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**Retroactively Rewriting the Revolution: The Discursive Mobilization of  
Sustainability in La Habana, Cuba**

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**Retroactively Rewriting the Revolution: The Discursive Mobilization of  
Sustainability in La Habana, Cuba**

**by**

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**Thesis**

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this thesis to my family, though hopefully they will never have to read it.

Thank you so much for your support, patience and long talks while I undertook this project.

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Thank you to the Memorial Center of Martin Luther King. Without their guidance I would never have gotten this far in my research. A special thank you to my Grandfather Law who, though I never met him, helped me a great deal during this process. Additionally I owe a debt of gratitude to Yanet, Octavio, Maylin, Xiomara, Dr. Sarah Blue, Emerio, Dr. Frank Guridy and Dr. Rebecca Torres for facilitating and encouraging me throughout my thesis.

## **Abstract**

# **Retroactively Rewriting the Revolution: The Discursive Mobilization of Sustainability in La Habana, Cuba**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

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The intent of my thesis is to demonstrate how the discourse of sustainability, specifically sustainable urban agriculture, has traversed borders. It is no longer the innovation of the United Nations. It has been adopted, manipulated, and exported to fit a variety of objectives. However, despite its vast travels, the discourse and praxis of sustainability privileges food production over food consumption especially in the Global South. In the process of consuming this idea, this mantra, this labor, many overlook, intentionally or not, the racialized, gendered and classed politics of consumption.

I utilize Cuba as a case study to exemplify how sustainability has been adopted by other nations and provide grounded examples of the effects of this state-sponsored meta-narrative. My central argument is that the Cuban State's discourse and practice supports their politicized ideals of agricultural production by marginalizing food consumption. They accomplish this goal by creating a narrative of production at both the national and local level. The Cuban government supports sustainable production through speeches, local newspapers and sponsorship of particular agricultural organizations. On a local level, pamphlets, workshops and everyday conversations mirror the State's discourse and tout agricultural production as a panacea to Cuba's current state of low

food security. I want to bring to light the complexities of Cuba's urban agricultural model. I do not intent to dispute the importance of their accomplishments in urban agriculture, however I also do not want to praise their impressive strides blindly. Despite their political leanings, like any nation, their relationship with food is raced, classed and gendered.

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## **Introduction and Methodology**

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze the state's discursive mobilization of "sustainability" in Cuba and how it influences the raced, classed and gendered politics of production and consumption of food in La Habana, the islands capital city. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the economic crisis called the "Special Period in the Time of Peace" had a devastating impact on Cuban food security. Out of necessity, the state shifted to an organic or "sustainable" means of agricultural production. During this period, urban gardens emerged throughout La Habana through the use of local resources and relatively low input tools for production to alleviate food shortages. In the early 1990's, the State appropriated the urban agricultural movement along with the term sustainability as Revolutionary.

After roughly twenty years of the state's discursive mobilization of sustainability, it is now inextricably linked to the Revolution and influences the way the residents of a low-income, primarily black community views food production, distribution and their own consumption of fresh foods. Through this lens, I explore the many ways the State seeks to increase 'sustainable' food production and how that affects the resident's ability to consistently access fresh food in a local setting.

### **THE SETTING: POGOLOTTI IN LA HABANA**

Situated between the Caribbean Sea and the North Atlantic Ocean, Cuba is an island of 11.27 million people (Altieri and Funes-Monzote 2012). La Habana is the capital, a major port and the most populated city in Cuba. There are countless neighborhoods in La Habana that are involved in the urban agricultural movement however; I will concentrate my research on the neighborhood of Pogolotti, in the district of Marianao. Pogolotti is the first planned workers neighborhood of La Habana. In the

early 1900's, President José Miguel Gómez attempted to build worker's housing for the urban poor but due to bad planning and "flimsy materials" only 950 units were completed out of the 2,000 promised. This early housing quickly deteriorated and Pogolotti soon became labeled as a slum, "notorious for outbreaks of infectious diseases" (Scarpaci, Segre, and Coyula 2002). The perception of Pogolotti has slowly improved in part due to the creation of the Centro Memorial de Martin Luther King in 1987. The CMMLK is a non-profit organization that links the Cuban community with international agencies to promote emancipatory values with a focus on Freirian Popular Education and critical theology ("Centro Martin Luther King" 2015). The center is often used by mass organizations to hold meetings, conduct workshops and disseminate printed information booklets due to their newly constructed facility along with onsite access to up to date technology and the Internet. I would not have had the opportunity to access the resources, people and information without this Center and for that I am eternally grateful.

## **METHODOLOGY**

My research takes place between the months of May and July of 2014, primarily in the neighborhood of Pogolotti, though I did spent two weeks commuting back and forth from El Vedado. While in Cuba, I performed three types of research: participant observation, interviews and disccourse analysis. My participant observation consisted of walking, both alone and with members of the CMMLK, around the markets in Pogolotti. My observation was not limited to the neighborhood of Pogolotti. I also navigated five markets in and around El Vedado as well as, an agricultural market on the outskirts of town called El Trigal. Additionally, I participated in a three-day workshop on cooperatives in Pogolotti from Thursday, June 25th through Saturday, June 27th. It consisted of 18 participants, including myself, who were from La Habana as well as the

provinces. Eleven women and seven men were specifically chosen by their Center because of their specialized backgrounds in popular education and cooperatives. The workshop began at 8:30 in the morning and ended at 10:30 at night with three breaks for lunch, coffee and dinner.

The purpose of the workshop was to educate the participants on what “real” cooperatives consisted of, how to include popular education into cooperatives and how to create a cooperative in the current political and economic climate of Cuba. The first day concentrated on the modern day politics and economy in Cuba. The group leader believed that it was important to situate the workshop to discuss the current socio-political situation in Cuba before discussing the intricacies of cooperativism. The second day consisted of group work to discuss what “real” cooperatives are and how it contrasts with some of the “false” or state cooperatives. Since the workshop was approached with a popular education methodology, we would present our findings and have an entire group discussion of the conclusions reached by the group or the individual after each activity (group work, movies, personal reflections)

Throughout this workshop, I gained insight on both the legal, political and economic challenges that face cooperatives but also how perceptions of cooperatives can be changed through education. Two themes I noted during my participation observation was the emphasis on sustainability and gender roles within the “new, real” cooperatives. All members involved agreed that it was crucial to be a sustainable cooperative however, there was no consensus on what sustainability meant. When the conversation turned to the role of gender in cooperatives, I found that men dominated the conversation even though women were in the majority. The men who spoke agreed that women should have a leading role in the cooperatives because “cooperatives are a family and women are the head of the family thereby, women should run cooperatives”. This experience and the

materials from this workshop greatly influenced the writing and formation of Chapter Three “The Production of Sustainability”.

I interviewed 10 families from the Centro de Martin Luther King, workers within the center, several academics in various fields such as history, economics, social movements and journalism and spoke informally with most of the market vendors in my area of Pogolotti and El Trigal. My interview questions were mostly informal, touching on their perceptions on food access, quality of food and whether they believed urban agriculture helped reduce prices of produce and increase production. I decided to not record my interviews because it clearly made my interlocutors anxious. Many of the people I interviewed freely expressed their views on everything from grocery shopping to agriculture to the State once we began to cultivate a relationship. However, that relationship entailed a negotiation on their behalf as well as mine. If they decided to speak with me it was under the clear terms that I would not record their interview and that I would not use their names. I respected their wishes, which is why I refrain from using names and instead use general descriptions of class, race and gender to further my arguments. As I discuss in Chapter Four “The Consumption of Sustainability”, those I spoke to generally believed that urban agriculture has helped but not significantly. The most common phrase used was that salaries were too low and food prices were too high. When I asked what a possible solution could be the consensus seemed to call for an increase in production all over Cuba, which they claimed would reduce prices in the cities. I also noted a subtle dislike for the farmers and vendors (sometimes one and the same) because “they are being paid a higher salary” and they steal money from the customers by not weighing the food or meat accurately and pocketing the extra money.

To round out my observations and my interlocutor’s perceptions, I performed a content analysis on the local Cuban newspapers, the most ubiquitous being *Granma*, to



gain insight into the State's discussion of sustainable agriculture. Everyday I would buy *Granma* and on occasion *Trabajadores* or *Juventud Rebelde* to search for articles on food production, food consumption, urban agriculture and sustainability. Almost every week, I would find an article on one of these themes. I noted that the discourses in the articles were generally echoed by many of my interlocutors ie. we need to produce more food, Cuba is very sustainable and urban agriculture is creating a difference. This prompted my investigation of the effects of the State's discursive mobilization on sustainability in Cuba and how that affected how citizens practiced urban agriculture. I also conducted a discourse analysis on José Martí's writings, as well as, Raul and Fidel's speeches during large international and national political events. For example, I analyze Fidel's speech to the United Nations in 1992 as well as Raul's recent speech during the Sixth Congress of the Communist Party. Through this analysis, it became increasingly apparent that environmental, equitable and economic sustainability became a term that was strongly linked with State led nationalism.

My methodological framework engages in three inter-related fields including feminist methodology (Haraway 1988; Collins 1998; Collins 2008) participatory (rural) appraisal (Chambers 1994) and participatory research methods (Freire 1996).

## **FEMINIST METHODOLOGY**

I employ feminist methodology (Reinharz and Davidman 1992) because I practice it in my life and work. I utilize this methodology not only because I am a woman but because it provides a lens to critique dominant ideologies that leave not only leave gender unexamined but also race, class, sexuality, religion and so on (Mohanty, Russo, and Torres 1991; hooks 2000; Andersen and Collins 2009). While I recognize there is not a consensus on the definition of feminism nor feminist methodology, I will employ

aspects that advocate for social justice and takes into consideration the positionality of the researchers, allowing the researcher to engage in self-reflection of their emotions, thoughts and experiences during the research process (Reinharz and Davidman 1992; Haraway 1988; Collins 1998).

Since so many scholars studying Cuba fall into the trap of either reducing Cuba to a stereotype of itself or framing it in a Cold War context, it is important to recognize and utilize “situated knowledge’s” (Haraway 1988). This is the “belief that it is possible to see only partial truths about the world as knowledge is dependent upon the viewers own position in the world” (Haraway 1988). The theme of positionality is critical in feminist methodology (Pateman and Grosz 2013; McDowell and Sharp 1997) and in my own work; it is crucial to address how I am embedded in social structures and cultural frameworks of the United States when I am speaking about Cuban culture and policy. While I interrogate the ideas behind sustainability, its discourse and its everyday practice, I do not intend to make judgments on whether it succeeded or failed in Cuba or elsewhere. By making those assessments, I would have to rely on preconceived notions of how success and failure manifests as well as, how and by whom it is measured.

#### **PARTICIPATORY APPRAISAL AND PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH METHODS**

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) is built upon the theory of Rural Rapid Appraisal (RRA) in the 1990’s. It is considered a “family of approaches and methods to enable rural people to share, enhance and analyze their knowledge of life and conditions, to plan and to act” (Chambers, 953, 1994). PRA has contributed and enhanced five research techniques: activist participatory research, agro ecosystem analysis, applied anthropology, field research on farming systems and of course, rapid rural appraisal (Chambers, 1994). The direction of activist participatory research was greatly influenced

by Paulo Freire's book "The Pedagogy of the Oppressed" (2000). Freire focused on empowering those who were exploited by encouraging them to conduct research and analyze their own reality. Adult education, in most cases, has been a priority so community leaders can accumulate knowledge about their political and social surroundings to enact political action (Gaventa and Lewis 1991). The community within the CMMLK is already heavily engaged in Freirian pedagogy therefore, many of my interviews were steered by the interest of the Center's supporters. I utilize applied anthropology (Kedia and Willigen 2005) to delve further into how an urban community negotiates culturally with a primarily rural method of subsistence that has been known to have a stigma of "dirty work". While the space I am researching is located in an urban setting, this research method provides me the tools to evaluate urban agricultural sites and both the community's and my own perception of the field.

## **THE FIELD**

*"The field is not naturalized in terms of 'place' or a 'people': it is instead located and defined in terms of specific political objectives that (as much) cut across time and space"(Nast 1994).*

The field, in my case, Pogolotti, is not fixed in a time or place (Hyndman 2001). Hyndman argues that as researchers, we are always in the field and we should recognize that this presence changes the dynamic of the field as well as the researcher (2001). The once believed "objective" relationship between field, researcher and subject has been challenged by the "science question in feminism" (Harding 1986; Haraway 1988). Instead of the common belief that research should present a neutral viewpoint, Haraway (1988) critiques the "god(dess) trick" and contends that in all scholarship we are viewing

from the body, the researchers body. I intend to further examine the idea of subjectivity, of partial, embodied and situated knowledge's in fieldwork as well as, how I position myself within my own fieldwork as a white, female American-Brazilian researcher.

The researcher's body, my body, is subject to speculation, construction, and reconstruction in the field. Faria & Mollett (2013) explore how whiteness is felt and perceived in the Global South. They contend that whiteness is not simply about race or culture but rather "whiteness is a structural advantage signifying 'success, modernity and wealth'" (Mollett and Faria 2013). By claiming race is fixed, we are perpetuating essentialist notions of natural bodies that tend to immobilize 'white' bodies (Kobayashi 2001; Mollett and Faria 2013). Mollett, an African-Canadian cultural geographer, was considered in the field to be black but at times whiteness was conferred on her due to her education and foreign nationality (2013). Her perceived race was not stagnant but rather a "process of becoming" (Hall 1993) which influenced her dynamic in the field and with her interlocutors. I utilize their theory of whiteness to mark my own body and address how both my perceptions of the community and the community's perceptions of me influences my research.

My first few weeks in Pogolotti, the community I worked with at the Centro Memorial de Martin Luther King referred to me as "la blanquita". While many said it as a term of endearment, it was also a clear way to connote my whiteness, my foreignness, and my ability to leave Cuba. Because I spoke Spanish and was not living in the tourist zone, many in the community would not accept that I was from "La Yuma", Cuban slang for the United States. If they kept pressing, I would say I grew up in Spain, Mexico and Brazil or that I was a Brazilian citizen, which would confirm their suspicions that I was not really from the United States. About half way into my second month, I was referred to less as "la blanquita" and more by my name. Some even joked that I was now "la

morena” because I became increasingly tan as the summer progressed. Even though I remained permanently an “outsider”, my perceived identity shifted over time.

