

## A Crucian Parable

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**By David Bond**



St. Croix stands at a crucible. For 50 years, a massive oil refinery underwrote economic development on this US territory in the Caribbean before the plant closed abruptly in 2012 to avoid facing up to its environmental legacy. Today, the negative ecologies of fossil fuels — whether in a legacy of toxic pollution or the arrival of furious superstorms — threaten life on St. Croix. Facing up to these challenges is a costly affair, and many worry over how to build a future that can rise above the throes of petro-capitalism. Backed by pedigreed expertise, one plan has elbowed its way into reality: heavily subsidize the rebooting of the refinery in the hope of bending the fiscal properties of fossil fuels into new investments in climate resiliency. For many civic groups and residents, this undertaking was the very definition of foolhardy. Battered and bruised by the environmental properties of fossil fuels, citizens demand a forceful break with the refinery to secure a more sustainable future today. Instead they got more of the same: a revived refinery dripping with profitable negligence.

For much of the past 60 years, the Limetree (HOVENSA) Refinery was the largest oil refinery in the world. It was also one of the most indifferent to environmental protections and public health. Built by Hess Oil, the refinery came to the island through the express promise that its operating contract would trump any efforts to regulate its pollution. While immensely lucrative to refinery shareholders and government revenue, this colonial arrangement proved disastrous for the people of St. Croix.

The island's only freshwater aquifer is now crowned with a plume of petrochemicals some eight feet thick. What was once the largest mangrove estuary in the Lower Antilles today finds itself recast as a cauldron of contamination. Refinery workers, many of them brought in as guest workers from other Caribbean nations to prevent unionization, were routinely exposed to asbestos, benzene, and other hazards with no protective gear provided. Respiratory disease and cancer rates are believed to be through the roof, but after the refinery failed to purchase the island's only hospital in the 1980s, it helped engineer an austerity regime that removed any serious tracking of health statistics on St. Croix. When the Environment Protection Agency (EPA) demanded the refinery spend \$700 million to bring it into compliance with environmental law in 2012, the refinery simply filed for bankruptcy and sidestepped all responsibility.

This not only sidestepped its legal obligation to clean up its own mess, it also compelled draconian cuts to the territorial government budget. When the refinery shut its doors, 20 percent of the territory's annual budget disappeared in an instant. The closed refinery had "shaken the foundations" of St. Croix, the governor of the US Virgin Islands said at the time, forcing cuts that were nothing short of "catastrophic." Unemployment soon shot up to nearly 20 percent and energy costs skyrocketed (the refinery had long subsidized electricity and gasoline rates) as the state hemorrhaged governing capacity. Crime rates on St. Croix rose substantially as theft and assault became commonplace (a United Nations report notes the US Virgin Islands now has the fourth highest homicide rate in the world). One year out, the US Virgin Islands labor commissioner testified his surprise that there hadn't been a complete meltdown on St. Croix. "But," he added, "it has only been a year."

Catastrophe built on catastrophe. With St. Croix still in a tailspin, an unprecedented Category 5 hurricane brushed up against St. Croix in 2017, causing considerable damage. Two weeks later, a second Category 5 hurricane slammed directly into St. Croix, leaving nearly every building on the island in tatters and obliterating most public infrastructure. Ninety percent of all electrical transmission lines were destroyed. The back-to-back superstorms inflicted "widespread catastrophic damage," as the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) put it, as uninsured damages exceeded \$7 billion. The hurricanes blew away roughly 1 in 10 jobs on the island and hacked an already emaciated public purse in half. Unemployment claims spiked to twice their previous high point: the closure of the refinery. The territorial government found itself downgraded and beyond bankrupt, unable to secure aid on par with its dire need nor able to renegotiate its debt obligations. Three years on and congressionally allocated funds for recovery remains a fading promise in this Caribbean territory. The plight of St. Croix clarifies exactly what "colonial" means in the present tense.

In 2018, a year after one of the worst hurricane seasons in recorded history, Caribbean nations gathered to discuss climate resilience in the region. Many spoke of weaning themselves off fossil fuels and building green economies. The enthusiasm was clear: the Caribbean was poised to become the premier laboratory for redesigning societies beyond oil. Then the US Virgin Islands stepped on stage. Their plans for climate resiliency pivoted on one idea: restart the refinery. When pushed, officials spoke about the rising challenges and costs that climate change is bringing to the island with storms like Hurricane Irma and Maria. How could the territorial government bear these costs without the refinery? The oil industry may be morally bankrupt and complicit in the coming catastrophe, but who else is still capable of paying the bills?

