

# What the Petro-state Does Do: Power in the Caribbean After 1973

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On 28 April 2025, the United National Congress (UNC) prevailed in the Trinidad and Tobago general election with a decisive return of twenty-six seats to the incumbent People's National Movement's thirteen. The election marked a comeback of sorts for UNC political leader Kamla Persad-Bissessar, who returned to the Office of the Prime Minister after ten years of PNM rule under Keith Rowley and his hand-picked replacement, Stuart Young.

Her comeback story, though, marked an about face from her debut campaign in 2010. Fifteen years earlier, Persad-Bissessar emulated the liberal multiculturalism of Barack Obama by forging a People's Partnership coalition government with the center-left Congress of the People, trade union-affiliated Movement for Social Justice, Tobago Organisation of the People, and Black Power outfit National Joint Action Committee. In 2025, however, she borrowed instead from the political playbook of Donald Trump and his acolytes. In the months prior to national elections, Persad-Bissessar denounced the rise of a "woke, extreme left-wing agenda" that she attributed to the US political landscape under the tenure of President Joe Biden.<sup>1</sup> On the home front, Persad-Bissessar pledged to act swiftly against all illegal Venezuelan migrants by "deport[ing] every one of them to their homeland by any means necessary" and advocated for

1 Dareece Polo, "Kamla Says Previous US Administration a Disaster; Blames Woke Agenda for Defeat," *Trinidad and Tobago Guardian*, 21 January 2025, [www.guardian.co.tt/news/kamla-says-previous-us-administration-a-disaster-blames-woke-agenda-for-defeat-6.2.2212534.cf56215ae9](http://www.guardian.co.tt/news/kamla-says-previous-us-administration-a-disaster-blames-woke-agenda-for-defeat-6.2.2212534.cf56215ae9).

the adoption of stand-your-ground legislation as a remedy for violent crime and insecurity.<sup>2</sup> On the latter issue, she controversially riffed on a popular “Trinidad” dancehall anthem by the late K Lion at a UNC rally in San Fernando, where she encouraged supporters to “load up the ’matic (automatic), pull it back, and knock it on them, and then knock it again when the criminals coming through your door!”<sup>3</sup>

The UNC victory confirmed the popular purchase of her authoritarian gestures with pivotal segments of the electorate. It also reflected a broad disenchantment with the policies of her predecessor, Rowley, and the PNM. Though the PNM embraced a narrative of fiscal restraint to navigate the uncertainty of declining oil and gas production, Trinbagonian working people were made to bear the brunt of this fiscal burden through cutbacks to food and fuel subsidies and the shuttering of the state-owned Pointe-A-Pierre refinery in 2018. During his ten years as prime minister, Rowley had forecasted relief in the form of Venezuelan “Dragon gas” reserves located on its maritime border with Trinidad and Tobago. The commercial viability of the Dragon deepwater fields (operated by Shell) hinged on a special license from the US Office of Foreign Assets Control issued under President Biden that would permit Trinidad to transport and monetize the Venezuelan gas reserves via a subsea tieback pipeline. Where the Biden administration permitted an exception to its sanctions against the Bolivarian Republic, however, Rowley feared Biden’s successor would not. As I put it in an earlier essay on the 2025 general election in Trinidad and Tobago:

Days before formally resigning and turning the Office of the Prime Minister over to Young in March 2025, Rowley shared a parting word of paternal concern: “If you see us losing that OFAC (US Office of Foreign Assets Control) license, as you will see in the news if that happens, then you know that your ‘coo coo is cooked.’” Young’s turn at the helm of Rowley’s Dragon masquerade ended prematurely when Trump and his own deputy, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio, did indeed revoke the lucrative OFAC license. Their dragon costume had come apart at the seams.<sup>4</sup>

The end of Rowley and Young’s Dragon mas did not bring an end to the masquerade of the petro-state, however. Instead, in one of the first acts of her second term as prime minister, Persad-Bissessar announced the award of a lease to ExxonMobil for deepwater exploration off Trinidad’s east coast. The exploration area, adjacent to Trinidad’s maritime border with Guyana, fueled speculation that the US multinational could replicate the success of its Guyanese deepwater program, which accounts for discoveries of more than eleven billion barrels of crude oil equivalent. Even in the event of a commercial find, however, production would not begin until well after Persad-Bissessar’s five-year term. Furthermore, the exact terms of the product sharing contract with ExxonMobil, including profit-sharing and royalty payments,

<sup>2</sup> “Kamla: ‘Deport Every Illegal Venezuelan Migrant,’” *Trinidad Express*, 26 November 2024, [trinidadexpress.com/newsextra/kamla-deport-every-illegal-venezuelan-migrant/article\\_a156580e-ac18-11ef-aef1-d3f5c400a8b3.html](https://www.trinidadexpress.com/newsextra/kamla-deport-every-illegal-venezuelan-migrant/article_a156580e-ac18-11ef-aef1-d3f5c400a8b3.html).

