Climate Change and the Victim Slot: From Oil to Innocence

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ABSTRACT People change the climate. Ethnography, however, tends to look past these perpetrators and see only victims. In such accounts, parties vulnerable to climate change suffer, adapt, or do both. To varying degrees, their societies are resilient and may soon make themselves more so. These comparatively cheerful keywords overlook an entire moral field of responsibility, complicity, and culpability. High emitters of carbon dioxide bear the bulk of responsibility for the unfolding catastrophe. How do such people interpret and justify their actions? What ethics and mentalities with respect to the environment are high emitters, their firms, and their governments fabricating? In this article, I address these questions in the context of a society both complicit and vulnerable: the petrostate of Trinidad and Tobago. There, an overlapping set of environmental policymakers and environmentally minded industrialists consider Trinidad—including its oil industry—to be only vulnerable. Their "victim slot" relies on cultural constructions of insular geography, performances in diplomatic fora, and planning rubrics for hazards. In each instance, the slot allows Trinidadian institutions and corporations—including oil firms—to skirt accountability for carbon emissions. Nevertheless, some Trinidadian public figures are beginning to reconsider hydrocarbons in ways both painful and humane. [*climate change, carbon emissions, environmental anthropology, Trinidad and Tobago, the Caribbean, islands*]

RESUMEN La gente cambia el clima. La etnografía, sin embargo, tiende a dejar de lado a los responsables y a ver solo las víctimas. *En tales explicaciones, los grupos vulnerables al clima sufren y/o se adaptan*. A diferentes niveles, sus sociedades son resistentes y pueden pronto serlo aún más. Estas palabras comparativamente alentadoras ignoran un campo moral entero de responsabilidad, complicidad y culpabilidad. Altos emisores de dióxido de carbono cargan con la mayor parte de la responsabilidad por la catástrofe en desarrollo. Cómo este tipo de gente interpreta y justifica sus acciones? Qué ética y mentalidades con respecto al ambiente están fabricando grandes emisores, sus firmas y sus gobiernos? En este artículo abordo estas preguntas en el contexto de una sociedad tanto cómplice como vulnerable: el petro-estado de Trinidad y Tobago. Allí un conjunto de coincidencias entre creadores de políticas ambientales e industriales de mentalidad ambiental consideran a Trinidad—y su industria petrolera—solamente vulnerable. Su "posición de victima" depende de construcciones culturales de geografía insular, presentaciones en foros diplomáticos, y criterios de evaluación de planeación para riesgos. En cada caso, la posición les permite a las figuras públicas de Trinidad y a las corporaciones—incluyendo las empresas petroleras—eludir la responsabilidad por las emisiones de carbono. Sin embargo, algunas figuras públicas de Trinidad están empezando a reconsiderar los hidrocarburos en formas tanto dolorosas como humanas. [*cambio climático, emisiones de carbono, antropología ambiental, Trinidad y Tobago, El Caribe, islas*]

When people suffer from climate change, they suffer in ways that are both unmitigated and unfair—or so cultural expressions would suggest. Inhabitants of the Torres Straits, for instance, are "sinking without a trace [as] Australia's climate change victims" (The Independent 2008). The "victim" serves as an absolute category of people both vulnerable to and innocent of the given crime. For the isles of the Straits, this label fits: their carbon emissions barely surpass zero. But the category of victimhood has expanded well beyond the shores of this and other subsistence-level archipelagos. In the media, fully industrialized societies—ranging from China to Bahrain to Louisiana—represent themselves as victims. Most recently, Hurricane Sandy swept through the energy-intensive suburbs of my state, New Jersey, leaving millions of victims but no one willing publicly to accept partial responsibility. Under new climates, hardship redeems in an almost Christian fashion. It renders or maintains the polluter's conscience as pure.

In this widely distributed form, I argue, victimhood increasingly constitutes a "slot." Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1991) defines this term as an enduring category of thought and enquiry, one that canalizes and disciplines scholarly work. Renaissance Europe created the "savage slot," he writes, and anthropologists still explain the Other within its confines. Tania Li (2000) uses "slot" slightly differently: as a durable political tool that marks and separates "tribal" people from populations nearby and straddling the boundary. The "victim slot" exhibits all these features. It draws strength from archaic geographies and cleaves social groups radically and irreversibly from close similars. Under climate change, emitters of carbon dioxide—even high emitters—have deliberately occupied or accidentally fallen into this compartment. Like the "savage slot" or the "tribal slot," the victim slot artificially clarifies an inherently murky moral situation. It whitewashes—as innocent—societies, firms, and industrial sectors otherwise clearly complicit with carbon emissions and climate change. To the extent that the slot persuades us, it allows good people to do bad things to the biosphere.

Perhaps nowhere has this rhetoric proved more effective than in Trinidad and Tobago (sometimes abbreviated as "Trinidad," hereafter). There, a pervasive sense of vulnerability crowds out a more searching analysis of responsibility. Up to now, hurricanes have missed the twin islands as they career through more northerly Antilles. "God is a Trini," citizens like to say. Models of climate change, however, anticipate a southward dip in the hurricane belt, sooner or later devastating Port of Spain. Meanwhile, rising seas menace that city and the entire littoral. In 2010, fear broke out in public. "Oy Mama, please Mama," crooned that year's award-winning calypsonian, "We beggin' and pleadin' for relief from climate change."[1] Appeals of this abject sort abstract Trinidad from its historical and political context—and particularly from the ample evidence of its culpability for climate change. The modern hydrocarbon industry began in south Trinidad, where the driller Walter Darwent spudded the world's first commercial well in 1859.[2] Trinidad and Tobago now enjoys the status of a middle-income country, with gasoline and electricity so amply subsidized that many people consume them wastefully. In 2010, therefore, Trinidad and Tobago's per capita carbon emissions ranked fourth among nation-states (International Energy Agency 2010). These statistics omit the oil and gas Trinidad extracts for exports. Among hydrocarbon producers, Trinidad and Tobago occupies 38th place, making it not an enormous contributor but still a larger one than Bahrain and Ecuador combined (United Nations Statistics Division 2009). In short, Trinidadians have collectively benefited from the lethal hydrocarbon system and, in so doing, exacerbated climate change. Their seas rise in what Ulrich Beck (1992:23) calls the "boomerang effect"—wherein pollution bounces back onto the polluter. Such circumstances suggest ambivalence and ambiguity. How and why, then, do Trinidad's public spokespeople still frame the country as unequivocally innocent?