Such plans appeared wistful thinking until Donald Trump was elected President. Four years ago, the Trump Administration effectively waved a magical wand that made all outstanding penalties and mandated repairs disappear along with guidelines for reopening a shuttered refinery. The Trump Administration actually directed the EPA to remake itself as a "customer service" organization to this massive entrepot refinery. With a compliant government and \$2 billion in private investments (which, as bankruptcy court has just revealed, actually topped \$4 billion), the facility rebranded itself the Limetree Refinery and claimed to be the most state-of-the-art refinery in the Western Hemisphere. Backed by big money, no oversight, and a historical amnesia about past problems, this past February the refinery sputtered back online. The results, predictably, have been catastrophic.

The past six months have been an environmental nightmare for the people of St. Croix. The refinery continued to rely on a malfunctioning flare unit to process dangerous emissions for months while refusing to operate monitoring systems to evaluate what exactly was being released. This dual negligence resulted in toxic emissions doused in uncertainty. Neighborhoods and farms on this majority Black and Brown island have been assailed by asphyxiating emissions and petrochemical downpours. In many low-income neighborhoods, these attacks on their health became a daily occurrence between February and May. "The Island Where it Rained Oil," ran the Washington Post headline. Hundreds of homes and farms were repeatedly coated in petrochemicals from February to May as the refinery coughed out partially processed crude oil and other chemicals. In a belated filing, the EPA warned that a spark could have transformed these petrochemical mists into "flaming rain" across the island. Although the refinery admitted "oil droplets" did travel beyond its property it has determined "the release did not present a health hazard to the public."

Most residents on St. Croix get their drinking water from rain catchment systems, a basic fact that transforms any industrial emissions into a drinking water crisis. Although the refinery has offered to clean the crude oil from cars and roofs in select neighborhoods in the wake of its unchecked emissions, the refinery has refused to test or clean many residential cisterns. Residents in those neighborhoods now avoid drinking water from their cisterns because of the chemical taste, but still use it for cooking and bathing their children. Dozens of livestock and pets that drank from these rainwater systems died.

The troubled restart of the refinery was also plagued by explosions, chemical fires, and unchecked flaring on a near daily basis. During these emissions episodes, entire neighborhoods were stricken with severe vomiting and debilitating headaches for weeks on end. As the refinery refused to install and operate required fence-line monitoring equipment, no one is entirely sure what chemicals were emitted and what toxins people were exposed to. What is clear is that hundreds of families were sickened by the emissions, some quite severely. Desperate calls for help to territorial and federal agencies went unanswered for weeks and weeks. Some families abandoned their homes and took to living in cars so they could get upwind of the refinery.

Four months after this nightmare began, EPA finally sent staff and air monitoring equipment to St. Croix in May. As they were driving around the plant, EPA's onsite coordinator was stricken with a cloud of emissions. "The odor I briefly encountered was overwhelming and nauseating" and "more pungent than others I have encountered" in decades of work investigating negligent refineries (As the EPA staff drove to safety he noticed construction crews continuing their work: "I was surprised how unaffected the workers were by the odor.") After repeatedly denying any dangerous emissions were being released from the plant, the refinery later admitted to the EPA that in open defiance of the law it was not operating any emission monitoring equipment and did not know what was being released by its malfunctioning flare. The EPA now estimates the refinery released toxic hydrogen sulfide in levels 565 times in excess of the threshold for concern at refineries. The refinery also released an untold amount of the deadly gas sulfur dioxide.

While we do not know exactly what was released by the refinery, we are beginning to understand just how extensive the environmental and health impacts have been to the thousands of families living downwind of the plant on St. Croix. In July, I partnered with three local groups to conduct a Community Impact Survey to gather information about these impacts from the communities hardest hit ([www.bennington.edu/Limetree](http://www.bennington.edu/Limetree)). It should not be the responsibility of citizens to compile evidence of the criminal conduct done to them, but since government agencies are refusing to step in residents themselves are stepping

up. Standing outside grocery stores and going door-to-door in communities in June and July, we learned just how criminal the assault on public health has been.

