Food, Memory, and Cuban Society: Unraveling Trauma, Traditions, and Future Imaginaries in Havana

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Abstract

This paper delves into the intricate interplay of food scarcity and memory in contemporary Havana, Cuba, drawing on a period of immersive fieldwork conducted in the summer of 2022. Situating itself amidst the lived experiences of diverse Cubans, the study examines the enduring impact of historical challenges, particularly the Special Period, on present-day perceptions and experiences. Employing an oral history methodology rooted in collective memory theory, the research explores how food serves as a potent medium for encapsulating past experiences and shaping future imaginaries. Through oral narratives spanning from 1941 to 2022, the paper uncovers diverse memories and emotions associated with food, ranging from nostalgia for pre-revolution abundance to the hardships endured during the Special Period and contemporary struggles with food scarcity. The analysis highlights the multifaceted nature of food as a cultural, social, and political symbol, embodying aspirations, traumas, and collective resilience. By grounding our understanding in materiality and embracing diverse perspectives, this paper moves beyond static narratives, offering insights into the complexities of Cuban society and the enduring impact of historical challenges on collective memory and identity.

Keywords

Cuba; food memories; food scarcity; oral history; collective memory

This paper is based on a period of immersive field work carried out in Havana, Cuba in the summer of 2022. There have been many shifts in Cuba since the two years have passed, but continuous contact with Cubans on the island has provided me a lens into these ongoing changes marked by escalating migration, a declining peso, and persistent food shortages. The essence of this study lies not only in its role as an archive but as a living testimony, capturing stories from the past while providing a glimpse into present-day realities.

Cuba's historical trajectory, characterized by its colonization in 1492, the establishment of sugar monoculture, the institution of slavery, the fervent independence movement culminating in 1898, and the transformative Cuban

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Revolution of 1959, has been a tumultuous journey. Subsequent events, such as the imposition of the U.S. embargo in the 1960s[1] and Cuba's increased reliance on the Soviet Union during the 1970s and 1980s, laid the groundwork for the nation's entry into *El Período especial en tiempos de paz* [The Special Period in the Time of Peace] in 1991. Despite its peaceful designation, this era was marked by profound struggle as the island grappled with severe shortages, ranging from petroleum to food, resulting in an average weight loss of 20 pounds per person (Santana and Guanche 2021). This period persisted throughout much of the 1990s (Hernandez-Reguant 2009, 1), but slowly got better as Cuba found new trading partners and also shifted to more local practices.

What is frequently discussed in food studies regarding the Special Period are the achievements associated with the establishment of an alternative agricultural system not reliant on fossil fuels. Scholars such as Altieri, Rosset, and Funes assert that Cuba's Special Period offers valuable lessons in achieving self-sufficiency and sustainable food systems (Altieri 2012; Rosset et al. 2011; Funes et al. 2002). Analysis of this period varies, with focus ranging from agricultural science to social impacts. Machado observes Cuba's transition towards agroecology, citing it as an inspiring example despite challenges (Machado 2017, 7). Government incentives promoted urban farming and organic practices, emphasizing a shift from industrial to agroecological methods. Scholars challenge the notion of small countries requiring imports, noting Cuba's strides towards self-reliance (Funes et al. 2002). Many scholars advocate for agroecology's potential in enhancing food sovereignty, as well as highlighting how urban agriculture expanded significantly during the Special Period, addressing urbanization challenges and reducing reliance on imports (Koont 2007, 312).

