic American cultural space, the open road, became a national policy and Americans invested in it heavily. Major grants for the construction of highways in 1947 and 1957 laid the foundation of 79,500 miles of pavement (Gill 34). Suburb-hater James Howard Kunstler notes that one major developer, Robert Moses, was responsible for converting rural Long Island’s 1,400 square miles into “a parking lot” by the time he retired in 1968 (Gill 34). The interstate system, the legacy of President Eisenhower, is the most celebrated investment, but the entire twentieth century offers a similar history of conquering space and time with convenience and speed, and suppressing wildness with a tarmac of interconnected roads over the land. This highway lattice represents the creation of a new dimension of being—one in which origin and destination are fused, not by intermediary prairies or mountains that actually exist, but instead by a quintessential petro-cognitive dimension that feeds on speed, consumer convenience, and self-absorption.

As David Nye has memorably argued, technological momentum does equate to determinism: our world is designed around opportunities and choices, and the American love affair with the automobile was never a compulsory relationship. America had mass transit systems in place in the early twentieth century, which we chose to dismantle and neglect in preference for the power, convenience, and freedom car producers promised. In Nye's words, "The use of the car in America expressed cultural values, not a technological imperative. The automobile ministered to a pre-existing penchant for mobility. It did not cause suburbanization or nomadism; Americans used it to express these choices" (177). Once the choice was made, however, once the interstate highway system existed, the system became more rigid, less open to choice, more devoted to the automobile as a way to recoup costs for road construction and maintenance. All the other effects of the personal car—low-density suburban development, roadside culture, fragmented natural habitats—flowed downstream of that choice point.

The American road trip is only superficially about the places where travelers pause before spinning down the line; roadside attractions, natural and cultural, are constructs of the highway ideology of open access and marketed interest. To stop at South of the Border (SOB—a chain of restaurants off I-95 in the southern United States) is to indulge in an experience of cheap representation. For hundreds of miles in either direction, "Pedro," the stereotypical Latino mascot, shrills about the thrills of SOB, informing travelers that their experience of this petroculture is essential to the patriotic car-borne experience. "You never sausage a place!" Pedro pipes from a billboard studded with an enormous plaster wiener. True, Pedro: SOB does attain that unique American roadside quality of openly, knowingly cultivating kitsch for its own appeal, rather than being a naive mistake of cheap commerce gone too far. SOB and its cohort of show-me stops are the playground of a now-global culture of tacky, instantly gratifying, endlessly available baubles, many of them actually made of petroleum. It's a gas.

The American road trip is fundamentally about discovering one's self in relation to nothing in particular—or at least, nothing lasting. The road traveler's shadow pitches over a hundred different scenes, a mile or more per minute, traversed with such ease and speed that the places are little more than sketches of themselves, forgotten as soon as the next frame comes into view. What one gets on a road trip is time to contemplate origins and destinations, past and future, to the amusing scenic musak of the fleeting present. The only vestige the visitor leaves behind is the imprint of her credit card. To consider how literature

has entertained this transient state of the present tense, two novels in particular will serve: *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac (one frenzied passage in particular), and *Desert Solitaire* by Edward Abbey (one angry park ranger–author in particular). Frenzy and animosity, travel and traffic, road rash and road rage: petroculture is our pet Cerberus. These texts show a persistent American confusion that equates driving with being alive, with being powerfully embodied by the prosthetic automobile (LeMenager *Living Oil* 80).

Novels have the power to represent entire generations, especially if the book records a flashy rejection of the previous generation by way of wandering, sex, and drugs. Consider the perennial popularity of *The Great Gatsby*, leading candidate for the elusive “great American novel,” and itself a perspective on petrotopianism. George Wilson’s filling station is not just a roadside attraction conveniently midway between the Eggs and Manhattan. It is the nucleus of the novel’s action: the place where commerce meets God on the billboard, the place where the classes intermingle and abuse one another, the place of American small business meant to be ennobling, but which finally serves as a stage for infidelity and drunken manslaughter. The manic ecstasy and rage of petroculture collide, appropriately, at Wilson’s garage.

Jack Kerouac’s autobiographical *On the Road* examines the petroculture of nowhere. Kerouac was king of the Beats, the handsome, daring, reckless, rough, football-playing hero who spat in the face of 1950s conformity. At one ennui-filled station of life, his autobiographical characters Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty acquire a 1947 Cadillac limousine. This car was six feet tall, nineteen feet long, seven feet wide, weighed over five thousand pounds, and was propelled by a 5.7 liter V-8 engine of unknown (and unspeakable) mileage per gallon. What a car for a romp from Denver to Chicago, blitzing across those monotonous plains and sleepy farm towns! This kind of car makes no apologies, it makes impacts. As Patricia Yaeger has noted: “Kerouac’s characters are gasaholics. Oil dependency created their world; each city, suburb, truck stop, and bite of pie depends on Standard Oil” (306).

Sal’s account of the trip demonstrates how this oil-driven existence is at least as much cognitive and ontological as it is physical:

In no time at all we were back on the main highway and that night I saw the entire state of Nebraska unroll before my eyes. A hundred and ten miles an hour straight through, an arrow road, sleeping towns, no traffic, and the Union Pacific streamliner falling behind us in the moonlight. I wasn’t frightened at all that night; it was perfectly legitimate to go 110 and talk and have all the Nebraska towns ... unreel with dreamlike rapidity as we roared ahead and talked. It was

a magnificent car; it could hold the road like a boat holds on water. Gradual curves were its singing ease.

“You and I, Sal, we’d dig the whole world with a car like this because, man, the road must eventually lead to the whole world. Ain’t nowhere else it can go—right?” (230–1)

The all-night drive is a visual illusion: Nebraska seems to be unrolling from Sal and Dean’s future straight into their past, with each foot of ground occupying, at 110 miles per hour, only 0.0062 seconds of their lives. A mile that would take twenty minutes to walk passes by every 32.7 seconds. What would Ruskin say? Time-space is contracted from our evolutionary standard of walking down to about one-fortieth of its original size. Those Great Plains seem miniscule on petroleum. Not only has the world shrunk, but it has also abstracted, transformed into a surreal picture show in which the old-fashioned locomotive falls behind the car’s pace under the light of the vanishing moon. In his dream reverie, Dean, at the wheel, imagines himself much larger because the world appears so much smaller; it is barely memorable because it has never really been perceived. Nebraska is a flat, fast, darkness.

Sal and Dean have an idea of space, the impression of time, which the gods might share as they gaze down from Olympus. To quote Tennyson, the passengers are drugged and lulled by passivity like “The Lotos-Eaters,” who recline in their seats “like Gods together, careless of mankind. / For they lie beside their nectar, and the bolts are hurl’d / Far below them in the valleys” (ll. 155–7). The nectar is petroleum, the bolts are eight valves punching power to the wheels, and Dean, complete with his frenzy of power and caprice, is Zeus.

The liberty from space and time made possible by fossil fuels carries with it a sensual ecstasy that frequently blends with manic madness: it is a road fiction that imagines how it feels to live, and to die, by automobile (LeMenager *Living Oil* 91). Dean and Sal use the car as a way to chase *thanatos*, the death drive that is thrilling because of its inherent risks. The physical experience of raw power and momentum far beyond the body’s limits had previously belonged to a world of dream and fantasy, but the carbon-borne experience grants us a mighty prosthetic (Johnson 52). From Charles Lindbergh’s wings high above the Atlantic to Kerouac’s maniac wheels belittling the Great Plains, the modern, oil-borne body is a cyborg that trains muscles to maintain machines. Our bodies no longer end at our toes and fingers, but somewhere further—the wheel, the pedal, the carbon-made pavement. These fantasies even fit into postapocalyptic visions of future scarcity with films like *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), in which a feature-length road war unfolds as a dialectic of aggression and fuel consumption.

Genders are neutralized: the women rev their engines with as much fury, and often greater success, than their male counterparts, so this very masculine film has been hailed as a feminist triumph. But it can only be considered so within the petro-fed zeitgeist of the culture from which it emerged: the early twenty-first century, a full tank of angst and exuberance.

The open road is the surreal ideal, and such flights of altered consciousness, the psychic and erotic highs, do not last. Space and time eventually run out and wrestle the flesh body to the earth. The next day, the rest of humanity returns, and Dean's night of petro-ecstasy turns into zombie-like withdrawal. Sal recalls:

I went to sleep and woke up to the dry, hot atmosphere of July Sunday morning in Iowa, and still Dean was driving and had not slackened his speed; he took the curvy corndales of Iowa at a minimum of eighty and the straightaway 110 as usual, unless both-ways traffic forced him to fall in line at a crawling and miserable sixty. When there was a chance he shot ahead and passed cars by the half-dozen and left them behind in a cloud of dust.

