

## Written with lightning: filming Barbuda before the storm

RUSSELL LEIGH SHARMAN

“The people in the old days, they used to call one another brother and sister.”



*Before the Storm: subsistence and survival on the small island of Barbuda*

Russell Leigh Sharman & Cheryl Harris Sharman, 2017, 30m

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**Abstract:** In June of 2014, I travelled to the island of Barbuda with Cheryl Harris Sharman to document and film the traditional foodways of the people of the island. We gathered more than 25 hours of footage from farmers, ranchers, hunters, fishermen, shopkeepers and educators. The narrative that formed throughout those hours of interviews was one of deep conviction over the traditional subsistence autonomy of the island and the growing threat to sustainability from over-development and state intervention. And that was *before* the hurricane in 2017 that decimated the island and drove every last inhabitant from its shores. Now, as residents attempt to return and rebuild, those corporate and government forces are an even greater threat to their tradition of sustainable practices. This chapter places that new reality in the context of life before the storm, in the words of the farmers, fishermen and shop keepers themselves.

*“The people in the old days, they used to call one another brother and sister.”*

Papa Joe sits on a rock just outside the wire fence that encloses his small yard and concrete block house. Tufts of white hair cling to his head and chin, his hands large and calloused and wrinkled with age. His eyes are a bit cloudy, but still sharply focused. His granddaughter sits a few feet away, playing in the dust at his feet with the few baby chicks that scurry past. A few feet further still, a camera on a tripod. Papa Joe does his best to keep his gaze fixed on the woman asking questions, not the camera.

*“But they’re not really brother and sister from the same mother and father,” he continues. “But they unite toward one another, so they say, they use the words brother and sister. And it was nice. Because what you have you share with me, and what I have I share with you.”*

It’s 2014, and my wife, Cheryl Harris Sharman, and I have recently landed on the small island of Barbuda to document as much of the traditional foodways of the inhabitants as we can in a few short weeks. After a choppy open-ocean crossing on a crowded pontoon boat, the only regular access to the island by sea, we’re anxious to steady our sea legs and set to work. And as anthropologists and filmmakers, we know the quickest route to the thick description we’re looking for is through a respected gatekeeper, a nexus in the local network of shared information. It helps if they’ve been around a while, lived a little. And in 2014, well into his 80s, Papa Joe had lived quite a bit.

He’d seen the island teeming with livestock, the soil tilled by nearly every inhabitant, and fishermen providing fresh fish and lobster from the calm waters of Codrington Lagoon and the open ocean beyond. The Barbuda of his youth, and much of his adulthood, was an island community of subsistence farmers, fishermen and hunters. An island largely cut off from the rest of the Caribbean archipelago, but content to be so, providing for their own needs, and in some cases – such as peanuts and poultry – exporting their surplus to neighboring islands.

He’d also seen Barbuda pass into independence from Great Britain in 1981, along with sister island Antigua. He’d seen the island struggle in the shadow of that larger sister, the seat of power and post-colonial political and economic development. He’d seen the slow, inexorable slide away from subsistence foodways toward commodity capitalism until the only exports of value were sand and

human labor, two of Barbuda's most precious, non-renewable resources. And he'd seen the passage of the Barbuda Land Act of 2007, a law that codified the tradition of communal land ownership for Barbudans, and, at least on paper, protected their right to control economic development on the island.

But like many of the older residents of Barbuda, Papa Joe had mixed feelings about independence, and misgivings about the enforceability of that 2007 legislation. Indeed, he made no attempt to hide a somewhat wistful longing for the benevolence of Empire after years of perceived neglect and exploitation from home rule government.

*"Now since the independence come now, it's worse,"* he says from his perch on that dusty road outside his home. His countenance shifts. The twinkle that was in his eye as he remembered days gone by dims. He stares hard at Cheryl just off camera. *"Because the people and them who in charge, who bring us independence, they promise to give them this and give them that and give the other. The whole thing is gimmick. People can tell you, 'Oh, I'll give you the world.' But they never live to see the world."*

He pauses, a slight shake of his head. *"As the saying goes, 'United, you stand, but divided you're bound to fall.'"*

Papa Joe's lament would echo through every interview we filmed over the next few weeks. We would hear it in the pleas from working farmers and fishermen for more government investment and broader support for home-grown food security among their neighbours. We would hear it in the conflicted loyalties of local shopkeepers, witnessing first-hand that shift from subsistence practices to commodity capitalism, even as they profited from it themselves. And we would hear it in the convictions of educators, committed to raising a new generation of farmers and fishermen, a new generation of Barbudans who would call one another "brother" and "sister."

Two years later, almost to the day, Papa Joe would pass away.

And a year after that, in September 2017, hurricane Irma would devastate the island, wiping away all those farms and fisheries, all those shops and schools. 95% of the built environment was destroyed. All 1,800 inhabitants evacuated to Antigua.

For the first time in perhaps thousands of years, Barbuda was a deserted island, empty of all human life.

But not for long. Within days, before government officials allowed a single Barbudan to return and survey the damage, a construction crew was on the island and clearing ground for a new international airport, a development pushed through Parliament without the consent of Barbudans in

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direct contradiction of the Barduda Land Act of 2007. Six months later, Prime Minister Gaston Browne introduced legislation to repeal the Land Act itself.