While these narratives highlighting Cuba's strength and resilience hold elements of truth, they often present only one facet of the story. Overemphasizing this perspective can be detrimental, as it fails to acknowledge the hardships endured and the coerced adjustments many had to make in transitioning to a fossil

[1] "The U.S. embargo (blockade) extends beyond a mere ban on trade between countries. It assumes a formidably stringent character, resulting in a near-complete obstruction of all commercial activities. In essence, the blockade prohibits the sale or exportation of nearly all goods and intellectual property produced by U.S. citizens and corporations to Cuba. Consequently, one must envision the far-reaching influence of the United States, one of the world's foremost superpowers, whose grasp extends over virtually every tangible and intangible item. Moreover, Cuba is further impeded in its economic revitalization as it is barred from receiving funding from the World Bank, IMF, and other potential lenders – a crucial step in rebooting the Cuban economy. An essential recurring theme in my interviews is the stark reality expressed by my primary professor: 'Money. There is no money.' The blockade looms as an omnipresent topic, infiltrating every aspect of daily life on the island, shaping every object observed or endeavor undertaken." (Cerkleski 2023)

fuel-free lifestyle. It is intriguing to contemplate how a nation swiftly adapted from abundance to scarcity, yet many of these narratives overlook the intricacies – the highs and lows – shared through the firsthand accounts of those who lived through it.

Within this landscape, this paper situates itself amidst the lived experiences of various Cubans whom I had the privilege of engaging with and documenting their narratives. Consequently, the temporal scope of this study aligns with the life spans of the interviewees, spanning from 1941 to 2022, as their firsthand experiences directly shapes the information being explored. This paper explores the interplay between food scarcity and memory in contemporary Havana, drawing on oral narratives from diverse Cuban individuals to illuminate the enduring impact of historical challenges, particularly the Special Period, on present-day perceptions and experiences. Through an oral history methodology, it investigates how food serves as a potent medium for encapsulating and reliving past experiences, while also shaping future imaginaries and societal transformations.

Background and Literature Review

In delving into the interdisciplinary domain of food and memory, numerous scholars have underscored the intricate connection between sensory experiences, particularly taste and smell, and the retrieval of memories. Notably, works such as those featured in “Food and the Memory: Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 2000” lay foundational perspectives, positing food as a mnemonic device crucial for fostering a sense of belonging and group identity (Kravva 2001, 142). Furthermore, Ann Laura Stoler and Karen Strassler's exploration of “Memory-work in Java” elucidates the role of daily practices like cooking and eating in shaping affective memories (Stoler and Strassler 2016). Similarly, Jon D. Holtzman's analysis shows the interdisciplinary nature of food studies offering general insights into the relationship of food and memory (Holtzman 2006). Expanding upon this discourse, David E. Sutton's ethnographic study offers poignant examples of how food triggers memories across diverse cultural contexts, whether it be the tradition of Easter ovens in Kalymnos, Greece, or the recollection of industrial chemicals with distinct tastes and colors in the United States (Sutton 2008). Likewise, Meredith E. Abarca and Joshua R. Colby delve into the intersection of food, memory, and narrative through their academic research and pedagogical endeavors (Abarca and Colby 2016). Collectively, these works contribute to a nuanced understanding of how food shapes and preserves collective memory within various cultural and social contexts.

Building upon these foundational works, my research in Havana during the summer of 2022 employed an oral history methodology rooted in Maurice Halbwachs's collective memory theory, which argues that memory is only able to endure in sustaining social contexts; individuals remember by situating themselves

within the broader perspective of their group, while the memory of the group finds realization and expression through individual memories (Halbwachs and Coser 1992). My study specifically aimed to use food as a tool to trigger memories. I focused on food and its procurement and preparation as a mundane daily task, which allowed people to capture and explain in detail the daily reality of life. There is also the fact that within an authoritarian regime, there are many keeping a watchful eye on everyone's moves. Food is a simple and accessible way to speak about life under such a regime. People were put at ease knowing they had something to say and express themselves, many times approaching answers and details that were much deeper than one could imagine coming from such a mundane subject as food.

Methodology

During my fieldwork, I employed an oral history approach to uncover hidden narratives and empower individuals through remembering and reinterpreting the past (Perks and Thomson 2016, ix). Instead of pursuing "fact-finding research on remote problems," I aimed to "entangle" myself "with wider interpretations of contemporary issues" (Thompson 2016, 25).

