

Dealing with petrocultural legacies and histories otherwise: Definitions and directions for cultural history and heritage

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Introduction

The planet is overheating, biodiversity is collapsing, and the sea levels are rising. Climate change and the need for a green transition away from fossil fuels are real. So why are we not collectively tackling the global environmental crisis by moving away from coal and petroleum faster and more decisively? Climate inaction is often framed as an economic and political stalemate. Yet, we argue that it is a temporal crisis and that deeply rooted cultural notions lie at the heart of it. To combine the words of Felix Guattari and Gregory Bateson, our ecological crisis is one of physical landscapes, economics, ideas and (subconscious) subjectivities.¹ Similarly, our entanglement with fossil fuels and energy is not purely defined by hydrocarbons' economics and physical characteristics. Coal, then oil, and finally, natural gas, have changed our engagement with and being in time. Not only have they influenced the speed of everyday life, but our normative conceptions of progress and development have also become encoded within them. Both deeply rooted memories and future imaginaries prescribe our engagement with fossil fuels and thus influence how societies move away from them (or do not).

Since the mid-2010s, the field of energy humanities has established itself as an innovative field of research, systematically delving into the social and cultural interdependencies associated with the exploitation of natural resources for the production of energy.² Principally responsive to the imperatives of climate

change and resource depletion, this academic domain positions itself as a valuable contributor to the green transition by providing a humanities-oriented lens. Refusing to frame energy resources as purely geological, economic or technological challenges, the field of energy humanities provokes us to explore the cultural-political dimensions of energy.

Notably, petroleum, encompassing natural gas and oil and their derivatives, has assumed paramount importance within this discourse, meriting considerable scholarly attention. A pivotal concept within this domain is that of 'petrocultures', a concept used to explore how oil and its associated products (including natural gas and petrochemicals) have created our contemporary culture and enacted distinct knowledge practices and understandings of economic progress and modernity.³ Petrocultures as both *method* and *concept* allows us to investigate the 'cultural work' of oil, that is, how it shapes habits, beliefs and temporality, and our interconnected cultural understanding.⁴ On the one hand, petrocultures allow us to study the materiality of oil, ranging from cars to central heating, and how these have shaped contemporary cultural practices. On the other hand, it also explores the cultural construction of petroleum, the imaginaries that 'stick' to it, and their implications on politics and political economy.

The concept of petrocultures has found particularly fertile ground within cultural studies, human geography and anthropology. From cinema to literature, the representation of petroleum and oil-based lifestyles in popular culture has received considerable attention,⁵ showing not only how oil is omnipresent in our daily lives but also how popular discourses around oil lubricate and deeply texture our experience of time, normalizing selective modernities centred around carbon-based lifestyles. Anthropologies and geographies of oil have addressed the material entanglements of petroleum and how oil as a substance and its infrastructures structure everyday lives and political relations.⁶ Ethnographers have also explored the webs of significance through which people engage with and ultimately understand oil. This research highlights how oil is culturally assembled and the importance of context. Cultural notions sticking to oil play an important role in the futures that people imagine and aim to craft through their politics selectively. Normative understandings of oil influence politics because they are a product of a discursive struggle over meaning and value.

Petrocultures and the energy humanities are increasingly providing the humanities with a language and method to contribute to urgent debates around fossil fuels and global warming. Oil has been an essential theme in history, and seminal works such as *Carbon Democracy* (2011) by Timothy Mitchell have

been foundational for energy humanities. However, most histories zoom in on the political economy nexus or the international relations perspective. Cultural history and allied fields such as heritage studies have only slowly embraced petrocultures as an avenue of research. While these fields are uniquely positioned to showcase oil's carefully assembled cultural understanding and subjectivities, they can also highlight how current heritage practices and dealings with petroleum's legacies can either delay or be a catalyst for change. Paraphrasing the words of Simon Orpana, we argue that cultural history and heritage studies can help society wake up from its petrocultural dreams and embrace new imaginaries.⁷

