

Lakeside, or the Petro-pastoral Sensibility

I saw Trinidad's Pitch Lake first in the National Museum (figure 4.1). An 1857 watercolor hangs on the second floor, in a kind of shrine to the island's first professional painter, Michel Jean Cazabon. Cazabon, the son of wealthy French planters, helped launch a national consciousness among the island's polyglot, multiracial population. Through the brush, he converted a space hardly known or valued by its own inhabitants into known, named, beautiful places (Cudjoe 2003, 154). Thus, the pleasant watercolor titled *Asphalt Lake* stands as an exception to my general finding of symbolic thinness regarding hydrocarbons. The image is still more improbable. As I discovered upon visiting the Pitch Lake, Cazabon saw a scene both banal and unpretty. At 114 acres (48 hectares), the feature resembled a large, puddled parking lot. I toured the lake dutifully and then looked for people in La Brea, the adjoining town named in Spanish after pitch. Activists were fighting a proposed aluminum smelter, a threat to the environment and human health. I had met these critics in Port of Spain and then renewed my acquaintance at their homes and in political meetings. Were these working-class Afro- and Indo-Trinidadians concerned about the current danger from oil as well as about potential toxins from a smelter? I probed in this way and hit a wall. To a person, these activists—as well as their allies in Port of Spain—expressed a positive view of hydrocarbons. Without citing the painter, they shared Cazabon's rosy view of asphalt, petroleum, and gas. I continued my quest. On repeated visits of a day or two from the capital, I crisscrossed South Trinidad looking for dissenters. Trinis were preparing for Carnival, but I hoped to find, at least, someone concerned about global and local oil spills. Yet as I moved east and north from La Brea—passing Cazabon's home region of Naparima—I encountered complicity and silence. In the oil belt, I met many earnest, environmentally minded people but no kindred spirit.



4.1 *Asphalt Lake*, watercolor, Michel Jean Cazabon, 1857. © Michel Jean Cazabon, Courtesy of the National Museum and Art Gallery.

Oil's natural quality shields it from a degree of interrogation and fear. Remember, petroleum geologists believe that 95 percent of all the hydrocarbons ever formed in Earth's crust have come up without human intervention (chapter 3). People extract the small, stubborn remainder and—crucially with respect to the climate—burn all those stockpiles. Combustion releases carbon dioxide, most of which, again, already exists in nature. The entire hydrocarbon fuel system, in other words, generates no new substances. Plastic manufacturers do convert oil and gas into artificial compounds. But on the energy side of downstream production, refineries and power plants generate nothing so exotic as the radioactive isotopes minted in any nuclear station. Human actions, therefore, only amplify petrolic activity that preceded industrial life. Of course, that amplification bursts the bounds of moderation. Global climate change makes that clear. Locally, in the Niger delta, jagged-edged pipelines and lurid gas flares provoke rebels, writers, and photographers alike. With a similar starkness, the vast strip mine amid Canada's tar sands overruns boreal forest. Observers near and far criticize these oil fields as environmental and social atrocities. Less extreme cases attract less criticism than one might expect—nearly

none, in other words. In Texas, Oklahoma, and California, pump jacks sway like horses, a metal rodeo bucking up oil. After so many decades, they seem to belong amid tumbleweeds and alkali soil. The literary scholar Leo Marx names this aesthetic compromise the “technological sublime” (1964, 230). Americans have applied it in appreciating railroads, bridges, and skyscrapers (Nye 1994). Oil wells too: in the eye of the tolerant beholder, rigs thrum gently, undisturbingly. Offshore, fish and aquatic vegetation colonize production platforms, as the Houston aquarium is eager to display (Jørgensen 2014, 267–68). To the resident, this oil land is home: a mosaic of water, soil, plants, animals, and a gooey mineral widely sought and contentedly consumed (Campbell 2014, 83, 101).

Such an imaginary—which I call the petro-pastoral—shaped my entire experience in South Trinidad. In this chapter, I relate the “infinitely malleable” pastoral genre to cultural sensibilities among Trinidadians who actually write very little (Garrard 2004, 33). Outside Trinidad, pastoral authors have long applauded small-scale, communitarian alternatives to the capitalist, technological city. In villages, one should live a less regulated life, keep one’s own hours, and marry for love. The English poet William Wordsworth wrote famously of the beauty of Cumbrian landscapes filled with lakes and interspersed with fields, forests, and meadows. These aesthetics run like a red thread through contemporary England’s rural nostalgia and frequent romance with agrarian life (Williams 1973). Trinidad is different. Even without oil, this sort of conventional pastoralism would hardly enter into its literature or calypso (Rohlehr 1992, 203). Caribbean farming has frequently evoked brutal, rather than gentle, times (Deloughrey 2004, 299). Sugarcane, the island’s chief crop, carried the taint of slavery and indentureship long after the abolition of both institutions. Amid that legacy, the country’s first president, Eric Williams, industrialized with a palpable “scorn for agriculture” (Miller 2011, 54). He applied nostalgia—or, at any rate, assumptions of rightness and belonging—to the energy sector. Inflected by the “petro,” Trinidad’s pastoralism applauds the oil well, rather than the village water well. Even when the well damages ecosystems and human health, petro-pastoralism underwrites a surprising tolerance. That indulgence frankly frustrated me—but not enough to impede my ethnography. On the contrary, I kept moving through South Trinidad, trying to find an antioil sentiment. Stubbornly, I sought a conscience about hydrocarbons and climate change in the most unlikely place. Meanwhile,

movements complacent toward hydrocarbons brought the party founded by Eric Williams to its knees. One government left office, and the other replaced it, but no policies or practices changed with respect to hydrocarbons. I lived through a historical turning point that—because of the lakeside aesthetics of La Brea—failed to turn.

