

Tourism's Sweet Perils

CLARE CARDINAL-PETT
Iowa State University

Treading blindly for what seemed aeons in oppressive darkness on an unstable mush of fermenting sugar cane stalks, nearly overcome by the sickly sweet smell, you approached a faint ray of hope: the dim glow of a TV hanging overhead. On it was a video collage of Castro's life. And as you turned back, all senses on total alert, you faintly perceived the presence of bare living bodies, endlessly rubbing their mouths or slapping their thighs. Some viewers saw a man and a woman, others insisted there were four males. Like Cuba itself, it was a total sensory experience—contradictory, illusive, and hard to fathom. It summed up the invisibility, the toxic presence, the history of exploitation, and the heart of darkness.¹

Tania Bruguera's art installation in a tunnel at La Fortaleza de San Carlos de la Cabana during the VII Bienal de la Habana² has been interpreted as "presenting a philosophy of (national) history in which people journey through a collective experience that can only be comprehended once they've reached its end, whereupon 'the past' reveals itself as having consisted of repeated rituals and empty gestures."³ "It's like Cuba," said the artist. "It's sweet. It can be dangerous. It's intoxicating."⁴ Bruguera's attempt to overwhelm her audience with the odor of decay and the neurotic gestures of caged animals can obviously be read as an obituary of the Cuban revolution. Unlike other contemporary Cuban artists, however, she does not joke about



Fig. 1. Tania Bruguera, "Sin título," VII Bienal de la Habana-2000-photo: habanaviva.com

it. The piece laments the death of what many Cubans call the 'dream with no name.'

Tania Bruguera throws her 'food' on the floor in protest. She also literally strips her neighbors (the 'actors' in the piece) and makes them dumb. Their neurotic gestures are emblematic of the enormous waste of human capital that defiles Cuba's public space. Bruguera's lament is a wake-up call to those responsible for turning well-educated Cubans into cooks, waiters, and chambermaids. International tourism, the government's sugar-substitute, is the island's *pharmakon*.⁵

Most Cubans have an extraordinary ability to improvise, to make do in the face of adversity. Christina Garcia, a US fiction writer whose first novel was *Dreaming in Cuban*, describes this fundamental aspect of Cuban character in "Simple Life," an essay about visiting her relatives in Cuba:

Cubans are masters at making the best out of any difficult situation. 'Resolver,' to resolve, is probably the most commonly used verb in the language on the island. 'Resolver' can mean resuscitating a twenty-year-old Russian Lada for a ride to the beach or tracking down a single out-of-season sweet potato for a dessert offering to Yemaya, goddess of the seas...In Cuba 'resolver' means to survive, to overcome all obstacles with inventiveness, spontaneity, and most important, humor.

The lack of humor in Tania Bruguera's installation is a possible indicator of how severely the Special Period has tested Cuba's resolve. The government's invitation to the largest industry in the global market, tourism, and legalization of the US dollar has opened the door of economic privilege and social advantage.⁷ Tips from tourists, 'remittances'⁸ from relatives abroad, and other sources of dollar-based income now constitute a significant part of many household economies. In the emerging dollar economy, the government's peso-based salary for teachers, doctors, architects, etc. is no longer a living wage.

Many Cubans still can find comedy in this tragedy. Recent films like "Guantanamera," "The Waiting List," and "Honey for Oshun" are good examples of how scarcity can be laughed at. And there are the jokes on the street:

A Cuban a girl dumps her boyfriend. "He swore he'd struck it rich at the Hotel Nacional," she gripes, "claimed he'd actually landed the job of doorman." But she dropped him when she learned the bitter truth, that he was just another Cuban neurosurgeon - a state job, that is, with no ties to the dollar economy.'

The mood in much of Cuba's professional community is more somber. Mario Coyula, an architect in Havana and member of The Group for the Integral Development of the Capital, expressed his misgivings about the effect the dollar economy is

now having on the city's neighborhoods in his 1996 essay, "Havana For Ever, Havana Forever":

*A recent variant associated to a relatively higher income level of a pathetic nouveau riche projects into the streetscape with a Peerless type of chain-link fence two meters high that separates a passer-by from the salivating fangs of a well-fed Doberman pinscher, plus a front garden turned into a car porch covered with undulating green Fiberglas, where the owner's 1950's well-kept Chevrolet stands side by side with a 1990's Nissan rented by a foreign paid guest. The ubiquitous fencing sadly reflects the rising increase of thefts, which ten years ago were few.*¹⁰

