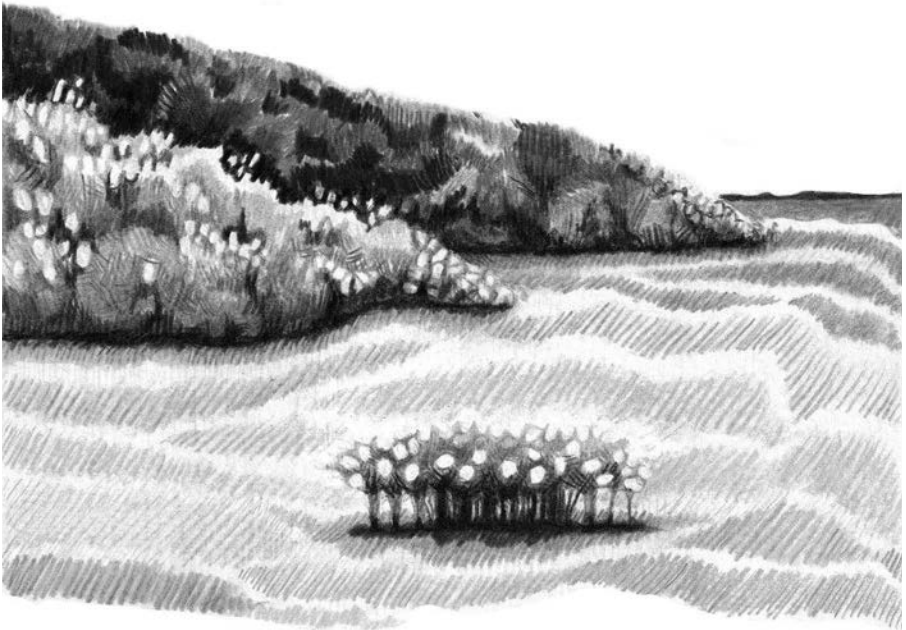


OUR LAND OUR SURVIVAL

Vulnerabilization and Decolonial Resistance Through
Communal Land in Puerto Rico and Barbuda



LINE ALGOED

TERRA NOSTRA PRESS



TERRA NOSTRA PRESS

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For Caraballo and all the community warriors
in Puerto Rico and Barbuda
¡La Lucha Sigue!

‘El territorio es la vida, la vida no se vende, se ama y se defiende.’

“The territory is life, life is not for sale, it is loved and defended”

Francia Marquez, Vice President of Colombia (2018)

‘No puedes comprar mi vida. La tierra no se vende.’

“You can’t buy my life. The land is not for sale”

Calle 13, “Latinoamérica” (2010)

‘Our land system is the reason we have survived. As simple as that.’

John Mussington, marine biologist, Barbuda

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FOREWORD

John Emmeus Davis
Editor-in-Chief, Terra Nostra Press

The International Center for Community Land Trusts launched its in-house imprint, Terra Nostra Press, in 2020 with publication of *On Common Ground: International Perspectives on the Community Land Trust*. Line Algoed co-authored two of its twenty-six chapters and served as one of the book’s co-editors.

Over the next five years, all of the books and monographs published by Terra Nostra Press featured the same innovative form of land tenure that had inspired *On Common Ground*, a social enterprise known as the “community land trust” (CLT). Notably, many of the organizations described in these publications bore only a passing resemblance to the model that had emerged out of the American Civil Rights Movement in the 1970s and been slowly refined over the next two decades. They were variations on a theme of what is known in the United States as the “classic CLT.”

These organizational and operational variations multiplied as CLTs continued to spread to other regions of the world. The American “model” remained a touchstone, but the CLT was modified again and again, adapted to fit conditions, priorities, laws, and needs that differed greatly from place to place. Most of the authors published by Terra Nostra Press, accordingly, tended to speak of the CLT rather expansively as a flexible strategy for community-led development on community-owned land of housing (and other land-based assets) that remain permanently affordable. This generic definition has grounded the work of the International Center for Community Land Trusts and guided the selection of manuscripts by Terra Nostra Press.

The portrayal of CLTs in *Our Land Our Survival* is more expansive still. The CLT is viewed by Line—and by the colleagues who joined her in co-authoring the book’s middle chapters—not as a singular “model,” but as one strategy among several for the “collectivization of land ownership.” It can be said, in fact, that the book is not really “about” CLTs, compared to previous publications of Terra Nostra Press.

The regular appearance on stage of the Caño Martín Peña Community Land Trust notwithstanding, the spotlight is usually directed elsewhere. Vulnerabilization and resistance play the starring roles.

