

Journal of American Studies

<http://journals.cambridge.org/AMS>

Additional services for *Journal of American Studies*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



Fossil-Fuel Futurity: Oil in *Giant*

DANIEL WORDEN

Journal of American Studies / Volume 46 / Special Issue 02 / May 2012, pp 441 - 460
DOI: 10.1017/S002187581200014X, Published online: 30 May 2012

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S002187581200014X

How to cite this article:

DANIEL WORDEN (2012). Fossil-Fuel Futurity: Oil in *Giant*. Journal of American Studies, 46, pp 441-460 doi:10.1017/S002187581200014X

Request Permissions : [Click here](#)

Fossil-Fuel Futurity: Oil in *Giant*

DANIEL WORDEN

Giant is a sprawling narrative, centered around the Benedict family, Texas cattle ranchers, and Jett Rink, a nouveau riche oilman. Originally serialized in *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1952, subsequently published as a novel, then adapted into George Stevens's 1956 film starring James Dean, Rock Hudson, and Elizabeth Taylor, *Giant* is a text that dramatizes the domestication and naturalization of the oil industry in the postwar United States while endorsing a multiracial vision of Texas. This essay explores how *Giant* ultimately arrives at nationalistic pluralism after representing the radical changes brought about by the modern oil industry in the US, particularly the erosion of traditional class divisions as Jett Rink's oil wealth exceeds the Benedict's ranching wealth. The subsumption of oil into liberal pluralism marks what this essay names "fossil-fuel futurity," an ideological configuration in which normative life is produced through the commodities and modes of transportation made available by fossil-fuel culture. The essay then puts *Giant* into a broader context of narratives about oil in the postwar US, especially the television series *Dallas* (1978–91) and the film *There Will Be Blood* (2007). In all three texts, oil culture becomes postwar US culture, saturating aesthetic, affective, and family relations. The challenge for us, then, is to imagine a mode of futurity that does not replicate the ideological valences of "fossil-fuel futurity."

But I know where oil is . . . it is future, undrilled . . .

Rick Bass, *Oil Notes*¹

The discourse of sustainability asks us all to imagine possible futures that are more environmentally responsible and less reliant on fossil fuels. This is no small feat, as Imre Szeman has argued, since many visions of a sustainable future rely on technological fantasies, the apocalyptic threat of a barren landscape, and, most importantly, the wishful desire that a new, environmentally friendly society will not require any radical readjustments to our lives at all.² Moreover, the difficulty of imagining life without, or beyond, fossil fuels stems from the fact that fossil fuels themselves connote futurity in late twentieth-century culture. It is difficult to imagine a future without petroleum, in part because petroleum underlies the normative vision of family, work, and social belonging in the late twentieth-century United States. Mowing the lawn,

Department of English, University of New Mexico. Email: dworden@unm.edu.

¹ Rick Bass, *Oil Notes* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1995; first published 1989), 2.

² See Imre Szeman, "Oil Futures," in John Knechtel, ed., *Fuel* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 18–35; and *idem*, "System Failure: Oil, Futurity, and the Anticipation of Disaster," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 106, 4 (Fall 2007), 805–23.

taking a road trip, getting a personal parking space at work, and teaching an adolescent child to drive all connote social belonging and are imbued with a ritualistic, affective charge. It is the ruse of “oil culture” that these activities do not typically strike us as activities having anything to do with drilling and refining, even though they are utterly dependent on the availability and social acceptability of fossil-fuel consumption. One of the tasks of an environmentally aware criticism, then, might be to document the ideology of what I call “fossil-fuel futurity.” This ideology functions as a variation on what Lawrence Buell calls the “environmental unconscious,” a narrative device that disconnects fossil-fuel consumption from the environment and instead places it in the realm of the “merely” cultural.³ Since fossil fuels are bountiful and available within this imaginary, they do not register as a part of the environment but instead as a medium through which the environment becomes consumable and upon which is constructed a vision of normative family life.

In this essay, I will develop an account of how fossil-fuel futurity operates in the 1950s, in the novel and film versions of *Giant*, and then, briefly, chart the emerging crisis of this ideology in the 1978–91 television series *Dallas* and the 2007 film *There Will Be Blood*. These three texts align with three significant moments in US oil culture. *Giant* was written and filmed during the postwar rise in oil consumption and the imperative to construct the interstate highway system, legislated through the Federal Highway Act of 1956; *Dallas* became a national as well as an international success during and after the 1979 oil crisis; and *There Will Be Blood* was released during the Iraq War.⁴ Together, these texts map how oil becomes central to the vision of the good life in the post-1945 United States and the ruptures that changes in oil production and availability, as well as the stability of marriage and gender roles, produce in the vision of the petroleum-consuming family dominant in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. All three texts imagine oil and futurity as inextricably and intimately connected, though the ameliorative connection of oil to the family depicted in *Giant* morphs into less idyllic, though still binary, relations in *Dallas* and *There Will Be Blood*. Accordingly, this essay begins with a reading of *Giant*'s celebratory account of oil culture as leading to pluralistic, familial national belonging, and then moves on to an analysis of *Dallas* and *There Will Be Blood*'s representations of oil as ultimately anathema to family belonging. In so doing, I aim to account not only for the

³ See Lawrence Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

⁴ For accounts of the postwar boom in US oil consumption and the 1979 oil crisis see Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (New York: Free Press, 2009; first published 1990), 391–412, 523–42, 656–725. For an account of the Iraq War see Peter Maass, *Crude World: The Violent Twilight of Oil* (New York: Knopf, 2009), 136–64.

resiliency of fossil-fuel futurity, as, for example, *Dallas* and *There Will Be Blood* continue to bind oil to all family relations, even as oil's effect on the family is explicitly dramatized as pernicious, but also for fossil-fuel futurity's crisis, as oil's mid-twentieth-century connotations of middle-class prosperity wane and new modes of representing oil's effect on everyday life might become possible.

