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“HORSES AND OIL IN HIS BLOOD”:
MYTHOPOETICS AND WESTERN PETROMELANCHOLIA
IN ALEXANDRA FULLER’S *THE LEGEND OF COLTON H. BRYANT*

By

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Thesis

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PETROMELANCHOLIA IN ALEXANDRA FULLER’S *THE LEGEND OF COLTON H.
BRYANT*

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Alexandra Fuller’s book *The Legend of Colton H. Bryant*, often read as merely a sad biography of a young man who meets his demise in the Wyoming energy patch, performs urgent cultural work. Fuller captures Wyoming’s shift from conventional (Easy Oil) extraction to the extreme (Tough Oil) extraction method known as hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, at the dawn of the twenty-first century. This shift to Tough Oil involves far more than engineering concerns, as Stephanie LeMenager points out in her cultural critique *Living Oil*. LeMenager terms our national failure to acknowledge the crises that accompany Tough Oil practices *petromelancholia*, focusing much of her attention upon the BP Horizon disaster in the Gulf of Mexico and fracking near urban centers in Appalachia and California. The interior West and its landscapes of extraction remain overlooked, its denizens invisible. In this thesis, I argue that Fuller enacts a Western iteration of petromelancholia, and I make my case using textual evidence from *The Legend of Colton H. Bryant*, as well as secondary support from Stephanie LeMenager, Robert Warshaw, John G. Cawelti, Wallace Stegner, Ray Ring, and many others.

In my first chapter, I explore the risks associated with the relinquishment of large tracts of Wyoming and the interior West as sacrifice zones, and I interpret the various strata of Fuller’s unusual comparison of drilling rigs to the Eiffel Tower. In my remaining chapters, I discuss the interplay of Western American mythologies with Colton’s worsening petromelancholic denial. In chapter two, I explore tensions between Wyoming’s cowboy identity and the petro-industrial complex. I then show how Colton’s cowboy repose positions him to enter the oil and gas industry. In chapter three, I explicate Colton’s deterioration and the various elements of his petromelancholia as he attempts to become a self-made man in the Western tradition. In my fourth chapter, I examine Colton’s denial and anger in Fuller’s gun-cleaning scene, and I analyze the ways in which Fuller rethinks two worn tropes of the Western genre, firearms and violence, to illustrate Colton’s deep and fatal petromelancholia.

Introduction

In her 2008 work *The Legend of Colton H. Bryant*, Alexandra Fuller explores the numerous forms of grief surrounding the death of a young Wyoming man in the mid-2000s natural gas-fields. To be sure, Colton's family mourns him after he falls into the cellar of a drilling rig, and the pall of a greater, social grief hangs over the text as Fuller forces us to consider what Ray Ring of *High Country News* termed the "disposable workers" of the natural gas boom (Ring, "Disposable"). Fuller herself claims that she was spurred to write the book after chancing upon Colton's obituary in a local newspaper during her research; his death, the fourth in a matter of months in the Wyoming gas-patch, led her to question why worker safety was not being regulated.¹ Moreover, Fuller originally intended, she claims, to write a scathing analysis of the ecological damage to the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem incurred by hydraulic fracturing, or "fracking," and thus her *Colton* emanates deep ecological grief as well. Despite her decision to focus upon the industry's human cost by telling Colton's story rather than "writing in the rhetoric of conflict," as her friend Terry Tempest Williams explains (in a 2008 article about Fuller's anti-fracking activism), shadows of Fuller's original ambition lurk at her narrative's periphery (Robbins). By sympathizing with Colton and a handful of other drillers and frackers, Fuller's environmental concerns seem curiously muted—at first blush. She quietly represents the land as a weary, abused site of economic colonization, and gives Colton's plight primacy. One of her most pointed passages gravely intones:

Taken from the air, this spread of wells across the state translates as if the high plains are experiencing contagious balding, clumps of ground cover falling out and vaporizing. And what is done out here is indelible. (85)

Perhaps her deep environmental concern contributes to the land's objectification and secondary treatment; as Jane Bennett explains, "the more alarmed an author is about ecocodecline, the more thoroughly nature is depicted as a disenchanting set of defeated and exhausted objects" (91).

Fuller's direct treatment of ecological grief is surprisingly sparse, which seems to be an unusual rhetorical choice for this outrageously brash memoirist. She hugs no trees, suggests no monkeywrenching, and takes no swipes at Ayn Rand or Dick Cheney in *Colton*.

Fuller, it seems, has larger aims, and her representations of all-pervading grief in this text transcend the tidy categories of personal and ecological sorrows. Fuller's focus upon the social cost of energy extraction vis à vis Colton's story implicates petroleum culture, or

"petromodernity," as Stephanie LeMenager terms our current oil-soaked state, as the culprit (67).

Fuller's enormously complex, implied accusation not only points at industrial capitalism and a handful of greedy oil tycoons but also implicates America's culture of convenience; fortunately, a few tools to address these issues have recently appeared. LeMenager's 2014 work *Living Oil* has greatly influenced my readings of Fuller's *Colton*, and provides some necessary scaffolding in the absurdly complicated task of thinking about our culture's utter immersion in fossil fuels.

LeMenager bravely analyzes oil's ecological parade of horrors and its cultural ramifications, and gives us a useful vocabulary (many of which employ "petro-" as a prefix) so that we might be able to address the vast topic of oil coherently.

I will be relying heavily upon LeMenager's petro-terminology in this thesis, so I would like to take a moment to briefly define several key terms. The first of these is *petrophilia*, which literally means *oil-loving*. LeMenager coined this word to describe our "loving oil to the extent that we have done" (102). American culture adores oil; petroleum enables transportation, light, heat, production of goods, and it comprises our ubiquitous plastics. Our current state of relative

comfort and ease, then, is called *petromodernity*, which means “modern life based in the cheap energy systems made possible by oil” (67). The good times are drawing to a close, however, since the apex of petromodernity, LeMenager explains, was the “American twentieth century” (67). The twentieth century was a time of conventional petroleum extraction, or *Easy Oil*; we now live in a period which relies upon unconventional *Tough Oil* extraction techniques, such as hydraulic fracturing. As LeMenager explains, “The activist and scholar Michael T. Klare names our current era ‘Tough Oil World,’ riffing on the oil industry’s term for conventional oil resources, which it calls ‘easy oil’” (3). As an illustration, the four authors of the 1986 work *Beyond Oil: The Threat to Food and Fuel in the Coming Decades* solemnly admonish their readers that “by the year 2020 domestic oil supplies will be effectively depleted—by then the supply and quantity of remaining oil will have become so low that other fuels will be used for most purposes” (Gever 55). These Easy Oil-era economics scholars anticipated a shift to “other fuels,” but they did not foresee the lengths we would go to in order to sustain our petroleum addiction, nor did they predict the grave consequences in store for humans and the natural world.²

LeMenager insists that this shift to Tough Oil involves far more than mere approaches to petroleum engineering:

We, by which I mean myself and most moderns, refuse to acknowledge that conventional oil is running out and that Tough Oil isn’t the same resource, in terms of economic, social, and biological costs. Denial inhibits mourning, a passage forward. (105)

LeMenager names this denial of dwindling conventional oil resources *petromelancholia*, and she devotes an entire chapter of *Living Oil* to this concept, defining it as “the feeling of losing cheap

energy that came relatively easily, without tar sands extraction, ultradeep ocean drilling, and fracking” (102). Yet we continue to condone extreme, Tough Oil extraction practices, a sure sign of national (petro-)melancholia. As Judith Butler puts it, melancholia differs radically from mourning since

One mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly for ever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say *submitting* to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance. (21, Butler’s emphasis)

In the context of our petroleum-based culture, we have rejected such a transformation. Americans do not properly mourn our loss of conventional fossil fuels, preferring instead to condone these radical extraction techniques to maintain the comforts of petromodernity. Proper mourning, on the other hand, would involve making a radical, collective shift in renewable energy sources and capitalist consumer practices.

LeMenager’s concept of petromelancholia, in particular, gave me a new lens for my analysis of Colton’s short, fraught existence. In fact, when I first began to consider Fuller’s text through LeMenager’s lens, I was convinced that petromelancholia was Colton’s sole problem. However, since *Colton* is a Western American text and LeMenager’s own study of petromelancholia addresses the BP blowout in the Gulf of Mexico, disturbing, difficult-to-answer questions eventually superseded my hasty diagnosis. To be sure, the BP blowout fantastically illustrates environmental destruction and concomitant petromelancholia. It stretches beyond tragedy and into the ecocatastrophic, considering the environmental cost and the utterly incompetent corporate response. BP hired pilots to “carpetbomb” the water, Terry Tempest Williams reports, with Corexit, a volatile chemical cocktail which causes the oil to sink to the

ocean floor, thus masking it from public view (Williams, “The Gulf”). The event demonstrates—terrifyingly—industrial capitalism gone amok.

But in my effort to unpack *Colton*, I found that despite LeMenager’s noble aims and vital, rigorous thinking, *Living Oil* falls short since (with the exception of California) she does not adequately address the American West. I find this omission preposterous, especially considering the West’s dependence upon vehicles and roads, and the vast amount of fossil fuel extracted from Western lands. LeMenager ignores many of our nation’s major Western shale formations—the Bakken, Niobrara, and Green River Basin shales, to name a few—where the keenly felt shift from conventional crude oil to fracked natural gas adds a startling new chapter to the region’s historical energy booms and busts, which have continued unabated for over a century. Fuller herself describes Wyoming as a “carbontocracy” in her essay “Boomtown Blues,” indicating that the energy extraction industry dictates state law (Fuller, “Boomtown”). In Wyoming, carbon-based power generates political power, a circumstance greatly influenced by the state’s role as a provider of energy for the rest of the nation. Complicating (perhaps even altering) the picture substantially, the petro-industrial complex mercilessly fracks federal lands that comprise nearly half of Wyoming. Sublette County, with its broad swaths of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land is (as *Gasland* documentarian Josh Fox proclaims in one of his block-lettered section headers) America’s original gas land.

LeMenager’s omissions in *Living Oil* suggest the unimportance of the interior West, and underscore the invisibility of its rural citizens. For example, in her discussion of mineral rights in the United States, LeMenager claims, “While in many [North, Central, and South] American countries oil has been recognized as the property of the nation, in the United States oil rights almost always belonged to private owners” (92-3). Her assertion suggests that the West was not

dominating her thoughts as she crafted her “Aesthetics of Petroleum” chapter; although LeMenager examines two classic American road novels, *On the Road* and *Lolita*, we get the sense that the interior West exists only as a sexual playground for Kerouac’s Dean Moriarty and Nabokov’s Humbert Humbert.³ Nearly any copy of *High Country News* would quickly cure her of this quaint notion, as not all Westerners own their mineral rights. Fox’s beleaguered Coloradan and Wyomingite interviewees in *Gasland* underscore this point, for they are the folks with newly migrated methane in their water wells. Surely LeMenager is aware of Fox’s dramatic, Oscar-nominated film, which prominently features flammable water in the West, yet it does not appear in her bibliography.⁴

But the West figures so largely in our national imaginary that a more comprehensive treatment of the West—which is limited to LeMenager’s excellent close readings of Nabokov, Kerouac, and Sinclair—in *Living Oil* seems appropriate. LeMenager’s thesis, as she says in her introduction, is exploratory: she aims “to consider how the story of petroleum has come to play a foundational role in the American imagination and therefore in the future of life on earth” (4). Yet the West and its possibilities, if we are to believe Frederick Jackson Turner, define the American spirit—a problematic claim in American history but a salient point in the context of resource extraction. The insatiable American demand for energy implicates anyone who flips on a light switch, drives a car, or enjoys the ease of plastic in contemporary quotidian life; Colton Bryant’s blood is on many hands. In the context of energy extraction, Turner’s notion of the Western frontier rattles LeMenager’s thesis to its core since he argues, as Patricia Limerick interprets, that “the center of American history . . . was actually to be found at its [the United States’] edges” (20). Limerick also points out that Turner’s grandiose statement regarding the end of the frontier was premature, and that mining lay at the heart of the frontier’s continual

perpetuation. “If the frontier ended in 1890,” she asks, “what was going on when prospectors and miners rushed to the southern Nevada mining discoveries—in 1900?” (24). We can ask this same question about any of the energy booms of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Liza J. Nicholas goes so far as to term the West’s new sites of natural gas extraction “the western energy frontier,” placing Wyoming, Colton’s home state, at its locus (115). Indeed, as I sat in Montana, reading LeMenager’s critique of the Gulf Coast’s petromelancholia and her cataloguing and analyses of literary works which appeared shortly after the catastrophe, I was simultaneously awed by her brilliant analyses and puzzled by her omissions. “Where,” I inwardly fumed, “is *our* fracking poetry? Why is she ignoring the West?”

In LeMenager’s defense, few Western fracking texts exist. The silence is deafening. Even Williams, a naturalist, poet, and powerful environmental writer who is no stranger to the damage wrought by environmental extraction in Utah, tends to avoid Western fracking in her own creative work, although she does attempt to incite preservation-minded, community activism in her 2004 book of essays, *The Open Space of Democracy*:

Here in the redrock desert, which now carries the weight of more leases for oil and gas than its fragile red skin can support due to the aggressive energy policy of the Bush administration, the open space of democracy seems to be closing. The Rocky Mountain states are feeling this same press of energy extraction with scant thought being given to energy alternatives. A domestic imperialism has crept into our country with the same assured arrogance and ideology-of-might that seem evident in Iraq. (83)

Williams worries about her beloved homeland, as she should. Yet when the BP blowout occurred in the Gulf of Mexico, the unfolding disaster captivated her and she immediately wanted to

witness the damage firsthand. In her essay “The Gulf Between Us,” Williams seems to indicate that the damage to the West is expected, a continuing saga made tolerable by history and time. In her introduction, she muses, “The scars on the fragile desert of southeastern Utah . . . will take decades to heal. These are self-inflicted wounds made by a lethal economic system running in overdrive” (Williams, “The Gulf”). Yet she begins the next paragraph with a justification of her trip to Louisiana so she could witness this ecocatastrophe firsthand: “After months of watching the news coverage . . . I had to see for myself what I felt from afar” (Williams, “The Gulf”). The BP oil spill, an *event*, dominated her thoughts, even as she looked at the Utah desertscape ravaged by years of *ongoing* hydraulic fracturing.⁵ I reference Williams, one of the West’s great defenders, here not only to emphasize that the Gulf catastrophe apparently trumps the problems surrounding energy extraction in the West, but also to highlight her narratological decision to write these essays.

Even the novelist Annie Proulx has set her fiction pen aside to address the matter: in 2008, she published *Red Desert: History of a Place*. Part One of the book consists entirely of a collection of Martin Stupich’s photographs, which document—in addition to the dramatic landforms of the high desert and its native flora and fauna—several scenes of energy extraction’s legacy: mines scraped from hillsides, a network of roads that connect drilling pads in the gas-fields, a Halliburton truck barreling down a narrow road, and a pit of “produced water” (reemerged, used fracking fluid) left to evaporate in the Wyoming sun. In her introduction to the book’s Part Two (the collection of essays she has edited), Proulx resignedly states:

This book is not another plea to save the greater Red Desert. Many tries for conservation by people who love the place have come and gone over the decades.

. . . this book tries to sort out what there is about the Red Desert that makes it valuable, scientifically and historically interesting. (77)

In this moment of crisis, Proulx submits to the documentary impulse—in this case, photography, as well as scientific and historical essays—in an attempt to preserve the Red Desert’s memory, as it dies a slow, human-induced death.

With the works of Williams and Proulx in mind, one might conclude that non-fiction, which the University of Montana’s Judy Blunt affectionately defines as “the genre of truth and light,” is *the* appropriate vehicle for documenting the West’s sacrifice zones (Blunt). Perhaps the environmental damage incurred by Tough Oil practices needs no embellishment to awe and terrify. Yet Fuller, working with the human cost of extraction in *Colton* rather than the ecological cost, steps over the nonfiction line, confronting the Western void present in *Living Oil*. Fuller has written, by necessity, a work of *creative* non-fiction; Colton is dead, killed by the industry, and so Fuller has “taken narrative liberties with the text,” as she admits in her Author’s Note. Fuller explains, “I have emphasized certain aspects of Colton’s life and of his personality and disregarded others. I have re-created dialogue and occasionally juggled time to create a smoother story line” (201). By straying into occasional embellishment and gracefully negotiating the intersectionality of genre, Fuller gives us what is arguably the most startling representation of energy extraction’s cost in American letters. While Williams and Proulx articulate *what* is happening to these landscapes, Fuller explains *why* we condone this extreme method of energy extraction in the West. I write these words seven years after the book’s release, and heartily assert that *Colton* remains a vital cultural document, important enough, I feel, to singularly address in my M.A. thesis.

Fuller's *Colton*, I believe, has not been accorded the attention I feel it is due, for Fuller has written one of the most important works of contemporary American literature. I read *Colton* for my own amusement in 2009, and although I never envisioned tackling a project such as the piece now before you, I liked the book very much and was appropriately saddened by Colton's demise. When I read the book again in 2013 for Dr. Nancy Cook's "Rethinking the American West" graduate seminar at the University of Montana, I was dismayed by the dismissive reactions of many of the MFA candidates in the course. They mercilessly scoffed at this text; and one complaint in particular seemed ridiculously petty: the book, titled in a Western-esque way and sporting a cowboy on the cover, was actually about oil and natural gas. Fuller and her publishers were lying to us, they charged, or at the very least had adopted a bad marketing strategy. This rift seemed unnegotiable and so went unresolved, and we soon moved on to James Welch and other authors they approved of. The cowboy / oil divide, however, had gotten my attention. Fifteen months later, it surfaced yet again: Dr. Amy Fuqua, my mentor at Black Hills State University who introduced me to Fuller's *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* in an undergraduate survey course, responded to my grouching over Fuller's seeming overuse of coordinating conjunctions by remarking that some of Fuller's sentences in *Colton* seem unfinished. Since this exchange, my contemplations of Fuller's rhetorical decisions, as well as my comparison of *Colton* to her works *Don't Lets Go to the Dogs Tonight* and *Scribbling the Cat*, have led me to conclude that Fuller adopted this rhetorical move specifically for *Colton*.

Fuller's many *ands*, I came to realize, represent her entire *Colton* project in miniature, for they frame the entire complicated issue of energy production in the West, which LeMenager so neatly sidesteps; at the same time, Fuller sets up a complex conversation between Western mythology and petroleum extraction. One of these conjunctions in particular, which I have

selected for my thesis title, succinctly encompasses a distinctly Western iteration of petromelancholia, which LeMenager overlooks. Fuller claims that “Colton was born with horses *and* oil in his blood” (24, Fuller’s emphasis). The “horses” in this phrase represent Western mythologies, which Colton desperately attempts to live out. The “oil” represents “Easy Oil,” or conventional oil extraction, which Colton’s father and grandfather participated in, but Colton—a participant in the unconventional, Tough Oil method of extraction known as hydraulic fracturing—cannot. Her crucial *and* in this assertion, then, symbolizes the divide between Western mythology and the petro-industrial complex, and within this liminal space churn irreconcilable tensions between these wildly disparate ideologies. In broader terms, the cowboy and the oil field worker can never be synonyms, despite Bakken magnate Harold Hamm’s insistence upon referring to Western oil and gas fields as “Cowboyistan.”⁶

Fuller’s juxtaposition and her commitment to writing a Western, as she terms her project in her first chapter, indicate her awareness that she must lay all of Colton’s cards, some with mythological underpinnings and others fueled by industrial ideology, on the proverbial table. As Lee Clark Mitchell explains:

[According to Marshall McLuhan] the cowboy’s appeal is part of “the deep nostalgia of an industrial society”—a character so perfectly poised against modern culture that if he had not existed he would have been invented Yet the Western is a form not committed to *resolving* these incompatible worlds but to *narrating* all those contradictions involved in what it means to be a man. (27, Mitchell’s emphasis)

Fuller underscores these tensions and their vast network of relationships with her liberal usage of coordinating conjunctions. As a critic, my role includes examining the ways in which these tensions and relationships interact with and influence each other.