<sup>3</sup> “Kamla Unapologetic! . . . Says Load Up the ‘Matic,” *Trinidad and Tobago Guardian*, 3 August 2023, [www.guardian.co.tt/news/kamla-unapologetic—says-load-up-the-matic-6.2.1768196.e9a5f72d3c](https://www.guardian.co.tt/news/kamla-unapologetic—says-load-up-the-matic-6.2.1768196.e9a5f72d3c).

<sup>4</sup> Ryan Cecil Jobson, “Red Wedding: Trinidad and Tobago After Keith Rowley,” *Clash! Voices for a Caribbean Federation from Below*, 6 May 2025, [medium.com/clash-voices-for-a-caribbean-federation-from-below/red-wedding-trinidad-and-tobago-after-keith-rowley-097023d91602](https://medium.com/clash-voices-for-a-caribbean-federation-from-below/red-wedding-trinidad-and-tobago-after-keith-rowley-097023d91602).

were not made public. Instead, the prime minister confidently declared, “Today, we also send a clear message: TT’s energy sector is open for business.”<sup>5</sup> If, as Brent Crosson reasons, Guyana constituted a “far more appealing regional ‘partner’ [for ExxonMobil] than Trinidad,” in a matter of months the realignment of hemispheric geopolitics had confirmed the opposite to be true.<sup>6</sup>

## Deepwater Horizons

The continuity of this deepwater extractive horizon from Persad-Bissessar to Rowley and back again serves as an instructive postscript to my historical ethnography of the Trinbagonian petro-state in *The Petro-state Masquerade: Oil, Sovereignty, and Power in Trinidad and Tobago*.<sup>7</sup> Crosson, in his essay here, is correct that the term *petro-state* is historically deployed as a pejorative by North Atlantic diplomats and financiers. Indeed, when countries outside the proverbial borders of the West are identified as petro-states, it often coincides with the imposition of structural adjustment policies or economic sanctions. It is associated, in these circles, with corruption, authoritarianism, and an incapacity for self-government. And, contrary to Crosson’s contention that this term never extends to the United States as a net exporter of oil and gas, this designation is even used by liberal commentators to measure the erosion of constitutional democracy under the second Trump presidency. As the opening line of a recent commentary entitled, “Welcome to the American petrostate,” reads: “The United States is now a failed Democratic state.”<sup>8</sup> This christening of the US petro-state (and the breakdown of its ersatz democracy) is belated at best.

Rather than debate the merits of this commentary, however, I take this opportunity to trace another genealogy of the petro-state that, to my mind, is far more pertinent for the contemporary Caribbean. Indeed, one of the tasks of my book is to demonstrate how the petro-state emerges not only as a disciplinary technology but as a normative aspiration for postcolonial nation-states, in particular. As Laleh Khalili reminds us, these dual trajectories were birthed from the zeitgeist of the 1973 OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) embargo that simultaneously generated a campaign by “North Atlantic countries to portray OPEC as the villain holding the world to ransom” and the outline of a world in which “[oil-producing] countries would control pricing and volumes of oil extracted and sold, thus giving them sovereignty over their natural resources.”<sup>9</sup> Despite the wave of nationalizations, this sovereignty over natural resources has not translated into the anticipated freedoms for

5 Janelle De Souza, “\$300m to Explore Trinidad and Tobago Deepwaters—Government Pins High Hopes on Exxon Deal,” *Trinidad and Tobago Newsday*, 13 August 2025, [newsday.co.tt/2025/08/13/300m-to-explore-trinidad-and-tobago-deepwaters-government-pins-high-hopes-on-exxon-deal](https://newsday.co.tt/2025/08/13/300m-to-explore-trinidad-and-tobago-deepwaters-government-pins-high-hopes-on-exxon-deal).

