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From Green to Black: A Voluminous Political Ecology of the Extraction–Conservation Nexus

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Within political ecology research, a dominant focus on the hard physicality of the world limits engagement with how events taking place on land mediate and are mediated by other material spaces like the atmosphere. This article engages with burgeoning research on the extraction–conservation nexus to show how the clearly demarcated land-based boundaries on which nexus thinking relies limit an awareness of how processes of conservation and extraction cohere and take shape in and through the aerial atmosphere. The article substantiates this argument with case studies on Guyana and Suriname, two countries that have been working on avoiding deforestation through Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation for over a decade in the aim of mitigating climate change. In each case, we examine three years of news reporting on recent, major oil finds in the Guyana–Suriname Basin. The news reports, set against longer term research, demonstrate a narrative pivot from “green,” land-based avoided deforestation narratives to “black,” offshore extractive ones. The reports show that reference to the competing atmospheric effects of the mutual pursuit of these activities is scarce, even at a time of rapidly intensifying climate change. Hence, we argue that a voluminous analysis of the extraction–conservation nexus integrating a vertical awareness of the ever-present and unbounded atmosphere harbors potential for orienting a less contradictory politics of climate change—one that recognizes how activities deemed oppositional on land take shape in the shared, unbounded atmosphere. These activities consequently go on to affect other spaces and places in indirect, often unpredictable ways. *Key Words:* atmospheres, climate change, political ecology, volume.

In 2010, international accolades abounded for Guyana as it sought to include its forests in international avoided deforestation schemes designed to financially incentivize the conservation of the world’s rapidly disappearing rainforests in the interest of mitigating climate change. Among many other plaudits, Guyana’s then President, Bharrat Jagdeo, was designated Champion of the Earth by the United Nations Environmental Program in recognition of his quest to internationally position Guyana as a leader in the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) initiative, which was supported heavily by Norway, both in Guyana and elsewhere. Promises were made of nothing short of complete, green societal transformation (Office of the President, Republic of Guyana 2008) that would see Guyana’s economy transmogrify into a “low-carbon” variant (Office of the President, Guyana 2010) with REDD+ as the centerpiece. Neighboring Suriname, which also possesses significant swathes of Amazon

rainforests, looked on as it assessed the extent to which REDD+ represented a viable and sustainable income stream. Eventually, Suriname’s government also came to see REDD+ as a worthy pursuit and joined the multilateral REDD+ effort in 2013, although without bilateral Norwegian support.

By 2015, however, the dominant environmental policy and development narrative in Guyana had begun to shift. Oil and its promises of billions of U.S. dollars in earnings began to dominate development discourse as Guyana celebrated ExxonMobil’s massive oil finds in its territorial waters, announced in May 2015. Subsequently, with major news outlets reporting on the response of politicians, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and government officials in both countries to these new finds, the previous emphasis on “green” narratives of development that had dominated local environmental and development policy discussions prior to the discovery of “black” offshore oil quickly dissipated. In early

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2020, Suriname announced its own significant oil finds in the area, leading some to question whether it could be seen as the next offshore oil hot spot (“Apache cheers ‘significant oil discovery’ offshore Suriname” 2020). Although not nearly as large as the discoveries in neighboring Guyana, these oil finds also harbor significant potential for altering Suriname’s development prospects.

In this article, we characterize these news reports as signaling a narrative shift in development discourse from conservation to extraction, or from green to black, as the basis of the developmental futures of Guyana and Suriname, both in the midst and in the face of rapidly intensifying climate change that paradoxically threatens these very futures. We suggest that this ability to ignore the climactic consequences of this green-to-black pivot is partly the result of the fact that the different activities are spatially separated, such that the tension between them can be more easily overlooked than if conservation and extraction were, as in other cases, intended to occupy the same territorial spaces. Whereas green development activities are largely centered in the forests of Guyana and Suriname, black development activities primarily take place offshore. Hence, unlike in other situations where conservation and extraction activities occur in the same spaces (e.g., oil extraction causing deforestation in the same national parks whose trees are intended to also function as carbon sinks; see Arsel and Angel 2012), in Guyana and Suriname, they only come together in and through the overarching and connective atmosphere (Roberts 2021), when greenhouse gas emissions from oil extraction and use, on one hand, and carbon sequestration through forest conservation, on the other hand, meet and compete to influence the climate. Consequently, the way black extraction potentially contradicts the green gains conservation is intended to make is rendered out of sight and hence also out of mind.

This analysis thus complicates a growing body of research framing the interaction between conservation and extractive activities as conjoined within an extraction–conservation nexus. Thus far, the focus of this literature has been on how these activities come together on land, hence overlooking the ways that conservation and extraction occurring in varied and different physical spaces can also be seen to cohere in and through the aerial atmosphere. This lack of attention to the atmosphere is also characteristic

of the broader field of political ecology within which work on the conservation–extraction nexus is situated, which has likewise tended to focus on the hard physicality of the world at the expense of surrounding “volumetric” (Mostafanezhad and Dressler 2021) or “voluminous” spaces (Billé 2020; Collins 2024b).

Attention to volume has been gaining ground elsewhere in the social sciences, where scholars have challenged two-dimensional understandings of the world in multiple material spaces and places (see, e.g., Peters et al. 2018; Billé 2020). The atmospheric “turn” (McCormack 2008; Adey 2015; Verlie 2019) has been especially productive within geography, with scholars integrating a third, vertical, although not automatically cubic, dimension of territory in their analysis (Braun 2000; Elden 2013). Water shares some notable similarities with atmospheres in this sense, with efforts to govern it differing from efforts to govern land due to the substance’s unique characteristics. Thus, in line with Bakker and Bridge’s (2006) call to highlight the “analytical significance of concrete differences in the material world and the way these enable and constrain the social relations” (21), we argue that the particular material composition of the atmosphere vis-à-vis both land and water presents unique dynamics and also therefore challenges for both analysis and pursuit of environmental politics. A dominant overemphasis on physicality within political ecology research, we contend, limits engagement with how events taking place on land and in water mediate and are mediated by the unbounded atmosphere.

Building on nascent discussions of volume through a political ecology lens (Mosquera-Camacho and Marston 2021; Mostafanezhad and Dressler 2021; Mostafanezhad and Evrard 2021; Roberts 2021; Collins 2024b), we therefore assert that a voluminous political ecology approach can contribute an important dimension to research exploring the relationship between extraction and conservation, one that is focused on the atmosphere as an in-between space more difficult to concretely perceive than land or water. Yet bringing this liminal space more clearly into focus might nonetheless harbor potential for orienting a less contradictory politics of climate change than one focused only on terrestrial spaces, one that recognizes how seemingly disparate spaces shape one another in indirect, often unpredictable ways. The indirect yet formative

nature of such relations is exemplified by the work of Bovolo et al. (2018), who observed that deforestation taking place in key locations in forests of the Guiana Shield, of which both Suriname and Guyana are a part, has the potential to detrimentally influence rainfall patterns across the rest of the South American continent as its atmospheric effects interact with land and other climate-significant ecologies. Similarly, funding for carbon emissions reductions offered by Norway for REDD+ in the Guiana Shield can be viewed as offset by the emissions produced by consumption of the oil drilled off the Norwegian coasts through which funding for REDD+ in large part derives. A voluminous political ecology allows disparate connections of this sort to be illuminated and politicized. Although we are concerned to explore how the nature of nonhuman materiality affects human behavior in different spaces, we are wary of efforts to attribute agency to this materiality and thereby distribute agency away from humans, as this could undermine a focus on humans' unique responsibility for their part in unfolding environmental change that we feel is vital for a progressive ecological politics (Bakker 2012; Buscher and Fletcher 2020).

