

## Climate Change and the Victim Slot

In between forays in the oil belt and conferences with oilmen, I conducted ethnography within Port of Spain's "climate intelligentsia." I apply this term to a loosely linked group of professionally successful men and women, born in Trinidad and belonging to African and Indian ethnicities. All had earned bachelor's degrees, and many had studied further in the United States, Canada, or Britain. They knew the facts of climate change, and they cared enough to join public discussions about it. To these scientists, activists, policy makers, and energy specialists, I introduced myself as a fellow traveler: an environmental anthropologist writing a book on energy policy. Together, in 2010, we participated in a round of public consultations on the country's first policy regarding climate change. The participants might have considered carbon emissions and means of reducing them. Instead, the consultations and the policy centered on impacts: environmental hazards, including even threats to oil's infrastructure. In a fashion I had not anticipated, my informants positioned Trinidad and Tobago as a victim of climate change. Evidence suggested otherwise. The country was enjoying the status of a middle-income country, with gasoline and electricity so amply subsidized that many people consumed them wastefully. Therefore, Trinidad and Tobago's per capita carbon emissions ranked fourth among nation-states (International Energy Agency 2010, 95–97). These statistics omit the oil and gas Trinidad extracts for exports. Among hydrocarbon producers, Trinidad and Tobago occupies thirty-eighth place—not an enormous contributor, but still larger than Bahrain and Ecuador combined (United Nations Statistics Division 2009, 40–72). In short, Trinidadians were collectively benefiting from the lethal hydrocarbon system and, in so doing, exacerbating climate change. Their seas rise in what Ulrich Beck (1992, 23) calls the "boomerang effect"—where pollution bounces back

onto the polluter. With these informants, my conversations sometimes bordered on arguments, as instructive as they were contentious. No one broke off contact, and all seemed to consider our debate one worth having. I kept probing for an answer to the question: how and why did the climate intelligentsia frame the country as unequivocally innocent? Innocence, after all, amounts to a license to pollute.

Blame often travels in the simplest form possible—or so cultural expressions would suggest. Inhabitants of the Torres Straits, for instance, are “sinking without a trace [as] Australia’s climate change victims” (“Sinking without a Trace” 2008). Victim serves as an absolute category of people both vulnerable to and innocent of the given crime. It was not always so: psychology of the 1950s and 1960s diagnosed individuals as enabling cruelty (Fassin 2009, 122). Some still blame attractive women for rape. Experts on climate change have never dabbled in this kind of ambiguity. In any case, they would have a hard time blaming the isles of the Straits: their carbon emissions barely surpass zero. But the category of victimhood has expanded well beyond the shores of this and other subsistence-level archipelagos. In the media, fully industrialized societies—ranging from China to Bahrain to Louisiana—represent themselves as victims. Hurricane Sandy swept through the energy-intensive suburbs of my state, New Jersey, leaving millions of victims but no one willing publicly to accept partial responsibility. Under new climates, hardship redeems in an almost Christian fashion. It renders or maintains the polluter’s conscience pure. In this widely distributed form, I argue, victimhood increasingly constitutes a slot. Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1991) defines this term as an enduring category of thought and enquiry, one that canalizes and disciplines scholarly work. Renaissance Europe created the “savage slot,” he writes, and anthropologists still explain the Other within its confines. Tania Li (2000) uses “slot” slightly differently: as a durable political tool that marks and separates “tribal” people from populations nearby and straddling the boundary. The victim slot exhibits all these features. It draws strength from archaic geographies and cleaves social groups radically and irreversibly from close comparators. Under climate change, emitters of carbon dioxide—even high emitters—have deliberately occupied or accidentally fallen into this compartment. Like the savage slot or the tribal slot, the victim slot artificially clarifies an inherently murky moral situation. It

whitewashes — as innocent — societies, firms, and industrial sectors otherwise clearly complicit with carbon emissions and climate change. To the extent that the slot persuades us, it allows good people to do bad things to the biosphere. In short, the victim slot disguises complicity and displaces conscience.

In the context of climate change, innocence refers to geography as much as morality. Consider the movement for international climate justice. Using cardinal points as a shorthand, activists are pursuing a claim of the Global South against the Global North. In the course of industrializing, the North has polluted the biosphere, to the detriment of everyone but particularly to the detriment of the resource-dependent societies of the South (Davis 2010, 37; Robert and Parks 2007). In essence, Africa, Asia, the Pacific islands, and Latin America are suffering from a problem not of their own making, and they deserve various forms of compensation. This argument gives specific weight to geography and only general weight to actions. As all parties acknowledge, the North did not initially embark on this energy-intensive development pathway knowing or intending the harm. The South might well have taken the same route if it had access to equivalent finance and resources. In fact, China's rapidly expanding carbon footprint suggests an almost irresistible attraction to coal and crude. Activism centered on cardinal points then blames people as much for accidents of temperate-zone birth as for deliberate actions. The same logic exonerates residents of the tropics — people in the right place at the right time. Of course, more fine-grained analyses do break apart the reductive binary of North and South. Shoibal Chakravarty and his coauthors refer to one billion "high emitting individuals who are present in all countries" (2010, 11884). In an era of widespread neoliberalism, one might expect this citizen-centered analysis to take hold. It "responsibilizes" the consumer for his or her own choices (Goldstein 2005, 39). Yet international negotiations and policies continue to denote entire countries or societies as high or low emitting. The victim slot, in short, encompasses low-latitude land masses and especially their offshore archipelagos. Small and windblown, these islands now represent the frailty of victimhood more compellingly than does any other geography (Lazrus 2012). How did Trinidad and Trinis gain the enviable position of insular victims? Historical accident contributed as much as did strategic choices.

