The Rise and Fall of a Caribbean Refinery

History Churning in the Wake of the American Empire of Oil

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ABSTRACT How can the capitalized history of the climate catastrophe be written without reifying the empire of oil as the only author of consequence left? The economic rise and ecological fall of the imperial refinery on St. Croix in the US Virgin Islands offers critical insight into this question. Bringing together recent scholarship on the petrochemical composition of US empire, the changing climate of history, and the critical need for a starting point neither entirely within nor entirely beyond the relentless progress of the present catastrophe, this essay reflects on the charged status of history around the rise and fall of the St. Croix refinery. In so doing, this essay both outlines the imperial history of how the refinery invaded St. Croix—and the vibrant *resistance* farmers mustered before they were violently dispossessed of the land—while also attending to the insurgent memories of alternative futures that have come roaring back to life in the collapse of the refinery and the arrival of superstorms. Such memories *refuse* the teleology of the American empire of oil and provisionally sketch a more reparative politics built around the empire's uprooting. In other words, this essay is the story of what was forgotten when the oil industry reigned supreme and how such impossible memories now gather like kindling around the climate crisis of today.

KEYWORDS St. Croix, US Virgin Islands, Walter Benjamin, oil refinery, Caribbean, climate

> History is what hurts.
> —Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*

> The point is not to do history but to undo it.
> —Michael Taussig, "History as Commodity"

> Every generation confronts the task of choosing its past.
> —Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*

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The magnitude of the refinery is clearest when taking flight. It is only from above that you can take it all in. Sprawling across 1,500 acres on the southern shore of St. Croix, the refinery is a bustling metropole unto itself: a tended forest of pipes and distillation units, bright spires of cracking towers and flare stacks, ordered grids of squat storage tanks each the size of a modest stadium, a glass-shelled corporate office complex under an oversized American flag, a grassy hillside with luxury villas first built for the white "continental" workers, and an industrial port with supertankers dotting the turquoise horizon. At its prime, the refinery processed over seven hundred thousand barrels of crude oil each and every day as it claimed the mantle of biggest in the world. For decades, St. Croix was perhaps the prime spigot of cheap gasoline into the United States. Yet the territorial location of the refinery occluded any critical accounting of its significance. On St. Croix itself, the refinery rarely comes into view. An arching limestone ridge blocks the line of sight of the refinery, and most residents prefer the center highway that avoids the plant altogether. The cloistered landscape of the refinery is curiously reflected in its imperial history. The largest refinery in the world is hard to see for what it is.

Or rather, it used to be hard to see. The refinery filed for bankruptcy twice in the past decade, both times to evade all responsibility for poisoning the water, soil, and air on St. Croix. The last bankruptcy followed months of the refinery coughing up clouds of partially processed petrochemicals that rained down in crowded neighborhoods where roughly ten thousand households get their drinking water from rain cisterns. Residents described a thick white fog glistening with rainbows, like the shimmer of gasoline atop a puddle, a curious thing of beauty until the asphyxiation took hold. Fruit trees and gardens withered away in a matter of hours. Several workers died. As the refinery assailed life across the island, it became impossible not to see. Yet the sudden view of the refinery felt more like a rising accusation than a historical location, more like a shock than any continuity. How did this happen?

Getting My Bearings

I arrived on St. Croix in 2011, wondering if the story of Caribbean oil refining could reveal an unexpected angle on the American empire of oil. It struck me as odd that one of the world's largest oil refineries was located on this rather modest US Caribbean territory: St. Croix is only about forty-five kilometers long and eight kilometers wide yet was home to an oil refinery so big it singlehandedly shaped US petroleum markets. This incongruity of being both very small and very big didn't yet strike me as colonial through and through, just curious. And so, for a few months in 2011, I lived on St. Croix, trying to find ethnographic connections between the imperial scale of the refinery and its "hidden" placement on a Caribbean territory of the United States. My curiosity about the refinery was met with blank stares.

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While workers offered rich stories of how they came to work in the refinery on St. Croix, most had no idea how the refinery came to St. Croix.

The archive held a different story. In the windowless third floor of the Florence Williams Public Library in Christiansted, St. Croix, the negative images of newspaper microfiche projected the refinery as a profound upheaval on the island.[1] The first protests came from the stewards of the land. They were also the first victims. To make room for the refinery, the colonial government set its sights on dismantling a radical New Deal project. At the height of the Great Depression, a federal experiment in socialism seized plantations over the vocal protests of owners and the merchant class and divided the land up into small homestead farms distributed to the poor while building collectivist infrastructure of agriculture, education, and health care on St. Croix.[2] The arrival of an aluminum and oil refinery in the 1960s brought a swift and violent end to this island socialism. With a Cold War commitment to anticommunism, federal officials and refinery executives joined together to privatize the abundance of homestead agriculture. Such rural destruction was necessary to getting "the industrial revolution going right here," as one official put it.[3]

Refusing the premise, Black and Brown farmers flooded the streets in protests that brought St. Croix to a standstill. By some estimates, over a third of the island joined in protest. The governor and refinery executives denounced the protests as a beachhead of communist infiltration and cut off all public assistance for agriculture. Some farmers took the accusation with unexpected grace: They began reading Fidel Castro and Kwame Nkrumah and studying peasant revolutions in Mexico, China, Cuba, and Vietnam. Their impassioned letters to local papers about other revolutions the island might join were met with paramilitary violence to stomp out the insurgent sparks of a peasantry dispossessed. Death threats to farmers became commonplace, while a coalition of industrial executives launched their own radio and newspapers on St. Croix with a stated mission of ignoring the farmers' protests.[4] Then the repossession of farmland began. By the year's end, the colonial government of the Virgin Islands was celebrating the "death of agriculture" on St. Croix as evidence of an industrial revolution underway.[5]

Crushing alternatives was not enough to secure the refinery's reign. As dispossessed farmers joined the industrial workforce, they did not check their dissent at the door. When the oil refinery waffled on promised wages, the first batch of disgruntled workers occupied the refinery. They went on strike—repeatedly. St. Croix recorded four major industrial strikes as construction of the refinery began in 1965. "Labor Unrest Plagues St. Croix South Shore," ran one 1968 headline.[6] The oil refinery promptly fired all workers and turned to a more manageable source of labor: noncitizens. "Bonded aliens," as imported workers were classified, were housed next to the refinery in camps surrounded by barbed-wire fences. The refinery could deport them at will, and the federal government kept a plane on St. Croix

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for that express purpose. By the late 1960s, "bonded aliens" accounted for over half of all workers on the island. As revenue from the oil refinery filled the territorial coffers, the government started hiring and soon became the preferred employment agency of what became known as "native" Virgin Islanders. In the wake of the refinery, an entirely new demographic hierarchy took shape to vertically rank the new diversity of St. Croix residents.