6 J. Brent Crosson, “What Is a Petro-state? Masking and Unmasking Power in a Fossil-Fueled World,” this issue of *Small Axe*, 152.

7 Ryan Cecil Jobson, *The Petro-state Masquerade: Oil, Sovereignty, and Power in Trinidad and Tobago* (University of Chicago Press, 2024). Hereafter cited in the text.

8 Michael E. Mann, “Welcome to the American Petrostate,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 7 November 2024, [thebulletin.org/2024/11/welcome-to-the-american-petrostate](https://thebulletin.org/2024/11/welcome-to-the-american-petrostate).

9 Laleh Khalili, *Extractive Capitalism: How Commodities and Cronyism Drive the Global Economy* (Verso, 2025), 35, 10.

working people in the formerly colonized world. Yet even as petroleum failed to make good on the promise of postcolonial sovereignty, this incomplete project of sovereignty remains beholden to an imagined future in which more benevolent rulers will distribute the spoils of the petro-state more equitably and responsibly.

This fantasy of the petro-state as a limitless reserve of national patrimony spawned by OPEC recurs in the everyday talk of Trinbagonians. As a friend once relayed to me in a conversation at Gulf City Mall in San Fernando in 2015: “Ryan, we could be *Dubai!*” To be clear, her Dubai was one of untold opulence, extricated from sordid accounts of Emirati authoritarianism and human rights violations that the pejorative rendering of the petro-state connotes. Crucially, as the anthropologist Sarah Shaer observes, both images of Dubai rest on crude simplifications of the Emirates’ political landscape in which noncitizen residents’ critiques “of rulership practices in the UAE [are] set against the ideal of a particular form of care in rulership and informed by the perception of its failed promise.”<sup>10</sup> Even a quintessential petro-state like the United Arab Emirates, it appears, is not consistent with what its noncitizen residents imagine or desire it to be. Instead, it is an ordinary geography in which capital abounds but is minimally accessible to migrant laboring classes only under the most precarious of conditions.<sup>11</sup> Under closer scrutiny, Dubai does not conform exactly to the image of unabashed luxury *or* resource curse. Not even Dubai is *Dubai*.

It is this lack of stable definition that compels my turn toward the petro-state as a masquerade rather than a set of measurable features or indices. Again, this masquerade does not sit in contrast to an unadulterated real that looms behind its performance. From Guy Debord and the Situationist International to the practitioners of obeah discussed in Crosson’s own work, we are reminded that the substance of the real is not self-evident or transparent.<sup>12</sup> If we follow their lead, we should treat our lived reality as suspect—colonized as it is by mediated spectacles of mass culture and artificial intelligence. But we must remain skeptical, too, of our capacity to liberate our world from the spectacle and unmask a hidden reality for precisely what it is.

In short, the charge of *The Petro-state Masquerade* is not to define what the petro-state is but the work it *does*. To regard this repertoire of state effects as a masquerade does not mean it is lacking in material and ideological consequence. Anyone who has played mas on the streets of Port of Spain or San Fernando can attest to the real power of the masquerade. On this matter I concur with Crosson himself when he describes elsewhere his own intellectual project as one “less interested in what Obeah is and more concerned with (to use the words

10 Sarah Shaer, “Embeddedness in the Field: Navigating Familiarity,” in Suad Joseph, et al., eds., *The Politics of Engaged Gender Research in the Arab Region: Feminist Fieldwork and the Production of Knowledge* (Bloomsbury, 2022), 192.

11 In this brief reflection on Dubai as an ordinary geography, I think of the late Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s polemic against Haitian exceptionalism in Caribbean Studies. See Michel-Rolph Trouillot, “The Odd and the Ordinary: Haiti, the Caribbean, and the World,” *Cimarrón* 2, no. 3 (1990): 3–13.

12 See, for example, Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Black and Red, 1983); and J. Brent Crosson, *Experiments with Power: Obeah and the Remaking of Religion in Trinidad* (University of Chicago Press, 2020).

of the Rio Moro protest song) ‘what Obeah does do.’”<sup>13</sup> Not unlike Obeah as a technology of supernatural power, the ethical arc of the petro-state does not inherently serve healing or harm. And, certainly, harm for some may represent justice for others. To this end, we cannot unveil the deception of the petro-state masquerade in service of objective reality since there is no objective reality that rests behind the mask of the state. Rather it is to apprehend the contours of this masquerade such that ordinary people may devise masquerades of their own, masquerades that hold the power to conjure political practice anew.