Empirically, this article is grounded in analysis of three years of news reporting in Guyana and Suriname on recent, major oil finds in their territorial waters in search of reference being made to the shared atmospheric effects of their mutual pursuit. Although it might be tempting to dismiss the lack of attention to climatic concerns in recent media reporting on oil discoveries as merely another means by which mass media endeavors to “manufacture consent” in support of capitalist elites' interests (Harvey 2005; Herman and Chomsky 2010), here we instead follow the poststructuralist strategy of taking seriously, for analytical purposes, the possibility that those professing a given perspective do so genuinely. The attention to materiality demanded by the voluminous frame allows us to speak back to what is ignored or overlooked in media reports. Consequently, our analysis takes the news reporting we analyze at face value and endeavors to explain the logic (or lack thereof) of the perspective it espouses in its own terms (Mosse 2004; Li 2007, 2014).

In the first section, we explore the limits of existing land-based studies exploring the relationship between extraction and conservation. In the second, we outline the methods used in this analysis. In the

third, we outline the green environmental narratives that guided the environmental and development policies of Guyana and Suriname prior to the deepening focus on oil production. Here, we acknowledge that while extractive activities in the form of gold mining and onshore oil production had, in fact, continued unfettered in both countries (onshore oil production was specific to Suriname) in the early stages of REDD+ preparation, extractive activity is currently overtaking REDD+ in meeting the development ambitions of the population (Collins 2022). The third section explores recent media narratives of oil production and their overlap and connection to REDD+ and climate change. In the conclusion, we discuss the significance of these events for developing a climate change politics attentive to how disparate spaces of extraction and conservation converge in a voluminous atmospheric focus.

Theorizing Atmospheric Relations

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the climate is:

determined by the atmospheric circulation and by its interactions with the large-scale ocean currents and the land with its features such as albedo, vegetation and soil moisture. ... To understand the climate of our planet Earth and its variations and to understand and possibly predict the changes of the climate brought about by human activities, one cannot ignore any of these many factors and components that determine the climate. (Baede et al. 2001, 87)

Research in the tradition of political ecology has repeatedly and convincingly demonstrated how nature–society relations are organized in ways that result in increasing environmental and social hardship that disadvantage some groups more than others but has thus far tended to focus on those aspects of daily life that are visible and tactile to support its claims (Bryant 2015). Like some other social scientific fields, therefore, political ecology has paid relatively little attention to the invisible yet perceptible atmospheric connective tissue that connects things and beings to one another, as Mostafanezhad and Dressler (2021) recently highlighted.

Increasingly, however, connectivity between and across knowledge traditions has been prioritized by researchers in ways that afford recognition that unfolding global challenges are the outcome of

overlaps between different temporalities, geographies, and scales. These discussions are most evident in debates concerning the Anthropocene, understood by some as the current geological epoch through which human beings have become the driving force behind environmental change. The critical scholarship that has engaged with this term has, in turn, challenged the neutrality of the conceptualization of the “human,” noting instead that it is a particular group of Western, White and usually male beings that has primarily driven this change (Yusoff 2018), as well as the political-economic structures and processes (namely, capitalism) this elite group directs (Moore 2018). The resulting debates have thus increasingly sought to organize themselves around alternative hinges or “-cenes” that might better characterize the root causes as well as means of transcending of our present predicament, including *inter alia* the Capitalocene (Moore 2018) and Plantationocene (Wolford 2021).

This article chooses a different hinge, albeit not one squarely in dialogue with the Anthropocene. We focus on the atmosphere to connect seemingly diverse activities with clear atmospheric impacts, such as oil production and avoided deforestation projects through REDD+. We proffer that a voluminous political ecology (Collins 2024b) might provide another point of orientation around which a coherent politics of climate change could coalesce. A voluminous approach to political ecology holds true to the tradition’s focus on environmental conflict and contestation but integrates a greater vertical awareness of the environment beyond the earth’s surface. It thickens the physical site of political ecological analyses beyond both land and water, stretching instead vertically into the atmosphere and simultaneously toward the geos (Bobbette and Donovan 2019), with the atmosphere representing aerial volume forming a particular global common that both mediates and is mediated by all human activities.

In other work, the first author traced how atmospheres emerge through interactive relationships between different social, physical, and historical aspects of human existence (Collins 2020b). She drew attention to the fact that political ecologists have long been aware that, as Bryant (1992) noted, “unequal power relations are as likely to be ‘inscribed’ in the air or the water as they are to be ‘embedded’ in the land” (89). Her focus on processes of weathering brought into view the ways in which

the disintegration of the rocks that form the Guiana Shield allows gold, diamonds, and oil to be unearthed. These activities were noted as having a double-edged effect of emitting carbon into the atmosphere that then accumulates as fossil fuels are burned to power the mechanization of these activities. As the soil is weathered to enable the production of precious metals, climate mitigating forests and other types of vegetation are also uprooted and cut down. This process of double-edged weathering has the effect of reducing the capacity of the forests to maintain the hydrological forests of the Amazon, a key contribution to sustaining the wider forest basin (Bovololo et al. 2018). Oil goes even further in exacerbating these dynamics, “completing the loop” and increasing “the potential to rainfall infused with atmospheric gases to speed up the weathering of rock ... , and to speed up the slow process of weathering rock” (Collins 2020b, 181).

The value of understanding the atmosphere as mediating and mediated by these activities becomes clear when one considers the small but growing body of research exploring what is termed the extraction–conservation nexus. This frame emerged from attempts to map out “some of the main extraction–conservation relations” (Le Billon 2021, 865), building on previous work by Büscher and Davidov (2013, 2016) to describe a more narrow ecotourism–extraction nexus. In a key contribution to discussions of the relationship between extraction and conservation, for instance, Enns, Bersaglio, and Sneyd (2019) problematized the conventional wisdom that conservation and extraction are fundamentally incompatible activities. They wrote, “If, in the twenty first century, the extractive sector is seen as ‘spoiling Eden,’ the biodiversity conservation sector tends to be presented in the opposite light. The conservation sector is often portrayed as the solution to fundamental challenges facing the future of the planet” (Enns, Bersaglio, and Sneyd 2019, 970). They noted that the land-based, spatial overlap between extraction and conservation activities in many places spurred many researchers to point out existing similarities between the two, often centered on efforts to neoliberalize conservation via market-based instruments that aim to realize economic value from conservation efforts much like the extractive activities to which conservation ostensibly stands opposed (Büscher and Davidov 2016; Enns, Bersaglio, and Sneyd 2019).

