

University of Montana

ScholarWorks at University of Montana

Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, &
Professional Papers

Graduate School


2016

TOWARD AN ONTOLOGY OF EXHAUSTION: ON THE AFFECTIVE STRUCTURES OF MASCULINITY IN THE AMERICAN OILFIELD

John W. Jepsen

University of Montana, Missoula

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd>

 Part of the American Literature Commons, American Material Culture Commons, American Popular Culture Commons, Continental Philosophy Commons, Human Geography Commons, Literature in English, North America Commons, Nonfiction Commons, and the Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Jepsen, John W., "TOWARD AN ONTOLOGY OF EXHAUSTION: ON THE AFFECTIVE STRUCTURES OF MASCULINITY IN THE AMERICAN OILFIELD" (2016). *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 10800.

<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/10800>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

TOWARD AN ONTOLOGY OF EXHAUSTION:
ON THE AFFECTIVE STRUCTURES OF MASCULINITY IN THE AMERICAN OILFIELD

By

JOHN WANNAMAHER JEPSEN

Bachelor of Arts in English Literature, University of Montana, Missoula, Montana 2010

Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Arts
in English Literature

The University of Montana
Missoula, MT

August 2016

Approved by:

Scott Whittenburg, Dean of The Graduate School
Graduate School

Dr. Katie Cane, Chair
English

Dr. Robert Baker
English

Dr. Stephen Schwarze
Communication Studies

© COPYRIGHT

by

John Wannamaker Jepsen

2016

All Rights Reserved

ABSTRACT

Jepsen, John, M.A., Summer 2016

English Literature

Toward an Ontology of Exhaustion: On the Affective Structures of Masculinity in the American Oilfield

Chairperson: Dr. Katie Kane

What is the significance of the oil encounter in the lives of men living and working in the modern oilfields of the United States? Engaging with both literary examples of the lives of men in the Interior West and the personal experiences and reflections of the author, this essay seeks to examine the connections between ideology and place as it works to shape the identity and affect of men in America's oilfields, ultimately ending in them identifying with the very resources their activities seek to exploit and exhaust. Utilizing Theodore Adorno's *Minima Moralia* as its moral touchstone, this essay works to point out the ways in which totalizing ideologies operate within the lives of individual men, and how those ideologies are perpetuated and structured by spatial/place-based concerns. The first section will examine how masculinity is represented in John McPhee's *Rising From the Plains* and Alexandra Fuller's *The Legend of Colton H. Bryant*, exploring how place informs and shapes the perception of masculinity. The aphoristic, meditative style of *Minima Moralia* also informs the structure of this work, as does Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*; the essay weaves personal experience with critical theory to attempt a synthesis of the two. Having worked for nearly four years in the oilfields of the Interior West, the author was able to witness both sides of the boom-bust dynamic that structures the oil industry, and the ramifications of that dynamic in the lives of individual men, himself included. Using Adorno's insights into the nature of totalizing ideology and the many subtle ways by which it perpetuates itself in culture and behavior, this essay utilizes the work of Nelson, Adorno, and Judith Butler, among others, to question just how ideology structures gender. By combining this with a concern for the spatially-bounded nature of human experience and the way that place informs identity, this essay looks at how a culture of resource extraction—"petroculture"—shapes and defines masculinity. While acknowledging the epistemic uncertainty of its approach this essay argues that through both conscious modeling and unconscious reactive conditioning, men foreclose on the possibilities for themselves and their shared world. This crippled sense of futurity leaves these men vulnerable to exploitation and exhaustion by the global market that seeks to extract the petroleum by means of these same men's labor.

This work is dedicated to all the men and women I worked with, but most especially, Sam Mongold, Brandon Savage, Shawn Phillips, Tiffany Sorensen, and, last but not least, to my father, Stanley Robert Jepsen.

Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Introduction	1
Section One, No Place for Cowboys: Wyoming and The Spatial Boundaries of Masculinity in <i>Rising from the Plains</i> and <i>The Legend of Colton H. Bryant</i>	30
Section Two, It Is What It Is, and Then Some: A personal narrative of exhaustion in America's oilfields.....	62
Conclusion, A Précis to Further Study: Directions in Ontological Understanding.....	102
Works Cited	104

Toward an Ontology of Exhaustion:

The Affective Structures of Masculinity in the American Oilfield, an Essay

The understanding of the oil encounter, and the cultures spawned by and nurtured within petromodernity is essential if one wishes to have any clear idea about our current world-civilization.¹ Petroleum is the bedrock of modern industrial life on earth. Its energy is the basis for all the technological processes by which we can distinguish this age from its predecessors, and it is the indispensable resource that makes possible the functioning (and dysfunction) of all modern states and the trans-national economy that links them. Without petroleum and its byproducts we wouldn't have modern agriculture, medicine, pharmaceuticals, transport, clothing, and the technologies of the digital age. Quite simply, no oil means *no* modernity. Or put in more direct terms, without the easy energy of petroleum and its physical byproducts we would not have the civilization that we have today, nor the possibility of its existence. As Fredrick Buell points out in "A Short History of Oil Cultures; or, The Marriage of Catastrophe and Exuberance," "Nowadays, energy is more than a constraint; it (especially oil) remains an essential (and, to man, the essential) prop underneath humanity's material and symbolic cultures" (Buell , 70). Buell is building on Leslie White's assertion that, "Other things being equal, the degree of cultural development varies directly as the amount of energy per capita per hour harnessed and put to work."² Under the petroleum regime our civilization has reached its apex under the rubric of consumption. The principal chemical driver of the entire economic system is

¹ I first encountered the term in LeMenager, Stephanie, *Living Oil*, p. 67: "modern life based in the cheap energy systems made possible by oil."

² Quoted in Buell, p. 69

also the solid substance upon which much of humanity sits, literally, in the form of plastics, and other synthetics. Popular consumptive regimes are not at the fore of this essay, however, what it seeks to consider is a particular schematic technique at the heart of masculinity. Precisely, the tendency of men in the interior west of the United States to ascribe to a kind of rugged individualism as the center of their identity. What it amounts to is an identity that does not perceive itself as dependant upon the struts and supports of the wider culture—the federal government, for example—as a core facet of its internal self-understanding. And yet this constructed self finds itself at the mercy of the greater global system of acquisition, accumulation, and acceleration. Macroeconomic forces impinge upon every microeconomic unit, as no system is immune to the rapacious growth of the consumption economy.

This kind of macro-view of the role of petroleum does little, however, to educate the reader in the ways in which petromodernity insinuates itself into the individual lives and ideologies of men and women throughout the developed and the developing world. The oil encounter is essential to the understanding of petromodernity, as individuals find themselves confronted with the scale and growth of modern civilization as made possible by petroleum. In order to make clear and viscerally present the means and outcomes of petroleum's effect upon individuals, one must seek out concrete examples of its effects in and on the lives of men and women. In addition, individuals must be called upon and willing to offer testimony of their experiences within petromodernity. Amitav Ghosh, in his essay "Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel," wonders why it is that the spice trade was generative of so much great literature, whereas the oil encounter had, at the time of his essay, seen so little. His answer, "to the principal protagonists in the Oil Encounter...the history of oil is a matter of embarrassment verging on the pornographic" (Ghosh, 29). Indeed, there still remains precious little in the way of

good literature, whether fictional or non, that deals explicitly with the oil encounter. Ghosh was primarily interested in the relationship between America and the Middle East, he offers a small guess as to why the American writer might not be interested in writing oil, or about the oil encounter:

"It would be hard indeed to imagine the writing school that could teach its graduates to find their way through the uncharted firmaments of the Oil Encounter. In a way, the professionalization of fiction has had much the same effect in America as it had in Britain in another imperial age: as though in precise counterpoint to the increasing geographical elasticity of the country's involvements, its fictional gaze has turned inward, becoming ever more introspective, ever more concentrated upon its own self-definition. In other words, it has fastened upon a stock of themes and subjects each of which is accompanied by a well-tested pedagogic technology. Try and imagine a major American writer taking on the Oil Encounter. The idea is literally inconceivable (30).

While this project will not concern itself directly with fictional accounts, Ghosh's argument can easily be extended to the professionalized domain of non-fiction and journalism which suffers from a similar kind of inward turning. Indeed, the examples that the first section will use are both interested in the lives of men in the United States, with very little attention paid to the global system to which these men are subject. Ghosh is quick to point out that the blame cannot be pointed at the writers themselves, "There isn't very much they could write about: neither they nor anyone else really knows anything at all about the human experiences that surround the production of oil" (30). This project is an attempt to address, through the medium of academic discourse, some of this deficiency of knowledge.

The need for a human-scale understanding of the effects of petroleum exploration and extraction is especially acute, for often hidden at this level is much of the violence and long-term harm visited upon individuals by our civilization's need for petroleum. Moreover, it is at the level of individual people where one can examine the multiform ways ideology shapes and is shaped by a person's experience within petromodernity. Even if this project will not seek to examine fictional accounts, or to make fictional accounts its primary focus, it will still attempt to give imaginative work pride of place in the attempt to articulate what is most important about the oil encounter. By examining the real lives, of real men, and by staying close to those subjects, this small-scale attempt will provide a basis for further examination of works, both fictional and non, according to their implicit or explicit bearing upon the oil encounter and petromodernity.

This kind of "micrological" work, to borrow Adorno's phrase, is necessarily bounded by the scope of individuals and their individual lives. This means that the stories told and the examples given must be understood *in-place* and in regard to the culture and ideologies operative in those individual's lives. This kind of spatial and ideological unpacking is necessary to understand not only the individual's experience, but also individual reactions to experience, and the ideas and concepts that guide, abet, conceal, and shape understandings of that experience. These understandings will not only bear upon the oil encounter and petromodernity as it functions in people's lives, but it will also bear, at times decisively, on our self-understanding.

The work of understanding self-identity and its ideological underpinnings is not only essential to the project of understanding petromodernity; it also functions as the entrée into a critique of petro-culture, and, more importantly, to an effective petro-politics that could animate those most inured to petroleum's benefits to see and to act meaningfully to thwart its most devastating negative consequences. To understand the way in which individuals get caught up in

and then justify their experiences in the extraction and exploration of petroleum is key to beginning dialogue with them about remedies that might mitigate the worst consequences they must endure or that humanity and the planet may suffer.

It is not necessarily within the scope of this project to begin a discussion of the global effects of petroleum extraction, though some key concepts used in this project will come from scholars whose work is transnational, or global in perspective. The weight of this absence should be understood to inform all further considerations, as the global market for oil, for crude oil and its derivatives, is determinative of so much of modern life. To wit, many, if not most, Americans think the US. goes to war for oil—a claim that is hard to dispute this with a straight face. This project will instead focus regionally for the purposes of utilizing the “experiential” (its author's own experiences and others’) and in keeping with the spirit of 'micrological' work. This project will further combine literary analysis with personal narrative to achieve a hybrid style. This will allow for the weaving of personal reflection and experience in the oilfields of the United States with academic and philosophical considerations of masculinity, place, the public sphere, selfhood, and what I now call the "ontology of exhaustion." Moreover, this project will allow me to explore the affective nature of self-understanding, and how oil-culture(s) shape and are shaped by that understanding.

The affective aspect of self-understanding, specifically the gendered nature of identity, is something that was brought to my attention in an urgent manner by Maggie Nelson's autobiographical/theoretical work *The Argonauts*. Nelson's concern has as much to do with the affective aspects of identity as it does with exploring and giving embodied expression to the context and content of modern attempts at self-understanding. Her meditation upon the viscera of childbearing, the difficulties of living with and loving a person who rejects any common notion

of gender, her own sexual and sensual reactions to the world all speak to the tension alive in any attempt to represent these things in prose. To make of the messy stuff of life an intelligible, indeed *relatable* description of what it's like to *be* Maggie Nelson, or, even more challenging, to attempt to relate the lives of her partner, Harry, or her son, Iggy. The beauty of *The Argonauts* is that Nelson is aware that words will not do, that representation is not always equal to the task of understanding. Early in the book, as Nelson is speaking with, or writing to, Harry (the book could be construed as a lengthy love-letter), she remarks upon their divergent views of language:

Before long I learned that you had spent a lifetime equally devoted to the conviction that words are *not* good enough. Not only not good enough, but corrosive to all that is good, all that is real, all that is flow. We argued and argued on this account, full of fever, not malice. Once we name something, you said, we can never see it the same way again. All that is unnamable falls away, gets lost, is murdered. You called this the cookie-cutter function of our minds. You said that you knew this not from shunning language but from immersion in it, on the screen, in conversation, onstage, on the page. I argued along the lines of Thomas Jefferson and the churches—for plethora, for kaleidoscopic shifting, for excess. I insisted that words did more than nominate. I read aloud to you the opening of *Philosophical Investigations*. *Slab*, I shouted, *slab!*

For a time, I thought I had won. You conceded there might be an OK human, an OK human animal, even if that human animal used language, even if its use of language were somehow defining of its humanness—even if humanness itself meant trashing and torching the whole motley, precious planet, along with its, our, future.

But I changed too. I looked anew at unnamable things, or at least things whose essence is flicker, flow. I readmitted the sadness of our eventual extinction, and the injustice of our extinction of others. I stopped smugly repeating *Everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly* and wondered anew, can everything be thought (Nelson, 4).

The work is a testament of love borne out in the attempt to stay in that place of unknowing/impossibility, to embrace the particular and provisional *as* particular and provisional, yet relatable through the medium of text and thought. Part of the power of this approach is that it remains radically open. Open not only to its audience and interlocutors, but open to its own lacking, its own incompleteness, its own failure. Judith Butler, whom Nelson acknowledges as a mother and muse to her project, puts it this way in her book *Precarious Life*: "for representation to convey the human, then, representation must not only fail, but it must *show* its failure" (Butler, 144).

This project will also, then, have to show its failure. Through the various attempts to describe and relate a very particular self-understanding that I propose is a feature of modern masculinity, and which is in effect in harmful and deleterious ways in the lives of men and women in the American oilfield, I cannot help but make partial and provisional arguments, give partial and provisional examples. My own physical and historical proximity to the oilfield, and the particular places and acts I took part in while there, necessarily mean that I can only point to the issues at hand from that unique particularity, from that unique subject position. That said, I will try to counterbalance that which might be thought pernicious in this type of writing with examples, ideas and arguments made in academic journals and books, and by examining literary examples of lives disparate from my own.

This idea of weaving the academic or theoretical with the personal is, again, something for which I owe Nelson credit, for providing *The Argonauts* as a kind of model or template, and, at a more personal level, as a kind of permission to mix one's own messy life with the stuff of high-theory. This is not autobiography or memoir, nor is it an attempt to theorize one's life. What it amounts to is a sometimes clumsy, sometimes brilliant attempt to generate insights into life *and* theory: to take the stuff of one's life and make it speak back to and through and with the academic/theoretical realm so often devoid of the personal. This brings me back to Butler, and the idea of showing failure. What I hope to provide, at times, is something like what Butler calls "the critical Image." Which is to say that, by offering examples from my own experience in the second section, and of the experience of other men in the first, I hope to point up some of the difficulties inherent in representing a person's experience while also attempting to make those experiences resonate in meaningful but non-tendentious ways for the reader. Butler writes:

Jacqueline Rose reminds us, identification collapses into identity, which spells the death of identification itself. This difference internal to identification is crucial, and, in a way, it shows us that disidentification is part of the common practice of identification itself. The triumphalist image can communicate an impossible overcoming of this difference, a kind of identification that believes that it has overcome the difference that is the condition of its own possibility. The critical image, if we can speak that way, works this difference in the same way as the Levinasian image; it must not only fail to capture its referent, but show this failing (Butler, 146).

This quotation comes from the final, eponymous, chapter of Butler's book *Precarious Life*. And while the context and argumentation that Butler is using is post-9/11 America, and the non-identification with Muslims or people of Middle Eastern descent, the point stands when we are

talking about men in the United States. One major hurdle for my work will be to maintain some critical distance from men with whom I identify, and with whom I worked closely. It will also require that I be willing to submit my own assumptions and experiences to the critical gaze so often only turned on the unwitting subjects of social, literary, or theoretical work. And so, I will have to be willing to fail in order to make this project a success. I will attempt to represent a kind of life and a kind of ideology with which I had the most intense familiarity, and so I will have to be willing to admit my own complicity with, my own blindness to, and my own fondness for that very thing I wish to point to as a problem. This kind of representation, when attempted at the academic/theoretical level, is easy to fail at, and to fail at from the start.

One quote from Butler will help to give some idea of where the failure of representation, either through academic analysis, biography, or personal narrative can begin:

The bad reading [of *Gender Trouble*] goes something like this: I can get up in the morning, look in my closet, and decide which gender I want to be today. I can take out a piece of clothing and change my gender: stylize it, and then that evening I can change it again and be something radically other, so that what you get is something like the commodification of gender, and the understanding of taking on a gender as a kind of consumerism....When my whole point was that the very formation of subjects, the very formation of persons, *presupposes* gender in a certain way—that gender is not to be chosen and that "performativity" is not radical choice and it's not volunteerism....Performativity has to do with repetition, very often with the repetition of oppressive and painful gender norms to force them to resignify. This is not freedom, but a question of how to work the trap that one is inevitably in (Nelson, 15).

This "bad reading" is also a trap one can easily fall into when analyzing one's own predicament, or the situation of others. To ascribe an active, invested, and conscious agency to the gendered nature of a person's being in the world is to assume that person's knowing and committed stance toward the very question of their identity. But as Heidegger has warned, authenticity of action and being is not guaranteed, even for a being "which in its Being has this very Being as an issue" (Heidegger, 68).³ Which is simply to say that gendered-personhood, or the affective trappings of such are not, nor indeed must they be, articulated or articulable by any given individual.

Undoubtedly, common sense understandings and "average, everyday" conceptions of gender and gender roles are accessible to individuals. But it would be a step too far to assume constant conscious implementation of gender-norms and affective responses to the world at the level of an individual life. It is with this in mind that description of the masculinity operative in the American oilfield becomes a minefield of assumption and presumption. We may begin surveying these mines by pointing out whose stories I am choosing here to include: namely, men's stories. Women in the oilfield are certainly few, and perhaps because of their presence as *other*, those women I did know had to hew pretty closely to the dictates of the masculinity that characterized

³ For context, the entire quote: "...in each case Dasein is mine to be in one way or another. Dasein has always made some sort of decision as to the way in which it is in each case mine [je meines]. That entity which in its Being has this very being as an issue, comports itself towards its Being as its ownmost possibility. In each case Dasein is its possibility, and it 'has' this possibility, but not just as a property [eigenschaftlich], as something present-at-hand would. And because Dasein is in each case essentially its own possibility, it *can*, in its very Being, 'choose' itself and win itself; it can also lose itself and never win itself; or only 'seem' to do so. But only in so far as it is essentially something which can be *authentic*—that is, something of its own—can it have lost itself and not yet won itself. As modes of Being, *authenticity* and *inauthenticity*...are both grounded in the fact that any Dasein whatsoever is characterized by mineness. But the inauthenticity of Dasein does not signify any 'less' Being or any 'lower' Being. Rather it is the case that even in its fullest concretion Dasein can be characterized by inauthenticity—when busy, when excited, when interested, when ready for enjoyment."

the oil patch.⁴ A fruitful future study might look at how women in the oilfield do or do not inhabit similar affective responses to the world as their male counterparts. For the purposes of this project, however, because the origins of this investigation lie in my own experience as a man in the field and in my reading of male-driven non-fictional narratives, I will limit my engagement to men and masculinities as they present themselves in the modern American oilfield.

This thesis engages with the written word, and with "big-L" Literature, work that the first section will attempt to illuminate. However, because the nature of the topic is both personal for its author, and peculiar in its specificity, the second section will necessitate a personal narrative and personal reflection upon the experiences related through that narrative. The first section needs no defense of form, as its genre will be a recognizable form of literary criticism. The second section will, however, require some explanation and critical elaboration, and by its inclusion in the whole, so does the entire project. The structure of this project will be rather conventional for a master's thesis, an introduction setting up what is at stake for the author and the argument, and then two sections dealing with concepts of existence and exhaustion, the first by way of literary analysis, and the second by way of personal narrative and reflection, the project will close with a short summary, a set of conclusions, and the outline of further work to be done.