In the weeks and months that followed the storm, Barbudans would begin to make their way back, hoping to salvage what they could, rebuild, start over. But with the likely repeal of the Land Act, the inevitable privatization of land, and the opportunistic, large-scale development projects imposed from outside by multinational corporations and the Antigua-based government, the hopes of farmers, fishermen, shopkeepers and educators for a return to sustainable food security and self-sufficiency seemed to be slipping away. One only had to look to the massive earth movers plowing through virgin forest land to make way for direct flights from the US and Europe to visit resorts yet to be built to see it.

I was still sorting through 25 hours of footage when Irma hit Barbuda in 2017. Cheryl and I had edited a short documentary, [Sustainable Barbuda](#), about an aquaponics project started by anthropologist Sophia Perdikaris and John Mussington, a biologist and the local high school principal. But there was still a trove of interviews to cull, edit and make available. The goal was to put together a larger documentary about the traditional foodways of Barbudans, as well as several stand-alone interviews of local farmers, fishermen and hunters for research and archival purposes. Watching the reports of the devastation of the small island roll in, I knew whatever we had captured for those few weeks, just a few years before the storm, had suddenly become that much more important. The voices of Barbudans lamenting the loss of tradition and self-sufficiency and working toward a return to both were now re-contextualized. Irma had literally wiped the slate clean, but a larger political and economic storm was brewing in its wake. If there was any hope of weathering that second, larger storm, it would be in listening to the voices of those who had weathered the first, the shopkeepers, farmers and fishermen, the educators and old-timers.

Old timers like Papa Joe who, back in 2014, summed up his feelings on the changes wrought on his island over his lifetime, then looked at Cheryl and I and said simply, *“You all wouldn’t know. But I know. I grew up here”*.

### **From Subsistence to Dependence**

*“I was born in Barbuda. And my parents, growing up, they ate everything they produced”*. Miss Fancy sits in a back corner of her shop on an overturned milk crate, framed by the half empty shelves. A Winnie the Pooh beach hat perches on her head, clashing nicely with her nickname. No one uses

her given name, Fancilla Frances. She's always been Miss Fancy. *"We ate healthy, growing up we ate healthy,"* she continues. *"Because everything our parents grew here, that was food for us. And our meat came from the lagoon, which was fish, daily fish, that was it, from the lagoon. Daily. I never ate frozen fish, I never ate refrigerated fish. Every day it came from the lagoon"*.

Miss Fancy's shop sits just a few hundred yards from the airport. Not the controversial, still under-construction international airport, but the small landing strip for the semi-regular, single-prop plane service from Antigua. Hers is one of a handful of shops on the island that sell foodstuffs imported from off island. Canned goods, frozen fish and chicken, some produce, and plenty of processed snack food and sweets. When we first arrived, we were told Miss Fancy was an important local contact, a prominent business woman and stalwart Barbudan. But at the time, she was visiting a daughter in North Carolina. Miss Fancy, like so many others, has seen more than one close family member leave the island in search of higher wages and a better future. Now many of them are bound up in transnational kin networks, spread thin across the Caribbean, into the United States, and all the way to England.

Waiting for her to return, we spent some time on the dock, watching the daily ferry from Antigua – the same one we arrived on days earlier – and filming the arrival and unloading of the weekly cargo boat. The vessel was not much bigger than the small ferry, though it was heavy laden with boxes of inventory for the local shops, as well as building materials, appliances, bottled water, and dozens of propane canisters. This, apparently, was a new boat. A few weeks before we arrived, one of those propane canisters exploded on board the old cargo vessel, scuttling the boat and injuring many of the crew. Talk on the island was that the captain had been killed by sharks patrolling the wreckage. A grizzly story and evidence of the tenuous connection Barbuda maintains with her sister island and the rest of the Caribbean. Tenuous, but critical. With the cargo deliveries temporarily interrupted, supplies throughout the island grew worryingly low.

Days later, we're sitting in Miss Fancy's shop after her return from the U.S., listening as she describes the quotidian struggle of any small business owner simply trying to keep goods on the shelves. It's late in the week, and supplies are running low. The weekly shipment is due in that afternoon.

*"They load up in Antigua and they leave about 12, 1 o'clock",* she explains. *"They should get here about 3:30, 4. But if they're late, it depends, throws them off a bit. The boat gets here, I go down. I have two trucks, because they offload the trucks, come up offload, return. And it's a long, drawn-out process"*. She shifts a bit, hands on her knees. She seems tired just thinking about it. *"Say the boat gets in at 5, I don't get to leave down there till about, maybe, sometimes 10 o'clock at night. And that*

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*is, that is really tiresome... We offload the stuff from the boat down there, load it onto the truck, and truck it here to my store, offload it, get it into my store. That's one part of it. Then, tomorrow starts the process of gettin' rid of that stuff".*

That "stuff" includes a lot of staple goods, such as rice, flour, sugar, pasta and other processed foods. But it also includes fresh produce, meat and poultry, most of which is also imported from off island despite the fact that such things are produced locally by a handful of farmers. Miss Fancy explains that part of the problem is volume, that local farmers just can't match demand. At least not yet. But part of the problem is also the changing tastes of her customers. *"When I started out, with cold storage, I started out selling mainly [local] chicken, but then the taste came in for, like, American foods, like turkey and oxtail, and different stuff like that. [But] when I first started, we would sell the local chicken. Then the taste came in for the frozen chicken and we sort of phased out the local chicken".*