In this chapter, we explore the value of petrocultures within the fields of cultural history and heritage, elucidating its prospective contributions to the energy humanities and current public debates and policies around green transitions. Although we direct attention to key themes and concepts central to historical inquiry, we have paid specific attention to the intersection between memory, heritage and petroculture because we believe that public engagement with petroleum's histories is a site for urgent action. A critical heritage engagement with oil is lacking and is needed in light of the climate crisis. Popular culture has often been described in literature as a key vehicle through which oil has become interlinked with notions of modernity. These elements are also encoded in various heritage experiences, ranging from traditional national historical museums to technical museums and industrial heritage sites and landscapes. These heritage experiences further normalize existing energy hegemonies and undermine the green transition. Yet cultural heritage studies have not, to date, engaged sufficiently with these issues.

We bridge the gap by exploring key themes and concepts from the petrocultures literature, embedding them within existing cultural history and heritage debates. We begin this chapter by examining the notion of petromodernity and how the perception of being modern (or becoming modern) has become associated with oil, contributing to the delay of green transitions. Next, we turn our attention to the visual culture of oil and how aesthetics shape its cultural valuation. We then focus on the foundational role of resources in processes of state and nation-making. Finally, we zoom in on the critical heritage of oil, exploring how the public (re)presentation of oil represents hegemonic history writing and normalization, particularly through an examination of contemporary protests against fossil-fuel sponsorship in the arts and cultural industries. The Art Not Oil activism serves as a case study in this final section.

The cultural history of petromodernity

The first and second industrial revolutions, which were fuelled by new methods for the extraction and utilization of fossil fuels, can be argued to have shaped every aspect of contemporary life on our planet, from global economies to technology, and political and social organization to our changing climate. Fossil fuels and their unequal distribution and control contributed to the rise of nation-states, expedited and hastened global imperial and colonial processes, and have contributed directly to the 'great acceleration' of humanity's direct and irreversible impacts on the Earth's geology and ecology.⁸ The concepts of natural and cultural 'heritage' – as a subject of active state protection and management – were simultaneously developed alongside and as an integral part of these processes, as a way of mediating and facilitating the social, ecological and environmental changes which accompanied the development of modern industrialized societies and of giving history to the social, racial, ethnic and cultural differences which were seen as integral to understanding the origins of nation-states.⁹ Heritage in its modern form – as a product of late nineteenth-century modernity – is inherently prescribed by the imbrication of nationalism with carbon-fuelled capitalism. As such, museums and heritage interpretation have normalized the idea of progress, modernity and nationalism.

A central characteristic of petroculture consists of normalized ideas about this petroleum-modernity nexus.¹⁰ Stephanie LeMenager refers to this cultural expression as petromodernity: 'a modern life based in the cheap energy systems long made possible by petroleum'.¹¹ In this historical imaginary, oil and gas are seen as imperative to a life defined by unrestricted mobility, consumption and control over nature and ecology (ranging from heating and air-conditioning to drainage of large tracts of land). In such a perspective, our inextricable dependency on oil is a product of European modernity. At the same time, oil has become a natural, almost universal, basic human need for acquiring and maintaining a modern lifestyle. Thus, the cultural conceptualization of the state of modernity, that is, the (sub)conscious awareness of being modern, has become tied with habits, norms and beliefs enabled by petroleum. Take oil away, and we do not move forward but backwards.

In *No More Fossils* (2003), Dominic Boyer links the dominance of oil and current political regimes governing energy to 'fossilized' historical relations, actions and ideas innate to European modernity.¹² Trust in technology for control over human destiny and the quest for rational efficiency in political economy are at the heart of European modernity. In this paradigm, mastering nature as a

passive actor through mechanical control is essential.¹³ For Boyer, energy has always been at the heart of European modernity. As much as modernity was about control over human destiny and thus relentless growth, it was also about control over energy.