In working to dismantle “apparent contradictions or dichotomies between extraction and conservation,” Le Billon (2021, 867) also highlighted the many similarities that exist between the different processes. Among these, he pointed out that both extraction and conservation reshape “landscapes for their own purposes” (Le Billon 2021, 867). Yet, despite his adoption of a broad definition of extraction, defined as a transformative process of “dispossession and accumulation enabled by and exacerbating inequalities at the expense of pre-existing socio-environments,” Le Billon’s (2021, 866) analysis remains implicitly land-centric. When addressing the overlap between coal mining and conservation within a protected area in South Africa, for instance, the focus remains on how these conflicting forces affect the physical landscape, whereas their contribution to climate change, an atmospheric outcome, although mentioned, is not identified as a key domain in which the nexus between extraction and conservation also plays out. This is also true of more recent analysis by Fletcher et al. (2023) of an expanded “production–protection nexus” across spaces and scales.

As these examples demonstrate, this burgeoning scholarship on the extraction–conservation nexus remains predominantly cartographic in orientation, relying heavily on the ways that conservation and extraction activities converge within physical spatial boundaries to develop its analysis. Consequently, the ways that conservation and extraction come together in less direct, tangible ways within the overarching and connective atmosphere remain underexamined, taken for granted, or left implicit. Foregrounding a voluminous approach thus allows different dimensions of the conservation–extraction nexus to be brought into focus than a land-based or tactile approach affords. At the same time, it broadens the stakes of interest in extraction and conservation away from those living in or near the specific sites in which these activities are taking place to any being anywhere who depends on favorable atmospheric conditions to survive.

In the following analysis, we therefore argue that a voluminous political ecology offers a useful lens through which to analyze how REDD+, a land-based conservation tool, and oil production, which takes place offshore and hence out of sight of the Guyanese and Surinamese publics, are mediated atmospherically. From this perspective, our analysis

suggests that the contradiction that might otherwise be identified between a REDD+ mechanism aiming to sequestering carbon from the atmosphere, and oil production generating substantial carbon emissions can be overlooked in analyses based on a dominant focus on land as the main site in which different activities converge.

Methods

Given that events around oil production in Guyana and Suriname are nascent but intensifying, we examine news reporting as one means of accounting for the political tenor of the moment. Media reporting, although not all encompassing, tends to highlight how politicians, civil society, and other stakeholders publicly discuss events. Building on a tradition of media analyses of environmental change from a poststructuralist perspective (Di Gregorio et al. 2015; Goodman et al. 2016; Di Gregorio 2017), we analyze the statements of various stakeholders related to environmental and development policy in these two countries to understand their public stances on the matter. We then analyze the data by looking for presence or absence of green development narratives in developing ones around oil production. Using the atmosphere as a hinge, we connect the previous heavy discursive emphasis on green avoided deforestation projects with the absence of these narratives around competing oil exploration activities, arguing that a continued awareness of the mediating role of the atmosphere would bring this overlap into sharper relief. These arguments build on roughly ten years of research in both countries on carbon offsetting projects (see Collins, 2019, 2020a, 2022, 2023, 2024a). Throughout 2014, the first author conducted a multisited ethnography of REDD+ in Guyana and Suriname. This included roughly sixty in-depth interviews with REDD+ stakeholders identified by the governments through Readiness Preparation Proposals, and participant observation through unpaid internships for nine months with two inter-governmental organizations that were key to preparing for REDD+ in these locations.

This research demonstrated how REDD+, a payment for avoided deforestation initiative, was taken up by these two countries in ways that foregrounded its development potential and that viewed REDD+ as an additional source of income, rather

than as one that displaces other deforesting, carbon-emitting income earners (Collins 2022). Further, earlier work outlined the fragmented policy landscape of REDD+, where inconsistencies were a defining quality (Collins 2019). These inconsistencies make themselves felt as varied activities are simultaneously pursued. The inconsistencies are represented through discourse, which, in the Foucauldian sense, allows room for both meaning and practice, forming thick, so to speak, representations of different phenomenon (Hook 2005). Although often internally incoherent, discourse is still flexible enough to identify external areas of divergence. It is essentially “an ensemble of notions, ideas, concepts, and categorisations through which meaning is ascribed to social and physical phenomena, and that is produced in and reproduces in turn an identifiable set of practices” (Hajer 2009, 66). We focus on narratives as constitutive of discourse and examine them in these particular cases as “stories of apparently incontrovertible logic which provide scripts and justifications for development action” (Fairhead and Leach 1995, 1023).

Building on these ideas, this article examines the newspaper coverage of the oil discovery between January 2018 and December 2020, taking note of how the finds were reported. Newspaper articles reporting on REDD+, the oil discoveries, and the relationship between them from prominent online newspapers in Guyana and Suriname were analyzed to identify the popular narratives surrounding these initiatives. The sampling strategy examined newspaper articles that focused on these initiatives directly (newspaper articles with tangential reference to REDD+, oil discoveries, or their relationship were intentionally excluded). To achieve narrative saturation and to capture shifting narratives within and across newspaper sources over time, newspaper articles dating back to 2012 were referenced, including the period before oil discoveries were made. The data gathering process was limited to online representations of the discursive shift by the coronavirus pandemic that limited access to these countries during the years of the study.

The Narratives

Remaining constant across the narrative shifts we trace in this article is the material reality of climate change. The densely populated coasts of both

Guyana and Suriname remain highly vulnerable to flooding, which forms, perhaps, the phenomenon’s most immediate threat to the region, especially Guyana. Whereas the threat of climate change is becoming only more urgent and cataclysmic in tone (Bettini 2013) and its impacts increasingly felt, the narratives around environmental conservation and extractive activity demonstrated in news reporting in Guyana and Suriname appear to have remained oriented around the global market priority *du jour*. These narratives have demonstrated little awareness of the connections between these commodities and climate change. This state of affairs might have been dismissed as exemplary of conditions wherein an awareness of the urgency of climate change has not yet developed, but this assertion would be patently untrue given the centrality of conservation and carbon reduction narratives in orienting development trajectories just a few years ago (Collins 2020a, 2022), when the expectation had been that development, loosely defined, would be made possible precisely through foregoing resource extraction to instead focus on avoided deforestation initiatives like REDD+, thus rendering development compatible with climate change mitigation.

