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**Making and Resisting Uninhabitability:
Climate Adaptation, Disasters and Dispossession in Barbuda**

Ph.D Program in International Studies

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Thesis Abstract

As extreme climatic events continue to intensify, so do the injustices they contribute to and the violence they can reinforce. Given this, the de-politicisation of climate change adaptation and the naturalisation of disasters become increasingly problematic, as they not only displace issues of justice, but also conceal violence. This thesis addresses some of the urgent questions that arise in this context, combining theoretical and empirical analyses to investigate how climate uninhabitability, mobilities, and disasters are defined and mobilised in climate adaptation discourse and policies, and with what consequences for people and places in terms of control and accumulation via dispossession. Three articles address this research problem. The first article asks how uninhabitability is used in the context of climate change discourses and policies around climate change (im)mobilities. Tracing the concept's roots in colonial imaginary geographies, the article argues that, today, uninhabitability continues to be a key label in processes of othering and in the production of climate change imaginative geographies, which in turn act as technologies of government. The second article interrogates the multiple and contested character of climate change discourses and practices around uninhabitability and disasters. The empirical analysis focuses on the Caribbean island of Barbuda which, in the aftermath of hurricane Irma, was declared uninhabitable justifying the displacement of its population. The concepts under scrutiny emerge as fundamentally political categories with normative power, susceptible to performative uses aimed at control and dispossession. The third article further delves into the performative use of adaptation and disasters as governmentality tools. The article mobilises the nexus between tourism, disaster capitalism, and colonialism to investigate the violence that post-political climate change narratives help to support. The empirical analysis of Barbuda in the aftermath of Irma is grounded in a critical overview of its history highlighting how disasters and adaptation provide new framings for the reproduction of long-standing violence.

1. Introduction

The impacts of anthropogenic climate change are increasingly shaping the experience of life on earth. This is particularly observable in the intensification of climate change-related extreme weather events across the globe. The people and places that disproportionately suffer the impacts of these events and related disasters are those already experiencing intersecting forms of marginalisation and, consequently, heightened vulnerability (e.g., based on socio-economic, gender, and racial factors). Typically, those who bear the costs of climate change the most are also those who have contributed the least to its (re)production. This produces multiple and complex forms of injustices (Sheller, 2018; Sultana, 2022a).

This is the fundamental concern at the basis of this thesis, that is the urgency to critically analyse climate change related disasters and the injustices that characterise them. This urgency stems, on the one hand, from the increase in the frequency and intensity of climate change related extreme weather events (from now on, climatic events), and, on the other, the recognition of the injustice and violence that underlie them (Loperena 2017; Bonilla, 2020). A key concern is to critically analyse the ways dominant narratives and policy approaches to these issues have depoliticising and securitising effects, leaving issues of justice and structures of violence unaddressed (Andreucci & Zografos, 2022; Hartmann, 2010; Kothari, 2014; Mikulewicz, 2017).

In this context, a focus of the thesis is on adaptation and climate change (im)mobilities, since disrupting climatic events and the policies proposed to face their impacts affect people's mobilities. These mobilities are complex and diverse, and they can include, to mention a few, forced relocation, involuntary and voluntary immobility, evacuations, displacement. This is why, in this thesis, the term (im)mobilities is preferred to the more common climate migration, as the former better accounts for the complexity of the nexus between climate change impacts and human movement (Boas et al., 2019; Farbotko & McMichael, 2019; Klepp, 2017). More specifically, the focus of this thesis is on forced evacuation and forced prolonged displacement, understood as forms of temporary adaptation in the face of a climatic event that turned into a disaster. The distinction between a climatic event and a disaster is necessary to avoid the conflation between sudden, sometimes natural events, and disasters, which are instead understood as long-term processes, shaped by relations of power, and structures of violence and neglect that precede and follow the event (Bonilla, 2020;

Remes & Horowitz, 2021). Highlighting the inherently political character of disasters is necessary to avoid naturalising injustice.

In this context, the thesis' objective is to address the depoliticising effects of dominant discourses of climate change, particularly in relation to adaptation and (im)mobilities. To do so, I critically investigate how narratives and practices around key concepts (i.e., uninhabitability, disaster, resilience, and adaptation) are constructed and mobilised within hegemonic narratives and by dominant actors to advance their claims and agendas, and with what consequences. The research adopts a case-study approach and focuses on the Caribbean island of Barbuda in the aftermath of 2017 hurricane Irma. Barbuda is a small island, part of the twin-island state of Antigua and Barbuda, a former British colony that gained its independence in 1981. The day after Irma, Barbuda was declared uninhabitable by the central government and the Barbudan people were forcibly evacuated to Antigua and prevented from returning home for over a month after the hurricane. The analysis focuses on top-down post-Irma policies and narratives around disaster, uninhabitability, the evacuation, adaptation, and resilience, and on what effects they produced in terms of (in)justice. Parallely, the analysis focuses on bottom-up conceptualisation and perspectives around the same concepts, to highlight their contested and political character.

In doing so, the thesis contributes to critical adaptation, mobility, and disaster studies, as it advances nuanced and critical understandings of key conceptual categories such as uninhabitability and disaster, highlighting their performative uses in narratives and policies aimed at accumulation and control. In addition, it contributes to efforts in the above mentioned disciplines to counteract the depoliticising and naturalising effects of dominant discourses around and approaches to climate change, its impacts, and its governance, framing them instead as fundamentally issues of (in)justice.

1.1 Climate change depoliticisation

Climate change is fundamentally a political issue produced by and productive of injustices and inequities (Gardiner, 2011; Sultana, 2022a). However, it has effectively been depoliticised in hegemonic discourses. Critical literature in environmental and climate change studies has shown how the dominant apocalyptic imaginaries through which we think of climate change —made of disasters, climate refugees, and uninhabitable places— significantly contribute to the current post-political condition (Giacomelli, 2023; Hartmann,

2010; Swyngedouw, 2010; Seager, 2008). Hegemonic accounts of climate change present it as a fact of nature, often through sensationalist images and language, ignoring issues of responsibility and liability and instead repurposing old climate deterministic arguments (Hartmann, 2010, 2014; Seager 2008). If politics refers to the space for dissent, the questioning of established relations and structures of power, and the imagining of alternatives, the post-political (or de-political) condition is then one “characterised by the increasing evacuation of the proper political dimension from the public terrain as technocratic management and consensual policy-making has sutured the spaces of democratic politics” (Swyngedouw, 2010, p. 214). The consensual framing that characterises climate change policy-making erases the space for democratic dissensus and reduces it to a set of governmental and technocratic fixes. If “[t]he modernist subjection of political problems to rational management is a hallmark of post-politicisation” (Grove, 2015, p.175), one of the ways climate change is depoliticised is through the dominance of approaches that frame its various related issues (e.g., mobility, adaptation, mitigation) as problems to be managed via techno-managerial strategies. Mainstream approaches’ failure to understand climate change and related vulnerabilities as political, as issues of (in)justice, and as ingrained within larger structures of racio-colonial capitalism means that the underlying dynamics that produced and reproduce climate change, and differential vulnerabilities and responsibilities, remain uncontested.

The dominance of Western science and epistemologies is central to the depoliticisation of climate change (Kothari, 2014; Sultana, 2025). This knowledge, assumed to be politically neutral, is elevated to the terrain of politics and taken as the guarantee for properly designed policies. This eliminates the space of democratic dissensus and forges depoliticisation (Swyngedouw, 2010). Moreover, this dominance constitutes a form of epistemic violence (Sultana, 2025), since it works at the expense of non-western ways of knowing climate change and thinking of climate action. In addition, it contributes to reproducing climate injustice, because of its power in shaping policies, including the allocation of financial resources (Bordner et al., 2020; Sultana, 2025).

Critical climate adaptation literature has shown how dominant discourses and practices around the issue are particularly symptomatic of the post-political condition, and, in turn, a key site where the depoliticisation of climate change is forged (Grove, 2015; Mikulewicz,

2017, 2020). As an expression of the broader environmental post-political consensus, dominant approaches to adaptation ignore questions of power and political economy (Andreucci & Zografos, 2022) and legitimise specific forms of technocratic governance at the expense of transformative politics (Mikulewicz, 2020), which can make affected people and places more amenable to violence and control.

Indeed, by displacing the possibility of dissent, the post-political environmental consensus is reactionary (Swyngedouw, 2010), it advances agendas of securitisation, (Hartmann 2010, 2014; Gonzalez, 2020), and the extension of neoliberal capitalist relations (Andreucci & Zografos, 2022; Felli & Castree, 2012) predicated on racist and colonial logics of expendability (Pulido 2017; Rice et al., 2022; Sultana, 2022b).

Starting from these general considerations, the thesis critically analyses climatic disasters and adaptation discourses and practices. I analyse the case of Barbuda, a small island in the Caribbean, which, in 2017, was hit by category 5 hurricane Irma, leading the central government to declare it uninhabitable and to forcibly evacuate the whole population. In the aftermath of the hurricane, the narratives and policies mobilised around adaptation and disaster represented a fertile analytical ground to interrogate the depoliticisation of adaptation and the naturalisation of disasters. The analysis specifically focuses on evacuation and displacement, understood as types of temporary climate adaptation, to interrogate how the latter can be used to conceal violent practices aimed at dispossession and control. In light of the increasing pervasiveness of climate adaptation policies and their impacts on people and places, adopting a climate adaptation lens is conducive to a critical analysis of the ways the climate crisis and its governance can become tools to legitimise new forms of governmentality.

Climate (im)mobilities are another key discursive and policy site where the post-political can be observed in its various reactionary and securitising effects (Bettini 2013; Farbotko, 2010; Giacomelli & Cappi, 2025; Hartmann, 2010; Weatherill, 2023) and thus represent a fruitful entry point through which to observe how climate change and related disasters can be used as tools of dispossession and control. Dominant narratives on the nexus between climate change and human (im)mobilities reproduce the argument that climate change will lead to mass migration and displacement, as its impacts affect livelihoods and places' inhabitability. Despite having been disproved by academic research on climate

(im)mobilities (Arnall & Kothari, 2015; Farbotko, 2022; Farbotko & McMichael, 2019; Forte, 2021; Jamero et al., 2017; Wiegel et al., 2021), this mass migration theory and its securitising effects persist. “Depicted as an unavoidable fact, narrated with apocalyptic rhetoric of crisis, [climate migration] becomes a frightening looming threat” (Bettini, 2013). Predictions on climate change induced uninhabitability and mass displacement are elevated to the realm of the political and become matters of concern via a dominant discourse that is characterised by unavoidability and apocalyptic tones and that relies on racialised imaginary geographies that appeal to fear (Baldwin, 2013; Bettini 2013). Dominant narratives on climate change (im)mobilities and uninhabitability engage with deep seated fears of the other and become powerful tools to justify adaptation interventions that involve moving people from the places they inhabit.

Climate change migration and planned relocation have come to be framed, proposed and implemented as adaptation strategies, expertise-based solutions to a scientifically identified problem: presented as politically neutral and necessary, the policies proposed to adapt to uninhabitability are instead deeply political and contested. They involve important questions of power, for instance, around who can design and implement a relocation scheme; on the basis of what knowledge; with what consequences on the affected people in terms of justice and wellbeing; and with what outcomes for the place that is left uninhabited. Uninhabitability predictions and declarations are used to justify policies that affect people’s mobilities - often displacing them from their homes - and reconfigure land uses. The critical literature on climate change (im)mobilities has been demonstrating how adaptation narratives and policies that engage migration/relocation are often mobilised by governmental institutions in order to advance preexisting capital and state interests and how the people affected resist these top-down narratives and policies (Kothari, 2014; Van Voorst & Hellman, 2015; Barbosa & Coates, 2021).

Therefore, a central objective of this thesis is to analyse how the post-political dominant discourse on climate change (im)mobilities, disasters, and adaptation can contribute to and support the reproduction of the violent structures that underlie the problem in the first place, advancing old agendas of accumulation and control through dispossession. To address this research objective, I identify the following overarching research problem:

As extreme climatic events continue to intensify, so do the injustices they contribute to and the violence they can reinforce. Given this, the de-politicisation of climate change adaptation and the naturalisation of disasters become increasingly problematic, as they not only displace issues of justice, but also conceal violence. In this context, urgent questions arise on how climate uninhabitability, mobilities, and disasters are defined and mobilised in climate adaptation discourse and policies, and with what consequences for people and places.

Disasters are material and discursive political phenomena that lay bare and, at the same time, produce structures of power and violence. Thus, focusing on extreme weather events, which are typically framed as climate disasters, is conducive to a critical interrogation of the political dimension of climate adaptation. The passage of hurricane Irma over Barbuda and its immediate framing as a climate change disaster permits an analysis of how such framing influences the scope and direction of the adaptation policies and narratives proposed as appropriate and necessary. In this context, the post-hurricane uninhabitability declaration, the forced evacuation and displacement, and government sponsored legal reforms and development projects are understood through the lens of climate adaptation.

The choice to analyse the case of a top-down declaration of uninhabitability in the aftermath of an extreme weather event, that served as the basis for a mandatory evacuation, is a deliberate departure from dominant narratives that oversimplify the climate change-migration nexus and frame the former as a *natural* driver of the latter. These narratives naturalise and climatise displacement and injustice and hide the deeply political and contextual dynamics that are relevant to any discussion of climate change impacts and policies (Bettini et al., 2017; Mikulewicz, 2017). A focus on these types of forced (im)mobilities reveals the power dynamics that characterise climate change policy-making. In addition, the selected case-study was conducive to an interrogation of the possibility of a performative use of uninhabitability and (im)mobilities, as well as to an analysis of the multiple and contested meanings assigned to these concepts and material processes by multiple actors.

The thesis comprises three articles that together begin to respond to this overarching research problem. Each article identifies a separate research question focusing on different

aspects of the processes under analysis. Depending on the research questions, the articles adopt a more theoretical (article 1) or more empirical analytical approach (article 2 and 3). Together, they aim to provide a critical account of adaptation discourses and practices in the context of disasters and in relation to uninhabitability and mobilities, revealing their inherently political and contested nature, as well as the ways in which they can be performatively mobilised to advance agendas aimed at accumulation and control through dispossession.

The **first article** identifies uninhabitability as a key discursive element in narratives that contribute to the depoliticisation of climate change adaptation, and asks how uninhabitability is conceptualised and mobilised in the context of climate change discourses and policies, especially in relation to climate change (im)mobilities. The article presents a critical analysis of narratives that trace the concept's roots in colonial imaginary geographies and environmental determinism. It argues that, today, uninhabitability continues to be a key label in processes of othering and in the production of climate change imaginative geographies, which in turn act as technologies of government in the context of climate change.

The **second article** builds on the analysis of the first and empirically interrogates the contested character of climate change discourses and practices. It investigates how uninhabitability and disaster are differently conceptualised by distinct actors - on the one hand, the government, and on the other the people that directly experience a disaster and a place's (declared) uninhabitability - and how these different conceptualisations contribute to the weaving of narratives to advance distinct sets of interests. The article presents an empirical analysis of the case of Barbuda in the aftermath of 2017 hurricane Irma, when the island was declared uninhabitable by the central government and its population forcibly evacuated. The analysis focuses on the concepts of uninhabitability and disaster, and on the multiple and clashing meanings assigned to them by different sets of actors. The analysis finds that, contrary to dominant approaches, the concepts under scrutiny should be understood as having not only a material, but also an affective dimension, and they should fundamentally be approached as political categories with normative power, susceptible to performative uses aimed at control and dispossession.

The **third article** further delves into the performative use of adaptation and disasters to reveal that they can be used as governmentality tools to weave narratives and justify policies aimed at accumulation and control. The article focuses on tourism and disaster capitalism and presents a critical discourse analysis of post-Irma speeches by government officials and by the private companies involved in tourism development in Barbuda. The analysis is grounded in a critical historical overview of the unequal relations of power between Antigua and Barbuda and on the role of the tourism industry in the post-colonial period. This historical context is necessary to understand how disasters and adaptation provide new framings for the reproduction of long-standing structural violence. Specifically, the article proposes the trinomial tourism - disaster capitalism - neocolonialism to investigate the violence that post-political climate change narratives help to support in Barbuda.

Altogether, the three articles stress the urgent need to counteract dominant depoliticising approaches to the climate change-related issues under analysis, which risk enabling their instrumentalisation in the expansion of neoliberal colonial capitalism and state control. They present both theoretical and empirical analyses that complement each other to build an understanding of key concepts, their conceptual histories, and of the narratives they contribute to create, responding to the urge to advance critical knowledge by providing thick empirical research. The overarching conclusion across the analyses points to the need to re-politicise climate change adaptation by recognising its contested character. From such recognition follows the importance to approach climate adaptation in politically informed ways that do not reproduce structural violence and injustice but rather work to dismantle them. Approaches based on the right to self-determination are identified as one way to achieve repoliticisation, to resist violence, and to forge more just climate adaptation, (im)mobilities, disaster politics, and development politics.

1.2 Theoretical and conceptual framework

To understand and counteract the depoliticisation of climate change, it is crucial to identify discursive struggles (Weatherill, 2023), and to do so it is useful to map out “the relations between different concepts that enable actors to assert certain ‘truths’ about what climate change is, what problems it presents, and how these problems can be addressed” (Grove, 2015, p. 181). Uninhabitability is one of these concepts, since, as it was already mentioned, it is central to arguments on climate change migration and adaptation. The first

article presents an overview of concepts, definitions, and critical understandings of (un)inhabitability, which demonstrates the contested character of the label and its potential normative capacity to define policy making and orient adaptation strategies. Indeed, predictions of uninhabitability based on climate models are taken as proxies to predict large flows of climate migrants and to frame climate migration as a problem to be solved. Uninhabitability is a key conceptual category to the question of climate (im)mobilities and their depoliticisation and performative use, as it underlies the deterministic arguments that imbue the dominant discourse on climate change migration. Within this discourse, uninhabitability is often framed as an inevitable result of climate change impacts and, in turn, as a natural trigger of displacement in the future, or as reason for planning relocation/resettlements in the present.

Farbotkos and Campbell's (2022) critical analysis of the dominance of eurocentric scientific accounts of uninhabitability with a claim of neutrality and universality and their power to coalesce "into ostensible truths about the inevitable relocation of atoll people" was a crucial point of departure for the identification of uninhabitability as a key object of study as well as a key analytical category. Similarly, Forte's (2019) analysis on the uninhabitable spaces of flooding in the peripheries of Sao Paulo informed my understanding of uninhabitability as both performative and contested, and an emotional and relational concept. Forte builds on Simone's reflections (2016, 2018) on the "so-called uninhabitable" as a *different* form of urban life, rather than a depleted one (Simone, 2016, p.136), and she encourages to frame it "as the familiar and intimate" (Forte, 2021, p. 27) for those who inhabit it. Indeed, the research shows how climate adaptation policies that dismiss locations as uninhabitable can increase the vulnerability of local dwellers.

Critical research on the concept of vulnerability (Bankoff, 2001; Weatherill, 2023, 2025a) was also key in reconstructing (un)inhabitability conceptual histories, its colonial genealogy, and the role of narratives in enabling and justifying violence. Similar to vulnerability, the conceptual history of uninhabitability and disasters is rooted in colonial climate and environmental sciences and the deterministic arguments they produced to justify imperial projects and violence.

Similarly, drawing from critical disaster studies and particularly responding to the calls to adopt a historical perspective when employing the analytical lens of disaster capitalism

(Bonilla, 2020; Villanueva & Cobián, 2019), the thesis focuses on slow and structural forms of violence and neglect, and adopts an understanding of disasters as long term processes rather than sudden events. The analysis is therefore focused, on the one hand, on the historical processes of vulnerabilisation of Barbudan land and people, in order to avoid a decontextualised and depoliticised analysis of current climate change impacts and policies. On the other, it investigated how responses to climate change impacts, like that of hurricane Irma, can reinforce and reproduce conditions of and for disaster. A central interest, therefore, has been to understand how those responses, in particular displacement based on top-down assessments of uninhabitability, can increase the vulnerability of the local population and create conditions for dispossession. This double focus (on the historical roots of climate vulnerability and on the current dynamics that reinforce such vulnerability) was aimed at demonstrating how vulnerability to extreme weather events related to climate change is rooted in colonial histories and, at the same time, continues to be reproduced by colonial dynamics (Bonilla, 2020; Sheller, 2021; Sultana, 2024).

This need for a historical perspective also applied to the analysis of the role of the tourism industry in Barbuda, in the post-disaster context, in dynamics of disaster capitalism and colonialism, its relations with the state, and its use of climate-change related discourse. To understand these phenomena, an appreciation of the tourism industry's historical role in Antigua and Barbuda and its colonial capitalist character was necessary to build a nuanced analysis of its role after hurricane Irma.

Justice based approaches, particularly mobility and climate justice, were necessary to frame such depoliticised and naturalised issues - climate change impacts and, specifically, climate (im)mobilities, uninhabitability, and disasters - (Gardiner, 2011; Gonzalez, 2018, 2020; Heyward, 2014) in ways that allow us to reveal the inequalities and injustices that characterise the climate crisis and the ways that are proposed to manage it. Climate change is characterised as central in top-down and external narratives around displacement, disasters, and uninhabitability (Wiegel et al., 2021). This has the effect of climatising and naturalising these processes, erasing their political and justice dimensions. In bottom-up accounts, instead, climate change per se is not afforded the same value, while more context-specific, everyday and political issues, that intersect with climate change but are not entirely shaped by it, are prioritised and perceived as more urgent. Indeed, in the case of Barbuda climate change

narratives around displacement, uninhabitability, adaptation and resilience were performed by state and capital actors to advance their interests of realising a touristification and capitalisation of the land of the island. This is the view of many Barbudans, who articulate the experience of the disaster, the displacement, and the uninhabitability declaration as matters of injustice, and as largely shaped by political choices made by the government, rather than by the hurricane itself. Part of the local population, through civil society organisations and the Barbuda Council, has been resisting the narratives and practices that have emerged since hurricane Irma through various means, including legal action. Now reframed within the discourses of climate change adaptation and resilience, these practices and narratives represent a continuation of, rather than a break from, long-standing attitudes of Antiguan economic and political elites toward Barbuda, aimed at accumulation and control through dispossession. This confirms the need for a political and justice-based approach, grounded in historical and political contexts, to the study and governance of disasters, uninhabitability, and mobilities in the context of climate change.

1.3 Methodology

In light of the research topic and questions, and of the identified theoretical frameworks, the research adopted a qualitative approach. Ethnographic fieldwork research and critical discourse analysis (CDA) have been the two methodological strategies employed to answer the research question.

Fieldwork

Fieldwork and the selected methodological strategies were identified as appropriate in response to the need to centre the perspectives and experiences of those directly impacted by climate change and related policies, which are often marginalised in dominant approaches (Arnall & Kothari, 2015). This focus was aimed at developing a more complex understanding of disasters, (im)mobilities, and uninhabitability and to counteract dominant top-down narratives (Horton et al., 2021; Sterly et al., 2025). The latter, as discussed in the theoretical introduction, tend to depoliticise and simplify the relation between climate change and (im)mobilities, overlooking a more nuanced understanding and hindering adequate policy design.

Access to fieldwork was priorly ensured by reaching out to several public figures in Barbuda. Despite not managing to get in touch with everyone I had contacted beforehand, I was able to connect with some key representatives of the community before arrival (i.e., an academic, an environmental activist, and a member of the Barbuda Council). Once there, these contacts served as the starting point to get introduced to more people in the community, to attend community meetings where I was able to introduce myself, the research project, and organise the first interviews. As time went by, and given the small size of the island and of the community, I was able to meet people autonomously, engaging in informal conversations and organising interviews.

The fieldwork consisted of two different research stays in Barbuda: between April and June 2024 and between March and May 2025. Methodologically, it included a mix of ethnographic methods combining semi-structured interviews (n. 30), numerous informal conversations, and participant observation in community meetings and at the 2024 United Nations Small Island Developing States (SIDS) Conference, held in Antigua in May 2024. The two fieldwork periods also afforded me the possibility to observe, through the guidance of research participants, the impacts on Barbuda of phenomena related both to climate change (e.g., beach erosion and the aftermaths of Irma), and the post-Irma development projects directed at catering tourism and the real estate industries (e.g., mining, waste management, enclosure, spatial segregation). Interviews and informal conversations were aimed at building an understanding of people's experience and relation with their environment, and also their experience and understanding of climate change impacts, disasters, uninhabitability, and tourism development (Dowling et al., 2016). The analysis of the information gathered during fieldwork allowed to identify discourses and practices of the local population in relation to climate-induced relocation, uninhabitability, the hurricane, the disaster, and post-hurricane responses. The interviews and the processing of the data were conducted in accordance with the University of Trento's ethical guidelines, which are detailed in each article that employs interview materials (articles 2 and 3). An annex at the end of the thesis collects the anonymised interviews' transcripts.

Critical Discourse Analysis

CDA (Fairclough, 2013) supported the identification of official narratives and definitions of uninhabitability, disaster, and climate change (im)mobilities, and was used to investigate their instrumental use in the post-disaster context to advance elite interests.

The term discourse is understood as referring to “a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorisations that are produced [...] in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities” (Hajer 1997, p. 44, as cited in Oels, 2012). It is thus understood as a form of social practice which is both produced by and productive of other social practices (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). This perspective implies that i) meaning is not inherent in concepts but is instead socially constructed, ii) dominant discourses are solidified through relations of power (Grove, 2015, p. 182), and thus that iii) discourses are context-specific and “always embod[y] wider struggles within society” (Ibid, p. 181).

CDA was deemed well suited to answer part of this project’s research questions, which aim to understand how multiple and contested meanings around concepts such as disaster, uninhabitability, and climate (im)mobilities are constructed and come into play in the weaving of climate change narratives. CDA as “an analytical practice” was used in this thesis to uncover “the way social-power abuse and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimated, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context.” (Van Dijk, 2015, p. 466). CDA allows us to answer questions such as “how is the [speech] positioned or positioning? Whose interests are served by this positioning? Whose interests are negated? What are the consequences of this positioning?” (Janks, 1997, p. 329). These are all crucial questions to understand the discourses and practices that emerge in relation to disaster, uninhabitability, (im)mobilities, and adaptation.