In her article “Getting Personal: Reflexivity, Positionality and Feminist Research” (1994) England navigates through her own power relations in academia to highlight the “academic neoimperialism” that rises out of research. However, her line of discourse often leads to a paralyzing feelings of “white guilt” which can be counter productive by reproducing the dialogue of the privileged versus the oppressed. Simply performing self-flagellation, acknowledgement and apology will not mitigate racial power (Mollett and Faria 2013, Gillman 2007). Mohammad (2001) Hapke & Ayyanketil (2001) argue that approaching research through an “insider/outsider” binary replicates ideas of singular identities within the community as well as the researcher. Instead they argue for an “in-betweenness”. Each author found that even though they shared common traits with their community (nationality, race, sexuality) there were other aspects of their person (education, gender, race and religion) that created divisions.

While in many ways I was viewed as just a foreign white academic, there were some moments where I found myself being an “insider”. The CMMLK shared a wall with the Ebenezer Baptist Church. In practice, they were two separate entities however, the leader of both institutions was a Pastor named Raul Suarez. What I did not know upon arrival was that my grandfather, who was a missionary in Cuba for ten years, was Pastor Suarez’ seminary professor and mentor. By discovering this familial connection, he introduced me to the Church as a “daughter coming home”. Through his validation and my perceived Baptist faith, I became less suspect. Out of religious solidarity, this tie made me more welcomed into a faction of the community since Baptists, or anyone practicing religion, were marginalized and discriminated against during the heyday of the Revolution. My presence became partially accepted within the center and I became an

almost normal sight with my notebook and pen in hand. My normalized presence and the religious connection with many in the community clearly influenced my findings and analysis of my fieldwork.

I found that my experience in the Center and the Church, treading the often-blurry line of fieldwork ethics, is not a unique one. Mohammad (2001) discusses her “erasure of the personal/professional boundary” as a Pakistani woman conducting research in a Pakistani community in England. She argues that the researcher and “community” play performing roles, neither one knowing the whole ‘truth’ about each other. Despite the fact that she was single and no longer practicing, she was often presented as a married, Muslim woman which was further solidified by her Punjabi dress. I found her representation of her ethics problematic like mentioning that “perhaps” her Punjabi dress encouraged the community to think that she was a part of it. She underplays the ethics of her performance as a “traditional” Muslim as part of the politics of doing research. However, I can only critique her writing style and not her practice. Many times, I let people believe that I was a practicing Baptist or even that I was married to limit unwanted male attention. I struggle with how I conducted research to gain access to people’s opinions however, I think in some ways it was necessary to navigate that cultural sphere. Hapke & Ayyankaril (2001) admitted that they would let people believe they were married, before they actually were, or even changed their appearances to gain entrance into the particular geographical area of study.

I have discussed that the field cannot be understood through a “fixed” place but rather one that moves across spatial and temporal scales. Much like the field, the community constructs my identity, as white or “less white”, Brazilian or ‘American’, Baptist or secular, which influences the way I conduct, perceive and write my research. However, it is important to acknowledge that despite Hyndman’s argument that we are

always in the field (2001) and Mollett and Faria's assertion that we should not perpetuate Global North versus Global South narratives (2013), I have the opportunity to leave Cuba. In a country where this has been a point of contention, I find it problematic to not concede to this fact and admit how much emotional distance it created between the community and myself. Additionally, it creates implications for the knowledge I produce. In the end, I am choosing subjects to interrogate, questions to frame and quotes to use to further my research objectives. However, this is not a one sided conversation. While I found the CMMLK and the Ebenezer Church very welcoming, there were many sites where I was not allowed access. I could hypothesize why some urban agricultural sites and some agricultural engineers permitted me onto the property and answered my questions but it would be just that, an educated guess. I can only express my "situated knowledge" and hope that the reader does not misappropriate or misunderstand my intentions. Out of all the ambiguity that comes from research the one thing I am sure of is that fieldwork has a steep learning curve that requires continual reflexivity and practice.

#### **POINT OF DEPARTURE**

My fieldwork and my last year of my Masters work occurred during a remarkable time in Cuban politics and Cuban-US relations. On December 17, 2014, President Barack Obama announced a shift in policy towards normalizing relations between the Cuba and the United States.

Good afternoon. Today, the United States of America is changing its relationship with the people of Cuba.

In the most significant changes in our policy in more than fifty years, we will end an outdated approach that, for decades, has failed to advance our interests, and instead we will begin to normalize relations between our two countries. Through

these changes, we intend to create more opportunities for the American and Cuban people, and begin a new chapter among the nations of the Americas.

(“Statement by the President on Cuba Policy Changes” 2015)

I hesitated discussing Cuban-U.S. relations in my scholarship in efforts to distance myself from the western centric dialogues around Cuba as well as to avoid Cold War clichés. However, as the months roll by and more news articles are released about Cuban-U.S. involvements, I would feel remiss not to mention the impact this normalization will have on food and the politics of food.

### **POLITICS OR FISH? WHY NOT BOTH?**

Walking around food markets in La Habana there is something noticeably missing, fish. There is chicken, pork and even sometimes beef hanging from the small green stalls but never fish. It is not obvious at first, but overtime it grows more apparent that there is something lacking, a haunting of something that should be, a feeling of something missing in the back of your mind, that a nation surrounded by water does not have a thriving fish market. Even though fish is allotted in the Cuban libreta or ration books, it is rarely filled. This gave way to a popular yet dark rationing joke that their fish rations looks like chicken “el pescado parece como pollo”. I have heard different accounts of why there is no fish. Some say that it was because Cuba has a trade deal with other countries for fish others say that the state was purposefully holding out on La Habana markets. Rumors in Cuba are often closer to the truth that the “Truth” is. However, on December 17th it was reported by Yoani Sánchez (2014), the famous and often controversial female Cuban blogger, that there was finally fish for sale. What she wrote has stayed with me for the entirety of my thesis:

**Oigo los discursos o compro el pescado?/ Do I listen to speeches or buy fish?**



This accurately sums up an argument that I have been grappling with during my Master's research. How do I address the complicated, contentious and inseparable web of food and politics? Should they be placed at odds with one another? Do we listen to speeches or do we buy fish? Maybe we should do both. Food is political. Cuba's economic crisis, the Special Period, was brought on by a set of *political* decisions of the Cold War that ultimately brought Cuba's society down to its most basic living conditions. This crisis that has haunted Cuba since the 1990's was marked by the collapse of the cattle industry, the near failure of the agricultural industry, the meagerness of rations that led to rampant food insecurity. A set of historical, political moments set into play some of the leanest years in Cuba. The normalizing of relations brought back fish according to Yoani Sánchez. I find that I cannot ignore this. Food is political.

Apparently I am not the only one who thinks so. In the following months, NPR, the New York Times as well as, several Cuban blogs have brought food politics and agriculture to the forefront of the normalization of US-Cuban relations. This is to say that food is increasingly being recognized as a conversation that is inextricably linked with the political. I plan to further interrogate these ideas in the following chapters.

## **CHAPTER OUTLINE**

The intent of my thesis is to demonstrate how the discourse of sustainability, specifically sustainable urban agriculture, has traversed borders. It is no longer the innovation of the United Nations. It has been adopted, manipulated, and exported to fit a variety of objectives. However, despite its vast travels, the discourse and praxis of sustainability privileges food production over food consumption especially in the Global South. In the process of consuming this idea, this mantra, this labor, many overlook, intentionally or not, the racialized, gendered and classed politics of consumption.

I utilize Cuba as a case study to exemplify how sustainability has been adopted by other nations and provide grounded examples of the effects of this state-sponsored meta-narrative. My central argument is that the Cuban State's discourse and practice supports their politicized ideals of agricultural production by marginalizing food consumption. They accomplish this goal by creating a narrative of production at both the national and local level. The Cuban government supports sustainable production through speeches, local newspapers and sponsorship of particular agricultural organizations. On a local level, pamphlets, workshops and everyday conversations mirror the State's discourse and tout agricultural production as a panacea to Cuba's current state of low food security. While the hyper-fixation on production has been a common critique in the literature on food and sustainability (Pollan 2006; Goodman and DuPuis 2002), I want to bring to light the complexities of Cuba's urban agricultural model. I do not intent to dispute the importance of their accomplishments in urban agriculture, however I also do not want to praise their impressive strides blindly. Despite their political leanings, like any nation, their relationship with food is raced, classed and gendered.

My first chapter provides an outline of the current literature on sustainability and how sustainability became associated with urban agricultural practices worldwide but also specifically in Cuba. I discuss the importance of linking production and consumption when addressing agriculture, especially urban agriculture. By addressing both, the politics of production and consumption, we can further identify limitations in food distribution and access, specifically who has access and why. I hope to fill in the gaps on the current food systems literature and contextualize in the second chapter by highlighting the emergence of the sustainability and urban agriculture movement in Cuba. Next, I discuss how the sustainability movement in Cuba emerged out a unique set of historical circumstances. I cite the July 26th movement, the overthrow of the US-backed

dictator Batista, and even more recently the Special Period to show how this type of sustainability arose in a socialist society. The take away point is that ‘Sustainability’ is part of a State manufactured nationalist project that later became inextricably linked with urban agriculture. Utilizing Gold’s scholarship (2014), I contend that Fidel Castro, Raul Castro and, José Martí’s discourse reflects the three pillars of sustainability: equity, environment and economic. I analyze Fidel and Raul Castro’s speeches and utilize Fidel’s interpretations of José Martí’s writings to make this claim. Their nationalist discursive mobilization influences the way people engage with urban agriculture through both production and consumption.

My third chapter on urban agricultural production lays out how the state engages and preferences production to the detriment of consumption. I examine how they define urban agriculture, what urban agriculture production looks like in La Habana and finally, who produces. I, then, discuss how institutions have attempted to ‘add in’ women into the production process by calling upon Che’s conception of the “Hombre Nuevo” to further their claim.

After we see the narrative behind production, my last chapter addresses what this discourse looks like ‘on the ground’. I utilize my ethnographic research to explore consumption practices in Pogolotti. I consider why many residents of Pogolotti call upon the government’s discourse on production to find the solution for consumption. I do this by applying three quotes I often heard while conducting interviews and analyzing them in a historical and economic context. My interviews indicate how much La Habana has improved since the Special Period. However, food prices are still too high for many Cubans due to a myriad of factors like high cost of inputs, greater demand than supply, physical distance from the tourist sector and the marginalization of certain ‘low cultured’ peoples. In attempting to find the solution, the State and the residents cite production as

the answer. I problematize why this issue cannot be solved solely through production and what consequences can arise from this line of thought.

## **Chapter One: The Development of Sustainability**

After its emergence in 1987, sustainable development and then, sustainability became applicable to almost everything. Discursively sustainability is associated with environmental, economic and at times, equitable growth in the Global North (Wallerstein 1974; Appadurai 1990)<sup>1</sup>. However I contend that sustainability has traversed borders and is no longer restricted to the Global North paradigm. Furthermore, I interrogate how and why sustainability has been so widely used with urban agriculture by examining conceptions of discourse, space and the environment-society divide. I finish by weaving together the often-disjointed food literature on production and consumption to locate what has been under researched. Through this process, I demonstrate how the Cuban case study can address these ‘holes’ to give us a fuller picture of sustainability and urban agriculture.

### **BIRTHPLACE OF SUSTAINABILITY**

It has been over two decades since the Brundtland Report (“Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future (Brundtland Report)” 1987) from the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development was published. This report addressed how human resource development, economic stagnation and environmental degradation was directly influenced by poverty, gender inequity and the lack of distribution of the global wealth. They coined the term “sustainable development” to describe what would become a new meta-narrative of the

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<sup>1</sup> The terminology of Global North and Global South draws from Wallerstein’s World Systems Theory, which situates the nation state within a broader economic, political and legal framework known as a ‘world system’. Global North usually refers to countries like the United States and other European Nations while the Global South refers to Latin American and African countries. Appadurai, as well as many other scholars, draw upon this theory to explore the complexities of globalization of culture. I personally utilize Global North and Global South discourse because my interlocutors used the same language to describe themselves and other countries as a form of solidarity.

twenty first century (S. Campbell 1996). Sustainable development is defined as that which "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" ("Our Common Future," 1987). Synonyms of sustainable development and sustainability have flooded our modern day lexicon. Tariq Banuri, Director of the UN Division of Sustainable Development refers to sustainability as "a bridge (between) environment and development, North and South, government, business and civil society, present and future, long term and short term, science and policy and efficiency equity and participation" (2009). Alkon suggests that the absence of a definition or defining through tensions sustainability generates is "an attempt to create a discursive space in between" (2012). For the most part, this western idea is framed in terms of production, e.g. organically grown or GMO free. The concept of sustainability has grown in tandem with urban agriculture in the Global North. Urban farms ideally provide "fresh", "local", and "healthful" food without the high cost of transportation and in some cases the use of pesticides and fertilizers. From there, citizens, or privileged citizens, are expected to consume (environmentally, socially and economically) consciously and buy green, organic, local, non-GMO, fresh foods. Therefore, despite our efforts to create a 'sustainable' sustainability movement, there is often too much focus on the preservation of our resources for future generations and not on the distribution of the resources within each generation (Alkon 2012).

#### **SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT VS. SUSTAINABILITY**

In the past fifteen years there has been a marked delineation between the terms sustainable development and sustainability.

## Google books Ngram Viewer

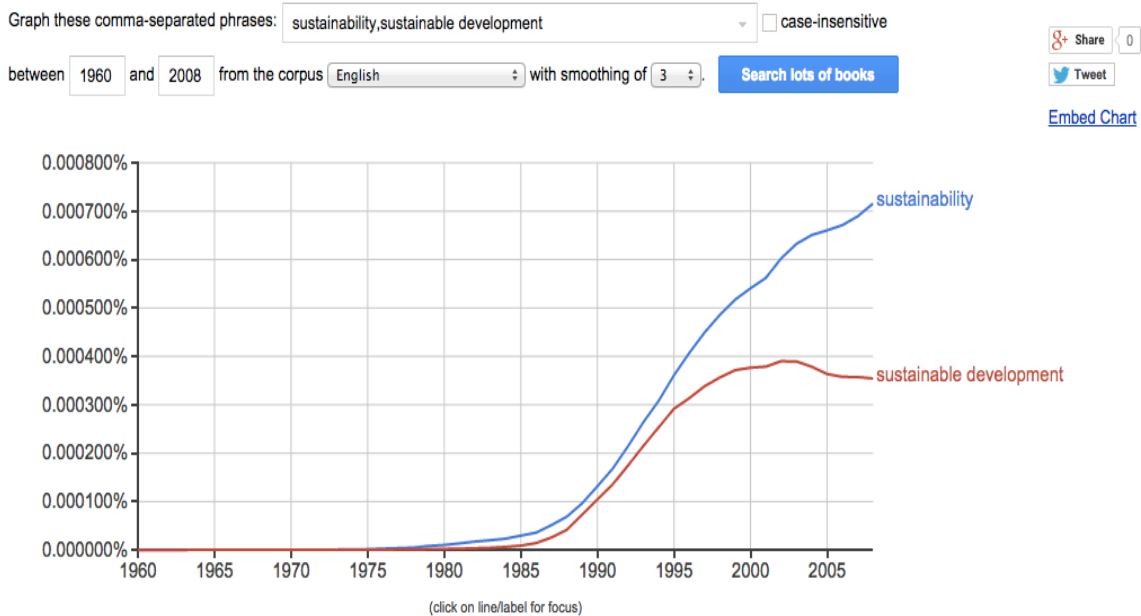


Figure One Google books Ngram Viewer is an online viewer that charts the frequencies of certain words or phrases in Google books. In this instance, the term sustainability and sustainable development are charted to show the delineation in frequency used.

