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FIGHTING AGAINST HISTORY, NATURE AND POLITICS: SMALL-SCALE
FARMERS, AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION AND SELF-SUSTAINABILITY ON
ST. CROIX, U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS.

By

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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My dissertation examines how small-scale farmers on St. Croix U.S. Virgin Islands are politically asserting their citizenship in new ways to alleviate their financial circumstances following the 2008 economic recession. Through neoliberal self-refashioning, these agricultural entrepreneurs, centralize the importance of local produce and utilize tourism as a vehicle to promote both themselves and agriculture as vital to the financial future of the island. In seeking ways to increase their self-autonomy and advocate for greater support of the agricultural industry, farmers engage in political action to challenge government authority and as a result, call into question existing concepts sovereignty and political determination. My work adds to the recently burgeoning research on agricultural renaissances and local food movements in the Caribbean; add ethnographic insight to the literature on stimulating local domestic agriculture in the Caribbean that currently tends to focus on production rather than on the producers; and contribute to the scholarship on neoliberal entrepreneurial self-making.

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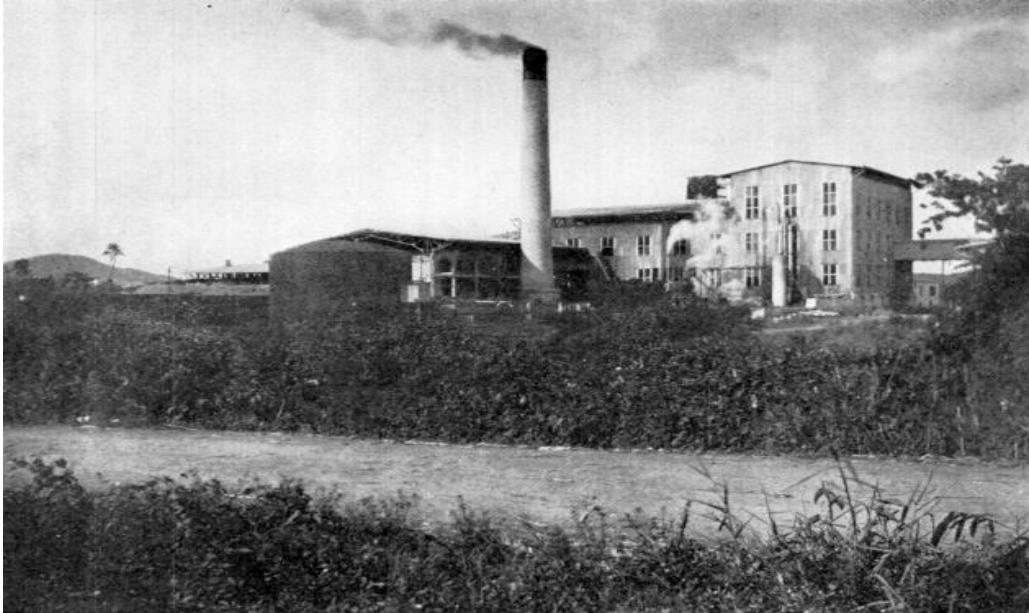
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Bethlehem Sugar Factory on St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands: The last to be closed in 1966, ushering in the end of sugar cultivation on the island. (Digital Library of the Caribbean at <https://ufdc.ufl.edu>)

Chapter 1

Looking for Culture in a Revitalized Agricultural Movement or “Food will show the way!”

“Food will show you the way,” Tara shouts enthusiastically over the roar of the blender as it continuously churns out the rather popular guava and passion fruit smoothies. This is her retort to my questions on how best to understand the current agricultural revitalization that is occurring on St. Croix. Food, not necessarily the farming, would guide me to an answer. I should have expected this response from her – a lawyer by profession but a cook and food blogger by passion. Although she says she has come straight from her office to meet me for lunch at a local bistro, I would not have guessed that. Her dreadlocks are casually pulled back away from her face, and she wears a bright pink sleeveless sundress with large beaded gold dangling earrings. Then again this is St. Croix and the formalities of island life tend to differ. Summer business casual at a local government law office might very well be a brightly colored sundress. “We are the change we have been waiting for.” She heartily laughs, “Just follow the food.” My conversation with Tara would prove a reminder to be attentive to viewing things on St. Croix in their own context. – [Excerpt from my field notes, July 2015]

St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands is a small Caribbean island, geologically volcanic and coral reef-based. It is roughly 84 square miles – twenty-two miles long and seven miles wide. It is the largest of the United States Virgin Islands and for most of its modern history it was involved in mono-crop cultivation for export. Agricultural production was mostly in sugar although cotton and tobacco were also grown. Under Danish rule, St. Croix enjoyed significant wealth from sugar, molasses, rum and slave trade.¹ Most of its land mass was dedicated to production for export. Like many other Caribbean islands, St. Croix was divided among plantation estates. Place names still reflect the historical divisions, but beginning after 1966, cane fields were largely replaced by commercialized

¹ In the 1700s, the Danes had an agreement with the Dutch based Brandenburg African American Company (BAAC) to import and sell slaves from West Africa. – Eltis, D. and D. Richardson. 2008. Extending the Frontiers: Essays on the New Transatlantic Slave Trade Database. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.

spaces, densely populated residences or overgrown idle land. Today less than five percent of St. Croix's land mass is engaged in agriculture.

This is how I remembered the island where I grew up. Driving down Centerline Road, (the main thoroughfare that runs through the center of the island), one passed by private houses, supermarkets and strip malls, public housing subdivisions then large spans of green overgrown, seemingly abandoned land. The terrain slowly began to change after 2008. When I returned to begin fieldwork in summer 2014, these overgrown areas were now fields lined with irrigation and planted in rows of vegetables or cleared acres, with a grazing horse or two, awaiting cultivation. Along the road and right outside of some of these areas stood small farm stands. Some bore the name of a farm and hours when produce would be sold. Driving just off Centerline Road towards the now former Hovensa Oil Refinery, were small goat and pig farms. Occasionally in the midst of areas of uncleared brush, beehives made from recycled and weathered wood could be seen.

I was accustomed to small farmers toiling on their plots or home gardens then selling at roadside stands, at the farmers markets on the weekends, or showcasing produce and livestock at the annual fair. Such had been their place in Crucian² society. Farmers I encountered in the context of my fieldwork were suddenly engaged in cooperative and community relationships beyond their small plots of land. I found at least two farmers had engaged their operations into providing produce for monthly subscriptions in community supported agriculture programs. Some worked in collaboration with others to diversify their produce offerings with artisans, selling honey, mead or goat cheese that were all local-sourced. Others were working with community advocates and educators to create gardens at local public schools and partnering to

² Meaning: Of St. Croix; a local inhabitant of St. Croix; or the English-based patois spoken on St. Croix.

provide farm-to-school lunch programs. Still, others were engaged in tourism activities showcasing local produce and Crucian cuisine, acting as self-appointed purveyors of culture and tradition. Nonetheless, more important than the shift in their activities was the transformation of the farmers themselves and their role in the community. From marginal agricultural workers at the mercy of nature or the local Department of Agriculture that provided resources from seedlings to water itself, current farmers appeared as astute business operators suddenly central to a reawakening economy following the crippling effects of economic recession, job stagnation and increasing crime.

I had originally set off to interview farmers in order to gain insight into how Crucians were crafting territorial arguments of belonging within efforts to re-engage with the land. I assumed the revitalization in agriculture I had observed was part of a concerted effort through which some were laying claims to citizenship. While small-scale farming had always been practiced, even during large-scale sugar production, it had always been marginalized. Its marginalization continued even in the absence of sugar, when priority was then given to manufacturing, oil refining and tourism. Further, during preliminary fieldwork, I had observed that an increased dissatisfaction with government economic priorities and rising food prices had resulted in the growth of cooperative relationships among formerly disparate farmers and others involved in the food industry, like distributors, restaurateurs and supermarkets following the U.S. economic recession of 2008. Myopically, however, what stood out to me primarily was that these efforts involved both *native* Crucians and ‘immigrants’ working in tandem and in support of each other. Immigrants, or more pejoratively ‘down-islanders’, referred to labor migrants

from former British colonies like St. Kitts, Antigua, Nevis, and St. Lucia. The historical rift that existed between the two groups had been an ongoing tension since before emancipation as the islands always suffered a lack of adequate labor especially in agriculture. Barbadians were heavily recruited for their skills to work on plantations in post-emancipation (Dookhan, 1974). Further, for decades since the 1930s, agricultural workers from Puerto Rico had been migrating to St. Croix, seeking work due to the decline of sugar there and then following the U.S. military's occupation of Vieques. Tensions were exacerbated in the 1960s and 1970s following a boom in tourism and other heavy industry like manufacturing and oil refining that created a demand for labor that could not be readily filled by the existing Virgin Islands population. The tension has been described as perhaps the largest impediment to each subsequent attempt by the government to ratify a Virgin Islands constitution; from the first attempt in 1964, to the fifth and most recent attempt, which officially failed to be ratified in 2012. It failed due to a lack of clarity on who was eligible to vote on its ratification and because the definition of native contained in the document imparted legal advantages to one group while infringing on the civil rights of others³. Having always struggled with its population's cultural diversity, historical marginalization of former labor migrants and government attempts to legally define a native category, I wondered, are Crucians now investing labor in the land as part of deliberate claims to belong?

³During the first four attempts at drafting a Virgin Islands constitution (1964, 1971, 1977, 1980), a *Native Virgin Islander* was defined as: Any person born in the Virgin Islands prior to 1927; any person who is an offspring of a parent or parents born in the Virgin Islands prior to 1927 or any person born outside of the Virgin Islands to Native Virgin Islands parent(s) while that parent(s) was studying abroad, employed abroad, or on active military service. While the definition shifted overtime to be more inclusive of the islands' diverse population it continued to impart preferential treatment to those who could show ties to the Danish period..

What I had naively expected to encounter on St. Croix among the local farmers, was something akin to Lillian Guerra's poignant work about the *Jibaro*⁴ and Puerto Rican national identity. That these farmers "negotiated, contested and struggled to transform discursive notions of national identity in the search for a common, if multifaceted and multidimensional, sense of self" (1998:6), - through the land. However, the majority of farmers, I interviewed during fieldwork, stood clear of any discussions regarding identity or belonging. Rather, what I found were farmers engaged in direct transformation of the island's economy through deliberate promotion of themselves and agriculture. Previously marginalized alongside the agriculture industry, St. Croix farmers had, instead of making claims to belong, refashioned themselves from fringe actors to entrepreneurs determined to redirect their activities towards greater self-sufficiency in response to rising food costs, high unemployment and a perceived lack of government assistance. In short, what I was observing were farmers' attempts to economically survive and thrive.

The flexibility of neoliberal capitalism allows for a remaking of self in the search for increased sovereignty. For farmers, this means more self-reliance and less dependence on the government to make ends meet. As Samuel, a farmer in his late forties who had returned to full-time farming after having been laid off by the Hovensa Oil refinery, expressed, "When I start to farm I said no sah, I ain't owing nobody. I got to feed myself. Because when the rains come I can't do nothing and I still need to eat. I still need to feed my family. I still need to pay bills" I cyan't rely on anybody but me." Samuel reflects the sentiments of personal responsibility and self-governance that characterizes neoliberalism

⁴ Jibaro – a Puerto Rican small farmer or laborer that lived in the central mountain regions of the islands. At one time the term was used derogatively but came to be embraced as a national symbol of Puerto Rican culture and tradition.

(Rose 1999). Here the ‘rains’ indicate a stormy turbulent period where necessities are absent or hard to come by. Farmers are preparing themselves to weather the storm. In acting to improve their lives, farmers hope to reinvigorate the stagnant economy by recasting the narratives of farming, food and culture while additionally calling into question the reliance on traditional channels of support and assistance like the government.

Throughout the manuscript, I will show this by first examining the shift of farmers from marginal actors to central protagonists. As expressed through their own words, farmers are seeking greater agency and deliberately moving away from an image of themselves as dependent laborers. Rather, they are transforming themselves into self-sufficient entrepreneurs who are actively working to improve agriculture’s viability as a core vehicle for economic growth regardless of government assistance. In the current moment, through prioritization and promotion of local produce, farmers have increased demand for their products and expanded the food market beyond imported products. In doing so, they have not only rekindled a crippled economy but have recast the sentiments of farming from backward and unskilled to a valued cultural heritage seen as vital to the future of the island. Second, I will present how the role of farmers has become heightened in the community. Borrowing from the rhetoric of the U.S. local food movement, farmers are redefining locally grown produce as organic, fresh, and nutritious in contrast to imported produce and food products. Through this linkage, they are securing themselves as transmitters of health and practitioners of sustainability. Moreover, as they engage with tourism as a medium to further promote local food and farming, these become inherently ascribed as culture and tradition. As a result, farmers

become the transmitters of tradition. Finally, by questioning the many natural impediments and political obstacles to a significant agricultural industry, I demonstrate the intention of farmers to not only act in their own self-interest but to utilize their successes to push the government to acknowledge and invest in their futures.

The Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture, Farmers and Entrepreneurialism

Agricultural revitalizations or turns to bring *back* agriculture as central to the culture and economy have been a regular occurrence since the abrupt collapse of the sugar industry in the Virgin Islands in 1966.⁵ As early as 1971, with agriculture on the verge of disappearing, the local Department of Agriculture instituted the first agriculture and food fair in hopes of rekindling interest by celebrating farmers and the *fruits* of their achievements. They hoped to attract participants by also introducing information on new farming techniques and equipment. The fair seemed nostalgic for a time when agriculture was at its peak. This period, however, was during sugar cultivation under the labor of slaves. On the one hand, as a main characteristic of the island (and the Caribbean region), agriculture represents a historical cultural identity and tradition. On the other hand, it recalls a time of horrific cruelty, bondage and immense inequality. As a result, many, including farmers, viewed agriculture negatively – as a backwards and outdated occupation that people participated in as a last resort.