In this thesis, I argue that Fuller accomplishes what no other author has dared to attempt: she *enacts* Western petromelancholia, representing it as a very distinct and complex set of relationships in *The Legend of Colton H. Bryant*. In my first chapter, I begin by exploring the harms associated with the national dismissal of Western sacrifice zones, and then I discuss Fuller's unusual aestheticizations of hydraulic fracturing apparatuses. I argue that she comments upon America's dangerous dismissal of Western sacrifice zones in her unique use of simile. Our continuing denial of these ecological risks and harms is a particularly insidious form of American petromelancholia that LeMenager overlooks. Next, in my second chapter, I examine tensions between Western American mythologies and petroleum extraction, which are bound by wildly disparate ideologies. I probe Colton's version of cowboy repose in this chapter, and I argue that Colton's attempt to embody this aspect of the Western myth suffers from petromelancholia, which in turn economically positions him to attempt another enactment of Western mythology, the self-made man, a lethal endeavor which I address in my third chapter. In my fourth chapter, I perform a close reading of Colton's gun-cleaning scene through the lenses of LeMenager's petromodernity and Western genre criticism. In this section, I seek to highlight the accretions of Western myth, specifically the symbol of the gun and the trope of violence, atop the toxic layer of self-made manhood. I argue that the guns, too, indicate Colton's deep and lethal Western petromelancholia.

Chapter One: “Like a Couple of Tiny Eiffel Towers”:

Aesthetics and Western Sacrifice Zones

In the scene in which Colton and his friend search for a campsite on federal land, Fuller employs an interesting simile to describe two distant drilling rigs twinkling in the Wyoming night: she compares the derricks to the Eiffel Tower—now a beloved French landmark and *the* civic symbol of Paris. Before I interpret her rich, multi-tiered simile, I need to set up the risks Americans court with their casual acceptance of Wyoming’s federal lands as a national sacrifice zone. A zone sacrificed to oil and gas production involves a certain degree of petromelancholic denial, as Naomi Klein explains (albeit with a decidedly anthropocentric slant):

Though there are certainly new and amplified risks associated with our era of extreme energy (tar sands, fracking for both oil and gas, deepwater drilling, mountaintop removal coal mining), it’s important to remember that these have never been safe or low-risk industries. Running an economy on energy sources that release poisons as an unavoidable part of their extraction and refining has always required sacrifice zones—whole subsets of humanity categorized as less than fully human, which made their poisoning in the name of progress somehow acceptable. And for a very long time, sacrifice zones all shared a few elements in common. They were poor places. Out-of-the-way places. Places where people lacked political power, usually having to do with some combination of race, language, and class. And the people in these condemned places knew they had been written off The people reaping the bulk of the benefits of extractivism pretend not to see the costs of that comfort so long as the sacrifice zones are kept safely out of view. (310-11)

In the context of Wyoming and the West, I would like to expand Klein's definition of *sacrifice zones* (and their human cost) so that it includes entire ecosystems.

As I will explain in more detail shortly, the West cannot readily heal from capitalist enterprise. Wallace Stegner, who uses the development of 20th century, petrophilic tourism as an example, explains the impact of human encroachment upon the West's fragile landscapes and admonishes its visitors:

Without careful controls and restrictions and planning, tourists can be as destructive as locusts—can destroy everything we have learned to love about the West. I include you and me among the tourists, and I include you and me in my warning to entrepreneurs. We should all be forced to file an environmental impact study before we build so much as a privy or a summer cottage, much less a motel, a freeway, or a resort. (55)

Though Western tourism, a high-impact endeavor in its own right, causes untold damage, the petro-industrial complex's poisonous, irreversible, and unsustainable resource extraction processes are especially damaging in the West, and thus demand special consideration. The acceptance—or dismissal—of the interior West as a national sacrifice zone is a harmful and dangerous practice with dire results, as I will soon point out.

Fuller's comparison of drilling rigs to the Eiffel Tower, her comment upon the apparatuses of industrial capitalism in the West, not only underscores the ramifications of American petromodernity in this arid, delicate landscape; this simile suggests that hydraulic fracturing in Wyoming has grave national and even global consequences. When we look at Fuller's simile through the lens of petro-culture and petromelancholic denial, that time-honored question asked by any rhetor worth her salt inevitably arises: *what's at stake here?* After a

lengthy consideration of Wyoming's ecology, seismicity, hydrology, agricultural importance to the nation, and disenfranchisement of its Native peoples, my response to this complex query of what's at stake has become all-encompassing, concerning the interconnectedness of humans to the land and its nonhuman occupants. *Everything* is at stake when we frack Wyoming to maintain our petromodernity, when the Tough Oil derrick, like the Eiffel Tower, becomes a symbol of Western identity.

High Stakes in the High Country:

Wyoming Public Land as a National Sacrifice Zone

One ecological concern largely ignored by the public about hydraulic fracturing in Wyoming involves the loss of wildlife habitat. According to Ann Chambers Noble, a writer and historian from the Pinedale area, energy extraction in Sublette County affects “sage grouse, pygmy rabbits, [and] pronghorn antelope”; but mule deer, she takes care to note, have been particularly affected. She reports that the mule deer population declined 60% in the first decade of the twenty-first century (Noble). Although Noble focuses her attention upon the drastic decline in deer population, industrial activity in the area greatly impacts the pronghorns' migration to Yellowstone. Robbins describes his tour of the Pinedale area with Fuller:

We drove past the tiny town of Pinedale, and across public land, where . . . a natural landscape once full of antelope, jackrabbits, and sagebrush is now a vast industrial landscape Biologists say that this development could destroy the antelope migration from outside Pinedale to Yellowstone National Park, hundreds of miles north, now the longest overland mammal migration in the Lower 48.

(Robbins)

While this news might alarm biologists, hunters, and nature enthusiasts, it has failed thus far to capture the attention of an anthropocentric nation enmeshed in petrophilia.

While the public might wave away the staggering losses of wildlife and happily continue to engage in petromodernity, other consequences of fracking in Wyoming pose risks to human life, rendering the dismissal of the West's sacrifice zones dangerous to even the most anthropocentric of humans. For instance, fracking poses the risk of increased seismic activity; Ohio, Oklahoma, and Arkansas have all reported an uptick in earthquakes in recent years. The scientific community has recently confirmed that hydraulic fracturing causes earthquakes (Ellsworth). I raise this concern since Sublette County's seismic activity is already 332% of the national average, and Pinedale lies roughly 150 miles from the Yellowstone caldera (citydata.com). A further increase in the region's seismicity could potentially trigger an earthquake large enough to cause the Yellowstone Supervolcano to erupt. In 2013, on the northern edge of Yellowstone, residents of Montana's Beartooth Range region became very alarmed when they discovered that the oil and gas industry was planning to begin drilling in their backyard. The Yellowstone Caldera was one of their chief concerns. Betsy Scanlin, a Red Lodge local, penned a worried letter to the editor of the *Billings Gazette* in 2013:

Hydraulic fracking is now proposed in the Roscoe/Dean area, as well as the Bearcreek area, approximately 80 miles from the edge of the Yellowstone caldera, our neighboring sleeping supervolcano. . . . A complete study of the potential serious impacts of fracking this close to an active earthquake and volcanic area is absolutely necessary before further preliminary exploration or any of the dozens of planned wells become activated. (Scanlin)

Scanlin goes on to quote Yellowstone geophysicist Bob Smith as having estimated that the supervolcano eruption would cause “87,000 immediate deaths” and decimate worldwide agriculture. The United States Geological Survey has concluded, Scanlin reports, that further study must commence to assess the possibility of a Yellowstone eruption triggered by a fracking-related earthquake. But the potential does exist, and we would do well to consider this prospect before dismissing large tracts of Wyoming as sacrifice zones for energy extraction.

In fact, the 2015 discovery of an immense, previously uncharted reservoir of magma beneath Yellowstone National Park may ratchet the risk of fracking in Sublette County (and Montana’s Carbon and Stillwater Counties, which lie 60 miles from the Park) even higher.

According to the fractivist blog *Preserve the Beartooth Front*:

While Montana and North Dakota have not seen this same level of induced earthquakes [as Oklahoma], the juxtaposition of the USGS report [a more recent report than the one referenced by Scanlin, whose authors also conclude that injection wells cause earthquakes] with a new report . . . issued last week, by a team of University of Utah scientists on seismicity in the Yellowstone volcanic system offers a reminder that what we don’t know about fracking should scare us . . . the newly discovered reservoir is 4.5 times larger than the [previously mapped] reservoir above it. There’s enough magma there to fill the Grand Canyon . . . while the report doesn’t change the timetable for a future major eruption, it is a reminder that we act at great risk if we jostle the earth’s crust. (DavidJKatz)

I emailed a polite, neutral inquiry to Yellowstone after reading this blog, explaining that I was a graduate student at the University of Montana and was working on a project involving hydraulic fracturing in Wyoming. I asked if the Park was at all concerned about the possible threat to the

Caldera posed by fracking, and whether this issue was being studied. A seasonal ranger emailed me back within one day with the welcome news that he had forwarded my email to the Park geologists. That exchange was the last that I heard from Yellowstone. I regret not having hard scientific facts to support what might otherwise be an alarmist-sounding, remote possibility, but I am not at all surprised. But I include the possibility of the Yellowstone Supervolcano eruption in my catalogue of harms because I do not believe that the voices of frightened residents should be ignored.

Another risk we court by condoning fracking in Wyoming involves declining air quality and the subsequent effects on humans and the state's agriculture. As air pollution in Sublette County steadily grows worse as a result of the emissions generated by energy production, American food sources—and thus human health—suffer. The air pollution, too, highlights the high stakes of Western Tough Oil extraction and the ludicrousness of sacrifice zone dismissal. According to *High Country News*, air quality in rural Sublette County in 2005 was as contaminated as the air in traffic-heavy urban centers such as Los Angeles and Denver, with ground-level ozone 25% greater than the safe levels outlined by the Environmental Protection Agency (Keller). Ground-level ozone created by hydraulic fracturing poses problems because “ozone belongs in the upper reaches of the earth's atmosphere” where it protects Earth's life forms from intense ultraviolet radiation (Frisch). Nearer the ground, ozone caused by industry emissions harms our respiratory systems. In late 2014, the *Casper Star-Tribune* reported that ozone problems in Wyoming were no longer limited to the Upper Green River Valley; six of Wyoming's 23 counties now exceed the standard set by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for safe emission levels (Storrow). Wyoming's ozone levels pose risks in the greater context of climate change, of course, but they also pose significant agricultural risks for the rest

of the nation. According to the Wyoming Farm Bureau Federation's statistics for 2012, Wyoming ranked third in the nation for production of pinto beans, fourth in production of sheep and lambs, eighth in barley production, fifteenth in beef production, and seventeenth in alfalfa production ("Wyoming Ag"). While the effects of ground-level ozone upon cattle and other livestock requires further study, it certainly affects human respiration, killing "adults with respiratory conditions" as well as putting "children with asthma in the hospital" (Frisch). It follows then, that if ground-level ozone affects humans, other mammalian respiratory systems likely suffer similar effects when exposed to these pollutants. Furthermore, ozone drastically affects crops; it is "responsible for more crop damage than all the other major air pollutants combined," and "clover, an essential plant in pastures and for livestock nutrition, is one of the most sensitive of the over 90 crop species affected by ozone" (Frisch). With Wyoming's vital role as a national food-producer of both crops and livestock in mind, the state's levels of ground-level ozone do not bode well for the American agribusiness complex, nor for the health of its consumers.

In addition, the region's aridity heightens the risks associated with energy extraction in Wyoming. Stegner asserts that aridity, rather than an arbitrary geographic positioning involving the 100th meridian, defines the American West: "Aridity, more than anything else, gives the western landscape its character" (46). He presses further, claiming that aridity marks a fundamental difference between east and west in the land's ability to readily recover from industrial enterprise:

Vermont, for example, is a rugged country with a violent climate, but it heals. . .
the West, vast and magnificent, greatly various but with the abiding unity of too

little water except in its extreme northwest corner, has proved far more fragile and unforgiving. (xxiii, Stegner's emphasis)

Wyoming and its Western neighbors, then, may not "heal" from Tough Oil extraction, and aridity serves as the impetus for Proulx's Red Desert documentation project. I want to briefly expand this discussion to include the dramatic example of California's ongoing drought so that we might better understand aridity in the age of Tough Oil, why LeMenager's exclusion of the interior West in *Living Oil* proves to be such a risky oversight, and why Fuller's aesthetic simile possesses such rich potential for interpretation. Stegner highlights the nonsensical nature of Western American urban development in the face of aridity and predicts a mass exodus should a severe drought strike, noting in his 1991 introduction to *Bluebird*:

Five years of drought have not even slowed down the growth [in Los Angeles]. But ten years would, and fifteen would stop it cold, and twenty would send people reeling back not only from Los Angeles but from San Diego, Albuquerque, Denver, Phoenix, Tucson, every artificial urban enclave. (xxii)

Stegner did not live to witness the extreme California drought of the 2010s, but the West's current hyper-aridity might well be the exodus-inducer he anticipated. In March 2015, NASA scientist Jay Famiglietti published an ominous op-ed in the *Los Angeles Times* entitled "California Has About One Year of Water Left: Will You Ration Now?" in which he reports that California "has been dropping more than 12 million acre-feet of total water yearly since 2011" and that January 2015 was the driest "since record-keeping began in 1895" (Famiglietti). Furthermore, Tough Oil extraction techniques are compounding the already grim situation; California's Water Resources Control Board reports that oil and gas companies illegally pumped three billion gallons of fracking wastewater into the state's fresh-water aquifers in 2014 (Stock,

et al.). While the current situation in California provides a drastic example, it underscores Stegner's point regarding aridity and denotes the West as a region particularly vulnerable to energy extraction and its collateral damage.

Wyoming, too, suffers water contamination and despite its rurality, its gritty, self-reliant “stickers” also face the prospect of Stegnerian exodus. John Fenton, a third-generation rancher near Pavillion, Wyoming, keenly feels this threat; Fenton has been forced to consider leaving the family ranch, because water contamination caused by hydraulic fracturing threatens to poison his herd:

We've only got a certain amount of water wells to work with, and I don't know how they [his cattle] drink it, to be honest with you. It's the damnedest-smelling stuff and it comes out in different colors all the time, but you've gotta use it sometimes. (Fox)

In 2011, the EPA conducted a study of the link between water contamination and fracking in Pavillion, Wyoming (Fenton's hometown). According to Mead Gruver and Ben Neary of the Associated Press, the investigation was suddenly abandoned by the EPA (with no explanation given to the public) and turned over to the state of Wyoming after the agency admitted that hydraulic fracturing does indeed contaminate water wells. Before turning the case over to the state, “the agency publicly linked fracking to groundwater contamination” (Gruver and Neary). The case in Pavillion, then, is important on two counts: the problems of energy extraction in rural Wyoming have entered the national spotlight, and the goings-on in Pavillion could have widespread ramifications for other communities besieged by fracking activity.

Yet another issue associated with the dismissal of Wyoming's sacrifice zones—and Pavillion's water troubles—concerns the relationship between tribal and state governments. In a

bizarre twist of events, after the EPA turned the investigation of Pavillion's water over to the state, the agency decreed that the town of Pavillion would now be a part of the Wind River Reservation. The reasoning behind this curious move has not been made available to the public, but Pavillion's environmental issues likely lie at the heart of the decision. The state of Wyoming questions the reservation boundary change's legality, and sued the EPA to change the reservation boundaries back to their former designations. This ongoing lawsuit has not yet been resolved as of spring 2015. According to *County 10*, a Fremont County local news source, "In its ruling, the EPA put Riverton, Kinnear, and Pavillion inside the reservation's boundaries, despite 1905 Congressional action designating the borders and past court rulings to the contrary" ("Quick Facts"). The boundary change causes headaches for the two tribes who share Wyoming's sole reservation, the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho people, as well as other state residents; it "gives tribes access to grant funding for air quality monitoring" but millions of acres of state land—and the sizable town of Riverton—would now be under tribal jurisdiction ("Wyoming"). Tribal members complain that the ruling implies that the Reservation's Shoshone and Arapaho people are not state residents, despite their paying state taxes ("Tribes"). And while the tribes *might* benefit from their newfound ability to pursue grants for cleaner air, I contend that the state's upset stems from a nasty concoction of Riverton's institutional racism and the town's horror at being included in the federal dismissal of the reservation.

Like other federal lands in Wyoming, the Wind River Reservation, too, serves as a sacrifice zone: the oil and gas industry routinely dumps their fracking wastewater inside the Wind River Reservation boundary. The tribe's water sources, like Fenton's in Pavillion, are now contaminated. According to Elizabeth Shogren of *National Public Radio*, the EPA allows

oil companies to send so much of this contaminated water onto dry land that it was creating raging streams . . . on Wyoming land outside of the reservation, state rules ban companies from dumping water after it's been used for hydraulic fracturing or other chemical treatments. (Shogren)

While an exhaustive treatment of this unsavory scenario—merely the latest in an ongoing series of tribal disenfranchisements by the federal government—lies beyond the scope of this thesis, I raise these issues in the hopes of illuminating the unique Western-ness of this situation in regard to my proposed Western petromelancholia. The scarcity of water, the large tracts of reservation and state land in question, the friction between the tribal and state governments, and the bizarre dismissal of these lands as a sacrifice zone could only occur in the American West.

The final harm of our acceptance of Wyoming sacrifice zones that I wish to discuss concerns another federal agency: the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Western energy extraction and petromodernity contrasts sharply with the rest of the nation in terms of federal land ownership and its relationship to Tough Oil extraction. I have already raised the issue of land owners' lack of mineral rights in the West in my introduction, but federal land use is a parallel, uniquely Western concern since these purportedly public lands have become sacrifice zones. Most federal land in the United States lies in the West and in Alaska; with the exception of the Forest Service (an arm of the Department of Agriculture) the Department of Interior manages the bulk of federal public land, including in its agencies the National Park Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Bureau of Land Management.⁷ This latter agency figures largely in *Colton*, since the Jonah Field, where Colton worked and died, lies on BLM land. In fact, federal land comprises a staggering 48% of Wyoming, and the BLM manages the majority of it (“Understanding”). Moreover, Colton died in 2006, one of the first casualties of a piece of

legislation championed by then-Vice President Dick Cheney (former CEO of Halliburton): the Energy Policy Act of 2005. In the text of this Act, a remarkable urgency to drill on federal land betrays the spare, wooden prose of its drafters. For example, in Section 364 of Title III of the Act, which addresses “estimates of oil and gas resources underlying onshore federal land,” we learn that nothing must impede the BLM’s haste to issue leases. We also discover that, with a neat shift in noun choice, that the reserves of the future have become the resources of the present.

This section of the Act reads (in part):

Section 604 of the Energy Act of 2000 is amended . . . by striking paragraph (2) and inserting the following: “(2) the extent and nature of any restrictions or impediments to the development of the resources, including—

[in subsection (a)](A) impediments to the timely granting of leases;

“(B) post-lease restrictions, impediments, or delays on development for conditions of approval, applications for permits to drill, or processing of environmental permits . . .

