LINE ALGOED AND ANTONIO CARMONA BÁEZ —

Communal Land as Survival: Barbuda's Decolonial World View

The Caribbean is at once the Earth's most geographic and ungeographic region. It is "the starting place," as Martinican scholar Malcom Ferdinand has said, "from which you conceptualize the Earth, the world, the people, the human, and non-human."[1] And yet it is still largely imagined as if it were not a real place. Globalization started here with the colonization of the Americas and the transatlantic "trade" in enslaved Africans. The region, as Jamaican scholar Jean Besson puts it, "has long been seen as a series of landscapes to be mined for their wealth or enjoyed for their beauty by outsiders."[2] Its global imaginary has been claimed by outsiders who have flocked to the region: the colonizers, the settlers, the real estate investors, the tourists, the shell companies, the remote workers. This imaginary belongs to everyone except its people.

The Caribbean is the region from where to consider the longevity of colonial notions of land use—which hinge on the supposed necessity of private property. Here we see the contemporary materializations of neocolonialism, the coloniality of power, and the decolonial resistance of its inhabitants. These three forces are particularly pronounced on the island of Barbuda, the smallest island of the independent Caribbean Commonwealth State of Antigua and Barbuda, located in the eastern part of the Leeward Islands. Although it is estimated that 65 percent of the earth's surface is communally held,[3] Barbuda is the only island in the world where all land is entirely held in common by Barbudans. The land is not property of the state, nor is there any private property; land cannot be sold. Communal land ownership has allowed Barbudans to keep the island out of the global land market, to limit the built environment, and to protect the delicate ecosystem of its coastal areas and lagoons. However, the island's centuries-old communal land is now threatened by the twin state's Central Government and its economic allies, who have used the devastating hurricanes of 2017 to capitalize on the island's unspoiled condition through land grabs, policy changes, and the advancement of luxury real estate projects—most notably Robert De Niro's "Paradise Found" and the Barbuda Ocean Club by John Paul DeJoria's "Peace, Love and Happiness" partnership. We see Barbuda's story of resistance against private property and these types of development as a fight for survival, not only of its people and environment, but also of the maintenance of its own sense of geography—of knowledge-practices that refuse to separate humans from nature.

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[1] Malcom Ferdinand, "A Future Named 'Ayiti': Thinking Decolonial Ecologies from the Caribbean World," *Funambulist*, no. 35 (May 2021): 20.

[2] Jean Besson and Janet Momsen, eds., *Land and Development in the Caribbean* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 39.

[3] Rights and Resources Initiative, "Who Owns the World's Land? A Global Baseline of Formally Recognized Indigenous and Community Land Rights," 2015.

Barbuda defies private property

Barbuda has a powerful history of resistance against Western forms of property and subjugation. When the Kalinago inhabited the island, they called it *Wa'Omoni*, Island of Herons. They fought to defend their land from European settlers.[4] In 1628, the island became the personal property of King Charles II, who in 1685 leased it for almost two centuries to the Codrington family for just "yearly one fat sheep if demanded."[5] A limestone island, Barbuda was too dry for large-scale sugarcane production, so the British enslavers used it to house their managers and overseers. A few hundred enslaved Africans worked under force to supply livestock and food staples to the Cordington's Antigua estates.[6] When Britain banned slavery in 1834, Barbudans were omitted from the Slavery Emancipation Act and had to fight to free themselves. The Codrington family left in 1870, and the Barbudans, who had lived and endured two hundred years of brutal enslavement on the island, refused to pay rent to the British Crown. The Crown eventually granted Barbudans legal status as its lawful tenants in communal possession in a 1904 colonial enactment.[7] This communal possession was maintained throughout the twentieth century and was refined and ratified in the Barbuda Land Act of 2007. The Act, which states that the island is owned in common by the people of Barbuda, entitles each Barbudan to three plots of land: one for housing, another for agriculture, and a third for business.[8]

While the Crown remains the symbolic owner of the land, the Barbuda Council, composed of nine directly elected and two ex officio members serving four-year terms, is the legal land administrator. The Council has the power to allocate and lease plots of land. Some can be leased to international investors for a limited number of years, but major development[9] requires explicit approval by a majority of Barbudans of voting age (18+), who need to be fully informed of the complete plans during Village Meetings. With a population of about 1,500 people, the island's approval process includes three steps. First, Barbudans give their consent in principle to the proposal. The proposal is then considered in detail by the Cabinet of Antigua and Barbuda. Finally, the detailed proposal comes back to Barbuda for consideration and consent. Village Meetings are held regularly, whenever needed, and the entire community is invited.

