

PART II

ORDINARY OIL



Author's son, Jesse, with oil pump jack, Point Fortin, Trinidad, 2010

SILENCES ARE NOT ALWAYS QUIET. They can resound with noise and quite articulate speech. They are, as I wrote in the introduction, the absences that present a shape. This second half of *Energy without Conscience* explores the contours and discourses surrounding—and, in a sense, obstructing—what is for me the core issue: a moral reckoning with hydrocarbons and a sense of responsibility for climate change. Oil appears all too banal and ordinary. In this more ethnographic section, my informants grapple with notions of plenty (chapter 3), with industrial accidents in their neighborhoods (chapter 4), and with environmental victimhood (chapter 5). Expert and popular opinions proliferate in what seems like a robust debate. Yet nearly all participants draw back from the cliff's edge. They refuse to consider questions of conscience: if (rather than how fast) one should produce oil, or whether oil is intrinsically (not incidentally) harmful, or whether they have perpetrated (not merely suffered from) climate change. In my fieldwork, a handful of self-aware geologists and policy makers appreciated these dilemmas. Far more often, their own expertise and activism proved so interesting that it distracted them from considering alternatives. Perhaps—if silences are loud—then complicity is diverting and fulfilling in this way. My informants did not cover up a shameful secret, as one might imagine knowing perpetrators of harm to do. Climate change, they understood, was important, and they would deal with it. But they always found something more pressing: oil to locate, toxins to fight, or worse offenders to indict. This is the most widespread, least reproachable form of complicity: an earnest pursuit of local, immediate, rather ordinary concerns in the run up to apocalypse. Like stewards rearranging deck chairs on the *Titanic*, one can easily lose a sense of proportion.

But who I am to criticize these well-meaning Trinidadians? Many of them, after all, cope with economic circumstances far more adverse than those of a university professor (although the energy executives enjoy far better conditions). Before such subalterns, ethnographers usually defer. Waiter-like in their humility,

they act as if the customer-informant is always right (Rabinow 1977, 45). My informants, I concluded, are mostly wrong—either mistaken on ecological grounds or conducting environmental malfeasance. And I write forthrightly in that conviction not only because it is true but also because it matters to us all. Here again, one might ask why I make Trinidadians' affairs my business. The Indian social critic Vandana Shiva famously accuses North Atlantic environmentalists of practicing an imperialist “global reach” when they insist, say, that African peasants refrain from hunting animals. I agree with her in that instance. Hydrocarbons are different. More so than any other form of environmental harm or violence, they circulate through the biosphere. Natural gas burned in or exported from Trinidad circumscribes lives elsewhere. Coastal residents of Bangladesh or Vietnam have perhaps the greatest cause for concern. Still, Superstorm Sandy—which hit New Jersey after the bulk of my fieldwork—made the threat to me, my family, and my community apparent. The Trinidadian energy companies I study bring danger to my doorstep. They are an empire. So I write with as much anticolonial outrage as colonial arrogance. But above all—and to put aside ill-fitting metaphors—I try in this ethnographic section to capture the frustration and possibility of my own encounter with climate-changing complicity.