

Introduction

“OIL IS THE LUBRICANT”

Pulp fiction author Wenzell Brown liked to tell a lurid tale. But as he arrived from the United States on the arid, wind-swept island of Aruba in 1946, his purpose was ostensibly different. He had come to observe an industrial boom. In the mid-twentieth century, the southerly Dutch Caribbean isles were the center of an emerging global energy system. Aruba, home to the Standard Oil of New Jersey-owned Lago Oil & Transport Company, and Curaçao, site of the equally enormous Royal Dutch Shell plant, housed the largest oil refineries in the world.¹ Stationed at one of the many clapboard saloons erected in the shadow of the Lago refinery, Brown found a lurid tale anyways. In the span of several inebriated hours, he encountered men from nine different Caribbean islands and three countries on the South American main. The men grumbled about wages, working conditions, and political circumstances in their countries of origin. They lamented long, hot hours toiling among the pressure stills while white US Americans occupied comfortable office jobs. They drank, they gambled, and occasionally they fought. And then, before the night was through, they ambled to one of several hotels where Dominican sex workers greeted an impatient line of customers. Together, they made for the rough windward coast of Juana Morto and

Smal—a public dump—to copulate among the skeletons of discarded automobiles and trash.²

Brown's writing gave personality to the men who turned crude into valuable commodities. He dignified their aspirations at a moment of heady possibility following World War II, even as he also described how race and nation could divide them, grievances spilling over into barroom brawls. Unquestioned by Brown, however, were the other laborers traveling along oil's commodity chain: the sex workers from the Dominican Republic. Brown did not ask about the male desires or the corporate investments that demanded their presence; less still about the longings of the women who labored at the fringes of the oil industry. While attentive to the diverse composition of a migratory male labor force, Brown neglected to see a similar arithmetic at work in the organization of commercial sex. For like many of their clients, the women who sold sex on Aruba were recruited from elsewhere. And like their clients, too, these women formed part of the itinerant and racialized workforce upon which oil companies relied. Indisputable in Brown's account, however, was what drew together these people from distant reaches of the region. Surveying transactional trysts one evening, Brown shrewdly observed that in these encounters, "oil is the lubricant."³

By attending to the intimate arrangements thought to facilitate oil's rise and demise in the Caribbean, this book shows that the reverse of Brown's observation is also true. Oil did not simply facilitate sex; sex lubricated the age of oil. *Offshore Attachments* argues that from boom to bust, ideas about sex and race influenced the organization of labor in the peak age of oil and were marshaled again to insulate shocks to the global oil market. Supported by corporate and state leaders, and variously embraced and challenged by Caribbean publics, attempts to shape intimate selves in support of the energy economy were always inseparable from the making and management of race.

Sexual energy and racialized labor were profoundly entangled in the production of energy itself. Often described as global capitalism's most valuable commodity, oil is thought to possess inherent worth.⁴ A spate of recent research has shown, however, that oil gained value through the labor that participated in its commodification. In oil camps from Lake Maracaibo to Veracruz, just as on Aruba and Curaçao, women's work of

clothing, feeding, and care, often invisible and unwaged, was vital to the sustenance of an exploited, racialized male workforce.⁵ But as this book also shows, the kinds of intimate arrangements sought by oil companies and their state protectors overflowed the more visible forms of sexual labor sensationally described by Brown. From efforts to regulate the fertility of Caribbean women as the industry declined to domesticating masculine subjects and encouraging self-sufficient nuclear families, the sites of intimacy deemed pertinent to the oil economy included not just the regulation of sex but the remaking of sensibilities.

This book tracks these projects in two distinct periods on Aruba and Curaçao: the brief boom of the 1930s to the early 1950s, and the bust that followed, through to the sale or shuttering of the refineries in 1985. In each phase, attempts to construct new gender and sexual subjectivities, inseparable from concerns about race, were a primary method for managing the fluctuating demands of the oil economy. Through the boom period spanning the 1930s and early 1950s, Standard Oil and Shell, like other extractive and industrial enterprises in Latin America and the Caribbean, viewed the question of making laborers as a matter of fashioning certain gender and sexual norms.⁶ Logics of race and nation also determined the conditions in which men labored and loved. Chemists, engineers, and other managerial staff from Europe and the United States lived in comfortable bungalows with wives and children, solidifying their claims to white respectability.⁷ Living downwind of the refinery's toxic emissions, foreign production workers were granted access to women's sexuality on transactional terms. Believing women's proximity to whiteness essential for these men's sexual satisfaction, authorities facilitated the transport of women from the Dominican Republic and Colombia against prevailing colonial law. Local workers, meanwhile, followed a different sexual regime. Company managers offered material supports to incentivize marriage, widely assumed to enhance discipline and performance on the job. The dialectical reasoning connecting "homeplace and workplace" galvanized a renewed civilizing mission in the Caribbean, this time led as much by oil corporations as by state and religious authorities.⁸