Line and her colleagues are less concerned with describing a particular CLT, in other words, than with examining the conditions that make impoverished, place-based communities vulnerable to being displaced when confronted by natural disasters. They look specifically at places in the Caribbean where collective forms of tenure like a CLT have long existed or recently emerged, documenting the ways that collective landholding has served as a “strategy of resistance.” It has allowed communities to withstand displacement pressures from land-clearing hurricanes and land-grabbing capitalists who predictably appear in their wake. It has enabled devastated communities to recover more quickly and to develop more equitably.

These findings fly in the face of the dominant development paradigm touted by international agencies, neo-liberal economists, governments at every level, and private investors of every stripe. These global elites are nearly unanimous in proclaiming the privatization of land, individual titling, and an increase in single-family homeownership to be a necessary and superior path to prosperity. This policy trifecta appears in numerous schemes for the rejuvenation of both urban neighborhoods and rural areas, but it is most frequently embedded in programs and plans for the privatization and individualization of customary lands and informal settlements in the Global South, places where generations of people have lived on land or made use of land they neither legally own nor securely lease.

The counter-argument that is forcefully made by Line and her colleagues is that individual titling can actually make it harder for low-income communities to prosper—or even to survive—when battered by extreme weather events. Compiling evidence from the hurricane season of 2017, they show that collective landholding out-performed individual ownership in both Puerto Rico and Barbuda when it came to rebuilding devastated neighborhoods and preventing the displacement of economically disadvantaged residents.

They focus on two islands in the Caribbean, but their analysis is applicable to any vulnerable community impacted by hurricanes, floods, or wildfires, underscoring the potential of collective landholding for climate change adaptation. It is applicable, as well, to any mobilized community whose local leaders are considering whether to

adopt a collective form of tenure as a strategy of political resistance and equitable development.

The book is not explicitly “about” CLTs, therefore, but it ends up providing an extremely rich theoretical and practical rationale for why they are needed and what they can do.

The book also deepens the rationale for resident engagement in the management of collective forms of tenure. CLT advocates speak often of the importance of “keeping the ‘C’ in CLT,” meaning that people who live within a CLT’s service area should be directly involved in guiding and governing the nonprofit organization that holds the land beneath their feet. Such involvement is said to be good for the organization, contributing to its acceptability, accountability, and productivity. Line and her colleagues make a similar point, extolling the leadership of local residents in organizing and maintaining collective landholding in Puerto Rico and Barbuda. Their analysis of why “community matters” goes further, however, than most of the current CLT literature, for they examine not only how resident engagement strengthens the entity that owns the land, but how it strengthens the community the organization serves.

Their conclusion is that collective ownership in Puerto Rico and Barbuda has delivered a variety of social, political, and pedagogical benefits that accrue to the community as a whole, complementing the benefits that are realized individually by homeowners and renters. Collective forms of tenure have fostered social cohesion and mutual aid. They have given communities the power to confront the state, safeguarding their sovereignty and shaping the trajectory of their own development. They have promoted the participation of residents in the co-creation of ideas and innovations challenging a Western ideology of landownership that views land merely as property, used mainly for the expropriation of resources and the extraction of value.

Notably, these “counter-hegemonic knowledges,” as Line Algoed and María E. Hernández Torrales characterize them, tend to travel back and forth across between communities and countries. A countervailing narrative of ownership and stewardship that challenges the orthodoxy of individual landholding in one place inspires critical thinking among local activists in other places. Collective landholding that succeeds in thwarting disaster capitalists in one place incites and informs strategies of resistance elsewhere. Transcending the territorial boundaries of their place of origin, subversive

ideas and innovations like these have the potential for forging solidarities and sparking social change on a wider scale.

The transmission of “knowledges” that challenge dominant ideologies and institutions sometimes happens serendipitously, like dandelion seeds carried on the wind. More often, a more conscious, concerted effort is needed to spread the word, bridging geographic, cultural, and linguistic distances between grassroots leaders in different parts of the world. Peer exchanges function especially well in this regard, enabling residents and activists from scattered communities to meet face-to-face, swapping stories and sharing details of insurgent action and collective ownership. Less directly—but no less influentially—ideas and innovations that emerge out of the resistance of beleaguered communities get lifted up for the larger world to see through the published work of engaged scholars like the ones represented in the present volume.