In short, the thesis will make two intertwined arguments, and give some answer to the inevitable questions that this project will raise. The first argument is that a masculinity defined by rugged individualism is both *anti-intellectual* thus disregarding others' attempts at thought

⁴ Contrary to the idea that women weren't strong enough to make it in the oil field, the two women I worked with for any sustained period of time were both second generation oil field, like myself, and had earned undergraduate degrees in engineering. They both evinced the same self-reliant spirit that the men I worked with did, with the only major difference being that the men treated them differently.

and *anti-collectivist* thus disregarding the communal nature of human existence. This combination abets a kind of hyper-masculine property accumulation that is couched in a morality of ownership and 'just desserts' that lends metaphysical weight to the very act of accumulation through work and thereby disregards and devalues those that either cannot or will not conform to the neo-liberal fiction of the self. The second argument, utilizing Judith Butler's analysis of Levinas in her book *Precarious Life*, will be the necessity of reintroducing personhood and particularity into the oil encounter, an encounter that has the pernicious effect of de-humanizing and de-particularizing our understanding of petromodernity, thereby abetting the reification of all being, including human being, as 'standing reserve' devoid of value outside of the realms of energy and economy.

These two arguments are in service of a larger idea I wish to drill down into and excavate and which feeds back into and structures the affective experience of men in oilfield: this larger idea is exhaustion. The word itself, "exhaustion", has manifold applications for the topics of human life, the oilfield, and ecological or climatological concerns; it is also applicable to the project itself, in that by 'showing the failure' of words, whether in the form of narrative, biography, or critical theory, this project also points to the exhaustion of language as a means of coming to grips with reality, in both exhausting language itself and the ways in which attempts at utilizing language exhausts the mind and body at work. By bringing into dialogue the infinitesimally small (in the form of narratives and stories from the lives of individual men) with the seemingly infinite or incomprehensible (in the form of the global system of oil extraction and the economies and civilization dependant upon it) this project will seek the limits of comprehensibility, of rational and coherent description. If words cannot tell the whole story, we are left asking, "How do we talk about this issue?" I propose that by placing the idea of

exhaustion in the fore, and never losing sight of it as a kind of "structure of feeling," to borrow a phrase from Raymond Williams, we can explain much of what is motivating, both at the level of the individual and that of culture and society.

It is at this point that the danger and opportunity of such a project starts to become clear. If the exhaustion of resources, lives, and words are all inherent features of the oil encounter, of the very nature of petromodernity, then the question is begged regarding how this exhaustion manifests itself in the conscious life of the individual, if indeed it does. Short of conscious recognition in the individual is the affective dimension of human life and experience, with its often unarticulated or unrecognized character. Does exhaustion show itself at the level of affect and behavior before it is apprehended by consciousness? Does exhaustion show even at the level of language, before it shows itself at the level of reified thought or ideology? This last question seeks to stretch the idea of reified thought and ideology to include the sub-conscious apprehension and understanding of one's situation and the modeling of it in language long before an individual or culture becomes dialogically aware of it. We talk the language *of* exhaustion before we talk *about* exhaustion. Discussion of resource exhaustion is rampant among elites and leftist intelligentsia, but it is the very denial of exhaustion that structures the discourse of many on the right, Peak Oil aside. This means that at the level of the individual within oil culture, especially those men most inured to the industry of oil extraction, exhaustion is the unspoken. Exhaustion is the evil that dare not speak its name, because the admission of its reality would be the very undoing of everything that petromodernity provides. It will be my goal to show how the oil encounter, as evidenced through the masculinity of the American oilfield, is affectively structured by exhaustion, both physical and psychic, both conscious and sub-conscious. In so doing, I hope to give words to the structures of feeling that support a system that thrives upon

ignorance of its fundamental reality, while recognizing the danger inherent in the reification of thought, and the valorization of ways of life inherent to petromodernity.

It is at this point that a robust defense of the second section, with its personal narrative and attempts at critical reflection upon them becomes crucial for keeping a level of objectivity. Paradoxical as it may seem, reflection upon a personal narrative allows the author to put at the fore his own prejudices and assumptions and thereby bring them up for critical scrutiny. To fail to do so is to keep bad faith with the audience, who are assuming a level of probity from the text and its author that comes at a high cost in trust if not maintained scrupulously. For someone who came from a liberal-academic background to then work in an industry notorious for its attempts at shutting down critical debate and outside research of its inner workings, an attitude and ideological formation that trickles down to the men in fields turning the wrenches, I had a first-hand experience with total ideological conflict. Which is to say that the men and women I worked with could not have had views more divergent from my own. It would be untrue to say that I never met a liberal-minded person working in the oilfield, but on the whole the political-ideological stance of most people I met ran toward the paleo-conservative, libertarian, and often downright "black helicopters" style anti-governmentalism best represented by people like Alex Jones or Glenn Beck. Many people I met, especially truck drivers and rig hands, are convinced that Barack Obama is coming for their guns, and that civil war is inevitable

Many discussions I took part in or witnessed were solely focused on the nature of and evidence for the world government that would strip America of its sovereignty and allow the global elites to more completely determine the destiny of America's people. It can be hard not to sit by cynically during such discussion, thinking of Marx in the *German Ideology* when he writes, "The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material

relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence, of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance" (Marx, 64). And yet Marx and the entire discourse of communism or socialism is anathema to the discourse in the oilfield. I only once heard a co-worker ask, "Why don't we have unions?" And this only after we all had suffered a temporary pay-cut in late 2012. More commonly I'd be singled out *as a communist*, this almost always in half-joking repudiation. In fact, in the minds of many of the men I met my academic background was suspect precisely because of its assumed left wing, communist prejudice.

I cannot stress enough how absolutely correct these men were in their assumptions. I did and do have relatively hard-left stances on many issues. With the possible exception of gun ownership and the size of the federal government, I hew to a set of beliefs most academics in the humanities would find unsurprisingly familiar. The constant, frictive confrontation my ideas and assumptions met with acted to both undermine and sharpen my convictions. How do you argue with a man that the very thing that puts food in his children's mouths is a great evil? How does one argue for the dismantling of or divestiture from a system that is literally the only reason I had for the opportunity to speak with these men, the only reason all of us were there? Concurrently, how can one walk, day-after-day, through the same toxic cesspool and not speak out? How can one ignore the carelessness, recklessness, and downright brutal ignorance that leads so often to spills, accidents, mayhem, and death?

In the dedication to *Minima Moralia*, Theodor Adorno warns the reader of critical reflection upon one's own life and upon the "immediate." This warning is much like the above selection from Judith Butler, in that critical reflection upon others' lives cannot assume too much intention on the part of those analyzed, adding that the hasty critic is liable to obscure something

basic about his own situation. The "melancholy science" is what Adorno dubs the philosophical attempt at "teaching of the good life," which by its conversion into "method," has lost its way: "What the philosophers once knew as life has become the sphere of private existence and now of mere consumption, dragged along as an appendage of the process of material production, without autonomy or substance of its own (Adorno, 15). This critique has the familiar ring of Marxist thought, but with the private-public distinction made central. This concern with the private sphere of the individual as the locus of "life" is one that we must take seriously if we are to understand the way ideology produces in individuals a particular way of being. But, as Adorno warns, this attention upon the immediate can easily shade into a justification for or mere rehearsal of the ideology of the present moment:

He who wishes to know the truth about life in its immediacy must scrutinize its estranged form, the objective powers that determine individual existence even in its most hidden recesses. To speak immediately of the immediate is to behave much as those novelists who drape their marionettes in imitated bygone passions like cheap jewellery [sic], and make people who are no more than component parts of machinery act as if they still had the capacity to act as subjects, and as if something depended on their actions. Our perspective of life has passed into an ideology which conceals the fact that there is life no longer (15).

This meditation upon the private lives of individuals, which are now subject merely to the dictates of production and consumption speaks precisely to the notion of exhaustion. Or, as Adorno says, "Should the appearance of life, which the sphere of consumption itself defends for such bad reason, be once entirely effaced, then the monstrosity of absolute production will triumph." Life for Adorno is "the consciousness and unconsciousness of individuals," which

presents only the barest bulwark against a system which seeks, at all times, to generate and satisfy needs and desires, to invest and populate that innermost realm so as to yoke it entirely to the market.

I would like for this project to be a foray into the individual and subjective domain of the modern man in petromodernity. I cannot, of course, hope to spell out with epidemiological certainty or statistical veracity the claims that I will advance. What I can do, however, is attempt to relate the experiences of men who have worked in and around the oilfield, myself included, with the hope of pointing to something that seems, at least to me, to be shared. Again, Adorno has a warning:

Subjective reflection, even if critically alerted to itself, has something sentimental and anachronistic about it: something of a lament over the course of the world, a lament to be rejected not for its good faith, but because the lamenting subject threatens to become arrested in its condition and so to fulfil [sic] in its turn the law of the world's course. Fidelity to one's own state of consciousness and experience is forever in temptation of lapsing into infidelity, by denying the insight that transcends the individual and calls his substance by its name (16).

To merely replicate in one's intellectual output the very thing one wishes to point out is the intrinsic danger here alluded to by Adorno, and something about which he warns later, under the headings of morality and style. Specifically, his advice to the writer/thinker is to gird oneself against three important prejudices: naiveté, sophistication, and the desire for relevance. I belabor this point only to make absolutely clear what I think is at stake for this project: my own existence and something very close to my self-understanding. This project is not merely in service of some degree, but is an attempt to explicate something I have found to be true about our modern world.

Adorno's warnings about naiveté and sophistication come in section 46 of *Minima Moralia* under the heading "On the morality of thinking." His language would not be unwelcome on the stage of much current American political debate:

Reflection that takes sides with naivety condemns itself: cunning and obscurantism remain what they always were. Mediatly to affirm immediacy, instead of comprehending it as mediated within itself, is to pervert thought into an apologia of its antithesis, into the immediate lie. This perversion serves all bad purposes, from the private pigheadedness of 'life's-like-that' to the justification of social injustice as a law of nature (73).

This project will attempt to address just how pernicious this kind of naive thought can be in the second section, where I will dissect how the oilfield's ubiquitous phrase "it is what it is" acts as the ideological equivalent of capitulation to reality, the exhaustion of thought, and the decimation of possibility. As Adorno makes clear, naive thought does not consider the ideological basis for itself. It assumes a kind of *innocence* that does not exist, but is rather a symptom of ideology, and not its precursor. This kind of argumentation can be hard to counter when faced head-on, as the interlocutor espousing his "Isn't it obvious I'm right!?" attitude will generally take for granted not only the premises of his thought, but will assume the primordial correctness of his arguments. A clear example of this is knee-jerk reaction against any form of government, the assumption being that "the government is best that governs least." While some simple platitude may work well to gin up hysteria about government overreach or to sell t-shirts, it subsumes any and all examples of *good governance* or successful interventions *by* government. I do not intend this example as evidence for more government, rather, I simply wish to point to the fact that while the Reaganite "moral majority" may think it understands implicitly what is "right," the mere bandying about of slogans or maxims does not and cannot constitute thought or

argumentation. To quote is not to think, no matter whether you are quoting Karl Marx or Friedrich Hayek.

This condemnation of simplistic or naive thought is balanced in Adorno's own thinking by an even more scorching castigation of overheated sophistication. Sophisticated thinking is liable, in his words, to "revert to a naivety engrossed with utilitarian goals," a byproduct of over-emphasis on practical concerns and with a "distrust of theory." But, he warns, even when sophistication is "that which widens horizons," it falls prey to its own tendency to abstraction and conceptualization:

It is just this passing-on and being unable to linger, this tacit assent to the primacy of the general over the particular, which constitutes not only the deception of idealism in hypostasizing concepts, but also its inhumanity, that has no sooner grasped the particular than it reduces it to a through-station, and finally comes all too quickly to terms with suffering and death for the sake of reconciliation occurring merely in reflection—in the last analysis, the bourgeois coldness that is only too willing to underwrite the inevitable. *Knowledge can only widen horizons by abiding so insistently with the particular that its isolation is dispelled* (74, my emphasis).

One can recognize this sort of thinking in the top-down technocratism of Silicon Valley and the bloated security state that feeds off its products. All particulars fall victim to the so-called "greater good" of data-mining and the possibility of total information saturation. We willingly give up information to the system through our smart phones and digital devices, and the algorithms churn up useful knowledge for intimate marketing. The promise, for government, is prediction. By harnessing all that raw data, the technocrats and the hapless governments they work with hope to be able to anticipate terror attacks and domestic unrest—No matter that not a

single act of terror seems to have been decisively stopped by these data collection activities, or the predictive power of Silicon Valley.⁵ Again, I'm not arguing this in order to assert some claim about the government, but to elucidate a point about the perniciousness of sophisticated thought. We fall victim to our own *teche* when we think that it can do the thinking for us; when we abdicate the hard work of looking for terrorists or criminals to an algorithm or computer, we also assume all the prejudices baked into that system.

Adorno's third admonition for the writer is singular in its intent, and yet comes in two sections of the book: 50, entitled "Gaps," and 64, "Morality and Style." In the first he states, "The injunction to practice intellectual honesty usually amounts to sabotage of thought" (Adorno, 80). What he means by this, is that when one is asked to formulaically spell out one's process of

⁵ See: Akerman, Spencer & Paul Lewis, The Guardian, "US senators rail against intelligence disclosures over NSA practices," at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/31/us-senate-intelligence-officials-nsa>: "The NSA has previously claimed that 54 terrorist plots had been disrupted "over the lifetime" of the bulk phone records collection and the separate program collecting the internet habits and communications of people believed to be non-Americans. On Wednesday, Inglis said that at most one plot might have been disrupted by the bulk phone records collection alone. "There is an example that comes close to a 'but for' example," Inglis said." See also: Waterman, Shaun, The Washington Times, "NSA chiefs admission of misleading numbers adds to Obama administration blunders," at <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/oct/2/nsa-chief-figures-foiled-terror-plots-misleading/>: "The Obama administration's credibility on intelligence suffered another blow Wednesday as the chief of the National Security Agency admitted that officials put out numbers that vastly overstated the counterterrorism successes of the government's warrantless bulk collection of all Americans' phone records. Pressed by the Democratic chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee at an oversight hearing, Gen. Keith B. Alexander admitted that the number of terrorist plots foiled by the NSA's huge database of every phone call made in or to America was only one or perhaps two — far smaller than the 54 originally claimed by the administration. Gen. Alexander and other intelligence chiefs have pleaded with lawmakers not to shut down the bulk collection of U.S. phone records despite growing unease about government overreach in the program, which was revealed in documents leaked by former NSA contractor Edward Snowden. "There is no evidence that [bulk] phone records collection helped to thwart dozens or even several terrorist plots," Sen. Patrick J. Leahy, Vermont Democrat and committee chairman, told Gen. Alexander of the 54 cases that administration officials — including the general himself — have cited as the fruit of the NSA's domestic snooping. "These weren't all plots and they weren't all foiled," he said.

thinking, the mental paths that one followed to get to one's ideas or concepts, then inevitably one will deracinate and desiccate that very thought:

For the value of a thought is measured by its distance from the continuity of the familiar. It is objectively devalued as this distance is reduced; the more it approximates to the preexisting standard, the further its antithetical function is diminished, and only in this, in its manifest relation to its opposite, not in its isolated existence, are the claims of thought founded (80).

This notion of thought becoming so much like what came before it so as to be indistinguishable from its antecedents, is Adorno's warning against a kind of Cartesian logic that states that we must "address ourselves only to [abstract] objects," in denial of the fact that our "knowledge comes to us through a network of prejudices, opinions, innervations, self-corrections, presuppositions and exaggerations, in short through the medium of experience." But it is by acknowledging the disparate and often-untraceable nature of knowledge that we point to what Adorno refers to as an inadequacy, "This inadequacy resembles that of life, which describes a wavering, deviating line" (81). If life is "no longer," as Adorno says, then to put our thoughts out in a way that acknowledges their messy genesis, without reversion to formula or insistence on repetition, we might begin to approach something like re-birth. Or, as Adorno insists, "Every thought that is not idle, however, bears branded on it the impossibility of its full legitimation...Thought waits to be woken one day by the memory of what has been missed, and to be transformed into teaching."

Adorno elaborates on the writer's reality, that they will find the more they try to hone their arguments, the more they try to insist upon nuance, attention to detail, and care in choice of word or example, "the more obscure the literary result is thought, whereas a loose and

irresponsible formulation is at once rewarded with a certain understanding" (101). This example is an intensifying of the original point on the deracination of thought, but with the added caveat that one must not only avoid formula and cliché in ones expression, but also not fall victim to the temptation to sloppiness or simplicity in exposition in order to garner the assent of their audience.

Shoddiness that drifts with the flow of familiar speech is taken as a sign of relevance and contact: people know what they want because they know what other people want. Regard for the object, rather than for communication, is suspect in any expression: anything specific, not taken from pre-existent patterns, appears inconsiderate, a symptom of eccentricity, almost a confusion.

We are taught to expect and to repeat vagaries, to speak in ways that do not shake up or dislocate or discomfit the thinking of the other. Our writing and speaking are to be of a piece, vague enough that the hearer can "imagine whatever suits him and what he already thinks in any case"; this kind of writing, this kind of speech, does not instruct, but merely perpetuates that which the hearer had in his mind anyhow, and in so doing reinforces the prejudices and preconceptions that he were dumped in his harbor by the first thing he heard and compounded by thousands of instances of the same. Adorno is very clear on this point: we must seek to teach, if only by forcing the reader to have to think for himself, to shake himself loose from stock notions of how things are, or how things ought to be:

Rigorous formulation demands unequivocal comprehension, conceptual effort, to which people are deliberately discouraged, and imposes on them in advance of any content a suspension of all received opinions, and thus an isolation, that they violently resist. Only what they do not need first to understand, they consider understandable; only the word

coined by commerce, and really alienated, touches them as familiar. Few things contribute so much to the demoralization of intellectuals. Those who would escape it must recognize the advocates of communicability as traitors to what they communicate.

It is with this final quote that we see Adorno addressing not only the writer as he is read, but also the writer as he is writing. If commerce and production are coin of the realm, so to speak, then how does one write outside of that paradigm? What words are adequate to speak back to, from outside, those inured to capital's seductive charms? For if the writer is not careful, then his words are no more than the perpetuation of the ideas through which capital, and its logic of production and consumption, eat up and infect the "consciousness and unconsciousness of individuals." And if this happens the writer is responsible for the continued attrition of that space wherein we might find some refuge from the impositions of an ideology that only knows to grow and to consume forever: "Should the appearance of life, which the sphere of consumption itself defends for such bad reason, be once entirely effaced, then the monstrosity of absolute production will triumph" (15).

This totalizing concept, "the monstrosity of absolute production," has a corollary in the thought of Martin Heidegger. In his essay "The Question Concerning Technology," Heidegger posits technology as "a way of revealing" (Heidegger, 318). What it reveals to us is a way of understanding and approaching the world. His term for this totalizing manner of revealing and approaching the world is as "standing-reserve":

The word expresses here something more, and something more essential, than mere "stock." The word "standing-reserve" assumes the rank of an inclusive rubric. It designates nothing less than the way in which everything presences that is wrought upon

by the revealing that challenges. Whatever stands by in the sense of standing-reserve no longer stands over against us as object (322).

This logic, by which the technology we have created sets forth for us a manner of understanding, approaching and interacting with the world around us, is not something we are immune to by the mere fact of our being men, and therefore the ostensible creators of this technology. As Heidegger explains,

If man is challenged, ordered, to do this, then does not man himself belong even more originally than nature within the standing reserve? The current talk about human resources, about the supply of patients for a clinic, gives evidence of this. The forester who measures the felled timber in the woods and who to all appearances walks the forest path in the same way his grandfather did is today ordered by the industry that produces commercial woods, whether he knows it or not. He is made subordinate to the orderability of cellulose, which for its part is challenged forth by the need of for paper...(323).

Heidegger insists, however, that man "never is transformed into mere standing-reserve," this because man is "challenged more originally than are the energies of nature." It is the "mere" that I am most concerned with here. Because, it is this that allows for me to claim that men are at times regarded, like a tree useful for its cellulose, as standing-reserve. And, while Heidegger's prescription for getting out of this predicament is the "saving" power of Art, he also acknowledges the devastating consequences of this totalizing manner of understanding the world:

In truth, however, precisely nowhere does man today any longer encounter himself, i.e., his essence. Man stands so decisively in subservience to on the challenging-forth of

enframing as a claim, that he fails to see himself as the one spoken to, and hence also fails in every way to hear in what respect he ek-sists, in terms of his essence, in a realm where he is addressed, so that he *can never* encounter only himself.

