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Reassembling Caribbean Energy? Petrocaribe, (Post-)Plantation Sovereignty, and Caribbean Energy Futures

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Reassembling Caribbean Energy? Petrocaribe, (Post-)Plantation Sovereignty, and Caribbean Energy Futures

Abstract

In this paper, we probe the possibilities and limits of Petrocaribe, a Venezuelan-led oil alliance that has shaped energy and development initiatives in the Caribbean basin since the mid-2000s, as well as the US responses to the program. Drawing from a range of sources, including interviews with regional actors and leaked diplomatic cables from Wikileaks, we describe some of the contours of these competing regional energy assemblages, and analyze how they intersect with both the legacies of colonial dependency and more recent neoliberal models for development within the Caribbean region. We contextualize and frame these initiatives by drawing from the rich Caribbean scholarship on regional history and contemporary change and focus in particular on the continuing role of the plantation model in shaping regional affairs. We place this Caribbean scholarship in conversation with recent work in the social sciences utilizing the concept of assemblage which, we suggest, can be usefully adopted to trace how Caribbean energy networks and relations are structured and change over time. We argue that while Petrocaribe has successfully provided opportunities for new forms of Caribbean development, the program had to be layered onto an already-existing oil assemblage comprised of durable infrastructures, private sector actors, and geopolitical interests, conditions that limit the available options for truly transforming energy relations within the region. While such conditions opened up space for a viable US response to Petrocaribe, we argue that U.S. government initiatives in the region have consistently embraced a private sector approach that reproduces existing dependencies rather than enhancing the region's energy sovereignty.

Keywords: Caribbean, oil, energy, Petrocaribe

Introduction

In June of 2009, Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez made his second-ever state visit to the Eastern Caribbean island of Dominica. The occasion was the formal opening of a new fuel storage and distribution plant, funded in part by the Venezuelan government to facilitate its Petrocaribe initiative to supply oil to the island. Two years prior, Dominica had become the first Caribbean country to join the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (or ALBA), the Venezuelan-led trade and development alliance proposed as an alternative to the prevailing US-led neoliberal policies in the region. Speaking to the assembled crowd in front of the new storage tanks, Dominican Prime Minister Roosevelt Skerrit pointed to "the tremendous untold criticism which was levelled on Dominica's membership of ALBA" and then expressed his appreciation to the Venezuelan leader for his resource diplomacy. "We must recognize," said Skerrit:

the tremendous commitment of President Chávez and the people of Venezuela. This is a leader with a vision. This is a leader who is prepared to use his resources to extend a hand of friendship to many countries ... I am very proud to say that I am a

friend of Hugo Chávez and Dominica is a friend of Venezuela. (quoted in “Waitukubuli Fuel Storage and Distribution Plant Opened in Dominica” 2009)

For his part, Chávez emphasized the role of Petrocaribe in bypassing foreign oil companies and thereby enhancing the region's energy security: "Now you won't depend on transnational companies, who... bought petroleum in Venezuela and came... here to sell [it] at double and triple the price... now you'll have fuel security without anyone coming to plunder... know that all the petroleum that Dominica needs for the next 200 years is there in Venezuela" (quoted in Acuña 2013: 79).

Officials at the US embassy in Barbados took note of the event. In a leaked cable sent shortly after Chávez's visit, US diplomatic staff expressed concern that Venezuela's largesse was "slowly altering the political landscape [in Dominica] ... as the opposition parties are unable to compete with the Venezuelan transfer payments that are being spread liberally throughout the countryside by the ruling party." Despite the cable's derisive tone (labeling Skerit as “sycophantish” and mocking his “red ‘Chavista’-style shirt”), embassy officials noted that projects such as the fuel storage facility were likely to "bolster the legitimacy of ALBA as a regional development tool and Venezuela as the premier partner of choice for the Eastern Caribbean" (Embassy Bridgetown 2009a).

The speeches and commentary surrounding a seemingly mundane piece of energy infrastructure speak to a broader set of issues attending to the Petrocaribe program, issues that have to do with the role of energy and its infrastructures in Caribbean regional development and sovereignty. Petrocaribe came together in the last months of 2004, when fourteen Caribbean countries negotiated formal agreements with Venezuela and became official members of the program. Since then, as we describe in more detail below, the program has offered its member countries a new set of energy infrastructures and relationships, as well as an alternative path to regional integration and development. In this paper, we examine some of the key dimensions of Petrocaribe and US responses to the program, probe the possibilities and limits of each, and discuss how these intersect with both the legacies of colonial dependency and more recent models for development within the Caribbean region.

