DISFIGURED COMMONS

Profit and Pollution in the American Empire of Oil

David Bond

Abstract: Fifty years ago, an upstart oil company built a mammoth refinery in the US Virgin Islands. Colonial officials, intent on shifting the island economy from peasant provisioning to petro-prosperity, stomped out collective agriculture on the island. The first dispossession: profit against the commons. Operating with imperial impunity, the refinery authored the destruction of the island's ecology. When it became impossible to ignore, the refinery filed for bankruptcy (twice) to shed all responsibility. Today, extensive contamination brings real fear of toxicity lurking in the land and the sea. The second dispossession: pollution preventing any easy return to the commons. This article reflects on a 'disfigured commons', describing how toxicity now forcefully extends a project of dispossession. And what the community in St. Croix is doing about it.

Keywords: Caribbean, colonialism, critique, insurgent memory, repair, Virgin Islands

> But when does one decide to stop looking to the past and instead conceive of a new order?
>
> — Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*

Surveying the unearthly record of planetary catastrophes, Bill McKibben (2003: 9) writes of the novelty of our current predicament: "Now we are the asteroid." Although in St. Croix, the asteroid has a more exacting name: the American Empire of Oil.

The oil industry landed like an invading force on this modest Caribbean outpost of the United States. In 1967, Leon Hess began construction in St. Croix on what quickly became a 1,500-acre industrial behemoth: the largest oil

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refinery in the world, one whose unprecedented scale single-handedly shaped US petroleum markets as it became an essential conduit of cheap gasoline to the Atlantic Seaboard. Yet the arrival of this mammoth refinery (and the colonial exceptions to the law it trafficked in) was neither popular nor inevitable. First by coercive force and then by consumer ease, oil refining bent the island away from the bounty of the land. Farmers were evicted from the land and shopping malls paved over prime farmland. The vibrant mangroves of Krause Lagoon fell quickly, some bulldozed in the construction of the refinery, others felled by the crude oil routinely sprayed on the shoreline to keep the mosquitos down. For as long as anyone could remember, a flock of pink flamingos had resided in the estuary. As supertankers replaced the mangroves, the flamingoes took flight, never to return. So much was lost, but until recently that loss felt like the promise of something better. Among the ascending classes on St. Croix, the destructive wake of the refinery was widely celebrated as proof of progress. Like a landscape blurred on a speeding journey, a faltering of ecology was evidence of historical acceleration. At least until the whole thing imploded.

The refinery filed for bankruptcy twice in the past decade. Both closures followed catastrophic breakdowns at the facility, which issued shelter-in-place orders to the public while explosions blackened the air and petrochemicals rained down. And both times corporate owners gutted the assets before heading to a sympathetic bankruptcy court to avoid liability for environmental crimes. The revenue is gone, and with it the ability of the territorial government to float a sturdy middle class with patronage salaries. Several tailspins later, the economy still teeters at the edge of collapse. The oil industry's fated production of a booming future now lies in tatters. But what remains is more worrisome still: a simmering toxic disaster. Legacy contamination leaches into the estuary, and refinery wastewater continues to crown the islands' sole freshwater aquifer with a thick cap of crude oil and petrochemicals. And now a different fossil-fueled disaster is arriving. In 2017, a Category Five hurricane brushed St. Croix, causing significant damage. Two weeks later, one of the strongest hurricanes every recorded in the Caribbean slammed directly into St. Croix, damaging 90 percent of the buildings and wiping out public libraries, schools, and the island's only hospital. Seven years on, and many have yet to reopen.

"Shut the refinery down!" "Think beyond petroleum." Spirited dissent filled the room at a recent community meeting with the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency). After new owners purchased the refinery from the bankruptcy court, EPA officials explained the regulatory pathway for a potential restart of the refinery. Residents refused the premise. Voicing outrage over the cascading dispossessions now coming into view as the principal charter of the refinery, a new coalition of residents rose to explain a more fundamental fact to the federal officials at the meeting: "St. Croix has had an oil economy for long enough."

This article reflects on the rise and fall of the St. Croix refinery as exemplary of the 'disfigured commons' we find across the Anthropocene. It is an effort to step back to better discern the imperial momentum that naturalized earthly destruction as modern progress, rendering it nearly impossible to grasp a 'before' or an 'after' to the reign of fossil fuels. The stance that shapes this inquiry is clear: the American Empire of Oil is the first author of the Anthropocene, and critical anthropologists should widen their view to better apprehend their conjoined history. Yet this article also moves in the opposite direction. It steps into the community's unfolding struggle to help shore up the conviction of their outrage. Eschewing the sidelines as the stance of a different epoch, it joins the fight to break out of the history of empire. Following the example of the commons themselves, the article refuses any obvious distinction between theory and storytelling, between aspiration and analysis, between explanation and protest.