Yet, in former Governor Evans' penned address in the first program booklet, he stated: "Although the passing years have dimmed the importance of farming here, and the fields of cultivated sugar cane have vanished from the scene, the soil of our native land is

⁵ Sugar cultivation came to an end when Estate Bethlehem, the last working plantation and sugar mill on St. Croix, was closed in 1966.

still a precious possession. The farmers, who have remained close to the earth must be admired for their appreciation and understanding of the more basic values of life” (1971:4). Encouraged by Governor Melvin H. Evans, the first elected governor and first black, native of the islands to serve, the Department of Agriculture desired to act as a stimulus for the future of food production in the Virgin Islands, declaring that, “to preserve rural life on St. Croix should be one of our greatest objectives of this decade” (Shulterbrandt, 1972:5). At the same time, however, new and competing industries like manufacturing, oil refining and tourism, were being introduced to the islands (the latter in most of the Caribbean). The shift of resources, including the transfer of former cane fields, to these areas, sounded a death knell for agriculture. Its declining productivity moved agriculture to the margins as new industries arose. Nevertheless, each subsequent governor of the islands and commissioners of the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture (VIDOA), would continue to praise agriculture. They all similarly conveyed that its endurance was vital to the island’s culture and remained a potential path to economic autonomy.

Truthfully, surveys indicated most residents at that time and at present would also argue that agriculture should be a major component of the island’s economy; that it remained an integral part of St. Croix’s Caribbean identity and history (Rosenberg, 1966; Mills, 1984). The agriculture and food fair remains an annual three-day event held every February without fail. Contradictorily, outside of the fair, the marginalization of both farmers and the agricultural industry continued. The government has failed to officially recognize the industry in economic policy and has neglected to provide resources to adequately maintain or improve it.

Agricultural resurgences are often short-lived, dissipating quickly without actual planning or tangible resources to support and sustain agriculture afterwards. Yet this most recent turn, which began in 2008, persists. Rising demand for local products and increasing inclusion of farmers across various sectors, from tourism to education, indicate an investment in its longevity. There appears a dedicated effort by farmers and a following of supporters to restore the prominence of agriculture to St. Croix, even after more than 40 years of marginalization following the end of sugar cultivation.

Economic uncertainty can give rise to the entrepreneurial spirit. However, it is too simplistic to view the revitalization of agriculture on St. Croix, throughout the region or on the global scale as solely a result of the economic recession and its ensuing crises. Trouillot noted that “empirical global markers,” like capitalism, could sometimes blind us to the situatedness of sites (2003: 126). The “challenge is to discover the particulars hidden by this sameness” (Trouillot, 2003:126). On the entrepreneurial spirit and flexibility, Freeman saw among women in Barbados that “there was no absolute reign of flexibility disengaged from the particulars of culture” (2007:262). Women’s subjectivities as entrepreneurials were shaped by Barbadian history and culture. This suggests we need to look at phenomena in the specificities of place.

In Carla Freeman’s recent text, Entrepreneurial Selves: Neoliberal Respectability and the Making of a Caribbean Middle Class, she writes: “The process of subjectification, as I see it, is *both* individual and social, animated in realms of the imagination and through quotidian practices in private and public life. Importantly, the means by which selfhood is contemplated, crafted, and judged, are not solely *private* or *personal* matters, in the narrow sense that they are simply up to the individual or made possible by sheer

grit or "choice." Rather, new concepts of the self are vital to the broader workings -- and power -- of the political-economic and social order" (2014:3). In Freeman's text, globalization and neoliberalism have changed the Barbadian economy. With traditional models no longer viable, Freeman's subjects make sense of themselves, their labor, lives and society through an *emotional register* (2014:3, 208). She explains that central to the *entrepreneurial ethos* is an entanglement of self and labor. As capitalism seeps into every aspect of the entrepreneur's life -- "even the intimate parts" -- who she is and how she exists in the world is an embodied experience intertwined with the work she performs (2014:4-5). As the marketplace transforms, so do the workers. An independent, entrepreneurial and assertive farmer is perhaps the Crucian response to economic downturn.

Farmers on St. Croix have refashioned themselves as independent businessmen under the current resurgence to regain control over their lives. Rather than wait for government assistance, that may limit their abilities to successfully cultivate and sell crops, they act on their own accord to achieve more self-sufficiency first without expectations of assistance. Moreover, there is a deliberate effort to reclaim their reputation by shrugging off the negative perceptions that have defined them and agriculture. They are turning away from notions of farmers as backwards, uneducated and unskilled, by embracing more contemporary practices. For example, to emphasize their more modern selves, they are adapting more innovative and flexible ways of doing business, from introducing new crops to collaborating and forming cooperative relationships as well as marketing their own products. Further, they have moved from solely being in the fields to being present in politics and media through campaigning for

supportive politicians or lobbying against actions that would harm the progress and growth of the agricultural industry. Casting themselves as businessmen, (which I explore further in Chapter 3), makes them crucial to the potential economic recovery of the island through agricultural production and food tourism. This identity is indicative of farmers' desire to play a more prominent role in the economic future of the island. They are the new agents of change. Yet it is ironic that farmers, as vestiges of a Caribbean rural past, represent the key to a modern and financially productive future.

The government, however, manages the agricultural industry in the Virgin Islands (as in much of the Caribbean). Farmers are reliant on the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture (VIDOA) for land, water, equipment and markets for their goods. With no investments made to improve the industry over time, farmers must deal with a failing infrastructure that cannot adequately provide the resources they need to successfully farm. These impediments are further intensified when added to the limitations imposed on the Virgin Islands as a result of their political status as unincorporated territories of the United States. Mainly, that US agricultural trade restrictions do not allow farmers to export their produce outside of the territory. This severely affects the future possibility of expansion of the agricultural industry or considerations to incorporate commercial farming for export, alongside small-scale cultivation for local consumption. Nevertheless, in spite of the specific culture and history of the island, farmers have moved towards a 'responsibilization' of self (Rose, 1999). They are acting to determine their own lives under a system that has forced them to be reliant on the government. Their actions are in direct challenge to the government and the lack of support they have provided. In seeking alternative ways to increased self-autonomy, farmers are raising questions about

traditional pathways to sovereignty beyond an understanding of individual self-reliance. Rather, their actions and impact suggest that the government or the state, are no longer the sites where power or control are organized. It is people on the ground inserting and asserting their citizenship in new ways that today can affect lasting political change.

Who are these Crucian farmers? The irony of independent businessmen

While Crucian farming and farmers are framed positively in the current resurgence, there have long been stigmas associated with the industry and its participants. Farmers were viewed as the uneducated with little choice but to engage in long hours of backbreaking work for little or no pay. Historically, farmers in post-emancipation were black and uneducated. Most were Crucians, with a growing number of immigrants from the then British colonies. By 1966, after sugar cultivation had ended, there were fewer farmers on St. Croix. Many of the remaining farmers were older, cultivating on leased lands, and the majority were black and Puerto Rican with mixed levels of education ranging from having completed some middle to high school to attending a college course (Rosenberg, 1966). The exception was a very small number of cattle ranchers who were landowners, educated and mostly Crucian-born of Danish ancestry. Diseases, increasing costs, lack of facilities and equipment to test milk products, and U.S. restrictions on exportation, all but ended cattle farming. Further, the introduction of new industries, like manufacturing and tourism, during the same period, were popular (and more profitable) luring labor away from farming. In Chapter 4, I explore how farmers are currently utilizing tourism to promote and popularize local food and agriculture. It is ironic that

the tourism industry, which led to agriculture's decline, would become the means through which returns to prominence and farmers achieve greater autonomy.

Faced with a dearth of jobs following the 2008 economic recession, farming again became a popular occupational choice. However, its lack of profitability meant most people embraced what part-time employment they could find while turning to kitchen gardens and small family plots to feed their families, and supplement incomes by selling at roadside stands or weekend farmers markets. Others, who were already full-time farmers continued as they had always done – struggling to cultivate and to sell their produce.

Masai, a farmer in his late forties and my former high school classmate, has been driven to achieve success in agriculture. In an interview he provided on farming with the Facebook group, “Humans of St. Croix,” in February 2014, he stated:

“I grew up with it. It has always been my passion. My grandfather was a farmer, my father, my uncle kept up the farming tradition. It has always been in my blood. I am what you call a real Crucian/Crucian/Crucian. I ain't going nowhere, this is something I really enjoy doing and it's not even like a job to me. I would love to see farming become a viable industry here in these islands. The land is rich, very fertile and can produce a lot. My advice to young people is that it's a business where you are your own boss. It's very lucrative if they would venture into it. We got fooled into thinking that money don't grow on trees, but it actually does!”⁶

When we met in person a few months later on the farm where he worked, we discussed his passion for farming, but more so his insistence that agriculture could be more than it presently was. In my methodology section on page 26, I provide more details on my fieldwork interviews with farmers and other aspects of my data collection. While hindered by the lack of resources and government neglect, Masai still believed that growing interests in farming and innovating processes and products could strengthen

⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/V-I-Farmers-Cooperative-Inc-487463901287690/>

agriculture. Especially if people approached it as a viable business opportunity, where the farmer took charge without waiting for government led direction. Masai is a constant advocate for the industry, and took on the role of President in a prominent farmer cooperative⁷. Masai, like many other full-time farmers, remain passionate about farming. Yet they often find themselves emotionally strained as they grapple with work they love but deal with the frustrations that arise from the constraints of the industry. This means that as they struggle to be free to produce, the very means of production are not reliably available to them.

For instance, the majority of these farmers do not own their own land but lease government lands. Deterred by the high cost of land, most farmers lease former sugar plantation land from the government. This has been the practice since the end of sugar cultivation in the territory but also for most of the Caribbean as agriculture was a colonial undertaking and later a state-run industry. Further, under the continuing structure of VIDOA, farmers are dependent on the government for equipment, markets for their produce and livestock, even access to water, which is already problematic on a small island with limited sources of natural water, high erosion and susceptibility to drought. Finally, new and young farmers are few.

Dean, a prominent and outspoken farmer in his late fifties who had been farming on St. Croix for almost twenty years argued:

“The industry is going to disappear. The industry will just disappear...because there is not enough education in our high schools...we’re not educating youth, young farmers. The farmers we have in the territory are 55 years and older. And there’s no new ones being created at this time.”

⁷ Established in 1998, the VI Farmers’ Cooperative did not really get off the ground until 2005. It disbanded in early 2014 over claims of corruption and missing USDA grant funds.

When not working in his fields, however, Dean was also a constant agitator, pushing VIDOA to do more for the farmer and admonishing the governor for not providing the agency with an adequate budget. “The total reliance has been on the government to promote and develop the industry. Their role has been minimal...they don’t see farming as being a vehicle...for economic development. But we’re determined to change that!”

Crucian farmers centrally engaged in the resurgence, like Masai and Dean, are the same farmers who have been engaged with small-scale agriculture for over 15 years or more.⁸ They include several who have returned to farming full-time since losing other employment or have returned to the island after living for a number of years in the U.S., employed in other industries. New farmers includes at least three full-time farmers who relocated to St. Croix from Georgia, Illinois and Maine, the latter additionally works for the Cooperative Extension Services at the University of the Virgin Islands part-time. The average age among these farmers is still around 55 years. Many are still non-college educated but increasingly more have college degrees and technical training from U.S. trade schools. Despite the heterogeneity among these farmers, there is a shared mutual respect and broad-based support for each other. Present farmers are also more willing to take part in workshops or training sessions held at the University of the Virgin Islands geared towards educating farmers on pesticides, new techniques, and the like.

Henry, originally from Nevis and in his late sixties, noted, “The university really helps because they give you insight into what kind of pesticide to use especially if you

⁸ Since the decline of sugar, full-time farming has seldom provided long-term economic stability unless a farmer was additionally engaged in rearing cattle. This is a rarity since the majority of farmer lease small acreages of government land unsuitable for cattle raising.

want to get close to sustainable agriculture. But the department (VIDOA) is a killer. I don't even take on the stress anymore if I don't have to." Unsurprisingly, full and part-time, farmers are motivated by the ability to provide food – fresh, local, healthy -- for their families in an environment wrought with instability.

Today government jobs are few and private sector employment is largely unavailable. Moreover, the U.S Virgin Islands' government has focused mainly on courting external economic investors as the solution to bring jobs back to the islands rather than focusing on internal investments. A common sentiment is that the US presence in the islands since 1917, has created an overwhelming sense of dependency among its territories (Boyer, 2010; Dookhan, 1974; Statham, 2003). Statham has noted that this outward reliance for support is part of the U.S. colonial structure (2003:6). Dependency is par for the course where guaranteed 'handouts' are preferable than attempting to help themselves.

Yet, many farmers are now investing their hard labor to forge a path for themselves seemingly as self-employed businessmen by engaging themselves in broader relationships than just the cultivation of their plots for quick sales at farmers markets. Crucian farmers are redefining themselves in light of the economic instability of the market and the lack of viable alternatives for jobs as independent farmers forging their own successes despite a dependent relationship with the government. On the one hand, it is a stark contradiction. On the other, it implies a new assertiveness that serves as a challenge to the status quo. Given this illogicality, how can a farmer on St. Croix consider himself or herself self-sufficient? Why is farming embraced as the path to self-

sufficiency on a small Caribbean island where one is without capital, resources and opportunity?

