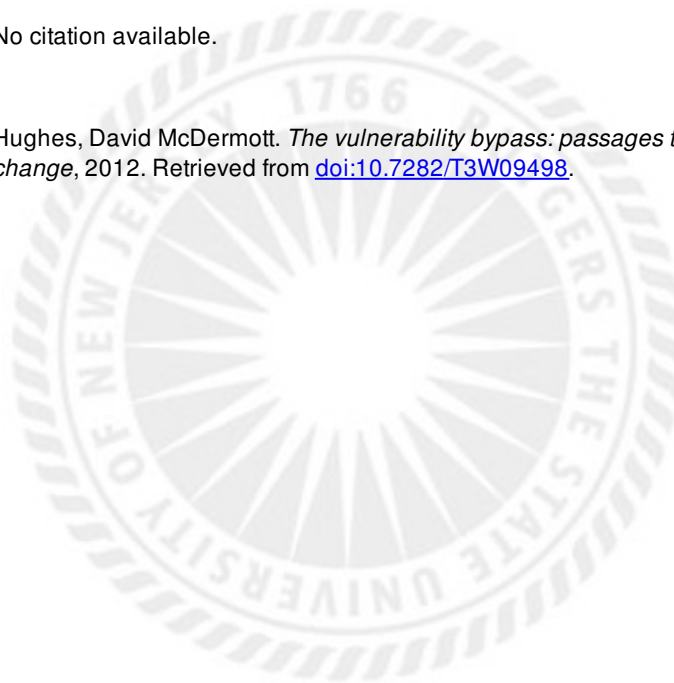


The vulnerability bypass: passages to innocence under climate change

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The vulnerability bypass:

Passages to innocence under climate change

Abstract

People change the climate. This simple fact remains at the margins of discussions of current climate change in anthropology – indeed, in much of the social sciences. Ethnographies tend to analyze the victims rather than the perpetrators. In such accounts, parties *vulnerable* to climate suffer and/or *adapt*. 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 – those who burn hydrocarbons or have benefitted disproportionately from them – 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 fabricating? This article addresses these questions in the context of a society both complicit and vulnerable: the twin-island petro-state of Trinidad and Tobago. There, an overlapping set of environmental policy makers and environmentally minded industrialists consider Trinidad – including its oil industry – to be *only* vulnerable. Their *vulnerability bypass* makes use of an identity, a slot (or category), and a moral defense. In each phase, the bypass skirts accountability for carbon emissions. Nevertheless, some Trinidadian public figures are beginning to reconsider hydrocarbons in ways both painful and humane.

Keywords

In discussions of contemporary climate change, anthropology has specialized in the study of vulnerability and responses. How, one might ask, do people “on the ground” adjust practices and meanings as their climates diverge – often dangerously - from expectations (Orlove, et al 2008)? So far, the anthropology of climate change has focused on this question – and done so mostly under the rubric of resilience, and adaptation. I will not summarize this burgeoning literature, as Susan Crate has already done so (Crate 2008, 2011). She acknowledges the problem of consumption, as do a few of the contributors to her edited volume (Crate 2011:183; Barlett and Steward 2009, Bohren 2009, Wilk 2009). Yet, this concern has not gained traction among anthropologists. Crate herself advocates a “climate ethnography” centered on adaptable, resilience, and “cultural models ... to understand both how climate change is affecting local cultural predictions and how communities can best integrate this new level of environmental change into their understandings and worldviews” (Crate 2011:187). This approach emphasizes the improbable agency of people facing vast disruptions beyond their control. Although already vulnerable in political and economic terms (Ribot 1995, 2009), these subalterns make the best of what the skies and seas hurl at them. And, therein lies the central oversight. A group of people sometimes called “high emitters” have created the conditions for climate change and are making them steadily worse (S. Chakravarty, et al 2009). The average resident of the United States emits 18 metric tons of carbon dioxide per year, perhaps as much as four times the level considered safe. Of course, national figures disguise significant variability. The poorest Americans may burn only negligible volumes of fossil fuel. By the same token, elites everywhere dump CO₂ wantonly and with disastrous effect. Anthropologists, including this one,

jet to fieldsites. The “downstream” concepts of vulnerability and adaptation shed little light on such “upstream” practices of carbon pollution.¹ What mentalities and moralities allow good people to do such bad things to the biosphere?

