

**AUTHOR****Anna Åberg**

Chalmers University of  
Technology,  
anna.aberg@chalmers.se,  
ORCID: 0000-0001-6547-3982

**Kristoffer Ekberg**

Lund University,  
kristoffer.ekberg@hek.lu.se,  
ORCID: 0000-0002-1468-7283

**Susanna Lidström**

KTH Royal Institute of  
Technology,  
susanna.lidstrom@abe.kth.se,  
ORCID: 0000-0003-3476-2567

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## Pervasive petrocultures: histories, ideas and practices of fossil fuels

**Abstract**

This special issue focuses on the concept of petroculture and its relationship with energy history and energy humanities. The contributions explore many facets of oil, including far-reaching impacts of petroleum on identities and practices as well as the role of economic, geopolitical and cultural factors in maintaining the use of fossil fuels despite efforts to transition to renewable energy systems. Our aim is to bridge petrocultural studies and energy history, exploring diverse geographical perspectives and historical contexts. We believe that further integration of these fields can help strengthen understanding of how petrocultures resist attempts to decrease the use of oil across modern societies.

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**Plan of the article**

- Introduction
- State of the art and contribution
- Energy history, ecocriticism and petroculture
- Conclusion: petroculture as a way to see beyond emissions

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## INTRODUCTION

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- 1 A growing awareness of the consequences of our energy system in terms of climate change and other forms of environmental degradation has informed new research fields, aiming to make sense of our current state as well as understand how to mitigate negative effects. One such field of research has been labelled petroculture studies. Petroculture is a cross-disciplinary concept that brings together researchers from environmental and energy humanities working to unpack and make visible how oil pervades modern lives on all levels.
  
- 2 Our goal in this special issue is to strengthen the relationship between petroculture studies and energy history. Our contributions include case studies that both draw from the past in some way and point to the embeddedness of energy in cultural and narrative contexts, thus connecting history with ecocritical research. We find it especially important to look at how petrocultures have permeated the past century in light of the under-representation of oil in contemporary climate politics; even though carbon emissions from fossil fuels have caused the climate crisis, oil is rarely mentioned explicitly in climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies. How can we understand this contradiction? And how can the notion of petroculture aid us in this endeavour?
  
- 3 The inaugural issue of JEHRHE identified several key shifts in the development of energy history as a field. The first one was the shift from studying the history of individual energy sectors to examining the wider systems that energy is a component of. Second, there was a change of focus from systems and sectors in their mature state and function to analysing transitions. Third, energy historians have shown an increasing interest in energy use and consumption, in addition to extraction and production. Petroculture is a concept and research field that connects to all of these movements in different ways, making it a fruitful concept for energy historians to engage with.

With regard to the first movement, while petroculture research is concerned with specific sectors and has often been studied through the central (extractive) sites of these sectors (or at least the research field as such emerged around these sites), the concept invites us to identify something beyond this, a more pervasive system, or culture.<sup>1</sup> By focusing on such cultures rather than more narrowly defined structures, petroculture research moves beyond merely identifying the components and material conditions that make petroleum use possible. The concept draws our attention to the meanings and symbols that uphold this culture, beyond the political economy of sites of resource extraction. Connecting petroleum use to cultural practices places emphasis on longevity and ties into identities and practices that are shaped by petroleum in distinct ways, as we can see from the contributions to this special issue.

As regards the second point, petrocultures research is linked with the growing interest in (energy) transitions of recent years. The climate crisis has made evident the need to shift away from the burning of fossil fuels and triggered an immense interest in past energy transitions.<sup>2</sup> However, so far petroculture studies have focused more on processes that have solidified energy systems and thus hindered the transition away from fossil fuel use, showing less interest in examining processes by which specific fossil resources have been abandoned. For example, works like Matthew Huber's *Lifeblood* and Stephanie LeMenager's *Living Oil* retrace the omnipresence of oil in cultural imaginations and practices in North America, reflecting the profound importance of oil for the rise of the US geopolitical dominance and national myths.