Miss Fancy attributes some of these changes to those transnational kin networks extending far beyond the island. As more and more Barbudans leave the island to find work elsewhere, those who stay behind benefit from an increased flow of capital in the form of remittances. With more cash to spend in the local shops, there is less incentive to invest in the more traditional, labor-intensive subsistence practices. As she explains, *"Most of our parents and older siblings, they migrated out. They worked and sent home money for us, so we didn't need to work as hard, you know. So we were able to buy other things. Mainly things that came in from outside. Imported".*

And even though her shop depends on that shift in consumption, it worries her. *"I sell, weekly, about 52 cases of chicken",* she says, dismayed. *"As opposed to the fishermen, you know, we're not eating as much fresh fish or fresh food anymore. Everything is imported. Most of it. Imported".*

Miss Fancy knows there are a handful of local producers trying hard to maintain those traditional practices. As well as a government-supported farm designed to provide local produce. She does her best to support them all, selling as many locally-produced goods as she can. *"But".* she laments, *"we're still importing more of that than we are producing here. I don't know why. I really don't know why".*

A few blocks away, Ned Luke thinks he has an answer. He sits behind the counter of his own small shop, my camera catching him from across an aisle as Cheryl listens intently to his views on the subject. *"We were never like this before, pre-Independence",* he explains. *"We were more self-sufficient, pre-1981".*

Ned is quite a bit younger than Miss Fancy, splitting his time between the shop he inherited from his father and the local secondary school where he works as a science teacher. Like many young

Barbudans, he's spent time off island, attending university in Cuba and working for a stint at a Sandal's resort on Antigua.

According to Ned, independence from England forced Barbuda into a new but perhaps equally paternalistic relationship with the government based in Antigua. A local Barbuda Council was given an annual budget and the power to dole out government jobs as a form of political patronage. Access to easy wage labor in exchange for votes, combined with the remittances already flowing in from relatives overseas, meant even less incentive to produce food for local subsistence, much less as a self-sustaining business. *"We didn't carry on the traditions of our forefathers. We didn't. And politics made things worse. Everybody can go work for the Council and get paid, you know. 'So why am I going out?'"*

Ned can remember the hard work of his father's generation that paid off in the form of fewer imports and even enough surplus to send out. *"My father used to plant cotton. My grandmother planted cotton. That building down there, they call it the ginney, that's where we do the court, and the council meetings, that's what that building was used for. My father alone, in farming, he used to fill the cargo boats, him alone, with watermelons. You know, I mean, and they used to ship partly to Antigua, and then to St Kitts, St Barts, and St Martin, and, you know, there was, there was some trade. You know, and the farmers here in Barbuda, they used to, they applied the traditional methods. They watched the moon, they looked at the cycle in the rainy season, and they do the mulching. You know, they used the older techniques. And they produced. We had an economy here"*.

Ned nods to several wooden bins just behind me and the camera, half-filled with a few items of fresh produce. *"Look at that rack. We have bananas and plantains, says product of Dominica. The garlic probably comes from China. The onions probably come from God knows where... I would like to see everything on that rack be Barbudan. That's what we're hoping for"*.

As a teacher, Ned places a lot of that hope in the next generation. He does his best to instil a sense of pride in his students, a connection to the land and the sea and their own past as a self-sustaining community. Mr. Mussington, the school's principal and a biologist himself, is a strong ally in that endeavour. *"I know that Mr Mussington is trying to push something like that. I mean, it is on the way"*.

But still, Ned's hope is tempered by his own pessimism in light of the current political context, and like Miss Fancy, his role as a shopkeeper in feeding the consumer appetite for imported goods. *"You know, I mean, when we get down to the nitty gritty, we are teachers, we have failed this island, we have failed the community. I mean, we have failed"*. He glances to the camera, then back at Cheryl, *"I mean, sounds funny to say, right, on the camera, but it's a reality"*.

## A Return to the Land

*“One day I in my yard...”*

Eugene sits in a frayed and restrung lawn chair in the middle of his quiet, relatively isolated farm – his “yard” – a mile or so outside the village of Codrington. He’s surrounded by a two or three acres of papaya trees, rows of young corn plants, beans and a few other vegetables and fruit trees he’s lovingly planted over the years. *“I in my yard one day”*, he continues in his lilting West Indian English, *“And I looked and a little boy passed my yard. And me hear the young boy say, ‘Wow, what a pretty yard.’ He said he’d love to get a place just like this”*.

Eugene smiles, clearly pleased with the memory of the young boy who admired his farm. He speaks again, his voice so soft we have to lean in close to hear, and hope the microphone clipped to his faded t-shirt picks up the sound. *“You see, the young people, what they see you do, they will do... I wish more Barbudans come out and do this, so the younger ones can see, and go along”*.

We’ve been at Eugene’s farm for the better part of the day, hoping to get him to sit still long enough for an interview. We spent the first hour or so with a group of students from the United States touring the farm and learning a bit about Eugene’s traditional farming practices. No pesticides, all organic fertilizer, and age-old techniques that maximize fresh water sources on an island plagued by scarce, relatively unpredictable rainfall. Getting usable footage surrounded by chattering undergraduates proved challenging, so we stayed back after they left, spent some time with him, explained our goals for the project. He was eager to do what he could to encourage more Barbudans to turn back to farming. But as the camera started rolling, he froze, unable to speak. Not uncommon. Cameras have a way of unsettling people, especially those who’ve cultivated a life of quiet solitude, working the land, alone, undisturbed.