Edna Ferber's 1952 novel *Giant* and George Stevens's 1956 film adaption of the same title are key texts in the development of "fossil-fuel futurity," in part because *Giant* explicitly dramatizes the economic and cultural shift in West Texas from a cattle-ranching economy to an oil economy. At the center of *Giant* are the Benedicts, who own and operate Reata, one of the largest cattle ranches in Texas. Jordan "Bick" Benedict runs the ranch with the help of other family members, a host of Chicano ranch hands, and Jett Rink, a poor, white ranch hand and car mechanic. While on a trip to Washington, DC, Bick stops in Virginia to buy a horse from the Lynnton family. There, he meets Leslie; they immediately fall in love, and soon Bick and Leslie marry and travel back to Reata. Leslie is new to Texas and approaches the Benedict's ranch with the spirit of a reformer. She is especially troubled by the racial hierarchy at Reata – the ranch is owned and operated by whites and relies on Chicano workers, who form a kind of peasant underclass in West Texas. *Giant* then focuses on Leslie and Bick's arguments about racial injustice, their concerns about whether or not their children will marry properly and/or continue to work on the ranch, and Jett Rink's rise to incredible wealth when he strikes oil on a small piece of land. Race plays into all three plots. Leslie tries to better the conditions of Reata's Chicano workers; Bick and Leslie's son Jordy marries a Chicana woman, Juana, a union that Bick struggles to accept; and Jett Rink institutionalizes racial discrimination by instructing the workers in his new hotel, built with the profits from his oil empire, to refuse service to nonwhite customers. The novel and film conclude as the Benedicts lease portions of Reata to Jett Rink's oil company for substantial profits yet distance themselves from Jett's excessive wealth, power, and racism. By the end of *Giant*, the Benedicts have become racially tolerant, generous employers, and they accept both Jordy's marriage and the fact that their children will pursue professions outside the family ranch, while Jett Rink squanders his fortune by building an extravagant hotel and finds himself lonely and desperately unhappy. In so doing, the narrative draws a distinction between "good" and "bad" oil cultures that are, in fact, mirror images of one another, with the key exception that "good" oil culture represses oil as an industry and represents it as a readily accessible medium for everyday life, while "bad" oil culture broadcasts excessive avarice and hostility to the collective good through villains like Jett Rink and, later, *Dallas*'s J. R. Ewing and *There Will Be Blood*'s Daniel Plainview. In *Giant*, as the oil industry is domesticated in Texas, fossil-fuel futurity governs

characters' lives and provides a normative vision of family life that supersedes other modes of belonging based on class and ethnicity.

Originally serialized in *Ladies' Home Journal* and subsequently published as a book, *Giant* was a controversial novel upon its publication in 1952 because of its representation of well-to-do Texans as corrupt, crude, racist despots. In a *New York Times Book Review* article, Lewis Nichols commented, "as has been noted through vibrations felt easily from Houston to New York, a fair share of Texas has failed to find in 'Giant' the substance for amusement. Large chunks of a large state are mad in a large way."⁵ The article goes on to quote Ferber, who defends her novel against Texan criticism: "'Giant' is not a novel about Texas . . . It's about the United States. The people just happen to live in Texas. The story is about the effect of men and women on Texas."⁶ Later in the article, she explicitly links the novel to social uplift:

To be able to have written anything at all in the last fifteen years is a triumph. Serenity and peace must be there before you write anything to make others feel hope, courage, reason. Writers have become disappointed in love with the human race. After I saw Buchenwald, I couldn't do anything worth doing for five years.⁷

Ferber's reference to the Holocaust – that after seeing Buchenwald she was crippled by disillusionment – positions her novel in a tradition of sentimental writing that seeks out affective modes of response to brutality and social injustice. In *The Female Complaint*, Lauren Berlant documents the ways in which this genre of sentimentalism, also realized in Ferber's 1926 novel *Show Boat*, asks the reader "to see all American sufferers as part of the same survival subculture."⁸ For Ferber, *Giant* makes a humanistic claim of survival. *Giant* depicts the injuries of World War II through the enlistment and war death of one of Reata's Chicano residents, Angel Obregon, and the excesses of oil production that fuel the war effort. After the war, the Benedicts arrive at a new vision of social belonging that is constructed around the family automobile, which serves not as a sign of the parasitical oil industry but instead as a marker of independent mobility and renewed possibilities in postwar culture.⁹ *Giant's* wealthy, racist Texans and exploited Chicano workers are foils through which the novel then imagines an idyllic, pluralistic family.

⁵ Lewis Nichols, "Talk with Edna Ferber," *New York Times Book Review*, 5 Oct. 1952, 30.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 69.

⁹ For analyses of the automobile and the interstate highway system in the postwar US see James J. Flink, *The Automobile Age* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 358–376; Cotton Seiler, *Republic of Drivers: A Cultural History of Automobility in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 69–104; and Rudi Volti, *Cars and Culture: The Life Story of a Technology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006; first published 2004), 104–13.

Despite Edna Ferber's own claim that *Giant* is about the US or, even more broadly, about the world after the nightmare of the Holocaust, both the novel and the film trade on regional detail. Texas culture is presented as foreign, feudal, yet avowedly democratic. The bluebonnet is paradoxically – and tellingly – described as the “national state flower of Texas” in the novel, one example of many phrasings that cast Texas as both an independent nation and a microcosm of the United States.¹⁰ A European visitor remarks that Texas is “like another country, a foreign country in the midst of the United States.”¹¹ Texans themselves are portrayed in the novel as intentionally manufacturing this regional distinctiveness, which also connotes egalitarianism and folksiness: “Each was playing a role, deliberately. It was part of the Texas ritual. We’re rich as son-of-a-bitch stew but look how homely we are, just as plain-folksy as Grandpappy back in 1836. We know about champagne and caviar but we talk hog and hominy.”¹² *Giant*'s Texans view their own history as common knowledge, and unfamiliarity with Texas landmarks such as the Alamo is shameful. For example, on his private plane, Bick offers to have his guests flown over Spindletop. A visiting Hollywood starlet does not recognize the oil-culture landmark:

“Spindletop?” said Miss Lona Lane, the movie girl. “Is that a mountain or something? I don’t like flying over mountains very much.” The Texans present looked very serious which meant that they were bursting inside with laughter . . . It was as though a tourist in Paris had asked if Notre Dame was a football team.”¹³

Texas connotes difference, yet by the end of *Giant* this Texan uniqueness becomes normative national belonging, a shared set of codes and practices that unify subjects despite class and racial difference.

Giant's focus on exotic Texan culture also allows for the development of a liberal, antiracist allegory.¹⁴ While Bick claims that his treatment of Latino and Chicano workers is benevolent, his wife Leslie takes an immediate interest in remedying the living and working conditions of her husband's employees and raises Bick's racial awareness. Leslie's activism is initially thwarted; the only way that Bick is finally swayed to accept Chicanos as equals is when his son Jordy marries the daughter of one of Bick's ranch hands, Juana, and has a dark-skinned son named Polo, after Juana's father. Bick's social awakening, then,

¹⁰ Edna Ferber, *Giant* (New York: Perennial, 2000; first published 1952), 29.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹² *Ibid.*, 7.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁴ For readings of *Giant*'s racial politics see Lee Bebout, “Troubling White Benevolence: Four Takes on a Scene from *Giant*,” *MELUS*, 36, 3 (Fall 2011), 13–36; June Hendler, *Best-Sellers and Their Film Adaptations in Postwar America: From Here to Eternity, Sayonara, Giant, Aunt Mame, Peyton Place* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 115–52; and Rafael Pérez-Torres, “Chicano Ethnicity, Cultural Hybridity, and the Mestizo Voice,” *American Literature*, 70, 1 (March 1998), 153–76.