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<sup>1</sup> The Petrocultures Research Group at the University of Alberta is the prime example. See Sheena Wilson, Adam Carlson, Imre Szeman, *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Rempel, Joyeeta Gupta, "Equitable, Effective, and Feasible Approaches for a Prospective Fossil Fuel Transition", *WIREs Climate Change*, vol. 13, n° 2, 2022; Richard York, Shannon Elizabeth Bell, "Energy Transitions or Additions? Why a Transition from Fossil Fuels Requires More Than the Growth of Renewable Energy", *Energy Research & Social Science*, vol. 51, 2019, 40-43.

Less research has been directed towards places and periods where oil is ‘new’, or where the dependence on oil is questioned on various grounds.

6 The perseverance and pervasiveness of oil is also a theme that runs through many of the articles in this issue, making clear that these obstacles in the transition to renewable energy sources have been created as well as maintained over time, and can depend on economic, geopolitical and cultural factors. This is an important but often neglected theme in climate politics. In fact, although fossil fuels are at the heart of the climate problem, some energy issues have historically been absent in climate negotiations.<sup>3</sup> By separating the rhetoric around carbon emissions from clear statements about the fossil fuel that causes most of them, the perceived link between climate change and the role of oil in everyday life has been obscured. Our goal is to use the concept of petroculture to engage with historically situated and on-the-ground practices that have been responsible for the inertia of fossil fuel systems, both in the past and today. We suggest that this approach can help us understand current energy problems and the huge transformations we face as a global community.<sup>4</sup>

7 Considering the third point, from the perspective of the consumer, the use of specific energy sources is far from a free choice and therefore the transition away from one energy source towards another cannot be thought of as the responsibility of the individual. However, we argue

that it is nevertheless important to acknowledge both the practical conveniences and the cultural meanings that petroleum products have provided throughout the world. Without this recognition, it is nearly impossible to understand the obstacles to the current energy transition and the success with which fossil fuel companies have been able to capitalise on cultural narratives and material conditions.

### STATE OF THE ART AND CONTRIBUTION

8 Despite its centrality in shaping contemporary societies, oil is surprisingly absent from historical research, with some exceptions for specific studies of energy history.<sup>5</sup> Instead, humanities research on oil and oil history have primarily taken place within other disciplines, including the relatively new interdisciplinary fields of environmental and energy humanities.<sup>6</sup>

9 Petroculture was established as a research field in North America in the 2010s, through books such as *Living Oil* (2014) and *Petrocultures* (2017).<sup>7</sup> While these studies named the field as a new research area, its roots go further back. The first study of so-called petrofiction was published in 1992, in the form of a book review by Amitav Gosh, titled *Petrofiction: the oil encounter and the novel*.<sup>8</sup>

10 Aiming to unpack the relationship between oil, politics and culture, petroculture research has not been primarily historic. To a degree, studies of petroculture have even been conducted in opposition to a certain form of history writing, exemplified by Daniel Yergin’s US- and

<sup>3</sup> Stefan C. Aykut, Monica Castro, “The End of Fossil Fuels? Understanding the Partial Climatisation of Global Energy Debates”, in Stefan C. Aykut, Jean Foyer and Edouard Morena (eds.), *Globalizing the Climate: COP21 and the Climatisation of Global Debates* (London: Routledge, 2017), 173-193.

<sup>4</sup> For a different approach to reaffirming the connection between oil and climate change see for example: Peter C. Frumhoff, Richard Heede, Naomi Oreskes, “The Climate Responsibilities of Industrial Carbon Producers”, *Climatic Change*, vol. 132, n° 2, 2015, 157-71; Marco Grasso, “Oily politics: A critical assessment of the oil and gas industry’s contribution to climate change”, *Energy Research & Social Science*, vol. 50, 2019, 106-15.

<sup>5</sup> The overview and argument in this section is previously outlined in Jens Millkrantz, Anna Åberg, Kristoffer Ekberg, Susanna Lidström, “Petrokultur och energihistoria”, *Scandia*, vol. 88, n°1, 2022 (in Swedish).

<sup>6</sup> Katie Ritson, “Review Essay. Energy in Crisis: New Perspectives on Petrocultures”, *Ecozon@: European Journal of Literature, Culture and Environment*, vol. 14, no 1, 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Sheena Wilson et al., *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture* (cf. note 1).

