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Seduction, Promises and Disneyfication of Barbuda post Irma

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Photo 1. Houses in Codrington Village were damaged after Hurricane Irma struck the island.
Source: Sophia Perdikaris

Abstract: Under the guise of post-hurricane development, the national government of Antigua and Barbuda exploited the disasterscape of post Hurricane Irma Barbuda to usher in a new wave of economic development that has left Barbudans separated from their unique culture and identity. In this article we explore what are inhabited vs. uninhabited spaces, the effects of Colonial Christian ideas on cultivated vs. uncultivated lands and the effects of capitalist seduction to traditional landscapes and seascapes. We argue that this neocolonial approach to traditional lifeways increases vulnerability of both people and environment. By wiping out diversity and culture in order to replace it with acultural, Disneyfied landscapes serving outside interests and furthering the divide between rich and poor through the singular economy of tourism, it pushes local people into a new slavery through dependence and servitude.

Keywords: Barbuda, Disaster Capitalism, Disneyfication, Cultural Heritage, Uninhabited Spaces

September 6, 2017 forever changed the tangible and intangible cultural and physical landscape of Barbuda (Photo 1 and 2). Under the guise of post-hurricane development, the national government of Antigua and Barbuda exploited the disasterscape to usher in a new wave of economic development that has left Barbudans separated from their unique culture and identity (BOGER & PERDIKARIS, 2019; BOGER, PERDIKARIS & RIVERA-COLLAZO, 2019). Run as a cooperative, every Barbudan had the right to land and the local governing body, the Barbudan Council, recorded who was in which part of the island and the purpose of the individual land plots, habitation, and farming (TWEEDY, 1981). This relationship of Barbudans to their land, the way to be governed, and how outside investors were to be dealt with was codified in the 2007 Land Act that was repealed in 2018 by the current national government (Antigua & Barbuda 2008; 2016; 2018).



Photo 2. Horses at the Duck Pond downtown Codrington village post Hurricane Irma. For almost three weeks following Irma, standing water was most everywhere.

Source: Sophia Perdikaris

This strong connection to the landscape has developed over the past 400 years of history after enslaved people were brought to the island. Barbudans have had a very different trajectory from other enslaved peoples in the Caribbean; Barbudans were brought to the island to work the land for sustaining the British colonial machine with provisions. They were allowed to form households and live in family units, unlike many other enslaved peoples elsewhere. While there is nothing romantic or easy about enslavement, Barbudans were not part of the sugar production and hence were allowed certain liberties that are unique (GONZALEZ, 2018; GONZALEZ & MEBANE-CRUZ, 2018; PERDIKARIS, 2018; PERDIKARIS *et al.*, 2020). This significantly contributed to the Barbudan relationship to the land as some of their tasks involved rounding up animals, driving cattle, hunting, horsemanship, and cultivating various successful crop growing techniques. Barbudans developed a deep understanding of the local environment, which is particularly important when living on a semi-arid island with thin, nutrient poor soils, as well as an island that is subject to extreme weather events and freshwater scarcity (SCHLUYTER, 2012; BOGER *et al.*, 2014; BOGER, PERDIKARIS & ADAMS, 2015).



Photo 3. The Codrington Lagoon and the waters around Barbuda, are an important breeding ground for the spiny lobster, and a source of food and income for Barbudans. Locals refer to the resource as their “Bread Basket”. Source: Sophia Perdikaris

While living under colonial authority, Barbudans were able to develop a unique creolized intangible cultural heritage that grew from the culture in their original home and became adapted to the new realities of their life in Barbuda. While having regular dwellings for everyday life, Barbudans even today also live for various lengths of time in caves and rockshelters where they practice “living from the land”, a tradition of hunting, fishing, gathering and feasting in remote locations around the island (PERDIKARIS *et al.*, 2013). People tell stories about hearing the sounds of drums coming out of Indian Cave during the holidays and “the light” that follows people in a perceived ominous but also playful way. The landscape is part of Barbudan history, lore, storytelling; the land connects them with their ancestors and is a part of the Barbudan existence (GORE, 2018). The seemingly “uninhabited” terrain is only perceived as such by outsiders that fail to see the rich intangible cultural heritage that is integral to peoples’ identity and culture. The caves, large trees, big flat rocks, archaeology and other features in the landscape all have meaning and names.