Our conceptualization of the material and ideological shifts associated with Petrocaribe is informed by two sets of literatures. First, we draw from the rich Caribbean scholarship on regional history and contemporary change, focusing in particular on the continuing role of the plantation model in shaping regional affairs. And second, we engage with recent work in the social sciences utilizing the concept of assemblage which, we suggest, can be usefully adopted to trace how Caribbean energy networks and relations are structured and change over time. Drawing from a range of sources, including interviews with regional actors and leaked diplomatic cables from Wikileaks, we describe some of the contours of this new regional assemblage. As we demonstrate below, while Petrocaribe has successfully provided opportunities for new forms of Caribbean development, the program had to be layered onto an already-existing oil assemblage comprised of durable infrastructures, private

sector actors, and geopolitical interests, and this has limited the available options for truly transforming energy relations within the region. If such limitations might have opened up space for a viable U.S. government response to Petrocaribe, however, we argue that U.S. government overtures in the region have consistently embraced a private sector approach that seems likely to reproduce existing dependencies rather than enhance the region's energy sovereignty.

Methods and Research Design

This paper is part of a broader project examining the ongoing transition to renewable energy in Jamaica and the small independent states of the Eastern Caribbean. Our research has included 32 semi-structured interviews between 2015 and 2017 with energy-related actors including politicians, government officials, NGOs, and variety of private sector actors including utilities and renewable energy installers in the region (see Table 1). Interviews focused on the broader energy transition in the Caribbean, and were subsequently transcribed and coded for key themes. A recurring - and admittedly unexpected - theme that emerged from our first exploratory interviews was the importance of Petrocaribe to Caribbean energy relations, in terms of both the amount of energy delivered and the region's broader energy geopolitics. In response to this discovery, we began investigating leaked diplomatic cables collected from Wikileaks to determine how the Petrocaribe program was viewed by U.S. embassy officials and to better understand its role in the Caribbean energy assemblage.

The use of Wikileaks data represents something of a frontier for academic researchers, although it is now commonly used by journalists. Despite allegations that cables have been selectively leaked and the existence of questions over the links between Wikileaks and the Russian government, O'Loughlin (2016) and colleagues (O'Loughlin et al. 2010) have demonstrated the value of Wikileaks data in mapping conflict in Afghanistan. Further, Michael (2015) argues that despite being largely ignored by academics, the use of leaked diplomatic cables can provide valuable insights into contemporary policy and political analysis.

We used the keyword "Petrocaribe" to search the Cablegate archives, which returned 431 leaked cables sent between 2004 and 2011, primarily from the U.S. embassies in Bridgetown, Kingston, Port-of-Spain, and Caracas (see Figure 1). These cables - which were authored by diplomatic officials - were analyzed for content and coded for key themes, as well as used to create a timeline of key events around the creation and adoption of Petrocaribe. While we do not wish to overstate their ability to capture the opinions of those beyond Embassy officials, the leaked cables do provide more than simply the views of the U.S. diplomatic corps, as they report on discussions between diplomatic staff, Caribbean politicians, and private sector actors, including those in the petroleum industry. Because the leaked cables cover only a limited time period and one side of the issue, we use the cables in combination with interview data and relevant regional policy documents and commentary. Our aim is to document some of the views of, and responses to, Petrocaribe on the part of different Caribbean actors, and thereby to show how the initiative brings to the fore important questions

about the region's energy future. Before turning to these issues, however, we move to consider how an approach combining Caribbean plantation legacies with contemporary assemblage thinking can help to shed light on Antillean energy dilemmas.

Theoretical framework

The Plantation Model in the Caribbean

Contemporary energy dynamics within the Caribbean have been forged by a lengthy history of regional change shaped by outside interests, a dynamic long of interest to Caribbean scholars who have pointed to the region's foundational role in binding together the Atlantic World and its status as the crucible of European modernity (Mintz 1974). Central to this new world was the plantation model, which fundamentally transformed Antillean societies, cultures, and ecologies, and has continued to serve as an idiom for contemporary understandings of the region. Drawing on the literature in Caribbean Studies, we want to suggest a number of ways that the plantation can be usefully deployed as a frame for highlighting how the contemporary Caribbean remains indebted to its transatlantic legacies.

First, the plantation inaugurated what Trouillot (2002a) has called a new 'geography of management', combining the coercive practices of slave labor with new forms of agro-industrial efficiency around new institutional and infrastructural systems (also Mintz 1996). These plantation economies, ecologies, and labor relations not only anticipated Europe's later industrial revolution, but also re-engineered the Caribbean around an economic model that remains characterized by long-standing patterns of enclave development and structural inequality. Second, the plantation initiated what Trouillot (2002a) terms a 'geography of imagination', that is, the projection of European modernity and its particular cognitive perspective as the universal model for progress. The plantation, in other words, was not only a site in which new economic, ecological and cultural forms were forged, but an epistemological frame for the Eurocentric production of knowledge and subjectivity (Quijano 2000; Mignolo 2007).

