

Anthropology in an Age of Upheaval

Reflections on Environmental Justice in the American Empire of Oil

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Abstract

This essay describes ongoing efforts to put anthropology to work confronting American Empire in the field of its material operations. St. Croix, US Virgin Islands is home to one of the largest oil refineries in the world. The Hess/Hovens/Limetree Refinery has long operated in the colonial shadows of state oversight, disregarding local lives and landscapes in the mass manufacture of cheap energy for the United States. Based on ongoing collaboration with local residents on St. Croix, US Virgin Islands in their struggle to hold the refinery to account, this essay reflects on practical lessons learned about the place of anthropology in anti-imperial struggles today (and the necessity of analyzing and acting with that frame). Reflecting on effective tactics of engaged research today, this essay revolves around three areas of anti-imperial interventions: 1) history of the present; 2) connecting the dots; 3) documenting the harm. Together these three component parts worked in concert to build a common platform of insight, outrage, and radical possibility. They also made it possible to effectively insist on immediate remedies to the harm being done while never losing sight of the imperial structure that caused the harm and necessity of uprooting it.

Keywords: American Empire of Oil; Caribbean; critique; oil refinery; public anthropology; St. Croix

*«If anthropology cannot be put to
service as a tool for human liberation
why are we bothering with it at all?»
Nancy Scheper-Hughes (2009: 1)*

This essay provides a preliminary research report from a project of public anthropology within the American Empire of Oil¹. More descriptive than conclusive, this essay charts the three areas

¹ What do I mean by the American Empire of Oil? During the twentieth century, the United States emerged as a world power dripping with synthetic might: petrochemicals, nuclear weapons, and fossil fuels. The American Empire of Oil draws attention to the material foundation of US imperialism and its geographic form. The United States often asserted global hegemony less by occupying entire countries than by controlling planetary webs of energy flows (Mitchell 2011; Moore 2015). The American Empire of Oil draws critical attention to this infrastructural project, and the particular places remade in the imperial production and distribution of cheap energy as a god-given right of Americans (Bond 2022).

of anthropological engagement that sought to change the course of history on a US territory in the Caribbean. These areas of engagement are less defined by an administrative accounting of “impact” than by what seemed to gain traction in the struggle at hand. Modest though my effort may be and with an outcome that can only be described as uncertain and ongoing, this research report nonetheless may provide some illumination of what might take to enlist anthropology more explicitly into larger projects of human liberation. Here, this means facing up to decades of environmental harm around one of the largest oil refineries in the world. The Hess/Hovensa/Limetree Refinery on St. Croix in the US Virgin Islands has undermined the livelihoods and landscapes of St. Croix for generations, from the violent dispossessions of small independent farmers that first welcomed the refinery in the 1960s to the extensive contamination of the islands soil and freshwater aquifers that now conspires against any easy return to self-sufficiency. More perversely, the resulting impoverishment of St. Croix naturalizes the refinery as the only viable economic lifeline on this modest Caribbean island. For many in the halls of power, the serial abuser stands as the only protection left against the coming turbulence. Alternative arrangements remain wishful thinking for local leaders and federal agencies alike.

For some residents, however, intensifying accidents at the refinery have pushed the island to a tipping point. After a series of operational failures at the refinery in early 2021, residents began to rise in unison demanding answers from local leaders and the EPA². Governor Albert Bryan downplayed the problems while federal officials opened one meeting by acknowledging how key the refinery is to «the economic health and well-being of the US Virgin Islands». Residents were having none of this, and interrupted the meeting with a litany of comments: «This refinery stands atop a long history of broken promises, why does anyone believe them now»? «The refinery is killing us, we need to get rid of it». «We can’t breathe. Shut down the refinery». «Shut the damn refinery down, its killing the people and the island». «There is no economic boost that will erase the environmental and health impact this refinery has made on St. Croix». «Fossil fuels are not the future». The Governor declined to respond directly to the outrage while the EPA promised to keep looking into the matter (while explaining how Covid-19 made travel to the island difficult for its investigative staff).

² Environmental Protection Agency.



Figure 1. The Hess/Hovensa/Limetree Refinery on St. Croix was once the largest oil refinery in the world (by Author).

Collaborating with frontline neighborhoods who have finally had enough of the refinery's constitutional disregard for the wellbeing of St. Croix, since 2019 I've been working with residents and local advocacy groups to publicize the damages done and mobilize people in demand of an economy that did not sacrifice their health on the altar of cheap gasoline on the mainland. That is, this project sought immediate amends for those injured by the refinery within an admittedly colonial structure of governance while also working to cultivate the possibility of life beyond empire. Such a project, in the estimation of this essay, requires holding applied anthropology and critical theory together despite their divergent orientations. This drawing together of "what is" and "what ought to be" in a single frame of anthropological analysis finds inspiration from collaborative research in medical anthropology (Farmer 2004), social movements (Hale 2006; Bernal, Grewal 2014), disaster capitalism (de Waal 2008; Adams 2013; Schuller, Maldonado 2016; Benadusi 2018), and recent calls to decolonize that center the ongoing destructive work of US Empire (Garcia, Velicu, D'Alisa 2017; Bonilla, LeBrón 2019; Garriga-López 2020). In conversation with such scholars, my project stands in opposition to trends that divvy up the task of reform and revolution into two diametric directions of anthropological practice.

These themes – the widening crisis at hand and the sundering of anthropological inquiry – have specific national dimensions, and it is a great honor and necessary practice to reflect on such themes in an open conversation that breeches the ramparts of methodological nationalism and insists on dialogue beyond borders. For better or worse, I write from within American Anthropology with the stated goal to overthrow American Empire, in theory and in practice. This task that can only be enriched by conversations and collaborations that transgress the myth of the exceptional nation.

Anthropology and Anti-Imperial Praxis

The charge that anthropology is complicity with empire is not new. «Anthropology is a child of Western imperialism», wrote Kathleen Gough in 1968 (12). The previous high water mark of this decolonizing ferment in American Anthropology rose in the 1970s and 80s. Whether by artificially severing its object from shared history or by methodically tuning out wider webs of extraction or by naturalizing colonial inscriptions of difference or by the insipid relevance of anthropological insights to militant anti-colonial movements, anthropology is complicit in formatting the world for imperial rule (Fabian 1983; Roseberry 1982; Magabune 1973). Two things might be recalled about this previous effort to decolonize anthropology: 1) the call to decolonize anthropology emerged from ethnographic encounters with colonialism in the material field of its operations and 2) this call carried the equal conviction that ethnography could be reformed of its colonial ways and transformed into a powerful weapon to aid the overthrow of empire. Today, the impulse to decolonize surges forward once more in American Anthropology. While this impulse helpfully calls the canon of anthropological theory to account regarding racism today and foregrounds questions of diversity in citational practice, it nonetheless can sometimes mistake ideological effect for imperial cause. The current call to decolonize often prioritizes the epistemic traces of colonial relations within disciplinary practices as the most pressing field of empire itself. The university may very well be the nerve center of colonial epistemologies, but to focus too narrowly on the discursive imprint of empire can leave the active material field of American Empire largely untouched (if not strengthened for the lack of scrutiny; see: al Bulushi, Ghosh, Tahir 2020; Khayyat 2022). American Empire exists in the present-tense, still authorizing the coercive extraction, exploitation, and extermination of life-worlds. Without neglecting all the decolonizing work that remains to be done on campuses and in classrooms, I would also like to put anthropology in the service of more worldly struggles against the material operations of the American Empire of Oil, as if our lives depended on it. Because they do.