(2) in subsection (b)—

(A) by striking “reserve” and inserting “resource.” (109th Congress)

During a 2008 appearance on National Public Radio’s show *Book Tour*, Fuller prefaced her reading of *Colton* excerpts with an explanation of this Act’s effects. According to Fuller, “The 2005 Energy Bill pretty much rolled back any environmental and human health laws that had been kept in place since the Nixon era to defend us from the worst impulses of our greed” (Ulaby). She also questioned the BLM about their hasty issuance of drilling leases. In her interview with National Public Radio’s Susan Page, Fuller laments:

I've said to the BLM, "can't you slow down these leases?" and they say, "No.

This is a mandate from the American people. They want domestic sources of oil and gas and the oil and gas is where it is, so we've got to get at it. ("Interview")

I raise this issue because public lands in Wyoming are no longer truly public, and have become a place where American petrophilia condones industrial rape and pillage. "Public lands are our public commons," intones Terry Tempest Williams in *The Open Space of Democracy*, yet hunters, skiers, hikers, and other visitors we might imagine now risk trespassing upon their own usurped land (Williams, *The Open Space* 59).

In short, America's collective relinquishment of Wyoming's sacrifice zones and the concomitant perception of drilling activity as mere scenery in the West carry serious consequences. I do not wish to downplay the catastrophe of the BP blowout, but I will posit that part of our national horror regarding that event stems from the value we place on the Gulf of Mexico ecosystem, as well as national empathy for the Gulf Coast residents, who still reel from Hurricane Katrina's devastation. Even the drilling rigs on settled eastern lands, such as those tapped into the Appalachian Basin's Marcellus Shale formation, seem oddly out of place because of the multitudes of human inhabitants in the region. To take a case in point, early in *Gasland Part II*, Josh Fox returns to his once-bucolic Pennsylvania home after capturing arresting footage of the BP Deepwater Horizon catastrophe in the Gulf. He discovers that "a new surprise neighbor" towering above the trees has appeared; a drilling rig now sits adjacent to his property (Fox). He then zooms in on the rig, in his trademark wobbly, independent documentarian style, and we see—as a house blurs by—that the well intrudes into the sylvan exurbs, a glaring reminder of nearby industrial activity. This shot, on the heels of his alarming Gulf-doused-with-Corexit (a toxic oil dispersant) footage, inspires shock and dismay in the viewer, who struggles

to reconcile the woodsy neighborhood with preconceived ideas about sacrifice zones. In fact, to further illustrate the rift between highly populated areas and unconventional drilling methods, Governor Cuomo banned hydraulic fracturing in entire state of New York in late 2014, fearing water contamination and other health risks (Kaplan).

Fuller's Tough Oil Aesthetics

In *Colton*, Fuller comments upon the national dismissal of Western sacrifice zones by representing drilling rigs as benign, quotidian, expected scenery in southwest Wyoming. The rigs do not suddenly loom over a neighborhood, as we see in Fox's film. Instead, Fuller thrusts the aforementioned harms into sharp relief by portraying the apparatuses in a harmonious state with the land. For example, in the scene in which Colton and Cody are gulping down sagebrush-tinged Wyoming air as they search for a campsite along a gravel road, Fuller uses an innocuous simile to describe the sight of distant gas-fields visible to the young men as they enjoy the night air. Fuller writes, "And then, right far out in the distance, *like a couple of tiny Eiffel Towers lit up for the sheer romance of it*, there were two drilling rigs powering into the earth after pockets of natural gas" (78, my emphasis). Fuller's simile poses an interesting question: how do we perceive a properly-functioning oil or gas rig in the West? The apparatuses, clearly not ugly, industrial necessities in this scene, appear to be beautiful, capable of inducing the delight of wonder rather than the terror of traditional, Romantic sublimity—or the terror of ecosublimity, a contemporary iteration of the Romantic sublime.

In the Romantic sublime, the precipitous cliffs and mountains of the Peak District and the French Alps caused Wordsworth and his friends to shiver in terror:

Let me then invite the Reader to turn his eyes with me towards that cluster of Mountains at the Head of Windermere . . . if they be looked at from a point

which has brought us so near that the mountain is almost the sole object before our eyes, yet not so near but that the whole of it is visible, we shall be impressed with a sensation of sublimity.—And if this is analyzed, the body of this sensation would be found to resolve itself into three component parts: a sense of individual form or forms; a sense of duration; and a sense of power. (350-51)

According to Wordsworth, the sublime object (usually a mountain, although the sea could also qualify) must be immense, enduring (his nod to geologic time), and the viewer must be close enough to get a true sense of the object's inherent power, but not so close that he becomes paralyzed with fright. I will use Wyoming's Devils Tower here as a Western American example: if we see the Tower from a great distance, as we would from the scenic overlook on Interstate 90 between Gillette and Moorcroft (over 30 miles away), we can barely discern the monolith's scale. This viewing experience is *not* sublime, and the 800 foot-tall formation appears to be a thimble-sized blip on the horizon. On the other hand, if we are *on* Devils Tower, at the airy hanging belay partway up the *El Cracko Diablo* climbing route, we are *too close* for sublime experience. This situation would probably produce overwhelming, paralyzing fright for non-climbers, armchair mountaineers, and (some) guided clients. However, the thoughtful positioning of the National Park Service's Visitor Center, several city-blocks from the start of the talus field at the Tower's base, allows visitors a sublime experience in the Romantic sense. Here the Tower looms, fully occupying our view. We are thunderstruck by the sight—awed but not panicking.

In the ecosublime, on the other hand, industrial capitalism gone awry terrifies the viewer, causing a terrific jolt to his or her consciousness. In his introduction to *Ecosublime*, Lee Rozelle explains his newly-minted term:

From the Greek *oikos*, *eco* (which roughly means “home”), joined with the word *sublime*, [therefore] *ecosublime* can be defined as the awe and terror of a heightened awareness of the ecological home. When does an awareness of home provoke terror and awe? *When it's burning*. (1, my emphasis)

As a literary example, the immense cloud of the Airborne Toxic Event in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* provokes the awe and terror of the ecosublime. And in the context of petromodernity, the dramatic (and distressingly frequent) explosions of trains carrying Bakken crude—the so-called bomb trains—certainly produce the ecosublime experience in the viewer. The BP Deepwater Horizon disaster, too, can be aestheticized as the ecosublime, and this classification helps to explain why Stephanie LeMenager, Terry Tempest Williams, Josh Fox, and many others are so fascinated by the catastrophe. Fuller's Eiffel Tower-esque rigs, on the other hand, do not fit this aesthetic mode.

Instead, Fuller's Eiffel Tower simile suggests that the serene, twinkling rigs represent progress and American energy independence, a Wyoming version of Leo Marx's progress-promising “machine in the garden” (Marx). The rigs, in harmony with the Wyoming landscape in this passage, call to mind Marx's interpretation of George Inness's painting of a train chugging along in a peaceful landscape, “The Lackawanna Valley.” Marx explains the presence of Inness's train as pastoral and unobtrusive, asserting, “*The Lackawanna Valley* . . . is a striking representation of the idea that machine technology is a proper part of the landscape” (220). Fuller's Eiffel Tower simile, too, suggests that the rigs are doing no harm to the Wyoming plains, and that they indeed belong there. In fact, Fuller's decision to represent the rigs as pleasant scenery—a contemporary perspective of the Eiffel Tower as well—calls attention to the American misperception of drilling equipment as somehow belonging to the Western landscape

(rather than depicting the machines as a horror of industrial capitalism). Her representation, then, provides a rare, twenty-first century example of Leo Marx's "technological sublime." Marx asserts that Americans' Jeffersonian hopes of progress connect human perceptions of technology to the landscape, and thus we consider the machine to be in harmony with the land: "There is a special affinity between the machine and the new Republic. In the first place, the raw landscape is an ideal setting for technological progress" (203). In the twenty-first century, the rigs represent technological progress and American energy independence; the national prospect of no longer being beholden to OPEC seems progressive indeed, and will purportedly protect American freedoms and ensure that petrophilic lifestyles may continue unabated.

But Fuller's technological sublime-conjuring simile does not imply that all is well and harmonious in Wyoming's gas-patch. In the case of the technological sublime, the jolt of opposing perceptions (rather than Romantic mountains or ecological disaster) creates the sublime experience. According to Marx:

The sudden appearance of the machine in the garden is an arresting, endlessly evocative image. It causes the instantaneous clash of opposed states of mind: a strong urge to believe in the rural myth along with an awareness of industrialization as counterforce to this myth. (229)

Perhaps the comforts of petromodernity allow us to dismiss the unchecked ravaging of Western lands by the petro-industrial complex, and we accept these practices as a necessary evil. On the other hand, the popular (historical) misperception of the West's free land allows for the dismissal of such damaging extraction practices. In her essay "Open (for Business) Range," Terre Ryan explores twenty-first century aesthetics of oil rigs and the ideologies informing our still (Leo) Marxist perceptions. Manifest Destiny myths, she asserts, are at the core of our acceptance:

In a 2006 issue of *BusinessWeek*, the Houston-based True North Energy Corp, attempting to attract investors, ran a full-page headline that read: “Alaska! Focus on America’s Last Emerging Energy Frontier.” The copy is not surprising; one of Alaska’s state nicknames is “the Last Frontier.” Ad graphics include a snowscape featuring a gas drilling rig illuminated by the sun—the technological sublime mounted in one of the most myth-laden and forbidding of American landscapes.

(113)

The technological sublime, according to Ryan, did not end with Inness’ train entering the landscape; instead, its Tough Oil iteration connects directly to the Western mythos. In this sense, Fuller’s fracking-rig-as-Eiffel Tower simile underscores a tendency to accept the machinery of industrial capitalism as a marker of progress. Édouard Lockroy, minister of industry and commerce when the Eiffel Tower was erected, said that the Eiffel Tower is “the image of progress such as we conceive of it today: a pole around which humanity spirals eternally upward” (Brown 8). In the context of American energy independence and progress, Fuller’s apt comparison highlights this aspect of our tendency to dismiss such evidence of damaging industrial practices in the West.

Still another stratum of Fuller’s simile involves American perceptions of industrial heroics, since Gustave Eiffel’s supporters viewed his Tower as an extraordinary triumph of engineering, lauding him as a hero for his efforts. According to the cultural historian Frederick Brown:

On inaugural day, Eiffel, followed by a delegation, began to climb the 2,731 steps to the summit . . . After more than an hour, the survivors, journalists and politicians alike, crowded onto a small round platform in the campanile. There, at

Lockroy's behest, Eiffel unfurled a large flag, and with the tricolor flapping in the wind and cannons below firing a twenty-one gun salute, everyone sang the *Marseillaise*. Afterward, on a lower platform, Tirard promoted Eiffel to the rank of officer in the Legion of Honor. (19-20)

The crowd that accompanied Gustave Eiffel to the apex of his industrial creation clearly viewed him as a hero and celebrated accordingly, even bestowing a high national honor upon him. Therefore, in this context, Fuller's simile not only draws heavily upon the rigs' structural similarities to the Eiffel Tower, but also upon American perceptions of oil and gas industry employees: that they participate in the heroic endeavor of energy extraction. Our insatiable American thirst for oil and gas places workers in mortal danger upon these Western sacrifice zones, thus American demand for fossil fuels decrees that industry workers, too, must be sacrificed. Ring points out the industry's human cost, charging that "At times, the industry and the whole government system treat tenaciously loyal workers as if they were as disposable as a broken drill bit" (Ring, "Disposable"). He then considers the workers' alarming mortality statistics of the mid-2000s:

The human impacts of the exploration boom are felt especially in the Interior West, where the summertime total of drilling rigs has soared since 2000, from 204 to 447. . . with that increase in drilling and related activities, the number of fatal accidents has also risen. At least 89 people have died since 2000, working in energy extraction in Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, Montana, and North Dakota . . . Last year alone [in 2006, the year Colton Bryant died], 20 people died doing jobs directly related to drilling and servicing wells in the region. (Ring, "Disposable")

Industry workers' acceptance of such mortal perils in order to fulfill this national clamor for fossil fuels paints them in a heroic light. For example, in her passage about a rig on the plains, Fuller also calls attention to the bravery it takes for the employees to do their jobs:

And it's not just that a rig is vast, but it's ingeniously brave. The courageous imagination it takes to bolt yourself onto the high plains and drill down day and night, following a map of the world no one can see, but that geologists can track and picture. (129)

As Fuller points out, energy extraction, which provides (dangerous) jobs and touts the possibility of energy independence, carries significant heroic cachet in America. As an illustration, a national support group called "Rig Wives" provides support to the spouses of oil and gas employees. Their mission statement alludes to the heroic sacrifices these workers make, and suggests that like military veterans or emergency responders, these workers are national heroes too. According to their mission statement:

All of the woman [sic] that work for the foundation do it *for the love and pride we have for our men and what they sacrifice to take care of their families and yours* . . . Here at the Rig Wives Foundation we have made it our mission to help those that are new all the way to the *veterans* of our life style to manage the everyday life and struggles unique to us. (Rigwives.org, my emphasis)

As another example of this perceived heroism, Fuller's description of Colton's gravesite in her chapter "Evanston Cemetery," includes a faded baseball cap with an energy industry logo upon it near his grave. The honorable displaying of this hat suggests its status as a funerary object, similar to the headwear of a soldier or firefighter. According to Fuller:

There is a hanging basket on a trellis next to flowers and a black ball cap
(bleached by the sun to the color of sucked licorice in places) with the words
WESTERN PETROLEUM embroidered onto its front in orange thread. (190)

In fact, not only are industry employees perceived as heroic, many rigs, particularly those with patriotic paint jobs, reflect this nationally-approved, purportedly noble activity. Fuller describes such patriotically-painted rigs (in the following passage) near the end of *Colton*:

Above Jake's shoulder, the two Patterson-UTI rigs, 455 and 515—*red, white, and blue* in the daylight, but anonymously lit up at night, just like all the other rigs—keep on drilling and drilling into the earth” (197, my emphasis).

The patriotic colors of the rig itself point to its function as a matter of national duty, which in turn evokes the idea that its attendants perform a great service to the nation.

Fuller's pointed comment upon the American acceptance of Western sacrifice zones takes on still another dimension when we consider that the heated American debate over hydraulic fracturing echoes the Eiffel Tower's own historical controversies. When first erected for the Paris Exposition of 1889, the Eiffel Tower, which a contemporary of Eiffel's anonymously termed “a monumental political argument,” got a mixed reception (Brown 7). Eiffel's detractors considered his Tower an abomination, an industrial assault upon the senses. In this light, Fuller's provocative simile encompasses the current American debate surrounding hydraulic fracturing, echoing the hue and cry over the Eiffel Tower's construction. And while fracking's “economic, social, and biological costs,” as LeMenager puts it, are staggering in the West and therefore the subject of heated discussion (as I explained at the beginning of this chapter), the Eiffel Tower's detractors expressed concern over French capitulation to industrialism (105).⁸ To be sure, the Tower offended many aesthetes who perceived it as terribly

ugly, but these viewers also feared what it represented. In fact, as Brown reports, just after the Tower's construction commenced, a coalition of 47 artists and writers, including Guy de Maupassant, penned a (disgusted) letter to Alphonse Alphand, the French minister of public works, in protest of this monument to the industrial age. In the following excerpt, the group highlights American commercialism, likens the Tower to a "smokestack," and claims that the entire city is in an uproar:

Do not for a moment doubt that the Eiffel Tower, which even commercial America would not want on its soil, disgraces Paris. Everyone feels it, everyone says it, everyone is profoundly saddened by it, and we are only a faint echo of public opinion. When foreigners visit our Exposition they will cry out in astonishment "Is this horror what the French have created to display their vaunted taste?" to understand our case, one need only imagine a . . . giant black smokestack beetling over Notre Dame, the Sainte Chapelle, the Tour Saint Jacques, the Louvre, the dome of the Invalides, the Arc de Triomphe, humiliating our monuments with its barbarous mass, dwarfing our architecture And for the next twenty years, we will see this city, still vibrant with the genius of so many centuries, overshadowed by an odious column of bolted metal. (Brown 21)

These late nineteenth-century artists and writers select a smokestack, the most horrid structure their collective genius can conceive, as their analogy for the Eiffel Tower. They perceive the Tower as ugly since they view it as *the* representation of corrupt industrial practices and power. With this historical context in mind, then, Fuller's comparison of the drilling rigs to the Eiffel Tower suggests that the rigs are not in harmony with the Western landscape after all, despite the power and allure of the Manifest Destiny mythos highlighted by Ryan. Instead, her powerful

simile invokes the myriad of problems caused by hydraulic fracturing and the heated debate these extraction practices inspire.

Also, Fuller's simile draws attention to public complacency wrought by the dulling effects of time. I'd like to note here that (ironically enough), the Eiffel Tower is now considered *the* civic symbol of Paris, and the artists' letter of protest was written in vain. Gustave Eiffel's creation endures; the city of Paris did not tear it down after the Universal Exposition of 1889 drew to a close. The once-controversial creation is now *celebrated*. Similarly, Wyoming valorizes petroleum extraction. Various roadside points of interest and museum exhibits abound. An especially elaborate example can be found in Thermopolis:

The Hot Springs County Museum has an extensive collection of oilfield equipment and other artifacts related to the petroleum industry in central Wyoming The exhibits in and around the Petroleum Building take the visitor through every step of the process, from exploration to drilling, production, transportation, refining and marketing. ("Oil")

Though this museum will probably never receive the Eiffel Tower's millions of visitors (despite its position on a major artery to Yellowstone), this exhibit illustrates the regional vigor for drilling.

I would now like to turn away from the complex symbolism of the Eiffel Tower itself and briefly consider Fuller's adjective for her simile: she likens the drilling rigs to "a couple of *tiny* Eiffel Towers," commenting further upon American dismissal of Western sacrifice zones (78, my emphasis). This adjective might seem to be a bit curious, since the 986 foot (301 meters)-tall Eiffel Tower, as Brown reports, required an hour-long ascent by Gustave Eiffel and his compatriots via thousands of stairs on the day of its inauguration.⁹ But the immense, open

rangelands of the West dwarf the enormous drilling rigs in Fuller's text, and thus the machines appear to be diminutive. For the sake of comparison, I used Fox's "new neighbor" in *Gasland II*—the just-appeared rig—earlier in this chapter as an example of a rig's shocking presence in a non-sacrifice zone. In the context of scale, I want to point out that the apparatus's complete domination of the frame, too, adds to the effectiveness of Fox's scene. In contrast, Fuller carefully documents the bizarre distortion that the Western landscape causes; in her chapter "Drilling," she explains:

The high plains have a way of diminishing and distorting the scale of everything, and until you've climbed the stairs to the doghouse on a drilling rig, it's difficult to imagine the height of it—fifteen stories, all told—or the sense of exposure out here; it's as if the tower were anchored to a swell of water that might shift at any moment and set you adrift. (129)

Her description of the rigs as "tiny," then, highlights the landscape's optical illusion, another facet of American dismissal of these apparatuses in the West. After all, how much damage could such a small apparatus cause? What dangers could it possibly pose for those who must tend it? This illusion may well have contributed to Colton's carelessness after he begins work on the rigs, for he never learns to respect their soaring heights. He takes two long falls during his tenure as an industry employee; he breaks his foot and loses his job after the first fall, and he loses his life in the second (82, 172).