Guyana’s Green Narratives from 2010

Guyana gained its independence from the British in 1966, after which it saw decades of socialist rule during which its bauxite and sugar industries were nationalized (Vaughn 2012). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the then People’s National Congress (PNC) government began to liberalize the economy and market reliance began to take root (Vaughn 2012). By 2006, trade liberalization and openness to the international market had gained ascendance, as demonstrated in the publication of the National Competitiveness Strategy (NCS) in 2006. The NCS sought to position Guyana’s economic and development policy in ways that would allow it to diversify its economy away from its reliance on exports of raw material. It also featured a naked ambition to neoliberalize the economy by instilling market discipline and ethics of competition through competitive advantage. The Low Carbon Development Strategy, published in 2009 with the stated intention of furthering Guyana’s green development, fit with this push toward diversification, as the government

offered avoided deforestation “services” to the world for compensation that would aid in national development (Collins 2020a).

In Guyana, the REDD+ mechanism formed the cornerstone of the Low Carbon Development Strategy (Office of the President, Republic of Guyana 2013), which outlined the country’s plans for development with income derived from REDD+ activities as its source of funding. Drawing on language of a marketized and fungible nature, REDD+ was promoted as a means to provide funding to settle historical Amerindian land claims, to modernize Guyana’s interior, to prepare the country for climate change, and to reduce climate vulnerability on the coast, all while reforming some of the country’s major income earners and providing jobs and business opportunities for persons on the coast. Guyana’s forests, however, are most threatened by gold mining largely destined for the international market (Collins 2019). Hence, extractive activity had, even then, challenged REDD+’s effectiveness.

Guyana’s REDD+ agreement with Norway was intended to demonstrate to the world that deforestation could be stemmed to aid in climate mitigation efforts and that this reduction of deforestation did not have to come at the cost of economic growth and development in the forested country. The Guyana–Norway agreement, signed in 2009, had committed Norway to providing up to \$250 million to Guyana for performance payments toward avoiding deforestation. Due, in part, to numerous challenges in implementing the agreement along with changes in government in Guyana, the agreement had to be extended long past its intended end date, with its final payment being made in December 2019. Multilateral REDD+ support had also been provided to Guyana, which had received \$3.8 million from the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF) to support its readiness process. Guyana’s REDD+ Web site lists the country as still in the readiness phase.

Throughout the period of the Guyana–Norway REDD+ agreement (2009–2014), gold continued to be a major income earner of choice in Guyana despite its damaging effect on forest cover. Although the exploitation of the country’s newfound offshore oil reserves does not directly affect forest cover, the simultaneous pursuit of avoided deforestation to combat climate change and oil, the use and production of which is known to be a significant driver of

climate change, does not make sense within the framework of conservation. This model of simultaneously exploiting oil while seeking to conserve forests can be found quite clearly in Norway, Guyana’s bilateral partner in REDD+ and funder of much of the REDD+ activities taking place around the world as Norway supports conservation through its Sovereign Wealth Fund, largely funded by oil revenues. Although Guyana does show signs of cooperation between conservation organizations and the extractive industry, as seen through a Conservation International–Exxon funding agreement, the dynamics of extraction and conservation do not always align in the ways outlined in the burgeoning literature on the extractive–conservation nexus, especially because they do not take place in the same localities.

Guyana’s Black Oil Narratives from 2015

There has been a strong narrative shift in the news reporting on environmental policy and development imaginaries since the arrival of oil between the green emphasis of earlier years and the oil focus since the first oil finds. This observation is not rooted in an attempt to determine the validity or integrity of successive governments’ intention to orient the country along a green development pathway. Instead, it is rooted in the awareness that Guyana’s oil finds and the enthusiasm that swept the country in anticipation of its revenue fits well with Guyana’s historical attempts to diversify its economy since independence.

Nonetheless, some clear patterns and shifts were perceptible. Two major newspapers, *The Stabroek News* and *The Guyana Chronicle*, each have columns dedicated to oil and gas in Guyana, but each paper tended to represent the discovery of oil differently. *The Stabroek News* column was highly critical of the politics surrounding the discovery of oil, whereas *The Guyana Chronicle* is highly celebratory. This is unsurprising given that *The Guyana Chronicle* is government owned. In general, however, the discovery of oil in Guyana is widely regarded as positive and the main criticism leveled against its pursuit was undoubtedly the poor terms of Guyana’s oil agreement signed with Exxon in 2016. This agreement, which was concluded behind closed doors, was withheld from the public for a year. Once released, it revealed the government to have accepted poor

revenue terms for Guyana. Discussions on the poor terms of Guyana's oil agreement and its effects for the country's potential to benefit from its oil wealth infiltrated political rhetoric in the run-up to its contentious 2020 elections, where promises to renegotiate this deal were put forward by the presidential hopefuls. The remainder of this section teases out the cross-paper narratives around the oil finds, categorizing them according to their celebratory or critical slant.

Celebratory Oil Narratives Transformation.

Transformation is the main tenor of the moment, according to reports on the oil find in Guyana's newspapers. Early reports highlighted the optimism expressed by the country's former president, David Granger, for possible oil finds after a search that had lasted for decades. The former minister of finance under the coalition government insisted that Guyana must prepare itself for the takeoff of the oil industry in view of the "increased revenues, employment and income" it was projected to bring ("Focus to be placed on preparing for oil industry take off – Jordan" 2016). This economic boost was pitched as able to push Guyana close to achieving not only its national development goals, but also more internationally oriented sustainable development goals.

In line with this transformation narrative, the U.S. Ambassador to Guyana noted that the oil revenue had the potential to create "a large number of jobs in the manufacturing of value-added agricultural products and the development of its physical infrastructure, while at the same time delivering quality education for a diversified economy" ("Oil revenue has potential to transform Guyana" 2016). He positioned oil as being able to free the country from its development constraints and to allow it to move in whichever direction its people decided. For their part, the former A Partnership for National Unity government noted that they were pleased with the succession of oil finds being reported, describing each find as "a source of great pride and pleasure for all Guyanese" ("Gov't welcomes new ExxonMobil oil find" 2017). Underscoring this approach, the Department of Public Information put out a statement describing the news of the finds as "a further blessing" that "underscores the richness and diversity of Guyana's natural resources. Managed prudently, these resources will allow for an enormous transformational effect on the lives of every Guyanese in the years ahead" ("Exxon makes largest find" 2018).

Guyana's former finance minister projected an oil production output of up to 1 million barrels of oil per day in late 2020s, the revenues of which were projected to "have a transformative effect on the country," although the government stated its intent to "avoid the 'oil curse' by instituting a Sovereign Wealth Fund to ensure inter-generational equity" ("Finance minister projects up to one million barrels of oil" 2018). After yet another major discovery, the former minister of natural resources suggested that "all Guyanese will be brimming with further excitement of this historic news which reinforces that in the near future Guyana's share of profit oil will allow for national infrastructural, economic and social transformation hitherto unimaginable" ("ExxonMobil announces eighth oil discovery offshore Guyana" 2018). He insisted that Guyanese should look to the future with "anticipation and assurance that Guyana is moving meaningfully forward and that a better life for all Guyanese is ahead" ("ExxonMobil announces eighth oil discovery offshore Guyana" 2018). The oil finds were described as bringing about economic and social improvements, primarily through economic growth, with the succession of oil finds being seen as demonstrative of the fact that "the country is on the cusp of transformational development for current and future generations" that "is expected to facilitate the country's realization of substantial social and economic improvements" ("ExxonMobil makes 10th oil discovery offshore Guyana" 2018).