From the early 1950s until the shuttering and sale of the Lago and Shell refineries in 1985, automated technologies turned refineries into depopulated industrial landscapes. Price increases following the so-called

oil shocks of 1973–74 and 1979–80 spelled further disaster, with reduced demand creating a glut in refinery production. Authorities in Europe and the Netherlands Antilles looked once again to household arrangements and reproductive practices to correct the islands' faltering economy. The next several decades would be spent trying to resuscitate the nuclear family model absent the material incentives that once promoted married life. These interventions denigrated Caribbean repertoires of kinship and intimacy, repeatedly figuring them as lacking while at the same time displacing blame for structural inequality onto individual behaviors. According to family planning campaigners, development experts, and a new cadre of social scientists in Europe and the Caribbean, the collapse of the oil economy would be resolved not through wealth or job creation but by reducing the number of children born to low-income single parents. Intimacy and its racialized regulation, then, facilitated the meteoric rise of the oil industry just as it was imagined to blunt the effects of its equally precipitous decline.

As much as attention to intimacy illuminates the social reproductive foundations of the oil industry, it also highlights other actors and struggles that transformed company practice from the ground up. From Aruban housewives in the 1950s to radical Curaçaoan laborers and activists in the 1960s, popular actors mobilized to challenge oil's peculiar sexual economy. They did so from an array of political and moral positions. Some demanded that oil companies live up to their avowed family values, boldly defending access to middle-class respectability. Others insisted that erotic freedom would be the measure and the guarantor of liberation from corporate interests. Accounting for gender, race, and sexuality in the history of oil does not only tell a fuller story of the labor required to transform oil into wealth. It also expands our understanding of the sites of struggle that arose along the way—struggles that connected the bedroom to the boardroom and the domicile to the distillation towers.

At times, interferences into Caribbean intimate life relied on the stretching and usurping of law, first under Dutch colonial authorities and, after 1948, a democratically elected government operating under Dutch sovereignty. Like other Caribbean islands in the age of decolonization, Curaçao and Aruba opted to retain political ties with the erstwhile metropole. While some European laws remained in the Caribbean in the

postcolonial period, the perceived demands of the oil industry often resulted in the suspension of those statutes regulating marriage and divorce, sex work, and contraception. The exceptional treatment of intimacy—or, put another way, the offshoring of sex—thus buttressed a specific capitalist project in the Caribbean that helped to consolidate a new global energy regime. In this respect, Euro-Caribbean attachments proved consequential. Unevenly incorporated into the legal order of the erstwhile metropole, the nonsovereign status of the Dutch islands enabled transnational actors to intervene in Caribbean intimate lives while also denying the rights and protections that prevailed onshore.

PETRO-SEXUALITY

This story surprises not just because of the centrality of sex and race to the hydrocarbon age. That oil has a Caribbean history is itself a neglected aspect of the region's modern importance. In his 1966 attempt to define the region, Sidney Mintz noted the Caribbean was “both ‘urbanized’ and ‘westernized’ by its plantations, oil refineries, and aluminum mines.”⁹ That the plantation helped to inaugurate capitalist modernity is hardly in dispute among scholars today.¹⁰ Perhaps as a consequence of this, we know more about the plantation than we do about that other paradigmatic site of global capitalism, the oil refinery.¹¹ Canonical Dutch-language works have highlighted the transformations wrought by oil refining in the Dutch islands, changes so profound that Aruban and Curaçaoan history pivots on pre- and post-oil axes. Yet, while industrialization changed working rhythms and commercial tastes, many scholars noted that oil did little to alter the structural orientation of Caribbean economies.¹² The development of narrowly specialized exports and reliance on a racialized, exploited workforce echoed uncomfortably with the preindustrial past. As Mintz reminds us, the plantation and the oil refinery were not on opposite sides of a tradition/modernity divide.¹³ Both reflect the region's fundamentally modern character, unevenly integrated with but not, because of that, less central to the global capitalist system.