Defining the Lake

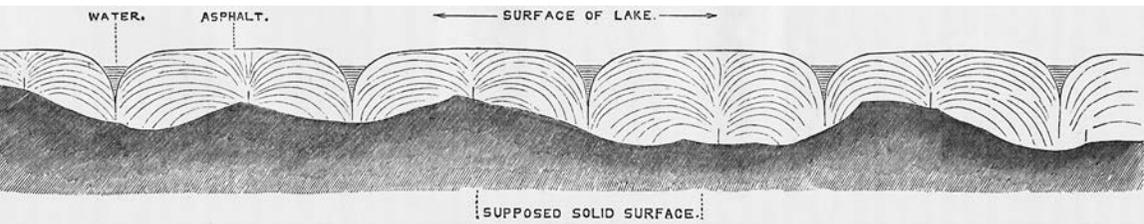
Hydrocarbons straddle the boundary between two forms of nature: the biosphere and the lithosphere, the landscape and its rocky substrate. From antiquity, naturalists have favored the surface. Among the first geographers, Hippocrates titled his most influential work on the environment *Airs, Waters, Places* while Strabo later focused inquiry on inhabited space (Glacken 1967, 80–81, 103). The underworld remained deeply foreign. That sense of strangeness—surviving religious and philosophical shifts far too complex to describe here—allowed most Europeans simply to forget the lithosphere. Even in the modern period, painters of nature depicted rocky mountains rather than deep rock (Schama 1995, 385ff.). In fiction, Jules Verne did send Professor Lidenbrock on his *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (1864). Scarcely imagined since, that subterranean trek still seems original. This sort of surface bias has long run through popular and academic discourse in North Atlantic societies and their colonial settlements (Scott 2008, 1857). The subsurface, after all, lies behind a veil, and literal-minded folk draw, describe, and remember what they see. Oil, however, breaks into view; it is one of the few aspects of deep geology to do so regularly and in many parts of the world. Seeping slowly through a fissure or spurting out through a well, hydrocarbons demand an explanation. Are they vegetable or mineral, topographical or geological, a product of soil or of deep rock? The Pitch Lake—which appears in Charles Lyell's (1830) foundational *Principles of Geology*—received perhaps the earliest and most thorough scrutiny of any single petroleum deposit. Ultimately, that debate would determine whether La Brea stood in the vertical column or on a horizontal plane. Did it perch perilously atop an unfathomably deep volcano or comfortably alongside a pastoral lake?

The extended first round of this enquiry reached a reassuring topographical consensus—but not before considering other, more outlandish possibilities. During his 1732 visit to Trinidad, the Jesuit Joseph Gumilla

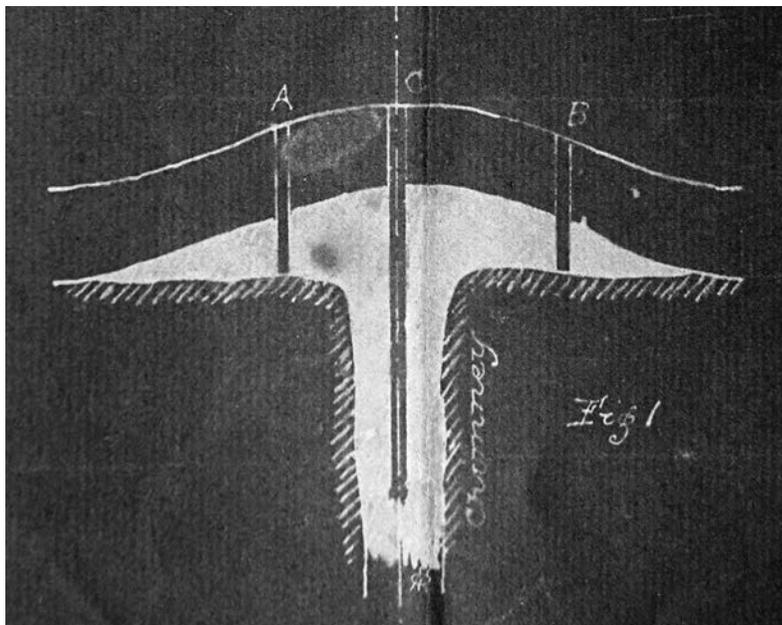
encountered pitch as well as the indigenous people living near it. The substance appeared to him like a “spring” that ran “inexhaustibly.” The neighbors appeared to live in terror. Just before Gumilla’s arrival, “a piece of land had sank . . . and then in its place had appeared another pond of pitch, to the fright and fear of the residents, suspicious that, when they least expected it, the same would follow inside their settlements.”

A century later, Lyell concurs with this Amerindian account. In his view, “the frequent occurrence of earthquakes,” “volcanic action,” and “subterranean fire” both produced petroleum and ejected it to the surface (Lyell 1830, I:218). Not long after this observation, George Wall and Jas Sawkins (see chapter 3) disputed it. The two men bored into the pitch lake—through the Pitch Lake, in fact—to a bed of clay. Sawkins drew the deposit as a set of convection cells resting on a “supposed solid surface” (figure 4.2; Wall and Sawkins 1860, 140). Wall’s main text concluded unambiguously, “The origin of the asphalt, is in the stratum itself, and not referable to any process of distillation or ascension from below” (Wall and Sawkins 1860, 143). Asphalt did not flow into the lake, then; it came into being as the lake converted the remains of plants and animals into more asphalt. Six years later, Wall described the “direct production of bitumen from vegetable remains” (1866, 236). Tropical air at 80 °F simply baked rotting vegetation. There was no underground mystery, he concluded: “The generation of bitumens is easily explained by the operation, at ordinary *terrestrial* temperatures, of chemical laws” (1866, 239, emphasis added). Like most aquatic lakes, pitch simply occupied a depression in the ground.

That comforting judgment held—until fears of a pitch shortage reopened the entire issue. Conrad Stollmeyer and others extracted and sold asphalt so rapidly that the lake began to shrink (see chapter 2). In 1901, the colonial government convened an Asphalt Industry Commission, but before it could issue its report an upstart geologist published his own short pamphlet. Actually trained as a civil engineer, Oscar Messerly disputed the reigning description of the lake as “simply a large puddle of pitch which has oozed out of the sandstone and collected in a basin-like depression in that rock” (1902, 18). Had Wall and Sawkins drilled in the right place, they surely would have found deep “chimneys.” These fissures, which Messerly sketched (figure 4.3), linked the Pitch Lake to “an enormous quantity of organic matters” deposited beneath the Gulf of Paria as the Orinoco scooped that “mediterranean sea [*sic*]” into existence (Messerly 1902, 8). Bitumen



4.2 Wall and Sawkins's cross section of the Pitch Lake, 1860.



4.3 Oscar Messerly's chimney in the Pitch Lake, 1902.

then rose through the chimneys to “orifices,” which included the Pitch Lake and similar features in Venezuela (30). Extraction appeared to prove this point. As one dug pitch, Messerly observed, the substance flowed in to fill the hole. It toppled in from the sides, certainly, but also welled up from the bottom of any hole or cavity. “Vertical pushing” smoothed the asphalt in La Brea (19). Were it not so, depressions would remain at the sites of extraction. The earth’s crust, in other words, always replenished what one digger had taken from another. This upwelling suggested new nomenclature. Messerly chided those authorities who had “very impro-

erly given the name of Lake, as it offers not one of the topographical conditions which may justify such a denomination" (5). More likely, powerful subterranean forces operated below La Brea. In his brash, undiplomatic way, Messerly almost made the catastrophic theories of Gumilla and Lyell fashionable again.

