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“Black was never more beautiful”: Ecology, Culture, and the Oil Boom in Trinidad

Michael Niblett

“Black was never more beautiful.” So proclaimed Eric Williams, the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, in his Independence Day Message in 1974 in the wake of his government’s purchase of an oil refinery and other assets from Shell Trinidad Ltd. Four years earlier, Williams’ administration had narrowly survived a Black Power uprising, motivated in part by discontent at the lack of meaningful socio-economic reform in the country since independence in 1962.¹ Williams’ play on the Black Power slogan in his speech renders oil the means through which to unite the twin discourses of economic and cultural nationalism. The purchase of Shell’s holdings is not only meant to signal a determination to curtail foreign domination over Trinidad’s economy (a key grievance of the Black Power protesters), but is also celebrated as heralding the rebirth of the nation. The Independence Day Message, delivered from the site of Shell’s operations in Point Fortin, was accompanied by a flag-raising ceremony in which the oil major’s standard was lowered and that of Trinidad and Tobago hoisted in its place. Williams concludes his oration on a portentous note:

As we proceed to lower the flag of yesterday [. . .] and hoist the flag of today and tomorrow and tomorrow, the flag of our nation as against the flag of an external corporation, as we see the flag, our flag, flying high and riding proud in the breeze, symbolizing the ascent of the nation and the higher destiny of the citizens of Point Fortin, let us say, [. . .] we are going well” (Williams, 1981: 80).

The Trinidadian state and its citizens, then, are presented as having entered a new era of independence, one in which oil functions as the (black) face of the island, the signifier of its sovereignty and progress.

Williams’ acclamation of the Shell purchase as ushering in a new dawn for Trinidad and Tobago may seem somewhat brazen given that his party, the People’s National Movement (PNM), had been in government for eighteen years by that point, twelve of those at the helm of an independent country. But Williams had good reason for feeling confident. The spike in oil prices caused by the OPEC embargo in 1973 had begun to generate windfall profits for the Trinidadian economy, precipitating a decade long boom during which government revenues grew at an average annual rate of 44% (Ryan, 1988: 126). “Money is no problem,” Williams famously boasted in the wake of the oil shock, the rise in revenues enabling the PNM to throw cash at the social grievances that had precipitated the unrest of the early 1970s. But the regime’s largesse did little to solve the structural weaknesses plaguing the island’s economy. Indeed, in many instances the infusion of oil money merely exacerbated the problems associated with the PNM’s rule. It did, however, contribute decisively to the shift in political discourse exemplified by Williams’ speech at Point Fortin.

¹ The Black Power Revolution began in February, 1970, following demonstrations by students and unemployed persons. By April the movement had swelled as urban and rural workers joined the uprising. With a general strike apparently imminent, Williams declared a State of Emergency on the 21st April and all the major spokespeople of the movement were arrested. Despite a mutiny in the army by militant junior officers in protest at the arrests, the revolution was stymied and the government was able to reassert control.

This shift was a reflection of the government's new aim of creating "a national identity in energy" (Furlonge and Kaiser, 2010: 539).

In this article, I explore how the transformations in life- and environment-making through which the oil boom unfolded were inseparable from the production of a range of new cultural discourses in Trinidad. These included the kinds of narratives required as part of the government's efforts to create a national identity in energy, as well as aesthetic forms such as novels and calypsos. As the oil boom rapidly reorganized existing social relations, there developed a new cultural politics of life. The government promoted new, petro-soaked modes of subjectivity, with the significant increase in mass consumption enabled by the influx of oil money radically altering normative understandings of what constituted the 'good life'. The emphasis on oil-led industrialization that underwrote this shift in cultural politics also reinforced the terminal decline of the island's sugar industry. The consequences of this, I will argue, are registered in a proleptic way in Sam Selvon's *The Plains of Caroni*. Published in 1970, Selvon's often overlooked novel sits on the cusp of an ecological revolution, involving the transformation not merely of Trinidad's energy sector, but of whole ways of life.

Underwriting my approach to literary analysis is a form of environmental criticism that draws on the world-ecology perspective developed by Jason W. Moore. This perspective understands history as always co-produced by humans alongside the rest of nature. It argues that the processes through which historical systems such as capitalism develop (including, for example, colonization, industrialization, and financialization) must be grasped as not merely having consequences for the environment, but as ecological projects – as both producers *and* products of specific forms of life- and environment-making. On this view, capitalism is "not an economic system; it is not a social system; it is a way of organizing nature" (Moore, 2015: 2). The capitalist world-system, in other words, is a world-ecology. The centrality of the Caribbean to the epochal reorganization of global natures through which this world-ecology emerged, as well as the often rapid and catastrophic nature of environmental change in the region, make writing from the archipelago a particularly fruitful locus for thinking through the implications of the world-ecology perspective for literary criticism. One constructive line of enquiry, I believe, is to consider the effects on cultural production of the ecological transformations entailed by the commodity frontiers through which capitalism secures the "cheap nature" required to sustain the world-economy (Moore, 2015: 118). Such is my interest here in exploring how the environment-making movements of the sugar and oil frontiers in Trinidad have been implicated in practices of narrative-making.