So we put in the time, passing the afternoon with Eugene, listening to his quiet patter about his life’s work. By the time we started rolling again, he’d forgotten all about the camera, sitting in his favorite chair, under the shade of a slender papaya tree.

*“I learned this from my parents, and my grandparents, and the rest Barbudans, the older ones, I learned this from them”*, he tells us. *“And I hope the younger ones do the same, take on the same pattern and do the same. I love to see a lot more come and do the same like we do here.”*

Eugene goes on to detail some of the techniques he uses on the farm, and their connection to the way farming has always been done on the island. His parents and grandparents were coal-makers as well, another deeply-rooted tradition on the island. Using a few sticks and a tiny hole dug with his fingers, he demonstrates the process of baking coal in massive earthen pits. But the through-line of



Eugene's quiet monologue is his desire for Barbudans to turn back to the land. For Eugene, the land is everything, and his tone turns rapturous as he tries to put this into words: *"I love this work. I love it. When I come, especially in the evening, and the morning, the early evening or in the morning, and you start to till the soil, turn over the soil, it make you feel good. Feel good. Really good. You know. I love to do that. And you look back by what I do, say, 'Wow, looking good, looking real good.'"*

Toward the end of our time together, that rapture shifts seamlessly into a prayer, taking Cheryl and I both by surprise: *"It's a blessed land we have here. All we just need to do, work the land... Oh, Lord help me. Come on, young boys and young girls, get up and come over. Come out and farm"*.

After a long moment of silence, his eyes scanning the tilled land around him, he turns to Cheryl, speaking of those boys and girls, *"I wish they could see and learn, you know. I wish that they could see and learn"*.

Eugene is one of several Barbudans committed to maintaining the island's tradition of sustainable, subsistence agriculture. His farm, like several others in the hinterlands around Codrington, provide produce for the local shops, augmenting the imported goods from Antigua and beyond, as well as meat, poultry and eggs to individuals throughout the island. But as Miss Fancy and Ned Luke point out, their collective efforts can rarely match the demands of local consumption, even on a small island like Barbuda.

One family hoping to change that is Shiraz and Anessa Hopkins. Along with their two young children, the Hopkins family runs a large farm raising cattle, goats, pigs, chicken and Guinea fowl, along with various vegetable and fruit crops throughout the year. Both Shiraz and Anessa have dedicated themselves to learning as much as they can about agricultural science, while still holding onto traditional farming practices.

Their farm is an impressive operation, if still a bit make-shift. Several pens built from scrap lumber and sheets of tin, and an open pasture of hard-packed earth where cattle and goats roam freely. Fruit trees mingle with stands of scrub brush, all of it brittle under the bright sun. There hasn't been much rain lately. A worrisome development.

The day we meet them, we're with that same group of students, all of them eagerly peppering Shiraz with questions about his livestock. We've clipped a microphone to his t-shirt, tailing him with the camera, catching what we can as we walk and talk. *"I do this because of my grandfather"*, Shiraz explains. *"He had a passion for this... [But] most of his kids left for the States, Canada, England. My mom stayed back, so I was like, 'I'm not gonna let this go down the drain like that, I gotta do something to keep it alive.' And I just fell in love doing it. So that's why I'm trying to keep it going."*

He shows us the pens holding various small livestock, the new de-feathering machine he acquired to make chicken processing faster and more efficient. But it's the several heads of cattle that are clearly Shiraz's pride and joy. We catch him for a moment to talk about the operation, framing out the students, though their chatter provides a constant hum on the soundtrack.

*"Anytime you go to the village and ask about my beef, you'll get a good answer about my beef because they like that, it's tender and everything like that",* he says, beaming. But he knows, too, that quality doesn't always trump convenience. The cultural shift toward a cash economy and imported goods in the last few decades has forced producers like Shiraz and Anessa to actively promote a "buy local" attitude. An odd problem to have on a tiny, isolated island, 35 miles across open ocean from the rest of the Caribbean. *"The younger folks, they will easier go to the shop, they want to go quick, everything quick. But I want to change that. I want to bring it from right here, right out of Barbuda, from the earth right here, everything processed right here, so they'll get a much more natural and healthier food to eat... So I'm trying my best to try and let them come back to our local stuff."*

Across a narrow track from the livestock is another fenced in pasture, this one recently tilled and ready for seed. Anessa stands at the edge of the field of brown soil, describing their plans for the season. She's a bit more soft-spoken than her husband Shiraz, but no less enthusiastic about what they are trying to do for Barbuda. *"Most of the crops we plant are, like, tomatoes, green peppers, sweet peppers. We do watermelon, we do pumpkins, because we know those are in greater demand on the island. We choose crops that we know... the supermarkets will buy. And certain crops they prefer locally. Because our local sweet pepper tends to last longer than the ones we import... Ours have a longer shelf life"*.

Several days later, we arrange a visit to their home, a modest concrete block house far enough from Codrington village to feel comfortably isolated, more connected to the land. Not surprisingly, they have a large fenced-in yard with some small livestock as well.