Ever since emancipation Barbudans wanted to be self-governing and maintain their unique relationship to the Barbudan landscape and seascape. Antigua and the central government have always been viewed as overly aggressive, dismissive of local customs and culture, and having a very limited view of the future that is defined by a western notion of richness and profit. The central government acts towards Barbudans with what seems to be a “big brother syndrome” where they use a paternalistic approach of “we know best”, “we are trying to protect you”, and “you will be happier and richer”. They regularly dismiss the voices of Barbudans as ignorant, abuse the name of their office through the use of unstately language in the local media and have assumed “superiority” over people (HILLHOUSE, 2018).

Shortly after Hurricane Irma struck, big excavation machinery was brought on the island and the bulldozing of land ran day and night on large parts of Barbuda. This was not to help in post-hurricane recovery, but rather to push forward a project that had not received the proper support and clearance at the local level. The controversial new international airport had already carved a large part of its current footprint on the Barbudan landscape just a few weeks after the hurricane (Photo 4). During all of this, Barbudans were kept away from their homes and homeland.



Photo 4. On October 22, 2017, a month post-hurricane Irma the airport in its current location was well underway.
Source: Sophia Perdikaris

The first attempt to excavate for the international airport demolished the 21-acre historic site of Plantation (Photo 5, 6). After the ground started caving the construction moved with no consultation or proper Environmental Assessment to the current location. At first the site was higher in the Highlands but massive cave-ins caused them to move the project for the second time farther downhill. The bulldozing destroyed protected tree species, farmland, archaeological sites, wetlands and the breeding grounds of fallow deer (PERDIKARIS *et al*, 2017a) and the protected red-footed tortoises. Both of these species significantly contribute to the traditional Barbudan diet.

Animals were stunned by the construction and wandered in the scarred landscape for months during and after the airport construction halted. While there on a two-hour survey in December 2017, we collected and relocated more than 16 adult tortoises that were wandering in the construction site. That was repeated every single time we visited the area. At night all the bulldozed trees were set alight and the blaze could be seen all the way from the village (Photo 7, 8, 9). The archaeological sites were used as dirt to fill in the multiple cave-ins and then covered with limestone that was brought from a newly established quarrying area that destroyed an additional 50 acres of land. The airport strip,

measuring one third of the size of La Guardia airport in New York City, is a naked landscape unfit to fulfill the purpose of its creation. It is the villain of destruction in a meaningless project that claimed the inhabited but “uninhabited” terrain.



Photo 5. Historic site of Plantation where the first attempt was made for building the international airport. The limestone remains of fences and buildings can be seen in the foreground and background.

Source: Rebecca Boger



Photo 6. Excavation of the airport in its current position in December 2017. Large excavation equipment can be seen in the background. Vegetation, including rare and endangered species were piled and burned as shown in the foreground.

Source: Rebecca Boger



Photo 7. The area excavated for the airport was the breeding habitat for the fallow deer and turtle species.

Source: Sophia Perdikaris



Photo 8. Family garden plot destroyed by excavation for the international airport.

Source: Rebecca Boger



Photo 9. One of the many caves exposed and filled in with soil and fill from the nearby quarry.
Source: Rebecca Boger.

Barbuda is a limestone island that is made up of caverns, caves and rockshelters. It was of no surprise to any Barbudan that the ground was unable to sustain such a large-scale project. Barbudans kept on repeating “we told them so”. Why is there a surprise of cave-ins? In an island where there is nothing but limestone, all the filling of caverns is pointless. It only lasts until the next rainfall. The soil then gets distributed to underground tunnels and caverns and the story continues. Landing large commercial airliners in such a terrain will be extremely dangerous assuming that the Federal Aviation Authority (FAA) can give approval for its use, which is highly unlikely. This poorly designed thoughtless project disregarded local knowledge, and destroyed cultural heritage and land that cannot be replaced.

Beyond the new airport, excavation has continued along the western Caribbean Sea side of the island. A large project, Peace, Love, and Happiness, is developing on Palmetto Point and has taken over Coco Point (Map 1). They have proposed additional

developments on the strip separating the lagoon from the Caribbean Sea and on the extreme NW of the island at the location of Cedar Tree Point. None of these areas have had an archaeological survey. They are protected wetlands with a RAMSAR allocation and were clearly demarcated as protected areas in the Antigua and Barbuda Fifth National Report to the Convention on Biodiversity of 2014 (Environment Division of Antigua and Barbuda 2014). Scientific experts that produced the reporting for the proposed new developments, looked in the literature for things that would confirm what they wanted to see rather than reach out to true experts that would be able to provide them with a proper cultural heritage assessment in the specific locations they are asking to develop.