Great horrors that we were going to crash this very morning took hold of me and I got down on the floor and closed my eyes and tried to sleep. As a seaman I used to think of the waves rushing beneath the shell of the ship and the bottomless depths thereunder—now I could feel the road some twenty inches beneath me, unfurling and flying and hissing at incredible speeds across the groaning continent with that mad Ahab at the wheel. When I closed my eyes all I could see was the road unwinding into me. When I opened them I saw flashing shadows of trees vibrating on the floor of the car. There was no escaping it. I resigned myself to all. And still Dean drove, he had no thought of sleeping till we got to Chicago. (234–5)

The too-fast-too-furious scene goes from a literal description of Dean's obstacles to Sal's figurative horrors at the terrible forces at play. Not only the forces of physics—the multi-ton car and its velocity, $F=ma$ —but also the force of Dean's compulsive personality. Dean is the deranged captain, bent on annihilating everything between himself and the white whale of Chicago, and killing Chicago once they find it. The weapon is the road itself, “unwinding into” Sal like a lance, threatening to pierce his prone body at every turn. They do wreck, they do have to stop, but those pauses serve as way stations where they assess how much road they have so quickly conquered. The car roars, the continent groans, and the battle hastens toward its conclusion at Chicago, with a tamed half-continent left in their dust: 1,180 miles in seventeen hours, “a kind of crazy record” (238). After this smug summation, Sal and Dean descend back into beat-down status. The

car reflects their condition as raggedy outcasts, just a few hours after anointing them gas-guzzling gods of the road:

At intermissions we rushed out in the Cadillac and tried to pick up girls all up and down Chicago. They were frightened of our big, scarred, prophetic car. In his mad frenzy Dean backed up smack on hydrants and tittered maniacally. By nine o'clock the car was an utter wreck; the brakes weren't working any more; the fenders were stove in; the rods were rattling. Dean couldn't stop at red lights, it kept kicking convulsively over the roadway. It had paid the price of the night. It was a muddy boot and no longer a shiny limousine. (238)

This account of the ferocious arc of fuel consumption is among the more famous car trips in literature, a classic vignette of the exhilaration and horror enabled by oil. In the mid-twentieth century there were many ambivalent literary accounts of petroculture, though none with as much sophomoric verve.

A contrasting impression of vast Nebraska comes from another novel completed in 1951, Patricia Highsmith's *The Price of Salt* (or, *Carol*). The reader rides in the mind of a young woman named Therese, who is on the lam with her lover Carol. On the level of oil ontology, Highsmith's novel can be seen as part of the "tilt in sexual mores that the car allowed, especially to young women" (Ziser 321). The women evade a detective who gathers evidence against Carol's moral competency to retain custody of her daughter. The entire novel is a psychological tornado, with Therese overwhelmed by the euphoria and fear of a first, and forbidden, love. This passage comes just after Carol was ticketed for speeding, and Therese's infatuated mind reads significance in the nuances of the moving landscape:

Therese offered to drive, but Carol said she wanted to. And the flat Nebraska prairie spread out before them, yellow with wheat stubble, brown-splotched with bare earth and stone, deceptively warm looking in the white winter sun. Because they went a little slower now, Therese had a panicky sensation of not moving at all, as if the earth drifted under them and they stood still. . . . She watched the land and sky for the meaningless events that her mind insisted on attaching significance to, the buzzard that banked slowly in the sky, the direction of a tangle of weeds that bounced over a rutted field. (192)

Less speed causes adrenaline withdrawal, but it also heightens fear and paranoia in the fleeing subject, who feels her pursuer gaining ground. Therese, car-imprisoned, occupies herself with the only pastime available: to watch the scenery. Sal and Dean did not look at scenery, they felt the velocity. Therese, on

the other hand, contemplates it so deeply that it comes alive with signification. Is the buzzard a spy, or herself caught in circles of thought? Does the tumbleweed have a destination, or is the wind an irresistible but aimless force that blows us around? Releasing the gas pedal, at least to sub-manic speeds, reverses the petro-psychology from Dean's inward-to-outward, where the landscape was a screening of his fears, to Therese's outward-to-inward, where the landscape offers features that yield introspection. She arranges her mind around the natural composition. Of course, the women are not sitting still, they are moving at about fifty miles per hour. But in this 1950s pre-interstate oil ontology (I-80 did not cross Nebraska until 1957), easing along the smaller, rougher roads allows the landscape to emerge in relief, as an assembly of living, dynamic inhabitants that might come in conversation with the rolling subject, rather than just crossed (out) by the speed-blind. In this case, the conversation is depressing. If in the 1950s the speeding car is a metaphor for progress, here Highsmith accomplishes an intriguing reversal of this highway ideology by trapping her characters in existential limbo (A. Wilson 34). They make use of the same infrastructure—car and highway—as other Americans, but their gender and sexual orientation convert mainstream freedom and progress into its opposites: pursuit and imprisonment.

A few days later, Therese finds herself with the car but without Carol, who has returned to New York to triage her child-custody standing. Again, speed emerges as psychological:

It was a fine day, cold and almost windless, bright with sun. She could take the car and drive out somewhere. She had not used the car for three days. Suddenly she realized she did not want to use it. The day she had taken it out and driven in up to ninety on the straight road to Dell Rapids, exultant after a letter from Carol, seemed very long ago. (215)

If Therese could not feel Carol's touch, she could substitute speed for the thrill, and the cursive word for the voice. But laid low by neglect, Therese cannot replace intimacy with speed, and the failure of petro-ecstasy to stand in for real life is poignantly aggrieving. The film version of *Carol* (2015) depicts a much shorter journey from New York to Iowa, the emotional arc of road tripping is shown using physical cues: the happy westward journey is high on champagne, giggles, and gazes; the sad eastward return is marked by Therese vomiting roadside and sleeping fetally in the back seat. The oil, the car, the road, and the liberty are all still there. Carol is not.

Both Kerouac's and Highsmith's couples illustrate how the road served countercultures of the 1950s, as well as embodying the postwar mainstream appetite for liberty and consumerism. The beatniks Dean and Sal, and the lesbians Carol and Therese, both find spaces in which to think and feel as they naturally are, rather than as society expects them to be. Nebraska's open road is a canvas of self-realization at the same time as it is a delusion. The road ends: Dean must return the vandalized Cadillac to its owner in Chicago; Carol must fly to New York to face her judges. Their companions Sal and Therese suffer the withdrawal of addicts, though the nature of the addiction is complex. The oily human condition injects physical velocity into emotional love. The industrial-era lover so often conflates emotion with motion that it has become cliché. Leaving on a jet plane. Hit the road, Jack. Baby, you can drive my car. Life in the fast lane. Life is a highway. Radar love. Get outta my dreams, get into my car! Shut up and drive.

When the oil runs out, will we resume writing ballads to our mistress's eyebrow?

The American car ruled the interstate, but it also infiltrated the scenic byways of textured land—from the intimate folds of Appalachian valleys, to the quilted plains, to the miles-high mountains, to the coasts, rocky and sugar sand. Prospectors graded and paved centuries-old wagon and hoof roads, and surveyed and laid thousands more *ex nihilo*. These byways were designated spots of beauty to be collectively enjoyed and tax supported; their paths changed forever the character of the map itself and the places the roads opened to traffic. Most essentially, the things located along good roads became defined by their convenient accessibility.

Places far from paved roads remained wilderness, compared to those places exposed to the parade of pleasure tourists seeking nature on their own, industrial-consumerist terms. The interpolated frontier was opened further with each two-lane road that tunneled into obscure nooks and made them marketed destinations. For nature-cultural theorist Alexander Wilson, the Blue Ridge Parkway represents the acme of landscape management, a ribbon of industrial-era construction that displays utter control of the field of vision, separates productive from nonproductive landscapes so the visitor may enjoy a "pure" experience, and produces an impression of nature itself as a series of magnificent vistas organized around a tourist calendar: vernal rhododendrons and laurels, autumn colors, and winter wonderlands (A. Wilson 37).

Ralph Seager's 1959 poem "Owed to the Country Road" is an elegy for the dirt-top tracks lost to the era of paving. The aesthetic of the road shifted from

the organic meander of old dirt tracks laid by centuries of feet and wagon wheels toward an engineered efficiency based upon least distances. Seager's first accounting of the loss is based on color and light. He misses the "shadowed breeze" on his skin, his feet on the "quiet, cool, receptive clay," and the woods "crowded in / to watch with green eyes what was going by" (ll. 3, 7, 4–5). Embedded in the animate woods, the old country road touched the feet and hooves of travelers. The winding route allowed for surprise, the "unexpected view / of doe and fawn, or Paisley pheasant's brood / to grace and color rural solitude" (ll. 12–14). These intimate encounters between passing individuals were being replaced by bright impersonal vistas arranged by planners to make the road scenic, attractions for car-borne vacationers who perceive only "road and open sky" (l. 6).