In the context of climate change, *innocence* refers to geography as much as morality. Consider the movement for international climate justice. Using cardinal points as shorthand, activists are pursuing a claim of the Global South against the Global North. In the course of industrializing, the North has polluted the biosphere to the detriment of everyone but particularly to the detriment of the resource-dependent societies of the South (Davis 2010; Robert and Parks 2007). In essence, Africa, Asia, and Latin America are suffering from a problem not of their own making, and they deserve various forms of compensation. This argument gives specific weight to geography and only general weight to actions. As all parties acknowledge, the North did not initially embark on this energy-intensive development pathway knowing or intending the harm. The South might well have taken the same route if it had access to equivalent finance and resources. In fact, China's rapidly expanding carbon footprint suggests an almost irresistible attraction to coal and crude. Activism centered on cardinal points then blames people more for accidents of temperate-zone birth than for their free will. The same logic exonerates residents of the tropics—populations, from a moral point of view, in the right place at the right time. Of course, more fine-grained analyses do break apart the reductive binary of North and South. Shoibal Chakravarty and his coauthors refer to 1 billion "high emitting individuals who are present in all countries" (Chakravarty et al. 2010: 11884). In an era of widespread neoliberalism, one might expect this citizen-centered analysis to take hold. It "responsibilizes" the consumer for his or her own choices (Goldstein 2005:39). But international negotiations and policies continue to denote entire countries or societies as high or low emitting. The victim slot, in short, encompasses Africa, Asia, Latin America, and especially their offshore archipelagos. Small and windblown, these islands now represent the frailty of victimhood more compellingly than does any other geography (Lazrus 2012).

Insularity thus substantiates Trinidad's credibility in the victim slot. So does the comparatively clean record of the oil industry itself. Since the "Dome Fire" of 1928, the industry has caused many small spills but no sensational disaster on land or water. Corruption and repression have often exceeded desirable levels, but they do not approach those of, say, Equatorial Guinea. The recent petroleum boom has entrenched a dictatorship on that part-continental, part-island nation. President Obiang Nguema and his family convert national wealth into trophy cars with reckless abandon. Outside the palace, poverty abounds, and critics find themselves in jail (Shaxson 2007). Journalists associate these pathologies with a "resource curse," often interpreted as the unavoidable result of extraction (Watts 2004). Indeed, so entrenched is this model that the mere discovery of deposits in neighboring, fully insular São Tomé e Príncipe has unnerved policymakers for more than a decade. They await the arrival of corruption, passing legislation to blunt its worst effects (Weszkalnys 2011). Observers of this eastern Atlantic archipelago, then, criticize a nexus of politicians and industrialists. They detect a boomerang effect of harm—from a short-distance throw rather than through the long arc of atmospheric change. In the Bight of Benin, petroleum's near-term problems cause greater fear than do rising seas. Trinidadians, by contrast, feel trepidation in the reverse proportion. Climate change appears to menace this island more than any resource curse. In addition, in the absence of ill-reputed local actors, climate change seems to arrive suddenly from distant shores. Trinidad's oil and gas firms pass as victims of the very climate they produce.

In 2009 and 2010, I conducted a year's ethnography in Trinidad within what one might call a national intelligentsia of climate change. My informants were professionally successful men and women, born in Trinidad, belonging to African and Indian ethnicities, and mostly secular or Christian rather than Hindu. All had earned bachelor's degrees, and many had studied further in the United States, Canada, or Britain. In the emic litmus test of sobriety, most would have identified with Christianity and against Carnival (Miller 1994). While others *fêted*, my informants worked. If they celebrated it at all, the Lenten festival took two days—rather than two months—from their calendar. To these stalwart scientists, activists, policymakers, and energy specialists, I introduced myself as a fellow traveler: an environmental anthropologist writing a book on energy policy. I made no secret of my personal fears of climate change. At times, they heard me as accusing Trinidad and themselves. Conversations sometimes bordered on arguments, as instructive as they were contentious. No one broke off contact, and all seemed to consider our debate one worth having.

This approach—part activism and part accident—provoked a form of defensiveness I had not anticipated. At workshops, demonstrations, and social gatherings, my interlocutors continually emphasized the insular landform. Geography was destiny, my informants seemed to believe.

In fact, they were "producing" small islands as a category and as an ethical position (Moore 2010:116). This effort minimized some aspects of Trinidad's history and emphasized others. Few remembered Trinidad's continental linkages: its description as a sometime peninsula of South America in 19th-century biogeography. Only in the 20th century could one imagine Trinidad as a self-contained "geo-body" (Thongchai 1994) such that encircling water suggested vulnerability. In the 1990s, Trinidad helped found the Alliance of Small Island States, an international bloc of the countries most vulnerable to rising seas. Finally, in 2010, Trinidad's climate intelligentsia took part in public consultations on the country's first policy regarding climate change. The participants might have considered carbon emissions and means of reducing them. Instead, the consultations and the policy centered on environmental hazards and even on the endangerment of oil infrastructure. The predator became prey, or so one would have observed from outside the victim slot. Yet, so powerful was this category that in three domains—physical geography, international diplomacy, and vulnerability assessment—it rendered Trinidad's complex, agroindustrial story as a flat narrative of innocence. And innocence amounts to a license to pollute.