occurs not through an awareness of exploitative working conditions and structural racism but, instead, through a new familial connection to his Chicano workers. Embodied in Jordy and Juana's child, family belonging leads directly to pluralist belonging in *Giant*. While the novel leaves Bick's enlightenment merely implied, the film renders it quite explicit as Bick, played by Rock Hudson, gets into a fistfight with a racist cook who refuses to serve Juana and Polo in a roadside diner. Rafael Pérez-Torres has argued that *Giant* "gives voice to a new America, one that struggles with discourses of inclusion and pluralistic liberalism."¹⁵ This discourse of inclusivity and pluralism, of course, is premised on the benevolence, tolerance, and permissiveness of wealthy, white elites such as Bick Benedict. *Giant's* setting and its representation of Texas as a synecdoche of the US allows for Bick's racial awareness to become a kind of national imperative, not to treat workers better but to love and accept all members of one's family. This is central to *Giant's* dramatization of fossil-fuel futurity, as the petroleum industry transforms the unique landscape of Texas and facilitates this pluralist vision of the American family.

While *Giant* is very much a narrative about the emergence and possibilities of racial equality in the postwar US, there is another narrative strain that is equally important to both film and novel: the emergence of the "oil rich" in Texas, dramatized through the rise of Jett Rink, played by James Dean in the film adaptation. Jett is an overt racist, though he is also portrayed as a class warrior, mumbling in his introductory scene in the film that "ain't nobody king in this country," as Bick orders him around.¹⁶ Jett Rink's newfound oil wealth, though, does not usher in new democratic structures but instead allows him to become even more despotic than the feudal lord and cattle rancher Bick Benedict. Jett Rink represents "bad oil" in the narrative. In the film, Jett Rink strikes oil and immediately drives his rickety Model T Ford to Bick Benedict's ranch house. Covered in oil, Jett laughs maniacally and attempts to flirt with Leslie Benedict, played by Elizabeth Taylor. This monstrous figure, covered in "black gold," represents avarice, racism, and cowardice, as opposed to the nostalgic Bick Benedict, whose major fault seems to be his inability to separate his familial obligations from his ranch. Oil functions here as a kind of blackface, racially coding the oil industry in relation to wholesome, white cattle ranching. As Eric Lott notes, blackface was often a way for white performers and audiences to stage otherness in the nineteenth century:

The black mask offered a way to play with collective fears of a degraded and threatening – and male – Other while at the same time maintaining some symbolic control over them. Yet the intensified American fears of succumbing to a racialized

¹⁵ Pérez-Torres, 158.

¹⁶ *Giant* (1956), Warner Brothers DVD, 2003.

image of Otherness were everywhere operative in minstrelsy . . . as its “blackness” was unceasingly fascinating to audiences and performers alike.¹⁷

The oil-covered, lascivious Jett Rink rechannels this nineteenth-century trope toward a representation of oil money’s pernicious effects, and *Giant* retains blackface’s double function, as identified by Lott, as representative of both fear and desire on the part of white America. While Jett Rink’s racialization through oil marks him as a villain, *Giant* goes on to dramatize how racial pluralism successfully excludes Rink from national and familial belonging. Blackface is used, then, to mark Jett Rink as outside the web of sympathy and paternalism that constitutes *Giant*’s vision of racial pluralism. Not race but oil connotes irreducible difference in *Giant*, and both film and novel ultimately demonize the oil tycoon only to subsume petroleum consumption into a normative vision of familial belonging.

Jett Rink is represented in the novel as an anachronism, doing in the present what families like the Benedicts did in a remote past. The construction of Jett Rink’s Conquistador Hotel is described as a modern-day feudal project: “Houses had been razed, families dispossessed, businesses uprooted, streets demolished to make way for this giant edifice. All about it, clustered near – but not too near – like poor relations and servitors around a reigning despot, were the little structures that served the giant one.”¹⁸ The novel concludes ambiguously, as Leslie and Bick Benedict discuss the “future” that they have created on Reata Ranch – they are, after all, wealthy because they have leased portions of their ranch to Rink’s oil company, subsidizing Bick’s now financially precarious ranching – while Jett Rink remains a wealthy tycoon. In the film, however, Jett Rink is last seen alone in his banquet hall, after all of his guests have left; he drunkenly falls over a table and passes out, isolated in his decadent consumption. The film renders a clearer message about the impotence of tycoons in the face of the Benedict family, happy to be at home babysitting their grandchildren. As Bob Dietz, a character in the novel who has graduated from Cornell and practices modern agriculture in West Texas, claims, “Big stuff is old stuff now,” registering the obsolescence of tycoons and

¹⁷ Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 25.

¹⁸ Ferber, 35. In a chapter on the Texas oil industry, the journalist and labor activist Harvey O’Connor notes the function that books like *Giant* had on the oilmen after which Jett Rink was modeled: “The lives of these men range from the uncouth to the gaudy; perhaps none has revealed more in the public eye than Glenn McCarthy whose opening in 1949 of the Shamrock Hotel in Houston set new records in slapstick lavishness. The postwar era of the Texas oil millionaires has been described in many a novel splashed with the adjective ‘fabulous,’ and none more observing probably than Edna Ferber’s *Giant*. But these people enjoy everything – even seeing their lives portrayed in novels which leave nothing to the imagination.” See Harvey O’Connor, *The Empire of Oil* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1962; first published 1955), 204.

large-scale industries and the emergence of the middle-class family as the basic unit of national belonging.¹⁹ *Giant* represents a cultural shift from organizing society around “great men” like Bick Benedict and Jett Rink to imagining society as a more democratic series of family units, all of whom contribute to the greater good. The family’s mobility, in this imaginary, is premised on the ubiquity of oil and the automobile.

Ferber’s novel begins where Stevens’s film adaptation concludes, with the oil industry. The novel opens with air travel; all of Texas society has been invited to the opening of oil tycoon Jett Rink’s new airport, and they converge on Hermoso, Texas in “an aerial stampede.”²⁰ Ferber’s portrait of Texas emphasizes the unsettling developments that have transformed the state from a rural landscape to a jumble of technology, luxury, and poverty:

High, high [the airplanes] soared above the skyscraper office buildings that rose idiotically out of the endless plain; above the sluggish rivers and the arroyos, above the lush new hotels and the anachronistic white-pillared mansions; the race horses in rich pasture, the swimming pools the drives of transplanted palms the huge motion picture palaces the cattle herds and the sheep and mountains and wild antelope and cotton fields and Martian chemical plants whose aluminum stacks gave back the airplanes glitter for glitter. And above the grey dust-bitten shanties of the Mexican barrios and the roadside barbecue shacks and the windmills and the water holes and the miles of mesquite and cactus.²¹

Texas here, as in the film, is portrayed as a site of radically uneven development, prompted by the modernizing effects of the oil industry. It is a region which stands in a synecdochal relationship to economic history itself, containing feudal ranch owners, aristocratic cotton kings, and emergent oil tycoons in the same historical moment. *Giant* ultimately makes the historical argument that the progressive developments of horticulture, ranching, and fossil-fuel production inevitably lead to democratization. This democratization, however, demands the repression of the petroleum industry and the construction of the nuclear family – as opposed to one’s ethnic group, one’s extended family, or one’s coworkers – as the normative unit in American culture. This normativity is represented in *Giant* by the Benedicts, who organize the family in opposition to the greedy, racist Jett Rink and, by extension, the oil industry. By privatizing life and circumscribing industry as merely a staging ground for affective belonging, fossil fuels become a benevolent medium for the production of familial togetherness.