The materials included in the analysis consisted of: institutional and governmental speeches (n. 10); articles in local media outlets (n. 9); documents and declarations (website pages, pamphlets) of the three main companies undertaking tourism development in Barbuda (Peace Love and Happiness, Land Discovery Company, and Deborah Brosnan & Associates); and pertinent pieces of Antiguan and Barbudan law. The selection of texts and speeches by state and corporate actors is These materials were analysed qualitatively and manually focusing on the mobilisation of relevant concepts (table n.1) taking into account the context and the framing within which they were used . The analytical categories were identified both

deductively, drawing from the literature and theoretical framework, and inductively, as they emerged recurrently, especially during interviews, in ways that were relevant to the research question. The materials under analysis refer to the period going from September 2017 to September 2018, which covers the phase between the passage of Irma and the return of the majority of Barbudans to their homes. Few exceptions to this temporal framing are included in the analysis of the historical context and when considered relevant to contextualise post-hurricane discourse.

uninhabitability	How is uninhabitability defined and conceptualised? Why was the island declared uninhabitable? How did participants perceive the uninhabitability declaration? Uninhabitable for whom?
access	How has access to place, community, and agency been impacted by the response to the hurricane and the post-hurricane developments?
development	How is development conceptualised?
mobility (evacuation and displacement)	How were the post-hurricane mobilities framed and experienced?
disaster	How is disaster conceptualised? What makes a disaster? Disaster for whom?
climate adaptation/resilience	How are adaptation and resilience defined and conceptualised?
culture and collective identities	How has the sense of culture and collective identities been impacted by the response to the hurricane and the post-hurricane developments?

Table n.1: the key concepts that led the analysis and the guiding questions around each.

Epistemological and ethical considerations

The concepts investigated in this research and taken as analytical categories (such as displacement, disaster, and uninhabitability) are all understood as socially constructed and sites of contestation among different actors. Epistemologically, this translates into an interpretivist approach, aimed at understanding meaning-making processes, experiences and behaviors, and possible performative uses around these conceptual categories.

Describing something as a disaster, a place as uninhabitable, and somebody as a climate refugee implies an act of interpretation (Remes & Horowitz, 2021). Acts of interpretation not only give meaning to reality but also shape it materially, as they define the scope of actions imaginable and deemed possible, implementable, appropriate or necessary. Emerging dominant interpretations of concepts, indeed, acquire a hegemonic character and imply the marginalisation of other interpretations. This strongly relates to the construction of narratives, of which hegemonic definitions of concepts are a key component. Narratives, in this framework, can be understood as discursive tools mobilised by different actors to make claims and advance agendas, which are also articulated around contestation and negotiations, resulting in the predominance of certain narratives over others. Understanding concepts as sites of multiple and contested meanings brings to the fore the centrality of context and power. The analysis of Barbuda's local context and ecologies of power, including their histories, was central to understanding the process of construction and the use of concepts' meanings and interpretations, likewise the way in which the latter shaped material outcomes.

The tensions concerning my position as a European researcher engaging in conversations around sensitive and often traumatic topics with the people directly involved for the sake of my own research, had been clear to me since deciding to conduct fieldwork and travelling to Barbuda, and they became ever more felt and clear once I started my work on the island.

During a conversation, I explained what I was doing on the island to a Barbudan resident who then told me: "you should come in September and you will understand". This statement, referring to the possibility of being (or not) on the island in September, which is the peak of the hurricane season, starkly reveals the mobility (in)justice made evident and reproduced by my own presence in Barbuda, and highlights how "it is the very existence of privilege that allows the research to be undertaken" (Patai 1991, p. 137, as cited in Boer

Cueva et al., 2024, p.15). I had considered, while organising my fieldwork, whether to travel to Barbuda during the hurricane period, but the idea of consciously travelling there at a time when numerous Barbudans, who have the possibility to do so, chose instead to temporarily leave, seemed even more absurd.

On another occasion, towards the end of an interview, the person I was speaking with plainly stated that while the topics we had been discussing were for me only academic research, for him they were his life and that of his children. Although I would argue that my interest in the processes occurring in Barbuda is deeply political rather than a purely academic exercise, I cannot but agree with this observation. While, in other instances, I have been recognised as an ally in the struggle for self-determination and my work has been praised as important for bringing attention to the cause of the Barbudan people against disaster colonialism, this does not remove the fact that by engaging in fieldwork, “[w]e remain nonetheless complicit, through our participation and the benefits we gain” in terms of academic achievements (Boer Cueva et al., 2024, p.16).

Indeed, the interactions described above reveal the paradoxes (Jaju, 2026) of fieldwork, understood as unavoidably a colonial enterprise (Boer Cueva et al., 2024). Recognizing and embracing the tensions produced by my own presence in Barbuda, I engaged in practices aimed at counteracting the risks of extractivism in my research, or at least at limiting them. I aimed to work towards a care-full research practice based on trust, mutual respect, reciprocity, and humility (Boer Cueva et al., 2024; Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). I approached the interviews as moments of learning rather than discovering, and interviewees as experts (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021) on the topics of research. To avoid risks of extractivism, I had also envisioned a research design that included avenues for a reiterated exchange of research output and feedback from participants; this soon revealed itself to be inappropriate, simply because it would have meant asking too much from research participants, and I failed to identify and implement other practices that could have fostered knowledge coproduction. I resisted, more or less successfully, the temptations of directing interviews in ways that would lead to “good” answers to be turned into perfect quotations, and instead let the people I was speaking with direct the dialogical exchange. I engaged in these practices consciously, to avoid reproducing violent fieldwork practices, and also largely spontaneously. They stemmed from a genuine gratitude and respect to the people that were

kind enough to engage with me in conversations, dedicating a part of their day to my research. In some ways, I acted as the “suppliant researcher” because I was aware that the interviewees’ knowledge was greater than mine (England, 1994). Most importantly, people were sharing their time, energy, and knowledge, sometimes having to revoke traumatic experiences and I could only be grateful for such generosity. Indeed, in most instances, my perception was that the people I was interviewing, for whom it was not the first time being interviewed about Irma and its aftermath, approached the interviews as moments where they were kindly sharing their knowledge with me, a young and inexperienced researcher.

The positionality statement above is indeed not intended to mark my position of power with respect to the supposedly disempowered Barbudans, between invulnerable researcher and vulnerable research participants (Gani & Khan, 2024). It does not aim to be a validity method, a disclaimer (Gani & Khan, 2024) or an unhappy confession of privilege (Lockard, 2016). It is aimed at addressing, rather than ignoring, how my decision to travel to Barbuda and conduct fieldwork is problematic and potentially extractivist, something that was, as outlined above, made explicit by the people that took part in the research, on more than one occasion.

Throughout the research, I felt that my feminist commitment to produce a research output that could be useful to the people of Barbuda was arrogant and entitled (Boer Cueva et al., 2024). How could my academic articles be of any use to the struggle of Barbudans against disaster capitalism, extractive tourism development, and for self-determination? In some ways, I hope they can be, insofar as thesis and its dissemination can bring greater visibility to the struggle of Barbudans against the violence of disaster and colonial capitalism, and its analytical work can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how this violence operates, is concealed, and is justified, so that it can be more effectively recognised and resisted. On the other hand, I recognise that an academic output as this thesis adds very little to the knowledge and tools of a people that has engaged in their struggle for so long and knows it better than anyone else. Therefore, whether this fieldwork was necessary remains debatable. I could have designed the research differently, identified research questions that could have been answered without travelling to Barbuda and bothering people with my questions, and I could have said no to fieldwork (Boer Cueva et al., 2024; Weatherill, 2025b). I identified the need for bottom-up perspectives to be at the centre of research on climate

change impacts and governance and indeed the exchanges that took place during fieldwork allowed the emergence of perspectives that would have not emerged otherwise, shaping my perspective and the conclusions I reached, which I hope is something that I managed to communicate effectively in the articles that compose this thesis.

Another tension that came to the surface early on during fieldwork was that of my own partiality with respect to the processes I was there to investigate. I arrived with my own ideas about the evacuation, the disaster, the government's adaptation policies, and their performative and instrumental character. These ideas had obviously taken shape while reading about Barbuda and listening to local activists and advocates on their respective platforms, and were shaped by my own political values. I had been in touch with some activists beforehand and they were my first contacts once on the island. In small communities, political and personal sympathies and animosities have a great influence on daily life, and as an external presence I came to be associated with a certain part of the community. While this did not prevent me from socialising and having informal conversations with people with an array of different political views, it did mean that those whose political opinions clashed with those of the people I was associated with were reluctant to participate in the research or declined to do so. This was predictable and somewhat inevitable given how small the community is. However, despite it in some ways constituting a bias in the group of research participants, it could also be considered a research result in itself. It highlights how disasters and their exploitation to advance neoliberal development can have divisive effects on communities. Some in Barbuda understand the narratives and policies around the hurricane and climate change as parts of an agenda to advance top-down neoliberal development, which they recognise as a form of violence, of "destructive development" (fieldnotes), and an attack on the community's culture, identity, and self-determination. However, others, despite being a minority, hold an understanding of development and progress that aligns with neoliberal values and sometimes dismiss the common land tenure system as something from the past that Barbudans should let go of. This shows the pervasiveness and effectiveness of neoliberal discourses on development and modernization, to which disasters and climate change provide yet another source of legitimacy.

Why Barbuda as a case study?

Barbuda was selected as a case study first and foremost because, as we shall see in the section dedicated to the framing of the context, it was subjected to a top-down declaration of uninhabitability that justified a mandatory evacuation and a prolonged forced displacement. Secondly, during the case study selection, there were already in Barbuda allegations of disaster capitalism made by local activists and politicians, as well as by some commentators, and this created the possibility to analyse an ongoing struggle over the meanings of narratives and policies around uninhabitability, disaster, (im)mobilities, and adaptation. The issue of the common land tenure system being threatened by narratives and policies constructed around concepts of climate change adaptation and resilience made it a relevant case among many possible ones, to interrogate the performative use of narratives around climate change, and the use of uninhabitability, (im)mobilities, and disasters as normative tools to advance state control and capital accumulation.

In addition, Barbuda is a small and flat island, falling within one of the geographical categories most often predicted to become uninhabitable and source of climate displacement. While this made the mobilisation of tropes of climate refugee, uninhabitability, and of an extinction narrative in the aftermath of hurricane Irma immediately available, it also meant that there was a research opportunity to investigate bottom-up perception of climate threats and in particular of uninhabitability.

A final reason to select Barbuda, an appropriate case study for the identified research problem, was its history and the possibility to investigate the legacies of colonialism and the persistence of colonial relations of power both within the nation state and between the latter and both new and old colonial centres. This was relevant to the study of the colonial dimension of climate change, disaster, and tourism development policies.

1.4 Contextualisation of the case-study

This section presents the context of the case study and it refers to empirical material gathered during the research in order to present some key historical considerations and current aspects of the situation in Barbuda, specifically regarding the land tenure system and the unfolding of the disaster and adaptation policies post 2017 Hurricane Irma.

Barbuda is located between the Caribbean sea and the Atlantic Ocean, and it is part of the twin-island state of Antigua and Barbuda, which gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1981. During British colonisation, Barbuda was leased by the British Crown to

the Codringtons, a family of plantation and slave owners, for one fat sheep per year (Coram, 1993). Due to its specific geomorphological characteristics, it could not be used for intensive agriculture typical of the plantation system and was instead used as a provision ground for the Codringtons' Antiguan estates. (Berleant-Schiller et al., 1995). Enslaved people in Barbuda, therefore, did not work in plantations, but performed specialised labour in a number of different sectors, including woodworking, raising cattle, collecting salt, burning charcoal, and small-scale agriculture (Berleant-Schiller et al., 1995; fieldnotes).

After emancipation in 1834, the Codringtons left the island, and as Barbudans put it today, they were left to fend for themselves (fieldnotes). In this context, they implemented a common land tenure system, which became constitutive of Barbudan culture, deepening the cultural and socio-economic differences between the two islands that already stemmed from the presence in Antigua and absence in Barbuda of a plantation system.

As is typical in former colonies, Barbuda and Antigua came to be joined into the single nation state that exists today, despite these significant institutional and cultural differences, because of colonial interests. Indeed, through two successive pieces of legislation, the Barbuda Extension of Laws of Antigua Act (1860) and the Barbudan Ordinance (1904) the British started to administratively link Barbuda to Antigua, with a view to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of colonial control in the region (fieldnotes; Lightfoot, 2020). With the entry into force of the 1967 West Indies Act, Antigua became an associate state of the United Kingdom, with Barbuda listed as a dependency. In 1976, the Barbuda Local Government Act established the Barbuda Council and provided a considerable degree of self-government to the island. With independence from British colonial rule in 1981, Antigua and Barbuda became a single nation state, despite the rising tensions between Antiguan elites, seeking to gain economic control via touristification over Barbuda, and the Barbudan people, who claimed independence and autonomy in the management of the island. As detailed in article 3, in the years leading up to independence, Barbudans repeatedly expressed their refusal for a unitary independent state, as they knew that being merged to Antigua would entail marginalisation and attacks on their common land tenure system and, thus, to their cultural and economic survival (Jobson, 2024). Indeed, since independence, Barbuda has been placed in a relation of dependence to Antigua (Weaver, 1988).

The specificity of Barbuda's colonial history will prove key to understanding the events that followed the passage of hurricane Irma on the island. On the one hand, Barbuda did not experience the typical transition from a plantation to a tourism economy, which characterized most islands in the Caribbean region, including Antigua. On the other hand, Barbudans were able to maintain a land management structure which prevented the land from being sold to external investors for big development projects.

This asymmetric relations of power between Antigua and Barbuda and the vulnerability of Barbuda's exceptionalism appeared clear in the context of the intensification of climate change impacts in the region, and specifically in the aftermath of hurricane Irma and the disaster that unfolded. As I analyse more in detail in the articles, the emergency framing of the "disaster" materialized the opportunity to attack Barbuda's exceptionalism and to advance processes of disaster capitalism and the alignment of the island to the rest of the region.

1.5 Articles' abstracts and interconnections

Article 1: Labelling the Uninhabitable: Imaginative Geographies of climate change

The article presents a critical review of the concept of (un)inhabitability as a key category in the production of imaginative geographies that act as technologies of government in the context of climate change. Through an analysis of the concept's current currency, read as necessarily connected to its past conceptual history, two principal dynamics are identified, whereby the uninhabitable is mobilized in narratives on climate change and (im)mobilities. While one is framed in the future-conditional, and the other in the present tense, both work to manage western fears and to control othered places and people. We propose a critical geography of (un)inhabitability that exposes the spatial and othering logics beyond a naturalized and depoliticized concept. This is paramount to counter (un)inhabitability narratives that, when presented as inevitable, foster inaction at best, or justify violent and dispossessing practices at worst, under the guise of neutral climate action or adaptation.

Article 2: Making places uninhabitable: disaster, governance, and the politics of (un)inhabitability in Barbuda

The article aims at critically analysing how uninhabitability and disaster, as ideas and material processes, are conceptualised in climate change discourses and practices, particularly in relation to human (im)mobilities. The article constructs an analytical and conceptual

framework drawing from critical climate (im)mobilities and disaster studies, and presents an empirical analysis of the consequences of Barbuda's declaration of uninhabitability in the aftermath of 2017 hurricane Irma. The analysis focuses on bottom-up perspectives and lived experiences, and on locally defined relations of power, to highlight disaster and uninhabitability as contested signifiers and modes of governance. The empirical analysis adopts a qualitative methodological approach, which includes interviews with Barbudans and participant observation. This is complemented by a critical analysis of top-down uninhabitability and disaster narratives mobilised by the central government. The analysis suggests that uninhabitability and disaster should be understood as having not only a material but also an affective dimension, and, crucially, as political categories with normative power. The article contributes to the critical literature on climate change (im)mobilities and disasters, and specifically on the key category of uninhabitability. By demonstrating the inherently political character of disaster and uninhabitability, the article calls for critical attention to be paid to their performative uses to advance neoliberal agendas. Disasters, uninhabitability, and mobilities in the context of climate change need to be approached as political and contested issues. Practices in climate change adaptation should take account of this political and contested character rather than ignore it, so that more just and effective climate adaptation strategies and policies can be imagined and implemented.

Article 3: *"Bringing Barbuda into the 21st Century": Tourism, Disaster Capitalism, and Colonial Violence in Post-Irma Barbuda*

The article focuses on the multiple lines that connect tourism, disaster capitalism, and colonialism and its enduring legacies, and argues that climate (im)mobilities and uninhabitability are increasingly relevant to the progression of these intersecting phenomena. Analysing the case of Barbuda in the aftermath of hurricane Irma's passage, the article presents a critical discourse analysis of government and private companies' speeches throughout the unfolding of the disaster. The study is grounded in a critical historical overview of tourism in Antigua and Barbuda. The conceptual framework draws from critical disaster studies and critical tourism studies to argue that post-political climate change narratives and practices provide new force to the trinomial tourism - disaster capitalism - colonialism. While these processes are not completely new, a focus on climate (im)mobilities and uninhabitability, adaptation and resilience, reveals their instrumental use in advancing

neoliberal tourism. The article calls for a politicization of climate change practices and narratives, and an approach to tourism development centered around self-determination as a possible avenue to resist the violence inherent to extractivist tourism.

As extreme climatic events continue to intensify, so do the injustices they contribute to and the violence they can reinforce. Given this, the de-politicisation of climate change adaptation and the naturalisation of disasters become increasingly problematic, as they not only displace issues of justice, but they also conceal violence. In this context, urgent questions arise on how climate uninhabitability, mobilities, and disasters are defined and mobilised in climate adaptation discourse and policies, and with what consequences for people and places.

The three articles and the respective analyses together address the identified research problem by providing a complex picture of the ways climate change-related discourse and policies are depoliticised and the consequences such depoliticisation has on people and places in terms of control and accumulation via exploitation and dispossession, which in turn leave them more vulnerable to climate change impacts, rather than more resilient, reproducing injustice and violence. Uninhabitability, disasters, and forced (im)mobilities in this context are framed as natural and neutral and used to conceal and justify violence. The empirical and theoretical research of this thesis clearly shows how they are instead deeply political and contested issues, intimately linked to locally defined unequal relations of power and structures of violence; and how their depoliticisation serves to reinforce such structures rather than contest them. Re-politicising climate change adaptation, both discursively and in policy-making, entails refusing dominant top-down managerial approaches and forging ones that structurally include the possibility of dissent so that other, potentially more just, visions for adaptation and a future marked by climate change impacts can be imagined and implemented.

1.6 Conclusions: limitations, further research, and contribution

Concerning the limits of the research, the theoretical framework would have benefitted from a deeper and more extensive engagement with approaches that have only tangentially informed it, and with the inclusion of perspectives that were excluded from the analysis. This is an important limitation of the research attributable to time and energy constraints. Future

research could redress the limitation of the current design, and include a closer engagement with feminist perspectives on environmental and climate injustice, as well as with dispossession and accumulation. A gender perspective is also lacking in the thesis. This represents a limit of the research, as climate impacts and injustice disproportionately affect women, children, and gender non conforming people, as does the violence of the tourism industry. Moreover, the colonial imaginative geographies of the island paradise, which are discussed both in article 1 and 3, are deeply informed by gendered and sexualised narratives of the people, especially the women, inhabiting these islands, which makes the inclusion of gender into the analysis particularly relevant. Future research should include a gendered perspective to the analysis of these processes in order to enrich the current research design.

Another significant limitation of the thesis is the lack of a more appropriate engagement with Caribbean scholarship, something which I tried to engage with but still failed to do extensively. This reveals how epistemological biases are hard to address even when one is aware of them. Future work should better address these biases and demonstrate a stronger engagement with perspectives necessary for an analysis of the violence of tourism and climate change not only, but especially in the Caribbean.

Further possible research on the interrelated topics addressed in this thesis and that could apply a similar theoretical framework are multiple. Several research outputs have been envisioned throughout the research that could not be realised due to time and energy constraints, although they could be pursued in future research. For instance, it would be relevant to investigate the impacts of top-down extractive tourism development on inhabitability. The touristification of places has significant impacts on local environments, it can degrade natural resources, cause pollution, affect access to livelihoods, resources, and places and, therefore has impacts on the ability of a place to sustain the dignified and healthy lives of its inhabitants. Moreover, tourism development can compound the impacts of climate change such as coastal erosion and loss of wildlife. A further line of research could therefore be the interaction between climate change impacts and tourism development. The interaction between climate change and tourism could also be addressed in terms of spatial segregation, which is a typical product of tourism development. In an era of intensifying climate change impacts, this could entail that locals, displaced by the tourism industry, could be forced to move to locations more exposed to those impacts, which would raise issues of climate and

mobility justice. These topics could be further explored in the case of Barbuda, as well as elsewhere. In Barbuda, further ethnographic work focused on forms of resistance and contestation around climate adaptation and development could advance the understanding of local climate and development politics, producing knowledge that could potentially be useful to local struggles for self-determination and climate justice.

The thesis responded to the urgency to critically analyse climate change related disasters and the injustices and the violence that underlies them. In doing so, the thesis focused on dominant narratives and policy approaches revealing the violent effects their depoliticisation enables, particularly by creating the opportunity for their instrumental use in advancing neoliberal colonial capitalism and state control. The analyses in this dissertation lie at the intersection of critical disaster studies, critical mobility studies, and critical adaptation studies that forward a nuanced understanding of ubiquitous current processes, like disasters, human (im)mobilities, and climate change, aimed at counteracting dominant depoliticised accounts and their violent and unjust effects.

The theoretical contributions this dissertation brings to this multidisciplinary debate are multifold. The thesis advances the conceptualisation of disasters and climate governmentality, highlighting how the governance of climate change related disasters can be an instrument to conceal violence aimed at control and dispossession. While this reiterates a point already made in critical disaster studies and critical adaptation studies, the thesis' analysis of uninhabitability as a key discursive tool in the production of violent climate change imaginary geographies and policy-making is its most original contribution. In addition, this focus on uninhabitability contributes to a critical perspective on the nexus between climate change and human mobilities, by analysing the multiple forms of violence that are reproduced in the process of labelling a place as uninhabitable. These theoretical contributions are supported by - and support - a thorough empirical analysis of the Barbudan case, which, grounded in fieldwork and critical discourse analysis, contributes to the existing literature and debate specific to the experience of the island and its people post-Irma. Overall, the arguments of this thesis contribute to curtailing the depoliticisation of climate action and the naturalisation of climate and mobility injustice.

The overarching conclusion of this dissertation points to the need to fundamentally approach all the issues under analysis as matters of (in)justice, so as to recognise the violence

that underwrites dominant climate change discourse and policy, including its current depoliticised managerial governance approach, and to contest and dismantle the flawed structures of power that shape it. This, in synthesis, amounts to a call for a re-politicisation of climate change, of disasters, of the relation between places and their inhabitants, and of development policies which shape (un)inhabitability. In practice, this would entail creating the conditions for those whose voices matter to lead efforts and co-produce knowledge in climate change adaptation, disaster management, and tourism development. Those whose voices matter are those who *inhabit* places, and therefore experience the impacts of climate change, disaster management, adaptation policies, and of tourism and other kinds of "development".

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2. Article 1

Labelling the Uninhabitable: Imaginative Geographies of Climate Change

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Abstract

The article presents a critical review of the concept of (un)inhabitability as a key category in the production of imaginative geographies that act as technologies of government in the context of climate change. Through an analysis of the concept's current currency, read as necessarily connected to its past conceptual history, two principal dynamics identified, whereby the uninhabitable is mobilized in narratives on climate change and (im)mobilities. While one is framed in the future-conditional, and the other in the present tense, both work to manage western fears and to control othered places and people. We propose a critical geography of (un)inhabitability that exposes the spatial and othering logics beyond a naturalized and depoliticized concept. This is paramount to counter (un)inhabitability narratives that, when presented as inevitable, foster inaction at best, or justify violent and dispossessing practices at worst, under the guise of neutral climate action or adaptation.

2.1 Introduction

The threat of uninhabitability imbues climate change discourses, especially in relation to climate migration. Climate science, the media, academia, and institutions reproduce the argument that some places are inevitably becoming uninhabitable due to climate change and this will cause mass migration and, as a consequence, security issues and political instability (Pörtner et al., 2019; Stern, 2007; Storlazzi et al., 2015; 2018). In light of the centrality the category of uninhabitability holds in climate change narratives and practices, growing academic interest is devoted to understanding how the concept is defined, by whom, and with what consequences (Farbotko & Campbell, 2022; Forte, 2021; Horton et al., 2021; Jamero et al., 2017; Janoth et al., 2024; Sterly et al., 2025; Weatherill, 2023). This article contributes to the debate by discussing uninhabitability as a normative category rooted in and reproducing unequal and colonial relations of power, which bolster securitizing and often violent practices of dispossession and forced mobilities.

Indeed, certain geographical locations across the globe are disproportionately described as uninhabitable or soon to be so. Similarly to what happens in narratives of climate vulnerability and insecurity, the discursive production of uninhabitability “draws upon and reinforces orientalist images of the other as both in danger and potentially dangerous” (Andreucci & Zografos, 2022, p.5). We argue that, likewise the imaginative geographies of climate (in)security (Chaturvedi & Doyle, 2015), (un)inhabitability narratives find their roots within colonial geographical imagination and relations of power (Fleetwood, 2023). A critical focus on the use of these narratives in climate change discourses unmasks how the concept functions to control “Southern” places and bodies, reassuring “Northern” fears, with climate change as the discursive legitimization of this renewed form of colonial labeling of places and people (Farbotko, 2010; Farbotko & Campbell, 2022). The governance of climate change mobilizes concepts such as disaster, disruption, vulnerability, and uninhabitability, which compose a discursive apparatus with othering effects, and which may enable political interventions that advance capital and state interests, under the veil of mitigation or adaptation practices (Kothari, 2014; Paprocki 2019). This is facilitated by the depoliticization of climate action that, under the guise of global governance, flattens power relations and spatial asymmetries.

Rather than considering uninhabitability as an objective condition resulting from environmental change, we approach it as a contested political category through which places and populations are classified, governed, and valued. This perspective shifts attention from whether places are objectively becoming uninhabitable to how uninhabitability is defined, by whom, and with what political consequences.

The article presents an analysis grounded in critical literatures that more or less directly address the issue of uninhabitability, including political geography (Simone 2016; Verhoeven, 2014), climate mobilities studies (Farbotko & Campbell, 2022; Wiegel et al., 2021), vulnerability and disaster studies (Bankoff 2001; Weatherill 2023). We identify two main dynamics that mobilize the uninhabitable in the discursive context of climate change. The first employs this narrative to complement the idea of “climate collapse” and to convey a sense of catastrophe in order to advocate for climate action, while contributing to securitizing the issue of climate migration (Bettini et al., 2017; Farbotko, 2010; Hartmann, 2010). The second resorts to the uninhabitability trope to justify relocations, evictions, and other types of forced mobilities, disguising them as depoliticized and consensual climate adaptation strategies, while often advancing pro-corporate land exploitation (Kothari, 2014; Van Voorst & Hellman, 2015; Barbosa & Coates, 2021). Uninhabitability is understood here as a key labelling act in processes of othering and in the production of imaginative geographies, which in turn work as technologies of government in the context of climate change. To advance a critical geography of (un)inhabitability¹, we unveil the political character of the uninhabitability label, presenting an analysis of its current currency, understood as necessarily connected to its past conceptual history with roots in colonial climate science and imperial geographical imagination.