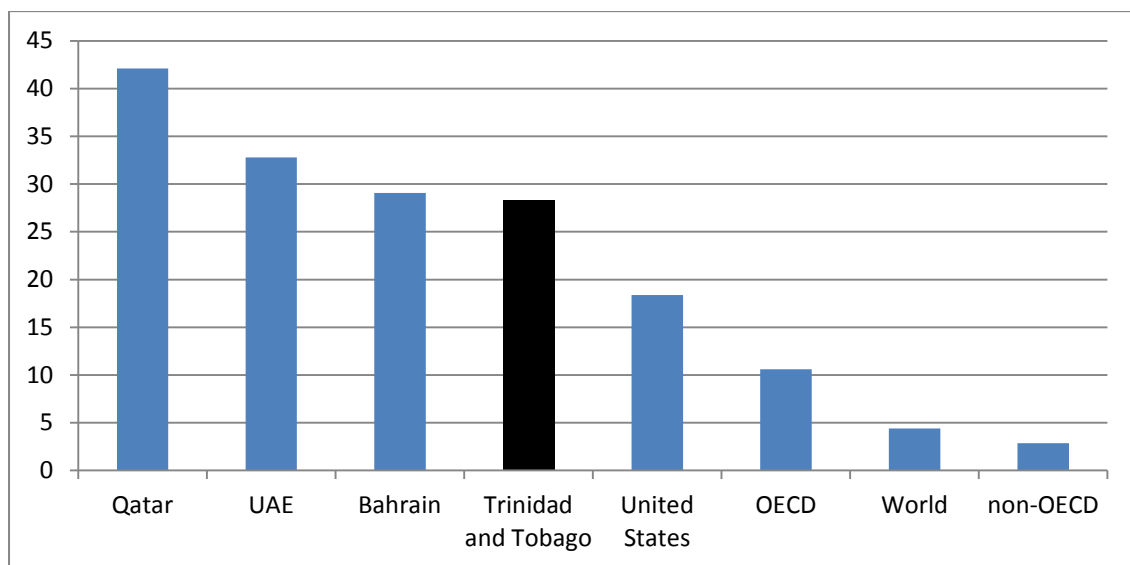
At least some people take what I call “the vulnerability bypass.” I use this metaphor to describe a hasty, impatient train of thought with respect to climate change. The United States military, for instance invokes climate change as a threat to the nation. Military planners imagine a bunker society sheltering some – perhaps not all – Americans from hurricanes, drought, and inundation (Masco 2010:25). This rapid reaction short-circuits a more thoughtful consideration of the arc of “carbon throughput” (Bridge 2011; cf. Boyer 2011). That path runs from fossil fuels through cars and various consumer goods and, only then, terminates with a changed climate. The bypass, on the other hand, directs one immediately to rising waters and, from there, into the lifeboat. Hydrocarbons lie along the longer route but not on the bypass. Indeed, the bypass avoids all questions of responsibility, reform, and justice. And deeper vulnerability may even accelerate one down the bypass. “Growing environmental and socio-economic turbulence,” Mike Davis predicts, “may simply drive elite publics into more frenzied attempts to wall themselves off from the rest of humanity” (Davis 2010:38). In this fashion, the vulnerability bypass functions only partially as an “anti-politics machine” (Ferguson 1990). The rhetorical structure dampens controversy regarding hydrocarbons and carbon-intensive lifestyles. But, by doing so, it may propel rhetoric towards ultimate questions of survival (D. Chakrabarty 2009; Žižek 2010). The bypass, then, cannalizes politics in a doubly destructive direction. It evades constructive debates on hydrocarbons, energy, suburbs, and so on. In this sense, the bypass contributes to what Swyngedouw diagnoses as “the post-politicization of the public sphere” (Swyngedouw 2010: 214). In another sense, however, the shortcut descends rapidly into the

mostly deeply insoluble and unjust dilemmas of a collapsing planet. The vulnerability bypass shortcuts through peace-making, the quicker to reach apocalypse.