As the saga of Trinidad’s deepwater exploration makes clear, the petro-state continues to generate material effects even in the absence of renewed oil and gas production. For Persad-Bissessar, it is the expectation of future prosperity in the form of ExxonMobil ultradeepwater leases that authorizes her performances of warmongering and xenophobia in the present. That Trinbagonian working people are compelled to underwrite this performance through the winding back of fuel subsidies, the retrenchment of public sector jobs, and the burden of inflated food prices is less an inevitable outcome of the national economy than a testament to the success of Persad-Bissessar’s masquerade, for the moment at least. Here, again, the petro-state is not a stable object but a semiotic register that can be called on to legitimate sovereign violence in the form of militarized police, propertied vigilantes, and economic abandonment. In this latest instance, Persad-Bissessar’s ignoble brand of authoritarian populism is staked to the future windfall she claims from ExxonMobil’s exploratory wells approximately three hundred kilometers off Trinidad’s east coast.

This is one moment where the fusion of state and corporate interests comes into view, just as Chelsea Schields’s masterful synthesis nudges me to consider “the theatricality of the corporate regime” that subtends the Trinbagonian state’s masquerade of permanence.<sup>14</sup> The success of this masquerade, then, rests on strategic alignments with the profit-driven ambitions of multinational oil companies. If an idealized rendering of the state as a counterweight to corporate interests persists, we should heed Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s caution that “if the state is indeed a set of practices and processes and their effects as much as a way to look at them, we need to track down these practices, processes, and effects whether or not they coalesce around the central sites of national governments.”<sup>15</sup> In my account, an inquiry into the state’s effects certainly cannot be reduced to the mechanics of national governments alone. This is precisely why my historical ethnography of the petro-state is equally alert to multinational corporate offices, petroleum engineers, geologists, joint press briefings, and private sector consultants as it is government ministers, politicians, and planners. As I detail in chapter 3 of *The Petro-state Masquerade*, it is at moments when the compacts between governments and corporations are threatened that the full contours of the petro-state masquerade appear.

13 J. Brent Crosson, “What Obeah Does Do: Healing, Harm, and the Limits of Religion,” *Journal of Africana Religions* 3, no. 2 (2015): 156.

14 Chelsea Schields, “Dual Power,” this issue of *Small Axe*, 163.

15 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, “The Anthropology of the State in the Age of Globalization: Close Encounters of the Deceptive Kind,” *Current Anthropology* 42, no. 1 (2001): 131.

For instance, only when the Australian multinational BHP (now Woodside Energy) considered rolling back its investments in the Trinidad deepwater did then prime minister Rowley admit Trinidad and Tobago's "danger of being left out" amid the former's corporate restructuring. As Rowley let slip in a moment of rare vulnerability, the power of the Trinbagonian state emanates from Melbourne (and London, Houston, and Madrid) as much as Port of Spain.

The perception of the state as independent of the corporation is not inconsequential, however. Consider the Highway Re-Route Movement protest opposite the Office of the Prime Minister that appears in chapter 5. Those familiar with this stretch of St. Clair Avenue in Port of Spain will know that directing our protest toward the prime minister required us to physically turn our backs on the headquarters of British Gas (now the Shell Energy House) just two hundred meters due east. While this protest was pitted against public works projects funded by energy revenues (and not against the energy sector itself), Schields encourages us to consider what a more capacious fashioning of the people's masquerade might look like. When such corporate offices recede quietly into corners of the Port of Spain cityscape, it permits multinationals' profits and the details of their agreements with Trinbagonian governments to proceed without comment. For instance, when the full terms of the recent ExxonMobil product-sharing contract were not immediately made public, it allowed the mere signing of an agreement to masquerade as windfall petrodollars. If, as I argue, the petro-state masquerade depends on the unquestioned stability of its corporate partners, we should ask what sorts of tactics would unsettle this conspicuous intimacy between state and corporate actors in policy and built environment? How might Trinbagonians occupy this space in between the state and corporation—quite literally, along St. Clair Avenue—as a basis of mass politics?