<sup>8</sup> Amitav Gosh, “Petrofiction: the oil encounter and the novel”, *The New Republic*, 1992, 29-34.

production hyphen centred global oil history from 1990.<sup>9</sup> Petroculture research has taken a different approach to cultures surrounding the use of fossil fuels, focusing more on everyday and individual habits than on grand national narratives spun around a few select individuals. However, despite this focus on use, petroculture research has still to a significant degree focused on countries or regions where oil is extracted.

11 In its opposition to empirical political and economic history writing such as Yergin's, we suggest that the petroculture research field has lost, or never acquired, a firm footing in historical research. Through temporal concepts such as permanence and pervasiveness and by exposing the longevity and emergence of specific oil cultures, we aim to show that petroculture research can benefit from a deeper engagement with historical analyses. Such approaches, we believe, can usefully complement other more prevalent perspectives in contemporary studies of the practices and cultures surrounding the use of fossil fuels. In this way, the special issue aims to further connections between studies of petroculture and energy history research in multiple ways, focusing on intertwining historical and ecocritical perspectives. Specifically, what the contributions to the special issue together intend to accomplish in relation to petroculture research is twofold:

12 First, petroculture research has focused on supposed centres of petroleum, in other words the places or regions of extraction. This special issue interrogates what happens when petroculture is seen as something that appears in all parts of the lifespan of oil, including prospecting, transporting, storing, burning and consuming. In these articles, petroculture is diversified geographically and exists both as world-system and in local practices and imaginations.

13 Second, petroculture research today primarily engages with contemporary society. The special issue views petroculture as changing over time,

and as historically situated and specified. In this way, not only oil extraction and exportation are historically grounded, but also the ensuing cultural behaviours, narratives and expectations. By historicising oil cultures in this way, we aim to shed light on some of the difficulties, often unacknowledged or down-played, associated with moving away from the use of oil and transition to other forms of energy that are associated with different social and cultural behaviours and expectations.

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### ENERGY HISTORY, ECOCRITICISM AND PETROCULTURE

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The basic assumption within petroculture research is that oil is not only an energy source: oil is part of our lives in a fundamental way, permeating our cultures, economies, politics and material lives. In order to make this manifest it is crucial to acknowledge that oil is not a mere thing or object but, as Huber argues, a "socioecological relation" encompassing both material and social aspects.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, ecocritical theory has pointed to the way oil has been obscured in social ideology as well as cultural expressions, despite the fact that in most societies, ideas and visions of a good life presuppose the burning of fossil fuels in some form.<sup>11</sup>

Petroculture is therefore not merely a description of the properties of a given society, but also a theoretical and methodological perspective that aims to unveil the embeddedness of oil in everyday life.<sup>12</sup> The contributions to this special issue use different concepts and methods to make oil visible in this sense. In "The ubiquity

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew T. Huber, *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 4.

<sup>11</sup> See, i.e. Patricia Yaeger, "Editor's column. Literature in the Ages of Wood, Tallow, Coal, Whale Oil, Gasoline, Atomic Power, and Other Energy Sources", *PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, vol. 126, n° 2, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Christopher F. Jones, "Petromyopia: Oil and the Energy Humanities", *Humanities*, vol. 5, n° 2, 2019, 36; Cara Dagget, *The Birth of Energy: Fossil Fuels, Thermodynamics, and the Politics of Work* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019); Huber, Matt, "Teaching Energy Geography? It's Complicated", *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, vol. 40, n° 1, 2016.

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<sup>9</sup> Daniel Yergin, *The Prize : The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991).

of Royal Dutch Shell in Netherlands as a case of banal petroculture,” Geert Buelens adapts Michael Billig’s concept of “banal nationalism” to highlight a form of “banal petroculture” he sees as underlying and permeating Dutch politics and culture for a century or more. A prominent part of Dutch society since 1890, Buelens shows how Shell has managed to weave a narrative around itself that has informed a view of the multinational company as a force of good, despite multiple scandals indicating the opposite, allowing it to “hide in plain sight” and escape scrutiny as well as criticism, until only recently. Buelens’s combined narrative and historical analysis shows the interplay between nationalist pride, accustomisation and elitism in extending and maintaining a corporate petroculture, which becomes nationally embedded, but at the same time invisible.