The article contributes to the identification and analysis of climate change discourses through a focus on the ways climate change is defined and mobilized, enabling certain actors to frame the issue and the relative solutions (Grove, 2015). We start by introducing the definitional debate around the category of uninhabitability in the context of climate change, pointing to its contested character and to the frequent clash between top-down estimations

¹ In conceptualizing a critical geography of uninhabitability we were inspired by a paper discussing the same move in relation to resettlement (Rogers and Wilmsen, 2020). We found the authors’ theoretical and analytical proposal particularly fruitful to engage critically with (un)inhabitability and to unveil its political and normative nature.

and bottom-up experiences and visions of the (un)inhabitable. The shortcomings of most assessments and predictions of present and future uninhabitability, which we discuss in detail, have not limited the success of the label and its normative power in relation to processes of relocation, repurpose and adaptation. Therefore, we interrogate the appeal of the uninhabitability narrative in crisis discourses and how it engages with western fears and reproduces othering processes, reinforced by the apparently neutral and apolitical character of climate science and actions aimed at the management of the environmental crisis. A historical genealogy of the labeling of places as uninhabitable reveals the colonial foundation of the concept and highlights continuities between past and present processes of land categorization as a technology of government. We then outline the two dynamics through which the concept is mobilized in the context of climate change, the catastrophic/securitizing logic, and the adaptation logic. The advancement of a critical geography of (un)inhabitability is presented as a necessary step to counter narratives that, when presented as inevitable, foster inaction at best or justify violent and dispossessing practices at worst, under the guise of neutral climate action or adaptation.

2.2 Uninhabitability as a Contested Category

2.2.1 Defining Habitability beyond Material Conditions

Most climate models that aim at forecasting the future uninhabitability of certain geographical locations define it, either explicitly or implicitly, as composed of strictly material elements (Horton et al., 2021; Storlazzi et al., 2015; 2018). The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), for instance, presents habitability as “the ability of a place to support human life by providing protection from hazards which challenge human survival, and by assuring adequate space, food and freshwater” (Pörtner et al., 2019, p.688). In a well cited article, Storlazzi et al., while not providing an explicit definition, forecast atolls’ uninhabitability based on a prediction of “loss of freshwater resources and the increased frequency of impacts to infrastructure” (2018, p.6), thus only engaging with its material components.

An alternative definition is provided by Horton et al., who argue that top-down approaches dominant in climate models pursue generalizability and comparability, neglecting bottom-up and place-specific perspectives. However, the latter are key in successfully predicting uninhabitability tipping points, and the inclusion or neglect of such perspectives

can lead to vastly different policy recommendations, with significant consequences for affected places and people. The authors call for the combination of top-down, quantitative methodologies and bottom-up, qualitative ones, since climate models “must be validated with on-the-ground local research” (2021, p.1282) and predictions of uninhabitability must include data on how affected people *themselves* define habitability. This mixed methodological approach is necessary to foster a more sophisticated understanding of climate (im)mobilities and to avoid climate determinism.

The complexity of uninhabitability definitions and the need to systematically include bottom-up perspectives are also recognized by the HABITABLE Project² and its working definition, which comprises both material and immaterial properties of place and explicitly includes a subjective component (Gemenne et al., 2021). In another recent contribution, Sterly et al., conceptualize “habitability as the emergent property or quality of the relation between people and a place that provides individuals and communities with the capabilities to pursue and sustain healthy, meaningful, and dignified lives” (2025, p.2). Despite its broad character, this definition importantly acknowledges the relational nature of habitability, rather than viewing it as a standalone characteristic of place, and extends its scope from mere “sustaining” life to encompass health, meaning, and dignity.

In the context of climate change, it is important not to limit our understanding of (un)inhabitability to an externally defined set of quantifiable material factors, but to recognize that this seemingly neutral term is in fact a complex and often contested signifier (Farbotko & Campbell, 2022). Different actors may assess the habitability of the same place in significantly divergent – and sometimes conflicting – ways, thereby generating tensions around land and human mobility governance. As we argue in the next section, these tensions typically arise between top-down scientific or institutional assessments of (un)inhabitability – which tend to frame it as a material category – and bottom-up, experiential perspectives, in which it emerges as a complex category encompassing material, relational, cultural, emotional, affective, and socio-political elements.

2.2.2 Habitability and the Politics of Staying

² The HABITABLE Project is funded by the European Union’s Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation programme that studies the links between climate impacts and migration and displacement patterns, to advance capacity to forecast and respond to their future evolutions.

The contested character of (un)inhabitability is particularly emphasized in the literature on climate (im)mobilities. Works in this field build on research with communities living in locations declared, described, or predicted to be uninhabitable and who nevertheless refuse relocation (Farbotko & McMichael, 2019; Forte, 2019; Jamero et al., 2017; Wiegel et al., 2021). An overview of this research highlights a dramatic mismatch between official assessments and inhabitants' perceptions and experiences, offering a critique of the dominant material framing of uninhabitability and its use in predicting inevitable mass displacement.

Jamero et al. (2017) present the case of four Philippine islands where an earthquake provoked land subsidence in 2013, bringing land levels within the range projected for sea level rise by 2100, raising questions of future uninhabitability and displacement. However, the islands' inhabitants preferred to remain on their islands despite their government relocation program, developing a series of strategies to cope with recurrent floodings. While the cultural, social, and emotional components of habitability are systematically ignored in risk assessments, they are central to ensuring a *sense* of security and to creating the conditions for people's ability and willingness to remain in place. This last point is appropriately highlighted by Wiegel et al. (2021) in their research on the Chilean village of Villa Santa Lucía, declared uninhabitable in the aftermath of a landslide caused by heavy precipitation. Here again, the local population refused to relocate.

These examples show how risk perceptions are influenced by culture and identity (Lemann, 2017) and are therefore shaped locally and informed by shared understandings of concepts such as "nature" and "society" (Wiegel et al. 2021, p.4). In contexts of recurrent climate risks, communities' willingness to remain in "risky", "dangerous", or "uninhabitable" places can be interpreted as an effort to preserve cultural, individual, and community identities, thereby fostering ontological security and wellbeing. This may occur even when there is awareness that such climatic events are likely to intensify due to climate change. Moreover, in risk-prone areas, risk itself can be understood as a constitutive element of local cultures and identities (ibid), as people engage in what has been termed the "normalization of threat" (Anderson, 1968, p.3). Behavior that may seem irrational – such as staying in a "risky" or "uninhabitable" location – might instead represent a culturally and socially appropriate response for the affected community.

Strictly material definitions of environmental risk, security and uninhabitability fail to account for the complexity of these categories and for the need to encompass local and cultural definitions emerging from the relation between people and the environment they inhabit. The latter is sustained through a rich array of material and cultural practices that do not cease to exist when the conditions for thriving deteriorate. Rather, the exposure to vulnerability and risk that affects the environment is shared with the people who inhabit it, actually reinforcing the relation of attachment between the two and revealing the inextricable connectedness of the social and the ecological. The widespread argument that causally links climate change impacts to uninhabitability and mass migration is not just oversimplistic and inaccurate, failing to account for the contested nature of uninhabitability, but it is also unable to capture the actual (im)mobilities of people facing significant environmental and climatic changes.

2.3 Producing the Uninhabitable: Climate Knowledge, Prediction and Uncertainty

In addition to the contested character of the definition, uninhabitability assessments present another set of criticalities deriving from their reliance on climate models, which are normally elaborated through the use of quantitative methodology. These assessments, therefore, require significant levels of discretionary decision-making in validation procedures (Hulme, 2011; Mahony and Hulme, 2018), are based on drastic simplifications of reality and simulated data (Heymann et al., 2017b), and often fail to integrate local geophysical specificities, frequently neglecting social and economic variables (Horton et al., 2021). For example, in the previously cited article by Storlazzi et al., due to insufficient data on atolls, the authors assume that a single atoll, Roi Namur, is “characteristic of [...] most of the *thousands* of atoll islands in the world’s oceans” (2018, p.5, emphasis added) and conclude that most atolls in the world will reach the tipping point of uninhabitability by mid-21st century.

Beyond their methodological limitations, climate models also raise epistemological questions, as a form of predictive knowledge that is legitimated through highly contextual and discretionary norms of validation (Hulme, 2011; Mahony and Hulme, 2018, Heymann et al., 2017b). Like any form of knowledge production, climate science is shaped by the moral, cultural, and social values of the people and institutions producing it. Notably, it emerged

through processes of imperial and colonial expansion (Fleetwood, 2023; Weatherill, 2025b) and continues to be grounded in colonial epistemologies (Weatherill, 2023). Referring to the work of the IPCC, Mahony and Hulme (2018) effectively highlight how climate knowledge production and circulation are far from being neutral acts, while Weatherill unveils how the panel “depoliticises climate change by narrating and communicating climate science as separate from historical context and structural processes” (2025b, p.4). Therefore, it is crucial to read any prediction of climate futures, risks, uninhabitability, and mass displacement with caution, critically engaging with the political embeddedness and epistemological biases of climate science. By considering the limitations of climate science knowledge production, we can avoid falling into a rhetoric of climate determinism, apocalyptic narratives, and “imaginative geographies of fear” (Chaturvedi & Doyle, 2015, p.114).

These limitations matter not only because they affect the accuracy of predictions, but because they contribute to framing uninhabitability as a measurable and inevitable condition rather than as a contested political category. Indeed, despite all these shortcomings, uninhabitability predictions and the arguments that causally link them to future mass displacement and geopolitical instability have gained widespread success, to the extent that they are often perceived as an unquestionable narrative that, in some cases, has become common sense. However, the knowledge underpinning predictions is uncertain by definition and neither morally nor politically neutral. On the one hand, this raises questions about the hows and whys this knowledge is often automatically elevated to matters of concern (Swyngedouw, 2010) and, therefore, to matters of policy. On the other hand, the success of the uninhabitability trope should direct our attention to the consequences of this discursive and material phenomenon for the people and places affected. These are the two focal points that the paper addresses in the following section.

2.4 The Political life of Uninhabitability Narratives

2.4.1 The Appeal of the Apocalypse

We now approach the central question regarding the success of uninhabitable tropes and narratives despite their flaws and shortcomings. Part of the explanation is probably connected to the apparent linearity of the causal links between climate change, uninhabitability, and migration, a link that has been frequently echoed across media, academia, and political arenas. Moreover, in relation to the climate crisis we are witnessing a

resurgence of deterministic arguments, such as Malthusian and tragedy-of-the-commons-like ones, which perfectly frame the uninhabitability narrative.

Beyond these simple explanations, few authors have investigated how uninhabitability narratives gained traction in shaping climate change discourses and policies. For instance, analyzing the case of Oceania, Farbotko (2010) identifies one reason in the notion of “wishful sinking” and in the metaphor of “the canary in the coal mine”: the West – in particular the cosmopolitan, environmentally conscious segment – *needs* atoll islands to disappear so that they can provide evidence of the urgency of the climate crisis. The success of the trope can thus be partly explained by the fact that it resonates with western anxieties about climate change: climate insecurity is confined to postcolonial Others “there”, producing a sense of security “here”. We can therefore interpret imaginative geographies of uninhabitability as one of the components of broader imaginative geographies of climate change, (in)security, and fear (Farbotko, 2010; Weatherwill, 2023) that “frame various places on selectively drawn regional and global maps of threats and insecurities” (Chaturvedi & Doyle, 2015, p.114). These maps often overlap with colonial ones: in most cases, climate refugees are postcolonial and racialized subjects, and the places deemed uninhabitable – or at risk of becoming so – are post-colonial geographies, pointing to the persistence of the colonial imaginary of the “heart of darkness” (Verhoeven, 2014).

These climate change imaginative geographies – the sinking/uninhabitable island and the associated characters, such as the climate refugee fleeing disrupted places – can serve as sense-making tools in the face of climate anxiety, where fear plays an important part (Chaturvedi & Doyle, 2015; Hartmann, 2010; Swyngedouw, 2010). However, the power of uninhabitability narratives does not lie only in their symbolic appeal: these imaginaries also produce material effects by shaping the policy responses considered possible and legitimate.

2.4.2 From Narratives to Governance: Securitization and Adaptation

Successful narratives contribute to shaping materialities, given that the different ways in which threat and risk are associated with the climate crisis shape the politics designed to face it (Baldwin et al., 2014). Climate change uninhabitability narratives, therefore, contribute to shaping not only how we think of climate change, but also what actions and policies we imagine as possible, appropriate, or even necessary. Uninhabitability risk assessments, however uncertain, are often treated as sufficiently credible and neutral to orient

policy design in the present and in the future. This constitutes a stark example of what Swyngedouw names the “science-policy short-circuiting” (2010, p.220), whereby problems presented as universal humanitarian issues transform from matters of debate into undisputable questions that do not admit disagreement or dissent.

The short-circuiting of policy by science has direct consequences for both the present and the future. In the present, uncritical policy design based on uninhabitability risk assessments can result in the neglect of alternative options that are deemed unviable (Bordner et al., 2020; Paprocki, 2018). One instance of this dynamic is the case of the Republic of the Marshall Islands, analyzed by Bordner et al. (2020), where uninhabitability predictions and narratives, coupled with the colonial concentration of power in the hands of external actors, direct investments away from in situ adaptation – the option preferred by Marshallese leaders – assuming outmigration as inevitable. With regard to the future, direct causal links are made between environmental disruption and political instability, passing through conflict and migration. Storlazzi et al. draw causal links between their uninhabitability predictions, mass displacement, and “significant, unavoidable geopolitical issues [sic]” (2018, p.1). Despite the limitations of their models, which we discussed in the previous sections, the authors present significant and unavoidable geopolitical issues – whatever that means – as the inevitable conclusion of their argument, effectively foreclosing alternative outcomes.

This connects to several scholars’ critique of the overly simplistic linkage between climate change and conflict, with often mass migration as an outcome, which, reminiscent of geographical determinist position, tends to be “[h]iding behind statistical analyses” to present “broad-brush statements, vague predictions and intuitive chains of logic” (Verhoeven, 2014, p.787) as established facts. Framed as neutral and technical, scientific discourses on climate change contribute to legitimizing politically sensitive processes of societal restructuring that disproportionately advantage external actors and domestic elites, while weaponizing “the language of crisis and adaptation” (ibid, p.802) against local communities. Uninhabitability narratives are no exception, whether articulated through future oriented predictions, or at the present tense through declarations that legitimize forced displacement and open up space for profit-making and corporate land uses, especially in the contexts of climate disasters.

Climate determinism, often reproduced in climate science directly contributes to the securitization of climate change and its impacts (see Bettini, 2013; Bettini et al., 2017;

Gonzalez, 2018; Hartmann, 2010; Klepp, 2017; Telford, 2018). Furthermore, it fosters the depoliticization of climate change action, as it “side-lines questions of power and political economy” (Andreucci & Zografos, 2022, p.4). This is starkly visible in relation to the discussion on climate migration, alternatively portrayed as a humanitarian issue, a form of adaptation, or a threat to security. In any of these cases, the often uncritical assumption of a direct link between climate change, uninhabitability and/or conflict, and migration leads to the depoliticization of the debate. Besides, climate determinism also fuels securitizing discourses and practices, through arguments that portray masses of climate migrants/refugees fleeing no-more-habitable “climate hotspots” and flooding rich and climate safe countries. Similar to the broader securitization of migration and borders, the securitization of climate migration is also premised on racial logics and discursive constructions (Gonzalez, 2018) that link a series of essentializing and naturalized assumptions about racialized others with possible outcomes in conditions of future climate insecurity, thus rationalizing and legitimizing interventions to prevent possible future threats (Telford, 2018, p. 268-270).

Andrew Baldwin aptly conceptualizes the climate migrant as the other of climate change, arguing that this figure functions to translate an otherwise ungovernable future marked by climatic impacts into something governable (2017, p.302). Similarly, Giovanni Bettini argues that “climate migrants/refugees are that ‘something’ that makes the ethereal, futureoriented and abstract phenomenon of climate change visible, tangible, embodied” (2019, p.341). Representing the potential catastrophic impacts of climate change in the form of security issues, embodied by masses of climate migrants, enables an illusory sense of control and agency over climate change. This framing of climate change-related fears diverts attention away from mitigation efforts and the necessary revision of our lifestyle and economic model – which are resisted at both individual and institutional levels – towards the management and containment of racialized subjects. Indeed, in security discourses, the focus on migratory flows of climate refugees is elevated to one of the most pressing threats posed from the climate crisis, as “building a fence is easier than changing lifestyles” (White, 2011, p.7). Uninhabitability can be understood as one of the discursive tools that support securitizing narratives, and part of an emerging racial vocabulary of climate change (Baldwin, 2017, p.302). This argument is supported by the historical use of the category during colonial expansion, which we present in the following section.

2.5 Colonial Genealogies of Uninhabitability

2.5.1 *The Production of the “Uninhabitable Subject”*

The argument that the category of uninhabitability can be a discursive tool for the reproduction of colonial relations of power finds supporting evidence in the analysis of the role the category played during colonial times in allowing and justifying violence.

McKittrick (2013) identifies the uninhabitable as one of the colonial imaginative geographies that reified global segregations. Those inhabiting the uninhabitable were labeled as uncivilized, primitive and unable to tame unruly lands that, in turn, were appropriated for colonial exploitation and settlement. These imaginative geographies still inform our western ways of thinking the world as divided along supposedly natural lines drawn according to environmental or climatic characteristics. More importantly, they still shape and organize western consideration of the value of life and its preservation. The process of dehumanization of the others, which enabled their dispossession, enslavement, exploitation, and death, was sustained also through associations between unruly bodies and uninhabitable land. McKittrick highlights the continuities between past and present uses of western geographical imagination and argues that today “those who continue to inhabit the uninhabitable are so perversely outside the western bourgeois conception of what it means to be human that their geographies are rendered – or come to be – inhuman, dead, and dying” (ibid, p.7). The author lists various places that can be thought of in these terms (e.g., war-torn countries, reservations, ghettos, the so-called “global South”), and does not directly address the uninhabitable or soon-to-be-so geographies of climate change. However, the latter are a very poignant example of the association between death and specific environments and places.

Colonial and imperial imaginative geographies were serving the purpose of enabling and justifying violence on people and places. They offered rational justification to the reduction of colonized and racialized subjects into a sub-human status (Wynter, n.d.), legitimizing their exploitation. Climate and environmental determinism were key to this process of rational justification, as was the notion of uninhabitability, which cast certain places as inherently uninhabitable and, consequently, their inhabitants as non-human or less-than-human.

In a review of the rare scholarship on habitability and its opposite, Fleetwood (2023) traces the history of the categories as inextricably connected to imperialism and colonialism,

showing their crucial role in the reproduction of environmental and climate determinism. Imaginative geographies of the (un)inhabitable and the un-inhabited have historically been central to colonial and imperial thinking and practices, as the climatic science in which these concepts and narratives were produced have played a determinant role in “enabling white colonization” (ibid, p.7). We argue that narratives around climate change and human migration have given a new momentum to determinism and colonial geographical logics, above all by framing environmental vulnerability in terms of threat.

2.5.2 Oceania and the Politics of Disappearance

A case in point is that of the islands of Oceania, today at the center of narratives around climate change-induced uninhabitability. These islands have been narrated as uninhabited, they have been rendered uninhabitable, and have been depopulated and repopulated, according to varying imperial powers’ interests and agendas (Mountz, 2015). The categories of (un)inhabitability and (un)inhabitation have been used to alternatively justify nuclear tests or produce imaginative geographies of untouched paradises (Weatherill, 2023). The islands of Oceania have been rendered uninhabited in favor of colonial logics of exploitation and extraction – as in the case of British phosphate mining on Banaba Island in 1945 (Farbotko & McMichael, 2019) – as well as of population management – as illustrated by the forced relocation of communities in what are now Kiribati and Tuvalu, driven by British colonizers’ Malthusian preoccupations and their effort to consolidate control in the region (Connel, 2012; McAdam, 2015). Finally, these islands have often been made uninhabitable as a consequence of those same interventions, such as nuclear testing and phosphate mining. It becomes almost natural, then, to imagine the far, small, poor, exotic, and almost uninhabited Pacific islands sunk and lost forever. “From a ‘story-line’ perspective [...] accepting this uninhabitability, in which islands are ‘disappearing’, ‘sinking’ or ‘drowning’ begins the story from a point at which the ending is written” (Weatherill, 2023, p.2). The power of this storyline stems, in part, from its repetition and longevity, and it serves to naturalize harm, in the past as in the present: the reality of the sinking threat is supported by the continuous racialization of islands as wild and mysterious places and is sidelined by the naturalization of sinking as an obvious component of climate change (ibid).

The uninhabitability narrative of climate change is but the latest rendition of these imaginative geographies of island uninhabitability, which have contributed to a description of

the world as divided between us and them, civilized and uncivilized. Bankoff's popular analysis of the concept of "vulnerability" and its historical roots reaches similar conclusions: "vulnerability" is part, together with tropicity and (lack of) development, of the same western colonial discourse "that denigrates large regions of the world as disease-ridden, poverty-stricken and disaster-prone" (2001, p.19). As its reverse, this discourse produces imaginative geographies of the West as disease-free, developed, and safe, while identifying climatic and environmental factors as determinants of potential danger to its well-being.

Today's uninhabitable imaginative geographies contribute to the same process of differentiation, dividing the world (often across the same colonial lines) between safe and unsafe in the face of climate change. There needs to be increased awareness about the clearly colonial roots of these concepts, if we are to avoid the reproduction of climate and environmental determinism and connected processes of othering, which in turn create the ground for complacency to new forms of epistemic and material violence in the context of climate change (like carbon offsetting schemes, conservation projects, or the green energy projects that rely on dispossession and extractivism: e.g. Rizzi, 2025; Timms, 2011; Zografos & Robbins, 2020). The uninhabitability narrative built upon racializing and othering logics frames life in the uninhabitable "as "problematic", "deficient", "incomplete", in need of saving or "improving", and as such it renders it amenable to governmental calculation and intervention" (Andreucci & Zografos, 2022, p.5).

2.5.3 Governing Life through Uninhabitability: from Colonial Urbanism to Climate Governance

In the European contexts, the categories of habitable/uninhabitable have been employed across time and space to shape urban spaces and, in particular, to justify slum clearance. In 19th century Britain, "the phrase 'unfit for human habitation' would frequently be used to justify the demolition of neighborhoods identified as 'slums'" (Woods, 2019, p.203). In 1885, the city center of Naples, considered uninhabitable because of a cholera epidemic, was the subject of a special law for its *risanamento* (meaning both rehabilitation and healing), that also came to be referred to as Naples' *sventramento* (disembowelment), which led to the forced eviction of 55,000 of its inhabitants. A more recent example from the Southern Italian context is that of the Sassi di Matera, ancient neighborhoods entirely carved into the rock, which formed Matera's millennia-old historic center. In 1952, a special law declared the Sassi

uninhabitable and provided for their *risanamento*, to be achieved through the clearing and relocation of their inhabitants. Around 17,000 people were forcibly moved to a series of newly built neighborhoods at the periphery of the city. Both Matera and Napoli had been characterized, prior to the respective special laws, as at the limits of civilization and as inhabited by racialized others subjected to a narrative of dehumanization. The question of Matera came to national attention following the 1945 publication of Carlo Levi's book "*Christ stopped at Eboli*" (2010), in which the city is compared to the circles of Dante's Inferno. Similarly, in 1806 Creuzé de Lesser wrote that "*L'Europe finit à Naples*", "*et même elle y finit assez mal.*" As noted by Bagnato (2020, p.40) "[c]omparisons with Africa abounded, and Naples came to be seen as ontologically different from the rest of Europe". If, as elaborated by Sylvia Wynter in her analysis of the mythology of the inferiority of non-whiteness, to be non-European was to be non-human (n.d., p. 10) and if the core of European culture was understood as monotheist Christianity (ibid), then Carlo Levi's statement that "Christ stopped at Eboli" expressed the same logic as Creuzé de Lesser's: both imply that civilization ends there, and that those inhabiting such insalubrious environments were uncivilized others, not fully human. These examples from the European context confirm the normative role that the category of (un)inhabitability has in justifying interventions to govern marginalized and racialized people and places, shaping mobilities and land uses.

Woods identifies a novelty in the use of the label in today's Anthropocene language, compared to its historical use to justify slum clearance. The author suggests that the logic of (un)inhabitability is now often mobilized by processes and actors responsible for producing uninhabitable spaces, rather than to justify their clearance (2019, p.204). Rather than this apparent discontinuity, we want to emphasize the continuities between historical and contemporary deployments of (un)inhabitability. The concept is still used today to justify land and population management, with similar racializing and stigmatizing undertones, and with a newly sourced normative power that stems from the post-political framing of climate change and adaptation discourses.

"If some places are rendered lifeless in the broader geographic imagination, what of those inhabiting the lifeless?" (McKittrick, 2013, p.7). What process of resignification occurs around the people living in a place that comes to be declared or narrated as uninhabitable? Do they cease to be perceived as people, as truly human? In light of the links identified above

between uninhabitability and othering during colonial expansion and imperialism, and of the discussion on the processes of othering that underlie much of the discourse on climate migration and uninhabitability today, this indeed appears to be the case: when the uninhabitability label is attached to a place, those who inhabit it come to be understood as other than human, or less-than-human. This makes both places and people vulnerable to external interventions, violence, and imposed expendability.

Critical literature in urban geography on uninhabitability in the context of urban dwellings and in relation to environmental degradation raises similar reflections (Jha, 2023; Lancione, 2020). This literature, in particular the work of Simone (2016, 2018), conceptualizes the “so-called uninhabitable” not necessarily as a depleted form of urban life, but as a *different* one (Simone, 2016, p.136) that challenges dominant understandings of habitability. This approach highlights the malleability of uninhabitability as a signifier, open to multiple meanings. Forte, engaging with Simone’s work and investigating uninhabitable urban spaces in relation to climate change, underlines how the uninhabitable is in fact “the familiar and intimate” (2021, p.27) for those who inhabit it. The author shows how climate adaptation policies in the peripheries of São Paulo dismiss locations as uninhabitable, increasing the vulnerability of local dwellers by putting them at risk of eviction. The local population resists local authorities’ uninhabitability assessments, viewing their environment as a place of reconstruction, providing them with livelihood opportunities and a sense of stability. Forte concludes by observing the dramatic disconnection between the two different understandings of what is habitable, confirming the frequent mismatch between top-down and bottom-up perspectives on uninhabitability we presented earlier in this article. Uninhabitability can still be read as a tool for managing urban spaces and the racialized and marginalized people that inhabit them, as their lives and their life-affirming efforts in what others consider uninhabitable are of no value to policy makers. On top of this, the climate change framing further works to justify forced displacements.

2.6 Towards a Critical geography of (Un)inhabitability

In light of the discussion presented above, this article identifies two main dynamics that mobilize the uninhabitable in the context of climate change. The first resorts to this narrative to justify forced mobilities, including relocations, evictions, and dislocations (Teaiwa, 1994) disguising them as depoliticized and necessary climate action. The second employs the

uninhabitable category to make sense of “climate collapse” and to convey a sense of catastrophe in order to advocate for climate action, and more or less consciously securitize the issue of climate change and climate change migration.