Map of Barbuda showing the airport construction and areas undergoing development after Hurricane Irma. One of these sites on Palmetto Point is within a Ramsar wetland site. The same developer is also proposing additional construction sites at Cedar Tre Tree Point at the northwest tip of the island and on the strip separating the lagoon from the Caribbean Sea. Both the latter in the Ramsar zone as well are in proximity to the frigate bird colony.

Everything that has occurred in Barbuda since hurricane Irma is what Naomi Klein (2007) describes as “shock doctrine”. Shock doctrine is a “deliberate exploitation of states of emergency to push through a radical pro-corporate agenda” (KLEIN, 2018: 45). Just like it did in post Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico and post Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, shock doctrine strategy is characterized by speed “pushing a flurry of radical changes through so quickly it’s virtually impossible to keep up” (Klein 2018, p. 45). The people of Barbuda were not only excluded from decision making, but were actively kept out while the central government proceeded with its agenda.

The central government of Antigua was seduced by the promises made by the wealthy foreign investors. However, while some pockets have been lined, disaster capitalism rarely delivers on its promises and often leaves people empty handed (KLEIN, 2018; SCHULLER & MALDONADO, 2016; PAUDEL & PHILIPPE, 2020; COLLARD, 2018; GOULD & LEWIS, 2018). Despite its poor track record, neoliberal economic policy of free market development (or simply capitalism) continues to spread to every corner of the world. Capitalism works best through seduction, a tactic that institutions and individuals alike employ to manipulate marginalized communities in order to shape power dynamics in their favor. The events that took place in Barbuda after the hurricane highlights the ways in which this power dynamic has been exploited to capitalize on land and resources without the engagement or approval of the local populations. As Takeyama argues “The art of seduction is, thus, a form of social governance-at-a-distance and also a pivot of speculative accumulation of capital” (TAKEYAMA, 2008: ii-iii). The initial attraction to promises of economic growth and long-term economic stability is quickly replaced by abandoned construction sites, loss of traditional livelihoods and ways of life, and environmental degradation. All of which can already be seen littering the Barbudan landscape. From an abandoned airport, to destroyed wetlands, the Island is already home to material expressions of these failed promises. The promises of a quick profit are seductive; they allow people to imagine a better future for themselves and their families, but in the end these promises are nothing but empty promises. What remains is a wake of destruction, both natural and man-made (PERDIKARIS & HEJTMANEK, 2020).

Aside from not delivering on their promises, disaster capitalism also leads to the furthering of the economic inequalities between the rich and the poor (BIRAU & DOAGA, 2019; BOURNE, 2009; EDWARD & SUMMER, 2018; YEE, 2018). The building of airports, hotels and other tourist attractions pushes the local populations into the lives of servitude. This type of economic subsistence is similar to the economic practices and lives during the colonial period and slavery. The promise of economic growth through development and implementation of western free market order has in recent years been called to question as the gap between the rich and poor continues to grow (BIRAU & DOAGA, 2019; BOURNE, 2009; EDWARD & SUMMER, 2018). In those countries with a high percent of economic growth we’ve seen a continued widening gap between rich and poor (BADER *et al.*, 2017: 2068). Even though the Caribbean itself has seen modest economic growth over the last several decades, poverty still remains a major problem for the region. The Caribbean Development Bank itself admits that despite the economic growth:

Economic volatility causes fluctuations in employment and incomes, with particularly strong influence on the employment and incomes of lower skilled workers. The poverty effects are magnified because poor people have weaker and less effective mechanisms for coping with loss of employment and income" (BEOURNE, 2009: 24).

This is in part due to the uneven economic growth between rich and poor, largely resulting from the uneven distribution of the country's income, the lack of social net mechanisms, as well as little investment in education and training of the workforce. Moreover, much of the economic growth tends to rely on the growth of one single industry which makes the countries vulnerable in the long-term. In the Caribbean the heavy reliance on tourism makes the countries more vulnerable and unable to cope with large scale economic fluctuations. Without a doubt, the events that have unfolded in Barbuda resemble what occurred in post disaster Puerto Rico, where disaster capitalism was used to create a safe, albeit manufactured, playground for millionaires and other elites (BOGER *et al.*, 2019).