But enframing does not simply endanger man in his relationship to himself and to everything that is. As a destining, it banishes man into the kind of revealing that is an ordering. Where this ordering holds sway, it drives out every other possibility of revealing (322).

One need only think of the example of slaves in the Antebellum South to understand how men (and women, and children) could not only be thought of, but treated as standing-reserve, something that exists merely for the exploitation by a technology, for instance the cotton gin, or cotton loom, and thereby the whole manufacturing of cotton goods. This is no less true of the men who work in the modern oilfields of America. When one thinks of the very fundamental role petroleum plays in our civilization, how can one deny that these men are not standing-reserve, harnessed to the totalizing logic of a technology that is in many ways the essential feature of our modern being in the world? And while it would be specious (not to mention extremely disrespectful to the memory and suffering of actual slaves) to speak of these men *as slaves*, I have on more than one occasion heard them refer to themselves as "sharecroppers." Peasants relegated to working the land, with only a pittance given to them for their own subsistence. Our petro-culture demands ever more inputs of raw materials to produce the energy that is always only barely sufficient to the need, and coupled with the capitalist drive to expansion through increased consumption, it seeks, whether knowingly or not, to exhaust the finite resources in a bid for infinite growth. Heidegger could not have made a more prescient observation when he wrote at the beginning of the "The Question Concerning Technology":

Everywhere we remain unfree and chained to technology, whether we passionately affirm or deny it. But we are delivered over to it in the worst possible way when we regard it as something neutral; for this conception of it, to which today we particularly like to pay homage, makes us utterly blind to the essence of technology (312).

The men and women that work in today's oilfields are delivered over to a boom-bust logic that opens them up for the worst kinds of use and abuse, namely, to be regarded as less than human, to be seen as a mere resource to be exploited in service to a socio-economic order in which they have almost no say or means of redress. What is worse, they are by and large convinced of the inevitability of this system and convinced of the impossibility of its ever being otherwise. They are both physically and mentally enmeshed within the ideology of the present, so much so that they are, as Adorno pointed out, prone to "violently resist" any attempt to get them to question "received opinions."

After working for nearly four years in the oil industry, most of which was spent in the Williston Basin, the heart of the Bakken oil-boom, and standing witness to both its exponential growth and precipitous decline, I am in a somewhat unique position to comment upon the human experience of living through an oil boom. What lured me there was a combination of money, curiosity, and the romantic notion of making it in a world I'd heard described as the "wild west" and a "modern nightmare." More importantly, I wanted to prove myself to my father. My father had gone to college with the idea of becoming a teacher. He wanted to teach history. It's hard to know what exactly prompted him to change his major in his junior year from history to geology. But he has told me that a recruiter at a job fair had said that with a degree in geology he could get a job out of college making \$30,000 a year, with a company vehicle. It may have been the fact that my father came from a working-class background—my grandparents met in the Amrock

factory in Rockford, Illinois— that he had lived barely above the poverty line much of his life. It may have been that upon meeting my mother he decided that he'd be better off with a steady job with good pay than to risk making little as a public school teacher. Whatever the case, when he graduated from the University of Montana in 1979 he immediately went to work in the oilfield. He worked for a company that was bought by a company that was bought by a company that was eventually bought by Baker-Hughes. Our family moved accordingly, eventually ending up in the Denver area. After about four years, Baker-Hughes laid-off most of its employees in the Rocky Mountain region, which is to say, my father laid off his friends and coworkers. Then, in 1992, he too was given walking papers. This inaugurated a very difficult time for my family: my father, a man who had earned his MBA in night school while managing Baker-Hughes' Rocky Mountain headquarters, now found himself unemployed with three kids and a stay-at-home wife in the throws of severe bi-polar disorder. He took the first job he could find working two week hitches on an oilrig in the Gulf of Mexico. For three years, he flew back and forth to Louisiana, working for two solid weeks and getting twelve solid days at home. The transitions from home to work were hard on all of us; as kids we didn't appreciate his heavy hand when home, and ran a little wild while he was gone. Without a steady partner to keep her afloat, my mother sank deeper and deeper into near-catatonic depression.

These were formative years for me, and while I was only dimly aware of it, they were dominated by oil. My father had been laid off because the price of oil had started tanking post-Operation Desert Storm. The unrest in the Middle East that had helped oil prices rise to ten-year highs subsided, and the result was that American domestic oil and gas drilling declined. My father was a casualty of that, and so were we. I wouldn't learn this until many years later, but I was actually born into an oil-bust, just after Ronald Reagan took office. So, while my experience

of the Bakken boom and its subsequent decline was something I can say I lived through personally, it's not an exaggeration to say that my entire life, personal and public, has been dominated by the vicissitudes of the global oil market. This doesn't mark me as special, nor does it mean that I have some genius insight into what's happening in the world. But what it does mean is that I have experiences directly relating to a recent event in our nation's history, and as a witness to those events I have both a right and a duty to tell my story.

By the time I left the oilfields of Wyoming in February of 2016, I was exhausted. I'd been waiting to be laid off for over a year, and the tension of this anticipation colored everything I did. In the final months I prayed, begged, and cried to get laid off. During my last hitch I got so sick that I could barely work for more than ten minutes before fatigue would force me to lay down for at least a half-hour, usually in a half-conscious stupor. I remember one day in January, I was cold, sick, depressed, and angry. I had been trying to find out if I was going to get laid off, calling my bosses constantly, texting them constantly. Everyone I knew and respected in the company, save for my direct supervisor, Sam, and my co-worker, Brandon, had been laid off or fired. They had been sending out private contactors who didn't know how to do the work and expecting me to train them and pick up their slack, all while making half as much money as I had been a year before (and knowing that one of them would eventually replace me). I was on one of the three rigs left that our company had jobs on in the entire Rocky Mountain region, the other two were in North Dakota, and the rumor was we might lose them; there were rumors we might lose the rig I was on. But on this day I didn't care about any of that. I just didn't want to do it any more, and I felt trapped like an animal. At some point in the day I snapped and started screaming into the empty chemical tanks inside of a connex. My voice filled the entire space, a sad, animal

noise, barely louder than the machinery surrounding me. I screamed until my voice cracked, until my lungs hurt, until I was horse and spent. There were many days working in the oilfield when I felt exhausted, many nights I slept the deep, dreamless sleep of a person whose body is recovering from brutal labor. But it was at that moment that I knew exhaustion as a state of being, as a totality. It was then that I understood that there might be something like an ontological weariness. It was my first taste of the ontology of exhaustion.

No Place for Cowboys: Wyoming and The Spatial Boundaries of Masculinity in *Rising from the Plains* and *The Legend of Colton H. Bryant*



Sheridan County, Wyoming: I-90 Welcome Sign at the Montana-Wyoming Border (Figure 1). Author's photo.

The cowboy is a uniquely American archetype, characterized in national ideology by stoicism, grit, and self-reliance. This embodiment of a certain seductive American masculinity is one that the state of Wyoming takes great pride in. For instance, the mascot for the University of Wyoming is a cowboy riding a bucking horse, and the slogan on the welcome signs at the border read "Forever West" below a silhouette of a man riding a bucking horse (fig. 1). And so it might be easy to assume that the men of Wyoming are all cowboys, or cowboy clones. That they all either had, have, or aspire to something like the life of a cowboy. Words like redneck, or phrases like white trash might come to mind also, evoking trailer parks, jacked-up trucks and the occasional rebel flag. Or, perhaps in a more generous frame of mind one might think of mountain-men and pioneers, hardy, off-grid survivalists living close to the land. More often, it might simply be the case that the men of Wyoming are not thought of at all, in any significant manner. Their lives, accomplishments, and trials in the context of modernity are, then, not interesting stuff for contemplation, except perhaps as anecdotal throwaways in examples of anachronistic ways of living, or ideological backwardness.

These Wyoming men might, however, also be the Yale-educated sons of pioneers and ranchers, with Wellesley-educated mothers. Or third-generation laborers in the oil and gas fields, denizens of the mineral rich basins so prized for their resources. David Love, the man at the center of John McPhee's *Rising from the Plains*, and Alexandra Fuller's *Colton H. Bryant* will certainly seem, through their author's respective depictions, to comport with the cowboy stereotype. Both men evince the stoicism and hardiness that defines the commonplace notion of the cowboy; indeed, both men rode and broke horses, perhaps one of the most distinctive attributes of the cowboy image. Through the prose of McPhee and Fuller, both Colton H. Bryant and David Love come across as gritty and self-reliant, the kind of men who can handle

themselves in an unforgiving country. And while I wish to look beyond the cowboy ethos to the country itself, and what the country makes of men, it is important to understand the deep appeal that cowboy culture has to the people living in Wyoming. Whether they were born to it, or aspire to it.

In the case of David Love, he had what might pass for a settler's middle-class upbringing. He was born "twelve miles from the geographic center of Wyoming" on his father, John Love's, ranch (McPhee, 79). He would earn a PhD in Geology from Yale, and go on to work for United States Geological Survey, and, eventually, the University of Wyoming. McPhee's descriptions of life at the Love Ranch depict something close to a pioneer Eden: a country in need of names and human intervention. Love's cowboy bona fides as living close to the land in ways that are part of the ideology of Western masculinity are unquestionable, he named the land around him and those names persist to this day. For Bryant, on the other hand, the names of the places he lived and worked in were a given, and his family name was not reflected in the land itself. Colton H. Bryant was born in Evanston in the southwest corner of Wyoming, on the I-80 corridor. His parents moved there so his father could "chase the rigs," as "Evanston has always been less than a day's drive from any oil patch Bill ever had to work in whatever combination of shifts the oil companies can dream up" (Fuller, 21). The choice was one of convenience but also because Bryant's father, Bill, didn't want his lifestyle to negatively affect his children: "I'm not having my kids dragged around from patch to patch" (20). When he eventually got injured and died, Colton was pursuing the same working-class life his father and grandfather had, laboring in the oil patch. While aspiring to something like the life of a cowboy—trucks, horses, guns, and chew—Bryant was helping develop the infrastructure required to extract the deposits David Love and other geologists sought out and cataloged, as a result of their exploring the deep history of the

land itself. And so there are two essential threads that one can trace between the lives of these men that are part of the ideological structure of masculine affect in the American West: the cowboy ethos with its accompanying lifestyle, and a working relationship to the mineral resources of the state.

According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration the geological and geographical entity known as Wyoming has a rich store of mineral wealth that can be exploited to great effect by people who want to mine subbituminous coal for burning in powerplants; mine bentonite and barite, used in drilling for crude oil and natural gas, both petrochemicals also being found abundantly in the deep geology of the state. Additionally, Wyoming is home to large quantities of uranium, necessary for the generation of nuclear energy ("Wyoming"). Uranium has a unique connection to the life of David Love, as he was responsible for discovering the first mineable deposits in Wyoming. Colton H. Bryant's life and family history is tied up in the drilling and development of the oil and gas fields of Wyoming; it was in a shale-gas play in Southwestern Wyoming where he would sustain the injuries that cost him his life. These geological details are important for understanding the significance of Wyoming as a kind of "energy colony," and for understanding the roles the men of Wyoming have had in the discovery and exploitation of those resources in service to the various energy regimes utilized by our civilization.

For this essay, what is especially important is the way in which the ideology and ethos of the rugged individual in the American West, captured best in the image of the cowboy, operates in the lives of men in Wyoming, and how that value system serves the needs of industry and capital. In a rugged land people must learn to become self-sufficient in order to survive. But the question remains as to whether this self-sufficiency, this personal-ruggedness, makes people

vulnerable to the vicissitudes of global capital, and the dictates of industry. A masculinity defined by rugged individualism is both *anti-intellectual* thus disregarding others' attempts at thought and *anti-collectivist* thus disregarding the communal nature of human existence. This combination abets a kind of hyper-masculine form of property accumulation, or affectation through consumption, that is couched in a morality of ownership and 'just desserts,' and that lends metaphysical weight to the very act of accumulation through work and thereby disregards and devalues those that either cannot or will not conform to the neo-liberal fiction of the self. This form of rugged individualism leads to people being seen through lens of resource extraction, ending in the reification of all being, including human being, as 'standing reserve' devoid of value outside of the realms of energy and economy. At this moment in petromodernity it would serve us well to look at the lives of men deeply tied to the industry that makes everything possible. And as our initial foray into understanding the ontology of exhaustion we have to ask what these men, and the lives they lead say about *being* in the petro-modern world.

Through the prose of Fuller and McPhee, we can trace the shared concerns and ideas that animated two men from Wyoming whose lives shared little in the way of what we might call class markers. Love embodies much of what we recognize as middle-class: education, position, engagement with the world of writing and publishing. Bryant can at times seem to be almost a Steinbeckian simpleton, his life seemingly as full of hard work and tragedy as that of George Milton. What they do share, however, is a masculinity informed by the idea of the rugged individual, and lived affectively in the style of the cowboy. How this affectation is described in the works of Fuller and McPhee is one thing this essay will seek to examine. More crucially though, this section will attempt to connect that lived affectation with the land from which these men came. To examine how the being-in-place creates a demand to inhabit certain routines of

behavior, and, moreover, to examine how it is those behaviors work for or against those men.

Annie Proulx, in an essay "Writing in Wyoming," states that, "I have an intense interest in rough country and the people it makes" (Proulx, 28). So too, this section will concern itself with rough country, and with the help of two books, attempt to glean some understanding of how that country comes to shape the men in it.

Masculinity, Space & Place and the 'Self-Made Man':

The academic study of masculinity has produced a significant body of literature that is both interdisciplinary and variously constituted in terms of what it seeks to find, or how it defines masculinity. The study of masculinity has, no matter the field in which it is pursued, always admitted of a variety of masculinities, as the work of Robert Connell, David Morgan, Joane Nagel, and Ethel Spector Person in texts like the *Handbook of Studies on Men & Masculinities*, and *The Masculinity Studies Reader* make clear. And while the admission of variety within masculinity is tempered by the acknowledgment of "hegemonic" masculinity(ies), the emphasis is nearly always placed on the plurality of what constitutes masculinity, both as practice, reality, or ideology. For instance, the emphasis may be put on psychoanalytic approaches to understanding masculinity, as in Ethel Spector Person's essay "Masculinities, Plural," wherein "the glory of our sexuality, our gender, and our creative potential...their malleability in different circumstances and in different cultures" is understood and celebrated (Person, 1184). Other approaches might seek to locate masculinity in relation to the nation, or to international issues related to globalization and imperialism. Robert Connell makes a salient observation about the current state of American Masculinity, and its relationship to the various ideologies of governance when he points to a kind of bifurcation in what is considered

"masculine":

Practice organized around dominance was increasingly incompatible with practice organized around expertise or technical knowledge. Management was divided from professions, and relations between the two became a chronic problem in corporations and the state.... Factional divisions opened in both capitalist ruling classes and communist elites between those willing to coerce workers (conservatives/hard-liners), and those willing to make concessions on the strength of technological advance and economic growth (liberals/reformers).

A polarity thus developed within hegemonic masculinity between dominance and technical expertise. In this case, however, neither version has succeeded in displacing the other. They currently coexist as gendered practices, sometimes in opposition and sometimes meshing. As alternative versions of hegemonic masculinity they can be called upon by advertising and political campaigns — "tough on crime" vs. "information superhighway", to take examples from current United States politics (Connell, 1995: 251).

What Connell points up here with his example of Clinton-era sloganeering is that the state and its various apparatuses have incumbent claims upon the idea of what constitutes masculinity; furthermore, what it helps reveal is the constructed nature of masculinity and the political purposes to which it can be yoked. Connell also observed later that with the so-called "end of history" and the ascendancy of neoliberalism, masculinity has been increasingly linked to global capital:

With the collapse of Soviet communism, the decline of postcolonial socialism, and the ascendancy of the new right in Europe and North America, world politics is more and

more organized around the needs of transnational capital and the creation of global markets. To the extent that the identification of men with the world of work is established, the global capitalist economy becomes the key arena for the making of masculinities (Connell, 2005: 76).

This point cannot be made too strongly, Connell is here pointing to the idea that "It is characteristic of modernity that the world of "work" is culturally defined as men's realm" (78).

What this means for your average man is that his masculinity, and thus his identity, is increasingly tied up with the work he performs and his abilities as a wage earner. But, as Connell spells out, this puts the masculinities of modern men increasingly at risk in a dynamic global economy:

But if the world capitalist economy increasingly constructed men as wage earners and thus tended to reshape masculinity by linking gender identity with work, this same process made the new masculinities vulnerable. The global economy is turbulent, marked by economic downturns as well as booms, regional decline as well as regional growth.

Mass unemployment will undermine masculinities identified with "work."

This important point is married to the idea of class and its relation to conceptions of masculinity, as class is often deployed for political purposes within the nation-state, and used to both justify and enact various economic policies.

The "working-class" and, more often these days, the "middle class" are constantly invoked by politicians as being under threat, and needing protection, or, more generally, as the potential beneficiaries of whatever policies that politician happens to be advancing. Class has also been an important factor for many researchers in trying to understand masculinity, both in terms of how class determines our understanding of masculinity and how masculinity can affect

our understanding of class. David Morgan's essay, "Class and Masculinity," complicates Connell's assertions about the linking of masculinities to "wage earning," if only by recognizing that "one of the most significant influences on the changing relationship between class and masculinity has been the decline of the male breadwinner model in practice and, although perhaps to a lesser extent, in ideology" (Morgan, 172). What Morgan seeks to describe is the way in which women entering into the labor market also began to erode divisions between class and status, and how this erosion leads to a weakening of gendered class distinctions:

Classically, class (based on economic criteria) was distinguished from status, where issues of prestige and esteem were central. However, as both were aspects of social stratification, it was frequently the case that distinctions became blurred. Status considerations could reinforce class distinctions (as in cases where we get a merging of economic and cultural capital) or could cut across them and, presumably, weaken their political effectiveness. In the male breadwinner model, it could almost be said that class and status frequently overlapped and, further, that the distinction between them was gendered. Thus men tended to be the fore in matters of class and class struggle, and women were involved in maintaining and reproducing everyday status distinctions through their domestic labor, their parenting, their organization of consumption, and their general moral demeanor within the local community (173).

What is interesting for this essay is the way in which Morgan describes class as becoming "less central and more complex," the result of, "a decline in the overall salience of class...; a growing emphasis on other social divisions; a fragmentation of class divisions, identities, and the sites where class work is performed; and a blurring of the distinction between class and status" (174). This fragmentation and de-emphasis of class meant, generally, a dissolution of certain

hegemonic conceptions of masculinity and, most important for this paper, a greater emphasis on certain status signals as means of understanding one's masculinity. As Morgan concludes:

[T]he undermining of a relatively stable sense of masculinity (at least in its more public discourses) was associated with growing uncertainty about the nature and significance of class. Thus, the growing "presence" of women in all areas of social, political, and economic life presented a problem for conventional class analysis, just as it presented a problem for established or hegemonic masculinities. Both class and gender became challenged by the recognitions of other social divisions, such as race and ethnicity, age, sexualities, disabilities, and abilities. A great sense of fluidity in working practices and the various complex strands of postmodernity and globalization, provided yet further challenges to both class and gender (176).

What this final quote makes clear is that any understanding of masculinity, whether it is tied to the nation, politics, economics, or class and status divisions, must be understood in its place and in its particularity. Thus, this essay will address certain class-based issues related to the masculinity of Wyoming, but it will be concerned primarily with a place-based approach to understanding masculinity, an approach recommended by a variety of researchers, such as Lawrence D. Berg and Robyn Longhurst's essay "Placing Masculinities and Geography":

...given the importance of contexts, relationships, and practices in both the (re)construction of masculinity and the way that we come to understand the meanings of the term, it should be very clear that masculinity is both temporally and *geographically contingent*. Perhaps equally important is the implication that given the multitude of possible gendered contexts, relationships and practices that come together in the structuring of identity in different times and spaces, we should not speak of a singular

masculinity, but rather, of multiple masculinities (Berg and Longhurst, 352).