He is optimistic, however, that his group's promotion of new planning methods that are "flexible, decentralized, cautious and regenerative" will help Havana recoup its losses:

*This path could lead to the construction of a new paradigm, that of a sustainable socialism, if able to achieve and maintain the difficult equilibrium between the built, natural and social environment and a supportive economy; that is, a creative socialism, viable and deeply participatory.*¹¹

In Havana, where blackouts are part of everyday life, hitching a ride is an art form, and banana peels have been used as a meat substitute, the word "sustainability" merely means survival, one day at a time. Mario Coyula's "sustainable socialism" derives its theoretical armature from subaltern survival practices and affirms his faith in Cuba's improvisational skills. Shifting responsibility from the state to the individual, his "sustainable socialism" calls for a "integral transformation of the neighborhood" into a "workshop". The means of production are decentralized:

*In such a place, dwellings will stop being a mere refuge and become microworkshops, the basis of a neighborhood economy which could be organized much like the recently established rural co-operatives. Perhaps in this way, the old Marxist dream of erasing the difference between the city and countryside would follow a different path, away from the simplistic approach of building five-story apartment blocks in the middle of the countryside and small, squalid detached houses in the inner city.*¹²

This essay examines three provisional constructions that have appeared in Havana during the Special Period that demonstrate how willing Cubans are to sacrifice principle for food and shelter. I present these constructions in order, from benign to toxic, so that the *pharmakon* might be deconstructed. Like Tania Bruguera's installation, this essay is a lamentation. I acknowledge Gayatri Spivak's declaration that "There is no state on the globe today that is not part of the capitalist economic system or can want to eschew it fully."¹³ Cuba's entry into the global market place is inevitable. Like Tania Bruguera,

however, I cannot forgive global capitalism for (or joke about) its proclivity to waste human and natural resources.

A PIG IN EVERY BATHTUB

As is the case in many cities, farm animals are 'unauthorized' in Havana. During the worst of the Special Period a severe shortage of gasoline and diesel fuel cut supply lines from farms to markets. The city health inspectors began to look the other way as rules were broken. Pigs lounged in the bathtubs of many apartments and were taken out to the sidewalks on leashes. Around the city you can still hear squealing from open windows and balconies. Laundry shrouds the slaughterhouses. Animal husbandry became unofficially sanctioned when the state rationed chicks to each family and every tenement incubated its future suppers.¹¹

A similar situation cropped up when fruits and vegetables failed to arrive in the city. Farms appeared in vacant lots. Cubans piled compost over the rubble in their neighborhoods and planted seeds. There were no pesticides or fertilizers so these gardens went 'green' out of necessity. A spontaneous and unauthorized activity at first, the organic urban farm has now

become a Havana fixture with well-educated specialists tending the rows with scientific precision and efficiency.

The current system of 'organoponicos,' as they have been dubbed, is now integrated with the city of Havana's Institute of Physical Planning, the governmental organization in charge of urban land management. The institute 'lends' available space to one of several agricultural organizations that grow food in the city. The distribution is planned with future construction in mind and takes into account neighborhood accessibility. Some 'organoponicos' are specifically linked to certain schools or factories, providing food for the students, teachers, and workers. Areas of under-utilized land such as the airports have been converted to edible landscapes.¹² Vegetables are sold on location with some produce redistributed or traded with other gardens. The neighborhood produce stands have become new community centers, similar in function to the more historic bodegas, or corner grocery stores that were eliminated by state planners:

An ambitious program for building an extensive supermarket network promoted in the eighties intended to ease food distribution for the sake of the state agency in charge of that task, reducing the number of distribution points. This program was aimed to eliminate the small corner groceries, combining



Fig. 2. A pig in transit. Central Havana-May 2001-photo: Jorge Encarnacion.

several under one single roof of a new building. Actually, the concept of a supermarket – meant to compel people into buying goods that they do not really need – did not fit with the purpose of a socialist country where the state's concern was to ensure a fair supply of basic food to everybody. These ersatz supermarkets concentrated the negative impacts of storage and mass assembly of consumers, forcing people to walk longer distances with often heavy loads; and squandered valuable corner lots while leaving several previously well-shaped city corners adrift.¹⁶

The 'organoponicos' that have sprouted in the urban decay have the potential to change traditional Cuban cuisine. While what we think of as traditional Cuban foods are global in their origins (all of the world's cuisines now reflect some history of global trade) there is a curious predictability and invariability in the typical Cuban meal. 'Vegetales raros' such as broccoli and bok choy are grown and sold in the neighborhood stands. Recipes are posted for exotic vegetables; neighbors swap tales of what they did with the daikon radish bought yesterday. Many of these so-called 'weird vegetables' are available because seeds have been donated by humanitarian organizations from abroad or come cheaply from China.¹⁷ Havana's numerous 'organoponicos' add color to a city short of paint. They provide affordable access to imported food, defying the US trade embargo. They are a source of diversion and information about other countries.