The Commons in the Anthropocene

Eric Hobsbawm (1962: 149) once described the closing of the commons as an almost planetary event: "The great frozen ice-cap of the world's traditional agrarian systems and rural social relations lay above the fertile soil of economic growth. It had at all costs to be melted, so that soil could be ploughed by the forces of profit." Some 60 years on, Hobsbawm's description punches into the present as searingly prescient but also, somehow, slightly askew. The contemporary mixes up his ordering of metaphor and material. The ice caps *are* melting. The great forests are being felled. The sea rises. Yet such earthly overheating does not unleash evermore profit so much as it now threatens any semblance of collective life.

There is no going back, that much is clear, but fueled progress finds itself equally condemned. As our planet enters a new epoch of induced ecological crisis, what is held in common is assaulted from all sides. Collective title to the abundance of nearby land and sea is encountered as an anachronistic outlaw, but across the margins of the contemporary so too is any common claim to breathable air and drinkable water (let alone a stable climate). The violent afterlives of enclosure still crash forward but are now met with avalanches of climactic dispossession bearing down from a future seemingly already lost. And in the present collision of propertied pasts and foreclosed futures, the Anthropocene heralds what Penny Harvey, Marianne Elisabeth Lien, and Jon Rasmus Nyquist (this issue) call 'compound dispossession'. And in this present swirl of what lingers and what looms, what place does the commons have within engaged anthropology and emancipatory politics?

St. Croix offers a charged ethnographic entry point into these debates. The cardinal questions around the commons—violent appropriation, imperial

frontiers, and poisoned futures—all exist within living memory on St. Croix. And the structure of this article follows suit: it reviews key theoretical debates around the commons and describes their lived coordinates on St. Croix. Theory and ethnography are organized in separate sections, not in the presumption of their unbridgeable divide but in the welcomed productivity of holding them together without resolving one into the other. Ethnography clamors after ramshackle worlds more compelling than any explanation in the abstract. And worlds a good deal more consequential, not least for the glimpses ethnography catches of lived possibilities just beyond the grasp of acceptable accounts.

The Commons: Genesis or Geography?

The destruction of the commons is the 'original sin' of capitalism, as Marx ([1867] 1976: 873) put it. The commons, sitting like the Garden of Eden within the Bible of Capital, anchored rural worlds of shared provisioning (whether called Calpulli, Die Allmende, Haudenosaunee, Musha'a, Obshchina, Tauhi Fonua, Zadruga, or countless other local forms). That is, until the ruthless theft of such abundance provided the rocket fuel capable of launching a new historical ontology of 'profit as progress' out of earthly gravity and into secular orbit. Much of this rested on the state stripping the peasantry to the bone, granting new rights of movement but severing every nourishing relation to place. Any attempt to return to the plenty of the commons—to treat the regime of private property as anything less than divinely ordained—became the first deadly sin of capitalism (Thompson 1975). The greatest robbery in history, as Karl Polanyi (1944) described it, one that baptized the amassed plunder of its bloody stench so that capital could rise up like a god to stand over society as the only organizing principle of social relations, the universal yardstick of national development, and the most seductive modern utopia.

For a founding event, Rosa Luxemburg ([1913] 1951) retorted, such savage accumulation sure does seem to repeat itself. Far from primitive, Luxemburg noted that systematic theft "is the constant method of capital accumulation" (ibid.: 267). The "violent appropriation" (ibid.: 266) of shared abundance is not the pre-history of capital but its perennial cookie jar. "Lest the motor of accumulation suddenly die down," Hannah Arendt (1968: 148) added, such robbery has to be repeated even to the point of complete ruination. That is, after all, what the colonies are for. And Luxemburg and Arendt both insisted that there is no version of capitalism that does not involve colonies. While industrial production and mass consumption may consummate capital in the metropole, ruthless pillaging remains the modus operandi in the colonial zones of the contemporary. The ongoing violence of empire underlines the fact that capitalism has never been a singular project but is perhaps the defining dualism

of modernity. As David Harvey (2003) argues, there are two spatial regimes of profiteering: one lawfully wed to the liberal order of property rights, the other—'accumulation by dispossession'—holding a gun to the head of everything outside of the West. And it is not the absolute distance dividing these two regimes that demands careful attention, but the bustling traffic between liberalism and imperialism, between humanitarian reason and colonial violence. Enclosures are not just the savage truth of capitalism best revealed at its outer edge—they are also the lifeblood of Western social democracy.

The debate over the commons is still unfolding, but the trenches are clear.[1] What is more telling? The question of where or the question of when? Are enclosures the opening chronology of capital or the still pulsing colonial frontiers of accumulation? When situating the significance of the commons, are imperial geographies more incisive than national histories? And does the defense of the commons provincialize capitalism by resurrecting a previous set of popular values or by forging a moral vision of the world after the end of empire?