¹⁹ Ferber, 350. The ideological function of “fossil-fuel futurity” is evident here since oil production and consumption grow rapidly in this era, while *Giant*’s Bob Dietz views large-scale industry as obsolete rather than emergent. As Daniel Yergin notes, between 1948 and 1972 “the numbers – oil production, reserves, consumption – all pointed to one thing: Bigger and bigger scale. In every aspect, the oil industry became elephantine.” Yergin, *The Prize*, 524.

²⁰ Ferber, 1. ²¹ *Ibid.*, 1–2.

There is a curious nostalgia in *Giant*, which is in many ways a narrative about the future. For example, Leslie claims that she is not impressed with the private planes that have become the chic mode of transportation in Texas: "I guess I belong to the generation that still thinks the automobile is a wonderful invention."²² This remark is shortly followed by an explicit connection between the automobile and the airplane: "'That's right,' said Congressman Bale Clinch. 'Here every kid's got a car or anyway a motorbike. And a tractor or a jeep is child's play. Flying comes natural, like walking, to these kids.'"²³ In postwar Texas, the engine has replaced the horse, and the automobile is not enough to satisfy Texans' desire for new modes of recreation and transportation. The consumption of fossil fuels – not only in cars but also in recreational vehicles and airplanes – runs rampant in *Giant's* representation of contemporary life. The automobile, then, is displaced as a dominant technology and takes on the wholesome, natural associations of horseback riding. Fossil-fuel futurity normalizes the automobile not as evidence of modern industry but instead as an object of nostalgia, saturated with domestic affect.

The demarcation between modern, fossil-fuel culture and the older, seemingly more honest cattle ranch does not persist as cleanly in the novel as it does in the film, mainly because in the novel Jett Rink does not have a physical confrontation with Bick, does not attempt to woo Bick's daughter, and is not, ultimately, left alone and isolated. In the novel, both beef and oil are portrayed, rightly so, as industries. Neither is removed from greed, exploitation, and environmental degradation:

So now the stink of oil hung heavy in the Texas air. It penetrated the houses the gardens the motorcars the trains passing through towns and cities. It hung over the plains the desert the range; the Mexican shacks the Negro cabins. It haunted Reata. Giant rigs straddled the Gulf of Mexico waters. Platoons of metal and wood marched like Martians down the coast across the plateaus through the brush country. Only when you were soaring in an airplane fifteen thousand feet above the oil-soaked earth were your nostrils free of it. Azabache oil money poured into Reata. Reata produced two commodities for which the whole world was screaming. Beef. Oil. Beef. Oil. Only steel was lacking. Too bad we haven't got steel, Texas said.²⁴

The novel draws a parallel between beef and oil, both of which serve as "stinky" fuels for postwar America. Though the "stink" of oil and beef permeates the landscape, these industries come to facilitate rather than impinge upon everyday life.

Giant casts cattle ranching as a racist enterprise, reliant on exploited Chicano workers. Oil is also manipulative, though the petroleum workers, in the novel, are capable of petitioning successfully for better schools and public

²² *Ibid.*, 17.

²³ *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 366–67.

services. The real harm of oil, according to Uncle Bawley, an old cattle rancher, comes from its effects on society and the consumer:

Oil! What do folks use it for! In the war they were flying around shooting up towns of women and children. Now it's lobsters from Maine. Got to have lobsters. And streaking hell-bent in automobiles a hundred miles an hour, going nowheres, killing people like chickens by the roadside. Pushing ships across the ocean in four five days. There hasn't been a really good boatload of folks since the *Mayflower* crowd.²⁵

Bawley's nostalgia soon morphs into a critique of class erosion:

The girls all got three mink coats and no place to wear 'em. And emeralds the size of avocados. The men, they got Cadillacs like locomotives and places the size of ocean liners, and their offices done up in teakwood and cork and plexiglas. And what happens! The women get bored and go to raising pretty flowers for prize shows like their grammaws did and the men go back to raising cattle just like their grampappies did a long time ago. Next thing you know mustard greens and corn bread'll be fashionable amongst the Twenty-One Club when they go to New York. My opinion, they're tired of everything, and everybody's kind of tired of them. They made the full circle.²⁶

Bawley yearns for a more authentic life, before the consumerism so emblematic of postwar America becomes ubiquitous. Bawley's nostalgia for the ambitions of the "Mayflower crowd" are juxtaposed in the novel with the emphasis on small business propagated by Bob Dietz, an experimental farmer convinced that "here in Texas maybe we've got into the habit of confusing bigness with greatness. They're not the same."²⁷ Bob is an advocate of small-scale farming, and his vision of a nation comprising small, family-run businesses takes a strange turn as Bob continues:

Why at Cornell, in lab, they say there's a bunch of scientists here in the United States working on a thing so little you can't see it – a thing called the atom. It's a kind of secret but they say if they make it work – and I hope they can't – it could destroy the whole world, the whole big world just like that. Bang.²⁸

In his speech about how to shift the US from obsolete, large-scale industry to more efficient, small-scale businesses, Bob's desire for small farms curiously turns into fear of nuclear war. Through Bob, *Giant* establishes a connection between small-scale businesses, the middle-class family, and large-scale disaster. The family, bearer of normative values in both private and public spheres, must be protected against a world-ending force, a force that, in Bob's speech, emerges from the same focus on the small scale that leads the family to prominence over and above the monopolistic drives of industrialization, which *Giant* depicts as corrupt and anti-American. Discarding older forms of greatness and fearful of an apocalyptic future, *Giant* positions the family as the

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 378.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 378–79.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 350.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 350.