In Line’s case, she eschewed the typical academic stance of treating communities as passive subjects of study. She welcomed them, instead, as active collaborators, “engaging these communities at every stage from formulating questions, designing fieldwork, and organizing activities to analyzing findings and writing.” Even more, she worked side-by-side with community leaders and allies in Puerto Rico and Barbuda, helping to create the solidarity networks that became the focus of her research.

The book that resulted from this collaborative endeavor breaks new ground. It offers fresh perspectives on the form of tenure featured in all previous publications of Terra Nostra Press. Significantly, it also ventures far afield of the community land trust. Line’s book surveys a landscape of theory and practice left largely unexplored heretofore by our other authors, a contested terrain where climate change is found to inflict the greatest damage on communities made vulnerable by a legacy of colonialism, racism, poverty, and land insecurity; where disaster capitalists lurk in the wings, eagerly awaiting an opportunity for quickly acquiring and profitably redeveloping storm-damaged land; where mobilized communities create and share insurgent “knowledges” of property, power, and place, strategies of resistance that are raised on a platform of collective landholding.

These are topics too important to be overlooked by a publisher committed to supporting the worldwide growth of community land trusts and related strategies of community-led development on community-owned land. Terra Nostra Press is proud to add Line’s far-reaching, groundbreaking study to our catalogue.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

THIS IS OUR LAND

“This is us. This is what we have to show from slavery,” Nico Webber Antonio, the owner of a roadside restaurant in Barbuda, told me as I savored her grilled seafood. “By any means necessary, we’re going to fight to maintain ownership of this land. It doesn’t matter what the government [...] says, or what the [court] says, this is our land.” She wore a T-shirt with the inscription: “True Barbudan: one who stands up for Barbuda.” This book centers the voices of two Caribbean communities, Barbuda and Puerto Rico, that have been engaged in the struggle of defending their communal land rights. Both communities have endured the profound impacts of the devastating 2017 hurricane season. I situate their experiences with climate-change-induced natural disasters and their not-so-natural aftermath within the ongoing colonial legacies of land as individually held private property.

My research journey started on September 1, 2017, following two years of close collaboration with the Martín Peña communities in Puerto Rico. Originally focused on studying their resistance against gentrification in self-built neighborhoods, my plans abruptly changed when Hurricane Irma struck the Caribbean just five days into my doctoral studies, followed by Hurricane Maria two weeks later. These hurricanes profoundly reshaped the region I had come to love.

The research and published articles that resulted became the core of my doctoral dissertation at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. They make up the heart of the present volume. Both the dissertation and this book embody a process of engaged scholarship, which evolved drastically from its very start, prompting me to not just to do research, but also to act in other meaningful ways. Both are products of collaborative effort, fueled by the voices and experiences of the communities at the center of this study. The communities under study were not passive research subjects but valued collaborators who are re-centering the relationships of humans with the land and reimagining the significance of collectivity. I coauthored these articles with scholars and practitioners of the region. Beyond mere academic critique, this book traces a path forward as our planet confronts the climate emergency.

This book explores the crucial role of communal land tenure in the fight against the climate crisis, with a focus on Puerto Rico and Barbuda. It scrutinizes the aftermath of the devastating 2017 hurricane season, examining external factors contributing to vulnerabilization within these communities and analyzing their resistance strategies. Emphasizing the prioritization of international capital over local needs, especially evident in coastal areas, the study reveals how this dynamic has spurred land grabbing and displacement. Yet, communal land systems empower communities to mobilize collective responses, protect their rights, and conserve their natural environment. By shielding communities against post-disaster displacements driven by foreign capital, this research highlights how communal land ensures continuity and fosters deeper cohesion. It serves as a foundation for mutual aid initiatives, enhances political influence, and fosters international solidarity.

This study underscores how communal land embodies an ethos of interconnectedness between humans and nature, nurturing counterhegemonic ‘epistemologies of the land’ that challenge dominant colonial and patriarchal narratives of property. By advocating for a reevaluation of property notions through tenure plurality, it underscores the necessity of amplifying local voices and countervailing knowledges to effectively confront the climate emergency. Centering Caribbean communities, this study unveils the interconnectedness between land tenure systems and global crises, advocating for a paradigm shift away from viewing land as mere property towards a holistic understanding of human-earth relations. It reframes these communities not as passive

victims but as proactive agents crafting essential counterhegemonic knowledges to inform global responses, thereby paving the way for sustainable land use and equitable development.