The profound transformation that oil refining brought to St. Croix was abundantly clear in the archive of local newspapers. At the end of each day I packed up my notes, descended the stairs of the library, and, as I set out into the streets of Christiansted, crossed what felt to me like an invisible threshold. If the refinery was a violent coup in the archive of fifty years prior, it was hardly noticed in 2011. By the summer's end, I had two boxes full of oversized copies of the near daily coverage of the refinery's hostile arrival in the late 1960s and early 1970s: letters to the editor boiling with rage, reprinted firebrand speeches, and carefully reported accounts of the island-wide protests and general strikes that amassed around the refinery's arrival. Together, the archive of local newspapers provided rich documentation: The refinery was a violent transformation of St. Croix, one whose advance was contested at every step. I also had no idea what to do with such a history of resistance. It was clear as day on the tattered pages of the archive: The refinery took over St. Croix like a colonial force, remaking the island around its operations. Yet this history of the present—still within living memory and with effects imprinted upon on every aspect of island life—was almost completely absent in the daily consciousness of St. Croix in 2011.

Yet I couldn't shake the glimpses of the past uncovered in the library. I ended up carrying around a box of newspaper clippings for years before deciding I had to make sense of this impossible history. My article "Oil in the Caribbean" centered the struggle I found in old newspapers, reading it as emblematic of a wider remaking of the contemporary Caribbean in the 1970s as a major refining conduit for cheap gasoline to the United States.[7] That essay aimed to be critical in a typical academic manner: by situating the refinery in a regional history of the American empire of oil. I never imagined it might actually intrude upon the worlds it described. But the essay took on a life of its own. Out of the blue, a leader of a major advocacy group on St. Croix called my office one day. "I've lived on these islands my whole life," she said, "and I want to know how the hell a professor in Vermont came to know more about our story than I did."

A few months after I wrapped up my research in 2011, catastrophic breakdowns at the refinery catapulted the question of its history into full view. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) investigations revealed chronic negligence at the refinery and levied a $750 million fine (at the time, the largest ever for a US refinery). After gutting the refinery of assets, the owners filed for bankruptcy to avoid liability for extensive environmental damages. It was only when the mammoth refinery first

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closed in early 2012 that many residents began to realize how little they actually knew about it. The community leader who called me had Googled "oil refinery St. Croix" and found my essay. Our conversation was the start of a collaboration that continues to this day. In the wake of back-to-back Category 5 hurricanes slamming into St. Croix in 2017, she brought me back to St. Croix to share my work with other advocacy groups grappling with the blunt fact of the climate crisis in the Caribbean. As the refinery was rushed back into operation under President Trump and then closed again under President Biden (with efforts currently underway to reopen), the present came to feel adrift from the promised prosperity of oil refining. Absent the momentum of progress and with superstorms now descending, memories flood forward of the brutal dispossession of the refinery's founding and the viral destruction that secured its reign. In the twilight of empire, the past does not so much diminish as proliferate.

The amnesia of empire and the revolt of repressed pasts has pedigree.[8] In a 1960 speech entitled "Why We Use Violence," Frantz Fanon observed that the blade of empire strikes its deepest blow in how "the colonial regime presents itself as necessarily eternal."[9] Alongside the theft of land and labor, colonialism severs the past and the future to eradicate any temporal reference point beyond empire's momentous rule. The radical task, for Fanon and so many anticolonial movements, became one of leveraging militant resistance to undercut the eternal conceit of empire and recuperate a protonational history unbowed by empire. Coordinated violence against colonialism gave proof that empire was historical, and not the only history in town. Generations of critical scholars have joined their pens to the armed struggle to substantiate a more decisive postcolonial history. But what history is most insulting to empire? Should the historical angle of attack be centrifugal or centripetal? Should critique aim for the fulcrum force that held everything together and work to expose the contingent, partial, and violent formation that it always was? Or should critique highlight the preponderance of instances cast out from imperial intelligibility, now empowered by their outsider status? Should critique begin within the battered truth of the colonial archive or by gathering outside the historiographic walls of empire?

While acknowledging the richness of these debates—for example, the equally generative yet ultimately divergent critiques of Eric Wolf's *Europe and the People Without History* and Ramachandra Guha's *History at the Limit of World History*—this essay does not add another reflection on their absolute distance but instead describes an instance of their contemporary convergence. Critical theory may be the court where philosophies of history come to divorce. Ethnography captures the opposite: those moments where they collide. On St. Croix, the cascading failures of oil refining poses the empire of oil as an urgent historical question while also provoking vibrant memories of collective life before the refinery arrived.[10]

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FIGURE 1. The view of the St. Croix refinery from a nearby neighborhood, June 2021. Photograph by the author.

Today it is not only insurgent pasts that challenges the eternal present tense of empire but also a vengeful future. The most radical task, Susan Buck-Morss once quipped, is not to explain history but to surprise it.[11] And the proliferating disasters of fossil fuels do just that. Climate crisis introduces its own radical discontinuity into the secular, sequential, and entirely staid time imagined by North Atlantic empires. If peasant insurgencies ruptured the illusion of imperial permanence in the twentieth century, climactic disasters seem poised to refuse any eternal conceit on a far vaster scale. Each new year, wildfires and superstorms rachet up destruction ever beyond any metric of reasonable risk. Droughts strangle key agricultural regions while relentless sea-level rise threatens the modern home of human habitation: coastal cities. Ocean acidification overtakes the coral and crustaceous foundation of nearly all marine life while rainforests that have taken millennia to grow into earthly significance are burned into cheap, transient pasture. Scorching heat waves now lap at the absolute limit of human survivability. Climate change is an epochal insult to the homogenous time of empire. But is it resistance?

The story of the American empire of oil in St. Croix provokes such a question, and even as this essay centers the radical discontinuity experienced around the disastrous fallout of fossil fuels, it also warns against too quickly celebrating planetary catastrophe as the revolutionary subject of the Anthropocene.[12]

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American Empire of Oil

If the refinery was hard to see on St. Croix, it also eludes mention in most accounts of US empire.[13] But perhaps that is how US empire operates. After World War II, the United States learned to flex its imperial muscle more through the bluster of nuclear weapons, the financial entrapments of debt and development, and proxy wars and targeted assassinations than through direct colonial occupation. Although the United States as an "informal empire," an "invisible empire," or an example of "imperialism without colonies" has a solid if often sidelined place in historical scholarship, the petrochemical composition of this sinewy empire is gaining new attention.[14] During World War II, the United States military and the oil industry awoke to the advantage of a geological fact: The United States had more reserves of crude oil than anyone else. During the 1940s, nearly two-thirds of worldwide oil production came from the United States, and up until the 1970s its oil production dwarfed that of every other nation.[15] With exports of petroleum severely curtailed after World War II, the war-inflated consumption of petroleum in the United States was artificially maintained by shifting it into novel logistical, agricultural, and suburban projects of energy profligacy. As J. R. McNeill and Peter Engelke have described, the massive military and then consumer appetite for fossil fuels in postwar America drove an energy expenditure without precedent in human history.[16]

Lenin's iconoclastic theory of imperialism builds on the colonial management of overproduction. What happened after the world war prophesied by Lenin begs an update, a task generative of so much critical scholarship in the twentieth century.[17] Yet one aspect of that update remains neglected: how often American imperialism found its self-effacing stride in the novel management of excessive crude oil. Against too easy an understanding of the American empire of oil along the lines of "scarcity of crude oil = national security," critical scholars today outline three distinct infrastructural regimes built around the tremendous innovation required to dream up ever more gluttonous ways to consume vast amounts of petroleum *as* national security: global military logistics, petrochemical harvests, and oversized lifestyles.[18] Fossil fuels and petrochemicals, in this new work, gives rise to a new materialist configuration of empire as network. And atop that global web, a novel conceptual configuration of the national economy no longer wed to territorial expansion as the foundation of growth.[19] As Daniel Immerwahr has succinctly quipped, after World War II, American empire "replaced colonies with chemistry."[20] There is real merit to such a stance, but too stark an opposition neglects how American empire also came to occupy semisovereign territories around the world as vital nodes in the networked constitution of imperialism, with small islands playing an underappreciated role in tilting global flows of force, fuel, and finance to American advantage.[21] Perhaps nowhere is this dynamic clearer than in the Caribbean.