Seager notes the violence brought upon the land to convert it into a modern thoroughfare serviceable to long-distance travelers. One packed iambic pentameter line identifies the perpetrators: "Bulldozers gouge and steel blades cut straight through," and the final effect of the development is one of death by engineering: "I see my hills knocked down, my valleys spanned / Where roads once fitted kindly to the land" (ll. 11, 15–16). Seager's poem updates the Romantic traditions of Wordsworth and Ruskin, who protested the incursion of rails into places that had been preciously rough; not wildernesses uninhabited by humans, but landscapes in which a long-evolved synergy between nature and culture had engendered unique locales. A large part of this protest tradition is the vulgar homogenization of space and the straightening of organic form into mechanical precision.

Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* contains a polemic against inroads into public lands, particularly the national parks that contain the most exceptional natural forms. Abbey is an environmentalist version of a beatnik, living outside of a mid-century American culture and peering in, with fear and disdain, at its values and waste. His cantankerous voice serves as counterpoint to the Smokey Bear jollity of the self-promoting Park Service. As a ranger at Arches National Monument in the 1960s, Abbey witnessed the survey crew arrange a hardtop road that would go deep into the park, within strolling range of many of the reclusive arches: an arroyo of tar put down to attract the masses in touring cars and campers.

The survey crew's leader, both a "soft-spoken civil engineer" and a "very dangerous man," tries to buoy Abbey's spirits with the promise that his lonely dwelling in the wilderness—populated mostly by snakes, ants, and "Giant Hairy Desert Scorpions"—will soon bustle with the "indolent millions," a camper civilization in the wilderness enabled by cheap petroleum (54). The

engineers see access and progress; Abbey envisions the campsite as “a suburban village: elaborate housetrailer of quilted aluminum crown upon gigantic camper-trucks of Fiberglass and molded plastic; through their windows you will see the blue glow of television and hear the studio laughter of Los Angeles” (44). The Park Service strives for exponentially higher visitation rates to Arches National Monument, which Abbey tweaks into “National Money-mint.” Abbey sees the industrial tourist as a doltish victim of a “syphilization” that treats nature according to the needs of industrial logic. The access promised by the tarred roads and electric campgrounds becomes an infrastructure demanded by the machines, whose servants the people have become. Industrial logic inherently pursues saleable goods, and since nature itself, in the form of the Arches, cannot be sold beyond the entry fee, it follows that their appeal as wonders of natural history and ferrous-red beauty can be fed into the machine to derive saleable stuff: hotels, restaurants, refrigerator magnets, Smokey the Bear dolls.

Two centuries earlier, picturesque tourism on the backs of carriage horses began to establish the kitsch of a shoddy nature culture. The Claude-glasses, convex brown-tinted mirrors that allowed tourist to “frame” scenes that they would then sketch, flew off the shelves. In sketch books were scribbled many a masterpiece meant to adorn a lady’s drawing room. English tourists in the Lake District could follow the series of stage-set roadside inns and expect ample food and shelter from the established preindustrial economy of the area. The difference between Wordsworth’s tourist-friendly Lake District and the (American) National Park Service’s improved campground in Arches is that petroleum makes the latter place survivable by a massive number of Great Indoorsmen. Without petroleum, there is no road, no water, no food, no electricity, and no television, and therefore nothing to sell. With it, the suburbanite’s living room rolls with him into the wilderness, as does his wallet. Abbey writes, “So long as they are unwilling to crawl out of their cars they will not discover the treasures of the national parks and will never escape the stress and turmoil of those urban-suburban complexes which they had hoped, presumably, to leave behind for a while” (51). For Abbey, true appreciation of natural wealth is closely allied with the muscle power needed to experience it. In lieu of roads serving cars, he advocates trails serving hikers, horseback riders, and bicycles.

His solution has the added benefit of reversing the ontological shrinking of the world by fossil fuels. Where coal and petroleum have made the world smaller, closer to the roadside, and easier to swiftly bypass, flipping that history back a page to biomass fuel will have the enabling effect of expanding nature again. “Distance and space are functions of speed and time. Without expending a

single dollar from the United States Treasury we could, if we wanted to, multiply the area of our national parks tenfold or a hundredfold—simply by banning the private automobile” (55). Naturalists can experience this reinfusion of distance into space by hiking into the secluded backcountry, which generally has no-engine and no-trace regulations.

In the 1960s, an era of cheap oil-driven consumerism, Abbey warns about the increasing physical conflation of humans with their machines, and sees the national parks as a final frontier against *Homo campervans*. In his polemic on industrial tourism, the ranger-ecoterrorist’s final act is to tear out the survey team’s flags by moonlight to erase the sketch of a road for just a bit longer. Fifty years later, on the other side of that incursion, many of the car-overrun national parks, including Yosemite and Zion, have recuperated peace with shuttle bus networks. Abbey’s radical act has been incorporated into the progressive mainstream.

Let’s face it: a gas-powered machine makes work easier. We work awfully hard trying to figure out how to save ourselves work. Gas can make extreme conditions survivable. For example, most people could not trek thirty miles across the searing Utah desert as the sun spans east to west. This does not deter the judgmental Abbey, who goes so far as to call the handicapped and children pro-automobile “pressure groups” whose needs are best ignored. Abbey’s writing is as fraught and contradictory as it is saucily entertaining. While he decries roads through Arches in *Desert Solitaire*, he depicts his hero George Hayduke, one of *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, littering that same desert with beer cans tossed from his roaring truck. No-apologies irreverence is part of Abbey’s misanthropic shtick, and it plays well with libertarians of many stripes.

Abbey’s bile overflows in his highly influential novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, a thought experiment on the potentials of ecoterrorism to liberate the American West from industrial development—or, in his words, to “sabotage the world planetary maggot-machine” (151). The book became a founding text for fringe environmental groups like Earth First! who use sabotage as a weapon against development. Most often the gang’s victims are dieselivores: trucks, tractors, bulldozers. These dumb machines are the prime movers that transmogrify the desert landscape from an unpeopled wilderness into what it is today: an electrified, irrigated sun strip, sprawling a thousand miles from Texas to California. The cities of Albuquerque, Phoenix, Las Vegas, San Diego, and Los Angeles, in particular, have benefited from twentieth-century projects that made mass habitation of these intensely hot, dry places possible. Petro-powered tools carved out and laid down the highways, the bridges, and the dams.

The ecoterrorist gang surveys their quarry: “Down in the center of the wash below the ridge the scrapers, the earthmovers and the dump trucks with eighty-ton beds unloaded their loads, building up the fill as the machines beyond were deepening the cut. Cut and fill, cut and fill, all afternoon the work went on. The object in mind was a modern high-speed highway for the convenience of the trucking industry, with grades no greater than 8 percent” (80). He sarcastically surmises that the engineers’ ultimate goal is “a model of perfect sphericity, the planet Earth with all irregularities removed, highways merely painted on a surface smooth as glass” (80). Abbey has no qualms about depicting sabotage as a legitimate moral strategy against the oily invasion of the America’s remote canyon country. In fact, he has fun with it. Since it is amusing to watch inanimate objects blow up, I will simply sample a few of the scenes in which the monkey wrenchers torch expensive equipment made possible by petroleum.

First, George Hayduke drives a bulldozer into Lake Powell, Glen Canyon Dam’s impoundment:

The thunder of the impact resounded from the canyon walls with shuddering effect, like a sonic boom. The bulldozer sank into the darkness of the cold subsurface waters, its dim shape of Caterpillar yellow obliterated, after a second, by the flare of an underwater explosion. A galaxy of bubbles rose to the surface and popped. Sand and stone trickled for another minute from the cliff. (127–8)

In an ensuing chase, Hayduke levers boulders into the road to impede the police, one of whom is driving a deluxe new Chevy Blazer. The boulder finds its mark:

There was an anguished crunch of steel as the Blazer, squirting vital internal juices in all directions—oil, gas, grease, coolants, battery acids, brake fluids, windshield wash—sank and disappeared beneath the unspeakable impact, wheels spread-eagled, body crushed like a bug. The precious fluids seeped outward from the squashed remains, staining the roadway. The boulder remained in place, pinning down the carcass. At repose. (138)

The metaphor of the crushed beetle implies that the machines are vermin that must be exterminated before they bring pestilence, and that inorganic nature, in this case a boulder, does an elegant and thorough job as a terrible swift sword of natural justice.