In this chapter, I have sought to interpret Fuller's unusual simile by exploring the particular risks we court by condoning fracking in Wyoming. In the East, concerns over groundwater contamination in urban environments seem to be the primary danger (and inspiration for New York State's recent hydraulic fracturing ban). While water contamination in

Wyoming certainly remains a serious problem, other, equally pertinent issues and unique concerns plague its residents and pose dangers to the rest of the nation. Fuller's Eiffel Tower simile can help us understand the national, petromelancholic denial of Wyoming's emerging problems and why relinquishing these federal lands as a Tough Oil sacrifice zone carries significant risk. Complacency, Fuller's simile suggests, plays a major role, and looking at our own perceptions of drilling rigs in the West through the lens of Marx's technological sublime helps us understand why we might aestheticize rigs as being in harmony with the landscape and therefore sacrifice enormous swaths of Wyoming to petromodernity. At the same time, Fuller's simile subtly suggests the clash of rurality and industrialism proposed by Marx, calling into question just how far we will go in the name of (so-called) Jeffersonian progress.

I want to shift my focus now from why Americans collectively relinquish the interior West as a sacrifice zone to why young people such as Colton Bryant would want to participate in such a shameless capitalist racket. Terre Ryan, whom I quoted in this chapter, points to Manifest Destiny mythologies—the faulty illusion of the West as free land—as our reason for trashing the interior West in the name of petromodernity. As we will see, another set of Western mythologies inform Colton's individual petromelancholic denial of Tough Oil's arrival in Wyoming: cowboy and Wild West myths help him justify his involvement with unconventional, extreme extraction processes.

Chapter Two: “Horses and Oil in His Blood”:

Colton’s Cowboy Repose as a Site of Petromelancholia

In my three remaining chapters, I address Fuller’s Western mythopoetics in *Colton*. To be sure, Western mythology courses throughout this text. When I first read Jane Tompkins’s book *West of Everything*, I found Colton Bryant in each chapter and I became convinced that Fuller must have consulted Tompkins before settling in to write *Colton*. We can apply Western genre criticism to numerous passages in Fuller’s text, and the significant interplay between the cowboy mythos and petrophilia yields many interesting readings. In my early drafts of this thesis, I attempted to interpret all aspects of the mythos, such as Cocoa (Colton’s horse) as an anti-petromodernity trope, and the meaning of Colton’s refusal to respond to the villainous KMart cowboys. But I soon found that my stab at interpreting these and other (minor) mythological examples in relation to petrophilia was an enormous undertaking. The details of Colton’s Western petromelancholia were becoming lost, awash in generalities. So in order to truly hone in on these myths and address them fully, in their singularities and as an accretion, I have selected aspects of the mythologies which I feel were the most toxic to Colton Bryant: his Western repose, his attempt to achieve self-made manhood, and the symbolism of the guns as well as the trope of Western violence. Each of these mythologies bears the distinct stamp of his Western petromelancholia; his denial of Tough Oil’s realities reinforces the myths, which then continues to inform his Tough Oil repudiations. In short, petromelancholia and Western mythologies mutually reinforce each other, and comprise a death spiral in *Colton*.

Before I move into my discussion of Colton’s investment in Western mythologies in a time of Tough Oil, I provide brief backgrounds of Wyoming’s oil-soaked history, its statewide

identification with the mythic cowboy, and the tensions that inevitably arise between these seemingly disparate camps.

Petroleum Extraction in Wyoming

Wyoming, long considered a prime, lucrative site for American resource extraction, possesses ample reserves of coal, uranium, oil, and natural gas. Owen Wister's 1903 work *The Virginian* helped to fix energy extraction in Wyoming's cultural imaginary, since the Virginian eschews the cowboy life at the book's close and transforms himself into a coal baron. To take a case in point, when he speaks to Molly's great-aunt, he touts himself as a burgeoning financial success because of his coal prospects: "And then, when I took up my land, I chose a place where there is coal" (306). Wister valorizes energy extraction again one page later, and begins his last paragraph of *The Virginian* by musing, "But the railroad came, and built a branch to that land of the Virginian's where the coal was. By that time, he was an important man" (307).

Although Wister may have helped to fix the romanticization of energy extraction and economic success in Wyoming's cultural imagination, the history of energy extraction in the state, particularly its oil, has tangible, economic roots. Phil Roberts, a history professor at the University of Wyoming, chronicles Wyoming's oil saga in his book *A New History of Wyoming*, and I will quote him liberally here to relate the state's oil-soaked history. Roberts notes that oil was discovered in Wyoming in 1866 near Fort Bridger—just seven years after "America's first gusher" was discovered in Pennsylvania (Roberts). Subsequent oil discoveries in Wyoming during that time period were used "as axle grease for wagons and coaches or lubricant for steam engines powered by wood or coal" until kerosene was recognized as a valuable light source since "the newly developed kerosene lamps gave off even better light than the increasingly costly whale oil" (Roberts). While the first oil well in Wyoming was drilled "in the Chugwater

formation,” the town of Casper soon became the center of drilling activity and became known as “the oil capital of the Rockies” (Roberts). Moreover, according to Roberts, the automobile first appeared in Wyoming in the year 1900, and soon proved to be crucial; the long distances between Wyoming’s ranches and towns became more easily negotiable (Roberts). In short, oil and gas production, eclipsed only by coal mining, are time-honored traditions in the state of Wyoming. Fuller, too, highlights Wyoming’s long, relentless mining past in her op-ed for the *New York Times*, “Recovering from Wyoming’s Energy Bender.” She begins her piece with the line, “For all its Old West mythology, Wyoming is and always will be a mining state, more roughneck than cowboy” (Fuller, “Recovering”).

Like Colton and his family, most twentieth century Wyomingites were certainly petrophiles. The superabundance of oil during this time adds a profoundly petrophilic dimension to working class Wyoming life. The economic base, though mostly controlled by major oil corporations, also carried the promise of autonomy since smaller oil companies met the energy needs of the state. In his chapter “Boom and Bust, Again: Wyoming in the 1970s,” Roberts explains:

Casper, the “oil capital of the Rockies” during the early part of the 20th century, continued as a significant refining center in the years after World War II. Huge refineries, operated by Standard Oil and Texaco, processed millions of barrels of oil . . . Elsewhere in the state, refineries by smaller independent companies continued to produce gasoline and petroleum byproducts for a mostly regional market. (Roberts)

Wyoming, like the rest of the nation, experienced the apex of the Easy Oil period in the twentieth century; the smaller oil companies' production provided locals and tourists with as much fuel as they cared to burn.

In fact, accessing Wyoming's oil reserves was initially so easy that it required no drilling. I encountered a wonderful example of Wyoming "Easy Oil" on a trip to South Dakota's Black Hills in January 2015: just a few miles east of Newcastle, Wyoming, a now-closed, late-twentieth century tourist attraction known as the "World Famous Hand Dug Oil Well" dominates a hillside on Highway 16. Its rickety derrick still stands; nearby signs, which once enticed hordes of Mount Rushmore and Yellowstone-bound tourists in the latter part of the twentieth century into the "gift tank," are now peeling and riddled with buckshot, rotting in the ditch. But despite these signs' proclamations of the attraction's uniqueness, Easy Oil in Wyoming was once fairly common: "During the fur trade and Overland trails periods, mountain men commented on 'oil springs where oil bubbled to the surface of water pools'" (Roberts). In the following century, oil production, like coal production, became a major Wyoming industry. Yet in the 1990s, with resources tapped after countless boom-and-bust cycles, as well as new environmental regulations making coal's future uncertain, oil companies with Wyoming interests began searching for a way to access the natural gas locked in Sublette County's subterranean tight rock formations. Thus Wyoming entered its Tough Oil period.

Wyoming, no mere participant in Tough Oil, found its gas reserves in Sublette County suddenly positioned at the developmental vanguard of Tough Oil extraction techniques. In her essay "The Jonah Field and Pinedale Anticline: A Natural-Gas Success Story," Ann Chambers Noble explains the failed efforts to access the gas in the Easy Oil days of the 1970s:

Meridian Oil Company drilled next for gas on the Pinedale Anticline . . . Its results were hampered by traditional drilling methods which did not work well in the Anticline's tight sandstones. And there still was no good market for natural gas. (Noble).

Two decades later, however, the markets were ready for natural gas and the industry refined hydraulic fracturing technology so that the dense rock formations guarding Sublette County's gas reserves could finally be profitably drilled. Noble notes that in the early 1990s:

McMurry Oil Company recognized that the only way to successfully draw the gas through the well-bores was to develop new drilling and fracturing technology that would allow free flow of the gas through the formation The Jonah Field rediscovery and successful extraction of natural gas initiated by McMurry Oil Company is heralded as one of the most significant natural gas developments in continental North America in the second half of the twentieth century. Jonah represents a turning point because of the enormous amount of production opened to new technologies. McMurry Oil Company's technical advances in the early 1990s, coupled with higher gas prices and a quick boom in pipeline capacity, allowed it and other companies to lucratively produce gas *from a previously inaccessible source*. (Noble, my emphasis)

With the introduction of fracking in Sublette County's Jonah Field, the Tough Oil era in Wyoming had begun, and the technology was soon adopted for use in the nearby Pinedale Anticline as well. Fuller refers to this region as the Upper Green River Basin in *Colton*; more specifically, he died working on a rig in Sublette County's Jonah Field.

Cowboy Mythologies in the Cowboy State

In the nineteenth century, Wyoming's oil reserves were not yet crucial to the rest of America. Kerosene, a petroleum derivative, was gradually replacing whale oil as a means to light lamps, and oil was valued primarily as a lubricant. Cattle, as Nicholas points out in her essay "Voting Western," were Wyoming's first major resource, and the cattle boom and subsequent bust was a precursor to contemporary energy boom and bust cycles: "That Wyoming capitalized on her natural bounty was certainly nothing new. Its high prairie grasses created the cattle boom of the late nineteenth century, which sustained the state's cultural icon, the cowboy" (115). The cowboy iconography is thus grounded in the state's economic history and the realities of this arid land. As Nicholas explains:

The state wasn't lucky enough to be endowed with silver, gold, or copper, like its neighbors Montana and Colorado. As a result, it failed to attract the population—and tumultuous labor movement—of its western neighbors. The wind and aridity discouraged farming, and its remoteness hampered transportation links to the greater West. Wyoming, then, was open to interpretation; and relatively few other western stories would interfere or compete with the one that came to dominate the state's biography, the saga of the American cowboy. (xi)

The image of the Wyoming cowboy, a product of early economic pragmatism has become infused with an enormous amount of potent American romanticism. Nicholas points out the early cultural origins of the state's mythos: "Wyoming drew such formative shapers of the western myth as Frederic Remington and Owen Wister, both of whom utilized this imagined space to construct 'western' types that they in turn used to assert their vision of true Americanness" (xiii). For white Eastern men, Wyoming was a *tabula rasa* waiting to be inscribed, provided an

opportunity for writers such as Wister and artists such as Frederic Remington to construct their version of American identity, and the cowboy became the masculine ideal, manifested in late nineteenth and early twentieth century gender biases. As Christine Bold attests, the West even served as a prescription for male nervous disorders. Bold explains the gender disparity between diagnoses at this time: Wister's friend Theodore Roosevelt, as well as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, suffered from "neurasthenia" and were both treated by Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell. While Gilman suffered the so-called rest-cure treatment chronicled in "The Yellow Wall-Paper," Mitchell prescribed Roosevelt the west-cure, which involved "vigorous outdoor activity" and the "recording of closely observed detail" (59). While Roosevelt's name is inextricably tied to western North Dakota because of his bison hunts and ranching activity near Medora (now immortalized by the national park that bears his name), Roosevelt carefully documented his elk hunting excursions in Wyoming, particularly the Big Horn Mountains. His writings, in conjunction with other works wrought by his cronies Wister and Remington (both prominent members of the group that Bold dubs "The Frontier Club") affirmed America's fascination with and idealization of the West. The cowboy thus became a symbol of American hypermasculinity and rugged self-sufficiency, and this cultural perception persisted throughout the twentieth century.

Despite the nagging reality that the Wyoming cowboy now works as either a rancher or a rodeo cowboy, the cowboy image remains firmly lodged in the state's cultural imaginary, fueled by Wyoming's Wild West history, America's mid-twentieth century enchantment with the Western genre, a still-lingering nostalgia, and the state's aggressive marketing to tourists.¹⁰ The ubiquitous iconography includes scores of the examples too numerous to list singly, but a smattering of well-known examples include the Million Dollar Cowboy Bar in Jackson, which

boasts saddles in place of traditional barstools, and attracts thousands of tourists each summer (who might also visit the Buffalo Bill Center of the West museum on their sojourns to Yellowstone Country). In the northeast corner of the state, in the town of Sundance, Harry Longabaugh spent time in jail and earned his Sundance Kid handle; Robert Redford, who played “Sundance” in the 1969 film *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, has since valorized the moniker with his Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah. And in southeast Wyoming, in Laramie, the University of Wyoming’s football team is named, of course, the Wyoming Cowboys, while in Cheyenne the ten days-long Frontier Days festival culminates in a famous rodeo; for the 2015 event, the Cheyenne Visitors Bureau has adopted the catchy, myth-invoking slogan: “Cheyenne, Wyoming: Live the Legend” (“Cheyenne”).

Tensions between the Tough Oil Industry and Western Mythologies

As I assert in my introduction, tensions seethe in the liminal space between Wyoming’s Western mythologies and the petro-industrial complex. Automobile manufacturers, Ryan points out, capitalize on Western mythologies to hawk their vehicles:

American motor vehicles have long been designed to haul the dreams of the nation Think about the names of a few light trucks: Chevy Blazer, Tracker, Trailblazer, and Avalanche; Dodge Durango [and Dakota]; Cadillac Escalade; Ford Excursion and Expedition; GMC Yukon Denali; Isuzu Rodeo and Trooper; Land Rover Discovery; Range Rover; Lincoln Navigator; Mercury Mountaineer; Subaru Forester; Toyota Highlander and Sequoia; Volvo Cross Country; Hyundai Santa Fe. Nissan’s Pathfinder bears the national nickname of explorer John Charles Frémont. (110-11)

But the deployment of the mythologies, not merely limited to Turner's and Roosevelt's respective views of the frontier and westward expansion, includes the quintessential Wyoming cowboy. The cowboy and oilman remain inextricably linked in the state's imaginary, as Ryan explains:

Wyoming may be the Cowboy State, but it has long been both mining and ranch country. The state seal, established in 1893 and modified in 1921, features the words "Mines," "Oil," "Livestock," and "Grain," and the figures of a woman, who symbolizes "Equal Rights," and a miner and rancher. Today there is some tension between the latter two of those old neighbors . . . Since 1999, the number of roads has increased by 36 percent on the Pinedale Anticline and by 100 percent on the Jonah Field, straining local wildlife communities. (96-7)

Nicholas makes a similar assertion in her essay "Voting Western," and offers an historical explanation of Wyoming's status as an economic colony which supports the demands of an insatiable nation:

In the twentieth century, its uranium, oil, and coal supplied the rest of the nation with fuel The state that saw itself as the eternal keeper of the cultural symbols of the "true" West became the site of a new western phenomenon. In the mid-1970s, the Cowboy State emerged as the epicenter of a new frontier, the western energy frontier. (115)

But Wyomingites relished the cowboy as a state symbol of rugged Western individuality, and this imagery held fast, informing the identities of generation upon generation.

An irreconcilable divide between cowboys and the oil industry appeared, reaching a fevered pitch in the early 21st century with the advent of Tough Oil extraction techniques.

Nicholas identifies a great tension between the state's collective cowboy identity and the difficulties accompanying the "western energy frontier." She attributes this tension to the boom phases of the state's incessant boom and bust cycles. She writes, "The population growth in the state's working-class industrial pockets produced by Wyoming's central place in the energy frontier threatened the state's traditional identities and quality of life" (115).

John Fenton, the Pavillion rancher whom I introduced in my first chapter's catalogue of harms, keenly feels the threat to his "quality of life." Fenton complains of polluted air hanging over his property "like a brown blanket" and that the oil and gas companies

tear up a football field-sized area and drill a hole out there and they spread toxic chemicals, and on top of that you've got gravel and rocks and big pieces of metal and then they pipeline everywhere and it just cuts us to pieces. (Fox)

Fenton has two options, as he sees it: he can leave the ranch behind and move his family elsewhere, or the area residents can collectively take action against the energy extraction industry. Fenton clearly favors the latter choice, telling documentarian Josh Fox that "we need to stand up to these assholes" (Fox).

Fuller's Colton embodies this tension between Wyoming's iconic heritage and the "western energy frontier," as Nicholas puts it, since he stubbornly claims a cowboy identity despite his eager participation in both petroleum culture and the industry which feeds it.

"This Is the Life, Eh?":

Petromelancholia and Cowboy Repose

The Eiffel Tower simile in Colton and Cody's campsite-searching scene serves as Fuller's comment on complacent American perceptions of Western sacrifice zones rather than Colton's subjective aestheticization. In this same scene, Colton himself experiences

petromelancholia, and the Western mythos adds another dimension to his loss. Petromelancholia occurs, according to LeMenager, when “loving oil to the extent that we have done in the twentieth century sets up the conditions of grief as conventional oil resources dwindle,” and Fuller sets up such conditions in this scene by calling attention to Colton’s petrophilia (LeMenager 102). First, Colton and Cody behave as if they still live in a time of conventional oil extraction, *reveling* in the act of driving on this gravel road: a rural iteration of a twentieth-century, Easy Oil sentiment. The act of driving, a manifestation of petrophilia, serves as a source of joy for the boys. LeMenager explores similar automotive joys in Kerouac’s *On the Road* and Nabokov’s *Lolita*, in her observation that “modern car culture . . . allows for a persistent association of driving with being alive” (80). Moreover, Colton and Cody feel deeply connected to the Wyoming landscape in this scene, but they remain within the confines of their Mazda truck, electing to experience the landscape from its interior. According to Fuller:

Colton wound down the window and stuck his head out. “Smell that! Whee-haw!”
Cody hung out of his side and the boys drove along like a couple of hunting dogs,
breathing in the summer-cool mountain air and the salty scent of deer and
antelope and the vague hint of a wildfire somewhere west of here. (78)

Their sensual act of smelling the environment engages them with this place, heightening their own awareness of Wyoming and cementing their connection to the Mazda, which enables this powerful experience as well as serving as the setting for its occurrence. Despite their delight, they do not pull over; instead, they continue to slowly bump down the gravel road with the windows open. In her critique of *On the Road*, LeMenager writes, “The longing to really see the land, that sharp desire to be more alive through its life, is an important twentieth-century environmental emotion connected to automobility” (89). Colton’s Wyoming version of sensory

environmental experience connects deeply to this place, since he and his friends are not continually traversing the nation as Kerouac and Cassady once did. But their regional travel links Colton and his friend to southwest Wyoming and seems to enrich their lives through their profound (but heavily mediated) experience of that particular environment.