## The Island Islanded

Islanders became victims as islands became insular. Sea-girt land forms loomed large, sometimes larger than continents in the geographical imagination of 1500–1800. Richard Hakluyt—who chronicled Sir Walter Raleigh’s sixteenth-century quest for El Dorado—denoted the West Indies as “a large and fruitfull continent” (quoted in Lewis and Wigen 1997, 29). Indeed, Raleigh and other seafarers constantly sought islands as way stations that would allow them to cross water. According to historian John Gillis, an “Atlantic Oceania” of the Azores, Antillea, Atlantis, and other unverified, shifting isles connected Europe to the Indies (Crone 1938; Gillis 2004, 86). By 1800, however, new technology disenchanting islands, establishing both their actuality and their location. Isles lost their allure, and continents gained in importance. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, surveying, settlement, and the entire colonial project prioritized prairie, savanna, and other large expanses found only on continents. Islands even lost their function as refreshment stations: coal-fired steamers sped directly across the Atlantic. Once a patchy Pangea, small islands became wayward dots—“islanded” in Gillis’s (2004) language. Demography worked against them too. In the Caribbean, in particular, total or near-total genocides almost wiped out islanders. “To the admirers of remote island peoples,” writes Gillis, “innocence made them seem like the children to which they were frequently compared, vulnerable to the point of extinction” (2004, 115).

This islanding—and its attendant innocence—did not initially affect Trinidad. Gumilla treated the land mass as part of “Orinoquia,” the region of Orinoco River and delta. Governor Chacón and his predecessors reported to Caracas, on the Spanish mainland (chapter 1). The British seizure in 1797 might have isolated Trinidad conceptually as well as politically. At almost the same moment, however, the epic biogeographer Alexander von Humboldt began his five-year trek through South America. In 1799, von Humboldt arrived at the T-shaped peninsula of Cariaco. There, the Gulf of Paria separates this Venezuelan appendage from Trinidad in a fashion that, for von Humboldt, called for geohistorical explanation. The gulf, he wrote, “owes its origin to subsidence and rents caused by earthquakes.”<sup>1</sup> Humboldt believed in a dynamic, visibly fluctuating earth—and also in

the reigning theory of oceanic retreat (Rudwick 2008, 106). This larger trend would soon desiccate the Gulf of Paria: “Under the actual state of things,” he affirmed, “we see the coastal plains growing, gaining over the sea.”<sup>2</sup> Among literate Trinidadians, von Humboldt’s history—if not his predictions—assumed the status of fact. “All Geologists who have regarded this Island,” wrote the settler historian E. L. Joseph in 1837, “agree in pronouncing it an amputation from the neighboring Continent” (1838, 4). Maps and texts of the period traced South Trinidad to the Orinoco’s alluvium and mountainous North Trinidad to the Andes (de Verteuil 1858, 345; Joseph 1838, 5). In biological terms too, the island shared kin relations with South America. Had he studied Trinidad, Alfred Russell Wallace, Darwin’s codiscoverer of evolution, would surely have noted the absence of any impassable Wallace Line between it and the continent proper. Species had crossed a short land bridge during the last ice age. At high water, the Amazon and Negro Rivers easily outspan the channel between Trinidad and Venezuela. In retrospect, Wallace’s “Guiana District” of northeastern South America encompassed Port of Spain as well as Manaus (Quammen 1996, 74). In short, nineteenth-century speculation and observation thoroughly blurred the edge of South America.

In more practical ways too, colonial enterprises and schemes straddled the Gulf of Paria. Almost as soon as Britain took Trinidad from Spain, anti-Spanish agitators launched expeditions from its shores to liberate Venezuela. The British themselves coveted Venezuela for different reasons. In 1805, Admiral Alexander Cochrane, the father of Thomas Cochrane (see chapter 2), surveyed southern Trinidad. Surely he looked across the strait and saw Venezuela, only 11 kilometers distant. “Trinidad,” he concluded, “may be said to be the key of South America, to the possession of which, the River Orinoco offers a safe and easy passage” (Cochrane 1805). Venezuela liberated and possessed itself in 1811, thwarting cross-channel imperialism. Yet in 1858, Trinidad’s seminal intellectual—Louis Antoine Aimé Gaston de Verteuil—laid out the most ambitious of such plans publicized before or since. Like Joseph, de Verteuil accepted von Humboldt’s fast-moving geohistory. “Even at the epoch of its discovery by Columbus,” he wrote, “the Indians entertained the opinion that this catastrophe had taken place at a not very remote period” (de Verteuil 1858, 85). If floodwaters had lately isolated Trinidad, de Verteuil proposed to use them to reconnect the island to the mainland. His compendious

geography of Trinidad recommended sculpting the nearby delta into a series of navigable canals. De Verteuil quoted the colonial governor's statement of ten years earlier: "Port of Spain may eventually become the receptacle of trade of that vast tract of country from which the Orinoco draws its waters" (1858, 347). Such boosterism came to naught. But it did help deny Trinidad what many other political units were acquiring at the time: a bounded "geo-body" (Thongchai 1994). Port of Spain extended to a fuzzy, indeterminate edge.