nation's only hope.²⁹ This move – seeing in small-scale endeavors predictions of nuclear war – positions the postwar family as looking towards a brilliant future while also fearing inevitable destruction. Families connote perseverance and heroic effort, and Uncle Bawley and Bob Dietz share a core insistence that the family is central to the nation's future. Bob's vision of the future – straddling a stark dichotomy between a technologically sophisticated, anti-federalist agrarianism and the world-extinguishing effects of the atom bomb – articulates what Fredric Jameson has identified as a central ideology in late capitalism: “the obliteration of difference on a world scale,” which entails “a vision of irrevocable triumph of spatial homogeneity over whatever heterogeneities might still have been fantasized in terms of global space.”³⁰ *Giant* portrays Texas as a heterogeneous space only to unite all of Texas's disparate populations and industries under the banner of national family values. That is, by opposing the feudal cattle ranch to the modern oil field, as well as the tyranny of industry to the difficulties of collective belonging, *Giant* dramatizes the erosion of differences as a transcendent experience of consciousness-raising that places the nuclear family at the center of affective bonds. The “good life” demands the destruction of racial and class differences, yet this erosion of difference relies on the egalitarian affordability of fossil fuels. In a period where many in the US experienced an increase in the accessibility of college education, a proliferation of managerial and middle-class employment opportunities, the growth of suburban housing developments, and, eventually, the erosion of gender and racial discrimination, the consumption of petroleum plays a central, if hidden, role.

At the end of the film, after Jett Rink's banquet celebrating the opening of his Conquistador Hotel, the Benedicts drive back to Reata. When their private plane flies over, a plane that they have earlier refused to travel in, they wave and realize how glad they are to have embraced the “simple life” of driving. Behind the wheel, Bick remarks, “Just as soon as the durn thing lands I'm going to sell it. This is for me, boy, the simple life. No more of this high-flying nonsense.” In this moment, the family car is cast as an intermediary between the horse and the airplane, a happy compromise between the individuality of horseback riding and the excessive luxury of the well-furnished private jet that imbues the modern technology of the automobile with nostalgia, just as *Giant* the film also feels nostalgic in its use of the modern techniques of Hollywood cinema. In her study of French culture in the 1950s and 1960s, Kristin Ross argues that the automobile and the film “reinforced each other. Their shared

²⁹ For an account of the family's priority in Cold War America, and especially how that vision of the family changed normative masculinity, see James Gilbert, *Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 106–63.

³⁰ Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 27.

qualities – movement, image, mechanization, standardization – made movies and cars the key commodity-vehicles for a complete transformation of European consumption patterns and cultural habits.”³¹ As Ross goes on to argue, this transformation is by and large an “Americanization” of Europe, and in *Giant* an intimate connection between consumption, family belonging, and the automobile is forged through the disavowal of oil’s centrality to postwar US culture.

In the novel’s concluding chapter, Leslie and Bick discuss the future of the Benedict family name. Leslie comments,

I thought, as we were driving along toward home – Luz and Juana and little Jordan and I – I thought to myself, well, maybe Jordan and I and all the others behind us have been failures, in a way. In a way, darling. In a way that has nothing to do with ranches and oil and millions and Rinks and Whitesides and Kashmirs. And then I thought about our Jordan and our Luz and I said to myself, well, after a hundred years it looks as if the Benedict family is going to be a real success at last.³²

This recognition of “failure” values the “Benedict family” over and above “ranches and oil and millions.” This revaluation is key to fossil-fuel futurity: industry and economics are displaced by the affective bonds of the family and the promise of futurity that the family represents. Leslie’s remark is followed by Bick’s realization, as he looks at his wife:

The lines that the years had wrought were wiped away by a magic hand, and there shone the look of purity, of hope and of eager expectancy that the face of the young girl had worn when she had come, twenty-five years ago, a bride to Texas.³³

This youthful gaze is represented in the film’s final shots of the Benedict grandchildren. The Anglo and Chicano toddlers fade into one another, accompanied by a nursery rhyme version of “The Eyes of Texas Are upon You.” The film concludes, like the novel, with a gaze into futurity. These eyes confirm not only the triumph of racial tolerance but also the hidden triumph of oil as the mediator of futurity.³⁴

Oil’s function as a vanishing mediator between industrialism and family life often renders it an absent presence in American culture.³⁵ As Amitav Ghosh

³¹ Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 38.

³² Ferber, 401–02.

³³ *Ibid.*, 402.

³⁴ For a reading of an earlier novel written by Edna Ferber, her 1931 *American Beauty*, that emphasizes how Ferber strives both to retain the power of, and to reimagine, the family and its role in the nation see Susan Edmunds, *Grotesque Relations: Modernist Domestic Fiction and the U.S. Welfare State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 95–122.

³⁵ In his account of “The Oil Ecofilm,” for example, John Shelton Lawrence mentions only three films: *Tulsa* (1949), *Giant*, and *On Deadly Ground* (1994). See John Shelton Lawrence, “Western Ecological Films: The Subgenre with No Name,” in Deborah A. Carmichael, ed., *The Landscape of Hollywood Westerns* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2006),

argues in a review of Abdelrahman Munif's *Cities of Salt* novels, there is an absence of art, literature, and culture about oil, for "the history of oil is a matter of embarrassment verging on the unspeakable, the pornographic."³⁶ In *Giant*, though, it is clear that oil is not so much absent from US culture as it is fractured and subsumed into a vision of a divided social field, constituted by, on the one hand, disavowed, avaricious businessmen and, on the other, normative, happy families. Subsequent representations of oil employ this "fossil-fuel futurity" logic as well, though in the television drama *Dallas* and the film *There Will Be Blood* oil's subsumption into demonic industry and domestic normativity becomes increasingly unstable, as petroleum consumption and the family both become widely recognized problems in the late 1970s. Following the 1979 oil crisis, oil connotes scarcity, and the American family loses its idyllic, paternal stability following the successes of the women's liberation movement and the passage of no-fault divorce laws in most US states by the early 1980s. Accordingly, the pillars of fossil-fuel futurity – the availability of petroleum and the happily reproductive, middle-class family – become unstable by the late 1970s, throwing the connections between oil and the future into crisis.

First aired as a miniseries in 1978, then picked up as a series for thirteen more seasons, from 1979 to 1991, *Dallas* details the lives of the Ewing family. The Ewings own a ranch and an independent oil business, and the show mixes family and business problems, often blurring the distinction between the private and the public.³⁷ *Dallas* draws heavily on the iconography of *Giant*, especially in its representation of the moral divide between ranching and oil. The Ewing family home doubles as Southfork Ranch, where the good-natured son, Bobby Ewing, played by Patrick Duffy, often works alongside the ranch-hand beefcake Ray Krebbs, played by Steve Kanaly. Krebbs is later revealed to

34–36. For a reading of *Tulsa* see Peter C. Rollins, "Tulsa (1949) as an Oil-Field Film: A Study in Ecological Ambivalence," in *ibid.*, 81–93. For an account of the concept "vanishing mediator," see Fredric Jameson, "The Vanishing Mediator; or, Max Weber as Storyteller," in *idem*, *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays, 1971–1986*, Volume II, *The Syntax of History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 3–34.