Literature Review

My dissertation examines how Crucian farmers, rather than the Virgin Islands' government, have been politically able to assert their citizenship in new ways to not only improve their financial circumstances, but also invigorate the islands' economy while also achieving increased self-autonomy within the existing constraints of the islands overarching political status as unincorporated territories of the United States. This manuscript contributes to the scholarship on neoliberal entrepreneurial self-making in the context of the Caribbean and the propensity in the region for reinvention as a mechanism of survival (Comitas 1964; Carnegie 1987; Freeman 2007, 2014; Prentice 2012; Robotham; Ulysse 2007) through the unique lens of a local Caribbean food movement. It will provide ethnographic insight to the literature on tourism and food culture, including food as heritage and identity (Belisle 1983, 1984; Garth 2013, Houston 2005; Sawyer 2013; Scher 2011; Wilk 1999); stimulating local domestic agriculture in a region dependent on imports but with a focus on producers rather than on food production itself (Conway and Timms 2010; Timms 2006, 2008). My research adds to the recently burgeoning research on agricultural renaissances and local food movements in the Caribbean (Holt-Gimenez 2006, 2013; Weis 2007), while also increasing the recent works on the region's non-sovereign territories and the political tensions they experience as they seek increased autonomy separate from notions of independence (Bonilla 2015; Clegg & Pantojas-Garcia 2009; Lewis 2013; Thomas 2004, 2013). Driven by the need to

economically survive the ongoing effects of the 2008 recession, Crucian farmers assert and insert themselves politically to become more self-sufficient calling into question the traditional role and power of the government. This dissertation offers additional ethnographic evidence to increasing scholarly demands to challenge Westphalian notions of sovereignty and rethink traditional concepts of power.

Anthropological scholarship has emphasized the prevalence of flexible economic activities in the Caribbean as people adapt to capital constraints and managing lives characterized by uncertainty. Economic flexibility or the opportunistic exploitation of situations is seen as part of the creative agency of the Caribbean people (Mintz and Price, 1992) exemplified in marronage or the economic enterprises that arose out of slave gardens and provision grounds (Mintz, 1989; Mintz and Price, 1992; Trouillot, 1992). This ingenuity continues. Comitas' (1964) early work in rural Jamaica identified certain adults as a new socio-economic type handling underemployment by engagement in a variety of gainful activities to generate full incomes. While Carnegie's (1987) work explored the psychological mindset of Caribbean people which entailed applying a 'strategic flexibility' approach to managing their personal lives. Identities and aspects of self were open to reinvention to cope with changing circumstances. More recent works drawing from the tensions of reputation (Caribbean self) and respectability (colonization) first identified in Wilson's (1969) ethnology and coupled with neoliberalism's flexibility illustrates the re-articulation of selfhood or performance of personhood to adapt or challenge economic crisis as exemplified in Freeman's (2007; 2014) work in Barbados or Prentice's (2008, 2012) on Trinidadian garment workers and their cunning skill acquisition to deal with a fragmented and unstable economy. See also Ulysse's on self-

making among Jamaican women involved in importing goods for sale in local markets (2007).

Scholarship on Caribbean agriculture has focused on the role of the peasant farmer and the struggle to maintain a livelihood even as domestic agricultural industries disappear or are neglected as reliance on food imports increase (Weis, 2007). The peasant farmer also appears as an enduring figure in the Caribbean imaginary as representative of the regions' enduring agricultural heritage, at once celebrated but also derided. Crucian farmers in the context of my dissertation grapple with celebrating what they see as their enduring contributions to culture by farming and role in preserving their heritage while also combatting the negative stereotypes of agriculture as 'backwardness' or its association with slavery. Kincaid has famously made mention of the tenuous relationship that Caribbean people, Antiguan in particular, are caught up in when we point to agriculture and farming noting that, "It seems clear to me, then, that a group of people who have had such a horrible historical association with growing things would try to make any relationship to (agriculture) dignified and useful" (1990:140). However, while tainted it has been a necessary aspect of the region's economic survival and sustainability. It is not detachable from the regions' identity but it is stigmatized and adversely contrasted to the newer and more profitable industries like manufacturing, tourism and recently offshore financial opportunities that have flooded the Caribbean (Mills, 1984; Navarro, 2010). Glissant (1989) speaks to the notion of dispossession not only economically from the means of their production or from the product of their labor from slavery to present; but dispossession moreover from the land itself – a rupture

between Caribbean people and the physical landscape with whom historically they have largely had an antagonistic relationship.

There is of course large anthropological scholarship on food from Mintz's (1985), seminal work, Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History, on the global consumption of sugar, history and the interwoven, oft complicated, processes of the commodity in the present; to food and eating as culture itself (Bell 1997; Mintz 1985; Mintz and Du Bois 2002; Phillips 2006). As Mintz and Dubois note in their review of the literature, "the anthropological study of food today has matured enough to serve as a vehicle for examining large and varied problems of theory and research methods (2002:100). Yet there is the nostalgic memory of food that appears to supplant the negativity of the plantation by emphasizing the provision ground as a place of resistance, agency, independence and cultural continuity. The provision ground as seen in the literature of Sylvia Winter (1971) or Erna Brodber (2007) also figures as the place of rooted African culture in the Caribbean soil (see also DeLoughrey 2011a, 2011b). Wynter focuses on the yam, foundational to diets, but also as symbolic of rootedness and culture – rooting African culture in the New World - where as Brathwaite (1977) views them as African transplantation. Food can additionally be representative of protection and healing. Benoit (2000) regards the kitchen garden as a space that nurtures an intimate relationship with the environment but also serves as a protective barrier and containment. For Loichot (2004, 2007, 2013), food captures the past and can provide healing. Through consumption and production one identifies and forms ties to a communal history. Further, an examination of food and eating can open pathways to understanding nostalgia and

memory (Sutton, 2001) or class identity (Roseberry, 1996), national identity (Garth, 2013; Cuadra, 2013; Pilcher, 1998) or even racial identity (Richard-Greaves, 2012).

Relatedly, tourism and food covers a wide breadth from the experiencing of culture and understanding of place through local consumption (Bélisle 1984; Houston 2005; Momsen 1998); to complicity in social or dietary change as tourists bring notions of a place and locals try to meet their expectations (Wilk, 1999; Sawyer, 2013). As the Caribbean continues to struggle with declining economies and increasing reliance on imported food, more research focuses on creating linkages between tourism and agricultural production. These studies have been ongoing for decades and have focused on building relationships with hotels and increasing their purchase of domestic products (Andreatta, 1998; Bélisle, 1983; Timms, 2006); to build the local economy as well as turning to alternate forms of tourism like eco-tourism, heritage tourism and food tours (Bélisle, 1983, 1984; Conway & Timms 2010; Duval 2004; Lorah, 1995; Lundgren, 1973; Momsen, 1972; 1986; Patullo, 2005; Scher 2011; Weaver 2001, 2006; Wilks 1999); and redirect food supply chains and demands towards reduce dependency (Klak, et al., 2011; Weis, 2004; Wiley, 1998). Many scholars have additionally researched the decline of agriculture in the face of tourism and other industrialization at the precipice of sugar's decline in the Caribbean (Beckford, 1975; Bourne and Weir, 1980; Hope, 1981; Momsen, 2000; Wiley, 2000); its effect on labor, food demands and consumption patterns (Bryden, 1973, 1974; Daubon and Robinson, 1975; Safa, 1995); and agriculture as a whole, following more recent fair trade agreements and their impact on the region (Barker, 2012; Moberg, 2009, 2014). Beyond fair trade, however, is looking at tourism linkages specifically in light of neoliberalism. Timms (2006, 2008) has suggested studying

linkages as relationships and focusing on farmers rather than hotels to resolve issues of production and distribution. The intent is to transform the domestic agriculture sector so that it is first beneficial to those most negatively impacted by starting at the micro-level of linkages. However, the solution should not be to just stimulate local agriculture to meet tourism demands but a full transformation of it in also meeting the needs of the local population (Timms, 2008).

In turning towards issues of non-sovereign small Caribbean states and their continuing political contradictions, much has been written over the last fifteen years about these persisting colonies, their lack of movement towards independence and the tensions and discomforts that have arisen over their political statuses (Adler-Niessen & Gad, 2013; Aldrich & Connell, 1998; Baldacchino & Milne, 2009; Bonilla, 2013, 2015; Clegg & Killingray, 2012; Clegg & Pantojas-Garcia, 2009; Corbin, 2001, 2012; De Jong & Kruijtit, 2005; Lewis, 2013; Oostindie & Klinkers, 2003; Ramos & Rivera, 2001; Veenendaal, 2015, 2016). However in questioning what is viewed as failed sovereignty in the region due to independent states like Jamaica or Barbados still subject to larger Western powers and global capitalism, there is little, if no avenue available for smaller states to redefine their political statuses (Griffith, 2011; Lewis, 2013). Rather a rethinking of the concept of sovereignty, particular in the case of the Caribbean is tantamount. Sovereignty as it is currently defined and applied cannot accurately capture how the region has politically evolved (Bonilla, 2013, 2015; Torres-Saillant, 2013). Rightly, Bonilla (2015) argues that when these non-sovereign countries choose options outside of the traditional political options they force us to rethink the concept of sovereignty itself and open up new possibilities in the current period. Sovereignty must instead be located

in the people rather than in governments and states as modern revolution and change will not come in large-scale movements but in smaller assertions and agitations to bring political change (Bonilla 2013, 2015; Thomas 2004, 2015). My research contributes to this growing body of literature as I investigate how farmers come to political action to ensure their economic survival by asserting their independence despite a historical reliance on state resources. In doing so, they are able to successfully attain increased self-sufficiency, challenging the authority of the government and calling into question existing concepts of power and control. Further, little attention has been paid to the U.S. Virgin Islands as an active society grappling with its political status. Perhaps due to their size or lack of a national identity (Ramos & Rivera 2001), the Virgin Islands have been seen as willfully dependent. The actions of farmers as illustrated in this manuscript, contradicts this notion.

Methods and Epistemology: food, farming and everyday life

It is difficult to say whether the 2008 economic recession was the catalyst that pushed farmers back into a full-time farming or towards a focus on sustainability practices, health and food insecurities. The recession did, however, create a crisis with a surge in unemployment and crime. Catalyst or not, there is a way in which a crisis creates something different. It often challenges the status quo and inspires changes to everyday practices and meanings. In many ways it can make practices more significant, increase their importance and bring them to the forefront as part of a movement, a demonstration or some supported action. As Tara, lawyer and passionate food blogger, noted during our lunch conversation, “*We are the change.*” She meant that farmers and the community

networks they have formed are the forces shaping the current resurgence in agriculture and behind the shifting recognition of local produce and food culture on the island.

My fieldwork was undertaken over a non-consecutive seven-month period during July 2014 through August 2015 with additional 4 weeks of follow-up interviews in September 2015 and December 2015. Having been born and raised on St. Croix, I was familiar with farming on the island, weekly roadside stands and Saturday farmers markets. My family attended the annual agriculture and food fair every February where on occasion my mother sold crocheted crafts. I used this to my advantage by contacting a former high school classmate who was also a farmer to provide introductions and set up initial interviews on my behalf. I also made contact with farmers via social media to arrange visits to their farms. I joined social media sites, blogs or signed up for newsletters from organizations involved in agriculture like the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture (VIDA), the Cooperative Extension Service and Agricultural Experiment Station of the University of the Virgin Islands (UVI) to remain informed of community agricultural events and anything else that was happening in agriculture. Additionally, I subscribed to a monthly vacation guides geared towards visitors to be able to attend food culture and culinary events and grassroots movement that farmers were partnered with like the Virgin Islands Coalition for Good Food which works to create school gardens and a farm to school lunch program⁹.

⁹ I used social media to help me in navigating the wider web of relationships on St. Croix to get a picture of what was happening with farming and food prior to beginning fieldwork. It helped in my initial outreach to some farmers to schedule interviews before I arrived. However, I engaged an informant to make in-person introductions to arrange the majority of my interviews and added on others through recommendation of farmers as I met with them. Social media supplemented traditional ethnographic research methods but never replaced it. It became more important as I realized that farmers used social media platforms to criticize the government, raise concerns about VIDO, and arrange gatherings or political actions.

At the outset, I was only able to schedule one interview a day with a farmer since I could not predict how much time it required. Meeting with a farmer often meant a two-hour conversation as they worked a section of their field or operated their farm stand, followed by a tour of their farm. In most cases this was 2 ½ - 7 acres, but sometimes it was 10 or more acres. While not all acreage would be under production at the same time, I found farmers often wanted to physically illustrate what they planned to do or hoped to do with the idle acres once the others were harvested then left to rest. Only one farm occupied 100 acres. However, only 20 acres were under cultivation, with about half of that used for livestock grazing. Some farmers, additionally, had plots under cultivation in multiple locations on the island. If they had agreed to speak with me about their farming then it was important for me to be able to see all parts of their effort. These visits entailed following behind a farmer in my rental car from one location to another, picking up our conversation from where we previously left off. On one occasion, after an interview and tour, I accompanied a farmer as he delivered his 100lbs of cucumbers to one of the local supermarkets. He insisted that I observe the transaction to understand what farmers dealt with in finding ways to sell their produce without the assistance or guidance from government offices overseeing agriculture.