As evidenced by the Google Books Ngram Viewer, the term ‘sustainable development’ stagnated in the late 1990’s and early 2000’s while ‘sustainability’ rose in popularity. I contend that sustainable development created a pathway for the term sustainability, which also followed a discursive shift from a focus from the environment to the economic. Since sustainable development was lexically understood to be ecological, sustainability was intended to encompass all "three pillars": environmental, economic, and equitable (Psarikidou and Szerszynski 2012). Therefore, for a program to be a truly ‘sustainable’ it must consider the inseparable link between nature, class and people. Initially intended to be a balancing act, these three pillars have in reality, created

a hierarchy. There is often more emphasis on economy rather than equity. However, I argue that this movement isn't simply economic, environmental or social in nature but all three that moves across spatial and temporal scales (McClintock 2010).

## **SUSTAINABILITY DISCOURSE**

Since sustainability, in many ways, has been defined as indefinable, I contend that it is the intent behind the discourse that drives the various meanings behind 'sustainability'. Discourse refers to the:

“groups of statements which structure the way a think is thought, and the way we act on the basis of that thinking. In other words, discourse is a particular knowledge about the world which shapes how the world is understood and how things are done in it” (Rose 2007).

Foucault (1979; 1980) a French historian and social theorist, argues that discourse is tightly linked to power by operating on the rules of exclusion. Discourse is privileged to those who have the power to speak, know where and how to speak, and what to speak of. It has the power to produce subjects as well as marginalize them. Gibson-Graham, feminist economic geographers, calls discourse “a language of domination, a tightly scripted narrative of differential power” (2006). However, discourse is not limited to language but can be visual like the visuality of an image or text. Therefore, as Foucault says, since discourse is everywhere, power is everywhere (1979). Even though, Foucault wrote groundbreaking scholarship on power, discourse and knowledge, Rose argues that his methodology was vague. This led her to create two yet overlapping methodologies from Foucault's arguments: discourse analysis I and discourse analysis II (2007). My method of analyzing discourse lends itself more towards the second definition:



“This form of discourse analysis tends to pay rather more attention to the practices of institutions than it does to the visual and verbal texts. Its methodology is usually left implicit. It tends to be more explicitly concerned with issues of power, regimes of truth, institutions and technologies” (Rose, 2007)

While discourse analysis can effectively articulate the social production of the visual, written and spoken discourse, it does not interrogate how social practices are articulated. While part of my work does analyze the production or marginalization of subjects through claims of truth, I want to concentrate on how the well-documented term, sustainability, affects how individuals interact with the spaces involved in the urban agricultural system. Moreover, I want to explore whether Cuba’s historical legacy gives them more license to discursively utilize sustainability? Does this specific space give more power to their discourse?

## **SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF SPACE**

Local space allows researchers a place to engage in how a person’s every day interactions, images and settings transform and convey symbolic meaning (Low 1996). This method has been used to describe the spatialization of social conflicts, specifically class based struggles with state imposed regimes (Harvey 1985; Harvey 1990; Castells 1983). Many scholars have argued that space is the construction or reflection of society and through the spatializing of social control of the human body we become aware of the state’s control of individuals (Foucault 1980; Rabinow 1984). Castells agrees that space reflects already defined power relationships (1983) but focuses on social and grassroots movements instead of highlighting individual agency. It is necessary to define existing power structures and from there to recognize that gender, race, ethnicity and sexuality are

defined through power (Green and Singleton 2006; Scranton and Watson 1998).<sup>2</sup> Castells conceptualizes the urban meaning of space as the “structural performance assigned as a goal to cities in general by the conflictive process between historical actors in a given society” (1983). Due to the heterogeneous nature of the urban setting, the city space will have multiple meanings for a wide variety of people. Like anything, context and history is key. The narrative of Cuba is influenced by its geopolitical positioning and their economic realities while still engaging with the discourse of the Revolution. These spatial realities, affect the way that the sustainability discourse is transmitted and the alternative food movement progresses. It is essential to analyze urban space because like urban agriculture, it provides researchers the “ability to integrate the localized discourse with larger political and economic processes (Low, 1996).

#### **SUSTAINABILITY AND URBAN AGRICULTURE**

The sustainability discourse has been ‘baked’ into urban agricultural projects of the Global North whereas in the Global South it usually is ‘added in’ after the fact, if at all. However, there are some similarities in urban agriculture between the Global North and Global South. First, both have struggled with the insecurity of land tenure. In the Global North, urban agriculture is often seen as a prelude for future land development and in the Global South, the politics of land tenure has been fraught with a history of colonialism and a perpetual displacement of indigenous peoples and farmers. Another pattern is that urban agriculture was touted as a panacea in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s (Hodgson, Campbell, and Bailkey 2011; Pearson 2010). From food access to economic development, urban agriculture could do no wrong. However, scholars have

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<sup>2</sup> Concepts of space tend to be theorized from a white hetero-normative male perspective (Massey 1994) however, recent scholars like McKittrick have challenged this frame (2006)

increasingly called this into question in the past ten years by highlighting problems of gentrification and land loss (Tornaghi 2014).

Urban agriculture is defined as ‘the growing, processing, and distribution of food and other products through intensive plant cultivation and animal husbandry in and around cities’ (“Urban Agriculture and Community Food Security in the United States: Farming from the City Center To the Urban Fringe” 2015). The intentional broadness of this definition suggests that anywhere one can grow food and other products in the peri-urban or urban space will be considered as urban agriculture. Sites of urban agriculture includes sites like small garden plots, balcony, windowsill, urban farms, land sharing, rooftop gardens and beehives, allotments, guerilla gardening and so on (Hou, Johnson, and Lawson 2009; Mougeot 2010; Nordahl 2009; Redwood 2012).

The literature of urban agriculture in the Global South has been far more developed than that of the Global North (Tornaghi, 2014). WinklerPrins noted that there is a regional distinction in how scholars approach urban agriculture in her extensive literature review on house-lot gardens in Africa, Asia, Latin American and the Caribbean (2002). In Latin America, the Caribbean and Asia, there was a specific interest in botanical descriptions and the cultural practices surrounding house-lot gardens; whereas, in Africa, there was a larger concentration of research on urban agriculture and food security. In many cities in the Global South, urban agriculture is widely and majority a need based practice to supplement income, increase food security and even continue cultural traditions. With the rapid urbanization and influx of peoples from the countryside, urban agriculture tends to be for personal or family use.

In the Global North, particularly the United States, urban agriculture was not as widely utilized and even marginalized at times. During moments of food insecurity, 1890’s, World War I, World War II, urban agriculture arose out of necessity however; it

remained a relatively dormant movement (Lawson 2005). Urban agriculture has experienced a growth in popularity since its origins as a social and environmental movement in the 1960's. This progress has been coupled with the term sustainability and branches thereof such as food justice, environmental activism and so on (Alison Hope Alkon 2012) .

### **THE ENVIRONMENT OF THE CITY**

Urban agriculture has been theorized as a place-making activity that jumps scales from local to national to global. Using feminist urban political ecology, I analyze the mythological binary between environment and society, which became intensified under capitalism. Rochelau et al. defines feminist political ecology as treating:

gender as a critical variable in shaping resource access and control, interacting with class, caste, race, culture, and ethnicity to shape processes of ecological change, the struggle of men and women to sustain ecologically viable livelihoods, and the prospects of any community for 'sustainable development.' (1996)

With a critical lens towards gendered knowledge, environmental rights, responsibilities and environmental politics, I push the society-nature divide further to analyze the obstacles individuals face in pursuit of reconnecting their labor with the environment.

Marx and later Braun and Castree (1998) Swyngedouw (2006) and McClintock (2010) theorized the idea of 'Metabolic rift' in conjunction with urban agriculture across scales and regions. The term 'Metabolic Rift' refers to the alienation between human beings and the products of their labor created by the disruptive process of capitalism and its 'tendencies towards expansion and accumulation (McClintock 2010). Urban agriculture attempts to repair that rift by re-connecting human beings and the environment taking into account their biophysical and socio-economic contexts.

Metabolic rift is broken down into three subsets: ecological, social and individual rifts. While the destructive forces of industrial agriculture cause the ecological rift, urban agriculture can mend it by bringing back the full nutrient cycle in the circle of production and consumption. The social and individual rift emerges through the commodification of labor, land and food and the consequent distance from the environment that occurs. McClintock contends that urban agriculture brings people back to the land, allows them to engage in labor and therefore eliminates the alienation between the individual and the environment. While he acknowledges that not everyone can interact with the environment, he does not elaborate on the limitations or obstacles that individuals face when trying to farm plots especially in urban areas. To understand better who is allowed access to certain spaces we must turn our eyes to systemic problems like land loss for Indigenous, Black and Latino farmers, urban gentrification, as well as gendered labor roles<sup>3</sup>.

### **THE CIRCLE OF PRODUCING AND CONSUMING**

To recognize the increasingly complicated interactions and implications of alternative agricultures, we must first interrogate the socio-political relationships that contextualize the circle of producing and consuming. Too often, the practice of production and consumption are spoken of as binaries instead of interweaving them together in the larger nutrient cycle (Goodman and DuPuis 2002). Putting producers and consumers at odds with one other often leads to a relationship where ethical privileged consumers support producers with sustainable if not organic production processes. Through this development, consumers associate themselves with a certain ‘brand’ or ‘label’ and are conferred the identity of environmentalist, social justice supporter and so

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<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that these groups have all encountered the same problems. Each has their own unique historical legacy that has influenced their ability to access land.

on. Globally, this is often referred to rollback neoliberalism where civil society regulates businesses. Labels like ‘fair trade’, ‘ecologically friendly’ and ‘organic’ are some examples of consumers dictating how business’ produce (Bryant and Goodman 2004). However, this does not just come from an individual level, often scholars like Miguel Altieri (2008) have called upon Global North consumers to support through purchasing from small hold producers like Via Campesina. The politics of consumption or to “vote with your fork” (Pollan 2006) has been a contentious issue in the foundation of the alternative food movement. Pollan (2006) argues that food activism today can be accurately judged by who is left out or disproportionately underrepresented, namely communities of color.

Relying only on the market and consumptive practices to bring about change in the food system leaves much to be desired (Alkon 2012; Alkon and Agyeman 2011a; J. Guthman 2008). Movements like Food Justice have sought to remedy these gaps. Food Justice advocates for “equal access to healthful food while addressing structural inequalities in the food system and distribution of environmental benefits” (Alkon, 2012). This movement is happening at a local, primarily western urban scale and therefore seeks to encourage grassroots food systems in low-income communities of color. There has yet been a comprehensive shift in the food system where people address the global structural change that needs to occur. There is little literature that addresses the loss of farmland for Indigenous, Latino and Black farmers, that address the issues and vulnerabilities of workers rights in industrial agriculture and that addresses the insecurity of urban land for food production (Reynolds 2015; Minkoff-Zern 2014). However, scholars started to pay closer attention to how food consumption is not only a biological process but also, highly politicized process across lines of race, class, gender and culture (Guthman, 2007; Harper, 2011; Slocum, 2007). I seek to frame sustainability in a way that interweaves the

realities of food access and food consumption. Additionally, I argue that food consumption should not only be framed as a practice of the elite of the Global North. There are systemic obstacles that prevent food production, food access and consumption in the Global South. However, it is important not to minimize the agency of these consumers; when possible, individuals choose what food they consume by preferencing some vendors over others, by traveling further to buy groceries and by relying on community members to find the best deals.

Through this literature review on sustainability, urban agriculture and space, I hope to highlight the gaps in the current food systems literature. Despite the movement towards food justice, food sovereignty and alternative agricultural systems, I continue the scholarship of Guthman (2007), Slocum (2007) and Harper (2011) to more critically interrogate the socio-political structure of food. That we messy or acknowledge the socio-historical hierarchies that constructs certain bodies that consume by interweaving histories and colonial legacies of gender, race and class and take into account the societal structures in place that limit access to food (Mollett and Faria 2013).

## **Chapter Two: Emergence of Sustainability Discourse in Cuba**

Many scholars (Altieri et al. 1999; Koont 2007; Viljoen, Bohn, and Howe 2005) have lauded Cuba as a model of organic production and urban agriculture in the face of economic crises and food insecurity. Moreover, in Cuba, the term sustainability has become almost synonymous with state generated nationalism and its Revolutionary principles (Gold, 2014). However, they still face major challenges like unequal food distribution and food access based on income due in part, to the state's focus on increasing sustainable production. I analyze how the state utilizes the discourses of sustainability, what practices they are associated with, and the ways in which those discourses fall short. I contend that their use of sustainability is as a set of strategies that incorporates and mobilizes both discourses and practices. I intend to provide the space to show how intimately the local discourses are influenced by the sociopolitical arrangements of each society and thereby affect how urban agriculture plays out in Cuba. I argue that in theory and in praxis "sustainability" is largely talked about in terms of food production, to the detriment of consumption. More specifically, how, where, and by whom the food is produced is privileged over who is consuming the food. By focusing on production, the global urban agricultural community fails to acknowledge consumption as an integral part of any alternative agricultural system. Moreover, it leaves the nutrient cycle a broken circle, as low-income communities in the Global North and Global South continue to struggle with access to healthful food. A theory of sustainability that fails to analyze the two concepts equally will be lacking.