This essay reflects on lessons learned in my ongoing efforts to put anthropology to work confronting American Empire in the field of its material operations. This revolves around three areas of anti-imperial interventions: 1) history of the present; 2) connecting the dots; 3) documenting the harm. Together, these interventions aim to pursue redress within a decidedly colonial structure while also building a more revolutionary case against empire itself.

History of the Present: Histories of the present can destabilize the imperial momentum of now and provide an alternative vocabulary of possibility. Empire saturates the present problems in St. Croix, and yet empire is exceedingly hard to name in polite conversation. The more official conversations about the crisis in St. Croix's take as their starting point the immense social need of the island. Inquiries into *how* the island became economically and ecologically impoverished rarely surface in the halls of power. Turning to a history of the present, my project works to destabilize this imperial amnesia by foregrounding the longer investments in colonial exceptions to the law that brought the refinery to St. Croix and authorized unbound environmental destruction as a minor cost of operating the largest refinery in the world. Such profitable destruction reduced the economy of the island to a single industry, and restricted the imaginations of governance to the gravitational pull of petro-prosperity. Beyond demonstrating the contingencies of such a formation, this history of the present also worked to resurrect an alternative vocabulary of political possibility from moments of peasant confrontation with the building of the refinery.

Connecting the Dots: Residents of St. Croix have been battered by the refinery for generations, yet so often the official register of those injuries separates each as a discrete and unrelated event. Whether in agricultural dispossession or groundwater contamination or collapsing fisheries or intensifying hurricanes, the negative ecologies of the refinery are parceled out into separate ledgers by state accounts. My project aims to link up and lift up what many on St. Croix intuitively know: the injuries are related. These are not unrelated incidents. For residents, experiences of dispossession, toxic exposure, and climate vulnerability form a single continuum of loss with one liable author: the American Empire of Oil. Ethnography can help stitch together such experiences into a more fulsome theory of empire, one that refuses the diminishment of state accounting and helps people themselves see the web of imperial forces at work in their lives. Such research not only provides a far richer empirical understanding of the contemporary than what is available within official categories, it also provides a roadmap for more fulsome confrontation with American Empire.

Document the harm: The refinery broke down catastrophically in early 2021, spewing clouds of petrochemicals and asphyxiating emissions into nearby neighborhoods. Yet the refinery continued to insist nothing was wrong, a line repeated by Governor Albert Bryan. The official insistence that nothing was awry (abetted by Covid-19 travel restrictions) delayed formal investigation by territorial agencies, the EPA, and even national journalists for months. Residents, desperate for assistance, reached out for help documenting the harms underway. This work, which was built around providing verifiable data to the urgent questions the community was asking, consisted of a fairly practical and straightforward research project: going door-to-door and collecting information about environmental and health impacts from the refinery in frontline neighborhoods. Yet it did three crucial things. One, the very fact that such a survey was happening provided an access point for national journalists unable to travel to St. Croix; two, the door-to-door survey brought (relatively well-off) community leaders into (relatively poor) frontline neighborhoods and their encounter with the still festering injustice sharpened their resolve and widened the coalition; three, providing practical analytic assistance to the community opened a door to an ethnographic field of the lived fallout of the refinery far richer than what would be accessible from a more detached position.

Together these three component parts – history of the present, connecting the dots, and documenting the harm – worked in concert to build a platform of insight, outrage, and radical possibility. They also made it possible to effectively insist on immediate remedies to the harm being done while never losing sight of the imperial structure that caused the harm and necessity of uprooting it. This work helped bring broad public enthusiasm for closing the refinery, which was announced a few days after we released the results of our neighborhood survey. (This is far from a victory though. The refinery filed for bankruptcy one day after we released the results of our community impact survey in July 2021, and one of the reasons listed was inability to pay for environmental damages. The damages are now documented, but hope for any reasonable assistance continues to dim.)

Public anthropology, within the scope of this project, is far more a method of critical praxis than a metric of academic contribution (Bourgeois 2006; Hale 2006; Checker, Vine, Wali 2010; Feldman, Brondo, Hyland 2021). Within the neoliberal university, public impact or the “third mission” is being introduced as an enlightened measure of scholarly excellence (and state funding) even as what is meant is often defined more in terms of market legibility than human emancipation (for example, see: Low, Merry 2010; Giofrè 2014; Anzivino, Ceravolo, Rostan 2021). While such metrics of impact encourage new pathways for the public to consume or compre-

hend the value of the university as an economic institution they can discourage making the resources of the university politically available to oppressed people. Science communication is celebrated alongside an entrepreneurial mining of university laboratories while efforts to put social research in the service of people's struggle against oppression are often met with disciplinary action. The right hand of academic freedom is given the king's sword while the left hand is shackled and silenced.

Such forces erode the institutional basis of scholarly explanation committed to political struggle at the very moment when the world seems desperate for cogent accounts of the upheavals underway. Curiously, working at a marginal private liberal arts college in the United States provides some measure of insulation from these neoliberal efforts to deflate the potency of scholarship. Yet this unfolds less from an administrative enthusiasm for a more radical alignment of scholarship with emancipatory politics than by their privileged indifference to the wider fields of policy orienting the academic practice today. At a place like Bennington College, my home institution, anthropology can be enlisted into a confrontation with the American Empire of Oil not because such a project aligns with administrative metrics of impact but because such critical praxis can unfold outside the diminishing expectations of knowledge production in the fulltime work of teaching relatively elite students. Perhaps it's at these exceptions to the neoliberal university that the radical potential of anthropology remains most promising.

A History of the Present

I first came to St. Croix in 2011, as a graduate student with only the vaguest of notions about what I was really after (and an even vaguer notion of how I'd know if I found it). It struck me as odd that the largest oil refinery in the world was located on this rather modest US Caribbean territory: the island of St. Croix is only about 45 km long and 8 km wide yet was home to a massive oil refinery that singlehandedly shaped national petroleum markets in the United States. This incongruity of being both very small and very big didn't yet strike me as imperially constructed, just curious. And so, for a few months in 2011, I lived on St. Croix trying to figure out if there might be enough material to build a dissertation around. Everything I found was fascinating, but at the time I didn't know how to deal with what I found: a brutal dispossession that paved the way for the refinery's arrival and the almost bland indifference of most people I spoke to regarding the refineries contemporary significance.