However, Colton and Cody's road trip, an episode of their summer-long rodeo venture, intentionally delays their entry into the world of work. As Robert Warshow points out in *The Immediate Experience*, "The Westerner is *par excellence* a man of leisure. Even when he wears the badge of a marshal or, more rarely, owns a ranch, he appears to be unemployed" (92). John G. Cawelti, too, notes in *The Six-Gun Mystique*, that "the cowboy hero is far from a hero of work and enterprise. Indeed, he is rarely represented as working at all" (64). Fuller juxtaposes this leisurely cowboy aspect of the Western mythos with petromodernity in this chapter, since Colton and Cody's sojourn onto the gravel road is part of a summer-long road trip on the rodeo circuit. In this stage of Colton's life, as Fuller reports, Cody has taken up bull riding, and Colton has installed himself as Cody's informal manager and primary cheerleader. Their petrophilia, marked by their incessant traveling—the chapter "Bull Riding" is subtitled "All Over the West"—and their delight in the West's long distances indicates these markers of Easy Oil practices (72). Furthermore, one key aspect of the Western mythos, the myth of the leisurely cowboy, makes this behavior (somewhat) culturally acceptable. According to Fuller, Colton and Cody do not wish to pay for a motel or a campsite (and they likely cannot afford it anyway), so they seek to bivouac on this gravel road. Colton gestures "out into the plains," according to Fuller, and tells Cody "They don't charge you for your money in God's hotel" (78). They do not want to spend their meager funds on a place to sleep. Also, they are so leisurely that they do not even bother to cook dinner after they decide to camp on BLM land. Fuller writes, "Then Colton pulled out a

Tupperware of Kaylee's meatloaf and a couple of cans of Mountain Dew and he said 'This is the life, eh?'" (79). Fuller notes that Colton builds a campfire in this scene, but the flames provide atmosphere rather than heat for cooking. Lounging around and eating his mother's leftover meatloaf proves to be the easiest route to satiation. And in a larger context, their repose underpins the entire bull-riding, playing-cowboy enterprise; the mythos and Easy Oil practices are inextricably linked in this scene.

Despite Colton's Easy Oil leisure, Fuller's descriptions of the setting make it clear that the oil and gas industry in southwest Wyoming has shifted to Tough Oil extraction processes by this point in time. Fuller's Eiffel Tower simile describes hydraulic fracturing rigs rather than traditional oil derricks; just after her simile, she says that the rigs are "powering into the earth after pockets of natural gas" (78). Although she explains in her *Afterward* that she has taken some "narrative liberties with the text," she does not embellish these industrial apparatuses. In a 1999 paper entitled "Wyoming Fossil Fuels for the 21st Century," Wyoming state geologists Robert M. Lyman and Rodney H. De Bruin corroborate Fuller's claim that the Eiffel Tower-esque rigs are indeed extracting natural gas:

Over 75% of Wyoming's present oil production comes from the Powder River, Bighorn, and Wind River basins Over 85% of Wyoming's present natural gas liquids and natural gas production comes from the Overthrust Belt, *Green River Basin*, Great Divide Basin, and Washakie Basin. (Lyman and De Bruin, my emphasis)

Although Fuller does not tell the reader precisely what year in which this scene occurs, Colton was born in 1980, and since this scene takes place in the summer following his graduation from the alternative high school, we may deduce that the campsite scene unfolds around 1998. While

natural gas extraction had not yet reached the fevered pitch dictated by the Energy Policy Act of 2005 at this time, the structures in this scene may certainly be classified as Tough Oil-era drilling rigs. According to Noble, Wyoming made the shift to Tough Oil in 1992, when the McMurry Oil company successfully fracked the tight shales of the Upper Green:

McMurry Oil Company . . . sought advice from the best consultants in the gas industry. Petroleum engineer James Shaw greatly assisted in developing a whole new system—and it worked . . . McMurry Oil Company reported its first production of gas in the Jonah Field to the Wyoming Oil and Gas Commission in September 1992. (Noble)

The campsite scene, then, takes place six years after the shift to Tough Oil occurs in Wyoming. Colton remains oblivious to the change (or denies that it takes place).

As he lounges by the campfire with Cody, Colton makes it clear that he fails to realize (or refuses to admit) that imitating his roughneck father has become an impossibility in a time of declining conventional oil reserves, and his wishful articulation suggests that he suffers from petromelancholia. After Cody inquires what Colton would ask for if he were granted only one wish, Colton replies “I wish I could be just like my dad” (80). As a twentieth century oil driller, Bill Bryant, Colton’s father and idol, provides Colton’s window into the world of Easy Oil. In her representation of Bill, Fuller twins Easy Oil and the iconic Wyoming cowboy:

It is easy to see how he inspired hero worship in Colton, and in everyone he has ever met, by the way he emanates soul . . . a high-altitude, big-sky, oil-drilling, saddle-bronc-riding monk who doesn’t have any special thoughts on the matter of celibacy or God (19).

The positioning of “oil-drilling” and “saddle-bronc-riding” in this list, separated only by an extremely significant comma, indicate Fuller’s awareness that Easy Oil and the Wyoming cowboy, though not synonymous, are still compatible to some degree. She echoes this compatibility in her description of Bill’s personal history:

Bill packed up his saddle and belt buckles . . . and followed his father onto the rigs. But he kept with him the impeccable timing he’d learned riding saddle broncs, and he never lost his horse sense, moving deliberately around that massive, sometimes unpredictable equipment like he didn’t want to startle something or get kicked. (25-6)

Bill’s rodeo experience served him well in the conventional oil patch, keeping him safe (and helping him to retain all of his limbs and digits). In contrast, Fuller never portrays Colton in this way.

But when we consider the campsite scene through LeMenager’s lens, Colton’s fireside wish to emulate his father goes well beyond the “hero worship” proposed by Fuller. Colton wishes for the impossible in the campsite scene, since Wyoming’s dwindling Easy Oil reserves render Bill inimitable in a way that transcends his unique personal attributes. Yet Colton wishes he could be just like him nonetheless. Thus we view the first glimmer of Colton’s petromelancholia in his wistful wish.

Colton exudes deep denial of the shift to Tough Oil in the campfire scene. His attempt to embody the cowboy myth, with its emphasis on leisure (or avoidance of work), allows him to stall and temporarily avoid the gas-patch. At the same time, Colton’s idolization of his roughneck father, voiced for the first time during his repose in the campsite, blinds him to the

fact that Wyoming's Easy Oil days are over. After Colton's deepening poverty finally leads him to seek employment in the gas-patch, he still hangs on to his fantasy:

Jake was in the Upper Green River Valley by then, working on *the new gas fields* as a flow tester, so Colton packed up and moved up north to work with Jake almost exactly where he and Cody had been camping that magical night after the Pinedale Rodeo when Colton had wished on star after falling star that he would grow up to be exactly like his father. (82, my emphasis)

This passage is telling since Fuller's phrase "the new gas fields" indicates that Colton's best friend Jake works on either the Pinedale Anticline or the Jonah Field, both of which require aggressive, Tough Oil hydraulic fracturing techniques to loose the gas from the shale's tight matrices. Here, too, the mythic aspect of cowboy leisure, forever entwined with twentieth century Easy Oil in Colton's mind (and voiced in his wish to be like his dad) continues to inform his petromelancholia.

In addition to Colton's petromelancholic yearning to be like Bill, the cowboy repose aspect of the Western myth ironically sends Colton to the gas-patch, since he accrues many debts in his attempt to live this fantasy in the penultimate year of the twentieth century. In another skillful juxtaposition of petromodernity and Western mythopoeics, Fuller begins her chapter "Drilling on the Rigs" with the last gasp of Colton and Cody's rodeo days, as she sets up the impetus for Colton's entry into the petroleum industry. This very short chapter consists of only four paragraphs; the first two address the end of Colton's involvement in Cody's bull-riding career, and Fuller explains Colton's experience of the drilling company's hiring process in the final two paragraphs. She begins this chapter by wedding the petrophilic bull-riding enterprise to the poverty caused by Colton's idling: "So it went all over Wyoming, Utah, and Idaho from one

small-town rodeo to the next until Colton ran out of money” (81). Their foolhardy perseverance suggests that Colton is in the throes of petromelancholic denial, and after a long-winded description of the Western rodeo experience, Fuller executes a similar rhetorical move in the middle of the paragraph which further indicates Colton’s Western petromelancholia: “But by the middle of August Colton found himself having to write bad checks to help pay for the Mazda’s gas—which didn’t feel so bad as it sounded” (81). Leisure, as it turns out, is not terribly profitable, and the realities of petromodernity thrust Colton into dishonest practices. Her aside after the dash, however, does not merely justify Colton’s check-bouncing; in this fraught bit of prose, Fuller portrays Colton as willing to acknowledge that late twentieth century Western leisure depends upon petroleum culture and profligate Easy Oil. The constant road tripping would otherwise be impossible, and the camping in free, remote spots (on federal land) inaccessible without a car. Yet by continually driving his checking account deeper into the red, he stalls. He denies the inevitable: Fuller notes in many other passages that Colton always knew he would work in the petroleum industry, as we see in his statement to Jake at a hunting camp: “I reckon I’ll be out on the rigs soon enough” (50). But the poverty resulting from Colton’s idling leads him to write rubber checks, which delays his entry into the gas-fields a little longer. His hesitation seems to contradict his desire to be just like his father—his sole wish in life.

Fuller chronicles the demise of Colton’s cowboy repose in the second paragraph of her “Drilling on the Rigs” chapter, and here we see Colton falling into deeper debt, which in turn hastens his entry into the gas-patch in the chapter’s latter two paragraphs. In this second paragraph, Fuller describes Colton’s arrest; the law has not taken kindly to his bad check-writing. Now, in addition to having to pay back the bank (presumably with numerous overdraft fees) for his petrophilic rodeo endeavor, Colton must reimburse his mother, who has bailed him out of

jail. He then proceeds to pawn his most valuable belongings, many of which connect directly to Wyoming cowboy iconography: “Colton was a pawning fool to pay her back—he pawned his DVD and his gun collection, his cowboy boots, and half of everything else he owned” (81-2). I will discuss the overzealous replacement of his DVD collection in a moment, but I first want to examine the implications of the more iconic Western items—the guns and the boots—in this list.

Many prominent (Western Americanist) critics, such as Warshow, Cawelti, and the (infamous) Jane Tompkins agree that the appearance of a gun is a crucial moment in a Western.¹¹ As Warshow succinctly explains, “Guns constitute the visible moral center of the Western, suggesting continually the possibility of violence” (92-3). In the context of Colton’s visit to the pawnshop, I wish to counter that the *disappearance* of the guns in Fuller’s text also “constitute[s] the visible moral center” while “suggesting continually the possibility of violence.” Despite Colton’s criminal act of writing bad checks, Fuller sympathetically offers a rustic bumpkin’s excuse: “the way Colton saw it, checks were just some kind of citified promise that if he *had* had the money, or maybe when he got the money someday, he’d be good for the whole amount” (81, Fuller’s emphasis). Since he knew he would eventually work in the petroleum industry and thus expected to make a significant amount of money, he justifies his illegal acts during his leisurely cowboy phase. Furthermore, although it might seem counterintuitive at first blush, Warshow’s “possibility of violence” is also made possible by Colton’s parting with his guns. At this moment, on the cusp of become a Tough Oil worker and leaving his impossible-to-attain leisure behind, Colton courts ecological violence, as well as violence to his own well-being. As LeMenager notes:

The oil business always courted significant and sometimes catastrophic risk. Yet going ultradeep implies an unprecedented potential for destruction because of

where those last reserves are and the violence of the experiments necessary to get them. (4)

While many of the pawned firearms were likely shotguns and deer hunting rifles rather than six-guns, Colton willingly parts with these iconic Western items in an attempt to stave off his worsening debt from his petromodern rodeo days. Fuller makes a point of including the guns as an important item on the list rather than lumping them in with “half of everything else he owned,” thus calling attention to the petro-violence which is made possible by their absence (81).

The cowboy boots, too, represent an iconic item of the rural, interior West which Fuller takes care to mention separately in her pawnshop list. Although the boots do not have the guns’ connotation of violence, they underscore Fuller’s juxtaposition of Western myths and oil in this important scene on the eve of Colton’s abandonment of cowboy leisure and subsequent entry into the Upper Green gas-patch. While cowboy hats tend to receive much of the attention given to the Western “costume,” as Cawelti puts it in his treatment of Western films, cowboy boots are crucial as well (44). In fact, as an illustration of cowboy boots’ importance, I would like to consider a longtime Sublette County deputy’s recent resignation, tendered after the Sheriff’s department banned both cowboy hats and boots. On February 1, 2015, Brendan Meyer of the *Casper Star-Tribune* reported that Pinedale Deputy Gene Bryson quit after the new sheriff banned Western wear in favor of an urban tactical ensemble consisting of baseball caps and combat boots:

Bryson, 70, was the deputy who wore the brown cowboy hat, brown cowboy boots, [and] summertime leather vest or wintertime wool vest. “That’s what looks good to me in the Sheriff’s Department,” Bryson said. “It’s Western. It’s

Wyoming . . . That's the way I dress three hundred sixty five days out of the year." (Meyer)

Bryson and Meyer both give boots and hats equal import in this article; in fact, cowboy boots receive special attention, since the new sheriff, clearly unaware that updated cowboy boots with Vibram soles are now available, justifies his new footwear requirement by claiming that "cowboy boots are slippery on ice" (Meyer). Though Fuller mentions no hat in her tally of pawnshop items, her inclusion of Colton's boots indicates that Colton willingly abandons cowboy iconography in his desperation to get out of debt, and here we see the beginning of his fatal capitulation to Tough Oil.

In this chapter, I have historicized oil extraction in Wyoming, as well as the state's cowboy identity, and I pointed to the tensions between the two factions so that we might better understand the scope of Fuller's project, and the extent of Colton's petromelancholia. I then returned to Colton's important camping scene on BLM land—the same scene in which Fuller delivers her Eiffel Tower simile (which I discuss in my first chapter). I address this scene from a different slant in this chapter, exploring Colton's budding petromelancholia and its interplay with his cowboy repose. Unlike the camping that took place in his youth, this quasi-planned bivouac is clearly a leisurely, petromodern, Tough Oil camp. Camping with his father, on the other hand, involved plenty of work and explodes the idea of cowboy repose:

Before dark, Jake and Bill fetched buckets of water from the lake for the horses and Colton stayed in camp to put the pegs in the new tent Jake and Bill came back from watering the horses and Bill put stones in a circle around the edge of the fire to boil water. (48-9)

According to Cawelti, “When one reads a more or less realistic narrative of cowboy life . . . or looks at actual photographs . . . the thing that stands out most strikingly in comparison to the formula Western is the amount of hard, dirty physical labor” (64). Despite the fact that his father models the hard work of setting up a suitable cowboy’s camp, the myth of repose, a staple of the genre Western, continues to capture Colton’s imagination. While Bill (somewhat) successfully melded the cowboy lifestyle with his (Easy) oilfield job, Colton’s initial petrophilic practices of repose sets up “the conditions of grief,” as LeMenager puts it (102). His summer of camping and cheering on Cody at the rodeos requires an immense amount of driving, and he happily engages in these pleasures of late-twentieth century petromodernity.

At his campsite with Cody on BLM land. Colton’s wish to be like his Easy Oil-drilling father reveals the depths of his denial that the time of Tough Oil has arrived. As his summer of repose continues, his petrophilic cowboy leisure impoverishes him, sending him to jail (his mother bails him out in a decidedly uncowboylike moment), to the pawnshop (where he parts with iconic cowboy items), and ultimately—as we will soon discover—to the gas-patch. Ironically, after all of his intentional loafing, he finds the jolt of down-time as a flow-tester—forced idling—unbearable.

Chapter Three:

“He Had to Give Up Rodeo Running and Start Being a Man”:

Tough Oil and the Western Self-Made Man Mythos

Although Colton finally eschews the damaging myth of the cowboy as a man of repose, he supplants it immediately with yet another element of the mythos: the self-made man’s pursuit of economic success, which he twins with Tough Oil extraction practices. According to Fuller, Colton

told Cody that he was very sorry to leave him at a time like this, when Cody was so obviously close to the big buckle, but he had to give up rodeo running and start being a man. And the day after that Colton signed up for the safety talk and the piss test and he signed the piece of paper saying he’d read the manual about this, that, and whatever else and he went out on the rigs. (82)

This brief passage contains seven conjunctions, but only one is adversative. The remaining six ought to simply coordinate the clauses that bookend them, as we would expect them to do. But here we see a stellar example of Fuller’s liberal usage of *and*, which I briefly discuss in my introduction. These conjunctions, as I suggest earlier, are no narratological quirk or editing oversight: the first and most crucial of these *ands* highlights the cowboy / oil divide. Instead of the *and* merely *bridging* these ideas, cowboy repose, facilitated by Easy Oil, crumbles into the gap, while on the other side, the promise of a masculinity constructed by Tough Oil extraction irresistibly entices Colton. This first *and* gives us a glimpse into the depths of this chasm, while the remaining *ands* pile Tough Oil hiring practice upon Tough Oil hiring practice, and we get the sense that Colton can no longer return to his life of repose even if he hadn’t been buried in debt.

In addition to her freighted conjunctions in this passage, Fuller makes it clear that Colton conflates “being a man” with financial success. Seeking work in the Wyoming gas-patch provides an opportunity for him to relieve the debts accrued during his days of repose and thus assert his masculinity. Of course, with LeMenager’s sweeping thesis—her aim to explore American petroleum culture—in mind, self-made manhood may be considered an American ideal, as Cawelti explains in his opening lines of *Apostles of the Self-Made Man*. He writes: “Americans have always been the world’s most enthusiastic proponents of the self-made man. Many still believe that he is not only an American invention but a unique national product” (1). In the context of petromodernity and resource extraction, I must note here that many man-camps brimming with hopeful self-made men exist in Louisiana’s Gulf region as well as in Pennsylvania’s Marcellus Shale gas-patch. But the Western version of the self-made man mythos distinguishes itself in historical terms, as Cawelti explains in *The Six-Gun Mystique*. He writes that progress and success in the West

have each given rise to a central hero figure and a myth which is celebrated . . . Initially, the heroic pioneer was the farmer who faced the dangers of nature and the Indian to bring civilization to the frontier. Somewhat later, the westering farmer was joined by the industrial pioneer . . . The success ideal produced its hero in the self-made man. (75)

Wister’s Virginian—the leisurely cowboy turned coal baron—provides an excellent example of a successful Western “industrial pioneer,” as Cawelti puts it. But in order for us to truly grasp the immense scope of this myth’s Western iterations, I must turn away from literature for a moment and consider the myth’s historical contexts, and the messy crush of humanity that accompanies the wild assortment of rushes and booms in the Old and New Wests.

Western Boom and Bust Cycles, Ghost Towns, and Tough Oil in Wamsutter

In Wyoming and much of the West, financial success has historically been tied to mining and oil wells, the vicissitudes of boom and bust cycles, and the public relinquishment of extraction sites as sacrifice zones. The collision of tumultuous, dynamic boom and bust cycles with the durable American myth of success gives rise to the petromodern, Western iteration of the self-made man. The well-documented precious metal rushes in the nineteenth century need no further treatment, but I will posit that the booms and busts that sustain our petromodernity, as LeMenager puts it, continue the nineteenth century's rush and bust pattern, which played an enormous role in the settlement of California, Montana, Colorado, South Dakota's Black Hills, and many other Western locales. In the September 2014 issue of *High Country News*, Taylor Brorby explains the etymology of the term "boom" and discusses North Dakota's Tough Oil-enabled entry in the West's historic economic cycles:

The word "boom" comes from the Dutch word *bommen*, meaning "to hum, or buzz." Business is certainly buzzing, and the state enjoys the lowest unemployment rate in the country. Meanwhile, gas flares are buzzing, so noisy that they rival the blast of a jet engine. Another definition of boom is "ultimately imitative," and if the Bakken oil boom is anything like the West's previous booms, it will bust sooner or later, leaving a mess so extensive that only another Superfund effort can begin to repair the damage. (Brorby)

As an illustration of the fickle nature of petroleum prices—and mere weeks after Brorby speculated about a bust in his op-ed—OPEC refused to cut production in spite of market saturation in late 2014. World oil prices began to fall, and although Westerners enjoyed the lowest gasoline prices in twenty years, production in the Bakken and other American shale plays

slowed considerably. Now, in the spring of 2015, many Bakken workers seek to escape the throes of an approaching bust, although the civic leaders of Williston and Watford City optimistically insist that the boom has merely stabilized somewhat. According to a recent article in the *Williston Herald*, the communities look forward to the “emerging economy,” by which they mean “a drop from insane growth to only a little bit crazy” (Jean). Yet in this same article, we learn that “the rig count” in the Bakken “is now under 100” as of May 2015 (Jean). No one can yet assert that a bust has truly arrived in western North Dakota, but—despite the Williston mayor’s optimism—it seems that the Bakken boom has ended for the time being.