Inspired by the scholarship that traces the genealogy of modernity back to seventeenth-century sugar cane plantations in the Caribbean that were true laboratories of mechanization,¹⁴ Boyer argues that similar relations still govern our engagement with energy today. First, slave labour drove the proto-industrial machines in the plantations, and in search for further efficiency and growth, later coal drove industrialization, and finally oil became the engine for modern industrial society. For Boyer, the sucropolitical relations around slave labour are similar to the politics of oil today because of their embeddedness in the same teleology and logic; that of capitalist trust in growth and progress. A trust in control over one's own destiny produces energopolitical regimes where centralization and thus control over energy sources is essential. Less energy sources, thus less growth runs counter to European notions of modernity.

In Boyer's logic, our current engagement with oil and thus our petroculture is a product of modernity and thus modern (European) thought. The type of modernity we arrived at post-Second World War up to today is then what LeMenager calls petromodernity, the natural successor of carbomodernity. In such a version of (American) modernity, the material affordances and political control over oil have produced a type of modern life where aeroplanes, cars and heating allow us to live or be anywhere we want, at any time. This lifestyle, imbricated with a petro-dependent growth model, comes with a tight grip and dependency on petroleum.¹⁵ Although it deliberately promotes a universalizing approach to petromodernity to draw attention to the role of energy in modernity at large, for future scholars of petroleum, we need to embrace the call of Dilip P. Gaonkar to trace the alternative modernities at play across the world.¹⁶ Different cultures or societies have different starting points to modernity, leading to different outcomes, thus also different power structures around the energies fuelling technological progress. Non-American petromodernities could not only allow us to better understand and nuance the path dependencies enacted by our thirst for energy; there might be inspiration beyond the West in dealing with petroleum otherwise.

However, modernity is not only a state of being enabled by material relations, it is also an imagination. Habermas sees modernity as a field of discursive politics, where modernity is constructed and holds a normative status,¹⁷ something mobilized to promote certain norms in a context. At the same time, this also

suggests that a society's understanding of being modern is never universal but brokered locally and influenced by politics and negotiation. In such an approach to modernity, for example, car or air travel can be perceived as a sign of modernity – or not! A society can also decide to see flying as backwards. Thus, in such a perspective, a petroleum lifestyle is not a product of modernity itself, but a perceived and negotiated prerequisite of it. Put simply, petromodernities are constructed not only materially, but also historically, politically and socially.

Researchers exploring climate obstruction and misinformation have similarly pointed out how selective modernities have been negotiated, often by the oil industry, to promote and naturalize an oil-based lifestyle as intrinsic to modern life. To delay climate action or energy transitions, strategic communication can be employed to highlight petroleum as a cultural signifier of contemporary industrial modernity.¹⁸ Fast-flowing petroleum, the car and a cosmopolitan lifestyle enabled by air travel have created a type of society that has 'progressed', and is understood to be normatively modern. Thus, oil has *created* modernity, and without it, the good modern life would end, and we would all regress. These arguments echo the normative understandings of civilization as technological and cultural progression from barbarism to modernity which were developed in Western European museums in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁹ Such a historical narration of oil runs counter to that of Boyer and many others, where oil is considered to be part of the same discursive and extractive logics as the sugar plantation, and its sites of extraction and their ecological and human impact are hidden from the gaze of its consumers.²⁰

Indeed, research on the funding of museums by the oil industry has shown how celebratory modernization narratives of whole nations are often attributed to domestic oil. In the context of an exhibition in the Netherlands, the economic activity of a local oil company was tied not only to overcoming food security, but even the larger welfare state was linked to oil income.²¹ Thus, contrary to an American context where freedom and transportation are linked to being modern, in the Netherlands, a localized signifier of an alternative modernity (central welfare institutions) was explicitly tied to the gas and oil sector.

In short, petromodernity, the interlocking of oil with modern life and society, is an important avenue of conceptual research for researchers of cultural history and heritage. It enables us to explore the underlying ideologies and political economies of oil. It highlights the cultural hegemonies and dominant ideas governing our current resource engagement. At the same time, it shows how selective framings of modernity and the historical role of oil in societal progress can delay climate action. Uncritical heritage engagements can undermine new energy futures.