On a slow night, Hayduke stops off at a favorite haunt, the construction site, to monkey around:

Full throttle forward. The tractor lurched ahead one turn of the sprocket wheels and stopped. The engine block cracked; a jet of steam shot forth, whistling

urgently. The engine fought for life. Something exploded inside the manifold and a gush of blue flame belched from the exhaust stack, launching hot sparks at the stars. Seized-up tight within their chambers, the twelve pistons became one—wedded and welded—with cylinders and block, one immovable entropic white-hot molecular mass. All is One. The screaming went on. Fifty-one tons of tractor, screaming in the night. (244)

And one more for good measure:

Twilight silhouettes, blurred by dust, Hayduke and Smith stand at the controls of their tractors, peering forward. Then very quickly they climb off. The tractors go on without human hands, clanking like tanks toward the canyon, and drop abruptly from sight. The tanker, the shed, the billboard follow. Pause for gravitational acceleration. A bright explosion flares beyond the rimrock, a second and a third. Bonnie hears the thunderous barrage of avalanching iron, uprooted trees, slabs of rock embraced in gravity, falling toward the canyon floor. Dust clouds rise above the edge, lit up in lurid hues of red and yellow by a crescendo of flames from somewhere below. (318)

Variations on a theme of industrial sabotage, these four scenes of ecoterror porn meld violence and suffering with spectacular, erotic action. Inanimate brutes die like animals, squirting, seeping, screaming, sparking, and seizing. Oil is their lifeblood, among other fluids. The pleasure with which Abbey details their demise registers their violent power to devastate a landscape to fit it to human needs: live by/die by. The gang has no compunction about despoiling the lake or the canyon with machine detritus. Like Thelma and Louise, who met a similar fate to the machines, everything over the edge is irrelevant. What matters is the battleground of the construction site, where the daily inroads against wilderness may be slowed by zealous counterpunches. These tactics of desperation contrast the failed legal alternatives to lobby, sue, and pacifically protest.

Abbey records an era in American history when the energy of petroleum had given the engineer unlimited power to alter even the most recalcitrant lands, which aligned perfectly with a national agenda of industrial development. Against the engineer's "we can" and the government's "we will" comes the environmentalist's "should we?" Daisies in gun barrels be damned; Abbey fights The Man on his own destructive terms. The Hollywood spectacle of dying metal giants merely gussies up the brutal guerrilla tactics of a futile tribe. New machines chuffing diesel fumes queue for work.

Yet Abbey's fringe ecoterrorist ethos continues to inspire conservation groups around the world. By refusing to operate within the rules of the master's house,

rules involving permitting, regulation, and litigious means of counteraction, Abbey's gang of apes defined for a rebellious 1970s generation the kinds of violence that might be justified means against a violent regime of industrial development: don't kill other humans; kill their oil-fed enablers and wreck their habitat of roads, dams, and bridges. At a time when the majority of environmental action was poignantly nonviolent and even passive, Abbey's bellicose actions use the master's tools to dismantle the master's house.

John McPhee is an environmental writer with more sympathy for people of all political stripes. He consistently succeeds in identifying the humane at work within various environments. *Coming into the Country*, perhaps his best book, contains a vignette that provides great insight into the mindset of Alaskans, both native and transplant, in regard to petroleum. The extremes of Alaska's seasons and terrain highlight petroleum's power to broaden the survivable range:

The forest Eskimos' relationship with whites has made them dependent on goods that need to be paid for: nylon netting, boat materials, rifles, ammunition, motors, gasoline. Hence, part of the year some Eskimo men leave the river to find jobs. These pilgrimages to the wage economy are not a repudiation of the subsistence way of life. They make money so they can come back home, where they prefer to be, and live the way they prefer to live—foraging the wild country with gasoline and bullets. (37)

There is no judgment here, regarding either whites or Eskimos, wages or subsistence. McPhee shows us a glimpse of the superhuman power lent by guns and gas, which help even well-adapted native cultures gain a firmer grip on existence at the margins. McPhee does not harp on the unnecessary goods a wage economy also provides, like cigarettes, alcohol, and nudie magazines. He shows the dignity of natives who accept alien work and money in exchange for practical and valuable advantages: better fishing, hunting, and transportation. They choose the point of engagement with white culture, and that point is gasoline. It makes us superhuman, which a human would like to be when facing winter at seventy degrees north latitude.

Another perspective on fuel in the wild country comes through Jon Krakauer's breakthrough essay "Death of an Innocent," the 1993 magazine story that preceded his book and Sean Penn's movie adaptation, *Into the Wild*. Gloss: an upper-middle-class boy from a Washington, DC, suburb, Christopher McCandless, graduates from college, drops off grid, and goes rogue in the American West, sojourning in the canyon lands and desert for two years before heading out on his final foray into the wild. Well, fairly wild. Fifteen miles from

State Route 3 near Healy, Alaska, across one notable river, he lived in a broken-down bus for about four months, on a trail blazed in mid-century by a mining company. Using the moniker Alexander Supertramp, McCandless rolled at least seven thousand miles on rails and tarmac before hiking only twelve miles into the bush. His whole journey from graduation day in 1990 until his death in 1992, a demon-hunting soul-haunting odyssey, was a journey enabled by petroleum. Though Supertramp is called a “leather tramp” by his friends in Penn’s beautiful, idealizing movie, indicating a foot-borne journey, he was in reality more of a “rubber tramp” borne by his thumb into automobiles.

How poignant, then, that his austere will to live in nature is so intimately entwined in the end with a broken-down vehicle. Ever since the film that framed Supertramp’s portrait in tramp history, the Stampede Trail has been frequented by pilgrims seeking the “Magic Bus” where Supertramp scrounged out survival and found scraps of his Shangri-La, but by mid-summer succumbed to hunger. He died lying supine, looking at the sky, in the back bunk of the bus. His primordial escape back to nature is actually a modern industrial story—down to the very existence of the dead bus that fixed Supertramp too long in one spot.

According to Krakauer, Supertramp’s bus hosted diverse scenes in its history. It was first a Fairbanks city bus, then a transport wagon for mine workers towed by bulldozers, then a broken-axled shelter for backcountry travelers, then Supertramp’s roost and coffin, and now a site for wilderness cult curiosity. The bus is a strange hulk deposited in a land of enduring wildness. Its incongruity in the landscape is the major ingredient in its magic. Supertramp’s self-fashioned “final and greatest adventure” and “spiritual pilgrimage” has been explored existentially more than geographically, as interpreters have turned him into a darling of anti-materialism, devourer of wilderness texts, philosopher of postindustrialism, wanderer and dreamer, great outdoorsman (90). The bus attenuates each of these personae.

Supertramp himself recorded no irony regarding his reliance on the big metal junker, even though he had purposely left behind basic survival gear like a compass, a map, and a tent. The bus was magic; at least it was *for him*. It was part of his narrative of triumph and reward for tackling adversity. Soon after encamping under its roof, Supertramp carved his mini-manifesto (it would fit in a few Tweets) into a scrap of plywood, words that would become his eulogy. It ends: “No longer to be poisoned by civilization he flees, and walks alone upon the land to become lost in the wild” (90). His triumphal photo is a selfie in which the entire background is the metal side panel of the bus; not Denali, which he could

see from his roost; not his library of Tolstoy and London and edible plant guides; not the riparian rocks and scrub pine where he toiled through summer days.

As reflected in both Krakauer's and Penn's accounts, Supertramp's journal reveals absolute glee at finding his magic bus in the bush, a welcome shell to cover his exposed body. He finds the bus only eight minutes into the film. Howling with wolfish abandon, he beats the mattress, flicks the lighter, burns the litter, and lights up the wood stove before tucking into bed to the light of a gas lamp. Immediately he gets comfy in his into-the-wild-indoors. None of us can blame him for the true animal satisfaction of finding a warm dry safe place to sleep, much as it tarnishes his prefigured resolve to purify himself of civilization. Lost in context, the bus no longer represents society, industry, history; now it signifies something much simpler and more beautiful in his eyes: staying alive. The magic bus montage equals the highest emotional moments in Penn's optimistic film, those inspired by mountains, caribou, romantic love, and the choreographed epiphany of his death.

Krakauer's and Penn's protagonist is an intelligent, playful, caring young man with a clear sense of purpose and an implacable ethic. His life and death are mutually fulfilling and even celebratory in the film, where he dies imagining the embrace of his reformed parents. The literal landscape belted by snowy mountains blends freely with the plywood narrative of the "aesthetic voyager" preparing for a "climactic battle to kill the false being within and victoriously conclude the spiritual pilgrimage" (90). Cultural critics, however, have found the Supertramp story to be less of a triumphant tragedy and more a terminal case of the muddling symptoms of consumer petroculture ennui. Timothy Morton sees his story as "fatal experimentation with masculine Nature" based on a fantasy of control and order created by the very society Supertramp sought to kill by abandonment (*Queer Ecology* 280). A lifetime of material privilege has two opposing effects: disdain and dependence. Over-access to stuff, in conjunction with an unhappy abusive family, infuses in him a visceral abhorrence for the so-called poison of civilization. His revulsion actuates the myth of the self-made man, accountable to nobody, independent from human ties like love, empathy, and vulnerability (280). But his dependence on industrial culture has only been extended by the oxymoronic wilderness bus, which substitutes for the adopted road-home he had previously found with wandering hippies in their rainbow camper. The magic bus is fixed in place, going nowhere while it figuratively drives Supertramp through his dreams and nightmares.