Then the Asphalt Industry Commission buried Messerly and his geological theory in a thousand pages of transcripts. Doubt reigned throughout the hearings. Consisting of a geologist and two barristers—and attended by the attorney general and six other legal men—the commission first interviewed a series of asphalt professionals. It spent the better part of a day, for instance, with Mr. G. F. Bushe, an agent responsible for Stollmeyer's portion of the lake. Bushe initially echoed Messerly's view of vertical pushing. In any given hole, he testified, "The amount that comes up in three months' time is too large to come from the sides, and therefore it comes from below" (*Colony of Trinidad 1903*, 45). The next witness discounted all forces but subterranean ones: "The whole pressure comes up from the bottom," claimed Arthur Protheroe, the owner of a lake lot. "You can see it rising." The attorney general led the witness: "You believe there is some underground supply?" "I believe so," Protheroe rejoined (65). He had watched diggers excavate to an apparent clay basement. Then the clay rose up, more than a foot in a night. Protheroe had supervised another 20-foot hole. "Did you get to the bottom of the pitch then?" pressed the attorney general, Nathaniel Nathan. "No, Sir," answered the witness (74). Interviewed on the next day, Francis Duncan claimed to have dug down twice as far. The pickaxes cut through clay and encountered more pitch. "Did you get to the bottom of that pitch ever?" asked Nathan (127). At 40 feet, Duncan had still not exited the stratum of bitumen. Finally—for this phase of the hearings—the pitch digger Alfred Rogers conjectured about a structure akin to Messerly's chimneys: Asphalt "comes from vents, as it were . . . all the time" (137). Clearly unconvinced, Nathan derided the witness's "constitutional impossibility of measuring lengths of time" (131). Some commissioners had already made up their minds.

That skepticism toward the diggers eventually won out. After twenty-two grueling days of testimony, Nathan and the others concluded that pitch was shallow, a topographical form. The commissioners explicitly endorsed Wall and derided Messerly. Although they rejected Wall's model of ongoing asphalt production from vegetation, they characterized pitch

emphatically as superficial (Colony of Trinidad 1902, 7). No “earth pressure” pushed pitch through chimneys, asserted the garrulous attorney general late in the hearings. “I think we may all assume,” he declared rather heavy-handedly, “that pitch was formed *in situ*, where it was found, and is not a volcanic product” (Colony of Trinidad 1903, 345). With evident scorn, the commission’s final report referred to Messerly’s ideas as “too visionary to need examination” (Colony of Trinidad 1902, 12). Had all the witnesses who concurred with him suffered from similar delusions? No, the commissioners explained, they were merely missing the forest for the trees. Shallow hydrostatic pressure could push up in a fashion indistinguishable from deeper geological pressure. Asphalt surrounding a hole behaves rather like water pressure in and upon a cup pushed underwater. Or, as an amenable witness had illustrated, “Here’s my hat. It has a flat bottom. Press the sides, and crown goes in” (Colony of Trinidad 1903, 203). This liquid property, then, gave the impression of upwelling and increase, when pitch was finite and actually decreasing. On this point, the commission ruled definitively: “The amount of asphalt in the lake and the land deposits is strictly limited and . . . the surface level of the deposits must be lowered by any mining upon them” (Colony of Trinidad 1902, 15). Pitch was falling rather than rising, a lake receding from its shore.

Largely forgotten now—even in La Brea—the Asphalt Industry Commission made history by what it did not say. It did not describe pitch as a deposit, outcrop, seep, or any other geological term in contemporary usage. It did not label bitumen as a pollutant from the underworld. Speculate for a moment on the counterfactual: the commission could have traced bitumen to Verne-like deep structures and processes. Perhaps Trinidadians would have read and reported this finding as an affirmation of the Amerindian myth. Perhaps La Brea residents would have treated the Pitch Lake and its products with greater caution. Like Messerly, they might have interrogated its designation as a still-water lake at all. A more scientific version of the story was soon proved true: pitch did seep up from deep below. Over the course of the first half of the twentieth century, petroleum geologists reached consensus on the migration of hydrocarbons from deep in the crust (Kropotkin 1997). Messerly had got it right after all. But this reversal in the dominant judgment came too late to disturb the hard-won consensus. In the wake of the Asphalt Industry Commission, practice established the Pitch Lake’s reputation as a purely terrestrial, topographical

body. Tourists visited, walking carefully so as not to sink into the liquid, sticky parts. Like many, I bathed in the healing, sulfurous waters lying in its crevasses. As popularly understood, the landscape cupped and contained its dark pond. Almost in Wordsworth's pastoral sense, La Brea became a lakeside village.

The Nonindustrial Industry

If, as Raymond Williams writes, rural nostalgia contrasts capital with community, La Brea created useful history of both kinds in the twentieth century. In the wake of the Darwent well (see chapter 3), oil production spread throughout the southern tier of the island and to the Pitch Lake. La Brea became an oil town—as well as a pitch town—surrounded by the infrastructure and staffhousing of British and American oil companies (Higgins 1996, 180ff.). Wells, oil tanks, and ponds of water filtered from oil dotted the environs. The industry cut many corners in those early days. The infamous Dome Fire of 1928 killed sixteen workers and bystanders (de Verteuil 1996). Outside the actual fields, all the companies practiced blatant discrimination. They limited the rise of black and Indian workers and squeezed them into crowded, segregated accommodations known as barracks. Frustration eventually boiled over in strikes, riots, and sabotage in 1937. By midcentury, however, the industry seemed to have overcome these growing pains. It no longer caused visible, violent damage. Trinidadian workers advanced, gaining in expertise and managerial positions. Meanwhile, as its oil fields were depleted, La Brea suffered a slow decline. Natural gas, liquefied nearby in Point Fortin, became the country's leading natural resource. Still, La Brea did not go bust. Unlike its codiscoverer of petroleum—Titusville, Pennsylvania—South Trinidad stayed in the hydrocarbon business (Black 2000, 189). The town continued to bring up pitch and some oil, leaving the technological sublime with a measure of nostalgia. Born in 1928, Arthur Forde recalled the La Brea of his youth as the “industrial capital of the Caribbean”: “We were more modernize [*sic*] than any other village in Trinidad.”² Misty-eyed, his memory called to mind a hamlet of machinery—and reconciled all the apparent contradictions in that sensibility.