### **BRIEF OVERVIEW OF CUBAN HISTORY: 1950'S TO 1970'S**

The sustainability movement in Cuba emerged out of a unique set of historical circumstances. In 1952, the military under the command of the former president,



Fulgencia Batista, took control of the Cuban state. His actions set into motion a series of events that inevitably led to the Cuban Revolution in 1959. Many Cubans consider July 26th, 1953 the beginning of the Cuban Revolution when “El movimiento 26<sup>th</sup> de Julio”, or the “July 26<sup>th</sup> Movement”, as it became known, attacked the Moncada Garrison in Santiago de Cuba. Fidel Castro, the leader and member of the Orthodox party, were sentenced to prison along with his brother Raul Castro. Perez refers to this attack as a spectacular failure that served to catapult Fidel Castro into contention for leadership over anti-Batista forces and reaffirmed armed struggle as the principal means of opposition (Pérez 2010). In 1955, Batista had ‘won’ another election, running unopposed, and due to political pressure released the Moncada political prisoners.

Just three years after the first attack, Fidel Castro, Ernesto Che Guevara and Raul Castro organized another attack returning to Cuba from Mexico on the small yacht Granma and disastrously lost. The Santiago uprising may have failed but this time the survivor rebels hid in the Sierra Maestra Mountains. Throughout 1957 and 1958, Fidel and his followers grew to create a force of guerilla fighters that were split between different fronts in the north and the east. In 1958, Fidel’s guerilla fighters won a series of battles including the Battle of Santa Clara led by Che Guevara. This time of political turmoil was also followed by a severe economic crisis in Cuba, which hit the middle class particularly hard. Student and worker strikes became frequent and were met with harsh repression from the Batista regime (Pérez 2010). This was coupled by United States arms embargo, which signaled to Batista and his government a clear withdrawal of aid. By December of 1958, one month before the Revolution, the military reported to Washington that 90 percent of the population supported the guerilla cause (Pérez 2010). Batista fled, the military ceased to resist guerilla fighters, and on the first day of 1959 the Revolution had succeeded. Guerra argues what made the Cuban Revolution exceptional was not

“U.S. imperial pressure of the way in which it conditioned outcomes but rather, the consolidation of a socialist state amid an atmosphere largely devoid of wide scale violence” (Guerra 2012). Fidel’s attempt to overthrow the Batista regime was marked by almost suicidal attacks, rebel soldiers and guerilla fighting but their real success was the quick formation of the new State.

With the triumph of the Revolution, the new government grappled with how to structure the new economy. In 1962, there was a large push to move the economy away from sugar production in order to industrialize the countryside and diversify agriculturally. Almost as a foreshadowing to other Latin American countries, “...efforts at import substitution and industrialization had resulted in widespread social distress and economic dislocation” (Pérez 2010). Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI) is a trade and economic plan that encourages domestic production over foreign imports. The idea was to reduce foreign dependency and create an internal market for goods and services. Between 1963 and 1989, the country went through three distinct economic phases. This consisted of the implementation, the Ten Million Ton Harvest in 1970 and its failure, which led to the third phase, the trade agreement with the Soviet Union in 1976 (Pérez 2010; Chomsky 2010)

#### **BRIEF OVERVIEW OF CUBAN HISTORY: 1970’S TO THE SPECIAL PERIOD**

In the late 1970’s, the Cuban government applied a agricultural and economic system that mirrored that of the Soviet Union (Mesa-Lago 1974; Campbell 2013). However, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 brought Cuba into the Special Period in the Time of Peace, a time of high economic and social instability. The Soviet bloc was 80 percent of Cuba’s foreign trade therefore; when the USSR regime collapsed the impacts on Cuba were hard hitting and wide spread (Pérez 2010). Even during the

economic crisis, the Cuban state remained committed to the socialist project, with a few exceptions like tourism and market trade with foreign nations, and convinced it was the only way to accomplish social equity and in the future, economic efficiency (Campbell 2013). This period was marked with social unrest, infrastructural deterioration, disastrous weather and severe cutbacks on institutions that cultivated education and healthcare. Watching their beleaguered neighbor, the U.S. government imposed more sanctions like the Torricelli Act, another attempt to limit Cuba's international shipping and the Helms-Burton Act, penalizing foreign countries to trade with Cuba (Pérez 2010). Despite the U.S. government's imminent predictions of the 'fall' of the Cuban state, the State found ways to 'resolver' or resolve their situation. The Castro regime first handled the crisis with ideological rigidity however over time the State had to make pragmatic decisions to survive the crisis, like pursuing new markets and trading partners. Fidel recognized this in his 1993 speech; "Today we cannot speak of the pure, ideal, perfect socialism of which we dream because life forces us into concessions". Despite the fact that Cuba had external and internal barriers to practice the "ideal, perfect socialism", it is important to note that the discourse and praxis of sustainability is not constrained to a democracy but instead arose in a socialist setting.

Pragmatic is the word that reflected the government's policies of the early to mid 90's in Cuba. The State legalized dollars, allowed small businesses in certain sectors, created agropecuarios, free markets, and sought out joint venture tourism with Spain, Mexico and Canada (Pérez 2010). At the outset of Revolution, the State had banned all tourist ventures claiming it was against the Revolutionary principles. Now the Cuban state began producing propaganda like "To defend tourism is to defend the Revolution". They tried to portray tourism as a necessary evil to save Cuba and the spirit of the Revolution in this crisis. "Capitalist ventures and American dollars helped save the

world's last Marxist economy..." (Ripley and Shacochis 2001). Once again, Cuba depended on foreign investments to preserve its state. Over the years the Cuban government repeatedly changed their policy on Cubans in tourist areas however for the most part Cubans were not allowed access into tourist zones even though many times they were there anyways (Wonders and Michalowski 2001). This was mixed with a series of laws to mitigate Cuban's contact with the tourist industry. During the summer and fall of 1994, the State handed down several decrees that dollarized the Cuban economy and created an opportunity for Cubans to open small shops offering State sanctioned goods and services (Ripley and Shacochis 2001). This led to severe spatial and racial segregation. Not only was the tourist zone officially prohibited for some Cubans, the government police would harass young blacks that would try to enter this zone labeling them as 'jineteros' or hustlers (Allen 2011). The spatial divide between the tourist area and Cuban living space created a distinction between what goods, foods and services were available to foreigners and those available to Cubans. This economic rift, which was inherently racialized, was coined the "tourist apartheid" by many Cubans who did not agree with the State's spatial segregation (Leogrande 2000). The double currency system created a social hierarchy between who could supplement their State wage with the tourist dollar or the CUC and who had to rely on the formal sector. Those who had access to the dollar by means of family or the tourist sector were often regarded higher than those paid in pesos.

## **SUSTAINABILITY IN CUBA**

The term, sustainability implies the economic and political ability to think past tomorrow. Inherently, the concept of sustainability shouldn't be one of privilege but the rhetoric has been adopted in places of the most privilege. In the Global North,

sustainability is built into the framework of urban agricultural projects. Cuba's attempts to incorporate the sustainability discourse parallels that of the Global North because it is introduced from the beginning into the urban agriculture project instead of being imposed onto the Global South through discursive colonization.

I introduce this western notion of sustainability in regards to Cuba for several reasons. First, three influential Cuban leaders have employed the term sustainability in one form or another to further the ideology of the Revolution and thus, the nation building process. Second, the states discourse is tangibly present in all sectors of society. Between *Granma* and *Juventud Rebelde*, two large Cuban newspapers, the news and propaganda billboards spreading across La Habana, the meta-narrative of sustainability is virtually inescapable. Not surprisingly this narrative then influences how citizens discuss, practice and implement sustainable projects like urban agriculture.

### **THREE LEADERS AND THREE FORMS OF SUSTAINABILITY**

Fidel Castro was one of the first political leaders who implemented this term. This began in 1986, during the tail end of Cuba's alliance with the Soviet Union. Fidel Castro denounced the Soviet Union for its "dependency on foreign inputs of hard currency; dependency on imports of consumer goods and food products; and a negative tendency in work ethics caused by material incentives" (Gott 2004). He carefully shifted his discourse to communicate that the Revolution is ideologically larger than a few trading agreement failures. During the Cold War, the USSR and Cuba were strategic socialist allies but with the dissolution of the USSR and the intensification of the U.S. blockade, Cuba was plunged into the "Special Period".

In 1992, Fidel Castro spoke to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro. He used the rhetoric of social sustainability to

support two claims, one explicit and one implicit. First, he chastised consumerist societies for their blatant wastefulness of resources and exploitation of developing nations. “Stop transferring to the Third World lifestyles and consumer habits that ruin the environment...Use science to achieve sustainable development without pollution. Pay the ecological debt. Eradicate hunger and not humanity” (Castro Ruz 1992). In this speech, Fidel Castro carefully delineates himself and the Cuban state from the Soviet Union by including the Soviet Union into one of the consumerist societies he spoke against. This tactical statement was to demonstrate that the Cuban state was stronger than their alliance with the former Soviet Union. Second, by denouncing the USSR along with other “consumerist nations”, he implicitly proves that the longevity or sustainability of Cuba as a nation is independent of the economic power and support of their Soviet Union allies.

In the coming years, Fidel Castro positioned José Martí, the national hero and 19th century Cuban independence leader, to become synonymous with environmental sustainability. Martí’s writing’s dealt with environmental protection and liberation but as a metaphor for the greater “political underpinnings of the relationship between nature and civilization, and therefore colonialism” (Gold 2014). Martí’s writings highlighted two elements of nature. The first element is the physical landscape. He claims that territory has been a source of colonial power and therefore will be the battlefield for the “war of liberation”. The second aspect is an inherently geographical approach, which contends that humans and nature shape and transform each other. Fidel reinterprets Martí’s writings to provide a platform for environmentalism and sustainable development as an ideological battlefield against imperialism (Gold 2014). Moreover, by calling upon the Father of the Revolution, he further validates his geopolitical positioning and nation-building project.

Since Raul Castro was elected into office in 2008, he has set his priorities on creating a sustainable Cuban economy, evidenced by the focus of the much-anticipated Sixth Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba. They discussed and analyzed the “Lineamientos” which determines the economic and social policy of the continued Revolution. The objective of the Sixth Congress was to realize the Cuban economic model, to guarantee the continuation and irreversibility of Socialism, to increase economic development and therefore raise the living standard of the peoples (Partido Comunista Cubano 2010). Raul Castro’s closing speech at the Sixth Congress highlighted the importance of increasing the efficiency of production and decrease inefficient bureaucracy. He contends that without a thriving economy, they cannot remain sustainable and independent from the global capitalist system. While the push for sustainable production is strategic, it ignores the politics of the perceived impossibility of sustainable consumption in a socialist economy. Additionally, as Gold argues, there is also a clear economic interest in adopting the sustainability rhetoric. International agencies became increasingly interested in Cuba when they discursively began valuing environmental protection and organic food production (2014). He searches for long term economic growth by creating in-roads with international agencies and other sympathetic Latin American countries like Venezuela. The (social, environmental and economic) ‘sustainability’ narrative is clearly utilized to further the ideological goals of the Revolutionary project. It has become synonymous with nationalism and the struggle against the destructive global capitalism.

### **Chapter Three: The Production of the Sustainability**

“The latest Bruno Mars album blasted as I climbed into the large red truck, carrying a variety of supplies for the Martin Luther King Memorial Center. We made our way out of Pogolotti, out of Marianao, to the periphery of La Habana. I finally had convinced a worker from the Center to take me on one of his weekly grocery trips to a large agro-market called “El Trigo”. We drove up to a huge open warehouse and waited behind the line of old brightly colored Chevy’s with their trunks overflowing with plantains, malangas, limes and tomatoes. We parked and then jumped up into the warehouse (since it was elevated five feet from the ground with no stairs in sight). Surprised, I noticed that as enormous as this warehouse was, there were not enough vendors to fill it. We went down the list of produce we needed, he immediately began haggling and I watched. He asked me to wait while he went to go grab a few crates to load the malangas he just purchased. I waited awkwardly, sweating in the midday heat, feeling the curious gazes of the vendors on me. “Are you his wife?” one man from Santa Clara asked. “Why do you ask” I replied. He grinned and scanned the market. I followed his gaze and realized that out of the roughly sixty people that were there, I was the one of three women.” – Fieldwork Notes, July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2014

This story is one of a series of events that prompted me to investigate who is included or excluded in food production in Cuba and how the State promotes this burgeoning sector. In this chapter, I will conduct a brief theoretical review on the Feminist Political Ecology since Rocheleau et al’s (1996) significant work on FPE. I will analyze the essentialist notion of how gender (read women) is perceived to be linked to nature through Rocheleau et al. (1996) and Nightingale’s scholarship (2006). I intend to contextualize these analyses by illustrating how sustainable production manifests in La Habana, how the State discursively supports this production and what methods they use



to incorporate women, who are currently absent, into food production. Additionally, I will employ Mollett and Faria's work to highlight the lack of a racial discourse and "mess with gender" in FPE (Mollett and Faria 2013). This analysis will shed light on the progressively gendered dialogue in agriculture, specifically urban agriculture in La Habana.

Feminist Political Ecology attempts to bring a feminist perspective to political ecology, a field that demonstrates how political forces influence "environment access, management and transformation" (Robbins 2011). Feminists have intervened in this field by looking at gendered knowledge, gendered environmental rights and/or responsibilities and gendered environmental politics and grassroots movements (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, and Wangari 1996). In her selective review, Rocheleau et al. (1996) contends that due to the growth of development programs, there is a need for a new theory on gender and the environment. Instead of examining environmental processes on a macro scale, Rocheleau et al. redirects our attention to how environmental issues are related to the personal health and home (1996). This expansion has led to an increase of women's environmental activism, a call to redefine women's identities and a shift to make the environment political (1996). Access to environmental resources are "inextricably linked" to peoples status in that society which is informed by gender, race, class and culture. By acknowledging this and altering the frame of development agencies, she claims that women are able to find their "voice".

Faria and Mollett (2013) challenge FPE to address issues of race directly instead of blanketing them under terms of difference or ethnicity. To address this they use postcolonial intersectionality "as a concept that moves beyond US based racial and gender hierarchies to acknowledge the way patriarchy and racialized processes (including whiteness) are consistently bound up in national and international development practice"

(2013). I have found FPE and postcolonial intersectionality theory critical to my analysis of urban agriculture. FPE seeks to make environment, in which I include food, political and provides the tools to interrogate women's access to environmental resources on a local scale. Postcolonial intersectionality can help to illuminate the perceived absence of women as agricultural producers and the silence around race in agriculture. Through the lens of FPE and postcolonial intersectionality, we can better understand Cuba's colonial past that intertwines race and gender ideologies within the Revolution and nation building process.