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Much of this story pivots on what happened when the prized resource of twentieth-century America ran dry. Domestic production of crude oil plateaued in the 1960s as demand skyrocketed. While investments in energy efficiency were briefly considered, the United States quickly backed a more imperial plan: secure oil from elsewhere.[22] With supertankers delivering the bulk of Middle Eastern, African, and South American crude oil to the United States through the Atlantic Ocean and with domestic US refineries hedged in by urban sprawl, strong labor unions, and new environmental regulations, many American oil companies realized the advantage of the West Indies. Soon select Caribbean ports found themselves remade premier refining hubs of the eastern United States. By 1970, half of all crude oil imported to the United States was already passing through the Caribbean Sea on supertankers. With deep ports and pliable governments all too willing to exempt new oil refineries from workers' rights and environmental oversight, US oil companies soon found themselves building a new kind of enclave refinery. Tesoro, Sun Oil, Gulf Oil, Union Carbide, Phillips Petroleum, Hess Oil, and others built a new wave of refineries across the Caribbean. While accepting delivery of crude oil from around the world, these refineries shipped petroleum products only in one direction: north, to US markets. Caribbean refineries became a premier place to launder the geographical origins of oil and evade import/export restrictions. The Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) embargoes against the United States in 1973 and 1979, for example, further consolidated the strategic importance of Caribbean refineries as they became a back door for OPEC crude oil to "leak" into the United States outside of the embargo. Between 1950 and 1990, oil refineries became the largest site of capital investment in the Caribbean, a leading source of state revenue, and one of the region's largest employers, especially during the construction boom of new refineries in the late 1960s and early 1970s.[23]

This petro-boom witnessed the renovation of older refineries in Aruba, Curaçao, and Trinidad and the construction of new entrepot refineries in Antigua, the Bahamas, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. By 1980, the Caribbean had become the world's largest exporter of refined petroleum products, all of which fed the Americans' ravenous appetite for cheap gasoline. By some estimates, one of every six gallons of gasoline sold in the United States was processed at a Caribbean refinery by 1990.[24] The Caribbean found itself recast as an imperial conduit for the American addiction to fossil fuels: close enough for the United States to monopolize the gain but far enough away to avoid any responsibility for the problems.

The refinery on St. Croix became the crown jewel of this Caribbean chapter in the American empire of oil.[25] In the 1960s, oil industry upstart Leon Hess decided to build a new refinery in the Virgin Islands to serve the East Coast of the United

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States. As Hess never tired of pointing out, it was far easier to ship petroleum to New York City from St. Croix than from Houston. And St. Croix provided colonial advantages that Houston could never match. "Word has gotten around Wall Street that corporations can get a businessman's deal in the Virgin Islands," advertised the Governor's Industrial Incentive Board in 1966, with less "peeking over the shoulder" of company operations.[26] Federal regulations all proved more pliable in these Caribbean waters than on the mainland, a fact Hess Oil came to count on. By 1970, the Hess Refinery gained the heavyweight title—largest refinery in the world—and during some boom years produced nearly 10 percent of total domestic consumption for the United States. Such scale was achieved not in the broad daylight of governance but by occupying the territorial shadows of the law. Hess's imperial operation was rooted in four areas of insular deviations from federal regulations: import quotas,[27] federal taxes,[28] labor law,[29] and environmental protections.[30] These territorial exceptions, "which amount to a monopoly," as the *New York Times* described it in 1967, transformed St. Croix into a paragon petro-state.[31] For the better part of the past century, this Caribbean outpost of the United States was perhaps the major trough of cheap gasoline to the East Coast. During some years, the majority of gasoline and jet fuel sold in New York City came from the Hess Refinery on St. Croix. The imperial significance of St. Croix in manufacturing cheap gasoline for the Eastern Seaboard is overtaken by the relative invisibility of St. Croix in most scholarly accounts of US empire.

This regime of unregulated (and unscrupulous) oil refining in the Caribbean may be drawing to a close. Climate change is removing the ecological distance the imperial network imagined it could maintain. Today, nearly every entrepôt Caribbean refinery has closed. The past two decades shuttered four enclave refineries in Puerto Rico, and 2012 witnessed the closure of the Valero Refinery on Aruba and the Hess Refinery on St. Croix. Five years later and the last entrepôt refinery was brought to its knees: The sprawling Pointe-à-Pierre Refinery in Trinidad and Tobago closed in 2018. Much of this relates to how the recent glut of oil and gas from fracking in the Permian Basin and Bakken Formation alongside deepwater discoveries off the Gulf Coast have restored Houston as the premier refining hub of North America (while upgrading refineries to be fueled by a surplus of cheap natural gas from fracking). Supertankers crossing the Caribbean in delivery of cheap foreign oil to the United States have disappeared while the Port of Galveston builds out world class oil and petroleum export facilities. At the same time, the tremendous ecological devastation unleashed by Caribbean refineries is beginning to catch up with these islands. Extensive contamination of groundwater, coastal mangrove estuaries, and air and soil left many refinery sites with decimated fisheries, poisoned aquifers, and sprawling coastal properties where still simmering toxicity prevents any easy repurposing.

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FIGURE 2. Defunct air monitoring station downwind of refinery at night, June 2021. Photograph by the author.

The Caribbean islands that once linked their future prosperity with the petroleum networks of the United States have recently found themselves isolated from that receding promise. At the same time, petroleum-authored climate change is amplifying the intensity and frequency of hurricanes across the Caribbean region. The negative ecologies of fossil fuels now assail the Caribbean from two sides: a catastrophic history of profitable neglect and a catastrophic future of climate instability. In 2018, a year after one of the worst hurricane seasons in recorded history, Caribbean nations gathered to discuss climate resilience in the region. Leader after leader stepped up to the podium to propose new investments in distributed solar energy, building efficiencies, electrification of transportation, and generally weaning themselves off fossil fuels. The enthusiasm was clear: The Caribbean was poised to become the premier laboratory for redesigning societies beyond the American empire of oil. Then the governor of the US Virgin Islands stepped on stage. His plans for climate resiliency pivoted on one idea: Restart the mothballed refinery. The governor shared plans to heavily subsidize the rebooting of the refinery in the hope of bending the fiscal properties of fossil fuels into new investments in climate resiliency. When pushed, the governor spoke about the rising challenges and costs that climate change is bringing to the island with storms like Hurricanes Irma and Maria. How could a territorial government bear these costs without the refinery? The oil industry may be morally bankrupt and complicit in the climate catastrophe, but who else is still capable of paying the bills?

