



Kent Academic Repository

Mavelli, Luca (2025) *Motherly oil industry: Governing the desire for climate action through petro-feminine spatial imaginaries*. Environment and Planning D: Society and Space . ISSN 1472-3433.

Downloaded from

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/111591/> The University of Kent's Academic Repository KAR

The version of record is available from

<https://doi.org/10.1177/02637758251380102>

This document version

Publisher pdf

DOI for this version

Licence for this version

CC BY (Attribution)

Additional information

Versions of research works

Versions of Record

If this version is the version of record, it is the same as the published version available on the publisher's web site. Cite as the published version.

Author Accepted Manuscripts

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding. Cite as Surname, Initial. (Year) 'Title of article'. To be published in **Title of Journal** , Volume and issue numbers [peer-reviewed accepted version]. Available at: DOI or URL (Accessed: date).

Enquiries

If you have questions about this document contact ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in KAR. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our [Take Down policy](https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies) (available from <https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies>).

Motherly oil industry: Governing the desire for climate action through petro-feminine spatial imaginaries

EPD: Society and Space

1–20

© The Author(s) 2025



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/02637758251380102

journals.sagepub.com/home/epdLuca Mavelli¹ 

Abstract

This article examines how the oil industry's recent public communication strategies operate as *petro-feminine spatial imaginaries*, shaping and governing desires for climate action within affluent, carbon-intensive societies. Existing scholarship has interpreted the industry's post-denialist turn primarily as an effort to deflect accountability for climate change, either by blaming consumers or through greenwashing. Analysing recent corporate campaigns and expanding existing conceptualizations of petro-masculinity while engaging debates on neoliberal feminism and CSR/pinkwashing, I advance the concept of *petro-femininity*. I argue that oil companies are increasingly constructing spatial imaginaries that recast themselves as motherly figures, no longer denying or solely deflecting responsibility for climate change but instead caring for Mother Nature. This gendered stance displaces the reality of climate change, enacting an imaginary that mirrors and supports consumer desires for ecological reassurance, symbolic climate action, and carbon-intensive continuity. I consider how the growing penetration of the oil industry into global climate governance – strikingly epitomised by oil executives chairing recent COP conferences – is an expression of an evolving post-denialist petro-masculinity crucially made possible by petro-femininity. This hybrid governmentality fuses masculine authority with the comforting illusion of a motherly oil industry, enabling oil companies to present themselves as indispensable stewards of the energy transition.

Keywords

Oil industry, climate action, petro-femininity and petro-masculinity, spatial imaginaries, climate change and climate action, desire, post-denialism

¹School of Economics, Politics and International Relations, Keynes College, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK

Corresponding author:

Luca Mavelli, School of Economics, Politics and International Relations, Keynes College, University of Kent, Canterbury, CT2 7NP, UK.

Email: L.Mavelli@kent.ac.uk

Introduction

From the quiet of his living room, a man glances up at the cloudy sky: will it rain? He grabs his car keys, walks to the garage, almost opens the car door, but then pauses, eyeing his bike thoughtfully. In the next scene, he is riding the bike, a bit wobbly and clearly out of practice. He is soon out of town, pedalling along a scenic country road lined with trees. It starts to rain, but he smiles, laughing as he gains confidence and picks up speed. We then see a little girl waiting outside her kindergarten. She spots her dad – the man on the bike – and runs to him, staring at the bike with wide-eyed astonishment. In the final scene, the man and his daughter ride home together, both smiling and laughing. A caption appears, ‘Thinking of driving less? We can help’, with an Esso petrol station in the background and a call-to-action: ‘Search *Thoughtful Driving* for changes we can all start making today’.

A second video begins, this time featuring cartoon figures instead of real people. The tone is more argumentative. Cartoon characters drive around an Esso petrol station while a reassuring woman’s voice explains that ‘car journeys are part of everyday life; delivering food, getting to and from work, keeping us connected with our family and friends. But driving has an impact on our planet [and] no single solution will be the answer’. This implies that oil is essential for sustaining the lifestyles we currently enjoy. Yet, the woman narrator suggests, there are ‘small changes we can all make’, drivers and Esso alike, such as ‘driving only when necessary, driving more efficiently, and even finding alternatives to driving’. As a partner in this effort, Esso can help drivers reduce their impact, even if it means ‘seeing you less often – not what you’d expect to hear from a fuel company!’

These 2023 adverts by ExxonMobil (2023a, 2023b), the parent company of the Esso brand, illustrate a momentous shift in the oil industry’s communication strategy: recasting itself from climate change denier to responsible partner in addressing the climate crisis. Existing scholarship has interpreted this transformation as an effort to *individualise* and *greenwash* the climate emergency, that is, to characterise it as consumer-driven while portraying its products and processes as environmentally sustainable (Bowen 2014; Franta, 2021; Grasso, 2019, 2022; Gunderson 2020; Megura and Gunderson 2022; Munoz, 2023; Staub, 2023; Supran, 2021; Supran and Oreskes, 2017, 2021a, 2021b). The oil industry’s goal is to divert attention from its history of climate change denial, misinformation, lobbying, and obstruction of climate policy, and from its reluctance to acknowledge climate change until the mid-2000s – with ExxonMobil doing so as late as 2014. The individualisation of responsibility and greenwashing are part of an established neoliberal discourse that, emphasising personal accountability, freedom, agency, resilience, and market-based solutions over the need for collective action and state intervention, associates ‘environmental problems and their solutions with questions of individual practice and virtue’ (Paterson and Stripple, 2010: 342).

In this article, I expand this analysis by arguing that individualisation and greenwashing capture only part of the broader dynamics at play in the evolving communication strategies of the oil industry. Adverts like Esso’s are more than just tools to shift blame for climate change onto individuals and deflect responsibility from oil companies. Rather, they can be regarded as spatial imaginaries that intercept, represent, and resolve Global North societies’ conflicting desires vis-à-vis climate change, namely, the desire for ‘recuperating a once wholesome (political, social, and environmental) climate that excessive consumption based on fossil fuels has derailed’ versus the desire to maintain ‘the [carbon-intensive] socio-symbolic order that leads to climate change in the first place’ (Pohl and Swyngedouw, 2023: 5). ‘Small changes’, like riding a bike or ‘driving only when necessary’ become forms of climate action encouraged by the oil industry – one of the primary culprits of the climate crisis (Grasso, 2019: 106; 2022) – which through these spatial imaginaries recast itself as nurturing, empathetic, and sensitive to environmental concerns. This evolving communication strategy, I contend, is the expression of an emerging *petro-femininity* enacted by a reimagined *motherly oil industry*.

The relationship between gender and climate change has historically been understudied. Early research primarily considered the disproportionate impacts of climate change on women, particularly

in the Global South (Denton, 2002; MacGregor, 2009). Recent scholarship has focused on the intersectional dimensions of climate vulnerability, exploring how environmental risks are racialised, classed, and gendered (Djouidi et al., 2016; Kaijser and Kronsell, 2014), and on how gendered logics and fossil-fuelled systems mutually support each other, that is, how oil, ‘running through everything’, shapes distinctive understandings and practices of ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’ (Appel 2019; Daggett, 2018; Lehman and Braun, 2023: 145; McHenry, 2021; see also Wilson 2014). Notably, Daggett (2018: 38–39) has coined the term ‘petro-masculinity’ to analyse the entanglement of masculinity, fossil fuel use, and climate denial, showing how fossil-fuelled cultures support ‘hegemonic white masculinity’ and can become sites of ‘compensatory violence’ in the face of gender and climate challenges.

In this article, I build on Daggett’s notion of petro-masculinity, expanding the focus to a complementary and thus far neglected dimension of the oil-gender relationship: *petro-femininity*. With this term, I understand a seemingly contrasting yet reinforcing strategic mode of representation and governance whereby the oil industry recasts itself as a motherly figure caring for the environment and the well-being of communities. Whereas petro-masculinity in Daggett’s characterisation is a ‘reactionary stance’ that aims to defend the traditional, fossil-fuel-based cultures that have sustained white patriarchal rule (Daggett, 2018: 33), petro-femininity embodies a progressive stance grounded in gender equality, fighting discrimination, and promoting inclusion. Whereas petro-masculinity is the expression of a ‘petro-nostalgia’, the American fantasy of ‘white men’ ruling ‘their households uncontested’ and supporting ‘housewives and children’ (Daggett, 2018: 31), petro-femininity is the expression of a petro-aspirational future where women occupy positions of leadership and environmental stewardship, and become the visual embodiment of oil companies turned champions of climate action. Whereas petro-masculinity addresses the societal demand for denialism, petro-femininity responds to the social calls for post-denialism in the oil industry’s evolving discourse of environmental care. Petro-feminine imaginaries, I contend, animate the advertising campaigns that introduce this article – and, as I shall argue later, are the condition of possibility for an evolving post-denialist petro-masculinity.