This gloss on the variety of masculinities and their relation to place can be further clarified by Robert Connell's short definition of masculinity: "Masculinity...is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture" (71). Masculinity then, is a complex phenomenon impinged upon by a variety of factors, as shown by the multiple directions research in the field has taken; however, it is the relation of masculinity to place, or region, that will be the foremost concern of this section.

Geographers have long recognized place as a source of significance for the individual, but also that the individual and their place have a reciprocal relationship. Edward Relph, in *Place and Placelessness*, describes them as "fields of care," sites where a "complex of affections and responses" are created through experience (Relph, 38). To be connected to a place, what Relph refers to as "rootedness," gives the individual "a secure point from which to look out on the world, a firm grasp of one's own position in the order of things, and a significant spiritual and psychological attachment to somewhere in particular." How this plays out in the life of any individual is something that will be at issue in this section. Specifically, whether or not one's rootedness in place—something that in Relph's brief description has a totally positive valence—opens one up to being vulnerable along with the place one is rooted to. It would do well in this regard to mention, briefly, the John Berger quote, useful everywhere but found most notably in Edward Soja's *Postmodern Geographies*, and utilized in Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, "*Prophecy now involves a geographical rather than a historical projection; it is space not time that hides consequences from us.* To prophecy today it is only necessary to know men [and women] as they are throughout the whole world in all their

inequality" (Soja, 22; Nixon, 45).⁶ This quote gives some insight into the significance of the "spatial turn" in critical and social theory, but moreover, the significance of people's relationship to places they live and identify with. What is at stake for the academic or researcher is whether or not spatial, geographical, and regional matters are, and to what degree, determinative of the lives and ideologies of the men and women inhabiting them. Approaches to this kind of work are as diverse as those concerning masculinity. Edward Soja or David Harvey would recommend a kind of critical geography informed by Marxist insights, and specifically with the way in which social injustices are created, perpetuated and spread through a "socio-spatial dialectic" or "time-space compression" respectively.⁷ Harvey's arguments seek to elaborate the ways in which our "postmodern" moment is dominated by a simultaneous increase in the speed of human movement *and* communication that gives the appearance of making space inconsequential, but merely masks the deeper spatial inequalities built into the very foundations of our civilization. Soja's argument, on the other hand, is an attempt to make clear the social nature of space by, "reopening the debate and calling for explicit incorporation of the social production of space in Marxist analysis as something more than an epiphenomenon" (Soja 1980, 207). What Soja is critiquing is Harvey's earlier and more orthodox Marxist reading, with its fear of spatial 'fetishism,' by insisting that a more Lefebvrian reading, which "stressed the "decisive" and "preeminent" role of spatial structural forces in modern capitalist society." In so doing, Soja calls

⁶ Nixon's defines "slow violence" as a "...a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all...a rethinking [of violence] requires that we complicate conventional assumptions about violence as a highly visible act that is newsworthy because it is event focused, time bound, and body bound. We need to account for how the temporal dispersion of slow violence affects the way we perceive and respond to a variety of social afflictions—from domestic abuse to posttraumatic stress and, in particular, environmental calamities" in Nixon, Rob, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, p. 2-3.

⁷ Soja, Edward, "The Socio-Spatial Dialectic," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. 70:2, (June, 1980); and Harvey, David, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 1990

for the "socio-spatial dialectic" wherein there is a recognition of the imbrication of the spatial with other social structures:

The structure of organized space is not a separate structure with its own autonomous laws of construction and transformation, nor is it simply an expression of the class structure emerging from the social (i.e. aspatial) relations of production. It represents, instead, a dialectically defined component of the general relations of reproduction, relations which are simultaneously social and spatial (208).

This emphasis on the relation of the social dimension of human behavior to our construction and understanding of the spaces and regions that we designate, create, and inhabit bears decisively on how we explain these spaces and approach them critically. As will become obvious later in the section, Wyoming has features that make it seem almost capricious, completely the created result of human rationality bereft of concern for the natural world, or as McPhee puts it in *Rising From the Plains*,

Wyoming, at first glance, would appear to be an arbitrary segment of the country.

Wyoming and Colorado are the only states whose borders consist of four straight lines.

That could be looked upon as an affront to nature, an utterly political conception, an ignoring of the outlines of physiographic worlds, in disregard of rivers and divides

(McPhee, 28).

The "four straight lines" will give some boundary to this essay, but will also allow for an examination of the significance that such "utterly political conception[s]" might have on the lives of men who are bounded and defined by them.

In approaching this notion of boundary and definition, and the significance these things are given by people, Edward Relph's *Place and Placelessness* can give some useful guideposts

for understanding our relation to place and with place. His examination of both the concept and experience of place within space led Relph to choose a phenomenological and existential approach as "The foundations of geographical knowledge lie in the direct experiences and consciousness we have of the world we live in" (Relph, 4). Relph defines the "essence of place" as involving "a concentration of our intentions, our attitudes, purposes and experience," or "as profound centers of human existence" (43). Places both form and inform the identity of the people who inhabit and interact with them. And so Relph puts focus on how we experience place in space and through time; how our human relationships form our conception of place; how place can be "personal and private"; how care for a place or what he calls "rootedness" can help shape us and give our lives meaning; following Heidegger, he describes the significance of "home places" as "the foundation of our identity as individuals and as members of a community, the dwelling-place of being"; and, how the "drudgery of place" can be a cause of "melancholia" brought on by an "oppressive and imprisoning" quality due to the "acceptance of the restrictions that place imposes and the miseries it may offer" (39-42).

Relph goes on to define three major concepts in relation to place, how we do or do not identify with a place, how our relations to place can be authentic or inauthentic, and, finally, the situation of placelessness. Relph describes placelessness as related to inauthentic attitudes where one is "closed to the world and man's possibilities" (80). He thinks that the forms and practices which prize "[u]ncommitted [sic] 'cold, prying thought'" are by nature inauthentic due to their "detachment and narrowness" (81). This is the way Relph characterizes much of modern urban and spatial planning and according to him, the "present-day landscape has, in short, a generally comfortable and quite efficient geography, even though it lacks depth and variety and tends to eradicate past geographies" (140). This lack of depth and variety makes any place just like every

other, and thus “every place” becomes “no place.” In this way we can see Relph as making a serious contribution to the critique of social/spatial formations under capitalism, though without his expressly acknowledging it as such. What will be important to keep in mind is the way that "rootedness" in place and "inauthentic attitudes" to place can exist simultaneously in the lives of men. Which is to say that fulfilling the demand to be a particular way in a particular place may not be authentic, whereas the need to be in place, and to feel a part of that place is certainly a normal human desire. The self-made man is one important component of the ideology that is demanded of men in Wyoming, and with which they will often identify as a means to feel rooted in place. Specifically, the origin story of the cowboy, frontiersman, homesteader, or mountain man is one of singular triumph against the elements, and a forging of the self out of that experience. This kind of thinking deeply informs the cowboy ethos, which insists upon individual action as the seat of any authentic accomplishment.

In his essay "The Birth of the Self-Made Man," sociologist Michael Kimmel defines the self-made man as both an "American neologism," and the product of an America suspicious of the sensibilities of the English and slowly becoming dominated by a market ideology:

America [in the mid-nineteenth century] was entering a new age, and men were free to create their own destinies, to find their own ways, to rise as high as they could, to write their own biographies. God had made man a "moral free agent," according to revivalist minister Charles Finney in a celebrated sermon in 1830. The American Adam could fashion himself in his own image. This new individual freedom was as socially and psychologically unsettling as it was exciting and promising. To derive one's identity, and especially one's identity as a man, from marketplace successes was a risky proposition. (Kimmel,139)

This emergent notion in the American psyche, the possibility for men to be actively self-shaping, is, perhaps, the fundamental concept for understanding masculinity in America generally. That said, it is not the final word on American masculinity, nor is it the final word on the kind of ethos that shapes men in the Interior West. In order to understand this more clearly we need to understand certain historical trends, and how those trends affected the self-conception of American men.

Borgmann and 'Rugged Individualism':

In his book *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* philosopher Albert Borgmann sketches the thought evinced by enlightenment thinkers Francis Bacon, Rene Descartes, and John Locke, throwing some light on the ideological underpinnings of western expansion in the United States. In a chapter titled "Modernism" he connects three characteristics of American modernity to the thinkers just mentioned. To Bacon he attributes "aggressive realism," which he characterizes as "a violent campaign of conquest," a conquest of both Native Americans and the West (Borgmann, 27). In this regard Borgmann focuses on the expansion of the railroads, a process that, for him, is emblematic of the aggressive nature of westward expansion:

Nothing could stand in the way of the aggressive advance of the railroads, not the claims of the Native Americans, nor the resistance of nature, nor the dissoluteness and the distress of humans. Neither, finally, did massive corruption. . . . The aggressive attitude toward reality that propelled this conquest was so deeply entrenched that historians have described its advance as an obvious necessity, characterizing its violent progress as the sweetly reasonable demand for a transportation system that was "fast, cheap, and dependable" (32).

It is important to stop here and note that Wyoming was both an important place for early trans-continental crossings by the fabled ox-drawn "prairie schooners," and the site at which the Northern Pacific Railroad, and eventually I-80, would cross the Rocky Mountains (history that both McPhee and Fuller will draw upon to tell their stories). This is doubly significant for Wyoming as that "fast, cheap, and dependable" transportation was made possible by the mineral resources found deep in the state's geological subsurface.

Borgmann associates what he calls "methodical universalism" with Rene Descartes, and his example is the modern corporation. This institution was, according to Borgman, "modernism's response to the openness of the physical and social landscape of the new world. Through its methodical and inclusive organization, the corporation was able to mobilize and integrate the gigantic resources needed to conquer a presumably wide-open continent" (36). This idea of methodical universalism is alive and operative today in Wyoming, both at the level of major oil and gas companies, but also at the level of smaller, "independent" oil and gas companies and service companies that proliferate in oilfield, and in the various industries of resource extraction more generally. The limited liability corporation (LLC) is the form all business takes, insuring stakeholders a modicum of distance from the fiscal responsibility or liability of doing business.

Finally, and most importantly for this section, Borgmann ascribes to John Locke what he calls "ambiguous individualism." This begins with Locke's acknowledgement that those previous sources of authority, such as the church or the king, were no longer unquestioned "grounds of the common order." And so, Locke sought to place authority in the "sovereignty of the individual" (37). However, Borgmann finds this "sovereignty of the individual" to be wholly ambiguous, in that the individual is "the author of the enterprise and the beneficiary of its fruits." It is with this

dual role of the individual—as active participant in the project of enlightened order-making, and as the enjoyer of all the benefits of that movement—that Borgmann seeks to identify a binary that it is important to highlight. He distinguishes the "function" of the active man as that of "rugged individualism," and the "function" of the passive, enjoying man as that of "commodious individualism" (38). Borgmann sees these two forms of individualism as semi-autonomous, and yet mutually reinforcing. Animating this dyad is what Borgmann calls an "artfully complex confusion" that mixes notions of public and private, economic and social, to such an extent that "the question [of] where to locate authority and responsibility in the modern project" cannot be answered:

The social distinction delimits the private realm as the sphere of commodious individualism; the economic distinction marks out the private sector as the field where rugged individualism will prosper. As it turns out, in fact, the social distinction serves to conceal the debilities of commodious individualism while the economic distinction exploits rugged individualism to justify the violence and injustice of the modern economy (38).

What is essentially important for this essay is the idea that so-called "rugged individualism" is, in principal, an ideological construction that covers, distorts, and misidentifies the true value of hard-working men and women. As Borgmann acknowledges, "The image of the rugged individual conjures up people who, facing up to a wild continent, were provoked to superhuman feats of ingenuity and endurance and bespoke in their weathered faces and plain behavior the grandeur of the land they had prevailed against" (38). In fact what is true about "rugged individualism" in our present age is that it seeks to draw upon these archetypes in order to justify a particular economic order, "We persist in designating a large part of the economy as private so

that we can disavow public responsibility for its evils and claim individual merit for its blessings" (47). One need only look to Wall Street or the boardrooms of multinational corporations for examples of men who ruthlessly pursue their own ends to the detriment of others, claiming the entire time a right to the fruits of their labors, based upon the notion that their individual efforts afford them that right. The connection to the self-made man is here made clear, as Kimmel states, "To derive one's identity, and especially one's identity as a man, from marketplace successes was a risky proposition" (Kimmel, 139). Made riskier for the fact that many men do not have access to the capital and resources necessary for success in the market. Neither do they have access to the land, and what lies under it, that being primarily in the hands of government and industry. The ideology of the self-made man and the rugged individual perpetuate the idea that self-making, and "success" are only to measured in economic terms, and only in *individual* economic terms. Thus making the "American Adam" into something more like an American Atom, alone, discrete, and susceptible to being mistaken for fissile material with which to make more energy.

However, and in concluding this digression on the historical origins of "self-actualizing" masculinity, I would like to acknowledge that "rugged individualism" is not a wholly hollow notion without merit as an ethos. Rather, it is a complex human phenomenon that has, at times, been exploited for the purposes of economic gain, both for individuals and for industries:

Rugged individualism, apart from the ideological service it was pressed into, is an authentic allusion to the vigor and self-reliance that inspired many American settlers to enormous exertions and accomplishments. Ruggedness in this sense was less often the father of the heroic feat than the mother of the austere endurance. In either case it drew its strength from the necessity of hard and sometimes desperate circumstances, and from the

joy of having for the first time ever a piece of land one could call one's own, or the mobility of a car, or a window on all the world's excitement through the screen of a television set (Borgmann, 64).

Borgmann's description of "austere endurance" as the more accurate reading of rugged individualism helps to illuminate how the fiction of the "heroic feat" feeds into a culture and ideology of exhaustion. By ignoring and dismissing "the dissoluteness and the distress of humans," or "the claims of the Native Americans" in favor of "aggressive realism" this ideological outlook seeks only to generate more wealth, by squeezing ever more out of the land and its people. The deadly combination sees only resources to be extracted and exploited, and understands no limits. Its "methodical universalism" knows only how to take in more, to consume, until all resources, be they human, animal, or mineral are exhausted. Combining the notion of the self-made man with that of the rugged individual we can begin to see the outline of a familiar form of American masculinity, one evinced by the frontiersman and cowboy. What is important to remember in this discussion of masculinity, ruggedness and individuality is the role that places have upon the people in them "as profound centers of human existence." The place in question for this section is, of course, Wyoming. However, what Wyoming is, or how Wyoming is valued is as important for understanding the men of Wyoming as the historical currents of masculinity.

Rising from the Plains: Masculine Identity and the Place of the West

John McPhee's *Rising from the Plains* can justly be characterized as two biographies in one. There is the biography of David Love as told by McPhee, and then the biography of Wyoming as told through David Love and McPhee's descriptions. What is immediately apparent

upon reading this book is that this dual-biography is part of the essential beauty of the text, as it shows clearly the connection between person and place: place being, in part, a function, or product, of those who live in and inhabit it. In this regard I want to quickly look at one passage from the text that makes clear the unique relationship between David Love and place known as Wyoming:

In the United States Geological Survey's seven-and-a-half-minute series of topographic maps is a quadrangle named Love Ranch. The landscape it depicts lies just under the forty-third parallel and west of the hundred-and-seventh meridian—coordinates that place it twelve miles from the geographic center of Wyoming. The names of its natural features are names that more or less materialized around the kitchen table when David Love was young: Corral Draw, Castle Gardens, Buffalo Wallows, Jumping-Off Draw (McPhee 78-9).

Born in 1913, on that very ranch twelve miles from the center of Wyoming, Love would go on get a PhD from Yale, and by the time of the writing of *Rising from the Plains*, be recognized as "the grand old man of Rocky Mountain geology" (4-5). So, it is fitting that the USGS map of Wyoming, a map Love had helped to prepare, should have such a personal stamp on it. The unique position that David Love occupied in regard to the state of Wyoming, is one attested to in the previous passage, that of the name-giver, the one who designates, and thereby gives significance to place. It is this position that makes Love a perfect subject for a study of Wyoming, and for the relation between that place and its people and the ideology of American masculinity.

Rising from the Plains also weaves the story of Love's mother, Ethel Waxham—a young lady at the time of her arrival in Wyoming who had graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Wellesley

College with a degree in Classics—in order to give background to Love's story. She initially came to Wyoming in order to teach in a tiny town named Hailey, but she would eventually meet David's father John Love, and together they would found Love Ranch. Her unpublished diaries serve to provide background on the on the early lives of David and his brother Allan. One particularly indicative quote involves their mother's narrative of the masculine interior of the home:

The house might be full of men, waiting out a storm, or riding on a round-up. I was baking, canning, washing clothes, making soap. Allan and David stood by the gasoline washing machine reading history or geography while I put sheets through the wringer. I ironed. They did spelling beside the ironing board, or while I kneaded bread; they gave the tables up to 15 times 15 to the treadle of the sewing machine. Mental problems, printed in figures on large cards, they solved while they raced across the...room to write the answers...and learned to think on their feet. Nine written problems done correctly, without help, meant no tenth problem...It was surprising in how little time they finished their work—to watch the butchering, to help drive the bawling calves in to the weaning pen, or to get to the corral, when they heard the hoofbeats of running horses and cries of cowboys crossing the creek (85-6).

While this description can make Love's upbringing seem Edenic, it was not without hardship. His father was nearly killed corralling horses, his mother nearly died in childbirth, both boys were under constant threat from the weather, local wildlife, and, in one anecdote that is related, from a neighbor's hunting dogs.

The biography of Wyoming is one that I do not have time to get into here. Suffice it to say that David Love cut his teeth on Wyoming geology, and would go on to become, arguably,

one of the most important geographers in the history of the state. His relationship with the land is one of deep understanding, but it is not without its vexing qualities. In describing his conception of the social role of the geologist to McPhee, Love characterized it thus, "his job is to find anything from oil to agates, and then, in effect, say, "Fly at it, folks," to the people of the United States" (125). This notion of people flying at the natural resources of Wyoming is indicative of McPhee's observation that Wyoming was, and still is, "acupunctured for energy" (179). The image evoked, of course, is hundreds of tiny oilrigs shooting into the sky all across the Wyoming landscape. It is important to note the irony of McPhee's description: the metaphor of a therapeutic pricking of the skin to describe the highly invasive and upsetting scene that is the oil and gas field. And while Love acknowledges that the oil, gas, and coal taken from Wyoming serves, in his words, as "the lifeblood of our nation," it is not without a certain ire that he describes the situation in Wyoming as being one where the land, and the people on it are beholden to outside interests: "We are at the mercy of East Coast and West Coast establishments," Love said. "It's been called energy colonization" (202, 180). *Rising from the Plains* ends by first noting that David Love was "in both a specific and a general sense, the discoverer of uranium in commercial quantity in Wyoming and the progenitor of the Wyoming uranium industry" (209). Ironically, some of the uranium mines were in sight of the former Love Ranch; it is at the site of that now abandoned ranch which McPhee chooses to end his book.

After taking a look at the remains of the ranch, Love tells McPhee "I can't stand this. Let's get out of here." And as they make their way toward the hills wherein the uranium mines are located Love makes a final admission, "Am I troubled? Yes. At places like this, we thought we were doing a great service to the nation. In hindsight, we do not know if we were performing a service or a disservice. Sometimes I think I might regret it. Yes. It's close to home" (214). It is

with this final meditation that I would like quickly present a picture of modern Wyoming, especially as it regards the exploitation of its geologic resources.

Wyoming:

In *Rising From The Plains*, John McPhee describes the state of Wyoming in the cartographic and toponymic terms:

Wyoming, at first glance, would appear to be an arbitrary segment of the country.

Wyoming and Colorado are the only states whose borders consist of four straight lines.

That could be looked upon as an affront to nature, an utterly political conception, an ignoring of the outlines of physiographic worlds, in disregard of rivers and divides.

Rivers and divides, however, are in some ways unworthy as boundaries, which are meant to imply durability that is belied by the function of rivers and divides. They move, they change, and they go away. . . . Wyoming suggests with emphasis the page-one principal of reading in rock the record of the earth: Surface appearances are only that; topography grows, shrinks, compresses, spreads, disintegrates, and disappears; every scene is temporary, and is composed of fragments from other scenes. Four straight lines—like a plug cut in the side of a watermelon—should do as well any to frame Wyoming and its former worlds (28-9).