Visual culture of oil and petro-aesthetics

Given its pervasive impact on contemporary social, cultural and economic life, it is no surprise that petroculture has intersected with the arts, media and visual culture in countless ways over the past two centuries.²² Indeed, one of the key ways researchers in the energy humanities have sought to understand petroculture is through a close reading of oil's impact on visual and aesthetic worlds, from photography and film to children's books and museum exhibitions. Investigating such cultural objects is essential in understanding the discursive strategies and material practices through which fossil fuels have come to shape the modern world.

Research in visual cultural history typically departs from several key resources, including advertising, films, photographs and the fine arts. Analysing such cultural artefacts can help to understand the specific processes and practices through which oil came to have meaning in different socio-cultural contexts. For example, photographs of gushing oil wells in the nineteenth century were deeply entangled with emerging ideas of progress, modernity and the frontier, especially in the American West. After the Second World War, Shell and BP directly commissioned artists to document and celebrate petroleum infrastructure, underlining the industry's role in shaping a new future.²³

Later, in the 1970s, the discovery of oil and gas in the North Sea would be captured by landscape photographer Fay Godwin at a time when the environmental impact of fossil fuels was entering public discourse.²⁴ While oil is often said to be a pervasive yet largely invisible part of the modern world,²⁵ fossil fuel companies have long understood the importance of crafting a particular image of this energy source, one tied to freedom, abundance and socio-economic development. Tracing the feedback loop between oil as a source of energy, the representation of fossil fuel infrastructures, and emergent cultural imaginaries based on oil is an important task for cultural historians and critical heritage researchers. This may include analysing the reception and consumption of oil-based iconographies, which stretch from documentary work depicting wells and refineries to the 'clean' products of plastic modernity.²⁶

Beyond representation, oil has also shaped the visual and aesthetic cultures of modernity in more direct ways. Fossil fuel companies have supported individual artistic projects and financed whole new cultural infrastructures, including museums, galleries and heritage spaces. Such initiatives have actively fostered an intimate connection between national and regional identity, economic development and fossil fuels. At the same time, the extraction and refinement

of oil have introduced new materials into creative practice. As Janet Stewart has argued, photographic images and technologies, for example, have long been dependent on fossil fuels and oil derivatives in terms of both production and consumption.²⁷ The materiality of oil has also been centred in contemporary artistic practice, most notably in Richard Wilson's *20:50*, a vast reservoir installation containing 8,000 litres of recycled engine oil. As the environmental impact of fossil fuels has become harder to ignore, critical aesthetic practices have emerged to confront the socio-ecological histories and legacies of petroculture.

Processes of resource and nation-making

Energy resources have served as the basis for establishing historical periodization (modernity), depicting countries (petrostates and oil nations) and characterizing cultural features (petrocultures). The mobilization of energy resources in Europe was central in national building projects as well as in imperial ones. Scholars have emphasized how control over resources has contributed to the 'construction of a national oil culture' in countries such as Canada and the entanglement between national aspirations of energy sovereignty and resource-based modernization.²⁸ While the connection between heritage-making and nation-making is well documented, however, the processes of resource-, nation- and culture/heritage-making remain unexplored in the literature on energy humanities and on heritage.

By coining the term 'resource-state nexus', Gavin Bridge aimed 'to capture the recursive character of scientific and political practice around resource-making and state-making projects';²⁹ according to Bridge's proposal, resources and state need to be considered both as products and as tools of modernity which implies taking into account how they 'come to be – i.e. the formative processes through which resources and states are generated'.³⁰ In the wake of Bridge's insights, we argue that heritage/culture, nation and resources are considered historical and socio-cultural formations. This entails considering heritage not merely as a tool for statecraft but as a constitutive element of the national/imperial-building projects and resource extraction and exploration.