#### **THE EMERGENCE OF URBAN AGRICULTURE AND THE LANGUAGE OF PRODUCTION**

The Special Period, a term used to describe the severe economic crisis, forced Cuba to create a new development model for its agricultural system. This new model was based upon five main goals: diversification of crops, use of organic fertilizers, an increase of local resources and development, decentralization of land tenure, and food self-sufficiency (Chan, Roach, and Francisco 2012). Before 1989, the government limited food production to backyards. However, as the crisis set in they relaxed their ordinances. Urban gardens began to emerge throughout La Habana through the use of local resources and relatively low input tools for production to alleviate food shortages. The beginning of the movement consisted of small-scale gardens (patios, small backyards, community gardens) that produced enough to feed immediate families and close neighbors. Cuban urban gardening is considered to be a 'popular agriculture' which means that crop production is heterogeneous in size, management and production (Altieri et al. 1999). As the movement grew and diversified, the government provided state support in the form of technological and information services and established state run gardens (Altieri et al. 1999).

The GNAU, or the National Group for Urban Agriculture, embodied this movement and provided the language that would define urban agriculture in Cuba. “The GNAU’s formal definition of urban locations includes all agricultural lands within certain distances of cities and towns having populations in excess of 1,000 persons” (Koont 2011). Consequently, any form of agriculture in La Habana province would be included under this movement. It is important to note that the urban agricultural movement is more than an attempt to resolve food insecurity in and around cities. Fuster Chepe (2006), director of the non-governmental organizations like ACTAF, Asociación Cubana de Técnicos Agrícolas y Forestales argued there are four goals that underlie the Cuban Urban Agricultural movement. The first goal was to organize individuals who engaged in farming in the urban or peri-urban areas. The second objective was for residents of the neighborhood to produce in, for the neighborhood and to provide training, guidance and support for those neighborhood producers. Their final aim was to de-centralize the links of production “from planting to plate” (Koont 2011).

To a certain extent these objectives worked. There was a high concentration of production from some of Cuba’s most important agricultural areas like La Habana, Matanzas, Camaguey and Pinar del Rio. Figure one illustrates the results of a vendor survey on the origins of products sold in the agro-markets. It highlights the high frequency of production in provinces like Habana, Matanzas, Pinar del Rio and Camaguey. Torres et al. hypothesizes this could also be an indicator of the blossoming urban agricultural movement, in the city and province of La Habana during the early years of the Special Period. The propensity of production around the city of La Habana also reflects the transportation and infrastructural limitations that Cuba experienced during the height of the Special Period (Torres et al. 2010). These limitations made it virtually impossible to transport produce long distances.

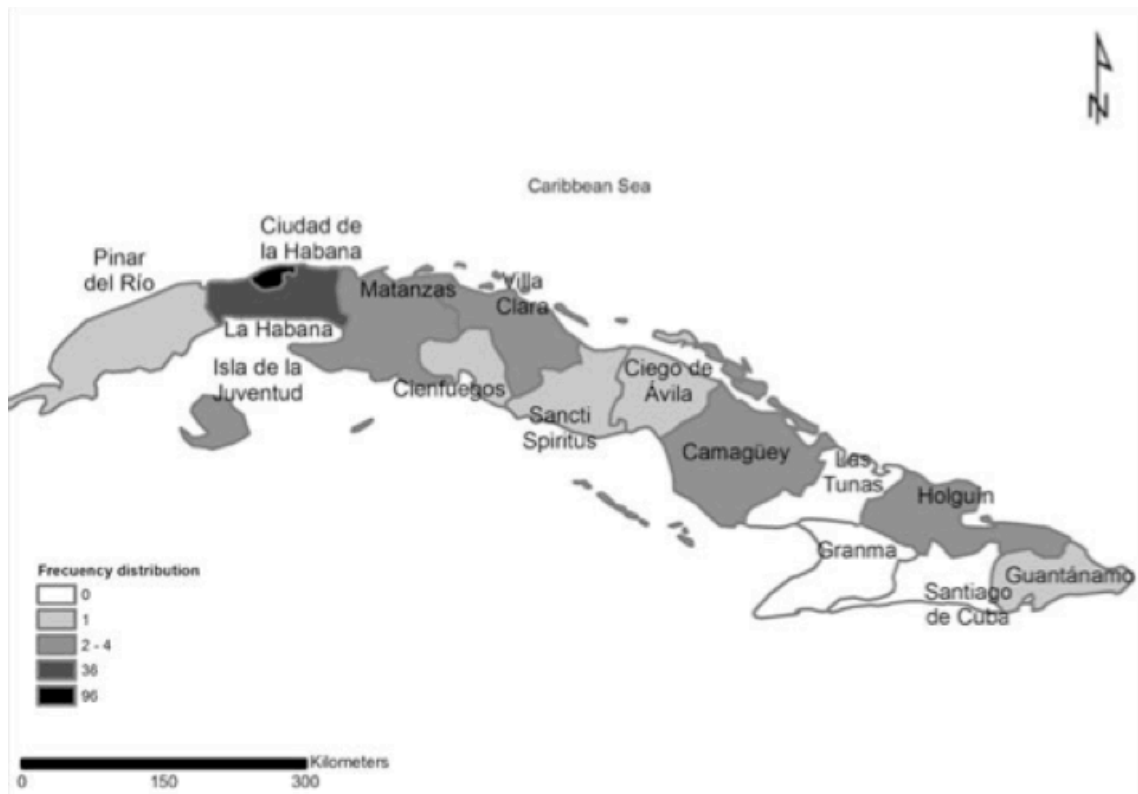


Figure Two This map reflects the origins of the volume of products sold in certain markets within La Habana. The frequency distribution on this map represents the sum of vendor survey respondents from the products origin. (Torres et al. 2010)

A majority of the produce can be sold in State sponsored markets or free commercial agro-markets, which were at one time considered to be an experiment to meet the immediate needs of the citizens but have remained active until the present (Jackiewicz and Bolster 2003; Reid-Henry 2007). Torres et al. hypothesizes that the success of the agro-markets have had an influence on current agricultural reforms and transitions to come.

## INSTITUTIONAL PRODUCTION: STATE MINISTRIES, PUBLIC/PRIVATE COOPERATIVES AND THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Production in and around the city can take on many forms; often it ranges from small family plots to large industrial farms. Miguel Altieri et al. gives a comprehensive overview of the types of urban gardens there were in La Habana in 1999 as seen in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Types of urban gardens

Garden type	Description	Ownership patterns
Intensive gardens:	Located in areas with high quality soils, drainage, and adequate water supply. Seeds are planted directly into fertilized soil.	Mixed state and private ownership
Organopónicos:	Located in areas with poor soil unsuited for agriculture. Seeds are planted in nursery then transplanted to garden. Cultivation occurs in containers or raised beds filled with organic matter and soil mix.	Same
Suburban farms:	Located in the periphery of densely populated urban areas. Larger units (exceeding 2 ha.) which have a more highly integrated system of production. Use methods of cultivation that utilize locally produced inputs and minimize synthetic inputs.	Same
Popular gardens:	Cultivated by community gardening organizations. Established in reclaimed dumps and vacant lots in urban and suburban areas. Managed by local individuals or groups.	Generally private use of state or private land
Enterprise and factory gardens:	Located on or near the property of factories and businesses. Produce used to promote self-sufficiency by feeding factory workers and their families.	Owned by enterprise or factory
Hydroponics:	Plants cultivated indoors in a nutrient rich solution, which is run through an inert planting medium. Least extensive type of garden due to higher costs	State owned
Household gardens:	Gardens cultivated by individuals in their own yards with a high variation in size and type of produce.	Privately owned

Table One “Types of Urban Gardens”. This table shows the variety of urban gardens located in La Habana, where they are located and who controls which type. (Altieri et al. 1999).

This list has not significantly changed over time but the frequency of the popular gardens and household gardens have decreased with the uplift in the Cuban economy. Most likely, this landscape will be drastically different in the next few years due to the

normalization of relations between the United States and Cuba<sup>4</sup>. As Altieri et al. notes, small gardens, like household gardens, are more likely to be privately owned and cultivated (1999). While organoponicos, raised bed organic gardens, are the most common model of urban agriculture, the popular gardens are most accessible by the public. Popular gardens are mostly family owned and cultivated on abandoned lots or small alleyways between houses. The State's level of intervention positively correlates with the size of the productive plot as seen in Figure Two. For example, the large State Farms and EJT's, the Youth Labor Army, are owned by the state and by collectives. Whereas, collectives and non-state actors own the smaller plots like the UBPC's, the CPA's and the CCS's.

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<sup>4</sup> Recently, there have been reports on Cubadebate and the New York Times about meetings between U.S. and Cuban agricultural companies suggesting there might be an increased trade or even a move back towards industrial agriculture.

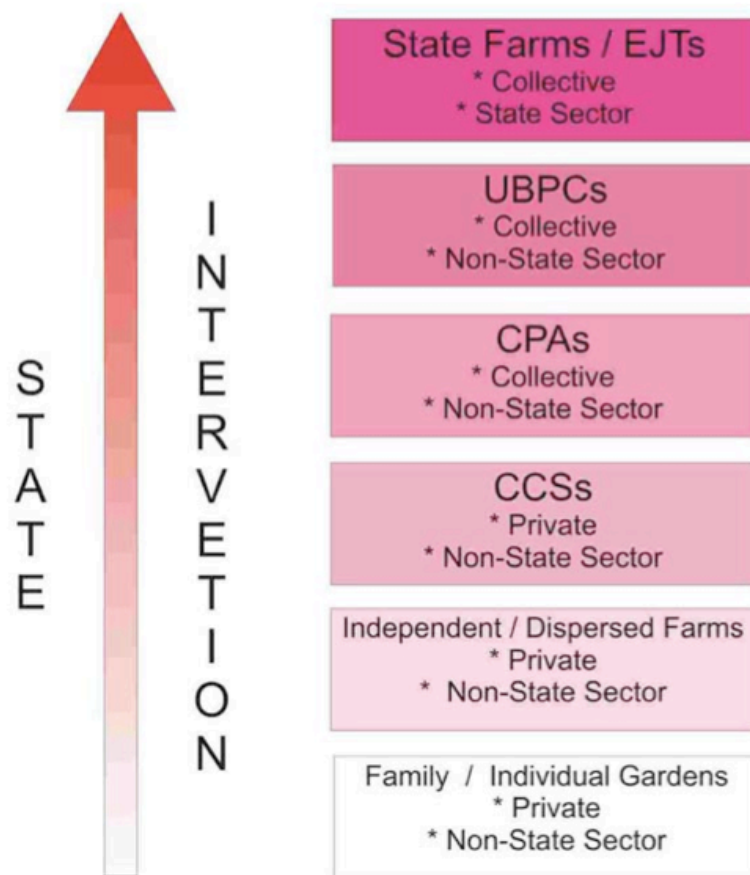


Figure Three “State Intervention Chart”. The chart demonstrates the level of intervention in different types of agricultural plots and which agency or individual controls these plots. (Torres et al. 2010)

This chart was created in the mid-1990’s and while the structure has not greatly changed there is a larger frequency of private collectives due to more lenient laws. The MINAG or the Ministry of Agriculture’s objective is to achieve sustainable development in agricultural production to fulfill people’s needs. MINAG consists of two parts, the State and business/cooperatives. The realm of the State oversees the Ministry itself and responsibilities like research centers and delegations to the agricultural provinces. The

jurisdiction of business/cooperatives ranges from State Farms to Cooperatives and everything in between (“Ministerio de la Agricultura” 2015). ACTAF, the EJT and the GNAU all fall under the supervision of MINAG.

Most Cubans who work in the agricultural sector in Cuba are part of one of three cooperatives, the CPA, the CCS or the UBPC. In 1975, with the passage of the Agricultural Reform Law, the State decided to support and develop their cooperative movement through the work of famers. With crop outputs declining, they opted to create the CPA, Cooperativa de Produccion Agricultura and CCS, Cooperativa de Creditos y Servicios, to create a ‘superior form of production’ (Cardenas Diaz et al. 2009). In 1993, the UBPC, Unidades Basicas de Produccion Cooperativa, was formed with the purpose of creating smaller cooperatives that could work on lands in usufruct and receive the means of production on credit. However, since they came about during the height of the Special Period, many of their initial objectives set by the State were not met. It has been almost twenty-two years since the formation of these smaller cooperatives and officially there are more than 260,000 workers in more than 2,500 UBPC’s that cultivate 3.2 million hectares or thirty percent of the acreage (Cardenas Diaz et al. 2009). Yet ACTAF argues that they have not achieved the level of agricultural production that they need or desire (Cardenas Diaz et al. 2009).

Agricultural workers are still some of the highest paid employees of the State, despite the fact that this sector has been under producing due to a myriad of internal and external factors, many of my interlocutors mentioned how there has been a shift in prestige surrounding agriculture workers. Laura Enriquez, noted Cuban and agricultural scholar, calls this the “repeasantization” of the economy (2003) describing the movement from non-agricultural to agricultural labor in Post-1990’s Cuba. In one of my interviews, the father and daughter of a middle to lower class, primarily white, household exchanged



opinions on the perceived value and pay of agriculture workers. The daughter commented on what it was like during the Special Period: “Before they (the State) didn’t value the work of the farmers so the farmers would either eat their own crops or sell to their neighbors”. The father interjected that since agriculture workers are being paid more the “...youth are going to school to become agro-engineers”. The belief that farmers are being paid a higher salary (whether they deserve it or not) makes the agricultural sector appealing to many Cubans. This creates a problem of access. Who is allowed into this ‘profitable’ sector and who is deemed unfit or not suited for this type of work?

#### **THE GENDER STRATEGY: HOW TO INCORPORATE WOMEN INTO SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE**

In 2009, National Association of Small Farmers (ANAP), and the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC), joined forces to eliminate false conceptions surrounding women’s ‘inability’ to work in agriculture and created the “Estrategia de Genero de la ANAP” (the Gender Strategy of ANAP). This study conducted over 3,400 workshops across the country to explore how to include women in agriculture and strive for gender equality. ANAP’s Gender Strategy sought to give women “voice” through workshops and events in over 50% of the municipalities in Cuba. The agricultural sector is one of the largest sources of the Cuban economy and should be a growing base for female employment. However, this does not correspond to the most recent data found in *Juventud Rebelde*, one of the major state-controlled Cuban newspapers on the island, in 2012. According to Cuban journalist, Hugo Garcia, only 200,000 women are engaged in agricultural activities and only 10% of leaseholders of state land are women. Many of my interlocutors, outside of the agriculture sector, cited ‘machismo’ as the main cause of this trend while farmers and vendors I spoke to argue that it was because women were not strong enough to engage in the labor. Therefore, ANAP’s work on education and

gendered discourse is justifiably crucial to women's advancement in the burgeoning agricultural sector.