Figure 1: Aerial view of Codrington and Codrington Lagoon, Barbuda. Source: Google Images



Figure 2: Aerial view of the Martín Peña communities. Source: Corporación del Proyecto ENLACE del Caño Martín Peña

LAND IS LIFE

For Caribbean communities land has always been a contest for life itself (Wolfe, 2006). The principles that historically pushed colonialism, from seizing land and uprooting populations to endangering life-worlds, persist in the contemporary Caribbean landscape. Presently, this manifests as real-estate interests staking claims on land, often leveraging juridical measures, favoring global financial elites and disadvantaging local communities. Efforts to increase land tenure security for disenfranchised communities, especially in areas with highly valuable natural resources and in self-built and self-organized urban settings, have been focused on private land ownership. A global scan of literature shows that in such settings, regularizing land through individual property titles is ineffective in halting displacements and dispossessions (e.g. Dyal-Chand, 2010; Rakodi et al., 2009; Clichevsky, 2003; Connolly, 2013; Varley, 2017). Instead, these land titling programs promote integration of land into the global land market, contributing to the global rush on land—a key component of neoliberal globalization. These processes have been accelerated after several disasters have struck the region over the past decade, ranging from economic collapse, hurricanes, earthquakes, and the recent COVID-19 pandemic, leaving local communities in distress.

The emphasis on private land property is rooted in colonial history. The colonial ideology of land improvement based on Western cultivation forms remains entrenched today, invalidating any other understanding of land (Bhandar, 2018). This continued ‘colonial inhabitation’ (Ferdinand, 2022)—a way of inhabiting the earth where some appropriate and exploit land for the benefit of only a small group—further produces vulnerability. As a resistant response, residents from these communities organize to defend their land through collective forms of land tenure. Collective land tenure functions as a powerful counterforce against vulnerabilization, defined as processes whereby populations are made and kept vulnerable, giving rise to a transformative political conception of ‘property.’ Scholars have stated that there is an urgent need to grasp other ways of relating to land, ways that have been obscured by imperial modes of ownership (Bhandar, 2018; Escobar, 2016). By relating to the land in a nonextractive way (Klein, 2007), these communities challenge the core tenets of Enlightenment thought, which made us believe that humans are separate from and superior to nature—a division that ultimately led to the current climate crisis (Crichlow et al., n.d.).

This research delves into the intricate interplay of land policy, colonial legacies, and climate change within the Caribbean, specifically focusing on climate-change-affected Puerto Rico and Barbuda. In Barbuda, residents fiercely defend a centuries-old collective land ownership system crucial for preserving their beaches and wetlands—vital ecosystems for survival (Figure 1). In Puerto Rico, residents have established a community land trust (CLT) in the Caño Martín Peña area to formalize land ownership and prevent displacement following the ecological restoration of a heavily polluted waterway (Figure 2). Both communities, severely impacted by hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017, had to navigate past radical neoliberal reforms imposed by governments and financial partners. These reforms that had already started before the hurricanes, but were intensified after they struck the islands. Climate change increases the frequency, intensity, and severity of hurricanes, due to the warming up of the oceans.

Informed by literature on contemporary land policy, communal land tenure, disaster capitalism, decolonial resistance and policy mobilities, I scrutinize the tension between vulnerabilization processes and the local communities' resistance against these processes. Specifically, I look at how the interests, policies, and discourse of political and economic elites perpetuate the vulnerability of residents in environmentally fragile areas (vulnerabilization). I also investigate how communal land tenure¹ allows communities to resist vulnerabilization through land-use control and protection of the environment, while building international alliances, strengthening themselves to face climate change and to have greater sovereignty over their recovery from climate-change-induced disasters and subsequent forms of disaster capitalism (resistance).

Grounded in decolonial thought and feminist research, this study explores the ongoing characterization of communities as 'uncivilized' or, in contemporary terms, 'underdeveloped,' due to their ways of relating to the land, reminiscent of historical depictions of native peoples during colonial invasions (Bhandar, 2018). The research scrutinizes how communal land tenure systems and the related grassroots community development processes challenge prevailing modern, colonial, capitalist, and patriarchal

1 By *communal land tenure*, I refer broadly to systems in which land is held in common by a place-based community. In this book, I use the term to denote both Barbuda's traditional collective land tenure system—where land is held by the Barbudan community as a whole—and a more contemporary adaptation of that same principle, in which land is owned by a non-governmental organization on behalf of a geographically defined community, such as in the case of the Caño Martín Peña CLT. While I recognize that related terms such as “common land,” “collective land tenure,” “shared land ownership,” and “cooperative land ownership” each carry specific legal and historical meanings, I use communal land tenure as an umbrella term that centers the principle of place-based, community control over land, across both customary and institutional forms.