PHYSICAL GEOGRAPHY

Residents of small islands face a perception of irrelevance. For Europe, the problem arose in the Renaissance with the notion of seagirt landforms. Prior to that point, an "island" simply lay apart from surrounding terrain. Islandness meant insularity, a quality that pertained to forest groves, built areas, and solitary people. Exploration added greater precision to the language. Columbus and other Europeans began to consider their point of departure as a "continent" (Gillis 2004:62). This specificity did not imply hierarchy. Islands loomed large, sometimes larger than continents, in the geographical imagination of 1500–1800. Ursula Heise's (2008) distinction between a parochial sensibility of place and of an inclusive concern for the planet did not yet apply. As in contemporary Micronesia, an "ocean-space" linked land, white water, and blue water (Steinberg 2001). In 1599, Richard Hakluyt—who chronicled Sir Walter Raleigh's quest for El Dorado—denoted the West Indies as "a large and fruitfull continent" (quoted in Lewis and Wigen 1997:29). Indeed, Raleigh and other seafarers constantly sought islands as way stations that would allow them to cross water. An "Atlantic Oceania" of the Azores, Antillia, Atlantis, and other unverified, shifting isles connected Europe to the Indies (Gillis 2004:86; cf. Crone 1938). By 1800, however, new technology dispelled the enchantment surrounding islands, establishing both their actuality and their location. Isles lost their allure, and continents gained in importance. In the 19th and 20th centuries, surveying, settlement, and the entire colonial project prioritized prairie, savannah, and other large expanses found only on continents. Islands even lost their function as refreshment stations: coal-fired steamers sped directly across

the Atlantic. Once a patchy Pangea, small islands became wayward dots—became "islanded" in John Gillis's language (Gillis 2004). Demography worked against them, too. In the Caribbean, in particular, islanders suffered total or near-total genocides. "To the admirers of remote island peoples," writes Gillis, "innocence made them seem like the children to which they were frequently compared, vulnerable to the point of extinction" (Gillis 2004:115).

This shift of meaning did not initially affect Trinidad. Throughout the 19th century, the land mass straddled the boundary between continent and island. Columbus had claimed Trinidad for Spain, and it later became a province of colonial Venezuela. But Spain gave it up—including a dishearteningly small population of French Creole planters and African slaves—to a British raid in 1797. This political separation from the mainland might have provoked a geographical reassessment as well. At almost the same moment, however, the epic biogeographer Alexander von Humboldt began his five-year trek through South America. In 1799, von Humboldt arrived at the T-shaped peninsula of Cariaco. There, the Gulf of Paria separates this Venezuelan appendage from Trinidad in a fashion that, for von Humboldt, called for a geohistorical explanation. The gulf, he wrote, "owes its origin to subsidence and rents caused by earthquakes."[3] Humboldt believed in a dynamic, visibly fluctuating earth as well as in the reigning theory of oceanic retreat (Rudwick 2008). This larger trend would soon dessicate the Gulf of Paria: "Under the actual state of things," he affirmed, "we see the coastal plains growing, gaining over the sea."[4] Among literate Trinidadians, von Humboldt's history—if not his predictions—assumed the status of fact. "All Geologists who have regarded this Island," wrote the settler historian E. L. Joseph in 1837, "agree in pronouncing it an amputation from the neighboring Continent" (Joseph 1837:4). Maps and texts of the period traced south Trinidad to the Orinoco's alluvium and mountainous north Trinidad to the Andes (Joseph 1837; see also de Verteuil 1858). In biological terms, too, the island shared kin relations with South America. Had he studied Trinidad, Alfred Russell Wallace, Darwin's codiscoverer of evolution, would surely have noted the absence of any impassable "Wallace Line" between it and the continent proper. Species had crossed a short land bridge during the last Ice Age. At high water, the Amazon and Negro Rivers easily outspan the channel between Trinidad and Venezuela. Wallace's "Guiana District" of northeastern South America encompassed Port of Spain as well as Manaus (Quammen 1996:74). In short, 19th-century speculation and observation thoroughly blurred the edge of South America.

In more practical ways too, 19th-century enterprises and schemes straddled the Gulf of Paria. Almost as soon as Britain took Trinidad from Spain, anti-Spanish agitators launched expeditions from its shores to liberate Venezuela. The British themselves coveted Venezuela for different reasons. In 1805, Admiral Alexander Cochrane surveyed southern Trinidad and concluded: "Trinidad . . . may be said to be the key

of South America, to the possession of which, the River Orinoco offers a safe and easy passage" (Cochrane 1805). Venezuela liberated and possessed itself in 1811, thwarting cross-channel imperialism. In a more modest scheme, John Adolphus Eztler and Conrad Friedrich Stollmeyer sent a group of utopian socialists to Venezuela by way of Port of Spain in 1845. They crossed the Gulf of Paria to settle on a land grant from Caracas. So lethally malarial was the coastal lowland that five months later a mere 26 of 41 settlers fled back to Port of Spain (Stoll 2008). This debacle should have dampened trans-Paria aspirations. Yet, in 1858, Trinidad's towering intellectual, Louis Antoine Aimé Gaston de Verteuil, laid out the most ambitious of such plans publicized before or since. Like Joseph, de Verteuil accepted von Humboldt's fast-moving geohistory. "Even at the epoch of its discovery by Columbus," he wrote, "the Indians entertained the opinion that this catastrophe had taken place at a not very remote period" (de Verteuil 1858:85). If floodwaters had lately isolated Trinidad, de Verteuil proposed to use them to reconnect the island to the mainland. His compendious geography of Trinidad recommended engineering the nearby delta into a serious of navigable canals. De Verteuil quoted the colonial governor's statement of ten years earlier: "Port of Spain may eventually become the receptacle of trade of that vast tract of country from which the Orinoco draws its waters" (de Verteuil 1858:347). Such boosterism came to naught.

In the next century, Trinidadians reoriented themselves toward other continents and islands. Although farther away, the British Empire impinged more directly on Trinidadians than did South America. So did certain Caribbean legacies, best expressed by the first generation of black authors. No one accomplished more to name and bound a regional and race-conscious identity than did intellectual C. L. R. James. Born in Tunapuna, Trinidad, almost at the turn of the century, James published his influential account of the Haitian revolution in 1938. *The Black Jacobins* (James 1938) metaphorically recast the region in the mold of injustice and reactions to it. "The transformation of slaves," begins James, "trembling in hundreds before a single white man, into a people able to organize themselves and defeat the most powerful European nations of their day, is one of the great epics of revolutionary struggle and achievement" (James 1938:ix). At that time, he envisaged independence throughout Africa and its diaspora. By 1963—as these dreams were coming to fruition—James narrowed his unit of analysis. "The history of the West Indies," he wrote in an appendix to the second edition, "is governed by two factors, the sugar plantation and negro slavery" (James 1963b:391; cf. Mintz 1985). Cricket was a third, more contemporary factor. As James writes in *Beyond a Boundary*, "The clash of race, caste, and class did not retard but stimulated West Indian cricket" (James 1963a:72). Caste had arrived with Indian indentured workers imported after slavery, whose descendants often played cricket with high passion and great skill. Of the Indo-Guyanese batsman Rohan Kanhai, James wrote, "I

have found . . . a unique pointer of the West Indian quest for identity, for ways of expressing our potential bursting at every seam" (James 1966:1). That regional identity seemed to inhere most in the black bowler George Constantine. His style provoked James to observe, "We West Indians are a people on our way who have not yet reached a point of rest and consolidation" (1963a:148). Restlessly, the West Indies team beat England and dominated the world at midcentury. Through sport, James and other Trinidadians identified their island with an archipelagic team.