Both instances require that some bodies and places are made expendable in the process. In the first instance, this expendability can be observed, for example, as certain locations are declared uninhabitable and cleared of their inhabitants, usually marginalized groups. The communities are in this way dispersed, and the locations are then used and reinhabited in ways that often advance state and capital interests, revealing the instrumental character of the imposed uninhabitable label. In the second instance, some places and the bodies that inhabit them are taken as proof of climate change's catastrophic potential, and their value is reduced to a cautionary tale for those in supposedly more valuable and less climate vulnerable geographies. In turn, this reduction to a proof of climate change exposes the communities and places involved to an array of policies and interventions, framed as climate action, that can lead to maladaptation (for example by ignoring local bottom-up adaptive capacity, culture, and values) or to violence (as in the case of forced relocations and dispossession). This shows how the two dynamics are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, they are often found in conjunction with each other: a place can first become a cautionary tale for the environmentally conscious cosmopolitan community (Farbotko, 2010) and then, in virtue of this imposed status, it can be exposed to top-down policies that are framed and justified as necessary and/or benevolent climate action.

The first dynamic occurs mostly in the context of climatic extreme weather events, in the aftermath of which places are declared uninhabitable and forced mobility schemes implemented. These are usually justified by human security concerns and can have the effect of increasing communities' socioeconomic and cultural vulnerability. Attachment to place and encompassing groups can be disrupted by these forced movements. This, in turn, hinders social cohesion, access to cultural practices – that are linked to the environment or the community – and access to livelihoods – which, similarly to cultural practices, might be dependent on access to a certain environment. In many instances, as the literature and our own research on the case of Barbuda after hurricane Irma shows, places are declared uninhabitable by local authorities, designated as buffer zones, and finally repurposed for capitalist development, “greening the city” projects or, more generally, for climate change

adaptation purposes – a non-exhaustive list (e.g. Ajibade, 2019; Forte, 2021; Loperena, 2017; Van Voorst and Hellman, 2015; Wright et al. 2020).

The second dynamic, the underlying motivations of which are arguably more emotional, but with equally material consequences, is one that disproportionately concerns Oceanic low-lying islands and more generally small island states. It relates mainly to slow-onset climate change impacts and involves a tireless and pervasive narrative of future uninhabitability. As already mentioned, Farbotko (2010) explains these narratives as western projected anxieties around climate change. To metropolitan spectators, the future uninhabitability of these geographies due to climate change comes to represent a picture of the future that awaits the rest of the world, including the “safe” “Global North”, if no effective action is taken. The consequences are material because relocation projects are set in motion and justified by depoliticized climate change consensual policy-making that claims to be protecting human lives. Besides, these future imaginaries fuel anxiety on the possibility of mass displacement, therefore reinforcing deterministic narratives and fostering climate change securitization.

Despite serving different purposes and sets of interests, the two dynamics are equally problematic and inscribed in racial capitalist and colonial power relations. Othering in the context of climate change serves to support “mainstream solutions to the climate crisis which are equally neoliberal and colonial in character” (Andreucci & Zografos, 2022, p. 8). Environmental and climate racism, and the expendability of some bodies and some places, are easily detectable by looking at (un)inhabitable geographies, real and imagined. In line with a well-established stream of literature, we maintain that this is due to a valuation process, whereby some places and the bodies that inhabit them are considered expendable and disposable (Farbotko, 2010; Pulido, 2016). Their value is not inherent but dependent on the function they play in dominant structures of political economic relations. In turn, bottom-up claims and efforts to contest – or assert – the uninhabitability of environments are suppressed or ignored when they stand in contrast with dominant narratives and interests.

2.6.1 Denaturalize Uninhabitability for Habitable Futures

The uninhabitable holds a central place in the ways we think of climate change, especially in relation to the future and in shaping responses to climate change. It is a key concept in the debate on the links between the latter and human (im)mobilities, and, at the

same time, we showed its roots in colonial and imperial geographies and the tendency to co-opt it in climate deterministic racial logics. Echoing calls to denaturalize and re-politicize climate adaptation, climate migration, vulnerability, and resilience (Andreucci & Zografos, 2022; Klepp, 2017; Mikulewicz, 2017), we argue that uninhabitability also needs to be politicized and denaturalized. This means that a critical geography of the (un)inhabitable is needed, to appreciate its contested character, to account for local ecologies and experiences, and to center the relations of power that shape the labeling of places and people as unlivable and un-lived. While it is important to design ways to make it a quantifiable object of study, (un)inhabitability cannot be reduced to a simplified model. Rather, bottom-up, experienced and culturally embedded understandings of the concept need to be systematically included both in declarations and predictions of uninhabitability. A critical geography of (un)inhabitability should also challenge its apparent inevitability and the efficacy of ready-made stories and cautionary tales, so that other possibilities can be imagined, possibilities that “re-centre our political vision of change on undoing dominant socio-ecological relations” (Andreucci & Zografos, 2022, p. 8).

Janicka (2024), points to the binary character of most discussions on the climate crisis, where certain actions are described as the only way to avoid that large regions of the world become uninhabitable and millions are displaced. These “either/or” formulations end up obscuring other questions and options, limiting the possibilities from the onset. What if, instead, we could imagine a world that is habitable? How could we imagine it? A critical geography of (un)inhabitability also entails a focus on what actually makes places difficult to live in. Climate change is certainly one of them, but past and present structures of racial capitalism, extractivism, and environmental racism are equally and arguably more destructive of environments, livelihoods, and lives. Climate change itself, as a contributing factor to uninhabitability, needs to be denaturalized and clearly understood as a political and justice issue, and a product of new and old forms of colonial capitalism. A critical geography of (un)inhabitability, then, would make it possible for our imaginative and material efforts to be directed towards the structural problems at the origin of environmental disruption, rather than concentrating on predicted apocalyptic futures.

Finally, it would also mean acknowledging the (un)inhabitability label’s role in sustaining racial and colonial logics, and its contribution to othering and dehumanization

processes. In the case of uninhabitability predictions, it would entail avoiding their supposed inevitability, and instead turn our focus to the stories, claims, and resistance of those framed as climate refugees, and let *them* narrate the story (Farbotko, 2022; Weatherill, 2025b). Similarly, in the case of emergency declarations, a critical geography of (un)inhabitability means asking why, how, and who has the power to issue such declarations.

2.7 Conclusions

This article presented uninhabitability as a key concept in the weaving of othering and racializing narratives in the context of climate change and (im)mobilities. The discursive power of uninhabitability narratives means that they are able to influence the present and to produce certain futures, while effectively foreclosing others (Paprocki, 2019; Telford, 2018; Weatherill, 2025b). Moreover, they are successfully exploited, behind the consensual character of climate change policy-making (Swyngedouw, 2010), to serve old political and economic agendas (Kothari, 2014; Weatherill, 2025b; Wright et. al, 2020).

This argument does not deny the negative impacts climate change is having and will have on living conditions and environments across the globe. However, one equally relevant way in which climate change is uprooting and impacting people's lives is through the material consequences of its discursive elaborations. As this article has sought to show, one of these is the creation of uninhabitability narratives, deployed on places and peoples with violent and dispossessing effects, in ways that are not new or specific to climate change, but where climate change is increasingly being used as the latest justification (Rogers and Wilmsen, 2020). Focusing on this category by retracing its colonial roots allowed us to see how uninhabitability can function as a fundamentally racist and colonial category with normative power over places and people, land uses and (im)mobilities. This normative power was made evident through the identification of two dynamics through which the uninhabitable is mobilized in climate change discourse and practice.

Reading uninhabitability as a fundamentally imperial, colonial, and racist category, with significant normative power and currency in climate change discourses and policy-making, calls for increased critical attention to its uses and misuses, and in turn for a critical and conscious attempt to denaturalize and re-politicize it. The problem is not that places predicted to become uninhabitable are not facing serious environmental challenges.

The problem is that the label itself carries political assumptions about whose lives, knowledge, and futures count.

A critical geography of (un)inhabitability has the potential to make it a useful analytical and political category in the study of and political approaches to climate change, disasters, and (im)mobilities. Everything is political, but a category that refers to relationship between people and place, communities and geography, cannot but be inherently and deeply so. At the same time, the material challenges to inhabitability should not be depoliticized and climatized. To conclude, a decentralization of climate change and a centralization of everyday experiences, local perspectives, and politics would allow for an account of (un)inhabitability that respects self-determination and avoids reproducing colonial violence and expendability. Climate change is to be understood as an iteration of the problem of ongoing coloniality and imperialism (Weatherill 2025b; Sultana, 2024). Solutions, therefore, can only be imagined within a larger project of anticolonialism, anticapitalism, and antiracism.

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3. Article 2

Making Places Uninhabitable: Disaster, Governance, and the Politics of (Un)inhabitability in Barbuda

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Submitted to: *Disasters*

Abstract

The article aims at critically analysing how uninhabitability and disaster, as ideas and material phenomena, are conceptualized in climate change discourses and practices, particularly in relation to human (im)mobilities. The article constructs an analytical and conceptual framework drawing from critical climate mobilities and disaster studies, and presents an empirical analysis of the consequences of Barbuda's declaration of uninhabitability in the aftermath of 2017 hurricane Irma. The analysis focuses on bottom-up perspectives and lived experiences, and on locally defined relations of power, to highlight disaster and uninhabitability as contested signifiers and modes of governance. The empirical analysis adopts a qualitative methodological approach which includes interviews with Barbudans and participant observation; and is complemented by a critical analysis of top-down uninhabitability and disaster narratives mobilised by the central government. The analysis suggests that uninhabitability and disaster should be understood as having not only a material but also an affective dimension, and, crucially, as political categories with normative power. The article contributes to the critical literature on climate change (im)mobilities and disasters, and specifically on the key category of uninhabitability. By demonstrating the inherently political character of disaster and uninhabitability, the article calls for critical

attention to be paid to their performative uses to advance neoliberal agendas. Disasters, uninhabitability, and mobilities in the context of climate change need to be approached as political and contested issues. Practices in climate change adaptation should take account of this political and contested character rather than ignore it, so that more just and effective climate adaptation strategies and policies can be imagined and implemented.

3.1 Introduction

This whole question of habitability. Right? I believe there has been a lot of what I should say, imperialistic views in terms of that. Because as someone from the outside, you don't tell me what is habitable for me. The person who determines how they can live in a place is the actual people who experience [that place] and are living there. They are the ones who should define what's habitable or not. Right? What has been happening is that this question of habitability is something which is being imposed more than anything else as a means of essentially capturing resources that are being used by the people.”
(interview n.18)

The idea that climate change and ‘natural’ disasters will cause places to become uninhabitable is widespread (Wallace-Wells, 2019) and it is often mobilised in arguments that causally link it to predictions of mass displacement (European Commission, 2022; Stern, 2007; Storlazzi et al., 2015, 2018; UNHCR, 2022). The key role the category of uninhabitability plays in the ways we think of climate change, climate (im)mobilities, and climate adaptation is at the centre of a growing academic debate (Farbotko 2010, 2023; Forte, 2021; Horton et al., 2021; Jamero et al., 2017; Sterly et al., 2025; Wrathall et al., 2023). A large part of this debate revolves around the definition of the concept. Additionally, the literature explicitly focuses on the consequences of uninhabitability predictions and declarations, questioning who has and who should have the power to define what is habitable and what is not (Farbotko 2023; Farbotko & Campbell 2022; Sterly et al., 2025). This article contributes to answering both questions. It critically interrogates dominant approaches to uninhabitability that employ it as a technical and quantifiable concept, and focuses instead on bottom-up and emotional conceptualisations that can contest dominant definitions. In addition, the article centres questions of power around the use of uninhabitability, revealing its category power in enabling policy decisions with material consequences for people and places.

The article presents an empirical analysis of the declaration of uninhabitability of Barbuda in the aftermath of 2017 hurricane Irma. On the 7th of September 2017, the central government declared the island uninhabitable and issued a mandatory evacuation order. Since

then, Barbudans have been resisting the uninhabitable label and questioning the declaration and its aims. This case is relevant to interrogate multiple and contested meanings around the concepts of uninhabitability and disaster, and how they are mobilised as discursive and material tools to reproduce (or contest) context-specific relations of power.

The research adopts a qualitative and human-centred methodological approach aimed at understanding Barbudans' perspectives on uninhabitability and disaster. This bottom-up approach is complemented by a critical analysis of the narratives produced by the Antiguan and Barbudan government. The analysis draws from the growing bulk of literature on climate change uninhabitability and (im)mobilities, as well as critical disaster studies. As we shall see, most scholars identify the need for a people-centred approach to rebalance the policy debate on climate change consequences towards people's experiences and perspectives, versus external and scientific assessments (Kothari & Arnall, 2019; Horton et al, 2021). Top-down uninhabitability narratives that overlook people's perspectives are limited in their capacity to comprehensively address concerns, and potentially harmful to targeted communities and places. They contribute to shaping policies regarding land uses and human (im)mobilities, and risk entailing the disempowerment of affected communities (Farbotko, 2023; Janoth et al., 2024) making them more vulnerable to maladaptation at best, and to abuse at worst. The analysis in this article builds on that of article 1 on current and historical uses of the category of uninhabitability which concludes that this critical concept works today, as it has historically, to support epistemic and material violence. The article focuses on uninhabitability in a disaster context. This choice is motivated by an understanding of disasters as revealing and productive of the social order, that is as processes that simultaneously lay bare and accelerate structural forms of violence (Remes & Horowitz, 2021; Villanueva & Cobián, 2019).

The article contributes, on the one hand, to the definitional debate, specifically by centering towards bottom-up perspectives, and, on the other hand, to the effort to politicise climate change adaptation discourses, by focusing on questions of power and the performative character of climate change-related narratives around disasters and uninhabitability. The contributions are both theoretical and empirical. The article contributes to the understanding of climate politics in the Barbudan context, focusing on contestation of narratives and policies about disaster and uninhabitability. The focus on power and contested

meanings reveals the violence reproduced in the process of declaring Barbuda uninhabitable and forcibly evacuating its population. In doing so, the article contributes to unmaking the depoliticisation of climate and disaster policy-making, and of assumptions about the inevitability of climate mobilities.

The article is structured as follows: section 2 reviews the literature on the depoliticisation of climate change, particularly in the area of adaptation and human mobility. This general overview on depoliticisation introduces critical reflections on dominant performative framings around uninhabitability and disasters in section 3, followed by the presentation of the methodological approach, a fieldwork-based case-study qualitative analysis. The most substantial part of the article, section 5, introduces the case study, providing the relevant historical background, and presents research materials and their analysis, delineating the complex and contested conceptualisation of uninhabitability and disaster, as well as their strategic and performative use. The analysis suggests that (unin)habitability and disaster a) have an emotional and ontological dimension, largely determined by (lack of) access to community, place, and rebuilding; and b) are political categories with normative power that can be exploited by state and private actors to advance neoliberal agendas, providing a frame for justifying dispossession, and increasing control over places and people, land uses and (im)mobilities. The last section provides concluding considerations and delineates possibilities to advance climate and mobility justice (Sheller, 2018), and habitable futures in the context of climate change.

3.2 The Depoliticisation of Climate Change, a Critical Review

Despite being a fundamentally political and justice issue, climate change has been profoundly depoliticised in mainstream discourse. This refers to a tendency of mainstream media, academia, state institutions, and international organisations to speak of climate change as something detached from issues of power, inequality, and violence.

Abundant critical scholarship has shown how the dominant apocalyptic imaginaries through which we think of climate change —made of disasters, climate refugees, and uninhabitable places— significantly contribute to the current post-political condition and, through the mobilisation of fear, to securitisation (Hartmann, 2010; Gonzalez, 2018; Swyngedouw, 2010). The post-political (or de-political) condition is one “characterised by the increasing evacuation of the proper political dimension from the public terrain as

technocratic management and consensual policy-making has sutured the spaces of democratic politics” (Swyngedouw, 2010, p. 214). The consensual framing that characterises climate change policy-making erases the space for democratic dissensus and reduces it to a set of governmental and technocratic fixes.

The reduction of political issues to questions of rational management is a key feature of post-politicisation (Grove, 2015), and central dynamic through which climate change is depoliticised is through the dominance of approaches that frame its various related issues (e.g., climate migration, adaptation, mitigation) as problems to be managed via techno-managerial strategies. Mainstream approaches’ failure to understand climate change and related vulnerabilities as issues of justice, and as ingrained within larger structures of racio-colonial capitalism (Pulido, 2017; Sultana, 2022), means that the underlying structures that produced and reproduce climate change and differential vulnerabilities and responsibilities remain uncontested.

A mechanism that contributes to the depoliticisation of climate change is the dominance of particular kinds of knowledge, in particular Western scientific discourse. When this knowledge comes to be seen as *the* knowledge on climate change, other systems of knowledge are delegitimised, which constitutes a form of epistemic injustice and limits our chances at better understanding and tackling climate change (Sultana, 2025). The dominant position of Western climate sciences makes it appear neutral and apolitical, which is misled. As Mahony and Hulme (2018) point out: the “objective of the IPCC to make knowledge which is ‘policy relevant, but policy neutral’ is [...] a chimera and needs calling out” as “[a]cting in the world may be a corollary of knowing the world, but how one acts is already bound up with how one knows” (2018, p. 411). The IPCC’s approach also contributes to depoliticisation because it presents climate change knowledge as detached from structural and historical processes (Weatherill, 2025b). The IPCC’s choice to exclude these elements should itself be understood as political. In addition, climate change knowledge is communicated in overly scientific terms that are accessible to ‘experts’, but inaccessible to most. This technicalisation of climate change is then used to legitimise climate change policies (Kothari, 2014). Swyngedouw (2010) names this phenomenon the science–policy short-circuiting, whereby matters of concern are stripped of their political nature when scientific facts are elevated to the political sphere. When scientific knowledge becomes the

foundation of politics and policies, the space for dissent and contestation disappears, forging post-politicisation (Ibid, p. 217).

This post-political environmental consensus, by displacing the possibility of dissent, is reactionary (Swyngedouw, 2010) and can be leveraged to justify policies that are framed as climate action—adaptation, mitigation, disaster response—but actually do nothing to tackle the underlying structures that (re)produce climate change impacts and related vulnerabilities. Rather, these depoliticised techno-managerial interventions, legitimised by the climate change framing, can contribute to advance State and Capital interests of accumulation and securitisation (Hartmann 2010, 2014; Felli & Castree, 2012; Gonzalez, 2020), predicated on colonial and racist logics of expendability that justify violence and dispossession (Pulido 2017; Rice et al., 2022; Sultana, 2022).

3.2.1 Adaptation as Postpolitical Governance

Mainstream approaches to climate change adaptation are expressions of this postpolitical condition, even when they recognise its political character (Grove, 2015; Mikulewicz, 2017, 2020). This is because such approaches limit the understanding of politics to issues of procedural and distributive justice, that is to the differential access to participate in and benefit from adaptation initiatives. In these accounts, procedural and distributional justice issues are framed as problems that can be rationally managed by including marginalized groups in adaptation initiatives (Grove, 2015). However, *including* voices does little to address injustice, if the structures of power that exclude those voices in the first place are left unchallenged (Sultana, 2025). This limited view leaves unquestioned the underlying structures of power and inequality that make people unevenly vulnerable to climate change, and unequally able to participate in and benefit from adaptation, and, even if well-intentioned, it can contribute to the reproduction of those structures.

Mainstream adaptation approaches “are largely associated with the extension of capitalist relations, predicated on racist and colonial ways of seeing and governing populations and territories” (Andreucci & Zografos, 2022, p.2) rooted in imaginative geographies of vulnerability and associated processes of othering (Grove, 2015; Mikulewicz, 2020).

In sum, as an expression of the broader environmental postpolitical consensus, the dominant discourse on adaptation ignores questions of power and political economy

(Andreucci & Zografos, 2022), it promotes depoliticised and technocratic climate change governance, which not only displaces the possibility of meaningful and structural change (Mikulewicz, 2020), but can make affected people and places more amenable to violence and control.

What is needed is instead a denaturalisation and politicisation of climate change and related politics of adaptation directed on dismantling and reconfiguring, rather than reinforcing, dominant and violent socio-ecological relations (Andreucci & Zografos, 2022). This article contributes to this effort by highlighting the various forms of violence that are reproduced in the process of declaring Barbuda uninhabitable, turning climate adaptation and disaster management into tools of violence and dispossession.

3.2.2 Framing Climate Change Mobility

The way the issue of climate migration is framed in mainstream accounts is also symptomatic and productive of climate change depoliticisation. Three main narratives can be identified around the climate change-human mobility nexus. One frames climate migration and climate migrants as a security issue and a threat, another frames them as a humanitarian problem and as victims (Bettini, 2013; Giacomelli & Cappi, 2025; Farbotko & Lazrus, 2012; Hendrixson & Hartmann, 2019). Both these narratives rely on sensationalistic language and prediction of future masses of climate refugees, and both contribute to securitising the issue, although the former advocates for migration control, and the latter for urgent climate action. A third narrative (Bettini et al., 2017) frames climate migration as a legitimate adaptation strategy, and the climate migrant as a resilient agent, in the end responsible for adaptation, which strips the discussion on climate change mobilities of any justice dimension.

All of these frames ignore the importance of colonial extraction, bordering processes, and carbon capitalism – to name a few of the processes underlining the uneven distribution of harm in the face of climate change – in shaping the nexus between climate change and human mobility (Giacomelli & Cappi, 2025). They instead rely on climate-deterministic arguments that causally link climate change and migration, which are not only unfounded (Barnett, 2000; Boas et al., 2019), but rely on processes of othering and reproduce racialised colonial imaginative geographies of threats and insecurity (Andreucci & Zografos, 2022; Baldwin, 2022; Farbotko, 2010; Giacomelli & Cappi, 2025; Gonzalez, 2021). Within these imaginative geographies of climate change insecurity, the environmental refugee can be understood as

“the Other of climate change” (Baldwin, 2012, 2013, 2022), while climate insecurity is confined to postcolonial Others “there”, producing a sense of imagined security “here”. Othering constructs climate migrants as victims/threats to be controlled through bordering or saved by humanitarian interventions (Andreucci & Zografos, 2022; Hartmann, 2010). In both cases, dominant narratives around climate migration, often framed in the future conditional as predictions (Baldwin, 2016), present it as an issue to be solved, setting the ground for biopolitical control (Andreucci & Zografos, 2022).

As pointed out by Uma Kothari, “technocratic and de-politicised discourses of climate change have often been invoked to conceal underlying political agendas in which environmental concerns are drawn upon to justify unfavourable government policies of mobility and resettlement.” (2014, p.130). For instance, Van Voorst and Hellman (2015), and Barbosa and Coates (2021) show how, in Jakarta and Rio respectively, climate change adaptation is mobilised to evict and relocate people from “risky” informal settlements.

As in the case of adaptation, a depolitical and technocratic approach to climate mobilities can be turned into a discursive and material tool to advance State and Capital agendas, which often require displacing people and appropriating their land. These dominant approaches to climate change not only ignore underlying structures of power that create the problem in the first place, but effectively become tools for their reproduction and expansion.

3.3 Uninhabitability and Disasters between Contestation and Governmentality

3.3.1 *What is Uninhabitability?*

Uninhabitability is a key concept used to causally link climate change impacts to climate migration and predictions of future mass climate change migrations are often assumed as a corollary of predictions of uninhabitability based on quantitative climate models (Storlazzi et al., 2015; 2018). Uninhabitability’s increasingly normative role in climate change discourse and policy and the significant consequences this entails for people and places are analysed more in depth in article 1.

Uninhabitability definitions employed in climate science are limited to material elements and also tend to depoliticise the debate (Horton et al., 2021; Storlazzi et al., 2015; 2018). As an example, the IPCC defines habitability as “the ability of a place to support human life by providing protection from hazards which challenge human survival, and by assuring adequate space, food and freshwater” (Pörtner et al., 2019). In a similar manner,

mainstream approaches systematically neglect bottom-up perspectives, and local socio-political contexts (Horton et al., 2021). These elements are instead crucial in successfully predicting tipping points in terms of uninhabitability, and their neglect shapes policy recommendations, with significant consequences for affected places and people, such as maladaptation, increased exposure to hazards, or dispossession. While material elements are undoubtedly necessary to sustain life, uninhabitability should be understood as a complex category, as it refers to the relationship between humans and the environment they inhabit, a relationship that transcends purely material conditions.

Given the central role uninhabitability plays in the ways we think of climate change, and particularly of climate (im)mobilities, increasing research is being devoted to critically interrogating this category, how it is defined and by whom (Farbotko & Campbell, 2022), introducing important reflections on the contested character of the concept. The majority of this research departs from critiques of dominant approaches and focuses on those elements which are typically neglected: bottom-up perspectives, local contexts and histories, and issues of power. This stream of research aims to develop more nuanced conceptualisations of uninhabitability that can better explain the links between climate change impacts and (im)mobilities.

Jamero et al. (2017), Wiegel et al. (2021), and Forte (2021), analysing the case of four Philippine islands, a Chilean village, and a São Paulo periphery respectively, all show how local populations resisted top-down declarations of uninhabitability and consequent relocation plans, concluding that “[t]he disconnection between what governments and climate displaced people consider habitable is dramatic” (Forte, 2019, p. 27) and calling for the need to “reconsider what it means for [a place] to become ‘uninhabitable’” (Jamero et al., 2017, p. 585).

Bottom-up perspectives on uninhabitability embrace complexity and include emotional, cultural, and social dimensions (Farbotko & Campbell, 2022; Forte, 2019; Horton et al., 2021; Sterly et al., 2025; Janoth et al., 2024). People decide to stay in supposedly uninhabitable places for several different reasons: continued access to livelihoods (Forte 2019; Jamero, 2017); attachment to place and encompassing groups (Farbotko & Campbell, 2022; Jamero et al., 2017); and emotional and cultural dimensions of risk perception (Forte, 2019; Wiegel et al., 2021).

A *feeling* of security in terms of continued sense of identity and social capital is found to be determinant in creating the conditions for people's ability and willingness for continued inhabitation (Wiegel et al., 2021). Relational and ontological aspects of security (Farbotko 2019; Wiegel et al., 2021; Farbotko & Campbell, 2022) are key categories to understand uninhabitability, since they reveal how bottom-up risk perceptions should count as much as top-down risk assessment in uninhabitability predictions and declarations. Dwellers' perceptions and experiences are shaped locally and are grounded in culture and collective identities (Wiegel et al., p. 4). What is dismissed as uninhabitable by external actors' "objective" risk assessments is often the "familiar and intimate" (Forte, 2019, p. 27) for those inhabiting it. An emotional and cultural lens, therefore, can contribute to a better understanding of uninhabitability and, in turn, its uses and misuses in narratives and policies around climate change (im)mobilities.

In this article, we embrace the literature's call to research the contested character of uninhabitability (Farbotko & Campbell, 2022) and to question who has the power to declare places uninhabitable (Farbotko 2023; Simone, 2015; Sterly et al., 2025) and how this leads to the implementation of techno-managerial decisions.