While it is not my intention to discuss the "former worlds" of Wyoming, I am interested with what lies within those "four straight lines." *Rising from the Plains* is concerned, as I've said, with a biography of David Love, a geologist, and with the biography of Wyoming, as told through the geologic knowledge of Love. That geologic knowledge gives the reader access to "former worlds," but it also gives us a chance to understand the processes that have made Wyoming the

mineral rich state that it is. It is perhaps one of the more tragic elements of the book that Love's descriptions of the geologic development of Wyoming, development over billions of years, is the thing that gives value to Wyoming in an immediate sense. In other words, the beautifully rendered geological biography of Wyoming belies the rapacious speed with which industrial capital, indeed multinational capital, has come to bleed Wyoming (and many other western states as well) of it's resources.⁸

According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), Wyoming is the second most productive state in the nation in terms of overall energy production behind Texas. It's coal reserves are second only to Montana, dry natural gas reserves second only to Texas, it's coal-bed methane second only to Colorado. Wyoming produces one-tenth of the nation's natural gas. The Powder River Basin is the "largest coal-producing region in the nation...accounting for nearly

⁸ Thompson, Jonathan, "The Global West: how foreign investment fuels resource extraction in western states," *High Country News*, 43.12, hcn.org, retrieved Aug 9th, 2016. An excerpt: "There are plenty of words to describe a place like Douglas [Wyoming]: Rural, Western, small-town, typically American. It's the type of place that country-and-Western singers rhapsodize about and city-folk tend to mock. Sarah Palin would likely recognize it as one of "these wonderful little pockets of what I call the real America. ..." Out here, "Drill, baby, drill!" is more than just a slogan, it's a way of life, for better or worse. Locals and politicians will proudly tell you that Wyoming is the backbone of an energy-independent nation. But look more closely. On a spring morning, when both snow and dust whip through the air, a drill rig can be seen just outside of town. The sign nearby says "Chesapeake Energy," but the rig operates with funding from a Chinese energy company, and it's searching for oil and gas partly owned by the same Chinese company. In another part of Wyoming, a Japanese firm has invested in the same play, called the Niobrara. The massive coal mines to the north ship coal to 25 different states, Europe and Asia. A Russian company controls nearby uranium mines, and on the other side of the state, a company from India owns one of Wyoming's biggest soda ash facilities. In other words, Douglas and Wyoming are not pure, unadulterated American after all, at least economically speaking. And if Douglas isn't, what community is? Not my hometown of Durango, Colo., on the edge of the San Juan Basin, where British Petroleum has about 3,000 natural gas wells. Not the mining towns of Arizona and Nevada, where Canadian, Australian and Mexican companies own gaping copper and gold mines. Not even the amber fields of Montana, which send wheat to Asia, or the Navajo Nation, which sells hay to Japan. It's the same all over the West: The natural resources that built America are no longer all-American. No matter how many red-white-and-blue flags fly over your trailer park, you too are tangled up in a global economic web that has compressed time and space and confused our ideas of place.

two-fifths of all coal mined in the U.S." In fact, according the EIA, "several Midwestern and Southern states are highly or entirely dependent [for coal] on Wyoming supply." And, finally, in the Green River Basin, which it shares with Utah and Colorado, Wyoming partakes in the distinction of having part of the largest Oil Shale deposit in the world; Wyoming's portion accounts for a potential 300 billion barrels of oil, or the equivalent of one-fourth of the world's proven oil reserves ("Wyoming"). All this is to say, that Wyoming's fate is overdetermined by what is under its soil. And so too is the collective fate of the men living within its "four straight lines."

The Legend of Colton H. Bryant:

Alexandra Fuller's book is concerned to tell the story of one young man whose life was in service to the extraction of the mineral wealth of Wyoming, Colton H. Bryant. Fuller never met Bryant. Rather, she got to know him through accounts she collected from his friends and relatives. Fuller learned of Bryant through a story in the *High Country News*. The story, "Disposable workers of the oil and gas fields," written by Ray Ring between 2005 and 2006, brought to Fuller's attention the often exploitative and nearly always dangerous environment that roughnecks face out in the oilfields. What was at issue for Ring specifically was the rising number of accidents, especially fatal accidents that seemed to be concomitant with the rising number of drilling rigs operating in the interior west, including Wyoming:

From Louisiana to Alaska, oil and gas is an industry in a rush, spurred by a sense of worldwide shortage, and entranced by escalated prices and inordinate profits. And the industry targets the Interior West, especially; the region's summertime total of drilling rigs has soared since 2000, from 204 to 447, according to RigData, a Texas company that

tracks the industry. With that increase in drilling and related activities, the number of fatal accidents has also risen. Last year alone [2005], 20 people died doing jobs directly related to drilling and servicing wells in the region. And for the whole time period I studied—2000 to 2006, roughly encompassing the current boom in coalbed-methane and other natural gas exploration—federal and state records show that at least 89 people died working in energy extraction in the states of Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, Montana, and North Dakota. That toll is almost certainly an understatement, and not just because the average oil and gas death gets less publicity than, say, a fatal traffic wreck.

The industry's true accident totals, fatal and otherwise, are shrouded in obscurity...(Ring).

Ring cites the fact that the federal agency in charge of maintaining workplace safety the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), was, at the time of his writing the article, understaffed and insufficiently uniform in its methods to be able to properly account for accidents in the oilfields. Additionally, in the case of Wyoming, along with Utah and New Mexico, the work of supervision is done by state agencies, in Wyoming's case by an organization known as Wyoming OSHA. This also accounts for the difficulty in determining the total number of oilfield accidents, as the state agencies are autonomous and heterogeneous in method.

According to Ring's report, Wyoming OSHA had, at the time of the writing of the article, only 8 cops, or "compliance officers," and only six of them concentrated on safety issues. And this is at a time (2006) when, according to the Petroleum Association of Wyoming, there were nearly 100 rigs operating in any given month in the state ("Average Working Monthly Rigs). Which brings us back to Colton H. Bryant, a blue-eyed, hyperactive cowboy, and third generation roughneck.

According to Fuller's account, Bryant barely graduated from high school, and only when he transferred to a remedial high school. He had been the object of ridicule by other students

during his time in school—"retard" the insult of choice (6). So much so, that he had tearfully confessed to his sister, upon learning that his wife was pregnant, his fear that his child would end up like him, "a slow learner" (139). However, evincing the rugged spirit, his motto was "Mind over matter. If I don't mind, then it don't matter," Bryant was able to weather most storms (7).

Bryant's life, as described by Fuller, is one typical of working-class Wyoming: hunting, camping, horse riding, chew, and copious amounts of Mountain Dew. Two anecdotes about Bryant illustrate his resolve in the face of hardship or danger. The first concerns a failed jackrabbit hunting expedition. In a ploy to cheer up his heartbroken friend Jake, Colton drove his truck deep into the snowy wastes outside of his hometown of Evanston, only to high-center the vehicle on a snow bank. When pushing failed, Colton told his friends to wait in the truck and proceeded to flag down a train, getting himself and his friends a ride back to town; and all this during a blizzard (97-103). In the second anecdote, Colton nearly cuts his foot in half while chopping wood. Rather than panicking, Colton continued to chop until he became lightheaded and thought perhaps he might need help. He then went to his neighbor's house to ask if they could call his sister so she could take him to the hospital (61-63). However, he nearly bled to death on his neighbor's porch, and all because, "I figured I didn't want to get blood all over his truck" (64).

The overall impression one gets of Bryant is that of a redneck, and through Fuller's telling, Bryant as much as admits it, referring to himself at one point as "The redneck retriever" (32). However, he is also a hardworking man who cares for his family and friends. That is why the story is so tragic. On February 14, 2006, during a rather intense snowstorm, Bryant fell from the catwalk of the rig he was working on in the Upper Green River Valley. He was taken to a hospital in Salt Lake City where he died the next day. According to the Wyoming OSHA report

"Patterson-UTI [the rig owner] had violated several safety regulations" (Ring). The thing that both Ring and Fuller point to in the Wyoming OSHA report is the absence of a proper safety rail on the catwalk. However, as Ring notes, there is no indication in the report as to what the "inadequacy" of the rail was, just that part of the catwalk *had* no safety rail.

What is especially important to understand about Colton H. Bryant is that, at least in Fuller's account, he felt he had no other choice but to work in the oilfields. "Then as now, the best-paying jobs in the West for someone without a college degree were out on the oil patch" (25). Colton's grandfather, his father, and his older brother all at one time had worked, or were working in the oilfields. At one point in the book, while defending his decision to work the rigs, Bryant describes himself to his wife as "oil-field trash," the self-deprecating term commonly used by, or derogatorily deployed at oilfield workers (146). Fuller's description of both Wyoming and the oilfields is one of "One scar over another. Wound upon wound" (86). What Fuller refers to is the overlaying of oil patches on the tracks made by the wheels of pioneers' wagons as they followed the Oregon Trail. This atmosphere informs and shapes Bryant's thinking: "Colton is a native son, so the weather and mountains, horses and guns, pickup trucks and oil rigs are what he must use to measure himself against manhood" (104). Fuller acknowledges that things could have been different for Bryant and, perhaps, his attitude is as much idiosyncratic as it is determined, "Sure, if you're lucky or have choices and time, there are more careful ways to measure yourself against the land than this flat-out, balls-to-the-big-sky method, but Colton doesn't see the benefit in pacing himself" (105). However, as Fuller is fully aware, Wyoming is dominated as much by its geography and weather as it is by the boom-bust cycle of international capital:

Since it's nothing new, there is a name for the depression and lawlessness that comes to communities that have been blessed with the dubious gift of nearby mineral wealth: Gillette syndrome. The psychologist ElDean Kohrs coined the term in the 1970's and popularized it in a paper entitled "Social Consequences of Boom Growth in Wyoming," in which he describes the ills then being visited upon the coal town of Gillette, Wyoming. A boomtown, he explained, experiences an increase in crime, drug use, alcoholism, violence, and cost of living, and a decrease in just about everything good except, arguably, money (84).

Bryant's life, indeed the life of Bryant's family for generations back, was the a product of this boomtown logic of the oil patch:

Colton was born with horses *and* oil in his blood like his father before him and his grandfather before that and maybe his grandfather's father before that. Who knows, because Wyoming is reseeded [sic] every time there is another oil boom, transience refreshed and history forgotten.... And then the boom's over and the brokenhearted leave, and it's all unseeded [sic] trailer parks and motels with their peeling backs to the long set of the afternoon sun. The wind blows the same anyhow, boom or bust, although more hollow with less people there to see it (24).

It is with this meditation on the transience of life in Wyoming, transience brought about by both the place itself, but also by what the place means within the system of global capital that I would like to complete the discussion of this book. As the EIA statistics above prove, Wyoming's objective value is as an energy resource, and so too the men of Wyoming are seen primarily as another feature of that value. Fuller's description of the philosophy of Bryant's father Bill is instructive:

...none of this seems to bother Bill much. He looks at the terms of his employment much the way most men think of women or weather, as something beyond the power of his control. Or like the way a hitch will shift under your feet; day to night, one week to a month, from a fortnight back to a week. It's all down to someone with a computer in Huston or Casper or Cheyenne typing you into a drilling roster on a desert or a high plain they have never seen, and have no intention of seeing, as if you're a megawatt (22).

The description here evokes the image of the rugged individual, willing to forego personal comfort or even the ability to control his circumstances, and boldly facing his fate, "Ruggedness in this sense was less often the father of the heroic feat than the mother of the austere endurance" (64). However, as Borgmann points out the ideology of the rugged individual is just as often used "to justify the violence and injustice of the modern economy," as it is to celebrate the actual lives of individual men (40).

Conclusion:

The notion that I alluded to earlier, that rugged individualism is often used as a cover for certain rapacious characteristics in the economy is what I wish to return to in concluding. In the case of Colton H. Bryant rugged individualism sent him out to the rigs to make money, as they are the best jobs available to unskilled laborers. Rugged individualism is the mentality behind the phrase "Cowboy Up" (read: "suck it up and take it like a man"), and allows it to continue as an ethos amongst the men of Wyoming. However, the ruggedness of these men is easily exploited by economic interests that seek to cut costs, and save time, by insufficiently looking after the safety of these men once employed. So too, in the case of David Love, his rugged determination and willingness to explore the backcountry of Wyoming, in a bid to "serve his county," was

eventually turned over to economic interests that did not share his outlook, "We're stewards here—of land and resources. If you gut the irreplaceable resources, you're not doing your job" (123). The idea of Love as the consummate self-made man, and rugged individual, coupled with the picture of Bryant as the rugged, if not, perhaps, foolish, individual gives some idea of how men in Wyoming are defined. Through the discussion of these two books, we can begin to see the outlines of a particular form of masculinity, one that is as vulnerable as it is necessary. That is to say, the rugged individualism and self-made ethos of Wyoming masculinity can serve to steady the individual in the harsh environment; however, it can also leave him open to exploitation by economic forces that see his rugged demeanor as a an asset upon which to profit. And so one is left to wonder if these rugged men, men made rugged by a rugged land, are merely doing the best that they can under the circumstances, or whether their natures are being exploited much like the land from which they come.

It Is What It Is, and Then Some: A personal narrative of exhaustion in America's oilfields.

With the exception of the author, or quoted authors, all names have been changed.



Figure 1: Sublette County, Wyoming: View of rig with cuttings pit in foreground. Notice the crane to the right of derrick: a second crew is on-site to perform fracking operations on a well that has already been drilled. They use the crane to lift the coiled-tubing that can perform the perforation of casing and send the frack-fluid downhole. This is known in the industry as Simops (Simultaneous Operations), the simultaneous drilling of wells, while also fracking wells on the same well-pad. In this case a four-well pad. Author's photo.

Near the end of my time in the oilfield and after getting bounced from one rig to another, and one state to the next, I found myself in a portion of what is sometimes called the sagebrush sea, the high prairie of Wyoming's Sublette County. It was September 2015. I was working on a rig drilling natural gas wells in what is known as the Jonah Field, in the Green River Basin of southwestern Wyoming. Sitting at an elevation of just over 7,000 feet, the field's topology is comprised of rolling hills and buttes covered in sage brush, and is populated by jack rabbits, and pronghorn. But there are also flare stacks, holding tanks, and valve assemblies all painted a dull brown to make them blend into the landscape. On a clear day, looking north toward Pinedale, you will see on your right the sharp, craggy peaks of the Wind River Range bending slowly in a northwesterly direction to meet the Gros Venture Mountains to the north. To your left, the gentler slopes of the Wyoming Range running north and south, seeming to mark, exactly, the western edge of the state and its border with Idaho. As you turn south to look toward Rock Springs, you'll be staring down at the southern border of Wyoming and the high desert that will lead you into Utah and its Uintah Range. But in the heart of the field, no matter which way you look, you will see the evidence of drilling and extraction: lease roads, semi-trucks, pickup trucks, cleared but empty well-pads, developed well-pads, equipment yards, company facilities, graders and dozers, plows and dump trucks, excavators, pipeline at various stages of installation, work-over rigs, smashed rabbits, trash, and, of course, the occasional drilling rig. It is the West, wide-open and full of human activity. It was in this place of surpassing natural beauty and staggering human activity that I became most intimately acquainted with exhaustion.



Figure 2. The Jonah Field from 30,000 Feet: The light spots are well-sites at some stage of development, the Wind River Range is at the top. Author's photo.

I spent just over five months on that rig in Wyoming, working long stretches of time without knowing when I'd get days off. Our company, like all the other companies in the industry, was in the agonizing process of "downsizing" and headcount reductions were the

principle means of accomplishing this; our CEO had become the darling of Wall Street when he pursued early and aggressive cuts to the payroll.⁹ What this meant for the boots on the ground—guys like me—was that you didn't know from one hitch to the next whether you'd have a job, and if you did there was no telling who you would be working with. By the time I arrived in Wyoming I was used to it, I'd worked on at least six different rigs and with at least a dozen different coworkers that year alone. Uncertainty was normal, and I inured myself to it with what my boss liked to call the "great cerebral marmalade of the working world": It is what it is. I'd say it to myself, or to others who would nod their assent. I knew there wasn't anything I could do except work hard and keep my head down. And so I kept doing that, no matter how hard or unrewarding the job became.

The fact that the global market for oil was changing was no one person's fault. You could resent this or that manager or CEO for the often painful or disruptive strategies and policies they

⁹ "Schlumberger Q1'15 Draws Praise from Analysts,"

<http://www.oilandgas360.com/schlumberger-q115-draws-praise-from-analysts>: an excerpt, "The effects of reduced drilling activity were apparent in Schlumberger's (ticker: SLB) Q1'15 revenues, but the oilservice giant still managed to report net income (excluding charges and credits) of \$1,358 million, or \$1.06 per share, in the three months ended March 31, 2015. The net income for Q1'15 represented respective declines of 30% and 15% compared to Q4'14 and Q1'14. North America pretax operating income was down by 51% and 39% in the same periods. SLB management attributed the declines directly to the slowdown in the drilling and exploration market. United States rig counts on the day of the release were at 954 – nearly half of the figure from April 2014. North America and international sources of revenue declined 25% and 16%, respectively, compared to the Q4'14, the immediately preceding quarter. SLB said approximately 75% of the revenue slide was due to decreased drilling and exploration activity, with the remainder being lost in the exchange rate. On a sequential basis, Q1'15 revenues of \$10,248 million were down 19% from Q4'14's total of \$12,641 million. The numbers beat several analyst estimates who had relatively low expectations in such a difficult environment. "Overall, this was a very strong quarter by Schlumberger as the company demonstrated better-than-expected operating margins across each region due to operational flexibility and cost control," said a note from Raymond James, while Capital One Securities said SLB achieved a "positive number on low expectations." The company plans on spending \$2.5 billion in 2015 operations, down from 2014's total of \$4.0 billion. The reduced activity led to the cut of an additional 11,000 jobs in the company. Approximately 15% of its workforce has been cut since the commodity crash.

pursued, but they were under enormous pressure to keep companies afloat in what has turned out to be one of the most painful and protracted busts in recent history. You could get mad about a pay cut, or having to work and train a different guy or several every hitch. But it wasn't their fault that the price of oil had dropped, or that the national rig count had fallen by over fifty percent.¹⁰ Everywhere on the rig you heard and repeated: It is what it is.

The phrase isn't unique to the oilfield. I'd heard it and used it before I ever thought I'd be living or working in the heart of the American oil patch. But I heard it more there than anywhere before. It came up at the end of conversations, the end of a hitch, and at the end of careers. It was the way the boom ended in North Dakota, but it was also the way the boom boomed. "It is what it is" is what you told yourself when you couldn't understand a new policy, when you were tired of the same old bullshit, when any person of authority made a call you didn't agree with, when a problem came up and the only way to fix it was to stop everything you had been doing and tear something apart. It was a mantra, a motto, a curse and cure-all for worries of all kinds.

Best friend got laid off?

Thirty percent pay-cut?

Another fifteen percent?

"It is what it is."

¹⁰ "How the Late October Oil Rig Count Dip Hurt the Total US Rig Count," by Alex Chamberlain, at <http://marketrealist.com/2015/11/late-october-oil-rig-count-dip-hurt-total-us-rig-count/>: "In the 12 months ending October 30, 2015, the total US crude oil and natural gas rig count fell by 1,154, or 60%. The number of active oil rigs fell by 1,004, or 63%. The number of natural gas rigs fell by 149, or ~43%, over this period."

Some higher up changed the drilling program and you spend three days fixing a problem that wouldn't have happened if they'd only just told you, and in the mean time you've literally scraped the skin and nails off of your fingers fixing it?¹¹

"It is what it is."

You get laid off?

"It is what it is."