This enduring legacy differentiates Barbuda from other Caribbean islands, including Antigua. In fact, Barbudans resisted independence from Britain in 1981 to avoid being forced to adapt their land system to Antigua's freehold system and its commitment to large-scale, coastal tourism. Unlike Antigua, Barbuda's coastline is preserved. Food is grown in small agroecological provision grounds or backyards, and people hunt and fish, selling food to the community. There are no fences. A typical plot for a private house is no larger than 0.5 acres. The built environment is limited to the roughly 600 homes in the island's only town, Codrington, and a few small-scale tourist resorts.

[4] James L. Sweeney, "Caribs, Maroons, Jacobins, Brigands, and Sugar Barons: The Last Stand of the Black Caribs on St. Vincent," *African Diaspora Archeology Network*, March 2007, 2.

[5] Teckla C. Negga Melchior, "#We the Peoples of the World… Except You: Disaster Capitalism in Barbuda," *Critical Legal Thinking* (October 15, 2018), link.

[6] Joy Lawrence, *Barbuda and Betty's Hope: The Codrington Connection* (St. John's: Sugarmill Tales, 2015), 8–9.

[7] Negga Melchior, "#We the Peoples."

[8] The Act defines a Barbudan as "(a) a person born in Barbuda of whose grandparents at least one was born in Barbuda; or (b) the child, wherever born, of parents at least one of whom is a Barbudan." Many Barbudans live abroad, but when they come back, they are entitled to the three plots. All remaining land and other resources are held and managed in common. Antigua and Barbuda, Barbuda Land Act, 2007.

[9] Any development costing over $5,400,000 USD or having a significant impact on the economy, environment, or infrastructure of Barbuda.

Arnel and Joanne at their agriculture plot. Photograph by Line Algoed.

"Paradise Found"

And yet, it is the island's immaculateness that has also attracted the rich and powerful to it. Princess Diana vacationed at (and made famous) the K-Club, which had a lease on the southern beach, Coco Point. In 2015, the American actor Robert De Niro announced his plans to redevelop the then abandoned resort into a 391-acre luxury, "Nobu-branded" residential community, which he and his billionaire partner James Packer have called "Paradise Found." The resort is anticipated to include a Nobu Hotel of fifty separate villas with private pools and Nobu residences for sale. The annual lease for the land is $62,000 USD,[10] a small sum compared to the millions the proposed residences will cost.

[10] Mackenzie Frank, "The Paradise Found Bill—A Response," Barbudaful, October 19, 2015, link.

There is, of course, nothing happenstance about the development of "Paradise Found." Prime Minister Gaston Browne—a former Antiguan banker and leader of the Antigua and Barbuda Labour Party—has explicitly sought out and legislated for this kind of development in Barbuda. His political attention has been devoted to attracting investors in tourism and real estate development, intended to turn the twin state into an "economic powerhouse" in the Caribbean.[11] To authorize De Niro's project, Browne designed the Paradise Found Act in 2015 to override the community approval sections of the 2007 Barbuda Land Act—applicable to the 391 acres designated for the resort. Many Barbudans were resolutely opposed to the law. Community leader Mackenzie Frank called it a "direct undermining of the 2007 Barbuda Land Act," which provides for the "democratic participation of people in land alienation to foreign interests."[12] To garner legitimacy for the Act, the Central Government claimed that a (narrow) majority of Barbudans approved the Paradise Found project in a referendum, but according to the Barbuda People's Movement (BPM), the results were illegitimate as certain sections of the regulations governing the conduct of the Village Meeting were contravened.[13] For example, non-Barbudans were allowed to vote, and sufficient details of the proposed

[11] Caribbean Series, "Honourable Gaston Browne," December 4, 2015, link.

[12] Frank, "The Paradise Found Bill."

[13] Martina Johnson and Richard Luscombe, "Robert De Niro's Plan for Caribbean Mega-Resort Opposed by Island Residents," *The Guardian*, November 27, 2015, link.

project were not provided prior to the meeting so that Barbudans could give their free and informed consent to the proposal. The Barbuda Channel filmed a widely attended Village Meeting in which the community unreservedly voiced its opposition to the prime minister's plan. Nevertheless, the Paradise Found Act was passed—and with it DeNiro's project was approved—ultimately due to the fact that Barbuda only represents less than 2 percent of the total population of Antigua and Barbuda. At the time this bill was passed, Barbuda's representative in the National Parliament was a member of Browne's Labour Party.