At his snack shop—across from seeps that sometimes burned spontaneously—Forde also gave me a lead. Agatha Proud, he confided, once owned the Pitch Lake. Chasing these rumors became my obsession. Peo-

ple referred me to Ethelbert Monroe, another elder inhabiting one of the many vintage houses tilted wildly in pitch-infused soil. Monroe remembered “Miss Proud” as a “Negro woman” who owned “the whole of the Pitch Lake.” She also claimed the adjacent parcels, belonging legally to oil companies and rented to tenants. She visited the latter, demanding rent and “threatening to move them from the land.”³ Errol Jones, who sculpted bitumen into tourist art, corroborated these details and added more: Miss Proud had worked as a servant for an American family, who pretended to possess property claims to the Pitch Lake. Dying without offspring, the family willed its supposed entitlement to Miss Proud. She pursued that claim until a fire—perhaps due to arson—destroyed all her documents. I believed this version, but Jones concluded, “They say she was screw-loose.”⁴ Other residents recalled Miss Proud as more sane and more deeply rooted in La Brea. Proud was “probably one of the last of the natives living here,” recalled a guide at the Pitch Lake.⁵ The woman, who was likely born around 1900, died or disappeared in the 1960s. No further facts were available. Although she had pressed her claim in court, I could find no record of it. Finally, I tracked down a neighbor of Miss Proud, born in roughly 1920. (She did not know the exact year.) Over tea and biscuits, Virginia Piper spoke as vociferously as her frailty allowed: “This t’iefing company . . . t’ief Miss Proud.” Piper was referring to Trinidad Lake Asphalt, the current holder of Stollmeyer’s original concession. Proud, she continued, had inherited the land from her grandparents, at least some of whom were Amerindian.⁶ Piper grew agitated recalling injustices recent and antique. Perhaps, Proud’s ancestors had met Gumilla.

As I found, Piper’s account crossed the generations in La Brea. On another visit, I walked along the main road, also buckling from pitch migration, to the house of Joshua Logan. Handsome and in his twenties, Logan taught drama at Vessigny Secondary School. While earning a bachelor’s degree at the University of the West Indies, he had written a one-act play about the Pitch Lake called *The Price of Progress* (Logan n.d.). The story centers on the Bird family: a man known as Bird and his deceased great-great-grandmother. This ancestor, called “Mamma” by all her descendants, represents Agatha Proud. A French planter owned Mamma. When his child falls desperately ill, he asks the slave for an African remedy. Upon the cure, as Bird recounts in Scene II, the master frees the slave and grants her a wish: “Mamma say she want de Pitch Lake,” narrates Bird,

and she gets it. Why—so long before Stollmeyer and others began selling it—did Mrs. Bird want the asphalt? “It had healing powers,” the younger Bird continues, and Mamma “wanted de Pitch Lake for everybody.” Later, she refuses to sell to extractors because “people does use it, and it is sacred.” When we met at his house—just across the street from Monroe’s—Logan explained the avian reference in Mrs. Bird’s name. He wanted to link Miss Proud with the Amerindian myth of the Pitch Lake and with “that oneness with nature.”⁷ The play thus represents hydrocarbons as nature’s gift to wellness—stolen by capital. Avaricious firms collude with the state to swindle the Bird family. Just as, in Logan’s experience, oil companies pollute the water and destroy the local fishery. But the penultimate scene undercuts the author’s own criticism. Bird dies suddenly and bequeaths a small fortune to the fisherman whose livelihood is most threatened by pollution. It is a win-win: the worker need no longer work, and capital can continue business as usual. Tempered in this way, Logan’s drama advanced to the national Best Villages competition.

Meanwhile, the real-life toxic drama of La Brea appeared to be heading toward a less happy ending. Logan’s uncle, Noah Premdas, led an environmentally minded group called La Brea Concerned Citizens United.⁸ Implacably, the group opposed the government’s plans to build an aluminum smelter. Meanwhile, these activists took no stand against hydrocarbons. I first encountered their paradoxical sensibility one evening in 2009 after a meeting of the group. Liming (hanging out) in Premdas’s open garage, the activists recalled the violent destruction of their forests and lakes. In 2004, before the government even imagined siting a smelter in La Brea, the state had ordered bulldozers to flatten the trees and workers to club the fleeing animals to death (deGannes 2013, 31; Sheller 2014, 218). Up to that point, people had recreated in the woodland, often, as one activist put it, “giving thanks for the virgin environment, the untouchedness.” This virginity still accommodated quite a bit of touching. When municipal water supplies failed, as they frequently did, families had collected their drinking supplies from nearby ponds. They drew a ring on the water with soap, recounted his colleague, “the soap used to push the oil [away from the water being collected]. . . . They were like little scientists. They were experimenting.”⁹ At that, everyone giggled. The site’s three lakes, I later learned, resulted from the dumping of “produced water,” the highly contaminated fluids separated from oil. Locals knew this history of the 1930s: they called the pond with

the most obvious sheen the “oil dam.” An environmental impact assessment—carried out before the bulldozing—showed levels of oil and grease 8.7 times Trinidad’s health standard.¹⁰ In effect, my informants treated hazardous waste as a minor irritant, like sand blowing on their beach picnic.

If oil in water caused no alarm, the infrastructure for producing oil almost provoked celebration. In La Brea, the site cleared for the smelter had contained derelict oil storage tanks and twenty-seven petroleum wells. When the government capped those wells in preparation for construction, onlookers misinterpreted the operations as more drilling. They greeted this development with equanimity. “It is only when people started to see the magnitude of the clearing,” Premdas recalled, that they realized a more sinister project was afoot. Premdas, in fact, worked as a well survey supervisor for Petrotrin, the national oil company. “People actually live with—you can say—oil fields in their yards,” he explained, “a few feet from their houses.” He defended oil and attacked the smelter by saying, “We for any industry that doesn’t create a health risk to the communities.”¹¹ Of course, he was also for an industry that employed his neighbors and himself. But the other activists—as I spoke with them before and after the meeting—nearly overlooked the economic benefits of oil. They remembered life with oil, rather than a living from oil. A Rastafarian, Isaac Gregory wore his hair in dreads and considered the earth sacred (figure 4.4). He put me up for the night after the meeting, gave me breakfast the next day, and submitted to my questions on the pump jacks that used to suck oil from nearby wells. “There was no hamburger,” he responded, using a Creole word for *problem*. “We used to get up and ride on those,” he continued with amusement. “They used to look like horses.”¹² Adam Chalant smiled at the same diversions: “I always like[d] the area . . . nice, quiet, serene. You could do what you want.” Did the whirring of pump jacks disrupt that quiet? I asked. No, he replied, “You’d see more or less a puddle of oil bubbling. It wasn’t, to say, dangerous.”¹³ We sat at the protesters’ encampment, just outside the gate of the construction site. Their signs labeled aluminum a “death industry,” and one—perhaps written by Gregory—referred to “Smelter Babylon.” They also labeled it a “heavy industry” and vowed to keep it from a community and ecology otherwise at peace.