Finally, in part because of these historical geographies, the plantation regime was characterized by a geopolitical topography that has continued to pose significant challenges to the establishment of Caribbean sovereignty and political agency, even after the arrival of nominal independence in most territories (Lewis 2012). As Bonilla (2013: 156) has put it, "the global processes that converge in the Caribbean show that the sovereign nation is a myth, an aspirational model at best." As a lens on the contemporary region, then, the plantation calls attention to long-established relations of dependence that hinder the development of Caribbean sovereignty and self-determination in the face of circumstances that are still often shaped by actors beyond the region. These circumstances, particularly when we consider the case of energy, encompass a meshwork of relationships that are both material and ideological. These socio-material relations, we believe, can be productively examined by drawing from recent work on the concept of assemblage.

Assembling the Caribbean

A significant body of recent work in geography and related disciplines has drawn upon the notion of assemblage as a way to approach socio-material relations. Derived from the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari, assemblage thinking has been developed by a range of scholars as a way to depict a world comprised of more or less stable associations among a diverse range of entities, and to heighten attentiveness to processes of emergence and change. We lack the space here for a full elaboration of the diverse trajectories of assemblage scholarship (see recent reviews by Anderson et al. 2012; Müller 2015; Müller and Schurr 2016), but we do wish to draw attention to a number of ways in which depictions of the Caribbean region can be seen to share significant affinities with assemblage thinking.

First, assemblages are acknowledged to be *heterogeneous*, comprised of a range of associations that include both human and non-human elements and cut across domains that are both material and expressive (DeLanda, 2006; Lancione 2016). As applied to the Caribbean, this serves as a reminder that the plantation was not only an economic model, but also a site of cultural, material, and biological mixing and improvisation, giving rise to unique regional identities characterized by processes of creolization and hybridity (Trouillot 2002b; DeLoughrey et al. 2005; Crichlow and Northover 2009). This attention to mixtures and heterogeneity provides a useful lens for understanding the Caribbean oil assemblage, comprised as it is of a diverse mix of state and non-state actors, materials and infrastructures, and programs and policies located both within and beyond the Caribbean basin.

Second, assemblage thinking denotes a *relational understanding* of composition and agency (Dittmer 2014), an approach that befits a region defined not so much by a bounded territorial identity, but by its fragmented and archipelagic geography stitched together by a history of movement, interaction and complex forms of connection (DeLoughrey 2007; Glissant 2007; Pugh 2013). A relational view can bring into focus the tensions between sovereignty and dependency arising from these historical geographies of connection within the Caribbean basin. As Bonilla (2013: 159) has observed, “it is only by examining ... [Caribbean] places in relationship to each other--and to the broader world--that we can get a better picture of the various uses, negotiations, and contortions of sovereignty across and beyond the Caribbean.” Extending this insight to Caribbean energy allows us to examine how energy flows, infrastructures and geopolitical initiatives are drawn into relations that extend across multiple sites and spaces of production, consumption, distribution, and diplomacy.

Finally, assemblage can be a means to highlight entities and processes that shape *regional stability and change*. One of the notable attributes of assemblage thinking is its insight that assemblages are always to some extent fragile and provisional, and require ongoing work to be sustained. Within assemblage theory, this see-saw of stabilization and change is often described as a movement of *territorialization* (components or agencies that enhance the stability of an assemblage) and *detrterritorialization* (those

with destabilizing effects) (Bear 2012; Müller 2015). The assemblage view of territorialization and change resonates with the ways in which the Caribbean region has been understood as a fluid, dynamic and constantly changing region. It is a region characterized by what Benítez-Rojo has called "unstable condensations" and "historiographic turbulence" (1996: 2,3) or what Brathwaite (1999) has termed "tidalectics". This and other Caribbean scholarship, as Clarke (2013: 105) notes, has "pushed the limits for how the region is understood, positing it in deterritorial terms" in which the Caribbean is "always being drawn and redrawn as part of an ongoing process." As applied to the case of Caribbean energy, we are reminded that energy systems and relations are shaped by processes of both territorialization (such as material infrastructures or trade agreements) that reinforce existing configurations, and deterritorialization (for example, price instability or technological change), which might open up the possibility for assembling energy in new ways.

Indeed, we argue in this paper that it was precisely this tension that was at play in the Venezuelan rollout of, and US response to, the Petrocaribe program. On the one hand, Venezuela's overture held out the potential to deterritorialize the existing fuel assemblage by offering a new set of energy relations. On the other, however, the program had to confront continuing forces of reterritorialization that made it difficult to dislodge the existing 'plantation' assemblage organized around fossil fuels. The question of Caribbean energy sovereignty, we want to suggest, revolves at least in part around the possibility of moving away--both materially and ideologically--from the existing energy-development nexus, one that, as we outline below, is oriented around the region's twin dependencies on fossil fuels and neoliberalism.