Schields, moreover, encourages me to clarify whether such "attachments to fossil fuels [are] purely an animating myth of the state."<sup>16</sup> Certainly, if we take the fantasy of Trinidad qua Dubai as any indication, this animating myth pervades beyond the boundaries of government houses and bureaucracies. As I rehearse in this essay, large swaths of the Trinbagonian political class and public regard the nation's reputation as a petro-state uniformly as a divine blessing rather than a developmental curse. This is shared by their counterparts elsewhere in the region, where Guyana and Suriname have stridently pursued offshore oil investments to enormous success, subsequently financing public works megaprojects and dispensing one-time cash payments to citizens. In St. Croix, Aruba, and Curaçao, nostalgic attachments to the relative prosperity and masculine work regimes of oil refining endure.<sup>17</sup> Elsewhere, offshore exploration programs in The Bahamas, Barbados, Grenada, and Jamaica suggest that many more

16 Schields, "Dual Power," 164.

17 On this point, we are indebted to Schields's definitive study of the gendered politics of labor and oil in Aruba and Curaçao and David Bond's extensive writings on the Limetree Bay oil refinery in St. Croix. See Chelsea Schields, *Offshore Attachments: Oil and Intimacy in the Caribbean* (University of California Press, 2023); and David Bond, "Disfigured Commons: Profit and Pollution in the American Empire of Oil," *Social Analysis* 68, no. 2 (2024): 21–43.

are eager to join the pantheon of oil-producing nations.<sup>18</sup> In the Caribbean, the petro-state overwhelmingly remains an object of desire rather than revulsion.

## A Petro-state Is a World

Against this backdrop, it becomes clear that this normative aspiration can hardly be limited to petroleum-exporting territories. Rather, the petro-state masquerade recurs even in contexts where upstream production is in decline (Trinidad and Tobago), where refineries have been shuttered (Aruba, Curaçao, St. Croix), and where major offshore hydrocarbon discoveries remain a distant, almost mythical prospect (The Bahamas, Barbados, Grenada, Jamaica). Today this masquerade draws its power from the deepwater success of Guyana, after which political elites across the Caribbean have scrambled to emulate its newfound title of “world’s fastest growing economy.”<sup>19</sup> Again, I am less interested in determining whether or not a given country is a petro-state than keen to apprehend the power that its masquerade continues to exert over contemporary Caribbean political culture. As Dominic Boyer puts it in a recent lecture, this requires us to confront petro-state not only “as a fixed political form, but rather in its classical sense as status—a dynamic arrangement of power in all its conditions of possibility.” By daring to stretch the concept of the petro-state beyond individual oil-producing nations, Boyer suggests that we understand “*the* petro-state as fundamentally a global or, better yet, planetary assemblage” that I regard as a structuring principle of Caribbean political life after 1973.<sup>20</sup>

This conjuncture of 1973–74 figures prominently in *The Petro-state Masquerade* as a moment in which Trinidad and Tobago’s masquerade of permanence was resuscitated by a dramatic increase in world crude oil prices. An addendum to my account might revisit this same conjuncture from the vantage point of the region at large. Where Trinidad stood to benefit from the OPEC embargo in the form of windfall revenues and multinational investment, for oil-importing countries such as Jamaica the price shocks of the 1970s are regarded instead as the origin of its longstanding sovereign debt crisis and turn to relief in the form of International Monetary Fund Structural Adjustment Loans. As Rupert Lewis opines in his contribution to the *Small Axe* forum on the Jamaican 1970s, the quadrupling of oil prices represents the “big economic issue overshadowing the 1970s.”<sup>21</sup> If not a sweeping regional history of the decade, we are in desperate need of case studies that tend to social histories of the oil price

18 See Thackwray Driver, “Caribbean Energy 2024: Prospects, Challenges, and Opportunities for Oil and Gas, Renewables and Environment,” Working Paper Series, Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center, Florida International University, April 2024, [lacc.fiu.edu/publications/lacc-caribbean-working-paper-series/driver-caribbean-energy-2024-prospects-challenges-opportunities.pdf](http://lacc.fiu.edu/publications/lacc-caribbean-working-paper-series/driver-caribbean-energy-2024-prospects-challenges-opportunities.pdf).

19 Danielle Balbi, “The World’s Fastest-Growing Economy Is Reversing Fortunes—Just Not for Everyone,” *Bloomberg*, 16 February 2024, [www.bloomberg.com/news/newsletters/2024-02-16/how-oil-made-guyana-the-world-s-fastest-growing-economy-big-take](http://www.bloomberg.com/news/newsletters/2024-02-16/how-oil-made-guyana-the-world-s-fastest-growing-economy-big-take).