To me, however, bitumen seemed the heaviest of all the products in question. How could one assimilate the mining of pitch to the activists’ bucolic image of their locale? After some difficulty, I gained access to Trinidad



4.4 Isaac Gregory, 2009. Photograph by the author.

Lake Asphalt. Having exported material for major bridge and tunnel projects worldwide, the company had recently perfected the bitumen pellet. In this bullish atmosphere, the firm hosted its annual calypso competition just before Carnival. I bought my ticket and, as a foreign curiosity, soon found myself in the deafeningly loud VIP section. While amply wine and dined, I heard two songs mentioning the smelter. Alfred Antoine's lyrics sympathized with a woman protesting aluminum, regretting that "industrialization, it come to stay."¹⁴ I followed up with him. A casual worker—possibly uneasy in the head office where we later met—Antoine backed away from any criticism of the smelter. "I for industrialization," he assured me, but he associated the term with future projects only.¹⁵ Trinidad Lake Asphalt fell outside this category. The second calypsonian, Roger Achong, worked as a well-paid chemist. His calypso praised "Mother earth [who] will bless and see you through" and pronounced the smelter "an environmental blight." At the same time, he endorsed "fires of progress . . . burning bright" and criticized oil and gas only for their depletion.¹⁶ In our conver-

sation, Achong clarified the distinction between pitch and aluminum. “It’s a natural project,” he assured me, gesturing toward bitumen samples in his office. “We are like caretakers.” Achong contrasted this stewardship with his earlier experience working in Trinidad’s methanol plant, the largest in the world. That industry synthesizes ammonia gas at intense temperatures and pressure (Hager 2008). There, “you have a chemical change taking place from the beginning to the end,” he explained. “This [Trinidad Lake Asphalt] is just a mining operation with a still. It’s a joke.”¹⁷ Laughably simple, the still heated asphalt to 150 °C—boiling away the water—while maintaining atmospheric pressure. Asphalt, in other words, was less industrial than moonshine and equally compatible with rural life.

As critics of the smelter reiterated their tolerance for oil, I scouted farther for someone willing to criticize both of them. Where was the conscience of energy in Trinidad? Searching for it, I followed the hydrocarbons from upstream production to sites of midstream refining and downstream manufacturing. Just east of La Brea lay San Fernando, the unofficial capital of the oil industry and a town large enough to produce its own Carnival parade. Most revelers bought masquerade costumes from a small number of producers, chief among them the award-winning Kalicharan family. In early 2010, the Kalicharans introduced eight costumes. Focused on the theme “Outta d’Rain Forest,” the skimpy outfits evoked macaws, leopards, and similarly colorful creatures. This biodiversity harbored one oddball, however: a blue-black, fringed bikini advertised as “oil spill.” Thinking I had at last found an antipetroleum artist, I took the ferry from Port of Spain to San Fernando. No, Wendy Kalicharan explained, the slick-like bathing suit did not indict hydrocarbons—sponsored, as it was, by Lenny Sumadh, Ltd., Automotive, Petroleum, and Industrial Supplies. Mrs. Kalicharan only objected to oil spurting, or “sputing,” as she put it. Producers “need to be a little more environment friendly and look into that,” she said, before referring me to her daughter, the real mastermind of the costumes.¹⁸ Ayana Kalicharan worked for a hydrocarbon firm on matters of health, safety, and environment. Her employer, she assured me, was “going green,” as were many others.¹⁹ The ambiguous costume, she clarified, referred to oil spills elsewhere, not in Trinidad’s rain forests. Ayana had studied Occidental Petroleum’s horrific spills in Ecuador and used these events as a cautionary tale in the brochure distributed at Carnival (cf. Sawyer 2004). “Fossil fuels,” promised the Kalicharans in that document, “can be extracted in an envi-

ronmentally friendly way.”²⁰ Once again, complicit parties gave blue-black crude a whitewash.

Still seeking a nature-minded criticism of oil, I continued slightly north of San Fernando. Since Molly Gaskin founded it in 1966, the Pointe-a-Pierre Wildfowl Trust had operated on the grounds of the country’s oil refinery. In that facility, pipes snaked everywhere, as gas ignited in flares. To me, the lurking smell of sulfur—and constant warnings against fire, sabotage, and even taking pictures—blared danger at every corner. I drove through Pointe-a-Pierre vigilantly. Gaskin felt these sensations too. But, as she explained to me at one end of the bird pond, “once you are inside here, you don’t know that there is a refinery out there.” The abundant avifauna did not appear concerned either. Their water, Gaskin continued, had not spurted from an oil well. Rather, the refinery had pumped up liquid from aquifers and stored it in ponds to cool the machinery. Water waited, so to speak, upstream before—rather than downstream after—an encounter with hydrocarbons. Still the entanglement appeared to shape Gaskin’s efforts at environmental education. I was struck by a poster on the pond’s shore that mentioned “industrial pollution in the atmosphere, including gas and oil.” Was a conscience-stricken Gaskin blaming Petrotrin for climate change? No: she disclaimed the billboard as a donation from the Organization of American States. She would have modified the indictment of oil and gas with a caveat regarding “proper checks and balances.” On her own account, Gaskin had printed a poster, “What You Can Do,” which recommended mildly that one inflate one’s car tires fully and turn off unused electronic devices. A “balanced” smelter might proceed too because, as Gaskin elaborated, “if you are totally unreasonable . . . you don’t make any sense.”²¹ Among industries, only the nuclear sector lay truly beyond the pale. Gaskin had first made news in 1995 when she invited Greenpeace to help protest the transshipment of nuclear waste through Trinidadian waters. Her elastic environmental sensibility embraced any pollutant short of radionuclides.

A final push northward took me outside the oil belt, to the Point Lisas Industrial Estate—and to the most full-throated endorsement of hydrocarbons. Amid factories heaving petrochemicals, I did not expect to find critics of industry. Engineers employed at Point Lisas saw oil—and aluminum too—as beneficial. Indeed, hydrocarbons, they believed, might neutralize the most severe threats to health and the environment. I found

Reeza Mohammed in the office of the National Energy Corporation. For that parastatal firm, he was coordinating environmental projects, including some proposals in the vicinity of the smelter. With a doctorate in physio-pathology, he had served in 1999 and 2000 as Trinidad's first minister of the environment. I asked Mohammed about water quality in La Brea. Given the high levels of oil and grease in the reservoirs, why had residents not succumbed to widespread illness? Mohammed, who warmed to his topic of expertise, misunderstood my question. He was concerned about fecal coliform bacteria: the water "was so bad, if you put a spoon in it, the spoon was standing on its own." "For the life of me," he continued, "I could not understand" how people avoided diarrhea. Oil and grease might have actually restored gastrointestinal function. "The seepage of hydrocarbons in the area," Mohammed speculated, "would have affected [reduced] the pathogenicity of the bacteria."²² Other experts ridiculed his theory, but the model of oil as salve applied more widely. Douglas de Freitas ran a company specializing in bioremediation. From offices close to Point Lisas, he oversaw the cleanup of contaminated sites in La Brea and elsewhere. "It's the perfect site," he enthused about La Brea. At 20 or 30 feet below ground, pitch provided "a natural sealant." "We have those massive tar sand deposits below us," he boasted to me. As he advertised to potential clients, nothing would leach through the town's bituminous shield.²³ Hydrocarbons protected people and the environment from contaminants far worse.