Plantation Dependencies and Caribbean Energy

Within the Caribbean, only Trinidad and Tobago, and to a far lesser extent Barbados, have considerable oil reserves and production, and this means that most Caribbean economies are heavily reliant upon imported fossil fuels for transportation, electricity generation, and in some cases cooking fuel. The region's electricity systems were established during the colonial era and were generally built around generators that run on diesel and heavy fuel oil. Despite having ample wind, sun, and geothermal energy potential, Caribbean countries have long been dependent upon oil imports from Trinidad, Mexico, and Venezuela to fuel island life. This in turn means that, as oil importers and price takers (Bradshaw 2009), the Caribbean has found itself on the wrong side of rising oil prices for many years. For example, as far back as 1983 Jamaica, one of the rare independent Caribbean countries with refining capacity (most refineries are located in US and European colonies and protectorates), was spending 14% of its GDP, and 30% of import spending, on crude and refined petroleum products (UNDP/World Bank Energy Sector Assessment Program 1985). By 2006, with oil prices around \$76/barrel, the problem had become even worse in Jamaica, as two thirds of every dollar earned from exports was being spent on oil imports (Kingston Embassy 2006a). Jamaica is not alone, as most Caribbean islands continue to be plagued by the effects of high oil prices on trade balances and foreign exchange holdings.

The flows and infrastructures characterizing the fossil fuel-based energy assemblage in the Caribbean have been a key component of a wider economic development trajectory that in many ways derives from the region's plantation-style legacies of dependency (Beckford 1972). Notwithstanding several notable attempts in the post-colonial Caribbean to develop an autonomous, state-based development model, the electoral defeat of the Manley regime in Jamaica and the collapse of the revolution in Grenada ushered in two decades of US-backed policies of neoliberalism. During the 1980s and 1990s, Caribbean economies were buffeted by the winds of free trade layered onto territories already unevenly structured by colonialism and dependency (Levitt 1996; Weis 2005; Green 2007). In recent decades, the loss of preferential trade agreements in the Caribbean has decimated traditional export industries like bananas and sugar and has brought on public debt crises for governments struggling to make up for lost revenue (Girvan 2011; Fridell 2015). In response, numerous islands have been forced to suffer through structural adjustment programs designed to reorient economies towards export and shrink the size of the public sector (McAfee 1991; Thomas-Emeagwali 1995; Mullings 2009) while also opening up public infrastructures to transnational investment (Sheller 2009). Among the targets for privatization was the region's energy assemblage. According to a 1991 Energy Strategy for the region produced for the US Agency for International Development, "A.I.D. should now shift to a stronger assistance to help the private sector do business in a region that is ready to welcome private capital, both foreign and local," as this will "provide U.S. firms with a major share of the market opened by economic recovery in this region" (US Agency for International Development 1991).

On the whole, these neoliberal policies have failed to deliver economic prosperity to the region, and by the time Petrocaribe was launched, much of the region found itself "buckling under the weight of the neo-liberal agenda" (Lewis 2012: 6). As Jamaican scholar Norman Girvan (2011: 20) argues, the Caribbean "experience of neoliberal globalisation has so far been negative, especially for the smaller countries ... It has delivered little by way of the promised benefits of economic diversification and higher inflows of foreign direct investment." It has also eroded state sovereignty over key levers of national development. Neoliberalism, notes Klak (2009: 19), "has sidelined the state as a development agent, and made the state less prominent, trusted and relevant than before neoliberalization."

It is in this context that we want to place the intervention of Petrocaribe in the region. What is at issue, we argue, is the question of whether and how the Caribbean might assemble a post-plantation model of national economic development and regional security, and the role of energy in such imaginings. This turns fundamentally on what Scott has called the "nature of dependence within the context of neocolonial sovereignty" (Scott 2013: 5). In this respect, achieving Caribbean energy sovereignty entails confronting two challenges. The first is to disassemble what Trouillot (2002a) called the 'geography of imagination,' that is, to regain control over the contours, models, and vision shaping Caribbean social and economic development. This in turn suggests new forms of autonomy from or within the contemporary global political economy. And the second challenge is to re-assemble Trouillot's 'geography of management' such that energy resources, infrastructures and

circulations within the Caribbean are subject to regional control and democratic accountability. And this suggests to us the need to move away from imported fossil fuels and toward a model built upon the region's indigenous renewable sources of energy.

As Trouillot explained in the case of the colonial plantation model, these two dimensions of sovereignty are closely related. "The geography of management and the geography of imagination are intertwined," he noted, as "the imaginary projection of the West constantly refuels managerial projects of modernization" (Trouillot 2002a: 224). Taking Trouillot literally, we argue in the remainder of the paper that it is this question of how the Caribbean might "re-fuel" a post-plantation imaginary of sovereignty and development that Petrocaribe brings to the fore.