The distinctly Western phenomenon of a boom gone bust (and the frequency in which it occurs) forces the aspiring self-made man to flee. Ghost towns, for example, underscore the transience inherent to pursuit of the success myth in the West. In his scholarly field guide *How to Read the American West*, William Wyckoff explains the transience brought about by the mining life, and the subsequent flight which accompanies a bust:

Many Western mining towns have withered away and become ghost towns, with a population of zero or close to it . . . they are revealing signatures of industrial capitalism, of how the West’s boom-and-bust economy led to the widespread abandonment of many localities in favor of more promising opportunities elsewhere. (146)

While ghost towns remain associated with placer mining (the Easy Oil version of precious metal extraction) in the American cultural imaginary, the transience of workers—their sudden influx and equally hasty departures— continues into petromodernity, as *High Country News* reporter Ray Ring notes in his 2004 study of Wamsutter, Wyoming:

This place has been inhabited for more than 130 years. At times, the population has zoomed up to more than twice what it is today, only to plummet again. Yet, at the moment, there is no grocery store, no bank, no newspaper, no high school, no doctor, not even a veterinarian There isn't even a cemetery—apparently, even the dead don't settle in Wamsutter The essential fact is that no town would exist in this isolated, amenity-less place, if not for the industries that keep coming. (“When”)

Wamsutter is little more than a petroleum industry contrivance, according to Ring—and Stegner, if he were still alive, would likely chime in that Wamsutter's aridity, too, discourages permanent settlement. In short, during a time of bust, the aspiring self-made man has absolutely no business in places such as Wamsutter and must leave to ply his craft elsewhere.

“\$19 an Hour”:

Distinctions between Easy Oil and Tough Oil Transience in *Colton*

Colton Bryant did not live to experience a bust firsthand, but he did face the industry's disorienting transience coupled with a curious Tough Oil downward mobility during the gas boom of the early 2000s. Colton's father Bill, a self-made man from the days of conventional oil extraction, enjoyed a modest upward mobility despite his humble beginnings. Like their contemporary Tough Oil counterparts, twentieth-century Easy Oil workers faced the challenges of transience. Fuller notes that Bill, as a son of an oilfield worker himself, experienced a particularly peripatetic childhood, which was spent in “32 places” (24). Each of these residences, Fuller reports, was either a trailer or motel room, and in addition to the physical relocations themselves, both types of housing indicate a petrophilic, Easy Oil-era rootlessness. Wyckoff notes that twentieth century motels in the West constituted an integral part of a town's “strip:”

which he defines as a “built environment that celebrate[s] automobiles and mass consumption” (322). The word *motel* after all, forms a Western, petromodern portmanteau by combining the terms *motor* and *hotel*. Moreover, Bill’s other style of childhood home, the trailer, points to the transience of Easy Oil workers, as Nancy Cook points out:

The trailer, originally designed to provide short-term housing, heralded both the technology of mass production and the fantasy of better geography through engineering . . . Yet even as temporary housing the mobile home reminds its inhabitants that it is not a home. (220)

As an adult, Bill responds to his childhood transience by providing his own children with a stable home, one of his major self-made man successes. Fuller never fully describes the Bryant house in a single, tidy passage but by analyzing her occasional glimpses into it, we can picture a modest and not uncomfortable rural home. We learn that although Fuller describes it as a “cabin,” it is big enough to have a flight of stairs for Colton to fall down during a fight with his brother Preston (9). Furthermore, the cabin includes a washing machine, a porch, a yard, and a paddock with a round pen for their horses (6, 15, 67, 15). This household remains fairly stable, although Bill “is home only part-time” so he can “chase the rigs” (20, 21).

Colton, on the other hand, falters in his quest to become a successful, self-made man in a Tough Oil world; in Fuller’s chapter “The Astro Lounge,” we discover that Colton has moved into a trailer and that his best friend Jake has become his roommate (91). Colton, therefore, experiences downward mobility, and he readily accepts the transient worker housing from which Bill worked so hard to protect him. Furthermore, Colton experiences the pangs of homesickness, missing his horse Cocoa intensely; she remains at Colton’s parents’ house. After Colton watches Jake drive away to visit his girlfriend, Colton lingers outside of the trailer “looking at the slow

progress of black cows against the pale green plains” which “made Colton think of moving cattle with Cocoa. And thinking of Cocoa made Colton homesick” (91). The once-leisurely cowboy has left his horse behind to work in the gas fields, and he misses riding her. As Cook explains:

Neither at home nor at work, lodgers in these [gas-patch] accommodations live in limbo. Away from their home territory and their social network, these men struggle to match their regular recreational pursuits with both the limited time between shifts and their dislocation. (220)

Colton misses riding his horse terribly, yet he accepts this transient housing situation and makes no effort to rent a place with a horse pen. I concede that Colton was not yet married and Jake (who also works in the gas-patch) would be the sole backup caretaker for Cocoa, but Colton does not even consider this prospect. He could likely have afforded such a place, despite the minor debts accrued during his rodeo-chasing days; as Ring points out in his 2004 Wamsutter article, “The oil-patch workers are paid well — \$19 an hour for a kid fresh out of high school who hires on with a drilling crew” (“When”). Despite this relative wealth, Colton elects to live in a trailer with a roommate, a decision which raises the question: what happened to all of his money?

Petromelancholia and Tough Oil Boredom

Instead of seeking more suitable accommodations for himself and for Cocoa, Colton squanders his gas-field earnings on technological gadgets for his workplace, which he uses to combat the boredom of his flow testing job. Colton’s boredom, a beguiling mixture of his Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and petromelancholia, indicates his deep denial of Tough Oil’s many costs. I will leave his medical diagnosis for the psychological community’s dissection and I do concede that his ADHD certainly plays a role in his boredom; as Fuller explains early in *Colton*, “he doesn’t have speed perception—the way other people feel when

they're going too fast, Colton feels alarmed when he isn't going fast enough" (6). Thus ADHD certainly contributes to Colton's discomfort with his boring job as a flow tester in the gas-field. In her chapter "Flow Testing," Fuller reveals Colton's displeasure with his new post; he must wait for the fracking crew's "fireballs" to send the flow testing crews to their "action stations," which he finds interminably dull (87). But in the first paragraph of her "Flow Testing" chapter, Fuller hints that other maladies besides his ADHD contribute to his boredom. After explaining that he doesn't "like the hours and hours of waiting," she asserts that "and most of all he doesn't like flow testing because flow testing isn't drilling. And working on a rig is all Colton wants to do, because that's the only way he can get to be like his father" (87). Colton's insufferably dreary flow testing job doesn't resemble Bill's job as a conventional oil driller at all; the elder Bryant never had to sit around and suffer hours of inactivity. According to Fuller's description of Bill's haphazard work schedule, he has even worked "flat out, day in, day out until the hole was drilled" (21).

To remedy his disorienting Tough Oil boredom, Colton buys a small fortune's worth of electronic devices and brings them to his workplace. He replaces—exponentially—the DVDs he pawned to reimburse his mother, and in addition to this new collection, he brings a multitude of video games, a large television, and numerous other boredom-slaying devices to work:

So with his first couple of paychecks, Colton buys an entertainment center the size of a small Radio Shack showroom. The way Jake tells it, they pull up to the location one day . . . and he's got a full-size television with a twenty-seven-inch screen, a home entertainment unit, a luggage bag full of games and DVDs, every version of Game Boy known to man, the full-size steering device to go with it,

Nintendo, Pokémon, Toy Story, you name it. Colton says, “Man I ain’t afraid of much, but I’m scared to death of boredom. (88)

Despite Colton’s desire to be like Bill, his behavior provokes a good deal of curiosity here; we can be fairly certain that Bill did not spend his time at work goofing around, playing cards or other games of his era—the equivalent to his son’s video games and movies. This fraught moment in *Colton* points to his petromelancholia colliding with the self-made man myth; while he attempts to pursue success, the realities of Tough Oil extraction—in this case, toxic boredom—overwhelm him. He makes these extravagant purchases not to improve his home but to kill time at work. Western repose has returned, it seems, albeit in an unwanted form. He fails in his quest to be like his stoic, hardworking father at this moment, choosing instead to self-medicate with technology. He cannot or will not admit, however, that the resource he helps to extract is not the conventional oil drilled by his father, or that idling and watching *Toy Story* while waiting for the fracking crews to complete their series of miniature earthquakes might be unusual.

“How Bad Can It Be?”:

Petromelancholia and Hyperobjectivity of Natural Gas

While Colton’s purchases are a petromelancholic reaction to his Tough Oil boredom, which in turn undermines his attempt to become a successful self-made man in the West, his boredom reveals another strand of his distinctly Western petromelancholia: his denial that the resource has changed, and can be harmful to his health. In a bizarre scene in Fuller’s “Flow Testing” chapter, Colton roasts a hot dog over a natural gas flare pit. Flaring, primarily a Western hydraulic fracturing practice, allows workers to rid a well site of excess gas. Workers in the East’s Marcellus Shale sites flare gas on occasion, but tight regulations ensure that the

practice remains a relative rarity in that region. According to Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences, "In Ohio, the Ohio EPA regulates flaring. In Pennsylvania, the Department of Environmental Protection oversees flaring. Less flaring is seen in these states as they build out with more infrastructure ("Gas"). Flaring remains practicable out West for several reasons, including oil and gas fields' rurality, their statuses as sacrifice zones, the frenzied activity associated with a boom, the utter lack of regulations, and the relative scarcity of Marcellus-style infrastructure in the vicinity. As Adam Voge of the *Casper Star Tribune* puts it in his explanation of increased flaring near Douglas, Wyoming:

Well drilling and production are more advanced now than ever, unlocking "tighter," less-permeable hydrocarbon-bearing formations such as those in the Powder River Basin. But infrastructure hasn't kept up with the drilling. By the time some wells are active, there's no line to transport gases associated with the basin's oil, a much more attractive resource. So companies burn the gas. (Voge)

While the industry seeks crude oil in the Powder River Basin (or fracked *tight oil*, in the parlance of the industry), Western gas-producers flare excess gas as well, most notoriously, perhaps, in North Dakota's Bakken.¹²

Producers in the Upper Green River Basin, where Colton worked, flare gas as a Tough Oil matter of course, and thus Colton's doomed hot dog roast serves as a distinctly—and perversely—Western site of petromelancholia. In yet another instance of killing time at work (the technological devices were clearly not adequate to quell Colton's petromelancholic boredom as a flow tester), Colton roasts a hot dog over a flare pit, treating the flare as if it were a campfire. His friend Jake warns Colton against performing this foolhardy act, since he possesses firsthand knowledge of the gas's dangers. He tells Colton, "This gas can most certainly be

horrible,” to which Colton replies, “Come on, it’s just fire” (89). Colton proceeds to roast the hot dog and tells Jake, “Have the first bite. How bad can it be? Go on, eat it. I made it for you” (89). At this moment, in the depths of petromelancholic denial, Colton cannot fathom that the gas might be harmful to ingest, that it is *not* just fine. In this complex scene, Fuller portrays Colton’s Western petromelancholia in stages: first, it comes about as another means to quell his boredom. I will not belabor that point here, as I discussed it earlier in this chapter, but we can be fairly certain that Colton’s hardworking, Easy Oil-era father did not roast weenies at work in an effort to pass the time. Also, the scene involves a flare pit, a hallmark of Western, Tough Oil extraction. Colton cannot or will not acknowledge the dangers of this flare, although Jake warns him against cooking over it repeatedly. Despite the gas’s invisibility, Jake makes the distinction that eludes Colton; Jake received his natural gas knowledge by hard-won experience, which invokes the deep ecological idea that nonhuman entities act independently of humans, and can pose very real dangers to us. In addition to his steadfast denial that the resource has changed from Easy to Tough Oil, Colton denies that natural gas possesses the capacity to harm him.

Environmental philosopher’s Timothy Morton’s theory of *hyperobjects* gives us a useful lens for viewing Jake’s perception of natural gas’s potentiality and properties. I find Morton’s theory helpful since his main concern lies with dangers posed by nonhuman objects, which Jake recognizes in natural gas and Colton does not. In his introduction to *Hyperobjects*, Morton explains that he “coined the term *hyperobjects* to refer to things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans” (1). Because of our utter immersion in petro-culture and human-caused climate change—in petromodernity, to use LeMenager’s term—Morton brazenly asserts that “the end of the world has already occurred; it transpired in April 1784, at the moment when James Watt patented the steam engine and the Age of the Anthropocene began” (7).

Morton emphasizes hyperobjects' persistent dangers, stating bluntly in his book that "Hyperobjects are what have brought about the end of the world. Clearly, planet Earth has not exploded. But the concept *world* is no longer operational, and hyperobjects are what brought about its demise" (6, Morton's emphasis). Morton, well aware that hyperobjects can be difficult and perhaps overwhelming to consider, notes in his two page-long layperson's article in *High Country News*:

Thinking ecologically about global warming [a term he refuses to replace with the more publically palatable phrase *climate change*] requires a kind of mental upgrade, to cope with something that is so big and so powerful that until now we had no real word for it. However, thinking of global warming as a hyperobject is really helpful. For starters, the concept of hyperobjects gives us a single word to describe something on the tips of our tongues. (8-9)

For our purposes here with Fuller's *Colton*, we can consider petroleum a hyperobject, as Morton repeatedly asserts in his book; he continually classifies oil as a hyperobject in his longer work, charging: "it's oil we must thank for burning a hole in the notion of *world*" (34, Morton's emphasis). In fact, in a very broad sense, he echoes LeMenager and her concept of petromodernity when he intones "in some sense, modernity is the story of how oil got into everything," but while LeMenager points an accusatory finger at twentieth century American culture to explain our crisis, Morton suggests that oil oozed into modernity of its own accord, stating bluntly in his next sentence that "such is the force of the hyperobject oil" (52).

Although the invisible natural gas in Wyoming lacks the "terrifying ooze of oil," as Morton puts it, methane, too, may be classified as a hyperobject, and reading Colton and Jake's hot dog-roasting scene through this lens can help us comprehend yet another dimension of

Colton's petromelancholic denial (180). Natural gas (like all hyperobjects) exhibits the distinct yet interconnected properties of viscosity, nonlocality, temporal undulation, phasing, and interobjectivity.¹³ Fuller's language in the hot dog-roasting scene strongly suggests that she, too, recognizes the gas's ability to act, and her phrasing in this passage reflects two of the hyperobject's five properties, nonlocality and viscosity, in startling detail.¹⁴ The first hyperobjective hint that Fuller drops in this passage concerns Jake's vast expertise with natural gas, for here she notes that "Jake loves gas as intimately as if it were something living, with a mind of its own. He knows how it behaves underground. He understands gas above ground too, the way it ignites in the flare pit" (88). Her deep ecological phrasing here, particularly her simile "as if it were something living" and her use of the active verb "behaves," acknowledge the gas's ability to act, and here Fuller foregrounds methane as a hyperobject in a general sense.

But Fuller's language also points to the specific hyperobjective property of viscosity, or stickiness, in her account of Jake's near-death experience with methane, which in turn explains his wariness of Colton's idiotic plan to roast hot dogs over a flare pit. Morton explains that a hyperobject exhibits viscosity since it "sticks" to the humans and animals it encounters and he uses the example of oil from the Deepwater Horizon blowout in the Gulf to demonstrate its agency. Morton writes, "When the BP Deepwater disaster happened in 2010, nonhumans and humans alike were coated with a layer of oil, inside and outside their bodies. While the media has moved on to other spectacles, the oil continues to act" (33). He ascribes stickiness to the oil since it poisons—and continues to poison—marine life and the Gulf Coast's human residents, effectively decimating the region's ecosystems. In Jake's previous mishap, Fuller indicates that the gas stuck to Jake and continued to act:

Before Colton started working with him, Jake was hit once by a faceful of sour gas that knocked him flat on his back and shut out his lights for a few moments and that would have been the end for Jake, except that he was following the buddy system and a coworker pulled him clear of the flume. (89)

Fuller's use of active verbs acknowledges the gas's ability to act since it "knocked him flat on his back" and "shut out his lights." We get a true sense of methane's viscosity at this moment, since he lies insensate after it "knocked him flat on his back," exposed to the full force of the flume's invisible rush, while the gas continues to act. His coworker's quick response prevents the gas from killing him, and that is why the methane only "shut out his lights for a few moments" (89). According to Fuller: "that would have been the end for Jake, except that he was following the buddy system and a coworker pulled him clear of the flume" (89). The coworker saves Jake's life, for the gas would surely have continued to act, sticking to Jake until he succumbed. When he patiently explains to Colton how dangerous the gas can be, however, Colton cannot or will not believe that methane could be harmful since he cannot see it act.

Furthermore, Fuller's noun "flume" in this passage points to another critical aspect of Morton's hyperobjective criteria: nonlocality. Morton insists that we can only see parts of hyperobjects at one time, and while Fuller's language allows us to envision the flume of gas that nearly spells the end for Jake, we cannot see the whole of gas locked in the earth's sandstones and shales. The flume itself is not a hyperobject; it is merely a small piece of the hyperobject methane. In his article for *High Country News*, Morton explains that he coined the word *hyperobjects* to describe "all kinds of things that you can study and think about and compute, but that are not so easy to see directly . . . things like: not just a Styrofoam cup or two, but *all the Styrofoam on Earth, ever*" ("Hyperobjects" 8, Morton's emphasis). Morton offers plutonium as

another example of a hyperobject, and says this designation includes “Not just this one speck of plutonium, but *all the plutonium we’ve made, ever*. That plutonium decays for 24,100 years before it’s totally safe. That’s an unimaginable time” (8, Morton’s emphasis). Like Morton’s myriad of examples, Jake’s flume and Colton’s flare pit demonstrate nonlocality; we can think of the natural gas a hyperobject, then, capable of causing great destruction. And while we can be fairly certain that Morton’s term is not bandied about in the gas-patch very often, the vast scale of the gas is evident. Geologic maps reveal the immense gas reserves locked in the Jonah Field and Pinedale Anticline, in the Bakken, Marcellus, Barnett, and Monterey Shales, and beyond. And Jake’s cautious treatment of the gas is rooted in his acknowledgment of the harm natural gas can cause. Colton, of course, cannot or will not acknowledge the scale (or the stickiness) of the gas, and his denial suggests that petromelancholia underlies his foolish attempt to roast a hot dog in a flare pit. It is certainly “not the same resource,” as LeMenager puts it, as the Easy Oil once drilled by Colton’s father (105).