Hurricane Irma as opportunity for "Peace, Love, and Happiness"

The encroachment did not end there.

In September 2017, Hurricane Irma passed with unprecedented strength, devastating Barbuda. Flying in a helicopter over the island the day after the storm, Prime Minister Browne declared it "barely habitable."[14] The army was deployed to evacuate Barbudans to shelters in Antigua, where they stayed for months. The official justification was that another storm, Hurricane José, was approaching. However, Barbudans resisted this evacuation, as they had wanted to start rebuilding their homes and participate in the international recovery efforts, especially after José passed without making landfall on the island. The official media worked to establish a different narrative, reporting: "95 percent of Barbuda's buildings were destroyed. Barbuda residents flee."[15] The Wikipedia entry on Barbuda still states that after Hurricane Irma, Barbuda was left "empty for the first time in modern history." The US ambassador to Antigua and Barbuda declared in a 2017 Oxfam America forum, "There's not a single living person on the island of Barbuda—a civilization that has existed on that island for over 300 years has now been extinguished."[16] The island was devastated, but not beyond repair, and its community certainly was not extinguished. Keeping the population off Barbuda for months[17] and exaggerating the island's uninhabitability served the political and economic interests of the prime minister and his allies, who saw the disaster as an opportunity to advance their goals for self-enrichment.

In the thirty days that Barbudans were not allowed to return, Barbuda became a textbook example of disaster capitalism.[18] In that same month, Browne amended the Barbuda Land Act and called a snap election in March 2018 to cement his legitimacy. Despite Barbudans' extraordinary efforts to vote in large numbers, as a minority population, they could not stop Browne's reelection and thus the amendment.[19] The amended act effectively abolishes communal land ownership, stating that Barbudans have "the right to purchase the freehold interest in land situated in Barbuda."[20] Barbudans would be forced to apply for private land ownership and buy the plot of land on which their house is located for the symbolic price of 1 EC$. The other two plots in their name would be sold to them at market price. In opposition to this amendment, Barbudans have widely rejected this scheme. "I already own something, and you're telling me I have to pay a dollar for it—how insulting is that?" Barbudan Kendra Beazer asks in a *New York Times* video filmed a few months after the hurricane.[21] "They want to put us in a reservation," Barbudan Tyreen Gift told us. "We own 62 square miles, but they want us to have only 2 square miles of that."[22]

[14] BBC News, "Hurricane Irma: Barbuda 'Barely Habitable,' Says PM," September 7, 2017, link.

[15] BBC News, "Hurricane Jose: 'Barely Habitable' Barbuda Residents Flee," September 8, 2017, link.

[16] Andrew deGrandpre, "On Tiny Barbuda, a 300-Year-Old Civilization Has Been 'Extinguished,'" *Washington Post*, September 15, 2017, link.

[17] Schools did not reopen until six months after Irma, making it impossible for families to return. The hospital was not fully restored until 2022.

[18] Naomi Klein and Alleen Brown, "Robert De Niro Accused of Exploiting Hurricane Irma to Build Resort in Barbuda," *The Intercept*, January 23, 2018, link.

[19] As citizens were only allowed to vote in Antigua, campaigners chartered ferries to facilitate the Barbudan vote, which resulted in a record score for the Barbuda People's Movement (BPM) candidate Trevor Walker, who won a seat in the House of Representatives, where he is the only representative for Barbuda out of nineteen members.

[20] Antigua and Barbuda, Barbuda (Amendment) Act, 2018.

[21] Neil Collier, Ora DeKornfeld, and Ben Laffin, "No Man's Land: Barbuda after Irma," *New York Times*, November 26, 2017, link.

[22] T. Gift, personal communication, January 28, 2023.

During the same period of evacuation, the government also began construction on an international airport, without approval of the Barbudan people or the Council, and without an environmental impact assessment. A ninety-nine-year land lease deal was also signed under the partnership "Peace, Love and Happiness" (PLH)—led by the self-proclaimed "self-made" billionaire John Paul DeJoria—for the development of the "Barbuda Ocean Club," an exclusive US \$2B luxury residential community. Working with developers Discovery Land Company, DeJoria and partners intend to construct 450 exclusive dwellings for ultrawealthy foreigners on the island's southern beaches of Coco Point and Palmetto Point. Promising "a spectacular private resort community" and an "unparalleled family-oriented, adventure lifestyle for discerning residents," the Ocean Club's website pictures mostly White people on a seemingly desolate island.[23]