In the next century, Trinidadians—still more worldly than innocent—reoriented themselves toward other continents and islands. Although farther away, the British Empire impinged more directly upon Trinidadians than did South America. So did certain Caribbean legacies, best expressed by the first generation of black authors. No one accomplished more to name and bound a regional and race-conscious identity than did the towering intellectual C. L. R. James. Born in Tunapuna, Trinidad, almost at the turn of the century, James published his influential account of the Haitian revolution in 1938. *The Black Jacobins* metaphorically recast the region in the mold of injustice and reactions to it. "The transformation of slaves," begins James, "trembling in hundreds before a single white man, into a people able to organize themselves and defeat the most powerful European nations of their day, is one of the great epics of revolutionary struggle and achievement" (1938, ix). At that time, he envisaged independence throughout Africa and its diaspora. By 1963—as these dreams were coming to fruition—James narrowed his unit of analysis. "The history of the West Indies," he wrote in an appendix to the second edition, "is governed by two factors, the sugar plantation and negro slavery" (James 1963b, 391). Cricket was a third, more contemporary factor. As James writes in *Beyond a Boundary*, "The clash of race, caste, and class did not retard but stimulated West Indian cricket" (1963a, 72). Caste had arrived with Indian indentured workers. Of the Indo-Guyanese batsman Rohan Kanhai, James wrote, "I have found . . . a unique pointer of the West Indian quest for identity, for ways of expressing our potential bursting at every seam" (1966, 1). That regional identity seemed to inhere most in the black bowler George Constantine. His style provoked James to observe, "We West Indians are a people on our way who have not yet reached a point of rest and consolidation" (1963a, 148). Restlessly, the West Indies team beat England and dominated the world at midcentury. Through sport, James and other Trin-

idadians identified their island with an archipelagic team. The Orinoco's island was becoming more so.

James's student Eric Williams pushed this identity home: Trinidad as a weaker party now gaining strength. Recall that, as a midcentury historian, he sought to demolish Britain's reputation as a liberator (as explained in the introduction to this book). After 1962, as the country's first prime minister, he continued to draw attention to imperial prejudices. The rhetorical high point came in 1977 when Williams spoke at Point Lisas at the opening of the nation's first steel mill. "The colonies were to manufacture not a nail, not a horseshoe," he lectured. "They were to produce raw materials only" (Williams 1981, 82–83). That dictum had persisted through sugar into the age of oil up to the present rupture. At the Point Lisas industrial estate, Trinidad would at last harness the energy of hydrocarbons to make steel and aluminum, the latter eventually at La Brea's ill-fated smelter (see chapter 4). In a promise kept, the industrial site would have converted petroleum into downstream plastics. "Point Lisas," Williams boasted in 1977, "is the symbol also of the aspirations of the developing countries of this world" (1981, 82–83). More measurably, Point Lisas became an enormous point source for carbon dioxide. In this sense, Williams's speech may mark Trinidad's first exploitation of the victim slot. The prime minister represented heavy industry unapologetically as a right due to the downtrodden.

Beyond economic policy, geographical themes of fragility, flimsiness, and islandness have arisen periodically in public culture. During and after Williams's rule, the island's two Nobel laureates—V. S. Naipaul and Derek Walcott—waged a literary dispute centered on size, among other issues. Naipaul hardly refers to his home country without disparaging its scale. Born to Indo-Trinidadian parents, he moved to England in 1950, a teenage novelist. At the invitation of Eric Williams, he returned to write his first travelogue. *The Middle Passage* (Naipaul 1962)—whose very title seemed to relativize slavery—still angers Trinidadians. "Nothing was created in the British West Indies," opines Naipaul, "no civilization. . . . There were only plantations, prosperity, decline, and neglect. The size of the islands called for nothing else" (1962, 27). "It was hard to attach something as grand as history to our island," he recalls in a memoir (Naipaul 1988, 143). A second memoir contrasts Trinidad's "small-island geography" with the "continental scale" of Venezuela (Naipaul 1994, 214). Naipaul once joked, "Trinidad was detached from Venezuela. This is a geographical absurdity. It might

be reconsidered" (1970, 34). Against this belittling of the Antilles, Derek Walcott has waged a decades-long campaign. In accepting the Nobel, for instance, Walcott reinflated his homeland in space and time: "There is a territory wider than this—wider than the limits made by the map of an island—which is the illimitable sea and what it remembers" (1992, 30; cf. Benítez-Rojo 1992). This profoundly cosmopolitan memory centers on the true Middle Passage and the voyages of Indian workers over *kala pani*, or "dark waters." His address closes with a view from Felicity, the Indo-Trinidadian heartland, imagining "the light of the hills on an island blest by obscurity, cherishing our insignificance" (Walcott 1992, 34). Trinidad, in other words, extended across oceans while oceans concealed it from view. In various ways, then, encircling water became a focal point of debate—and available for ensuing claims of victimhood.