Supertramp lives in self-imposed ignorance of his actual surroundings. Without a map, his dwelling in the environs of the bus becomes a mythical

place of his own creation. The magic bus is the center of a tight circle, and the center must hold for him to keep his bearings. Several weeks in the wild seem to have been enough to cure him of ennui. His terse journal records that his attempt to return to town in July 1992 was foiled by the swollen Teklanika River. Unburdened by maps, he was unaware of two easy recourses, one a river crossing cable only a quarter mile upstream from his attempted crossing, the other, a cabin stocked with provisions for backcountry rangers about six miles south of the bus. Ignorance of these aids made him over-reliant on the bus as shelter, drawing him back to that magic locale that, in his increasing desperation, he came to see as a trap. The far side of the river and beyond, the road and town, retreat from the margins of his mind map.

His declining health closes the circle further. His refusal to plan, his renunciation of the existing geography in preference for a personal mythology, is enabled by the magic bus. Rather than spending the summer wide-ranging across a remote area, as thousands of backcountry explorers do every year in American wilderness, Supertramp circled tightly around a derelict bus, squabbled with his inner demons, and miscalculated reality in terms of time and space. His moments at peace with pure nature respected, this story is a pyrrhic victory in which the real vastness of Alaska lies undiscovered beyond the rusting hull that is at once a defunct bus and a demon-haunted mind.

His death is explicable not just by exposure or starvation or poisoning, but in essence by his equation of freedom with lack of planning. It was an equation that had worked out many times before during his ranging in the lower forty-eight and Mexico, where he was frequently bailed out of trouble by generous people in cars and motorboats. The magic bus temporarily assuages his failure to provide for his time in the wild. Then, inadequate in itself, his addiction to the bus kills him. Central Alaska was wild enough that he had not seen another human all summer, and help would not arrive until a few weeks after Supertramp's sojourn had come to an end.

On September 6, 1992, an astonishing six people in three separate parties coincided at the magic bus, some of them driving the gassed-up all-terrain vehicles that have reconfigured our definition of wilderness. There they found the remains of McCandless. Now a memorial site, the magic bus still squats in that spot, lower and rustier by the year. It remains an enduring symbol of the incursion of industry into wilderness. Literally getting out of gas-powered machines to step into wild country is easy. But getting outside of the petroculture mind-set was more than McCandless could accomplish in his short life.

IV Oil's locales

Oil created some of the richest people the planet has ever known: J. D. Rockefeller's adjusted wealth was about a half trillion dollars. But the trickle down to the subordinate workers in the oil economy was slow indeed. Sitting behind a massive desk in New York City, Rockefeller had little exposure to the matter of oil itself: the accoutrements of drilling, refining, and filling, and the economic chanciness of selling a commodity only a few cents above wholesale price. Instead, poets have gone to these places. In a poem titled "Filling Station," Elizabeth Bishop notes the indignities of roadside mechanical work versus the perennial human desire for self-improvement, often displayed through possessions. The poem begins, seemingly, as a snobby anthropology of the gas station men:

Oh, but it is dirty!
 —this little filling station,
 oil-soaked, oil-permeated
 to a disturbing, over-all
 black translucency.
 Be careful with that match!

Father wears a dirty,
 oil-soaked monkey suit
 that cuts him under the arms,
 and several quick and saucy
 and greasy sons assist him
 (it's a family filling station),
 all quite thoroughly dirty.

(ll. 1–13)

As matter, oil is powerful outside of the fuel tank as well as inside due to its stickiness, viscosity, indelibility. It permeates its sphere with a "disturbing, over-all / black translucency"—disturbing because it is both black and bright, and it stains. This little stop-n-go world is completely defined by the aversive, alluring duality of gas grease. The actual business of oil dehumanizes its workers into monkeys, and the family business that is the icon of proud middle America is here a trap where sons are chained in prosaic servitude, stuffed in greasy overalls alongside their ragamuffin father. In response, the sons are "quick and saucy," traits that might be admired in ambitious young men, but Bishop cancels the virtue by repeating "greasy" as their leading trait. Whatever they may be underneath, it is hard to perceive beneath all that filth.

Still, Bishop presses past the surface, as a poet must, to come away with some insight into the people she stereotypes as grease monkeys. Presumably, as they attend to her car, she noses around their property:

Do they live in the station?
It has a cement porch
behind the pumps, and on it
a set of crushed and grease-
impregnated wickerwork;
on the wicker sofa
a dirty dog, quite comfy.

Some comic books provide
the only note of color—
of certain color. They lie
upon a big dim doily
draping a taboret
(part of the set), beside
a big hirsute begonia.

(ll. 14–27)

The wicker, the dog, and the doily are shades of a better life, but they have succumbed to the universal grease. This is a poem about color and color's diseases—how the world can be suffocated by the slick-sticky dirt of oil—and the things that escape this fate, gesturing to another life in this oil-scape: comic books (low-class entertainment, but colorful!) and, most remarkable of all, a living plant that would have exuberant pink blooms to shout out against the chromatic din. For Bishop, these exceptions prove a higher value and order to a thoroughly dirty world. Hope is not lost; in fact, through the doily and the plant, love shines through:

Somebody embroidered the doily.
Somebody waters the plant,
or oils it, maybe. Somebody
arranges the rows of cans
so that they softly say:
esso—so—so—so
to high-strung automobiles.
Somebody loves us all.

(ll. 34–41)

This is a gently feminist turn, where domestic accomplishments like embroidery and horticulture spruce up the grease-scape and show by their very existence

that care and pride ground this goopy place. The dog is cozy. The plant survives and blooms. The absent presence is the maternal caregiver, whose several sons and husband sling grease and gas to fill themselves with milk and meat.

Most importantly, this filling-station world exists to cater to the needs of our new favorite pets, our cars, and the line of perfectly arranged Esso cans whispers a lullaby to those machine-babies suckling oil. From an initial aversion to obvious filth, the poem comes around to rejoice in a universal succor enjoyed by animal, plant, and machine. There is dignity in this work. Like the charcoal man smeared in his soot garb, the filling station men help us. Unlike the silk-suited oil tycoon, they wear the marks of their labor.

Elizabeth Bishop wrote one other oil poem worth mentioning here. “The Fish” is mostly a visual exploration of the body of an old, battered lake fish hauled aboard a rented rowboat. But the culmination is notably petro-philic:

I stared and stared
and victory filled up
the little rented boat,
from the pool of bilge
where oil had spread a rainbow
around the rusted engine
to the bailer rusted orange,
the sun-cracked thwarts,
the oarlocks on their strings,
the gunnels-until everything
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
And I let the fish go.

(ll. 65–76)

Unlike the dark, greasy filling station where light is swallowed, here oil emulsifies on water and reflects all colors. It turns pollution and decay into a fragile beauty, both alluring and repulsive, something Bishop’s images often pursue. The rainbow vision propels her mood from the triumph of victory (she caught the venerable old fish), to the empathy of mercy. Like “The Filling Station,” an oily aesthetic decorates the scene with an equivocal chemical nature that fans out in a range of color-plays from black vacuum to shimmering rainbow. Oil’s tawdry company—grease, bilge, rust—do not ruin its magic materiality.

More contemporary poems look back on the legacy of the cheap oil era of the twentieth century. Philip Appleman’s 1996 poem “How Evolution Came to Indiana” snipes at a regressive statewide biology education policy while also

meditating on the fate of the obsolete dinosaurs of the mid-century car industry. Roaring through “the swamps of Auburn” and “the jungles of South Bend,” these hulks are now metallic fossils that show in their forms a cause for extinction: “3-speed gears ... 2 chain drive” (ll. 4–6)—inefficient engineering. Appleman quotes Darwin:

*There is grandeur in this view of life,
as endless forms
most beautiful and wonderful
are being evolved.*

And then
the drying up, the panic,
the monsters dying:

(ll. 16–22. Emphasis in original)

In the old world awash in fossil fuels, these paleolithic cars ruled the landscape, triumphed in their excess of raw power and battled to be alpha-dinosaur in gasoline’s golden age. Most of these brands were extant in the first half of the twentieth century and manufactured in Indiana, supporting the small economies of company towns for a human generation or two. Like Ankylosaurs, Hadrosaurs, and Prosauropods, these rusty relics are hardly recognizable to youth, who look to more “successful” forms of cars—including some makes that coexisted with the Deuseys and Stutzes, like Cadillac and Ford, as well as new competitors with better mileage and reliability like Honda and Toyota—that filled the niches left open by extinction. As any economy is inherently an ecology, we can say that these cars thrived in the “wet” conditions of the American oil boom, then declined through “the drying up, the panic,” caused by a change in environment.

Appleman lists the mechanical traits that he characterizes as failed experiments in engineering. As in evolution, though, extinction often cannot totally be attributed to a flaw or failure in the dying species; biological and economic evolution are both racked with happenstance and bad luck. Even if biological evolution was not taught in Indiana classrooms, its citizens need only look in their junk yards and tall-grass ditches to see the principle hold true. In evolution, there is often progress (at least when perceived in retrospect), but there is always ruination.