In the first advert, the father who chooses to bike instead of drive to pick his daughter is a motherly figure that personifies Esso/the oil industry. Its strength lies not in its extractive capacity, the power of its fuel to enable unrestrained mobility, but rather in its gentle and supportive care. In this reframing, riding a bike becomes a maternal gesture of love for our children and the environment that epitomises the oil industry’s transition from agent of environmental exploitation and crisis actively engaged in denying climate change to caring partner in climate-conscious practices. In the second advert, the oil industry speaks with a woman’s voice. Driving is presented not as the hedonistic satisfaction of endless freedom but as essential for sustaining familial and communal bonds. The small sacrifices ‘we can all make’ – people and oil companies alike – are framed as gentle acts of care for both the social and ecological well-being. The message is clear: small lifestyle changes under the maternal guidance of the oil industry, willing to make a small sacrifice itself by seeing its customers ‘less often’, can enable affluent Western societies to satisfy their desire for climate action without fundamentally disrupting their underlying carbon-intensive existence.

To develop the concept of petro-femininity, I draw on the critical geography concept of spatial imaginaries. Spatial imaginaries are ‘socially held stories, ways of representing and talking about places and spaces’ that circulate through language and are ‘embodied in material practice’ (Watkins, 2015: 509). Spatial imaginaries do not simply reflect material geographies but actively shape how people perceive and engage with the world around them, crafting collective visions that define the horizon of political possibilities. In particular, as ‘spatial imaginaries often transmit social anxieties, or shared fears about the future’ (Watkins, 2015: 510), they can be deployed as ‘performative imaginative geographies’ that, by contributing to produce the very space they represent (Bialasiewicz et al., 2007: 409), act as ‘governmental technologies’ that establish ‘hegemonic or dominant spatial horizons of action’ (Jessop, 2019: 54–55). According to Gregory (1995: 456), it is crucial ‘to understand the ways in

which anxiety, desire and fantasy enter into the production of imaginative geographies'. Building on this insight, this article focuses on how the oil industry deploys petro-feminine spatial imaginaries as governmental technologies that address social anxieties about climate change by reconciling the desire for climate action with the conflicting desire to preserve the existing carbon-intensive lifestyle, thus sanitising fossil fuel consumption with the fantasy of the oil industry's motherly care and reinforcing the fossil-based order.

The discussion proceeds in three main steps. First, I provide a brief overview of the evolving communication strategies of the oil industry in relation to the existing literature, showing how they transcend the individualisation of responsibility and greenwashing. Second, I explore how the industry's recent campaigns are expressions of petro-feminine spatial imaginaries that shape and govern Global North societies' conflicting desires vis-à-vis climate change in ways that extend beyond the remits of existing critiques of neoliberal feminism and CSR/pinkwashing. Third, I examine the recent communication campaign of Italian oil giant ENI as a striking instantiation of petro-feminine spatial imaginaries. I then use this analysis to illuminate the oil industry's increasingly petro-masculine penetration of global climate governance through the Conferences of the Parties (COP), the annual UN climate summit and most important global forum for negotiating responses to climate change. This discussion will show that petro-femininity's maternal care and petro-masculinity's authoritative control are not antagonistic; rather, petro-femininity is the condition of possibility for an evolving, post-denialist, seemingly progressive, and gender-sensitive form of petro-masculinity.

Before beginning, a note is in order on how this article engages with the problematic practice of gender attribution and what counts as masculine and feminine. Gender is a social construct that is both self-ascribed and externally assigned in formal (legal) and informal (everyday) encounters; it is 'a non-essential category' that is 'repeatedly performed based on societal norms' (Lindqvist et al. (2021: 333). Crucially for my argument, gender is 'also performed by those who are authoring texts (be they written, oral, video, etc.)' (Toros, 2025: 157). I argue that the oil industry performs gender through petro-feminine and petro-masculine spatial imaginaries by deploying stereotypical imagery associated with men and women, blending traditional and progressive tropes. As I discuss later, these are also interwoven with racialised representations to further promote an image of inclusivity and progress. Hence, in my analysis, I am not ascribing an ontological essence to gendered and racialised categories but exploring how they are mobilised by fossil fuel corporations to consolidate their power.

Beyond the individualisation of responsibility and greenwashing

As is well documented, oil companies long denied the existence of climate change and its human causes (Grasso, 2019). Through public communications and extensive funding of lobbying groups promoting disinformation, they fuelled doubt since the 1960s (Supran and Oreskes, 2017). This communication strategy emphasised the complexity of climate science and our limited capacity to fully comprehend it, while also arguing that transitioning to 'greener' energy would be economically harmful, socially disruptive, and technically impractical (Supran and Oreskes, 2017, 2021b). These arguments served to delay and obstruct regulatory measures aimed at reducing carbon emissions, protecting the oil industry's financial interests while downplaying the urgency of climate action. By the early 2000s, however, rising public awareness made this approach increasingly untenable. Oil companies began to reduce (though not cease) their funding of anti-climate lobbying and shifted their direct communication from climate change denialism to rebranding, promoting an environmentally conscious image committed to addressing the climate crisis (Mavelli, 2025: 5).

What followed was a momentous turn in communication efforts. Among European oil companies, BP led this shift with its 2008 campaign popularizing the concept of the 'carbon footprint', a term that transferred the focus from corporate accountability to individual consumption and action. As part of its broader rebranding from British Petroleum to Beyond Petroleum, BP launched ads under the slogan

'It's a start,' which conveyed that individual practices, however small, could contribute to addressing climate change. The campaign included a series of TV and online ads featuring people in various locations being asked if they knew their carbon footprint and what steps they could take to reduce it. BP's accompanying ads featured wind farms and solar panels, thus emphasising its commitment to renewable energy and suggesting that BP was helping pave the way to a greener future. Since then, the carbon footprint has become a ubiquitous measure, from flights to household goods, reinforcing the idea that climate responsibility crucially lies with individuals.

In 2019, BP relaunched its carbon footprint initiative with a new digital calculator encouraging 'low-carbon' lifestyle adjustments. The same year, ExxonMobil/Esso, as part of its 'Thoughtful Driving Manifesto', launched a series of adverts, including the ones opening this article, which promoted responsible behaviour and acknowledged our shared desire 'to use less fuel'. Building on this trend, Shell also launched a carbon offset programme inviting members to pay '1.8p per litre extra' to reduce their footprint, while rolling out in 2024 a \$500 million 'Powering Progress' campaign promoting wind, solar, hydrogen, and low-carbon fuels, and framing consumer choice as key to green progress.

As these illustrations suggest, the individualisation of responsibility for climate change has been accompanied by greenwashing, with oil companies overstating their green investments in relation to fossil fuel spending and exaggerating the environmental benefits of their products (Mavelli, 2025: 6). 'Low-carbon fuels', for instance, suggest lower emissions overall, yet the reductions mostly concern extraction and production, not combustion. Other oil companies, such as Chevron and TotalEnergies, have adopted similar communication strategies: acknowledging climate change, emphasizing consumer responsibility, and portraying themselves as responsible climate actors, while in fact mostly continuing to operate business as usual. According to the International Energy Forum (IEF, 2024), upstream fossil fuel spending rose by \$63 billion in 2023 and was projected to exceed \$600 billion in 2024 – the highest level in a decade. The IEF (2024) estimates that \$4.3 trillion in fossil fuel investments will be needed between 2025 and 2030, and major oil companies are expanding fossil fuel investments accordingly, with some (notably BP, Shell, and Chevron) reducing their spending on renewables despite their green public communication.

Existing research on the oil industry has interpreted oil companies' transition from climate change denialism to individualising its causes and greenwashing its products as a new stage in the industry's strategies of deception and deflection of responsibility (Grasso, 2019, 2022; Munoz, 2023; Supran and Oreskes, 2017, 2021a, 2021b; see also Mavelli, 2025: 7). This 'discursive grooming' (Supran and Oreskes, 2021a: 713) reframes climate change as a problem driven by individual behaviours rather than oil companies' continued fossil fuel expansion. Climate change thus becomes a 'risk' to be mitigated through small, personal adjustments with the 'help' of oil companies (Supran and Oreskes, 2021a), enabling the oil industry to circumvent the no longer tenable stance of outright denialism by rebranding itself as a responsible partner in the climate change fight. While only recently deployed by oil companies, the individualisation of responsibility has long been employed by political and corporate powers to frame social issues like inequality, public health, and environmental degradation as problems whose genesis is personal rather than structural (Kent, 2009; Maniates, 2001; Paterson and Striple 2010).

While agreeing with the critique of individualisation, Paterson and Striple (2010: 341), writing in this journal, have argued that too narrow a focus on it risks missing 'the complex way that subjects are produced by [individualising] practices'. In the remainder of this section, I discuss their important perspective, emphasising how it briefly touches upon, but ultimately leaves unaddressed, the role of *desires* in the governmentality of climate change. This argument will set the stage for the next section, where I analyse how, rather than simply individualising responsibility and greenwashing their processes and products, oil companies are governing the desire to address climate change through petro-feminine spatial imaginaries.