From the view of the archives, the refinery was a coup. In the windowless third floor of the Florence Williams Public Library in Christiansted, St. Croix, the negative images of newspaper microfiche projected the refinery as an unprecedented upheaval in the 1960s. The refinery changed everything. The arrival of the refinery in 1966 extinguished public investments in homestead agriculture, and violently stomped out the insurgent sparks of a peasantry dispossessed. Thousands of residents poured into the two cities in defense of agriculture, with some marches bringing over a quarter of the island's population onto the streets. But nothing could stop the refinery. Over the fierce protests of most and with barely concealed government corruption, the refinery usurped prime farmland to become the island's largest landowner and first author of the bureaucratic expansion and colonial exceptions of territorial governance. From the resulting perch of industrial monopoly and agricultural collapse, the refinery incited a profound crisis of unemployment while overflowing the state budget with tariff revenue. And soon the government started hiring its way out of the unemployment crisis as government offices proli-

ferated. The refinery, in other words, turned this Caribbean backwater of the United States into a paragon petro-state.

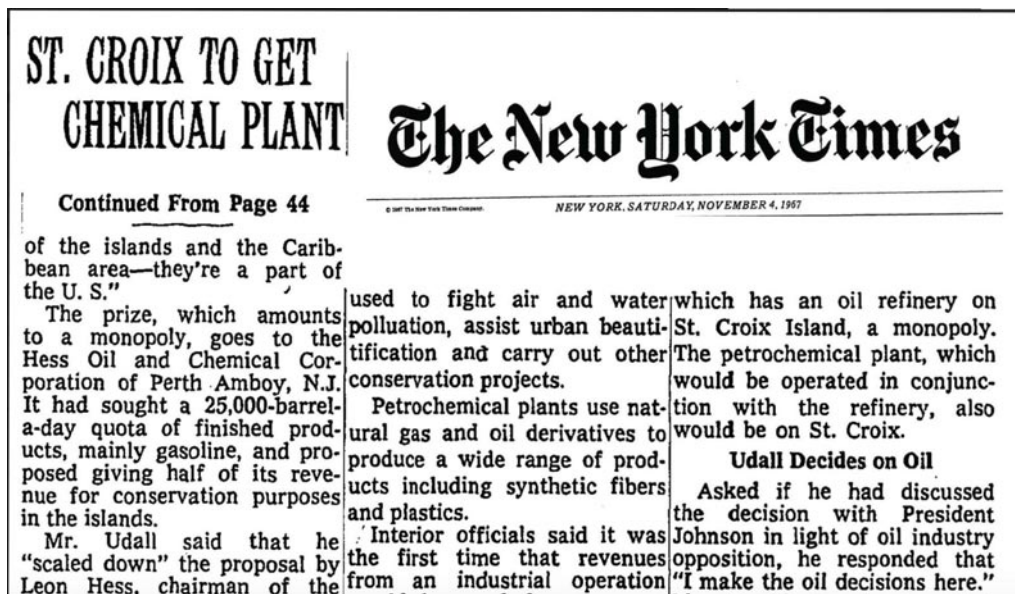


Figure 2. *New York Times* coverage of controversial Hess Refinery in St. Croix in 1967.

By 1970, the Hess Refinery gained the heavyweight title – largest refinery in the world – and was the primary conduit of cheap gasoline to the East Coast of the United States. Such a scale was achieved not in the broad daylight of state governance but by occupying the colonial shadows of the law. The US Supreme Court gave this shady relation a more memorable formulation in the Insular Cases: St. Croix was, they wrote, “Foreign in a domestic sense” (Burnett, Marshall 2001). Whether in formal exceptions granted US Territories or in the informal limits to regulatory oversight, Hess’s imperial profits were rooted in four areas of territorial deviations from federal rules: import quotas, federal taxes, labor law, and environmental oversight (Bond 2021). These negotiated exemptions map out an enduring contradiction of oil refining on St. Croix. The US Government invited Hess Oil to the Virgin Islands in the belief that oil refining could finally break from the colonial legacy of the plantation. Yet Hess Oil only came to St. Croix when new colonial exceptions to federal law were guaranteed. As the tremendous profits from this arrangement lined the pockets of shareholders and the territorial government, St. Croix became locked into a mercenary dependence on its own secondary status in relation to the mainland. The best pathway out of colonialism was more colonialism.

St. Croix was not alone in this imperial reformation into enclave oil refining in the Caribbean. In the latter half of the twentieth century, the American Empire of Oil fundamentally remade the Caribbean around the infrastructural needs and lucrative tax base of enclave oil refining. In 1955, roughly 90% of the petroleum consumed in the United States came from domestic sources. Twenty years later and over half of the gasoline, jet fuel, and heating oil consumed in the US came from foreign oil. This newfound dependence on foreign oil (and the supertankers

that delivered it) transformed the Caribbean into the premier refining hub of the eastern United States. Between 1950 and 1990, oil refineries became the largest site of capital investment in the Caribbean, a leading source of state revenue, and one of the region's largest employers, especially during the construction boom of new refineries in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This petro-boom renovated older refineries in Aruba, Curaçao, and Trinidad and built new entrepot refineries in Antigua, the Bahamas, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands and elsewhere. Accepting delivery of oil from the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America, these refineries only processed crude in one direction: north to US markets. By 1980, the Caribbean had become the world's largest exporter of refined petroleum products in the world, almost all of which went to the East Coast of the United States. By far, the crown jewel in this rising American empire of oil in the Caribbean was the Hess Refinery on St. Croix, USVI. The Caribbean found itself recast as an imperial outpost of the deepening American addiction to fossil fuels: close enough for the U.S. to monopolize the gain but far enough away to avoid any real responsibility for the problems³. "The Caribbean", wrote James wrote at the time (1963: 409), «is now an American sea».

The dispossession that oil refining brought to St. Croix was abundantly clear in the archive of local newspapers, speeches from the governor and others, and operating agreements with oil companies. Yet this history of the present – still within living memory – was largely absent in the daily life of St. Croix in 2011. At the end of each day, I packed up my notes, descended the stairs of the Florence Williams library, and as I set out into the streets of Christiansted it felt like I was crossing a border. If the refinery was an imperial coup in the archive of 50 years prior, it was hardly noticed in 2011. When I asked residents about their experience of colonialism, many began and ended their discussion with reference to slavery under Danish rule. Colonialism was back then. For most middle class residents, the refinery was a fuzzy place just over the hills on a part of the island few frequented. If out of sight, the refinery nonetheless existed as a feeling of progress propelling St. Croix into a good paying government job and the lifestyle of an ascending middle class. Other than a few old farmers at roadside stands (and a few former employees at the refinery), almost no one recalled the refineries violent arrival and even fewer people had a sense of its imperial placement within American conduits of cheap gasoline. But the refinery, as a structure more than an event, was widely felt to be the backdrop of everyone's prosperity. The majority of residents I spoke with on St. Croix had very little to say about the refinery other than polite suggestions that I might want to find something more interesting to study.