#### Oases as a Diplomatic Card

At roughly the time of Walcott's Nobel award, Trinidad began to use this insular imaginary as a diplomatic trump card. In the 1990s, the country faced a choice of alliances: identify with complicit hydrocarbon producers or with the world's innocent archipelagos. Besides Bahrain, only Trinidad and Tobago—at that time—could claim belonging among both of these groups. Although it did not export enough oil to join OPEC, Trinidad did share oil and gas fields with the petro-powerhouse Venezuela. In the 1990s, it experienced a gas boom, leading to rapid capital accumulation and resource nationalism (Mottley 2008). Why did this mineral-based pride not provoke Trinidad and Tobago's Foreign Ministry to represent the country as an oil state? Hydrocarbons never generated wealth fast enough to provoke an identity-shifting faith in or fear of them. Even the captains of this industry did not begin to feel secure until the gas boom of the 1990s. Port of Spain's diplomats, then, have never carried off the swagger of OPEC. Instead, in the 1990s, they chose to huddle at the other extreme of political and economic power, with the states most prey to environmental and economic shocks. Alienated by the bluster of Tehran, Trinidad performed the suffering of Tuvalu. It joined the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), a bloc that soon came to represent those most desperately vulnerable to climate change (Lazrus 2009). Indeed, this body "produced" small islands as a category and as a blameless, ethical position (Moore 2010, 116). To the

main players—whom I tracked down in Trinidad years later and over the course of years—geography was the window to the soul.

In fact, Trinidad and Tobago gained admission to the club of small islands by creating it. Otherwise, its own carbon emissions might have barred Port of Spain from membership. The effort began in a hotel room in Geneva in 1990 during a meeting prior to the 1992 United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development, known as the Rio summit (Heileman 1993). Lincoln Myers, then Trinidad's minister of environment, and his two advisors agreed on a political strategy. The regional, continental blocs marginalized states of the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans. These peripheries should unite to form a core, a strong voice. A year after the end of my main fieldwork, I returned to Trinidad, mostly so that my son could visit his friends. Perhaps because I had rented a car, dropped my son west of Port of Spain, and driven to Central Trinidad—all with breathless speed and mobility—Myers's appearance took me by surprise. He approached me in his wheelchair, vigorous but appearing meek through diminished stature. And his argument about isles matched this body language: he converted peril into moral authority. "Where else could it be," he asked, "except in an island like this—a small island like this—where all the issues concerning development and climate change can be as stark as this. . . . All the issues of development become pronounced in these finite spaces." This hazardous condition actually empowered "the smaller countries of the world." "Their resource," he continued, "the main contribution they can make, is the advocacy of justice and fair play. . . . We have to be the moral voice."<sup>3</sup> At diplomatic forums, at least, the meek would inherit the earth.

Leo Heileman, a marine chemist and one of Myers's advisors in Geneva, echoed this sentiment. "We didn't have economic power, political power, or military power," he recounted on a Skype line, "but we had the power of influencing the conscience of the world."<sup>4</sup> Weakness, it seemed, generated another kind of strength. Myers and Heileman named their thirty-eight-member group AOSIS deliberately: it sounded like *oasis*, an inverse island. (To me, Myers pronounced the acronym as *oasis*.) I met Heileman over lunch on another return visit to Trinidad. He himself was taking home leave from his post directing the United Nations Development Program in another petrostate, Equatorial Guinea. "AOSIS came out of my mind, my head," he claimed, with less meekness than Myers. Regard-

ing Trinidad and Tobago's ambiguous position, "I had people back here bringing that point to me, raising alarms." He overrode them because, as Heileman put it again, "We [were] more placed to be the conscience of the world . . . to consider issues that are based on the environment." Conscience broke out, in other words, but only in relation to other countries' actions. Our conversation turned to Trinidad's current environmental policy. Heileman dismissed solar energy as "insignificant: . . . the scales are not there." Perhaps, his responsibilities in Equatorial Guinea—which were developing oil and gas rapidly—narrowed his sense of the possible. He advocated natural gas as a bridge fuel and dismissed as "just politics" AOSIS's current call for an 80 percent cut in carbon emissions. Equatorial Guinea, he informed me with equanimity, now sought to join AOSIS.<sup>5</sup>