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Tripping Up Fossil-Fueled Teleology

The refinery on St. Croix filed for bankruptcy twice in the past decade. Both closures followed catastrophic breakdowns at the plant that issued shelter-in-place orders across the island while explosions blackened the air and petrochemicals rained down across St. Croix. And both times corporate owners gutted the assets before heading to a sympathetic bankruptcy court in Houston for the express purpose of avoiding liability for environmental crimes. Emptied of every job but threadbare maintenance, the refinery of today rusts away alongside an empty supertanker port blanketed with signs warning about consuming seafood. The revenue is gone, and with it the ability of the territorial government to support a sturdy middle class with patronage salaries. Several tailspins later, the economy still teeters at the edge of collapse. The oil industry's fated production of a booming future is gone. But what remains of the refinery is more worrisome still: a simmering ecological disaster.

A legacy of industrial toxins leaches into the estuary, and refinery wastewater continues to crown the island's sole freshwater aquifer with a thick cap of carcinogens. Prime farmland is saturated with petrochemicals and whatever else rained down from decades of unregulated emissions. Residents worry about what might now be lurking in their gardens. The mangrove fisheries disappeared long ago, but now the coral reefs are dying as a different order of fossil-fueled disaster strikes: global warming. In 2017, two supercharged Category 5 hurricanes slammed into St. Croix, damaging 90 percent of the buildings and wiping out public libraries, schools, and the island's only hospital. Five years on and much of this public infrastructure has yet to reopen. Yet one thing has started to change: Rampant destruction no longer feels like progress. On this, so many now struggling to keep their heads above water agree: Radical change is needed, and perhaps the land might once more provision St. Croix. Yet cooler heads have found their chorus. The devastation cuts too deep; the contamination has spread too far; the suburban lifestyles are too fixed in place to allow for any return to the land. The extent of ecological destruction and its poisoning of alternatives has become its own perverse logic: a kind of accumulation by contamination.[32] Today, an upswell of agriculturally minded dissent against the refinery is swatted away by the sober diagnosis of federal agencies and bankruptcy courts. The illness is too advanced to change course now. The governor begs anyone who will listen to help him restart the refinery at any cost. What else, he says with some conviction, is capable of generating the revenue needed to clean up the mess and prepare St. Croix for the coming catastrophe of climate change?

Curiously, it is a question not entirely unrelated to a hesitation that haunts scholarly critiques of the climate crisis today. How can we write the capitalized history of the climate catastrophe without reifying the empire of oil as the only

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author of consequence left? Insisting with so many others in this issue that the imperial history of the climate crisis is necessary but is also not enough to disrupt the dismal politics of the present,[33] the remainder of this essay stays close to ethnographic encounters that bear witness to the undoing of the refinery's reign. As the refinery breaks down, glimpses of what might have been roar back to life. These images of what lies behind the fossil-fueled teleology of US empire hold diamond-tipped stories that rip apart how comforting the reasons for our destruction have become. Such stories refuse the temptation to conclude with paralyzing complexity or, worse, to celebrate what might take root in the ruins of this world when the fight has just begun. I am drawn to these insurgent memories for how they seed the present with possibility.[34] They provincialize the sheer absurdity of the present, insisting that we come together to take responsibility for what must be done. This stance joins with the struggle urgently required to blast out of what Benjamin once called "the impossible continuum of now."[35]

The First Green New Deal

During the Great Depression, a radical wing within the Roosevelt administration appropriated sugar plantations on St. Croix and tasked a coalition of local unions, Black scholars, and card-carrying socialists with redistributing the land to destitute men and women.[36] Roosevelt's plan for this Caribbean "pivot" of the New Deal, as the *New York Times* reported at the time, sparked a consequential debate between "the economy of capitalism and private property and so-called planned economy and public ownership" in addressing the Great Depression.[37] The redistribution proceeded over the vocal protests of an entrenched planter and merchant class as it seized plantations and handed the land to the poor. Soon St. Croix found itself on the front page, above the fold, of major national papers in New York City and Washington, DC, and was debated extensively in Black newspapers across Atlanta, Baltimore, Detroit, and Harlem, for it was on St. Croix that many thought you could best read the tea leaves about how far to the left of capitalism the New Deal might go. Homesteaders, as those granted land in St. Croix were called, agreed to put half of their five-to-ten-acre plots into crops for local markets and half into sugar for export via a (now) publicly owned sugar factory, rum distillery, and port, all rebuilt for that purpose. A modern fleet of farm equipment was maintained at the sugar factory and was available for any farmer to use. After costs, all revenue was reinvested in education, health care, and public infrastructure on St. Croix. "Public Ownership for Virgin Islands," ran the front-page headline in the *New York Times* in 1934.[38] By 1940, St. Croix had bustling local markets, collective ownership of key economic infrastructure, broad enfranchisement of small farmers, and brand-new schools and hospitals. This "Caribbean breadbasket," as many described it, was a reconstituted commons that harvested local plenty over distant profit.

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FIGURE 3. Jack Delano, "Farm Security Administration borrower, vicinity of Frederiksted, St. Croix, Virgin Islands" (1941). Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-USF35–469 [P&P]. https://www.loc.gov/item/2017877882/.



FIGURE 4. Jack Delano, "Christiansted, Saint Croix Island, Virgin Islands. Class in the Christiansted high school" (1941). Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-USF34-047021-D [P&P]. https://www.loc.gov/item/2017797433/.

The arrival of the American oil industry in this Caribbean outpost of the United States changed everything. In the 1960s, US officials enticed Hess Oil to St. Croix with colonial exemptions to labor law and environmental protections that promised to remake the island around the astronomical revenue of unregulated oil refining. Recognizing the threat, farmers took to the streets in protest. In reply, the refinery sponsored a paramilitary campaign of violence against smallholders that torched fields before harvest, tore roofs off homesteads as the rainy season descended, and usurped huge swathes of prime farmland for commercial development. Collectively held farm equipment was seized and dumped in the sea. To industry executives and colonial officials, the fierce protests of peasant farmers crying foul was taken as wholesome evidence of progress underway, until such

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trodden voices were forgotten altogether. By the decade's end, one economic survey could not find a single person on St. Croix who identified as a farmer.[39]

The former commissioner of agriculture joined me on a radio show in 2021. It is popular with farmers, and so we sat down in the studio just before dawn in a windowless building near the refinery. A mural of Bob Marley and snapshots of local farmers graced the wall behind our metal folding chairs. Across a squat table, our host squeezed himself in between soundboards and equipment. The program opened with a request to narrate how farmers first protested the arrival of the refinery, and how an industrial coalition crushed agriculture on St. Croix. Then the phone lines opened, and we were awash in lived details and livid outrage over that history. "Professor says refinery murdered agriculture, that's what the Professor says," one farmer called in to reiterate, "And here we are picking up the pieces." "St. Croix may have made big money, but we've all been starving since the 1960s," another farmer called in to say, "and it's time we hold the refinery responsible for that hunger." Another caller emphasized "the need of now," and how ill-equipped the refinery was to meet that need. Others shared stories their parents used to tell: flickering tales of abundant tables, vibrant local markets, and fiercely proud rural communities that seemed to exist at an almost impossible distance from the present. We had time for one last caller. He wanted to tell us about his father, recently deceased. His father was expelled from Vieques by the US military and forced to be a cane cutter at the public sugar mill on St. Croix. But he worked his way into securing title to one of the last homestead farms granted, and he came to love St. Croix. "This is our history, all of our history," he said. "We can't let this history go to nothing. Outsiders come and only see the better place we should be. But farmers are our true history, and right now we must hold that history in the light."