Almost every farmer I was introduced to, or approached to request an interview, made time to meet with me. Each often had suggestions of whom I should speak with next, either offering to make introductions or giving detailed directions of where the next farmer was to be found. With unreliable GPS available on the island, detailed directions were important. Farmers were open and honest in their discussion. While happy to answer my prepared questions, most just wanted to talk about their work, the difficulties

they faced and their hopes – not necessarily for themselves, but mostly for agriculture on St. Croix. So while my interviews started off based on structured questions, it eventually always unraveled to whatever my interviewees were most interested in expressing. My research was the richer for it, as they were open, honest and direct. They gave me permission to record their interviews asking only that if they referred negatively to someone by name that I would ignore it. They trusted me, and all waived aside consent forms as an unnecessary formality. We talked while they worked and as the majority worked without the assistance of others (volunteered or hired labor), I was happy to help move equipment, hold down irrigation lines or weed tarp while a farmer fixed it into place, refill animal water troughs, etc.

I was only asked once, not to record an interview. It was the only uncomfortable interview I conducted, filled with vitriolic disdain for the local agricultural officials and many of the other farmers on their willful ignorance, lack of business sense and the certain failure of any sustainable future in farming. Many other farmers voiced complaints or indicated dissatisfaction with the state of agriculture but always respectfully. This particular farmer and I met again under better circumstances, this time with a recorded interview. Armed with a recording or not, I would always set aside time after every interview to write extensive notes describing my observations of surroundings, the crops planted, details regarding the farmer, farm size, etc. I additionally attended farmers markets and cultural events like the Annual Agricultural Food Fair and

Mango Mele.¹⁰ I used these opportunities to make additional contacts but also as chances to observe and learn more about food and culture on St. Croix beyond just farming.

While my list of interviewees had grown as a result of referrals and social media, my observations at the events made clear that there were many more aspects to agriculture than I had originally understood. Most significant were my visits to the farmers markets and the assumptions I had made in my definition of a farmer. I thought of Caribbean farmers in the manner of Netting's smallholders, as "rural cultivators practicing intensive, permanent, diversified agriculture on relatively small farms in areas of dense population" (1993:2). On average, farm acreage ranged from 2 ½ to 7 acres so the farmers I had interviewed fit this definition. Many that self-defined as farmers at the farmers markets, however, did not. The majority grew vegetables, herbs and 'ground provisions',¹¹ in their home gardens to primarily feed their families, selling any surplus at the farmers markets for extra money. Others, growing and selling similar items, did not consider themselves farmers because it was done part-time in what they referred to as their 'back gardens'. At least two people I interviewed at the farmers market, admitted the majority of their produce on sale was brought in from other islands, which they sold for extra income.

The markets and the cultural events I attended, made clear that the agricultural resurgence and prevalence of culture and local foods, while central and largely due to the efforts of the farmers themselves, extended beyond just the farms and farmers.

Restaurant chefs and buyers, who had traditionally relied on supermarkets and specialty

¹⁰ Mango Mele is a summer fruit festival, which in addition to tasting the wide variety of mangoes grown on St. Croix, includes family activities, educational workshops on nutrition and farming, food and craft vendors and live local music and traditional quadrille dancing.

¹¹ Starchy root vegetables and tubers like sweet potatoes, yams, and cassava are referred to as ground provisions in the Caribbean.

stores, were now frequent buyers at the farmers markets and farm stands. Promotion of local honey, mead wine and organic body products were making their way onto supermarket shelves when they had previously been restricted to farmers markets. My observations needed to be resituated in the correct social context. On the one hand, my unit of analysis needed to be expanded beyond just farmers but juxtaposed against the larger global processes around food to understand what was happening on St. Croix.

I sought Tara's help as means of getting a better 'lay of the land' to understand all the pieces involved and people, beyond farmers, engaged in this local food movement. She had a vast network and connections among the local and transplanted populations. As a well-known lawyer on the island, but more so a popular cook who loves to entertain and a food blogger, Tara has forged connections across many different groups on the island. There are the farms where she shops for local produce, the food stands she frequents and writes about, or the food events she judges. Moreover, one would think finding farmers on a small island is an easy task. A few farmers tended to isolate themselves, especially from government officials. This is easier to do by those farming on privately owned land. There are no enforced requirements that farmers must register or hold permits. A few, on leased government lands, tried to interact as little as they possibly could with the VI Department of Agriculture (VIDOA), noting that it was sometimes easier than the frustrations of working with them.

I had visited several offices early on in an attempt to acquire official data on the number of farmers on the island and total acreages under cultivation. The last official U.S. agricultural census had been done in 2007 and agricultural data was not available in the annual reports released by the Virgin Islands Council on Economic Development,

which highlighted information from all other industries in the Virgin Islands. Both the V.I. Department of Agriculture (VIDOA) and the local USDA offices should have had information on farmers leasing government lands, those registered to receive disaster relief or tax exemptions, or signed up for soil testing, etc. The University's Cooperative Extension Service and Agricultural Experiment Station would also have information on those who signed up for educational or training programs. However, there was sometimes overlap but no correlation in the data. "[Our] numbers don't match. I've been trying to get them to for 20 years. Farmers won't share information and at the same time farmers don't trust us," reported a long-term USDA employee. She was slumped tiredly in an office chair as we sat in conversation with an administrative assistant at the VIDOA offices.

Some farmers indicated a level of distrust towards the organization noting them as being "unhelpful". Most complained that they were forced to use their services but in the end they were more of a hindrance than actual help. Hal, a farmer who had moved to St. Croix from the U.S. mid-west in 2011, suggested that it was best to keep your distance if you had trouble cultivating your entire leased acreages or even if you deliberately attempted to cultivated portions at a time. There was a chance, despite an active lease agreement, that you could lose acreage because it was not being planted. Henry, a farmer in his sixties who did not have additional help to keep his 2 ½ acres fully cultivated, confirmed Hal's warnings. "They tell you your land is unproductive. Therefore you don't really need it. And just so they take it back."

Nevertheless, those at the organizations expressed an honest desire to support farmers but felt that often their own hands were tied by insufficient budgets, lack of

access to U.S. based grant programs that could aid farmers, and the absence of trust. Designated as high-risk, the Virgin Islands were not eligible for many of the grant programs available through USDA until recently. Without an official agriculture census, the only official data from VIDOA during the period of my fieldwork identified 145 farmers who leased government land for small crop cultivation, livestock, bees or mixed use. I interviewed 60 “farmers”: 40 on leased government farm doing crop cultivation or a mix of crops and small livestock; 6 farming on privately owned land; and 14 most of who identified as farmers growing small fruits and vegetable in kitchen or backyard gardens and selling at roadside stands or farmers markets. On average, farmers occupied 2 ½ to 7 acres. A few had up to 11 acres. Only one held 100 acres with 20 acres in use for crop cultivation and small livestock.

Chapter overview

The next chapter, Chapter 2, provides a brief history of agriculture in the U.S. Virgin Islands and the specific case of St. Croix, as the main agricultural producer of the Danish West Indies. The chapter provides an examination of the ideological framework; attitudes and values people place on agriculture and the act of farming, including how farmers see themselves, their work, and their futures on the island.

Chapter 3 looks closer at the self-fashioning of farmers as modern entrepreneurs. Utilizing theoretical works on neoliberal flexibility and personhood, I analyze my ethnographic data to understand how farmers view and position themselves in the current moment and their reasons for inserting themselves into the “economic salvation” of St. Croix. I seek to understand their increased agency through their own words.

Chapter 4 looks at farmers' increased engagement with local produce and markets. I examine how farmers strategically work to grow demand for local products by redefining them as signifiers of Crucian identity and culture. Food and its production become the cultural capital needed to secure the pathway to agriculture's salvation and the elevation of the farmer to successful entrepreneur. In the tourism industry, farmers find a vehicle to insert themselves into local economic ventures, by linking local food consumption and the "consuming" of St. Croix, as an exotic culinary destination.

Chapter 5 explores farmers organizing politically to force the government to acknowledge their integral role in the community's future. It is also an appeal to the government to recognize agriculture as a viable industry capable of producing long-term economic stability to the islands. I examine specific moments of farmers' activism and ways in which they are able to affect change and improve their circumstances. Farming becomes political action calling to question traditional concepts of sovereignty and political self-determination.

Finally, given the increase of local food and agricultural movements throughout the Caribbean in the last few years, I encourage more comparative work across the region -- in further understanding of the agricultural resurgence on St. Croix. It is particularly important to explore these recent movements across U.S. territories to ascertain commonalities, and gain a greater understanding of the American political presence.

Chapter 2
A Historical Look at Agriculture on St. Croix:
From sugar producing Danish colony to industrially modern U.S. territory

“St. Croix was called the breadbasket of the Caribbean and the garden spot of the Caribbean. This is Caribbean agricultural black history... The sad thing is that the agriculture industry of the Virgin Islands is a low priority when it comes to the economic development of these islands...

As Virgin Islanders, many of us separate ourselves from other Caribbean people simply because we are American citizens. Many of us think so highly of ourselves, we believe we are better than our Caribbean brothers and sisters. The Virgin Islands are part of the Caribbean, but we trade and exchange ideals more with the mainland than with our Caribbean neighbors. Because of ignorance, many of us do not believe that other Caribbean islands have anything to offer to us. Believe me, we are so wrong”. – Olasee Davis (Crucian ecologist, activist, writer)

Agriculture serves as a powerful defining trope of Caribbean identity. Agriculture creates a direct link to a common history of plantation economy, African slavery and sugar cane cultivation across the region (Edmondson 1999; Arnold, Rodriguez-Luis and Dash 2001; Döring 2002). Ironically, Glissant has argued that the violence of plantation societies created a rupture between these human relationships with the land (1989). Said (1994) urged us not to overlook the importance of the past or the reality of how past histories cannot be “quarantined from the present” (Said 1994:4). They both inform each other and continue to simultaneously co-exist within the landscape as well as within the psyche of the colonized (Bhabha 2004; Fanon 1963; Memmi 1991). In the present period, DeLoughrey contends that alienation from the land is compounded further by a neo-colonial market in which food is still heavily imported (2011a: 268). Local domestic agriculture continues to be marginalized by competition from other industries or as priorities are given to export agriculture albeit embattled by fair trade policies or

degraded by economic policies issued by international lenders in a large part of the region. Nevertheless, the plantation economy forms the historical and continuing legacy of modern Caribbean society (Beckford, 2001: Crichlow, 1994) and maintains agriculture as an intrinsic part of their identity.

For the U.S. Virgin Islands, I would argue that agriculture (and locally produced food), following the 2008 recession, has become one of the main motifs through which it is attempting to maintain its Caribbean cultural identity along-side its political status and often-primary public identifier, as an American territory in the Caribbean. While sun, sand and beaches still predominate in tourism promotions for the U.S. Virgin Islands as a whole, local food, farming and food-based events have increased in the specific marketing of St. Croix. This is not to suggest that food and tourism partnering is new. Rather that it has never been a focal point of the islands' marketing. The Virgin Islands have been selling themselves as "America's Caribbean" or "America's Paradise" for decades – highlighting what it has in common with other Caribbean islands (a former European colonial presence, natural beauty, sandy white beaches) but also noting the ease and safety of travel to a U.S. territory (no passports, US dollars). I will revisit Virgin Islands tourism and its linkages to the current agricultural resurgence in Chapter 3. However, present efforts are primarily focused on *selling* the island as a culinary destination with the Virgin Islands Department of Tourism enlisting a local-born chef as culinary ambassador for its promotional tours.

The aim of this chapter is to explore the history of agriculture and the values and attitudes developed around farmers and farming. By looking back at the history of agriculture on the island as a thriving sugar producing colony under Denmark to its

transformation as a resource dependent U.S. territory importing almost 99% of its food, we gain a clearer understanding of the current agricultural resurgence and the driving forces working to sustain it.

History of sugar production as a Danish colony

St. Croix enjoyed a rich history of agricultural production while St. Thomas and St. John enjoyed a combination of agriculture and commercial trading. Unlike St. Thomas and St. John, which are characteristically hilly, rising abruptly from sea level, St. Croix's landscape has greater diversity with hills along the northern coast to valleys and flat plains to the south. Four times the size of St. John and two and a half times the size of St. Thomas, St. Croix had the greatest proportion of productive soil best suited for agriculture. Denmark purchased St. Croix from France in 1734, 62 years after it had already settled St. Thomas. To counter the limited agricultural potential of St. Thomas, St. John was settled in 1718 and then St. Croix for its certainty to increase production over them both.

From 1740-1830 under Danish rule it successfully produced sugar (and cotton to a lesser extent) as well as a substantial amount of the food needed for its own consumption and export to neighboring islands. During the 18th century, almost all of St. Croix was dedicated to agricultural production. The island was divided into nine quarters and then each quarter sub-divided into a number of uniform plantations ranging on average about 120 acres each¹². Plantations were optimally configured to take advantage of the

¹² Most of the original designation of the nine quarters – East End Quarter A, East End Quarter B, The Company's Quarter, Queen's Quarter, King's Quarter, Prince's Quarter, West End Quarter, North Side Quarter A and North Side Quarter B – remain on St. Croix as names of residential neighborhoods or commercial districts. Some places are still known by the specific plantation estate's name.

80). With that growth, small sections on each plantation were additionally set aside for the growing of provisions for slaves.

By the early nineteenth century, cotton production was on a decline across the region due to competition with the southern United States. A similar waning of sugar production and plantation agriculture as a whole would soon follow due to a variety of factors: environmental and climatic consequences; inefficient agricultural methods; and, expanded sugar production in new regions as well as experimentation with beet sugar. Planters exhausted the soil without replenishing its fertility and practiced little to no terracing as a means of soil conservation in areas susceptible to erosion. Hurricanes and drought caused severe damaged to both the plantations and harbors devastating both the crops and the means to transport them. The island suffered through four severe hurricanes during the period of 1772 - 1837. Further, even after the introduction of steam-mills, there was a continued reliance on rollers powered by wind and animal power, which proved economically wasteful and inefficient. Ineptitude here, competition from expanded sugar production in Cuba, Brazil, India and other parts of the East Indies and dwindling access to the European markets now turning to sugar beets, resulted in tremendous losses for St. Croix's planters.