Back in 1990, however, petrostates mostly avoided the bloc. Bahrain, whose per capita emissions stood at more than double those of Trinidad, did not join. I brought up this notable absence with Angela Cropper, the second advisor who had accompanied Myers to Geneva. She had eventually become deputy secretary general of the United Nations Environment Programme. We met in 2012 in her temporary lodgings in Port of Spain. She had taken medical leave and looked infirm. As a low-elevation island, Bahrain could have joined AOSIS, Cropper explained. But "they saw the whole climate change negotiation treaty as a potential threat." Naturally so: limits to carbon emissions might eventually dampen demand for Bahrain's oil exports. Perhaps the similarly flood-prone United Arab Emirates and mostly insular Qatar stayed away for the same reason. Why did Trinidadians—then known as the "Arabs of the Caribbean"—not appreciate their economic common interest with these Persian Gulf petrostates? Did Port of Spain anticipate switching to renewable energy? No, Cropper and her colleagues had no intention of sacrificing their country's hydrocarbon industry. They simply thought about the future only in terms of the impact—rather than the cause—of climate change. Delegates shared "the sense that all these small islands were going to be inundated. . . . [The threat] appeared more imminent than it has proved to be." In this low-grade panic, Cropper recalled, "Nobody knew where this would go. . . . The whole thing evolved really."<sup>6</sup> Without any conspiracy, circumstances deferred discussion of cuts to carbon emissions. Perhaps, AOSIS members were practicing what Kari Norgaard (2006, 352) calls "implicatory denial," accepting the fact of carbon emissions but avoiding the moral conse-

quences. Or, rather, Trinidad's delegation appreciated only its own moral innocence, to the exclusion of its guilt.

After 1990, Trinidad mostly passed as a small island state in climate change's victim slot. High-placed Trinidadians didn't seem to need to perform the role. Mere discretion sufficed. Even so, at the 1992 Rio summit, the delegation found itself in an awkward position. Eden Shand, Myers's deputy, recounted the scene to me in the midst of his retirement in Delaware, from where he still ran a forestry business in Trinidad. We knew each other from my rental of his Cascade house (as described in the introduction). "They were discussing carbon pollution and pointing fingers towards the North and the Middle East," Shand recalled. "Trinidad had to be very silent 'round the table," he continued. "I remember it being an embarrassing situation." Shand winced at me from behind his beer, looking all the more pained in his stoop caused by the gravel truck on the Savannah. Amid this "strained feeling," Trinidad's delegation tiptoed through Rio.<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, the gathering dispelled such unease by creating a group slightly larger than AOSIS, known as Small Island Developing States. Bahrain did join this bloc (Kelman 2010, 610), and it attended the first meeting in Barbados in 1994. The resulting Barbados Declaration generously exonerated all the signatories as "among those that contribute the least to global climate change and sea level . . . [while] among those that would suffer the most the adverse effects."<sup>8</sup> In that same year, Angela Cropper published an article titled "Small Is Vulnerable." She included no caveat for her own country. She even wrote, without qualification, "small islands because of their size are often not endowed with . . . fossil fuels" (Cropper 1994, 9). As before, Cropper intended no obfuscation. Neither did an early draft of the Kyoto Protocol "reaffirming that per capita emissions in developing countries are still relatively low."<sup>9</sup> Trinidad and Tobago submitted that document—on behalf of AOSIS—to a 1996 preparatory meeting. Silence and omissions allowed accomplices to harbor among innocents in the victim slot.

Trinidad played no further prominent role in the global politics of climate change until November 2009. Concurrent with my fieldwork, Port of Spain hosted the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, widely considered a dress rehearsal for the Copenhagen summit on climate change the following month. By that point, Eric Williams's predictions at Point Lisas had come true. A boom in gas production and

downstream industries had advanced Trinidad and Tobago to the cusp of what the government heralded as “developed country status.” The nation’s per capita emissions had tripled from their 1990 levels—nearly the fastest rate of increase of any nation-state in that period. Meanwhile, in an effort to stabilize the climate, AOSIS was demanding immediate, drastic reductions in the use of fossil fuels. “1.5 to stay alive!” its publicity proclaimed, referring to their maximum acceptable temperature rise in degrees Celsius. Could Trinidad again carry out the trick of 1990, redeeming its emissions through international diplomacy? To do so, Prime Minister Patrick Manning would have to vindicate the country’s hydrocarbon-fueled industrial policy. In part, he played with the numbers. “The atmosphere does not respond to per capita emissions,” he repeated whenever relevant. “It only responds to absolute emissions.” In aggregate, Trinidad and Tobago emitted only 0.1 percent of the global CO<sub>2</sub> total. Manning might have massaged the data further: Trinidad burned much of its gas to manufacture exports. Trinidad could have rejected responsibility—as China was doing—for these “off-shored” emissions.<sup>10</sup> Rather than proffer this rationale, Manning claimed a size-related exemption: at 1.3 million, the small national population pushed Trinidad and Tobago’s per capita figure artificially high. At the Heads of Government Meeting itself—inside the ever-sumptuous Hyatt Hotel—Manning exercised his influence as chair to call on the Global North to compensate the Global South. The resulting document—the Port of Spain Climate Change Consensus—stipulated “a dedicated stream [of funds] for small island states and associated low-lying coastal states of AOSIS.”<sup>11</sup> As before, no caveat excluded Trinidad and Tobago. Manning had maintained his country’s position in the victim slot.