To address potential interviewer bias, I engaged with anyone willing to talk, utilizing an open interview structure focused on the five broad themes of access, traditions, identity, socialism, and future imaginaries, all in the context of food. This methodology also involved a drawing exercise in which seventeen of the twenty-three interviewees visualized their ideal food system or general future – some of these drawings will be displayed below. [2]

The intersubjectivity inherent in oral history theory (Abrams 2010) played a critical role in understanding the interaction between my subjectivity and that of the interviewees, shaping their sense of self through experience, perception, language, and culture. To achieve this, I committed myself to a "process of mirroring" or "engaging with the subjectivity and positionalities adopted during fieldwork." This approach involved a decision to "stay connected rather than extract private memories" (Proglio 2020, 12).

Additionally, I adopted "deep hanging out" (Garth 2020, 23) as a methodology in Cuba, emphasizing non-verbal communication to build trust and bonds with interviewees. Recognizing the importance of non-verbal cues in a context where some feared repercussions for their literal words, I sought to convey safety through

[2] Twenty-one out of the twenty-three interviews were conducted in Spanish and translated into English by two Cubans fluent in both Spanish and English, but if there are some discrepancies in words, this could be why. Two interviews were conducted in English.

body language, commitment, and openness, allowing for a deeper understanding of their lives and fostering a trusting connection.

Lastly, it's important to address the common concern about the credibility of oral sources, as highlighted by Alessandro Portelli. Portelli argues that oral sources possess a different credibility, one that may not strictly adhere to factual accuracy but instead delves into imagination, symbolism, and desire. He suggests that while factual credibility should still be assessed, the psychological truth conveyed by oral sources holds equal importance to factual reliability. This perspective underscores the diverse and valuable nature of oral history, emphasizing its unique contributions to understanding historical narratives (Portelli 2016, 37).

Results: Interplay of Food Scarcity and Memory in Contemporary Havana

In examining the interplay of food scarcity and memory in contemporary Havana, diverse narratives emerge from individuals spanning different generations, each offering unique insights into the lasting impact of historical challenges on present-day perceptions and experiences.

Verita, an 80-year-old black woman, vividly recalls the stark inequalities that characterized the pre-1959 capitalist era. When asked about how she procures food on an everyday basis she replies, “I am a very big planner when it comes to this issue, not my son, who tells me that I plan too much or that I save a lot, but I like to save because I was part of capitalism.”[3] Her reflection illuminates the enduring need to plan and save; a persistent fear of reverting to a past marked by poverty and inequality, shaping her present perceptions and actions around food choices.

The period between 1960 and 1991 is described by interviewees Silvero and Dalila as an age of “prosperity.” They state:

> Cuba has never had, has never been splendorous, we have always suffered from shortages and limitations. From '60, '62, '63, when we became familiar with the socialist regime until the year '90, when the socialist camp fell, we had a period of…prosperity. Not splendorous, but of prosperity… It[4] started to be sufficient [for our needs].[5]

These reflections give insight into the memories after the revolution, years associated with great change and flows of certain goods. Not surprisingly, the presence of Soviet food imports left a lasting imprint on Cuba's culinary landscape

[3] Interview with Verita, June 15th, 2022, Havana, Cuba

[4] The food supply that was available to them.

[5] Interview with Dalila and Silvero, July 21st 2022, Havana, Cuba

not just about prosperity in general mentioned by Silvero and Dalila but also the specific types of foods that were available – a memory often evoked through references to "carne russa." Homero recalls the ubiquity of this canned meat from Russia during his childhood: "When I was a kid, everything was state-owned… there was this canned meat from Russia. So, it was very common to see 'carne russa, carne russa'."[6] Mirana's reflections further underscore the enduring influence of Soviet food on Cuban diets:

> …there was a lot of Russian, Soviet food. Melata (a type of syrup) and condensed milk. I mean, the food was brutal. It wasn't scarce or anything like that…it was not the traditional taste. The Soviets sent condensed milk in abundance, and we began to change our milk for [that] milk and things like that, as there are many changes in our way of feeding ourselves. [7]

These recollections make a direct link between a food item and a geopolitical reality which is imprinted on Cuban culture and memory.