The phrase can connote determination, either grim or happy, to do what must be done. Or it can denote a firm or careless resignation regarding the circumstances at hand. It is the fluid and malleable nature of what is implied by the phrase that attracts me to it as a means of trying to explicate and understand the nature of the oilfield and the culture that grows around and within it. In one sense the phrase seems to be the ultimate act of giving-in or giving-up one's personal will to the "great cerebral marmalade of the working world." My boss's definition tells you exactly what it is about "it is what it is" that's so problematic, it's pabulum, an insipid phrase that means everything and nothing all at once. We don't want to think about it anymore, we don't feel that it could be otherwise, so we stop thinking in order to stop feeling. But in another important way the phrase is indicative of a kind of brutal wisdom. Why would you bother getting upset

¹¹ The project engineer for our company decided to switch chemicals during a rig move, this change wasn't communicated to us and even the mud engineer who worked on-site wasn't aware of the change. When it came time to drill the new chemical, a polymer used for suspending weight materials in water based mud, was added to the drilling mud. This wasn't a problem until we started to "strip" the mud using another polymer solution, the same polymer solution we'd been using for months. When the two chemicals reacted it turned the mud into something like cold peanut butter, or wet cement. This resulted in two burned out pumps and me having to crawl on my hands and knees to dig out a couple hundred pounds of solidified mud that had accumulated in a barely accessible catch tank. Because my gloves would inevitably get soaked and stuck in the mud I resorted to digging the mud out barehanded. This eventually wore the skin off of the tips on my fingers and pulled a couple of my fingernails off. Still, we were able to get the equipment repaired and running within 24 hours, keeping the oil company happy. The problem chemical was switched out and we got back to normal operations.

about what is not within your power to change? Why waste time talking about what is outside your control?

What I realized about that phrase, and its significance in the lives of the men and women I worked with, was that it meant the death of thought. It is the verbal equivalent of lying down and letting the world roll over you. For all the toughness and thick-skinned stoicism we tried to convey to each other, the fact was that no one was happy with the way things were. People could laugh and make jokes, but underneath the jovial camaraderie was a deep sense of unease. And when you spoke to people what you heard, in those all-too-rare moments of raw honesty, was fear. Uttering the mantra-like phrase "it is what it is" allows one to signal acceptance of the situation, without having to question the possibility of its being otherwise. In certain circumstances this rejection of possibility was healthy, when a task has to be completed or a piece of equipment repaired, when the inevitable myriad problems that spring up in drilling a hole thousands of feet deep into the earth eventually require some response. But what gets lost in this nose-to-the-grindstone, knuckle-down, way of being is the fact that we all took the act of drilling, the act of excavating the ground for its resources as a given. It calls to mind the Upton Sinclair quote from *I, Candidate for Governor: And How I Got Licked* (1935), "It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends upon his not understanding it!" We were all there to drill for oil or gas and no one ever questioned that basic fact, or the fact that drilling would beat up our bodies, leaving us tired, sore and desirous of sleep or stupefaction.

The apologia for the state of the world, or a slouching resignation about it, is something Adorno comes back to again and again in his book of aphorisms, *Minima Moralia*. Though his concern is more with what he sees as the fascism latent within modernity, and the desolation of

European Jewry by the hyper-rationalized methods of the Nazis, his meditation upon the sophistry of those who would defend the status quo illuminates much of what is most insidious about the phrase "it is what it is." Specifically, in section 149, entitled "Don't exaggerate," Adorno spells out what is at stake for anyone attempting to call attention to modernity's more unsavory aspects:

Criticism of tendencies in modern society is automatically countered, before it is fully uttered, by the argument that things have always been like this. Excitement—so promptly resisted—merely shows want of insight in to the invariability of history, an unreasonableness proudly diagnosed by all as hysteria...The obviousness of disaster becomes an asset to its apologists—what everyone knows no-one need say—and under cover of silence is allowed to proceed unopposed. Assent is given to what has been drummed into people's heads by philosophy of every hue: that whatever has the persistent momentum of existence on its side is thereby proved right. One need only be discontented to be at once suspect as a world reformer. Connivance makes use of the trick of attributing to its opponent a reactionary and untenable theory of decline—for is not horror perennial?—in order by the alleged error in his thinking to discredit his concrete insight into the negative, and to blacken him who remonstrates against darkness as an obfuscator (Adorno, 233).

And while it would be an error itself to attribute the level of intellectual sophistication that Adorno is pointing to when he talks of the "apologists" of disaster, is it not true that "it is what it is" stands in for a more elaborate defense of the current state of the world? Or, at the very least, I can say that I've had the phrase uttered at me in order to bring closure to a conversation, especially when the discussion began to concern the possibility of things being different from

what they were. In that sense, the phrase was a kind of verbal tic deployed to counter thoughts that might lead to greater distress, something about which I cannot but sympathize. Who would want to make depressing situation bleaker, an already uninviting topic all the more funereal? But what is prevented by this mental spasm is an examination of the ground of the initial complaint. Which ensures nothing so much as the continued dominance of an ideology that seeks to obviate discussion about the role that fossil fuel consumption and exploration play in the immiseration of people and the desolation of the planet. This kind of rationalization, to Adorno's way of thinking, is what make's the horror's of the modern world acceptable, indeed, inevitable:

Horror consists in its always remaining the same—the persistence of 'pre-history'—but is realized as constantly different, unforeseen, exceeding all expectation, the faithful shadow of developing productive forces. The same duality defines violence as Marx demonstrated in material production: 'There are characteristics which all stages of production have in common, and which are established as general ones by the mind; but the so-called *general pre-conditions* of all production are nothing more than...abstract moments with which no real historical stage of production can be grasped.' In other words, to abstract out historically unchanged elements is not to observe neutral scientific objectivity, but to spread, even when correct, a smoke-screen behind which whatever is tangible and therefore assailable is lost to sight (Adorno, 234).

The oilfield changes, and it changes all the time. In my own experience I worked on rigs that were built in the nineteen-fifties and had barely been updated in the intervening half-century, but I also worked on rigs that had only been in the field a few months, bristling with the newest technology. The technical improvements certainly meant that the men involved in the work were at less risk of injury, that the work could be completed more quickly and with less chance of a

problem, but the basic, underlying program of drilling for oil had not changed. Which is to say that though the technology for extracting the resources had evolved, the actual deeper, structural dependency upon fossil fuels has only become more fundamental to our society. In this way the violence Adorno cites in Marx's formulation, with its smoke-screen of historicity, is exactly what Rob Nixon is pointing to with his concept of "slow violence," "The insidious workings of slow violence derive largely from the unequal attention given to spectacular and unspectacular time. In an age that venerates instant spectacle, slow violence is deficient in the recognizable special effects that fill movie theatres and boost ratings on TV" (Nixon, 6). The oilfield is largely unspectacular, and most definitely out-of-sight. Though there are examples such as the Deepwater Horizon spill in the Gulf of Mexico, or the more recent leak at the Aliso Canyon natural gas facility in Southern California, it is worth noting how little press the latter received by comparison to the former, the effluent being an invisible gas, rather than a seeping black mass impinging upon the gulf coast.¹² This obsession with the spectacular, coupled with an uncritical,

¹² So much so that even the Governor of California, Jerry Brown, did little to intervene in the leak for the first two months, see: "California Finally Declares State Of Emergency Over Methane Leak That Forced Evacuation Of Thousands," Gaworecki, Mike, at: <http://www.desmogblog.com/2016/01/08/california-finally-declares-state-emergency-over-methane-leak-has-forced-evacuation-thousands>: "Methane first started leaking from Southern California Gas Co.'s Aliso Canyon storage facility on October 23, two and a half months ago. More than 2,300 homes have been evacuated in nearby Porter Ranch, a suburb of Los Angeles, and many more people are reportedly applying for help relocating after suffering nosebleeds, rashes, headaches and other serious health impacts due to the gas leak and the sulfuric stench permeating their home town. DeSmog first reported on the Aliso Canyon gas leak and the unfolding public health crisis in Porter Ranch on December 11, while California Governor Jerry Brown was in Paris attending COP21 to burnish his credentials as a climate leader. By December 22, the California Air Resources Board estimates, as much as 66,000 metric tons of methane, a greenhouse gas that scientists believe to be as much as 35-times more potent than carbon dioxide (though it doesn't persist in the atmosphere as long as CO₂), had escaped from the well. That same day, it was called "a catastrophe the scale of which has not been seen since the 2010 BP oil spill" by famed environmental activist Erin Brockovitch. More than two weeks later, on January 6, 2016, Governor Brown at last declared a state of emergency over the Aliso Canyon gas leak.

hyperactive 24-hour news cycle, means most of the large disasters borne of our dependence for oil and gas go largely unnoticed by the majority of people. Add to this the obfuscatory work of paid hacks and even elected officials creating the illusion of a debate around the links between fossil fuel consumption and the Earth's ever more erratic climate, and you have a recipe for total ignorance on the part of the American polity about the current state of fossil fuel consumption and our civilization's dependence upon it, something that is doubled down upon by the men in the oilfield proper.¹³

To date, according to the Environmental Defense Fund, more than 80,000 metric tons of methane have poured, and continue to pour, into Earth's atmosphere."

¹³ One recent, notable, and particularly egregious example: "Exxon Knew about Climate Change almost 40 years ago, " Hall, Shannon, at: <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/exxon-knew-about-climate-change-almost-40-years-ago/>: "Exxon was aware of climate change, as early as 1977, 11 years before it became a public issue, according to a recent investigation from InsideClimate News. This knowledge did not prevent the company (now ExxonMobil and the world's largest oil and gas company) from spending decades refusing to publicly acknowledge climate change and even promoting climate misinformation—an approach many have likened to the lies spread by the tobacco industry regarding the health risks of smoking. Both industries were conscious that their products wouldn't stay profitable once the world understood the risks, so much so that they used the same consultants to develop strategies on how to communicate with the public.... One thing is certain: in June 1988, when NASA scientist James Hansen told a congressional hearing that the planet was already warming, Exxon remained publicly convinced that the science was still controversial. Furthermore, experts agree that Exxon became a leader in campaigns of confusion. By 1989 the company had helped create the Global Climate Coalition (disbanded in 2002) to question the scientific basis for concern about climate change. It also helped to prevent the U.S. from signing the international treaty on climate known as the Kyoto Protocol in 1998 to control greenhouse gases. Exxon's tactic not only worked on the U.S. but also stopped other countries, such as China and India, from signing the treaty. At that point, "a lot of things unraveled," Oreskes says. But experts are still piecing together Exxon's misconception puzzle. Last summer the Union of Concerned Scientists released a complementary investigation to the one by InsideClimate News, known as the Climate Deception Dossiers (pdf). "We included a memo of a coalition of fossil-fuel companies where they pledge basically to launch a big communications effort to sow doubt," says union president Kenneth Kimmel. "There's even a quote in it that says something like 'Victory will be achieved when the average person is uncertain about climate science.' So it's pretty stark." Since then, Exxon has spent more than \$30 million on think tanks that promote climate denial, according to Greenpeace. Although experts will never be able to quantify the damage Exxon's misinformation has caused, "one thing for certain is we've lost a lot of ground," Kimmell says. Half of the greenhouse gas emissions in our atmosphere were released after 1988. "I have to think if the

Adorno was particularly interested in the way that certain arguments were advancing the rationalization of the liquidation of Europe's Jews at the hands of the Nazi's, those voices that sought to downplay the significance of the act, by equating it with historical antecedents. So too, there are those who would deny that our current civilization and its concomitant problems are anything worth getting excited about historically, and they would thereby seek to get out from under the moral burden presented by a civilization that looks toward the exhaustion of its own basis for existence. The error of denying our current situation means a denial of futurity, or, more precisely, a denial of other's futures. To put this more prosaically, when we say that "it is what it is" we are not only denying that things could be different in the here and now, we are deciding that things will not be different for future generations; we are guaranteeing a legacy of suffering:

Auschwitz cannot be brought into analogy with the destruction of the Greek city-states as a mere gradual increase in horror, before which one can preserve tranquility of mind. Certainly, the unprecedented torture and humiliation of those abducted in cattle-trucks does shed a deathly-livid light on the most distant past, in whose mindless, planless violence the scientifically confected was already teleologically latent. The identity lies in the non-identity, in what, not having yet come to pass, denounces what has. The statement that things are always the same is false in its immediateness, and true only when introduced into the dynamics of totality. He who relinquishes awareness of the growth of horror not merely succumbs to cold-hearted contemplation, but fails to perceive, together with the specific difference between the newest and that proceeding it, the true identity of the whole, of terror without end (Adorno, 234-35).

fossil-fuel companies had been upfront about this and had been part of the solution instead of the problem, we would have made a lot of progress [today] instead of doubling our greenhouse gas emissions.”

It is this infernal refusal to see possibility, or a lens of inevitability through which men see their lives that "it is what it is" signifies. But it is by making known the particular and the specific, the personal and the subjective that one can put flesh on the examples of what is immediate and immanent. The stories of men can give us access to that which might prevent our historically abstracting the conditions from which they come; that can keep us from the "tranquility of mind" that ignores the slow violence of "a mere gradual increase in horror."

After a month on the rig, I had met and worked with everyone on the Ensign 119 rig crew, and gotten to know something about them all, even if it was only that they were lazy, or boastful, or a know-it-all. A couple days into my second hitch I found myself in a conversation with an old, nine-fingered roughneck named Robert. With a gravelly voice and bushy, mountain man's beard, Robert was the embodiment of rough living. It showed in his bloodshot eyes, sallow skin, and his yellowed grin, full of gaps and the worn down nubs of teeth. I'd heard that Robert used to be a "tool pusher," that is, the person who manages the rig in the idiom of roughnecks, and the highest position on a rig (though the company man, or representative of the oil company, is the highest position on-site); it was on this occasion that I learned how it was he came to be "working the floors." Which is to say that he'd gone all the way to the bottom of this rig's hierarchy.¹⁴

¹⁴ The positions on a rig are as follows: a Tool Pusher manages the rig, he's responsible for ordering parts, overseeing major repairs, and making sure everyone else is doing their jobs; a Driller runs the rig, literally, he is responsible for how fast the bit turns, how much weight is put on the drill string, and how fast the pumps push fluid down hole (though other people generally make the call on the actual parameters of operation the driller must actually run the equipment), the driller also runs the crew; the Derrick Hand or Derrick Man is responsible for mixing chemicals into and maintaining the drilling fluid, as well as maintaining and servicing the mud pumps that send the fluid down hole, he is also usually responsible for going up into the rig's derrick to help pull the pipe back or push it forward depending on whether the rig is tripping out

With the patch in such disarray due to the bust it wasn't uncommon or surprising to see former tool pushers drilling, or working any of the various positions on the rig. Anybody still working at this point had either been higher up the ladder than they found themselves now or were lucky to have kept their position. In fact, before I was transferred out of North Dakota I'd seen a rig's crew replaced, man-by-man, one hitch after the next, until it was staffed entirely by tool pushers and drillers. Every man replaced having been laid off. But this wasn't the reason Robert gave for "getting busted down to floors." He was a floor hand because he'd gotten thrown in jail—something that would happen a couple more times while I worked with him, eventually costing him his job entirely. In the story he related he had drunk himself into a stupor, disabled the interlock device in his truck, and then drove around his hometown of Vernal, Utah. His license was already suspended from a previous DUI, hence the interlock device, and so when the police eventually arrested him they were forced to keep him in jail for a month, and so he couldn't make it to work. But, according to him, drinking wasn't the underlying cause of his

or into the hole (tripping is the term used for bringing pipe out of the well bore, or putting it back down into the already drilled portion of the well); the Motor Hand or Motor Man is responsible for maintaining and fueling all the diesel generators and equipment on-site, helps the floor hands when making connections (that is, to add more drill pipe to the drill string, thereby allowing the rig to drill deeper), and, more generally, with keep the grounds around the rig organized; the floor hand(s), and often there are two of them, do anything they are told to do, with their most important job being to help make connections during drilling, or to break connections when the rig pulls the pipe out of the hole, second to that is cleaning, floor hands do a lot of cleaning. In the past a more experienced floor hand might be called a Chain Hand, as he would throw the chain that spun the pipe. Additionally, some crews work with an extra man, sometimes known as a Pit Hand, he is responsible for watching fluid levels in the rig's holding tanks, known as the pits, in addition he would be responsible for assisting the Derrick Man and keeping the shale shakers clean. A new rig hand, with little to no experience is called a "worm," and anybody who doesn't know what they are doing is called "wormy." Generally there is always one tool pusher on site, with two rig crews, working opposite 12-hour shifts, day and night. These shifts are called a tour, which is pronounced, "tower." Finally, on most rigs, the crews work two-week "hitches," another crew replacing them during their two weeks off. Tool pushers work a similar schedule that allows them to work with all four rig crews.

problems. The real cause, and the one that was still haunting him, was the death of his son. It was the reason he gave for having been in jail just before the hitch we were both working.

In Robert's telling, his son had been murdered by a woman he'd "shacked up with." Robert's most recent stay in jail came after he began drunkenly screaming in his front yard upon seeing what he called "the woman's court testimony" posted on Facebook. He thought it was slanderous, and when he was brought before the local judge he said as much. The judge told him he was too old to be getting drunk and disturbing the peace and put him in jail for a week. But of course this wasn't what got him busted-down to floors. That happened after his son died, and the drinking he did afterwards, and the two DUI's, and the month in jail. His son had been a roughneck and driller just like his father. And just like his father he'd messed around with drugs, specifically methamphetamines. The woman, who everyone agreed shot his son, said he'd been high on meth and beating her when it happened. Robert knew both of these things were true. But it didn't change his mind; the woman had murdered his boy. He finished telling me his disjointed story, leaving off with what a pain his dead son's in-laws were to deal with, when he said the words, "Well, I guess it is what it is."

Robert had no way to bring his son back, no opportunity to work himself back up to the position he'd lost, he couldn't even compel his ex-daughter-in-law to let him see his grandchildren. On the one hand, he was accepting the facts of a desperately hard life; on the other, he was admitting that he had no other words for the anger, pain, and grief he was feeling. And while Robert's story isn't necessarily indicative of the entire oilfield, it is illustrative of the way in which the phrase, "it is was it is," gets deployed to allay people's discomfort, while admitting their impotence in the face of a hard and often unremitting life. The way that he told the story, only occasionally allowing emotion into his voice, and then shrugging when he

finished, brought home the rehearsed nature of the telling: the flattened affect, the distance from emotions that had animated his prior behavior. Robert was tired. Tired of life, tired of the work, and tired of telling his sad story to bored men surrounded by loud, stinking equipment.

When the Bakken was still booming and I was working in the oilfields of North Dakota I would travel to and from work in my truck. The drive from Missoula was approximately seven hundred miles, give or take, depending on the location of the rig. The route varied depending on where the rig was in the field, or my level of boredom, or in order to shave time off of what could seem an interminable journey. In the summer, if I didn't run into construction and was well rested, I could make the trip in about ten hours. During the winter that same trip could take up to fifteen hours, if I wasn't completely stymied by the weather. And, no matter what, it meant putting over fourteen hundred miles on my truck for every hitch, driving back and forth. I was far from unique in this, almost everyone I worked with drove to the rig from home. Some flew into Williston or Minot and drove from there, but the vast majority drove. I had a night hand that drove from Idaho, his trek adding two hours and a hundred and forty miles to mine. Often I met men that lived in places like Michigan, Oregon, or Texas, their drives could take twenty-four hours or longer. I bring all this up because it was drummed into us during safety training, by repeated emails sent during holidays, and the ever-more restrictive driving policies our company instituted, that driving was the most dangerous part of our job. I bring it up because driving was often one of the more exhausting parts of the job.

I would leave Missoula in the morning, and by dint of eastward motion and time zones, arrive having lost an hour, the sun often already set. A ten-hour drive, at a minimum, means a long, lonely day. And even with good sleep and ample caffeine I would often find myself drifting off, or zoning out. When I got to the rig, more often than not, I wasn't able to sleep. Usually this

had something to do with the situation there, no empty beds, a problem that needed to be addressed, or the guy I was relieving wanting to talk. And, even when I arrived with plenty of time to an empty bed, I often found I couldn't sleep the first night. From discussions I had with other men, I know I wasn't alone in this. Sleep was often difficult in these strange, shared beds. This was only complicated by the fact that I nearly always slept on-site, the rig noisily drilling only a hundred feet (at most) from where I lay. People would use medication, sleep-aids, and alcohol to help them sleep. I employed an air purifier for white noise. There were days that I worked so hard that sleep came easily, but just as common was the exhaustion and soreness that made sleep difficult and fitful. Two weeks of this meant that I was poorly rested on my drive home. It was only the excitement of being off of work that got me there without having to take naps along the way. In roughneck culture it is customary to leave immediately after one's last shift of the hitch. This usually amounts to getting off work, showering, finishing any last minute packing, and then driving home. What this means is that the man behind the wheel has been up for at least thirteen hours, thirteen hours spent on his feet, working. All you have to do is imagine one of the men I mentioned from Oregon or Texas to see how dangerous this combination of hard labor, long hours, and long-drives can be. One arrived at work exhausted, and left exhausted.