Palmetto Point is protected by the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands.[24] In a 2016 Village Meeting, only plans for the redevelopment of the existing hotel on Coco Point were presented. Plans for a golf course and more villas at Palmetto Point were not disclosed, which is a breach of the Barbuda Land Act. After a Village Meeting in early 2020, where Barbudans voiced their concerns, the Barbuda Council asked PLH to immediately halt construction, but this has not happened, and the Coco Point villas and the Palmetto Point golf course are now being built. The latter is already disturbed by heavy rains in early 2023—to be expected when building on wetlands. Feeling betrayed in their request to stop construction, deeply concerned about the ecological impact, and saddened by the loss of cultural practices like straw weaving—which depended on plants in the area—many Barbudans are vehemently against PLH.[25]

[23] Barbuda Ocean Club, "About," link.

[24] "Antigua and Barbuda," Ramsar Convention Secretariat, link.

[25] Gemma Handy, "Barbudans 'Fight for Survival' as Resort Project Threatens Islanders' Way of Life," *The Guardian*, December 14, 2020, link; see also Barbuda Silent No More on Facebook: link or link.

Resisting individual land titles

From the moment the Codringtons left, Barbudans have collectively protected their land, natural resources, and common interests. There have been several previous attempts by the Central Government to privatize land in Barbuda, which Barbudans have constantly refused. In *Barbuda Voice*, a newspaper published in New York City in the 1970s, a Barbudan says: "The new Government is planning to give deeds to the people for their land… If… people accept deeds…, the Government will sell Barbuda piece by piece."[26] Now, individual land titles or deeds are seen as a technique to include Barbuda's land in the global real estate market, which will end up displacing the local population. According to the BPM representative, if "land were to be sold, the rich people will just come and buy it up. [Our] traditional way of life… will be extinct."[27]

At present, Barbudans have filed four court cases against the Central Government: a challenge to the repeal of the Barbuda Land Act; a review of the construction of an international airport without Barbudans' consent; a challenge to the Paradise Found Act; and a challenge to the amendment of the Crown Act, which weakens the Barbuda Council's jurisdiction over land and resources. Despite this pattern of resistance, Barbudans' justice system is ultimately tied to the oversight of a settler court. In July 2022, Barbuda's case against the Paradise Found Act was also lost in the Privy Council in London,

[26] Amy Potter, "Transnational Spaces and Communal Land Tenure in a Caribbean Place: 'Barbuda Is for Barbudans'" (PhD diss., Louisiana State University, 2011), 44.

[27] Claudio Accheri, Max Baring, and Adela Suliman, "Communal Land Ownership in Barbuda a Myth, Says Prime Minister," *Thomas Reuters Foundation News*, April 23, 2018, link.

the highest court of appeal for Commonwealth countries and British Overseas Territories, after the case was previously heard and lost in Antigua and Barbuda's court. According to the Privy Council, the Applicants were not "deprived of any right or interest in land, which they enjoyed pursuant to the Barbuda Land Act 2007," as due to the Paradise Found Act "the Land Act does not apply to the leased land."[28]

[28] Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, "MacKenzie Frank and Another (Appellants) v. Attorney General of Antigua and Barbuda (Respondent) (Antigua and Barbuda)," link.

Neocolonial development and "sustainability"

> I WILL DRAW YOUR MEMORY BACK TO THE HISTORY OF THE REGION. WHEN COLUMBUS CAME, WE HAD PEOPLE LIVING HERE, AND HE TOOK OVER SOVEREIGNTY. WE HAVE SEEN THE EFFECTS OF THAT, AFTER 500 YEARS, IN HOW WE SUFFERED. ONE OF OUR BIGGEST CHALLENGES COMING THROUGH THE DISASTER IN 2017 IS THAT WE WERE FACED WITH THAT SAME PRINCIPLE GOING ON, SOMEONE HAVING DIFFERENT PLANS FOR THE RESOURCES THAT WE CONTROL.
> —JOHN MUSSINGTON, BARBUDAN MARINE BIOLOGIST AND COMMUNITY ACTIVIST[29]

[29] Stronger Caribbean Together for Food, Land, and Climate Justice, "Hunger, Covid-19, Resistance and Farmer Based Solutions," May 1, 2020, link.