Another interviewee, Desirada, who was born in the 80s, has nostalgic recollections of varied foods from her childhood, compared starkly with the current hardships. Desirada states: "In the 80s in Cuba, the food was good. We did not live as we live now. There was a great variety. I had access to many products: fish, seafood, meat, a diversity of meats…"[8]

The difficulties around resources started to be felt in the late 80s, and one can only assume how devastating it was for Cuba when the Soviet Union fell in 1991 and all imports were virtually cut-off overnight (Ferrer 2022, 439). The negative impact on the island was emphasized by the fact that the U.S. embargo (called *bloqueo* [blockade] by Cubans) remained in place. Two of my interviewees, Dauro and Dalila, explain the harsh reality of this period. Dauro highlights the double blockade faced by Cuba – both from the United States, and from the new post-Soviet reality, as the country lost a significant portion of its financing, raw materials, and exports.[9] This resulted in economic stagnation and a total disruption. Despite the adversities, Dauro stressed how Cuba managed to reverse this situation, likening it to a resurrection from near collapse. Dalila also elaborates on the challenges faced during the 1990s, acknowledging it as a period that lacked any semblance of being *especial* or special in a positive sense. Instead, it was marked by sadness, pain, and economic problems.[10]

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[6] Interview with Homero, June 12th, 2022, Havana, Cuba.

[7] Interview with Mirana, July 11th, 2022, Havana, Cuba.

[8] Interview with Desirada, June 20th, 2022, Havana, Cuba.

[9] Interview with Duaro, June 29th, 2022, Havana, Cuba.

[10] Interview with Dalila and Silvero, July 21st, 2022, Havana, Cuba.

The impact of the Special Period was also felt differently based on gender. Through revolutionary equitable policy, right after the revolution, many women could move up in society in a way they never had been able to before. They could go to school and get jobs that were previously not offered to them. Much of this liberation, though, shifted during the Special Period when there were mass shortages of work and food that brought the women back into the household, putting the pressure on to increase ingenuity in procuring and managing food supplies. There was a saying I heard a lot: "A man uses an onion to make one meal while a woman uses an onion to make meals for the week." Anton highlights the gender dynamics and shifting roles within Cuban households by saying:

> The man simply goes to work in the morning, he comes back late at night, but the woman is the one who has to be there, if there is chicken somewhere, she has to go there to wait in line, if there is bread, if there are eggs, whatever, she's there.[11]

Therefore, the memory of the scarcity of food becomes intertwined with the laborious and innovative efforts of women to provide for their families amid unprecedented challenges.

In contemporary Havana, individuals like Desirada express a mix of nostalgia and frustration, grappling with the challenges of providing for their families. The scarcity of certain foods catalyzes memory recall, prompting comparisons between past abundance and present hardships. Desirada combines these periods well. She says,

> I remember a time of misery, of poverty in terms of food during the Special Period in the 90s, the 90s were also very hard in terms of food. It was better than now. Now it is worse than in the 90s... In the 90s you went to the countryside and you could get food. There was a little more. But it was still difficult, and it was a time when there was only cabbage, only cabbage that in a house, the only thing there was cabbage.[12]

She continues by saying, "We didn't live like how we live now," emphasizing the transformative impact of food scarcity on the collective memory: "Right now, it's quite complicated because there's no food... There is no food."[13]

This was not the only person who said that to me though. A combination of these external and internal forces had drastically affected the Cuban food system I

[11] Interview with Anton, July 11th, 2022, Havana, Cuba

[12] Interview with Desirada, June 20th, 2022, Havana, Cuba

[13] Interview with Desirada, June 20th, 2022, Havana, Cuba

found in 2022. The perfect storm of factors[14] led to difficulties in accessing virtually every good. Not only were there hardly any goods, but many could also not afford what was there. Clara states:

> Right now it is the most complicated situation Cuba has had in the last 60 years, which is how old I am. Maybe it was much worse before, but I didn't live through it. From the time I was born until now it is the worst thing that has happened in my life.[15]

In essence, the trauma endured during the Special Period profoundly influenced the present-day recollection of memories, particularly those related to food. The intersection of trauma, memory, and food during the Special Period is a testament to the enduring impact of historical challenges on the present-day perceptions and experiences of Cubans. All of these memories are at the forefront of many Cuban's minds, and they feel extremely tangible because of the crisis that was (and still is) taking place.