After the show, the former commissioner of agriculture told me, "So many of us lived this history but so few of us remembered it." While reading my history, he told me, he suddenly recalled where the seized collective farm equipment had been sunk. The trucks and tractors were hauled to the supertanker port and dumped just offshore to build a new seawall that might protect the refinery from storms. His father pointed it out to him as a child, reaching for the words to convey its significance to the next generation.

Middle-Class Abundance, Middle-Class Amnesia

Oil refining destroyed the cultivated abundance of St. Croix, replacing it with a lucrative rent on the American addiction to oil. A new Black middle class took shape in the propertied ascent, but it was one haunted by an amnesia of how it all got started. Asphalt highways cut apart the fertile plains and shopping malls paved over prime farmland, as if they were the moral tide of history itself. Crowded towns

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gave way to suburban developments, turquoise reefs gave way to turbid shipping lanes, and bountiful local markets gave way to the abstractions of development. The metrics of gain reached previously unimaginable heights, but such a liftoff came with new prisons, a bolstered police force, and big-box stores selling cheap packaged food from the mainland. Black mold crept into public schools and clinics, but per capita earnings and private car ownership were among the highest in the entire Caribbean. Perhaps this was not so much a radical break with the plantation as it was the feeling of departing the plantation by arriving at the other end of its imperial geography: mindless consumption. But it felt like progress. And the history St. Croix told itself soon settled into stepping-stone chapters that leapt from slavery to emancipation to middle-class America. The refinery rarely entered the telling, but the tidal wave of its arrival was a dimming of the lights right before the onset of a most rewarding final act.

After discovering the brutality of the refinery's arrival in St. Croix in the archive, I sought out elders who experienced firsthand the building of the oil economy in the 1960s. In the summer of 2011, I arranged a handful of meetings with older residents. Crucians, as the old families are called, stood apart from any labored association with the refinery. Many of those Crucians I thought would have much to say about the refinery—emeritus faculty at the local university, the research librarian at the territorial archive, vocal leaders of an array of civic organizations, and elder statesmen from the government house—did not want to talk about the refinery. They were gracious in introducing me to other prominent Crucians and invited me to formal events celebrating the heritage of St. Croix that summer. But questions about the refinery fell flat.

When I asked about empire, many of the distinguished Black citizens anchored their discussion in African slavery under Danish rule. Colonialism was another time altogether, in these accounts, and was overthrown by the fierce resistance of Black Crucians who actively participated in the achievement of their own freedom. The stories were tended with care and carried forward in each retelling. Emancipation in 1848 was hard won, even if full freedom was deferred. Fed up with empty promises, Queen Mary led a guerilla band of Black women in the Great Fireburn of 1878 that torched the plantations across the West End. The spirited veneration of Queen Mary often ended with encouragement to visit a stunning mural of the revolt in the federal post office in Frederiksted. But in the telling of the island's native Black middle class, empire was often a story that ended with the island's transfer to the United States in 1917.

What about the refinery? I asked. Most had very little to say about the refinery other than polite suggestions that I might find something more interesting to study. One of my closest collaborators today—a stalwart advocate for Black environmental heritage on St. Croix—told me point-blank in 2011 that no serious

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scholarship would ever come from a study of the refinery. Everything about it was much too obvious, unobtrusive, and altogether ordinary. More recently, I had the opportunity to sit down with a firebrand elder on St. Croix. I asked him if he was around when the farmers protested the arrival of the refinery. He looked at me, a slight nod affirming. Did you take to the streets with the farmers? "No," he said after a long pause, "No, I hadn't had my political education yet." If largely out of sight and ungraspable as historical event, the refinery was nonetheless sensed as a kind of rising tide lifting St. Croix upward. The refinery was not so much known as felt, and it felt like prosperity that shouldn't be questioned.

After the refinery's last catastrophic breakdown and bankruptcy in 2021, I joined with community leaders to organize a door-to-door survey of impacts in downwind neighborhoods. The cluster of houses stood in the shadow of the refinery. She invited us inside with an offer of tea. An iron gate opened to a well-tended garden and wooden veranda that caught whatever breeze there was to keep her modest home cool and comfortable. She lived at the end of a one-way street now cluttered with used cars and children's toys and single-family homes converted into crowded apartments. Arriving with our survey in hand, many of her neighbors pointed in the direction of the refinery, told us about when the crude oil rained down, and showed us a few cars still splattered in black before quickly retreating back indoors to the AC. She insisted on tea first. As we waited for the water to boil, we sat in the living room with curtains billowing and spoke about how much had changed. She and her husband had inherited the house in the 1970s and started their own family. "It was a good place to raise kids then." Her husband had recently died of cancer, and the house felt heavier in his absence. Porcelain saucer and cup in hand, she preempted our survey by telling us she never had any problems with the refinery. "The refinery has been good to St. Croix," she told us. Sure, there had been minor issues every so often, smells and distant explosions that rattled the dishes. But it *was* a refinery. And on measure, the refinery had been a decent neighbor. Her husband always said Hess was the best thing that happened to St. Croix.

I asked where her drinking water came from. A rain-fed cistern, she said. I told her we documented crude oil raining down in this neighborhood, and asked if she knew anything about it. She left the room, returning with a pile of papers. The refinery had sent a team to spray off her roof right after it rained oil. Promising to help, they sprayed the roof with something soapy, then pressure-washed the whole thing and drained the sudsy water into her gardens. She asked them to test her cistern for any residual chemicals. That's unnecessary, they said, everything is fine now. Then they asked her to sign a nondisclosure form. She declined. A few days later they sent her a bill for the cleaning: $3,000. The refinery would help with the bill, she told us, but only if she signed their forms. "Sometimes I wonder if we might now be better off without that refinery," she concluded.

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We stood backstage, waiting for the press conference to begin. A prominent community leader, she knew what had to be said. It had taken her years to get there, she told me, but now it was time. Her father's rise on St. Croix was underwritten by the refinery, and she knew the private education she had been given, the international vacations taken, and the doors opened at the start of her own storied career were made possible by the refinery's largesse. But the damage to St. Croix was impossible to ignore any longer. Onstage, she faced the gathered crowd, proclaiming, "St. Croix has had an oil economy for long enough. The refinery must now become part of our past. It is no longer our future."

The Impossible Continuum of Now

So much was lost. Yet, until quite recently, such losses felt like the promise of something better. The refinery's impact underwrote a new experience of progress on St. Croix, one that is perhaps best understood not as rising toward a more illustrious future but as tearing down all other foundations of collective life. It was a momentum felt most clearly not from stepping forward but from every alternative falling to the wayside. The mangroves of Krause Lagoon fell quickly, most bulldozed and backfilled to make way for the supertanker port, the rest of the tidal forest strangled by the crude oil sprayed along the edges of the estuary to keep the mosquitos down. Absent the shelter of mangroves, fisheries fell into irreversible decline. Fishermen found an ancient bounty slipping through their fingers until their nets brought nothing in at all. Artesian wells that nourished families and farms for generations soured and took on a sulfur scent before the water came up splotchy with black flecks. The neighborhoods that crowded the refinery fence found their basements overflowing with the heavy scent of an auto mechanic's shop. One year, the refinery reported accidently emitting a half million pounds of benzene into the crowded communities downwind of the refinery (before they withdrew the notice and dismantled fenceline monitoring). Another year a construction crew thought they had hit the big time when a geyser of crude oil shot out of a hole they were digging. Then the dismal reality set in: They had tapped into a shockingly large plume of refinery wastewater. In the neighborhoods downwind, gardens and fruit trees shriveled up when emissions ran thick. Beloved pets keeled over and died. Cancer became ordinary. But among the ascending classes on St. Croix, the destructive wake of the refinery was widely celebrated as proof of progress. Like a landscape blurred on a speeding journey, a faltering of ecology was seen as evidence of historical acceleration. At least until the whole thing imploded.