At root, industries generated dread in and around La Brea—and offended conscience—only when they involved fast, high-risk processes. The industrial sociologist Charles Perrow distinguishes such operations from mere mixing, separation, or fabrication. Thoroughly artificial, these transformations occur at high temperatures and pressures, accelerating beyond humans' ability to monitor and control. Fission, as Perrow's (1999, 9–10) quintessential case, sustains itself independently in a nuclear power station. Aluminum stands closer to such self-piloting than to tool-like behavior. In a smelter, raw alumina flows into room-sized pots where it is bathed in cryolite and aluminum fluoride, heated to 1000 °C, and submitted to powerful electric currents. This Hall-Héroult process creates aluminum while coating the pots with a highly hazardous residue and sometimes releasing dangerous vapors of hydrogen fluoride. In the event of an accident, human operators can stop the reactions, but not immediately. Some of the well-educated activists from Port of Spain understood these

specifics. More vaguely, members of La Brea Concerned Citizens United feared smelting as a kind of juggernaut. Adam Chalant defined heavy industry as making noise “all day all night” with “shifts.” In light industry, “you have an opening time and a close off time.” Trinidad Lake Asphalt, whose equipment slept at dusk, harmonized with nature and the land in this way. Down the peninsula, residents of Pont Fortin drew even finer distinctions: some waxed nostalgic for the blue-yellow flare of the refinery, replaced by the orange flare of natural gas liquification (Campbell 2014, 63). In La Brea, from where one can glimpse all these flames, an activist still contrasted this local “scenery” with the unwelcome “bright life” of Port of Spain.²⁴ In the bucolic night, Chalant had even seen the deity known as Papa Bois.²⁵ Having survived since the French planters, this forest spirit now presumably flits among the pump jacks of South Trinidad. Ultimately, the specter of aluminum made oil appear even safer than people already considered it to be. For residents of La Brea and the oil belt, petrolic pastoralism involved no contradiction in terms.

The Island against the Mega

At the national level, the movement against smelters began with tropes closer to standard, agrarian pastoralism. In 2006, the government first suggested manufacturing aluminum at Chatham (deGannes 2013, 3). Down the Cedros Peninsula and past La Brea, this village lay beyond the arc of industrial sites. Indo-Trinidadians raised crops and fished in a string of inland settlements and beachside villages. They occupied a patchwork woodland described in Jamaica as “ruinate” (Cliff 1987, 1; Maisier 2015, 117). The present seemed to constantly churn through the past. This temporal topography fit the popular “racial landscape” of South Trinidad—where descendants of indentured laborers still worked the land (Khan 1997, 4). Prime Minister Patrick Manning and his mostly Afro-Trinidadian cabinet seemed bent on industrializing that village life. Then a fortuitous discovery both deepened the heritage of Chatham and gave it African roots. In August 2006, archaeologists uncovered Bou’Kongo, an early nineteenth-century settlement of slaves freed in the Middle Passage by the British navy. Burton Sankeralli, a public intellectual attached to the University of the West Indies, accompanied the expedition. Later, he published his diary. “An African liberated village,” he narrates breathlessly, “the Congo nation,

the cradle of the Chatham community. In the bush . . . our history in the bush . . . not quite lost” (Sankeralli 2009, 163, ellipses in original). In the same volume, Sankeralli explains, “This African village sources the ongoing living presence and soul. It provides a grounding for the ongoing living Spirit of struggle” (2009, 63). That struggle—in which Sankeralli became a leading voice—encompassed much more than the environment. “My notion of rights is tied with the notion of community,” he explained to me when we met for lunch in Port of Spain in 2009.²⁶ He practiced Orisha, an African-derived religion, and was writing a dissertation on it. For Sankeralli, Bou’Kongo constituted a sacred site, a place where Africans had disembarked as free. Only blasphemers would bulldoze it for aluminum.

The most public opponent of the smelter, Wayne Kublalsingh, situated aluminum in a similarly historical and cosmic drama. Prior to entering politics, he had written children’s books and occasionally lectured at the University of the West Indies. Then, although a slight man, he had undertaken a one-person hunger strike against the smelter. Kublalsingh moved with grace and spoke with a quiet calm that inspired the other activists around him. “He is doing this from something in his core,” a follower told me, “motivated from some deep sense of connection to the land . . . and people being able to reap healthy living off the land.”²⁷ When we met at his home in Central Trinidad, Kublalsingh began with first principles: “Spanish conquistadors smashed the Amerindian culture. . . . We’ve always been small and vulnerable.”²⁸ The *we* referred to any and all Trininis, past and present. A week later, at a strategy session, he predicted a rocky road to legal reform: “over the past five hundred years of our history . . . constitutions have been implemented . . . through vast violence and blood.”²⁹ The future might repeat the past. So it appears in the blockbuster film *Avatar* (2009). Kublalsingh watched the movie—wherein humanoids on planet Pandora eject an American mining corporation—and it reminded him of Trinidad’s struggle. In a newspaper editorial titled “The Avatar Threat,” he warned readers of “the corporation imperialist’s [*sic*] wars . . . which natives, some in Chatham and La Brea . . . and certainly all natives on the planet, must confront as this century wears on.”³⁰ Only Kublalsingh could stretch Caribbean history and identity to this extent and get away with it. He and his followers descended almost entirely from involuntary migrants rather than from Amerindians. Yet—compared to aluminum—even transplants to Trinidad’s social landscape appeared authentic. Cans and foil glistened

menacingly—at once hypermodern and bloodthirsty. Kublalsingh (2009, 72) emphasized the use of this light, strong material in advanced weaponry. Once called a “magic metal,” aluminum exceeded the limits of even the most flexible pastoral sensibility (Sheller 2014, 27).

Rhetoric that worked in Chatham, however, gained less purchase in La Brea. In 2007, the government relinquished its first proposal and recommended a smelter for the site already deforested. In that depressed town, the smelter’s promise of jobs garnered distinct support, creating awkward conditions for La Brea Concerned Citizens United. At the national level, this change of setting challenged the newly formed Rights Action Group. Living in the comparative comfort of Port of Spain and its suburbs, these activists found it difficult to oppose industry outright. Indeed, when I met Kublalsingh and his allies in late 2009, they refused to identify themselves as environmentalists at all. The problem, they insisted, was the size of a given industry. The footprint of development projects, they assumed or asserted, should be commensurate with the given landmass. In 2008, the economist Denis Pantin had specified this principle in a number of widely circulated essays. His text on “mega-projects in small places” recommended that planners apply an “irreversibility principle.” “Given our small island reality,” he wrote, “if we make an error, there will be little or no room for correction. The nuclear accident at Chernobyl affected a geographical area, for example, several times the size of Trinidad!” (Pantin 2008, 2). I met with Pantin in early 2010 in his university office and suggested that all places were small and fragile. No, he argued, larger nations are “in some way able to pick up the slack in terms of providing alternative space.” “If you have one wetland,” he further illustrated, “it’s a different thing [than] if you have a thousand.”³¹ In other words, parts of continents were interchangeable and replaceable. Islands were unique. The activists’ pastoralism pivoted from the agrarian to the merely small.