James's student, Eric Williams, moved from history to politics seeking similarly to prove the West Indies' large potential. His doctoral dissertation—published as *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944)—sought to demolish Britain's reputation as a liberator. London did not emancipate the slaves with compassion or humanitarianism, argued James. Parliament simply cast off an institution that was becoming unprofitable—due, in large part, to revolts on the plantations. Even if less dramatically than in Haiti, slaves of the British West Indies effectively freed themselves (Williams 1944). Williams did not remain in the historical profession. In the 1950s, he campaigned for the independence of Trinidad and Tobago, leading the People's National Movement. He became prime minister at independence in 1962. In office, Williams still insisted on correcting the misapprehension of Trinidad's past as trivial. The oil crisis of the mid-1970s gave him the perfect opportunity. Trinidad and other oil exporters experienced the crisis as an economic boom and an industrial fillip. Williams's speech in 1977 at the opening of the nation's first steel mill recalled a British policy three centuries old. "The colonies were to manufacture not a nail, not a horseshoe," he lectured, "they were to produce raw materials only" (Williams 1981:82–83). That dictum had persisted through sugar into the age of oil up to the present rupture. At the Point Lisas industrial estate, Trinidad would at last harness the energy of hydrocarbons to make steel and aluminum. It would convert petroleum into downstream plastics. "Point Lisas," Williams boasted in 1977, "is the symbol also of the aspirations of the developing countries of this world" (Williams 1981:82–83). Point Lisas also became an enormous point source for carbon dioxide. In this sense, Williams's speech may mark Trinidad's first exploitation of the victim slot. The prime minister represented heavy industry unapologetically as a right owed to the weaker parties of the world.

Beyond economic policy, similarly geographical themes of fragility or flimsiness have arisen in public culture. During and after Williams's rule, the island's two Nobel laureates—V. S. Naipaul and Derek Walcott—waged a literary dispute centered on size, among other issues. Naipaul hardly refers to his home country without disparaging its scale. Born to Indo-Trinidadian parents, he moved to England in 1950, a teenage novelist. At the invitation of Williams, he returned to write his first travelogue. *The Middle Passage* (Naipaul 1962), the very title of which seemed to relativize slavery, still angers Trinidadians. "Nothing was created in the British West Indies," opines Naipaul, "no civilization . . . There were only plantations, prosperity, decline, and neglect. The size of the islands called for nothing else" (Naipaul 1962:27). "It was hard to attach something as grand as history to our island," he recalls in a memoir (Naipaul 1988:143). A second memoir contrasts Trinidad's "small-island geography" with the "continental scale" of Venezuela (Naipaul 1994:214). Indeed, Naipaul once joked, "Trinidad was detached from Venezuela. This is a geographical absurdity. It might be reconsidered" (Naipaul 1970:34). Against this belittling of the Antilles, Derek Walcott has waged a decades-long campaign. In accepting the Nobel, for instance, Walcott reinflated his homeland in space and time: "There is a territory wider than this—wider than the limits made by the map of an island—which is the illimitable sea and what it remembers" (Walcott 1992:30; cf. Benítez-Rojo 1992). This profoundly cosmopolitan memory centers on the true Middle Passage and the voyages of Indian workers over *kala pani*, or "dark waters." His address closes with a view from Felicity, the Indo-Trinidadian heartland, imagining, "the light of the hills on an island blest by obscurity, cherishing our insignificance" (Walcott 1992:34). Trinidad, in other words, extended across oceans while oceans concealed it from view. Even if all did not agree on it, encircling water at least became a focal point of debate.

INTERNATIONAL DIPLOMACY

At roughly the time of Walcott's Nobel award, Trinidad began to use this insular imaginary as a diplomatic trump card. In the 1990s, the country faced a choice of alliances: identify with hydrocarbon producers or with the world's archipelagos. Besides Bahrain, at that time only Trinidad could claim belonging among both of these groups. Although it did not export enough oil to join OPEC, Trinidad did share oil and gas fields with the petro powerhouse Venezuela. In the 1990s, Trinidad experienced a gas boom, leading to rapid capital accumulation and resource nationalism (Mottley 2008). Why did this mineral-based pride not provoke Trinidad's Foreign Ministry externally to perform as an oil state? Hydrocarbons never generated wealth fast enough to stimulate an identity-shifting faith in or fear of them. Even the captains of this industry did not feel secure until the gas boom of the 1990s. Trinidad's oil does not "symbolize uncontrollable powers," as Fernando Coronil (1997:353) describes the substance in Venezuela, nor should one associate Trinidad's oil with a Nigeria-style "'seeing-is-believing' ontology that disguised the absence of productive base" (Apter 2005:14). Wealth has not surged fast enough to distract Trinidad's leaders from the wells and workers that generate it. Indeed, public spokespeople have been more likely to exaggerate the importance of infrastructure, if not also the operators of that infrastructure. Remember: Williams associated hydrocarbon-driven industry with the labor of sugar plantations. Trinidad's diplomats, then, have never carried off the swagger of OPEC. Instead, in the 1990s, they chose

to huddle at the other extreme of political and economic power, with the states most prey to environmental and economic shocks. Alienated by the bluster of Tehran, Trinidad performed the suffering of Tuvalu. It joined the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), a bloc that soon came to represent those most desperately vulnerable to climate change (Lazrus 2009).