ideologies (Lugones, 2010). Patriarchy, in this context, is conceptualized as an enduring ontology that perpetuates principles of separation, hierarchy, appropriation, domination, and violence (Escobar, 2023) that lie at the basis of colonial inhabitation, and the transformation of land into ‘property.’ The Cartesian dualism that separates humans from non-humans, also associated men with culture and women with nature, reflecting analogous dichotomies for black and native people, who were historically depicted as closer to the ‘state of nature’ (Connell, 2017, p. 169), and deemed unfit to own property, a privilege reserved solely for White men (Bhandar, 2018; Wynter, 1982). In this context, decolonial feminism emerges as an invaluable framework for understanding land not merely as property or a commodity, but as a nurturing force for life and the reproduction of a common shared by all (Escobar, 2023). I understand the story of resistance of these two communities against private property as a fight for sovereignty and survival facing neoliberal globalization and its global land grab; survival not only of its people and environment, but also of knowledge-practices that view land as necessary for life.²

Research Questions and Research Objectives

This research examines how communal land tenure systems respond to crises induced by climate change amidst power struggles between elite interests and vulnerable communities. The central research question is: **In what ways do these communities use communal land tenure to resist against the consequences of climate change and the vulnerabilization imposed by political and economic elites?**

The research objectives are listed as follows:

1. **VULNERABILIZATION:** Investigate and elucidate the events that occurred in the aftermath of the hurricanes in 2017 in the Caño Martín Peña area and Barbuda. Explore how the events preceding and succeeding these natural disasters can be comprehended as processes of vulnerabilization; a term I conceptualize as those processes that produce and perpetuate vulnerability. Unpack the ways in which political and economic elites contribute to vulnerabilization within these communities. What specific instruments, interests, and hegemonic knowledges are mobilized to vulnerabilize communities?

2 Throughout this work, “private property” refers specifically to individually titled ownership (i.e., “privately titled property”). This excludes collectively governed forms such as CLTs and cooperatives, which are also forms of private property in a broader legal sense.

2. **RESISTANCE:** Provide a detailed description of how these communities leverage their communal land tenure systems to resist external pressures. Resistance is understood as the strategies and mechanisms employed by communities to counter the processes of vulnerabilization, particularly through their control of development facilitated by communal land tenure systems. Investigate the significance of their local knowledge in the broader context of global struggles against climate injustices and epistemic extractivism. Analyze why and in what ways these locally produced knowledges are crucial for understanding and confronting systemic injustices on a global scale, yielding a counterhegemonic worldview, conceptualized by Gramsci (1995) as the way people formulate ideas and discourse to contest prevailing assumptions, beliefs, and normalized behavioral norms. Analyze how these knowledges travel globally. What specific instruments, interests, and counterhegemonic knowledges are mobilized to resist vulnerabilization?

To achieve these research goals, I formulated the following research sub questions:

- In what ways are these communities being vulnerabilized through land encroachment?
- How are these communities resisting this vulnerabilization, mobilizing their communal land tenure systems to halt the encroachment?
- How do these Caribbean land struggles shape emerging decolonial epistemologies on land property, fueling a counterhegemonic worldview?

To answer these research questions, this book is divided into seven chapters. The second chapter gives an overview of the literature this study builds on and describes the theoretical lens through which the study was conducted, with an emphasis on Caribbean literatures. Chapters Three and Four detail the processes of vulnerabilization and resistance in Puerto Rico and Barbuda, respectively. Chapter Five addresses the main research question and investigates the myriad ways through which these two communities use communal land tenure to protect themselves from the consequences of climate change and counter the vulnerabilization imposed by (local) political and (global) financial elites. Chapter Six examines how knowledges produced in the struggles for the defense of communal land ownership travel across the world, shedding light on how historically marginalized communities serve as a frequently overlooked actor in the realm of policy mobilities. Finally, in Chapter Seven, I bring together the main insights derived from this exploration, offering a

concise answer to the research questions and a reflection on the implications and limitations of this research.

Chapters Three through Six are composed of articles that have been previously published, three as peer-reviewed academic articles and one as an online journal article. All of these articles have been co-authored. The names and positions of my co-authors are mentioned at the start of each chapter.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book is based on my doctoral dissertation, itself the product of a collaborative journey that began well before my doctoral studies. Many have contributed—some so profoundly their names could be on the cover, others simply through their presence.

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