16 In other contexts, oil connects to grand national narratives in a more explicit way. Christos Karampatsos, Spyros Tzokas and Giorgos Velegarakis show the complexity of national oil narratives in their study of the Greek hydrocarbon discourse and its development over the past 150 years. While Greek hydrocarbon exploration has mostly failed over this time, a strong discourse of possibility, including descriptions of hydrocarbons as “subterranean treasures” and “deposits of hope” has surfaced periodically, largely in relation to national and international turbulence in terms of war and crisis. Karampatsos *et al.* demonstrate how this discourse is driven by a mixture of popularised petroleum geology and tacit geopolitical calculation, forming a particular Greek petrocultural expression. By looking at the historical contexts and developments of such naturalised national narratives of oil, we gain a deeper understanding of how the connections between oil and nation go beyond a “whig history” of oil.

17 Through their discourse analysis, Karampatsos *et al.* also argue that Greek hydrocarbons “displayed their ability to produce material effects despite their physical absence”. The role of geology is central in this process; petroleum geologists use their expertise to publicly formulate

the potentiality of oil, while simultaneously and tacitly connecting their practice to wider state imperatives as well as historical context. The authors thus highlight an important but understudied subject within petroculture studies: science. Although the presence and creations of knowledge and infrastructures are central to the pervasiveness of oil in our societies, which is also highlighted by petroculture studies, the role of science and scientists in creating social spaces for oil is understudied, thus making the science of oil a black box. Opening this black box can further deepen our understanding of the societal pervasiveness of oil in the form of, for example, printing chemistry, as pointed out by Furuseth, or in the field of economic theory, as touched upon by Groß *et al.*<sup>13</sup>

Another way of uncovering this normal state of oil is through genealogical methods where the “contingent processes that have brought [petroculture] into being” are analysed from a historical perspective.<sup>14</sup> This approach is taken by Giulia Champion in “Pervasive extractivism: petroculture and sedimented histories in Sandrine Bessora’s *Petroleum*”. Champion reads Bessora’s novel “as a re-telling of Gabonese history” centred on extractivism and colonialism, demonstrating a genealogy that connects contemporary petroculture in Gabon to an extractive history that includes slavery, logging and mining. Placing petroleum extraction at the centre of a combined historical and ecocritical analysis, Champion uses Bessora’s novel to identify how “world-systemic history connects colonial pasts with extractive presents” - Gabonese petroculture is seen as inextricably bound up with colonial and imperial practices in ways that have “erased the country’s past”. Drawing on the novel’s mythical associations, Champion suggests that Bessora provides a historiographical alternative that allows a view of how Gabon’s future could be shaped differently.

<sup>13</sup> See also current research by Christopher F. Jones.

<sup>14</sup> Mitchell Dean, *Critical and Effective Histories: Foucault’s Methods and Historical Sociology* (London: Routledge, 1994).