In a way, the heritage-making process parallels the resource-making process, predicated on the assumption that resources (whether natural or cultural) are sources of value, and values must be found in them. The conception of heritage as a process that adds value to objects, sites, landscapes and practices, as well as the mechanisms of value construction, has been largely demonstrated in the literature

on critical heritage studies. Simultaneously, geographers have been questioning 'how heterogeneous geological substances are rendered into knowable and exploitable resources in the first place, or "resource-making"'.³¹ Topics such as what counts as a resource³² and how resources are rendered 'worthy of exploitation' have been recently debated,³³ shedding light on the political-economic, socio-cultural and techno-scientific aspects underlying the processes of resource making.

Mineral collections in European museums provide an entry point for analysing the processes of resource-, nation- and culture-making. Mineral collections were important tools of state knowledge and key elements in the nation/imperial-building formative processes. These repositories of minerals, rocks and fossils were used for training civil servants, were associated with the utilitarian goals of economic development of the territories³⁴ and functioned as symbols of prestige in the metropole. The economic importance of mining required expertise in the fields of geology and its subdivisions (mineralogy and petrology) with their associated technologies (geological surveys, geographical and scientific exploration on a global scale, map-making, collecting, etc.), to the extent that these epistemic practices were deeply connected to extractivism and colonial violence.³⁵ Thus, the analysis of the process of assigning value to collections requires, as Alistair Paterson and Andrea Witcomb have pointed out, 'an extractive value-adding approach'.³⁶

It is no accident that energy resources and energy infrastructures have fuelled national imaginaries, given the way they compose and materialize the territory of the state.³⁷ Energy resources have often been considered national resources in the case of coal³⁸ and/or as a 'national commodity (a patrimony)' in what concerns oil.³⁹ As Michael Watts argues, 'Oil, as a subterranean, territorial resource that is highly centralized as property around the state necessarily channels claims over Nature ("our oil")', to the extent that 'oil seems to always invoke the spatial lexicon in which the Nation figures prominently'.⁴⁰ Due to their geographical and territorial anchorage, resources shape social and cultural imaginaries about a nation's past and future and are shaped by these imaginaries. In other words, energy resources rather than merely reflecting a shared sense of belonging and ideas of nationhood – it is significant that 'seventy of Norway's petroleum fields have been given names derived from the national golden age of the Vikings and Norse mythology'⁴¹ – closely contribute to the production of national energy imaginaries. How Shell is described in museum exhibits in the Netherlands 'as an intrinsic part of the Dutch national fabric enacting technological innovation'⁴² demonstrates the intricacies of technology and ideas about the nation's past and future, as well as their co-production.

The concept of socio-technical imaginaries, coined by Sheila Jasanoff and Sang-Hyun Kim as 'collectively imagined forms of social life and social order reflected in the design and fulfilment of nation-specific scientific and/or technological projects', opens up new venues for analysing the nexus between resources, nation, and heritage-making.⁴³ On the one hand, this analytic concept brings to the forefront the cultural dimension, given that 'socio-technical imaginaries are powerful cultural resources that help shape social responses to innovation'.⁴⁴ On the other hand, it highlights how energy projects 'encode and reinforce particular conceptions of what a nation stands for'.⁴⁵ Thus, a historical and critical analysis of the making of resources, nations and heritage can contribute to thinking about non-fossil fuel energy through a lens that is less nationalistic and less focused on cultural property.

The politics of petrocultural histories

When heritage institutions have collected and narrated modernity, they have inevitably collected and narrated petrocultural histories, reinforcing understandings of modernity as dependent upon fossil fuels and an inevitable progression from coal to oil and gas. This genealogy of heritage and museums ensures current practices are still prescribed by and perpetuate modernist/utopian ideas about divisions between culture and nature, contributing to an understanding of the world in which humans are perceived to be both separate from and superior to nature, which (alongside nationalist interests) necessarily underpinned modern extractivist approaches to the environment. As a result of the second industrial revolution and its shift to the exploitation and use of new fossil fuel sources, heritage – as a way of mediating and accounting for the experience of the rapid and widespread changes that this shift heralded – developed alongside technologies which supported widespread mass movement, including automobiles, trains and aeroplanes – as a way of making places distinctive and promoting their 'visitability' as destinations.⁴⁶ In this way, the development of our present system of national parks, historic sites, museums, historic houses and other forms of heritage can only be understood as implicated directly in the rise of the mass domestic and international travel that these new technologies of mobility made possible.