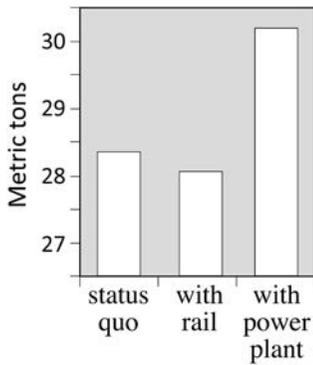
At exactly this time—as the smelter suffered insults in the press and at public rallies—the government raised the stakes on megaprojects. It announced an infrastructure project that seemed to burst the bounds of Trinidad’s scale and its history. The Rapid Rail would connect Port of Spain to San Fernando and other major cities. Eric Williams had torn up Trinidad’s first rails in the 1960s, creating conditions for widespread car use and gasoline combustion. Surely, a commuter rail system would benefit the environment, not to mention decreasing traffic congestion as well.

“Stupidity. That is total stupidity!” denounced Norris Deonarine, head of the National Food Crop Farmers Association, referring to the claim that rail would lower Trinidad’s carbon emissions. The way to do so, he insisted over (imported) coffee, was to become self-sufficient in food. He reminded me of the slogan “No smelter—agriculture!”³² As fate would have it, Rapid Rail’s tracks would pass through a coastal corridor of Indian small farmers, who flooded angrily into three public consultations on the project. Such an expensive project would surely encourage government corruption, many argued. Less explicitly, the memory of indentureship haunted these gatherings. At one of the consultations, Deonarine referred to himself and others as “generational farmers,” who had improved the soil quality by two grades.³³ “They now fear,” explained the member of parliament at another consultation, “that all their lands that their grandparents toiled very hard to give to them are now going to be taken away.”³⁴ Rapid Rail threatened to undo all that liberation, taking farmers back to the time of Trinidad’s colonial railway, “when our people had no say whatsoever.”³⁵ That train had carried plantation-grown cane. These occasionally far-fetched associations and equations demonized the proposed train as a one-way ticket to exploitation and landlessness. The rail corridor would bifurcate and eviscerate a dozen Bou’Kongos. Pastoralism of the agrarian sort made a comeback.

But the corridor also provoked acute anxiety related to scale. At the consultations, two participants compared Trinidad to the former metropole. Trinidad was “smaller than London and smaller than Europe,” asserted Stephan Kangel of the Caroni Assembly of Villages.³⁶ Presumably Port of Spain needed neither the Tube nor the Eurostar. A few minutes later, Anderson Wilson of Beetham Estate took the microphone. “I travel London. I travel the world,” he asserted—rather improbably, given that Beetham was notoriously poor—“Trinidad is too small for this thing.”³⁷ In part, farmers were voicing a conventional not-in-my-backyard complaint. Few seemed to realize how narrow a rail corridor would be.³⁸ Just as important, though, opponents of Rapid Rail associated trains with a kind of futuristic infrastructure and streamlined mobility they thought foreign to Trinidad (cf. Larkin 2013, 334). The Rights Action Group joined publicly with the farmers. “We need to lessen the speed at which we are moving,” Kublalsingh elucidated intently to me at a mall restaurant. “It is more of a metaphysical issue. . . . [The rapid rail] would give a metropolitan feel.”³⁹ I felt that way

about the eight-lane highway running by us and parallel to the proposed tracks, but Kublalsingh accepted the existing roads. Petro-pastoral sensibilities accommodated asphalt more easily than train carriages made of—or looking like—aluminum. By *metropolitan*, Kublalsingh also denoted an unwelcome, continental scale. The preferable short, insular distances, he believed, did not require a faster pace than that of the bicycle. Size—whether imagined as the footprint of the infrastructure or the way in which the technology would further compress Trinidad—seemed to trigger environmental alarms. Meanwhile, the promoters of Rapid Rail distributed and posted on the web predictions regarding cuts in carbon emissions. As motorists switched to rail, they would release 85 percent less CO₂ per passenger kilometer (Trinitrain 2010). The claim fell on deaf ears. Not a single participant in the public meetings even mentioned carbon or other forms of air pollution. Unassumingly, complicitly, the quality of the atmosphere simply mattered much less than the quantity of Trinidadian landscape.

By its very nature, this hectare-focused vigilance gave climate change, all hydrocarbons, and the specific power source of the smelter a free pass. The relevant resources lie underground and exit through tubes 30 inches wide. Of course, rigs, refineries, storage tanks, and the occasional spill enlarge this lateral spread. But, in terms of their efficient consumption of the earth's surface, hydrocarbons have no equal (Dukes 2003; Mitchell 2009, 402). Like a skyscraper, they save lateral space. At a Carnival fête, I asked Dennis Pantin about oil and gas. Did the sector constitute a megaproject and a worry for him? Not at all: “No problem,” he shouted over the music, so long as rigs lay far enough apart.⁴⁰ In La Brea, the National Energy Corporation had always planned to build a 720-megawatt gas-fired power plant near the smelter so as to supply aluminum's huge need for electric current. Opponents understood this plan. Indeed, they initially spoke of a smelter complex that included a new port as well and would release multiple pollutants. Partly due to this strategic choice, the Rights Action Group never devised criticism specific to the power plant. On June 9, 2009, Gary Aboud of the organization Fishermen and Friends of the Sea issued a “national call” to demonstrate against the generator.⁴¹ Aboud's electronic broadsheet railed against the interrelated waste of electricity, money, and natural gas. Regarding gas, the rhetoric of the Rights Action Group dwelled on the shortage of supply, rather than on the contribution to climate change. Finally, however, another member of the Rights Action Group did address



4-5 Trinidad and Tobago's options for per capita emissions, 2010. Prepared by Mike Siegel of Rutgers Cartography Lab.

carbon emissions. In November 2009, at a People's Democracy rally in Port of Spain, Cathal Healy-Singh cited “the age of global warming—when humanity itself is at risk.”⁴² Would he, therefore, throw his support behind public transportation? No: two months later, Healy-Singh denounced the Rapid Rail as a megaproject “contaminating this tiny land mass that we reside on.”⁴³ No one—inside or outside the group—appeared to note these contradictions. In per capita terms, Trinidadians stood as fourth highest emitters of carbon dioxide in the world. Rail would cut Trinidad's national emissions by 1 percent and the power plant would raise them by 6 percent (figure 4.5).⁴⁴ Trinidadians ultimately chose the least sustainable option.