I apply the metaphor of the bypass to explain environmental narratives in Trinidad and Tobago. By 2008, this Caribbean petro-state – benefitting from heavy industry and subsidized energy - had outpaced all but three nations in average per-capita carbon emissions (Figure 1). The average Trinidadian, however, hardly thinks about climate change at all. The minority that does consider global warming includes an overlapping set of middle-class environmental activists, civil servants, and policy-makers. They worry far more about their nation’s vulnerability to rising seas than its culpability for the same. Such expressions of concern and alarm avoid the thorny issue of responsibility through three mechanisms: an identity, a slot, and a defense. First, the bypass depends upon the Caribbean’s identity as a set of small islands lying outside conventional history and politics. Established by 20th-century writers, this exceptionalism initially bore no relation to environmental politics. Then, in 1990, state policy-makers formalized the insular identity by creating AOSIS, the Alliance of Small Island States. This international block represented itself as super-sufferers under climate change (Lazrus 2009, Moore 2010). AOSIS also suggested that its members only suffer from - rather than also perpetrate – carbon emissions. Small islands came to occupy what Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1991) and Tania Li (2000) call a “slot”: a transposable, modular category that permits no boundary-straddlers or ambiguous cases. In a fashion that Trinidad’s leaders did not entirely intend, the country circumvented accountability for its own contribution to climate change. Two decades later, in 2010, Trinidadian spokespeople exculpated themselves deliberately and successfully. In this third iteration of the bypass, public consultations on climate change erected a defense against any allegations of responsibility. Vulnerability and environmental risk

rendered the question moot. The bypass, then, operated as both a verb and a noun. On some occasions, environmental experts purposefully *bypassed* responsibility for their own country's emissions. At other times, individuals and groups skirted inadvertently – on an unmarked bypass - around the question of oil and gas production. Still, the bypass did not prevent sideways glances, as conscience pricked Trinidad's environmental intelligentsia.

Figure 1: Per-capita CO2 Emissions, 2008 (Mt)²



Insularity as an exceptional identity

Islanders face a perception of irrelevance. For Europe, the problem arose in the Renaissance with the notion of sea-girt land forms. 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. In 1599, Richard Hakluyt – who chronicled the exploits of Sir Walter Raleigh – 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 disenchanting islands, establishing both their reality and their location. Longitude and latitude locked islands in cross-hairs. 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 central, islands became remote – “islanded” in John Gillis’s language (Gillis 2004).

Anthropology contributed to this process of down-sizing and out-posting. In South Seas, Radcliffe-Brown, Malinowski, and Firth found relict peoples without history or modernity. “To the admirers of remote island peoples,” writes Gillis, “... this innocence made them seem like the children to which they were frequently compared, vulnerable to the point of extinction.” (Gillis 2004:115). Islanders gained identity and marginality at the same time.