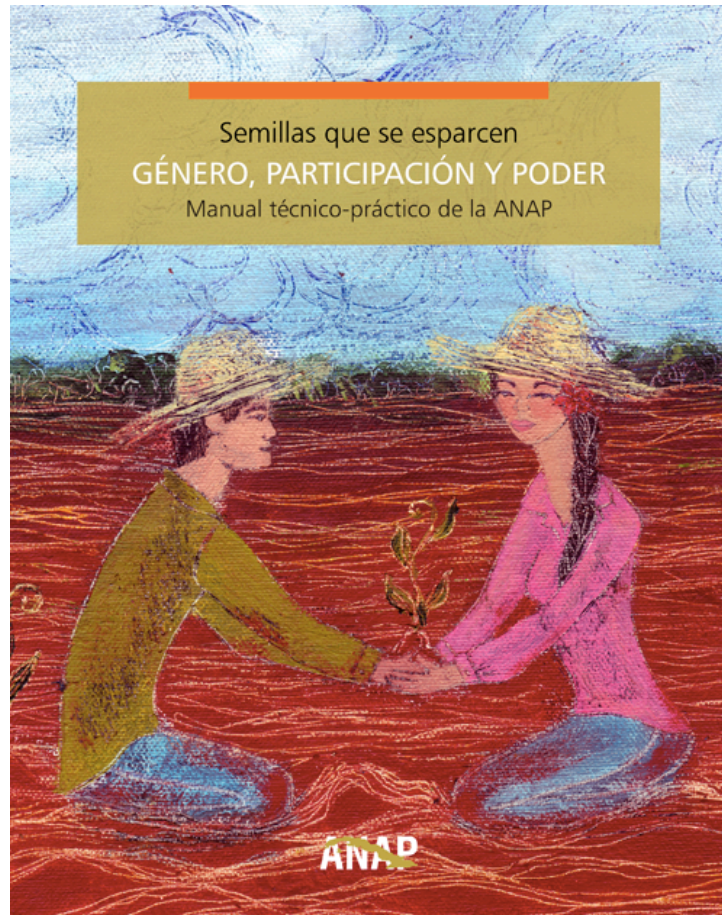


Illustration One “Género, Participación y Poder”. The front cover of the ANAP technical manual depicting a man and woman, that could be perceived as light skinned *Cubanos*, watching their seeds grow together. (Romero, Alejandro, and Delgado 2009). Used with permission.

ANAP's “Gender Strategy” is an impressive initiative that advocates for social sustainability by mitigating socio-historical constructions of gendered work. Their manual, while extensive, faces a few challenges that is commonly seen in FPE. First, they are utilizing the term gender to be read as “women” which Nightingale (2006) notes as

problematic when positioned within the scope of the environment. Nightingale (2006) converses with Rocheleau et al (1996) and warns about the dangers of relying solely on women when referring to gender. She builds on this argument by critiquing the essentialist notions of linking women to nature and highlights how gender is a process that becomes relevant in certain ecological outcomes and should be analyzed “as both a fundamental cause and a consequence of environmental issues” (2006). Mollett and Faria argue that even by making gender synonymous with ‘difference’ ignores hierarchical positions within the scholars and the community (2013).

Second, ANAP, a mass organization that answers to the Cuban State, seeks to combat negative gendered stereotypes through a top down approach instead of a bottom up. While a hierarchical method is valuable, it takes both perspectives to establish a shift in societal perceptions. Rocheleau et al. (1996) and Nightingale (2006), also, take a development perspective instead of the analysis everyday practices to address the complicated interactions of how environment constructs gendered processes. This potentially can be problematic in multiple regards. Primarily, they are creating a program that “adds women in” after the fact which can potentially disrupt women’s ability to negotiate with the existing patriarchal system . Subsequently, ANAP is attempting to mainstream gender equality in their organization and the largest sector of the Cuban economy. Mainstreaming gender has the potential to influence policy across a broad spectrum but it also will more likely depoliticize the movement through “reinstitutionalization and normalization” (Radcliffe 2006). This has been a critique of the Federation of Cuban Women and oft quoted reason for why there hasn’t been a stronger “feminist movement” in Cuba.

Finally, one of the biggest critiques of ANAP’s Gender Strategy is their lack of attention to race and class. The Revolution sought to eliminate racial inequality and

remove class hierarchies from society. While in State discourse this may be true, I found that Cubans distinguish race and class through terms like “high culture” and “low culture”. ANAP makes clear that it is illegal to discriminate but does not investigate how race colors societal interactions. Mollett and Faria addresses race, or the lack thereof in FPE, in their scholarship. They seek to complicate our notions of FPE by “...problematizing the tendency for a particularly narrow reading of gender, one that centers on sexual difference, gender roles and regimes of patriarchy, and that rarely moves beyond class/nature as entangled formations of gendered subjectivity” (Mollett and Faria 2013). Their intervention in FPE sheds light on how we can complicate existing notions of ‘gender’. Furthermore, it speaks to this content analysis by bringing attention to the absence of race in the ANAP conversation and other pamphlets I was given regarding women in urban agriculture. While they attempt to complicate norms of ‘male and female labor’ they also completely disregard how race plays into these power structures, which is seemingly more prevalent in agricultural work.

#### **REWRITING COOPERATIVES: HOW TO CREATE THE NEW (WO)MAN**

While organizations like ANAP seek to add women into agriculture as a whole, ACTAF takes a more precise approach by focusing on the inclusion of women in the UBPC. The fifty three-page pamphlet, “De UBPC a UBPC”, was written to address gaps in the UBPC production, system and management (Cardenas Diaz et al. 2009). ACTAF conducted a study to make these small cooperatives models for efficiency, productivity and sustainability in concordance with the Cuban social project. The pamphlet is divided up into four sections encompassing the history of cooperatives, the mission of the UBPC, what tools to use and which methodologies should be implemented. In the mission they describe the role of cooperatives or participatory work, which has four fundamental components: Productivity, Equity, Sustainability and Betterment (Cardenas Diaz et al.

2009). They describe sustainable agriculture as a practice that integrates actions around agriculture and their relations with environmental, economic and socio-cultural aspects. They argue that those who engage in this work should be aware of social justice, citizenship, economic viability, the care and respect of the environment, and the laws that govern nature, political viability, as well as diversity and local cultures (Cardenas Diaz et al. 2009). From this engagement on how social justice is rooted in sustainability, they abruptly jump to gender and historical socio-cultural constructions of the masculine and feminine. ACTAF contends that:

We must consider that to perform a job with a gendered perspective means that we open roads to make visible, validate, support and valorize the equitable development of peoples. This implies not only seeing another reality but also adopting another attitude (Cardenas Diaz et al. 2009).

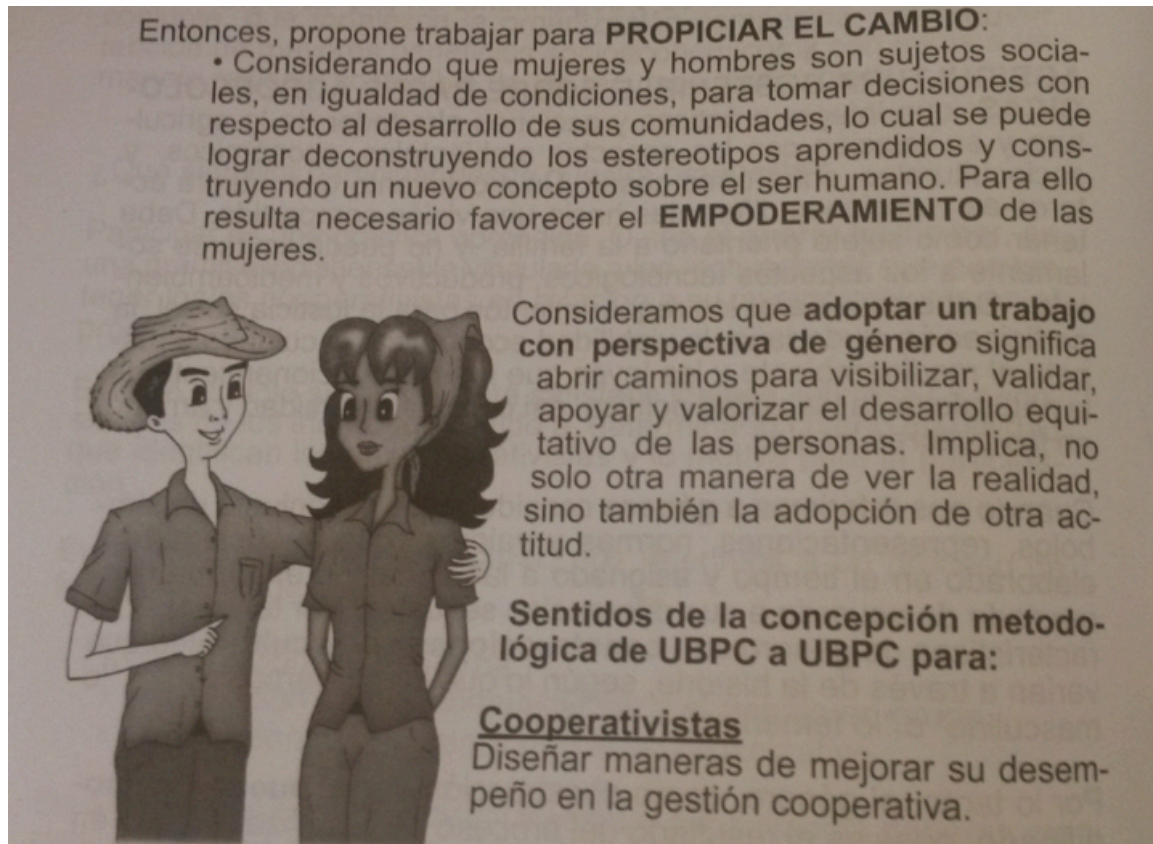


Illustration Two These cartoon illustrations are scattered throughout the collective's pamphlet to highlight the growing diversity in the sustainable agriculture. (Cardenas Diaz et al. 2009). Used with permission.

At the bottom of the page, there is a cartoon drawing of a skinny white man and an overly feminine woman of color standing side by side. The white male has his arm wrapped around the woman, and lifts his right arm as if to be teaching her something. He smiles while she stares off into the distance with a glazed expression. Her arms are behind her assuming a passive or what I interpreted to be an uncomfortable stance. At first glance, it almost seems like the male is teaching the female about her own empowerment. This depiction is a clear example of the problematic empowerment narrative; too often it is still a state driven, masculine discourse. Cruikshank defines the

doctrines of self help or empowerment as bound up in the historical genealogies of the state and that self help is a "technique that works to limit the need for state action--not by 'depoliticizing class relations or excluding the poor from politics but by getting them to act" (Cruickshank 1999). While Cruickshank's theory of empowerment is derived from a neoliberal context, I find her definitions are still pertinent to this content analysis. ANAP and ACTAF are responsible to the State and use their funds to create and hold these workshops but they frame the issue as the responsibility of the individual to achieve their equitable goals.

This is not a new strategy in Cuban discourse and politics. At the beginning of the revolution, Che utilized the term "El Hombre Nuevo" or the New Man to imbue and laud the ideals of the "selfless and cooperative, obedient and hard working, gender-blind, incorruptible, non-materialistic, and anti-imperialist" Cuban man (Hansing 2002). The Revolution sought not only to create a new equitable nation but also a new form of (male) citizen that could propel the country forward. The language in the pamphlet is clearly a reiteration of 'El Hombre Nuevo' and aimed at changing men's perceptions of women and more importantly, for women to help create the New Man, literally and politically (Guerra 2012). Both Illustration One and Two depict a male worker with what can be defined by some as white. This corresponds to the Revolutionary image of the *guajiro*, or Cuban from the countryside. The pamphlet seeks to "deconstruct learned stereotypes and construct a new concept of being human" (Cardenas Diaz et al. 2009). This can be interpreted as another attempt to 're-educate' men or a certain type of man, the perceived *guajiro*, who are often described as uneducated, backwards or simple. The State's discourse of the 'ideal worker' elides not only women but also certain males that do not embody the educated, urban 'Habanero'.

ANAP's Gender Strategy and ACTAF's pamphlet merits praise. These educational programs take a progressive hands-on approach to discontinue antiquated notions of "male and female work" as well as providing necessary education on gender equality. They are addressing issues of patriarchy, colonialism and imperial oppression that most sectors find too 'uncomfortable' to touch. I can only constructively critique what was written down and relayed to me thereby, I cannot wholly represent the effectiveness of the strategy. However, the fact they are suggesting these issues still exist is a victory that should not be taken lightly. Many who have tried to do the same have been deemed as an anti-Revolutionary. FPE provides a useful framework to better understand the contentious relationship of women in the urban agricultural community, to reveal the gendered discourse on agriculture and to provide a space to build a stronger theoretical model to analyze and make the term gender 'messy'.



#### **Chapter Four: The Consumption of Sustainability**

I walked down the maze of streets repeating the directions that a street vendor had given me in my head. ‘Left, right, then another right at the blue building, keep left at the pit and it will be the first on your right’. I arrived at a small apartment complex and found a white, middle-aged woman waiting for me on the steps. She kindly walked me up to her house and we sat down with her family at a small faded blue table with small flowers painted on it. I pulled out my notebook with a guideline of questions I wanted to know and began asking. – Fieldwork notes, June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2014

I interviewed ten families associated or participating in the Centro Memorial de Martin Luther King (CMMLK) about their neighborhood food access and investigated where they buy produce, the time it takes and whether they have certain preferences between vendors<sup>5</sup>. Despite systemic obstacles, the middle to lower class community of Pogolotti has specific consumptive practices, evidenced by their discourses around grocery shopping. I intend to position this chapter with McEwan’s (2003) framework of ‘rematerialized’ postcolonial geographies with an eye towards Domosh’s (2004) analysis of American commercial imperialism in Cuba.