Guyana's former head of the Department of Energy, Mark Bynoe, was reported as having encouraged citizens to prepare for oil and gas. He explained that Guyanese were "sitting not just on a gold mine, but we have the lottery ticket, and it is up to us when we wish to cash it in" ("Bynoe urges Berbicians to prepare for oil and gas" 2019). In announcing ExxonMobil's twentieth oil discovery, the burgeoning oil and gas sector was described as propelling "the country into becoming one of the richest nations in the hemisphere" ("ExxonMobil announces 20th oil discovery" 2021). Elsewhere, the oil finds were described as moving the country "out of economic bondage" (Seoraj 2019).

Bright Future. Oil-producing Guyana was described as being in possession of a bright future. Raphael Trotman, former minister of natural resources, described the oil as being "a significant part of our national patrimony," noting that given the

magnitude of the finds, “the sky is the limit” (“Discovery of commercial oil will alter Guyana” 2016). This sentiment was echoed by the former head of the Department of Energy who noted after the announcement of yet another significant oil discovery that “Guyana’s future is bright but more importantly, the time is ripe for all Guyanese to focus on how they want to see their oil revenues spent and invested” (“Tullow in another major oil find offshore Guyana” 2019). An editorial in *The Guyana Chronicle* likewise predicted that “with continued economic growth, steadily increasing revenues, and attractive conditions for new investment, Guyana’s future looks bright” (“Oil industry likely to continue strong growth” 2021), with the former president committing to disburse cash grants from the oil revenues to the populace in the run-up to the 2020 election. He promised to use the bounty for the betterment of every Guyanese.

Critical Oil Narratives

The Contract. The critical discussion around the oil finds in Guyana was overwhelmingly oriented around the inadequacy of the contract for ensuring that a fair portion of the oil revenue would be made available for the benefit of Guyana and its people. The agreement struck with Exxon was described as “a very poor financial deal” (“Another major oil find” 2018) that demands, according to some onlookers, renegotiation. One such onlooker argued that the deal “reeked of colonization by ExxonMobil” (“Exxon projects 500,000 barrels per day” 2018).

The contract and associated signing bonus were major, recurrent, and much critiqued sites for contempt directed toward the former government. Transparency International Guyana, an anticorruption watchdog, alleged that the government “appears to have deliberately engaged in deception in relation to the matter of a signature bonus” (“Anti-corruption advocates shocked by deception” 2017). Critique naturally also came from across the aisle as the opposition whip, Gail Teixeira, alleged that the Production Sharing Agreement signed with ExxonMobil in 2016 was “surreptitiously negotiated” (“Clean your own house” 2018). She went on to argue that “This Government ... for over a year refused to make it public despite thunderous public pressure ... the exposure of the ... agreement with

Exxon signed in June 2016, remains the subject of major public debate” (“Clean your own house” 2018). She continued,

the government’s sale of the country’s newly found oil and natural gas resources for a pittance is a shame on all Guyanese and a stain Guyana will have to endure for decades to come. Even the IMF and countless international petroleum watchdog bodies have found this to be a flawed agreement in violation of basic acceptable international standards for first discovery oil countries and have noted that Guyana will be grossly disadvantaged from reaping its just rewards. (“Clean your own house” 2018)

The \$18 million signing bonus was reported as having been received by the former government and “surreptitiously stashed in a secret bank account’ with not a word uttered about it to the public for over a year” (“Clean your own house” 2018). The opposition leader at the time, former president and current vice president, Bharrat Jagdeo, was reported as saying,

People who come here because of our resources, we welcome them, but they have a motive to make money. That’s not bad but we have to determine where our country goes and we are not in favor of treating anybody who comes here as our savior ... simply because they spend a little money in our economy. (“Jagdeo says avoiding oil activities” 2018)

An onlooker described as a petroleum expert, Dr. Jan Mangal, was also reported as having insisted that Guyanese get the maximum from oil blocks even if it meant renegotiating, rescinding, and reimbursing. He saw this as necessary because the ExxonMobil contract was “illegal, irretrievably flawed and is either the result of grand corruption or grand incompetence” (“ExxonMobil contract illegal” 2019). Transparency International Guyana drove home these concerns, stating that “successive governments of Guyana have cooperated with foreign private interests over a period of 20 years to produce a document which appears to be the result of either grand corruption or grand incompetence. This is the so-called contract with ExxonMobil” (“ExxonMobil contract illegal” 2019). Like Mangal, they argued that “the arrangement with Exxon is (a) illegal at its very root, and (b) irretrievably flawed (i.e., incapable of being salvaged)” (“ExxonMobil contract illegal” 2019). Similar critique flowed from a wide cross-section of Guyanese society. Local attorneys threatened to take legal action against the contract and sale,

and criticism was expressed from the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Guyana, accountant and anticorruption advocate Christopher Ram, the Private Sector Commission, and the international NGO Global Witness, which issued a contentious report on the contract.

The Inadequacy of the Political System. Political wrangling also informed some views where politicians accused each other of fomenting disappointment through the creation of unrealistic expectations of future revenue. Some critical narratives also addressed the inability of the current political system in the country to handle the influx of oil wealth, should that influx ever materialize. The U.S. Ambassador to Guyana noted, “The reality is that the real job creation is going to be outside and should be outside of the petroleum industry” (“Oil revenue has potential to transform Guyana” 2016). Concerns about the weakness of the political system were also expressed around the awareness that “Guyanese have no clear idea how they will benefit from oil” (“Guyanese have no clear idea how they will benefit from oil—GTUC” 2019). The Guyana Trades Union Congress (GTUC) declared that despite the announcement of one oil find of 5 billion barrels of oil, their workers had no idea how they should expect to derive benefit from these resources. The extent to which cost of living would rise beyond the reach of the average Guyanese was also a cause for concern.

The ability of the country to manage the oil wealth was also expressed around concerns for how the Guyanese people would actually benefit from oil. Some commentators advocated for the greater involvement of civil society in the oil and gas sector. One such onlooker, Dr. Laing, noted in one of the few mentions of REDD+ in this public debate, that “this will not be the first time that Guyana will be overlooking large sums of money, referencing the Guyana REDD+ Investment Fund whereby Guyana received receive up to US\$250 million from Norway. ... Based on the Norwegian money, Guyana had tremendous problems spending that money on anything worthwhile. If the government can’t spend the [oil] money on anything productive what does that mean for the Guyanese population” (“Strong need for civil society involvement in oil and gas sector” 2020). For another panel of commentators, the oil finds were “no reason to celebrate,” because “oil will impoverish Guyana” (“Economists, Janki pessimistic about oil future” 2018). Others noted that “the current political system is likely

to create a social crisis of rising inequality and resentment fostered by grandiose promises” (“Economists, Janki pessimistic about oil future” 2018).