³ This offshoring of domestic oil refining to island ports on the margins of effective citizenship but adjacent shipping lanes is not restricted to the Caribbean. As Mara Benadusi (2018) demonstrates in haunting detail, similar logics are at work in the Mediterranean today. Augusta, Sicily is home to "one of the largest petrochemical poles in Europe", where 22 companies operate refineries and petrochemical plants designed to process crude oil from the Middle East and North Africa in a place designed to be simultaneously part of the European energy market and just beyond the full reach of environmental law (45).



Figure 3. The view of the Hess/Hovensa/Limetree Refinery through sugar plantation ruins on St. Croix (by Author).

The world's largest oil refinery, in other words, was hard to see. The oil-inflated consumer prosperity and generous government employment of St. Croix made it hard for many middle class residents to grasp the historic significance of the refinery. My research struggled to figure out how to tell the story of something that so many avoided facing squarely. Initially, I was convinced this difficulty posed something of an anthropological failure: how can ethnography grasp at an imperial presence that people themselves struggle to recognize? I'm now convinced that such difficulty is itself what Ann Stoler and Carole McGranahan (2007) call an "imperial formation". This is precisely how the American Empire of Oil operates, in the discombobulating overlay of big and small, near and far, domestic and foreign.

Unsure of how to write an anthropological account of the refinery, I found refuge in this curious history of the present instead. My first publication, *Oil in the Caribbean*, tried to situate entrepot oil refining in the making of the contemporary Caribbean (Bond 2017). It was not ethnographic in trying to transmit what particular people in a particular place know or say. But it was ethnographic in trying to excavate the imperial currents within which a particular people in a particular place are swimming. But not quite able to chart their own way through that current. It's also an article, that in a rather curious way, has gained a larger readership on St. Croix than in any academic community. A few months after I published it I started getting a steady stream of notes from residents. The essay, they said, had given them a new vocabulary to explain «the history they lived but never knew how to say». «I found myself in your history, this is the world that made me and yet I never been able to name it». «I've lived here my whole life and through every one of these changes, but I never understood what was really happening until I read your essay». Teachers assigned parts of this history in high schools and my essay anchored several

community discussions among island non-profits about the need to take responsibility for the present. In 2020, I was invited by a local newspaper to serialize the history for a wider audience, and I ended up publishing a six-part series in a local newspaper and discussing this history on several island radio shows (Bond 2021). This history found its most engaged audience in the very world it described. A local journalist told me, «I've lived here 30 years and I've never heard these stories. Where did that history go? ». And yet once the stories were resurrected, the journalist told me, everyone was talking about them. Residents recalled experiences long forgotten – experiences that never seemed to fit within the affluent aspirations of the island – and suddenly recognized such fragments as instrumental to how imperial history happened. One resident reached out for my shoulder during a chance encounter in the streets: «Thank you for teaching me the history I lived but never knew».

I start with this history – the history of my own research and the history of the refinery – not so much as a standard exposition within anthropological writing but because this history provided the crucial opening for a more engaged anthropology of the refinery. For it was from how this history became public that the refinery came into new focus for many residents, and became more accessible ethnographically. That is, this history helped destabilize the naturalized presence of the refinery on St. Croix, showing the refinery to instead stand at the apex of a wider imperial network of coercive agendas and accumulations. This history provided an account not only of what had led to the present, but also the alternative paths that had been bluntly stymied. And so much of the subsequent parts of this project came through the local credentials such a public history granted me. Whether in the steady stream of emails from people wanting to share their stories of being impacted by the refinery or in national newspapers calling with requests for background information on the refinery or in being granted a seat at the table at high-level government hearings about the fate of the refinery, my historical account of the refinery enabled a more collaborative, a more critical, and a more consequential anthropology of the refinery (e.g. Hale 2006). As I reflect on the lessons learned in this project, it becomes clear that prioritizing the historical contingency of the present helped construct a more vibrant ethnographic fieldsite within the mobilization for change and authorized an anthropology that could simultaneously seek immediate amends for specific injustices while also never losing sight of the imperial structures that authorized such injustices in the first place.

The presumed separation of past and present as distinct analytical projects can undercut the possibility of research that demonstrates the historical contingency of the present moment. Anthropology as a history of the present carries critical possibility to trip up the imperial momentum of now and provide an alternative vocabulary of possibility (Coronil 1997; Price 1998; and above all Stoler 2016; see also: Kleinberg, Scott, Wilder 2020). Yet I would be remiss to suggest that history brought about social change. So much of how residents of St. Croix turned to this history and what they in turn did with it rested on the sudden disastrous visibility of the refinery in St. Croix at the end of 2011.

Connecting the Dots

During the last month of my research in 2011, the refinery started breaking down in a fairly spectacular fashion. That summer a series of explosions rattled the neighborhoods around the refinery as black smoke draped the verdant landscape in what looked like tar-black cloaks. These operational failures brought new scrutiny to the facility. The EPA, with no staff on the island, had long deferred to the refinery's own accounting of its compliance with the law. When

the explosions compelled an independent accounting, EPA was horrified at what they found. Contamination, it turns out, was built into the design.

As one investigator explained to me, «Every pipeline carrying a saleable product was built above ground». Every pipeline that carried waste products was installed below ground. Comprised of six miles of cast iron pipeline, some up to 30 inches in diameter, the entire waste stream was buried in the salty sand. They started rusting almost immediately. In 1982, the refinery estimated 300,000 barrels of petrochemicals had leaked from these pipelines and formed a petrochemical slick some 2 meters thick floating on top of St. Croix's only freshwater aquifer. In the 1990s, construction workers on the south shore stood back in surprise as a geyser of crude oil shot out of the hole they were digging. They thought they'd hit it big until the dismal reality of the situation became clear: they had tapped into a shockingly large plume of petrochemicals flowing from the refinery. An internal investigation in 2001 revealed 95 percent of waste-stream pipelines were leaking and by 2005 the refinery concluded they were "deteriorated beyond repair". Yet the refinery continued to operate as if nothing was amiss. The poor neighborhoods that crowded the fence-line of the refinery complained for years of smells of diesel emanating from their basements. No one believed them. But when the EPA put monitors in a few basements, they were horrified: homes were routinely filled with dangerous levels of carcinogenic petrochemicals. For decades, the refinery routinely sacrificed public health on the altar of operational ease and corporate returns.

Facing potentially record-breaking fines for this liable history of disregard, the Hess Refinery agreed to settle with the EPA. The refinery agreed to pay a \$5.3 million dollar fine and in lieu of penalties committed \$700 million to extensive remediation, state-of-the-art pollution controls, and substantial investments in public health on St. Croix (including a cancer register to investigate residents' worst suspicions). At the time, this settlement was the largest on record for a refinery in the United States. After finalizing the settlement and promising the community it would clean the extensive contamination of the island, the Hess Refinery instead filed for bankruptcy in February 2012. 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 an economic 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. (The Florence Williams Library, which housed the archives I built my history of the refinery around, was significantly damaged). Ninety percent of all electrical transmission lines were destroyed and every public school was damaged beyond use. 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.