Progressive Dispossession: The Promise of Fossil Fuels

In the 1930s, a handful of radical journalists pushed the Roosevelt administration to appropriate sugar plantations on St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands and tasked a coalition of local unions, Black scholars, and card-carrying socialists with redistributing the land to destitute men and women (Bond 2021a). Roosevelt's plan for this Caribbean 'pivot' of the New Deal, as the *New York Times* reported at the time, sparked a consequential debate between "the economy of capitalism and private property and so-called planned economy and public ownership" in addressing the Great Depression.[2] The redistribution proceeded over the vocal protests of an entrenched planter and merchant class as it seized plantations and handed the land out to the poor. And soon St. Croix found itself on the front page, above the fold, of major national papers in New York City and Washington, D.C., and debated extensively in Black newspapers across Atlanta, Baltimore, Detroit, and Harlem. For it was on St. Croix that many thought you could best read the tea leaves about how far to the left of capitalism the New Deal might go.

'Homesteaders', as those granted land in St. Croix were called, agreed to put half their land into crops for local markets and half their land into sugar for export via a publicly owned sugar factory, rum distillery, and port, all rebuilt for that purpose. A modern fleet of farm equipment maintained at the sugar factory was available for any farmer to use. After costs, all revenue was reinvested in education, healthcare, and public infrastructure on St. Croix. "Public Ownership for Virgin Islands," ran the front-page headline in the *New York Times* in 1934.[3] And by 1940, St. Croix had bustling local markets, collective

ownership of key economic infrastructure, broad enfranchisement of small farmers, and brand-new schools and hospitals: a 'Caribbean breadbasket,' as many described it,[4] one that reconstituted the commons to harvest plenty over profit (see also Wynter 1971). "St. Croix is primarily an agricultural island," wrote the head of the Virgin Islands Legislature in 1958, and "its wealth lies in agriculture."[5] A few years later, barely 100 people identified as farmers in the entirety of the Virgin Islands, less than 1 percent of all residents. "Agriculture has nearly vanished as an occupation in recent years," noted one federal report on the Virgin Islands in the 1970s.[6]

FIGURES 1-4: Homestead farmers and the public investments their work made. Photographer Jack Delano visited St. Croix in 1941 as part of the New Deal's WPA photography project.

What happened between 1950 and 1970? The Virgin Islands decided to get "the industrial revolution going right here in our own backyard of St. Croix," as one official put it in 1963.[7] Inspired by Operation Bootstrap in Puerto Rico, the colonial governor set his sights on a single path of development for St. Croix: heavy industry. With generous tax breaks and sizable subsidies, Harvey Aluminum (in 1962) and Hess Oil (in 1965) were enticed to set up shop on the south shore of St. Croix. Refineries and the wages they promised, the appointed governor said repeatedly, were the only means capable of pulling St. Croix out of its plantation past and into color-blind modernity. It is a detail

worth underlining: the American Empire of Oil introduced itself to St. Croix as a decolonizing and progressive project.

The state-sponsored industrialization of the Crucian economy quickly took a repressive turn toward agriculture: homestead farms had to be dismantled. Realizing their lives were being placed in the firing line, thousands of Black and Brown farmers took to the streets of Frederiksted and Christiansted in protest. "Crucians," wrote the *West End News*, "cannot sit back idly and watch the spring of life being sapped. So fight we will!"[8] By some estimates, over a quarter of the island's population took to the streets. "All over the world people are freeing themselves from colonial powers and corporations, and land reform is the basic ingredient of that freedom," wrote one resident in the *St. Croix Avis*.[9] Letters to the editor peppered their arguments against industry with references to Kwame Nkrumah and Fidel Castro. The *St. Croix Avis* threw up its hands in an editorial: "There is simply no justification for it, for once the land is disposed of it will certainly never be regained."[10] But perhaps that was the point.

Proponents of industry struck back with force. The governor equated any defense of agriculture with support for plantation slavery. "Governor Pledges to Wipe Out St. Croix Feudal System," ran one headline.[11] Opposition to industry, editorialized the *Home Journal*, was evidence of "the determination of some people to keep the colored population in economic slavery."[12] Refineries promised to "remove the social, economic shackles which have prevented progress on St Croix," another editorial opined.[13] Soon a paramilitary campaign of violence added to the talk of industrial emancipation: Black and Brown farmers had their fields torched just before harvest, and many found their homes relieved of a roof as the rainy season descended.

Then the governor auctioned off the land. With ten day's notice (and restrictions on local bidding), the colonial governor sold 3,000 acres of publicly held farmland to the owners of the refinery, who promptly evicted all farmers. Collectively held farm equipment was dumped in the sea. In his later years, the colonial governor of the Virgin Islands solemnly reflected on "the death of agriculture" on St. Croix (Paiewonsky with Dookhan 1990: 220). A more apt verdict: agriculture was murdered.