I complete this section of my paper by discussing some of the images drawn by my interviewees. Sometimes the drawings were able to represent things not covered in the interviews. If you listen to the audio of Desirada when drawing Figure 1 you can hear in her voice the strong desire she has for these foods. At one point she stated: "Let there be cheese. But there is no cheese anywhere! Let there be cheese!"[16] That was the first item she drew.

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[14] The implementation of *Tarea Ordenamiento* in November 2020 aimed to reform Cuba's economy by abolishing the Cuban Convertible Peso (CUC) and adjusting exchange rates, prices, wages, and pensions. However, these measures were not entirely successful which led to high inflation. Additionally, the Cuban government introduced *Moneda Libremente Convertible* (MLC) as a new strategy to access foreign currency, primarily catering to those with family abroad, excluding individuals receiving wages in the national currency, which is exacerbated by sanctions restricting remittances, which already disproportionately affecting black Cuban families who have statistically less family abroad. All of this occurred amidst the backdrop of additional sanctions imposed by the Trump administration to strengthen the embargo, reducing Cuba's ability to access goods. The situation worsened with the global surge in gas and petroleum prices due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, severely impacting Havana with gas shortages that disrupted transportation and food distribution. Additionally, increased import prices and harsh summer weather conditions reduced agricultural production and created significant disruptions in transportation and food access, particularly affecting Havana. Rural areas experienced comparatively better food availability due to closer proximity to agricultural production.

[15] Interview with Clara, July 21st 2022, Havana, Cuba.

[16] Interview with Desirada, June 20th, 2022, Havana, Cuba.

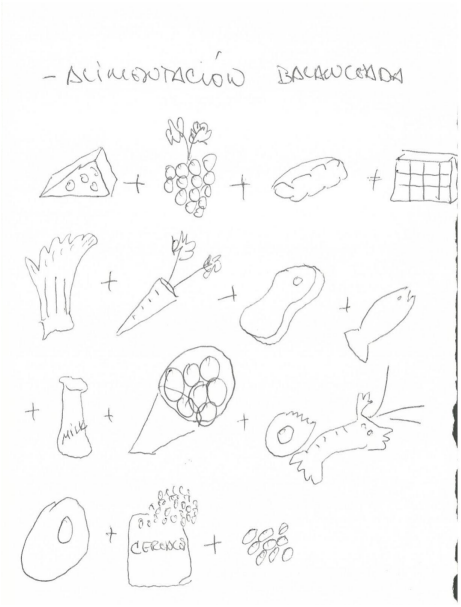

Figure 1: Desirada's drawing of her ideal future.

What is interesting about this drawing is that it emphasizes very specific desires, daily desires about food that is deemed adequate,[17] and pleasure that are often overlooked in studies about food scarcity. Mirana also brings it up above when saying, that the food was "brutal," but not scarce. The interviewees are emphasizing the need for variety and traditional tastes; food that brought them pleasure and joy through choice, not obligation.