For Paterson and Stripples (2010: 344), critiques of individualisation tend to frame the individual as ‘always impotent in the face of the large structural powers of capital and state’. While there is no denying that ‘people’s daily practices are shaped by large-scale historical/structural forces’, they (2010: 344) argue, it is also the case that ‘a response to climate change which does not entail changes in individual practice, as if all that was needed was to overthrow the power of transnational corporations (TNCs), is manifestly problematic’. From this perspective, carbon footprint calculators and consumer carbon offsets are ‘not so much a distraction from a “real” response, which would involve refocusing the state’s practices or challenging the power of capital, but precisely the means by which both state and capital interact with, and attempt to channel, the desires of many individuals to deal with climate change’ (Paterson and Stripples, 2010: 344).

To advance this argument, Paterson and Stripples (2010: 344) draw on Foucault’s notion of governmentality to explore how ‘power operates through individual practice, not over and against it’. Governmentality emphasises the productive nature of power in moulding subjectivity and guiding individuals to regulate their own behaviour. In the context of climate change, what many scholars regard as the individualisation of responsibility is in fact the consolidation of a regime that aims to govern the ‘conduct of carbon conduct’, wherein individuals are encouraged to manage their emissions through practices like calculating, offsetting, and reducing their carbon footprints (Paterson and Stripples, 2010: 345–347). This rationality of government operates not through coercion, and not primarily through deception, but through individuals’ internalised self-regulations enabled by ‘certain forms of knowledge (measurements and calculations of one’s own carbon footprint), certain technologies (the turning of carbon emissions into tradable commodities), and a certain ethic (low-carbon lifestyle as desirable)’ (Paterson and Stripples, 2010: 347).

What is the catalyst that prompts individuals to embrace this regime of self-regulation? For Paterson and Stripples (2010: 341), it is the alignment of carbon footprint calculators and consumer carbon offsets with the dominant cultural dynamics of digital platforms like MySpace and Facebook. These tools resonate with the individualising and performative logic of social media, where personal responsibility is internalised through a mix of narcissism, peer pressure, and the pursuit of public validation. The carbon-conscious individual is turned into the ‘narcissistic subject’, preoccupied with their emissions, and induced to scrutinise and adjust their practices by comparison with others through social communication and peer approval (Paterson and Stripples, 2010: 341). This dynamic mirrors the communicative rationality of social networks, where behaviours are shaped by a constant drive for connection, judgment, and validation.

Paterson and Stripples offer a compelling perspective to analyse the strategic shift in the oil industry’s communication strategies beyond existing accounts of the individualisation of responsibility and greenwashing. However, although they argue that individualisation is ‘the means by which both state and capital interact with, and attempt to channel, the desires of many individuals to deal with climate change’, they do not follow up on this crucial insight. Hence, they leave unaddressed the question of how corporate powers mobilise desire in the governance of climate responsibility *and* digital platforms, which they see as providing the overarching cultural framework that shapes initiatives such as carbon footprint calculators and consumer carbon offsets. This leads them to outline a governmentality of carbon conduct entirely relying on ‘calculative selves’ and ‘calculative spaces’ that encloses self-centred individuals within ‘calculative regimes’ (Paterson and Stripples, 2010: 359).

In a recent edited collection, Paterson and Stripples (Bulkeley, Paterson, and Stripples, eds., 2016) have expanded their argument by showing that the governmentality of carbon conduct transcends ‘calculative selves’, as it also encompasses the affective and moral governance of desires for low-carbon practices. However, their focus – and that of the other contributors to the volume – is primarily on how these ‘low-carbon desires’ are encouraged by political and civil society actors – such as states, local governments, and community initiatives – and resisted by high-carbon corporate powers. Hence, they do not discuss how carbon-intensive actors, such as oil companies, incorporate, mobilise,

and channel these desires, nor do they consider the role of conflicting desires in the governance of the desire for 'low-carbon' conduct.

To address these two points, I build on their insight that digital platforms provide the overarching cultural framework that shapes low-carbon desires. As recent research on digital societies shows, neoliberal governmentality does not merely channel individual actions through the calculative practices of narcissistic selves, but also encompasses the active cultivation and management of conflicting desires by corporate powers (Flisfeder, 2021; Mavelli and Cerella, 2024; Samman and Gammon, 2023). Specifically, the governmentality of desires encompasses the mapping, manipulation, and amplification of desires, while balancing this effort 'with the preservation of [user] participation and engagement' (Mavelli and Cerella, 2024: 14). For social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, as well as for the proliferating AI-powered chatbots, like ChatGPT, this means fostering desires congruous with the platforms' economic imperatives, such as the desire for products, services and social validation, thereby reinforcing the platforms' business models, their profits and the broader logic of neoliberal consumption. Likewise, it entails forbidding desires for harmful content, such as quests for material related to self-harm and suicide, which could alienate users, disrupt 'participation and engagement', and expose the platforms to significant legal and reputational risks damaging their profitability (Mavelli and Cerella, 2024: 14). This means that *the corporate governance of desires entails governing conflicting desires*. What does this mean for the oil industry?

Oil companies face the challenge of preserving 'user participation and engagement' with carbon-based products, while navigating the social desire for climate action and consumers' fears that this may result in the disruption of carbon-intensive lifestyles. As oil companies can no longer deny climate change, nor are they willing to stop selling their 'harmful content' (carbon-based products), they have channelled the desire for climate action into spatial imaginaries of 'low-carbon desires', where driving 'more consciously', riding a bike, buying 'low-carbon' fuel, or joining a carbon offsetting scheme have become symbolic acts of climate citizenship that provide ecological reassurance without threatening their carbon-based power. In the next section, I develop this argument building on Pohl and Swyngedouw's provocative idea of climate change as an 'object of enjoyment', showing how this enjoyment is an expression of a governmentality of desire that oil companies mobilise and channel through petro-feminine spatial imaginaries.

Conflicting desires and petro-feminine spatial imaginaries

Psychoanalytic geographers have often engaged with the question of desire and conflicting desires through a Lacanian perspective, framing 'desire as the engine of phantasy' (Sutherland, 2023: 74), as the longing for a lost object, and as the driver of the pursuit of what Lacan labels *jouissance*, that is, enjoyment. In a recent intervention, Pohl and Swyngedouw have explored *jouissance* in relation to climate change. Their starting point is the 'dissonance between knowing and acting that produces the current climate deadlock', which raises the following question: 'Although there is now a widely shared consensus on the perils of climate change and the urgent need to re-organize the socio-ecological parameters of life to deflect the history of the future, very little real impact has been achieved in terms of curtailing greenhouse gas emissions' (Pohl and Swyngedouw, 2023: 1). Why? The reason, they argue, is that climate change is experienced not just, and not primarily, as a threat, whether acknowledged, ignored, or denied, but also as an object of enjoyment.

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, enjoyment, or *jouissance*, is a complex phenomenon that describes the void created by the subject's entrance into the symbolic order of language and social norms. This absence is associated with the loss of a primordial completeness. While this void can never be filled, the subject constantly strives to regain their original completeness through *jouissance*, which is a form of excessive, and in some instances, destructive pleasure that both transgresses and sustains the social order (Pohl and Swyngedouw, 2023: 2–3). *Jouissance* oversees the constitution of desire, which is

what Lacan describes as the chase for ‘small a’ or ‘object a’ – that which ‘animates the subject in the pursuit of a “little” or partial satisfaction, one that is never fully really “it”’ (Pohl and Swyngedouw, 2023: 3). In neoliberal consumer societies, which compel individuals to maximize their pleasure, jouissance is not a choice, but the social imperative to satisfy one’s own desires. As the superego’s command to ‘Enjoy!’ applies to all domains and spheres of existence, including climate change, this means that also climate change must be enjoyed via the pursuit of *small objects a* (Pohl and Swyngedouw, 2023: 4).

Pohl and Swyngedouw (2023: 1) identify ‘two dominant strands of enjoying climate change’: ‘a passionate engagement in destroying Nature based on an imperative to enjoy fossil fuels’ and ‘an equally passionate commitment to saving Nature based on an imaginary enjoyment that stems from renunciation and sacrifice’. The first strand is represented by the ignorant, sceptics, and deniers of climate change – consumers who embrace carbon-intensive lifestyles, disregarding the environmental consequences. It is epitomised by the slogan ‘Drill, Baby, Drill’ – made famous by Sarah Palin in 2008 and extensively used today, with Trump recently reviving it together with the slogan ‘Trump digs coal’ – and by the practice of ‘rolling coal’, the deliberate modification of diesel trucks to emit thick, black smoke as a taunt to environmentally conscious citizens (Pohl and Swyngedouw, 2023: 4–5). For Pohl and Swyngedouw (2023: 4–5), this is the superego injunction to enjoy fossil fuels: an imperative that celebrates the destruction of the planet as a form of exhilarating, norm-transgressing and self-annihilating pleasure that resists and defies the scientific consensus around climate change. For those enjoying climate change as the destruction of Nature, the *small object a* of desire is not simply fossil fuels themselves, but the broader affective and symbolic investments connected to them: the sense of masculine power, the thrill of transgression, the phantasy of absolute autonomy and mastery over nature, and, of course, the glorification of consumption.