Contemporary "developers" settling in Barbuda, who use terms like "Paradise Found" and "Discovery Land Company," conjure colonialist notions of the "torrid zone," of "land left wholly to nature."[30] Colonial settlers, argues the Canadian legal scholar Brenna Bhandar, viewed the land they "discovered" as "lacking in civilized inhabitants, and therefore empty and ripe for appropriation."[31] The inhabitants of those lands "were deemed to be in need of improvement as much as their waste lands were."[32] This imaginary continues today, as Barbuda's "developers" see land as something to be discovered and "Paradise" to be found and appropriated on roaming expeditions. De Niro recalls how, while taking a boat trip from Antigua, he saw a beautiful island from afar.[33] In the project's commercial brochure we read that "Barbuda glitters like a pristine yet understated diamond. The island is relatively untouched, rich in culture, natural wonders and indigenous wildlife." The island is "unspoiled, it's unique, you don't find places like this anymore."[34] Once De Niro found "Paradise," it could be claimed as his own, imposing particular forms of land use upon existing ones. Building a luxury resort for the mega-wealthy to replace the hotel where Princess Diana once vacationed reveals a commingled geology of colonial histories and present-day imaginaries.

[30] These notions can be traced back to the English philosopher John Locke, whose 1690 book T*he Second Treatise on Government* introduced the hegemony of private property that currently organizes much of our world. A man obtains a right over land, Locke asserts, once he mixes his labor with it—thus he "improves" it. Locke writes: "Land that is left wholly to Nature, that hath no improvement of Pasturage, Tillage, or Planting, is called, as indeed it is, wast [sic]." Quoted in Brenna Bhandar, *Colonial Lives of Property: Law, Land, and Racial Regimes of Ownership* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 48.

[31] Bhandar, *Colonial Lives*, 4.

[32] Bhandar, *Colonial Lives*, 8.

[33] Stellene Volandes, "Robert De Niro Is Creating a New Caribbean Getaway," *Town & Country Magazine*, December 6, 2020, link.

[34] Jackie Wattles and Poppy Harlow, "Robert De Niro Wants to Help Rebuild Barbuda after Hurricane Irma," *CNN Money*, September 15, 2017, link.

The Paradise Found plot. Photograph by Line Algoed.

The tactic of declaring the island's uninhabitability after Hurricane Irma also recalls the "torrid zone." In her writing on disaster capitalism, Naomi Klein talks of the "clean canvases" that only great ruptures—such as a hurricane—can create. She writes: "It is in these malleable moments, when we are psychologically unmoored and physically uprooted, that these artists… begin their work of remaking the world."[35] We see this work as continuing neocolonial processes that render local practices of land use inferior and illegal.

Within this remaking, a large-scale environmental event provides yet another narrative "justification" for private developments. The Paradise Found marketing brochure communicates that the development is "an opportunity to create a greener, more sustainable Barbuda." PLH also states that the Barbuda Ocean Club will "advance sustainable infrastructure solutions, support environmental initiatives."[36] In an interview with the Barbuda Channel, Justin Wilshaw, the PLH project president, says they are in Barbuda "to assist, guide, train and educate" the local population and that they are "going to improve the environment by creating wetlands and building dune resistance."[37]

But Barbudans are not in need of this kind of assistance. The island's coastline is mostly undeveloped and its wildlife unharmed because locals have applied their environmental knowledge-practices over hundreds of years. Against all odds, Barbudans have been able to protect the coastline from the large-scale built development that characterizes the rest of the Caribbean. Barbuda hosts the world's most important nesting sites for frigate birds and other endangered species.[38] The wetlands, which can serve as a flood zone if needed, have protected the population from worse outcomes after storms.

[35] Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), 21.

[36] Business Wire, "Community Developers Committed to Barbuda Recovery after Hurricane Irma," September 13, 2017, link.

[37] Barbuda Channel, "Special Interview with Team from PLH," Facebook, January 20, 2021, link.

[38] Handy, "Barbudans 'Fight for Survival.'"

George at the Bird Sanctuary. Photograph by Line Algoed.

Decades of sand mining promoted by previous administrations—despite community resistance—have already caused significant environmental damage, but Palmetto Point specifically was put under "special conservation concern" and identified as highly at risk for coastal erosion.[39] The Central Government has pushed this extractive industry, which earned US $300 million over a 10-year period. Even when the Barbuda Council took over the sand mining industry, the players (international mining companies, government ministers) who were the major beneficiaries remained the same. PLH claims to be undoing the damage by restoring the dunes. However, the excavation of millions of tons of sand under the guise of creating artificial lagoons and the hundreds of luxury residences PLH is building will continue to alter the condition of the island beyond repair. The UN Special Rapporteurs reports that the Ocean Club poses a threat to safe drinking water, food security, biodiversity, and human rights.[40] Leveling the dunes to erect buildings, removing mangrove wetlands and replacing Indigenous flora, and introducing sewage and pollutants will destroy its fragile ecosystems.