The Environment and Climate Change. Finally, a few critical voices on the developing oil industry also oriented some of their concerns around societal considerations, such as that of the environment, although these concerns were expressed at a much smaller scale than the previous ones. One commentator noted,

For its part, Guyana must ensure that it receives a fair share of oil revenues and that the revenue generated is not disproportionately shared and that the industry does not operate at the expense of social dislocation, environmental degradation and sustainable development. Oil comes in with a bang that threatens to steamroll all and sundry before it because of the vast sums associated with its projects. That is the danger that we must manage so that other parts of the economy remain intact and are not left in tatters because they are neglected like the proverbial stepchild. (“Focus to be placed on preparing for oil industry take off—Jordan” 2016)

Mention of the environment, where it was made, was formulated around the conservation of the biophysical environment and not expressly around climate change. Environmentalists were reported as having “raised grave concerns that Guyana is completely ill-prepared for the challenges that will come from oil extraction beginning in 2020 and the framework needed to monitor oil companies and hold them accountable” (“ExxonMobil Foundation announces US\$10m for sustainable employment, conservation” 2018). One international environment group was reported as having called on Exxon to cease gas flaring, which was reported to be causing damage that was equivalent to the loss of 4,642 hectares of forest (Muffett 2020).

The number of articles that explicitly recognized the climate change impacts of oil production could be counted on one hand. One editorial noted, “Guyana stands to lose these hard-earned green credentials through continued and unmitigated development of the oil sector with limited counterbalancing efforts in a green, low-carbon economy” (Singh, Fraser, and Laing 2020). The commentators asked whether the country’s people are indeed desirous of following “a pathway toward a ‘brown’ economy—based upon oil and oil-dependent industries” (Singh, Fraser, and Laing 2020), noting that “even as

Guyana has made the sovereign decision to exploit its oil resources, pursuing a low-carbon and green economy would require using the proceeds of oil to sustainably manage our resources, diversify our economy and promote greener, happier, healthier lifestyles. For us to have a low-carbon and green economy, oil must not be at the centre of economic development” (Singh, Fraser, and Laing 2020).

Another of these precious few contributions noted that the civil society group, Policy Forum Guyana, had stood against the development of the oil industry in Guyana, stating expressly that this decision contravened the country’s climate goals. The group was reported as stating, “Guyanese society has been fed a diet of green project rhetoric, while the same old approach in the extractive sector—save in forestry—has not just continued but has accelerated. The closer the prospect of elections loom, the further official public discourse retreats from rigorous and measurable climate commitments. You can’t suck cane and whistle” (“Guyana regressing from stewards of natural resources to squanderers” 2019).

In a regular column on the development of the oil and gas industry in Guyana, accountant and columnist Ram (2018) noted that “oil and the Green Economy do not make good bedfellows.” Otherwise, the silence on climate change rang loudly. Not only has little climate concern been expressed, or at least reported; where these concerns do make an appearance, they do so under the rubric of oil production as Exxon itself contributed to the initiative with the blessing of environmental NGO Conservation International Guyana. This was demonstrated when the ExxonMobil Foundation, the philanthropic arm of ExxonMobil, announced \$10 million in funding for Conservation International and the University of Guyana “to train Guyanese for sustainable job openings and to expand community-supported conservation” (“ExxonMobil foundation announces US\$10m for sustainable employment, conservation” 2018). The statement also included the intention of supporting the Green State Development Plan, the APNU’s fifteen-year development plan that outlined its attempt to balance the diversification of Guyana’s economy with economic growth concerns.

Suriname’s Green Narratives from 2010

In Suriname, there was a comparatively weak historical imagination of the market as the adjudicator of environmental concerns as expressed in

development policy documents in the lead-up to its oil finds. After its independence from the Netherlands in 1975, the country had suffered from internal turmoil and civil war in the 1980s that had seen its former president and leader of the megacoalition, Desi Bouterse, accused of having organized and participated in a military coup during which he executed his opponents and took over the government. After the internal strife, Suriname was desperate for economic opportunities, especially because it had been unable to make use of the large sum of money that had been available to it after independence by its former colonizer.

Hence, Suriname’s eventual market liberalization can be understood as having taken place as the country turned to external sources for income to facilitate development. Through its REDD+ strategy, the former government sought to concurrently address concerns for the environment and demands for economic growth. The former Surinamese government explicitly positioned REDD+ as a tool for development in their Readiness Preparation Proposal (FCPF 2013) and as a method for converting avoided deforestation ecosystem services into cash. Their REDD+ Readiness Preparation Proposal, approved by the World Bank in 2013, made this development and economic growth focus of REDD+ explicit: “REDD+ is ... *a tool to find a sustainable way of treating the forests without limiting economic and social development* (FCPF 2013, 64, italics added).

Suriname’s Black Oil Narratives from 2015

Major offshore oil deposits were first discovered in Suriname in 2020, but much insight into the public view of the oil finds was also perceptible in the way the search for oil was reported in the run-up. The narratives were, as expected, overwhelmingly positive with a less marked newspaper reporting divide than that expressed in Guyana. Newspaper outlet *De Ware Tijd* described the first oil discovery in January 2020 as “fantastic news” (“Commentary: Finally oil” 2020). *De Ware Tijd* similarly heralded the discovery of offshore oil in Suriname as “good news for Suriname” (“Commentary: Oil discovery and downgrade” 2020). In another article, *De Waterkant* celebrated, stating that “thanks to the offshore oil and gas Suriname will be able to experience enormous industrial development,” emphasizing that “the

offshore oil and gas offer Suriname enormous opportunities” (“VHP calls for protest” 2020). These newspaper narratives were united in their framing of Suriname’s oil discoveries as the key to its national development and prosperity, and indeed as a discovery that had been highly anticipated. Criticism in Surinamese media reports was rare, with only one newspaper article challenging the otherwise universally positive media narrative attached to Suriname’s inevitable future oil wealth.

Celebratory Oil Narratives

Bright Future. Although the first major offshore oil discovery took place in 2020, optimism and hope for these discoveries date back to 2017 when acting President Ashwin Adhin announced that “sustainable prosperity and welfare are in sight,” based in part on “the confirmation of enormous oil reserves in the Suriname-Guyana basin” (“Acting President Adhin replaces Bouterse” 2017). The newspaper, *De Waterkant*, went on to note that the discovery of oil in Suriname “should not take too long,” and that “there is thus every reason for the government to be optimistic about the future” (“Acting President Adhin replaces Bouterse” 2017) because the discovery of offshore oil in neighboring Guyana in 2018 had further heightened expectations and optimism for similar wealth-generating discoveries in Suriname. According to *De Waterkant*, “the discovery of a promising oil well off the coast of neighboring Guyana [gave] Statoil director Rudolf Elias the confidence that Suriname too will, sooner or later, find large amounts of petroleum off the coast” (“Statoil hopes for promising oil well” 2018). “Optimism over a large oil discovery in Suriname” could “not be contained” as Statoil director Rudolf Elias was reported as saying, “we can no longer speak of ‘if’ but ‘when’ Suriname will find oil” (“Suriname remains optimistic for a large oil discovery” 2017).