#### **COLONIALISM, COMMERCIAL IMPERIALISM AND CONSUMPTION**

Literature on sustainability in the Global South is largely talked about in terms of food production, to the detriment of consumption (Winklerprins 2002). More specifically, how, where, and by whom the food is produced is privileged over who is consuming the food. By only analyzing sustainability from the standpoint of increased

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<sup>5</sup> In La Habana, agro-markets can vary in ownership between state, cooperatives and private.

production, we ignore and marginalize the racialized, gendered and classed politics behind food consumption. By analyzing both production and consumption in tandem with each other, we gain a more encompassing picture of where food is distributed and how it is accessed. I argue that consumption politics should not be framed only as a practice and privilege of the elite of the Global North. While there are systemic economic, political and socio-cultural obstacles that prevent food production and consumption focus in the Global South, it is important not to minimize the agency of these consumers. During my fieldwork, I found that there was a social and environmental consciousness when purchasing produce. I contend that this ‘consciousness’ is influenced by the State’s discursive mobilization around sustainability and sustainable production. When possible, residents of Pogolotti chose what food they consume by preferencing some vendors over others, by traveling further to buy groceries and/or by relying on community members to find the best deals.

Many islands in the Caribbean experienced the one-two punch of colonialism and imperialism. Cuba was subject to Spanish colonialism (1492-1898) as well as U.S. Imperialism (1902-1959) and only until the Revolution of 1959 did Cuba truly become sovereign. With the rise of the Castro regime, Cuba broke away from the United States immediate political and economic influence. However, the legacies of physical and emotional violence transcends temporal scales and therefore, it is crucial to examine present day Cuba through postcolonial lenses. Spivak (1990) defines postcolonialism as a theory that “seeks to destabilize, to problematize the ways in which the world is known and challenge the unacknowledged and unexamined assumptions at its heart that may be

profoundly insensitive to the means, values and practices of other cultures” (McEwan 2003). In recent years, postcolonial theory has been critiqued for its privileging of history, culture and discourse over the everyday materialities and lived experiences of postcoloniality (2003). McEwan utilizes geography as a possible field to engage with these critiques. She contends that postcolonialist thought should be considered an “ethico-politics’ of becoming or “recognizing a condition that does not yet exist, but working nevertheless to bring that about” (2003). In other words, she seeks to bring postcolonial thought to the present and link the discourse to the material and the economic to the cultural. I intend to converse with this point of departure by conversing briefly with Spanish colonialism and U.S. commercial imperialism in Cuba and connecting these legacies with the discursive practices of sustainability with on the ground interviews in the middle to low-income neighborhood of Pogolotti.

After the Spanish-American War ended in 1902, the United States seized control of Cuba’s government and economic activities through some clever political maneuvering otherwise known as the Platt Amendment. This sanctioned U.S. hegemony over Cuba and thereby, influenced the outcome of Cuban politics in the upcoming decades. The United States exerted formal imperial actions, exercising territorial and political claims over the island as well as informal imperialism, which was more economic by nature (Domosh 2004). This informal imperialism lasted longer than the Platt Amendment and even political schemes of making Cuba a U.S. territory. Even after the Revolution, the remnants of the United States’ commercial imperialism still exists as evidenced by the famous 1950 Chevy’s meandering around the streets of La Habana. As

Domosh argues, imperial or hegemonic commercial practices were seen as a first step for many colonized, whether formally or informally, nations to follow a more ‘civilized path’. “By aligning consumption with civilization, businessmen could consider the geographic spread of their products as missionary work...” (2004). Tourism was one of the most visible forms of consumption in Cuba. A short ninety miles from Miami, Cuba was the playground for the privileged. Consumption or ‘correct consumption’ became a feminized over time, as a way to domesticate foreigners and “bring them into the family of modernity, but in a clearly subordinate and unthreatening position” (Mehaffy 1997; Domosh 2004). This is one of the many reasons that the Cuban Revolution was seen as such a threat to the United States. Cuba left the family, so to speak, to revert to a ‘less civilized’ non-consumption based political ideology. However, the Revolution did not mark the end of consumers or consumptive practices in Cuba. As the Cuban form of socialism became watered down over time, due to internal and external factors, a variety of competitive agro-markets emerged with the permission of the state. I argue that many residents of Pogolotti exercise an environmentally ‘sustainable’ consciousness when buying produce and rely on a community network, possibly a remnant of the food insecurity during the Special Period, to access enough food to provide for their families. This is not to say that all Cubans are guaranteed the same quality and quantity of fresh produce. Cuba has taken significant strides to increase the production of food in urban and rural areas since the Special Period, a moment of stark food scarcity. However, the prices are consistently cited as being too high in the community of Pogolotti. This statement is influenced by racial, classed and gendered structures that are co-articulated

and reinforced by one another. As a ‘suburb’ of La Habana, Pogolotti is seen as ‘low culture’ by many Cubans, arguably due to the fact that it is a lower income, primarily black neighborhood. Their income level further strengthens their perceptions that the prices of food are too high, since they spend a majority of their paycheck on their groceries.

### **DISCURSIVE HAUNTING: REPETITION AS MOBILIZATION**

A female cook from the Martin Luther King Memorial Center (CMMLK) joked darkly, “Cubans look into the refrigerator in the morning, drink a cup of water, shut the refrigerator door; then open it again”. No matter how I would start the interviews, our conversations would inevitably circle back to life during the Special Period; in that moment, I would see a haunting of a time not so far gone. Avery Gordon describes this haunting as “a repressed or unresolved social violence (that) is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely” (2008). Her work influences my attempt to represent the “haunting of historical alternatives”(Gordon, 2008) and to alter my writing to replicate the circular and repetitive nature of my interviews. I believe that the thematic echoes are in part, rearticulations of the state’s discursive mobilization around the Greening of the Revolution (Rosset and Benjamin 2002)<sup>6</sup>. I intend to analyze three pervasive quotes in the following pages to understand how their repetition is inextricably linked with the states discursive mobilization and, to complicate the myth of sustainable production.

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<sup>6</sup> A term coined by Rosset and Benjamin (2002) to describe the propensity of organic, sustainable urban agriculture in Cuba.

**“CUBANS LOOK INTO THE REFRIGERATOR IN THE MORNING, DRINK A CUP OF WATER, SHUT THE REFRIGERATOR DOOR; THEN OPEN IT AGAIN”**

The Special Period in the Time of Peace has been framed in western work by what had vanished; however, for many Cubans, I found that it was marked by what became ubiquitous. Bicycles filled the streets instead of buses, blackouts became a daily if not hourly occurrence, black markets proliferated in neighborhoods and rationing lines became longer and more frequent. Waiting became a Cuban pastime.

Without their trade agreement with the USSR, their ability to purchase and import basic goods like petroleum and fertilizers became severely diminished. This detrimentally affected Cuban's access to food and therefore, rationing became rampant. “By 1994, agricultural production had fallen 54 percent from 1989 levels.... Food consumption fell 36 percent. Daily caloric intake fell from 2,908 calories per day in the 1980's to 1,863 calories per day in 1993” (USDA 1998). The kitchen manager from the CMMLK recalled, “We had money but nothing to spend it on... Nothing was more difficult than this. My dad was sick and I wanted to get him malanga, soup and yogurt but where?”. She explained that in reality, what is happening right now in Cuba is not the worst.

*During the Special Period, the farmers produced but the government did not allow markets. Fidel said that the intermediaries were getting rich off the farmers, so they took out the intermediaries. But this meant the city did not receive any more food.*

‘Intermedios’ or intermediaries is a term that has a variety of meanings. It is a job that entails anything from the pick up to delivery to the selling of goods. Due to the negative perception of the guajiro, or someone from the countryside, the despair of the crisis and Fidel's criticisms, the role of the intermediary is stigmatized and often blamed for the inflated food prices. “During the market ‘experiment,’ the free commercial

markets or MLCs, intermediaries were explicitly prohibited. Indeed, it was under charges of the rise of an “intermediary class,” and their enrichment, that the MLCs were closed in 1986 (Alonso 1992; Torres et al. 2010)

While I was in Pogolotti, *Granma*, one of the more prominent Cuban newspapers, ran an expose piece on the market’s antiquated system for weighing produce and the vendor’s complicity titled “Lo Que La Pesa Se Llevo”. The article in *Granma* made two arguments, the first explicit and the second implicit. The first argument was that the mechanical scales to weigh the produce were not calibrated correctly or so old that the calibration was off. Figure Three gives an example of what these scales look like along with the prices of food per kilogram.





as intermediaries but also farmers. Many interlocutors would complain about how the vendors would cheat them and pocket the cash. I asked if they knew they were being tricked at the time and many said yes but did not want to complain in public. In a conversation with a Cuban journalist and diplomat, he argued that this was a product of an authoritarian state. “We don’t complain directly to the vendors when we know we are being cheated. Vendors will sell two pounds of meat but only give us a pound and a half. When we get home, we complain or catharsis about it”. He goes on to explain that Cubans are so used to being given everything by the State and chastised for being critical that it leads to avoidance with those with perceived power at all costs.

*Granma* concluded the article on by demonstrating positive examples of markets that have changed their scale systems. In addition to the mechanical scales, some markets had one large digital scale by the entrance so people can check their weights on the way out. The journalist believed that this new measuring system was a good thing for the Cuban public and pointed to a larger change in the political spectrum. As evidenced by recent newspapers and interviews, the shadow of the Special Period is still very much present in the lives of many Cubans. The haunting of this time surpasses temporal scales and bleeds into present day relationships with food, and a tangible distrust of people who handle food.

**“THINGS ARE GETTING BETTER BUT THE PRICES (OF FOOD) ARE STILL TOO HIGH”**

Despite the significant strides that Cuba has taken to increase production in the urban and rural areas, the prices are consistently cited as being too high in the community of Pogolotti. Pogolotti is located in the district of Marianao that lies roughly six miles southwest from La Habana Vieja, the cultural and tourist hub. As a ‘suburb’ of La Habana, Pogolotti is seen as ‘low culture’ by many Cubans, arguably due to the fact that

is it a lower income, primarily black neighborhood. Their assertion that food prices are too high is influenced by racial, classed and gendered structures that are co-articulated and reinforced by one another. My interlocutors were mainly paid through the State and they made clear that their formal wages were not enough to afford the high food prices. Physical distance and racial marginalization influences the residents of Pogolotti's ability to supplement the State's wages with either informal or formal tourism work.

Currently Cuba relies on a dual currency system. Cubans are paid and purchase in pesos while foreigners are expected to use the convertible peso, the CUC, which is roughly equivalent to the US dollar. However, in the dual currency system the Cuban peso is undervalued so that 25 Cuban pesos is equal to one CUC. Therefore, working in the tourist sector is more profitable than relying solely on the State's stagnant wages. However, most residents of Pogolotti do not even have this opportunity due to their distance and the expense to travel into the downtown tourist area and the negative attention many black *Cubanos* receive from the police when they do commute into that space. Without the ability to supplement their income, the prices of everyday necessities like food are deemed too high.

In my interviews with families that either supported or were participants of the Martin Luther King Memorial Center, I found that there were echoes of the state's discourse of urban agriculture. "Organoponicos are well priced because you can buy directly from them. They create employment, produce vegetable and medical plants". When pushed to speak further about urban agriculture many of the praises would be mitigated with their economic reality. "Things are getting better but the prices (of food) are still too high". In Pogolotti, there is one organoponico, urban agriculture raised bed garden, called "Las Margaritas" within a twenty block-walking radius of the Martin Luther King Memorial Center. The rest of the produce were brought in from urban farms

and distributed to small vendors, which increased the price due to transportation and costs. One father said he would spend up to three hours grocery shopping each morning to find the quality and more importantly, quantity of produce necessary to sustain a family of four.

Through my interviews, I began to realize the significance behind how the residents of Pogolotti chose their food. Some, like the father above, would spend hours in the morning to avoid the heat, jumping from vendor to vendor to find the right amount and highest quality of produce. He was retired and had the time to dedicate to this process while his wife and daughter went to work. Often, single parent households or families with more means preferred the “carretilleros” or produce carts that would be trolleyed down the neighborhood. The vendors would shout or ring bells to signal the residents that they were coming down the street. While the consensus was that these “carretilleros” may be pricier, many agreed that the quality of vegetables was higher, their arrangement was nice and most of all, it was convenient. Additionally, I noticed that there were some vendors that some residents purposefully stayed away from. One worker of the CMMLK told me “I like the meat on fifty-first street because it is fresh and they don’t use chemicals. I like to be ecological”. A professor for the CMMLK said that when she and her mother go grocery shopping they look for the ‘platanito de verdad’ or a real banana. I asked her what this meant and she explained that some fruits like mango, avocado and papaya were injected with a chemical called “flor de ines”. She and her mother could often tell which fruits were chemically ripened by their distinct smell. “La gente tiene esa consciencia” she reasoned. She, along with other interlocutors, had a social and environmental conscious when buying groceries and would often refuse to consume what they perceived to be non-organic produce. These consumers had specific reasons for how they approached grocery shopping whether it was price, convenience or quality.

**“THE ONLY WAY TO BETTER THE SITUATION IS TO INCREASE PRODUCTION”**

This solution is a reverberation of Raul Castro’s speech for the much-anticipated Sixth Congress of the Community Party in 2011. The quote captures the problematic sentiment that is shared not only in cities like La Habana but also in the Global North. By only analyzing sustainability from the standpoint of increased production, we ignore and marginalize the racialized, gendered and classed politics behind food consumption (Julie Guthman 2007; Slocum 2007; Harper 2011). While “Production in the neighborhood, by the neighborhood, and for the neighborhood” (Koont 2011) should be a goal to strive for in every space, it must be placed in tandem with consumptive practices. In Cuba, the practice of who consumes what is highly politicized. This is not just restricted to the conversation of food, though it clearly affects it

During the height of the Special Period, as a way to mitigate the economic crisis, the state opened the country to tourist ventures. Tourism consumes spaces, peoples, and culture. In many cases, the tourist stays in a separated sector of society, only experiencing certain exoticized performances of the culture all while receiving the best goods and services in the country. In Cuba, this type of consumption has manifested as a tension between what spaces Cubans are allowed to enter, foods they are allowed access and in what capacity they are permitted to interact with foreigners. The tourist sector in Cuba, much like other countries in the Caribbean, are known to prefer hiring lighter skinned Cubans. As historian Lillian Guerra notes, “...Cuban blacks, once considered the most revolutionary of citizens, are now widely considered the most disaffected...Not only do state tourist facilities preferentially hire white, but government police disproportionately harass young blacks whom they assume make up the majority of pimps, hustlers and prostitutes” (2012). Additionally, the performance as the exoticized and eroticized other is expected, implicitly and explicitly, in most jobs. Assuming the tourist venture does not

import their own western staff, the work set aside for Cubans are in the service and entertainment sector. A recent *New York Times* article highlights the growing racial inequalities. “I look in those new places and don’t see anybody like me,” said Marylyn Ramirez, who works at a tourist hotel in the Vedado neighborhood and passes new restaurants on the way to work” (Archibald 2015). Marylyn’s anxiety reflects a common concern among most Cubans. The discourse and practice that creates the space of the zona turistica sequesters the profits from the surrounding community. It creates an atmosphere of spatial insulation and social exclusion (Gregory 2007).