In the twentieth century, the development of oil refining industries on Aruba and Curaçao linked these southerly isles to ascendant

transnational oil corporations and a burgeoning energy regime. In 1914, major oil deposits were discovered just thirty miles south in Venezuela's Lake Maracaibo region.¹⁴ The following year, Shell broke ground on a transshipment and refinery complex in Willemstad, Curaçao, where Dutch oilmen enjoyed close ties with the colonial government. Shell's Curaçao refinery, known by residents and workers as "Isla" for the peninsula on which the plant was built, became the company's most productive, processing over one-third of Shell's total in 1938.¹⁵ A latecomer to the Venezuelan oil fields, John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil of New Jersey (since 1926 using its trademark Esso) acquired a small refining and transshipment site on Aruba in 1932 that the company soon expanded into a major refining center. In the decade between 1939 and 1949, Lago's crude runs nearly doubled from 230,000 to 400,000 barrels per day—among the largest throughput of any operating refinery.¹⁶ During the Second World War, the refineries on Aruba and Curaçao supplied the Allies with a staggering 80 percent of their naval and aviation fuel, directly participating in the liberation of Europe from fascism.¹⁷

Fortuitous proximity to Venezuela's oil reserves was but one factor in the decision to establish refineries on the islands. Shell and Standard Oil also prized the dependent nature of these Dutch colonies. Independent republics and enfranchised laborers, after all, could make costly demands. It was also for this reason that Venezuelan strongman Juan Vicente Gómez outsourced the processing of crude to Aruba and Curaçao rather than risk the effects of labor concentration on his own terrain.¹⁸ The impact of this decision was to be far-reaching. Occupying a combined 250 square miles, Aruba and Curaçao transformed into key nodes in the global energy economy.

The construction of refineries on the Dutch islands presaged the growth of enclave refining sites in the Caribbean region. Apart from abundant oil reserves in the continental shelf stretching across Venezuela and Trinidad and Tobago, much smaller deposits in Cuba and Barbados, and recently discovered hydrocarbons in the Guianas, most Caribbean locales do not possess independent oil reserves.¹⁹ Yet the refineries housed in the Caribbean performed vital tasks, without which oil could not be globally commodified. As David Bond notes, the Panama Canal opened new transoceanic shipping lanes just as Euro-American navies and merchant fleets

turned to heavy fuel oil, making the Caribbean a strategic home to new oil depots and refineries. Unlike those built to serve nearby consumer markets in the United States and Europe, Caribbean refineries were “scaled to the oceanic merchant and military networks they supported.”²⁰ It was in these mammoth refineries that oil, of limited use in its crude state, was fractured, cracked, and distilled into an array of petroleum and petrochemical products. From motor gasoline for cars to jet fuel for aircrafts and heavy fuel oil for ocean tankers, these products helped to enable the collapsing of time and space upon which capitalism relies—a fact celebrated by industry executives on Aruba, who boasted of the island’s outsized role in fueling global interconnection (figure 1).²¹ Just as on Aruba and Curaçao, the dozen or more refineries built throughout the wider Caribbean between 1950 and 1970 were export-oriented, funneling petroleum products to growing markets in the United States and, to a lesser extent, Europe. In this same time period, the Caribbean became the world’s largest exporter of refined petroleum products.²² Together, Caribbean refineries processed over 2.7 million barrels a day in 1975.²³

In recent years, interdisciplinary energy humanities scholars have drawn attention to the fact that fossil fuels do not simply enable sprawling transnational transport or determine the contours of Great Power politics and geopolitical struggles. They also trickle down, so to speak, shaping individual desires and saturating deeply raced, classed, and gendered notions of the “good life”—often in ways we struggle to recognize because of the very omnipresence of petroleum and petrochemical products in our daily lives.²⁴ In the twentieth century, the fenced-off vinyl-sided house, connected to work and commerce only by car, became the model of middle-class domesticity.²⁵ For these reasons, too, oil’s heyday is often remembered fondly on Aruba and Curaçao. The age of oil, unlike the era of tourism dependence that followed, was for some a time of reliable wages, expanding employment, and respectable housing. As Cara Daggett has argued, in considering the political economy of fossil fuels, it is important to index their *affective* dimensions, including the ways that collective desires and identities are bound up in the fossil economy.²⁶ Fossil fuels have also enabled biopolitical projects throughout the twentieth century.²⁷ In a very literal sense, oil kept the lights on in Curaçao’s family planning clinic (the Caribbean, like the Middle East, relies on fuel oil for electricity