³⁶ Amitav Ghosh, "Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel," *New Republic*, 206, 9 (2 March 1992), 29.

³⁷ For a comparison of *Dallas* with *The Godfather*, based on how both represent the family as inextricably bound to business, see Mary S. Mander, "Dallas: The Mythology of Crime and the Moral Occult," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 17, 2 (Fall 1983), 44–50. *Dallas* was immensely popular in the US and Europe. For a reception study of *Dallas* in the Netherlands see Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*, trans. Della Couling (New York: Routledge, 1989; first published 1985). For a reading of *Dallas* in relation to the city of Dallas, Texas, and especially the television show's relationship with Dallas as the site of the Kennedy assassination, see Harvey J. Graff, *The Dallas Myth: The Making and Unmaking of an American City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 13–17.

be the illegitimate son of patriarch oilman Jock Ewing, played by Jim Davis, in one of the show's typical plot twists. The Ewing matriarch, Miss Ellie, played by Barbara Bel Geddes, grew up on the cattle ranch and views ranching as a wholesome industry, especially in relation to the oil business. Ewing Oil, founded by Miss Ellie's husband, Jock Ewing, is controlled by the Ewing's eldest son, and the show's antihero, J. R. Ewing, played by Larry Hagman. J. R. shares not only the initials of Jett Rink but also the unchecked ambition and greed of his predecessor.

Ewing Oil serves as mere background for domestic conflicts during the initial miniseries that launched *Dallas* in 1978.³⁸ The oil business provides a rationale for the Ewing family's wealth and serves as a justification for why the wealthy family, including two adult sons, their wives, and a third Ewing son's daughter, Lucy, played by Charlene Tilton, all live in the same large home. *Dallas* develops multiple plots and subplots around its central cast of characters. For example, the Ewing family has a long-standing feud with the lawyer and politician Cliff Barnes, played by Ken Kercheval; Bobby and Pamela, played by Victoria Principal, wrestle with their inability to have a child; J. R. and Sue Ellen, played by Linda Gray, go through ups and downs in their dysfunctional marriage; Jock and Miss Ellie deal with health problems; Lucy has many ill-fated love affairs; and, Ray Krebbs struggles with his unhappy bachelorhood. The oil business remains largely a subplot to these more central narratives until Ewing Oil jeopardizes the family itself, in the plot that leads to the show's famous "Who Shot J. R.?" cliffhanger.³⁹ This oil narrative reflects contemporary anxieties around the global oil industry, exacerbated by the 1979 oil crisis as J. R. risks the Ewing fortune by pursuing oil in an unstable foreign country.⁴⁰ Leading up to the cliffhanger, J. R. Ewing has started building oil wells in an unnamed Southeast Asian country, which end up posing a number of financial difficulties for J. R. Ultimately, he mortgages his family's home, Southfork Ranch, to fund the construction of the wells, without the knowledge or approval of the rest of the Ewing family. J. R.'s risky business deal is eventually brought to light. The Southeast Asian oil wells do not come in on schedule, and Ewing Oil is soon in danger of defaulting on its loan and therefore losing Southfork Ranch. This crisis is averted when the oil wells start producing, right when they need to in order to save Southfork. Following his

³⁸ The miniseries is collected as Season One in *Dallas: The Complete First and Second Seasons* (1978–1979), Warner Brothers DVD, 2004.

³⁹ The cliffhanger episode that concludes with J. R. being shot is "A House Divided," *Dallas: The Complete Third Season* (1979–1980), Warner Brothers DVD, 2005.

⁴⁰ Tied to the Iranian revolution's effects on oil production and compounded by the Three Mile Island meltdown and the Iran hostage crisis, the 1979 oil crisis led to increasing concerns about dependency on "foreign oil" in the United States and the question of US global dominance. See Yergin, *The Prize*, 657–96.

triumph in Southeast Asia, J. R. is tipped off that his oil wells are in further danger due to an impending *coup d'état* in the Southeast Asian nation where Ewing Oil has drilled. J. R. then quickly sells these oil wells to close business associates, right before the wells are nationalized during the coup. J. R. has, then, betrayed both his family, by mortgaging their home without their consent, and his business community, by selling them oil wells soon to be nationalized. Following all of these developments, in the season finale, an unidentified person shoots J. R. The next season picks up with J. R. being rushed to the hospital, and the subsequent episodes play up the possible suspects, which include J. R.'s wife, Sue Ellen, as well as his wronged business associates.⁴¹ In the lead-up to his shooting, J. R. has jeopardized the Ewing family's home and put the family in crisis, and he has violated the fraternal bonds between the members of the Texas oil cartel to which the Ewings belong. This disregard for familial and fiscal stability leads to the shooting, as J. R. is symbolically punished for his pursuit of wealth over and above family.

Eventually, Sue Ellen's sister, Kristin Shepard, played by Mary Crosby, confesses to the crime, which she committed after her affair with J. R. ended and she was left without the promise of further Ewing wealth and glamour. Despite J. R.'s nefarious business practices, it is ultimately his entanglement with family – his bad behavior as a husband and a lover, his affair with his wife's sister – that results in the shooting. In *Dallas*, the oil business corrupts even the family, dooming the Ewings to a life of intrigue, betrayal, and duplicity. Fossil-fuel futurity registers not through the disavowal of the petroleum industry, as it does in *Giant*, but instead through the recognition that the family, itself, is just as exploitative and manipulative as the petroleum industry that empowers it. Nonetheless, both the family and the oil business are represented as necessary, even sacrosanct, institutions, to be preserved and protected at all costs, despite their obvious flaws. Along with its clear reference to the 1979 oil crisis, *Dallas's* representation of the family as always on the verge of collapse reflects another crisis in the 1970s US, the sharply rising divorce rate.⁴² As Nancy Cott notes, beginning in the 1970s “the divorce rate rose . . . furiously, to equal more than half the marriage rate, portending that at

⁴¹ The episodes are “No More Mister Nice Guy Part I,” “No More Mister Nice Guy Part II,” “Nightmare,” and “Who Done It?”. These episodes are collected in *Dallas: The Complete Fourth Season* (1980–1981), Warner Brothers DVD, 2006.