Ironically, as agriculture was declining, trade was expanding in the Virgin Islands thanks to the British and the United States. The British relied on St. Thomas as a mail depot and for coal refueling on its way to its Caribbean colonies. By the end of the nineteenth century, 'trade with the United States accounted for approximately one third of the Virgin Islands imports' (Dookhan 1974: 248). Nevertheless, overall economic decline made the islands a liability to Denmark and increased their desire to dispose of

them. When tangible purchase negotiations began with the United States in 1902, the islands were not enough of a worthwhile business investment to them despite interests in the harbors and naval stations. Because of the longstanding trading association with the United States and its perceived prosperity, however, many local inhabitants remained hopeful even though possibilities of a sale had been discussed as early as 1865. Dookhan (1974) and Hall (1992) in their historical accounts of the U.S. Virgin Islands, note that tokens of sentiment that would usually link a colony to the mother country were largely absent. There was no reason for locals to oppose the transfer.

Apart from a few administrative officers and army personnel, the Danish made up a very small minority of the white population in the islands. St. Thomas and St. John engaged with mostly the Dutch and British then later the United States. The Danes had more of a presence on St. Croix where the administrative seat of the colony was located. However, with very few Danish planters, most slaves' and freed black populations' interactions were with other Europeans. Further, by the early 20th century, English was the official language and circulated currency was the Spanish Alfonso and gold doubloon. Multiple languages and patois were spoken with a prominent patois founded on Dutch rather than Danish. Hall (1992) refers to Denmark as an "Empire without dominion." As it was not a ranked European power, its colonial authority was continuously compromised. It dealt with three British occupations (1801, 1807, 1815), as well as Dutch cultural hegemony particularly in St. Thomas and St. John.

It was not until unfounded rumors of German interest in the islands followed by real fears of Denmark's conquer by Germany during World War I that Denmark and the United States reached a purchase agreement in 1916.

The need for military bases at strategic points in the Caribbean was given point by the projected construction of the Panama Canal. The acquisition of the Virgin Islands became important for two reasons: to enable the United States to defend the approaches to the Panama Canal, and to prevent the islands from falling under the control of nations hostile to the United States (Dookhan 1974: 248).

Transfer of the islands would take effect the following year with formal ceremonies officially marking the event on March 31, 1917. United States citizenship was granted in 1927.

Virgin Islands society in post-emancipation – the push away from agriculture

Before U.S. governance, Virgin Islands society was struggling to transition from slavery to freedom. Emancipation had come suddenly to the islands in July 1848 as a result of protests and violence. Then Governor-General Peter von Scholten abruptly declared an end to slavery hoping to quell the eruption and restore peace. There had been no preparation made to accommodate a sudden change in status – no accounting for structure, growth of the economy or the capacity for labor with a freed population. Nevertheless, a Danish royal decree formalized emancipation in September 1848.

Slaves were free but little else had changed. They were legally required to seek regular employment or face punishment, many on the same plantations where they had been enslaved. There were mandatory yearly contracts put in place. Anyone without a contract would be forced into labor. Should a laborer fail to terminate his or her contract without timely notice, he or she was forced to continue working on the plantation for an additional year whether they wanted to or not. Plantations were subdivided after emancipation to provide housing and leased plots of land to the laborer and their family for cultivation. Wages were low, inadequate and still required backbreaking work on the

plantations for those that were not lucky enough to be able to emigrate or find jobs in trade or the service industry in the towns. Most of the now freed populations chose whatever employment alternatives they could that would keep them off the plantations. Thus began the move away from agriculture tainted by the memories of slavery, now further tarnished by low wages and poor working and living conditions.

Life for planters was also in transition. Without slave labor and continuing economic decline of sugar, planters now considered changes to their agricultural practices. Forced to pay wages, they sought to reduce their costs by adopting alternative and more efficient practices that they had refused to consider before. They engaged in laborsaving tools like animal-driven plows and more efficient manufacturing devices to reduce the number of paid employees while increasing production (Hall 1992). They invested in manure and other fertilizers; converted to steam mills; and, diversified by introducing new crops. Some turned their plantations into pastures and expanded into cattle rearing.

Despite these changes, a major impediment to their success was the continual lack of adequate labor. Even with a compulsory passport system to curtail emigration, local laborers were few and unreliable. The only viable solution was immigration. Unsuccessfully, initial foreign workers like the small number of indentured servants from India, served out their five-year contracts then returned home or headed elsewhere in the Caribbean. Laborers from the British colonies and Dutch West Indies, seeking higher wages and fairer conditions than what they experienced at 'home' also arrived, but soon left the plantations for the towns seeking non-agricultural work and better wages.

Dissatisfaction with labor regulations and work conditions that felt indistinguishable from slavery led to the largest labor revolt on St. Croix on October 1, 1878¹⁴. Known as Fireburn, women were the prominent leaders of the revolt with participation from many of the newly arrived immigrant laborers. Crowds had gathered to protest working conditions and demand higher wages, but violence broke out after a rumor that a laborer had died at the hands of the police. Unable to get at the Danish soldiers who had barricaded themselves in Fort Frederik, the crowd turned to looting and burning down the town, the jailhouse that had been used to hold runaway slaves and plantations. The island suffered extensive and irreparable damage including a numbers of fatalities over several days. Five of the nine districts were severely impacted where of 87 plantations only 37 were spared major damage (Dookhan, 1974; Jensen 1998). Twelve laborers were condemned and hung. The three known women: Mary “Queen Mary” Thomas, Mathilda MacBean and Axeline Salomon were imprisoned in Denmark. In 2004, Wayne James, a former Virgin Islands senator, found evidence in the Danish archives of a fourth woman, Susanna “Bottom Belly” Abrahamson who had also been tried and imprisoned for the labor riots along with the other women¹⁵. Fireburn is remembered and celebrated annually as a time where Crucian people rose up against their oppression. It recognizes the fortitude of women who engaged in the same backbreaking labor as men, and the poor working class. Importantly, the destruction of the jailhouse and plantations are seen as an attempt to overthrow the colonial rule (Jensen, 1998).

Afterwards, new ordinances dismissed the yearly contract stipulations but kept aspects like wages and work day hours the same. However, the disdain for agriculture

¹⁴ All work contracts had to be renewed or new ones put in place every October 1st.

¹⁵ St. Croix Source, August 4, 2004.

grew and many continued to leave the plantations for towns where they also lived under poor conditions but found it more amenable. Some supplemented work in town with one day as part-time hired labor for the plantation, earning more in hourly wages for part-time work than the full-time workers. Others continued to find ways to leave St. Croix; for work in St. Thomas' harbor and coal depots or for places like Cuba, Puerto Rico and Panama where regular work was available (Dookhan 1974; Hall 1992; Lewis 1972).

The colonial government attempted to maintain agricultural production through a 'parceling-out system' where parts of foreclosed plantations were sold cheaply to laborers. Planters followed suit often offering up for sale the less desirable parts of their own plantations – areas laying in bush or steep hills. While this may have helped grow a smallholder community, it did not improve the larger economic conditions nor stop sugar's decline. Therefore, when the United States interest returned to purchase of the islands, Denmark was more than inclined to sell.

Many local inhabitants supported the sale and hoped that purchase by the U.S. would lead to better social conditions and an improved economy. This was not the intent of the purchase. In fact, the primary estimation of the islands as strategic military bases, defined the framework and policies that would continue to shape the lives of the current inhabitants and their relationship with the United States. I would argue that as their needs were not a priority or direct consideration at the time that there was no need to structure a political future incorporating measures to self-autonomy or real integration into the American union. The best interest of the local population was never a key factor. Hence, it was not surprising that autocratic rule maintaining most of the Danish system of

colonial governance but under an appointed army or naval personnel was initially the governing structure set into place under the U.S.

The hopes of U.S. acquisition

Under naval administration the islands surpassed their neighbors in achieving social modernization¹⁶. Significant changes were made to advance social services from public health to education¹⁷. A new infrastructure of roads, sewage disposal and improved concrete reservoirs, water catchments and wells helped to make sanitary conditions better. Establishment of hospitals, training of local nurses and vaccinations reduced mortality rates. Moreover, the passage of new ordinances and creation of police forces and fire departments staffed by the native population did much to correct previous inadequate services.

The greatest achievement of the naval administration was in the field of education. New school buildings were erected, others were repaired or reconstructed, and teaching facilities were improved. More teachers were employed, teacher-training was expanded and salaries were raised to the point where teaching became one of the best paid occupations in the islands. Improved curricula along American lines were introduced with greater emphasis on junior and senior high school education, and schools were secularized except for Catholic High Schools attached to the French Community (Dookhan, 1974:268).

However, lack of attention to St. Croix's economy continued. In 1924, a Department of Agriculture was established on St. Croix at the same time appropriations to support it was reduced. Planters were assisted in drilling wells and providing a process for marketing cattle in Puerto Rico. Yet their request to import cheap labor from the

¹⁶ 1940. Annual Report of the Governor of the Virgin Islands.

¹⁷ Statham notes that these were more for the benefits of the U.S. naval and military personnel than the local inhabitants. (Statham Jr., R.E. 2002. Colonial Constitutionalism: The Tyranny of United States' Offshore Territorial Policy and Relations. Lexington Books.)

British West Indian islands was denied. Rather, Puerto Ricans who were also American citizens were brought in to the island, 'even though their labor was more expensive' (Boyer, 1983). Sugar cultivation and overall production continued to decrease. Rum production ceased as a result of the extension of the Prohibition Act to the Virgin Islands. But some levels of recuperation of revenues was possible by diverting to production and export of bay rum, an aromatic liquid distilled from rum and bay berry leaves used in toiletries and cologne.

Until a local income tax was established in 1918, there was no adequate revenue or tax system in place. This was replaced by a federal income tax in 1921 and conversely, duties were removed from goods imported from the U.S. As expenditures related to the new social services surpassed revenues, the islands suffered a recurring budgetary deficit. This was met each time with financial grants approved through the U.S. Congress effectively creating no incentive to adopt new taxes or improve economic strategies. Emigration continued and scholars note dependency began (Boyer, 1983; Stratham, 2002).

The economy was revisited in 1931 when civilian officials in the U.S. Department of the Interior replaced the naval administration. Measures were put in place to not only rehabilitate the economy but to also continue improving social services. On St. Croix and to a lesser extent on St. Thomas, homesteading programs were established to sell 6-acre plots from former plantations now owned by the federal government. A home-building project was added to enable buyers to live on their plots with federal assistance to construct 2-3 room houses. Port facilities were improved in St. Thomas with tonnage taxes and other fees eliminated to boost shipping. Later, in the mid to late 1940s,

additional hotels were constructed in St. Thomas to promote tourism. To aid in economic development as a whole, the Virgin Islands Company was created to “promote industrial development through acquisition and cultivation of abandoned land, to provide employment opportunities for the people, and to assist peasant farmers in whatever ways necessary” (Dookhan, 1974: 273). These measures went a long way to benefit the economy, however, it did not erase annual deficits. Nor did it retain these farmers who would sell off portions of their land to fund future harvests as agriculture remained unprofitable. Nevertheless, the presence of a prosperous United States and these improvements to social services created a far better life for Virgin Islanders than that of their counterparts elsewhere in the Caribbean region in the 20th century.

An entrepreneurial governor, economic prosperity and the abandonment of agriculture

While life had improved for Virgin Islanders, there was growing discontent with the lack of political participation available to residents. A constitution initiated under the Organic Act of 1936 attempted to rectify this. It provided for the formation of two municipalities (St. Thomas¹⁸ and St. Croix) with a council of 7-9 elected members for each. The governor convened the councils to meet and enact legislation once a year. Additionally, franchise was given to all residents over the age of 21, but required them to be able to read and write in English.

This constitution, however, was based on some of the previous Danish colonial policies with adjustments for the American presence. Real power and decision-making was still located with a Governor who was appointed by the United States with no local

¹⁸ St. Thomas and St. John shared a municipality.

input. Eventually, the existence of two municipalities led to unnecessary redundancy and delay in decision-making and did not make sense given the size of the population.

Further, whereas having franchise no longer required one to own property as it had under Denmark, the English language clause denied participation to a growing number of American citizens from Puerto Rico who now lived in the Virgin Islands. A sizable percentage of agricultural workers on St. Croix originated from the main island of Puerto Rico as well as Vieques and Culebra.

A Revised Organic Act followed in 1954 to continue political re-organization of the islands and develop a path to greater self-governance¹⁹. It abolished the two municipalities, forming instead one legislature body with elected representatives from all three islands and removed the language requirement. Importantly, it created mechanisms for efficiency in financial matters and future economic autonomy. Federal income taxes were henceforth returned to the treasury of the Virgin Islands rather to the United States. Proceeds from custom duties and other collected government fees in the U.S., once the cost of collecting them was deducted, were deposited locally. An agreement to match-funds was established with the United States consenting to contribute an amount equal to all revenues the islands collected. This would come from the revenues collected by the U.S. on imported goods produced in the Virgin Islands and would not exceed \$5,000,000. The President of the United States or his designated official was still required, however, to approve any expenditure before they were made.

¹⁹ The revised act would eventually shift focus to look for leadership among local residents. Successful governance experienced under the initial changes would later create further constitutional reforms reducing the voting age to 18 and allowing Virgin Islanders to elect their own governor and lieutenant governor to four-year terms beginning in 1970.