Colton, of course, dismisses Jake’s dire experience, preferring instead to deny that cooking with this gas might harm him. Fuller enacts petromelancholia in this scene by highlighting Colton’s vehement denial of the gas’s dangerous potentiality, which I have sought to explain with Morton’s theory of hyperobjects, particularly its properties of viscosity and nonlocality. Thinking of methane as a hyperobject can help us understand this strange moment in *Colton*, and by doing so, we realize that Colton denies difference and scale. The flare pit, clearly not “just fire,” transforms the hot dog (a classic, twentieth century campfire food for children) into something else (89). The gas demonstrates viscosity by sticking to the hot dog after Colton removes it from the flame, which is why he spits it out and declares “Sonofa! That’s the nastiest-tasting hot dog I’ve ever had in my life” (89). And in the context of nonlocality, Colton’s

perception of the flare as a simple campfire indicates that he cannot or will not recognize that the gas is part of an enormous, dangerous whole. While humans, in our prideful anthropocentrism, make regional distinctions (this includes my exploration of petromelancholic concerns specific to the American West), these enormous hyperobjects that interact with humans do not draw such firm boundaries. As Morton says, “there is no such thing, at a deep level, as the local. Locality is an abstraction. Metaphorically this applies to hyperobjects” (47). Colton, of course, denies the nonlocality of the flare, and so he rejects Jake’s admonishments.

We see the continuation of Colton’s denial near the close of this scene, when he tries to force-feed the rest of the hot dog to Jake, even after he has spit his own bite out and exclaimed about the foul taste. The skirmish would probably have continued if it were not for the intervention of another worker, who tells the pair “to stop foolin’, there’s work to be done” (89). I would like to reiterate that at this stage in his attempt to achieve self-made manhood, boredom remains the primary symptom of his petromelancholia (and so he aims to kill time with this absurd weenie roast). Indeed, Colton must be *reminded* by his coworker to get back to work. He does not want to be in this Tough Oil setting at all. His boredom as a flow-tester only ceases when he finally lands his long-coveted position as a driller. But this posting, too, presents significant difficulties for Colton, and the collision of the self-made man mythos with petromelancholia lies at the core of his troubles.

Problems at Home:

Arguments, Cruel Attachments, and Colton’s Attempted Flight from His Son’s Birth

In his work *Richard Ford and the Fiction of Masculinities*, Josep M. Armengol explains Ford’s treatment of self-made manhood in “Rock Springs,” asserting that Earl Middleton’s attempt to achieve self-made manhood tears his family apart:

Obsession with wealth can easily turn into moral irresponsibility and, ultimately, into family dissolution . . . Thus, “Rock Springs” redefines self-made manhood as an unattainable and also particularly dangerous ideal. (35)

While Ford’s project differs radically from Fuller’s, Armengol’s assertion regarding the harmful “ideal” of self-made manhood provides an interesting lens for Fuller’s *Colton*, particularly in the context of Western petromelancholia and faltering familial relationships.¹⁵ Colton dies in the gas-patch before his marriage dissolves, but Fuller suggests that he and Melissa continually teeter on this precipice throughout their strained marriage, and that his Tough Oil obsession with wealth lies at the heart of their problems. Colton’s petromelancholic attempt to become a self-made man thus takes a darker turn after he marries and sires a child since his familial role, as he sees it, solely involves financing the family and requires little or no actual participation. By this point in his life, he has quit his stultifyingly boring flow testing job and now drills the holes for the fracking and flow testing crews, which, as we have seen, marks the achievement of his career goal. Yet he still fails to become like his conventional oil-drilling father since he cannot balance the demands of his Tough Oil job with family life; Bill, in marked contrast, managed to maintain this marital balance with his family by rushing home from the Easy Oil patch to spend time with Kaylee and ride horses or hunt with his sons.

In Colton’s case, he endangers his marriage to Melissa by his relentless pursuit of material success; her rejection of his materialism and her anxiety over the gas-patch’s dangerous working environment collide with his desire for shiny, new hallmarks of the Wyoming self-made man in the time of Tough Oil. For example, when the pair heatedly argues over whether he should seek a less-dangerous job, Colton argues, “It’s good money” to which she replies “It ain’t worth it.” His rebuttal is extremely petromelancholic as well as materialistic; steadfastly denying

the danger of his workplace, he proclaims, “I’ll buy me a F350. Tell me that ain’t worth it,” but she repeats her assertion that “It ain’t worth it” (146). He grounds his argument in Tough Oil materialism: Colton already owns a perfectly good Ford F150 pickup, yet the prospect of a newer, more powerful truck to mark his Western masculinity proves to be irresistible. Fuller makes a point of underscoring his material, petrophilic desire with the prospective shift to a new truck, and she specifically names the make and model he wishes to use in the construction of his masculinity. Her rhetorical moves here contrast deeply with her representation of Bill’s pickup, which she describes only as “cherry-red” in her chapter “Bill and Colton” (19). Her exclusion of make and model in her description of Bill’s truck suggests Bill’s satisfaction with his vehicle; moreover, his truck is not the locus of his identity. Fuller’s focused description of Colton’s object of desire delineates the materialisms of Bill and Colton, who represent Easy Oil and Tough Oil in microcosm. Colton’s perceived need for a bigger, faster, shinier truck indicate that he will never be satisfied by material objects, yet during this argument with Melissa, he uses the prospect of a new truck to justify his continuing work in the dangerous gas-patch. The couple cannot agree on this matter, and a resolution will never be reached.

Furthermore, Colton fails in his quest to achieve self-made manhood since he does not provide for Melissa as he promised he would, and his promise of financial stability in his marriage proposal thus consists of mere bluster. Colton unromantically mentions money in his marriage proposal and entices her with promises of a better life if she will become his wife. Colton tells her, “I got me a job drilling in the Upper Green . . . I’m back on the rigs. It’s real money, M’issa, sixty grand a year if I work overtime. . . I’ll take care of you, you’ll see” (124). A household income of sixty thousand dollars sounds positively affluent to Melissa, and she capitulates. However, their marriage soon becomes strained, and after yet another fight, Fuller

mentions that Colton visits Melissa at her place of employment to reassure her that things will work out. Melissa must work despite his promises that he would “take care” of her with all of his gas-field money; moreover, she must deliver their one year old son and her son from a previous relationship to daycare so that she may go to her job. Fuller writes, “He . . . drove an hour out of his way, back to Evanston to reckon with Melissa *where she worked*” (163; my emphasis). I concede that her life has improved somewhat since she no longer subsists on cigarettes and Mountain Dew soda in Wyoming, as she did in Arizona before she agreed to marry Colton, but she essentially remains a working, single mother because of his long absences in pursuit of success. She resents him for it; in still another fight, Colton says, “You can tell a lot about a man by how he takes care of his gun” and Melissa retorts “And his wife” (155). She has to work and he is rarely home. Colton’s pursuit of money so that he can afford new toys eclipses his promises that he would “take care” of her which he elicited as he courted her. Again, Fuller’s careful disclosures mark the shift to Tough Oil; in contrast to Melissa, she does not say whether Colton’s mother Kaylee holds a day job.

Colton’s attempt to flee the delivery room following the birth of his son, however, serves as the most shocking example of the fallout resulting from his petromelancholic attempt to become a successful, self-made man. Colton’s desire to be in his workplace so that he may pursue his dream of self-made manhood bears an eerie resemblance to an addiction; regardless of the dangers inherent to Tough Oil extraction, his perceived need to work in the gas-fields clouds his sense of familial duties. Colton’s complex relationship with the gas-patch could easily be classified as what Lauren Berlant calls a “cruel attachment.” In her essay “Cruel Optimism,” Berlant explains:

What's cruel about these attachments, and not merely inconvenient or tragic, is that the subjects who have *x* in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object or scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being; because whatever the content of their attachment is, the continuity of the form of it provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world. (94)

In Colton's case, "living" and "being in the world" link directly to his identification as a driller, or "oil field trash" as he terms it in his repeated defenses to Melissa (146). Colton does not tolerate being separated from his "scene of desire," as Berlant puts it, and he gives up his job on the oil rig only after Melissa issues him an ultimatum and threatens to leave. Colton, however, wants to return to the oil patch "not even two months into his new job [construction]" and he angrily tells Melissa that he had said that he would "give it a try working off the patch. I did and I can't do it" (154). In this fraught scene, an interesting moment in Fuller's text, Colton demands that Melissa call the rigs and gets him his job back. Yet four pages later, he openly acknowledges the dangers of the gas-patch to his brother-in-law, claiming that his job will lead to his demise. Out of earshot from Melissa, he tells his in-law that "I think it's gonna be the death of me" and clarifies that he is talking about "the rigs" when asked if he means that he will die of the cold Wyoming winter (158). This contradiction, too, bears the mark of the cruel attachment: Berlant writes that the subject of such an attachment desires the object or scene in question, even if "its presence may threaten their well-being" (94). Fuller outlines Colton's dilemma clearly: he says that this job will kill him, yet he cannot stay away from the gas-patch.

And as time goes on, the cruel attachment becomes more deeply rooted, and he fulfills familial duties with an odd, robotic detachment, as we see when his son is born. Fuller reports:

[On] September 15, 2004, Colton made it back to Evanston to see Dakota Justus Bryant being born, but he was halfway down the corridor on his way back to the Upper Green River Valley almost before the child had been rubbed dry. (148)

He cannot see that the endless pursuit of Tough Oil interferes with his family life. In this same scene, he shouts, "I've got a shift coming up!" and further explains that "They need me to make money," in defense of his attempt to escape his fatherly duties at the hospital (148, 149). In this sad and ugly moment, we see Colton's cruel attachment to the merciless demands of the gas-fields fully engaged, and he does not seem to care about this momentous occasion very much. He strongly feels that he must go back to work immediately and make money for his family rather than spending time with them. At the same time, his attempt to imitate his father fails spectacularly; Bill had not only attended Colton's birth, as Kaylee sternly reminds her son, but he had also been driving Kaylee to Utah (presumably Salt Lake City) from Evanston when Colton entered the world, as Fuller reports in her final chapter, "Colt" (149,193).

One very peculiar strand of Colton's cruel attachment is his inability to disengage from the rhythm of the gas-patch in this scene, and he has become so alienated from his family by this point that he feels no remorse about turning on his heel and attempting to leave (although his mother stops him) the moment the child is born. Colton cannot even spare a moment to coddle his newborn son, nor does he have time to feel guilty about it. As Ben Highmore explains in his study of the quotidian workplace, "In a very practical sense guilt . . . can be seen as emotional work that takes up time" (97). Guilt is time-consuming, "emotional work," as Highmore puts it, and Colton has no time to spare to dandle his barely-dry son. Fuller repeatedly refers to the frantic pace of Tough Oil extraction throughout the text, which culminates in this terrible moment; when Colton left his flow testing job to become a driller, for example, his superior at

the oil and gas company badgers the crew during their morning meetings, demanding that they be hasty in their work. He tells them, “The quicker we get ‘er drilled the less it costs. The less it costs, the more money is to be made. Drill it quick and drill it straight and don’t get blown up doin’ it. Get it? . . . Okay, sign here” (130). Colton carries this blistering haste into the hospital, and it fosters his attempt to prematurely bail the instant Dakota is born. In sharp contrast to his son’s attempted flight to the gas-patch, Bill answers the phone while at work to receive the news of his grandson’s birth; according to Fuller, Kaylee telephones him “at the oil patch down in Utah” (149). Fuller reproduces their conversation in full, and although the call was brief, the fact that Bill was willing to take the time to answer the telephone underscores his refusal to capitulate to Tough Oil’s excessive haste.

In this chapter, I have traversed a good deal of temporal, textual, and philosophical terrain in my quest to trace Colton’s attempt to achieve self-made manhood. As he leaves the life of repose behind and embraces the myth of self-made manhood, Colton’s romanticization of Bill’s Easy Oil-era job, which he views through the scrim of Western mythology, blinds him to his father’s status as a wage laborer. Bill is, in the parlance of Ray Ring, disposable. As Fuller explains, “for over thirty years he’s drilled for the same company, but they still have him on their books as a part-time laborer, which makes it easier for them to fire him the moment he gets too old or too slow, or if he slips” (21). Colton never makes this distinction, and his own entry into the world of Tough Oil extraction proves to be even more unstable. He clings to the idea of achieving self-made manhood and this mythology helps justify (and obscure) the reality of his situation. He completely misses the glaring evidence that participating in Tough Oil extraction will leave him homesick and living in a trailer, that waiting for the fracking crew might result in unbearable boredom (which he will proceed to combat with consumer capitalism and risky

behaviors), or that it might tear his marriage from its moorings. At these stages of his life in the extraction industry, Colton's life exemplifies the petromelancholic "conditions of grief," as LeMenager puts it (103). He still cannot distinguish between conventional and extreme drilling practices, nor can he discern the cultural changes that accompany the shift to Tough Oil. As his career progresses, Colton deteriorates, descending further and further into petromelancholic denial.

Chapter Four:

“The Death Made a Small Impression on the Front Page”:

Petromelancholia, Firearms, and Western Violence

I would now like to examine how Colton functions (or doesn't) in a full-blown state of petromelancholia. In this final chapter of my thesis, I interpret a short, fraught passage from the gun-cleaning scene in *Colton*; here, too, petromelancholia collides with aspects of Western mythologies. In this case, the symbol of the gun—and its concomitant Western violence—highlight Fuller's accretions of myth in *Colton*, and underscore Colton's worsening denial. In my discussion of Fuller's catalogue of pawnshop items near the close of my second chapter, I read Warshow against Fuller, arguing that the disappearance of the guns—Colton's willingness to part with them to reimburse his mother—was a “moral” moment. I now return to the subject of firearms and their appearance in Fuller's book, albeit in a more traditional Western sense; unlike the pawnshop sequence in which he *parts* with his firearms, the gun makes its mythic appearance in this scene. At this moment, Colton proves his own claim that “you can tell a lot about a man by how he takes care of his gun” (155). In this passage, Colton's disregard for his own life, his family, and the human community becomes glaringly apparent as he angrily prepares to clean his firearm.

In Fuller's chapter “Colton Works in Evanston,” Colton and Melissa argue over the dangers of working in the gas-fields:

That week's newspaper was thrown on top of the coffee table. The death made a small impression on the front page, a couple of inches under the heading, “Hand Killed on Ultra Rig.” Colton snatched the paper up and laid it down on the carpet,

exposing the real estate pages to the ceiling, “I got to clean my gun,” he said. “It’s hunting season.” (155)

In Fuller’s first sentence, we learn that the newspaper serving Colton and Melissa’s very rural home—despite the population influx of the early 2000s gas boom—is published weekly rather than daily. Fuller does not tell the reader the name of the newspaper, although we can discern that the paper is probably either *The Pinedale Roundup* or *The Sublette Examiner*, both weekly publications for the Upper Green River Valley (a third possibility, the weekly *Uinta County Herald*, serves Colton’s hometown of Evanston). Fuller does not exaggerate the rurality of Colton’s home in this phrase; the closest daily papers to that region are the *Jackson Hole Daily* and the *Rock Springs Rocket-Miner*. I make this point since we might expect a *weekly* newspaper to be regarded as a bit more precious than a decidedly more quotidian *daily* paper. But as we will soon discover, Colton does not value the newspaper in this way. In addition, we learn that Melissa has *thrown* the newspaper on top of the coffee table; she pitches it there in anger and disgust, since an item on its front page serves as glaring evidence and supports her argument against his dangerous job in the gas-fields. These arguments, as I point out in my third chapter of this thesis, are sparked by Colton’s attempts to enact the self-made man myth. I will not belabor that myth at length here, but I do want to note its crucial role in Fuller’s mythopoetic matrix in this passage. Colton clings tightly to the success mythos in this scene, and it informs the Western symbolism of the gun, as we will see.

Next, Fuller notes that the newspaper’s editors consider the drilling accident to be somewhat ordinary yet still newsworthy, important enough for its inclusion on the front page of this regional weekly paper but not important enough to grant it primacy. The editors seem to suffer a bit of petromelancholic denial of their own since “the death made a small impression on

the front page” (155). Fuller reports on this death in her preceding paragraph, noting its particular brutality: “Dewayne Hughes . . . died when his safety harness became entangled in the rotary head of the top of the drill . . . for some minutes, until the rig could be shut down, Dewayne spun with the drill at 45 rpm, inexorably into the earth” (155). Despite the goriness of this Tough Oil death, the newspaper emphasizes other events, perfunctorily reporting Hughes’s demise but allowing it few column inches in their publication. In fact, Fuller may have seen this particular article herself, since she was conducting research for a magazine article about the gas-patch (which eventually spurred her *Colton* project) at this time. In her remarks prefacing a reading of a *Colton* excerpt for *National Public Radio*, Fuller explains why Colton’s obituary intrigued her: unlike the terse obituaries and sidelined reports of the other gas-field deaths, the author of Colton’s obituary valorizes him, lovingly providing details of his life. The author calls him a “romantic,” which immediately got Fuller’s attention; the intimate detail which spurred her to contact Colton’s parents, however, was the author’s claim that “he was never late” (Ulaby). Fuller found these details to be very moving,

unlike the rest of the obituaries which tended to be sort of a column on the left-hand side of the paper, and then there’s usually a big article about what the latest rogue wolf has done—people in Wyoming tend to believe about wolves what the rest of the world believes about the devil. (Ulaby)

Hughes’s death is the second or third in Fuller’s list of four industry-related deaths, with Leroy Fried being the first and Colton Bryant as the soon-to-be-fourth.¹⁶ Hughes and Fried, likely aspiring self-made men themselves, represent Tough Oil’s social violence on an individual level. LeMenager writes, “going ultradeep implies an unprecedented potential for destruction because of where those last reserves are and the violence of the experiments necessary to get

them” (4). The social cost of Tough Oil becomes apparent in this context of four deaths in less than two years; Fuller’s sad litany underscores LeMenager’s observation that “Tough Oil isn’t the same resource, in terms of economic, social, and biological costs” (105). This spate of deaths in the initial stages of Wyoming’s Tough Oil gas boom stresses the social shift that has indeed occurred, and the newspaper’s treatment of the deaths reflect the region’s attitudes. At the same time, Fuller invokes the mythic death trope of the Western—her project, after all, *is* a Western—where men must face “their own annihilation,” according to Jane Tompkins:

The Western’s concentration on death puts life on hold . . . while placing unnatural emphasis on a few extraordinary moments—the holdup, the jailbreak, the shootout. The story that results, stripped-down, ritualistic, suspenseful, seems to be telling a universal truth about the human condition. (Tompkins 31)

While the gas-field workers court death regularly, the West’s Tough Oil “universal truth,” according to Fuller, points to the workers’ status as replaceable pawns in the sphere of industrial capitalism rather than Easy Oil, cowboy heroics. The newspaper treats Hughes’s lethal ride on a drill bit as an everyday occurrence, rather than an “extraordinary” event, Hughes having lost his agency and any control over his life. While she engages the West’s mythologies in this fraught passage, Fuller also highlights the region’s startling shift to Tough Oil.