Successful farming in Havana – raising city pigs, chickens, and produce – could not be reproduced in the United States. It does exist in many US cities and is a particularly vital element of many poor and immigrant neighborhoods. Supporting urban farming in the United States at the scale and efficiency of those in Havana would take cooperation among all socioeconomic classes and would demand knowledgeable participation of the educated elite. Although the Cuba now maintains a 75% urban population – as does most of North America – the revolution has made a point of educating its urban dwellers in rural values and knowledge. A longstanding and significant element of the Cuban educational system is an exchange of students and teachers between rural and urban schools. Students from rural areas are taken to the city on a periodic basis for cultural exposure. Students in city schools spend part of the year at schools in the countryside, where they learn agricultural and construction skills through service-learning type activities. Unlike most North American city dwellers, every Cuban knows where their food comes from. It is no surprise that urban farming in Havana has been so productive.

While much has been reported about Cuba's new 'green revolution'¹⁸ there is little sign that the country's rural agricultural practices are radically shifting from the industrialized and mechanized methods of production invented in the United States and embraced with a vengeance by the USSR.¹⁹ Sugar cane is especially difficult to cultivate organically. There are small institutes working on large scale organic farming

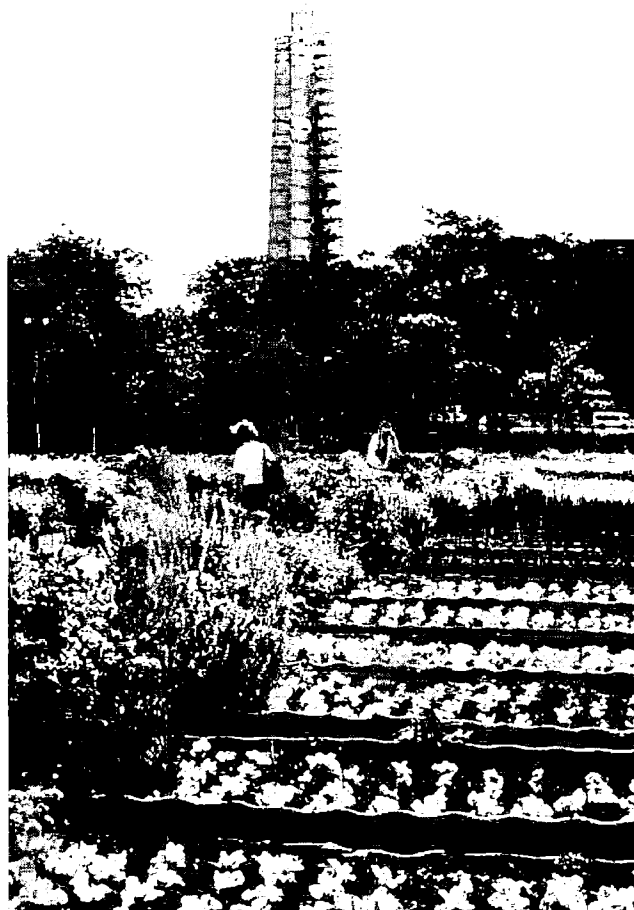


Fig. 3. Farming in the shadow of the monument to Jose Marti in la Plaza de la Revolucion, May 2000-Photo: author.

problems but many people involved in this work fear that, as the country gets back on its feet, support for 'green' approaches will fall out of favor and that much of Havana urban farming will be replaced with new construction.²⁰ It would, however, be an achievement of global significance if Havana's planners produced a new model of urban design from the provisional farming now taking place in Cuba's capital city.

MERCADO MIXTO

In Havana the boundary between city and countryside also dissolves at the numerous farmers' markets and agricultural supply shops that have opened up during the Special Period throughout Havana's neighborhoods. Shops selling agricultural supplies – seeds, tools, and organic fertilizers and pesticides – are state-run enterprises. Supply stores also distribute advice to residents wanting to make their city yards and rooftops more edible.