⁴² The rise in the divorce rate is often attributed to the unilateral and no-fault divorce laws passed in all but two states in the US between 1970 and 1983. For readings of the divorce rate and the debates about the cause of its rise in the late twentieth century see Leora Freidberg, “Did Unilateral Divorce Raise Divorce Rates? Evidence from Panel Data,” *American Economic Review*, 88, 3 (June 1998), 608–27; and Justin Wolfers, “Did Unilateral Divorce Raise Divorce Rates? A Reconciliation and New Results,” *American Economic Review*, 96, 5 (Dec. 2006), 1802–20.

least one in two marriages would end in divorce.”⁴³ In *Dallas*, divorce is discussed, or threatened, by every Ewing couple, making it clear that the family is no longer a stable entity, insulated from crisis by normative belonging. Many of the women in *Dallas* are also frustrated by their husband’s understanding of gender roles; Pamela Ewing wants to have a career, which goes against her husband Bobby’s desire for Pamela to stay at home and have children, while Sue Ellen is unsatisfied as a stay-at-home mother, turning to alcohol and affairs as solace. The vision of the happy family in *Giant* has clearly faltered in *Dallas*, a show produced in the wake of the feminist critique of normative domesticity and the restrictions it places on women.⁴⁴

The pursuit of oil profits and the manipulation of family loyalties are coextensive in *Dallas*, and both practices are discussed in the show as natural and innate, a matter of inheritance, rather than a set of economic, ethical, and political practices. For example, in the concluding episode to the original 1978 *Dallas* miniseries, Bobby Ewing’s wife Pamela announces that she is pregnant. In a drunken attempt to apologize for treating Pamela as an outsider, J. R. accidentally causes Pamela to fall from the attic of Southfork’s barn, and Pamela suffers a miscarriage. Later, when Pamela is resting in bed, Jock Ewing enters the room and apologizes for the Ewing family: “Us Ewings, we’re just not easy to live with, as you’ve found out. We’ve had things our way for so long that maybe, well, maybe, it got in the way of our being just people.”⁴⁵ Family, routed through oil, becomes something impersonal, even inhuman. In *Dallas*, then, the family’s ties to oil become deterministic and fatalistic. The family is bound, however unhappily, to oil, and there is nothing to be done about it other than to acquiesce to its hold on everyday life. In *Dallas*, fossil-fuel futurity no longer offers a happy vision of family belonging but instead a claustrophobic union of oil and family, a union that exacerbates both the instability of the oil industry and the fragility of marriage.

Dallas represents the resiliency of fossil-fuel futurity, as an oil crisis is explained away as a family crisis and, historically, the 1979 oil crisis makes no lasting impact on fossil-fuel consumption in the United States. Contrary to *Dallas*’s focus on the family as both the cause and the solution to oil crisis, Paul Thomas Anderson’s *There Will Be Blood* dramatizes a possible rupture between family and oil. Daniel Plainview, the film’s central character, played by Daniel Day-Lewis, is another independent oilman. The film begins in the early twentieth century, as Plainview works as a lone prospector, then quickly

⁴³ Nancy Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 203.

⁴⁴ This critique was most popularly articulated in Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963).

⁴⁵ “Barbecue,” *Dallas: The Complete First and Second Seasons*.

jumps ahead to Plainview's larger-scale oil business. In an essay on the limitations of representing oil in American culture, Peter Hitchcock criticizes *There Will Be Blood* for casting oil as a kind of individual pathology rather than a part of political or economic history.⁴⁶ The film's focus on Daniel Plainview is indeed the major revision that Anderson undertakes of his source material, Upton Sinclair's 1927 novel *Oil!*. While Sinclair's novel has more characters and a clearly political message in comparison to Anderson's *There Will Be Blood*, both the novel and the film respond to and critique privatization. Sinclair's *Oil!* is written, in part, as a response to the 1924 Teapot Dome Scandal and the "privatization of public goods . . . typical of the Harding administration."⁴⁷ Featuring a character named "H. W.," in 2007 an invocation of the Bush presidencies both past and present, *There Will Be Blood* is also about privatization, and the way in which the intertwining of privatized oil and the "private sphere" of family relations produces the violent yet curiously noble figure of Daniel Plainview.⁴⁸ In my reading, it is precisely the focus on the individual, oil, and family relations that gives *There Will Be Blood* resonance as a narrative about oil. Hitchcock describes the connection between blood and oil, kinship and crude, as a "metonymic disjunction," and it is the "disjunction" that the film introduces between oil and blood that marks a departure from oil's role in *Dallas* and *Giant*.⁴⁹ *There Will Be Blood* presents a challenge to the viewer: can a notion of familial belonging – "blood" – be recuperated from, or even exist without, oil? The film seems to present a rather bleak answer to this question, as it concludes with Plainview alone and drunk in his mansion after rejecting his adopted son H. W. and beating the evangelical minister Eli Sunday, played by Paul Dano, to death with a bowling pin.

While *There Will Be Blood's* conclusion gestures to oil's persistence – Plainview successfully guards his fortune – it is also a meditation on how oil and blood become equivalent in our social imaginary. *There Will Be Blood* begins without dialogue, as a single figure, Daniel Plainview, mines silver. The first complete sentence spoken in the film is "There she is," as Plainview finds silver in a well that he has just dynamited, resulting in not only the setting loose of ore but also Plainview's own broken leg.⁵⁰ The discovery of

⁴⁶ Peter Hitchcock, "Oil in an American Imaginary," *New Formations* 69 (Spring 2010), 81–97.

⁴⁷ Kevin Mattson, *Upton Sinclair and the Other American Century* (Hoboken: Wiley & Sons, 2006), 141.

⁴⁸ For a reading of *There Will Be Blood's* connections to free market economics see Michael W. Clune, *American Literature and the Free Market, 1945–2000* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 27–52. For a psychoanalytic reading of *There Will Be Blood* and Paul Thomas Anderson's other films see Julian Murphet, "P. T. Anderson's Dilemma: The Limits of Surrogate Paternity," *Sydney Studies in English*, 34 (2008), 63–85.

⁴⁹ Hitchcock, 96. ⁵⁰ *There Will Be Blood* (2007), Paramount DVD, 2008.

ore leads to Plainview's reentrance into society, as he drags himself back to a town to verify his claim. In its early sequence, the film associates Plainview with the earth – he is a primal creature, and culture only enters upon the discovery of natural resources. The film, then, dramatizes fossil-fuel futurity as an ideology – natural resources are explicitly portrayed as the material upon which a set of norms and a vision of the future are constructed. *There Will Be Blood's* difference from *Giant* and *Dallas* lies in the fact that the oil business is not subsumed into the family but remains visible and irreducible to “natural” family relations.

Following this opening primal scene, Plainview gains an oil claim and a family simultaneously. While working in the well, a worker is killed. Plainview lives, covered in oil in a way that mirrors the demonic, oil-soaked Jett Rink in *Giant*. The dead worker leaves behind an infant son, and Plainview adopts the son. Plainview's adopted son, H. W. Plainview, played by Dillon Freasier as a child and Russell Harvard as an adult, becomes central to the way that Plainview positions himself as an oilman. After two scenes of Plainview with the infant H. W., the film again jumps ahead in time, as Plainview tries to acquire oil leases on a newly discovered oil field in California.⁵¹ H. W. stands right next to him, and part of Plainview's pitch to the landowners is that “I'm a family man, and I run a family business. This is my son and my partner, H. W. Plainview. We offer you the bond of family that very few oilmen can understand.” Daniel and H. W. Plainview have no blood relation, only an oil relation. The “bond of family” is, in fact, produced not through conventional kinship relations but through the family oil business. In *Dallas*, oil complicates family relations that are already strained by the threat of divorce. In *There Will Be Blood*, oil becomes the only family relation.