Figure 4. Damage to Hess/Hovensa/Limetree Refinery after Hurricane Maria (by Author).

Starkly aware of St. Croix's vulnerability to the rising superstorms of climate change, territorial leaders began to voice a new plan for the mothballed refinery: heavily subsidize the re-booting of the refinery in the hope of bending the fiscal properties of fossil fuels into new investments in climate resiliency. 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 breaking with the American Empire of Oil 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 climate catastrophe, but who else is still capable of paying the bills?

Such plans seemed wistful thinking until Donald Trump was elected President of the United States. Almost from the moment Trump took his office his Administration prioritized reopening this refinery. The territorial government facilitated the sale of the refinery with generous tax breaks and promises to absolve the new owners of any responsibility for the legacy of contamination. The restart of the refinery, according to recently disclosed internal EPA emails, received

“high visibility inside the beltway” in Washington, DC during the Trump Administration, which waved away outstanding penalties and indefinitely delayed previously mandated repairs (cited Bond 2020). Guidelines for reopening a shuttered refinery were tossed out while the refinery was given tremendous latitude to regulate its own emissions. Restarting the refinery, according to the EPA under Trump, would provide economic development that is «especially important for the recovery of the U.S. Virgin Islands in the aftermath of Hurricane Irma and Maria» (EPA 2017: 1).

These events – the abrupt closure of the refinery, the back-to-back category five hurricanes, and efforts to reboot the refinery to invest in climate resiliency – were lived as a continuum on St. Croix, yet most reporting on these issues separated them out as wholly distinct events. For many residents, the environmental injustice of the refinery and arrival of new superstorms were not unrelated events. They form a single continuum of fossil fueled disaster, a continuum that had to be broken if there was any chance of rebuilding with real hope. «From Hovensa [the refinery] to Maria, there has been a plan to keep us down. We got to seek justice together». «Oil sabotaged our island», a local farmer reflected on the last day, «And now it’s up to us to set things right». Talking over the present plight for several days, the moment felt both desperate and pregnant with possibility. Again and again, someone would interrupt long pauses in discussions about the immensity of the challenge with the same refrain: «We need justice». And justice started with calling the fossil fuel industry to account for both the rampant contamination of the island and its stark vulnerability to the rising storms of planetary instability. My second publication on the refinery, *After Oil* (Bond 2020), took these insights and stitched them together into a more operable theory of the problem: the disasters of contamination and climate change may have very different temporal and spatial coordinates, but they share one liable author, the American Empire of Oil. And it’s only by holding that empire accountable—by prosecuting the profiteers of destruction—that true justice can be found.

Clifford Geertz was once asked what contribution ethnography makes to theory. “Subtraction”, Geertz tartly replied. «Ethnography in the way of theory», is how João Biehl (2013: 573) summarized the point. Committed to a preferential option of lived locality, here the point of ethnography is to trip up every kind of generalized explanation. If anthropology has any critical purchase, the argument goes, it is in the repeated demonstration that people are always more than any theoretical account of them. And so much of American Anthropology has become inoculated against theory in this way. Yet such a stance neglects the way people themselves sometimes desire cogent explanations of what is happening to them, explanations that can provide analytic coherence to unfolding strands of experience and explanations that can bring the forces at work back down onto the field of contestation and change. Theory, too, can be a vital public good and one that seems especially urgent in times of disruption and distrust. We might distinguish theories whose claim to clarity comes through the distance they help scholars achieve from the world at hand and theories that help bring us – all of us, residents and scholars alike – closer to what is actually underway. And of the latter, anthropology might reconsider how ethnography can help author theories of what is happening to those beset by upheaval today: theories that can connect proliferating experiences of neglect with unwieldy structures of power, theories that can bring dysfunctional systems into tactical focus for people living in their shadows, theories that can call out the profiteering at work in the institutional neglect of human suffering today, theories that can shed light on the overlay of injustice and the shared ground of dissent, and theories that can equip people to stand together in the pursuit of a better world today. In moments of global upheaval, paranoid uncertainty, and skewed information, wrote

Wright Mills (1963:611), task of critical scholarship lies in «the maintenance of an adequate definition of reality».

My second essay on the refinery – *After Oil* (Bond 2020) – aimed to connect the dots of how people on St. Croix experienced rising environmental vulnerability by linking incidents of toxic exposure and superstorms to the American Empire of Oil. And again, it soon gained a larger readership in the community it described than within academic circles. But at this point, writing was not enough.

Documenting the Harm

In early 2021 just before President Biden was sworn in, the massive refinery on St. Croix sputtered back online. Community leaders and a team of young lawyers contacted me worried about the reopening of the refinery. And soon we were meeting weekly on Zoom to share information, requesting the EPA send staff to monitor the refinery, and reaching out to national advocacy groups and news organizations to see if they might be interested in covering the story. As the refinery reopened, we started hearing stories that bordered on apocalyptic: homes and farms coated in petrochemicals and emissions that sickened entire neighborhoods. Each week, we'd have a few new reports of harm, often several people removed from the actual experience. But we also were collecting folders of press releases and news reports full of official denials from the refinery.

During this time, I was teaching fulltime in Vermont – some 2,000 miles away – and it was hard to sort out what exactly was going on. Yet such distance became its own advantage: after I suggested Bennington College play a supporting role more than a leading role in lobbying for attention to the unfolding crisis, community partners shot back: «Bennington College has to play the lead role. Your distance from St. Croix keeps this project immune to local politics, and there will be tremendous pressure to stop us». Such warnings proved accurate, and a handful of early community partners had to withdraw from the project when their jobs were threatened over their involvement (many continued their support behind the scenes). I could speak a truth that those living it could not. We soon devised a structure that made my public statements accountable to a committee of community leaders but also encouraged me to speak boldly to the injustice underway. Bennington College administrators supported this work, and even as I suspect they didn't fully grasp its significance they never questioned my express intent to use my analytical training, my faculty position, and the status of the College itself to document and publicize a dire environmental injustice. As my involvement with such work grew exponentially in the spring of 2021, I pursued a number of potential sources of social science funding. This project made no sense to program officers at leading funding agencies. «There doesn't seem to be a meaningful contribution to anthropological theory». «What's to prevent residents from just doing this work themselves»? «If the refinery is already there, doesn't that suggest the community probably wants it there»? «These data gaps should be addressed by the refinery or the EPA, not social science». «Are the territories even eligible for federally supported grants»? Throughout, I was reminded of how far away St. Croix feels to many in the United States. So far, in fact, as to be almost unintelligible as a home to American citizens.

As the urgency of the disaster grew, external support to do something slipped away. Cut back to barebone necessities, the project was eventually funded with a mix of my own research budget, donations from island residents, my credit card, and promises from Bennington College to see what they could do afterwards. Conditions on the island continued to worsen, especially as

it became clear that required air monitoring systems were not working properly. But it was clear that if social research was going to help, the time was now.