The farmers' market is also a thriving microcosm of Cuba newly mixed economy. For example, the market at the corner of 19th



Fig. 1. An 'auto-supplier' selling his pork, May 2001-photo: author.

and B in Vedado, a neighborhood bordering the city center which was built in the first half of the twentieth century, houses – under one rambling roof – a ration distribution center, a state-subsidized meat and produce counter, and areas for 'auto-suppliers,' private entrepreneurs selling their own pork and produce. This particular market is one of several around the city.

The market is a busy neighborhood gathering spot, a place to buy dinner and a cheap place to eat lunch. The building is a rambling concrete block and corrugated metal shed. In Vedado, where the architecture ranges from neo-classical stucco to early modernist glass and steel, the market does not fit in. While made from prefabricated parts, its functionalism is not planned. The structure seems appropriate to the food, raw and straightforward. At the small café and take out counter, the menu is 'comida típica': meat and starch with some chopped raw tomatoes and cabbage. Tourists do turn up at Havana's markets but they are not of the travel and leisure class. The food is simply too raw and the flies too numerous.

Selling food as a private enterprise in Havana is lucrative. The 'auto-suppliers' at the market in Vedado charge a higher mark-up on their goods than the state. They can get away with it because the state's supplies of subsidized meat and produce is

limited and often of a poorer quality. The prices on the state's rationed goods is even less than its subsidized goods but the shelves in that area of the market are empty more than they are full and rarely arrive on schedule. All prices in the three areas of the market are unbelievably low by US standards. (My box lunch of squash and 'salad' with beer on tap was the equivalent of 25 cents.) The minute differences, however, segregate Cuban shoppers. Under one deceptively simple roof, a once classless society buys its groceries at separate counters – each according to his income in a multi-layered economy. Foreigners do not see the true architecture of the Vedado market because everything in the rambling shed is bought and sold with Cuban currency. While the official exchange rate between the peso and the US dollar is one to one, it actually takes 21 pesos to buy a dollar. Most Cuban salaries are about 15 US dollars a month. The shoppers buying dinner from 'auto suppliers' have simply arrived with more pesos in their pockets, having exchanged their dollars elsewhere.

ROOM SERVICE

In Havana, as is the case all over the island, a Cuban national is not allowed into the rooms of foreigners at hotels that cater to tourists unless he or she is an employee. Preventing Cubans from

going to a tourist's hotel room is the government's attempt to prevent prostitution – the means justifying the ends. The rule – or law, I guess it must be – reflects the country's paranoia about its rapidly expanding tourist population. Cuba's invitation to visit its unspoiled beaches was a dramatic and desperate move given the grim reality of tourism prior to 1959.

Another form of human degradation can be found all over Havana and the state is trying its best to keep it under control as well. During the mid-1990s, many Cubans were allowed to turn their homes into means of economic production. Guest houses and small restaurants called paladares proliferated around Havana. Everyone in Havana knows someone who supplements his or her government salary with this form of second job. Some have abandoned their careers to become full-time hosts to tourists. While the government is now trying to curb this form of entrepreneurship through fines and taxes, they persist. Havana had nearly 1,000 paladares in the mid-1990s but government regulations have whittled the official number down to around 120.²¹ Many continue to operate clandestinely. Private restaurants are limited by law to 12 tables and that makes them less profitable. Some paladar owners hide extra tables in their houses, abandoning their bedrooms to their more lucrative activities.²²

Outside Cuba, however, the paladar is aggressively promoted by the travel press such as this recent article, "Havana's not for eating but eating can be fun," in the *New York Times*:

PSSST! Want to go to my mother's restaurant?"

Havana is the only city I have ever visited where going out to dinner sometimes takes on the cloak and dagger trappings of meeting with dissidents in Myanmar.

Tourists are often approached on the streets around mealtime by local touts asking, sotto voce, if they would like to try the marvelous food at certain restaurants. These restaurants pay the touts a fee for every customer they bring to the door.²³

And in the May issue of *Cigar Aficionado* (the good life for men):

[Paladares] are completely different from the large restaurants designed for tourists that are run by the government or hotels, which are usually overpriced and offer dull food. A good paladar can be anything from a handful of tables in the dining room patio of a family's 1950s-era Miami Deco house in the quiet neighborhood of Nuevo Vedado, to a cluster of round wrought-iron tables in the garden of a manor house in the posh area of Miramar. They not only please your taste buds but also satisfy your general well-being with their distinctly Cuban atmosphere.²⁴

Both articles are quick to judge the food in government-run tourist facilities substandard:

In other countries choosing a restaurant based on information from a stranger on the street doesn't seem like a smart idea. In Cuba your chances of getting a decent meal at one of these often illegal private restaurants are better than what you will find in most state-run establishments, where the service tends to be indifferent and the food often barely edible.²⁵

Cuba is bereft of culinary sophistication according to one European "who worked as a chef for a few months in a number of well-known Havana restaurants" because:

...the Cubans he worked with just didn't care, or simply couldn't understand, what good food was about – from the dishwashers to the head of the restaurant group. I once asked my second what his favorite dish was and he said, "Scrambled eggs with avocado and ketchup"...I knew that someone like that would have problems appreciating the subtleties of cooking for educated people from around the world.²⁶

The lens through which "educated people from around the world" view this healthy, well-educated but "underdeveloped" nation is dirtied by habits of over-consumption. The quaint neighborhood paladares or guest houses, particularly those run by former professionals and those desperate illegal businesses that supply a growing demand, are a waste of human capital. Young people are dropping out of medical school and leaving their teaching jobs to help their parents run the family bed and breakfast.

One Saturday afternoon in Havana, I casually mentioned to my uncle Tio Jorge that I was yearning for a piece of cake. About four hours later a prim man appeared at our door carrying an enormous coconut layer cake topped with fluffy pink meringue. It turned out that the deliveryman was, in fact, a heart surgeon who bakes cakes on weekends for extra cash.²⁷

Havana's neighborhood 'workshops' create wealth but undermine the education and health care systems: they put food on the dining room table but erase the bedroom. In a country with a severe housing shortage, giving up one's precious domestic space to gain a tourist's dollar is a serious sacrifice of dignity. Cubans may be eating more but they are still crowded in a crumbling infrastructure with their families and friends. The current efforts to restore Old Havana are only possible because it is a tourist attraction. In other areas of the city, the proprietors of paladares have been able to repair their crumbling properties with their profits. In the new tourism-based economy some areas of the city are unlikely to be a restoration priority: no foreigner on vacation would want to each lunch in a Soviet-inspired apartment building.



Fig. 5. Partially inhabited tenement in Central Havana-May 2001-photo: Steven Klocke.

Mario Coyula acknowledges the toxic properties of tourism and believes that the “neighborhood workshops” must somehow “rescue from degradation and cynicism a human capital amassed with endeavors, successes, mistakes, hardships and illusions...”²⁸ The rescue is:

...related to the necessity of empowering the economy of the city, neighborhood and family, with more productive activities than the elaboration of home-made sweets; thus avoiding to recreate step by step the long and tedious path from the earliest street vendors in the seedy environs of the port at the start of the 17th century...²⁹

EPHLOGUE

The Special Period's scarcity of food may have been a temporary phenomenon but it has had a transformative effect on the Cuban political economy and Havana's urban fabric. The ‘comida típica’ is back on the daily menu but a taste of the global marketplace is available in every neighborhood. The recovery has been fueled by dollars from relatives abroad and foreign tourists, an increasing number of them illegal US citizens and licensed travelers from the states acting as agents in Clinton's former program of ‘People-to-People Ties,’ such as

this baseball team funded, in part, by the Hooters Restaurant chain:

In cardboard boxes, we'd packed the new uniforms, eight sets of catcher's gear, three hundred baseballs, seventy-five pairs of spikes, two dozen aluminum bats, a mess of fielder's gloves and batting gloves, six cartons of new hats, a crate of Hooters calendars, dozens of hooters t-shirts and caps – plus a hundred orders of chicken wings with blue cheese and two dozen orders of Buffalo shrimp with hot sauce on the side. And curly fries.

One of the team members gets it just about right:

This is a metaphor for free enterprise and the entire American system...Wholesale capitalism, gross excess, and exploitation of the masses. The calendars alone could cause fighting in the streets. We're not just starting a baseball league, we're ideological-plague carriers. We may be the final nail in the coffin of Communism...³⁰

It remains to be seen if Cuba's *pharmakon*, tourism, will become a substantial substitution for sugar cane. Perhaps the ancient locomotives which still haul the harvest will be assigned a more lucrative task, hauling nostalgic visitors through Cuba's history of exploitation. Perhaps there will be ‘living history’



Fig. 6. "In each neighborhood, Revolution" Havana, May 2001-photo: Steve Klocke.

museums installed in the fields and mills with former engineers and teachers cutting and grinding and boiling—giving the tourist what they had in mind before they bought their tickets. Or perhaps the fields will be sold to developers who landscape their resorts with clumps of cane, then hire the local high-school dropouts to keep the cane weeded. Perhaps, as Tania Bruguera's lamentation suggests, history will repeat itself.