In response to community concerns, this 26 question survey gathered information from residents across St. Croix from June 17 to July 11. In three weeks, this survey generated 681 responses from 120 different neighborhoods on St. Croix. It gathered reports of serious health and environmental impacts in just about every neighborhood to the north and west of the refinery. Which is to say, downwind. Approximately 20,000 people live or work downwind of the refinery.

In neighborhoods west of the refinery, hundreds of residents described noxious odors that left them gasping for breath or stricken with debilitating headaches on a daily basis in April and May. In neighborhoods north of the refinery, hundreds of residents described low-lying chemical clouds that invaded their homes or incomplete flaring that splattered petrochemicals on their cars, cisterns, and gardens repeatedly in February, April, and May.

Over 100 households downwind of the refinery reported emissions that injured their gardens. After acute emissions episodes, some reported their vegetables and fruit trees shriveled up, impacts that are consistent with deadly levels of sulfur dioxide gas. Many residents downwind of Limetree described nightly emissions so bad they woke everyone in the household, sometimes with sudden nausea and vomiting and sometimes with the terror of being unable to breathe.

Many of these impacts have not been officially acknowledged, investigated, or remediated.

While the data is alarming, the stories shared describe horrors that numbers struggle to capture. Children falling out of bed in the dead of night, gasping for breath. Parents, overwhelmed by the smell of gas and rising to check their stove only to fall flat on their faces overtaken by the fumes.

Men, collapsing at work sites when clouds of emissions from the refinery overtook them, now months later still unable to walk let alone work. Emissions so thick that they appeared as a fog invading living rooms, kitchens, and bedrooms. Individuals, in voices still raspy from the pain, trying to describe the night the air burned their throats and lungs. Workers recounted a cloud that looked like gasoline vapors shimmering in the tropical air, a thing of curious beauty until the asphyxiation took hold. Unable to walk, they desperately crawled in search of air to breathe, thinking they would not make it. One told me, "It felt like my nervous system was being eaten from the inside out." To this day, he struggles to stand up without losing his balance.

We've heard stories during the worst emission episodes at the refinery of the ER so packed with people desperate for medical assistance that getting help stretched into the next day. Of nurses marking the affliction as "refinery" even as the Health Department and Governor refused to acknowledge a single victim let alone a significant medical crisis.

Again and again, we've heard stories of Black and Brown families struggling to breathe. One of our questions asks how frequently people struggled to breathe with the refinery coming online? Once a day, once a week, once a month, rarely, or never. In some neighborhoods, the overwhelming response has been "once a day."

Thousands of families have been severely impacted by the monstrous negligence of the refinery. And yet for many of them, this has been the normal course of life on St. Croix for the past half century. Today, something is beginning to change. In response to the reckless disregard at the refinery, Black and Brown communities are joining together for the first time to demand accountability and justice. Talk of revolution is in the air, and it seems entirely practical for most residents. Radical transformation is the only thing that will save this island.

The corporate owner of the Limetree refinery on St. Croix has already filed for bankruptcy in a Houston court, and their lawyers are hard at work sidestepping any serious reckoning with the damages inflicted on St. Croix. They've asked the judge to dismiss all the claims against them for environmental damages as the refinery restructures debts to prioritize the needs of investors. The Governor of the Virgin Islands is already looking for new corporate backers, advertising the refinery as the best deal in the fossil fuel industry. Recently the Governor promised island residents the refinery will reopen soon: there is, he said, a long list of potential operators ready to take charge of the refinery (if they can be assured they won't be held liable for any of the pesky problems that plague the facility). For the government of the US Virgin Islands, rebooting the refinery is the last gamble still offering winning adequate to the immense need of now (without, you know, disrupting the imperial order of things). But doing so involves an ongoing baptism of history to wash away all record of harm from the official ledger. It's only by turning our backs on the historical present that we can face up to the demands of today. Such thinking advances new justification for sub-standard citizenship in places like St. Croix: to best prepare for climate change we must absolve and subsidize the very industry that led us into this crisis. Profits, not people, will save us in the end.

Residents are having none of this. While the corporation washes its hands of the mess it made and the territorial government doubles down on oil refining as the only way out of that mess, many residents are turning their outrage to the more liable author of the crisis: the American empire of oil. It is only by holding that empire accountable—and by prosecuting the profiteers of destruction—that justice can be found and a society beyond oil begun.

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