- 19 A central strategy for visibilising the pervasiveness of oil is to use myth and literary genre to tap into emotional and cultural meanings of oil. In Bessora's novel, the merging between the Medea figure and the West African Mami Wata character becomes a way to explore the sometimes obscure character of oil, as well as to show new ways forward. Karl-Emil Rosenbaek shows similar strategies used in contemporary Danish literature. However, in a Danish context, where extraction happens offshore and the possible apocalyptic consequences of oil use still looms as a spectre rather than a harsh reality, the Gothic instead becomes a lens through which we are able to see and understand oil as horror. As Rosenbaek points out, by using myth and gothic fiction to make the often obscured maritime petroleumscape visible, the two novels he studies show that "the world-ecological reality of oil... is opaque and ominous - yet strangely alluring", and thus paradoxically succeed in creating a more realistic description than realism would allow.
- 20 Another way to engage with the veiled and embedded character of oil is to combine historical research into the materialities of oil with narrative studies in order to unpack the semiotic side of oil, and the sway it holds over many societies. By moving beyond the actors and elites most deeply and visibly engaged in petro-industry, focus can instead shift to the everydayness of oil and how oil in contemporary society has become "equated with life itself".<sup>15</sup> In Sissel Furuseth's analysis of the reception of Upton Sinclair's novel *Oil!* in Scandinavia in the 1920s, the petro-materialities that occupy the centre of Sinclair's novel are analysed through a narrative filter provided by contemporary book reviews and associated newspaper articles. Through this approach, Furuseth is able to show not only how the perception of oil and its materialities were interpreted across national, political and cultural borders, but also how petroculture and news media are historically interrelated as cultural practices - or, to put it differently, how news media is an important part and form of petroculture history.
- Although flowing and therefore elusive, oil is not only distant or hidden in everyday life; in some instances, our dependence on oil is highly visible and recast as sublime objects of modern life. In his study of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System (TAPS), Philip Wright shows how this massive structure not only "transformed the young polity of Alaska into a petrostate", but also provided a site of contestation as environmental issues rose to the fore during the second half of the twentieth century. As Wright shows, the meaning and importance of TAPS have changed over time in relation to the stages of maturity of the project and the way associated revenues have transformed Alaskan society. By the early 21<sup>st</sup> C., the dependence on oil seems almost impossible to escape for this region, despite the growing alarm of climate change. Wright importantly points out that while the capture of Alaska by oil interests is and was significant, it was not hegemonic in the sense that it removed all opposition, which urges us as researchers not to become trapped in generalising conceptualisations of petrocultures. Nonetheless, similar processes of "petrofication" both in economical but also cultural terms are crucial for understanding the pervasiveness of oil.
- As argued in the beginning of this text, petroculture relates to key questions within energy history, for example the role of oil in energy transitions. This role is perhaps most visible in the contribution by Robert Groß, Odinn Melsted and Nicolas Chachereau which analyses how a European petroculture was created, or at least reinforced, through the European Refinery Expansion Program, and how the Marshall plan following WWII aided in the transition to oil. Their article expands the knowledge on how geopolitical concerns and specific infrastructures have made the world dependent on oil infrastructure, but in contrast to more sweeping arguments of oil (and US) dominance it shows the contingent and partial process, structured along power-relations, whereby oil was introduced. They further direct our attention not only to the infrastructures of refineries but also to how consumer demand and specific oil-dependent technologies, such as the internal combustion engine, further expanded the role of the already favoured

<sup>15</sup> Huber, *Lifblood*, xii (cf. note 9).

oil industry, particularly in relation to coal. This system-wide transformation shows how encompassing the current transition, this time away from oil, will actually be.

23 As Furuseth notes in her article, there has been a tendency within petroculture research to focus on the ‘ills’ of petroleum and to identify the villains of the climate and fossil fuel story, often in the form of the global oil industrial complex. This results partly from the fact that petroculture research emerged during - and in response to - the intensified discussion of climate politics as well as the boom of oil extraction in North America in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis. In addition, oil has been used as a geopolitical and imperial tool, and as such has been part of the development of unequal power structures over time. As pointed out in an earlier special issue in JEHRHE, the relations between the oil industry and global governance need to be unpacked.<sup>16</sup> The same is true for the “role of energy systems in the colonial and post-colonial world and conversely, the way in which colonialism and imperialism (formal or informal) have impacted on the structures of the energy industry”.<sup>17</sup> Several of the contributions to this issue contribute to this endeavour.

24 However, while negative political and environmental consequences of oil continue to be an important rationale for the study of petrocultures and fossil fuels, it is also important to note that its pervasiveness does not only stem from the intentional accumulation strategies of private as well as state-owned companies. To understand the pervasiveness of oil, we need

<sup>16</sup> Marta Musso, Guillemette Crouzet, “Energy Imperialism? Introduction to the Special Issue”, *Journal of Energy History/Revue d’Histoire de l’Énergie*, n°3, 2020. Url : [energyhistory.eu/en/node/205](http://energyhistory.eu/en/node/205). Such efforts are beginning to emerge not least in relation to environmental governance (accessed 08/06/2023). See for example: Ann-Kristin Bergquist, Thomas David, “Beyond Planetary Limits! The International Chamber of Commerce, the United Nations, and the Invention of Sustainable Development”, *Business History Review*, 2023, 1–31; Ben Huf, Glenda Sluga, Sabine Selchow, “Business and the Planetary History of International Environmental Governance in the 1970s”, *Contemporary European History*, vol. 31, n°4, 2022, 553–569.