A newspaper editor on St. Croix called me in 2020, asking if she could reprint an excerpt of my (academic and paywalled) history of the refinery.[40] After the refinery had been mothballed for almost a decade, President Trump had just waived outstanding fines at the refinery and made reopening it key to "America's energy

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FIGURE 5. Resident photo of refinery breakdown. Taken at Molasses Pier in spring 2021, submitted to "Environmental Justice Begins in St. Croix" project in June 2021.

dominance." The Trump administration went so far as to rebrand the EPA as a "customer service" agency for the new owners, tossing out all protocol within the EPA to speed the restart of the refinery.[41] It was a good time to revisit the refinery's history, the editor told me. The 2017 hurricanes had destroyed the archive on St. Croix, and I felt the community needed to know the stories contained in the newspaper clippings I had been carrying around for almost a decade. So I wrote the history anew, with hyperlinks to newspaper clippings now digitized by my students. The history

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FIGURE 6. Resident photo of refinery breakdown. Taken on Sion Hill in spring 2021, submitted to "Environmental Justice Begins in St. Croix" project in June 2021.



FIGURE 7. Resident photo of refinery breakdown. Taken from Barren Spot in spring 2021, submitted to "Environmental Justice Begins in St. Croix" project in June 2021.

followed the condensed arc presented here, and it was published in serialized form on St. Croix in early 2021 as the refinery came back into operation. The response from the community was overwhelming—four years later, I still receive emails and letters from residents wanting to share the part of this story they lived (or correct the part I got wrong). So much of this history had been held just under the surface of island life during the refinery's reign: "arrested histories," Carole McGranahan aptly calls them.[42] As Michel-Rolph Trouillot reminds us, power silences the narration of any past in disagreement with its present configuration.[43] "I lived this, I was there, and yet I never understood what happened," one resident told me. Another said, "Your series taught me the history I lived but never knew. It taught me so much about that moment. And I was here when it happened!" A journalist arrived

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FIGURE 8. Resident photo of refinery breakdown. Taken from day care center in Clifton Hill in spring 2021, submitted to "Environmental Justice Begins in St. Croix" project in June 2021.

in the Virgin Islands in 1980s and had been writing about St. Croix ever since. After a press conference, she came up to me: "I've lived here thirty years and I've never heard those stories. Where did that history go? Why are we so surprised to remember how the refinery happened?"

My publication aligned with a new generation of rising dissent against the refinery. And credit for the protest must go to where it is properly due: to the four women who lead the environmental nonprofit sector in the Virgin Islands and are organizing a new coalition to end colonial oil refining on St. Croix.[44] My public history was quickly enlisted in their struggle, and I was invited to play a supporting role. I soon found myself on St. Croix making the rounds on a half dozen local radio programs. One afternoon I spoke with the Spanish radio program in a sunny room perched above a strip mall. A Virgin Islands senator joined us, helping translate the calls that came in from residents eager to share their stories. Many voiced long-standing frustrations of living downwind of the refinery in neighborhoods wracked

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FIGURE 9. Meeting of different communities on St. Croix to join together for the first time and organize against the refinery, June 2021. Photograph by the author.

by health issues that no one seemed to care about. But a number also placed such complaints within a much longer history. Their parents grew up on Vieques before being expelled by the US military when farms tended for generations were appropriated to turn two-thirds of the island into a naval bombing range in the 1950s.[45] Dispossessed, they were shipped to St. Croix as cheap labor for the publicly owned sugar mill and housed in concrete barracks that became the first fenceline neighborhood when the refinery was built. Many of the callers voiced frustration: Their families were excluded from the collective organization of homestead agriculture and then assaulted by the refinery's environmental negligence. For as long as most could remember, several callers emphasized, "we were invisible on St. Croix."

A few days later, we were sitting together around a table, Black and Brown leaders discussing different histories but shared concerns. In the brightly colored courtyard at El Flamoyant, a Puerto Rican restaurant near the refinery, an unprecedented conversation began. "I'm realizing this is the first time we've ever really all sat down together," one prominent Black leader noted as the meeting started. Startled at hearing that out loud, she quickly said, "We have to change that." Neighborhood leaders from the Puerto Rican and Dominican communities pointed out that the distance was not of their making. "We've complained about this refinery for years," one said; "this is not a new problem for our community." The tension eased only when the conversation turned toward what needed to be done now, and the meeting adjourned with an agreement to stand together against the refinery.

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The Ends of Oil

On St. Croix, the American empire of oil is losing any conceit of permanence. After a long hibernation, the temporal edges of the refinery's regime are coming back into view: before and after. What holds the refinery in place is no longer the unstoppable momentum of fueled progress but the violent bookends of devastation. A bruised past and already battered future overshadow the refinery's promise of easy prosperity, and most everyone knows it.

"The refinery may have helped us, but it destroyed St. Croix," a captain told me as we searched in vain for evidence of coral reefs still clinging to life after the cascading storms of petrochemical pollution and hurricanes. "The refinery built my house, helped me raise my kids, and sent them to college. I'm thankful for what the refinery did for me. But now it's killing us," a retired worker relayed, reeling from a recent cancer diagnosis. Another worker explained, "The pay was great, and I couldn't have bought my house without the refinery. But that work leaves something on you that you can't wash off."

Such sentiments pose the refinery as a historical question. And in the colonial explanations and rooted stories that rise to the occasion, the present is mined with possibility. Radical discontinuity swings into view as both the starting point of the refinery and the starting point of any survivable tomorrow. And repair is centered as the revolution it might be. Such reparative politics does not begin by departing this blasted present for some pristine past or utopian future; even less does it find conceptual celebration in what might take root in the rubble of this world.[46] It digs in for the fight at hand.

At a recent community gathering, residents shared their conviction that the era of oil refining is over. A handful of students, farmers, and activists are coming together to center the hard work of repair as the foundation of a new economy. "Oil sabotaged our island," a local farmer reflected, "and now it's up to us to set things right." Desperation hangs in the air, but something new has taken root. History, once again, is fearsomely contingent. And perhaps this essay is less a historical account of the American empire of oil in the Caribbean than an ethnography of what happens when that imperial project is stripped of any aura of permanence. It is the story of what was forgotten when the refinery reigned supreme and how such impossible memories now gather like kindling around the crisis of today.

I found a poet waiting on my porch when I rose with the sun on my first morning back on the island in June 2021. The cool breeze of dawn promised a moment to collect my thoughts before the day began, but there he was: wraparound shades, dreads tucked into an oversized knitted cap, and calloused feet on the pavement. He told me he had a message for me: "Bible says the wise man builds on rock, only a fool builds on sand. That's what the Bible says. After the storms passed, I went

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down to the beach. All the sand was gone, only rock remained. And in that rock, I saw the chiseled image of my ancestors. And I saw all the work that remains."