Despite the headline’s diminutive size, it still supports Melissa’s argument against Colton’s job, which infuriates Colton, particularly because of the headline’s content: “Hand Killed on Ultra Rig.” Colton, deep in petromelancholic denial, works for Ultra Petroleum (so did the first deceased worker in Fuller’s list, Leroy Fried) and thus he does not want to be reminded of his employer’s negligence at this moment. All of the deaths that captured Fuller’s attention, in fact, were attributable to Ultra:

And I thought one death seems a little upsetting, two seems a little careless, three you're thinking okay, and it was the same company, all of these men were drilling for Ultra Petroleum. By the third one, wouldn't you think well, my God, we've had three rig failures, maybe we should check up on this? (Ulaby)

Ultra Petroleum's website, of course, makes no mention of their dreadful safety record, featuring instead a page entitled "Corporate Responsibility," replete with an impressive photograph of the Teton Range's Mount Moran and the company's purported commitment to worker and environmental safety: "At Ultra Petroleum, we are committed to safe operations, and we maintain high standards of ethical conduct and pursue our work with integrity and respect for the environment in which we conduct our business" ("Corporate"). And, as Fuller points out, while Ultra Petroleum proved to be especially irresponsible in the hasty, mid-2000s gas-boom, the entire state of Wyoming failed to protect its workers properly during this time. In her Author's Note, Fuller reports that "In April 2007, the *Casper Star-Tribune* reported that Wyoming and Montana had the worst records in the nation for workplace safety in 2005" (202). Thankfully, according to the State Epidemiologist of Wyoming, Dr. C. Mack Sewell, Wyoming workers are dying less frequently than they were in 2005, since alliances and task forces have since been formed. In his report "2013 Workforce Services Department Epidemiology Report on Occupational Fatalities and Non-fatal Injuries," Sewell writes, "The Wyoming Oil & Gas Industry Safety Alliance (WOGISA) was formed in 2010 after Governor Freudenthal formed a Workplace Fatality Prevention Task Force the previous year" (Sewell). While the formation of these groups has improved industry safety statewide, they convened far too late to help Colton, who died in February 2006: the fourth Ultra employee to die in a matter of 18 months.

In the third sentence of this brief but complicated passage, we learn that “Colton snatched the paper up and laid it down on the carpet, exposing the real estate pages to the ceiling” (155). He “snatched” it away, of course, because he responds to Melissa’s angry, prominent display of the newspaper with his own indignation. In a hauntingly petromelancholic scenario, he flips the paper over, and at this moment the weekly news becomes nothing more than a means to catch gun oil drippings. A thin weekly newspaper, so devoid of news that the real estate classifieds do not even require their own section, might not be enough to save Colton and Melissa’s carpet from the messy activity of cleaning a gun. As gun enthusiast Kathy Jackson explains on her personal website, her firearm cleaning precautions include devising

a way to keep any spilled or dripped solvents from destroying the finish on your furniture. I use several layers of newspaper, laid out on top of a larger plastic garbage sack. When my gun cleaning chores are done, I crumple up the newspaper and the icked-up disposable patches, then flip the plastic bag inside-out to catch the whole mess. (Jackson)

While Jackson’s cleaning technique might seem to be overly fastidious, her extreme care contrasts wildly with Colton’s hasty, enraged decision to clean the gun at that particular moment. His actions suggest that he is at his wits’ end in this ongoing argument with his wife, and that he fully intends to ruin that newspaper—and anything else in close proximity—with gun oil. He clearly does not care whether he damages the living room in this scene; his petromelancholia eclipses the materialism of his self-made manhood in this fleeting moment, and material objects suddenly seem less important than maintaining his denial of Tough Oil’s risks.

Furthermore, Colton’s explanation for flipping the newspaper over denotes the denial of petromelancholia and a tangle of Western myths, including the symbol of the gun and the trope

of violence. According to Fuller, Colton says “I got to clean my gun” since “it’s hunting season” (155). As I explained in my discussion of Colton’s pawned items in my second chapter, the appearance of a gun carries enormous significance in the Western, as Warshow points out.¹⁷ In this context, the significance lies in Colton decision to avoid honest discussion with his wife and instead ruin the newspaper with gun oil. Also, I must make a regional distinction between East and West in the context of contemporary gun ownership here; like many Westerners, Colton owned many guns. Such quotidian, widely accepted ownership is partly due to Western mythology and “the six-gun mystique,” as Cawelti so eloquently puts it in the title of his Western critique. Contemporary attitudes regarding “firearm localism,” as Duke professor of law Joseph Blocher puts it, also plays a significant role:

Rural residents are far more likely to own firearms than people living in cities, and have more opportunities to use them for lawful activities like hunting and recreational shooting. These differences, while certainly not universal—not every city has stringent gun control, nor do all residents oppose it—are so stable and well-recognized that they have calcified into what are often referred to as different gun “cultures” Households in states that are themselves more rural—primarily those in the South and West—are more likely than those in the Northeast to have guns. (Blocher)

The mere presence of the guns passes as a barely remarkable facet of quotidian life in this Western household; as he made the shift from leisurely cowboy to aspiring self-made man, Colton replaces the once-pawned firearms and likely accumulates a few more in the ongoing construction of his Western masculinity.

But trotting a gun out in response to a newspaper headline proves to be another matter entirely. Two possibilities arise here: either Colton experiences such frustration that he wants to shoot this argument with Melissa, for he clearly cannot win, or the gun becomes a security blanket, as it does in other moments in which he has difficulty expressing himself. The possibility of attacking the argument with a firearm, although preposterous-seeming to the uninitiated, is a not-unusual rural reaction to unresolvable frustration. This response, simultaneously a display of force and utter helplessness, famously occurred in the late 1970s in Alaska when President Jimmy Carter set aside millions of acres for several national parks, including Lake Clark and Wrangell-St. Elias. A reporter's voice on an old newsreel, resurrected in Ken Burns's excellent documentary about the Parks, reports that roughly 1500 Alaskans "ran races, shot guns, and claimed they [the federal government] had violated 27 laws" (Burns). These frustrated Alaskans had no chance of shooting a National Park, just as Colton has no chance of shooting an argument with his wife or a newspaper already in circulation which further weakens his defense in that argument. But he brings the gun out anyway, intending to destroy the newspaper with gun oil.

On the other hand, the gun might be functioning as a security blanket in this scene. The newspaper's headline causes great unease for Colton, who struggles to maintain his petromelancholic denial of Tough Oil's danger in light of the small yet glaring headline, and so he brings out the gun to comfort himself and reassert his masculine power. Colton draws comfort from the presence of a firearm and insists on holding it when difficulties in communication arise. This seemingly bizarre reaction occurs earlier in the text as well, when Colton uncomfortably tells his sister that he has gotten Melissa pregnant. In that scene, too, the gun serves as a Western security blanket of sorts, for he can only speak after his gun is in his lap:

Then Colton switched off the truck, reached back for his .22, and put the gun across his lap . . . And that's how the world stayed for some time—no bunnies [to shoot] and all the silence a person could stand—a careless, unpeopled silence that went back to before there were words for it. Then, “She’s pregnant,” said Colton.
(138)

Colton, not especially verbose, struggles with communication and his admission to his sister also functions as a confession that he and his wife have had sex, an uncomfortable topic of conversation for these Mormon siblings to broach. I refer to this passage since it illustrates Colton’s communication difficulties and demonstrates that he draws comfort from his guns, foreshadowing the terrible petromelancholic moment with the newspaper. Cawelti writes, “The distinctive characteristic of the cowboy hero is not his possession of a symbolic weapon, but the way in which he uses it” (59). I concede that Colton does not *fire* the gun in either of these scenes, as Cawelti suggests a hero would, but the fact that the weapon needs to be present to enable his conversation with his sister indicates that “the way in which he uses it” connects directly to communication and masculine power. In the pregnancy confession scene, cradling the gun allows him to speak; in the gun cleaning scene, the gun represents his refusal to communicate about the dangers of the gas-patch or shuts down the conversation entirely.

Finally, Colton’s excuse for wanting to clean his gun, the explanation that “it’s hunting season” carries more than a hint of irony in addition to its already heavy load of petromelancholia, since his status as an inept hunter undermines his authoritative excuse for cleaning the weapon. In fact, Colton’s slapdash approach to hunting echoes the violence and waste of Tough Oil. Again, Colton fails in his quest to be like his father, since he ignores the hunting ethics imparted by his father Bill, whom Fuller portrays as a manifestation of the mythic,

ideal cowboy and as the embodiment of the Easy Oil worker. In short, Bill represents an era of simple competence, and he never wastes a bullet. Cawelti notes that such restraint lies at the center of weapon deployment in the classic Western:

The most important implication of this killing procedure seems to be the qualities of *reluctance, control, and elegance* which it associates with the hero . . . The cowboy hero does not seek out combat for its own sake and he typically shows *an aversion to the wanton shedding of blood*. (59; my emphasis)

While Cawelti addresses the Western genre's dusty shootout in his analysis, Bill practices a similar restraint in his contemporary Western hunting practices.

Bill makes several attempts to impart these conservative hunting ethics to his son, but the graft does not take. As Fuller explains in her "Bill's Philosophy of Hunting" chapter:

If you shoot a goose, you'd better be eating the whole goose, not just the parts most people say are edible. If you shoot a jackrabbit, you'd better be up for rabbit stew and rabbit-skin carpets and rabbit-foot key rings. (55)

Yet in the chapter "Goose Hunting with Jake, Colton, and Cody," we see Colton and his friends needlessly unleash a hail of shot upon a flock of geese, which echoes Tough Oil's extraordinary violence noted by LeMenager—and its Western hastes and wastes, which I have repeatedly remarked upon in this paper. According to Fuller, the boys do not even attempt to shoot the birds on the wing. Instead, in a moment of extraordinarily poor hunting style, they fire at a flock of geese sitting placidly on a lake:

And then, all at once, the three boys had their guns to their shoulders, unloading on those geese as if they thought it likely the birds would fire back. The geese started up, struggling to get airborne on the thin, frigid air, skidding on the ice . . .

The boys pumped shot after shot down onto the reservoir and when the smoke cleared there was just one goose left on the ice, every other bird airborne. (32)

I raise this point regarding Colton's hunting practices since his sudden attention to Bill-esque detail is nothing more than an exercise in petromelancholic denial. He brings out his gun to avoid having to further defend his gas-patch job to Melissa, and he cites the great Western pastime of hunting—despite his ineptitude—as justification for ruining the newspaper with the damning headline. He will never acknowledge the gas-patch's dangers to his wife.

Conclusion

In this study, I have sought to interpret Fuller's *The Legend of Colton H. Bryant* by establishing a Western American iteration of LeMenager's petromelancholia. I emphasized two major points: that Fuller highlights the folly inherent to American dismissal of Western sacrifice zones through her unique aesthetic choices, and that Western mythologies, a frequently fatal set of practices in their own right, deeply inform and interact with petromelancholia in the intermountain West. My case for Western petromelancholia hinges on the fact that petromodern concerns in the American West differ radically from other regions. Mineral rights issues, large swaths of federal land, and a long, celebrated history of extraction distinguish the West in the context of petromodernity. Westerners depend heavily upon vehicles and roads to negotiate vast distances and our collective carbon footprint is enormous. Consider, for instance, the petroleum-intensive rescue of Judy Blunt's father in *Breaking Clean*. After two of his fingers are ripped off by farm machinery in northern Montana, the Golden Hour of urban medicine is at stake:

On that perfect harvest day, my parents drove *fifty miles* to the hospital in Malta. There, the doctor administered morphine, while Mom called the local airport, one dirt strip at the edge of town. *A small plane hauled my father to a medical center in Billings* [207 miles to the south]. (Blunt, *Breaking* 31, my emphasis)

A long journey to medical help such as this is not unusual in the interior West. Colton Bryant himself was born in a speeding car piloted by Bill on the way to Salt Lake City. Although Fuller doesn't tell us the number of the mile marker on Colton's birth certificate in her penultimate chapter, she does write that he was born "near Payson Utah," which is a distance of over 100 miles from the Bryant home in Evanston, Wyoming. As Kaylee, Colton's mother, explained to Fuller: "There weren't any decent hospitals in southwest Wyoming in those days" (193). While

medical care certainly justifies such a trip, quotidian rural life in the West, too, often involves long journeys to town simply to procure groceries and other necessary supplies.

In addition to the West's unique concerns such as our heavy reliance upon roads and vehicles, our recognition of Western petromelancholia emerges as a crucial and urgent act because the collection of dangerous Western mythologies persist into the twenty-first century. Petroleum magnates, such as Bakken kingpin Harold Hamm, spin the mythology to suit their industrial capitalist purposes in an eerie echo of nineteenth and twentieth century boosters. As Hamm's interviewer reports in *Forbes*:

“I call it Cowboyistan [his mega-conglomerate of wells in North Dakota, Oklahoma, and Texas] *because that's the attitude* of those who have made it happen,” says Hamm, whose Continental Resources now produces 200,000 barrels of oil (and natural gas equivalents) per day. (Helman, my emphasis)

The Cowboyistan “attitude” to which he refers conjures images of Carhartted drillers gleefully hollering *yippie-ki-yay* as they go about their work. Hamm clearly buys—and sells—the Wild West mythologies to his employees and to the American people. But as I explained at the beginning of my second chapter, irreconcilable tensions exist between actual ranchers and the petro-industrial complex. Even the iconic image of the cowboy, revered because of its suggestion of anti-industrialism, does not fit Hamm's reference to his employees' “attitude.” According to Mitchell:

To wonder why cowboys were translated into such mythic status . . . or to ask why the Western emerged when it did is to enter into vexed historical terrain. The simplest explanation involves the collective response to industrial capitalism: the

West once again as escape valve for eastern tensions and psychological pressures.

(26)

As an illustration, one of the more startling versions of this trope appears in Edward Abbey's early work *The Brave Cowboy*. Abbey's antihero on horseback, an arresting image contrasting starkly with the cars rushing by him on the highway suggests that this cowboy *protests* petromodernity. Colton Bryant, on the other hand, faced a Cowboyistan-esque dilemma, and his inability to negotiate it cost him his life. Fuller's mythopoetics take up this important, complex issue, and I have teased out the various elements of that issue in this thesis—attempting to go “ultradeep,” to borrow yet another of LeMenager's terms, in my critique.

In short, the tragedy of Tough Oil in the West—and therefore its petromelancholic root—is not a single catastrophic event that we can witness, as the BP blowout proves to be (and which LeMenager skillfully analyzes). Instead, it is an ongoing *process*, a creeping catastrophe in its slow violence, foreshadowed by nineteenth and twentieth century rushes and booms, and peopled by hopeful self-made men—and women—who journey to Western locales and endure the industry's imposed transience in the hopes of seeking their mythic fortunes. Fuller's often overlooked book raises many petromodern issues, and perhaps readers tend to ignore it because of their own petromelancholia: self-implication often proves to be a difficult endeavor, and driving a car, enjoying the quotidian ease of petrochemical-based plastics, and adjusting heating and cooling systems to suit our comfort zones becomes difficult when we are forced to consider that countless people die so that we may maintain our petromodernity. There are many Colton Bryants in the West, and I hope that our literature will one day broadly represent the harms associated with fossil fuel dependency. Until that day comes, Fuller's text will continue its lonely vigil in the Western canon.

When I began the research process for this thesis, gas production was still booming in Wyoming, North Dakota, and other major American shale plays; now, as the project's end approaches and this thesis prepares to ride off into the Western sunset, the American shale gas boom teeters on the precipice of a bust. Throughout these 12 months of research and drafting, I have attempted to avoid writing anything which might not apply next month, next week, or tomorrow. Such are the vicissitudes of oil production and the risks of petro-criticism. One thing remains constant: our petromodernity, and although I stop just short of completely lambasting LeMenager in my introduction, I do want to laud her work with petromodernity in *Living Oil* (and for giving us the vocabulary to address these issues in the first place). I hope that her work inspires many more petromelancholic critiques, and that the current trends of identity criticism—vital but ultimately anthropocentric modes of study—eventually expand to include the implications of fossil fuel dependency. Most mid-twentieth century works of literature and film reflect petrophilia in some form, as LeMenager points out in her work with *On the Road* and *Lolita*. *Thelma and Louise* do commit their Western suicide by launching their convertible into the Grand Canyon, after all. It follows, then, that twenty-first century works represent and will continue to represent iterations of petromelancholia in these days of Tough Oil. The critic's most important task, I feel, includes calling public attention to this shift. Only then can we (as William S. Burroughs puts it so prosaically) “get the whole show out of the barnyard and into Space.”¹⁸

Notes

1. See Ulaby's *Book Tour* on National Public Radio. Fuller discusses her discovery of Colton Bryant's story early in the recorded reading, at the 5:51 mark.
2. See *This Changes Everything* by Naomi Klein, particularly her introduction and chapter nine, for a detailed discussion of ecocatastrophe and climate change caused by the petro-industrial complex. In one of her many compelling arguments, Klein asserts that industrial capitalism will soon render Earth uninhabitable.
3. See LeMenager, 83-92.
4. Fox's *Gasland II* also features flammable water in the West and the water contamination case in Pavillion, Wyoming, but we may excuse LeMenager for not mentioning this sequel, since it was released in the spring of 2013 and *Living Oil* may have gone to press by that point in time.
5. Although he does not specifically address hydraulic fracturing in the Western United States, Rob Nixon terms a gradual, continual assault upon the environment *slow violence* in his text *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Nixon explains that slow violence is "a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space," and that it "is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive" (2). The slow violence of fracking in the West lacks the ecocatastrophic cachet of a sudden, dramatic event such as the BP blowout, and I maintain that LeMenager, Williams, and Fox (in his work *Gasland II*) focused upon the Gulf partly because of the disaster's drama and immediacy.
6. See Helman's *Forbes* article "Welcome to Cowboyistan" for Hamm's discussion of "highly trained and reliable rednecks," as he puts it, in Western energy patches.
7. See Wyckoff's chapter six, "Landscapes of Federal Largesse," for brief but rich analyses of the Bureau of Land Management's history and identity crisis.

8. See LeMenager, 105. Tough Oil has many “economic, social, and biological costs,” which do not necessarily mirror nineteenth century concerns about the shift to industrialism. We can probably assume, however, that Guy de Maupassant and his Eiffel Tower-hating cronies would not be thrilled about drilling rigs either (considering their withering remarks about smokestacks).
9. See Brown, “Eiffel’s Tower,” 19.
10. See Mitchell, particularly chapter one, and Tompkins’ introduction for further insight into America’s fascination with the West and the Western genre.
11. See Warshow, Cawelti, and Tompkins for excellent in-depth discussions of guns in the Western genre.
12. A number of satellite photographs available on the internet document the impressive Bakken flares at night. The webpage “Oil Fields from Space at Night,” on the website *Geology.com* includes an exceptionally good photograph which captures the countless flares at the height of the North Dakota energy boom. These Bakken flares collectively rival the light pollution emanating from the urban centers of Denver and Minneapolis-St. Paul.
13. Morton explores the five “interrelated qualities” of hyperobjects in Part One of his book, and probes “the Time of Hyperobjects” in Part Two (23).
14. Methane, like crude oil, possesses all five of Morton’s hyperobjective criteria, but I have decided to focus upon viscosity and nonlocality in relation to Fuller’s text since her language in the hot dog-roasting scene suggests these two properties specifically. All five, however, are present in natural gas. For example, like its fellow *fossil* fuel crude oil, methane exhibits temporal undulation. As Morton puts it, “I start the engine of my car. Liquefied dinosaur bones burst into flame oil is the result of some dark, secret collusion between rocks and algae and plankton millions and millions of years in the past” (58). Methane shares similar ancient origins,

and thus we can easily apply Morton's concept of temporal undulation to natural gas as well.

However, Fuller makes no gestures toward dinosaur bones in *Colton*, so I have elected to omit temporal undulation (as well as phasing and interobjectivity) in this study.

15. See Armengol, particularly chapters one and five. While many readers perceive Richard Ford's work as a valorization of the hyper-masculine, Armengol argues against this interpretation, going so far as to designate Ford a "genderless writer" in his introduction (7).

16. See Fuller's *Colton*, Chapter 36: "The Death of Leroy Fried."

17. See Warshow, 92-93.

18. Burroughs addresses an entirely different issue, that of minding his own business, in his essay, but his quotation nicely encapsulates my own frustration regarding America's difficulty in making the shift to cleaner energy sources.

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