<sup>17</sup> Musso and Crouzet, “Energy Imperialism?” (cf. note 15).

to understand the way that oil has become part and parcel of our lives and activities, offering comfort, efficiency, political argumentation and economic development. Several of the contributions to this special issue show both support for and opposition against oil use from all parts of the political spectrum and under different economic regimes. Further, the ways in which actors argue for and against oil in for example Alaska, the Netherlands, Norway, Greece, and the US (with material consequences in the Marshall plan) paint a picture of how oil has been seen as a tool to do good by many actors on different political levels. In this sense, oil has similar qualities to other sources of high energy concentration, as it can provide a feeling and sensation of endless possibility - a possibility that in turn is reliant on historical examples. The articles in this issue provide a range of such examples, including Furuseth’s analysis of newspapers as not only a source material for semiotic analysis of a historical petroculture, but at the same time “themselves artifacts of high-energy culture” that allowed for a new scale and frequency of information dissemination. In Wright’s contribution, oil changes shape from hero to villain over time and in the eyes of different actors across the political spectrum.

As these examples foreground, if we look at petrocultures only through the lens of contemporary society rather than from the view of historical circumstances, we will miss out on a more complex analysis of the allure of oil. Thus, rather than seeing oil solely as a geopolitical tool in the hands of the current hegemon (the US for most parts of the last century), it is therefore important to acknowledge the agency and voices of actors in their local regions and places. This agency is furthermore not only visible in political power but in the ways oil is and gets embedded with specific meaning.

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## CONCLUSION: PETROCULTURE AS A WAY TO SEE BEYOND EMISSIONS

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As Aykut and Castro argue, recognition of how and why fossil fuels inform contemporary societies were for a long time absent in negotiations of

climate change mitigation and adaptation - the need to phase out the use of oil and coal were mentioned for the first time at COP26, taking place in Glasgow in 2021.<sup>18</sup> The climate policy discourse has made oil invisible, and thereby delimited its function and relevance to emissions and providing a rationale for keeping the possibility open for a continued use of fossil fuels. This omission in the discourse of climate change further enables the fantasy that fossil fuels and their emissions are distinct and clearly separable entities, which underlies concepts such as “net-zero”, “climate compensation” and technologies like “direct air capture” (DAC) and “carbon capture and sequestration” (CCS).<sup>19</sup>

- 27 Taken out of historical and cultural context, carbon emissions represent a superficial view of oil use. Lowering emissions are thus a similarly superficial, and inefficient, way of approaching the undoing of pervasive but diversified

petrocultures, each with historically and culturally situated roots and reasons for persevering. By revealing oil in all its facets - as scientific, horrific, alluring, gendered, colonial, multinational, embedded in landscape, material, political, and so on - petroculture studies help to make apparent reasons for the lack of progress in attempts to transition away from oil. Recognising how oil has been made invisible in multiple places and times, and for different reasons, makes it possible to understand why oil has become in some ways, paradoxically, invisible in contemporary climate politics.

Thus, bringing together energy history and pet- 28  
roculture studies contributes to ongoing discussions on climate and energy by placing fossil fuels in their historical and cultural context, revealing the meanings and practices that make the current energy system so pervasive (and at times appealing).

<sup>18</sup> Aykut, Castro, “The End of Fossil Fuels?” (cf. note 3); Harro van Asselt Harro, “Breaking a Taboo: Fossil Fuels at COP26”, *EJIL:Talk*, 26/11/ 2021. Url: <https://www.ejiltalk.org/breaking-a-taboo-fossil-fuels-at-cop26/>.

<sup>19</sup> Wim Carton, “Carbon Unicorns and Fossil Futures. Whose Emission Reduction Pathways Is the Ipcc Performing?”, in J. P. Sapinski, Holly Jean Buck and Andreas Malm (eds.), *Has It Come to This? The Promises and Perils of Geoengineering on the Brink* (New Brunswick, Camden: Rutgers University Press, 2020).



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