Among nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), public discussion on climate change threatened to burst beyond that restrictive category. In parallel with the Commonwealth summit—but at a markedly more plebeian hotel—NGOs convened the Commonwealth People’s Forum. They invited Angela Cropper to give the opening address. Fiery and full of conviction, she declared the world to be “moving towards an ecological civilization.” Amid loud applause, she asked those in the room to “accelerate the transition towards a low-carbon economy.”<sup>12</sup> Emily Gaynor Dick-Forde, Trinidad’s minister of planning, housing, and the environment, rose next to the podium. Two months earlier, the minister had claimed, “We emit very little.” Grandly, she had also quoted the head of AOSIS as saying, “We are the

conscience of the world when it comes to climate issues.”<sup>13</sup> At the forum, however, Cropper’s speech seemed to inspire a more humble tone. Dick-Forde referred to “that ecological civilization to which we are working.” In cutting carbon emissions, she claimed, “We as a nation have been trying to do our part.”<sup>14</sup> The statement contained more hope than truth, but, in any case, it implied responsibility. Had Cropper forced open a door? Manning and his ministers might actually have to discuss the country’s own culpability. Perhaps Trinidad could balance within and outside the victim slot. “It is not one or the other,” Cropper later told me wearily, sounding as if she felt personally the heavy load of Trinidad’s emissions.<sup>15</sup>

### Assessing Vulnerability

In discussions of climate change, the concept of vulnerability often conceals as much as it illuminates. It has become an indicator in Sally Engel Merry’s terms, “creat[ing] a commensurability . . . even though the users recognize that these simplified numerical forms are superficial, often misleading, and very possibly wrong” (2011, 86–87). Although dubious, measures of vulnerability confer credibility upon the victim slot. Above all, the notion of vulnerability pushes responsibility to the margins. Often, of course, adverse circumstances do reduce one’s scope for choice. People rarely desire to live in flood-prone areas. The housing market consigns the poor to riskier, cheaper areas. Meanwhile, climate change has hit colonized people like a blow to a downed boxer (Ribot 1995, 2009). In Siberia, for instance, Sakha herders are losing their livelihood as permafrost degrades into swamp (Crate 2008). Do they possess sufficient ecological knowledge and resilience to adapt? One hopes so, and the question and its terms fit the Sakha context. In a petrostate, however, resilience is not necessarily desirable. One might not hope that oil and gas industries bounce back—or “forward” in the latest lingo—from Katrina or the next Gulf hurricane (Manyena et al. 2011). At root, ExxonMobil and Siberian herders act as quite different agents in respect to climate change: the former propels its dynamics while the latter struggle to survive through it. The Sakha conduct their affairs as historical agents of the old-fashioned sort, generating events under conditions not of their own making. Drillers and pumpers, on the other hand, wield “technologies that . . . have an impact on the planet itself.” A cloud of environmental guilt might settle among such “geological

agents,” but Category 3 winds blow it away (Chakrabarty 2009, 206–7). Of the three fields where the victim slot operates—*islandness*, *diplomacy*, and *vulnerability*—the last discourse is the most powerful and the most deceptive. In the discourse of *vulnerability*, Trinidad’s oil and gas sector played the victim card to its greatest effect.

After the Commonwealth summit, climate-concerned politicians steered the country well away from any recognition of complicity. Prime Minister Manning began a national discussion on global warming. He had avoided the issue for decades. Before entering politics, Manning had worked for Texaco as a petroleum geologist. We met in his constituency office in June 2010. His party had just lost the election (see chapter 4), and—demoted to a mere MP—he had time to see me. Looking utterly dejected, the former statesman recalled a long period of ignorance regarding climate change. “At first, I ignored it,” he admitted. He seemed to have educated himself on the topic mostly so as to reject Trinidad’s status as a high emitter. Per capita measures, he argued, “discriminate[d] against small states.” Had I misunderstood? “We are small. Remember that,” Manning advised me. I returned to the issue of per capita emissions. “It’s not right. It’s not right,” he insisted. “I fighting that!” In our conversation, he indicted China, which had just overtaken the United States to become the highest aggregate emitter. “They just spewing into the atmosphere,” Manning accused, “and they don’t care about anybody.”<sup>16</sup> He slumped in his chair, aware that he possessed even less power than before. Manning did not seem to care that the average Trinidadian spewed five times as much carbon dioxide as the average Chinese or that China manufactured mostly for other countries. Shortly after the Port of Spain Consensus, Manning’s government put pen to paper again. In March 2010, Dick-Forde’s ministry released its “Draft Climate Change Policy.” Of twenty pages of text, the document devoted merely two pages to vague means of reducing the country’s carbon emissions. Indeed, Kishan Kumarsingh—the document’s author, who had trained in chemistry and law—parroted the prime minister’s line: “In a scientific context the atmosphere reacts only to absolute emissions and not per capita emissions.”<sup>17</sup> The prime minister had closed all discussion of culpability—and, therefore, of conscience.