Trinidad's oil industry dates back to the mid-nineteenth century, when the US company Merrimac drilled a successful oil-well at La Brea (Mulchansingh, 1971: 74). By 1940, the industry had established itself as the island's dominant economic sector (Brereton, 1981: 205). It would go on to play a vitally significant role in shaping the social and political life of the country in the latter half of the twentieth century. In this regard, 1956 stands as an important turning-point, marking the year in which the PNM came to power, but also the year in which Texaco acquired the assets of Trinidad Leaseholds Ltd. As James Millette observes, Texaco's actions were to have serious economic repercussions:

The coming of the oil giant was to mark a decisive shift, not only towards big capital investment, but towards big United States investment in the country. It was the most significant step in the establishment of US hegemonic control of the country's economy even before British overlordship was terminated by the winning of independence in 1962. Immediately, Texaco upgraded the throughput capacity of the Pointe-a-Pierre refinery from 75,000 to 124,000 barrels per day; and plans were laid for further expansion to 250,000 barrels, thereby making it one of the largest refineries under US control operating outside continental USA. (1995: 67)

Crucially, the PNM endorsed Texaco's take-over, earning it the ire of the Caribbean National Labour Party. The latter accused the PNM of having come under the domination of American oil interests, branding the party the "Petroleum National Movement" (Ryan, 1972: 133).

Perhaps the most striking example of the influence of oil in political life came in 1973. In September of that year, Williams unexpectedly announced at the PNM's Annual Convention that he intended to retire, only to reverse his decision in December. The reasons for this volte-face have been much debated. Some argue that his announcement was merely a political stratagem designed to flush out opponents of his leadership. Others claim that his initial decision was genuine, but that he then changed his mind (Parris, 1981; Ryan, 1989). Certainly Williams' position in 1973 was a difficult one: the economy remained in a poor state and there was much social unrest. Indeed, the government was in the midst of a confrontation with an armed guerrilla movement, the National Union of Freedom Fighters, which had been formed in the aftermath of the Black Power revolt. If Williams was genuinely disillusioned with office in September, what had changed by December to convince him to persevere? One answer, of course, is the uptick in oil prices following the OPEC embargo. Williams would admit that the oil shock "made of the local scene a different ball game": "if the Sheik could play, who is me," he declared, in conscious parody of the calypsonian Cypher's composition "If the Priest Could Play" (Regis, 1999: 103).

Following this dramatic, petroleum-inflected twist in the trajectory of Trinidadian politics, there occurred that shift in government policy and rhetoric epitomized by Williams' 1974 Independence Day Message. As the state now sought to construct a national identity in energy, oil's significance changed: no longer just closely imbricated in the political life of the island, it became "an idiom for doing politics" (to borrow Michael Watts description of the situation in Nigeria [2004: 76]). Watts contends that "as a subterranean, *territorial resource* that is *highly centralized as property around the state*," oil necessarily "channels claims over nature ('our oil') into a sort of 'rights talk.'" This 'rights talk' "speaks to three questions: (1) local identity, territory and the rights that stem from them, (2) relations between local political and territorial claims and forms of governance (decentralization, participation, autonomy), and (3) links between various identity politics [. . .] and notions of citizenship." Underlying all three, concludes Watts, is "a notion of a nation-state, on which discussions of community, citizenship, and rights ultimately turn. It is no accident that so much of the rhetoric of oil raises questions of the nation (or the social body) or of national development" (2001: 207-08). Such was certainly the case in Trinidad, the increased importance of oil to the economy post-1973 quickly issuing in Williams' new, petro-inflected discourse of national sovereignty and progress. As the oil dollars flowed, moreover, the rhetoric of national development could be concretized in spectacular infrastructural projects designed to showcase the modernity of the island.

What Fernando Coronil, writing with reference to Venezuela, calls the “Faustian trade” of petro-money for modernity was widely pursued by many oil-rich countries during the boom years of the 1970s. Andrew Apter describes how in Nigeria, for instance, “oil money transformed the [. . .] landscape into images of national renewal,” with “new highways, centres, buildings, [and] processing plants” producing a “spectacle of development” (2005: 213). “The tangible signs of progress and abundance,” argues Apter, “ratified the new prosperity with visible evidence, producing a national dramaturgy of appearances and representations that beckoned toward modernity and brought it into being” (2005: 41). Something similar was the case in Trinidad, where the centrepiece of the government’s oil-driven development programme (and the most visible manifestation of its efforts to create a national identity in energy) was the Point Lisas industrial complex.