The second strand of enjoying climate change – a commitment to saving Nature through the celebration of forms of renunciation – finds expression in the surge of environmentally conscious practices such as vegetarianism, recycling, and reducing carbon footprints (Pohl and Swyngedouw, 2023: 5). This enjoyment is driven by the fantasy of recuperating a lost harmony with Nature – one that ‘excessive consumption based on fossil fuels has derailed, but which can be regained with the right sacrificial pursuit’ (Pohl and Swyngedouw, 2023: 6). Yet this enjoyment is not the mirror image of the one revolving around the destruction of nature. Whereas the latter represents a radicalisation of the enjoyment that underpins the existing fossil-fuelled order, the former is not a radical departure from it as its fantasy clashes with the reluctance to challenge ‘the [carbon-intensive] socio-symbolic order that leads to climate change in the first place’ (Pohl and Swyngedouw, 2023: 5).

The result is that the ‘saving Nature through sacrifice’ camp ultimately engages in a process of ‘fetishistic disavowal’ that displaces the libidinal desire for a just and ecologically benign world onto the techno-managerial control of ‘greenhouse gases’ (Pohl and Swyngedouw, 2023: 7). The latter thus becomes the *small object a* of desire that can be pursued through driving less, offsetting, biking instead of driving, and paying a premium for supposedly ‘low-carbon’ fuels. This fetishistic disavowal, Pohl and Swyngedouw (2023: 7) conclude, ‘permits both seeing the truth (of climate change) and denying its roots by displacing the latter onto a thing that is elevated to the dignity of a “true cause” around which acting can crystallize. In doing so, some forms of climate activism become support structures for sustaining the status quo, for assuring that nothing really changes (other than a range of techno-managerial interventions)’.

In the remainder of this section, I expand Pohl and Swyngedouw’s argument in two main directions. First, Pohl and Swyngedouw analyse the ‘enjoyment of climate change’ and its related ecology of desire in psychoanalytic and socio-structural terms. Yet if we approach enjoyment from the perspective of Foucauldian governmentality, it can be argued that the polarised enjoyment of climate change is also the result of a distinctive governmentality of carbon-intensive corporate powers. In the context of this article, the fetishistic displacement of climate action onto the *small object a* of carbon emissions

and personal sacrifice is a product of oil companies' efforts to govern the 'conduct of carbon conduct' (Paterson and Strippel, 2010: 345–347) through spatial imaginaries that intercept, convey, and manage the desire for climate action. The oil industry's recent advertising campaigns function as governmental tools that mobilise individuals as 'vehicles' and 'elements' of its power (Foucault, 1980: 98) by representing them within spatial imaginaries in which the small sacrifice of riding a bike instead of driving a car becomes a meaningful practice of climate action and a form of enjoyment that reconnects individuals to their loved ones and to Nature.

Second, Pohl and Swyngedouw rightly consider the gendered dimension of enjoying climate change. For those enjoying climate change as the destruction of Nature, this is 'the overtly sexualized meaning and erotic excess' of the slogan 'Drill, Baby, Drill' and the petro-masculinity of the 'rolling coal' practice (Pohl and Swyngedouw, 2023: 4). For those enjoying climate change as saving Nature through renunciation, it is the understanding of Nature as Mother, that is, the 'fantasy of Mother Nature' (Pohl and Swyngedouw, 2023: 6). Pohl and Swyngedouw characterise this as 'mOther Nature'. 'Other' is the Lacanian *small object a* of desire pursued to restore the original plenitude – the 'Nature to which we could return if we defeated climate change' – which becomes embedded in the very idea of Mother Nature (Pohl and Swyngedouw, 2023: 6). Yet from the perspective of this article, the gendered dimension of desire surrounding climate change does not solely concern the enjoyment of the latter – whether as 'destroying' or 'saving' Mother Nature – but also the self-construction of an environmentally desirable identity by the fossil-fuelled corporate powers that govern the enjoyment of climate change.

Consider a 2023 Shell advert from the previously mentioned campaign 'Powering Progress', which was eventually banned in the UK for presenting a greenwashed image of Shell. This advert (Shell, 2023) begins with a sequence strikingly similar to the Esso one opening this article: a father, a daughter, and a bike, with the father this time teaching his daughter how to ride on a flowery road, while he informs the audience that in the UK '1.4 million households use renewable electricity from Shell'. Images of environmental stewardship follow: a white woman engineer on a windy seashore announces Shell's wind projects for six million homes; a gentle old lady explains the installation of 50,000 electric car chargers; and finally, a confident Black woman, arguably the manager in charge of a Shell electric vehicle charging station, proclaims that 'the UK is ready for cleaner energy'. This advert constructs a spatial imaginary of clean energy and mobility in a harmonious relation with Nature, who maternally provides wind and other 'renewable sources' to generate electricity. This imaginary links parental care and women's voices of authority to the oil industry's purported role as a responsible climate actor. As in the Esso advert, the oil industry emerges as a maternal and caring figure.

Yet unlike the Esso campaign, which makes references to the 'small changes we can all make' (as discussed in the second advert in the introduction), the Shell advert sidesteps any notion of 'small sacrifices' altogether. It substitutes the already diluted logic of renunciation in the Esso campaign with a fantasy of nurturing inclusivity and technological progress, recasting Shell as a motherly figure of environmental care that reassures viewers of an easy, seamless transition to green energy. In Shell's imaginary, renunciations are not needed, as the white woman engineer and the Black woman manager – both embodying Shell's identity and spirit – are actively working on techno-managerial solutions that make any sacrifice unnecessary.

In this petro-feminine spatial imaginary, which also mobilises a racialised imagery of empowerment – where the Black woman becomes the official voice of Shell and the cooperation between the white woman engineer and the Black woman manager epitomises Shell's inclusivity – the *small object a* of desire is not primarily the techno-managerial control of 'greenhouse gases' (Pohl and Swyngedouw, 2023: 7) but Shell itself: its reassuring maternal voice, gentle promises of care for Nature, and self-proclaimed ability to manage the transition. The Shell advert governs the desire for climate action by transforming it from an interactive endeavour – the individual management of emissions through 'small sacrifices' – into a form of 'interpassive' enjoyment (Pfaller, 2017; Žižek,

1998), where social anxieties and desires for environmental care are performed and managed by Shell itself, allowing individuals to passively consume the fantasy of climate responsibility without fundamentally disrupting their carbon-intensive lifestyles.

Importantly, the imaginary of the Shell and Esso adverts departs from the patriarchal underpinnings of Daggett's notion of petro-masculinity. As Daggett (2018: 33) argues, petro-masculinity 'draws upon aspects of a traditionally hegemonic masculinity' as grounded in a fossil-fuelled patriarchal order where women are subordinate and confined to domestic spaces while men are tasked with providing and dominating. Petro-masculinity thus rests on a nostalgia for the 'breadwinner job' and the promise of fossil-fuelled privilege, as epitomised by a certain vision of 'the American way of life ... centred around a version of white, patriarchal rule in which the achievement of hegemonic masculinity required intensive fossil fuel consumption' (Daggett, 2018: 36, 32). In the Shell and Esso adverts, however, gender roles are reimagined and reshaped. Men appear in nurturing roles – caring not just for children, but for *daughters* – and women are not housewives looking after children, but engineers and managers mastering the techno-managerial solutions that promise to reconcile fossil fuels with climate action, which is undertaken by Shell on our behalf.

Petro-feminine spatial imaginaries, in which oil companies present themselves as catalysts for women's empowerment and challengers of patriarchal norms, abound in recent corporate campaigns. Saudi Arabia's national oil company, Aramco, recently launched a 'Powered by How' campaign, which presents women engineers and scientists at the forefront of energy innovation, encouraging a shift towards inclusivity and gender equality. In one of its adverts (Aramco, 2023), a woman's voice asks: 'How can more women drive innovation in our industry? Women continue to be globally underrepresented in fields such as science, technology, engineering, and maths'. This has prompted Aramco, the narrator continues, to kickstart 'a series of initiatives to accelerate women's professional development within our operations'. Images of both veiled and unveiled women engineers and scientists appear on screen, working in laboratories, peering into microscopes, and delivering public talks. This visual and narrative interplay reimagines the traditionally male-dominated oil industry in a new petro-feminine spatial imaginary of futuristic workplaces where women shape the future of energy. The desire for climate action embodied by Aramco thus merges with the desire for a gendered-balanced future with women at the forefront of the green transition. Shell, ExxonMobil, and ENI have all launched similar campaigns focusing on women's empowerment and inclusion.