During the Special Period, Cubans were told that this enclave tourism was for their benefit; they did not have to engage with the corrupting force of capitalism (Caldeira 2000)<sup>7</sup>. However, it created a space that once entered makes any Cuban a *jinetero/a*, or a hustler. Judith Butler uses the theory of performativity to explain how subjects perform gender and how gender is constructed by repeating these practices again and again. She argues that it is “...a reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains (Butler 1993). I try to ground this more abstract theory by taking into account how space interacts with social relations. Massey (1994) contends that social relations forms and produces meanings of particular spaces. Therefore, Cubans, more specifically women, that enter the zona turistica are hailed as sexualized and expected to reproduce colonial notions of the ‘mulata’. However, if Cubans wanted certain foods, extra income, and even a few luxuries like toilet paper they would have to enter these spaces. Further demonstrating how despite the strides the Revolution took to provide racial, gender and class equality, the emotional and physical violence of colonialism bleeds through into the present.

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<sup>7</sup> Caldeira (2000) theories that tourist zones are a “fortified enclave” which means that it keeps the profits from the surrounding community and then define this as something for the common good.

Even in 2015, despite the end of the restrictions on Cuban's entering tourist sites in 2008, tourists are more likely to be afforded luxuries like beef and fish in the tourist zone. These meats have been notoriously hard to find, much less purchase, on the island and have been calling high prices on the black market. As discussed previously, fish has been missing from the Cuban markets for many years with the exception of December 17th, 2014. However, beef is also rarely seen in the markets. Cuba's cattle population has suffered severely since the Special Period and now is in dwindling numbers. There have been many attempts to increase their numbers but the climate and poaching have impaired their ability to grow. Ropa Vieja, a traditional Cuban meal made with beef, is now a delicacy in paladares, private Cuban restaurants, instead of being served in the household. Inherently tourism does not promote sustainability. It privileges those who can pay while marginalizing others who do not fit into the experience the tourist venture is selling. The frequency of tourism also creates a narrative of who produces and who consumes and in this scenario, the Global South, including Cuba, is always the producer and never the consumer. This is one of the effects of privileging production. Discourse around production does not often take the next step to analyze where the production is being distributed which means that the Cuban state may attempt to increase production, successfully or unsuccessfully, but all that production may go into the tourist sector and not benefit the larger populous. My intent on interrogating consumption practices is to show how uneven the distribution of production is and how it affects people's relationships with food.

The painful memories and the present day repercussions from the Special Period, the often unspoken implications of class and race and the spatially unequal distribution and access of food are forming small cracks. If and when pressed these fissures become cleavages that need to be and have the potential to be addressed in this new development

of Cuban politics. Through McEwan's intervention, we can have a more encompassing view of how postcolonial politics extends through multiple scales from the body and everyday lived experiences (grocery shopping) to the global (imperial consumerism and the meta-narrative of sustainability). By looking at the politics of food in the neighborhood of Pogolotti, I seek to destabilize the western views that Cubans do not exercise choice when making purchases. I also believe that it is important to label the residents of Pogolotti as conscious consumers to undermine the notion that Black communities are only producers but never consumers of the product (Domosh 2004). I ask that we more critically interrogate the socio-political structure of food production and consumption; that we messy the bodies that consume by interweaving histories and colonial legacies of gender, race and class and take into account the societal structures in place that limit access to food.

## Conclusion

My thesis interrogated how sustainability and sustainable urban agriculture has become a global phenomenon and how it has operated in contemporary Cuba. While its roots lie in the United Nations' Brundtland report, it has evolved to encompass a variety of objectives ranging from fiscal responsibility to the rewriting of the Cuban nationalist project. The Cuban government appropriated the once grassroots urban garden movement to become a symbol of the resilience of the Cuban people and the ideology of the Revolution. While their attempts to create and maintain a sustainable urban agricultural program in face of external and internal adversity is laudable, there are still challenges that not only the Cuban government but global proponents of sustainability projects must face. Currently, the dialogue of sustainability marginalizing the politics of consumption for increased production practices. While agricultural production is a key component in the establishment of a stable food system, it will not be complete without an analysis of consumption. With this aspect of the food system circle unexamined, we elide the raced, classed and gendered politics of food and food access.

To reveal further insights into this statement, I grounded my research in the neighborhood of Pogolotti. I explore how they engage with the state discourse of sustainability; cite an environmental consciousness when purchasing food and the systemic obstacles they face when trying to access high quantity and high quality food for themselves and their families.

In my thesis, I first illustrated the global nature of the discourse on sustainability by linking it to a current conversation in La Habana. I trail through the vague definitions of sustainability and conclude that generally, it is defined as a three balancing pillars representing environmental, equitable and economic *preservation* and *distribution* of resources within the current and for future generations. I also link sustainability to urban



agriculture and follow their trajectory in both the Global North and Global South. The Global North's relationship with urban agriculture was tenuous and rarely utilized outside of times of great food insecurity like World Wars or famine. Therefore, the literature on urban agriculture in the Global North lacks in comparison to the Global South. However, there is a movement spurring from 1960's activist roots that indicate there may be a sustained growth of urban agriculture as well as, more social awareness around food production and consumption.

While the literature on urban agriculture in the Global South is vast, it tends to follow two schools of thought, either that it is cultural and has specific botanical interests or that it is to relieve massive food insecurity. Latin America, the Caribbean and Asia tend to fall into the former while African Nations are relegated to the latter. The literature on Cuban urban agriculture challenges these distinctions. Due to the economic crisis of the Special Period, Cuban sustainable urban agriculture clearly sprung up to combat food shortages and then was appropriated by the State as a revolutionary, nationalist movement. Furthermore, the State's qualifications for urban agriculture are so broad that it encompasses any agricultural activity that is conducted in the Habana province. This may influence reader's perceptions of what 'urban' agriculture actually entails.

Therefore, it is the intent behind the discourse where we find how the term is implemented. Throughout the Castro era, sustainability was employed and mobilized in a variety of ways. Fidel Castro utilized José Martí's writings to call upon territorial pride and to advocate for an environmental and nationalist platform under the guise of environmental sustainability. In Fidel's 1992 speech addressing the United Nations, he chastised other nations, including the Soviet Union, on their inequitable treatment of their citizens and resources. Thus further reinforcing that the Revolution and the State was more powerful and 'sustainable' than their trading partners. Finally, Raul Castro, ever the

pragmatist, challenged the Sixth Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba to strive for economic sustainability by increasing agricultural production. A consequence of this whether intended or not, was that it solidified Cuba as a leader in the organic agriculture movement and further ‘greened the Revolution’. In effect, the Castro brothers rewrote the Revolution to exalt sustainability as a nation-building project and as a central principle of the Revolution.

Raul’s call for more agricultural production was heard by Cuban producers. *Granma* was frequently running newspaper stories about record-breaking tomato crop or what provisions the government was providing to support urban agriculture in the urban and rural areas. Different agricultural organizations like ANAP and ACTAF attempted to broaden the image of production and producers by incorporating more women into the agricultural sector. While their work to promote gender equity deserves commendation, it still ‘uplifts’ women through patriarchal nationalism. Their limitations in this program reflect the challenges that the FPE field has faced over the years. First, it equates gender with women thereby, marginalizing sexual orientation and trans bodies. Second it is a state led empowerment narrative, which mainstreams any feminist movement that might arise from these programs. Finally, their attempt to make agricultural work into a ‘friendly’ atmosphere for women completely elides conversations of race. In a fifty three-page pamphlet, it does not once mention race and/or racial inequality in Cuba or more specifically in the workforce even though they portray different illustrations of men and women that appear to be Afro-Cuban. Through these pamphlets and manuals, the State constructs an ideal image of the Cuban producer. Their discussion of who should be included in production is just as important as who is left out of the conversation.

In my literature review on food politics, I contended that the discourse around sustainable agriculture privileges production over consumption. This is not only true of

the Global North but also clearly in the case in Cuba. Production and consumption should be seen as an unbroken circle, the one constantly feeding back into the other. In the Global South, it is easy to overlook the politics of consumption. In the better half of the twentieth century and twenty first century, residents of the Global South have been categorized as producers for the Global North. Wallerstein's World Systems Theory expounds on a capitalist world system where the 'underdeveloped' periphery is constantly being exploited for their cheap labor, raw materials and agricultural production (Wallerstein 1974). If they are continually seen as producers there is no room to view these subjects as active consumers. Additionally, Post-Revolution Cuba is viewed by capitalist nations to be outside the 'family of consumption' since they altered their trajectory and chose a non-consumption based political ideology. On a local scale, the residents of Pogolotti, a primarily black population, are further reified as producers (of crops, entertainment etc) due to the ever-present legacies of colonialism and imperialism on the island (Domosh 2004). This analysis is not to privilege the act of consumption or the consumer as an 'agent of choice' but rather as a lens to interrogate the racial, gendered and classed politics behind food access and distribution in marginalized communities.

## **FOOD IS POLITICAL**

On December 18<sup>th</sup>, the day after President Barack Obama announced a new chapter in Cuban- U.S. diplomacy, *National Public Radio (NPR)* ran the story "*What The Change In U.S.-Cuba Relations Might Mean For Food*" (Barclay, 2014). It addressed Cuba's "jig-saw" nature of the food markets and currencies, the lack of beef and fish, the potential for trade with the American Farm Bureau and what this trade policy could mean for the future of Cuba's food. Not even a month later, *NPR* ran another story on a recent

initiative led by Miami Cuban-American Chef Rodriguez to take Americans on a culinary tour of La Habana (Vidal 2015). In the beginning of March, *the New York Times*, wrote a hopeful piece on the promise of increasing agricultural trade relations. A bipartisan group of senators introduced a bill to end the embargo, with clear farm and business backing, to explore the ‘untapped market’ (The Associated Press 2015). While I admit there are some concerning implications for opening of trade relations, the articles portray a refreshing reality of Cuban-U.S. relations. They are not counting down the days until McDonalds establishes its bright yellow arches on the Malecon. They exercise restraint and a measure of respect for Cuba’s agency in the matter. John Kavulich, president of the U.S.-Cuban Trade and Economic Council cautions, “What people tend to forget is it's not what the U.S. wants to do to or for Cuba. It's about what Cuba feels is in its interest” (The Associated Press 2015). This is a clear divergence of discourse from even twenty years ago, where Cuba was portrayed as a helpless island waiting for the U.S. to save it from itself.

It is not just U.S. foodies, scheming senators, and the agriculture lobby that are rooting for the return of normalized diplomatic relations, many Cubans have expressed excitement for the variety of food they hope will appear in markets. Yoani Sánchez (2015) writes:

The great national obsession, which is food, also has had a space within the imaginative dreams of recent weeks. A housewife, who defines herself as “sick of having to cook the same thing, because there is nothing else,” has projected her illusions on the arrival of goods from the north. “Some lost products will return and the stores won’t have empty freezers like now.” Her perspectives are direct and clear, experiencing the lost taste of beef, the texture of oil and the smell of an onion browning in the pan – February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2015

This is a sentiment I have frequently heard while I was in La Habana. Many Cubans long to open their old dusty cookbooks and try their hand at recipes they have long since forgotten due to the absence of ingredients<sup>8</sup>. Cubans are obsessed with food however, because they are ascribed the “Third World” nationhood or even in my own words “Global South” we associate that obsession with need instead of a socio-cultural process. It is true, they are obsessed in part, because they don’t have it but also because it is deeply engrained into society. At certain times of the day, all production stops so Cubans can sit and talk over a *cafecito*. It is in these moments, that I want to explore further in future research. How are Cubans obsessed with food and how does that manifest?

#### **OIGO LOS DISCURSOS O COMPRO EL PESCADO?/ DO I LISTEN TO SPEECHES OR BUY FISH?**

As a feminist critical food scholar, I can barely hold in my excitement. It is an affirmation that I am not crazy for spending two years of my life reading, living and breathing sustainability and food politics. However, there are actually broader implications for this than my own self-satisfaction. Until recently, food has been relegated to the private sphere. The process of buying, preparing and consuming food was considered within the realm of women’s work and unworthy of academic (or any) attention. In the past few years, scholars like (Pollan 2006; Guthman 2007; Guthman 2008; Alkon 2012) brought the politics of food and food access into the public sphere. Food justice advocates in the United States have battled against inequalities in the food system and called for a global structural shift in how we understand, produce and

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<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that many of the conversations are still framed in terms of production. How will the trade with the American Farm Bureau help Cuba increase production? What will access to fertilizers affect the urban agricultural movement? Will Cuba still be the model for organic produce? While we should not ignore these questions, we should also be asking production for who? The variety of food will increase on the island if relations keep easing but will it only be accessible in the *zona turistica*? Will food tourism continue to insulate certain foods to the majority of Cubans or will it be distributed throughout the island?

consume food. Additionally, scholars like Guthman (2007), Harper (2011) and Slocum (2007) have addressed how food is more than a biological need to survive but also a political process that interweaves lines of race, class, gender and culture. However, there are still gaps in the literature regarding loss of farmland for Indigenous, Latino and Black farmers, workers rights in industrial agriculture and the ever shrinking urban land for food production.

The continued conversations of Cuban-U.S. relations in terms of food bring hope, not only for the future of food access on the island but for the trajectory and recognition of food politics in society. However, we are not there yet. Despite reports of Netflix, Airbnb and the Mastercard coming to the island, the embargo is still in place. There have been great strides like the easing of travel sanctions, talks to establish embassies, the release of Alan Gross and the removal of Cuba from the terrorist list but we are still waiting on Congress and that may be a long wait. Yoani Sánchez (2015) jokes “Cuba is changing at the speed of a tortoise that flies by clinging to the legs of an eagle”. While we wait to see what implications the normalization of relations might bring, I ask that we more critically interrogate the socio-political structure of food; that when analyzing relationships with food (production and consumption) we recognize the messiness of the bodies that engage in this process and that we are cognizant of how the colonial and imperial legacies of gender, race and class influences access to food.

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