Operations at the oil refinery grew and grew. Yet even as the Virgin Islands achieved the highest per capita GDP in the entire Eastern Caribbean in the 1970s, the refinery did not exactly 'free' St. Croix so much as deepen the islands reliance on vital imports and external assistance. Packaged food from the mainland became as ubiquitous as it was costly. Federal aid for poverty actually tripled in the decade after industry set up shop in St. Croix, while unemployment crested at 10 percent. The refinery never employed more than a few thousand men (and often a good deal less), but revenue from the refinery single-handedly lifted St. Croix into the stratosphere of most macro-economic measures. As taxes on oil revenue inflated state coffers beyond anything previously known,

prolific government jobs were conjured up in the overflow. The territorial government became the de facto employment agency of Crucians (some decades employing over half of all adults on St. Croix). And with the generous salaries being handed out, suburban housing developments spilled out across what farmland remained.

The suburban sprawl and bustling strip malls that now crowd Centerline Road on St. Croix distract the imagination from the prolific fields and proud farmers that claimed this ground just 50 years prior. Oil refining destroyed the cultivated abundance of St. Croix, replacing it with a lucrative rent on the American addiction to oil. A new Black middle class took shape in the propertied ascent, but it was one haunted by an amnesia of how it all got started. Along the gentle slopes of St. Croix, the architectural record seems to jump directly from plantation ruins to suburban clutter, a leap that quietly extinguishes the monumental accomplishments of homestead farmers. The arrival of the refinery was not an inevitable step forward for the island; it was the brutal eradication of every other means of subsistence. An easy affluence may have taken hold, but it was one that lost any working relationship with the land as it reached for an easy prosperity. At least until the refinery started breaking down.

A newspaper editor on St. Croix called me in 2020, asking if she could reprint an excerpt of my (academic and paywalled) history of the refinery (Bond 2017). President Donald Trump (2019) had just waived away outstanding fines at the refinery, going so far as to rebrand EPA as a 'customer service' agency for the new owners and breaking all protocol within EPA to speed the restart of the refinery (Hiar 2019). A good time to revisit the refinery's history, the editor told me. I wrote the history anew, following the condensed arc presented here and published in serialized form on St. Croix in early 2021 as the refinery came back into operation. The response from the community was overwhelming.

Four years later and I am still getting emails and letters from residents wanting to share the part they lived (or correct the part I got wrong). So much of this history had been held just under the surface of island life during the refinery's reign: as Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) reminds us, empire is the gravitational force that silences any past in disagreement with its rule. "I lived this, I was there, and yet I never understood what happened," one resident told me. Another said: "Your history gave me the words to understand what I experienced but never knew how to talk about." My publication aligned with a new generation of protests against the refinery on St. Croix. And credit for the rising dissent must go to where it is properly due: the four women who lead the environmental non-profit sector in the Virgin Islands and are organizing a new coalition to end colonial oil refining on St. Croix (Poblete 2021). My essays were quickly enlisted in their struggle, and I was invited to play a supporting role. The past, too, is a commons lying in the wait (Buck-Morss 2010).

The Commons: Revelations or Repair?

The Anthropocene troubles any straightforward literature review of the commons. Enclosures swing back into view, not as the fixed starting point of capital nor as the colonial frontier of accumulation, but as the looming end to a habitable earth (Mbembe 2021). Global warming brings unlivable futures into precise scientific focus. Whether in proliferating species extinctions, planetary tipping points, or heat waves beyond the parameters of human survival, the loss of tomorrow now presses into today. Of climate change, writes Andreas Malm (2016: 11), "this tempest is eminently temporal." If the Anthropocene centers the future in struggles over what is held in common, it also expands the active mechanisms of dispossession. While explicit policy decisions, police forces, and neoliberal discipline continue to sever nourishing relations to place (with an assist from environmental warfare), that work of dispossession is now amplified by the ecological aftershocks of petrochemical capitalism (Moore 2015). Desertification, depletion, and dead zones are now surpassing state violence as the leading agent of dispossession, while industrial pollution advances what Camelia Dewan (this issue) calls 'enclosure through contamination'. Updating the peasant frontiers of capitalism that long animated such questions (Guha 1989; Hecht and Cockburn 1990; Scott 1985; Stoler 1985; Taussig 1980; Wolf 1969), global warming colludes with industrial pollution to advance a more sweeping negative ecology of dispossession (Bond 2022).

The Anthropocene heralds a brave new world of virulent dispossession without the bother of imperial intentionality. A toxic closing of the commons, externalizing the brutal work of enclosures beyond any contestable institution and internalizing what once required vigilant threats of violence to maintain: fear of local abundance. Is this a contradiction whose fierce resolution will blast us out of an unbearable history? Or will the unworkability of this crucible simply spur the four horsemen of capitalism at the end of the world?

Toxic Dispossession: The Fallout of Fossil Fuels

On St. Croix, pollution added ecological injury to the agricultural insult of oil refining. By 1970, the Hess refinery gained the heavyweight title 'largest refinery in the world', and during some boom years produced roughly 5 percent of total domestic consumption in the United States. Such scale was achieved not in the daylight of federal governance but by occupying the territorial shadows of the law. Hess's operation was founded on key exceptions to environmental protection, and such exemptions map out the enduring contradiction of oil refining on St. Croix. The governor invited Hess Oil to the Virgin Islands in the belief that only heavy industry could break out of the colonial history of the place. Yet

Hess Oil came to St. Croix only when colonial exemptions to federal law were guaranteed. As the tremendous profits from this arrangement lined the pockets of company executives and territorial government, the industrialized economy of St. Croix became locked into a mercenary dependence on its own secondary status. The best pathway out of colonialism was more colonialism.