Appleman quotes Darwin’s final passage on the “grandeur in this view of life,” but rather than riff on Victorian triumphalism, his poem is an elegy about the end of innocence during the early era of black gold. Younger generations may feel a similar twinge for the more recent hulks of the American car industry,

endangered by their ruinous appetites during the 1970s oil embargo—the Cadillacs and Lincolns that became “hoopties” of hip-hop fame. Nostalgia is a powerful potion, and each generation suffers through its own battle between self-indulgence and frugality. The Hummer is the leading contemporary example of an outlandish vehicle made extinct by more efficient competition. The Hummer’s open flouting of efficiency, in fact, made it a laughing stock and soon a discontinued brand. It took fuel bravado to an extreme, and American society discovered the limits of its tolerance. Cars fight these evolutionary economic struggles on the ecological plain of gasoline.

For the poet Sina Queyras, the interstate offers a mosaic of disjointed images that correspond to our cognitive experience of landscape experienced via automobile. Intense with enjambment, the images in “Endless Inter-States” (2009) jumble together without consistent form, threatening to wreck, but the poem veers between the spacing of regular tercets. Before surging down the road, Queyras pauses to remember past travelers and their metal carapaces. Like Appleman’s poem, the past clutters the roadside in a mechanical version of natural history: cars are like bugs of various species, all identified and studied for their curious features. Simultaneously, in a fast-paced consumer economy, they are ugly garbage, blithely discarded and ignored.

Sagebrush, dead-ending on chain
 Link, old cars collecting like bugs
 On the roadside, overturned, curled, astute,

Memory of the Overlanders,
 Optimism, headlong into
 Hell’s Gate. Churn of now,

The sound barriers, the steering
 Wheel, the gas pedal, the gearshift,
 The dice dangling, fuzzy,

Teal, dual ashtrays, AM radio
 Tuned to CBC, no draft, six cylinders,
 The gas tank, the gearshift, easing

Into the sweet spot behind
 The semi, flying through Roger’s
 Pass; the snowplow, the Park

Pass, sun on mud flap, the rest stop
 Rock slides, glint of snow, the runaway

Lanes, the grades steep as skyscrapers,
 The road cutting through cities,
 Slicing towns, dividing parks,
 The road over lakes, under rivers,

 The road right through a redwood,
 Driving on top of cities, all eyes
 On the DVD screen,

 All minds on the cellphone,
 The safari not around, but inside
 Us: that which fuels.

(ll. 117–37)

From a view of the wasted roadside, Queryas passes into the domestic amenities of the car's interior. Our cars are rolling living rooms appointed to entice us to stay behind the wheel, to feel the powerful engine as an extension of our own bodies. From that position of power, everything outside, however naturally magnificent, is diminished by its access and exposure. The road cuts, slices, and divides, rather than uniting places, as we often assume. The road scars landmarks in a comprehensive array: towns and cities; parks, lakes, and rivers; forests filled with massive redwood trees. The road even cuts through individual redwood trees.

The poem ends by erasing even those sketches of the world. The outdated experience of sightseeing by car, a kind of "safari," observing the terrain's accessibility and diminishment, marveling at the engineering and money that supports such infrastructure, has now melted into a technological solipsism. Existence in the early twenty-first century has turned our eyes to screens and minds to virtual spaces. A brain moves through actual space, but it thinks of immaterial abstractions. That which lurks beyond the screens, outside the windows, has become irrelevant, as abstract and aphysical as a "like" on Facebook. And less interesting to many.

Gentle folk in the eighteenth century who traveled by carriage through the Alps were known to draw their curtains against the mountains' ugliness, seen as evidence of God's displeasure with mankind. From the world's greatest vistas, their world then retracted into a space between carriage windows, about four feet square. According to Queryas, today we travel with the curtains of our minds drawn against the varying landscapes, for even glimpses of vast mountain ranges at high speed are less enthralling than these self-oriented world-simulations

within our new favorite prosthetic, the smart phone. That phone, plugged into the car's power stream, runs on gas, too.

V Pastoral oilfields: The suburbs

Suburbs are locales uniquely beholden to fossil fuels. Their existence depends upon a daily commute into and out of them, originally by train, but now mostly by one-person cars. They are literally and aesthetically located between rural and urban spheres, promising the leisure of a pastoral idyll and the plump salary of an urban white-collar professional. Early American landscape designers like Frederick Law Olmstead were inspired by English urban parks to unite the culture and wealth of the American city with the supposed tranquility and purity of the rural sphere (Gill 21–2). Contemporary accounts of the design principles of early suburbs allude to the satisfaction felt by residents when raising chickens and growing their own vegetables, and usually prescribed a mixed-use flower and vegetable cottage garden cultivated with an ethos of self-sufficiency and honest labor.

These Edenic edicts align with the early positive perceptions of the first American suburbs, glorified as a proving ground for pioneers on a new frontier of naturalized domesticity. Along with independence and self-reliance, the early suburban model tested the viability of starkly gendered ideas of space and time that would survive for more than a century (Gill 22). In 1869, Harriet Beecher Stowe praised the railroad as a vector for achieving the best of both worlds because they enable “men toiling in cities to rear families in the country” where heads of family may “seek a soil and climate which will afford . . . outdoor labor for all” (qtd. in Gill 23). These railway suburbs soon gave way to the twentieth-century version based on sublime automobility—an individual's escape from muscle space into fossil space, which dedicates the body, the mind, the home locale, and the family economy to a civic architecture designed around the car (Johnson 54).

Suburbs carry stereotypes that have been in play ever since the rapid construction of suburbs along rail lines in Europe and America in the 1800s. Rapid mass production of neighborhoods is thought to breed conformity and normativity. Space is highly privatized but often adorned in the appearances of welcome: picket fences studded with flowers, welcome mats next to home security signs, neighborhood groups mostly dedicated to vigilance against outsiders. The “gated community” is an updated, higher level of exclusivity

operating on the same parameters as the earliest suburbs of the nineteenth century. Suburbs are severely landscaped, turning their rural or wild substrate into chartered rectilinear plots where a small variety of plant species foisted by the local garden center appear in a recursive infinity down the street. New subdivisions often adopt the name of the landscape they destroy: Deer Chase, Whispering Pines, Sunny Meadows.

Promised as the country house of everyman, suburbs are often bourgeois, culturally homogeneous, beholden to mass media entertainment (rather than live and local productions), and tend to house uniform racial and socioeconomic groups. They intensify consumer desire by providing the space to accumulate things such as televisions, cars, riding mowers, trampolines, patio sets, and display a voyeuristic layout to make constant neighborly comparisons.

Wendell Berry, philosopher of the virtues of muscle energy, laments how the modern home, especially the suburban one, “is a veritable factory of waste and destruction. It is the mainstay of the economy of money. But within the economies of energy and nature, it is a catastrophe. It takes in the world’s goods and converts them into garbage, sewage, and noxious fumes—for none of which we have found a use” (*Unsettling* 52). Like the fossil-fueled modern farm of monoculture and high-concentration animal husbandry, the suburban home exists outside biodynamic material loops that turn waste into fertility. This is both a material and ideological point: Berry argues that when people lived where they worked—in cottage industry, for example—dwelling and productivity were mutualistic. Place was indistinguishable from purpose, and each dwelling was uniquely accommodated to its dweller. But in the era of the “industrial conquistador,” Berry writes, “everything around him, everything on TV, tells him of his success: *his* comfort is the redemption of the world,” but that emblem of success is abstracted from the consciousness of work performed to succeed (53). Suburbs drive a wedge between work and life, selling us the notion that we *do* only so that we may *have*. To simply *be* does not compute in this economy.

Even in its glory days of the 1950s, the gender-determined suburb became an intriguing place of dissipation: bored housewives spewed venomous gossip; sheltered children, also bored, sought outlets in virtual violence, drugs, and sex; absent working fathers kept *pied-à-terre* apartments in the city and lingered there suspiciously. Equipped with a car, the wife was able to redefine herself from being a producer of food and clothing in a traditional domestic sphere, to becoming a consumer of carefully marketed brand goods: canned food, clothing, cosmetics, cars, washers, and anything else sold in the petro-marketplace (Nye

181). The suburb is the classic industrial-era locale for mistakenly equating personal value with possessions, rather than actions, accomplishments, or experience. In stereotype, they are inane utopias occupied by self-conscious but unremarkable people.

After the apex of idyllic suburbery in the 1950s, the time in America when consumerism was a normative patriotic lifestyle, the paint started to peel off the country-kitsch picket fences. When the inner suburbs around major cities grew shabby or crowded or too expensive, developers conscripted the next ring of farmland to residential service. Commutes grew longer; roads, larger; cars became more like living rooms than rolling chairs. The evolution of the suburb in the twentieth century entailed a deeper investment in its worst characteristics—inefficient land use; loss of personal time and community cohesion; perhaps most apparently, flagrant waste of fuel in cars and lawn machines.