The wealth generated by the oil boom had led the government to seek to re-orientate the island’s economy. Hitherto the PNM had prioritized import-substituting industrialization. Although this continued, the emphasis now was on the “utilization of oil revenues to create large-scale resource intensive export industries” (Thomas, 1988: 283). And because the boom “happened to coincide with the discovery of huge natural gas reserves, the energy intensive export industries tended to be favoured” (Thomas, 1988: 283). These new industrial activities, which centred on fertilizers, chemicals, iron, and steel, were to be located at the Point Lisas complex. Speaking in 1977 at the start of the construction of the iron and steel plant, known as ISCOTT (Iron and Steel Company of Trinidad and Tobago), Williams celebrates the venture as heralding the island’s entrance into the brave new world of (petro)modernity:

Steel today; tomorrow aluminium. Maybe, the next day petrochemicals (and by petrochemicals I mean not just the production of simple fuels and intermediate products; but the production of finished petrochemicals that could lead to meaningful downstream activities in plastics and other modern-day chemicals). [. . .] We have taken what may be the more difficult road and that is – accepting the challenge of entering the world of steel, aluminium, methanol, fertilizer, petrochemicals, in spite of our smallness and in spite of our existing level of technology. We have accepted the challenge of using our hydrocarbon resources in a very definite industrialization process. I am certain that, bearing in mind the skills, the educational level and the ambitions of our people, particularly our young citizens, it was in fact the only choice we could have made. (1981: 84)

There is something of a modernist flavour to Williams’ celebration of the material vectors and velocities of “modern-day” industry, not least in the image of accelerated technological development with which he heralds Trinidad’s new future (“Steel today; tomorrow aluminium. Maybe, the next day petrochemicals”). The ISCOTT plant is not only construed as the spectacular embodiment of national progress, however; it is also presented as concretizing the hopes and ambitions of the Trinidadian people, responding to their longing to inhabit a new, petro-modern form of citizenship.

In this respect, Williams’ oil-soaked discourse represented an original twist on the ideology of citizenship that he had typically articulated in the 1950s and 1960s. The emphasis then had been on the importance of creolization in the context of Trinidad’s complex mix of ethnicities and cultures. An ideal “hybrid Trinidadian national subject” was posited as

“necessary for the foundational legitimacy of the nation” (Puri, 2004: 48). Here, for example, is Williams in the conclusion to his *History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago*:

There can be no Mother India for those whose ancestors came from India [. . .]. There can be no Mother Africa for those of African origin [. . .]. There can be no Mother England and no dual loyalties [. . .] There can be no Mother China [. . .] and there can be no Mother Syria or no Mother Lebanon. A nation, like an individual, can have only one Mother. The only Mother we recognize is Mother Trinidad and Tobago, and Mother cannot discriminate between her children. (1962: 281)

Williams’ stern evocation of an organicist and patriarchal vision of the national ‘family’ was intended to promote creolization as the glue to bind Trinidad’s multiracial society together. (In practice, of course, the discourse of cultural hybridity was frequently used to divert attention from the persistence of social inequalities.) In the oil boom era, this ideology of citizenship was reinforced, but also re-inflected by the pursuit of petro-led modernization. Writing on the Point Lisas complex, Graham Holton accurately summarizes the cultural work such development projects performed:

Williams saw petroleum-based industrialization as the quickest way to remove Trinidad’s stigma of slavery, indentured labour, and colonialism derived from its sugar industry. It was not by accident that Williams chose the Point Lisas estate, an old sugar plantation covering 672 hectares on the south-west coast of Trinidad. Point Lisas was to symbolise the creation of a new Trinidad that had overcome its woeful colonial past. The new industrialization was to bring racial harmony ‘where sugar divided.’ An industrialized Trinidad would be a wealthy, modern nation without ethnic and class conflict. (1995: 102)

Against what was presented as sugar’s retrograde divisiveness and its association with the colonial past, therefore, the island’s new, oil-based industrialization was now promoted – alongside creolization – as the guarantor of racial harmony and as the basis of the freedoms of the petro-modern citizen.

However, just as the ideology of creole citizenship was often mobilized as a means to mask ongoing social inequalities, so Williams’ emphasis on the racially-integrative role of the new industrialization was viewed by some as obscuring the PNM’s complicity in maintaining ethnic divisions in Trinidad. As Percy Hintzen explains:

Conditions of regime survival pre-empted the implementation of a viable fishing and agricultural policy. The East Indian population, which has an almost exclusive predominance as agricultural labour and own-account small- and medium-sized farmers, was not politically strategic for the PNM’s hold on power. The regime depended for its mass support upon the racial mobilization of lower-class blacks. To survive it had to allocate resources in ways that proved most beneficial to the middle- and upper-class sectors of society while engaging in a system of racial patronage directed at the black lower-class population. This meant that spending on agriculture had to be neglected. (1989: 176)

The PNM's neglect of agriculture in favour of industry was thus felt by many Indian farmers and rural labourers to be of a piece with the government's favouritism towards its black supporters.

The failure to put in place a strong system of support for agriculture was reflected in the sector's economic performance. In the post-war years, the sugar industry's output declined markedly as a percentage of GDP, falling from 17.8% to 5.9% between 1952 and 1970. Over the course of the boom years it would sink to 2.3%. Oil, by contrast, grew from 22% to 42% over the same period (Vertovec, 1992: 132). In his speech to mark the start of ISCOTT's construction, Williams celebrates the supersession of sugar by the planned new energy-intensive industries. "Here at Point Lisas," he proclaims, "sugar cane gives way to wire rods" (1981: 83). The land at Point Lisas had previously belonged to Caroni Ltd., a subsidiary of Tate and Lyle, which in the 1950s and 1960s had dominated Trinidad's sugar industry, accounting for 90% of all output at the time of independence (Brereton, 1981: 217). It is at this point that I want to turn to Selvon's *The Plains of Caroni*. Set in a sugar-cane village, the novel was written by Selvon following his return to Trinidad in 1969. His trip had been financed by Tate and Lyle, who asked him to produce a book on the island's sugar industry (Fabre, 1988: 69). Tate and Lyle was, in fact, on the verge of disengaging from its Trinidad operations: in 1970, it sold a majority share in Caroni Ltd. to the PNM government, before ending all involvement in the company in 1976 (Pollard, 1985: 828). Against this backdrop, Selvon's novel conveys a deep sense of impending change, not only highlighting the difficulties facing Trinidad's agricultural sector, but also foreshadowing the emergent cultural politics of life associated with the triumph of Emperor Oil over King Sugar.