These initiatives are part of broader corporate social responsibility (CSR) and equity, diversity, and inclusion efforts that corporate powers have embraced to improve their public image and respond to social demands for gender equality in an increasingly climate-conscious world. From a critical standpoint, they can be regarded as manifestations of what Rottenberg labels 'neoliberal feminism': the neoliberal 'colonization' of 'yet another domain' by corporate power for the purpose of projecting a modern and progressive image of itself (Rottenberg, 2014: 420). McRobbie uses the term 'post-feminist masquerade' to describe how 'flexible global capitalism' exploits feminist values for brand enhancement and capital accumulation (McRobbie, 2007: 719–722). The co-optation of gender equality and equity issues has also been analysed as 'CSR-washing' (Gaspari and Giuliani, 2025) – a term that closely resonates with the 'greenwashing' explored in the first section of this article. 'CSR-washing' practices include 'fem-washing, gender-washing, pink-washing, or rainbow-washing, depending on the target audience and strategic objectives' (Gaspari and Giuliani, 2025: 8). As with greenwashing, which constructs an appearance of environmental sustainability for the expansion of petro-capital, these forms of CSR-washing instrumentally deploy equality and equity themes 'for reputation management or profit-driven motives' (Gaspari and Giuliani, 2025: 1).

While not specifically using the terms CSR- or pink-washing, Wilson (2014: 244, 248) has been a leading voice in exploring how feminist aesthetics and gendered tropes are co-opted by the oil industry to cultivate 'petro-discourses' that, on the one hand, 'neutralize or trivialize women's political and economic relationship to oil', thus reinforcing 'long-standing patriarchal conceptualizations of woman as object and as property', and, on the other hand, produce an affective imaginary of oil as a condition of

possibility for female and social advancement more broadly. This can be observed, for instance, in Appel's (2019) ethnography of so-called 'oil industry wives' – expatriate spouses of male oil workers – in Equatorial Guinea. Their engagement in 'charitable, philanthropic and educational projects' – providing 'school supplies, toiletries, toys, clothes', working with nuns in local villages, teaching 'art, English and stitching classes', helping to run summer schools, and organising fundraising for social projects (Appel, 2019: 127) – is framed as extending women's rights, while it in fact embeds gendered narratives of empowerment within the very structures of extractive capitalism. As McHenry (2021: 194) observes in relation to how fracking campaigns in the United States mobilise gendered imaginaries of women's emancipation and advancement, the oil and gas industry increasingly adopts 'a neoliberal feminist logic' that ultimately 'weaponizes femininity'.

While my argument that oil companies present themselves as catalysts for women's empowerment and challengers of patriarchal norms through petro-feminine spatial imaginaries clearly resonates with these critiques of neoliberal feminism, CSR/pinkwashing, and weaponisation of femininity, it also extends beyond their remit. These accounts investigate the gendered identities neoliberalism produces to govern its subjects' relations to oil 'in a crude world' (Wilson, 2015). My approach complements this perspective by focusing on how the oil industry reconfigures *its own identity* in feminine terms – by using the imagery of women's empowerment and maternal care – to *govern the desire for climate action* within affluent, carbon-intensive societies. Differently put, critiques of neoliberal feminism, CSR/pinkwashing and weaponisation of femininity focus on the 'motherly' attributes and identities ascribed to the subjects *governed by oil*. In contrast, the petro-feminine perspective advanced here centres on the self-ascribed 'motherly' identity of the corporate powers *governing through oil*. My focus is on the 'motherly' as a form of corporate self-fashioning that mobilises spatial imaginaries of care to shape and govern the desire for climate action.

The oil industry's petro-feminine spatial imaginaries thus operate on two conjoined levels. On the one hand, they are 'performative discourses' that shape and are shaped by the material practices through which space is produced (Watkins, 2015). The 'women's empowerment' campaigns not only project a vision of a more inclusive and caring oil industry but also materially enact this vision through selective initiatives that reassert the legitimacy of fossil-fuelled power. On the other hand, they are visual 'spatiotemporal strategies and fixes' that perform a 'recalibration' and 'reorganization' of their public identities (Jessop, 2019: 29). The environmentally conscious, maternal, and inclusive imaginary that oil companies propagate is the *small object a* of desire – an object that promises to satisfy the conflicting desires for environmental care, gender equity, and carbon-intensive lifestyles by resolving these contradictions in a petro-feminine imaginary of a motherly oil industry.

These considerations, and the argument advanced in this section, might suggest that petro-femininity stands in opposition to petro-masculinity. However, such a conclusion would be mistaken. In the next section, I focus on the recent *Plenitude* campaign by the Italian oil giant ENI, which offers one of the most striking instantiations of petro-feminine spatial imaginaries and yet remains firmly situated within a petro-masculine context of expanding oil and gas production. I consider how ENI's strategy mirrors the broader approach of the oil industry and connect these considerations to the evolution of the COP conferences, which in recent years have been led by oil industry executives and marked by the petro-masculine penetration of oil companies into global climate governance. This analysis will show that petro-femininity's maternal care and petro-masculinity's authoritative control are not antagonistic, but that petro-femininity is the condition of possibility for an evolving, post-denialist form of petro-masculinity.

Petro-femininity and post-denialist petro-masculinity

In 2021, Italian oil giant ENI launched Plenitude, its green energy subsidiary integrating renewable energy production, electric mobility, and energy retail within a single structure. Plenitude has been presented as the embodiment of ENI's commitment to sustainability. Its branding revolves around

the idea of harmony – between people, technology, and the planet – mobilising a visual narrative of uncontaminated nature, women’s empowerment, idyllic landscapes, smiling technicians, and joyous consumers engaged in sustainable lifestyles. The company’s name itself signals abundance, balance, and peacefulness: it promises not sacrifice but fulfilment. Plenitude promotes an imaginary of renewable energy not as a disruptive break with the past, but as a natural continuation of ENI’s historical mission of providing ‘the energy of today & the energy of tomorrow’ while ‘preserving the planet and promoting access for everyone to energy resources in an efficient and sustainable manner’ (ENI, n.d.). Plenitude operates as ENI’s maternal face and as a vehicle of petro-feminine governmentality: it channels care, nurturance, and inclusion. To better understand the functions and implications of its petro-feminine spatial imaginaries and how they operate as governmentalities of desire for climate action, I focus on two prominent adverts from its recent Italian market campaign.

The first advert (ENI, 2022), titled ‘A new season has started’,¹ opens with an image of Sandro Botticelli’s *Primavera* (*Spring*), one of the Italian Renaissance’s most famous paintings, which then dissolves into a living scene inhabited by real people joyfully immersed in a blooming nature. Botticelli’s mythological nymphs are replaced by two smiling women at the centre of the frame, dispensing flowers. Next to them, a gender-fluid couple dances in white, their movements gentle and celebratory, with one of them raising a smartphone (arguably a symbol of eco-conscious control). On the edges, a Black man carefully picks fruit from a tree, while an energetic Black woman, dressed in urban fashion, rides a skateboard, echoing the racialised imagery of inclusion of the previously discussed Shell advert. A white-robed man hovers in the trees above, whereas in the foreground a bearded middle-aged man calmly pedals through the scene – a recurring figure of oil companies’ petro-feminine spatial imaginaries. The aesthetic is ethereal and queer, radiating lightness, diversity, and harmony.

A woman narrator declares: ‘We are at the beginning of a new season where each of us has an essential role’, linking Plenitude’s mission – producing renewable energy, enabling new mobilities, transforming action into choice – to a vision of shared responsibility without sacrifice. Meanwhile, the figures begin to move, interacting softly with their environment: adjusting solar panels and clicking wall-mounted controls, immersed in an ecological dream of grass, flowers, and fruit-rich trees. Mother Nature is portrayed as generous, energy-giving, and seamlessly integrated with human technology. The promise of climate care is aestheticised as effortless and desirable: each small action, each object – a bike, a smartphone-controlled thermostat, a solar panel – becomes a *small object a* of eco-desire. The advert asks viewers not to renounce but to enjoy, to consume harmony, to desire the maternal ENI-led Plenitude of its new corporate ecological order. Within this petro-feminine spatial imaginary, the ‘return to Nature’ is the Lacanian return to the maternal womb of primordial ‘completeness’, ‘wholeness’, and ‘bliss’ (Pohl and Swyngedouw, 2023: 7, 3).

The second advert (ENI, 2024), titled “‘E’: This is how energy is born”, stages an imaginary of transformation through the symbolic power of conjunction. It opens in a grey and old-fashioned chemistry lab where a white male scientist – arguably symbolizing an old-fashioned fossil-fuel industry – scribbles an ‘o’ (the Italian word for ‘or’) on a blackboard. The chalk snaps in his hand, and he is frustrated, but then has a sudden inspiration: he reshapes the ‘o’ into an ‘e’ – the first letter of ENI and the Italian word for ‘and’, thus switching from exclusion to inclusion. The scenery rapidly changes: the male scientist, the old lab, and the ancient chalk blackboard disappear, replaced by a transparent, high-tech interface in a luminous research space, operated by a young woman scientist of Asian descent. She is the embodiment of ENI’s evolution, no longer mired in a stale and conservative carbon environment but opening itself to a post-carbon future thanks to a reconfigured gender dynamic. While she expertly draws complex digital diagrams with the ‘E’ at the centre, a male voiceover reflects on the symbolism: ‘Nothing divides more than an O [OR]: old or new, white or black. But with a simple E [AND], everything changes. E unites – you and me. E is the expression of change and a truly

alternative, available energy'. The advert concludes by asserting ENI's key role in 'supporting the present and future of the country for the last 70 years'.