Critical research on uninhabitability also highlights its political and normative character, showing how dominant narratives shape policy options and can depoliticise climate change by presenting displacement and outmigration as inevitable (Chaturvedi & Doyle 2015; Mikulewicz, 2020; Paprocki, 2018; Bordner et al. 2020) and by advancing forms of climate determinism that contributes to securitisation (Bettini et al., 2017; Gonzalez, 2018; Hartmann, 2010; Klepp, 2017).

This article argues that predictions and declarations of uninhabitability can provide State and Capital with a novel narrative framework to justify interventions that advance their agendas, rather than the interest of people experiencing climate change impacts. Kothari (2014), for instance, demonstrates how, by framing it as a necessary action in the face of uninhabitability predictions, the Maldivian government managed to implement a relocation plan that had long been on the agenda but had failed due to public contestation. Uninhabitability narratives are an integral part of the apocalyptic imaginarium that reduces climate change politics to a set of consensual management strategies that can be co-opted to

advance private and state interests, reproducing, rather than dismantling, the underlying structures that produce climate change impacts and related vulnerabilities.

To understand the ways uninhabitability can be exploited as a norm to govern people and places it is important to acknowledge its colonial roots. Fleetwood (2023) traces the history of the notions of habitability and uninhabitability as inextricably connected to imperialism and colonialism. These concepts shaped colonial and imperial imaginary geographies and were central in climate and environmental deterministic arguments which were pivotal in “enabling white colonisation” (ibid, p. 7).

A case in point is that of the “sinking islands” of Oceania, today at the center of climate change-induced uninhabitability narratives. During colonisation, these islands have variously been narrated as uninhabited and uninhabitable to justify violent interventions over land uses and mobilities in favor of colonial powers’ economic and political interests (Connel, 2012; McAdam, 2015; Weatherill, 2022). The uninhabitability narrative of climate change is but the last rendition of these imaginative colonial geographies of island (unin)habitability and (unin)habitation. As in the past, uninhabitability supports climate deterministic arguments and related processes of othering, which in turn create the ground for complacency to new forms of epistemic and material violence in the context of climate change.

The postpolitical nature of climate change policy-making, coupled with the role uninhabitability historically played in justifying and perpetrating colonial control and violence, and the key role it continues to play in discourses around climate change call for a critical focus on whether and how the uninhabitable label is mobilised to advance procorporate and state agendas at the expense of people and places. There is a need for nuanced understandings of climate change-related (im)mobilities and (unin)habitability, that centre the lived experiences and aspirations of affected people (Arnall & Kothari, 2015; Bee, 2013; Bee et al., 2015; Janoth et al., 2024; Kothari & Arnall, 2019). At the same time, research on uninhabitability needs to acknowledge the concept’s performative and normative character and systematically include questions of power (Farbotko 2023; Sterly et al., 2025).

3.3.2 What Makes a Disaster?

In mainstream accounts, disasters are sudden, often natural events beyond human control, and disaster risk is something to be managed through technocratic strategies such as

better risk preparedness and warning systems. Issues of power inequalities and differential distribution of hazards are usually neglected.

Recognizing that “to describe anything like a disaster is an act of interpretation” (Remes & Horowitz, 2021, p.1), a critical approach to disasters departs from the recognition that they are fundamentally social and political constructions. This entails that disaster can be taken as a conceptual and analytical category to ask questions such as: who has the power to declare something is a disaster, and to define and organise the response?

Vulnerabilities (to disasters) are also not natural and predetermined by geography. Bankoff’s (2001) popular analysis of the concept of “vulnerability” demonstrates that the latter is part of a coherent Western colonial discourse “that denigrates large regions of the world as disease-ridden, poverty-stricken and disaster-prone” (p. 19). As its negative, this discourse produces imaginative geographies of a West as disease-free, developed, and disaster-immune. In each of its shapes, this discourse identifies “the environment as the decisive quality in determining the condition of danger posed by this ‘other’ world” (p. 28).

A critical approach rejects such environmental and climate deterministic arguments. Instead, vulnerabilities and disasters are questions of power (Gibb, 2018) and the product of structural violence and neglect that disproportionately exposes certain places and people to hazards, often within logics of environmental racism, climate colonialism, and racial capitalism (Bankoff, 2001; Bonilla, 2020).

This makes history and context central to the analysis of disasters, which stop to be approached as unexpected and sudden *events*, but as long-term *processes* that are shaped by and reveal structural and slow violence. Disasters do not only reveal the social order, “as events and as ideas” they (Remes & Horowitz, 2021, p. 2) also contribute to its formation. When an event is framed as a disaster, its management/response/recovery follows, (re)shaping the affected socio-political system.

In virtue of this world-making quality, disasters can be regarded as an effective mode of governance. Biopolitical approaches show how “seemingly apolitical interventions designed to improve the quality of life” (Grove, 2015, p. 173) such as disaster management can “make ‘life’ [...] subject to governmental regulation” (Ibid, p.5), for instance through the mobilisation of scientific and technical expertise to assert and maintain power (Remes & Horowitz, 2021).

Naomi Klein's notion of disaster capitalism highlights the use of disasters as modes of governance and the deliberate exploitation of crises to advance and expand neoliberal capitalism (Klein, 2018). This framework highlights state and capital's use of disaster-related narratives and practices that obscure actual motives (e.g., state control and accumulation) and promote their interventions as necessary and benevolent (e.g., aid, reconstruction, support). Disaster capitalism shifts and reconstitutes the meaning of disaster, from the (sometimes natural) event to the post-disaster interventions which are themselves increasingly framed by affected populations as disastrous (Gunewardena, 2008, p. 73).

Despite its success, the concept of disaster capitalism has been critiqued for lacking a long-term perspective and for an overfocus on the post-event context. This "can make structural conditions appear contingent, widespread conditions appear local, and chronic conditions appear acute" (Remes & Horowitz, 2021, p.5). In the context of former colonies, the lack of a long-term perspective fails to "show how it is the 'slow violence' of colonial and racial governance which sets the stage for the accelerated dispossession made evident in a state of emergency" (Bonilla, 2020, p.2). This failure is significant because it neglects and, in a way, erases long histories of colonial violence. Therefore, Bonilla (2020) calls for disaster capitalism to be understood as foundationally a form of racio-colonial capitalism.

This understanding allows us to account for enduring forms of slow and structural violence that characterise relationships of power especially, but not only, in postcolonial geographies. Disaster capitalism should be understood as simply a version of colonial capitalism (Villanueva & Cobián, 2019, para. 10), which makes clear how emergency contexts *reveal* and *accelerate* violence, but they do not necessarily cause it (Bonilla, 2020; Villanueva & Cobián, 2019). An analytical approach based on local context and history can elucidate how disaster capitalism can be so effective in securing State and Capital interest because it can take "advantage of an infrastructure of extraction that has been firmly in place for decades" (Villanueva & Cobián, 2019, para. 6).

3.4 Methodology

The article adopts a qualitative methodological approach to analyse uninhabitability in a way that departs from dominant accounts limited to quantitative and "objective" methodologies (Horton et al., 2021; Sterly et al., 2025). Fieldwork and, in particular, in-depth interviews were employed to account for bottom-up perspectives (Dowling, et al.,

2016) around uninhabitability and disaster - understood as both sites of contested meanings and concepts with normative power - responding to the need to recentre the debate around those who directly experience the impacts of climate change and its governance, which are often marginalised in mainstream discourse and policies, in favour of top-down and external perspectives (Arnall & Kothari, 2015; Parsons, 2019).

The materials analysed are the product of five months of fieldwork conducted in Barbuda by the author between April and June 2024, and between March and May 2025. They include 26 semi-structured in-depth interviews, numerous informal conversations, and participant observation in several community meetings and in the United Nations Small Islands Developing States Conference held in Antigua in May 2024. Participants were selected to ensure a balanced sample across age groups and gender. The sample is composed of representatives of diverse sectors of Barbudan society and includes politicians, activists, environmental experts, fishermen, business owners, farmers, students, retirees, health care providers, teachers, and disaster management experts. The key themes that structured the interviews covered participants' relationship with the land, their experience of and perspective on disaster, uninhabitability, and climate mobilities.

Media and government officials' speeches were also analysed to include an account of top-down narratives around uninhabitability, disaster, and the forced relocation. As struggles around concepts and meaning are an essential element of climate politics (Feindt & Oels, 2005), the analysis of these narratives and how they differ from those of participants allows us to identify the consequences these differences entail. Namely, it allows us to ask what policy options do these narratives propose, what actions do they justify, and whose interests do they advance? (Feindt & Oels, 2005; Grove, 2015; Janks, 1997). A discourse analysis of these top-down narratives is aimed at advancing an understanding of the normative power of disaster and uninhabitability as discursive tools. The analysis included selected media and government officials' speeches around the hurricane, the state of emergency, the evacuation and the displacement, for the period going from September 2017 to September 2018, that is since the passage of Irma until the majority of Barbudans had managed to return home.

The interviews were audiorecorded and transcribed verbatim. After having lined out the sections of the interviews and of fieldnotes where the topics of uninhabitability and of disaster were directly or indirectly addressed (that is sections where the topic was explicitly

positioned in the questions asked, and, on the other hand, sections where it emerged spontaneously through dialogical exchange), these were analysed qualitatively using a codebook. This was designed using categories relevant to the question of uninhabitability and of disaster as they could be identified in light of the literature review (i.e., encompassing groups and attachment to place; natural vs unnatural disaster; disaster capitalism) and integrated with themes that became apparent during fieldwork, and could be formally identified throughout the analytical process (i.e., access to rebuilding). Conclusions concerning the emotional and normative character of the concept of uninhabitability were reached inductively and deductively through the analysis of fieldwork materials, and iterative reference to the relevant literature, including case studies (on uninhabitability, climate change perceptions, and (im)mobilities), and to the theoretical and conceptual frameworks (uninhabitability as a discursive tool for colonial violence; the post-political character of climate change policy-making; disasters as modes of governance).

Free and informed consent was guaranteed by sharing an information sheet with participants presenting the scope, aims, and methods of the research project, which also included information on the processing of personal data³ and the interview material. Given the sensibility of the research topics, and the preference of some participants not to be named, all the data presented are anonymised. In light of the emotional and political sensibility of the research, several strategies were put in place before and during the interview process to ensure that participants felt comfortable with the scope and modalities of the interview.

The tensions concerning my position as European researcher engaging in conversation around sensitive and often traumatic topics for the sake of my own research were always very strongly felt, both before and during fieldwork. This positionality statement is not intended to mark my position of power with respect to the supposedly disempowered/vulnerable Barbudans (Gani & Khan, 2024), and it does not aim to be a validity method, a disclaimer or an unhappy confession of privilege (Gani & Khan, 2024; Lockard, 2016). It is aimed at addressing, rather than ignoring, how my decision to travel to Barbuda and conduct fieldwork is problematic and potentially extractivist. Indeed, the tensions and risks of extractivism were made explicit by some interviewees on more than one occasion, for instance when one of them, towards the end of the interview, pointed to how while the topics we had been

³ Conducted in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (EU) 2016/679 (GDPR) and relevant Italian implementing legislation.

discussing were for me only research, for him and other Barbudans were their lives and those of their children. This was something that had been clear since before travelling to Barbuda as an inherent part of doing research, and in particular fieldwork. Embracing these tensions rather than thinking they could be erased, I engaged in practices aimed at counteracting the risks of extractivism in my research. I aimed to work towards a care-full research practice based on trust, mutual respect, reciprocity, and humility (Boer Cueva et al., 2024; Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). I approached interviews as a dialogical exchange, focusing on listening, rather than making sure I checked a list of questions, and letting research participants lead the interview towards the topics that were more important for them to speak about. In some instances, this meant that some topics I would have focused on were not extensively addressed, but it allowed for a richer, more complex, and unexpected exchange to occur between me and participants, and for key topics I had not identified as relevant to emerge. I approached interviews as moments of learning rather than discovering, and interviewees as experts (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). I was in some ways a supplicant researcher because I was aware that the knowledge of those I was interviewing was greater than mine (England, 1994), and I felt and expressed genuine gratitude for them deciding to share it alongside their time and energy.

Finally, while recognising that communities, even small ones like that of Barbuda, are complex and include an array of different political views and values, I use the wording “the people of Barbuda” in light of the community's history of political unified resistance, and in light of the latest - at the time of writing - Barbuda Council⁴ elections, held in March 2025, which saw the Barbuda People’s Movement⁵ win all seats in the Council with an overwhelming majority.

3.5. Barbuda and the Making of a Disaster

3.5.1 Colonial Legacies and Land Rights: Historical Context

Barbuda is a small island between the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean, part of the twin-island state of Antigua and Barbuda that gained independence from the United Kingdom

⁴ The Barbuda Council is the democratically elected local government, established under the 1976 Local Government Act.

⁵ The Barbuda People’s Movement is a local movement founded in 1978 calling for secession from Antigua. Today the movement represents Barbuda’s fight for cultural and political self-determination, as an independent Caribbean people, with a distinctive history and culture.

in 1981. During British colonization, Barbuda was leased by the British Crown to the Codringtons, who owned numerous plantations across the region, particularly in Antigua. Due to its specific geomorphological characteristics, Barbuda could not sustain sugarcane plantations and was used instead by the Codringtons as a provision ground for their Antiguan estates (Berleant-Schiller et al., 1995). In what represents a very rare case in the Caribbean context, enslaved people in Barbuda did not work in plantations, but performed specialized labour in a number of different sectors, including woodworking, raising cattle, collecting salt, burning charcoal, and small-scale agriculture (Berleant-Schiller et al., 1995; fieldnotes).

Through successive pieces of legislation (Barbuda Extension of Laws of Antigua Act, 1860; Barbudan Ordinance, 1904) the British administratively linked Barbuda to Antigua, with a view to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of colonial control in the region (fieldnotes). With the entry into force of the 1967 West Indies Act, Antigua became an associate state of the United Kingdom, with Barbuda listed as its dependency, and in 1981 the two islands became a single and independent nation state.

After emancipation in 1834, when the Codringtons left, Barbudans implemented a common land tenure system, which is still in place today and became constitutive of Barbudan culture⁶ deepening the cultural and socio-economic differences - rooted in Barbuda's historical absence of a plantation system - with Antigua. These differences further intensified following the collapse of the sugar industry, when Antigua transitioned from a plantation to a tourism economy (Weaver, 1988), becoming a largely touristified landscape, with tourism accounting for approximately 50% of the national GDP (Caribbean Development Bank, 2019). Barbuda did not experience this transition and, to this day, the island has not been massively touristified like most of the region. The majority of the local population (around 2000 people) is employed in small-scale fishing, agriculture and in the public sector (fieldnotes).

Since associate statehood in 1967 and even more after independence in 1981 and the forced unification of Antigua and Barbuda under the same postcolonial nation state, Antiguan economic and political elites have been continuously endangering the maintenance of the common land tenure system, so as to gain control over Barbuda's land and realise a corporate use of its territory. Indeed, they have systematically leveraged their dominant role within the

⁶ For a better understanding of the crucial relationship between land and culture in relation to processes of transplantation and indigenisation in the Caribbean context see Wynter, n.d.

state apparatus to exploit the island's natural resources (e.g., sand-mining) for private gain, and to withhold Barbuda's access to financial resources (Berleant-Schiller et al., 1995; Coram, 1993; Tweedy, 1981). In 2007, the Barbuda Land Act enshrined the common land tenure system into law, but it has not been constitutionally entrenched. While the Act established that the whole land of the island was commonly held by its people, forbade its sale, and stated that major development projects in Barbuda had to be approved by the democratically elected Barbuda Council through public vote, its vulnerable status made it amenable to repeal. In fact, as we shall see in the next section, the Antiguan government would soon exploit this vulnerability, taking advantage of an emergency situation.

3.5.2 From Event to Disaster

On September 6th 2017, Barbuda was hit by Hurricane Irma with devastating consequences, leading the government to promulgate a state of emergency. The declaration of uninhabitability justified a mandatory evacuation of the Barbudan population to Antigua. The top-down uninhabitable label was perceived by Barbudans as disingenuous, and even ill intended (fieldnotes). During interviews and conversations, some interviewees recalled that people who resisted evacuation orders were forced to leave, in some cases with the use of violence. Those who were willing to go to Antigua did so under the impression that they would be able to go back home after a few days, once the threat of a second hurricane had passed. Barbudans were prevented from returning for almost two months, which caused additional material damage to that already brought about by the hurricane in relation to their properties and belongings, including the loss of livestock and other animals. In the few occasions when Barbudans were allowed to temporarily go back for a few hours to recover their belongings, the procedure to board the ferry to Barbuda was militarized, dehumanizing, and lacked transparency (fieldnotes). Hundreds of Barbudans crowded the dock in Antigua hoping that their name was called, while seats were reserved to non Barbudans every day (fieldnotes). In fact, during the forced displacement in Antigua, a new airport was being built without their knowledge (fieldnotes). Therefore, while Barbudans were forcibly displaced from their homes and community, workers, investors, and the military were all allowed to stay on the island to secure tourism development (fieldnotes).

Hurricane Irma and the consequent devastation were exploited to advance private interests by allowing land grabs (Perdikaris et al., 2020; Perdikaris et al., 2021; Rhiney,

2020), in a fashion that can be described as an instance of disaster capitalism. Only weeks after Irma, the Antiguan government started amending the 2007 Barbuda Land Act, and repealed it in May 2018. This was a deliberate effort to allow land grabs and dispossession, promoting capitalist tourism development under the guise of support for reconstruction (Gould & Lewis, 2018). This was enabled by the top-down framing of disaster and uninhabitability, which enabled a forced displacement and disabled the ability for collective political action, including that of the Barbuda Council (Gould & Lewis, 2018).

Barbudans found themselves displaced twice, once by the climate change-fueled hurricane and the mandatory evacuation, and then by development projects they did not consent to, which restricted the community's access to common lands traditionally used for an array of cultural and livelihood practices. The uninhabitability narrative justified the imposition of forced (im)mobilities—the evacuation to and prolonged displacement in Antigua—creating the conditions for disaster.

Analyses of post-Irma Barbuda and disaster capitalism have effectively highlighted: its impacts on local socio-ecological relations, and the negative effects these could entail in terms of vulnerability (Lightfoot, 2020; Perdikaris et al., 2020; Perdikaris et al., 2021); the connections between disaster capitalism and colonial legacies (Jobson, 2024; Lightfoot, 2020; Moulton & Machado, 2019; Rhiney, 2020); the use of resilience, sustainability, and climate justice discourse to support predatory capitalism in ways that instead further reproduce climate injustice (Gould & Lewis, 2018; Lightfoot, 2020; Moulton & Machado, 2019). Building on these key analyses and their conclusions, while still adopting a disaster capitalism lens, this article focuses on conceptualisations of uninhabitability as a key discursive tool in supporting displacement, dispossession, and control, to further elucidate the workings of disaster capitalism in an era marked by climate change and climate governance.

3.5.3 Contested Meanings: Uninhabitability and Disaster from Below and Above

In the aftermath of the hurricane, the mandatory evacuation and then the prolonged forced displacement, justified on the basis of the island's uninhabitability, increased the levels of material and ontological insecurity for the people of Barbuda. This finding emerges when the concept of uninhabitability is used as an analytical category to understand Barbudans' experience of life in Antigua, and back on the island once they were able to return.

Three main themes appear as constitutive of (unin)habitability in this context: (lack of) access to community; (lack of) access to home; and the (im)possibility to rebuild. In light of a conceptualization of uninhabitability as composed of these three elements, it can be argued that Antigua was experienced as uninhabitable by many Barbudans that were eager to go back home, while, despite the dire material conditions on the island, Barbuda was perceived as habitable. As an emotional category, uninhabitability, in this context, appears as defined by feelings of loss, displacement, anger, frustration, and helplessness. Vice versa, habitability emerges as being characterized by feelings of hope, empowerment, peacefulness, and happiness. The next three sections highlight how (lack of access to) community, home, and rebuilding, emerge as fundamental components of a (unin)habitable environment; and how the decisions and actions taken by the government in the aftermath of Irma, perceived by many Barbudans as unjust and violent, worsened the community's material and emotional conditions, compounding the trauma and destruction caused by the hurricane itself, and deepening and prolonging the disaster.

I. Bottom-up Perceptions: Community, Home, and the Right to Rebuild

Theoretical and empirical debates stress that continued access to encompassing groups is a key element explaining the unwillingness of people to move from supposedly uninhabitable locations. Encompassing groups are a constitutive element of collective and individual identities and wellbeing (Adger et al., 2013; Heyward, 2014). In the context of disasters, encompassing groups are crucial for the provision of both material and emotional support. When Barbudans were forcibly displaced, community cohesion was impaired. This increased levels of distress, ontological and material insecurity, emotional displacement, loss, and helplessness.

A recurrent story that was shared by Barbudans during conversations and interviews while reflecting on the uninhabitability declaration referred to Christmas celebrations after the hurricane, when a few dozen people had returned to the island.

The first Christmas, we had a good time. We were actually like a community that you see existed in the old time. Very close. Everybody was looking out for everybody, you know. And it was good, it was a good experience despite all the problems. We had no light and no water, no church, no schools. People bring

food and we sit and we fellowship. We ate together...it was good. - (interview n. 24)

This topical moment came to represent the coming back of the community and the rebuilding of networks of material and emotional support; a moment characterized by a regained sense of belonging and hope, despite the material hardship people were experiencing on a daily basis.

Coming back to Barbuda, people immediately started working to reestablish livelihoods and basic services, but a participant highlighted how: “this resilience would happen once we were back on the island as a community. The evacuation and staying so long in Antigua took away our ability to be resilient as a community.” (interview n.29). The disruption of the community was caused by the mandatory evacuation rather than the hurricane. The evacuation made Barbudans vulnerable to increased levels of ontological and material insecurity:

So the bigger disaster for us was to be taken off of the island and the opportunity for recovery was taken away from us. That was the bigger disaster. That is what crashed our economy. That is what caused the dislocation and disruption more than anything else. The community was totally dislocated. [...]
- (interview n.18)

While the hurricane was a destructive event, the disaster is attributable to the government’s decision to declare the island uninhabitable and to displace the community, impairing its capacity to recover.

Home

Place attachment is another crucial element of individual and collective wellbeing (Adger et al., 2013; Heyward, 2014). Especially in the aftermath of an event like Hurricane Irma, place attachment is a central element influencing wellbeing and ontological security (Brown & Perkins, 1992). The denied access to home emerges from the interviews as a constitutive aspect of uninhabitability.

A university student , who was just 12 at the time of the hurricane, expressed how adjusting to life and school in Antigua was very hard. After an initial period of shock and

emotional displacement, she managed to make friends and perform well at school, like she used to in Barbuda, and retrospectively considered her experience in Antigua as overall a formative one. However, she expressed the importance of being home and in a familiar environment:

[...] and then to come back over here, I was so relieved! Coming back to Barbuda after having established myself there [in Antigua], I was very happy! I knew I was gonna live in a tent, I was happy because it was gonna be in my grandparents' yard. (interview n.21)

Her mother explained how life in Antigua could just be a temporary solution for her: “We [my husband and I] said to ourselves. We can't stay here. This is not life. This is not what we are, Barbuda is our home and we cannot survive in Antigua.” Similarly, this retired farmer talked about life in Antigua as impossible because all she could ever think about was going back home and starting working to get things back in place and towards a sense of normalcy, revealing the emotional toll caused by the forced displacement:

You know, your mind is at home. You want to go home, come back home. You know, it doesn't matter who you live with or what they are giving you. You just want to come back home and be at home to clean up and get things back together. But they didn't allow us. (interview n.25)

This teacher explained about how, after Irma, the island was habitable and people could have stayed. She argues that the habitability of Barbuda in that context largely depended on an internal and emotional state:

People would have slept under a tree, and that would have been habitable for them. Because I think it's a frame of mind. It's having that peace in knowing that this spot where I'm at, this is my home, and I could make my bed right there and be happy [...]. So I would say psychological and physical would go hand in hand [...]. It was good enough because this is where we want to be. You know? So I think habitability is not ...for people who have been through a disaster.... it is not physical, it is more emotional and your connection to where

you are at, and see what the possibilities are. You know what I mean? That's what I think. (interview n.8)

Similarly to the uninhabitability in the above interview extract, also the concept of disaster was framed both in material and emotional terms by several participants, especially in relation to the emotional trauma caused by the forced (im)mobility. After having listed the material needs the people had because of the destruction caused by Irma, a participant explained that:

So that was a disaster ...physical. But then, you had people who were taken from their homes and had no knowledge of living in another space. That is another disaster. And that psychological disaster, it has a lingering effect...because you talk to people and people are still crying when they remember! (interview n.8)

The owner of a local restaurant also explained that the lack of basic services after a hurricane was not a novelty, and people could have managed to stay as long as they had *felt safe*, suggesting the performative character of the uninhabitability label:

When I heard we're going to be evacuated, I thought it was utter nonsense. Because it's not like we didn't have somewhere to live. In this house the roof was gone, but there were parts of it that were still livable. We didn't have electricity. That wasn't new. We have lived without electricity for years [...]. I could live anywhere. As long as I... for Barbuda, I know what I can do. I know what I'm capable of doing. (interview n.11)

These interview extracts demonstrate the complexity of the concept of uninhabitability, and its ontological and emotional dimensions, confirming the importance of bottom-up perspectives, and the performative character of the top-down uninhabitability label. In addition, they show that disaster is also a contested concept, with both material and emotional dimensions, and point to the importance of critically attending to the ways the conditions for disaster can be intentionally worsened by those with power over emergency policy-making.

The last two sections showed how community and home are key to ensure ontological and material security in the context of disaster. This is partly because they support the conditions for collective and individual action. Agency is crucial in the wake of a disrupting event such as Irma because it ensures that the conditions for habitability are restored materially, and because it provides affected people with psychological wellbeing, as they can take direct actions to rebuild their lives and establish a feeling of normalcy. Staying in Antigua, in an unknown environment, hosted by families or in the national stadium, dependent on others' kindness and on the will of the government contributed to emotional and material loss, worsening the disaster.

The idea of rebuilding was central to participants' accounts of life during and after the forced evacuation. Two long time friends explained how being in Antigua was unbearable because one needed to be home in order to clean up, repair, and save whatever belongings could be saved. The inability to do those things increased the emotional distress, causing anger and frustration. It also caused increased material loss because, as reported by virtually all interviewees, their belongings spoiled in the water and in the sun while they were forced to stay in Antigua.

I25: Dry out what there was to be dried out, and just try to make life again. You know? We wanted to come home but the government did not let us. After [1995 Hurricane] Luis, people stayed, rebuilt, and cleaned up their place. They didn't have to go nowhere. And they didn't sustain as much damage as what happened during Irma. If people were allowed to stay, we would have been so much further along with the recovery. We would have been able to save a lot of things.