The Plains of Caroni registers the struggle over efforts to reorganize life- and environment-making on Trinidad's sugar frontier in the context of rising costs of production and declining competitiveness. As the character Romesh observes (and in testament to the research Selvon undertook during his Tate and Lyle-sponsored trip), "it takes 1.94 man days to produce a ton of sugar in Hawaii, and 15.21 in Trinidad" (72). Romesh works as an agricultural scientist for the management of a fictionalized version of Caroni Ltd, which is seeking to rationalize its operations through greater mechanization. The plot of the novel turns on the controversy caused by the trialling of a new harvesting machine on the sugar estate where Romesh's family works. The estate labourers fear, rightly, that the success of the machine will see them lose their jobs. The threat of disruption it represents to the prevailing configuration of human and extra-human natures is emphasized by the way the harvester's arrival is experienced as a strange, other-worldly event. Various described as a "magic machine" (85), a "space machine" (90) and a "giant monster" (91), the harvester is initially suspected of being a "metal Trojan horse" ready to "disgorge eighty-eight men" (85). Its operation is a "miracle" (86) that leaves Romesh's cane-cutter brother, Teeka, "not sure of what he was seeing" (85). Understood as providing "a glimpse of the world outside [the village] and Trinidad" (90), the oil-powered machine represents to the agricultural labourers the encroachment of an alien (petro)modernity into their lives.

The arrival of the machine as heralding an ecological revolution that will transform not just working practices, but a whole way of life is best exemplified by the fate of Balgobin. An aged and experienced cane-cutter (and, it will transpire, Romesh's real father), Balgobin's subjectivity has been fundamentally shaped by the sugar frontier. His body is said to ooze "with the sweet smell of molasses, and sugarcane, and rum. By smell alone, he was part of the plantation" (20). Such is the imprint left by the rhythms of cane-cutting on his

habitus that without his cutlass he cannot “keep his balance”: “He was like a man without a limb: so accustomed were his fingers to nest around the handle that they were curled although they only clutched empty space” (130). It is worth recalling the presentation of the sugar industry in the petro-inflected political discourse of the 1970s, where it was associated with the bitter legacy of slavery and colonialism in contrast to the bright new future promised by energy-intensive industrialization. Balgobin’s exhausted body, scarred and deformed by estate work, certainly testifies to the industrial pathologies of the sugar frontier. For the old cane-cutter, however, his labour (and in particular his skill with his cutlass) is also a source of pride and identity:

He began cutting, his arm arcing the air with [his cutlass] in a grace of movement. It did not seem as if he hurried, and yet cane after cane fell swiftly. Every move he made had purpose and effect, and after a minute or so he became engrossed with the rhythm of the work [. . .] It was always so with him in the fields. (92-93)

The appearance of the harvester is thus a direct threat not merely to Balgobin’s livelihood, but to his sugar-moulded subjectivity and sense of self-identity.

The potential of the harvester to overturn his way of life induces a kind of delirium in Balgobin. Maddened by the machine, he sets off at night to confront it. In a dream-like sequence focalized in part through the old labourer’s disturbed consciousness – the irrationalism of the scene emphasizing the de-realizing effect had by the harvester’s disruption of everyday life – Balgobin hacks at the surrounding sugar-cane, imagining it to be the “eighty-eight coward vagabonds” who had been hiding in the machine’s Trojan horse-like belly (93).² He then proceeds to attack the harvester with his cutlass. Perceiving it as a monster, he succeeds in severing one of its ‘veins’ – in reality a pipe-line that spews oil all over his feet. Balgobin uses the oil to set the harvester alight, destroying it. This will be something of a pyrrhic victory, however. For the image of Balgobin, his feet sunk in oil, his cutlass irreparably damaged by his attack on the machine, could be said to foreshadow the future direction of Trinidad’s economy – the triumph of oil over sugar – and the associated re-making of subjectivities along new, petro-oriented lines. Balgobin himself has no place in this world; and in this regard it is telling that following his encounter with the harvester his health deteriorates and the novel ends with his death.

Balgobin’s fate and the sense it embodies of a community and, indeed, a country in transition has a formal analogue in the organization of the text. Frank Birbalsingh has complained that *The Plains of Caroni* is merely a “collection of sketches and anecdotes jumbled together in flimsy frames of romantic intrigue” (1988: 155-56). But this is to miss the way the disjointed, uneven quality of the narrative speaks precisely to the situation Selvon encountered on his return to Trinidad in 1969. The novel’s lack of unity is an expression of the tensions and ruptures that surfaced in this period, with the island on the cusp of the Black Power uprising and the prevailing modes of life- and environment-making beginning to unravel.