The leading Trinidadian writers of the 20th century sought to maximize the former and minimize the latter. Slavery – as a heritage and a world system - provided the most obvious starting point. Born in Tunapuna, Trinidad almost at the turn of the century, C.L.R. James published the still-definitive account of the 1791-1804 Haitian revolution, *The Black Jacobins* (1938). “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) Toussaint and the sugar plantation ranked alongside Robespierre and the monarchy. Indeed, the sugar plantation placed the Caribbean on a kind of historical cutting edge. Written in 1963, the appendix to *Jacobins*, describes plantations as “the most civilising as well as the most demoralising influence in West Indian development ... The Negroes, therefore, from the very start lived a life that was in its essence a modern life” (James 1963b:392; cf Khan 2001). Could the liberated slaves of Haiti and those emancipated later reclaim and reappropriate the plantation? Even when the opportunity existed, few availed of it. In Trinidad, beginning in 1845, sugar growers replaced slaves with indentured workers from India, whose descendants did largely take over the cane fields. For most, though, sugar bore too large stigma to generate any pride. Sport, in James’s view, played that role. “The clash of race, caste, and class did not retard but stimulated West Indian cricket,” he wrote in the classic *Beyond a Boundary* (James 1963a:72). 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” (Ibid:148). Restlessly, the West Indies team beat England and dominated the world at mid-century. At various times, then, slavery, sugar, and cricket made the islands matter.

James’s student, Eric Williams, moved from history to politics with the same disquiet regarding an importance overlooked. 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 1944:204ff). 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 a 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. "[T]he colonies were to manufacture not a nail, not a horseshoe," he lectured, "They were to produce raw materials only ...". 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. To Williams and his audience, none of this manufacturing seemed prosaic. "Point Lisas," he boasted, "is the symbol also of the aspirations of the developing countries of this world ..."³ Now containing the largest methanol plant in the world, Point Lisas also became an enormous point-source for carbon dioxide. Prior to that point, Trinidad had hardly combusted hydrocarbons. In this sense, Point Lisas and Williams's speech may mark Trinidad's initial turn onto the vulnerability bypass. The prime minister promoted production and pollution as rights due to the weaker parties of the world.

As a extreme form of that weakness, smallness continued to obsessed Trinidadians. Public intellectuals almost felt compelled to address it. Already in 1959, CLR James asserted, "size has nothing to do with it. ...Look at the Greek city state" (James 1970:63). Subsequently, the island's two Nobel laureates, VS Naipaul and Derek Walcott, launched 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 Eric Williams, he returned to write his first travelogue. Irreverently entitled *The Middle Passage* (1962), the book 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). A memoir contrasts Trinidad’s “small-island geography” with the “continental scale” of Venezuela (Naipaul 1994:218,214). 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 – a part-time resident of Trinidad - has waged a decades-long campaign. In accepting the Nobel, for instance, Walcott re-inflated his homeland in space in 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” (1992:30). This profoundly cosmopolitan memory centers on the true Middle Passage of slavery and the voyages of Indian workers over *kala pani*, or “dark waters” (cf. Glissant 1990). 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” (Ibid:34). The passage constructs Trinidad an exotic, quixotic “geobody” (Thongchai 1994). Exceptional and singular, Caribbean land forms were the “little engines that could” – or, if one believed Naipaul, the little engines that couldn’t.

Victimhood as a slot

At roughly the time of Walcott’s Nobel award, climate change began to politicize insularity. The bypass began to operate not only as identity but also as a slot. In 1990, Caribbean states – along with those in the Pacific and Indian Oceans - formed the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), a bloc that came to represent pure victims of climate change. Sea

level rise threatened these countries more immediately and more substantially than other states. Just as important, it threatened these countries visibly and manifestly. Small islands, like glaciers, stand at an environmental threshold, where a marginal change in conditions wreaks major damage. From -1 degree C, a 2-degree warming melts everything. At two meters above sea level – the average elevation of the Maldives – a storm surge annihilates the nation-state. In European imaginations, moreover, the obviousness of islands has long suggested strangeness and fear. “An island,” writes the English author Adam Nicholson, “is both perfect and horrible. It is nature at its best and worst, its most pure and its most hostile. Feelings of threat and worship cluster quite close together here” (Nicholson 2007:153). This binary runs through the history of science too. On “tropical island Edens,” 18th- and 19th-century botanists discovered both biodiversity and endangered species (Grove 1995). AOSIS, thus, made its appeal against a backdrop of almost literary tragedy, supplemented by climatological evidence. The Western bloc and others accepted them as “vulnerable to the point of extinction.” Of course, no international body adopted AOSIS’s demands – centering eventually on cuts in carbon emissions as high as 80% - but no international body challenged the credentials of its members either. How did Trinidad’s contributions to carbon emissions not disqualify it from this collection of unmitigated sufferers?