This rhetorical erasure became evident in public consultations on the climate change policy in early 2010.<sup>18</sup> This time, as civil servants, university lecturers, and NGO leaders flocked to a middle tier of hotels, each event



5.1 Kishan Kumarsingh, 2009. Reprinted with permission from the *Earth Negotiations Bulletin*.

began with Kumarsingh's note of alarm: "Sometimes a whole island is a coastal zone." For emphasis, he widened his eyes like a startled deer (figure 5.1). At the first consultation, in Port of Spain, comments from the floor backed Kumarsingh into a corner. Some participants, including myself, mentioned Trinidad's carbon emissions and suggested that the document include targets for cutting them. Eden Shand, who had returned to Trinidad for this meeting, agreed with me. He suggested Trinidad identify less with Tuvalu and more with Bahrain, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. "If we admit our per capita prominence," he continued before his unconvinced audience, "we get to sit at the table with the big players."<sup>19</sup> Kumarsingh parried both of us with, "We have to bear in mind with regard to what you are asking a small country to do." Further discussion restored Trinidad to the victim position, but now as prey to solar and wind power. "Imagine that you get no electricity tomorrow," Kumarsingh warned, "because it is a green economy." In the event, the consultation did result in one concrete proposal regarding emissions. "We want Tobago to be a carbon-neutral destination," declared John Agard, a biologist and member of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.<sup>20</sup> Much less industrial and less popu-

lated than Trinidad, Tobago already bore the brand of a tropical paradise. Krishna Persad's eco-resort hugged its leeward coast (see chapter 3). Tourists burned jet fuel to get there, of course, but Tobagonian individuals and firms emitted little carbon. A good many already lived without electricity. They would sacrifice less going green. Fifty thousand Tobagonians, Agard implied, could more easily shoulder a burden that 1.25 million Trinidadians were too vulnerable to bear.

At a different venue, Agard almost—but not quite—dislodged Trinidad from the victim slot. In January 2010, we met in his office at the University of the West Indies. He was preparing for the climate policy consultations and had met recently with Patrick Manning. The two had debated the salience of per capita emissions. Manning, of course, cared only about Trinidad's low aggregate pollution. "Think about what it means," Agard responded, "to be a contributor to a problem of which you are also a victim. . . . Forget about the arithmetic!"<sup>21</sup> Nowhere else had I encountered such a pithy and forceful summary of Trinidad's ambiguous position. Hoping for more such directness, I attended Agard's professorial inaugural lecture on campus the next month. The bulk of the talk presented four scenarios in the global approach to climate change: markets first, policy first, security first, and sustainability first.<sup>22</sup> The first three scenarios resulted in capitalist or authoritarian dystopias of various kinds. Sustainability first, however, would allow the world to shift from fossil fuels to renewable energy with democracy and economic well-being. "That is the vision," Agard declared, beaming at his audience.<sup>23</sup> What did the vision mean for Trinidad's oil and gas? I queried in the question-and-answer session. "That is easy," Agard shot back, "[because it is] a wasting resource" and will run out anyway. After the formal program, I walked forward and asked Agard if he was really advocating business as usual: that Trinidad should just use up its hydrocarbons. No, he confided, it made sense to "leave something for the future" in the ground. In that case, the finitude of Trinidad's reserves made no difference: the country would stop producing oil and gas before—not because of—exhausting supplies. Ecuador had made a similar proposal to leave oil underground (Rival 2010), but nothing in Agard's presentation suggested such deliberate forbearance as a development model. Agard had overlooked this logical extension of his own sustainability first principle. It required the country to accept responsibility rather than mere vulnerability.

Fear, however, soon overwhelmed all other sentiments. By April 2010, drought and fire were scorching the country. At the second consultation, a geologist—identifying himself as “from oil”—spluttered, “There is no one alive who can remember a dry season as dry as this one.”<sup>24</sup> This gathering actually took place in the petroleum belt almost in the shadow of the Paria Suites’ mock oil rig. After Kumarsingh’s presentation, a faction, smaller and less vocal than that at the Port of Spain meeting, raised the issue of Trinidad’s emissions. This time, the oil and gas sector did not wait for Kumarsingh but responded on its own behalf. Shyam Dyal from Petrotrin insisted upon business as usual: “We have to realize that Trinidad is energy-based,” he reminded us. “Adaptation should be given a higher priority than mitigation,” he insisted before rushing out of the meeting.<sup>25</sup> Dyal had, in fact, overseen a study of Petrotrin’s exposure to sea level rise and extreme weather events—the only risk analysis conducted in the country. Modeling of storm surges showed “catastrophic effects to onshore operations and offshore platforms.”<sup>26</sup> “Trinidad is a small island developing state so we are vulnerable,” he had told me in his office, alongside the country’s oil refinery. “We have wells that could fall into the sea.”<sup>27</sup> In this way, encircling water generated sympathy for the very industry perpetrating climate change. Back in the second public meeting, big oil became the biggest victim to global impacts. The topic of mitigation did not arise until nearly at the end, when a man objected to the draft policy’s brief mention of public transport. “All I see is Rapid Rail running through Central Trinidad and demolishing endless houses,” predicted the man, having identified himself with the populist “rum shop perspective.”<sup>28</sup> The audience saw itself as doubly vulnerable: to climate change and to sustainability. I returned dejectedly to Port of Spain by ferry, where I fought fires with Akilah Jaramogi above St. Ann’s. “This is reality ah climate change,” she announced, weeping, “I am exhausted. I am exhausted. I am exhausted.”<sup>29</sup> Climate change would blight her life.