² I borrow the term irrationalism from Michael Löwy, for whom it designates modes of writing in which realism is absent or becomes warped in some way through the incorporation of elements of the fantastic, marvellous, or dreamlike (2007: 194-95). Elsewhere I have argued (2012) that irrationalist literary forms such as surrealism, magic realism, or the Gothic might be especially well suited to expressing the feelings of strangeness and rupture engendered by rapid reorganizations of human and extra-human natures. The current article represents a further specification of that argument.

If, in exploring the troubled trajectory of the sugar frontier, *The Plains of Caroni* registers certain emergent trends and tendencies in Trinidadian society, it is unlikely that Selvon could have foreseen the spectacular way in which these would be manifested during the oil boom. As Daniel Miller observes, the island's inhabitants "seem to have experienced [the boom] as something on a par with a tropical storm, which, with hindsight, passed over the country leaving an astonishing trail of detritus in its wake" (1994: 204). As the spike in oil prices made itself felt at the national level, wages shot up and new forms of mass consumption emerged. The "number of cars in the [. . .] country increased by 65 per cent between 1974 and 1980, and the number of televisions trebled over the decade. Electricity became more readily available throughout the island, and refrigerators, stereos, TVs and video recorders became universal possessions" (Vertovec, 1992: 138). Miller's ethnographic fieldwork provides a snapshot of the responses of various islanders to the topsy-turvy logic of this period:

'In '73 I felt it first, I got a raise in salary from \$250 a month to nearly \$475 a month.'

'People had money coming out of their ears. You would see people go into a store and buy 100tt whiskey and whatever top brands of everything. Everybody had on Gucci jeans, Calvin Klein, Reebok shoes.'

'We were even close to importing winter coats and so on because everything was being brought into Trinidad. You know things had gotten so out of hand I was ashamed.' (1997: 27)

This was an era in which, as the Mighty Sparrow put it, "capitalism gone mad". His calypso was one among many to critique the 'easy-money', free-spending ethos that took hold in Trinidad. "Money today change up so much life / Calculators take the place of wife", sang Black Stalin in *Money* (1980). King Austin, in *Progress* (1980), saw "consciousness abate, / As today we live recklessly / Money makes egos inflate / And thereby creates a turbulent state" (1980). The PNM, however, was keen to encourage the new consumerism – not least, one suspects, precisely because of its capacity to make "consciousness abate." The increased availability of consumer durables enabled the proliferation of a whole new set of "lived practices and visions of the good life" (to borrow Matthew Huber's description of the impact had by oil in the re-making of post-war U.S. society [2012: 305]). Williams' oil-soaked discourse of national progress appeared to have become reality. Petroleum, both as the source of wealth and as materially constitutive of many of the consumer durables, now shaped the reproduction of everyday life in Trinidad more deeply than ever before.

Of all the consumer items popularized during the boom, the automobile was perhaps the most significant to the new forms of life-making to emerge in this period. Cars had been important in Trinidad prior to the boom as markers of prestige. As they became more widely available, however, they not only seemed to symbolize the era as one "of new possibilities for many people", but also came to "dominate the Trinidadian self-image" (Miller, 1994: 237). "In contemporary Trinidad," writes Miller, "the car is probably the artefact which outweighs

even clothing in its ability to incorporate and express the individual” (1994: 237). Given the fundamental association of the automobile with the new technologies and velocities of modernity, the popularity of cars as “a vehicle for expressive identity” (Miller, 1994: 240) dovetailed neatly with the government narrative of Trinidad’s entry into the age of petro-modern citizenship. But the car also became a key trope in critical responses to the boom era by writers and calypsonians. With this in mind I want to turn now to V. S. Naipaul’s *Guerrillas* (1975).

A cynical and disturbing novel, *Guerrillas* offers an imaginative reconstruction of the ‘Black Power Killings’ in Trinidad, while also alluding to a series of other events of the early 1970s, including the Black Power uprising and the government’s struggle against the National Union of Freedom Fighters. However, the oil boom is absent, at least in any explicit sense. This is perhaps understandable given that the novel was written during the early years of the boom. But the text also makes no mention of the island’s oil economy in general. This *is* a surprise given its otherwise forensic, if problematic, dissection of Trinidadian society. Moreover, in a companion essay exploring the real-life incidents on which *Guerrillas* is based, Naipaul not only mentions oil but situates the ‘Black Power Killings’ in the context of the social fallout from Trinidad’s dependence on the petroleum industry, the revenues from which are “magically cycled” through the island, helping to sustain an otherwise unproductive economy (2003: 178). *Guerrillas* evokes the consequences of such petro-led underdevelopment, but oil is curiously displaced from its presentation.

I will return to the reasons for this displacement in a moment. First I wish to highlight how, despite not being represented explicitly in the novel, oil’s shadow falls unrelentingly over Naipaul’s prose:

After lunch Jane and Roche left their house on the Ridge to drive to Thrushcross Grange. They drove down to the hot city at the foot of the hills, and then across the city to the sea road [. . .]. After the market, where refrigerated trailers were unloading; after the rubbish dump burning in the remnant of mangrove swamp [. . .]; after the new housing estates, rows of unpainted boxes of concrete and corrugated iron already returning to the shantytowns that had been knocked down for this development; [. . .] after this, the land cleared a little.