In fact, Trinidad and Tobago joined the Alliance of Small Island States by inventing it. 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 – had to unite and speak with one voice. I met Myers, now retired, at

his home in central Trinidad. From 1990, he recalled both the peril of small islands and their consequent moral authority. “Where else could it be,” he asked, “except in 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.” “[T]heir resource...,” he continued, “the main contribution they can make is the advocacy of justice and fair play ... We have to be the moral voice.”⁴ Leo Heileman, 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.”⁵ 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, distilling the virtue of life.⁶ The two continental members – low lying Guyana and Surinam – did not undermine this sense of purity. I asked Myers, who still pronounced the acronym as “oasis,” about Trinidad’s per capita emissions in 1990. They stood at triple that of the next highest AOSIS member.⁷ Didn’t Tuvalu and others question Trinidad’s fitness to lead? “The message,” Myers explained, was that “...that very important issue of climate change overrides all other concerns.”⁸ 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.⁹ 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 United Nations Environment Program. As a low-elevation island, Bahrain could have joined.

But, she continued, “they 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 flat United Arab Emirates and mostly insular Qatar stayed away for the same reason. Why did Trinbagonians – then known as the “Arabs of the Caribbean” – not appreciate its economic common interest with these Persian Gulf petro-states?¹⁰ 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.”¹¹ Without any conspiracy, circumstances deferred discussion of cuts to carbon emissions. Perhaps, AOSIS members were practicing what Kari Norgaard calls “implicatory denial,” accepting the fact of carbon emissions but avoiding the moral consequences (Norgaard 2006:352). 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. High-placed Trinbagonians didn’t even feel compelled to perform victimhood. 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. “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.¹²

Ultimately, the gathering dispelled such unease by creating a group slightly larger than AOSIS, known as Small Island Developing States (SIDS).¹³ Bahrain did join this bloc (Kelman 210:610), and it attended the first meeting in Barbados in 1994. 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.”¹⁴ 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. In the slot, silence and omissions kept Trinidad and Tobago nestled among innocents.

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 that point, all of Eric Williams’ 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 two islands’ per capita emissions had tripled from their 1990 levels – nearly the fastest rate of increase of any nation state in that period.¹⁵ Could Trinidad again pull off the trick of 1990, redeeming its emissions through international diplomacy. Prime Minister Patrick Manning, Williams’s longest-reigning successor and head of the People’s National Movement, would have to vindicate his 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% 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.¹⁶ Instead, Manning consistently emphasized size: 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, Manning benefited from the unexpected visit of French President Nicholas Sarkozy. The latter seemed to endorse Port of Spain’s development policy. “Trinidad and Tobago does not risk upsetting the world’s carbon emission balance,” he assured the press, “despite its heavily industrialized economy.”¹⁷ Meanwhile, Manning exercised his influence as chair to call on the Global North to compensate the Global South immediately and continuously for the cost of adapting to climate change. 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.”¹⁸ As before, no caveat excluded Trinidad and Tobago. Manning had maintained his country’s position in the vulnerability slot.