Hess promised "that every precaution would be taken to assure there would be no obnoxious fumes from the industry."[14] As refinery operations got underway, the thinness of such platitudes became clear. In response to complaints about emissions in 1967, the locally elected legislature passed bills giving new teeth to the regulation of air and water pollution. Lawyers soon brought the bad news: the original contracts with Hess (which said nothing of pollution control) "could not be abrogated by any legislation."[15] On environmental matters, the oil refinery's colonial arrangement with the government overrode the will of the people.

Hess sidestepped industry standard safeguards, refused to comply with mandated monitoring of emissions, and completely ignored environmental benchmarks of refinery operations. Contamination, in other words, was built into the world's largest refinery (Bond 2017; Johnson 2019). By 1982, Hess estimated that 300,000 barrels of petrochemicals had leaked from the refinery. An internal investigation in 2001 revealed that 95 percent of waste-stream pipelines were leaking, and by 2005 the refinery concluded that the entire waste-stream was "deteriorated beyond repair." One year, a construction crew thought they had hit the big time when a geyser of crude oil shot out of a hole they were digging. Then the dismal reality set in: they had tapped into the shockingly large plume of refinery wastewater. Yet the refinery continued to operate as if nothing was amiss.

This history of neglect finally caught up with Hess Oil in 2011. The EPA levied a record-breaking fine of $750 million to help clean up the island. At the time, it was the largest penalty on record against a US refinery. After siphoning off more than $1 billion in assets, the refinery announced in February 2012 that it was filing for bankruptcy to avoid "environmental liability." In 2016, the Trump administration waved away those fines and encouraged the refinery to quickly restart in order to reclaim "American energy dominance" (Trump 2019: 1). And hours before President Biden was sworn in, the refinery on St. Croix sputtered back to life in 2021.

Almost from the get-go, stories started coming in of emissions causing health problems in the neighborhoods downwind of the refinery. Soon I was on weekly calls with community groups trying to figure out what to do. Broadcast daily on every available channel, the message from refinery executives was crystal clear: nothing was amiss. All emissions were within health guidelines and "far below the level normally considered dangerous to health" (Limetree Bay Refinery 2021). Residents later told me that they stopped trusting their senses: "I thought I was going crazy." Many started believing that the ailments

they began to suffer daily in early 2021 were a personal shortcoming. "We just didn't question it," one resident later reflected. "I didn't think our government would let anything like that happen to us."

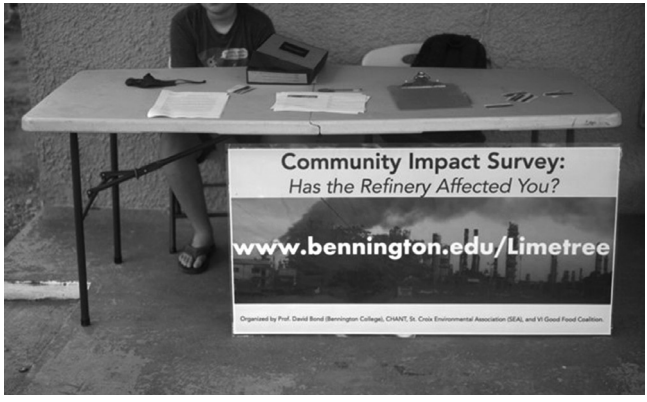
A steady drip of complaints about the refinery in 2021 soon became a daily deluge in February, March, and April. After repeated calls to EPA for independent monitoring went unanswered, I worked with community groups to set up a phone line to document basic details about residential complaints (location, time, nature of complaint). Within a few days we had amassed a database suggesting a compelling pattern of harm. Neighborhoods voiced shared accounts of homes coated in crude oil and consistent complaints of headaches, vomiting, and trouble breathing clustered around certain dates. When the EPA declined to send independent air monitoring equipment to St. Croix, we reached out to national news organizations to cover the unfolding disaster. "The Island Where It Rained Oil," ran the *Washington Post* headline in March.

With national attention, the EPA finally sent staff to investigate the refinery in early May 2021 (some four months after complaints started). On 6 May, an

FIGURES 5-8: Community impact survey with non-profits. Photographs by author.

EPA on-site coordinator pulled his car over near the refinery and rolled down the window, stating: "The odor I briefly encountered was overwhelming and nauseating" (EPA 2021a: 19). He became violently ill immediately. One week later, the EPA issued an executive order for an emergency 60-day shutdown of the refinery for posing an "an imminent and substantial endangerment to public health" (EPA 2021b: 1). It was only the third time in its history that the EPA unilaterally closed a refinery.