I heard of many accidents in the oil patch. I saw cars and trucks flipped over in the ditches next to the highway, witnessed vehicles slide and spin on black ice, I watched a trailer come off of a hitch and drift into the grass divider of HW-1804 in Williston during rush hour traffic, I even saw what it looked like when an 18-wheeler jack-knifes on the highway. But I managed to never get into an accident. Fortunate does not begin to describe how I feel about that fact. Early in my second year in North Dakota I arrived on site to bad news. One of the rig hands

had left for home after working a hitch and had rolled his truck outside of Forsyth, Montana. I had worked closely with this guy, and we had had several heated run-ins because of his propensity to spill fluid all over my work site. I hadn't particularly disliked the guy, he was nice enough, he just wasn't careful about his job. In February of 2014 he was ejected from his truck and killed when it rolled over him. The tool pusher told me that the police report said he wasn't wearing his seat belt when he lost control of his Ford pickup; they suspected he had fallen asleep at the wheel. He had been on his way home to White Sulphur Springs, Montana, he had been a reservist in the Marine Corps., and he left behind a wife and two young children. It no longer mattered whether I liked him or not, he was dead.

As far as I know he is the only person I worked with who was killed in an oilfield related accident. However, what should be said here is that since he was off-site, in his own vehicle, and off the clock, no company can be held responsible, nor will the accident be recorded as an oilfield related fatality. Rather, it is added merely to the bloody total of highway fatalities; the significance of his death memorialized and obscured by a little white cross on the side of I-94. As Ray Ring noted in 2006, the prevalence of oilfield related fatalities is concealed by the fact that many occur outside of the patch. Just like Robert's son's death. He died at home, but he died as a result of a life lived in service to the oil patch. The meth and violence were concomitant to the boom-bust life of a roughneck. Sleep is perhaps the only fitting response to prolonged physical exhaustion. What we know for certain is that death is the ultimate form of physical exhaustion, a state from which no man returns.

As I type these words the fatigue, frustration, and fear comes back to me. The closest I ever came to death in oilfield was on the road: a long-haul trucker nearly running me down head-on near Alexander, North Dakota, another almost running me off the road outside of Livingston,

Montana. It isn't my intention to exploit these stories for personal glorification or to garner some intellectual capital. The weariness that comes from having to be constantly vigilant on the road is exemplary of the idea I have tried to advance in this project. We have created a technology that allows us to hurtle at great speeds through space, thus saving us time, and allowing us to work in the far-flung places where oil and gas are extracted. But this same technology comes with the inherent risk of catastrophe. Being exhausted has consequences for individuals and for the society they live in. When we ignore this facet of modernity we allow it to menace us in unpredictable and unaccountable ways.

In her monograph, *Exhaustion: A History*, Anna Katharina Schaffner makes clear that a concern with exhaustion is not new to our age:

[T]he history of exhaustion reveals that concerns about its effects on the mind and the body of the individual, as well as on the wider social community, are by no means a modern phenomenon. The mental, physical, and spiritual symptoms of states of exhaustion have been theorized since classical antiquity and appear, under different names and labels, as common denominators in an ever-shifting historical regime of exhaustion-related syndromes (Schaffner, 233).

In Schaffner's view, what marks our present moment as unique, is a concern with not only the exhaustion of bodies, races, or nations, but of the very ground of their being: the exhaustion of the environment, "This worry relates to the exhaustion of our planetary raw materials caused by the rapidly increasing energy needs of a fast-growing world population and our careless habits of consumption" (237). At the level of the individual, Schaffner focuses on "burnout" as the syndrome most indicative of our age. As she notes, "The term "burnout" emerged in the 1970's in

the United States as a popular metaphor for mental exhaustion among social-sector workers" (213). The definition of burnout, as Schaffner shows, has gone through various permutations depending on the theories prescribed to explain it.¹⁵ However, what is always recognized as a "major component of burnout" is exhaustion.

As Schaffner notes, the prevalence of discussions of burnout in Germany far exceeds that of the US or Great Britain (217). Specifically, she notes the politically-inflected nature of much of the German discourse around burnout: "German burnout discourse, especially of the academic-sociological variety, tends to be politicized and frequently combines psychomedical arguments with criticism of the damaging psychosocial repercussions of neoliberalism, globalization, and acceleration."¹⁶ She contrasts this with much of the English language literature,

¹⁵ From Schaffner, Anna K, *Exhaustion: A History*: pp. 213-16: Schaffner gives the following definitions of burnout in chronological order: "American Social Psychologist Christina Maslach..." "Burnout is a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who do 'people work' of some kind," or "a state of exhaustion in which one is cynical about the value of one's occupation and doubtful of one's capacity to perform." Maslach and Michael Leiter: "energy turns into exhaustion, involvement into cynicism, and efficacy turns into ineffectiveness." Schaffner goes on to explain other theories of burnout that deal specifically with "resource exhaustion" as it relates to individuals: "COR [Conservation of Resources] theorists consider burnout as an affective state that is marked by feelings of emotional exhaustion, physical fatigue, and cognitive weariness, all of which, "denote the depletion of energetic resources resulting from cumulative exposure to chronic work and life stresses." Or, the World Health Organization's definition of burnout as a "life management difficulty." Finally, she presents a popular idea of burnout from a German newspaper article by Sebastian Beck: "[burnout is a] socially accepted luxury-version of depression and despair, which leaves the one's self-image unharmed even during moments of failure....Only losers become depressive. Burnout is a diagnosis for winners, or, more specifically: for former winners."

¹⁶ See, for instance: Rosa, Hartmut, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2013, p. 316: "Moreover, time structures also appear to be a privileged site for the genesis, and hence the analysis, of social maldevelopments of *suffering-inducing social pathologies*, because an illusion of almost unlimited individual freedom is produced by the minimally restrictive ethical code that predominates in late modern society, while, at the same time, an ever greater need for coordination emerges in view of the ever more complex, unsteered, and self-autonomizing interaction chains and the need to fulfill the resulting structural imperatives (roughly, the compulsions of growth and acceleration). So the ethically

which often takes the form of self-help books, and its particular emphasis on the individual: "burnout self-help books in general, and English ones in particular, tend to follow a much less socioculturally oriented trajectory, redirecting responsibility for the management of energy resources to the individual and subscribing to a simple biochemical adrenal-exhaustion model." In the context of this project one cannot help but see this as evidence of the larger tendency in American culture to place the ultimate responsibility for one's reactions to experience back upon the individual.

An example of recent German philosophy concerned with burnout is Byung-Chul Han's slim volume, *The Burnout Society*. Although Han originally published the work in 2010, it wasn't until 2015 that an English-language edition became available. Perhaps we can see the lag as due to his relative obscurity to English readers, or to the relative disinterest in the concept of burnout more generally. Whatever the case, Erik Butler's translation allows me to put forward Han's basic thesis about modernity and the conditions that lead to burnout: burnout is the result of an excess of positivity. Han formulates positivity in relation to certain disorders, "psychic maladies," that show a tendency to "excess positivity," which he contrasts with earlier repressive social tendencies that defined a more "disciplinary society" (Han, 41). He argues that rather than pointing to evidence of repression or external discipline, syndromes such as burnout or depression, "indicate an *excess of positivity*, that is, not negation so much as the *inability to say no*; they do not point to not-being-allowed-to-do-anything [*Nicht-Dürfen*], but to being-able-to-do-everything [*Alles-Können*]." What leads to burnout, in Han's analysis, is when the individual "positivizes itself; indeed, it liberates itself into a *project*," (46) doing so because, as Han indicates by borrowing a phrase from Nietzsche, he has become "exhausted by his sovereignty"

and politically uncontrollable trend of acceleration does not just exert an increasing normalizing force; it also harbors a growing potential to produce "pathologies of acceleration.""

(44). The idea here is that in the neoliberal conception of the self, it is only through personal achievement that one can express one's sovereignty, and that atomistic notion of self-hood is bought at the cost of "self-exploitation": "The achievement-subject exploits itself until it burns out. In the process, it develops auto-aggression that often enough escalates into the violence of self-destruction. The project turns out to be a *projectile* that the achievement-subject is aiming at itself" (47). What is most insidious in this formulation of burnout is that the violence necessary to compel the individual to burnout comes from within its very being. This is where excess of positivity can be seen as pathological: "Exogenous violence is replaced by self-generated violence, which is more fatal than its counterpart inasmuch as the victim of such violence considers itself free."

Han eventually boils this down, utilizing Agamben's notion of "bare life" and the *homo sacer*, to a civilization that focuses only on "survival": "The capitalist economy absolutizes survival. It is not concerned with the *good* life. It is sustained by the illusion that more capital produces more life, which means a greater capacity for living. The rigid, rigorous separation between life and death casts a spell of ghostly stiffness over life itself. Concern about living the good life yields to the hysteria of survival" (50). This idea of life being equated with capital is something that this project addressed in the introduction. Adorno's warning at the outset of *Minima Moralia* is here again germane to understanding the ideological conundrum of late-modernity, or petro-modernity: "Our perspective of life has passed into an ideology which conceals the fact that there is life no longer" (Adorno, 15). When individuals begin to self-exploit, seeing themselves as "mere standing reserve," they lose that self-shaping part of their humanity that makes life worth living (Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 323). The individualist tendencies at work in the oilfields of the United States means that actual men (and women) are

left to fend for themselves when the eventual busts inherent in global capitalism drive them out of work. Meanwhile, they are also left to shoulder the burden of all that comes with the fallout of economic insecurity. The masculinity of the oilfield, dominated as it is by rugged individualism, a subservience to a mythology of the cowboy, and an insistence upon the necessity of self-making, leaves its adherents vulnerable to exploitation by corporations and global capital. The evidence of vulnerability manifests itself at the affective level in the symptoms of burnout and exhaustion. When the very nature of one's work, work one uses to in order to secure one's identity, is dependent upon the exhaustion of the individual and the ground of that individuals being, it cannot but leave the self exhausted. This is ontology of exhaustion, a state where one's self, one's being, one's livelihood, and one's ideology are all inherently structured by physical and mental exhaustion.

I began training for my job in the summer of 2012: my hiring date, according to my 401K records, was the 9th of June, a Saturday. It was a dry, hot summer. On I-90 just east of Missoula, Montana, I drove past a massive camp of wildland firefighters in Beaverhead State Park their innumerable small tents aglow in the early morning darkness. The sky was hazy in Western Montana, and grew increasingly smoky as I drove east. I remember cities like Butte and Bozeman being nothing more than ghostly figments glimpsed briefly on the highway, as a dense blanket of smoke obscured much of Montana's natural beauty as well. When I got to Casper, the place where I would train, the eponymous mountain to the city's south was on fire. The entire Front Range from Casper to Denver was burning. In my memory the landscape is apocalyptic, an atmosphere of smoke and fire. The long drive through the smoky heat of June had been taxing. I came to Casper worn out.

I had arrived two weeks before the official "training" was supposed to start, and so they put me to work in the shop assisting with various repairs and projects. That two weeks was primarily spent pressure washing equipment that had just come in from the field, but it allowed me to develop a rapport with most of the men who worked at what everyone called "the Casper shop." The profanity and right-wing chest-thumping were notable; specifically, one man loudly proclaimed that the sitting president needed to be lynched, because he was the reason there wasn't more drilling going on in Utah. Though, mostly the discussions revolved around work, motorcycles, and horses being lamed due to gofer holes. On my third weekend in Casper a group of eight other students arrived thus beginning our three weeks of job-specific training. With the exception of one student from New Mexico, all of my classmates had been recruited from a tech school in Colorado that specialized in "renewable energy and sustainability," called the Ecotech Institute.¹⁷ The irony wasn't lost on any of us: they had just spent the last two years preparing to go into "green energy" only to take jobs in the oilfield. Though most of them were rather sanguine about this fact. The money they could make in the oilfield would far exceed what they would have made had they pursued "green" jobs.

Our trainer, Buck, had been an elementary school teacher before going into the oilfield. It was obvious right from the beginning that the training was an ad-hoc mixture of things Buck thought were important, things the company expected, and then a lot of winging it. A majority of the training was done in a classroom, but often when Buck ran out of things to talk about, we would go out into the yard where equipment and parts sat, or into the shops where things were

¹⁷ See: echotechinstitute.com: From their website: "Ecotech Institute in Aurora, Colorado...is the first and only college entirely focused on preparing graduates for careers in the fields of renewable energy, sustainability, and energy efficiency. We offer associate's degree programs designed by experts in the industry for people seeking renewable energy jobs in the rapidly emerging clean tech economy."

fabricated or repaired. Much of the equipment we were expected to run, once we got into the field, required more power than the facility could generate. This meant that the only "hands on" training we got was helping with some simple repairs, or more often than not, cleaning the shop. Training ended with a week of general "safety training," including the industry standard OSHA 10-hour. I was one of the group who opted to go straight up to North Dakota on August 5th after the training was complete. This coincided with the beginning of the big motorcycle rally in Sturgis, South Dakota. We were repeatedly warned to keep our eyes out for motorcyclists, and to try to give Sturgis a wide berth.

I rode to North Dakota with Roy, one of my fellow trainees. After telling me about the gay-bar culture of Denver, focusing on the way in which drag queens had a tendency to overrun leather bars (Roy identified as a 'leather'), he asked me whether he ought to be open about his homosexuality at work. I told him to be very careful and only to come out to someone he knew for a fact he could trust. I assured him that I wouldn't say a thing, and mentioned that I'd just attended the Denver Pride Fest with my sister and her girlfriend that weekend. The fact that I rode to oilfield with a gay man still astounds me. During the time I worked "fag" or "faggot" was the most common epithet thrown around the rigs. I was saddened, but not surprised when I found out that Roy had quit only a couple of months into the job. Anyone working in the oilfield needs to be thick-skinned and physically tough, but I have the utmost respect for any person of color, or non-heterosexual orientation that even attempts the work. It's can feel like an unfriendly environment for a liberally-minded person, even a "thinking" person sometimes, let alone a person form an historically persecuted group. Which is to say that the argot and conduct of the oilfield doesn't seem to have advanced beyond the 1950's.

On our way up we'd convoyed with another truck, and before we got to Williston we dropped off a man riding in the other vehicle at the rig Unit 108. When we pulled up a guy in a filthy Georgia Tech sweatshirt came up to us. Mistaking me for someone else, he had run up from across the pad. Nevertheless, he introduced himself and noticing our shiny orange hard hats inferred that we'd just come from training. He laughed and said he had a piece of advice for me, "Take all that shit, ball it up, and throw it the fuck away. You didn't learn a damn thing about the patch." So much for training.

When we arrived in Williston we were told that with the office being closed, and the company apartments in town all full, that we'd have to drive another fifty minutes west to Culbertson, Montana where the company had a house rented. When we got to the house we were immediately accosted by the five other men already camped out there. Everyone loudly complained about our taking up so much space and, because all the bedrooms were taken, warned us to watch out for rattlesnakes as we slept on the living room floor. One guy was especially put out: Ricochet, his actual nickname, complained the most because he wanted to sleep in the living room recliner with the TV on. That night I slept on the floor with four other men, and woke to someone stepping over me to get to the kitchen. That next day at the shop I was assigned to a fresh rig-up on Precision Drilling 604, with a man I will call Jake. Along with Jake and I two other men from my cohort in training came along. We drove out to the rig in a nearly identical Dodge to the one I'd come up in, and I spent the next week living on-site, about seventeen miles east of Watford City, North Dakota just south of State Highway 23. It was decided I'd be acting as Jake's night hand, and since his hitch was over after that first week I rode back to Casper the morning of August 13th. I picked up my jeep at the shop at about 2 pm and

got into Missoula just in time for last call. I'd returned to Missoula after more than seven weeks, my third paycheck would arrive at the end of my two weeks off.



McKenzie County, North Dakota: PD 604 with author's equipment in foreground. Author's photo.

Halfway through my third hitch on PD 604 I was sitting in the conex we used for safety meetings, waiting. I was usually the first to arrive. In theory we had a safety meeting that began thirty minutes before any shift began, in practice most people piled in at about five minutes late. Like they did most days the rig hands all came in together, talking and laughing. The subject of

their mirthful conversation was the YouTube video they had all just watched of the worm, the newest member of the rig crew, taking a beating in his first professional MMA fight. As they let me watch of couple of seconds of grainy video, a small white man getting pummeled by an equally small black man, it came up that he wouldn't be fighting for little while. I asked why, and he held up his gloved right hand. Even through the glove I noticed the swelling. He winced as he took the glove off to show me the hand; it was discolored, purple, red, and yellow. I asked him if he was going to hospital to have a doctor look at it.

"Why would I do that?"

"Probably lose his damn job," another rig hand offered unprompted.

"Yeah, and I ain't no pussy," he said, pulling the glove back on. "Besides, I only got five days left and then I'll be home."

At the time I was more impressed by the swollen, purple, softball-sized hand, than I was the stupidity and callousness of the attitudes. However, I did note that the topic was dropped as soon as the tool pusher and company man came in. I understood immediately that this was a kind of conspiracy of silence on the part of the rig crew, and I understood that I would be expected to keep my mouth shut also.

By December of 2012, PD 604 had "stacked out," industry jargon for a rig that will no longer be drilling, and Jake and I had been moved to another rig to help out with the surface and fasthole sections of the well. This was my first taste of the dislocation that became so normal as the boom in the Bakken began to bust; when any employees lucky, or hard-working enough to not get laid-off would be subject to constantly switching rigs in order to fill holes in crews, or to start new jobs in the desperate hope that we could keep them. The new rig, H&P 309, was a

newer, faster rig than 604. The job also required us to operate heavy equipment; in this case a John Deere 540K front-end loader. My only experience at that point had been with forklifts in warehouses with smooth concrete floors and orderly aisles, not heavy equipment on uneven ground and in tight, cramped spaces. In addition to my needing to be trained to run all three pieces of equipment, we had the added complication that one of the sheet metal slides that directed drill solids into a three-walled catch tank wasn't cut right and so hung a couple of inches past the beveled edge of the catch tank. This created a convenient hazard, as the slide only hung from J-hooks on the overhanging catwalk, meaning that one bump with the loader and the slide would come off into the catch tank, and any drill solids would fall directly on the ground between the tank and the rig's pits.

It's my first night out alone during fasthole, a period of very rapid vertical drilling when a rig will achieve most of its vertical depth, I notice that the miscut slide was hanging like it had already been hit and is probably going to fall. Thirty minutes later, I'm getting help from a couple members of the rig crew shoving the slide back into place as it hung suspended by a chain from the stinger, a long straight attachment for the 540K. We get it in place and I thank the rig hands for their help. I work all night and about an hour before my shift was over I manage to bump the slide again. It didn't appear to be knocked loose, but just the weight of the front wheels of the loader coming into the catch tank causes the slide to fall. I get the derrick hand to shut off flow to the shaker which the slide carries cuttings for, and I wake up Jake.



Sublette County, Wyoming: Example of a front-end loader similar to the 540K in foreground. Author's photo.

As Jake drives the 540K, I try to push the slide back into place. The slide weighs anywhere from four to six hundred pounds, and the hot, viscous, oil-based mud leaching out of the cuttings in the tank make getting the footing necessary to swing the slide nearly impossible. Every time I get it close I slide back on the slick sheet metal floor of the catch tank. Seeing this, Jake tries to get out of the loader. The loader's main door is blocked by a catwalk on its left, and so he tries to go out the smaller vent door on the right. The only problem is that Jake is severely

overweight, and the joystick that controls the front assembly of the loader is right under the small vent door. So, when he climbs out he also jams the joystick straight down, sending the entire front end of the loader, hydraulic arms, stinger, chain, and slide crashing down. All while I'm holding the slide. It comes down with such force that I'm knocked backwards into the far wall of the catch tank, the slide landing on my legs. The end of the stinger misses crushing my left foot by about four inches. Jake gets back in the loader and lifts the slide off of me. A rig hand that had been standing by, watching and laughing, finally decides to help us and we get the slide back up.

I walk away from Jake and sit down away from the work site. He comes up and asks if I'm alright.

"I'm fine. I'm just kind of pissed and sore."

"You're not going to say anything are you?" Jake's face twists with worry.