I24: I remember when I came from the boat the first time, and I passed by a lady's house and that really angered me to see her whole house was out in front. You know, she had to take out her bed. Everything. Everything was spoiled. Her bed, her living room set, everything. Her whole house...just outside. She couldn't use anything again because we stayed in Antigua too long.

I25: We did not stay, they kept us there. They kept us hostage. They kept us hostage in Antigua.

The forced displacement increased the material damage suffered by Barbudans because their things were stolen, thrown away, and were left to rot, and because it delayed the start of rebuilding and recovery processes. This worsening and prolonging of the destructive effects of the Hurricane - the event - shows that disasters are not time-limited events, but long-term processes shaped by - often ill-intended - governments' "disaster response".

Like in the interview extract above, participants made numerous references to 1995 Hurricane Luis as a way to highlight how the community had gone through intense climate events before, and recovery and rebuilding processes had been easier and faster because the community was not displaced and could work for a timely recovery. Reference to previous hurricanes was also made to highlight how the community is knowledgeable and experienced in dealing with the aftermaths of such events. The ability to act on the basis of that knowledge is what prevented 1995 hurricane Luis to turn into "a major disaster" for the community (interviews). Differently, the forced evacuation stripped Barbudans of that ability, contributing to the making of the disaster. A local activist elaborated on this point:

When you get hit by a hurricane, there's certain things that you have to do. You have to clean up. You have to take stock of what you have around. [...] We were denied all that. Take the typical fisherman. After a storm, your boat and fishing gear is at risk of being damaged, if they weren't damaged directly. There are things that you have to do to prevent further damage. So you have an outboard engine that has gone through a storm [...]. So any fisherman knows that you have gone through a storm, the first thing you do, you need to wash that engine out, do some maintenance so that it's not damaged. So if you now have to leave your gear, leave your boat, leave your engine for a month! Your engine is gone. Okay? So the storm itself did not take away the engine. It was that period of time when you were not able to respond in a manner to save your things. (interview n.18)

The forced evacuation, and the the impossibility to act collectively and individually to limit damages and to start the rebuilding process on the basis of local knowledge and experience was framed by W. also as a missed opportunity for the youth : "I have lived through other hurricanes but for the kids, for whom Irma was the first one, it was a missed

opportunity to see and experience that, that community resilience and solidarity”. The missed opportunity to transfer this knowledge to younger generations could have the effect of leaving the community more vulnerable to future hurricanes and storms, revealing yet another dimension of the long-term harm caused by the forced displacement.

The disruption of the possibility to transfer this knowledge to the youth can have the effect of weakening local eco-social relations, which rely on intergenerational transfer of knowledge and constitute the basis for the community's cultural and territorial identity. Indeed, a recurrent topic during fieldwork was the key importance of youth participation in matters related to the land and culture, which was framed as fundamentally a matter of transmitting to younger generation cultural practices and identities, something that the is becoming increasingly difficult, in part because of the post-Irma government-sponsored redevelopment projects and the significant impacts they are having on the island’s social and cultural environment (fieldnotes).

II. Top-down Narratives: Government, Media, and the Uninhabited Island

In the aftermath of Hurricane Irma, the prime minister Gaston Browne and other State representatives, echoed by the media, deployed a existential threat narratives that framed Barbuda as uninhabitable and uninhabited (Lightfoot, 2020), Barbudans as climate refugees, and hurricane Irma as a devastating disaster. In a radio interview (CBC Radio, 2017) the Antiguan prime minister said:

Well, that was a most horrendous day for Barbudans. Luckily for Antigua we were spared [...] and we continue to accept tourists from right across the world. But Barbuda, I mean, it was a totally different situation. Barbuda was decimated. You have a situation in which an entire population had to be evacuated because the island was deemed to be uninhabitable. And we could not have left them there otherwise they would have been exposed to vector borne and waterborne diseases. [...] It looks like a blown out city. Looks as though the island was actually bombed [...] was just literally carnage. But to evacuate them in less than 24 hours was a real challenge for us. Then the island remains uninhabitable and they are now being taken care of in Antigua. [...] We have a few hundred in shelters and they have been fed by the government of Antigua and Barbuda. [...]

So it is like running a big welfare system which has created a serious strain on public resources here.

The main basis for declaring Barbuda uninhabitable were the risk of waterborne diseases spreading and the overall damage to infrastructure, revealing a limited and material understanding of uninhabitability. Despite the serious damages to infrastructure, only one person died during Irma, which makes the language such as “carnage” seem unjustified and sensationalistic.

The emphasis placed by the PM on the economic toll that taking care of Barbudans had on the treasury of the state portrays Barbudans as a burden. Narratives framing Barbudans as lazy and resistant to development were already in use before the hurricane as a way to call for the touristification of the island and the removal of the common land tenure system (fieldnotes; Lightfoot, 2020). After Irma, the PM advocated for the immediate introduction of private property, proposing that Barbudans paid a symbolic one dollar price for the land they already occupied, and presenting this proposal as a strategy for financial empowerment and climate resilience that would allow Barbudans to access credit to rebuild after Irma (Derrick, 2017).

The PM also used uninhabitability, extinction, and disaster narratives to call for climate justice action in the form of financial aid from climate responsible countries, estimating the cost of rebuilding at US\$250 million and “spinning the crisis into a financial windfall”(Lightfoot, 2020, p. 140). However, participants consistently pointed to the fact that significant amounts of aid money never reached Barbuda; that aid sent by Barbudans in the diaspora disappeared; and that aid organizations’ operations were hindered by the central government leading several to leave Antigua and Barbuda. In January 2024, the Barbuda Council officially requested an independent investigation into “unaccounted hurricane Irma recovery donations” (Barbuda Council, 2024).

Echoing the government's narratives, the BBC reported that “the ferocious storm extinguished the isle’s way of life and left the beautiful spot uninhabitable. And, now, for the first time in a few centuries, no one lives there” (Licker, 2017), and the Guardian titled an article “The night Barbuda died” (Lyons, 2017). Ronald Sanders, the Antigua and Barbuda ambassador to the United States was quoted (Sterling & Santiago, 2017) saying: “The damage is complete. [...] For the first time in 300 years, there’s not a single living person on

the island of Barbuda – a civilization that has existed in that island for close to, over 300 years has now been extinguished.”

This language and the uninhabitable/uninhabited narratives erase the experiences of Barbudans and the community’s very existence and echoes colonial tropes of terra nullius. In reality, the island was never left completely empty, as several Barbudans resisted the mandatory evacuation order and went into hiding, some taking refuge in caves in the north of the island that have traditionally been used by locals, both human and non-human, to wait out storms. They were eventually chased down and forcibly removed by the defence force.

The uninhabitable/uninhabited narratives mobilized by the government and the media entered everyday discourse, exposing Barbudans to epistemic violence at different levels, for example in their interactions with Antiguan during their displacement:

“Oh, there's no more Barbuda”, a teacher told this to my son, and she didn't think nothing of it. So you went through the humiliation. You went through the degradation. So it's like hurricane all over again. It made you feel less than a human. When time came to come home, it was like, “where y'all going back to? Why y'all have to go back home?” (interview n.11)

In this interview extract, the interviewee directly compares the experience of displacement in Antigua to that of the hurricane. Across interviews, framings of the post-hurricane response as a disaster in itself were common. This is in line with similar findings in critical disaster research (Gunewardena, 2008) that point to the fact that it is often post-event discursive and material state violence that makes disasters, by deepening and prolonging conditions for trauma.

The uninhabited/uninhabitable narratives and the forced displacement they supported served the purpose of erasing the existence of Barbudans as a people, and pave the way for the dismantling of the common land tenure system, which stands at the basis of Barbudans’ collective identity (Lightfoot, 2020). This argument finds support in the legal reforms that the government implemented in the aftermath of Irma. In a series of amendment acts and bills the majority in Parliament: i) removed the definition and wording “the people of Barbuda” substituting it with “Barbudans”; ii) repealed Part II of the Act which established that “Barbuda land is owned in common by Barbudans” and defined the procedure through which

the Barbuda Council would be in charge of approving major development on the island; iii) introduced the possibility of private freehold sales; iv) introduced provisions that refer to Barbudans as “tenants of the crown”. When Barbudans started a legal action to contest the legality of the new airport, the PM called them “deracinated imbeciles” (Thomson, 2017). The epistemic violence of the uninhabitable/uninhabited narratives enabled the material violence of deracination. The disruption of the community and of the Council, at a time of material and emotional trauma, hindered the possibility for concerted political efforts. This allowed the government and private companies to carry out development virtually undisturbed. The trauma of the hurricane and of the government’s attacks continued after the return to Barbuda. As explained by a teacher:

So the disaster... there's a disaster after the disaster. And I think what hurts is that you see it happening over every day! Every day I see a truck pass here, I feel like I'm being traumatized again...your feelings are not taken into consideration. Your culture is not being taken into consideration...you're not even considered. It's like we're just gonna do what we want and that's it. You better move out the way. You know? The audacity, the gall [...] It's really despicable, and it keeps happening. And they're not even considering you as a part of the equation. You're not in it. You're just incidental. (interview n.8)

This interview extract elucidates the continuous character of disaster, in contrast with an understanding of the concept as an exceptional time-limited event. It shows that the disaster relates to the hurricane and, equally, to the violation of the community's right to self-determination, and to the violence enacted by the central government and private companies that took control over the land, hindering Barbudan’s land rights, and thus their culture and identity. Barbudans are constantly faced with new threats by the government (Antigua News Room, 2025), and illegal enclosures of their land under the protection of riot police (Barbuda, 2025). This state violence, facilitated by a climate change-fueled disaster and top-down uninhabitability label, keeps serving the interests of local elites and foreign corporations, mainly from the UK and USA, that former and new colonial powers.

3.6 Uninhabitability and Disaster as Tools of Government

The previous two sections respectively presented an analysis of the bottom-up and top-down narratives around uninhabitability and disaster, in the aftermath of Irma. In the accounts of Barbudan interviewees, uninhabitability and disaster were often conceptualized in emotional terms, and as shaped by the disruption of access to community, home, and rebuilding. Government narratives, on the contrary, reduced uninhabitability to its material dimension and equated disaster to the extreme-weather event. Government narratives also tended to exaggerate the impacts of the hurricane through sensationalistic language that depoliticised and naturalised uninhabitability and the disaster; participants instead - while always remarking the hurricane's serious impacts, both material and emotional - politicise and denaturalise uninhabitability and disaster, framing them as products of the central government's decisions, rather than as direct consequences of the hurricane.

The dramatic mismatch between these two perspectives was explained arguing that top-down declarations and narratives were strategically mobilized by the central government to exploit the post-hurricane context. The performative use of the concepts of disaster and uninhabitability enabled policies on mobilities and land uses that advanced the government's agenda rather than the community's wellbeing.

The specious character of the uninhabitability declaration and the central government's intention to exploit the emergency to advance its own political and financial interests were obvious to many participants:

For me, what it is, it's a twisting of the truth: to tell a story that you want to tell to get what you want from the situation. Saying that it is uninhabitable is a bold face lie because we all know we had people on the island, using it for the gain...I call it gain. Because there are persons who benefited from it personally, even within Barbuda. (interview n.6)

The mobility injustice that materialized after the forced evacuation reinforced the idea that the uninhabitability declaration was just tool of government and led Barbudans to question and contest the concept's use and definition:

When they declared that it was uninhabitable, I was living in Barbuda! There was the defense force, there were investors. They were doing the airport,

there were workers. All these people were still on an uninhabitable island. And then my question is: what is considered uninhabitable? (interview n.14)

The performative use of the uninhabitability narrative to justify keeping Barbudans off the island became even more apparent once people started to come back, as the government could no longer justify a state of emergency. At this stage, a number of strategies were put in place to obstruct Barbudans' return and recovery, prolonging the disaster.

A member of the Barbuda Council explained how the government purposely delayed the recovery of the local fishing sector, which accounts for a large part of the island's economy and employment, by imposing bureaucratic obstacles:

When we came back we started fishing lobster again, and sent the first shipment to Antigua. It was good, some money going, some economy going, fishermen were back at their jobs and the government stopped that. They said that the processing was not happening correctly and the person that should have signed the papers for the processing of the seafood was still displaced [in Antigua] so they could not operate. This was done to make things harder for us once back on the island. (interview n.29)

A local activist further explains how the fishery sector was impaired by the threatening presence of the defence force in the fisheries complex building:

[The building] is the seat where we export all our lobsters and make our living. [...] Because when they are sitting here, we cannot export lobster and fish, which is one of the foundations of our economy. So by that military occupation they were actually stymieing the recovery of the community. (interview n.18)

The defense force left the fisheries complex building only in September 2018, a year after Irma, and only because of continuous protests of Barbudans and their representatives. This hindered economic recovery, but most importantly it meant that, while they were dealing with the hardship of rebuilding their lives, Barbudans had to simultaneously deal with the government's violent interference on the island.

When national elections were due in January 2018, the national government declared that voting could not take place in Barbuda, arguing that there was no proper infrastructure to host the polls. This decision was perceived by Barbudans as just another way to make their return home slower and costlier, as pointed out by a school teacher:

And then they came back here and they announced the election. Let's do this again! And that's when everybody had to go back over to vote. It's like, "we are gonna kick you when you're down." Where are we gonna get money to go back to vote? (interview n.23)⁷

The above interview extract highlights the paradox of forcing the community to travel to Antigua to exercise their right to vote, just a few months after they had experienced the trauma of the forced evacuation, revealing once again how the central government's decisions were not aimed at alleviating the harm suffered by the community, but instead they contributed to prolonging it.

Another field where the government acted to delay the return of Barbudans, making life harder on the island, was that of education. A member of the Barbuda Council and local activist recalled a meeting with the National Office of Disaster Services (NODS):

Mr Mullins [the head of the NODS] was saying "Yes, the repairs of the school are going well. The children should be back by half term, which is October, November [2017]. And then, suddenly, the next week he's saying "Oh, no, no, it's going to be Easter." I thought, what? Easter?! (interview n.12)

When families that had returned to Barbuda for the Christmans break decided that they would not go back to Antigua, they were threatened with legal action, and when they and some teachers who had also returned organized a provisional educational institution, they again were threatened by the government.

From the Ministry of Education, truancy officers were threatening to prosecute us [the parents who refused to bring their children back to school in Antigua]. So what some of us did, we started organizing meetings with the

⁷ A round trip from Barbuda to Antigua by ferry costs 100 US dollars, it is even more expensive by plane, and one also needs to add the cost of accommodation.

other parents to provide them with support and to educate them of their rights. [...] And so we told them “look, when you get that call from the chief officer, tell him, look, I am living in Barbuda, and I demand my education in Barbuda.
(interview n.18)

In conclusion, the central government used the concept of climate change-induced uninhabitability, within depoliticised narratives that climatised the disaster, to justify a forced evacuation aimed at forwarding a top-down developmental agenda for the island; and it also adopted a number of strategies that delayed recovery, contributed to material and emotional uninhabitability, and prolonged the disaster. On the one hand, uninhabitability and disaster are inherently political concepts that can be employed to justify policies aimed at controlling land uses and mobilities, and, on the other, they are conditions that can be imposed on places and people to advance the same logic of control. This highlights the performative character of these concepts as discursive and material tools to extend and improve government control.

3.7 Conclusions and a Note on the Future

The article argued that uninhabitability and disasters can be used as tools to increase government control over places and people, shaping mobilities and land uses. The performative character of these two concepts is understood to be effective in advancing violent and contested policies because of the depolitical and consensual framing that characterises climate change. While the use of disasters as modes of governance has been extensively addressed in critical disaster studies, a similar use of uninhabitability, despite suggested by critical literature on climate change mobilities and on adaptation, remains less explored and could be a fruitful starting point for further research. In addition, uninhabitability's historical role in the colonial imaginative geographies that enabled various forms of colonial violence and control makes its current uses in climate change discourse and policies particularly deserving of critical scrutiny.

The article responded to calls advanced by the literature on uninhabitability and climate mobility to focus on bottom-up perspectives and experiences, and to centre power understood in light of local context and history, in order to counteract dominant positivist approaches on the nexus between climate change, uninhabitability, and human mobility.

The analysis suggests that (unin)habitability and disaster a) are not only determined by material realities, but have an emotional and ontological dimension, and b) they are political concepts with normative power that can be strategically used by state actors to advance their agendas, providing a postpolitical frame to conceal violence aimed at increasing control over places and people, land uses and (im)mobilities.

In the case of Barbuda, the framings of uninhabitability and disaster employed by the central government and reinforced by mainstream media supported the forced (im)mobilities of an entire community, increasing material and emotional loss, and paving the way for further state violence. The case also reveals how conditions of uninhabitability and disaster can take shape as a consequence of top-down policy choices, rather than climate change-related events *per se*. A key point that emerges from the empirical analysis of the Barbudan case and that deserves further mention is that a place can be purposefully made uninhabitable to discourage certain forms of life that are not valued by those with power, so as to make it inhabitable for other forms of life which are instead considered valuable, because of their ability to generate profits. In Barbuda, this meant making locals' life, which is based on a common system of sustainable resource use, difficult before, during, and after the hurricane, with the aim of making the island habitable for foreign wealthy tourists and expats. The post-hurricane violence is to be understood as possible because of the colonial legacies that placed Barbuda into a position of vulnerability and dependence from Antigua.

The experience of climate change impacts largely depends on locally defined contexts of power relations. There is an urgent need to repoliticise climate change and to foster approaches that systematically link it to local struggles and political contexts. Only such critical and political approaches are able to reveal the complex and multi-layered injustices that take shape in relation to climate change impacts.

Highlighting the emotional dimensions and the performative uses of uninhabitability should not be taken as an underestimation of the relevance of material components or of the serious impacts climate change is and will continue to have on habitability. This focus is rather motivated by the need to question dominant depolitical accounts that neglect people's perspectives and experiences, and their normative role in shaping the material and epistemological ways we deal with climate change. Adopting a re-policising approach informed by bottom-up perspectives and experiences, and by local cultural, historical, and

political contexts is crucial to advanced mobility and climate justice, and to work for more just and emancipatory futures.

Turning briefly on future (un)inhabitability, as a flat and small island, Barbuda falls into one of the geographical categories most often narrated as and predicted to become uninhabitable. When thinking about the future, Barbudans are aware of the risks posed by climate change to their island's future habitability. However, they are also reclaiming the possibility of a future where adaptation based on local knowledge, ways of life, and eco-social relations would ensure continued habitability. They are thus resisting the idea of a future uninhabitable island and of forced migration. Most importantly, they are faced with what they perceive to be a more pressing threat to the community's survival, represented by the attacks on their self-determination and to the communal land tenure system. The current administration promised that it will start the sale of Barbudan land (Antigua News Room, 2025), meaning that the possibility of land privatisation and its corporate use for the benefit of tourism and real estate is real. Many Barbudans interviewed for this research perceive this possibility as an existential threat. They know that losing access to the land would entail losing access to their culture and to their livelihoods, it would mean the disruption of the community and its collective identity, it would cause financial impoverishment, and contribute to material and ontological insecurity, increasing climate change vulnerabilities and threatening emotional and material aspects of habitability. Self-determination over land uses and (im)mobilities is key to ensure a habitable future for Barbuda and its community, both in the face of future climate change impacts, and in the face of the threats posed by colonial logics of extraction and dispossession.

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4. Article 3

"Bringing Barbuda into the 21st Century": Tourism, Disaster Capitalism, and and Neocolonial Violence in Post-Irma Barbuda

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Abstract

The article focuses on the multiple lines that connect tourism, disaster capitalism, and colonialism, and argues that climate (im)mobilities and uninhabitability are increasingly relevant to the progression of these intersecting phenomena. Analysing the case of Barbuda in the aftermath of hurricane Irma's passage, the article presents a critical discourse analysis of government and private companies' speeches throughout the unfolding of the disaster. The study is grounded in a critical historical overview of tourism in Antigua and Barbuda. The conceptual framework draws from critical disaster studies and critical tourism studies to argue that post-political climate change narratives and practices provide new force to the trinomial tourism - disaster capitalism - colonialism. While these processes are not completely new, a focus on climate (im)mobilities and uninhabitability, adaptation and resilience, reveals their instrumental use in advancing neoliberal tourism. The article calls for a politicization of climate change practices and narratives, and an approach to tourism development centered around self-determination as a possible avenue to resist the violence inherent to neocolonial tourism.

4.1 Introduction

The article identifies the multiple lines that connect tourism, disaster capitalism, and colonialism and its ongoing forms (see Bonilla 2020; Cohen, 2011; Devine & Ojeda, 2017; Fletcher 2012; Gunewardena & Schuller, 2008; Kincaid, 1988; Klein 2018; Kothari 2015; Loperena 2017; Ojeda, 2024), and argues that climate (im)mobilities and uninhabitability are increasingly relevant to the progression of these intersecting phenomena. In this context, climate adaptation and resilience work as discursive and material tools to advance state and capital elites' interests at the expense of people and places. The case of Barbuda in the aftermath of 2017 hurricane Irma is explicative of the ways this trinomial operates, how its elements mutually reinforce each other, and the forms of violence on which they rely.

A few days after the passage of hurricane Irma, the central government declared Barbuda uninhabitable and displaced the whole population to Antigua. While Barbudans were labeled as desperate climate refugees forced to escape their supposedly uninhabitable island, the central government exploited the hurricane and the forced evacuation to allow foreign companies to carry out tourism development without the community's consent, and promptly passed legal reforms hindering Barbudan land tenure rights, turning crisis into a profitable opportunity (see Lightfoot 2020; Moulton & Machado, 2019; Perdikaris et al., 2020; Rhiney, 2020). Legal reforms and tourism development were promoted by the government and the companies involved as necessary for disaster recovery, and for increased climate resilience, revealing the instrumental character of climate change discourse.

The article contributes to elucidating how tourism, colonialism, and disaster capitalism reinforce each other's progressions, relying on shared forms of material and discursive violence. The article's conclusions, supported by an empirical analysis of Barbuda in the aftermath of hurricane Irma, show that this violence, while far from being a novelty, finds renewed material and discursive support in practices and narratives built around climate change, and related concepts of uninhabitability, (im)mobilities, adaptation, and resilience. In doing so, the article contributes to debates within critical disaster and critical tourism studies on the politics of tourism development, disaster management, and climate adaptation, their colonial discursive underpinning, and their dispossessing effects.

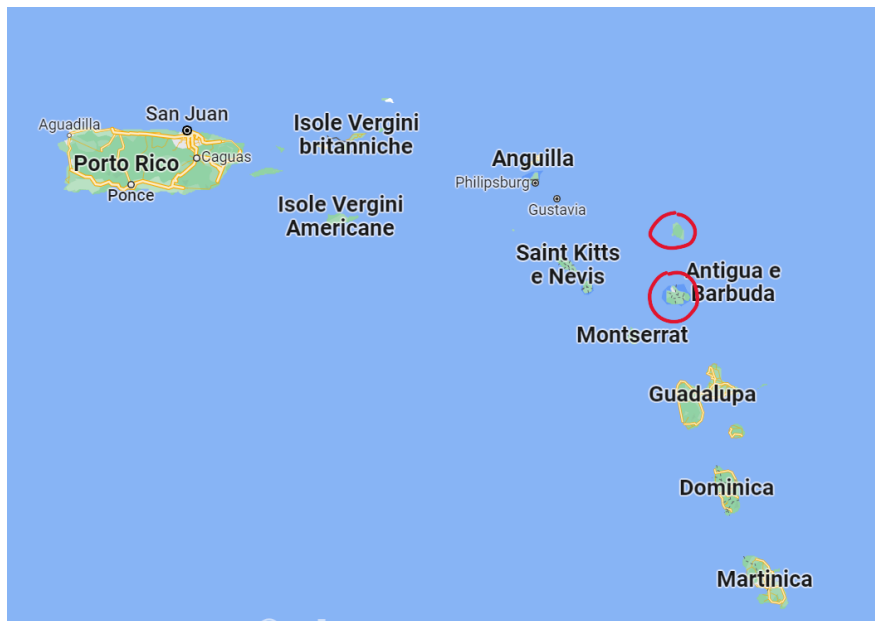


Figure 1: Antigua and Barbuda, marked in red. Barbuda is located north of Antigua. Source: google maps.

The article opens by introducing the trinomial tourism-disaster capitalism-colonialism, clarifying the connections between the three phenomena, highlighting the various forms of violence on which they rely, and how climate change-related narratives provide new tools to justify longstanding forms of violence. The following sections presents the methodology and the materials selected for the analysis, to then provide a critical historical account of the unequal relations of power between Antigua and Barbuda, and the ways tourism came to be constitutive of the post-colonial nation state. This historical background is necessary to contextualise the violence of the trinomial post-Irma (Bonilla 2020; Villanueva & Cobián, 2019). The core of the article is the analysis of the processes that took place after Irma, with a focus on the use that government and private companies made of practices and narratives around climate change-related concepts to justify their interventions. The analysis shows that these practices and narratives continue a long tradition of colonial discursive and material violence aimed at accumulation by dispossession. As a counter narrative to these discourses, the following section highlights Barbudan resistance to extractive post-disaster tourism development, and a vision for an alternative tourism that is locally owned and rooted in self-determination, followed by some concluding remarks that point to the importance of self-determination in resisting the violent effects of colonial tourism development and

preserving local cultures and identities.

4.2 The Tourism-Disaster Capitalism-Colonialism Nexus

Disaster capitalism refers to the “deliberate exploitation of states of emergency to push through a radical pro-corporate agenda” (Klein, 2018, p. 45) and highlights how capitalism is based on structures that are premised upon and benefit from shocks to economic, environmental, and/or social systems (Rivera, 2020). The concept has enjoyed widespread success in both public discourse and academia as a useful analytical category to uncover the ways neoliberal capitalism exploits crises to sustain itself.

Research on the role of tourism in processes that can be framed as instances of disaster capitalism is extensive (Cohen, 2011; Gunewardena & Schuller, 2008; Klein, 2007; Loperena, 2017; Schuller & Maldonado, 2016; Timms, 2011; Wright et al., 2020). Tourism is a major global capital industry, particularly able to provide capital with temporal and/or spatial fixes (Harvey, 2004; Fletcher, 2011, 2025) and thus “a central means by which neoliberalization spreads” (Fletcher, 2025, p.2). Therefore, it is not surprising that the tourism industry is identified as a key actor in processes of disaster capitalism.

One of the most extensively analysed cases of interaction between tourism and disaster capitalism is that of the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean where the governments of Thailand, Sri Lanka, and India turned the destruction caused by the Tsunami into an opportunity to advance aggressive neoliberal reforms favouring tourism development, leading to the rewriting of coastal land into touristified landscapes, through the dispossession of local communities (Cohen, 2011; Gunewardena, 2008; Wright et al., 2020).