A subsequent EPA investigation found cascading operational failures at the refinery. A faulty flare was effectively aerosolizing crude oil into thick clouds of petroleum that drifted over the island. As the EPA reported, these oily mists could have sparked "flaming rain" in the Black and Brown neighborhoods downwind of the refinery. While apocalyptic firestorms may have been averted, the resulting petrochemical downpours poisoned the rain catchment systems that 50 percent of residents rely on for drinking water. Asphyxiating emissions also became ordinary. Federal health agencies consider air containing over



100 parts per million of hydrogen sulfide to be lethally dangerous to humans. Limited monitoring at the refinery showed levels spiking to 91,649 parts per million and routinely being orders of magnitude above the lethal threshold, often for days at a time.

A few weeks after the EPA shutdown, I was in St. Croix. Collaborating with four non-profits, I helped run a community impact survey in June and July. We set up tables outside of popular grocery stores, and soon there was a line of residents waiting their turn to share what the refinery did to their health and their homes in early 2021. The stories were harrowing. Emissions so thick they appeared as a fog invading classrooms, offices, and bedrooms. Entire neighborhoods suddenly stricken with headaches, vomiting, and asphyxiation during the worst emissions episodes. Children falling out of bed in the dead of night, gasping for breath. The night everyone in the neighborhood started vomiting uncontrollably. Individuals, in voices still raspy from the pain, trying to describe the night that the air burned their throats and lungs.

Construction workers recounted a cloud that looked like gasoline vapors shimmering in the tropical air, a thing of curious beauty until the chemical strangulation took hold. Unable to breath, they crawled in the dirt in desperate search of air. Many did not think they would 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. They also talked about their co-worker, who collapsed when the chemical clouds overtook him and died on the way to the hospital. And the way company managers waved away requests for medical assistance but offered a 1-800 number for grief counseling.

Residents also described gardens and fruit trees scorched by whatever was in the air. One farmer talked about his 50-year-old mango tree that shriveled up after a cloud of emissions swept through. Fisherman spoke of being overtaken by a low-lying chemical mist several miles offshore. Although the lethal impact on crops and livestock was most shocking, it was soon followed by a newfound fear of local produce. "I don't eat anything local anymore," one community leader told me. "That refinery contaminated everything." At community meetings, residents spoke of no longer eating local fish, of abandoning gardens cultivated over a lifetime, of a new fear of what comes from the land.

Our survey documented substantial injuries in every single neighborhood downwind of the refinery (www.bennington.edu/Limetree). The day after we released our findings, the refinery filed for bankruptcy in Texas. A prime reason given for bankruptcy by CEO Jeff Rinker was the "severe financial and regulatory constraints" imposed by the federal expectation that the refinery clean up the mess it had made (Eilperin and Grandoni 2021). The injustice, however, does not end in the mere shirking of environmental responsibility. Demonstrating just how challenging the great transformation away from fossil fuels will be, the debacle at the refinery has not revoked their operating license so much

as it has encouraged even more absurd accommodations. Rallying to "save a refinery," a bankruptcy court judge in Houston privileged speculative economics over sustained injuries (Borns 2021). With promises of modest reform once the revenue starts flowing again, the bankruptcy court naturalized substandard citizenship on St. Croix in the long wait for the salvation of profit.

This double bind of 'petro-colonialism' resonates in the halls of power. I hear it in the governor's insistence that environmental justice be postponed until the refinery's resumed operations can pay for it. It echoes in the EPA's recent endorsement of jump-starting the refinery as the best revenue stream to meet the immense cost of cleaning up the contamination. It echoes in a federal refusal to invest in any alternative to the oil industry. And it echoes in the polite laughter that meets any talk of ecological reparations. The refinery may have destroyed St. Croix, but it is the only production still capable of paying the bills."The refinery poisoned everything," one community leader told me recently. For so many residents of St. Croix, the refinery has become destruction. And destruction no longer feels like prosperity. No promise of progress can patch over the injuries so many live with. A resident told me of getting blood tests in Florida. The doctor, horrified at the litany of petrochemicals in her blood, asked if she worked her entire life at a refinery. "No," she said. "But I lived on St. Croix."

Aligning historical critique with earthly repair, residents gather around memories of the destroyed commons now hoisted up as the stage of a different politics. At a recent community gathering, residents voiced their dissent: "Why should we bear the burden for things others have profited from?" "Those who have profited from the refinery must be held accountable for the destruction they caused to the land, water, and people of St. Croix." It is only by recalling the immensity of the profits that flowed from the destruction of St. Croix that the immensity of the debt owed the people of St. Croix comes into view as reasonable and capable of building an economy of repair. Again and again, someone would interrupt long pauses in discussions about the immensity of the challenge with the same refrain: "We need justice." "We need to heal the land." "This island provided for our grandparents, and it can provide for us." Small farmers, once again, are leading the way. Insurgent memories of the commons gather like kindling around the oily history of empire as a very different world comes into empirical view.