We set up the camera, framing Shiraz, Anessa and their two children, Skylar and Shiresa. All four of them work the farm together, as a family. A fact that Shiraz is quick to point out: *"To have a family that farms together means a lot, because it comes from way back, from my grandfather. And just to see how he raised his family by doing farming, it's just so, so amazing. Now I have my family, and they're ready, they want to go, especially when it's time to harvest. They love that. When it's time to harvest. They're ready to go... From what my grandparents did, and my mother did, it just grew a part of me. So, I just like to do the same thing, and let my family see that there is hope in doing that. Because look at where it came from. There's a lot of hope in doing farming"*.

Shiraz and Anessa discuss what life was like growing up on the island when everyone kept a small “ground”, or farm, they used to cultivate basic provisions. As Anessa explains, *“Everyone back then was into farming, because that was the only way for them to provide. They didn’t have a lot of goods coming in like we do now. So they had to survive, and that was the means of survival”*.

They both go on to describe how that older generation developed an informal pattern of crop variety to both maximize expertise in one or two crops and satisfy everyone’s subsistence needs through a barter system. The reciprocity established in the sharing of produce not only made sure everyone was well-fed, but it also confirmed and strengthened kin and non-kin networks on the small island.

But as it had been made clear over and over in all of the interviews we had done to that point, times have changed on Barbuda. *“I have a cousin and he brings cargo from Antigua”*, explains Shiraz. *“And I go down there and I help him offload his boats. And I’m like, every week you have a big garbage bag full of anchovas, a big garbage bag full of cucumbers, a big garbage bag full of sweet peppers, boxes of tomatoes, boxes of tomatoes! And I’m like, ‘Nah...We have enough land here. We don’t have a lot of people. We have enough land that we can cultivate to produce our own stuff.’ So I think we can and we should look into that... We’re suppose to be exporting, because we have the land to do it.”*

*“Look at the other day when we had the cargo boat that sank”*, Anessa interjects, referencing the tragic accident when a propane canister exploded, sinking the vessel and killing at least one crew member. *“We hardly had any produce for that weekend,”* she continues, Shiraz nodding in agreement. *“So everything has to be brought in from Antigua or maybe Dominica, but if we had our own farmers, local farmers, then that wouldn’t happen. So in the event of anything happening like that, whether it’s a natural disaster, like a hurricane, and we can’t get any boats to come in, cargo boats to come in, what are going to do, you know, for a while? So we need to start relying on ourselves instead of relying on other people for that”*.

Anessa makes a strong case for self-reliance, a return to a traditional intimacy with the land and what it can provide for the island’s relatively small population, especially given their fragile connection to Antigua and the world beyond. But none of us knew then how prescient her reference to a natural disaster might be. A storm that could not only temporarily interrupt inter-island trade, but cut them off completely and potentially wipe out so much of the progress they’ve made in restoring that sustainable, subsistence practice.

But before all of that, back in 2014, many Barbudans were actually praying for rain. For generations, consistent rainfall had made traditional farming practices possible. But climate change has brought with it long stretches of drought, punctuated by increasingly severe hurricane seasons.

To make matters worse, the well system employed by many on the island, including the Hopkins family, suffers from increasing salinization as rising ocean levels begin to penetrate ground water. And that's if you have the money to fuel your gas-powered pumps.

Back on his farm, Shiraz inspects the brittle leaves of his fruit trees. *"Right now I'm just praying for the rain"*, he confesses. *"We need some rain right now. I have a well and I have a pump and everything. But it's too expensive for me to pump water like everyday, to water these areas. So I've gotta just pray for rain and hope for the rain to fall."*

There's a nervous chuckle in his voice, a worry that's hard to conceal. He pauses a moment, looks off to the dry, dusty earth around us. Then, as if remembering his role as self-appointed ambassador for a return to farming, he looks back to the camera and brightens, *"But I love doing it, no problem. I love doing this and don't think I'm gonna stop. I'm not gonna let my grandfather's work go down. I'm gonna keep it up"*.

### Coming Home to Roost

*"The whole of this area is round about, um, almost thirty acres all together,"* explains Frances Beazer with a wave of her arm. She's moving across an open pasture, heading toward a large concrete block and corrugated tin building that dominates the open space. The muted cacophony of hundreds of clucking chickens' rumbles behind the tin walls in the distance. *"The chicken farm occupies a very small area"*, she continues. *"The whole area belongs to the farmer's cooperative. But we are the only ones that are active at the moment"*.

Frances moves slowly, but with purpose, a baseball cap fit snugly over her short-cropped white hair, shielding at least some of the afternoon sun. Well into her 60s, raising chickens is Ms. Beazer's second career. Like so many others, she left the island years earlier, eventually landing in England where she spent several decades as a nurse and then a social worker. But unlike many of those who left, she eventually returned home to Barbuda, choosing to spend her retirement years building up a sizable egg production facility.

We stay a few paces behind her as she walks, the camera following her on her daily rounds. *"We created this chicken farm three years ago"*, she tells us. *"The purpose for doing so is to let young people see that chickens don't always have to come from abroad, that we could create chickens here. Chickens can be born, eggs can be hatched, and we can supply the island with as many eggs as they need. However, young people don't appear, at this moment, to be very much interested. But we are hoping that eventually they'll see the value of what we're doing and will come along and join us"*.

Frances has not let the apparent lack of interest among the Barbudan youth to slow her down. When her hens are at peak laying season, her farm produces as many as twenty dozen eggs every day. Nearly 250 eggs that she and her husband collect, clean and package for the local island market, day in and day out. Miss Fancy is one of her best customers. Still, her primary motivation was and is to encourage others to re-engage with the land. Like Shiraz and Anessa, she hopes she is leading by example, but she knows there are many obstacles to overcome.