During the third industrial (digital) revolution in the mid to late twentieth century, as some societies began to move away from certain industrialized technologies, particularly human labour-intensive ones, heritage again formed

a way of mediating and celebrating the accompanying technological, economic and social changes. The transition from coal to oil and gas across Europe has been marked by the heritagization of coal mines and power stations, while shifts from human to mechanized labour systems in oil and gas extraction have been accompanied by the museumification and valorization of these outmoded technologies and their associated ways of life in museums of science and technology and the world and national industrial heritage sites. Indeed, whilst conservation is often seen as pitted against processes of modernization and change, it is in fact an integral part of them.⁴⁷

While this entanglement has been acknowledged in critical heritage studies literature, a detailed historical investigation of the simultaneous rise of petrocultures and heritage cultures and their inter-relationships has not yet been attempted. Moreover, an acknowledgement of these inter-relations is a necessary first step in challenging and rethinking the role of heritage within the context of the green industrial revolution. Despite some notable attempts to engage critically with dominant discourses, existing heritage and museological narratives generally either re-enforce or valorize fossil fuels, the technologies and advances they have facilitated, and the values and societies they have helped to develop. If we are to foster confidence in green transitions for the heritage and museum sector, as well as for policymakers and citizens, we need to find new ways of mobilizing and narrativizing heritage to foreground the impacts of petrocultures and reliance on fossil fuels on people and planet and to support just transitions towards green energy alternatives. The entanglement of petrocultures and heritage cultures precisely necessitates such a shift in the purpose, understanding, interpretation and use of heritage and museums in Europe and beyond.

Heritage institutions are not only shaped by their collections, the materiality of the heritage they curate, or national petrocultures. Specific funding structures also directly enact heritage regimes. Transnational civil society groups such as Fossil Free Culture, Culture Unstained and Just Stop Oil have challenged the funding of heritage by the fossil fuel complex. The impacts of these funding structures have been explored by a number of scholars.⁴⁸ As Chris Garrard, co-Director of Culture Unstained, explains in *Reimagining Museums for Climate Action* (2021):

At first, the opposition to oil sponsorship was led by a small group of artists and activists, but today this has flourished into a growing international movement of arts workers, actors, musicians, scientists, youth climate strikers, as well as those from communities impacted by climate change and extractivism. These grassroots groups oppose oil sponsorship deals because they offer companies

like BP, Shell and Equinor a cheap way to sustain their 'social license to operate', a kind of social legitimacy that leads policymakers and the public to believe that these are responsible philanthropic companies, rather than the firms that were behind decades of climate delay and denial. However, this movement for 'fossil free culture' has deepened that initial focus, and protests are now activating museums and galleries as vital platforms for addressing the intersections between race, colonialism and climate breakdown.⁴⁹

The UK provides a helpful case study for tracking the impact of these movements. Art Not Oil was formed in 2004 as a network of *Rising Tide UK*, a grassroots alliance of independent groups and individuals committed to taking action against climate change. In 2013, it became a coalition of autonomous organizations united around the aim of ending oil sponsorship of the arts and sharing its resources as the Art Not Oil Coalition. Members of the Art Not Oil Coalition include the groups Liberate Tate and BP or not BP?, both of which staged a series of theatrical artistic protests throughout the 2010s and 2020s which aimed to draw attention to fossil-fuel sponsorship of the arts and culture. Another member group, Culture Unstained, was founded in 2016 as a research, engagement and campaigning organization which aims to end fossil fuel sponsorship of culture. The lobbying work of Art Not Oil Coalition member groups has been successful in seeing dozens of arts and cultural organizations in the UK, including Tate, Edinburgh International Festival, the Royal Shakespeare Company, the National Portrait Gallery, the Royal Opera House, the Scottish Ballet, the National Theatre, Southbank Centre, the National Gallery, National Galleries Scotland and The Edinburgh Science Festival, ending sponsorship arrangements with fossil fuel companies. At the time of writing, the most prominent UK organizations that maintain sponsorship arrangements with fossil fuel companies include the British Museum, sponsored by BP, and the Science Museum, sponsored by Adani, a subsidiary of Shell.