Among NGOs, public discussion on climate change threatened to burst beyond that narrow category. In parallel with the Commonwealth summit, non-government organizations convened a 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.”¹⁹ In our meeting in 2012, Cropper described the position of Trinidad and Tobago as fundamentally contradictory - as “advocating the victim position but ... developing one’s fossil fuel based industry.” Cropper did not recommend any radical change in policy – only a new consciousness. The government should recognize the “balancing act” required of it.²⁰ She had already helped stimulate this shift in attitude. Emily

Gaylor Dick-Forde - Trinidad's Minister of Planning, Housing, and the Environment – had heard Cropper's speech. 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."²¹ At the Forum, however, Cropper's speech seemed to cause a change of heart. Taking the podium immediately after Cropper, 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."²² 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 vulnerability slot. "It is not one or the other," Cropper told me wearily, sounding if she felt personally the heavy load of Trinidad's emissions.²³

Endangerment as a defense

The door pried upon by Cropper soon shut, and politicians steered the country back onto the vulnerability bypass. Shortly after the Commonwealth summit, the government began a national discussion on climate change – one that incised the slot more deeply and more deliberately than before. Manning may have desired this outcome from the start. Before entering politics, he had worked for Texaco as a petroleum geologist. When we met 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[d] against small states." Had I misunderstood? "We are small, he, remember that," he advised me. This identity placed Trinidad and Tobago squarely within AOSIS, a position in which it might escape

suspicion. But the press was starting to ask difficult questions, and I did as well. 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 US to become the the highest aggregate emitter. “They just spewing into the atmosphere,” Manning accused, “and they don’t care about anybody.”²⁴ He did not seem to care that the average Trinidadian spewed five times as much CO₂ as the average Chinese (Figure 1). Manning’s government enshrined these ideas in its emergent domestic policy towards climate change. In March 2010, Dick-Forde’s ministry released its “Draft Climate Change Policy.” Of twenty pages of text, the document devoted two pages to discussing means of reducing the country’s carbon emissions – and in no great detail. Indeed, the author, Kishan Kumarsingh parroted Manning’s line: “...in a scientific context the atmosphere reacts only to absolute emissions and not per capita emissions.”²⁵ Under pressure, the bypass was evolving from passive to active, from slot to defense.

This shift became evident in two public consultations on the climate change policy.²⁶ Attended by civil servants, university lecturers, and NGO leaders, 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 disbelieving audience, “we get to sit at the table with the big players.”²⁷ Kumarsingh parried both of us with, “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 fear of solar and wind power: “Imagine that you get no electricity tomorrow ... because it is a green economy.” In 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.²⁸ Fifty thousand Tobagonians should 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 vulnerability slot. In January 2010, we met in his university office. He was prepared for the climate policy consultations and had met recently with Patrick Manning. The two 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!*”²⁹ 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 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.”³⁰ Scenarios one through three resulted in capitalist and/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.³¹ 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 asked Agard 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. Perhaps practicing his own implicatory denial, Agard had overlooked this logical extension of his own principle. It required the country to accept responsibility rather than mere vulnerability.

Alarm, 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.³² 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.”³³ This gathering actually took place in the oil belt. 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 insisted upon 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.³⁴ 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.”³⁵ “Trinidad is a small island developing state so we are vulnerable,” he had told me in his office, alongside the country's oil refinery, “We have wells that could fall into the sea.”³⁶ 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.”³⁷ 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 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.”³⁸ Climate change would blight her life.

In more intimate spaces such as these, a more complex environmental subjectivity seemed to be taking shape. Jaramogi and other environmentally minded Trinidadians could take the bypass and make the defense. They might also take their thoughts down more reflective paths. Towards 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 sector only for its lack of fiscal transparency.³⁹ 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.⁴⁰ In its authors, this sarcasm must have touched a personal nerve. Garcia’s husband worked for an international gas firm, and Rudder’s son 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 and Tobago, 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?”⁴¹ The question balanced parochial and universal concerns, a love of community with an awareness of its transgressions. More than a year later, I shared lunch with Rudder. 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.”⁴² At the edges, was the vulnerability bypass beginning to erode?