[39] OHCHR, link, June 22, 2021.

[40] OHCHR.

In these campaigns, a Western imaginary of "sustainability" is mobilized to erase Barbudans' preservation practices and to justify neocolonial practices of land expropriation. Within these new highly contemporary narratives of sustainability, a centuries-old hierarchy is perpetuated. Natives are seen as "naïve savages" who need to be assisted, guided, trained, and educated, in short "improved" to adapt to modes of production—and environmental "protection"—that ultimately benefit others, not the local population. The purpose is to keep the working native population subordinate to investors and visitors from Europe and North America, reinforcing their dependency and vulnerability.[41]

By a similar token, these development projects offer a small number of mostly low-paid jobs to the community. De Niro's team asserts they are trying to help the island after Hurricane Irma, offering jobs to "every Barbudan that's willing to work."[42] DeJoria has also said that the hurricane encouraged

[41] Quijano and Ennis, Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel, and Maldonado-Torres see the legacy of colonialism as formerly colonized nations continue to struggle against the new structures, which keep their populations subordinate to the logic of Western modernity and transnational capital (Anibal Quijano and Michael Ennis, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 3 (2000); Santiago Castro-Gómez and Ramon Grosfoguel, eds., *El giro decolonial: Reflexiones para una diversidad epistémica más allá del capitalismo global* (Bogotá: Siglo del Hombre Editores, 2007); Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007).

[42] Wattles and Harlow, "Robert De Niro."

him to "immediately advance development plans" of the Barbuda Ocean Club, calling themselves "community developers."[43] Mussington sees this as a standard practice of developers: "They approach small, resource rich communities they believe are poor and depressed. The jobs they hand out will never be owned by the people, and the wealth the communities hold in common is extracted. In the end the communities are left impoverished without the resources that sustain lives and livelihoods, and the 'developers' move on to the next place."[44] The Discovery Land Company already demonstrated this conduct when they abandoned the Bahamas a few days after Hurricane Dorian in 2019, leaving the Bahamas Ocean Club in pieces, its staff anguished and jobless.[45] Nevertheless, Wilshaw claims they are "pleased to be part of the Barbuda family and the Barbuda community."[46] But the community they claim to be a part of is now divided, forced to compete for the jobs created by the Ocean Club. "Divide and conquer, the colonial program is known," the Guadeloupean novelist Maryse Condé writes.[47]

De Niro, DeJoria, and their allies evoke the figure of the colonial White male possessive individual, to borrow from Brenna Bhandar. This figure was historically defined in contrast to the "Savage," the "Indian," who was painted as being unfit to be an owner.[48] Sylvia Wynter calls the possessive subject simply "Man," who "overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself."[49] Barbuda, like many places in the Global South that have struggled for self-determination, challenges this overrepresentation of "Man," who takes the shape now of a possessive individual interested only in the cash value of real estate, not in the non-monetized value of the natural environment. In Barbuda, resources are a part of the community. "We're not looking at natural resources turned into billions. They are the foundations of our existence," Mussington said.[50] "I'm the richest man on earth! We own this whole island, together," a Barbudan fisherman told us when he took us around the island on his boat.[51] The collective transcends the individual.

[43] Business Wire, "Community Developers Committed to Barbuda Recovery after Hurricane Irma."

[44] J. Mussington, personal communication, September 3, 2021.

[45] Kevin Sieff, "When Hurricane Dorian Blew through the Bahamas, It Exposed One of the World's Great Faultlines of Inequality," *Washington Post*, September 12, 2019, link.

[46] Barbuda Channel, "Special Interview with Team from PLH."

[47] Maryse Condé, *Le Cœur à Rire et à Pleurer* (Paris: Pocket, 1999), 143, own translation.

[48] Bhandar, Colonial Lives, 183.

[49] Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 260.

[50] J. Mussington, personal communication, January 29, 2020.

[51] D. Warner, personal communication, July 22, 2018.

Coloniality of development

Gaston Browne's economic model is well-known; it is the dominant model of the Caribbean region (and many others). It fits within the colonial matrix of power, in which former colonial subjects reproduce extractive strategies of development similar to those used by former European colonizers to fill their coffers, treating inhabitants of the land in question and as nothing more than potential workers or worse—obsolete in the project of creating wealth. The legacies, hierarchies, and knowledge-practices imposed by colonial institutions are reproduced in service to those in power.[52] For the sake of "development," resources—in this case, land—are extracted and monetized by these governments, until they run out. The current extractive model of the Caribbean region is mostly tourism and the related real estate sector.