Climate change-related events that turn into disaster are increasingly providing the tourism industry with opportunities to expand through violent practices typical of disaster capitalism. The post Hurricane Mitch developments in Honduras are a well-analysed example of tourism development advanced through the exploitation of a disaster, in particular, through the establishment of new conservation sites to promote eco-tourism via forced relocation and dispossession of communities (Loperena 2017; Timms, 2011). This was achieved through swift pro-corporate legal reforms including the introduction of the possibility of sale of coastal land to foreigners, just two days after the hurricane (Loperena 2017, p. 622). Indeed, speed is a typical feature of disaster capitalism, exploiting emergency policy-making and prioritising neoliberal development, rather than recovery.

As a conceptual tool, disaster capitalism highlights the use State and Capital do of narratives and practices to obscure their actual motives (e.g., state control and capital accumulation via dispossession and touristification) and promote their interventions as necessary and benevolent (e.g., aid, reconstruction, resilience, climate adaptation). In addition, disaster capitalism suggests a shift of the meaning assigned to the concept of disaster: from the (sometimes natural) event to the post-disaster interventions. This finds support in empirical studies, such as in the case of post-tsunami Sri Lanka, where local fishermen, displaced and dispossessed by government-sponsored policies, framed these policies as a second and more destructive wave than that caused by the tsunami (Gunewardena, 2008, p. 73).

Despite these merits, as an analytical tool disaster capitalism has been critiqued for a lack of long term perspective and for an overfocus on the post-disaster context. As put by Yarimar Bonilla (2020), the shortcoming of certain applications of the concept is the failure to “show how it is the ‘slow violence’ of colonial and racial governance which sets the stage for the accelerated dispossession made evident in a state of emergency” (p.2). This failure is problematic, firstly because it prevents an appropriate appreciation of the dynamics that occur after an event that turns into a disaster, and most importantly because it neglects and, in a way, erases long histories of colonial violence.

Bonilla (2020) calls for disaster capitalism to be understood as foundationally a form of racio-colonial capitalism in order to avoid affording excessive explanatory power to the disaster as an event. The point is to recenter the focus on long-term processes that are instead key in determining what a post-disaster context looks like. Critical analyses of Puerto Rico in the context of 2017 Hurricane Irma show that the hurricane revealed and accelerated structural forms of violence and neglect rooted in colonial capitalism, but it did not cause them (Bonilla, 2020; Villanueva & Cobián, 2019). The concept of disaster *colonialism*, proposed by Rivera (2020) helps synthesise these arguments and emphasises how colonial capitalism relies on disasters for its own reproduction.

This calls for applications of disaster capitalism as an analytical lens to be accompanied by critical analyses of local histories. An historically informed perspective allows us to see that disaster capitalism is successful precisely *because* it can rely on long-standing “infrastructure[s] of extraction” (Villanueva and Cobián, 2019, para. 6) with states of

emergency justified by disrupting events enabling speed and acceleration. Importantly, Villanueva and Cobián (2019) also argue that as violence is *accelerated* but not *created* by disasters, also resistance to such violence can find new articulations in the aftermath of an event, but often finds its roots in old and long-standing apparatuses of resistance to colonial governance and its ongoing iterations.

The need to account for continuities and adopt an historically-informed approach to the analysis of disaster capitalism is made evident in the case of tourism. Tourism has historically been a means to the continuation of colonial relations of power into the postcolonial period. In the Caribbean context, for instance, numerous newly independent states directly transitioned from one form of dependency to another, that is from a plantation economy to a tourism plantation economy (Mei-Sing et al., 2024; Weaver, 1988), with essentially unchanged underlying socio-economic structures. The companies that own and develop tourism infrastructure are mostly foreign owned, often from the UK and USA, that is new and old colonial centres.

Tourism owners and developer of companies owning tourism These historical links between colonialism and tourism must be accounted for when employing disaster capitalism to analyse the role the tourism industry plays in post-disaster contexts.

Colonial capitalism not only reproduces through disasters, but it has itself been a disaster (Garcia Lopez, 2020; Kincaid, 1988) and the colonality of development, as a rendition of colonial capitalism continues to be a disaster that erases “different forms of (non-capitalist) living-being –and life in general” (Garcia Lopez, 2020, p. 2). Tourism development is to be understood as integral to the global neoliberal development project (Cruz, 2024) where “[h]ow to achieve development and so overcome underdevelopment becomes the fundamental problem facing most societies, and one where the ‘cure’ is envisaged in terms of modernisation through the agency of Western investment and aid.” (Bankoff, 2001, p.24). Indeed, in the name of development and modernisation, via touristification, non-capitalist ways of existing and relating are continuously destroyed to make space for corporate use of territories and the expansion of capitalist modes of production.

Tourism development is a significant force of neoliberal expansion, a key means to the “development” of former colonies, and a commodity mainly produced in former colonies and

consumed by old and new colonial centres. As such, tourism is an expression of colonial capitalism and shares a number of the latter's violent practices. It also relies on forms of violence typical of industries more commonly defined as extractive (e.g., mining, agrobusiness), which are in turn rooted in and shaped by colonial relations of power. These forms of violence include reliance on enclosures, overexploitation of natural resources, environmental degradation, repression of opposition, systematic natural resource expropriation, and dispossession (Loperena 2017; Ojeda, 2024). Some tourism development also shares striking similarities with plantation systems, as a specific type of extractive industry (Weaver, 1988), like the dominance of foreign ownership and management, the repatriation of profits, the seasonal nature of employment, the need for a large supply of "unskilled" labour - that is cheap racialised and gendered labour -, the responsiveness to external rather than internal socio-economic needs, and the production of spatial and socio-economic segregation.

In his seminal analysis of the political economy of tourism in former colonies, Britton (1982) demonstrates how tourism development constitutes a new form of dependency. This is largely due to the forces of the international division of labour with roots in the colonial expansion of capitalism, and colonial expansion of neoliberalism (Fletcher, 2025). Tourism is at the same time dependent upon and productive of "the structural violence inherent in the general patterns of spatially uneven development across the world" (Büscher & Fletcher, 2017, p.653; Cruz, 2024) and uneven access to mobilities (Sheller, 2009, 2018). Both uneven mobilities and uneven development are products of the capitalist mode of production, and of new and old forms of imperial and colonial violence.

Tourism is also a means for increased control over people and places, actively promoted by states not only for economic but also political interests (Ojeda, 2024). Tourism development can be imposed on marginalised people and places to dispossess them and incorporate them into the abstract space of state and neoliberal capital (Devine, 2017), thus erasing local political ecologies, cultures, and livelihoods, and increasing central states' capacity to control. This happens particularly along unequal relations of power and uneven geographies within nation states whose borders have been drawn according to colonial maps.

Tourism relies on violent structures proper of colonialism, both materially and epistemically. Discursively, the tourism industry relies upon colonial imaginaries that

essentialise places and people and enable their exploitation and dispossession. The imaginative geographies (Said, 1978) produced and marketed by the tourism industry, such as the pristine isolated and uninhabited island, find their “roots in an historical – and particularly colonial – geographic imaginary of ‘islandness’” (Kothari & Arnall, 2017, p. 986). Tourism relies upon and reproduces colonial tropes of the *terra nullius* e *terra incognita* (Kothari & Wilkinson, 2010), while imaginative geographies of uninhabited, virgin, pristine islands enabled colonial violence and are today appropriated by the tourism industry justifying accumulation by dispossession (Kothari & Wilkinson, 2010; Weatherill, 2023). Newly independent states have themselves resorted to colonial imaginative geographies that essentialise and erase people and places to market themselves as attractive tourist destinations (Kothari & Wilkinson, 2010).

These colonial tropes that justify and simultaneously obscure material forms of violence constitute a form of discursive violence. They erase the histories and complexities of people and places, and often, as in the case of the trope of uninhabited and untouched nature, which holds strong currency in tourism, the very existence of people inhabiting tourist destinations. They reproduce the euro-centric idea of “true” nature as untouched and devoid of human occupation, which is central to capitalist modes of accumulation (Greiner & Standop, 2026). This view of nature is for instance at the basis of the tourism conservation industry that routinely relies on dispossessions and forced relocation (Greiner & Standop, 2026; Loperena, 2017; Timms, 2011).

Material and imaginative violence go hand in hand, each reinforcing and justifying the other. Tourism imaginaries sourced directly from colonial imaginative geographies produce what Devine and Ojeda (2017) call a spatial fetish, that is, “an illusory space detached from the realities of its production” that hides the violence that both sustains and is produced by tourism development (*ibid*, p. 610). Tourism’s spatial fetishism relies on imaginative and material violence in order to maintain the tourist fantasy, and thus the industry’s profitability, simultaneously obscuring the various forms of violence that are required to advance tourism development.

In sum, tourism is both a legacy and a continuation of colonial violence, “an effective producer and reinforcer of uneven geographies, a constant recreator of colonial relations, a powerful locus of state power, a catalyser of racialised and gendered dispossession” (Ojeda,

2024, p.4). This violence is not only expressed and reproduced through tourism practices and narratives, but is inherent to the industry (Ibid), for it is difficult to think of touristification processes that do not rely upon or produce one or more of these forms of violence.

While the links between the three elements of the trinomial have been analysed more or less extensively, as shown by this literature review, the narratives around climate change (im)mobilities, uninhabitability, adaptation, and resilience, and the role they play in perpetuating tourism and disaster colonialism, remain less explored. This article focuses on tourism development stemming from disaster capitalism in the wake of a climatic event, and justified by the mobilization of narratives, imaginaries, and policies pertaining to (im)mobility, uninhabitability, adaptation, and resilience.

The impressive adaptability and flexibility of colonial discourses and practices is what has made them so effective (Kothari & Wilkinson, 2010). Climate change narratives provide this flexibility and adaptability to colonial capitalist discourses and practices, and are especially effective because of their consensual and post-political character (Farbotko, 2010; Swyngedouw, 2010). Indeed, dominant climate change imaginaries have a significant role in shaping a generalised post-political condition (Swyngedouw, 2010). The latter refers to the consensual framing (Ibid) that characterises climate change discourse, which strips climate change policy-making of the possibility for democratic dissensus. Mobilising climate change related concepts (e.g., uninhabitability, climate refugees, adaptation, resilience) to advance neoliberal agendas contributes to making them more easily acceptable, and even laudable, at least to the environmentally conscious “cosmopolitan gaze” (Farbotko, 2010, p. 58), which is that of many Western tourists. This makes tourism development marketed as sustainable, green, or contributing to climate resilience, particularly popular and easy to sell.

4.3 Methodology

To understand how climate (im)mobilities and uninhabitability relate to the progression of tourism, disaster capitalism, and colonialism, it is useful to focus on the weaving of narratives around these and other climate change-related concepts; and on how these narratives dialectically relate (Fairclough, 2013) to practices in disaster management, tourism development, and climate adaptation. A critical discourse analysis focused on how these key concepts are mobilised by hegemonic actors can reveal how the latter are able “to assert certain ‘truths’ about what climate change is, what problems it presents, and how these

problems can be addressed” (Grove, 2015, p. 181), and what effects this has in terms of material outcomes. The article employs critical discourse analysis as “an analytical practice” to uncover “the way social-power abuse and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimated, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context.” (Van Dijk, 2015, p. 466). Specifically, CDA is conducive to the interrogation of narratives and frames around resilience and adaptation in the disaster context and of their performative uses to advance a neoliberal agenda, revealing whose interests are advanced and whose interests are negated (Janks, 1997; Van Hulst et al., 2025).

The analysis focuses on speeches by central government officials and private companies conducting tourism development in Barbuda. This is to include both state and capital actors, as they are the dominant actors in the progression of tourism and disaster colonialism (Gunewardena & Schuller, 2008; Klein 2018). The focus of the analysis is on the mobilization of colonial tropes to justify and market tourism development; and on climate-change related images and ideas of climate change (im)mobilities, uninhabitability, adaptation, and resilience for the same purpose. The materials taken into account focus on the period starting from the aftermath of hurricane Irma, although, when relevant to the argument, materials include instances of previous speeches. This is necessary in view of the need of adopting a long-term perspective that allows to properly understand the continuities of violence (Bonilla, 2020; Villanueva and Cobián, 2019). Also to this end, a historical overview of tourism development in Antigua and Barbuda and of the relations between the two islands is included in the following section in order to appropriately contextualise the materials and their analysis. To provide an account of the historical role of tourism in Antigua, I refer to secondary sources and local literature, in particular to the work of Antiguan writer Jamaica Kincaid. The focus on private companies’ speeches is limited to the three main companies involved in the development of Barbuda Ocean Club (BOC), the major (in terms of size and impact on the island and community) development project in Barbuda post Irma. Finally, the materials include interviews (audiorecorded, anonymised, and transcribed verbatim) with key Barbudan informants (i.e., environmental experts, and members of the Barbuda Council) and field notes from participant observations from two periods of fieldwork conducted in Barbuda from April to June 2024, and from March to May 2025. The inclusion of interviews is aimed to provide an account of bottom-up narratives that

contest official and external accounts of the disaster and its management, resilience and adaptation. Highlighting not only the violence of disaster colonialism but, equally, the resistance against it is crucial to avoid reproducing an image of affected people as helpless victims. This is not only inaccurate but reinforces harmful stereotypes of vulnerability, that are in turn key to the depoliticisation of climate change, development, and disaster governance, and to their performative uses to advance agendas aimed at dispossession and control. In addition, a focus on resistance and its long-standing character further elucidates the deep roots of the connections between colonialism, disaster capitalism, and tourism (Villanueva and Cobián, 2019). The fieldwork also included attendance at the 2024 United Nations Small Island Developing States (SIDS) Conference held in Antigua in May 2024, which represented an opportunity to collect further insights on institutional discourses on Barbuda's development and climate adaptation.

4.4 Historical Background: Plantation Legacies, Tourism, and Post-Colonial Power Asymmetries

As pointed out above, the violence of disaster capitalism does not happen in a vacuum, it is instead the continuation of longstanding forms of structural violence with roots in colonial relations of power and their legacies. This section provides the historical background necessary for a proper understanding of the processes that have been occurring in Barbuda since Hurricane Irma. It focuses firstly on the role tourism played as a continuation of plantation colonialism in postcolonial Antigua and, secondly, on the position of marginalization and dependence that was imposed on Barbuda with respect to its sister island, leaving it vulnerable to various forms of violence at the hand of central state institutions and foreign capital interests.

4.4.1 From Plantation to Tourism: Antigua's Postcolonial Economy

The Commonwealth nation of Antigua and Barbuda consists of two main islands: Antigua, which hosts the majority of the population (around 90,000), as well as the country's central state institutions; and Barbuda, a smaller island with a population of approximately 2,000 people. Tourism accounts for more than 50% of Antigua and Barbuda's GDP and around 46% of total employment (The Commonwealth, n.d.).

During British colonial rule, Antigua was characterised by a plantation system focused

on sugarcane crops. As the sugar industry became progressively less profitable and tourism grew globally, Antigua transitioned from a sugar-based economy to one increasingly dependent on tourism (Lightfoot, 2020; Weaver, 1988). This shift began approximately in the 1940s and was complete by the 1970s, when crop-land accounted for less than 7%, and an ever increasing number of hotels and resorts lined Antiguan coasts (Baldwin, 2005; Coram, 1993; Weaver, 1988). With the transition towards tourism “the core-periphery structure and the plantation system [has] remained substantially intact, resulting in a tourist industry that perpetuates underdevelopment” (Weiner, 1988, p.320).

Antigua is today a fully touristified landscape. The island promotes itself as having 365 beaches, one for every day of the year, and the local registration plates sport the slogan “land of the sea and sun”. The unregulated and ever-expanding tourism development in Antigua revealed its contradictions early on. These included high levels of environmental degradation (e.g., the destruction of mangroves, wetlands, and beaches due to sand mining for construction purposes and beach nourishment, free sewage dumping, loss of wildlife), widespread corruption, undistributed socio-economic benefits, and spatial segregation (Baldwin, 2005; Kincaid, 1988; Weaver 1988).

Antiguan author Jamaica Kincaid wrote one of the sharpest critiques of postcolonial tourism, in her 1988 book *A Small Place*. Kincaid (1988) captures the contradictions inherent to tourism, describing the (ignored) cognitive dissonance a North American tourist must experience arriving in Antigua. The separation between spaces of leisure and of work, which structures tourism and reflects the processes of alienation typical of capitalism (Lefebvre, 1991), means that the tourist travels to escape “banality and boredom” turning those of locals, who are too poor to escape their own, into a pleasure for himself (Kincaid, 1988, p.19). To protect this escapism, the tourist has to ignore all the environmental and climate externalities that characterise the tourism industry. He must at all costs avoid thinking that “the contents of [his] lavatory might, just might, graze gently against [his] ankle as [he] wade carefree in the water, for you see, in Antigua, there is no proper sewage-disposal system” (p.14). The tourist must avoid thinking about the fact that a tourism-dependent place like Antigua is unable to provide the goods required by the industry (Baldwin, 2005; Britton, 1982; Weaver 1988). In the same fashion, the local food the tourist craves on arrival will probably not be local at all. It will have come from a place like Miami, where it first got to from another place, more

similar to Antigua (Kincaid, 1988, p. 14).

Kincaid also lays bare the racialised spatial and socio-economic segregation produced by tourism development, a kind of development that is designed to keep racialised locals in low-waged jobs, and unable to access the beaches where they used to gather the “best wilks in the world” (p. 57), reproducing exploitation and dispossession. Tourism transformed spaces Antiguan could once access freely into spaces they can now only access as servants and “[p]eople can recite the name of the first Antiguan (black person) to eat a sandwich at the clubhouse and the day on which it happened” (p. 27). Kincaid's sharp analysis reveals how, in tourism-dominated economies, underdevelopment and dependence are not accidental, but by design, “for an institution that is often celebrated in Antigua is the Hotel Training School, a school that teaches Antiguan how to be good servants” (p.55); and how these dependence and underdevelopment are legacies of colonialism and the plantation system, highlighting the inherent relationships “between their [Antiguans’] obsession with slavery and emancipation and their celebration of the Hotel Training School” and “between their [Antiguans’] obsession with slavery and emancipation and the fact that they are governed by corrupt men, or that these corrupt men have given their country away to corrupt foreigners” (p. 55).

The corrupt men Kincaid refers to are Antiguan political and economic elites, and specifically Vere Bird, his sons, and his party, the Antigua and Barbuda Labour Party (ABLP) (until 2014, only the Antigua Labour Party). The ABLP controlled the national government for the virtual integrity of the existence of the state (since 1967, with only a five-year exception in the 70s and a ten-year one in the early 2000s) and has always been a fierce promoter of tourism development as *the* road to modernisation, development, and economic growth. Like his predecessors (the Birds’ political dynasty), current ALBP prime minister Gaston Browne (in government since 2014) equates tourism development with good economic performance, more and better employment opportunities, and with his government’s legitimacy.

The ABLP has always been characterised by a laissez faire and conservative political economic approach, significantly directed to safeguarding foreign capital and local elite’s interests (Baldwin, 2005; Coram, 1993). In 1951, the first hotel aid act was introduced establishing tax exemptions and free repatriation of profits for foreign investors (Baldwin, 2005, p. 226). The Antigua International Business Corporation Act (1982) established the

possibility to register a tax exempt company in the country, contributing to transforming Antigua into a fiscal heaven. The Citizenship by Investment Act (2013) essentially allows foreigners to buy an Antiguan and Barbudan passport through donations to the national development fund, or investments in real estate.

The case of Antigua is not uncommon in the Caribbean, which has seen a trend of increasing neoliberal reforms characterised by privatization and deregulation (Sheller, 2009) and the flourishing of “new forms of tax-free low-wage export processing, and new forms of real estate and luxury property development” (ibid, p. 190), with tourism development being a central driver of both. This political economy approach favours local elite and foreign capital’s interests while reproducing colonial relations of power and underdevelopment (Weiver, 1988), and represents a shrinking of the “sovereignty of the state relative to capital” (Klack, 1998, p. 15, as cited in Sheller, 2009, p. 193).

Tourism development and state-making in Antigua have historically gone hand in hand, and continue to do so today with the Browne administration. Tourism in Antigua and Barbuda is an example of what Ojeda (2024) describes as an everyday geopolitical project “reenacting colonialism, materialising racialised and gendered dispossession, and turning people, places, and their histories into highly desired commodities” (p.1). Tourism development is a powerful tool in the hands of private corporations and the state to advance their interests, spanning from capital accumulation to increased state control; it provides a means for the inclusion of places and people into the abstract spaces (Devine, 2017; Lefebvre, 1991; Wilson, 2013) of state and capital, violently erasing ways of existing and inhabiting that have so far resisted capitalism's reach.

4.4.2 The Post-Colonial State and the Struggle for Land Rights in Barbuda

Unlike Antigua, Barbuda’s colonial history is not marked by the plantation economy, since its geomorphological characteristics made it unsuitable for sugarcane cultivation. The history of the island is tied to that of the Codringtons, a British family of plantation owners, who used it as a provision ground for their Antiguan estates. After emancipation in 1834, the Codringtons completely left Barbuda and, as some residents explained to me in unrecorded conversations, Barbudans were left as abandoned assets and had to survive on the resources the island provided (fieldnotes). In this context, they implemented a common land tenure

system, which became constitutive of Barbudan culture⁸. Despite continuous attacks from the central Antiguan government, the common land tenure system is still in place today.

As the sugar industry declined, Antigua transitioned to a tourism economy, while Barbuda was interested by just a few and small scale tourism developments. To this day, most of the local population works in small-scale fishing and agriculture, is employed in the public sector, or is self-employed. In 1981, Antigua and Barbuda became an independent nation state, despite rising tensions between Antiguan elites, seeking to gain economic control via touristification over Barbuda, and the Barbudan people. Barbudans repeatedly expressed to the British their refusal of a unitary state with Antigua (Jobson, 2024), arguing that Antiguan elites wanted “sovereign rights over the lands and beaches of the Island (i.e., Barbuda), and in the name of “Development” make land deals with enterprising foreigners, and use the money obtained to swell their bank balances in overseas secret accounts” (quoted in Coram, 1993, p. 99). The formation of a twin island state is to be understood as a legacy of the joined colonial administration of the two islands by the British colonial administration (Barbuda Extension of Laws of Antigua Act, 1860; Barbudan Ordinance, 1904) aimed at increased efficiency and effectiveness of British colonial control in the region (fieldnotes; Lightfoot, 2020). Indeed, in a 1981 British parliamentary debate, an MP acknowledged that the relationship between the two islands was artificially imposed by the colonial power in disregard of the claims of the Barbudan people (Hansard, 1981, cc 514-531).

Barbudans’ fears were wellfounded, as Antiguan political and economic elites have systematically abused their power within the state apparatus to exploit the island’s natural resources for private gain (e.g., sand-mining), and to withhold Barbuda’s access to financial resources, effectively placing it in a relation of dependence with Antigua (Baldwin, 2005; Berleant-Schiller et al., 1995; Coram, 1993; Tweedy, 1981). Continuous threats to dismantle the common land tenure system have periodically been advanced by the various prime ministers despite the constitutionally entrenched Local Government Act (1976), which recognised a significant degree of self-governance to the island, to be administered by the democratically elected Barbuda Council. In 2007, the Barbuda Land Act (BLA) enshrined the common land tenure system into law, establishing that the whole land of the island was commonly held by its people and forbidding its sale. Major development projects in Barbuda

⁸ For an analysis of the relationship between land and culture in relation to processes of transplantation and indigenisation in the Caribbean context see Wynter, n.d.

had to be approved by the democratically elected Barbuda Council through public vote. However, the act was not entrenched in the constitution, remaining vulnerable to amendments and repeal that, as we shall see, political actors were ready to pursue when the opportunity arose.

4.5 Post-Irma Barbuda: Disaster as Opportunity for Colonial Tourism Expansion

4.5.1 “The time has come to bring Barbuda into the 21st century”

Hurricane Irma created the opportunity for the intensification of the systematic attacks to Barbuda’s self-determination, and for the acceleration of the government’s plan to introduce a private property system and advance aggressive tourism and real estate development on the island. On September 7th, the day after Irma, the central government declared a state of emergency and issued a mandatory evacuation order declaring Barbuda uninhabitable. With the pretext of human security concerns, the whole population of the island was displaced to Antigua. Barbudans recalled that those who refused to leave were forced to do so at gunpoint by the defense force brought over from Antigua to manage the emergency (fieldnotes). Barbudans were prevented from returning home for over two months, while their belongings were left to rot and their animals to die. During this time, they were allowed to travel to Barbuda for just a couple of hours at the time in order to salvage what they could from their homes. When the continuation of a state of emergency could no longer be justified, the government stymied Barbudans’ return home through a series of deliberate obstacles and delays⁹. What happened in the very first weeks after Irma, and in the following months, is an example of the ability of state and capital to transform ““crisis” into opportunity, demonstrating yet again the importance of disaster for the maintenance [and expansion] of contemporary configurations of neoliberal capitalism.” (Loperena, 2017, p. 630). Post-political (Swyngedouw, 2010) narratives around climate change (im)mobilities and uninhabitability, resilience and adaptation provided additional support to justify the government’s post-hurricane choices.

⁹ e.g., the unjustified delay to the resume of educational activities, and threats of legal prosecution to parents that refused to bring their children back to Antiguan schools after the Christmas break; the refusal to set polling stations in Barbuda for January 2018 national elections, under the claim that there was no proper infrastructure; the delay of the recovery of the Barbudan fisheries, the backbone of the local economy, through bureaucratic obstacles and through the occupation of the fisheries complex building by the defense force from September 2017 to September 2018 (fieldnotes).

In the very first days after the hurricane, while Barbudans were forcibly displaced in Antigua, construction for a new international airport began without the community's consent. Speed is a typical characteristic in practices of disaster capitalism, and "[m]ajor crises not only set the stage for extractivist forms of tourism, but also serve as conjectural moments when people are unable to defend against extractivism" (Loperena, 2017, p. 622). To take advantage of the community's physical absence and inability for organised resistance, the works for the new airport were initiated in a hurry and lacked an environmental impact assessment (EIA). This led to the need to abandon the first selected site, which coincided with a network of underground caves, and was thus unable to sustain the infrastructure. However, the whole area had been cleared out, destroying the habitat of local fauna and flora, and an environment used by Barbudans for a number of cultural and livelihood activities, including hunting, foraging, and leisure. Construction at the second and definitive site continued at sustained speed in the months after the hurricane. Barbudans who had returned to the island recall seeing lights and hearing machinery operating throughout the night at a time where power had not yet been restored (fieldnotes). While Barbudans, labeled as climate refugees, were forcibly displaced from their homes and community, workers, investors, and the military were all allowed to stay on a supposedly uninhabitable island to secure tourism development, revealing the performative use of climate change related labels.

Mobility infrastructures and those controlling them determine the flows of tourism mobilities (Sheller, 2009). "Antigua's nascent tourism industry gained an early comparative advantage over its neighbors when, in 1951, the US Navy granted commercial airlines the use of a modern air field" (Baldwin, 2005, p. 226). The construction of an international airport with a 1,900-metre runway, an aviation services firm to handle private jets (Gruenbaum, 2021), and capable of accommodating 20 aircrafts on an island with low tourism development represents the first step of a design to turn Barbuda into a Disneyland for the ultra wealthy.