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The Institute for Advanced Study remains a rare refuge encouraging critical scholarship that matters. For their invitation to the join the Climate Crisis Politics theme in 2022–23 and the warm welcome extended to the crew gathered under that banner, a thousand thanks are due to Wendy Brown, Didier Fassin, Timothy Mitchell, and Joan Scott. My own work was enriched by the encounter, and this essay first took root in the boisterous discussion an early kernel provoked one April morning in the Birch Garden. Special thanks to all who joined that debate and helped clarify the point. On St. Croix, the fight against empire continues. And if this article elicits any scholarly recommendation at all, such citation might start by first making a contribution to the ground-holding work of Frandelle Gerard, Deanna James, Sommer Sibilly-Brown, and Jennifer Valiulis.

Notes

1. The archive on St. Croix was destroyed by Hurricane Maria in 2017, along with every library on St. Croix. It took seven years to rebuild and reopen the first library after the storm, but the historical archives of local newspapers have yet to be reconstructed.
2. Bond, "First Green New Deal."
3. *St. Croix Avis*, "Legislative Record."
4. Bond, "Manufactured Progress."
5. Paiewonsky, *Memoirs of a Governor*.
6. *Virgin Island Daily News*, "Labor Unrest Plagues St. Croix."
7. Bond, "Oil in the Caribbean."
8. For paradigmatic examples, see Said, *Orientalism*; Said, *Culture and Imperialism*; Guha, *Elementary Forms of Peasant Insurgency*; Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*; Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*; Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*; Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*; Stoler, *Haunted by Empire*; Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*; Okoth, *Red Africa*.
9. Fanon, "Why We Use Violence," 654.
10. Dipesh Chakrabarty draws inspiration from the divergent philosophies of anti-imperial history to sketch out the scholarly binaries now rising to confront the Anthropocene (*One Planet, Many Worlds*). The planetary crisis requires more than a history of our impossible present. We need two: A history of how we got here is necessary, but such a history is incapable of blasting us out of the descending catastrophes. For that, we require historical alternatives that can rupture the fossil-fueled teleology of today. Chakrabarty presents the absolute distance between these philosophies of history as the defining contradiction of our present. Peter Osbourne notes that emphasizing the absolute distance between these philosophies of history presents them as "structurally insoluble, and thereby effectively depoliticizing" ("Planet as Political Subject," 113). Yet it is mostly Chakrabarty's theory that makes it so. This essay is an ethnographic experiment in the opposite direction. With Walter Benjamin, this essay is attentive to the lived fuse of disaster in setting off the

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flashbulb of insurgent pasts suddenly coming into focus at the sandy pedestal of empire and just outside its hardened reach.

11. Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, 69. See also Jameson, *Political Unconscious*; Taussig, "History as Commodity"; Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*.
12. Jason Moore celebrates the coming revolt of the "biotariat" as a sort of posthuman uprising that will finally topple capitalism ("Imperialism," 10). The feral revenge of wounded ecology will finish the job that the organized dissent of oppressed people never could. Climate change is the consummate revolutionary subject. As I've written of this worrisome current of thought, a profound pessimism of the political now conspires with a rising optimism of the ecological (Bond, *Negative Ecologies*, 26). While rarely stated as directly as Moore, elements of recent work by Anna Tsing, Donna Haraway, and others lean into the ecological aspiration of this deeply depoliticizing project.
13. A. G. Hopkins's sprawling 938-page book *American Empire: A Global History*, for example, mentions the Virgin Islands only twice in passing and never addresses the refinery. The Caribbean is both the backyard laboratory of US empire and, from Aimé Césaire to Fidel Castro, home to many pioneering critiques of Yankee imperialism. In 1963, C. L. R. James declared, "The Caribbean is now an American sea," and many scholars labored to flesh out his thesis (*Black Jacobins*, 303). Most of the resulting critique centers on key events of US intervention: the invasion of Cuba and Puerto Rico in 1898; Antillean labor inscription for the building of the Panama Canal from 1904 to 1914; the military occupation of Dominican Republic and Haiti in 1915–34; and the establishment of naval military bases during World War II in Aruba, Bermuda, British Guiana, Jamaica, St. Lucia, and Trinidad, alongside huge expansions of existing military bases in Guantánamo Bay and the canal zone in Panama. While much has been written of this formative Caribbean experience in the twentieth-century version of US empire, very little highlights how select Caribbean ports were remade as the premier offshore refining hub for the Atlantic Seaboard in the 1970s. While the groundbreaking work of Malcolm Ferdinand, Adriana Garriga-López, Vanessa Agard-Jones, Sarah Vaughn, Yarimar Bonilla, and others rightly insist on the overlay of empire and climate crisis in the Caribbean, the imperial hinge of enclave oil refining in the 1970s remains largely neglected.
14. On the informality of US empire, see Williams, *Tragedy of American Diplomacy*; Jones, "Specificity of US Imperialism"; Magdoff, "Imperialism Without Colonies"; Stoler, *Haunted by Empire*; McGranahan and Collins, *Ethnographies of U.S. Empire*. On the petrochemical composition of modern empire, see Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy*; Haniah, "Petrochemical Empire"; Malm, *Destruction of Palestine*.
15. Patel and Moore, *History of the World in Seven Cheap Things*.
16. McNeill and Engelke, *Great Acceleration*.
17. Lenin, *Imperialism*. A review of efforts to update Lenin to the postwar epoch would fill libraries. But, for a few standout efforts to bring Lenin into conversation with a new world of American superpower, see Magdoff, "Imperialism Without Colonies"; Arrighi, *Geometry of Imperialism*; Patnaik and Patnaik, *Theory of Imperialism*; Harvey, *New Imperialism*.
18. For the scarcity of oil as the material and conceptual starting point of US "energy imperialism," see Foster, "Peak Oil and Energy Imperialism"; Klare, "Energy Imperialism." A growing body of work productively refuses this blinkered starting point by centering three American projects built around the fact of too much crude oil. For global military logistics, see Costs of War project at Brown University; Crawford, *Pentagon, Climate Change, and War*.

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For petrochemical harvests, see Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*; Hubbard, "Sobering Details"; Haniah, "Petrochemical Empire"; Romero, *Economic Poisoning*. For oversized lifestyles, see Williams, *Empire as a Way of Life*; Orff, *Petrochemical America*; Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy*; Bond, *Negative Ecologies*; Brand and Wissen, *Imperial Mode of Living*.