[. . .]

Traffic was heavy in this area of factories. But the land still showed its recent pastoral history. Here and there, among the big sheds and the modern buildings [. . .], were still fields, remnants of the big estates, together with remnants of the estate villages [. . .]. Sometimes there was a single rusting car in a sunken field, as though, having run off the road, it had simply been abandoned; sometimes there were heaps of junked vehicles. [. . .] [S]ometimes there were rows of red brick pillars [. . .]. It was what remained of an industrial park, one of the failed projects of the earliest days of independence. Tax holidays had been offered to foreign investors; many had come for the holidays and had then moved on elsewhere. (2002: 1-3)

Oil is absent here in any direct sense; yet it saturates every line of the text. For what we are presented with is a landscape and an account of that landscape organized around the

automobile and the infrastructure of petromodernity. Naipaul's narrative is propelled and textured by the movement of Jane and Roche's car through the city and the specific kinds of sensory experiences this engenders. The landscape flashes by in a sequence of distinct snapshots to produce a linear, serialized view of the cityscape, one mediated throughout by the windows of the car. In this way, the text underscores not only Jane and Roche's alienation from an increasingly reified lifeworld, but also how the demands of petrolic life have fundamentally reshaped environments and human sensoria.

Significantly, the above passages present Port-of-Spain as a deindustrialized space, a portrait that might well be read as an oblique critique of the political ecology of Trinidad's oil frontier. The depiction of the landscape as degraded and decayed, littered with junked cars and dilapidated factories, serves as something of a riposte to Williams' contemporaneous celebration of the country's bright, new petro-powered future. The suggestion is that Trinidad's incipient course of oil-led development will prove hollow and unsustainable; the images of broken, rusted cars suggest the decay of Trinidad's new dream of modernity just as much as the reference to the failure of the island's policy of industrialization by invitation.

Naipaul may have been writing on the cusp of the boom, but his novel's gloomy forebodings would prove fairly accurate. By the early 1980s, the oil boom had turned to bust. Despite the windfall gains of the previous decade, "unemployment in 1985 stood at 15 per cent of the labour force, with the huge investments at Point Lisas yielding less than 1 per cent of total employment" (Thomas, 1988: 293). The massive ISCOTT plant in particular had become a visible white elephant, haemorrhaging money (Thomas, 1988: 284-85). The proleptic quality of Naipaul's narrative could be said to derive from its registration of tendencies already at work in Trinidad's oil-dominated economy, which the boom only exacerbated. Most significant among these was the petroleum industry's corrosive impact on other branches of the economy as oil profits forced up exchange rates, thereby reducing the competitiveness of domestically produced goods and services (so-called Dutch disease). Thus, as the boom unfolded the country found itself earning an excess of wealth (in the form of oil rents and revenues) even as its productive economy stagnated. "Growth without development" was how Trinidad's Central Statistical Office described the state of the island's economy in the very year *Guerrillas* was published (qtd. in Stewart, 1995: 724).

Writing with reference to the Nigerian oil boom, Apter offers an illuminating comparison. Since the value created for the Nigerian economy by oil was "based not on the accumulation of surplus value" but on the circulation of externally-generated oil rents and revenues, "oil replaced labour as the basis of national development, producing a deficit of value and an excess of wealth, or a paradoxical profit as loss" (2005: 14, 201). The various signs of economic development the state had promoted – infrastructure projects, new institutional buildings, an abundance of money and goods – turned out to be precisely that: signs, lacking substance. Such was the "magical realism" of Nigerian modernity, as Apter puts it (41). Oil profits were not productively absorbed; hence, "underlying the appearance of instant development [. . .] was a negative dialectic of internal consumption that expanded the state at its own expense by pumping money into the public sector while privatizing public office and resources – partly along ethnic lines – and by absorbing organized assaults on its position" (44). In this context, corruption and the dispensing of political patronage could flourish, hollowing out democratic political structures and, ultimately, eroding the very foundations of citizenship and civil society.

Elaborating on the tendency for oil booms to have a pernicious effect on both the productive economy and modern structures of governance, Watts suggests that oil “simultaneously elevates and expands the centrality of the nation-state as a vehicle for modernity, progress, civilization, and at the same time produces conditions which directly challenge and question those very same, and hallowed, tenets of nationalism and development” (2001: 208). Such dynamics were clearly visible in Trinidad during the boom, not only in the form of those white elephant development projects such as ISCOTT, but also at the level of the state and of political institutions. The boom “enabled the regime, through authoritative decision-making, to employ the state as an instrument for reallocating the phenomenally expanded oil income into politically strategic sectors of the domestic economy” (Hintzen, 1989: 143). The Trinidadian state, marked by the imprint of colonial history, was already characterized by a certain prebendalism. Now, with its “tremendously increased revenue, the regime was able to sustain and expand the system of patronage” aimed at its electoral base in the black lower-classes (much to the ire of the rural Indian populace), while also meeting “the accumulative claims of the country’s middle and upper classes” (Hintzen, 1989: 143). The effect of such clientelism was to further hollow out already precarious democratic structures and intensify class and ethnic divisions.