The Petrocaribe Alternative

A New Development Imaginary

The Petrocaribe oil program emerged from Venezuela's wider vision for ALBA, which was conceived as a direct alternative to the prevailing ethos of neoliberalism in the region. In contrast, ALBA was to be an alliance "based on the principles and values that break from the logic of the market" (Subscription of the Government, n.d), a form of South-South cooperation founded on the ideals of complementarity, solidarity and justice (Fridell 2015; Muhr 2017). As an extension of the ALBA ideal, Petrocaribe thus represented an alternative, state-based development model, one that would help its member countries to break from the region's plantation legacy, described as "the unfair international economical order, inherited from colonialism and imperialism, and imposed by rich and Developer countries" (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and Governments of the Caribbean 2005: 2, 1). In this context, Petrocaribe represented not only an energy alliance, but also "a comprehensive process that promotes the elimination of social inequalities and promotes quality of life and an effective participation of the peoples in the shaping of their own destiny" (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and Governments of the Caribbean 2005).

Petrocaribe functioned not by selling oil at a preferential price (as an OPEC member Venezuela is prohibited from selling below the global price), but rather by allowing member countries to pay for oil on preferential terms. Under the standard Petrocaribe agreement, member countries could delay payment for Venezuelan oil deliveries for between one and two years. Then, depending on the global price of oil, members could finance between 5% and 50% of the purchase price over a time period that ranged from 17 to 25 years. The interest rate on financed oil was extremely low – between 1% and 2% - and in keeping with the wider ALBA vision of solidarity and cooperation, could be paid for in-kind with sugar, rice, or, in the words of one Caracas-based US embassy official, "other goods and services affected by the trade policies of wealthy countries" (Caracas Embassy 2005).

The deferred oil payments would be placed in a fund that could be used for development projects, essentially acting as a form of concessional lending. The goal of the Petrocaribe program, then, was not only to secure the supply of oil in a region hard hit by petro-dependence, but also, in the words of Chávez at the 2005 Petrocaribe summit, to serve as “a political catalyst to help ... reduce the terrible gap regarding poverty, income, infrastructure, volume of trade and a fair access to information and education which stop significant sectors of our countries from having essential conditions and a decent way of living” (PdVSA Caribe 2008). In this respect, Petrocaribe appeared to possess the potential to offer a new model of development in the region, thus potentially altering Trouillot’s (2002a) 'geography of imagination' that had long drawn the Caribbean into the sphere of Western influence.

Caribbean leaders expressed to us during interviews that they found this to be appealing. For one thing, the deferred payments for oil came at extremely low interest rates. As one Caribbean energy official told us:

“We were getting concessionary finance ... At one percent! At one percent – it’s like a gift!” (Interview participant #1, June 2017)

Another echoed the sentiment, stating:

“The financing was appealing. I mean, getting millions of dollars at one percent, two percent.” (Interview participant #2, June 2017)

Equally importantly, Venezuela pledged to not get involved in the domestic affairs of recipient states. Unlike concessionary financing that might be available through the Bretton Woods Institutions or regional development banks, the funds provided through Petrocaribe came with no strings attached. As one Caribbean minister told us:

“You have a social program that is funded by a friendly government. And they weren’t looking at you, they [are] not in your politics here, you know, you work *with* them.” (Interview participant #3, June 2017)

This proved especially useful for cash strapped Caribbean governments, especially during tough economic times in the late 2000’s when some member countries were rumored to be using Petrocaribe funds to pay civil servants. As one diplomatic cable from Jamaica noted, “the benefits from Petrocaribe ... helped to keep Jamaica from falling into the abyss” (Kingston Embassy 2009).

By 2008, Petrocaribe had become the largest source of concessionary finance for its member countries, and the deferred payments were being used to fund a wide range of social projects around the region, including health care programs, education initiatives, and low income housing (Girvan 2011). Petrocaribe funds also were used for airport construction in Dominica and St. Vincent, as

well as recovery support after tropical storms. Overall, then, Petrocaribe proved attractive to Caribbean countries as both an alternative model of oil supply and a social and economic development alternative to structural adjustments and vague promises of private investment at a time when Caribbean leaders were struggling with economic hardships. These benefits notwithstanding, however, there were limits to the image of regional energy sovereignty offered under the Petrocaribe model. First and foremost this is because, as an oil program, Petrocaribe was unable to help fundamentally re-engineer the regional energy assemblage away from fossil fuels and toward more renewable sources of energy. Indeed, a US diplomatic cable observed as much, noting that "to the extent that Venezuela can strengthen its economic influence over the region by increasing dependence on Venezuelan oil products, these islands will be slow to move to develop the vast alternative energy resources that are available" (Bridgetown Embassy 2009). But even considered as a more cooperative and state-based alternative for the region's fossil fuel energy supply, Petrocaribe has interacted in complex ways with existing infrastructural and geopolitical relations in the region.