Under the leadership of Ralph Paiewonsky, appointed as Governor from 1961-1969, the islands made significant strides in the area of housing, education and industrial growth. He was a native born Virgin Islander whose parents had emigrated to the Danish West Indies from Lithuania, a politician and successful business man. Paiewonsky's eight years in office was characterized by exceptional prosperity that would continue well into the 1980s. That he was able to generate revenues at the same time that the sugar industry ended proved the possibility for a viable Virgin Islands economy. Though thriving industrial growth under Paiewonsky also meant the stagnation and near end of agriculture. Competing industrial, commercial and social interests laid siege to agriculture.

Homestead Acts were continuously utilized as ways to stimulate sugar production as the agricultural economy continued to decline. It was thought that by creating a small peasant class yields would continue by putting idle former plantation lands back into use. It would also promote the planting of smaller scale crops. At the same time that many plantations lay abandoned, people in the islands were suffering from housing shortages and poor living conditions. As life had improved, population growth pressed up against limited developed space. In 1962 Paiewonsky created the Department of Housing and Community Renewal in hopes of continuing to elevate health and living standards by starting a land acquisition and home construction project. During his term, he provided housing for almost 8,000 residents and eliminating existing slums. In the same year, Paiewonsky supported the need for higher education and aided in development of the College of the Virgin Islands. Ten years later it was designated a Land Grant College and is today, the University of the Virgin Islands.

His successes shifted the landscape, especially for St. Croix, changing it from agrarian to suburban. But his business acumen and ability to attract large-scale investors from abroad pushed St. Croix away from agriculture for the first time in its history, into manufacturing, tourism and oil refining. Under Paiewonsky, jobs became available and wages increased. With additional employment came additional immigration. As residential and commercial spaces grew to accommodate people and new business, agriculture was pushed to the outskirts and former farmlands converted to other use.

Attempts were initially made to preserve agriculture by finding ways to make small-scale sugar production more efficient and profitable on St. Croix. VIDOA undertook surveys of family farms to understand the cause of low-level production. Family farms had been the hope of previous Homestead Acts. They wanted to know how they functioned; whether efficient techniques were in use; if they provided adequate income to support families; and, if general interest in farming remained (Mullins, 1954).

In 1953, most farmers (about 90%) owned all or part of their farms. Family farms were defined as a “farm in which the operator and his family make up the principal year-round labor force and which is large enough to provide reasonable full employment and an adequate income for the family” (Mullins, 1954:2). These were farms between 20-99 acres and assumed to generate an annual net income of \$1,400-\$1,600. Anything under 20 acres was considered as subsistence. Anything above 99 acres was generally dedicated to cattle or sugar that at the time was still cultivated for rum production. Most families were black and about one third Puerto Rican. The majority of farmers (heads of households) were over 50 with an average age of 53. And the majority had never been engaged in any other type of work. It was found that farmers kept poor records of their

earnings and transactions and did not practice modern techniques. Most used hand-drawn plows. They largely grew sugarcane, as there was a readily available market to sell to, although at low prices. A very small percentage of income came from other crops. The survey concluded that this was likely from selling surplus crops of what farm families themselves had not consumed. Finally, farmers complained of issues with financing production, weather and low prices but few showed a desire to give up farming and do other work. Agricultural income, in general, came from sugarcane and cattle. However, in 1953, cattle farmers began to suffer serious losses. Restrictions on exporting live cattle were imposed due to Texas fever ticks (Mullins, 1954:18).

In 1965, with a year left before the last mill was to be shut down, the Caribbean Research Institute at the then College of the Virgin Islands and the St. Croix Agricultural Development Program completed a 'socio-cultural' study. It was meant to "concern itself with farmer's attitudes and aspirations" and 'determine the probable willingness of farm families to assume the risks involved and remain in agriculture" (Rosenberg, 1966: introduction). The ensuing termination of sugar production and lack of other alternatives to maintain agriculture at the time made it imperative to investigate whether current farmers would be willing to continue using their land for farming. In 1965, while other industries were being explored, agriculture was still the main existing one. Since no anthropological or sociological study existed to provide detailed knowledge of Crucian culture, the study contained interviews, which asked about the following:

- 1) The present plans or lack of them, regarding land use and the major problems anticipated by farms in replacing sugar production;
- 2) Patterns of action and attitudes so far as seeking advice and technical assistance, and willingness to organize to solve common problems;
- 3) Willingness to take risks in order to maintain land in agriculture and the deterrent factors most significant to the

farmers; 4) Values regarding farming as an occupation, and the ownership of land; and 5) identity as farmers expressed through social relationships.

For Rosenberg, what was understood to be Crucian culture or the main signifier of St. Croix was farming or agriculture. I would argue that it was specifically sugar cultivation as it was the only type of agriculture that was fully participated in at the time. Vegetable crops were grown on a smaller scale but mostly for individual consumption. A formal market for these sales did not exist as there was little demand with food needs already supplied through imported foods. As sugar declined and St. Croix was pushed out of the market by competition from other producers and success with beet sugar, its demand slowed down. Competition with the U.S. south for cotton also negated the possibility of maintaining monocropping by switching to an alternate crop.

Unlike Mullins' study 10 years earlier, by 1965 farm sizes were significantly smaller, farmers fewer, and still less owned their own land. At the time of Rosenberg's study, a growing number of farmers were leasing land from the government or private owners. She interviewed 40 farmers: 27 were land owners at least partly engaged in sugar production and 13 were renters. Farms engaged in agriculture and at least partly in sugar production were deemed as those ranging from 7 ½ acres to 100 acres. Of the landowners, she noted, "In the case of St. Croix, the farmers are a first-generation of land-owners, but a generation that has its roots firmly in farming as a way of life" (1966: 3). Of the farmers interviewed 55% were from St. Croix (estate born); 33% Puerto Rican, most from Vieques; and, 11% British Virgin Islanders who came early in life to the island as field workers, became naturalized and settled on land purchased through federal programs like homesteading. These were all primarily men. Although there were women

farmers, Rosenberg noted in her survey, that the majority operated farms under 7 ½ acres and produce mainly subsistence crops.

Farmers on St. Croix were engaged in two types of agriculture – sugar production and truck farming.

“Within the complex of organization and traditions associated with the plantation economy for sugar production that dominated Cruzan history, as elsewhere in the West Indies, there is as well what may be described as a minor tradition, that of truck farming, or the cultivation of “small crops”, as it is known” (Rosenberg, 1966: 5)

Sugar had been centralized on St. Croix in the 1930s first under a U.S. federal company, the Virgin Islands Company (VICO), then under a local government company, the Virgin Islands Corporation (VICORP). They created a reciprocal relationship between farmers and buyers. The latter provided technical support, equipment like tractors and supplies like fertilizer or pesticide. The costs for these services were deducted from the sales. Transportation was no longer provided so farmers had to find ways to transport their cane to buyers. Nevertheless, there was a sense of security around sugar cultivation both from it being the environment they had all been brought up in as well as from the resources that existed to support it. These services were ending with the inevitable closing of the mills and end of sugar production

Most farmers were struggling with a transition from sugar to small crops like provisions or root crops (tania, yams, sweet potatoes) and vegetables (tomatoes, okra, sweet and hot peppers, eggplant, pigeon peas). Small crops had always been produced but for local consumption – on plantations to feed the slaves to smaller plots of private land for the use of farmers and their families. A unofficial market (as opposed to the market

for sugar) existed for these crops but not substantial enough to provide any level of financial security for farmers.

Moreover, the patterns associated with growing sugar versus small crops were very distinct. Plantation techniques, which were familiar to most farmers who had almost all worked on the estates, were utilized to grow sugar even on smaller plots of land. This included the practice of using imported hired laborers from British islands and Puerto Rico. The family handled small crop production without the use of hired hands or mechanized equipment. There was a division of labor by gender in relation to the different crops planted. Men worked in sugar while both men and women worked in vegetables and root crops. Selling small crops at the marketplace was considered women's work. Today women continue to predominate at farmers markets, although some men also participate.

Most of the farmers in Rosenberg's survey concluded that they preferred farming to any other type of engagement. However, only slightly more than half of them dedicated 100% of their time to farming. Some held other jobs or had other business interests out of economic necessity. "[H]aving found that farming was not sufficiently remunerable," some dedicated only 20%-50% of their time to farming (1966:13). At the time of interviews, 86.7 acres were in cane; 79 acres in pasture; 8.5 acres in vegetables; and 73 acres idle.²⁰ The latter were already trying to dispose of or change the use of their farmlands. Despite the security and stability they believed came from land ownership, some farmers were selling portions of their land to make farming more manageable on

²⁰ Rosenberg notes that her study encountered lots of fluidity. As she spoke with farmers, opinions and actions changed in response to what was happening with sugar production and the decision to close down the last mill on Estate Bethlehem.

smaller plots. Others thinking of leaving farming behind were dividing land among their adult children for the purpose of building homes.

Ironically, farmers held large landowners (of 100 acres or more) in high prestige. Cattle and dairy farming were again profitable. They could afford to employ laborers and had their own or shared equipment. For the farmers interviewed, a main complaint regarding the move from sugar to other crops was the lack of a cooperative through which they could share labor or equipment. They lamented the lack of resources and real assistance. Ironically, Rosenberg pointed out that the government's assistance in trying to maintain agriculture in post-emancipation created farmer's dependency.

The pattern established over the years since the very origin of the independent farmers has been one of dependence on the government for certain facilities; generally the land was acquired from the government, paid through government loans and agencies, the crops sold to a government agency, which also provided various kinds of technical assistance, and subsidies were assured as well. The farmers look expectantly to the government to accept responsibility in the present situation so far as establishing a structure with adequate personnel to meet their needs in fairly familiar patterns, in order for their work to be rewarding (1965:51).

This assistance, of course, had related to sugar and not to any other crop.

In regards to the willingness to remain in agriculture once sugar production was halted? There appeared a few alternatives: to use the land for small crops, switch to livestock or undertake a combination of the two. Livestock was not an available option for many with small acreages since they could not afford to purchase more land to support grazing. For those with 20 or more acres, livestock or a combination was chosen. Nevertheless, while small crops presented an alternative, without a market to successfully sell them, or guaranteed assistance as they had received under sugar; many felt it was a very high risk and therefore a serious deterrent regardless of farm size. Other deterring factors were again lack of access to equipment, the rising cost of labor and the unreliable

water supply. Farmers walked away from farming and the closing of the last sugar mill in 1966 led not only to the abrupt end of sugar but to the stagnation of agriculture overall.

Economic self-sufficiency

Despite these studies' attempts to understand agriculture and whether it could be maintained without sugar, there was a greater need to immediately build the economy. Under Paiewonsky tourism was fully introduced and instantly flourished in the islands. Ironically, former agricultural lands gave way to hotels, golf courses and complexes to house the increasing number of immigrant workers that arrived to work in the industry and the related construction boom. Many agricultural workers found jobs in tourism. These were generally low-skilled positions but with guaranteed wages as agriculture's future continued to dim.

Paiewonsky's objective was to move towards a goal of self-sufficiency. "To be considered, also was the greater measure of self-government we stood to gain if we could show ourselves able to provide for our own needs without recourse to the United States" (1990: 219). He believed he could accomplish this through a diversified economy so laid the plans for concentrating most tourism in St. Thomas and St. John with agriculture and industries on St. Croix. He offered generous tax incentives to persuade business to locate to the Virgin Islands.

[I]ndustries or businesses would be exempt for ten years from the payment of all taxes on real property, building materials, and licensing fees, except liquor and automobile licenses. For the same ten years, they would be entitled to nontaxable subsidies equal to 90 percent of import duties on imported raw materials and 75 percent of income-tax liability. Under the law, two basic conditions were set up in order for businesses to qualify for tax exemption or subsidy. The businesses had to offer substantial economic benefits to the islands, and they had to show need for the incentive to qualify. A most important condition was that no less than 75

percent of all persons employed in each tax-exempt or subsidized business had to be legal residents of the Virgin Islands, though provision was made for a waiver in exceptional cases (1990: 222).

Many of these incentives remain today with adjustments made or additional restrictions imposed (like the 2004 Jobs Act, the most recent iteration of many previous similar acts/laws) over time. With the securing of Harvey Alumina, Inc. (which later became the Martin-Marrieta Corporation) and Hess Oil Virgin Islands Corporation (which later became HOVENSA) on St. Croix in the late 1960s, Paeiwonsky created a boom that would generally sustain itself for decades increasing commercialization and continuing to draw land and workers away from agriculture. At the same time, he instituted zoning laws to structure organized development retaining the integrity and aesthetics of much of the islands, especially St. Croix. For while tourism was not a focus for St. Croix, it remained a part of Paiewonsky's vision for economic diversification. Opposition, however, stymied his efforts to support and grow agriculture.

Even as agriculture waned, Paeiwonsky hoped to replace sugar with another monocrop. Sanctioned experimentation had already proven the successful grafting of the Valencia orange with a local stock of lemon. He planned on citrus as a cash crop and the capability to grow, can and freeze the produce with bulk shipping of concentrates to Europe. However hostilities from large sugar cane planters who wanted more done to retain their status quo, and obstruction from U.S. based citrus growers, particularly in Florida, stopped the effort. The latter believed a rumor that orange juice would be produced for shipment to the United States under the benefits provided by existing duty-free provisions. In regards to the sugar elites on the island, Paiewonsky wrote:

I challenged the planters and merchants to put their money where their mouths were and to take control of the sugar industry by bringing their unused lands

under cultivation and buying and operating the sugarcane mill. In short, I said, “Put up, or shut up.” They did neither and lost. And so did I... I was extremely disappointed that the people of St. Croix had been denied a source of gainful employment at a much higher rate than that offered by the sugar industry. The people were the greatest losers. Citrus did not come to St. Croix, but neither did sugar survive (1990:245-246).