NOTES

¹ Kim Levin, "Cuba Libre: Art and contradiction at the Havana Biennial" *Village Voice* December 20-26, 2000, <http://www.villagevoice.com/issues/0051/levin.php>.

² The Biennial de la Habana was inaugurated in 1984 as a forum for artists outside the Western culture industry. The theme of the 7th Biennial was "Closer to the Other".

³ Nico Israel, "VII Biennial de la Habana," *ArtForum International*, February 2001 v. 39 i6 p147.

⁴ Kim Levin, "Cuba Libre."

⁵ I borrowed this term from Gayatri Spivak who borrowed it from Derrida. She uses it in the statement, "Capitalism is thus the *pharmakon* of Marxism," in her book, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), pg. 83. Her footnote of Derrida reads: "For *pharmakon*, poison that is medicinal when knowingly administered, see Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Disseminations*, tr. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981), pp.61-172."

⁶ Christina Garcia, "Simple Life," in Miller, Tom ed., *Cuba: True Stories* (San Francisco: Travelers Tales, Inc., 2001), pg. 15.

⁷ For two of many published discussions of this see, Glazer, Jon and Hollander, Kurt, "Working for the Tourist Dollar," in *The Nation*, June 15, 1992 and Dunning, Thad, "Internal Bleeding," Resource Center of the Americas: http://www/americas.org/News/Features/200107_Cuba/20010701_index.asp

⁸ "Remittances" are the transfer of money from abroad legalized in the 1990s. In "Internal Bleeding," Thad Dunning writes: "To make ends meet, roughly a third of Cubans can rely on the overseas remittances. The government collects no data on the income, which has reached an estimated \$1 billion per year. But many economists speculate that remittances only worsen Cuba's inequity. Most of the money, they say, comes from the pre-revolutionary elite that fled to the United States four decades ago. These Cuban Americans, overwhelmingly white, tend to support light-skinned families in a country where most people have African ancestry."

⁹ Reported on a PBS Newshour segment July 17, 2001 by Paul Solman. Transcript of entire report at http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bl/latin_america/july-dec01/cuba_7-17.html

¹⁰ Mario Coyula, "Havana For Ever, Forever Havana," Grupo para el Desarrollo de la Capital, La Habana, Cuba August 1996. Article available online at: <http://www.louisville.edu/org/sun/sustain/articles/1999/cuba/havanaforever/index.html>

¹¹ Mario Coyula, "Havana For Ever, Forever Havana."

¹² Mario Coyula, "Havana For Ever, Forever Havana."

¹³ Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1999) pg. 84.

¹⁴ Interview with Eneide Ponce de Leon, Grupo para el Desarrollo de la Capital, Havana, May 2001

¹⁵ Interview with representatives from The Ministry of Agriculture, Havana, May 2001.

¹⁶ Mario Coyula, "Havana For Ever, Forever Havana."

¹⁷ Interview with Encide Ponce de Leon, GDIC, Havana, Cuba, May 2001.

¹⁸ See, for example, Zunes, Stephen, "Cuba's New Revolution," *Designerbuilder*, August 2000, pp. 5-8.

¹⁹ Interview with representatives from The Ministry of Agriculture, Havana, May 2001.

²⁰ Interview with Egidio Paez, President ACTAF, Havana, Cuba, May 2001.

²¹ James Suckling, "Eating Well in Cuba," *Cigar Aficionado*, June 2001, pg. 92.

²² Newshour, PBS

²³ Marian Burros, "Havana's Not For Eating, but Eating Can Be Fun," *New York Times*, August 5, 2001.

²⁴ James Suckling, "Eating Well in Cuba," *Cigar Aficionado*, June 2001, pg. 92.

²⁵ Marian Burros, "Havana's Not For Eating, but Eating Can Be Fun," *New York Times*, August 5, 2001.

²⁶ James Suckling, "Eating Well in Cuba," *Cigar Aficionado*, June 2001, pg. 92.

²⁷ Garcia, Christina, "Simple Life," in Miller, Tom, *Cuba: True Stories* (San Francisco: Travelers Tales, Inc. 2001), pg. 15

²⁸ Mario Coyula, "Havana For Ever, Forever Havana."

²⁹ Mario Coyula, "Havana For Ever, Forever Havana."

³⁰ Randy Wayne White, "Viva Los Diplomats," in Miller, Tom, *Cuba: True Stories* (San Francisco: Travelers Tales, 2001), pg. 83.