The petro-feminine spatial imaginary of this advert displaces the binary of old versus new, man versus woman, fossil versus renewable, by integrating them into the wholeness of ENI's vision where women are the futuristic inheritors of a legacy reimagined. It presents the racialised 'women's empowerment' theme of the Aramco's and Shell's campaigns in a more structured narrative of continuity and change, functioning as a governmentality that disciplines and redirects the desire for climate action within affluent, carbon-intensive societies towards identification with ENI's managed, non-disruptive energy transition. The figure of the woman scientist is not a rupture with the petro-past, but the seamless succession into a petro-ecological future where continuity, inclusion, and scientific advancement converge and are articulated through the fundamental contribution of women as the embodiment of ENI. This imaginary recasts ENI's masculine past as fertile ground for a maternal, plural and harmonious future, where the *small object a* of desire is not the control of greenhouse gases through small sacrifices, but ENI itself – a reimagined fluid entity paving the way for a future of green energy and women's empowerment through the gentle conjunction of the 'E'.

Read together, the spatial imaginaries of these two adverts reveal that Plenitude is not a departure from ENI, but its feminine extension – born, as it were, *from a rib of ENI*, as in the famous scene from the Genesis (Genesis 2:21–22), where Eve is created from Adam's side while he sleeps. Eve's very existence is defined as derivative and supplementary to Adam: she is created from and for him. She is the 'mother of all living' (Genesis 3:16, 3:20) but also 'the Other' – the Lacanian 'mOther' analysed by Pohl and Swyngedouw (2023: 7) – while man [Adam] is the Subject' (Roberts, 2024: 22). In a 'patriarchal reversal' of human generation, Eve is created from Adam's 'bodily excess' and, as Simone de Beauvoir (2011: 42) famously argues, 'Her spouse is her origin and her finality; she is his complement in the inessential mode'. Like Eve from Adam, Plenitude emerges from within ENI's body, and while she is presented as an autonomous and empowered motherly agent, her corporate ontology is *derivative, supplementary, and complementary*: she channels care, innovation and harmony, but only insofar as she serves and completes ENI's petro-legacy.

This is reflected in the structural relationship between the two companies. Plenitude is entirely owned and strategically directed by ENI, and its operations are deeply embedded in the latter's expanding fossil-fuel agenda. In fact, Plenitude constitutes only a small component of ENI, and its clean-energy investments are cross-financed by profits from oil and gas operations that ENI continues to develop across multiple geographies. In 2023, Eni invested €637 million in Plenitude renewable energy solutions versus the €8.2 billion invested in fossil fuels, including over €7 billion in new explorations (Reclaim Finance, 2023: 5). This means that 'for every euro invested in Plenitude, 12.9 euros were invested in oil and gas' (Reclaim Finance, 2023: 5). Moreover, between 2021 and 2023, Eni invested around US\$1 billion a year in new 'oil and gas exploration, making it the 14th-largest investor in this area over those three years' and its fossil fuel investments in the period 2024–2027 are estimated at 'around €35 billion' (Reclaim Finance, 2023: 5), thus dwarfing its renewable energy spending and reaffirming the company's goal of fossil fuel expansion.

These considerations suggest that petro-femininity does not stand in opposition to petro-masculinity, but rather derives from, supplements, and enables it. Like Eve, who is created from Adam's rib and whose role is defined in terms of *help* and *reproduction*, Plenitude emerges as the feminised extension of ENI's masculine petro-body, tasked with sustaining its legitimacy and fossil fuel expansion in a post-denialist era. ENI's petro-feminine governmentality operates as a soft power extension of a masculinised corporate sovereignty: governing climate desire through images of care, while materially sustaining a regime of fossil fuel expansion. ENI's creation of a mOtherly identity caring for Nature through a split in corporate messaging is not unique, but part of a broader transformation in oil industry discourse.

Since the early 2020s, oil companies have increasingly claimed that their scale, capital, and technical expertise not only entitle them to a role in the transition to green energy but also cast upon them a

vital obligation to guide its successful achievement (Mavelli, 2025). Sultan Al Jaber – CEO of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) and chair of the 2023 COP28, the world’s most important annual climate summit – has repeatedly argued that the oil and gas industry bears a ‘special responsibility’ in tackling climate change because ‘with great power comes great responsibility’ (cited in Mavelli, 2025: 3). This claim of responsibility for leading the transition has been echoed by key oil industry executives from BP to ExxonMobil (Mavelli, 2025). Yet this display of petro-care – presented as a commitment to healing Mother Nature’s malaise – has been accompanied by an equally assertive defence of continued oil and gas expansion. Industry leaders have argued that fossil fuels ‘will continue to be needed’ (BP) (Looney, 2021: 3); that phasing them out ‘would be irresponsible’ (Shell) (Sawan, 2023) and risk bringing ‘the world back into caves’ (ADNOC) (Al Jaber, cited in The Guardian 2023); that the energy transition, ‘given the size and complexity of the challenge,’ must be managed ‘thoughtfully and carefully over many decades’ (ExxonMobil) (Woods 2023); and that the profits generated from ongoing oil and gas activities will help finance the transition to green energy.

This stance clearly resonates with several dimensions of Daggett’s petro-masculinity as a reactionary formation that responds to deep-seated anxiety over the destabilisation of fossil-fuelled orders. The claim that *only* oil companies possess the scale, expertise, and infrastructure to manage the energy transition and save the planet – BP’s Looney (2021: 2) has gone as far as stating that ‘if BP doesn’t transition, the world won’t transition’ – reaffirms a hierarchical order grounded in masculine sovereignty and patriarchal indispensability. The oil executives emerge as the paternal guardians of the global energy and ecological order. They are, at once, the architects of the climate crisis and its only credible saviours. However, their stances also transcend the remit of petro-masculinity as they are post-denialists, express care for the planet, and crucially present fossil fuel expansion not as necessary to preserve the existing petro-order but as instrumental in overcoming it – albeit in a temporally undefined and deferred future.

To clarify these differences, it is useful to consider that Daggett (2018: 34), drawing on Hultman, distinguishes between three types of masculinity in relation to fossil fuel: *hybrid masculinity* – such as that embodied by figures like Arnold Schwarzenegger – who blend ‘toughness, determination and hardness ... with appropriate moments of compassion and care’ – *ecomodernist masculinity* – which resonates with hybrid masculinities but subordinates ‘care and compassion’ to ‘techno-rationality, toughness, and economic growth’ – and *petro-masculinity* – an inherently ‘reactionary stance’ that disdains any veneer of hybridity or care’ and is mired in denialism. The petro-masculinity of today’s oil executives blends these different versions of masculinity, performing precisely such a veneer: it incorporates the language of environmental care, responsibility, and stewardship while preserving the underlying fossil fuel structures of control in a perspective that does not subordinate ‘care and compassion’ to ‘economic growth’ but presents them as compatible and mutually sustainable.

This hybridization, I contend, has been crucially abetted by the emergence of petro-femininity, whereby imaginaries of care, women’s empowerment, Mother Nature and eco-consciousness are strategically embedded into the discourse of carbon corporate powers. This reimagined petro-masculinity is not simply softened by femininity but relies on it: it rests on the deployment of petro-feminine spatial imaginaries – whether in the overtly aestheticised narratives of ENI’s adverts or in the declarations of climate responsibility and environmental stewardship of oil executives. Just as Eve (woman) is instrumental to the reproduction of Adam (man), petro-femininity is instrumental to the reproduction and legitimisation of a new petro-masculine fossil fuel order. As Adam penetrated Eve to generate life, the oil industry, to ensure its own reproduction, has first penetrated the material space of Mother Nature with its denialist carbon extractivism and is now, in a post-denialist phase, penetrating the symbolic and material spaces that once sought to regulate and discipline fossil capital by turning the fight against climate change into a tool of its carbon expansion. These spaces – institutional arenas like the COP conferences – are now being possessed and reconfigured from within through a gendered mode

of governmentality: a patriarchal reclamation of authority and dominance cloaked in the petro-feminine language of care, inclusivity, and ecological stewardship.

The unprecedented and seemingly paradoxical appointment of an oil executive to chair the world's leading climate summit, with Sultan Al Jaber presiding over COP28 in the United Arab Emirates, a petro-state, should not be viewed as an isolated anomaly. Coupled with the formation of the 'COP Troika' – a coordination mechanism involving Azerbaijan and Brazil, hosts of COP29 (2024) and COP30 (2025), respectively – this development signals the consolidation of a geopolitical bloc of major oil-producing states leveraging the energy transition as a platform to strengthen rather than dismantle fossil fuel power. While Al Jaber, Mukhtar Babayev (President of COP29 and former executive at SOCAR, Azerbaijan's state-owned oil and gas company), and André Aranha Corrêa do Lago (President of COP30 and Brazil's Secretary for Climate and Environment) have each affirmed their pledge to the 1.5°C target of the Paris Agreement, the trajectory from COP28 is one of 'phasing down' rather than 'phasing out' fossil fuels, against the backdrop of accelerating fossil fuel expansion, with the UAE, Azerbaijan, and Brazil all boosting their oil and gas production.