In fact, Trinidad and Tobago gained admission to this club by creating it. Otherwise, its own carbon emissions might have barred Port of Spain from membership. The effort began in a hotel room in Geneva in 1990, during a meeting prior to the 1992 United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development, known as the Rio summit. Lincoln Myers, Trinidad's then–Minister of Environment, and his two advisors agreed on a political strategy. States amid the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans—always marginalized within their regional, continental blocs—would unite and speak with one voice. I met Myers, now retired, in mid-2011 at his home in central Trinidad. From the speeches of 1990, he recalled both the peril of small islands and their consequent moral authority. "Where else could it be," he asked, "except on an island like this—a small island like this—where all the issues concerning development and climate change can be as stark as this . . . . All the issues of development become pronounced in these finite spaces." This hazardous condition actually empowered "the smaller countries of the world." He continued, "Their resource . . . the main contribution they can make is the advocacy of justice and fair play . . . . We have to be the moral voice."[5] Leo Heileman, a marine chemist and one of Myers's advisors in Geneva, echoed this sentiment. "We didn't have economic power, political power, or military power," he recounted on a Skype line from Equatorial Guinea, "but we had the power of influencing the conscience of the world."[6] Weakness, it seemed, generated another kind of strength. Myers and Heileman named their 38-member group AOSIS deliberately: it sounded like "oasis"—an inverse island. The two continental members—low-lying Guyana and Surinam—did not undermine this sense of purity. I asked Myers, who pronounced the acronym as "oasis," about Trinidad's per capita emissions in 1990. They stood at triple that of the next highest AOSIS member. Didn't Tuvalu and others question Trinidad's fitness to lead? "The message," Myers explained, was that the "very important issue of climate change overrides all other concerns."[7] As NGOs and other countries also pushed this agenda in Rio, the message overrode its first messenger.

At the margins, however, the sense of crisis applied to some petro states more than others. Bahrain, whose 1990 per capita emissions more than doubled that of Trinidad, did not join AOSIS. (Equatorial Guinea did not join either, although São Tomé e Príncipe did.) I brought up this notable absence with Angela Cropper, the second advisor who had accompanied Myers to Geneva. She had eventually become deputy secretary-general of the United Nations Environment Programme. We met in her temporary lodgings during a 2012 visit to Port of Spain. As a low-elevation island,

Bahrain could have joined AOSIS, Cropper explained. But that delegation "saw the whole climate change negotiation treaty as a potential threat." Naturally so: limits to carbon emissions might eventually dampen demand for Bahrain's oil exports. Perhaps the similarly flood-prone United Arab Emirates and mostly insular Qatar stayed away for the same reason. Why did Trinidadians—then known as the "Arabs of the Caribbean"—not appreciate their economic common interest with these Persian Gulf petro states? Cropper and her colleagues, it appeared, had no intention of sacrificing their country's hydrocarbon industry. They simply thought about the future only in terms of the impact—rather than the cause—of climate change. Delegates shared "the sense that all these small islands were going to be inundated . . . [the threat] appeared more imminent than it has proved to be." In this low-grade panic, Cropper and the other founders of AOSIS were not thinking of renewable energy and other reforms later considered vital: "Nobody knew where this would go," she recalled, "the whole thing evolved really."[8] Without any conspiracy, circumstances deferred discussion of cuts to carbon emissions. Perhaps AOSIS members were practicing what Kari Norgaard (2006:352) calls "implicatory denial," accepting the fact of carbon emissions but avoiding the moral consequences. Or, rather, Trinidad's delegation appreciated only its own moral innocence to the exclusion of its guilt.

After 1990, Trinidad mostly "passed" as a small island state in climate change's victim slot. High-placed Trinidadians didn't seem to need to perform the role. Mere discretion appears to have sufficed. In 1992, at the Rio summit itself, the delegation found itself in an awkward position. Eden Shand, Myers's deputy, recounted the scene to me in the midst of his retirement in Delaware, from where he still ran a forestry business in Trinidad. "They were discussing carbon pollution and pointing fingers towards the North and the Middle East," he recalled. "Trinidad had to be very silent 'round the table." Shand continued, "I remember it being an embarrassing situation." Amid this "strained feeling," Shand tiptoed through Rio.[9] Ultimately, the gathering dispelled such unease by creating a group slightly larger than AOSIS, known as Small Island Developing States (SIDS). Bahrain did join this bloc (Kelman 2010), and it attended the first meeting in Barbados in 1994. (Again, Equatorial Guinea did not join while São Tomé e Príncipe did.) The resulting Barbados Declaration generously exonerated all the signatories as "among those that contribute the least to global climate change and sea level . . . [while] among those that would suffer the most the adverse effects."[10] In that same year, Angela Cropper published an article entitled "Small Is Vulnerable." She made no caveat for her own country. She even wrote, without qualification, "small islands because of their size are often not endowed with . . . fossil fuels" (Cropper 1994:9). As before, Cropper intended no obfuscation. Neither did an early draft of the Kyoto protocol "reaffirming that per capita emissions in developing countries are still relatively low."[11] Trinidad and Tobago submitted that

document on behalf of AOSIS to a 1996 preparatory meeting. Silence and omissions allowed accomplices to harbor among innocents in the victim slot.

Trinidad played no further prominent role in the global politics of climate change until November 2009. Port of Spain hosted the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, widely considered a dress rehearsal for the Copenhagen summit on climate change the following month. By this point, all of Eric Williams's predictions at Point Lisas had come true. A boom in gas production and downstream industries had advanced Trinidad and Tobago to the cusp of what the government heralded as "developed country status." The nation's per capita emissions had tripled from its 1990 levels—nearly the fastest rate of increase of any nation state in that period. Meanwhile, in an effort to stabilize the climate, AOSIS was demanding immediate, drastic reductions in the use of fossil fuels. "1.5 to stay alive!" its publicity proclaimed, referring to the maximum acceptable temperature rise in degrees Celsius. Could Trinidad again carry out the trick of 1990, redeeming its emissions through international diplomacy? To do so, Prime Minister Patrick Manning would have to vindicate the country's hydrocarbon-fueled industrial policy. In part, he played with the numbers. "The atmosphere does not respond to per capita emissions," he repeated whenever relevant, "it only responds to absolute emissions." In aggregate, Trinidad and Tobago emitted only 0.1 percent of the global total. Manning might have massaged the data further: Trinidad burned much of its gas to manufacture exports. Trinidad could have rejected responsibility—as China has—for these "off-shored" emissions.[12] Rather than proffer this rationale, Manning claimed a size-related exemption: at 1.3 million, the small national population pushed Trinidad and Tobago's per capita figure artificially high. At the Heads of Government meeting itself—inside the glittering Hyatt Regency hotel—Manning exercised his influence as chair to call on the Global North to compensate the Global South. The resulting document—the Port of Spain Climate Change Consensus—stipulated "a dedicated stream [of funds] for small island states and associated low-lying coastal states of AOSIS."[13] As before, no caveat excluded Trinidad and Tobago. Manning had maintained his country's position in the victim slot.