Much like the rest of the Caribbean, the government, seduced by the quick profit promised by the tourist industry, has allowed for creation of manufactured spaces that are uniform and match the entertainment values of the US mass culture often referred to as "Disneyfication". Karen Klugman (1995) defines "Disneyfication" as "the application of simplified aesthetic, intellectual, or moral standards to a thing that has the potential for more complex and thought-provoking expression" (KLUGMAN, 1995:103). Disneyfication thus takes what to the Western eyes seem like uninhabited landscape, and makes it into its own simplified and sterilized version devoid of any cultural context (KLUGMAN, 1995; MATUSITZ & PALERMO, 2014). This commodification of ancient landscapes that hold important historical and cultural value to the inhabitants of the island has turned "uninhabited places" into commoditized tourist attractions.

Disneyfication itself is only a small piece of the larger issue - the endless race for profit. This race for profit is therefore responsible for destruction of nature and tangible and intangible cultural heritage. The destruction must occur in order to create space for building a boutique Disneyfied notion of what is "pretty" or desirable by outsiders who know little to nothing about the landscape they will come to occupy as tourists (PERDIKARIS & HEJTMANEK, 2020). Disaster capitalism seeks to sanitize spaces considered dirty and unfriendly. Sanitation of the land helps contribute to the creation of what is deemed a "blank canvas". In Western perspective a blank canvas is seen as perfection, a space where creation and businessfication can occur. The destruction brought upon by the hurricane started the process towards the creation of this blank canvas (PERDIKARIS *et at*, 2017b), but the bulldozers finished it. To the people who gave a

go ahead to those bulldozers, the landscape before them appears uninhabited, but what they do not realize is that every rock, every sand dune, and every cave is deeply connected to the identity and culture of the local people.

The insatiable desire to develop “uninhabited” spaces is a byproduct of Western colonialism in which “not only did the English believe it was their right to colonise open spaces, they also believed that they had a God-given calling to cultivate all uncultivated land.” (GRASSOW 2004: 1). What the English saw as open spaces were likely historically and culturally significant to the native peoples. This desire to cultivate and order “uninhabited” spaces is a direct response to the English understanding “Old Testament book of Genesis to be ordered and cultivated, whereas those banished from the Garden were in an uncultivated wilderness” (GRASSOW,2004: 1). For the missionaries and early European settlers, cultivation of these “uninhabited” spaces was a sign “of moral and spiritual success” and a return to the Garden of Eden (GRASSOW, 2004: 1). The newly colonized spaces and people had to be brought under control through the cultivation of the countryside (or the uninhabited spaces) and be “tilled and planted anew--cultivating the heathen workers as they cultivated the soil” (COMAROFF, 1991: 80). Cultivation of uninhabited spaces thus becomes synonymous with civilization, and ultimately with commerce. Since modern day capitalism is a direct byproduct of English mercantilism, it follows that present-day developments, like the one in Barbuda, seek to order the “uninhabited” spaces in the same way early settler colonialists did by recreating the imagined Garden of Eden.

The other unfortunate outcome of the shock doctrine in post-Irma Barbuda is domestication and erasure of diversity. Removing culture and identity destroys diversity, and this lack of diversity leads to “domestication”. Through the sanitation of land, its history, and traditional ways of life, Barbuda is being domesticated, a process which is inevitably going to make the island and its people more vulnerable. Just like domesticated species who can no longer survive in the wild, the same happens to people and landscapes who have been bulldozed over by Western development. The creation of a manufactured tropical paradise created for the pleasure of wealthy outsiders ignores nature and local culture while using natural disasters as an excuse to become part of the neocolonial development agenda. Disaster capitalism leads to a Western developed landscape that lacks character and authenticity (PERDIKARIS *et al*, 2020). This new landscape is nothing but an illusion manufactured for the western gaze and tastes, while lacking connection to the people, space, and place. The Western neocolonial policy agenda sees landscape, seascape and local people as expendable and disregards the meaning of place unless it

fulfills the westernized notion of “built” and “developed”. In creating neocolonial disasters, irrespective of development and structures, they become the true uninhabited landscapes, a Disneyfied artificial perception of existence and “perfection” devoid of culture and meaningful connection to identity and space.

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