Peace, Love, and Happiness (PLH), the owner company of the Barbuda Ocean Club, contributed a significant amount of money to the construction of the airport, and the keys to the terminal are held by PLH project manager, Justin Wilshaw (fieldnotes). A few days after the official opening of the airport, Wilshaw stated that there are plans to expand the airport's capacity. He also suggested that the Barbuda Council should cooperate with PLH, given the

company's significant contribution to the local economy in the form of jobs (ABSTV Antigua, 2024). Grounded in the assumption that Barbudans are destitute and in need of employment, this narrative—which echoes the one proposed by the PM and the ABLP—implies that foreign companies' ability to offer jobs, no matter the quality of the labour conditions, should be sufficient for locals to be welcoming and even grateful. When Barbudans initiated a legal action against the construction of the new airport, Browne called them imbeciles, ignorant, and destructive, because they were undermining “a much needed infrastructural project to improve the economic prospects of Barbuda” (Pressly, 2019), and threatened to dismantle the Barbuda Council and the 1976 Local Government Act (Derrick, 2019).

After Irma, the government made explicit its intention to turn Barbuda into an elite tourism destination, a “low density, green and organic island”, and a “Jumby bay on steroids”¹⁰ (Michael, 2023). These plans for the future of the island are routinely presented in conjunction with the need to effectively dismantle the common land system and to include Barbuda into the national land registry. The argument of the government is that Barbudan lands are crown lands and therefore, since 1981, belong to the state, dismissing Barbudans' claims to their traditional common ownership as “nonsensical arguments” (Mohammed, 2023). Just weeks after the hurricane, the BLA was amended, and eventually repealed in May 2018. The introduction of private property, which had been on the Antiguan state's agenda for decades, could now be presented not only as necessary for modernisation, economic growth, and “development”, but also as a tool for reconstruction and recovery, and even for increased future climate resilience.

In the aftermath of Irma, Browne, while reassuring that “Antigua is actually open for the business”, described Barbuda as a war zone, uninhabited and uninhabitable, and Barbudan “climate refugees” as putting a “a serious strain on public resources” forcing his government to be “running a big welfare system” (CBC Radio, 2017). The emphasis placed on the economic toll that taking care of Barbudans had on the treasury continues a long-standing narrative that describes Barbudans as lazy, squatters, and backwards, incapable and in need of being modernised and developed (fieldnotes); and of the common land tenure system as a hindrance to economic growth and resilience. To address these issues, Browne

¹⁰Jumby Bay is a 300-acre private, luxury island two miles off the coast of Antigua.

proposed that Barbudans paid a symbolic one EC dollar price for the land they already occupied and receive a title deed on that land. While some Barbudans welcomed the proposal as an opportunity to access credit, most found it to be an attack on their culture and self-determination, especially offensive at a time of collective trauma (fieldnotes). The government advertised the initiative as a means for economic empowerment and climate resilience, as the title deed would enable Barbudans to place their land as collateral for loans needed for reconstruction. When Barbudans successfully boycotted the initiative, Browne stated that it was time to bring Barbuda into the 21st century (Derrick, 2018), arguing that the government had no responsibility for reconstruction, and that Barbudans opposing the one dollar deal were not “taking any responsibility for their own negligence” as they “failed to insure their properties”. This displacement of responsibility onto individuals who need to be agents of resilience through neoliberal tools such as credit and insurance is typical of the depoliticization of climate change politics (Bettini, 2013; Grove, 2014). The framings of Barbuda’s common land tenure system as an hindrance to development, and of Barbudans’ continuous struggle for self-determination as a menace, intensified after Irma but were not new. The Paradise Found (Project) Bill introduced by Browne’s government in 2015 is an ad hoc law to ensure the implementation of a tourism development project in Barbuda. The memorandum attached to the bill states that its aim is to provide Parliamentary approval to an agreement signed between the Government and Paradise Found LLC on “a very large tourism development project in Barbuda”, and that the bill became “necessary as efforts to implement the project have been stymied by maneuverings of persons in Barbuda” (Paradise Found Bill, 2015 p. 12). “Maneuverings” refers to a legal action initiated by some Barbudan citizens contesting that the approval of the project had not been carried out in accordance with the provisions of the BLA, which the memorandum dismisses as “technicalities”. The act is essentially a long list of tax exemptions, and other privileges afforded to the company. Most importantly, the bill exempts the Paradise Found project from the provisions of the BLA, which at the time had not been repealed, because the BLA was not “investor-friendly” (p. 12). Despite the project being based on a lease agreement, what the bill provides for is effectively a land sale: a rent of USD 5.2 million prepaid to the Government of Antigua and Barbuda to cover the first 99 years foreseen by the lease (with the possibility of a 50 years extension), an amount probably comparable to the one fat sheep/year paid by the Codringtons

during colonialism. The 2015 Bill is an ad hoc act passed by the Parliament to turn into law an agreement between the government and a US corporation owned by “American movie icon, Robert De Niro and Australian billionaire, James Packer” (p.12) with the stated aim of ignoring locals’ legitimate opposition, and of going around the BLA. The central state’s imperative is tourism development and profiting at all costs, while local concerns for environmental rights, self-determination, local culture, and wellbeing are dismissed as hindrances.

4.5.2 Climate Resilience for Whom? Tourism Development and Environmental Dispossession

Sand mining was the first extractive industry in Barbuda before tourism. Sand mining operations began in 1979 at Palmetto Point on the southwest coast of the island. They were carried out by a company owned and controlled by Lester Bird, at the time Minister of Economic Development, Tourism, and Energy and later Prime Minister (Baldwin, 2005; Coram 1993). Barbudan sand was needed for tourism development in Antigua and neighbouring islands, both for construction purposes and to mitigate beach erosion (Baldwin, 2005; Coram, 1993). In 1994, Barbuda was the single most significant source of sand in all of the Eastern Caribbean (Baldwin, 2005, p. 233). Barbudans never received the benefits of sand mining, which instead yielded astonishing profits for the company’s owners. A few Barbudans were employed in the industry, performing some of the first waged labour on the island which, in the 70s, was still mostly reliant on subsistence and on a moral economy of exchange (fieldnotes). The environmental destruction caused by sand mining at Palmetto Point compromised an important aquifer on a fresh water scarce island, and destroyed the sand dunes that acted as a natural protection against storm surges and storms. This is particularly important because, due to its location, the Palmetto Point peninsula itself plays a protective role for the Codrington Village, and the sand dunes improved this protective capacity.

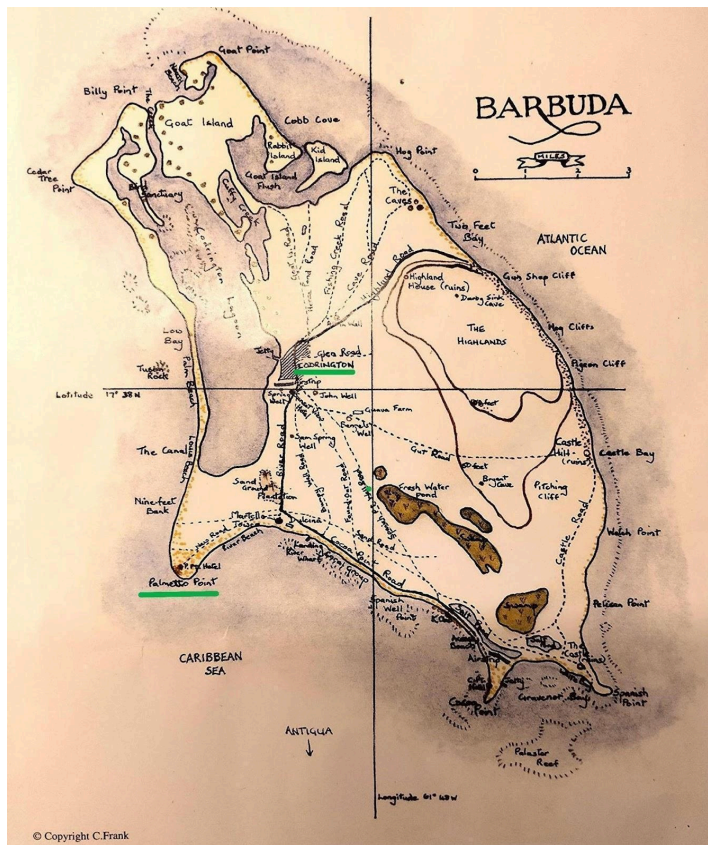


Figure 2: The map shows how the Palmetto Peninsula constitutes a natural protection for the Codrington Village, shielding it from storms and storm surges coming from the Caribbean Sea. Source: courtesy and copyright of Claire Frank.

After Irma, the environmental damage caused by decades of sand mining was leveraged by PLH and Discovery Land Company (DLC), owner and developer of BOC, which includes a golf course and a luxury private residential community at Palmetto Point. These companies, in concert with the government, weaved a narrative that framed their interventions as sustainable development, including the restoration of the sand dunes, and thus a contribution to climate adaptation and resilience.

Deborah Brosnan & Associates, which carried out the EIAs for BOC, is a consulting company that provides “elite scientific insight and practical solutions to some of the world’s most complex challenges, *from disaster-prone coastlines to multi-billion-dollar sustainable developments*”, “turning risks into opportunities” to “enhance *nature, community and profit* providing a science-based win-win solution” (Deborah Brosnan & Associates, n.d.) [emphasis added]. The company advertised its intervention at Palmetto Point as a successful

implementation of nature-based solutions that managed to restore the sand dunes destroyed by sand mining. Because, starting in the 1990s, sand-mining at Palmetto point was managed by the Barbuda Council, the latter, and per extension Barbudans, are often blamed for the destruction of the sand dunes, and framed as poor environmental stewards of their island (Office of The Prime Minister Antigua and Barbuda, 2020). The framing of local communities as an environmental threat is a common discursive tool to justify external management and interventions, and accumulation by dispossession, in the name of sustainability (Loperena, 2017). This narrative erases the history of extraction and dependence that characterised the relations between Antigua and Barbuda, while providing new grounds for continued dispossession.

While Brosnan highlights the importance of beach and sand systems restoration because “this is what tourists want” (fieldnotes), these spaces are relevant to locals beyond their capacity to provide revenues and employment through tourism development. Beaches represent culturally relevant places, sources of livelihoods, and protection from environmental and climate hazards. Numerous Barbudans report that the developments at Palmetto Point contributed to dispossession and environmental degradation (fieldnotes). They argue that the sand dunes were not restored, and highlight the problems that come with maintaining a large golf course on a dry island. Local environmental experts are pointing to the spilling of chemical products required to maintain the grass green into the Codrington lagoon. The lagoon is a breeding ground for fishes and lobsters, therefore crucial to both wildlife and to economic and food security. In the words of a local activist and environmental expert:

“These resources provide us with our food security. They also provide us with our resilience in terms of being able to withstand some of the climate change consequences like sea level rise and greater storms. So it's a double tragedy in the sense that we are being exploited and left in a more vulnerable situation.” (interview n.27).

The PLH-owned development is perceived by many in the community as an example of classic extractive tourism, because locals receive no benefits, beyond volatile employment, and are left to deal with the significant environmental impacts (fieldnotes). In a typical

dynamic of disaster capitalism, state-sanctioned tourism development promoted as reconstruction, recovery, and resilience, actually leaves people and places more vulnerable, compounding the effects of a destructive event like Hurricane Irma.

During the 2024 United Nations Small Island Developing States (SIDS) Conference held in Antigua in May 2024, Brosnan and the Government of Antigua and Barbuda organised a panel on nature-based solutions and their benefits for SIDS. At the end of his speech, PM Browne pointed to the presence in the audience of members of the Barbuda Council, and other residents of Barbuda, inviting all external guests to refrain from believing their claims that his government is not environmentally responsible (fieldnotes). The room was filled with Barbudan activists and members of Council who—in a clear example of systemic injustice in the form of barriers to meaningful participation in climate forums (Sultana, 2025)—had to arrange their own attendance to the conference as they were not invited in their official capacity (fieldnotes). This is but one example of the deliberate exclusion and obstacles to self-determination that Barbudans have been continuously forced to deal with in order to have their rights respected and claims heard. Development interventions, framed as contributing to sustainable development and climate security, and thus easily justified, are part of a long-standing plan to engulf Barbuda into a neoliberal national economy premised on, often foreign-owned, tourism and real estate development. They are just the continuation of an effort to extract profits out of a place and a people who have continued to resist the ongoing attacks on their culture and right to self-determination.

4.5.3 Barbuda: a Private Paradise

The BOC “comprises two enclaves, Coco Point, and Palmetto Point each featuring an exquisite collection of exclusive amenities weaved among island-inspired residencies” (Barbuda Ocean Club, n.d.). Enclave tourism is premised upon the production of a spatial fetish (Devine & Ojeda, 2017) and a type of spatial segregation that echoes that of the colony (Kothari & Wilkinson 2010). Often marketed as an “opportunity to own a ‘piece of paradise’” (Kothari & Wilkinson 2010, p.1407), enclaves are designed so that tourists never have to exit them during their stay, requiring large infrastructures, which produce spatial segregation, dispossession, and environmental degradation.

The BOC development is having enormous impacts on the local community, apart from environmental destruction, dispossession, and spatial segregation. Workers’ mobilities to

Barbuda from Antigua and other Caribbean islands roughly doubled the number of people living on the island. This population increase not only adds strain on the environmental resources and capacity of the island, but has contributed to major changes to the life of Barbudans. These changes happened right after Irma, when Barbudans were struggling with rebuilding their lives and regaining normalcy, with negative impacts on ontological security. Drug availability, prostitution, alcohol consumption, and instances of violent crime all rose on the island (fieldnotes). Numerous Barbudans experience these changes as threats to their culture and way of life, and some perceive them as part of a designed effort to weaken the community's identity and cohesion, hence their capacity for resistance (fieldnotes).

On the BOC website (Barbuda Ocean Club, n.d.), Barbuda is portrayed as devoid of inhabitants, reproducing all the tropes of the island paradise escape: the pristine, uninhabited, exotic island; the images and words used to market the development include no reference to the people of Barbuda or to the village of Codrington. A whole page on the website is entitled "Barbuda lifestyle" and includes photos of empty beaches and white people drinking cocktails. The overwriting and discursive violence of erasing the people of Barbuda and their culture, and rewriting the island as a playground for the white ultra rich is a clear example of the enduring colonial geographical imagination that underlies tourism. While claiming that BOC's "residencies aim to blend seamlessly into the casual island lifestyle", the architectural choices of the PLH development could not be further from those typical of Barbuda, just like the activities proposed to entertain the villa owners have nothing to do with Barbuda lifestyle. For instance, the Palmetto Point development includes three-stories *casitas* built few meters from the shore, while in Barbuda, the virtual totality of dwellings have only a ground floor and Barbudans do not build so close to the water, knowing the risks this entails.

"It is very destructive. They put these big homes up there. They put a golf course. Nobody in Barbuda plays golf. [...] The golf course wasn't designed for us. And how many acres of land we give away just for something we can never go on unless we walk with a golf bag for somebody else or we work on the golf course to keep it green so they can enjoy it. That is the sadness of this type of development." (interview n.28)

The only mention of the community on the website reduces it to a vulnerable and

incapable victim in need of external aid and development, also fostering a language based on adaptation and resilience which further legitimize the intervention:

“BOC is committed to restoring and preserving the island's fragile ecosystem as well as assisting the development of its infrastructure and revitalising its economy. Working alongside hundreds of Barbudans, our ongoing goals focus on rebuilding the island community, enhancing the island resiliency, and fostering sustainability.” (Barbuda Ocean Club, n.d.)

Emphasising the island’s economic and environmental fragility to justify PLH’s development is nothing new. “[T]ropicality, development and vulnerability form part of one and the same essentialising and generalising cultural discourse that denigrates large regions of the world as disease-ridden, poverty-stricken and disaster-prone.” (Bankoff, 2001, p. 19). Narratives built around concepts of sustainability and climate resilience continue the long tradition of colonial tropes crafted to justify foreign interventions aimed at accumulation.



Figure 3: Palmetto Point as it is represented on the Barbuda Ocean Club website, a private playground. Source: <https://barbudaoceanclub.com/real-estate>. Accessed 28 October, 2023.



Figure 4: The BOC map of Barbuda erasing the existence of the community. A comparison with Figure 1 makes clear the discursive violence enacted by this map, where local toponomastics and geographies are erased and rewritten in a way that supports the private island fantasy. Source: <https://barbudaoceancub.com/about>. Accessed 15 January, 2026.

BOC is a “Discovery Land Company Community”, which “is a US based real estate developer and operator of private residential club communities and resorts with a world renowned portfolio of domestic and international properties” (Barbuda Ocean Club, n.d.), as well as a renowned portfolio of legal actions and opposition from local communities who suffer the impacts of their violent development on local environments, political ecologies, and ways of life (Heasman, 2023). The name of the company itself references the colonial myth of land discovery, and the tropes of terra nullius and incognita, used to justify colonial conquest and genocide.

The development is marketed as providing an “escape to a private paradise in the eastern Caribbean“, where future villa owners are invited to explore “*miles of raw* white and pink beaches” [emphasis added] and “spend time just how [they] like with the people who matter most to [them]” in private residences “designed to be treasured by [their] family for generations” (Barbuda Ocean Club, n.d.). While the private residences are doubtfully designed to be treasured for generations, given that they are built on some of the areas of the

island most exposed to extreme climate and weather events, what this type of language reveals is the segregational and dispossessing reality of tourism development. This violence is sharply explained by a resident:

“They're stopping us from our resources. What we used to enjoy, we no longer can enjoy [...]. They're taking our best prime land that we used to enjoy and making it so that we can't go and enjoy it or let our children enjoy it. But they can come and buy it, enjoy it, and their children enjoy it, and their friends enjoy it, but we, who it belongs to, can never go and enjoy it.” (interview n.14).

The BOC website announces that “the new international airport is now open! With a 6100 foot runway it can accommodate nearly any size of private aircraft providing families and guests with a seamless arrival experience to our warm and welcoming island” (Barbuda Ocean Club, n.d.). While the environmental and participatory injustice produced by the construction of the airport has already been pointed out, significant issues of mobility and climate justice are also raised. Locals can move in and out of the island with the usual flights that already operated before the opening of the new airport, or through the ferry service. While both services operate daily, they are highly dependent on weather conditions and therefore not very reliable, and both are relatively expensive. A round trip by ferry costs 100 US dollars, while the price for a round trip by plane used to be around 175 US dollars, but has increased since the opening of the new airport and is now at 220 US dollars. Therefore, Barbudans’ access to mobility has not improved since the opening of the new international airport, while the ultra rich, who could already access the BOC through a private helicopter landing pad, can now also fly in on their private planes, on an airstrip built exclusively for them.

4.6 Resisting Colonial Violence: Community, Common Land, and Self-Determination

Barbuda’s resistance against extractive and colonial tourism development and tourism dependency is rooted in the community’s longstanding struggle for self-determination and the continuation of their traditional land tenure system and livelihood practices. Overreliance on tourism is identified as one of the most common problems affecting many tourism destinations (Fletcher et al., 2023). Barbuda has so far been able to avoid such overreliance

for its economic sustainability, a rare case in the Caribbean context. Barbudans have historically been self-reliant and able to support their community through common and sustainable uses of the island's resources. Farming, hunting, and fishing are all livelihood practices Barbudans strive to preserve and invest in, on a par with tourism, to sustain and ensure local wellbeing, income opportunities, and continued collective cultural identities. The next interview extract by a local farmer elucidates how preserving diversified livelihood practices is crucial to both the protection of local culture, and to continued economic sustainability, against a dependence on jobs provided by a foreign owned tourism industry, which would leave Barbudans less resilient and more vulnerable to violence, including exploitation and dispossession.

“Me a farmer, me can go home now and dig potatoes and beets and bring them here [to the village, for sale]. People have the land, we need to protect the land and fight for the land. Me burn coal, make use of Barbuda nature. Some of them go at sea and get them fish and they take them to the village, and everybody just buys and enjoys it. So we wanna keep on, so that when the [new] generation comes they can carry on. If the children change, people [can] come here and steal and we become slaves in our own country.” (interview n.10)

Behind the claimed contributions to sustainability and resilience, the tourism development analysed in this article is but an instance of neoliberal expansion into an “untapped” Caribbean island.

“If you look at Barbuda, versus the rest of the Caribbean islands: we have 62 square miles with only 2,000 people. So we have all these beaches everywhere, which are not developed. So there's a push for development.” (interview n.28)

The myth of the empty island works in favour of extractive tourism development in two ways: is attractive for investors, who see it as an underutilised resource to be put to profit, providing the perfect environment for spatio-temporal fixes (Harvey, 2004; Fletcher, 2025); and, at the same time, it plays into the private island paradise fantasy that can be sold to

tourists. Processes of primitive accumulation and accumulation by dispossession include the commodification and privatization of land; the conversion of various forms of property rights—common, collective, state, etc.—into exclusive private property rights; suppression of rights to the commons; commodification of labour power and the suppression of alternative, indigenous, forms of production and consumption; colonial and imperial processes of appropriation of assets (Harvey, 2004). As pointed out by Harvey, “[t]he state, with its monopoly of violence and definitions of legality, plays a crucial role in both backing and promoting these processes” (2004, p.74). The central Antiguan government is threatening Barbuda with all the above-mentioned processes. It recurses to both its monopoly on violence by deploying the Antiguan defence force to protect enclosures (Barbuda, 2025; fieldnotes) and on legality, by dismissing claims to common land tenure through legal arguments based in colonialism, and repealing the BLA.

Barbudans have great pride in the common land tenure system and afford great value to a local economy that still partially relies on traditional livelihoods and community exchange. They consider this socio-economic system as rooted in and constitutive of local culture and identities. The common land ownership and the widespread knowledge of the island’s ecological systems place Barbudans in a privileged position to develop and implement what critical tourism studies define as post-capitalist tourism. Barbudans have in fact actively engaged in this kind of tourism for decades, as small business owners and tour operators, and are now threatened to be brought out of business, and to be overpowered by a fast changing socio-economic landscape that favours exclusive and extractive tourism development that redistributes no benefits but only externalities.

Büscher & Fletcher (2017) argue that tourism “must move radically from a private and privatising activity to one founded in and contributing to the common” (p. 664). The fundamental difference enabling this kind of tourism is who owns the means of production (Devine, 2017). In the words of a local activist, explaining his view of a tourism development path for Barbuda that resists traditional extractivist “plantation type tourism”: “[t]he difference with that is [that] the ownership is within our hands. It means the bulk of the benefit remains within our system” (interview n.27). Local ownership means that socio-economic benefits are more fairly enjoyed and distributed, and also that the local tourism industry is designed and implemented with respect for the island’s resources,

environment, and eco-social relations:

“We understand more than most as owners of the resource, we understand how to utilise that resource in a sustainable manner. So that is the concept of utilising your resources in a manner which is sustainable and not exhaustive, and that's the kind of tourism I would support.” (interview n.27).

The common land tenure system and the local culture ensure that levels of homelessness and poverty are virtually null. Everyone on the island has access to shelter, food, and can enjoy a healthy environment. Many Barbudans indeed argue that what they should invest in is increased food security, education, and a strong healthcare system, and not outside “development”:

“Under the cover of “development”, they say that Barbuda needs to be developed. I ask this question. If, one, Barbuda doesn't have vagrants; and two, in Barbuda almost everyone owns their home. And when you reach 18, you have the ability of starting your home¹¹. Most countries, even in America, don't have this. So what are you developing? Right? Rather you are exploiting.” (interview n.14)

4.7 Conclusions

The article outlined the multiple connections between disaster capitalism, colonialism, and tourism, and showed how the three mutually sustain each other relying on shared forms of material and discursive violence. It pointed to how, while this violence is far from new, it finds new material and discursive support in practices and narratives built around climate change, and related concepts of uninhabitability, (im)mobilities, adaptation, and resilience. In doing so, the article contributes to debates within critical disaster and critical tourism studies on the interaction between climate change discourses and policies, the tourism industry and disaster management.

The case of Barbuda is telling of the workings of tourism, disaster capitalism, and colonialism in advancing neoliberal and state reach over places and people that have historically resisted it, relying instead on a socio-economic system based on local culture,

¹¹ When a Barbudan reaches eighteen years of age they can present a request to the Barbuda Council and be assigned a plot of land destined to the construction of a home.

traditional knowledge, and community. While tourism can be an avenue for increased livelihood opportunities in Barbuda, it can only be so if locally designed, owned, and implemented, in respect of the local culture and environment, particularly of the common land tenure system and the value it holds for the island's continued cultural preservation and economic sustainability. "People, Land, Culture" are the three words chosen as the motto of the local activist movement, led by local environmental experts, members of the Barbuda Land Rights & Resources Committee, and of the Barbuda Council. Land, people, and culture are understood to be mutually constitutive. Self-determination is the essential principle advocated for by the movement so that Barbudan people, land, and culture can continue to thrive. Self-determination should be the guiding principle of tourism development in Barbuda. Any external intervention that is not founded on such principle, or, as it has often been the case, stands an explicit attack to it, represents a threat to the well-being of Barbudans and to the island's resilience, including and especially in the face of intensifying climate change impacts.

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Annex 1: Concise Interview Information

Interview n.	role/profession	date	length of the interview	recorded
n.1	resident	19.06.2024	1h27min	yes
n.2	resident	07.05.2024	1h approx	no
n.3	student	16.06.2024	50min	yes
n.4	tour operator	16.05.2024	20min	yes
n.5	local ngo member	01.07.2024	45min	yes
n.6	resident	03.05.2024	51min	yes
n.7	small business owner	15.04.2024	1h	no
n.8	teacher	17.05.2024	1h	yes
n.9	fisherman	16.06.2024	1h05min	yes
n.10	farmer	08.05.2024	29min	yes
n.11	small business owner	25.05.2024	1h	yes
n.12	member of council	09.05.2024	1h11min	yes
n.13	nurse	01.05.2024	39min	yes
n.14	resident	24.04.2024	1h46min	yes
n.15	fisherman	23.05.2024	50min	yes
n.16	tour guide	06.06.2024	1h30min	no
n.17	member of council	03.06.2024	1h05min	yes
n.18	environmental expert	08.05.2024	1h20min	yes
n.19	small business owner	06.06.2024	56min	yes
n. 20, n. 21	member of council, student	14.05.2024	1h37min	yes
n. 22	resident	05.05.2024	1h30min	no
n. 23	teacher	09.05.2024	34min	yes
n. 24, n. 25	residents	03.05.2024	38min	yes

n. 26	local politician	23.05.2024	39min	yes
n. 27	activist	30.04.2025	55min	yes
n. 28	resident	28.04.2025	1h47min	yes
n. 29	member of council	22.03.2025	45min	no
n. 30	activist	15.03.2025	2h	no