Among NGOs, public discussion on climate change threatened to burst beyond that narrow category. In parallel with the Commonwealth summit—but at a markedly more plebian hotel—nongovernment organizations convened the Commonwealth People's Forum. They invited Angela Cropper to give the opening address. Fiery and full of conviction, she declared the world to be "moving towards an ecological civilization." Amid loud applause, she asked those in the room to "accelerate the transition towards a low carbon economy."[14] Emily Gaylor Dick-Forde, Trinidad's Minister of Planning, Housing, and the Environment, rose next to the podium. Two months earlier, the minister had claimed "we emit very little." She had also quoted the head of AOSIS as saying, "We are the conscience of the world when it comes to

climate issues."[15] At the forum, however, Cropper's speech seemed to cause a change of heart. Dick-Forde referred to "that ecological civilization to which we are working." In cutting carbon emissions, she claimed, "we as a nation have been trying to do our part."[16] The statement contained more hope than truth, but in any case it implied responsibility. Had Cropper forced open a door? Manning and his ministers might actually have to discuss the country's own culpability. Perhaps Trinidad could balance within and outside the victim slot. "It is not one or the other," Cropper later told me wearily, sounding if she felt personally the heavy load of Trinidad's emissions.[17]

ASSESSING VULNERABILITY

In discussions of climate change, the concept of "vulnerability" often conceals as much as it illuminates. It has become an "indicator" in Sally Engel Merry's terms, "creat[ing] a commensurability . . . even though the users recognize that these simplified numerical forms are superficial, often misleading, and very possibly wrong" (Merry 2011:86–87). Measures of vulnerability confer credibility on the victim slot. Above all, the notion of vulnerability pushes responsibility to the margins. Often, of course, circumstances warrant this emphasis. Climate change has hit colonized people like a blow to a downed boxer, layering environmental vulnerability atop political and economic forms (Ribot 1995, 2009). In Siberia, for instance, Sahka herders are losing their livelihood as permafrost degrades into swamp (Crate 2008). Do they possess sufficient ecological knowledge and resilience to adapt? One hopes so, and the question and its terms fit the Sakha context. In a petro state, however, resilience is not necessarily desirable. One might not hope that oil and gas industries bounce back—or "forward" in the latest lingo—from Katrina or the next Gulf hurricane (Manyena et al. 2011). At root, BP and Siberian herders act as quite different agents in respect to climate change: the former propel its dynamics while the latter struggle to survive through it. The Sakha conduct their affairs as historical agents of the old-fashioned sort, generating events under conditions not of their own making. Drillers and pumpers, on the other hand, have become what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls "geological agents." Superhumanly, they wield "technologies that . . . have an impact on the planet itself" (Chakrabarty 2009:206–207). A cloud of environmental guilt might settle among such folk, but category 3 winds blow it away. Of the three fields where the victim slot operates—islandness, diplomacy, and vulnerability—the last discourse is the most powerful and the most deceptive. In the discourse of vulnerability, Trinidad's oil and gas sector played the victim card to its greatest effect.

After Cropper's intervention, politicians steered the country away from questions of responsibility. Following the Commonwealth summit, Prime Minister Manning began a national discussion on climate change. He had avoided the issue for decades. Before entering politics, Manning had

worked for Texaco as a petroleum geologist. When we met in his constituency office in 2010, he recalled a long period of ignorance of climate change. "At first, I ignored it," he admitted. He seemed to have educated himself on the topic mostly so as to reject Trinidad's status as a high emitter. Per capita measures, he argued, "discriminate against small states." Had I misunderstood? "We are small. Remember that," he advised me. I returned to the issue of per capita emissions. "It's not right. It's not right," he insisted, "I fighting that!" In our conversation, he indicted China, which had just overtaken the United States to become the highest aggregate emitter. "They just spewing into the atmosphere," Manning accused, "and they don't care about anybody."[18] He did not seem to care that the average Trinidadian spewed five times as much CO_2 as the average Chinese or that China manufactured mostly for other countries. Manning's government soon enshrined his rationale in official documents. In March 2010, Dick-Forde's ministry released its "Draft Climate Change Policy." Of 20 pages of text, the document devoted merely two pages to vague means of reducing the country's carbon emissions. Indeed, Kishan Kumarsingh—the document's author, who has a background in chemistry and law—parroted Manning's line: "In a scientific context the atmosphere reacts only to absolute emissions and not per capita emissions."[19] Culpability was not open for discussion.

This rhetorical erasure became evident in two public consultations on the climate change policy.[20] This time, as civil servants, university lecturers, and NGO leaders flocked to a middle tier of hotels, each event began with Kumarsingh's note of alarm: "Sometimes a whole island is a coastal zone." At the first consultation, in Port of Spain, comments from the floor backed him into a corner. Some participants, including myself, mentioned Trinidad's carbon emissions and suggested that the document include targets for cutting them. Eden Shand, who had returned to Trinidad for this meeting, agreed with me. He suggested Trinidad identify less with Tuvalu and more with Bahrain, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. "If we admit our per capita prominence," he continued before his unconvinced audience, "we get to sit at the table with the big players."[21] Kumarsingh parried with us, saying, "We have to bear in mind with regard to what you are asking a small country to do." Further discussion restored Trinidad to the victim position but now as the victim of sustainability. Kumarsingh pedaled doubt regarding solar and wind power: "Imagine that you get no electricity tomorrow . . . because it is a green economy." At the event, the consultation did result in one concrete proposal regarding emissions. "We want Tobago to be a carbon neutral destination," declared John Agard, a university biologist and member of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.[22] Much less industrial and less populated than Trinidad, Tobago already bore the brand of a tropical paradise. Tourists burned jet fuel to get there, but Tobagonian individuals and firms emitted little carbon. They had less to lose by going green. Fifty thousand Tobagonians, Agard implied, could more easily shoulder a burden that 1.25 million Trinidadians were too vulnerable to bear.