After repeated requests to EPA for independent monitoring of emissions went unanswered, our weekly discussion group decided we had to do something more. We decided to set up a call line to start recording a few basic details about residential complaints (location, time, nature of complaint), with a promise to publicize what we learned from residents. And soon we amassed a modest but alarming database that suggested a serious pattern of harm. Neighborhoods downwind of the refinery complained of crude oil literally raining down on their homes while residents complained of emissions that made it hard to breathe. It also soon became clear that there was no independent monitoring of air quality on the island, and the limited data available was all from the refinery itself. We shared our preliminary findings with the EPA and asked them to please send independent air monitoring equipment and personnel to St. Croix. Hemming and hawing, the EPA said they would get back to us. Frustrated, we started reaching out to environmental reporters with our suspicions. And soon, *Inside Climate News* and the *Washington Post* expressed an interest in the story. Neither newspaper sent reporters to the island – Covid restricted the travel of their journalists – but through ongoing conversations with their reporters we were able to explain what was happening and connect them to local residents living the nightmare of the refinery. In March, both papers published their stories. “The Island Where it Rained Oil”, ran the *Washington Post* headline.

There were moments of trepidation. The company line – broadcast daily on every available channel – starts to seep into your consciousness and seeds preemptive doubt. The press releases from the refinery were crystal clear: nothing happened. All emissions were within health guidelines and all releases were «far below the level normally considered dangerous to health» (Limetree 2021). Embroidering corporate defense into a state mantle, for weeks the Governor acknowledged complaints but told reporters his environmental agency had no evidence of any foul emissions from the refinery and the hospital had no evidence of folks seeking medical assistance from emissions. «We ask for calmness to get to the facts, not innuendo», said Governor Bryan before wondering out loud if an open sewer might be responsible for the complaints (Borns 2021). Talking heads on radio and television and social media extended the tapestry even further, repeating the lack of any real proof of that the refinery had done anything wrong while hinting at a more nefarious conspiracy at work in the continental disrespect for Black jobs and the neo-colonialism of white environmentalism. Such comforting lies – in time, each of them would be proven willfully false – had been woven into an elaborate web that held out insulation from the reality at hand. The lies stitched together a luxurious robe that one could slip into and not feel a thing. Their calm repetition replacing the need to encounter the world directly.

With national coverage and an ongoing stream of complaints from residents, the EPA finally agreed to send staff to investigate the refinery in early May (some four months after the complaints started). On May 6th, an EPA on scene coordinator pulled his car over near the refinery and rolled down the window. «The odor I briefly encountered was overwhelming and nauseating» (EPA 2021b: 19). He felt sick immediately, and struggled with a “cloudy head” all day. «It was obvious to me the odor was emitting from Limetree [the refinery]» (EPA 2021b: 19). One week later, the EPA issued an executive order for an emergency 60 day shutdown of the refinery for posing «an imminent and substantial endangerment to public health» (EPA 2021a:1)

A subsequent EPA investigation found catastrophic operational failures at refinery that came distressingly close to a mass casualty event. 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 communities that surround the refinery (EPA 2021b:11). While apocalyptic firestorms may have been averted, the resulting petrochemical downpours poisoned the rain catchment systems that 50% of residents rely on for drinking water.

Asphyxiating emissions also became shockingly routine. As the refinery later admitted to the EPA, hydrogen sulfide levels exceeded the operating threshold of 162 parts per million (ppm) as a matter of routine, often by orders of magnitude. In late April, hydrogen sulfide levels skyrocketed to 91,649 ppm. Anything over 100 ppm is «immediately dangerous to the life or health of workers», according to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH 2021:1). ATSRD notes that «the respiratory tract and nervous system are the most sensitive targets of hydrogen sulfide toxicity» and that «just a few breaths of air containing high levels of hydrogen sulfide can cause death» (ATSRD 2016: 1).

Such murderous exceedances did not go unnoticed inside the refinery. As refinery officials watched hydrogen sulfide spike well beyond levels considered deadly, with alarming ease, refinery executives continued to lie to the public, issuing assurances that sulfurous smells were «far below the level normally considered dangerous to health» (Limetree 2021: 1).

Under toxic assault from January 2021 to May 2021, residents of St. Croix cried out for help to everyone they could think of. Residents complained to the refinery, to the territorial government, and to the EPA of debilitating headaches, severe vomiting, neurological impairments, and gardens shriveling up (injuries consistent with perilous levels of emissions). The fact that such gross negligence was allowed to continue unabated for so long are proof of American colonialism in the present tense. This is what the withholding of full citizenship looks like for communities of color. This is environmental racism.



Figure 5. Operational failures at Limetree Refinery release clouds of petrochemicals in spring 2021 (photo submitted by resident to Community Impact Survey project).



Figure 6. Malfunctioning flare at Limetree Refinery emitted smoke and droplets of crude oil in spring 2021 (photo submitted by resident to Community Impact Survey project).



Figure 7. Cloud of petrochemicals descends on daycare center in spring 2021 (photo submitted by resident to Community Impact Survey project).

With the refinery temporarily closed, the refinery, the territorial government, and the EPA were all focused on how the refinery might reopen. Many residents wanted to understand what had just happened to them. While the specific operational failures at the refinery was becoming clear, the full reach of the impacts on those living downwind of the refinery was not. And yet no one – not the refinery, not the territorial government, not the EPA – wanted to investigate or map the fallout. In part, I suspect, because they all were complicit in the delay in responding to the complaints of residents. But the community wanted to know.

In May, I agreed to work with local groups to help organize a community survey of the impacts from the refinery. At first, I tried to partner with a local university but it soon became clear the local university was beholden to the pro-refinery territorial government and worried they would face serious repercussions for such work. At one point, a community leader told me: «It's better if you organize the survey yourself. You are someone we all know but you come from outside. You won't be subject to the same harassment some of us would likely be». But such a plan posed its own ethical questions. As I told the community leader at that time, «For something like this to work, I do need to be accountable to people locally». And so we organized a core group with representatives from four non-profits and community groups on St. Croix that would help me organize and conduct the survey. At some points in the survey, we would stand together. At other points, they would ask me to voice the more direct critiques alone. There are very good reasons to collaborate with community groups on engaged research that bounds everyone to the same project and message, and sometimes there are very good collaborative reasons to also speak as a scholar apart from that collaboration. Perhaps too quickly we presume the ethics of critically engaged research is best decided in classrooms and journals prior to the political field of its unfolding.



Figure 8. Press conference announcing launch of Community Impact Survey on St. Croix, June 17, 2021.