*“It’s expensive living on an island”, she admits, echoing what so many others have told us over the past several days. “Especially an island like Barbuda. Quite expensive. Because you have to pay for everything that comes in”. We’re standing in a shipping container a few yards from the hen house where Frances carefully washes each egg in a bleach and detergent solution, then packages them by the dozen. “When I was a child, we used to grow enough vegetables and provisions to feed ourselves. But things have changed. The soil doesn’t yield as much as it used to... And, as people become more westernized, they think it’s old fashioned to work the land, to do farming.”*

Frances dunks another egg into the large yellow plastic washbasin, wipes it gently with a cloth, then sets it to dry on an overturned shipping barrel. All of it with a practiced grace, the smooth motion of an action repeated too many times to count. *“They prefer to go and work in offices”, she continues, “where you can dress up in suits, and ladies wear high heels and nice minidresses and show their legs and all that sort of thing. So farming in Barbuda is on the decline. We’re trying to revive it, but it’s, it’s a very lengthy process”.*

She goes on to describe some of the particular challenges of farming on Barbuda. The difficulty of tilling the soil with limited equipment, the reliance on traditional techniques that require more labor than modern, industrial farming practices, and perhaps most challenging, the recent lack of rain. She’s quick to point to climate change as a likely culprit, but she also acknowledges that Barbudans have not always been good stewards of the land. Clear-cutting trees without a plan for reforestation, for example. Or the rampant population of feral donkeys and other grazing livestock that eat through protective ground cover.

But Frances is just as quick to praise her home island and her people. *“Barbuda, in my opinion, is a unique place”, she tells us. “I don’t think there’s any other place like it. Even the people. I don’t think there’s any other people like Barbudans. We’re knowledgeable. I’m not saying we’re educated, but we’re knowledgeable. And when we hold an opinion, it’s very difficult to shake that opinion out of us. Everything is fresh. We get fresh air. We have fresh food, when we plant it and cultivate it. Fresh fish, from the sea. The land is free. We got our Land Act passed in 2007, in the Houses of Parliament in*

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*Antigua, and the land belongs to the people. I, as a native born, I am entitled to a plot of land for housing, a plot for grazing, and a plot for cultivation. Where else could I get that?"*

Frances smiles, a twinkle in her eye as she reflects on the central role the land has played in Barbudan identity, and the critical importance of the Barbuda Land Act of 2007 in protecting residents' connection to that land. Like Anessa Hopkins's oblique reference to the hypothetical dangers brought by unpredictable Atlantic storms, Frances's reference to the Land Act would prove prescient. In the aftermath of the storm, with the Land Act under attack by Antiguan politicians, her question – *"Where else could I get that?"* – will loom large.

In the meantime, however, Frances is more concerned with her primary goal of attracting young people to working the land and reconnecting with sustainable foodways. *"Going back to when I was a child, we had to learn how to grow things. We were introduced to planting things in the soil, and watched them grow. Watered them and so on so forth. And I think they should go back to that. And teach children... Let the children see that we can grow what we eat... Because some children, they don't realize that certain things are grown. They think you just buy them like that. And I think this is what the schools should do... Start at preschool. When children are at the age of three, they have a lot of knowledge. They know a lot of things. And they learn very quickly. So if we were to introduce this to them, it would be something that they grow up with."*

She pauses a moment, focused on the last few eggs she has to clean. She's a dreamer, but she's also a realist. *"And all of them, naturally, is not going to become farmers,"* she admits. Then, hopeful, determined, she adds, *"But some will."*

The days harvest of eggs cleaned and packaged, Frances stands at the open doorway of the shipping container, surveying the ruddy red chickens scurrying here and there as they enjoy a few more minutes in the open air. Soon her husband will rap on the metal wall of the container and their flock will stream back toward the hen house. As well trained as they are well cared for.

She takes this moment to give us a little background on the farmer's cooperative that owns the land we stand on, of which she is a founding member. *"In 2005, we started the cooperative, on paper. A group of us got together because we were very much interested in agriculture and want to see agriculture revive in Barbuda. Most of us were middle aged people, so to speak, middle age to elderly. And each one had a desire to do one specific thing. Well, I always wanted to produce eggs. Some people wanted to produce the chickens for the dinner plate. Some wanted to produce vegetables. Some wanted to produce roaming animals, small stock, like pigs, and, uh, Barbuda is famous for rearing goats and sheep and things like that. So people had an idea what they would do. But of course, like everything else, people change their minds."*

She looks around the empty field, cleared and ready for crops if anyone cared to sow them. *“And, um, as you see, I’m the only one at the moment doing something. Other people are still in the process. They say they’re going to do this, and they’re going to do that, but we have to wait and see.”*

Somehow she seems undaunted by the lack of involvement of the other members of the cooperative. Or the apparent lack of enthusiasm of Barbudan youth. For now. *“My dream is that we, Barbuda, become productive; that we’re able to produce the food that we eat, all locally right here. And I think we can. Yes, I think we can do it. With a bit of willpower. And the rain from above. I think we can...”*

### **Captain Speedy**

*“Well fishing in Barbuda to me is... Well, it’s a way of life.”*

Arthur “Speedy” Walter sits at a wooden table in the open air by the small pier that serves Codrington village. Behind him a small, protected marina. A few vessels bob in the dark green water. Some large enough for the open ocean. Some meant for fishing the calm waters of the lagoon. *“I’ve known fishing all my life,”* he continues. *“My family were fishing people, boat builders and fishermen.”*

Speedy is in his early 40s, broad-shouldered, tall, a body built for the hard labor of long line fishing, trapping and conch diving. A frayed cap covers his nearly-shaven head. A pair of sunglasses on the table in front of him. When he talks, his hands are always in motion, his arms swinging in wide arcs to emphasize a point.