This leads us to another one of my interviewees, Neoma, who lived through the Special Period, but was particularly troubled by the current situation. Neoma was the first person that I felt told me her truth, the first person that I felt the joy, the aspirations, but she was also the first person who made me cry, who I felt pain from, when I heard her words and saw her drawing. When asked about her ideal future in Cuba, she drew this (Figure 2) and said: "In the future, here in the future,

[17] This language recalls the term "politics of adequacy" coined by scholar Hanna Garth. She states: "If food security, subsistence, and sustenance are about access to sufficient nutrients and mere survival, then I propose that the framework of adequacy can account for what is necessary beyond basic nutrition, prompting us to ask not whether a food system sustains life, but whether it sustains a particular kind of living. That is, whether a food system adequately supplies what we need for the social, cultural, and personal dimensions of a good life. The politics of adequacy is about who determines what is necessary to live a good life, how it is determined, and must include both the political economy of food access and the social and affective experiences of eating" (Garth 2020, 5).

you're never going to see it…Cubans flee Cuba. What for? So that they don't die of sadness, of suffering. [long silence staring] That's what."[18]

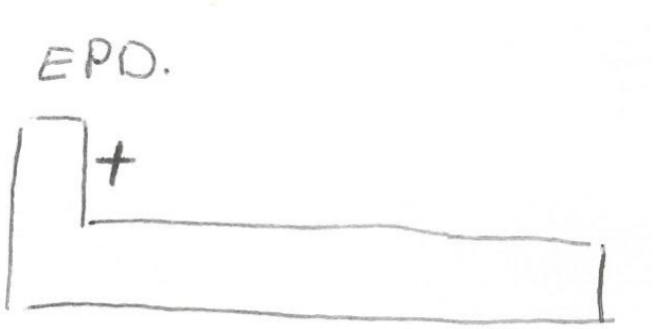

Figure 2: Neoma's drawing of her ideal future

Many people are also *not* fleeing Cuba, but doing what they can to not just stay alive but thrive in the community; to distance themselves and do what they can to create the life they imagine. One of these people was Nalda. She, with the help of other community members, ran a project centered around food and energy sovereignty. This included an after-school program for youth and teenagers on various topics related to sustainability, food production, and much more. Nalda had an aura around her of love that allowed her to have faith in the future, but without being naive. She spoke very clearly about the issues and frustrations but did not let these thoughts bring her to any other conclusion than why she was working and fighting for the survival of her community. She said she did not speak of politics; I respected this wish and asked little directly about socialism or the government. Through their actions, though, I observed the community were consciously disconnecting; they were forgetting the promises of socialism and creating for themselves what they needed, instead of relying on the government. In this, they did not outwardly blame the government with words but simply stated what they were doing and why and said a lot in their silence. This can be seen in her drawing (Figure 3).

[18] Interview with Neoma, June 15th, 2022, Havana, Cuba.