In June and July, I spent several weeks in St. Croix working to collect and amplify what the community knew about the refinery's impact. Working with neighborhood groups near the refinery, we designed a survey to ask the community what had happened to them, and to pull together better data on the lived impacts of the refineries restart. This survey remains the only effort to investigate and document what happened to the community during the troubled restart of the refinery. As I said at the press conference launching this effort:

It is because of the cascading failures of oversight at the refinery that the burden of proof now falls to citizens themselves. It is beyond frustrating that it has come to this, but we will not shy away from the urgent task at hand: drawing together the rich insights of the community in order to advance a more honest accounting of refinery's impact on the environment and health of St. Croix. As is so often the case, the People know the Truth of what happened. And this survey is our effort to gather and amplify that Truth.

The temporality of action leaves little room for more scholarly reflections. During the survey, every day unfolded in a steady rush of immediate tasks to get the word out about the survey and to share early findings with consequential offices and media. There's something immensely refreshing about this work: each days ends in a complete exhaustion that easily identifies what exactly was accomplished. But so often it is a rush with little room for the kinds of open-ended reflexivity that mark anthropology as a vocation. We were trying to gather and publicize data that might change the course of what was unfolding. I don't consider such data ethnographic per se, but the act of collecting concrete information on impacts from the community opened up a vibrant ethnographic scene. It did so even as I was often so busy with the practicalities at hand I had trouble writing it all down. Each morning started well before dawn with a stream of emails updating EPA officials, territorial leaders, and national news organizations as to what we were finding on the ground. Most days also involved media interviews of some sort, and each day came with a new message to be crafted and then broadcast out consistently. As the national papers never actually sent reporters to St. Croix, many of those papers frequently requested local descriptions of what it looked like and felt like on the ground, and each national paper expected a unique and exclusive account. Around 10am, we often had a quick check-in with all the core team, sometimes drafting a quick letter to the EPA to request specific assistance, sometimes drafting a press release to share a preliminary finding, sometimes hosting an informal discussion with elected officials locally and in D.C., sometimes organizing a media event where we would be available for the local press.

Our goal, throughout, was to cultivate pressure on local and federal scales. Locally, we aimed to validate individual discontent with the refinery, helping stitch together disparate accounts of impacts into a social definition of the refinery's negligence that might orient a broader movement to demand change from below. Crucial to this work was cultivating bridges across fault-lines on the island, namely the commonality of impact that ignored longstanding divides of class and ethnicity on St. Croix. The fallout of the refinery touched a clear and present majority. We also worked to pressure federal agencies to demand change from above. The effort to compel the federal government to hold the refinery accountable involved building both external pressure (national and local media coverage of the lived impacts) and internal pressure (letters to congressional committees and various EPA offices formally requesting their attention to uncovered negligence at the refinery). This was the morning work. By lunch, we split into teams and headed into the community with the survey itself.

We went door-to-door in neighborhoods downwind of the refinery, where people welcomed into their homes with an exasperated line about how long it took for someone to come asking about the refinery. As Pierre Bourdieu (2003: 15) once remarked during his research in Algeria as French colonial rule began to crumble, Algerians only found one topic worthy of study: “their current suffering”. Bourdieu reflected on the critical urgency for anthropology to aim at “publicizing the living conditions of the Algerian people” at that time. «In a revolutionary situation, these are the issues which carry weight since everyone know that to describe is to denounce». Such a point is a far cry from what some anthropologists have criticized as “damage-based research” (Tuck 2009; see also Robbins 2013) an almost a priori refusal of anthropology to traffic in descriptions of suffering for reasons that may be theoretically astute but nonetheless fall politically flat in moments when communities are desperate for the world to recognize their injustice so that something might be done about it. In certain moments, the immediacy of injustice finds people eager to share what is happening to them. And when the state turns its back on what is happening, anthropology can play a crucial role in gathering the insights of a community and amplifying it into public discourse.



Figure 9. Gathering community insight on impact of refinery outside grocery store in St. Croix, June 2021 (by Author).

As we went door-to-door in neighborhoods around the refinery, many residents told us they had been expecting a more official visit for months. They were waiting to tell their stories. We also set up survey booths outside grocery stores and soon found ourselves with a line of people waiting to tell us what they knew. We were astounded at the efforts people made to tell their stories. And at the immense scale of injustice that their stories started to color in. A daycare pro-

vider described that morning when white smoke rolled like a thick fog out of the refinery and settled on her street, screaming to get the kids inside and then desperate attempts to seal the windows with tape while children coughed and gasped for breath. She called the refinery, begged them to stop. Begged them for help. They said nothing was amiss. She said I can see the smoke coming from the refinery. The refinery said what clouds?

With 26 questions about how the refinery impacted residents homes and health, our survey gathered 681 responses from 120 different neighborhoods on St. Croix. This survey documented serious medical and environmental impacts from the refinery in just about every neighborhood to the north and west of the refinery. Some 20,000 people live downwind of the refinery.

While the data we collected alarming, the stories shared document horrors that numbers struggle to capture. 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. Parents, overwhelmed by the smell of gas and rising to check their stove only to fall flat on their faces overtaken by the fumes. Gardens and fruits trees scorched by whatever was in the air. Petrochemical rains that proved fatal for beloved pets and farm animals. Men, collapsing at work sites when clouds of emissions from the refinery overtook them, now months later still unable to walk let alone work. Individuals, in voices still raspy from the pain, trying to describe the night the air burned their throats and lungs.

Construction workers near the refinery 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 desperate search of air. Many did thought they would not make it. One told me, «it felt like my nervous system was being eaten from the inside out».

Again and again, we've heard stories of Black and Brown families struggling to breathe. One of our survey questions asked how frequently people struggled to breath with the refinery was coming online? Once a day, once a week, once a month, rarely, or never. In most neighborhoods downwind of the refinery, the overwhelming response was "once a day". Some families abandoned their homes, and slept in crowded cars for weeks so they could get upwind of the refinery and breath again.

For those with underlying respiratory issues like asthma or lung cancer, it was even worse. Some have shared stories of desperately struggling to catch a breath and unable to call out for help as their throats burned with sulphurous emissions, terrified they would not make it through the night. Workers recounted a cloud that looked like gasoline vapors shimmering in the tropical air, a thing of curious beauty until the asphyxiation took hold. Workers described crawling off job sites on their hands and knees, desperate for fresh air. Others talked about chemical emissions that tasted almost sweet, until you couldn't taste or smell anything at all.

We documented stories of the ER packed with people during the worst emission episodes at the refinery, of nurses describing the general affliction as "refinery" even as territorial agencies refused to acknowledge a single victim let alone a significant medical crisis.

We also collected stories of at least three tragic deaths that surviving family and friends ascribe to unchecked emissions from refinery.

Stepping back, a horrifying portrait of environmental racism came into focus. Among the citizens we spoke to there was a widespread sentiment: these Black and Brown communities felt under assault by refineries environmental negligence and abandoned by government agencies tasked with protecting their health. We are starting to see just how criminal the assault on public health and the environment has been. Moreover, we invited community leaders to join us going

door-to-door. Many of these leaders had not experienced the fallout from the refinery directly, and carried small doubts about how severe it had actually been. One day in the frontline neighborhoods extinguished any doubts, and their volunteer work with our survey helped convince them of the immensity of the injustice, and catalyzed their outrage and demands for immediate assistance and long-term transformation.