20 Dominic Boyer, “The Metabolism of the Petrostate,” Calvin and Freda Redekop Lectures in Environment and Society, University of Chicago, 24 April 2025 (italics mine); see [www.youtube.com/watch?v=8M6-ZAdwTDk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8M6-ZAdwTDk) (accessed 1 November 2025).

21 Rupert Lewis, “The Jamaican Left: Dogmas, Theories, and Politics, 1974–1980,” *Small Axe*, no. 58 (March 2019): 110.

shocks and their consequences for the Caribbean.<sup>22</sup> This is the moment at which all states were compelled to regard petroleum as a windfall blessing or fiscal encumbrance rather than a simple commodity. And this, I contend, is when all Caribbean states and territories were subjected to the world of *the* petro-state as a “planetary assemblage.”<sup>23</sup>

In our contemporary moment, I am preoccupied with resilience of a positive attachment to fossil fuels. Refusing to treat this phenomenon as an innate feature of postcolonial desire, I liken this instead to Sidney Mintz’s magisterial genealogy of sugar and taste in *Sweetness and Power*. Indeed, to paraphrase Mintz, one cannot simply assume that all states (or citizens) have an infinite desire for petroleum.<sup>24</sup> The appearance of this desire as a natural condition of postcolonial governance must be historicized and, ultimately, confronted.<sup>25</sup> The history of this attachment that I trace through my study of Trinidad is an object lesson for the political futures of the Caribbean at large. This masquerade of permanence, which I trace to the Trinidad oil boom of the 1930s, stands in stark contradiction with regional efforts to curb the effects of carbon-fueled climate change and suppressed experiments by Caribbean people to cultivate traditions of peasant autonomy and workers’ self-management.<sup>26</sup> On the contrary, even in the face of climate disasters and rising temperatures, the petro-state masquerade marches on. Much like Trinidad in the 1930s, petroleum remains an object of the parallel but incongruous desires of ordinary people, statesmen, and technocrats alike.

If my account appears bleak, it is because the outlook for the Caribbean undoubtedly is. The state masquerade is ascendant. In Trinidad and Tobago, the allure of authoritarian populism embodied by the political personality of Kamla Persad-Bissessar is a testament to this. Beyond Trinidad and Tobago, the appeal of insular nationalisms and extractive resource frontiers pervades the entire region. It is precisely at such bleak moments, however, that novel presentations of the people’s masquerade often emerge. In *The Petro-state Masquerade*, I foreground 1937 and 1970 as two moments in which the insurgent potential of working people asserted itself through a Carnavalesque display of “power in the streets” of Trinidad.<sup>27</sup> More recently, we have seen this power manifest again in the PetroCaribe Challenge protests in Haiti (sparked by the hashtag query #KotKòbPetroCaribe) from 2018–21 and the 2024 demonstrations over

22 Thanks to Ian Scott, we may not have to wait much longer for such an account. For the moment, his bachelor’s honors thesis charts the way forward. Ian Scott, “Where Were We Going? The Rise and Fall of Democratic Socialism in Jamaica, 1972–1992” (BA thesis, Dartmouth College, 2024).

23 Boyer, “The Metabolism of the Petrostate.”

24 As the original passage from Mintz reads, “One cannot simply assume that everyone has an infinite desire for sweetness, any more than one can assume the same about a desire for comfort or wealth or power.” Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (Penguin, 1985), xxv.

25 To this end, we must remain alert to other vectors of desire that “restore to view a different set of intimate attachments initiated by oil” (Schildes, *Offshore Attachments*, 19).

26 On the question of workers’ self-management, see Joseph Edwards, *Workers’ Self-Management in the Caribbean: The Writings of Joseph Edwards* (On Our Own Authority!, 2014). On the peasant labor process and the struggle of the peasantry in Dominica after emancipation, see Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Peasants and Capital: Dominica in the World Economy*, 2nd ed. (Hau Books, 2025).

27 I borrow the phrase “power in the streets” from a 1975 address by C. L. R. James. C. L. R. James, “The Seizure of Power” (1975), box 11, folder 4, C. L. R. James Papers, Columbia University, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New York.