* * *

Concern about climate change is taking shape in many places as a narrative of innocence. The judgment arises not from ignorance or disputes with science. It follows from a logical train of thought, the vulnerability bypass. Along this path, people grapple with climate change directly, shallowly, and simply. The bypass’s triple move – of identity, slot, and defense – pushes guilt to the margin. The slot, in particular, “simplifies” social life: it narrows the vision of policy-makers, allowing them to design blueprints, regimes, and institutions (Scott 1998). Yet, the slot and the larger bypass do more than merely “render technical” (Li 2007). The bypass redirects and amplifies environmental emotion, stimulating a sense of persecution, vulnerability, and even apocalypse. In Trinidad, this affective passage towards fear requires only a short distance. Like “threat and worship,” the effect and the cause of climate change “cluster

quite close together here” (Nicholson 2007:153). As wells release hydrocarbons from safe, underground storage, they confront inundation from rising seas. In a process akin to Ulrich Beck’s ‘boomerang effect’ (Beck 1992:23), Trinidad manufactures risk, sends it into the atmosphere, and then dreads its return through the ocean. Few places concentrate culpability and vulnerability so tightly. The distinction between a “sense of place” and a “sense of planet” – described by Ulrich Heise (2008) regarding Germany – falls apart in Trinidad. The place and the planet are coterminous there. Of course, many people hold this belief about their homelands. Marshall Islanders, for instance, fault themselves for causing climate change. In a tight loop, they feel their environmental sins are coming back to haunt them (Rudiak-Gould 2011). Their sins hardly rate in carbon terms. High-emitting Trinidadians, on the other hand, mostly evade liability. A layered notion of vulnerability defuses and delays any such reckoning. Petro-Goliath Goliath takes the bypass and emerges as innocent David.

If not “vulnerability,” then, what mentalities and moralities might facilitate accountability? Outside the energy sector and outside government, some Trinidadians are reconsidering the question of responsibility. In our 2012 discussion, Cropper turned her earlier assumption about insularity on its head. She referred to Trinidad and Tobago as “this tiny country – which lends itself so well as a crucible for getting things done.” One of those “things” would be a post-carbon society.⁴³ Trinidad’s small size might allow it overcome the indecision endemic to larger polities. Perhaps the proximity of everything in Trinidad throws hydrocarbons into stark relief. One can actually smell it. Perhaps, Trinidadians might appreciate the connection between hydrocarbons and sea level if they considered only the place, rather than the planet. Consider New Orleans. Franny Armstrong’s recent film follows the reckoning of a petroleum paleontologist living in that city. 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” (the title of the documentary) (Armstrong 2009). An awareness of such self-destruction might form of the core of a new CO2-specific “environmentality” (Agrawal 2005). That sensibility would animate a “responsible, carbon-calculating individual,” of the type found in Portland, Oregon (Dowling 2010:492). More likely – in a petro-state – this mentality would include self-blame and self-loathing. These emotions cause discomfort, surely. Painful as it is, this affective passage cuts carbon emissions more rapidly than does feeling vulnerable. With luck, Port of Spain and New Orleans will assemble and export a recognition of culpability. It is now more essential than oil.

¹ Myanna Lahsen and Michael Paolisso made the same point in commenting in *Current Anthropology* on Crate (2008). Cf. Swyngedouw (2010).

² International Energy Agency (2010:97).

³ Williams (1981:82,83). Williams made the speech on 18 October 1977, launching construction of the iron and steel complex at Point Lisas.

⁴ Interview, Gran Couva, Trinidad, 2 July 2011.

⁵ Interview via Skype, 19 July 2011.

⁶ The 39 current members of AOSIS are: Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Cape Verde, Comoros, Cook Islands, Cuba, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Fiji, Federated States of Micronesia, Grenada, Guinea-Bissau, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Kiribati, Maldives, Marshall Islands, Mauritius, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Singapore,

Seychelles, São Tome and Principe, Solomon Islands, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Trinidad and Tobago, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu.

⁷ The figures were as follows: 9.29 Mt for Trinidad and Tobago; 3.01 Mt for Jamaica. Singapore, however, exceeded them both at 9.45 Mt, the highest per capita emissions in AOSIS (International Energy Agency 2010:95-97).