In 2019, Guyana’s oil discoveries were described in the Surinamese newspapers as holding the potential to “completely change Guyana’s future,” whereas Suriname remained “less fortunate” (“Guyana could become a super rich oil state” 2019) as exploration continued without success. The assumptions of prosperity attached to oil in this period extend to the point where a 2019 newspaper article on the income potential of Guyana’s oil discoveries quoted the Surinamese minister of trade, industry and tourism

as highlighting the need for Suriname to “piggyback on this development (oil discovery) in Guyana” (“Bridge between Suriname and Guyana” 2019). The minister described plans to construct a bridge between Suriname and Guyana as a “must if we want to hitch a ride with the developments in our neighboring country, regardless of when we find oil” (“Bridge between Suriname and Guyana” 2019).

The sentiment of offshore oil wealth as the key to Suriname’s national development thus pervaded even prediscovery media narratives in Suriname. The anticipated benefits of offshore oil prior to its actual discovery were likewise overwhelmingly positive, optimistic, and largely unchallenged. The former acting president of Suriname insisted that the people would benefit from the oil finds, noting, “there is thus every reason for the government to be optimistic about the future. The times of difficult economic weather seem to be ending” (“Suriname’s acting president” 2017). When oil was eventually found offshore, it was described as something to enjoy and a source of hope. Naturally, the economic boost of the oil finds was also lauded. In a press conference following the first major offshore oil discovery in Suriname in January 2020, former President Desi Bouterse was reported to have congratulated the entire Surinamese population on the discovery. Subsequent articles referred to the discoveries as a “gift given by God that belongs to all Surinamese people” (“VHP calls for protest” 2020) and that will ensure a “beautiful future” (“Gross sales of Suriname’s Statoil” 2020) for the country. Oil was heralded for its potential to create more income and employment and to lift the economy out of its dire straits and help the Surinamese population to improve its standard of living. Oil was also described as helping to create more income and employment in Suriname, which “could lead to a strong growth of the economy” (“Oil sector offers many opportunities” 2019). Development and industrialization were key drivers of the enthusiasm, with the potential of the oil finds to aid in the diversification of the economy taking center stage.

Associations between oil and development were so intrinsic to the popular oil discovery narrative that in 2020, plans were already being reported in anticipation of the need for a broader labor market strategy to meet future oil income-generating labor needs. In an observation that runs counter to the U.S. Ambassador’s warning against expectations of

jobs in oil production in neighboring Guyana, the Surinamese government began to make plans for an increase of jobs through the oil discoveries that “cannot only be filled locally” (“Dutch Surinamese to return to Suriname” 2020). Hence, it was reported that “the ministry of labor is already taking into account that many Dutch Surinamese people could decide to come and work in Suriname” (“Dutch Surinamese to return to Suriname” 2020). The dominant narratives around the discovery of oil in Suriname are thus steeped in understandings of oil as a gift that belongs to all Surinamese people.

Remediation and Redemption. The remedial and redemptive potential of oil for Suriname’s economy was emphasized in the reporting of Suriname’s local newspapers on the oil finds. The oil discoveries were reported as having given the country something to be proud about and as the end of “difficult economic weather” (“Suriname’s acting president” 2017) in Suriname. One report noted, “In the middle of all the misery currently affecting Suriname, something positive happened on Thursday: oil company Apache announced a second significant oil discovery on our deep-sea area. Absolutely something to be optimistic about. It’s a change from corona or the dire financial depths that we, now also according to Standard & Poor’s, that we continue to sink further in” (“Commentary: Oil discovery and downgrade” 2020). Others, however, cautioned that oil production alone will not “make the country rich and prosperous” (“Oil production alone won’t make Suriname rich” 2020). Nevertheless, these warnings about the need for good governance still framed the offshore oil finds as redemptive. Suriname was described as having “made the news for something positive” (“Column: Eureka!” 2020) after quite some time, and “not for cocaine seizures or a criminal sentence for multiple murders of its president” (“Column: Eureka!” 2020).

One report indicated that oil would “of course be an enormous boost for the Surinamese economy” (NDP page Faya Pepre news reports” 2020), which would help the country to repay its loans. In encouraging voters to turn out for elections held in 2020, Bouterse was reported as saying, “We must work together! Building on our own strength, we will have to ensure that the wealth from the oil discoveries is used sustainably. The most sustainable thing is the Surinamese person. A well-housed, healthy and educated Surinamese person who develops himself in

the service of himself, his family and of society” (“Bouterse calls on all eligible voters” 2020). Opportunities were also seen as abounding for small and medium-sized entrepreneurs to have them benefit from the industry. Announcing the finds by Apache and Total S.A. off the coast of Suriname, the former president encouraged the population to “Put all negativity aside and together look at how we can use this moment for Suriname’s development” (“Apache and Total S.A. hit recoverable oil reserves” 2020).

Critical Oil Narratives

The Inadequacy of the Political System. The media’s positioning of oil is strongly tied to wealth, debt alleviation, and development, but the optimism of Suriname’s oil reporting is tempered by one unified concern: government corruption. A 2020 article in *De Ware Tijd* stated, “not everybody is overly celebratory after the major oil discovery off the Surinamese coast” (“Mixed reactions to oil discovery” 2020). Opposition politicians warned against “the misuse of future oil revenue by a corrupt government” (“Mixed reactions to oil discovery” 2020). This fear was echoed widely by newspaper accounts, which emphasized that these discoveries and their benefits “belong to the whole population” (“New board of supervisors appointed by Statoil” 2020) and warned against a corrupt government with a history of poor governance. Opposition member Paul Somohardjo (Perjajah Luhur) insisted that the oil should not be “used as a deposit for a possible loan to finance the elections” (“Mixed reactions to oil discovery” 2020) in 2020. Other onlookers were reported as having characterized Suriname’s government as the “absolute worst” “steward of (Suriname’s) collective riches” (“Cheering (for oil)?” 2020), stating that the only way for Suriname to truly benefit from its newfound oil wealth was for the current government to “definitely leave the field” (“Commentary: Oil discovery and downgrade” 2020).