These developments signal the evolution of petro-masculinity in a post-denialist era: no longer based on climate obstructionism, it now relies on rhetorical adaptation, strategic co-optation, and affective appeals to care and responsibility by mobilising petro-feminine spatial imaginaries – whether in the oil industry's advertising narratives featuring father-daughter bonding, empowered women, celebrations of nature, and displays of racial inclusivity, or in the oil executives' public declarations of climate responsibility and environmental stewardship, increasingly voiced from institutional spaces like the COP conferences. From this perspective, petro-femininity is not simply the Other of petro-masculinity. Petro-femininity as embodied by the oil industry's spatial imaginaries is the mOther of petro-masculinity in the double sense of *small object a* of desire for climate action and the condition of possibility for an evolving petro-masculinity.

Conclusion

In this article, I have explored how the oil industry's recent public communication strategies operate as *petro-feminine spatial imaginaries* that govern the desire for climate action within affluent, carbon-intensive societies. Moving beyond existing critical scholarship, which has interpreted the oil industry's post-denialist turn primarily as an effort to deflect accountability for climate change, either by blaming consumers or through greenwashing, I have shown how oil companies engage in the construction of petro-feminine spatial imaginaries to recast themselves as motherly figures no longer denying or resisting climate change, but caring for Mother Nature. These gendered imaginaries displace the reality of climate change by projecting harmony between fossil capitalism and ecological sustainability, promising a transition that does not require sacrifice but instead offers the affective plenitude of a post-carbon order underpinned by a carbon-intensive infrastructure.

Building on Pohl and Swyngedouw, who approach the question of 'enjoying climate change' as a psychoanalytic and socio-structural condition, I instead examined it as a governmentality of climate action mobilised by the oil industry through petro-feminine spatial imaginaries. What is governed, I argued, is not just the 'conduct of carbon conduct' through 'small sacrifices', but the very desire for climate responsibility, channelled into symbolic actions of environmental care performed by oil companies themselves. Their petro-feminine imaginaries shift the *small object a* of climate desire from the techno-managerial control of greenhouse gases to oil companies themselves and their promise of an ecological future empowered by women. This analysis extends critiques of neoliberal feminism, CSR/pinkwashing, and weaponisation of femininity by shifting the focus from the 'motherly' identities ascribed to the *subjects governed by oil* to the self-ascribed 'motherly' identity of *corporate powers governing through oil* – a petro-feminine mode of self-fashioning that mobilises spatial imaginaries of care to govern climate desire.

Expanding Daggett's understanding of petro-masculinity beyond the confines of 'petro-nostalgia' and denialism, I considered how the growing penetration of the oil industry into global climate governance – strikingly epitomised by oil executives chairing recent COP conferences – is an expression of an evolving, post-denialist, and futuristic petro-masculinity crucially enabled by petro-femininity. I discussed how this hybrid governmentality fuses masculine authority with the comforting illusion of a motherly oil industry, enabling oil companies to present themselves as indispensable stewards of the energy transition.

As with Daggett's petro-masculinity, the projections of petro-femininity are not singular. They encompass a set of differentiated, strategic performances embedded in different spatial imaginaries – from 'Mother Earth' petro-femininity, which draws on environmental and nurturing metaphors connected to nature and planetary care, to 'workplace women' petro-femininity, which focuses on women engineers, managers, or workers in oil ads framed as breaking barriers and advancing equality, to 'community carer' petro-femininity, which emphasises corporate maternal care for local communities, schools, and health.² Yet these different configurations of petro-femininity all share and are enabled by a common framework. This is the oil industry's self-reconfiguration as the enabling Mother, whose petro-femininity is also crucially the mOther of petro-masculinity – that is, both its constitutive Other and its condition of possibility.

For Pohl and Swyngedouw, the idea of Mother in the fantasy of Mother Nature is the problematic pivot around which the current 'deadlock' of the climate situation rotates. They argue that the 'possibility of a Real enjoyment of climate change' – capable of challenging both the destructive enjoyment of the 'Drill, Baby, Drill' camp and the ineffective, sacrificial enjoyment of small personal gestures – requires 'travers[ing] the fantasies' that structure the current climate consensus (Pohl and Swyngedouw, 2023: 2). Both forms of enjoyment ultimately function as modalities of disavowal of the Real and, particularly for the 'saving Nature' camp, Mother Nature operates as a 'phantasmatic' entity of displacement: she is either evoked as 'a place of nostalgic longing' that can restore the original plenitude, or a vengeful force to be appeased through sacrifice (Pohl and Swyngedouw, 2023: 7). In both cases, the phantasy of Mother Nature displaces 'the Real' of the climate crisis, replacing it with a fetishistic investment in technocratic fixes and symbolic gestures. Breaking the deadlock, Pohl and Swyngedouw (2023: 8) conclude, requires relinquishing this fantasy and confronting the Real of the climate crisis, which is not 'the destruction of nature, but the destruction of human's place in it'.

The analysis carried out in this article suggests that breaking with the fantasy of Mother Nature requires dismantling the petro-feminine spatial imaginaries through which this fantasy is reproduced. The oil industry has strategically appropriated and mobilised the figure of Mother Nature, using it as both a 'spatiotemporal fix' and a regime of 'multispatial metagovernance' (Jessop, 2019: 29) of climate desire, extending its influence across advertising narratives, public discourse and the institutional architecture of climate governance. Through emotionally charged appeals to care, protection, and continuity – framed in the language of maternal stewardship and epitomised by ENI/Plenitude's appropriation of Botticelli's *Primavera* – these imaginaries invite to relinquish meaningful climate action, including the small acts of sacrifice for Nature, for an imaginary that celebrates 'human's place' in Nature through affective plenitude, moral responsibility, women's empowerment and a re-gendered petro-masculinity that can successfully advance climate action on our behalf.

These considerations raise questions about the limits and possibilities of existing forms of climate protests. When members of the climate activist group Ultima Generazione glued themselves to the protective glass of the *Primavera* in 2022 – in the wake of similar actions undertaken by UK-based Just Stop Oil activists – they said they did so to sound 'an alarm call: we are heading towards social and eco-climate collapse' that is depriving us of the possibility 'to see a spring as beautiful as this today' (The Guardian, 2022). While valuable in drawing public attention to climate breakdown, the protest ultimately revolved around the very idea of 'destruction of [Mother] nature' questioned by Pohl and Swyngedouw and did not address the fact that this imagery had already been appropriated by ENI/


Plenitude. Such protests risk unwittingly being reabsorbed into, and reinforcing, the very ‘Mother Nature’ imaginary that underpins the oil industry’s petro-feminine spatial imaginaries.

This article has argued that effective responses to the climate crisis must also challenge the gendered governmental apparatus through which the oil industry has appropriated and instrumentalised the Mother Nature imaginary. Only by exposing and contesting this hybrid formation of care and control – of petro-femininity enabling post-denialist petro-masculinity – can we begin to confront the Real of climate breakdown beyond the oil industry’s deceptive imaginaries of desire, opening the possibility, however uncertain, of envisioning and pursuing genuinely transformative practices of climate action.

Acknowledgements

This project was funded by a Leverhulme Research Fellowship, RF-2023-394/7, “‘We are all in this together’: Climate Change and the Politics of Collective Responsibility’, whose support I gratefully acknowledge. I am also deeply grateful to the editors, the two anonymous reviewers, and Harmonie Toros for their close readings, insightful feedback, and inspiring comments, which encouraged me to engage with the concept of petro-femininity and greatly strengthened this article.

ORCID iD

Luca Mavelli  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6163-2971>

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was made possible by the generous support of a Leverhulme Research Fellowship, RF-2023-394/7, “‘We are all in this together’: Climate Change and the Politics of Collective Responsibility’.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. All direct quotations from ENI’s adverts in this section are my translations from the original Italian.
2. I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for prompting me to clarify and differentiate these dimensions of petro-femininity.

References

- Appel H (2019) *The Licit Life of Capitalism: US oil in Equatorial Guinea*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Aramco. (2023) How Can More Women Drive Innovation in Our Industry? https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1bygDAoDmUs&ab_channel=aramco (accessed 11 June 2025).
- Bialasiewicz L, Campbell D, Elden S, et al. (2007) Performing security: The imaginative geographies of current US strategy. *Political Geography* 26(5): 405–422.
- Bowen F (2014) *After greenwashing: Symbolic corporate environmentalism and society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bulkeley H, Paterson M and Strippel J (eds) (2016) *Towards a Cultural Politics of Climate Change: Devices, Desires and Dissent*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Daggett C (2018) Petro-masculinity: Fossil fuels and authoritarian desire. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 47(1): 25–44.
- de Beauvoir S (2011) *The Second Sex. Volume I: Facts and Myths*. New York: Vintage Books.