Infrastructural and Geopolitical Entanglements

Assemblage thinking calls our attention to the relational embeddedness of both material and discursive properties with an assemblage. This is highlighted by some of the ways that the Petrocaribe program has intersected with existing relational networks of both material infrastructures and diplomatic affairs within the region. For one thing, Venezuela was not simply dispersing money; they were selling and shipping oil, and this means that Petrocaribe was not simply a regional development program, but an infrastructure program as well. The agreement called for a series of joint venture corporations that were tasked with "the responsibility of organizing a logistic network of ships, storage spaces and terminals, including, wherever possible, refining and fuel and by-products distribution capabilities" (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and Governments of the Caribbean 2005). Doing so, however, proved challenging, especially in Eastern Caribbean territories characterized by small markets and limited existing infrastructures.

On the island of St. Vincent, for example, Petrocaribe took over the supply of LPG canisters for cooking after a government dispute with Texaco, the island's previous supplier. Venezuela, however, lacked the appropriate oil transport vessel needed to offload bulk LPG at St. Vincent's tiny port. As a result, 7,200 bottles of LPG had to be prefilled in Venezuela, transported by a Venezuelan naval vessel, and removed from a shipping container by hand once they arrived in St. Vincent. Making matters worse, the bottles from Venezuela were not refillable with the existing LPG equipment in St. Vincent (Bridgetown Embassy 2006a).

Infrastructural hurdles also confronted Petrocaribe in Dominica, where a 5,000 gallon storage tank provided by PdVSA to the Dominican government in 2006 sat unused for nearly half a year while the government struggled to find a suitable site, a situation that the US Embassy in Bridgetown described as "typical of the nation's small, poorly staffed government, which often has trouble

carrying out the most basic tasks not to mention implementing Petrocaribe” (Bridgetown Embassy 2006b). Dominica’s logistical struggles continued later that year, when a large shipment of petroleum was disrupted, and reports emerged that one ship captain had left the port because he was unhappy with the docking, while another had pumped half of the fuel shipment and then left (Bridgetown Embassy 2006c).

In St. Lucia, meanwhile, the need to develop a parallel Petrocaribe logistical network has been a barrier to full participation as the country already had substantial privately owned petroleum infrastructure in place since the early 2000s. Although St. Lucia signed onto the Petrocaribe agreement, it has never taken delivery of Venezuelan petroleum. As a St. Lucian energy official explained to us, the requirement to set up new state-owned facilities

“was just too difficult. We had 10 million gallons of fuel storage capacity there already, and you have Sol and Rubis [two Caribbean-based oil companies] bringing in LNG.”

Although the Petrocaribe financing was attractive, he noted that “you had to look at the docking facilities, storage facilities, transshipment facilities, delivery facilities, managing a [different] business model” (Interview participant #2, 2017).

In addition to these infrastructural challenges, Caribbean leaders have also had to navigate Petrocaribe’s energy diplomacy in the context of existing geopolitical relations within the region (Sanders 2007; Maingot 2011). Although we lack the space here for a full accounting of these issues, questions have been raised about the influence of Petrocaribe on existing relations within the Caribbean Community, in particular the region’s trading relationships under the Single Market Economy (Bryan 2009; Girvan 2011). And although the Petrocaribe agreement explicitly affirms the geopolitical sovereignty of its member countries, some commentators have expressed a concern that Venezuela might leverage Petrocaribe to gain favorable diplomatic support (Carnevali 2015). We can point here to Venezuela’s (ultimately failed) 2006 effort to seek a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council as well as ongoing territorial disputes with Dominica (over Bird island) and Guyana (over the Essequibo region).

In sum, we suggest that Petrocaribe offered Caribbean countries an alternative ‘geography of imagination’ with significantly more latitude to shape a regional development model around their own interests and priorities. At the same time, however, these efforts were complicated, and their potential impacts substantially muted, by the region’s existing ‘geographies of management’ around fossil fuel infrastructures, and by geopolitical entanglements that can result in renewed dependencies rather than increased sovereignty. These shortcomings provided a potential opening for a U.S. government response to Petrocaribe, an opportunity that, we argue below, was foreclosed by the shale gas revolution and by the continuing adherence by the U.S. government to neoliberal approaches driven by the private sector.