*“I used to move around by boat a lot”,* he explains, a bit wistful. But maybe also a hint of regret that it took him as long as it did to settle down. *“Now I’m sitting here in Barbuda, I’m married now, I have a daughter, and I’m building a business. I was never grounded. I got the name Speedy because I’m always on the go. But now it’s a whole different picture. Barbuda is a beautiful place. It’s quiet. You can think here. Get on with living. It’s very important for young people who get carried away with the fads and the new lifestyles, the crazy outside [world]. You can find peace of mind here. You can find a good living here. You can raise your children here. A healthy place. A natural place”.*

Speedy is part of a community of fishermen working the waters of the lagoon and the Caribbean beyond. For most of our time on Barbuda we were stymied in our attempts to arrange an interview with him, or any of the other Barbudans who make their living on the water. Mostly because their schedules never leant themselves too much time on land talking in front of a camera. Speedy proved worth the wait. His passion for his work was matched only by his passion to preserve and protect the fisheries, and to pass his knowledge down to the next generation. *“I think we can teach*

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*the children to take care of what they have”, he tells us. “Which is the important thing. Take care, not mash it up”.*

Speedy favors vertical long line fishing for snapper and squid. Mostly because he can do it on his own, without a crew. But he also works lobster traps along the reef, and deep water conch diving. Both of which require at least one other hand on deck, if not an entire crew. Like most fishermen, his day begins early, at 3 or 4 in the morning. He’s on the water by 5, before the sun rises. And if he’s diving for conch, he’s gone to until sunset.

*“Conch is a lot of work”, he explains. “Taking it out of the shell, collecting them, cleaning them afterwards. It’s a full day’s work, conch diving”. And as he describes the difficulties in diving and processing conch, he shifts effortlessly into the importance of conservation. A theme he returns to over and over. “I remember some years ago they thought conch would never be done. But it’s at a point now where it’s a protected thing. And it has to be because the conch beds only have so much yield and it takes so many years for a conch to develop to an adult, to maturity”.*

For Speedy, conservation is not a burden to be managed, but a critical part of his vocation. And he recognizes that passing that ethos on to other fishermen is a critical part of maintaining productive fisheries around the island. His evangelism on the topic rivals that of the farmers in their attempts to turn people back to the land. In fact, Speedy himself makes a direct connection between fishing and farming: *“It’s very much like farming. A farmer will never kill his prized bull, that’s in the taking of fish and lobster and conch. He’ll never kill his prized bull, and he’ll never kill a cow that’s in calf or he doesn’t kill animals with growth potential. So what you have there then, you create a balance between those three points. And when you really start to look at it, you begin to realize that the ocean is just teeming, life everywhere”.*

But he also recognizes that it can be a hard argument to make with men and women who depend on productive fishing to provide for their families. He sees the value in tightly controlled seasons for lobster and conch to allow breeding and maturity. But he also knows that a lot of his colleagues have struggled to make ends meet, especially lately. Foreign fishing vessels have started to troll dangerously close to Barbuda’s shores, capable of plundering what stock remains near enough for small boats to reach. Worse, some foreign fishermen have taken to using bleach to kill the reefs and stun the fish, making them easier to catch. And making it more and more difficult to make a living for local fishermen. *“It’s a balance that has to be struck. We’re living by it, but we also have to protect it at the same time. And it’s not an easy thing when you’re at a certain state of desperation financially”.*

Like most of the Barbudans we’ve talked to, Speedy sees hope in the next generation, the younger folks who will have to choose between wage labor off island, or making a living off the land



and sea like the generations before them. *“I think that if you open that education to younger people in the school level coming up, people will grow with it. They will understand it better. And that way they will grow with a love and an understanding for the ocean that will replace indiscriminate taking and have the natural conservation idea. Conserve. Protect. Take care of. And it will be a beautiful place, for all of us”.*

But he also understands the call of the wider world. He spent enough time away to know its attraction. But as with conservation, he’s convinced it’s all about balance. *“For the young people, go out and get experience”*, he encourages. *“But come back with it and use it at home. Don’t neglect your home. Try and help the younger ones that are coming up to give them the understanding. Because all of us can appreciate that it is here and here that it has to start. And I know the young people in school today, I think they’re learning that too. We can help each other, the younger generation by showing them a better way. There is a better way for all involved. For the stake holders and the environment”.*

### After the Storm

*“Things really not what they used to be, and it’s getting worse”.*

Papa Joe is still on his rock, the sun starting to dip toward the horizon, the granddaughter long since run after the baby chicks that scurried into his yard. We are nearing the end of our time together, his narrative bending back more and more often to that central complaint about how much things have changed for the worse since the halcyon days of his youth. It’s a familiar and perhaps universal complaint of the elderly, lamenting the passage of time. But Papa Joe is more specific. For him, the root cause is discontinuity, a lack of history.