At a different venue, Agard almost—but not quite—dislodged Trinidad from the victim slot. In January 2010, we met in his office at the University of the West Indies. He was preparing for the climate policy consultations and had met recently with Patrick Manning. The two had debated the salience of per capita emissions. Manning, of course, cared only about Trinidad's low aggregate pollution. "Think about what it means," Agard responded, "to be contributor to a problem of which you are also a victim . . . *forget about the arithmetic!*"[23] Nowhere else had I encountered such a pithy and forceful summary of Trinidad's ambiguous position. Hoping for more such directness, I attended Agard's professorial inaugural lecture on campus the next month. The bulk of the talk presented four scenarios in the global approach to climate change: "markets first," "policy first," "security first," and "sustainability first."[24] Scenarios 1 through 3 resulted in capitalist or authoritarian dystopias of various kinds. "Sustainability first," however, would allow the world to shift from fossil fuels to renewable energy with democracy and economic well-being. "That is the vision," Agard declared, beaming at his audience.[25] What did the vision mean for Trinidad's oil and gas, I asked. "That is easy," Agard shot back, "[because it is] a wasting resource" and will run out anyway. After the formal program, I approached Agard to ask if he was really advocating business as usual: that Trinidad should just use up its hydrocarbons. No, he confided, it made sense to "leave something for the future" in the ground. In that case, the finitude of Trinidad's reserves made no difference: the country would stop producing oil and gas before—not because of—exhausting supplies. Ecuador had made a similar proposal to leave oil underground (Rival 2010), but nothing in Agard's presentation suggested such deliberate forbearance as a development model. Agard had overlooked this logical extension of his own "sustainability first" principle. It required the country to accept responsibility rather than mere vulnerability.

Fear, however, soon overwhelmed all other sentiments. By March 2010, drought and heat were baking the country. Fire swept through forest deemed too moist to ignite. "The whole of Trinidad is burning right now," said an environmental planner at the first consultation.[26] Consternation spread even to the Ministry of Energy. At the second meeting, a geologist—identifying himself as "from oil"—spluttered, "There is no one alive who can remember a dry season as dry as this one."[27] This gathering actually took place in the petroleum belt almost in the shadow of the Paria Suites' mock oil rig. After Kumarsingh's presentation, a faction, smaller and less vocal than that at the Port of Spain meeting, raised the issue of Trinidad's emissions. This time, the oil and gas sector did not wait for Kumarsingh but responded on its own behalf. Shyam Dyal from Petrotrin (the national oil company) insisted on business as usual: "We have to realize that Trinidad is energy based," he reminded us. "Adaptation should be given a higher priority than

mitigation," he insisted before rushing out of the meeting.[28] Dyal had, in fact, overseen a study of Petrotrin's exposure to sea-level rise and extreme weather events—the only risk analysis conducted in the country. Modeling of storm surges showed "catastrophic effects to onshore operations and offshore platforms."[29] "Trinidad is a small island developing state so we are vulnerable," he had told me in his office, located alongside the country's oil refinery. "We have wells that could fall into the sea."[30] In this way, encircling water defended and whitewashed the very industry perpetrating climate change. Back in the second public meeting, Big Oil became the biggest victim to global impacts. The topic of mitigation did not arise until nearly at the end, when a man objected to the draft policy's brief mention of public transport. "All I see is rapid rail [a proposed train system] running through Central Trinidad and demolishing endless houses," predicted the man, having identified himself with the populist "rum shop perspective."[31] The audience saw itself as doubly vulnerable: to climate change and to sustainability. I returned dejectedly to Port of Spain by ferry, where I met Akilah Jaramogi, a community leader, on her third day of fighting fires. "This is reality ah climate change," she announced weeping, "I am exhausted. I am exhausted. I am exhausted."[32] Climate change would blight her life.

In intimate spaces such as these, a more complex environmental subjectivity seemed to be taking shape. Toward the end of my ethnographic year, I met Winston Rudder and Keisha Garcia of the Cropper Foundation, an NGO originally created by Angela Cropper. In public, the organization had criticized the oil and gas sector only for its lack of fiscal transparency.[33] Private—but still official—communications opened up much broader issues. Submitted to the Ministry of Planning, Housing, and the Environment, Rudder and Garcia's written comments derided the draft policy on climate change. "Does the atmosphere not respond to this?" they asked in line-by-line criticism regarding increased emissions in multiple sectors. In its authors, this sarcasm must have touched a personal nerve. Garcia's husband worked for an international gas firm, and Rudder's son had trained as a petroleum engineer. Perhaps for this reason, these two environmentalists conveyed the compromises and contradictions of ecological sentiment better than any others had to me. "We want to have our cake and eat it," said Garcia, as the three of us chatted at the foundation's office. Trinidad, she meant, wanted to become rich without relinquishing the exemptions of a poor country. Rudder agreed but was not sure how Trinidad should adjust its deep-rooted investments. "Can we go about development," he asked, "in a way that makes sense given our [environmental] responsibility and given the fact that we live on this piece of earth . . . that has a certain capacity, that has certain natural resource wealth?"[34] The question balanced parochial and universal concerns, a love of community with an awareness of its transgressions. More than a year later, on a follow-up trip, I shared lunch with Rudder at my no-star hotel. Manning and the People's National Movement had lost an

election. The new government had shelved its policy on climate change. Rudder seemed even less sure than before. He described a "goodness feeling about the smell" of the country's refinery. "You don't question the oil industry," he almost commanded. And, in the midst of all this silence, "We conspire in our own demise."[35]

CONCLUSION

Faced with climate change, it was easy for islanders to sound the alarm. Rising seas threatened them immediately and visibly—and also exonerated them. Especially in a European-dominated milieu, encirclement by water suggests frailty and weakness. Atolls have lain prone before natural elements as well as total genocide, slavery, and colonialism. They can credibly pass as victims-in-waiting of the next great injustice. Ecology still marks them as "tropical island Edens" (Grove 1995). Mostly, small island states do belong in the category of climate change innocents. The Maldives recently committed to cutting its carbon emissions to zero. Except under those absolute conditions, however, at least some islanders surely belong in the guilty camp of high emitters. Too few acknowledge this responsibility, with the exception perhaps of the Marshall Islands. Marshallese blame themselves for impending inundation—a consequence, they believe, of allowing the United States to explode nuclear weapons on Bikini Atoll during the Cold War (Rudiak-Gould 2011). Their sense of guilt exceeds, so to speak, the climatological science. None of my Trinidadian informants contested that paradigm, but almost all rejected blame either tacitly or explicitly. Instead, the national climate change intelligentsia situated Trinidad in a multiplex victim slot. In considering their landmass, in performing at diplomatic fora, and in planning for hazards, these experts represented their nation and their institutions as innocent. A generous pardon, it reached all the way to the country's gas rigs and petroleum refinery. In this way, the slot "rendered technical" all the thorny questions of responsibility and complicity that would otherwise arise (Li 2007). Petro Goliath entered the slot and passed as a greenwashed David. In this sense, climate change had the misfortune of being recognized by residents of small islands.