In service of this mode of development, Browne has called Barbuda's collective property "a myth"[53] and Barbudans "deracinated imbeciles"[54] for believing they are its lawful possessors. He thinks Barbudans occupy the land informally.[55] Like De Niro and DeJoria, by casting Barbuda's life in common as a fiction, Browne cultivates a colonial worldview, where systems of

[52] Quijano and Ennis, "Coloniality of Power"; Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel, *El giro decolonial.*

[53] Accheri, Baring, and Suliman, "Communal Land Ownership in Barbuda a Myth."

[54] Human Rights Watch, "Antigua and Barbuda: Barbudans Fighting for Land Rights," July 12, 2018.

[55] Accheri, Baring, and Suliman, "Communal Land Ownership in Barbuda a Myth."

private property and development are deemed necessary and inevitable. This has significant material consequences. As Bhandar writes:

> RENDERING INDIGENOUS AND RACIALIZED POPULATIONS AS ILLEGAL OR UNLAWFUL, OFTEN ON THE BASIS OF THEIR WAYS OF LIVING OR RELATING TO LAND, HAS BEEN USED AS A PRIMARY MEANS OF DISPOSSESSION. OWNING LAND IN COMMON, WITHOUT INDIVIDUAL PRIVATE OWNERSHIP, REFLECTED A "STATE OF PRIMEVAL SIMPLICITY." WITHOUT OWNERSHIP, AND THE LAW THAT ACCOMPANIES IT, THERE COULD BE NO CIVILIZATION.[56]

[56] Bhandar, *Colonial Lives*, 48.

"Do you [know of] any country in the world that has advanced without a well-developed property rights system? It is fundamental to growth and development in any country. What makes Barbuda so special?" Browne asked in an interview.[57] Liz Alden Wily, an international land tenure expert, disagrees. There is growing recognition, she says, that many of the world's communally held lands are not just lands that are occupied and used but are owned, that they are actual—well-developed—forms of property.[58] The fact that Barbuda lost the court case in the Privy Council against the Paradise Found Act demonstrates that juridical techniques of appropriation and dispossession continue to inform ongoing processes of displacement as well as the struggles faced by Commonwealth nations in achieving self-determination through "legal" structures determined by settler states.

[57] Accheri, Baring, and Suliman, "Communal Land Ownership in Barbuda a Myth."

[58] "Line Algoed Interview with Liz Alden Wily," Center for CLT Innovation, link.

The context today is the global climate emergency. Locally entrenched lifestyles that have protected wetlands, biodiversity, and wildlife—and the ways of relating to the land that support these lifestyles—are invalidated and rendered "unsustainable." In this mentality, the threat of climate change and the population's vulnerability are used to dispossess people and clear the land for those who are deemed less vulnerable, which is attributable to their wealth. This is what happened in the months after Hurricane Irma when Browne forced Barbudans off the island while a ninety-nine-year lease was signed with PLH. Yarimar Bonilla writes in an article on the coloniality of disaster that "'Vulnerability' (both social and environmental) is not a natural state but the product of racio-colonial governance."[59] We therefore prefer to speak of *vulnerabilization*, a political action making and keeping communities vulnerable so they can be easily moved around,[60] actively kept from rebuilding after a disaster,[61] and forced into the colonial framework of private property.

[59] Yarimar Bonilla, "The Coloniality of Disaster: Race, Empire, and the Temporal Logics of Emergency in Puerto Rico, USA," *Political Geography* 78 (2020): 1.

[60] Line Algoed and María E. Hernández Torrales, "The Land Is Ours. Vulnerabilization and Resistance in Informal Settlements in Puerto Rico: Lessons from the Cao Martín Pea Community Land Trust," *Radical Housing Journal* 1, no. 1 (2019): 39.

[61] Research has shown the importance of people affected by disasters in participation in rebuilding. See, e.g., Anthony Oliver-Smith, "Communities after Catastrophe: Reconstructing the Material, Reconstituting the Social," in *Community Building in the 21st Century*, ed. S. E. Hyland (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2005, 53). There is a need to expel stress hormones after the event, which can settle in the body if people are treated as passive victims (see, e.g.. Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score* [New York: Penguin, 2015]).

Decolonial resistance for survival

"[Our land system] puts the wealth of our nation, the access to the resources, in the hands of the people first," Mussington says. "After the disaster, there was a concerted effort to change that. It was the repeat of things that took place during colonization. That's why we fight."[62]

[62] Stronger Caribbean Together, "Hunger, Covid-19."