As it finally went down in defeat, aluminum production completely overshadowed and displaced the issue of carbon dioxide. The Rights Action Group contributed substantially to a wave of disgust with Manning's corruption and arrogance. Thinking he would win and silence his critics, the prime minister called an early election in May 2010. The smelter—but not the power plant—immediately became a focus of debate. I attended a candidates' forum in my neighborhood and asked through the moderator, “How do you assess Trinidad and Tobago's responsibility for climate change and for the reduction of carbon emissions?” “Very poorly,” shot back the main opposition candidate for parliament, Annabelle Davis. The moderator resumed reading my question: “And how would you suggest that the country fulfill that responsibility?” “No smelter!” Davis retorted to hearty applause. “Simple!”⁴⁵ But it was not so simple. Davis's People's Partnership ousted the People's National Movement and shelved the smelter as well as the Rapid Rail. The government continued building the gas-

fired generator at La Brea, this time with Kublalsingh's blessing. "Keep the power plant, keep the port, stop the smelter," he urged in the newspaper.⁴⁶ At a conference in early 2011, I asked Kublalsingh about the gas-fired power plant, then nearly complete. "I'm not worried about pollution there at all," he assured me. "It can be mitigated."⁴⁷ He seemed to forget about carbon dioxide. Kublalsingh and Sankeralli were in the audience when I presented this work to the University of the West Indies, mentioning the 6 percent figure. Afterward, I asked Sankeralli what he thought of that outcome. He looked at the ground, still digesting the information. Then he answered me with a pithy, less-than-scholarly expression of regret.

Sankeralli's "Oh, fuck"—to quote the unquotable—represented a breakthrough in my efforts to practice engaged ethnography.⁴⁸ I had spent an awkward year in communication with the smelter's opponents. They suspected me of supporting aluminum, even of working for the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. I repeated continually that I opposed the smelter but perhaps not for the same reasons as every one of them. This declaration of partial solidarity could have initiated a far-reaching dialogue. How do you weigh the risks of global climate change against those of purely local import? I asked—although rarely so directly. (One learns more from extended listening and observation than from blunt interrogation.) I tried to be an engaged or activist ethnographer, that is, one who "collaborates with an organized group in struggle for social justice."⁴⁹ La Brea Concerned Citizens United and the Rights Action Group were certainly struggling for justice: they fought against the imposition of environmental risk upon Trinidad's underclass without a democratic endorsement from below (Hosein 2007). Conscience mostly ended there. I observed in meetings, speeches, and declarations a consistent neglect of hydrocarbons, carbon emissions, climate change, and all of their unjust effects. Smelting aluminum does not produce carbon dioxide. Only the source of electricity for smelting would do so. Indeed, when driven by hydrocarbons, that extraordinarily energy-intensive process releases an average of 13 tons of carbon dioxide for each ton of aluminum (Sheller 2014, 19). The gas-fired power plant, therefore, presented activists with an opportunity to protest and restrain Trinidad's carbon emissions. But they grew strangely silent. My informants' "sense of place" overrode their "sense of planet" (Heise 2008). By defeat-

ing rail and tolerating gas, they opted for the highest of three emissions scenarios. Even in opposing aluminum alone, Kublalsingh and his allies strove to relocate—rather than abolish—toxic smelting. Another island or continent now endures the risk of producing the aluminum that La Brea would have manufactured. On the radio, Healy-Singh cited the interest of “anthropologists” as evidence of the smelter’s severity.⁵⁰ Until Sankeralli expressed his shock, though, activists had not valued my perspective.

La Brea’s own protesters had long shielded the oil industry from criticism. Lakeside, pastoral aesthetics occluded both environmental facts and possible political strategies. Wells had rendered their community a toxic brownfield. In the United States, residents might have mobilized to demand the remediation of contaminated water and soil. They might have further claimed rights to restitution for cancers and other illnesses linked to industrial plants (Bullard 1990). Or, like those surrounding Shell’s refinery outside Buenos Aires, they could have waited. Javier Auyero and Débora Swistun (2009) describe a limbo in which victims hope alternately for health or for provable, actionable pathologies. Residents of La Brea, by contrast, considered oil, gas, and bitumen as neither a threat nor a mystery. Bitumen cures the sick after all. Other hydrocarbons—and the machinery for their production—formed part of the surface topography of houses, gardens, forests, and ponds. The lake land encompassed water, petro-queous mixtures, and—in the case of pitch—nearly pure hydrocarbon. La Brea’s flexible, even contradictory, pastoral approximated the antiurban sentiment of the Martiniquais writer Patrick Chamoiseau. “Texaco,” he narrates in the novel bearing that title, “was what the city conserved of the humanity of the countryside.”⁵¹ Texaco is, in fact, a shantytown at the site of that company’s former refinery in Fort-de-France. The first squatters notice the smell and danger of gasoline, but Chamoiseau emphasizes hazards from across the harbor: “The city stutters pollution and insecurity. . . . It threatens cultures and diversity like a global virus.”⁵² For La Brea, aluminum and other megaprojects posed this sort of metropolitan threat. Ultimately, smelting may have made its opponents appreciate hydrocarbons all the more, as both more humane and more natural than the alternative.

At root, these politics of place do not serve the unfolding battle against carbon-intensive development. Hydrocarbons often enjoy the most support precisely at the point of their production. There they benefit not only

from pastoralism but from the entire sentiment of local belonging and history. Amid pollution, residents stretch agrarian language to accommodate hydrocarbons. The cornfield becomes an oil field. Perhaps the experience of La Brea demonstrates again the need for an ecological politics of the entire planet. Of course, this kind of global reach—the sleight of hand whereby American and other environmentalists claim authority over distant elsewheres—recapitulates numerous colonial missions (Shiva 1992). Still, the sensibility of an interconnected, interpolluting globe would add much to Trinidad’s environmental debates. Consider Julian Kenny’s shift in perspective. As a multidisciplinary naturalist, he chaired Trinidad and Tobago’s Environmental Management Authority during the height of the smelter debate. Activists faulted him for not opposing the project publicly, but his administrative role constrained him. In that period, he wrote an essay titled “Alarmism in Science.” “We seem to be too much distracted by climate change hype,” he opined, “and not concentrating on the mess we are creating of our immediate environment” (Kenny 2011, 237). Widely respected but considered mercurial, Kenny refused to be interviewed. In 2011 at the Green Business Forum, I caught him off guard. “What did you really think of the smelter?” I asked. I expected him to talk about “our immediate environment.” Instead, he shot back, “A couple hundred thousand tons of CO₂. . . . That was my first concern.”⁵³ Kenny, then eighty-one, died later that year, and Kublalsingh lionized him as “an ecological messiah.” Even in tiny Trinidad, perhaps, a consensus about the planet may soon supplement the obsession with place. Or we all might consider the whole Earth a place, bounded by the 20-kilometer depth of its atmosphere. Lying off the sun’s shore, our island is small and, more and more, it needs a large vision.