Figure 10. Community leaders and residents collaborate to get Community Impact Survey out to all impacted neighborhoods on St. Croix (by Author).

By design, we released our preliminary findings one week before the EPA's temporary order shutting down the refinery expired. We wanted our findings to be present when EPA decided whether to continue the shutdown or to allow the refinery to resume operation. And we organized a call with the top EPA officials who would be making that decision to share our findings. The day after we released our preliminary findings of extensive environmental and health damages in every neighborhood downwind of the refinery, the refinery announced it was filing for bankruptcy due to the potential liability of environmental concerns and over its current inability to raise money. While this decision came as an immense relief to many in the community, it also carried its own frustrations. Not only would there be immediate layoffs at the refinery, but bankruptcy meant the refinery would avoid cleaning up its mess, effectively leaving hundreds of homes and farms still contaminated with petrochemicals and many residents sick without recourse to medical aid. In a bankruptcy court in the United States, claims for environmental redress go at the very bottom of the list of priorities during financial restructuring. Bankruptcy courts privilege speculative economics over sustained injuries and only shareholders have debts

worth repaying. Lawyers for the refinery continue to work to ensure an endless deferral of any serious reckoning with the damages inflicted on St. Croix.

We released our final survey results a few months later, and built a website to showcase our findings⁴. Armed with this data, national newspapers picked up the story once again and kept the issue in national conversations throughout the fall of 2021.

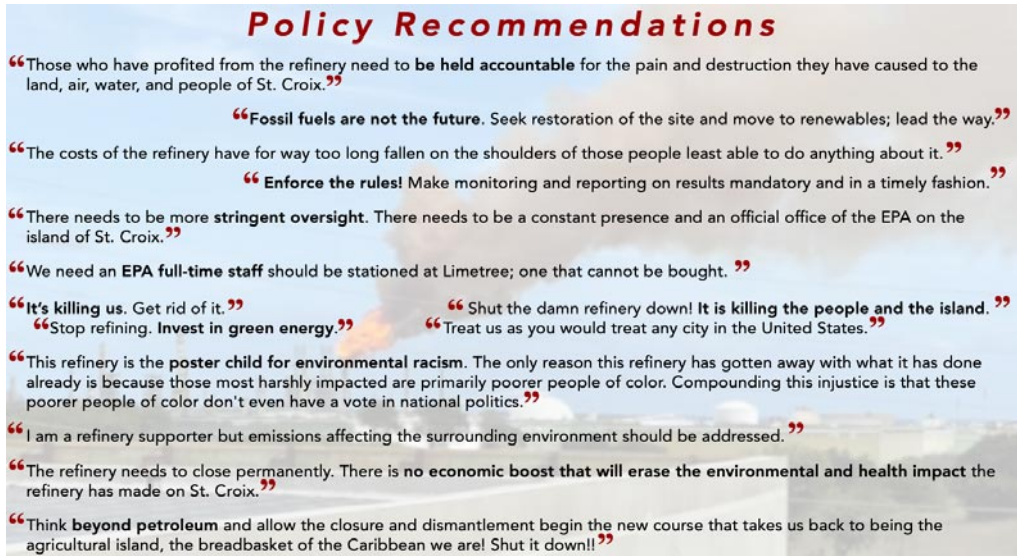


Figure 11. Survey Results: Amplifying community insights about the refinery and future of St. Croix.

The refinery filed for bankruptcy in Houston, which is a very friendly court to the fossil fuel industry. On the first day of the bankruptcy hearings this fall, the judge announced his mission to bring everyone together to “save a refinery”. And throughout much of the bankruptcy proceedings, the Governor of the Virgin Islands hired an ad agency to publicize the refinery as the best deal in the fossil fuel industry, while promising to waive away any outstanding environmental liability from previous accidents. History repeats itself. 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 survive the upheavals underway (including the recent environmental racism of the refinery) we must absolve and subsidize the very industry that led us into this crisis. The Governor continues to plead with the EPA to withdraw concerns and expedite the reopening of the refinery (now repackaged as the only fiscal engine of environmental justice in the colonies): «The refinery is a key element to the economic sustainability of the Territory and that element should be part of environmental justice considerations for the US Citizens resident in the Territory» (Bryan 2022: 1). Profits, not people, will save us in the end.

⁴ www.bennington.edu/Limetree.

Residents are having none of this. And even as historical patterns of abuse seem cyclical, something is beginning to change. The negligence of this refinery is nothing new. Yet many have reached a tipping point in their outrage. In response to the reckless disregard at the refinery, Black and Brown communities on St Croix are joining together for the first time to demand accountability and justice. They are demanding the refinery fund the clean-up of their homes and farms and pay for medical assistance. But they also are aware that real justice will only come when the island breaks with the refinery in a more substantive manner. Talk of revolution hangs in the air, and seems imminently practical. Radical transformation is the only thing that will save this island. Residents continue to organize. They rise in their demand to hold the refinery accountable for its profitable destruction of their homes and their insistence that the tremendous debt owed be used to build a more sustainable foundation for their island.

As the refinery emerges from bankruptcy court in late 2021, it once again prepares to reopen helmed by either an American online payday lender or a Jamaican retail gasoline company. Neither has any experience in oil refining and both have ongoing charges against them for using the shady territorial status of US Empire to their illicit advantage. And both are currently making the rounds in Washington DC, lobbying the EPA to waive away previous negligence and permit operations outside of existing guidelines. Unregulated oil refining, they argue, offers the only real path to prosperity in this beleaguered US Caribbean territory. The work remains.

Anthropology in an Age of Upheaval

How can anthropology confront American Empire in the field of its material operations? How can ethnography provide practical assistance to those living in the environmental disregard of American imperialism while also working towards the overthrow of that colonial structure? This paper has reflected on three conjoined areas of potential anti-imperial interventions in anthropological practice: 1) history of the present; 2) connecting the dots; 3) documenting the harm. Together, these interventions provide a way to pursue vital redress within a decidedly colonial structure while also building a case against the empire itself. Reflecting on these themes, this paper offered one case where anthropology helped bring visibility, outrage, and change to longstanding environmental problems. In the summer of 2021, this project published a public history of the refinery, published a public account of the negative ecologies of the refinery today, and, conducted a survey of the lived impacts of the refinery. These activities helped bring longstanding negligence and widespread suffering into unflattering public light. This paper has reflected on the lessons of this work for public anthropology, and reflects on how the two orientations of this project – critical theory of US Empire and practical assistance for those injured by the refinery – might be brought into renewed conversation in this dawning age of climactic upheaval.

«The first and only radical question of the [colonial] system is that which the [colonial] system itself generates, namely revolution against the principles on which it is based», wrote Pierre Bourdieu (1963: 14). Ethnography had much to offer alongside and in amplification of the revolutions already underway.

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