Once again it was the calypso that led the way in critiquing the phenomenon of oil-backed patronage. Most striking, perhaps, was Black Stalin’s “Piece of the Action” (1976):

Oil drilling, money making
 Mr Divider here is a warning
 Mih blood in this country
 Mih sweat in this country
 So when you sharing your oil bread
 Ah say remember me
 [. . .]
 Fix up my little piece of dough
 Before oil finish and the Yankees go
 [. . .]
 Mr Divider, [. . .], so much of bread you saying,
 You spending on food a year
 But Ay cyar get flour,
 Ah cyar get butter
 And when Ah get rice the thing so dear
 [. . .]
 Ah say T&TEC defrosting mih fridge at all
 Monthend they still sending a big bill
 Piece of the action, Ah tell you, piece of the action
 Local Arabs feteing
 Two Mercedes one driving
 And my old bus stalling
 [. . .]

Stalin’s calypso offers a brilliantly concise account of the life- and environment-making dynamics of the oil boom, not least through its various plays on the word “bread”. There is

the combination of excess and want, of wealth without development: oil bread is everywhere, but real food is still hard to come by; and when it is available, the inflation caused by the boom has made it prohibitively expensive. There is the continuation of US imperialist domination (undercutting Williams' assertions of a new oil-based sovereignty). And there is the saturation of life with new consumer durables (the fridge, the car). The contrast drawn between the two Mercedes and Stalin's rickety old bus (reminiscent of Naipaul's junked cars) crystallizes the uneven quality of Trinidad's modernity, the simultaneous over- and under-development of the island.

While calypsos were able to furnish direct critiques of the "oil drilling, money making" logic of the boom years, however, the novel form seems to have had more difficulty in responding. We have already touched on oil's displacement in Naipaul's *Guerrillas*. And broadly speaking, while the effects of the 1970s boom – the rise in mass consumerism, say – have often received attention, it is rare to find a Trinidadian novel that deals explicitly with the oil windfall as the immediate cause of the upheavals. There are exceptions (Neil Bissoondath's *A Casual Brutality* [1988] springs to mind), and the island's more recent, post-2000 hydrocarbon boom has a more obvious presence in narrative fiction (see, for example, Oonya Kempadoo's *All Decent Animals* [2013]). But in general, the novel form tends to struggle when confronted by the topsy-turvy logic of the boom era.

The problem here, I think, has much to do with the implications for narrative of oil's 'magical' capacity to produce something out of nothing. Oil, as Ryszard Kapuscinski once observed, "creates the illusion of a completely changed life, life without work, life for free [. . .] The concept of oil expresses perfectly the eternal human dream of wealth achieved through lucky accident" (1985: 35). Discussing how oil shapes narratives of development, Jennifer Wenzel describes it as a kind of *deus ex machina*: "a miraculous agent, external to a historical narrative, whose arrival makes possible what is otherwise impossible within the narratives own terms. That is to say, there is something almost antinarrative about the ontology of oil, if narrative is understood as the working out of cause and effect and oil is understood to produce something out of nothing" (2014: 212). In circumstances such as obtain in Trinidad and Nigeria, moreover, where oil windfalls give fresh impetus to already existing structures of prebendalism, oil's antinarrative qualities are reinforced by the similarly antinarrative qualities of patronage and clientelism. For the latter, too, introduce an element of the miraculous into everyday life, fostering a situation in which an individual's existence might suddenly be transformed on the whim of a benevolent patron. Thus, Stalin's Mr Divider (Williams) is himself something of a *deus ex machina*: win his favour, receive his oil bread, and you, too, could be driving a Mercedes and not an old bus.

The volatility and whimsicality of a social world structured along such clientelistic lines, combined with the illusions induced by the 'magic' of oil booms, perpetuate into the postcolonial era what Shake Keane once called the "sense of the unreality of colonial life" (qtd. in Nanton, 2003: 76). In this regard, it should be no surprise that so many authors have explored "the idea that Trinidadian people inhabit a social reality underwritten by fantasy" (Evans, 2014: 188). Certainly this is at the heart of Naipaul's *Guerrillas*, where it is embodied most arrestingly in the novel's deluded protagonist, Jimmy Ahmed. A would-be writer and revolutionary, Jimmy produces degraded, autohagiographic versions of Gothic romances. The parallel between his ersatz politics and his imitative prose – whimsical, lacking internal necessity, and overdetermined by his personal neuroses – gestures to the problems posed to novelistic form by the fantastical quality of Trinidadian social reality. The

hollowing out of narrative-making in Jimmy's fictions encodes the hollowing out of nation-making in Trinidad.

Crucially, however, Naipaul can only approach these issues in terms of Jimmy's individual psychopathology. The problem of representation is not incorporated as a formal principle of the novel, which remains confident in its realist anatomization of the delusions of its central characters. Rather, the crisis in narrative-making is displaced on to Jimmy's (psychologically crisis-ridden) prose. The narrative's distance from Trinidad, in the sense that it takes Trinidadian society as an object to be dissected, is replicated formally in its objectification of the representational dilemma through Jimmy's 'novel' and not within itself. Insofar as it does respond to the pressures brought to bear on representation by the dynamics of the oil economy, it does so through a series of hysterical, Gothic-inflected phobic responses to the landscape, women, and black bodies. These responses register the new forms of environment-making attendant on the boom, which involve the suturing together of human and extra-human natures in strange new combinations. They do so, however, at the level of what might be termed the ecological unconscious of the novel. What remains is to turn the representational problem posed by the oil boom and its energizing of the patronage system into a constructive formal principle.