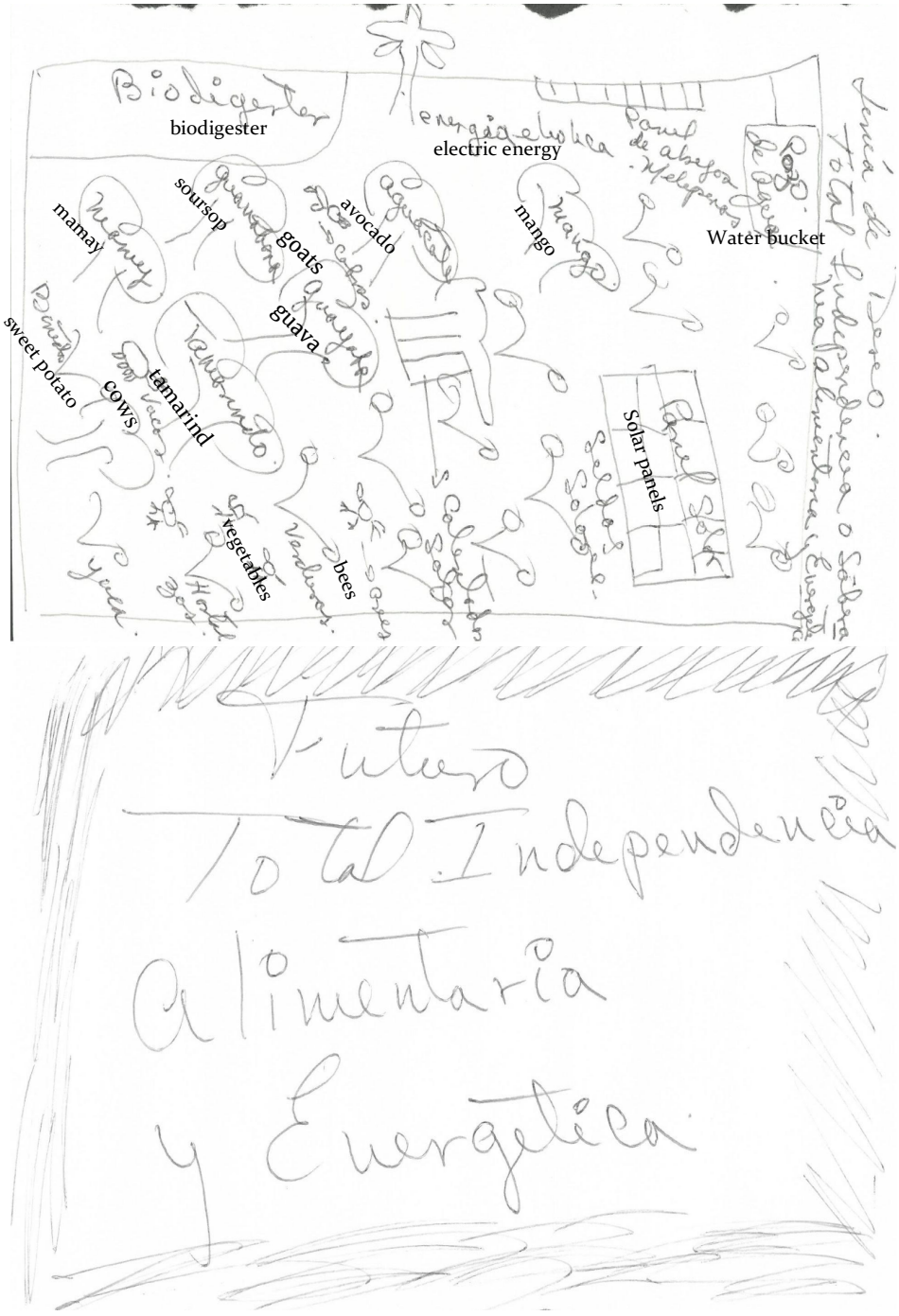

Figure 3: Nalda's drawing of her ideal future, June 16th, 2022, Havana, Cuba
top image titled "Farm of my Desires: Total Food and Energy Independence"
bottom image titled "Future: Total Food and Energy Independence"

But she was not the only one with this mindset; another one of my interviewees, Vinita, spoke the same way Nalda did. She said:

> In the situation we have in the country, with the food issue it is a little cumbersome because we are the ones who have the power in our hands with the food issue and there are many of us who sow… so I do not see this issue as so difficult… I supply myself, I am self-sufficient, because I raise my own… and it is like making an exchange between peasants… one killed a pig and sold half to this one and they make exchanges… To a neighbor, I gave a little piece to this one and to the other one, I share that, I do not sell the meat.[19]

Each of these images show stark differences compared to one another; drawn by women of fairly similar age, in similar neighborhoods, and yet such completely different outlook on the futures. One has simple desires, for herself and her immediate needs, one has a grand vision, and one has really lost all faith.

Conclusion

Memory, intricately entwined with materiality, holds profound significance in the Cuban context, with food emerging as a pivotal element in the creation and preservation of memories. The tangible nature of food makes it a potent medium for encapsulating and reliving past experiences. A compelling illustration of this phenomenon is evident in the reflections on the Special Period. The scarcity of food during this challenging era becomes more than a historical fact; it transforms into a tangible manifestation of collective trauma. The memory of losing an average of 20 pounds during this period is not just a statistic, but a visceral recollection embedded in the materiality of the human body. Furthermore, the concept of “carne russa” serves as a tangible symbol of the socio-economic challenges faced by Cubans. The distaste for this imported food product is not just about its flavor but becomes a representation of dissatisfaction with altered tastes and culinary traditions. Homero and Mirana's reflections on “carne russa” emphasize how certain foods from this period persist as tangible markers of an arduous time.