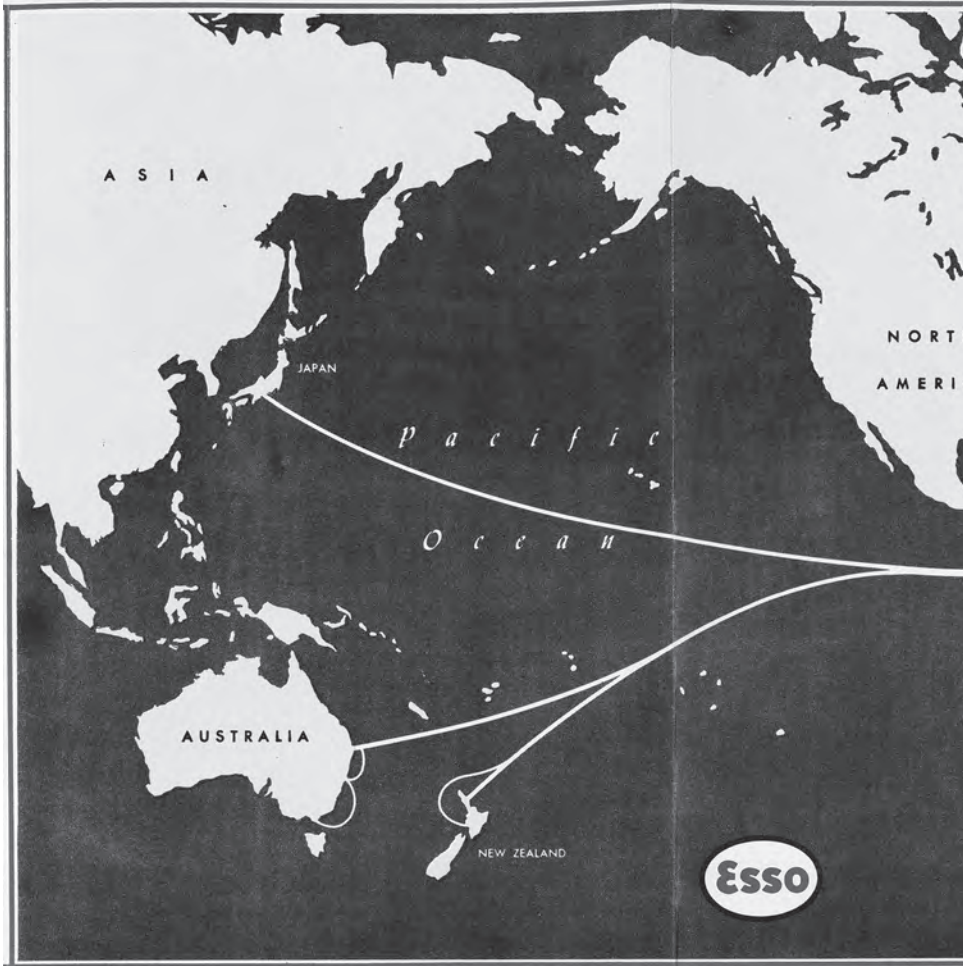


Figure 1. "The world-wide spread of Aruba's influence through the heat, light, and power of its products," 1959. SOURCE: The University of Texas at Austin, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, Lago Colony, Aruba, Collection, camh-dob-010394. Courtesy ExxonMobil Corporation.

generation) and facilitated the transnational travels of demographic experts, an increasingly common phenomenon as the oil refineries on Aruba and Curaçao reversed fortunes in the 1960s.

What these perspectives bring to the fore is the centrality of oil to the shaping of desires and the regulation of intimacy, a previously unexamined



dimension in histories of sexuality and gender. Routinely cited as the “most neglected” among studies of Caribbean sexuality, the Dutch Caribbean thus offers a poignant case study for examining how oil seeped into households and selves as insular societies hosted an immense industrial experiment.²⁸ In the first half of the twentieth century, industry managers and governing elites on Curaçao and Aruba considered oil a uniquely transformative force both in the organization of its production and in the values allegedly inherent to the commodities derived from it. They placed