Such is the achievement, I want to argue in conclusion, of the work of Earl Lovelace. Lovelace's most recent novel, *Is Just a Movie* (2011), deals explicitly with the petro-driven politics of both the 1970s and post-2000 boom. Indeed, it directly engages with the government's efforts to "create a national identity in energy." Against the backdrop of an oil-fuelled modernization drive, the narrative presents a Prime Minister-figure whose declarations of a bright new, energy intensive future – "if we are to enter the modern epoch as a contending force that the world shall respect" we must "ensure that every rural community be given electricity" (124) – unmistakably echo those of Williams in the 1970s. This discourse is subject to ironic scrutiny in the text. But the novel also works to mediate and objectify in its own narrative apparatus the experiential peculiarities and aesthetic dilemmas that derive from oil's seemingly miraculous transfiguration of social reality. Thus, for example, Lovelace very deliberately shifts narrative gears when invoking the post-2000 boom, switching to a more obviously 'magical realist' style as a means to capture the "petro-magic" (Watts, 2001: 205) quality of Trinidadian modernity.

Prior to *Is Just a Movie*, however, Lovelace's work had already demonstrated a capacity to confront the topsy-turvy logic of the oil frontier. Take *The Dragon Can't Dance* (1979), published at the peak of the boom. As with Naipaul's *Guerrillas*, explicit references to the oil economy are absent here, but (unlike Naipaul) the novel's formal inventiveness allows for the narrative internalization of the boom's reorganization of life- and environment-making in such a way as to produce it as an object of critique. Tellingly, *Dragon* erects a form of narrative scaffolding that will be revealed to lack a corresponding interior substance. In the first five and last two chapters, the text narrates the lives of its major protagonists by dedicating a chapter to each, designating their role via chapter headings such as "The Princess," "The Dragon," or "The Bad John." These labels, however, are shown in the chapters that follow to be inadequate to, or even at odds with, the personhood of the respective characters. The allotted roles or identities come to be recognized as hollow shells, the meaning they may once have possessed evacuated, with the characters needing to shed these carapaces if they are to achieve a kind of existential fullness – what Lovelace often refers to as "aliveness". It is worth stressing here the novel form's fundamental association

with modernity and the modern nation-state: as Fredric Jameson has observed, in the Third World “the imported form which is the novel is fully as much a component of modernization as the importation of automobiles” (2012: 476). In this regard, the lack of a substance corresponding to *Dragon’s* narrative scaffolding might be read as the aesthetic correlative to those modernizing development projects, such as ISCOTT, which the oil boom enabled yet rendered hollow through its erosion of the productive economy.

But to say that this narrative scaffolding lacks a corresponding substance is not to say that it is merely empty. It *is* inhabited by a content, only one governed by a very different logic – a content that seeks to burst the bounds of conventional novelistic discourse, drawing on a range of popular Trinidadian cultural practices to become the stylistic abstraction of an alternative mode of life. This is the Lovelacian sentence: characterized by its distinctive combination of Faulknerian modernism and the rhythms of calypso and steelband, it is a spiralling, voluble, unruly instrument. The way in which Lovelace’s writing explodes outwards with a centrifugal force, spilling from one theme or incident to the next, recalls Trinidad’s economic extroversion and the volatility caused by the island’s dependency on the fluctuating fortunes of the oil frontier. It might also be said to encode the movements of a society organized around the arbitrary and capricious dynamics of patronage. Yet this literary style simultaneously stages the quest for a new way of organizing human and extra-human natures. Rhythm is meaning too, Lovelace has declared (2003: 94). And the rhythms of calypso and steelpan that inhabit his sentences bespeak the search for organizational structures and forms of practice coincident with and capable of channelling in fulfilling ways the energies of the mass of the people.

What is at stake here is perhaps best summarized by Lovelace himself in his short story “A Brief Conversion” (1988). Here the narrator Travey, for whom his Uncle Bango is all he has to “pit against the desolate humbling of our landscape” (27), wonders what it is that his uncle possesses that he finds so inspiring:

I suppose I must call it style. It was not style as adornment, but style as substance. His style was not something that he had acquired to enhance an ability; rather, it existed prior to any ability or accomplishment – it was affirmation and self looking for a skill to wed it to, to save it and maintain it, to express it; it was self searching for substance, for meaning. (27)

What Travey says of Bango’s style could be said to apply equally to Lovelace’s literary style. Those long, sinewy sentences informed by the rhythms of various Trinidadian cultural practices represent a self “searching for substance” – a Trinidadian self seeking out “a skill to wed” itself to. This search entails a rejection of the empty promises of Williams’ petro-modern citizenship, inextricable from the hollowing out of Trinidad’s productive economy and its continued domination by imperialist oil interests. Instead, what is sought is a substance or skill in the form of autonomously organized modes of life- and environment-making that would allow the Trinidadian “self” to realize itself fully.

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