“food prices” in Martinique.<sup>28</sup> More than facile condemnations of governmental corruption or rising cost of living, both movements reject an economic commonsense in which our social and metabolic livelihoods hang in the balance of petroleum supplies and markets. In other words, the insurgent movements of the past decade in the Caribbean index a frustrated desire for life beyond the petro-state as a hegemonic arrangement of power.

In my genealogy of the people’s masquerade, I am alert to the moments at which the state monopoly on legitimate violence threatens to burst under the pressure of the occupations, movements, and masquerades that I call “road work.”<sup>29</sup> For example, following C. L. R. James in his meditations on carnival, we can look to the road march (and the seasonal preparations for this event) as a demonstration of Caribbean peoples’ capacity for creative work and self-organization.<sup>30</sup> However, the ultimate substance and character of the people’s masquerade is not the province of intellectuals to decide. Most importantly, the people’s masquerade does not unmask the fiction of the state masquerade in service of an objective or more legitimate reality. The state’s deception lies in its insistence that it is the *only* legitimate reality. Our collective recognition of the state as a fleeting construction of reality—a masquerade—permits us to indulge our own masquerades not simply as temporary reprieves but as genuine “experiment[s] in democratic power” (25). Reality is not what rests behind the mask of the state; reality *is* the mas itself. It is masquerades all the way down.

## Archive Work

This forum on Caribbean petro-politics in *Small Axe* represents a coming of age for our field of study. I would be remiss if I failed to register my gratitude for this careful, critical engagement with the concepts and categories that spring from *The Petro-state Masquerade*. That Schields and Crosson are themselves leading theorists of oil and power in the Caribbean is cause for celebration, too. As the three of us know well, one of the challenges of conducting research in this area is the relative obscurity of its foundational works. This includes, among others, Vernon Mulchansingh’s unpublished 1967 Queen’s University of Belfast thesis, “The Origins, Growth, and Development of the Oil Industry in Trinidad and Its Impact on the Economy, 1857–1965”; Jaap van Soest’s 1977 *Olie als water: De Curaçaose economie in de eerste helft van de twintigste eeuw*, which has not circulated widely beyond a dedicated circle of readers in the Dutch academy; and Trevor Farrell’s ““The Worship of the Golden Calf”: An Oil Exporter’s Industrial Strategy, Technology Policy, and Project Planning during the Boom Years,” an unpublished

28 On the PetroCaribe Challenge in Haiti, see Mamyrah Dougé-Prosper and Mark Schuller, “Haiti’s PétroRéalité,” *NACLA Report on the Americas* 52, no. 1 (2020): 20–25. On the 2024 protests in Martinique, see Margaret Kimberly and Rody Rod, “Martinique’s History of Resistance,” *Muntjac: Anarchism Decolonised*, no. 2 (Spring 2025): 19–23.

29 See Ryan Cecil Jobson, “Road Work: Highways and Hegemony in Trinidad and Tobago,” *Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 23, no. 3 (2018): 457–77.

30 See C. L. R. James, “Independence, Energy and Creative Talent of Carnival Can Do Other Wonders,” *The Nation*, 21 February 1959.

1987 mimeo that, thanks to the Farrell estate, enjoyed an overdue print release in 2022.<sup>31</sup> This forum is an occasion to behold the progress of this field thanks to the ongoing contributions of Schields, Crosson, David Hughes, David Bond, Mark Schuller, Mamyrah Dougé-Prosper, Zophia Edwards, Jacob Campbell, and Anna Palmer. It, too, is an occasion to revisit a body of Caribbean petro-criticism represented by Kari Polyani-Levitt, Lloyd Best, Norman Girvan, Percy Hintzen, and Dennis Pantin that has never been properly named as such. Indeed, I hope that our dialogue encourages new entries (and debutants) into this arena of Caribbean criticism. Our collective task, however, is not simply one of generating new scholarship but also one of tending to that of our predecessors through the “archive work” of translation and intellectual preservation.<sup>32</sup>

The role of this archive work in *The Petro-state Masquerade* remains implicit aside from my brief reflection on anthropological method in the book’s prologue. Schields graciously encourages me to pull back the veil (or mask) of my own archive work to consider how the archive functions as “a performance of state power.”<sup>33</sup> As Deborah Thomas reminds us, if one of the “agendas of Caribbean studies has been to create archives—or, more accurately, counterarchives—in order to make claims about the modern world and the significance of the [Caribbean] region,” this imperative is susceptible to capture by postindependence projects of political and cultural nationalism.<sup>34</sup> It follows that the archive is itself a key arena of contestation over the state masquerade. And in this theater intellectuals do, in fact, have a decisive role to play.