In parallel with these protest movements, many national and international codes of ethics for the arts, cultural and heritage sector have also drawn attention to the ethical dimensions of fossil fuel sponsorship. In the UK, for example, the UK Museums Association's Code of Ethics, last revised in 2014/15, states that museums and trustees should '[c]arefully consider offers of financial support from commercial organisations and other sources in the UK and internationally and seek support from organisations whose ethical values are consistent with those of the museum', and '[e]xercise due diligence in understanding the ethical standards of commercial partners with a view to maintaining public trust and integrity in all museum activities'.⁵⁰ Similarly, the International Council of

Museums (ICOM)'s Code of Ethics for Museums Standards for Fundraising, revised in 2019, states that:

Museums should create a process through which they may decide whether or not to accept financial support that is offered to them. They should consider whether to exclude any specific business or kind of business because of the business' products and services, taking into account the characteristics, values, and attitudes related to these products and services. This decision should be made in view of not only the museum's mission but also its respective communities. For example, a museum might consider whether or not to accept funds from tobacco companies, gun manufacturers, fossil fuel extractors or any other potentially controversial kind of business.⁵¹

It is nonetheless clear that museums and cultural heritage are imbricated in petromodernities in such fundamental ways that the simple divestment of fossil fuel sponsorship does not address the ongoing perpetuation of notions of progress, endless growth, petro-nostalgia, racial hierarchy and human exceptionalism and dominion over nature, which are at the core of the climate crisis, and which must be addressed in more radically transformative ways.

Conclusion

Examining petrocultures reveals how profoundly oil has shaped our cultural history and heritage. From the Industrial Revolution to the present day, petroleum has driven technological and economic advancements and profoundly influenced our cultural norms, values and institutions. Museums, literature, films and other cultural artefacts have embedded oil in our collective consciousness, often portraying it as a cornerstone of progress and modernity.

The concept of 'petromodernity' highlights the complex relationship between oil and the cultural narratives of modernity. This term captures how oil has come to symbolize freedom, progress and prosperity, reflecting various national trajectories. Similarly, the aesthetics of oil – through early films, mid-century advertisements and contemporary art practices – demonstrate how visual and material cultures have portrayed oil as essential to modern life. These representations have mirrored our dependence on fossil fuels and reinforced it, making the transition to alternative energy sources culturally challenging.

Energy resources, especially oil, have shaped national identities and cultural heritage, particularly in Europe. Energy infrastructures often become symbols of national pride and modernization, reflecting broader nation-building efforts. The

concept of socio-technical imaginaries helps us understand how technological projects and national identities are intertwined. This framework shows how energy resources and infrastructures are deeply embedded in cultural values and national narratives, offering fresh perspectives on non-fossil fuel energy.

Heritage institutions are critical in shaping public perceptions of oil's history and its impact on society. By critically engaging with the histories of fossil fuels and their environmental and societal effects, these institutions can influence how we understand our past and envision a sustainable future. They can promote alternative narratives and practices that support green transitions and environmental justice. In light of the climate crisis, integrating energy humanities with cultural history and heritage studies is essential.

This interdisciplinary approach can provide valuable insights into how cultural practices and historical narratives can support or impede the transition to sustainable energy systems. By bridging cultural history, heritage studies and energy humanities, we can develop more effective strategies for addressing environmental challenges. Ultimately, transforming heritage institutions to reflect and support sustainable practices is crucial for fostering a just and equitable transition to a post-fossil fuel society.

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