Yet the cooler heads of bankruptcy courts, federal agencies, and financial investors have found their rebuttal. The devastation cuts too deep, the contamination spread too far, the suburban lifestyles too fixed in place to allow for any return to the provisioning of the land. Today, an upswell of agriculturally minded dissent against the refinery is swatted away by the sober diagnosis of elected officials and corporate leaders. The sickness is too advanced to change course now. The governor begs anyone who will listen to help him restart the

refinery at any cost. What else, he says with some conviction, is capable of generating the revenue needed to prepare St. Croix for the very real catastrophe of climate change?

On St. Croix, the battle lines are drawn. And in this moment of planetary crisis, ethnography also must pick a side.

Disfigured Commons

I have been drawn to the commons as a way to make sense of the play of disastrous histories and foreclosed futures that assail St. Croix today. Yet this confluence of forces, in so many ways constitutive of the Anthropocene, also troubles our given understanding of the commons. Much of this pivots on what I call the 'disfigured commons'. The tectonics within the pairing is key. 'Disfigured' acknowledges that destruction now outweighs any teleology of progress—loss is no longer a minor entry in the ledger of gain but a brave new world unto itself. But here the empirical prerogative of the negative is allied with the insurgent politics of the commons to refuse any cheap acceptance of a permanently polluted world.[16] Against any conceptual embrace of absolute negativity as the only truly radical starting point or any principled withdrawal from the always already complicit fields of protest (like the 'undercommons' of Harney and Moten 2013), the disfigured commons returns dissent to the historical plane of racked reality we actually inhabit without being determined by it (Federici 2018; Linebaugh 2008; Thompson 1991). The 'we' is intentional: the commons pushes beyond any essentialist theory of protest to open the doors wide for all who want to join with an 'environmentalism of the poor' (Guha and Martinez-Alier 1997).

Damaged is not dead, at least not yet. Isabelle Stengers is instructive for what I mean by disfigured commons. Stengers writes of the crucial importance of "coming back to Marx's story of the commons" and insists on "the sheer destruction this wrecked" without resorting to the teleology of either capital or Marxism (see Stengers et al. 2018: 590). This feminist view of the commons pivots on the radical value of repair (Berlant 2016; Federici 2018), and by so doing tempers the commons of any wishful thinking that we might retreat to some purified ontology of 'before'. The significance of the commons amid proliferating disasters, write Burnett and Gordon (2021: 42), is not as a "promise for another world per se but as an expression of the vital relations holding together the worlds we are already in." Such a stance also means following the lead of those living closest to the planetary disasters at hand. The frontline communities I know best feel their worlds lurching beyond the cramped capacity of endorsed science, the social responsibility of offending industries, and the complicit vigilance of the regulatory state. Yet the way these worlds

slip into both acute disfigurement and authoritative disregard is not the end of politics but where politics must begin anew. Wedded to grassroots struggles, disfigured commons refuse how comforting the academic accounts for planetary destruction have become and how resigned many critical scholars are to ruins as the only intellectual redemption of this dismal present.

Refusing any splintering of theory and tactics, I take disfigured commons to be a verb for the collective "will to life," as Achille Mbembe (2021: 3) puts it, necessary to decolonize enclosures and cultivate possibilities beyond the bare survival of this impossible present (Bize 2022; Cherkaev 2020; Khayyat 2023; Vergès 2021). Amid planetary disasters, such a stance troubles any pre-emptive celebration of what might take root in the rubble of this world by insisting on two coordinates of engaged research today: one, never lose sight of how profitable earthly destruction continues to be, and, two, join with front-line communities in the struggle for environmental justice in the present tense. For so many battered communities, the manner in which proliferating disasters, pandemics, wars, and toxic exposures overwhelm institutional orders is not so much a prompt for philosophical reflection on better worlds to come as it is an invitation to join with the creative struggle to build a better world today. Joining with this rooted conviction, disfigured commons centers repair as the revolution it might be in any ethnographic accounting of the Anthropocene.

The Ends of Oil

On St. Croix, a land that provided plenty is now salted with pollution. If the profits of oil first evicted the people from the land, the resulting poisons now guard against any right of return. A toxic closing of the commons. On St. Croix today, the negative agency of petrochemical toxicity forcefully extends a colonial project of dispossession without the bother of imperial intent. Yet this article concludes by standing alongside local residents who insist on radical hope in dark times. Such hope does not begin in the departure of this blasted present for some pristine past or utopian future. Such hope digs in for the fight at hand.

"St. Croix has had an oil economy for long enough" was the refrain repeated by residents at a recent gathering. A handful of students, farmers, and activists are now working together to center environmental justice on St. Croix. "Oil sabotaged our island," a local farmer reflected. "And now it's up to us to set things right." Over the course of several planning meetings, a new consensus started to find its footing. Maybe we were approaching environmental justice the wrong way. Maybe we should think of environmental justice not in accordance with how much the offending company can afford or what exactly the EPA will authorize, but at the scale of a full repair of the damages done. Maybe environmental justice should be demanded not as a line item on the balance

sheet of profit but as the practical foundation of a radically different project of shared prosperity. The epiphany of one community leader summed it up: "An environmental justice economy!"