In *The Petro-state Masquerade*, I return to a little-known 1975 address delivered by C. L. R. James at Girls’ High School in St. John’s, Antigua. James arrived in Antigua at the invitation of Tim Hector and the Antigua Caribbean Liberation Movement to deliver his remarks on the topic of seizure of power.<sup>35</sup> For James, the Trinidad general strike of 1937 stood as the paramount case for the seizure of power. In the question-and-answer period that followed his address, James notes that the Black Power revolution of 1970 repeated the strategic errors of the past:

*But nobody sat down and wrote that account [of the Trinidad General Strike of 1937]. Nobody makes it clear how that tremendous explosion took place without the basic preparation. Therefore when this one took place, nobody had anything in his mind about what happened or about what could have been prepared in order to seize the power. Some of the boys were thinking about it but they weren’t thinking about it in the way that they should have done. That is why. But the*

31 Vernon C. Mulchansingh, “The Origins, Growth, and Development of the Oil Industry in Trinidad and Its Impact on the Economy, 1857–1956,” PhD diss., Queen’s University, Belfast, 1967; Jaap van Soest, *Olie als water: De Curaçaose economie in de eerste helft van de twintigste eeuw* (Centraal Historisch Archief, 1977); Trevor M. A. Farrell, “The Worship of the Golden Calf”: An Oil Exporter’s Industrial Strategy, Technology Policy, and Project Planning During the Boom Years (Estate of Trevor M. A. Farrell, 2022). I thank my friend and colleague Louis Römer for alerting me to Van Soest’s monograph nearly a decade ago.

32 See Ryan Cecil Jobson and Christen A. Smith, “Black Anthropology and Its Archives,” *Transforming Anthropology* 33, no. 2 (2025): 61–63.

33 Schields, “Dual Power,” 160.

34 Deborah A. Thomas, “Caribbean Studies, Archive Building, and the Problem of Violence,” *Small Axe*, no. 41 (2013): 27.

35 I thank Alvette Jeffers for providing this context behind C. L. R. James’s visit to Antigua in a telephone conversation, 19 March 2025.

government went to pieces because the army was willing to join the revolution. But they were not prepared, they were not thinking in terms of the seizure of power. They did not appoint a Commander-in-Chief. The people did not know what exactly was going to take place. So although a lot of them was carrying on a lot of agitation, there was not that sense of organization and that sense of planning which I am trying to instill in you here this evening.<sup>36</sup>

James understood that the archive does not perfectly align with performances of state power. He often made use of history to impart critical lessons on the question of power to his students and comrades. In *The Black Jacobins*, James demonstrated how what appeared to be a fleeting riot of enslaved Africans sparked by a vodou ceremony in 1791 brought about a protracted war for independence.<sup>37</sup> In barely twelve years, reality had been upended and refashioned into an unprecedented experiment in freedom. The arrangement of power in colonial Saint-Domingue was neither permanent nor inevitable. The same can be said for that of the petro-state. If we practice history in service of liberation, archival accounts of ostensibly formless mobs and senseless riots resurface instead as experiments in the seizure of power.

The archive, mercifully, leaves traces of their design. James's repeated lament that the "history of [the general strike in Trinidad] is still to be written" served as a guiding light as I sought to reconstruct the history of 1937 with an eye toward the desires of working people as they upended the reality of the colonial West Indies.<sup>38</sup> To do so required me to assemble a body of evidence dispersed in archives from Port of Spain to London, to navigate several governmental and institutional bureaucracies, and, at times, to wait several years for the restoration of indispensable source materials. Needless to say, this would not have been possible without the luxuries of resources, mobility, and time afforded to me as a professional academic. Dwelling in the space between the archive and the performances of state power that lay claim to the mantle of history, Caribbean intellectuals may still become evangelists of the people's masquerade and the worlds it made—and will.

36 James, "The Seizure of Power" (italics mine).

37 C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (Vintage Books, [1938] 2023).

38 C. L. R. James, "The Birth of a Nation," in Susan Craig, ed., *Contemporary Caribbean: A Sociological Reader*, vol. 1 (College Press, 1981), 14.