In contemporary Havana, the act of sharing memories related to food becomes a communal experience, fostering a shared understanding of the societal changes that have unfolded. Desirada's mix of nostalgia and frustration, expressed in the context of providing for her family amid current challenges, underscores how food continues to be intricately linked with the emotional landscape of memory. The significance of food transcends mere sustenance; it embodies a chain of connections, narratives, aspirations, and emotional landscapes including

[19] Interview with Vinita, June 22nd, 2022, Havana, Cuba.

autonomy, elation, and anguish. Central to this discourse are the individuals who shared their narratives and emotions. My research endeavors not solely to gather these narratives but also to explore the emotional dimensions inherent within these experiences. Presently, Cuba grapples with challenges. I endeavor not to trivialize these recollections but rather to highlight the intricacies of the society. Each narrative is uniquely complex, pushing against a singular perspective.

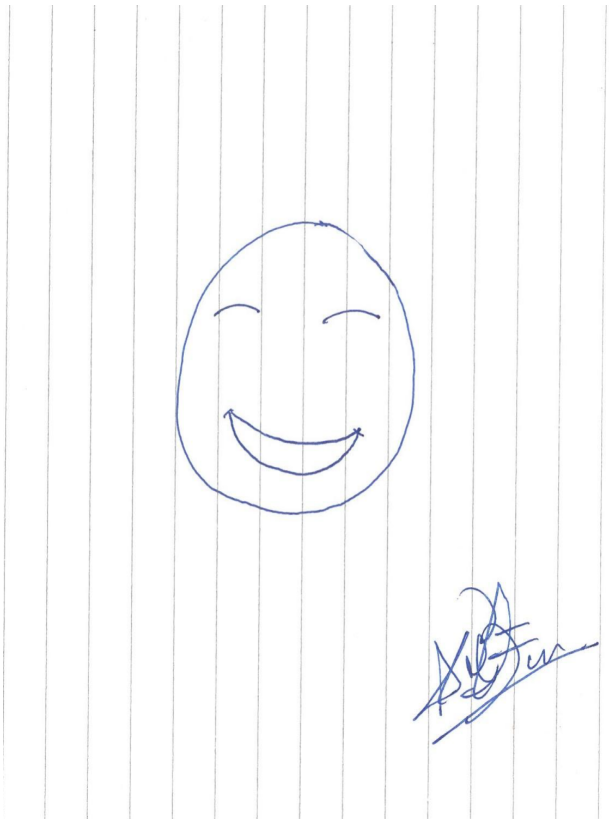

Figure 4: Maricela's drawing of her ideal future, July 1st, 2022, Vedado, Havana, Cuba.

A friend of mine in Havana, Maricela, when asked about her future drew Figure 4 and said "I can smile and that would be real, but when you're really really happy, we all like smize[20]...I'm not unhappy... But if this would get better, I would be much happier. I would be much less worried."[21] Maricela's drawing serves as a powerful symbol embodying the universal human yearning for happiness and a better future. The juxtaposition of joy amidst suffering, witnessed daily in Cuba,

[20] Smile with the eyes.

[21] Interview with Maricela, July 1st, 2022, Havana, Cuba

reflects the nuanced and multifaceted nature of people's experiences which was something that I observed daily in Cuba, small moments of joy in the sea of chaos. I watched people line up to get their daily ice cream cone directly next to those wondering if they would find anything to eat in the line for the *bodega*. Ultimately, this paper aims to convey the intricate realities of historical periods through the diverse stories of those who lived them. By grounding our understanding in materiality and embracing diverse perspectives, we move beyond static, collective narratives. The use of the present-day food situation not only serves as a trigger for reflections on the past, but also propels us into an exploration of the future. In sharing highs and lows, ups and downs, neighbors in Havana contribute to a collective understanding of the complexities inherent in defining the successes and failures of a particular period.

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