Freed from the inadequate resources of bankrupt corporations and the complicit strictures of federal agencies, imaginations surged forward under the banner of repair. The university modernized to advance cutting-edge research into detoxifying soil and water. The hospital modernized to advance better techniques of caring for the injuries of petrochemical pollution. With reclaimed land and collectivized infrastructure, farmers providing fresh food to nearby schools, hospitals, and community markets (at costs well below the imported processed food now served). Cover the superfund site with solar panels and wind turbines, and put solar panels on every residential home and local business. Update the insights of those buildings that have withstood centuries of change on St. Croix to construct a new generation of sustainable housing for residents. Equip young people for the hard work of building a more just St. Croix. The enthusiasm was infectious: how St. Croix could become the premier laboratory for a post-oil society. And in the wake of that excitement, a more serious discussion took hold: how to recognize that the land and the sea are not the property of few but the responsibility of all.

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Notes

1. The shifting research coordinates of the commons are never far from political commitments. Studying the commons continues to uplift an empirically rich set of oppositional values, venues, and voices (Federici 2018; Linebaugh 2008) that refuse the mythology of capital as universal progress. E. P. Thompson (1991: 159) once noted the impossibility of any attempt "to explain the commons within capitalist categories." And what wonders continue to flow from that proverb! As social fact and symbolic figure, the commons provincializes the universal conceit of capitalism from the trodden ground of real alternatives.
2. See "Virgin Isles Form Pivot in Struggle," *New York Times*, 5 April 1935, https://www.nytimes.com/1935/04/05/archives/virgin-isles-form-pivot-in-struggle-issues-in-the-contest-over.html.
3. "Public Ownership for Virgin Islands," *New York Times*, 13 March 1934, https://www.nytimes.com/sitemap/1934/03/13/.
4. Debates over a 'reconstituted peasantry' have a foundational place in Caribbean scholarship (Mintz 1953; Wolf and Mintz 1957). With reference to this work, perhaps we might center a reconstituted commons to depart from the paradigmatic English version. Crucially, in the Caribbean the commons are creative responses to the established fact of capitalism (Wynter 1971). The Black and Brown rural underclass that flocked to homestead farms on St. Croix in the 1930s or former slaves more broadly across the Caribbean—in the Village Movement in Guyana (1838–1847), the free villages in Jamaica (1839–1850), or the Ejido in Mexico (1917–1934), among others (Mintz 1958; Mora 2020; Slocum 2017)—departed from the plantation to do so. They did not imagine themselves as returning to some idyllic 'before'. Nor did they hoist up values of feudal obligation as the counterpoint to the brutal logic of the modern plantation. The vibrant rural worlds built in the wake of the plantation across the Caribbean were neither 'primitive communism' nor a 'paternalistic moral economy'. In their founding spirit and actual organization, these Caribbean projects held the plantation economy at arms length in their aspiration to provide better for their community. Although there is tremendous variation in these projects and fault lines within each, they were all situated squarely within the desperate hunger of their moment. Responding to that great need, each cobbled together a provisioning economy around a shared infrastructure,

a shared responsibility for the land, and a shared suspicion of distant markets. Such reconstituted commons continue to shape life across the Caribbean (Sheller 2023).

5. "Pres. of Senate Aubrey Anduze Reports in Recent Trip to Wash.," *Daily News*, 11 April 1958.
6. *The Economy of the Virgin Islands*, 20 June 1979.
7. "Legislative Record," *St. Croix Avis*, 7 May 1963.
8. "Together We Will Go," *The West End News*, March 1964.
9. "Correspondence," *St. Croix Avis*, 9 January 1963.
10. "The Government Should Acquire Land," *St. Croix Avis*, 13 March 1963.
11. "Governor Pledges to Wipe Out St. Croix Feudal System," *Home Journal*, 30 June 1964.
12. "Is Story of Harvey's Hearing; Judge Moore Hits Division," *Home Journal*, 16 February 1962.
13. "Misrepresentation," *Home Journal*, 17 February 1962.
14. "De Lugo Brands as 'Lie' Talk That Donkeys Opposed Hess," *St. Croix Avis*, 16 September 1966.
15. "Air, Water Pollution Bills Approved by Legislature," *St. Croix Avis*, 19 April 1967.
16. "We take as our starting point a permanently polluted world," write Liboiron, Tironi, and Calvillo (2018: 332). From forever chemicals to plastic pollution to carbon dioxide, there is real empirical merit to such a starting point for social research within the Anthropocene. Yet too quickly foregrounding this as the opening chapter of the contemporary can dismiss the contingent history that got us into this mess, downplay the stark unevenness of toxic exposures today, and discount what can be done now to minimize the real injuries of pollution going forward (Bond 2021b).

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