The U.S. Response to Petrocaribe

U.S. diplomats in the region clearly recognized Petrocaribe as an effort to influence the geopolitical narrative in the region, as well as the fact that the program offered a potential alternative to private sector-led development initiatives and energy supply. One cable noted that "Petrocaribe ... gives the GOV an excellent opportunity to come across as kind and compassionate while at the same time offering the chance to tar international oil companies (IOCs) as price gougers preying on the poor" (Caracas Embassy 2005). Another observed that "Chávez has cast himself as the region's savior, while castigating the USG and U.S. energy companies as greedy imperialists" (Bridgetown Embassy 2006d). This is not to say that U.S. diplomatic relations in the region were especially poor, and indeed many of the cables suggest that Caribbean officials had no wish to alienate the United States. However, from the perspective of one embassy official, Petrocaribe would lead to Caribbean officials having "shorter memories of meaningful partnerships with the United States" (Bridgetown Embassy 2006e). In general, in the early years of Petrocaribe the diplomatic corps sought merely to "continue to make every effort to maintain a visible U.S. presence in the Eastern Caribbean through U.S. officials' visits and well targeted assistance to shore up our partnership with the region" (Bridgetown Embassy 2007). However, numerous cables indicate that early attempts to engage Caribbean governments over Petrocaribe were difficult, with the U.S. Embassy in Kingston complaining about the difficulty of engagement "in the absence of a clear USG alternative" (Kingston Embassy 2006b).

One clear alternative, and one mentioned by U.S. embassy officials, was to counter Petrocaribe's fossil fuel-based assemblage with an effort to help to develop the region's ample wind, sun, and geothermal energy potential. Indeed, during the initial years of the Petrocaribe program, a number of initiatives sponsored by European development agencies began to do just that, and recent years have witnessed a dramatic increase in renewable energy projects and financing throughout the region (Harrison and Popke 2018). For regional leaders, renewable energy is increasingly held out as a means to increase energy sovereignty by removing the financial burdens posed by oil purchases on the global market. In this sense, locally-generated renewables have the potential to significantly reduce the dependencies associated with the plantation energy assemblage oriented around fossil fuels.

The potential for an effective U.S.-led intervention around renewables appeared increasingly realistic after the collapse of global oil prices following the 2009 global financial crisis, which significantly altered the outlook for PdVSA, and by extension, Petrocaribe and ALBA. Reports from the U.S. Embassy in Caracas indicated that PdVSA production was dropping, oil service companies operating in Venezuela were not being paid, and Petrocaribe shipments had slowed (Caracas Embassy 2009). Since 2009 Petrocaribe has continued to face significant headwinds. Petroleum shipments fell by more than half between 2012 and 2016 (Stratfor 2017), a period that also

witnessed the death of Hugo Chávez and the beginning of a protracted political and economic crisis in Venezuela.

In the event, however, the U.S. government initiatives around renewable energy were limited, and were oriented primarily around an effort to project American influence by promoting investment opportunities for U.S. companies. As an official from the Bridgetown Embassy advised, "the U.S. cannot match Chávez's offer of concessionary oil financing but we could help promote alternative energy and help connect leading alternative energy companies in the U.S. with local electric companies. These partnerships could well bear fruit and increase U.S. influence in the region" (Bridgetown Embassy 2006d). Notwithstanding this suggestion, as we show in the section that follows, U.S. government overtures never coalesced around renewable energy initiatives, neoliberal or otherwise. Instead, weak U.S. government offers for renewable energy assistance were offset by a preference for private sector development and an interest in deploying surplus natural gas as a geostrategic tool through a program known as the Caribbean Energy Security Initiative.

The Caribbean Energy Security Initiative

The Caribbean Energy Security Initiative (CESI) was announced in 2014 and headed by then-U.S. Vice President Joe Biden. As a counterweight to Petrocaribe's state led development imaginary, the CESI was designed to "provide assistance to Caribbean islands on difficult policy and regulatory reforms [that] can attract the private finance required to implement new energy technologies and approaches" (White House 2014). This brief description highlights two key aspects of the new US energy diplomacy: it was grounded in a vision of energy development led by the private sector, and it promoted the adoption of energy sources that could substitute for Venezuelan oil.

On the former point, Biden (2015) was clear about what the program had to offer at a speech to Caribbean leaders at the White House in January 2015. In his words, "it can't just be about money. It has to be about doing business the right way. Government money and targeted international aid can and must be available – it's helpful, but the private sector is where the money is." Biden (2015) then chided Caribbean leaders for partaking in corruption, promising the commitment of the US, but cautioning that "we're not going to waste money. We're going to insist on considerably more transparency, greater coordination, and changes in regulations." We can see here the ways in which the CESI is consistent with a neoliberal vision for the region's energy future, one based around a strategy of setting up the appropriate regulatory and policy environment to guarantee significant returns on investment for private capital. But the strategy came with precious little funding. One Caribbean representative who attended the White House summit expressed his surprise at the meager amount of financial assistance that was on offer from CESI:

"We were in Washington at the Energy Summit ... and we're offered 3 million dollars by the U.S. administration. 'We' being CARICOM. Over 3 years. Three

million U.S. dollars, to 15 countries, over a 3 year period. Excuse me? Excuse me?! You want to wean us off of PetroCaribe for that?" (Interview participant #4, 2016)

Although the CESI paid lip service to the development of renewable energy in the Caribbean, a key component of the new U.S. government energy statecraft was a push to export natural gas, the production of which had been exploding due to advancements in hydraulic fracturing. As vice-President Biden (2015) noted during his speech to Caribbean leaders, "you can now purchase gas on the open market from many countries, including your neighbor Trinidad and Tobago right now. There's also LNG exporters in the United States with licenses to export to any of your countries, whether you have a free trade agreement or not. If you want gas, go talk to them." The U.S. Department of State has been active in facilitating this push, going so far as to set up closed door meetings between Caribbean energy officials and natural gas exporters at the annual Caribbean Renewable Energy Forum.