*“Because the young people today think what is going on now, that is what going on in time gone by. But it wasn’t so...”,* he explains. *“They doesn’t know anything about it, you understand. Because nothing there written in history or anything that say, ok this thing happened so and so a time.”*

Like the others we’ve talked to, Papa Joe feels some responsibility to pass on that history. But it’s tinged with a pessimism that also seems to come with age. *“So, now, you try to tell them about things that happen in time gone by, you know what they say?”* He asks, looking at Cheryl with a rueful smile. *“They say, ‘Oh, you old time-ish’”.* And he falls into a raspy chuckle. It takes him a moment to recover from his own joke. *“You understand me I say? Because they don’t believe you in what you’re trying to tell them. They don’t know what you tell them is what you passed through.”*

Soon he’s back to his other favored topic, politics. The mirth gone. The pessimism weighing on him as he hunches over on his perch. *“And the worst thing that is happening now, is family against*

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*family, is politicians come in and divide us all up, you know". He shakes his head, staring at the dry, dusty ground at his feet, "So, I don't know what is going to happen, but it's going to be terrible".*

Like so many of the men and women we interviewed during our short time on the island in 2014, Papa Joe's comments seem oddly prescient now in the context of hurricane Irma's devastation. From Mr. Mussington, a biologist and local high school principal, showing us the importance of mangroves in protecting the island from dangerous storms, and his own multi-year project to introduce agriculture, egg farming and aquaponics to his students. To Alcon Ned and Shaville Charles, both hunters, among many other things, upholding the tradition of protecting and sustainably culling the island's unique population of wild deer, hogs and land turtles. To the many other farmers, shopkeepers, food vendors, educators and fishermen we spoke to. All of them seemed to call for a reconnection to the past, a shoring up of community and solidarity in the face of an uncertain future, bracing for changes to come. Of course, none of them could have known how radical those changes would be, first from Irma, then from the political and economic forces that would sweep in to take advantage of Barbuda's weakened state.

Papa Joe didn't live to see Irma lay waste to his island, and perhaps that is for the best. But for Miss Fancy, the Hopkins family and all the rest, it has been a test of their resolve to make Barbuda the sustainable, self-sufficient island they always hoped it could be. Miss Fancy's store has not reopened, she's still cleaning out the wreckage, repainting and repairing the damage. The Hopkins family were some of the first to return to the island, quickly repairing and rebuilding their farm. Eugene is back as well, living at his "yard" and carefully restoring what was lost. Frances Beazer returned to find that many of her beloved chickens died in the storm, but the few that were left came running to greet her. The hen house was repaired and resupplied with the help of aid organizations. Speedy's new business, a seafood restaurant, was completely destroyed. He has plans to rebuild, but has spent most of his free time running boats back and forth to Antigua, helping others with supplies for their own recovery efforts. Some we spoke to, however, have not returned at all.

In the storm's aftermath, with Papa Joe's lament and the hopes and dreams of all those we interviewed still ringing in our ears, we went back to the footage, hoping to preserve the voices of Barbudans before the storm in a series of stand alone films: [Papa Joe](#)<sup>1</sup>, [Eugene](#)<sup>2</sup>, [Frances Beazer](#)<sup>3</sup>,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://vimeo.com/478991277>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://vimeo.com/478968547>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://vimeo.com/478969681>.

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[Shiraz and Anessa Hopkins](#)<sup>4</sup>, [Speedy](#)<sup>5</sup>, along with [Blaine “Righteous” Frank](#)<sup>6</sup> another small farmer, and hunters [Alcon Ned and Shaville Charles](#)<sup>7</sup>. All of them culminating in the documentary [Before the Storm: Subsistence and Survival on the Small Island of Barbuda](#)<sup>8</sup>.

And in the process of transcribing and editing hours of footage, listening to all of those voices again and again, one thing became abundantly clear: the consistent call for a return to the land and sea, for self-sufficiency and sustainability was not, in the end, about food at all. It was about community, identity and solidarity. When Barbudans turned away from the land and looked to the ocean, not for what fishermen could provide, but for the boats carrying goods from Antigua, they turned away from a system of mutual support and reciprocity that meant far more than food on the table. They turned away from the fictive kin network of “brothers” and “sisters” that Papa Joe described: “*What you have you share with me, and what I have I share with you*”. For generations of Barbudans, community and identity were built on a foundation of interdependence. But without traditional practices like farming, hunting and fishing that encourage those crucial systems of reciprocal exchange and interdependence, words like “community” and “identity” become abstractions, powerless against the radical infrastructural and political changes that threaten Barbuda’s autonomy. That threaten its very future.

Solidarity, then, among Barbudans is more important than ever. And in the end, self-sufficiency and sustainability may be as powerful a political act as it is a practical concern.

The final documentary, *Before the Storm*, preserves these voices from a time that is now, in Papa Joe’s words, “*A time gone by*”. It captures what is lost, but hopefully, not lost forever. As the last title card in the film reads:

*The future of the island depends upon listening to these voices, the voices of Barbudans, respecting their right to self-determination, and protecting their connection to the land that has sustained them for generations.*

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<sup>4</sup> <https://vimeo.com/478986711>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://vimeo.com/478993695>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://vimeo.com/478992606>.

<sup>7</sup> <https://vimeo.com/478989337>.

<sup>8</sup> <https://vimeo.com/478959977>.

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