Agriculture today

Under Denmark, almost all of St. Croix’s acreage was under agricultural cultivation. In 1964, two years before the end of sugar, there were 291 farms operating on 30,596 acres on St. Croix.²¹ By 2007, the last year a U.S. agricultural census was conducted, there were 160 farms on St. Croix operating on 5,574 acres. Today, less than 5% of St. Croix’s 53,760 acres is documented as being utilized for agriculture. The Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture (VIDOA) currently holds 2,561 acres of former plantation lands. Of that total, however, only 1,774 acres is available for distribution and lease to local farmers. The department, fair grounds and the University’s Agriculture Experiment Station occupy the rest. However, without an official census, the number of acres in private hands is as illusive as is the number of farmers on the island.

Despite a fifty-year decline in agriculture, the loss of land dedicated to farming as well as decreasing numbers of farmers, agriculture has continued on St. Croix albeit on the margins of society. However, in the current period, following the 2008 U.S. economic recession, there is a genuine and dedicated effort to restore the prominence of agriculture to the U.S. Virgin Islands, and particularly on St. Croix among farmers themselves.

The recession was a serious downturn for the islands’ economy. But perhaps the successful passing of the 2004 U.S. Jobs Act was the first domino to fall setting off the

²¹ 1964. Census of Agriculture, Virgin Islands of the United States. U.S. Bureau of the Census

chain reaction that persists into the current period. With its passing in 2004, US mainland and foreign businesses found it difficult to continue to qualify for special tax incentive and income tax benefits they had previously enjoyed. It created obstacles for foreign and U.S. mainland based entrepreneurs to establish residency and enjoy special tax statuses requiring 183 days in the island to qualify for 90% tax credit on federal and 100% exemption on local taxes. The Jobs Act of 2004 removed the U.S. Virgin Island's advantage as an offshore business destination. The U.S and global recessions of 2008 struck an already declining economy making worse the availability of jobs in a climate of increasing inflation.

The impact was even greater for St. Croix where many industries, like aluminum production, had already closed down. In 2011, after 50 years in business, the dairy industry that had at least maintained cattle farming on the island shut its doors due to rising operating costs and dwindling sales. Then the government laid off 500 people in order to deal with its own budget shortfalls that same year. Most disastrous, however, was the closing of Hovensa oil refinery in February 2012 on St. Croix, the largest private employer in the U.S. Virgin Islands and at one time, the largest refinery in the Western hemisphere²². Its closing meant the loss of over 2,000 jobs plus the loss of smaller affiliate companies. The refinery had been in operation since 1966, following the end of sugar cultivation and marking the significant shift of St. Croix's economy away from agriculture.

Bereft of the island's main employers and dealing with an increase in crime, there was substantial emigration. Former Hovensa employees left for locations where their

²² Hovensa was a joint venture of the U.S. based Hess Corporation and *Petroleos de Venezuela*, Venezuela's state-owned oil company.

refinery skills were more applicable.²³ Many assume that with U.S. citizenship, Virgin Islanders could choose to relocate to the U.S. mainland in search of opportunities whenever they choose. However, many are without the resources to leave. In 2010, the year the last U.S. Census was conducted, 22% of the population lived in poverty. It is expected that percentage is significantly higher since the closing of Hovensa. Virgin Islands' exports have decreased by almost 50% as a result. Between 2007 and 2012 sales revenue on St. Croix dropped by 78% largely due to rumors regarding the Hovensa and its eventual closing early in 2012 (US Virgin Islands, Bureau of Economic Research, 2014: 8). Further evidence of the current economic climate are the overcrowded supermarkets on the first of the month. The growing price of imported food has dramatically increased the need for welfare subsidies among the population.²⁴ At present ninety-five to ninety-nine percent of raw and processed food is imported to the U.S. Virgin Islands. As a result there is a 34% mark up on food prices owing to the cost of transportation, transfer and storage as well as the additional charges related to the local supermarkets' profit margins. Food quality also suffers due to the transportation process, which often entails a delay when shipping containers from the U.S. are unloaded in Puerto Rico then reloaded and transferred to the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Perhaps driven by food insecurities or more so the need to continue to sustain themselves, farmers have formed new relationships that have removed them from the margins to a central place in the islands food needs and an emerging local food movement tied to tourism. Historically periods of recession have inspired small

²³ Many who were employed by Hovensa have made decisions to move to Florida, Texas, Canada and even Dubai seeking immediate employment with current refining skills and experience rather than undergoing new job training without the guarantee of employment.

²⁴ See Table I in Appendix regarding Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participation and costs for the fiscal year periods 2007–2014.

resurgences in agriculture. However, the present return has already endured longer and continues. Why the longevity this time and not during earlier recessions (like that following the energy crisis in the late 1970's and early 1980's)? Is this current and seemingly enduring shift again towards agriculture a deeper investment on the part of farmers and community partners; or the result of a more severe recession, growing unemployment and the lack of alternatives to secure food and livelihoods? Farmer's reasons as to why they farm; the explosion of farmers on social media advertising their produce for sale or voicing shared concerns with the industry, lack of rainfall or pests; the increasing number of restaurants purchasing directly from farmers and chefs partnering with farms to host slow down dinners, indicate a much deeper change.

Chapter 3

Crucian Farmers As Modern Entrepreneurs

It is 7am on a Saturday morning in June 2014 and the La Reine Farmers Market is bustling. Tables are already piled high with produce and homemade goods, and buyers are making their way through the narrow aisles, browsing and engaging in conversation with vendors. In the open area, just beyond the covered market, a fisherman has erected a large scale on the flat bed of his truck alongside an even larger cooler. Meanwhile, sitting in a folded chair with plastic bags tied at the end of the arms, Agatha monitors her produce. She is an older woman with braided gray hair held back by a worn red scarf and a self-described farmer. She is a regular at the La Reine Farmers Market, where she sells tomatoes, eggplant, and other small vegetables, in addition to bags of moistened fresh herbs. “I would say I am a farmer. I am always in my garden, with my herbs and vegetables. I do this everyday and I always have something to bring here on a Saturday morning. Growing things is something I’ve always done. Other things, you know, come and go... I take what I need to feed my family and the rest comes here.” However, many others at the market, described Agatha as ‘not working’ – “...Except when you see she here on Saturdays. She come early and stay the whole time.” Miguel, who was seated at the neighboring table visiting with another vendor, insisted. I had asked a few of the vendors if other regulars were full-time farmers or engaged in other work. There were no negative intentions in his response. It was said matter-of-factly. Agatha is elderly. She has earned the right to no longer work. Rather, it is admirable that she continues to participate in the market. At the same time, it implies the act of farming or being a farmer, in contrast, is considered to be real work.

Agatha's neighbor, Jennifer, is also a regular vendor at the farmers market, where she primarily sells jams, stews and medicinal balms. Jennifer is younger, perhaps in her forties, wearing jeans and an oversized gray t-shirt. Rather than sitting down, she stands behind her table ready to greet buyers. Jennifer refers to Agatha as "a nice older lady, a church-goer", who regularly tends her small garden at the back of her house. "She sometimes send she son over with peppers when he stop by to visit me," Jennifer says. She regards neither Agatha nor herself as farmers. On the other hand, Jo, who has been a regular at farmers markets for almost 40 years and known for always having an abundance of local vegetables and fruit on her table, which she supplies from her backyard garden, refers to herself as a vendor. However, many others characterize her as a farmer, given her presence at almost every agricultural event especially the Annual Agriculture and Food Fair held every February, where she also sells produce. Jo sells jewelry and other trinkets at the market in Frederiksted²⁵ when the cruise ships settle into port. "Tourists want small things they can take back with them on the ship. I don't bring food to Frederiksted." That she sells a variety of products that are not always food related, Jo refers to herself as a vendor. I understand this to mean that she views herself as a business woman too since she also refers to her attendance at markets as "doing business." Jo's primary concern, however, is having enough money to visit her grandchildren in New Jersey on a regular basis. Coincidentally, neither Jo, Jennifer, nor Agatha register as farmers or filed for any tax-related exemptions.

St. Croix farmers are generally referred to as small holders or subsistence farmers. Nettings defines small holders or farm families as "rural cultivators practicing intensive,

²⁵ St. Croix has two main towns or urban areas. Frederiksted is the main town on the West end and Christiansted is the main town on the East End.

permanent, diversified agriculture on relatively small farms in areas of dense population” (1993:2). He further notes:

The family household is the major corporate social unit for mobilizing agricultural labor, managing productive resources, and organizing consumption. The household produces a significant part of its own subsistence, and it generally participates in the market, where it sells some agricultural goods as well as carrying on cottage industry or other off-farm employment ... Smallholders have ownership of other well-defined tenure rights in land that are long-term and often heritable (1993: 2).

Nettings’ definition of the small holder’s household and contributions to production describes more of those St. Croix farmers who were engaged in sugar production and truck farming during the 1950s-1960s. They owned and lived on the lands they farmed. They first fed their families with the small crops they produced and sold the remainder at market. Today most farmers do not own land but instead lease government lands. They do not live on the lands they farm, as they are not permitted to build stationary structures on leased property. While household members support their efforts, especially when pursuing farming full-time, most farmers push their children towards other careers.

Moreover, Nettings noted that not all food producers were small holders (1993: 2). This is evident among the majority who sell produce at the farmers markets and at roadside stands. They tended to grow produce in their kitchen gardens for their own subsistence, a practice that dates back to life on the plantations, during which time kitchen produce helped sustain the diets of slaves. In the literature on slavery, kitchen gardens have been differentiated from provision grounds as smaller and geographically closer to slaves’ living quarters (Brierley, 1985). Provision grounds existed as larger plots. They often were located on land unsuited for sugarcane production; yet, they were

significant in providing both subsistence and income, which potentially influenced future agricultural enterprises in emancipation (Beckford G., 1975; 2001; Beckford & Campell, 2013; Beckles, 1989; Besson, 1987; 2002; Brierley, 1985; DeLoughrey, 2011; Higman, 1995; Mintz, 1978; 1983; 2010). Kitchen gardens continue to be a feature of the Caribbean region.



Selling local fruit outside the Kingshill Post Office. (Photo Credit: C. Hanley)

During my observations and interviews at farmers markets, however, there was considerable more fluidity in who constituted a “farmer”. People selling locally grown produce varied from those cultivating full-time on two or more acres; others growing small vegetables and herbs in home gardens; and some selling on behalf of others or re-selling produce purchased outside the territory.²⁶ Those in attendance, who were brokering sales for others, chose to self-identify as vendors most often. Moreover, it also appeared to correspond directly with the goods being sold, (fresh produce versus food products, medicinal or natural body products). Yet, even in this instance, people, like Jo, who were local food producers, also identified as vendors rather than farmers. Under the

²⁶ There are often people selling root vegetables, like a variety of yams, and spices at the markets that are not readily available or grown on St. Croix.

galvanized roofing of the La Reine Farmers market, there were no rigid characterizations for being a farmer. Rather there was acceptance of the category's mutability. Despite the various ways Agatha, Jennifer, Jo and others sought to define themselves, the majority of people agreed, it was largely the work and dedication an individual put into producing that shaped the identity as a "farmer". Full-time commitment or sizeable acreage were not important factors. This variability suggests that rigid definitions cannot adequately address all aspects of small-scale domestic agriculture in the Caribbean. Further, self-identifying as farmer, vendor or other, speaks more to the human need to seek legitimacy – in this case, legitimacy at the market. This is similar to Crucian farmers seeking validity in the larger Virgin Islands economy by identifying as businessmen.

In this chapter, I focus on the self-fashioning of farmers as entrepreneurs. Farmers have seemingly experienced a shift, gravitating from the margins of society to a central role in cultural representation, the promotion of health and nutrition, sustainability and economic stimulation, following the 2008 recession. I see this transformation as initially driven by food and economic insecurities. Yet it is also part of their re-imagined selves as evidenced in their own words and actions. These vary from firm expressions of passion for their work, innovations in their practices, and a "deservingness" borne of hard work and effort. Throughout my interviews, it was interesting to note the eagerness with which many now embraced the title "farmer." This chapter explores the way in which this category has been re-envisioned in the context of neoliberalism and economic crisis.

As farmers reimagine themselves as businessmen central to the regeneration of agriculture and the economy of the island, it is important to also comprehend in part their motivation. How much are their emotions towards farming an active part in shaping a

new entrepreneurial self versus the labor or lack of resources? How much are the changes driven by fears surrounding food insecurities or a determination to rise out of society's margins? Lutz and White argued that a need to understand the role of emotions in peoples' personal and social lives, gave rise to renewed interests in the sociocultural experience from the perspective of the one living it (1986: 405).

In the narrative that follows, Dean, a farmer at the center of the current changes, touched on many points that I encountered among other farmers who were eager to resurrect agriculture and make it more prominent. They all held the belief that agriculture could sustain the community, and with increased support, boost the economy. Whereas all farmers complained about the lack of resources and the absence of official investment in growing agriculture, those at the forefront of change, envisioned a future centered on their own efforts, rather than a continued reliance on the government. Their imagined future, however, contradicts the current reality of agriculture on St. Croix, where most are dependent on government resources. Therefore, it is also important to examine who Crucian farmers are, as opposed to the independent businessmen they are asserting themselves to be.