Despite these efforts, many Caribbean leaders remain unimpressed. As one minister in the region characterized it to us, "the meetings were more about placating ministers, having a nice time and food, but not sufficient substance about energy." In his opinion, the initiative ignored existing regional initiatives that would more fundamentally alter the region's energy assemblage. "We felt that they were trying to throw natural gas down our throats," he recalled

"Natural gas is cleaner, yes, but we wanted to focus on indigenous sources of energy ... We did not want to move toward natural gas as baseload, which would make us dependent on another non-indigenous source of energy." (Interview participant #1, 2017)

A Caribbean utility executive that we spoke to expressed a similar sentiment about US natural gas politics.

"Big oil players - famous names - are coming saying 'we can bring you natural gas!'" But this, he contended, is "just again more noise that is confusing the Caribbean ... [Natural gas] being touted as a clean energy transition is just -- it's just nonsense." (Interview participant #5, 2017)

In sum, rather than view the present moment as an opportunity to help diversify the Caribbean energy assemblage toward more renewable energy sources – sources that hold the potential to remake regional geographies of management and energy sovereignty - the latest round of US energy statecraft seems an effort to replace the region's dependence on a state-led petroleum supply chain with one re-assembled around the private sector provision of natural gas.

Conclusion

The ongoing crisis in Venezuela and the election of Donald Trump have combined to place the future of the Petrocaribe program very much in doubt. In February 2018, U.S. Secretary of State (and former ExxonMobil CEO) Rex Tillerson told several Latin American countries that the U.S. government is considering restricting imports of Venezuelan crude oil, as well as limiting the export to Venezuela of refined petroleum products necessary to convert Venezuela's heavy crude into marketable products. While the embattled Maduro government in Venezuela has pledged to carry on the Petrocaribe program, some observers are skeptical, and Mexico has been rumored to be investigating the feasibility of taking over the program should Venezuela be unable to maintain it (Stratfor 2017; Jessop 2018).

Even in an era of low oil prices, the further demise of Petrocaribe would in the short run likely have negative impacts on Caribbean states that have benefited from the preferential payment terms and development assistance that stem from the program. For a longer-term assessment of the region's energy future, we have argued for an approach that combines an understanding of the region's plantation history with an assemblage approach to characterizing Caribbean energy geographies. Bringing these two literatures into conversation, we have highlighted the shortcomings of both Petrocaribe and the U.S. government's market-oriented response in addressing the region's longstanding energy dependencies. Petrocaribe played on Caribbean desires to undo centuries of plantation style development marked by high levels of inequality and patterns of enclave-style development. Yet the competing energy assemblages offered by Petrocaribe and the U.S. response appear to represent equally flawed alternatives. The Caribbean appears stuck between one model (Petrocaribe) that promises some measure of sovereignty over socio-economic development within a fossil fuel assemblage, and another (CESI) that seeks to re-work the assemblage around natural gas and existing neoliberal policies in ways that reproduce relations of dependency that have long shaped the region. Importantly, in both cases, the Caribbean would largely remain dependent upon external sources of fossil fuels, locked into an assemblage that hinders the region's ability to reorganize regional energy sovereignty around renewables and thereby to work toward crafting a post-plantation model of Caribbean development.

The question of energy in the Caribbean, and its relation to long standing debates around sovereignty in the region, is therefore related to recent calls for energy democracy that seek to “re-organize energy systems in a more just and democratic way” (Becker and Naumann 2017: 2). As the Caribbean energy assemblage continues to evolve, it will be in the interest of Caribbean countries to develop their sovereign energy resources in such a way as to limit their incorporation into assemblages that reproduce the existing patterns of dependency captured in Trouillot's (2002a) geographies of imagination and management. If they cannot, the islands of the Caribbean will, in the words of one minister, “always find ourselves ‘locked in’, always” (Interview participant #6, 2017).

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Table 1. Interview participants

Affiliation	Number of interviews
Caribbean politicians	7
Government officials	9
NGOs	5
Private sector	11
Total	32

Note. Interviews conducted between June 2015 and June 2017 in Jamaica, St. Vincent and Grenadines, Dominica, Grenada, Barbados, and St. Lucia.

Figure 1. Petrocaribe members and US Embassy locations