Why would anyone live there? Because suburbs promise amenities that many people find attractive, offering comfort, though along with smidges of shame and inconvenience. Many humans like to live with people who look and talk like themselves, have similar backgrounds and common dreams. Suburbs offer an illusion of control that results in painful contradictions. They provide safe space for children to play (if only we could get a stop light at the corner of Holly and Mulberry). They are leafy, flowery, wormy (and we really must spray the dandelions this year). They are quiet (Mr. Jones is mowing again!) and safe (Maggie saw that same ugly man loitering on the corner last night). Houses are capacious and stately (I almost keeled over while cleaning the great room today).

These suburban contradictions are intimately related to their paradoxical nature: they are pastoral oil fields. Designed to be rural, they rely on cheap abundant energy to be viable. Seemingly existing as both at once, they are truly neither. They are faux pastoral, because they involve organic nature but fail to produce rural goods like food and raw materials. They are faux oil fields because they are rich in oil, and defined by a dedication to oil culture, but they consume oil rather than produce it.

In all their liminal, in-between identity crises, suburbs are actually quite interesting to writers. John Updike, noting the marginal spaces where he often sets his novels, explained his interest in “middleness with all its grits, bumps, and anonymities, in its fullness of satisfaction and mystery.” In a 1966 interview he said, “I like middles. It is in middles that extremes clash, where ambiguity restlessly rules” (qtd. in Gill 155). Television shows like *Picket Fences*, *Six Feet Under*, *Desperate Housewives*, and *Weeds* have leitmotifs of suburban inanity. The cultivated outward appearances belie the illegal, rancorous, and raunchy

doings of the characters within. *Weeds*'s theme song is Malvina Reynolds's 1962 satire of the suburbs, "Little Boxes," which lampoons the "ticky-tacky houses" that all look alike. While the song plays during the opening credit sequence montage, we see a train of identical SUVs drive down the street.

Film culture has drunk the potent cocktails of the suburban gothic, the conflation of utopia with dystopia: the *Nightmare on Elm Street* slasher series; Marty McFly's oxymoronic Hill Valley, seen both in the past and in the present, in *Back to the Future*; the deaths of innocents in houses shaded by trees devastated by Dutch Elm disease in *The Virgin Suicides*; the sarcasm, self-indulgence, and self-hatred displayed in the suburban culture of *American Beauty*.

Literature of the suburbs predates the lavish vapidness of the suburbs depicted in television and film. The suburban gothic of America's late twentieth century had its predecessors two centuries earlier, as the world's great cities, London and Paris, began to develop outlying rural terrain to accommodate industrial-era populations and the coal-driven train system that transported workers from country to city and back again. In the early decades of the 1800s, London sprawled outward in often ill-conceived rapid development. In the nowhere/now-here bonanza, the space between old London and Hampstead Heath was filled with Camden Town, and new constructions in Stockwell, Brixton, Maida Vale, Kilburn, and Holloway soon followed (Witchard 24–5). Novelist Molloy Westmacott likens this development with dark magic in *The English Spy* (1826): "The rage for building fills every pleasant outlet with bricks, mortar, rubbish and eternal scaffold-poles, which, whether you walk east, west, north, or south, seem to be running after you ... It is certainly astonishing: one would think the builders used magic or steam at least" (72). If the builders were not wizards using magic, they were engineers using the alchemy of steam-driven engines. Both the demand for new housing and its rapid construction were driven by fossil-fueled industry.

Charles Dickens sees nothing but squalor in the environs of new train stations, which he imagines as a giant trampling the land: the place "is neither of the town nor country. The former, like a giant in his travelling boots, has made a stride and passed it, and has set his brick-and-mortar heel a long way in advance; but the intermediate space between the giant's feet, as yet, is only blighted country ... a pleasant meadow ... was now a very waste, with a disorderly crop of the beginnings of mean houses, rising out of the rubbish, as if they had been unskillfully sown there" (*Dombey and Son* 517, 519). Dickens's clever arrangement implies that the land is still too rural to consider the new things as buildings. They must be ugly crops. The country is ruined, and the

city is impossibly remote. Where are we? In a new fuel landscape, built by coal, accessed by coal, and created out of the paradoxical desire to escape the coal-industrial habitat.

The disorder and squalor that characterized the new construction sites observed by Westmacott and Dickens usually domesticates, in time, toward the distinctive neo-nature of the suburb. By the early twentieth century, these suburbs near railway stations would be established neighborhoods nestled into their natural surroundings with elevated property values. The second wave of suburbs was enabled by the automobile. In 1910, two hundred thousand automobiles were registered in America; in 1919, six million; in 1929, twenty-three million. The traffic jam, then a new development, scrambled nerves between the world wars. This stunning growth in car ownership, made possible by cheap domestic petroleum, caused the infill of car-only developments between the older suburbs already established along rail, streetcar, and trolley routes (Gill 26). Complete rings of suburbs around major cities such as London, Paris, New York, Washington, and Los Angeles, were in place before the start of the Second World War. We generally think of suburbs as a postwar phenomenon, but the railway and the car, along with the coal and petroleum that powered them, had already fundamentally changed the mode and locale of dwelling.

In the 1921 poem “The Tulip Bed,” William Carlos Williams examines the complex boundaries between a built environment and nature, the nexus between pastoral and urban spheres that the suburbs represent. After depicting the May sun’s power to unfurl the leaves, Williams observes:

Under the leafy trees
 where the suburban streets
 lay crossed,
 with houses on each corner,
 tangled shadows had begun
 to join
 the roadway and the lawns.
 With excellent precision
 the tulip bed
 inside the iron fence
 upreared its gaudy
 yellow, white and red,
 rimmed round with grass,
 reposedly.

(ll. 8–21)

Williams vexes the grid of neighborhood streets with a tangle of branches and shadows. The insistent geometry of the roadway yields to an organic mesh of boughs and grass lawns. But the foliage is precise, too; the tulips are laid to present a premeditated appearance of lush order, contained by the delimiting fence and classic “perfect” one-species grass lawns. Though this is closer to an image poem than a meditation on the nature of suburbia, Williams captures the energies of the wild, especially shadows and tulips, butting up against the designated boundaries of a closed space. Chaos and control vie for dominance. The literal begs for metaphor: shadows might be housewives; tulips, suburban children. Everything meant to be owned and contained, presented just so, is in revolt, and the gaudy tulips nip at the iron fence as the rain inevitably rots it away. The poem, provisionally an idyll of suburban contentment, squats over a dark well of equivocal energies. Petroleum is the energy that organizes the space into “crossed” streets and designates the placement of corner houses and the rest of the array: grass, fence, tulips. But the vying entropic energy of organic wildness will never be squelched out. This little vignette of a suburban poem contains a war of the worlds: industrial fossil-fueled civilization versus sun-and-soil-fueled nature. The last word, “reposedly,” suggests the appearance of things rather than their reality—the ultimate suburban condition.

Phyllis McGinley’s 1941 sonnet “The 5:32” catches the essence of the suburban woman’s experience during the war years. Thinking about the legacy of her life, she identifies the most memorable time of day in the endless progression of humdrum days lived out by the “housewife-mother”—the woman triply domesticated and controlled. The housewife-mother’s fixed daily moment is meeting the evening train and the city-working husband:

She said, If tomorrow my world were torn in two,
 Blacked out, dissolved, I think I would remember
 (As if transfixed in unsundering amber)
 This hour best of all the hours I knew:
 When cars came backing into the shabby station,
 Children scuffing the seats, and the women driving
 With ribbons around their hair, and the trains arriving,
 And the men getting off with tired but practiced motion.

Yes, I would remember my life like this, she said:
 Autumn, the platform red with Virginia creeper,
 And a man coming toward me, smiling, the evening paper
 Under his arm, and his hat pushed back on his head;

And wood smoke lying like haze on the quiet town,
And dinner waiting, and the sun not yet gone down.

(ll. 1–14)

This still-life poem is idyllic and creepy at once, reflective of a popular culture that has fashioned the suburbs as a setting for disturbing rituals and secret lives, obscured by the banal spectacle of hair ribbons, Virginia creeper, and conformity. At 5:32 p.m., the train releases the workers into waiting cars, fossil fuels shuffling them along various legs of their quotidian journey. These lives, it seems, are not their own but instead are directed by the rhythms of transportation: children and mothers confined to waiting cars, men wearily closing out another day of hither and thither. Dinner waits on every stove up and down the street. The sun illuminates rural wood smoke. The only fissures to be found in this settled contentment are the bored scuffling children and the mother who, in spite of herself, cannot help but imagine her “world torn in two, / Blacked out, dissolved.” Though the poem is about the warm comforts of a suburban routine, apocalypse is the opening catalyst that shows the frailty of it all. It may also serve as the woman’s subconscious fantasy of something, anything else.

If McGinley’s poem is deliciously ambiguous, insinuating the apocalypse in the idyll and punctuating stability and rhythm with violent change, Louise Bogan’s “Evening in the Sanitarium,” also from 1941, dispenses with the niceties of suburban appearances in order to study its psychoses. The poem’s chilling echo of “Jim home on the 5:35” indicates women destabilized by isolation and conscripted into domestic service:

O fortunate bride, who never again will become elated after childbirth!
O lucky older wife, who has been cured of feeling unwanted!
To the suburban railway station you will return, return,
To meet forever Jim home on the 5:35.
You will be again as normal and selfish and heartless as anybody else.