Imagine, by contrast, what can happen once continentals in a strong nation recognize climate change. Franny Armstrong's recent film follows the reckoning of a petroleum paleontologist living in New Orleans. To Alvin DuVernay, "oil smells so much like money it's just beautiful." Then he smells corpses rotting after Hurricane Katrina. The scales fall from his eyes. We are living, he concludes, in "the age of stupid" (Armstrong 2009). The charge of stupidity overlooks much complexity, but it is not a bad place to start. This portrayal leads more rapidly to accountability than does victimhood. Trinidad's new government has asserted victimhood less vocally than did Manning's administration. At the same time, no official in Port of Spain is accepting partial responsibility for climate change. Far from it: in 2012, the Ministry of Energy was simultaneously exploring for gas and

launching a program of enhanced oil recovery. Still, outside the energy sector and outside government, some Trinidadians are reconsidering their nation's complicity with climate change. In our 2012 discussion, Cropper turned her earlier assumption about insularity on its head. She referred to Trinidad as "this tiny country—which lends itself so well as a crucible for getting things done." One of those "things" could be a postcarbon society.[36] Trinidad's small size might allow it to overcome the indecision endemic to larger polities. Perhaps the proximity of everything in Trinidad throws hydrocarbons into stark relief. One can actually smell them. Perhaps, Trinidadians might appreciate the connection between hydrocarbons and sea level if they considered only the place, rather than the planet. They might understand climate change as the boomerang of their own pollution rather than as a harpoon thrown from another hemisphere. An awareness of such self-destruction might form the core of a new CO_2-specific "environmentality" (Agrawal 2005). With luck, Port of Spain and New Orleans will assemble and export a product too rare to have a recognized name: carbon conscience.

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NOTES

1. Grant (2010), sung by Kwesi Jeffers. The song won the national award in the youth category. The song won the national award in the youth category.
2. More commonly Pennsylvania claims this credit, thanks to the simultaneous but shorter-lived Drake well.
3. "Les deux golfes [Paria and Cariaco, to the west of the Penninsula] doivent leur origine à des affaissemens et à des déchiremens causés par des tremblemens de terre" (De Humboldt and Bonplan 1816: III, 231.
4. "Dans l'état actuel des choses, on voit s'agrandir, en gangnant sur la mer, les plaines humides" (De Humboldt and Bonplan 1816: III, 232).
5. Interview, Gran Couva, Trinidad, July 2, 2011.
6. Interview via Skype, July 19, 2011.
7. Interview, Gran Couva, Trinidad, July 2, 2011. See Griffith and Oderson (2009:21, 86) and Leggett (2001:24–27).
8. All quotations are from interview, Port of Spain, January 7, 2012.
9. Interview, Newark, Delaware, June 20, 2011.
10. Declaration of Barbados, Part One, Article III, Clause 2.
11. "Draft protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change on Greenhouse Gas Emissions Reduction," submitted on May 17, 1996 as Paper No. 1 by Trinidad and Tobago on behalf of AOSIS for consideration by the Ad Hoc Group on the Berlin Mandate, fourth session, Geneva, July 9–16, 1996. Downloaded from http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/1996/agbm/misc02.pdf on June 28, 2012.
12. Surprisingly, in this period, the government invoked none of the available arguments, such as off-shoring, historical debt, or the distinction between subsistence and luxury emissions (cf. Agarwal and Narain 1992:24ff).
13. "Port of Spain Climate Change Consensus: the Commonwealth Climate Change Declaration," Port of Spain, November 28, 2009, Clause 13.
14. Remarks at the Commonwealth People's Forum, opening plenary session, Port of Spain, November 23, 2009.
15. Remarks at the Heath, Safety, Security, and the Environment Conference, Port of Spain, September 29, 2009. The origins of the quotation are unclear.
16. Remarks at the Commonwealth People's Forum, opening plenary session, Port of Spain, November 23, 2009.
17. Interview, Port of Spain, January 7, 2012.
18. Interview, San Fernando, June 29, 2010.
19. Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, "Draft national climate change policy for Trinidad and Tobago," 2010, p. 7. Port of Spain: Government of Trinidad and Tobago.
20. The government held four meetings in total.
21. Remarks at the National Consultation on Climate Change Policy, Port of Spain, March 23, 2010.
22. Remarks at the National Consultation on Climate Change Policy, Port of Spain, March 23, 2010.
23. Interview, St. Augustine, Trinidad, January 29, 2010.
24. Agard was summarizing chapter 9 of a large report (UNEP 2007). He had been one of three lead coordinating authors of that chapter.
25. Agard 2010.
26. Remarks at the National Consultation on Climate Change Policy, Port of Spain, March 23, 2010.
27. Public Consultation on Climate Change Draft Policy, La Romaine, April 6, 2010.
28. Public Consultation on Climate Change Draft Policy, La Romaine, April 6, 2010.
29. As presented by Garret Manwaring to the Health, Safety, Security and the Environment Conference of the American Chamber of Commerce of Trinidad and Tobago, Port of Spain, September 29, 2009.
30. Interview, Point-à-Pierre, March 3, 2010.
31. Public Consultations on Climate Change Draft Policy, La Romaine, April 6, 2011.
32. Personal communication, Port of Spain, April 6, 2011.
33. The Cropper Foundation 2008.
34. Interview, Port of Spain, July 2, 2010.
35. Interview, Port of Spain, January 4, 2012.
36. Interview, Port of Spain, January 7, 2012.

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