⁸ Interview, Gran Couva, Trinidad, 2 July 2011. See Griffith and Oderson (2009:21.86) and Leggett (2001:24-27).

⁹ 23.73 Mt (International Energy Agency 2010:96).

¹⁰ The origins of this widely-known phrase are uncertain (*The Economist* 1980).

¹¹ All quotations are from interview, Port of Spain, 7 January 2012.

¹² Interview, Newark, Delaware, 20 June 2011.

¹³ Fifty-two countries and non-sovereign territories belong to this grouping: Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Bahrain, Barbados, Belize, Cape Verde, Comoros, the Cook Islands, Cyprus, Dominica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Fiji, Grenada, Guinea-Bissau, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Kiribati, Maldives, Malta, the Marshall Islands, Mauritius, Micronesia Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Sao Tome et Principe, Seychelles, the Solomon Islands, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, Tonga, Trinidad and Tobago, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu.

¹⁴ Declaration of Barbados, Part One, Article III, Clause 2.

¹⁵ Only Benin and Vietnam's figures rose more rapidly, but they started from negligible per capita emissions in 1990 (International Energy Agency 2010:95-97).

¹⁶ 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).

¹⁷ Quoted in Mary King, “One Frenchman is wrong!” *Trinidad and Tobago Express*, 7 December 2009.

¹⁸ “Port of Spain Climate Change Consensus: the Commonwealth Climate Change Declaration,” Port of Spain, 28 November 2009, Clause 13.

¹⁹ Remarks at the Commonwealth People’s Forum, opening plenary session, Port of Spain, 23 November 2009.

²⁰ Interview, Port of Spain, 7 January 2012.

²¹ Remarks at the Health, Safety, Security, and the Environment Conference, Port of Spain, 29 September 2009. The origins of the quotation are unclear.

²² Remarks at the Commonwealth People’s Forum, opening plenary session, Port of Spain, 23 November 2009.

²³ Interview, Port of Spain, 7 January 2012.

²⁴ Interview, San Fernando, 29 June 2010.

²⁵ Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, “Draft national climate change policy for Trinidad and Tobago,” 2010, p. 7.

²⁶ The government held four meetings in total. The one in Tobago focused mostly on the most local issues, and the one in Sangre Grande drew too few environmental experts to spark debate.

²⁷ Remarks at the National Consultation on Climate Change Policy, Port of Spain, 23 March 2010.

²⁸ Remarks at the National Consultation on Climate Change Policy, Port of Spain, 23 March 2010.

²⁹ Interview, St. Augustine, Trinidad, 29 January 2010.

³⁰ Agard was summarizing Chapter 9 of a large report (UNEP 2007). He had been one of three lead coordinating authors of that chapter.

³¹ John Agard, “Environment in development: from plantation economy, biodiversity loss and global warming towards sustainable development,” lecture at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, 25 February 2010.

³² Remarks at the National Consultation on Climate Change Policy, Port of Spain, 23 March 2010.

³³ Public Consultation on Climate Change Draft Policy, La Romaine, 6 April 2010.

³⁴ Public Consultation on Climate Change Draft Policy, La Romaine, 6 April 2010.

³⁵ 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, 29 September 2009. Petrotrin has never released the full report, but Singh et al (2008) reproduces its main findings.

³⁶ Interview, Point-à-Pierre, 3 March 2010.

³⁷ Public Consultations on Climate Change Draft Policy, La Romaine, 6 April 2011.

³⁸ Personal communication, Port of Spain, 6 April 2011.

³⁹ The Cropper Foundation. 2008. “Mind your own business: how to keep track of Trinidad and Tobago’s energy billions.” Port of Spain: the Cropper Foundation.

⁴⁰ The Cropper Foundation, “Comments on the draft climate change policy for Trinidad and Tobago,” no date.

⁴¹ Interview, Port of Spain, 2 July 2010.

⁴² Interview, Port of Spain, 4 January 2012.

⁴³ Interview, Port of Spain, 7 January 2012.

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