- Denton F (2002) Climate change vulnerability, impacts, and adaptation: Why does gender matter? *Gender & Development* 10(2): 10–20.
- Djoudi H, Locatelli B, Vaast C, et al. (2016) Beyond dichotomies: Gender and intersecting inequalities in climate change studies. *Ambio* 45: 248–262.
- ENI. (2022) Plenitude, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EBbh0uAYA9s&ab_channel=Plenitude (accessed 11 June 2025).
- ENI. (2024) “E”: così nasce l’energia, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LyVj_4KZaYg&ab_channel=enivideochannel (accessed 11 June 2025).
- ENI. (n.d.) 70 Years ENI Italy; ENI for 2024 [Infographic]. <https://www.eni.com/en-IT/media/events/70-years-eni-italy.html>; <https://www.eni.com/visual-design/infographics/eni-for-2024/en/> (accessed 11 June 2025).
- ExxonMobil. (2023a) Esso Thoughtful Driving, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GKKYCKO3xZU&ab> (accessed 29 January 2025).
- ExxonMobil. (2023b) What is Thoughtful Driving?, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WVOiavw72tg&t=4s&ab> (accessed 29 January 2025).
- Flisfeder M (2021) *Algorithmic Desire: Toward a New Structuralist Theory of Social Media*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Foucault M (1980) *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*. New York: Pantheon.
- Franta B (2021) Early oil industry disinformation on global warming. *Environmental Politics* 30(4): 663–668.
- Gaspari L and Giuliani M (2025) The co-optation of gender equity issues in empirical business research: A systematic literature review. *Business Ethics, the Environment & Responsibility*: 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1111/beer.12844>.
- Grasso M (2019) Oily politics: A critical assessment of the oil and gas industry’s contribution to climate change. *Energy Research & Social Science* 50: 106–115.
- Grasso M (2022) *From Big Oil to Big Green: Holding the Oil Industry to Account for the Climate Crisis*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Gregory D (1995) Imaginative geographies. *Progress in Human Geography* 19(4): 447–485.
- Gunderson R (2020) Spectacular reassurance strategies: How to reduce environmental concern while accelerating environmental harm. *Environmental Politics* 29(2): 257–277.
- IEF. (2024) Upstream Oil and Gas Investment Outlook. Available from: <https://www.ief.org/focus/ief-reports/upstream-oil-and-gas-investment-outlook-2024> (accessed 11 June 2025).
- Jessop B (2019) Spatiotemporal fixes and multispatial metagovernance: The territory, place, scale, network scheme revisited. In: Middell M and Marung S (eds) *Spatial Formats Under the Global Condition*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 48–77.
- Kaijser A and Kronsell A (2014) Climate change through the lens of intersectionality. *Environmental Politics* 23(3): 417–433.
- Kent J (2009) Individualized responsibility and climate change: ‘if climate protection becomes everyone’s responsibility, does it end up being no-one’s?’. *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 1(3): 132–149.
- Lehman J and Braun B (2023) On the dark Side of the boom: Narratives of social crisis and liberal art of governance. In: in Thomas ME and Braun B (eds) *Settling the Boom: The Sites and Subjects of Bakken Oil*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 143–172.
- Lindqvist A, Gustafsson Sendén M and Renström EA (2021) What is gender, anyway: A review of the options for operationalising gender. *Psychology & Sexuality* 12(4): 332–344.
- Looney B (2021) ‘BP’s CEO is trying to convince the world he’s serious about going green. *Time Magazine*: 1–5. <https://time.com/6125315/bernard-looney-bp-ceo-interview/> (Accessed 3 January 2025).
- MacGregor S (2009) A stranger silence still: The need for feminist social research on climate change. *The Sociological Review* 57(2): 124–140.
- Maniates MF (2001) Individualization: Plant a tree, buy a bike, save the world? *Global Environmental Politics* 1(3): 31–52.

- Mavelli L (2025) With great power comes great responsibility': Climate change and the politics of simulation of the oil industry. *Environmental Politics*: 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2025.2497217>.
- Mavelli L and Cerella A (2024) Neoliberalism against society? Spontaneous order and governance of desire in digital societies. *Critical Sociology*: 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08969205241287067>.
- McHenry KA (2021) Getting fracked: Gender politics in fracking discourse. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 47(1): 191–207.
- McRobbie A (2007) Top girls? Young women and the post-feminist sexual contract. *Cultural Studies* 21(4–5): 718–737.
- Megura M and Gunderson R (2022) Better poison is the cure? Critically examining fossil fuel companies, climate change framing, and corporate sustainability reports. *Energy Research & Social Science* 85: 1–10.
- Muñoz S (2023) *How Oil Companies Put the Responsibility for Climate Change on Consumers*. The Conversation. Available from: <https://theconversation.com/how-oil-companies-put-the-responsibility-for-climate-change-on-consumers-214132>.
- Paterson M and Striple J (2010) My space: Governing individuals' carbon emissions. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 28(2): 341–362.
- Pfaller R (2017) *Interpassivity: The Aesthetics of Delegated Enjoyment*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Pohl L and Swyngedouw E (2023) Enjoying climate change: Jouissance as a political factor. *Political Geography* 101: 102820.
- Reclaim Finance. (2023) *ENI: Climate Strategy Assessment*. Paris: Reclaim Finance. Available from: <https://reclaimfinance.org/site/en/2023/04/13/eni-climate-strategy-assessment/> (accessed 14 April 2025).
- Roberts L (2024) Can the story of Eve (Genesis 2–3) be interpreted as feminist. *Plurality* 1: 18–24. <https://doi.org/10.2218/plurality.10067>.
- Rottenberg C (2014) The rise of neoliberal feminism. *Cultural Studies* 28(3): 418–437.
- Samman A and Gammon E (eds) (2023) *Clickbait Capitalism: Economies of Desire in the Twenty-First Century*. Manchester: Manchester University Press
- Sawan W (2023) Shell CEO calls it 'irresponsible' to cut oil production now. *The Independent*, July 6. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/ap-shell-ceo-london-antonio-guterres-b2370512.html> (accessed 14 April 2025).
- Shell. (2023) Ready for Clean Energy, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZZUrrpq9p2U&ab> (accessed 11 June 2025).
- Staub ME (2023) Snake oil and gaslight: How the petroleum industry got in touch with nature. *Environmental Humanities* 15(2): 85–104.
- Supran G (2021) Fuelling their own climate narrative. *Science* 374(6568): 702–702.
- Supran G and Oreskes N (2017) Assessing ExxonMobil's climate change communications (1977–2014). *Environmental Research Letters* 12(8): 1–18.
- Supran G and Oreskes N (2021a) Rhetoric and frame analysis of ExxonMobil's climate change communications. *One Earth* 4(5): 696–719.
- Supran G and Oreskes N (2021b) The forgotten oil Ads that told us climate change was nothing. *The Guardian*. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/nov/18/the-forgotten-oil-ads-that-told-us-climate-change-was-nothing> (accessed 11 June 2025).
- Sutherland C (2023) COP26 and opening to post-capitalist climate politics, religion, and desire. *Scottish Geographical Journal* 139(1–2): 73–90.
- The Guardian. (2022) *Climate activists in Italy glue themselves to Botticelli painting*. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/jul/22/climate-activists-in-italy-glue-themselves-to-botticelli-painting> (accessed 5 August 2025).
- The Guardian. (2023) *Cop28 president says there is 'no science' behind demands for phase-out of fossil fuels*. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/dec/03/back-into-caves-cop28-president-dismisses-phase-out-of-fossil-fuels> (accessed 11 June 2025).
- Toros H (2025) Bad men, good men, and loving women: Gender constructions in British state messaging on counterterrorism, countering violent extremism and preventing violent extremism. *Terrorism and Political Violence* 37(2): 153–168.

- Watkins J (2015) Spatial imaginaries research in geography: Synergies, tensions, and new directions. *Geography Compass* 9(9): 508–522.
- Wilson S (2014) Gendering oil: Tracing western petrosexual relations. In: Barrett R and Worden D (eds) *Oil Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 244–263.
- Wilson S (2015) Petro-Mama: Mothering in a Crude World. Available from http://sheenawilson.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Petro_Mama_Mothering_in_a_Crude_World.pdf (accessed 11 June 2025).
- Woods D (2023) 'You Need to Do the Math and Then Explain the Math': A Talk with ExxonMobil's Darren Woods. McKinsey & Company, September 12. Available from: <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/oil-and-gas/our-insights/you-need-to-do-the-math-and-then-explain-the-math-a-talk-with-exxonmobils-darren-woods> (accessed 11 June 2025).
- Žižek S (1998) The Interpassive Subject. In: *Traverses*. Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1–18.

Luca Mavelli is a Reader in Politics and International Relations at the University of Kent, UK. His research critically engages with neoliberalism, focusing on its intersections with climate change, citizenship, infrastructures, digital society, and religion. His latest book is *Neoliberal Citizenship: Sacred Markets, Sacrificial Lives* (OUP, 2022). His articles have been published in *Environmental Politics*, *Political Geography*, *Critical Sociology*, *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory*, *Citizenship Studies*, *International Political Sociology*, *European Journal of International Relations*, *International Studies Quarterly*, *Review of International Studies*, *Security Dialogue*, *Millennium*, and *International Politics*.