Early in the film, H. W. is deafened permanently when he sustains a blow to the head as the Bandy oilfield violently comes in. H. W.'s deafness serves as a figure for the political lesson of the film – the process of understanding oil's claims on our everyday lives might require something more than unmasking the oil industry as corrupt and exploitative, something that has become all too familiar. From Jett Rink to J. R. Ewing and Daniel Plainview, we have come to expect to view oilmen as monstrous antiheroes, and these devilish oilmen are a means by which the oil industry can be disavowed while oil itself is endowed with futurity.⁵² *There Will Be Blood* gestures to the persistence of futurity's

⁵¹ For a history of oil in California, of which Upton Sinclair had first-hand knowledge, see Paul Sabin, *Crude Politics: The California Oil Market, 1900–1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

⁵² The trope of the devilish oilman goes back, at least, to Ida M. Tarbell's *The History of the Standard Oil Company*, which focusses on the business practices and personal character of John D. Rockefeller. Tarbell's *History* was originally serialized in *McClure's Magazine* from 1902 to 1904 and published as a two-volume book in 1904. See Ida M. Tarbell, *The History of*

connection to oil in its final sequence, as an adult H. W. leaves his father's oil business to start his own oil wells in Mexico. When H. W. tells his father of his plans, Plainview reacts angrily and tells H. W. that he is not Plainview's legitimate child. H. W. leaves as his father screams, "You're a bastard from a basket." Following this exchange, the film concludes with Plainview's murder of the evangelical preacher Eli Sunday. The murder signifies the extinguishment of the troubled connection between capital and religion represented by the two characters. In the end, capitalism triumphs in Plainview's single-minded pursuit of profit and monopoly; it is void of the hypocritical moral and spiritual trappings of Sunday's ministry. By leaving Plainview before this bloody confrontation and pursuing oil outside the family, H. W.'s independent oil wells represent a refusal of fossil-fuel futurity; only by rejecting oil's claim on family can H. W. hope to escape the control of his father. When read in relation to the Iraq War, *There Will Be Blood's* political message becomes clear: oil promises to secure the future, yet the pursuit of oil replaces family, society, and reason.⁵³ The film negates George W. Bush's widely reported personal rationale for invading Iraq to depose Saddam Hussein: "After all, this is the guy who tried to kill my dad."⁵⁴ Serving US oil interests as well as the President's sense of familial obligation, the Iraq War becomes, through the lens of *There Will Be Blood*, just another inevitable, violent effect of fossil-fuel futurity's binding of the oil industry to family relations, a connection that is severed at the film's conclusion as Daniel Plainview and H. W. part ways.

What *There Will Be Blood* dramatizes, then, is the constructedness of oil's connections to futurity. In *There Will Be Blood*, oil persists as kinship, even

the Standard Oil Company, briefer version, ed. David M. Chalmers (Mineola: Dover, 2003; first published 1966). For historical accounts of oilmen that take into account this mode of representation see Roger M. Olien and Diana Davids Olien, *Oil and Ideology: The Cultural Creation of the American Petroleum Industry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Roger M. Olien and Diana Davids Hinton, *Wildcatters: Texas Independent Oilmen* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007; first published 1984); and Brian Black, *Petrolia: The Landscape of America's First Oil Boom* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 1–12.

⁵³ This reflects the 2003 Iraq War, and especially the Bush Administration's unclear motives for invasion. As Peter Maass notes, "America's desires were so influenced by Iraq's inebriating crude that Washington could not think straight about the reasons for invading [Iraq]." "Neither [Vice President Dick] Cheney's motives nor the motives of the administration he served can be distilled into one word. WMD, democracy, religion, Oedipus, oil – America was like a drunk fumbling with a set of keys at night." See Maass, 159, 161. For a psychoanalytic reading of the Iraq War, the Bush Administration's conflicting reasons for invasion, and the war's ideological stakes see Slavoj Žižek, *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* (New York: Verso, 2004).

⁵⁴ John King, "Bush calls Saddam 'the guy who tried to kill my dad,'" *CNN.com*, 27 Sept. 2002, available at <http://edition.cnn.com/2002/ALLPOLITICS/09/27/bush.war.talk>, accessed 6 Sept. 2011.

when kinship itself – or “blood” – vanishes. In this sense, *H. W.* illustrates the political challenge of the film and a rupture in the ideological workings of fossil-fuel futurity. If *H. W.* can refuse family to pursue his own oil wells in Mexico, then it is conceivable that we, the audience, can inversely form alternative practices and modes of belonging that are not underwritten by fossil fuels. The way to imagine life without oil might be to do what *H. W.* does: stop listening to oil’s claims on us; turn a deaf ear to the intimate connection forged between oil, the American family, and futurity.

In *Giant*, the avaricious oilman, Jett Rink, is displaced by a pluralistic family, the Benedicts. This family ideal, though, is premised on the consumption of Jett Rink’s oil and consolidated through the use of the family automobile, a sign of middle-class prosperity in the 1950s US. The consumption of fossil fuels, then, is a hidden but necessary component of *Giant*’s vision of the national family. In *Dallas*, as petroleum consumption becomes a problem during and after the 1979 oil crisis and the patriarchal, reproductive American family becomes unstable after an unprecedented rise in the national divorce rate and the inroads toward gender equity made by the feminist movement, the avaricious oilman, J. R. Ewing, is not displaced from but is instead at the center of the family. Oil is inextricable from and incapable of being subsumed within the Ewing family. While *Giant* displaces the oil industry while normalizing petroleum consumption, *Dallas* acknowledges the presence of the oil industry in everyday life and constructs that presence as ultimately nefarious but necessary. In both *Giant* and *Dallas*, there is no future without oil, though each text imagines that future in very different terms, as idyllic family happiness and liberal pluralism in *Giant*, and as a continual cycle of betrayal and redemption in *Dallas*. *There Will Be Blood* marks a contemporary crisis in fossil-fuel futurity, as the family oil business undoes family altogether. Allegorizing the conjoined oil and familial reasons for President Bush’s invasion of Iraq, the film dramatizes the disjunction of oil and family, demonstrating how oil’s hold on our imagination of family belonging is distortive and parasitical. Through this reading of fossil-fuel futurity’s movements through the 1950s to the present in three exemplary texts, we can glimpse the possible imagining of a future without fossil fuels, an act that will also require rethinking ideals of family belonging that have been determined by oil.