I took off my hardhat and inspected it. "No. I'm not hurt. We'd probably get fired."

"Yeah," Jake says with a nervous laugh.

The next day I felt fine, and Jake and I were moved to another rig to help them with a rig-up. I never mentioned the incident to my supervisor or bosses. As far as I can tell I received no permanent injury from the slide falling on me, and no one but Jake or me ever knew about it. We got lucky, but the fact is that the industry and our company would have wanted us to report the incident. I decided not to because I didn't want to cost Jake his job, and I didn't want to seem weak or afraid.

It was late in January of 2015, while I was working in Divide County, North Dakota on H&P 317, when three friends called me within an hour to tell me they were getting laid off. That

same day my boss told me that my night hand needed to come to the shop as soon as he woke up and that someone named Steve would be along to replace him. My boss couldn't legally tell me that my night hand was getting laid off, but I knew. Soon, half of the rig hands I worked with were gone, and one of the company men was laid off and replaced. There was less and less money for everything, and so everything we did was being micro-managed more and more. The trust I'd built with the company men and rig hands meant nothing to the unfamiliar people I had to work with. It was hard not to be in a bad mood at work. Everyone was tense, waiting for the other shoe to drop. This had all started happening two months prior to it dawning on me that this guy Steve couldn't help but cast everything in a negative light due to being overwhelmed by grief. It became obvious when I relieved him one morning late in our third hitch together. As he described his night everything he said was couched in terms of the difficulties he had experienced, the frustrations. But when I arrived outside everything looked great; there wasn't any reason to worry.

The night before, as I sat eating my dinner of leftover pizza, Steve came in to tell me that the company man, Killer (another real nickname), had a message for me, "He said that you better not have ordered a third load of gravel, or else you'll be taking it home with you." Taking Steve at his word that Killer was upset at me, I grabbed some paperwork I had intended to deliver anyway and walked over to the office. Killer's story was a little different, he wasn't mad at me but the truck driver, "If I was mad at you, I'd come tell you." The miscommunication was caused by Steve's being on the defensive, and looking out for possible threats. He even said as much later when he admitted that he thought maybe he was going to get run off, which didn't seem likely, even given the contracting oilfield. Like almost everyone else in the oilfield at the time,

Steve was coming to terms with a pay-cut, with the dislocation of moving to a new rig, and with worry about whether this hitch was going to be his last.

Steve's grief was palpable that morning. And it came as something of a revelation to finally recognize this suffering in him. My own sense of loss and frustration kept me from being open to understanding him and his feelings; my anger, frustration and fear, a result of all the changes at work, kept me from perceiving the suffering he was experiencing. It's hard not to feel completely obtuse when you belatedly realize that the person you've been working with has been suffering deeply the entire time you've known them. The excuse that you've only known them as a grieving person works only if you admit that it was lack of empathy and compassion that made realization of their condition so late in coming.

In Steve's case, however, the grief was not merely professional. He had confided to me that his girlfriend, a victim of severe domestic abuse and an alcoholic, was upsetting his home life. He had kicked her out of his house, and that while she wasn't off his property (she was staying in his camp trailer instead) he told her to be gone completely before he came home from work. In addition to that his sons' youth baseball coach, and Steve's acquaintance, had committed suicide during his days off. As Steve related it, the man's teenage daughter came home and informed him that she was pregnant. The man then locked himself in his bedroom and shot himself, while his wife was out of town arranging for the funerals of her mother and sister who had died in a car accident.

Steve related this story to me as we made our way to Wal-Mart for groceries. The last thing he told me was that the man's son, Wyatt, was the same age as his own son, Wyatt. The boys were friends and attending ISU in Pocatello together. This was a coincidence too uncanny to let pass: both boys are named, no doubt, after the famous and tragic figure of Wyatt Earp, a

law man who lived by the gun. And here they were living in the aftermath of a tragic gun death. In this, it relates to another story Steve had told me about how three of his oldest son's friends had all died within a year of each other: one in an automobile accident, one from a combination of drugs and alcohol, and one by his own hand. The last boy had gone to Steve's home, found a loaded pistol and shot himself in the chest with it. Steve had speculated that he had done so to keep anyone from finding him "with his brains spilled out."

From my limited perspective this kind of unrelenting misfortune is the thing of myth and fiction, and yet I know that just this kind of thing is common all around the world. One might think of the killing fields of Iraq or Afghanistan, to the drug wars of Central and South America, to the streets of America's inner cities. I think the proper response to this understanding of another's pain and grief is gratitude: insight into another's suffering must be met with gratitude, otherwise the temptation to ignore it or avoid facing it becomes too strong. I try to see it as something to be cherished, it helps make it seem less like a burden, and more like a gift. Steve's stories helped me come out of the haze that I'd been living in: I wasn't the only one suffering. I kept this in mind whenever we talked about work, and tried to help keep him from feeding into that sense of doom. It wasn't easy, as we would eventually be subject to more pay cuts, more personnel changes, more stacked rigs, we'd see more people laid off. Eventually we'd be separated, he'd stay in North Dakota, I'd move to a rig in Utah. But while we were together I tried to maintain a positive environment at work, avoiding discussion of the topics that would get us both frothing at the mouth.

For several months I worked in Utah's Uintah Basin, just North of Roosevelt, a town with two grocery stores, two movie theaters, and one liquor store. I never saw any movies, and I

contended myself with beer from the gas station. The company we were drilling for had run out of money and a proposed fourth well was put on hold. The rig drilling the holes, SST 8, was going to stack out again, after coming out of the weeds just prior to us starting up in late April. I went home late in August, after packing up and loading all our equipment to be shipped back to Casper. At that point, I didn't know if I would even have a job, and if so, where that job would be. I was home for a little over a week when my boss called me. He said he might have work for me but he wasn't sure, and asked if I would be open to working in Wyoming or Colorado. I told him I'd do whatever he needed. He thanked me and said he'd be in touch as soon as he knew something.

Part of me wanted to get laid off, they were giving guys severance packages, and I'd be eligible for unemployment insurance through the state of North Dakota. That seemed better to me than going out to some new place I'd never been to work with guys I'd never met on a rig I'd never seen. The constant change, the need to again prove myself to the crew and company man on every new rig had worn me out; every rig has a different set-up, different protocols, different requirements and expectations, different assholes. By the time I left Utah, I'd been on at least five different rigs in 2015 alone. So, wherever I went it'd be a sixth new set of equipment, a sixth new boss, a sixth new set of coworkers who I'd have to convince I wasn't a total fuck up, a sixth drilling program and protocols, and a sixth shitty bed in the sixth shitty camp shack, all for less money and for longer and longer periods of time away from home. When I thought of some of my coworkers who had been laid off in the months prior, I could feel myself getting jealous. I wanted to take some time off, rethink my life, get out of the oil patch.

I was ruminating on all these things one night when I noticed the Netflix DVDs sitting on my kitchen counter. I'd moved into my place a few months prior and the DVD's had been in a

sack of random things I'd pulled out of a drawer at my old place. I looked at the titles, Cher's *Moonstruck*, something my ex-girlfriend had picked, and Josh Fox's *Gasland*. I realized that I had been holding onto these DVD's for years and had only ever watched *Moonstruck*.¹⁸ So I sat down to watch the other one. *Gasland* is an activist documentary about the negative consequences of hydraulic fracturing, one of the techniques that had helped to unlock the oil and gas in the shale plays all over the United States. In combination with 'directional drilling,' hydraulic fracturing had made the boom in the Bakken possible. It has also made development of the shale plays of California, Texas, Pennsylvania, New York, Ohio and West Virginia possible. And, as I was to learn from Fox and personal experience, it was what made the play in the Jonah Field in Wyoming possible. *Gasland* had come out just as the Bakken oil boom was taking off, and the natural gas booms in both the East and West were tailing off. On his journey to explore the effects of hydraulic fracturing, Fox begins in his native Pennsylvania and eventually follows the trail of fracking out West to Colorado. However, the place he ends his film is in the Green River Basin on BLM land in Sublette County, Wyoming, the same area where Colton H. Bryant sustained the injuries that killed him. When the film was over I cried.

The next day my boss called me and asked how soon I thought I could be in Casper. He wanted me to go to work on Ensign 119 in Sublette County; he was sending me to the Jonah Field. I flew to Casper the next morning, and I met up with the guy that I'd been working with in Utah. We'd be driving out to Pinedale that day to spend the night in a hotel. The following morning we'd drive the hour South to the location, where we'd be rigging up our equipment. The expectation was that we'd be ready to go by late that next afternoon. These were going to be a long couple of days. The rig up went smoothly considering we had to work in the muddy

¹⁸ I'm still in possession of both DVDs to this day.

footprint of the previous company's equipment. ZECO had just been run off, and they were the company that had replaced us on this rig only two months before. The oilfield had become one huge, muddy and tedious game of musical chairs. That morning we sat for two hours and watched the trucks move all of their equipment off site. By September of 2015, I'd made it to Ensign 119, and the Green River Basin. This was the first time I'd been on a rig drilling exclusively for Natural Gas, and the first time working on a rig in Wyoming. The sequence of events that led to my being in Wyoming at all were uncanny enough to make one wonder if there wasn't something more than mere chance at work.

That first hitch in Wyoming lasted a little over a month, by the time it was over I knew everyone on the rig, having worked with every crew. One thing that I learned during this time was that I didn't much appreciate either of the Tool Pushers. They were both gruff, profane, and, it turns out, cousins. Kyle and Mark had apparently worked together for years and had managed to get themselves into very lucrative jobs. Kyle was in his fifties, Mark in his sixties. Of the two Kyle was the most profane. He would actually make whole sentences out of the work fuck. So I didn't mind much when I found out he'd been suspended.

What surprised me, later on, was the reason for his suspension and, more surprising than that, the fact that he was coming back to 119. It had come to light that a hand injury had occurred on Kyle's watch and that he was aware of it, and had colluded with the injured crewmember to hide the injury from the higher ups. However, the injured man had gotten sepsis and that required the amputation of most of his hand. He had then filed a lawsuit against Ensign. When I spoke to the rig crew about this they were all pretty candid.

"He was trying to keep us working," said one.

"They were stacking out rigs, and injuries like that can get a rig stacked," said another.

Whatever Kyle's motive, the message was clear: Don't Get Injured! In some sense, the ideology is that your personal injury is a threat to other people's livelihoods; it's a threat to their well-being. Kyle had hidden an injury because having a long, unbroken string of days without a recordable accident is a badge of honor, it's a sign you're doing something right, and it keeps the customer happy. But in doing so he opened up the injured man to further suffering, and he eventually lost his position on the crew. What amazed me was that he wasn't fired for it. I don't know all the specifics, but I do know that I'd seen people in the last year fired or laid off for much less.

I did four month-long hitches on Ensign 119 before getting laid off in of February 2016. This meant that I was still around when Kyle came back to work. He seemed chastened at first, quieter during meetings. But during his second hitch he was back to yelling and cussing and telling everyone their business. I spoke to his son, who was also on the rig crew about what had happened. His take was that his father had done the right thing, and that he'd been unfairly punished. He indicated that his father felt the same way. The only stupid thing his son thought he had done was get caught.

I signed my lay off papers on the 8th of February, 2016 having worked in the oilfield for just over three and-a-half years. I had worked a boom at its apex, and I'd kept working well into the bust. One thing that stayed the same throughout my time in the oilfield was the sense that it was every man for himself. I had formed friendships and bonds with many of my coworkers, and I still talk to many of them even if I haven't seen them in over a year. I've still never told my supervisor, who is also a good friend, about the accident I had on 309 with the slide. I don't know

if that roughneck with the crushed hand is still working, or what the lingering effects of his injury are. I know that Ensign 119 is still drilling, and in true musical chairs fashion, I know that my former company lost the contract to a competitor. That means Kyle is probably still working, still nursing a grudge for having gotten in trouble.

One cold, sunny day in January near the end of my time in Wyoming, Ensign had a whole crew of electricians out to fix some issues after we had moved the rig to a new pad. A generator had blown and taken some other equipment out with it. The fix was going to take a couple of days, because they were going to have to diagnose and troubleshoot nearly every electrical system to make sure they were functioning. I knew all of this from talking to one of the electricians. He told me that we might be back up and running as early as the next afternoon, but that it could be a couple days if they had to have any new equipment shipped out. I laughed and said, "It is what it is."

He looked at me with a grin on his face and said, "And then some."

This reply brought me up short. It was such a simple retort, an almost idiotically simple addition, "...and then some." As I walked back to my equipment I thought about this saying, and the meaning of that second clause. If "it is what it is" is fatalism or grim acceptance, "and then some" is the recognition that even that is not enough. The world keeps moving; time does not stand still. A person can accept their circumstances, but their circumstances are guaranteed to change. And just because you can accept the way things are now, doesn't mean you will be able to, or should, accept the way they will be. If life in the oilfield can be hard and unremitting, it's often important to at least remind yourself that maybe that it isn't all it has to be, or that it's all you deserve.

Men ignore the pain and the suffering that they endure at their own peril. By saying "It is what it is" they foreclose on thought and on the possibility of change. If we can open up even the smallest space for ourselves to conceive of a world that is otherwise, then it is worth it. "And then some" gives us the possibility of seeing beyond our own circumstances, beyond the hurt, pain, and fear of our individual lives, to see the same in other's. If we can combat the urge to just push down our own suffering, and to ignore that of the other, we can have a chance of really forming something like community. The rugged individual needs no one, wants no help. But the rugged individual is a lie, and that lie is the author of much needless suffering and misery. I managed never to get seriously hurt, but I carry within me a history of the pain and suffering of others. The task of keeping these memories alive is vital to keeping hope alive. And my hope is for something better.

A Précis to Further Study: Directions in Ontological Understanding.

What I have tried to show with this project is the way in which the stories of individual's lives can give us some critical leverage for understanding the ideological aspects of petromodernity. What I believe, and what I hope that this project is only an initial attempt at, is that the recording and the re-telling of individual lives and experiences within modernity is a sure way to diagnose its ills, but also, and perhaps this is a bit utopian, a way to begin imagining alternatives. This project grew out of the first section's concern with men and resources, and men being equated with resources. That initial concern was deepened by my own experiences in the very territory that those men, David Love and Colton Bryant, inhabited. I have attempted to relate some of my own stories and the stories of men I met along the way in order to sketch what I came to believe was an overarching theme in the oilfield: exhaustion. It is not the case that the American oilfield is the only site of exhaustion, or that it is even the site most exemplary of exhaustion. The idea of the "ontology of exhaustion" is something that could be studied further in relation to other extractive practices, like mining, or even farming. It could also be looked at in reference to more white-collar jobs, like finance, academics, or business more generally. The gendered nature of this study leaves open territory that concerns itself with other genders and gender-relations as they relate to the ideology or ontology of exhaustion.

What is for me the most important aspect of this project is the gathering of voices and stories. To that end, I originally imagined an oral-history of the oilfield, beginning in the Bakken and then branching out from there. This idea, The Oil Lands Project, is only in, at best, an embryonic stage. My vision for the project was as an online database of video, audio, and transcripts, freely accessible and funded by donations. The ultimate end-goal would be to print occasional book versions that would be specific to region, state, oil play, or time. The books

could then be sold to libraries, and any profits rolled back into the project. This kind of work can be of service not only to oral-historians, or cultural critics, but to sociologists, epidemiologists, and policy makers as well. By aggregating stories and histories from around the oilfield we can begin to understand, at a granular level, how certain macro-economic trends, such as a price spike on the global oil market, filter down to lives of actual men and women. Together with professor Katie Kane, I am currently attempting to get support for a project that could achieve a similar goal to that of The Oil Lands Project. The hope is to get funding for an oral history of the Bakken boom. The spatio-temporal nature of phenomena like the Bakken oil-boom requires haste and determination in order to properly document them. As my second section shows, many of the men and women who were originally drawn to the initial boom have been scattered to the wind by the subsequent bust. This tendency within global capitalism to draw in and then expel labor is something that complicates the process of analysis, and research. However, it is my hope that by beginning with my own stories, and some initial, sketchy theorization, I will set up a program that will allow me to continue this research and analysis.

Works Cited

Adorno, Theodor. *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*. E. F. N. Jephcott trans., London: Verso, 2005. Print.

Akerman, Spencer & Paul Lewis. *The Guardian*. "US senators rail against intelligence disclosures over NSA practices." <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/31/us-senate-intelligence-officials-nsa>

"Average Monthly Rigs Working." Petroleum Association of Wyoming. pawyo.org/facts. n.d. Web. 4 Oct. 2011.

Berg, Lawrence D. and Robyn Longhurst. "Placing Masculinities and Geography." *Gender, Place & Culture*. 10: 4 (2003): 351-360. Print.

Borgmann, Albert. *Crossing the Postmodern Divide*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1992. Print.

Buell, Fredrick. "A Short History of Oil Cultures; or, The Marriage of Catastrophe and Exuberance," In *Oil Cultures*. Ross Barrett, and Daniel Worden eds. Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2014. 69-88. Print.

Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life*. New York: Verso, 2006. Print.

Carrigan, Tim, Bob Connell, and John Lee. "Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity." *The Masculinities Studies Reader*. Rachel Adams, and David Savran eds. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 2002. 99-118. Print.

Connell, R.W. "Globalization, Imperialism, and Masculinities." *Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities*. Michael S. Kimmel, Jeff Hearn, and R.W. Connell eds. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, Inc., 2005. 71-89. Print.

———. *Masculinities*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995. Print.

———. "The History of Masculinity." *The Masculinities Studies Reader*. Rachel Adams, and David Savran eds. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 2002. 245-261. Print.

Fuller, Alexandra. *The Legend of Colton H. Bryant*. New York: Penguin, 2008. Print.

Ghosh, Amitav. "Petrofiction." *The New Republic*: 206:9, March 2, 1992. 29-34. Print.

Han, Byung-Chul. *The Burnout Society*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2015. Print.

Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 1990.

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. John MacQuarrie, and Edward Robinson trans. New York: Harper Perennial, 2008. Print.

———. "The Question Concerning Technology." *Basic Writings*. David Farrell Krell ed. New York: Harper Perennial, 2008. 307-341. Print.

Kimmel, Michael. "The Birth of the Self-Made Man." *The Masculinities Studies Reader*. Rachel Adams, and David Savran eds. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 2002. 135-152. Print.

LeMenager, Stephanie. *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. Print.

Marx, Karl. *The German Ideology*. C.J. Arthur ed. New York: International Publishers, 2010.

McPhee, John. *Rising From the Plains*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1986. Print.

Morgan, David. "Class and Masculinity." *Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities*. Michael S. Kimmel, Jeff Hearn, and R.W. Connell eds. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, Inc., 2005. 165-177. Print.

Nagel, Joane. "Nation." *Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities*. Michael S. Kimmel, Jeff Hearn, and R.W. Connell eds. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, Inc., 2005. 397-413. Print.

Nelson, Maggie. *The Argonauts*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2015. Print.

Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2011. Print.

Person, Ethel Spector. "Masculinities, Plural." *Journal of the American Psychoanalytical Association*. 54:4 (2006): 1165-1187. Print.

Proulx, Annie. "Writing in Wyoming." *Deep West: A literary tour of Wyoming*. Mike Shay, David Romtvedt, and Linn Rounds eds. Greybull, WY: Pronghorn Press, 2003. Print.

Relph, Edward. *Place and Placelessness*. London: Pion Limited, 1976. Print.

Ring, Ray. "Disposable workers of the oil and gas fields." *High Country News*. 2 April, 2007. 26 Sept. 2010. <http://www.hcn.org/issues/343/16915>. Web.

Rosa, Hartmut. *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013. Print.

Schaffner, Anna Katharina. *Exhaustion: A History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016. Print

Soja, Edward. *Postmodern Geographies*. New York: Verso, 1989. Print.

———. "The Socio-Spatial Dialectic," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. 70:2, (June, 1980)

Thompson, Jonathan. "The Global West: how foreign investment fuels resource extraction in western states." *High Country News*: 43.12. hcn.org, retrieved Aug 9th, 2016

Waterman, Shaun. *The Washington Times*. "NSA chiefs admission of misleading numbers adds to Obama administration blunders." at <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/oct/2/nsa-chief-figures-foiled-terror-plots-misleading>

"Wyoming." U.S. Energy Information Administration. EIA.gov. Oct, 2009. Web. 5 Oct. 2011.