Barbuda's ongoing struggle to maintain collective land rights has its roots in the struggle against slavery and historical colonialism in the Caribbean. Like other forms of collective lands in the region (family lands, maroon commu-

nities, customary tenure),[63] Barbuda's land system is a resistant response to colonial domination.[64] The Haitian sociologist Jean Casimir calls this the "counter-plantation system." During the Haitian revolution and after independence, formerly enslaved Haitians turned their backs to paid forms of large-scale plantation labor and focused on small-scale subsistence permaculture on their own plots,65 which Casimir sees as sites of resistance.[66]

Barbuda Land Act Matters. Photograph by Line Algoed.

We see Barbuda's world-making project as a decolonial struggle, as Barbudans stand up against the legacies of colonialism in their own country, transforming hegemonic ideas and established narratives and rejecting the Cartesian logic of divorcing humankind from nature, where the former dominates and exploits the latter.[67] Through their ways of relating to the land, Barbudans challenge the global powers that continue to view nature as a resource to be exploited in one particular way based on generating wealth, and the local population as expendable.

Controlling their resources as a collective has shielded Barbudans from worse outcomes after the storm. Unlike other islands that are increasingly dependent on food imports, Barbuda had local food security, even without electricity after the storm.[68] Every young person in Barbuda learns how to fish and hunt. The day after Irma, Barbudans went fishing, Mussington remembers: "We shared it among the community. A typical person in Antigua would not be able to do that, because they do not have the skills."[69] The communal land system also prevented rising house prices, because the community still controls the land.[70] Importantly, the communal system shielded residents from displacement following Hurricane Irma. Despite the Central Government's attempts to fracture the community by forcing people off the island for months and by amending their Land Act, Barbuda's community returned, and are still there. The Barbuda Land Act has been amended (and subsequently repealed); however, the government's offer of one dollar for purchase of their housing plot has been widely rejected by Barbudans. The Barbuda Council maintains its right to administer the lands of Barbuda and its resources under its communal ownership system based on the Local Government Act (1976). This law remains in force and cannot be changed unilaterally by the Central Government. Currently, the Barbuda Council Lands Department is upgrading

[63] It is estimated that in the Caribbean region, 100,000 hectares of land is held by Afro-descendant communities under customary tenure, link.

[64] Besson and Momsen, *Land and Development*, 39.

[65] Jean Casimir, *The Haitians: A Decolonial History* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2020), as cited in Koen Bogaert, *In het Spoor van Fanon: Orde, Wanorde, Dekolonisering* (Berchem: EPO, 2023).

[66] The differences between these ways of relating to the land are beautifully described by Anna Tsing in *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 24: "Since the time of the plantation, commercial agriculture has aimed to segregate a single crop and work toward its simultaneous ripening for a coordinated harvest. But other kinds of farming have multiple rhythms. In the shifting cultivation… farmers needed to attend to the varied schedules of maturation of [crops]. These rhythms were their relation to human harvests; if we add other relations, for example, to pollinators or other plants, rhythms multiply. The polyphonic assemblage is the gathering of these rhythms, as they result from world-making projects, human and not human."

[67] Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being"; see also Karsten Schulz, "Decolonising the Anthropocene: The Mytho-Politics of Human Mastery," *E-International Relations* (July 2017).

[68] The Caribbean imports 83 percent of food consumed (see E. Dorodnykh, *Economic and Social Impacts of Food Self-Reliance in the Caribbean* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

[69] J. Mussington, personal communication, January 29, 2020.

[70] Rising house prices can be a perverse long-term effect of hurricanes. See Jordan Lulich, "Does Hurricane Damage Negatively Impact Your Real Estate Value?" *Forbes*, June 25, 2018, link.

its lands registration system by issuing certificates of allotment, which confirms ownership of the land under Collective Title. These triumphs give Barbudans we spoke to the confidence that they will also overcome the challenges presented by the new luxury developments.

The resistance of the people of Barbuda is destabilizing established narratives on property, progress, development, and sustainability. The dominant imaginary originates from colonial thought, which privileges Western practices of cultivation, exploitation, and domination of the land, leading to the land's destruction. The need for epistemologies that confront and substitute colonial thinking and practice is urgent, and the example of Barbuda can help us think and act otherwise. From this small Caribbean island emerges a decolonial worldview that sees land as "necessary for life"[71] and as a basis for survival in times of climate crises. "Our land system is the reason we survive. As simple as that." Mussington affirmed.[72]

[71] Bhandar, *Colonial Lives*, 25.

[72] J. Mussington, personal communication, January 29, 2020.