19. Timothy Mitchell, this issue. A great irony exists in the distance between networks as an improved constitution of imperial coercion and networks as celebrated advance within social theory. After WWII, the US Empire replaced the block geometry of European colonial occupation with the universal intimidation of a globe-spanning network of military bases alongside the managed conduits of energy and finance. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, network analysis had become perhaps the marquee theoretical advance in Western scholarship. Yet in the resulting tsunami of network studies, nary a word was given to the network constitution of contemporary US Empire.
20. Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire*, 271.
21. "Guantanámo lies at the heart of the American Empire," writes Amy Kaplan, asking what view of imperialism arises from the gray zones of small islands in US possession across the world ("Where Is Guantánamo?," 832). Scholars have highlighted this American theme of islands of imperialism, whether called "America's islets," "imperial archipelago," "pointillist empire," or "islands of connectivity that fasten together larger imperial structures." See Young, "Franklin D. Roosevelt and America's Islets"; Thompson, *Imperial Archipelago*; Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire*; Kramer, "Power and Connection." The globetrotting reach of US empire rests upon the flexible sovereignty of islands and the tremendous—and tremendously unregulated—flows of capital, crude oil, and military force between them. From offshore finance to export processing zones to the Peter Thiel utopia of seasteading, it is an overdue geography lesson that small islands are not marginal to contemporary forms of imperial power but constitutive of them. Yet the ways such an island arrangement eludes the more landlocked versions of imperialism have become both a popular starting point for students of US empire and a neglected angle in prominent *New Left Review* theories of contemporary imperialism. See Baldacchina, *World of Islands*; Burnett, "Edges of Empire"; Conkling, "On Islanders and Islandness"; Davis, "US Military Base Network"; Lloyd et al., "Militarization of Islands"; Mountz, "Political Geography II"; Vine, *Island of Shame*.
22. Imports of crude oil doubled between 1967 and 1973, providing a "safety valve" for growing social tensions over the shocking encounter with the potential finitude of energy. In 1955, roughly 90 percent of the petroleum consumed in the United States came from domestic sources. By 1977, roughly half the gasoline, jet fuel, and heating oil consumed in the United States came from foreign sources. This shift from domestic reserves to foreign geographies hardly even registered in the unabated American addiction to oil: Domestic consumption grew by 50 percent between 1967 and 1977. See Jacobs, *Panic at the Pump*.
23. Bond, "Oil in the Caribbean."
24. Barry, *Other Side of Paradise*; Richardson, *Caribbean in the Wider World*; Miller, *Environmental History of Latin America*.
25. Bond, "Oil in the Caribbean"; Johnson, "Black Gold of Paradise"; Poblete, "Love and Care in 2021."
26. *St. Croix Avis*, "VI Industrial Incentive Board."
27. Between 1959 and 1973, foreign imports of crude oil were strictly regulated by the Mandatory Oil Import Program (MOIP). Limiting foreign imports to about 12 percent

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of total domestic consumption, MOIP limited access to (cheap) new foreign oil fields while stabilizing the solvency of older and more costly domestic oil extraction. In 1965, US territories in the Caribbean were granted exemptions from these quotas and soon became an advantageous route for cheaper Middle Eastern oil to slip into the United States outside of existing import controls. This allowed the refineries in Puerto Rico and St. Croix to purchase crude oil at about half the cost that domestic refineries paid. Rooted in the ambiguous status of an insular territory, the St. Croix Refinery became a premier site for laundering the origins of foreign oil and bypassing existing quota regimes.

28. In the 1960s, Congress granted special tax exemptions and rebates to oil companies willing to establish new export-oriented oil refining in US territories in the Caribbean. This program permitted tax holidays for petrochemical investments and refunded nearly all the federal taxes collected through such operations to the territorial government. The territorial government was then encouraged to invest those funds as a subsidy to industry. Hess Oil secured a sixteen-year holiday on taxes to the Virgin Islands, and the government house agreed to rebate Hess 75 percent of all federal taxes the refinery paid. These arrangements proved immensely profitable for Hess in relation to his competitors. In 1979, a similar sized refinery on the Gulf Coast would have paid $51 million in taxes. On St. Croix that year, Hess paid a fifth of that. An audit in 1992 estimated that in twenty-five years of operation the Hess refinery saved $6.2 billion by operating in the tax shelter of the Virgin Islands. Johnson, "Black Gold of Paradise," 7.
29. The Hess Refinery relied on foreign workers. These "bonded aliens," most of them single men from St. Lucia, Haiti, Dominican Republic, and the Lesser Antilles, were paid substandard wages, denied access to all public services, and educated about the ease of their deportation at the first sign of dissent.
30. In 1967, frustrated by local reports of pollution, the Legislature of the Virgin Islands approved bills that gave new teeth to the regulation of refinery emissions and effluent. After they passed, legislative council brought the bad news: The original contracts with Hess (which said nothing of pollution control) "could not be abrogated by any legislation." See *St. Croix Avis*, "Air, Water Pollution Bills." Hess Corporation's economic arrangement with the colonial government overrode the environmental sovereignty of the Virgin Islands. In the rush to construct the refinery, Hess also sidestepped industry standards and environmental benchmarks for refineries. Contamination, in other words, was built into the design and operation of the refinery.
31. Blair, "St. Croix to Get Chemical Plant." These exemptions map out an enduring contradiction of oil refining on St. Croix. The governor invited Hess Oil to the Virgin Islands in the belief that only heavy industry could launch the islands out of a plantation past and into modern progress. Yet Hess Oil came to St. Croix only when colonial exceptions to federal law were guaranteed. As the tremendous profits from this arrangement lined the pockets of company executives and territorial government, the industrialized economy of the island became locked in a mercenary dependence on its own secondary status. The best pathway out of colonialism was more colonialism.
32. For alarming explorations of contemporary instances of "accumulation by contamination," see Picard and Beigi, "Stains of Empire"; Bond, "Disfigured Commons"; Dewan, "Polluted Transformations."
33. See Hillary Angelo and Lynne Huffer, this issue; Julia Dehm, this issue; Nayanika Mathur, this issue.

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34. Ethnographies of the "presence of the past" has a noted place in American anthropology (Behar, *Presence of the Past*). See also Appadurai, "Past as a Scarce Resource"; Hale, "Consciousness, Violence, and the Politics of Memory"; Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*. Much of this centers the reorganization of the past in the rise of the nation-state. Yet, in contrast to celebrated studies emphasizing the gravitational pull of nationalism on remembrance (e.g., Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; Hobsbawm and Ranger, *Invention of Tradition*), the Benjaminian task here is to describe how disasters unleash waves of heterodox pasts that can provincialize the eternal conceit of imperial rule (e.g., Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*). Insurgent memories are not the glue of hegemonic national cohesion but explosive charges laid at overstretched temporal foundation of modern empire.
35. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History." As Terry Eagleton has argued, Walter Benjamin refuses "homogenous history" that, by expelling any trace of rupture, has "surrendered to the hegemony of the present." Countering a placid present, Benjamin insists on the "radical discontinuity" lurking just below the surface. Yet it is "moments of danger" that ultimately bring such discontinuity into popular recollection and political realization (Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin*, 44–45, 54). On the explosive relevance of Benjamin to the crisis of the present, see also Kleinberg et al., "Theses on Theory and History"; Jameson, *Benjamin Files*; Tomba, *Universality*.
36. Bond, "First Green New Deal."
37. Baldwin, "Virgin Isles Form Pivot in Struggle."
38. *New York Times*, "Public Ownership for Virgin Islands."
39. Miller, *Economy of the Virgin Islands*.
40. Bond, "Oil in the Caribbean."
41. Hiar, "Trump Admin Provides 'Customer' Service."
42. McGranahan, *Arrested Histories*.
43. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*.
44. Poblete, "Women Community Warriors."
45. For accounts of the US Navy expelling residents of Vieques in Puerto Rico, see Ayala, "From Sugar Plantations to Military Bases"; McCaffrey, *Culture, Power, and Struggle*.
46. On reparative politics in the time of climate crisis, see Wendy Brown, this issue; Andreas Folkers, this issue.

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