A reliable government was reported as being necessary for Suriname’s oil transition, one that would be more capable of transparently and sustainably managing the oil revenue. The government at the time, led by Desi Bouterse, was described by some as being incapable of doing so. One onlooker wrote, “Surinamese people, our future cannot be sold by

this corrupt government. This final attempt of the government must be thwarted. Let us all fight for our oil and for our country!” (“VHP calls for protest” 2020). Elsewhere, it was reported, “Not everyone is overly celebratory after the major oil discovery off the Surinamese coast. Opposition politicians say they are happy, but also warn against the misuse of future oil revenue by a corrupt government” (“Mixed reactions to oil discovery” 2020). Further reports described onlookers as saying,

Of course we are all happy, we are grateful to the Almighty that we have found oil, but it should not be the case that the oil is used as a deposit for a possible loan to finance the elections. We are not happy about that. We are happy that the oil has been found for the future of our children’s children. (“Mixed reactions to oil discovery” 2020)

Local Capacity. Despite the overwhelming optimism in the growing oil industry in Suriname, some concerns were raised. These tended to include references to how few Surinamese had been employed with the work crew and the inability of the country to harness more of the potential of producing the oil for itself. Relatedly, another article was concerned about the possibility that the oil production efforts would not be sufficiently integrated into the local economy. The significance of the oil discovery in neighboring Guyana also made an appearance in reference to Suriname’s likely shared condition of not being well organized enough politically to handle the influx of oil revenue. Questions about the capacity for absorbing oil income, in reference to Guyana, were shown in reports that stated, “observers are also critical and warn that the country (Guyana) is not at all organized for this kind of influx of wealth, that has already led to chaos, corruption and war elsewhere” (“Guyana could become a super rich oil state” 2019). Guyana’s oil deal also resonated in Suriname around this narrative, as one report noted that Janki in Guyana was fighting against Guyana’s deal with Exxon, based on her prediction that “Guyana will not receive large parts of the enormous profits” (Dagblad Suriname 2021). Some pieces insisted that the income from the oil be used to benefit the people through the establishment of a fund through which the government could “use that money and interest to develop non-mining sectors in order to reduce dependence on unsustainable products like oil and gas” (“Income from oil has to benefit the people of Suriname” 2020). This concern was

further expressed in the observation that “Suriname has depended for too long on income from mining. As recent history has shown, this is too narrow a basis. When this income falls away society is immediately in trouble” (“Suriname’s acting president” 2017). A few concerns were also raised about oil dependency.

The Environment and Climate Change. The climate and conservation implications of Suriname’s new oil wealth were glaringly absent from media criticisms and concerns in Suriname. Even environmental NGOs in Suriname remained open to the positive aspects of an oil economy. One was reported as stating, “it is possible that the petroleum and gas revenues from Suriname and Guyana will be used to diversify the economy, develop sustainable sectors and create a ‘green economy’” (“Using Guyana’s oil dollars” 2020). Only one newspaper article, from the Netherlands, was observed as having addressed these implications. According to that piece, Suriname’s “discovery of oil stands at odds with the climate goals that all countries must achieve” (“Suriname hopes that oil discovery will save its economy” 2020).

Few critical voices were recorded on the global imperative to move away from fossil fuels and to develop a green, sustainable economy. One of these very few reports noted that:

The chance is very big that our future will depend 90% on an industry whose heyday is behind it. The world simply cannot afford to continue with fossil fuels. By the time we realize that this is a lost cause, our whole economy, our whole “workforce” and our education will be geared to that one sector. But then we immediately think, as the pessimist that we have become: oh damn, we don’t have an Environmental Act yet, and what about that law for protected coastal areas—is that already in place? And what else don’t we have yet? ... Cheering for an oil discovery? I don’t think so. ... Just an even greater awareness of the heavy responsibility we have towards future generations. (“Cheering (for oil)?” 2020)

These quotations gathered show that oil production has widespread support in both countries, primarily for its potential to bring much-needed economic earnings to the countries. Consequently, little attention is paid to oil’s competing atmospheric effects on climate change, in comparison to REDD+, an initiative being pursued in both countries for roughly a decade.

Conclusion

This article has shown that attention to climate change remains glaringly absent from recent news reporting on the oil finds in Guyana and Suriname. The news reports thus demonstrate a narrative shift from green to black, whereby previous celebration of the environmentally beneficial aspects of REDD+ as a climate-friendly development mechanism have been replaced by celebration of the development potential of offshore oil with little reference to its negative atmospheric effects during a time of rapidly intensifying climate change. We believe that this absence in places conditioned for roughly a decade to pursue low-carbon and carbon-compatible development models by multiple international actors through policy documents, consultations, and media reports is a significant shift (Collins 2022) deserving of critical inquiry. Here, we took the content of the news reports seriously and sought to account for this absence in terms of the disconnect created by the distance (both spatial and conceptual) between REDD+ as a land-based initiative and the oil drilling taking place offshore in both Guyana and Suriname.

The concerns around oil production and the capacity of these countries to benefit from the oil revenue, especially in Guyana, are also indicative of some of the constraints being faced by countries classed as peripheral to the global economic system. Neoliberal capitalist activity and the structures of their inclusion in part condition the space and scope for these countries to negotiate favorable terms for their resource use practices. Although corruption and poor governance certainly play a role, these countries' lack of access to technology to exploit their oil resources as they deem fit by themselves is also certainly a factor. The recognition of the ways in which power imbalances shape the management of natural resources raises the question of whether small countries like Guyana and Suriname can ever really shift the status quo, regardless of the commodity in demand and their ability to provide it.

This article shows how segmented, bounded, and land-based thinking has the potential to limit the development of a politics of climate change that is wide-ranging enough to accommodate the historical, cross-temporal and cross-scalar, connective, relational thinking necessary for grappling

with the challenge. A focus on the atmosphere exposes those limitations as it fills the physical gap between the production of different commodities and economic activity, despite the fact that its aerial nature makes it more difficult to perceive. Hence, instead of looking at conservation and extraction as land-based, spatially demarcated activities, we shifted the area of study both outward and upward, in considering both land and the atmospheric spaces above and around them. The integration of a voluminous atmospheric perspective, we argue, would thus necessitate more engagement with the atmosphere and climate change as mediating conservation and extraction activities in these places. This raises important questions concerning which other activities could be included under the “extraction” or “conservation” rubric once the atmospheric fabric connecting these activities across disparate spaces, foregrounded in this analysis, is included within discussion.

The article has shown that nexus thinking, characteristic of burgeoning debates on the extraction–conservation nexus, is contingent on clearly demarcated land-based boundaries between these activities and the ecosystems on which they are focusing. This reliance on boundaries, implicit or otherwise, is also evident within the wider tradition of political ecology, where a focus on the hard physicality of the world remains dominant, limiting engagement with how events taking place on land mediate and are mediated by the aerial, cross-scalar, and voluminous atmosphere (Mostafanezhad and Dressler 2021; Collins 2024b). Hence, given the expansive, ever-present nature of the atmosphere, a voluminous approach to studying the relationship between extraction and conservation harbors potential for orienting a more coherent politics of climate change wherein onlookers in other parts of the world can realize that they have a vested, atmospherically informed interest in the conservation and extraction events unfolding elsewhere. Conversely, to the extent that atmospheric relations are overlooked in other resource-rich regions of the world, climate action is likely to be similarly constrained. Accordingly, we invite other researchers and practitioners to adopt a similar voluminous focus in highlighting convergence and disjuncture between conservation and extraction in their own contexts of engagement.

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