There is life left: the piano says it with its octave smile.
The soft carpets pad the thump and splinter of the suicide to be.
Everything will be splendid: the grandmother will not drink habitually.
The fruit salad will bloom on the plate like a bouquet
And the garden produce the blue-ribbon aquilegia.

(ll. 14–23)

Though each woman—bride, older wife, and grandmother—has a different story behind their sojourn in the sanitarium, their emotional topographies have

become uniformly flat: no elation, no bitterness, no immoderation. In order to pull off such feats of indifference, Bogan releases her women into a general society as “normal and selfish and heartless as anybody else.” They are considered crazy, marked by their nonconformity, but the system promises to return them to normalcy—to the land of perfect salads and exceptional gardens.

Jim, who escapes on the train every day, is nothing in this poem but another chore. Both poems were published in 1941, a year notable as the beginning of a revolution in the American way of life, with war radically rearranging settled patterns of domesticity. McGinley’s apocalypse may be America’s commitment to the war. The men on the evening trains might any day go abroad as soldiers; the women waiting in cars may become versions of Rosie the Riveter. The suburbs were floating downstream through a four-year rapid, after which, in the 1950s, their hegemony as models of development would be reestablished.

As a proxy of rural dwelling, the suburban ideology mystifies its reliance on machines and fuel. But the real agricultural sphere that produces crops and meat has also changed its entire structure to benefit from the energy of fossil fuels. No longer biodynamic closed systems in which waste from animals became fertilizer for crops, petroleum has thrust itself into the cycle and shut it down. In place of animal labor come machines; in place of natural fertility, artificial petro-based fertilizer that reduces complex plant nutrition to three elements sold in bags: nitrogen, phosphorous, and potassium. Not only do the suburbs pose as something they are not, productively rural, they pose as something that hardly exists anymore: the cozy small farm that is at once its own ecology and economy.

Small wonder that futurists envision the suburbs of the twenty-first century in two basic forms: unevolved, they may become isolated ghettos with no economy or services and rotting infrastructure; or they may evolve into post-suburban communities retrofitted with town centers and local businesses to reduce dependence on petroleum. Suburbs will either stay dedicated to a dissolving ontology based on an industrial idyll, or evolve into mini-cities that can be navigated using our own muscles. Suburbs of the future might encircle their economy by dedicating the surrounding land to small-scale agriculture: every yard a productive garden, every tree-lined street an alley of fruit-yielding usufruct. To survive, suburbs will have to become both more rural and more urban at once. They will have to repudiate the original vision of neither/nor and embrace a both/and flexibility. Many American suburbs, including the one I write in, built in the 1950s, are now actively interpolating blank spaces of grass and parking lots with higher-density mixed-use zoning, public transportation, and community-based agriculture. The suburbs of the future will have to make

do with a lot less oil. Without petroleum, we must stay closer to place most of the time. These energetic limits may generate new value and production in the middle spaces of suburbs.

VI A note on natural gas

We have explored two chemical states of fossil fuels, solid and liquid, and one remains. The dark horse fossil fuel, natural gas, has been historically less important than its geochemical cousins of coal and petroleum. Widespread extraction and infrastructure to support natural gas supplies did not come about until the middle of the twentieth century in America, and a bit later in England. Its brief history belies its importance to our present and future economy. Natural gas widely fuels furnaces, electricity generators, and specialized locomotion such as new city buses. Recently it has received a lot of attention because of its comparatively low greenhouse gas emissions, its cheapness due to the extraction technique of hydro-fracking, and its abundance. Environmentalists see it as a fuel that may transition us from the dirtier fossil fuels to the cleaner, but more expensive and dispersed, renewable fuels derived from sun and wind. Some futurists see natural gas as the platform fuel that we must use, not to maintain the status quo but to build the infrastructure of a new economy based on renewables: our turbines, solar panels, and electric vehicles require intensive energy to produce. Natural gas is Janus-faced: it is climatologically a better option than petroleum and coal, but the booming use of hydro-fracking to attain it and the economic necessity to use this violent technique to achieve reasonable returns makes the modern natural gas industry anathema to many environmentalists.

But there is very little contemporary literature of natural gas. I will discuss one contemporary piece that engages with this fuel on the environmental level: Barbara Hurd's 2013 prose poem, "Fracking: A Fable." The poem plunges through deep geological time to gain perspective on the life and death of natural gas; the locale of interest is the Appalachian basin. Through the superhuman eons when "everything took forever," land and ocean was in flux, mountains jutted out and slowly eroded, and, most importantly, legions of plankton lived and died, settling into a soft rock-submerged mass that would be cooked for millions of years. Now comes formation:

Meanwhile, down in the black ooze, remnants of those tiny creatures that had been held in the mud were shoved more tightly together, packed side by side

with sludged-in sediment, cemented together, cooked by the heat deep in the earth, and converted into hydrocarbons. Layer after layer of crammed-together particles and silt began to sink under the accumulating weight of the mountains that grew above. Wrung of its moisture, its pliability, its flow, the mud slowly, slowly, over millions of years, turned into gas-rich rock.

After millions of years of uncertain, directionless change, humans evolve into the scene in a violent punctuation. Our tools are purposeful and keen, our actions swift. Eternity encounters immediacy, and the sleeper wakes with a jolt. The fracking method comes onto the scene in a geological instant: drills plunge deep into the rock and maneuver for the best purchase on pools of compressed gas, forcing fluid cocktails into fissures to break up the ancient seabed. The quiescence of a blind process is jolted into productivity, the wells give up their wealth, and the world is “lickety-split forever changed.” Humans, “whose footprints, so conspicuous and large, often obliterate cautionary tales,” cannot predict the outcome of their actions; economic demand and technological competence are the only rationales. Hurd ends her excursion with a note on the nature of time: “And now, in no time at all, not everything takes forever any longer.” Our thirst for fossil fuels alters the nature of time from the “forever” of an agentless world to the insistent “now” of the Anthropocene. As with Ruskin equating rapid train travel with killing space and time, here Hurd offers an epitaph on the death of the rock, and the annihilation of the eons that must pass for biomass to slow cook into rich fossil energy.

We are a lucky species, evolving from modest nomads into world rulers during a ten thousand-year string of stable weather that fostered the agricultural revolution; finding fuel resources at nearly every corner of the planet to build and subsist our cultures; innovating tools much more powerful than our bodies to renovate the earth to our specific needs. We are an even luckier cluster of generations, alive during this exceptional time of energy expenditure from fossil fuels unknown to earlier history and highly temporary in duration. In our oil ontology we live outlandishly, beyond ecological limits and past margins of energy previously imposed on earthlings.

The literature of this high-energy world is analogously manic: filled with exuberance, angst, and rage, self-absorbed in the mundane mastery that fossil fuels exercise over the material world. Coal and oil have changed everything in just a few centuries. World population has grown about seven times in the last two hundred years: from one billion to seven billion, with mid-century projections greater than nine billion. This exponential growth—the great departure from

millennia of relative population stability—can be explained largely through the energetic contributions fossil fuels have made to food systems and economies of production. The food calories from large industrial farms are generated with swarms of hydrocarbon calories that constitute fertilizer and pesticides, power large machines, process and distribute food, and keep it refrigerated. In parallel, hydrocarbon calories make other forms of industrial production possible, with legions of worker/consumers toiling around a glowing core of fossil energy. We cannot separate our present selves, physically or ideologically, from the great orbital gravity that hydrocarbons exert at the center of our lives.

But have we donned the wings of Icarus? The outrageous trajectory of energy use since the Industrial Revolution has us flying too high, and, crash landing being an ugly option, we must innovate in-flight. Fossil fuels are unsustainable in both supply and disposal as the carbon sinks fill up and supplies draw down. The current interest in ultra-low-grade tar sands oil and the furor over its intensive and destructive extraction method shows that in the early twenty-first century we are already in the fifth act of the hydrocarbon drama. Oil companies like BP and Exxon produce marketing campaigns that re-brand them as renewable energy corporations with “green” credentials. But considering ample supplies of coal and natural gas, the energy crisis becomes as much an issue of morality as of supply and technology. As individuals and societies, can we choose to descend with some grace, by questioning the logic of unrestrained consumption? Or may crises of ecology and economy force a freefall?

The next, and final, section explores the literature of renewable energy. New renewables inhere to the moral imperative of downscaling consumption because they are dispersed and hard to capture compared with fossil fuels. While evolving technology promises easier and more energy, renewables today may well demonstrate the historical era in which the moral issue of consumption comes into step with the material issue of supply. The fossil-fuel flash must give way to the shine, the flow, the breeze: forces comparatively pacific, but regenerative and time-honored. Renewable energy in literature is as much nostalgia as it is prolepsis.