In more intimate spaces such as these, an environmental conscience at last seemed to be taking shape. Toward the end of my ethnographic year, I met Winston Rudder and Keisha Garcia of the Cropper Foundation, an NGO originally created by Angela Cropper. In public the organization had criticized the oil and gas sector only for its lack of fiscal transparency (Cropper Foundation 2008). Private—but still official—communications

opened up much broader issues. Submitted to the Ministry of Planning, Housing, and the Environment, Rudder and Garcia's written comments derided the draft policy on climate change. "Does the atmosphere not respond to this?" they asked in line-by-line criticism regarding increased emissions in multiple sectors. In its authors, this sarcasm must have touched a personal nerve. Garcia's husband worked for an international gas firm, and Rudder's son had trained as a petroleum engineer. Perhaps for this reason, these two environmentalists conveyed the compromises and contradictions of ecological subjectivity with uncommon sensitivity. "We want to have our cake and eat it," said Garcia, as the three of us chatted at the foundation's office. Trinidad and Tobago, she meant, wanted to become rich without relinquishing the exemptions of a poor country. Rudder agreed but was not sure how Trinidad should adjust its deep-rooted investments. "Can we go about development," he asked, "in a way that makes sense given our [environmental] responsibility and given the fact that we live on this piece of earth . . . that has a certain capacity, that has certain natural resource wealth?"<sup>30</sup> The question balanced parochial and universal concerns, a love of community with an awareness of its transgressions. More than a year later—on a follow-up trip—I shared lunch with Rudder at my hotel. The new government had shelved Manning's policy on climate change. Rudder seemed even less sure than before. He described a "goodness feeling about the smell" of the country's refinery. "You don't question the oil industry," he almost commanded. And, in the midst of all this silence, "We conspire in our own demise."<sup>31</sup>

Faced with climate change, it was easy for islanders to sound the alarm. Rising seas threatened them immediately and visibly—and also exonerated them. Especially in a European-dominated milieu, encirclement by water suggests frailty and weakness. Atolls have lain prone before natural elements as well as total genocide, slavery, and colonialism. They can credibly pass as victims in waiting of the next great injustice. Ecology still marks them as "tropical island Edens" (Grove 1995). Mostly, then, small island states do belong in the category of climate change innocents. The Maldives recently committed to cutting its carbon emissions to zero. Except under those absolute conditions, however, some islanders surely belong in the

guilty camp of high emitters. Too few acknowledge this responsibility—except perhaps on the exceptional Marshall Islands. Marshallese blame themselves for impending inundation—a consequence, they believe, of allowing the United States to explode nuclear weapons on Bikini (Rudiak-Gould 2011). Their sense of guilt exceeds, so to speak, the climatological science. None of my Trinidadian informants contested that paradigm, but almost all rejected blame either tacitly or explicitly. Instead, the climate change intelligentsia situated Trinidad in a multiplex victim slot. In considering their land mass, in performing at diplomatic forums, and in planning for hazards, these experts represented their nation and their institutions as innocent. A generous pardon, it extended all the way to the country's gas rigs and petroleum refinery. The slot "rendered technical" all the thorny questions of conscience and complicity that would otherwise arise (Li 2007). Petro-Goliath entered the slot and passed as a greenwashed David. In this sense, climate change had the misfortune of being recognized by residents of small islands.

Imagine, by contrast, what can happen once continentals—in a strong nation—recognize climate change. Franny Armstrong's (2009) film follows the reckoning of a petroleum paleontologist living in New Orleans. To Alvin DuVernay, "Oil smells so much like money it's just beautiful." Then he smells corpses rotting after Hurricane Katrina. The scales fall from his eyes. We are living, he concludes, in "the age of stupid" (the title of the documentary). The charge of stupidity overlooks much complexity, but it is not a bad place to start. This portrayal leads more rapidly to accountability than does victimhood. Trinidad's new government has asserted victimhood less vocally than did Manning's administration. At the same time, no official in Port of Spain is accepting partial responsibility for climate change. Far from it: in 2012, the Ministry of Energy was simultaneously exploring for gas and launching a program of enhanced oil recovery. Still, outside the energy sector and outside government, some Trinidadians are reconsidering their nation's complicity with climate change. In our 2012 discussion, Cropper turned her earlier assumption about insularity on its head. She referred to Trinidad and Tobago as "this tiny country—which lends itself so well as a crucible for getting things done." One of those "things" could be a postcarbon society.<sup>32</sup> Trinidad's small size might allow it to overcome the indecision endemic to larger polities. Perhaps the

proximity of everything in Trinidad throws hydrocarbons into stark relief. One can actually smell them. Perhaps, Trinidadians might appreciate the connection between hydrocarbons and sea level if they considered only the place, rather than the planet. They might understand climate change as the boomerang of their own pollution rather than as a harpoon thrown from another hemisphere. An awareness of such self-destruction might form the core of a new CO<sub>2</sub>-specific consciousness. With luck, Port of Spain and New Orleans will assemble and export a product too rare to have a recognized name: carbon conscience.