Neoliberal farming

"I worked for the telephone company for 20 years. I farmed somewhat during that time too... about 17 years farming on and off. I was looking for something unusual to do. I basically grew up in a home where my father and mother were always business oriented. They were always doing some sort of business. Mostly small grocery and, you know, restaurant. And working for someone was again limiting 'cause I couldn't --- I don't believe I could have been able to do more than what is being asked for or what I'm told. So I thought about it and said, there are so many like businesses on the island. I mean if you walk into town most of the businesses are the same, you know. And I wanted to do something totally different."

Dean and I are sitting in white plastic armchairs next to his farm stand, which is open daily from 10a.m.-3p.m., Mondays through Saturday. As one enters the gates to his 11-acre farm, the farm stand is directly to your left. Normally, Dean's wife or one of his daughters takes care of the stand. However, today, his daughter is away and his wife is tasked with caring for their grandson. Besides Dean's farm on which he grows vegetables and raises goats and sheep, there is another farmer raising goats on a little less than five acres of land to the east. Between them is ten acres of grazing land belonging to another farmer raising cattle. Otherwise, the immediate neighborhood is mostly residential with a couple of combination corner store and bar. St. Croix's landscape flows seamlessly from residential areas to business districts to developed farms to natural untamed spaces. Dean is tall, thin, mostly bald but with an impressive gray beard. When standing and speaking, his rigid manner and tone command attention.

In front of him, Dean has a small card table, with an old adding machine and a cash box. As we engage in conversation, we pause every now and then for Dean to attend to customers including a local chef in search of breadfruit. Today, the farm stand is awash in an array of colors, overflowing with tomatoes, eggplants and a variety of sweet and hot peppers. There are a few dried coconuts, clear plastic bags of bundled aloe, bags of salad mixes, and small bundles of herbs. A bin also holds a handful of golden apples²⁷ but no breadfruit. Dean insists that I listen while he talks. He wants me to understand why he plants and raises animals, and why agriculture is important for the island. Dean is one of the better-known farmers on the island, and has a reputation for being quite vocal with regard to developing agriculture on St. Croix, almost to the point of aggressiveness.

²⁷ The small oblong yellow fruit is called golden apple in the Virgin Islands as well as on many other islands. It is also known as ambarella, jew plum or June plum.

“I did not embark on what I’m doing now. It’s more to me of an accident rather than something that I went out and looked for. It found me instead. My children were young. Now prior to that, my parents did do farming. And they either did it for the business – the food that they produced was for the business or for the home. So giving them (children) an opportunity to learn some of the history and also giving them an opportunity to nurture an animal. I bought three goats. Unfortunately, the goats outgrew them. They (the children) were only 3, 4 and 6 at the time. And I had no other choice but to look after them (goats). And I begin to look after them to point out that this was already something I knew. And then I also began looking at the different breeds of goat and how to care for them and stuff like that. Then I came to the conclusion, “why isn’t there more farms on St. Croix.” So I embarked on changing it and I’m trying to change it as much as I can. My wife has some horticulture experience so we set about to develop the industry, not for ourselves but for the entire Virgin Islands...

Dean sees agriculture as Caribbean culture and history. Farming was a part of his childhood, as his parents who were primarily merchants, grew small produce for both the family and their business. He works to impart this history to his children, and now grandchildren, who are involved in small tasks on the farm. Yet his own identity as a farmer differs greatly from Agatha at the farmers market or his parents. Dean is an entrepreneurial farmer. His intent is to make farming profitable, - “a vehicle for economic development”. For his parents, their restaurant/store was their main livelihood which farming, in part, supported. Agatha’s produce, a small amount sold every Saturday, is her supplemental income. Previously and for many years, Dean farmed part-time, while also working at the telephone company. Prior to obtaining their large farm, Dean and his wife also both farmed part-time and sold their produce at the farmers markets. However, Dean does not recognize the small-scale operations as farms as indicated by his surprise that there were not many in existence. Yet it is not due to size. Most farmers cultivate on 2 ½ to 7 acres of land. Rather, it is because their production is geared towards individual goals. Dean sees farming as a business that must go beyond benefitting the individual, but towards supporting the Virgin Islands as a whole.

We often times look at agriculture in the Virgin Islands and even in the rest of the Caribbean as being of a slave-oriented mentality. Total reliance has been on the government to provide promotion and development of the industry... Their role has been minimal and the turning of their backs to us (farmers) has caused others to look on us as backwards and failures. I find that to be absurd. It is very demeaning. They don't see farming as being a vehicle for economic development. It is looked at as the last resort for employment, something you do after retirement or if you're not educated. If you just down and out, you can plant something and sell it. Because farmers don't have the know-how... We need to deal with the stereotype, get over the stereotype and get to promoting agriculture and bringing more people into it."

As farming has been part of who he is, Dean is especially defensive of the negative stereotypes that have been attributed to farmers. He views this as further exacerbated by the government's neglect of the industry. Their lack of investment reinforces the idea of both the industry and its participants as insignificant. Dean feels it has adversely informed the perspectives of others in official or influential roles in the community and hinders the ability to recruit new and younger farmers. Moreover, because the University of the Virgin Islands does not provide an agricultural degree and there are no agriculture-based programs at middle or high schools, there is no mechanism available to cultivate an interest in farming among the local younger generations. Many farmers noted that the work required skill and an investment in labor but it could also be profitable with adequate investments. On the matter of education, levels vary among St. Croix's farmers. Of the farmers I interviewed, many had high school educations and were trained in various trades outside of agriculture. Still others had college degrees with at least one working toward a doctorate. Dean's wife earned her degree at the University of the Virgin Islands, focusing on horticulture. Dean, himself, has taken business workshops and attends training programs geared to farmers when offered. However, stereotypes continue to limit the development of agriculture by hindering more participation.

Farmers, and others in the community must move past damaging labels to advance agriculture.

“You know, if agriculture is stable, then every other industry is more efficient and the community is healthier... My wife and I, and some farming partners look at food and agriculture on a whole as the actual fuel of an economy. Most people don’t see that. They think it will be oil or just being a businessperson, or being an attorney, a teacher... they don’t see what creates a community... or holds a community together. So we want to make them understand that it is agriculture. Agriculture can sustain every part of our community. The Virgin Islands (economy) is always up or down. What comes in from the federal government, we throw it back out buying all our food, all our building supplies, from somewhere else... And so we created our farm as a blueprint of what agriculture and farmers can do... A family farm, and we work with a group of farmers that provide additional and different produce alongside what I grow. We buy what they bring and then do the marketing and promotion on behalf of our farm as well as those individuals. We diversify what we can provide and how we provide it, to meet demand, to create demand.”

The new blueprint Dean envisions and has put into place for his farm, along with the sustainability of farming and agriculture, absent government assistance, is a novel entrepreneurial enterprise that contrasts vividly to the agriculture that prevailed after the end of sugar cultivation. He compares his new venture to other non-farming, more corporate-like businesses on St. Croix, geared towards more profitability. Dean speaks to a particular kind of entrepreneurial work that warrants a very shift in the individuals themselves - neoliberal personhood. This requires a “recasting of identity in terms of flexibility, adaptability and instant transformation” (Elliot & Urry, 2010:7). Farmers as modern entrepreneurs would be guaranteed a respectability previous farmers did not enjoy. In addition to economic security, entrepreneurship is a path to achieving greater social and class mobility. Dean, additionally, reflects the ideal neoliberal subject. As he speaks to profitability, he exemplifies good citizenship by accounting for the needs of the larger society that is no longer being met by the government.

“Man, St. Croix has gone through changes where agriculture was important and then not. Then people start talking about it and participating again, until it dries up, until the next thing happens to bring down the economy. But not this time.”

I interrupt to ask what makes this resurgence different. Why would agriculture endure this time if the economy were to recover? Dean pointedly answered:

“Well I’ll tell you this much for me and a few others, it’s going to happen one way or another. No. Not one way or another. It’s been happening for the past 6-8 years. It’s happening and I’m going to keep pushing it. I know for a fact that there are now some people within USDA and the department (VIDOA) that are looking for it to happen. People in the community, the restaurants... So it’s gonna happen by and large even without the government’s help. And you’re going to find when it does happen, there is going to be an individual or government official who will say they were part of it... I’d like to be the person to tell them, “NO, you were not! You were not!” Because the government of the Virgin Islands has just been a slacker when it comes to agriculture.”

What is not discussed in the above but understood by all farmers engaged in either full-time or part-time farming, is that under the current economic circumstances, their livelihood is at risk. Without adequate resources and under continuing neglect, the future of farming beyond providing for individual sustenance is bleak. Farmers must act to prevent this. Freeman notes that, as a result of present economic insecurities, ‘entrepreneurial imperatives’ or the need to turn towards new and differently structured business enterprises, will inevitably grow (2014: 9). I would argue that this can be seen in many of the back-to-land movements and agricultural renaissances throughout the Caribbean, as economic insecurity exacerbates existing food insecurities. Significantly, the self-fashioning of farmers as independent businessmen is a response and a continuation of the creative agency of the Caribbean people to survive in the face of economic uncertainties. However, entrepreneurship “must be read simultaneously as a new way of being in the world that signifies not just a particular path of income

generation and consumption but also a new way of living and feeling that is shaped by and simultaneously giving new expression to gendered, classed, and racialized subjectivities” (Freeman, 2014:9).

Where government resources and political status already limits agriculture’s growth potential, why embrace farming? Rather than turn toward a new entrepreneurial venue, it is ironic that farmers are choosing instead to remake agriculture to meet their current needs. Long-term economic stability and complete self-sufficiency has been rare among post-sugar Crucian farmers. Small-scale farmers engage daily in a struggle to make ends meet. Most farmers lease the lands they cultivate through the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture (VIDOA). These farmers additionally rely on the organization for access to water and equipment. Farming is arduous. Almost all the farmers in my study worked without assistance. A few of the more fortunate farmers were able to support maybe two to three hired or volunteer laborers, who worked few and irregular hours depending on the stage of the crops. Presently only the organic farm has regular employees, runs a farming internship program with outreach to U.S. farming organizations and schools bringing in a regular group of young people for six-week stays a few times per year. Practices are intensive and require almost year-round effort. Some farmers stop planting their fields at the end of July due to intense heat and the lack of rainfall. They then return to land preparations and introducing new seedlings in mid-September or October; if there are no major tropical storms or hurricanes. Others will continue to farm year-round as long as there is fair weather, access to adequate water to support their crops, and sufficient brush and water for their animals.

On the matter of independence, small-scale farmers on the island have principally operated independently of one another but with heavy dependence on the haphazard resources provided by VIDOA. In 1998, a Virgin Islands Farmers Cooperative, with about 100 members (on leased and private lands), was attempted. It was one of the first efforts by farmers to improve their own conditions. Farmers pooled their produce together to sell at a twice-weekly market, and they subsequently distributed the profits between one another. When necessary, they shared equipment and assisted each other with harvests. Over time, however, relationships declined, as farmers failed to produce at the same rate or derive similar quantities. Some invested more labor than others. Subsequently, membership declined, and by 2011, the cooperative had dwindled down to about 23. In 2014, the remaining members of the cooperative permanently disbanded, due to the group's mismanagement of a USDA grant. They had received the award to further increase their collaborative efforts. Members were all held responsible for repaying the funds despite accusations that only two of the members had diverted funds towards growing their own individual operations. Nevertheless, the experienced of being in a cooperative inspired new collaborations between farmers who are now at the forefront of the current changes that are occurring on the island. This time not so much to aid in cultivation efforts or to share equipment, but rather to diversify products, to better market themselves and work in tandem in support of the community.

Reclaiming the farmer's reputation

Dean is invested in remaking the image of the farmer into a more respectable one. While a majority of the farmers situated in the resurgence are the same aging farmers,

they are deliberately attempting to shrug off the “backwardness,” not only in how they are perceived, but also in the way they have previously approached farming.

In Freeman’s works, she employs the opposing themes of “respectability” and “reputation,” themes originally developed by Peter Wilson (1969, 1973). Respectability describes the colonial cultural hegemonic system and the colonial value system.

Reputation, on the other hand, serves as its counter. It is the Caribbean response to colonial domination, as well as a creative resistance to colonial social hierarchy that is reinforced in institutions like schools and churches. Meanwhile, respectability is associated with the middle class, while reputation is associated with the lower classes, masculinity, and the public sphere of performance, such as the rum shop (Freeman, 2007; Wilson, 1973). Freeman sees reputation as adaptable and flexible - a Caribbean trait and the main feature of the Caribbean experience. With shrinking private sectors and a lack of stable employment, neoliberal forces have set the stage for a new entrepreneurship. In Freeman’s work, Barbadian women have engaged this ‘reputational flexibility’ to enact a new form of personhood, where entrepreneurialism is no longer about business, but a way of living. “These modes of labor become inextricable from their affective skills and subjectivities at work” (Freeman, 2014: 212).

As such, I recognize a similarity in the shift among farmers to be independent businessmen. Casting themselves as such, enables a reinvention of self as central and legitimate players in the potential economic recovery of St. Croix. It is in direct resistance to their position at the margins of society, where they have felt themselves relegated, with little government effort dedicated to develop farming or agriculture over time. Here uncertainty in the economy engenders the entrepreneurial spirit, but additionally has

pushed farmers towards a “responsibilization” of the self in the sense of acting to determine their own lives (Rose 1999). The power of rhetoric further bolsters their importance to the community. After all, when celebrating farmers or championing agriculture, the formal language of government has consistently relied on the imagery of “well-kept gardens adorning landscapes,” “lovely open green spaces that help to protect our environment and make our islands more beautiful,” people engaged in the “admirable pursuits of the basic values of life” or involved in “the most important service to mankind,” (Annual Agriculture and Food Fair programs; 1972, 1981, 1995, 2014). This rhetoric is interposed more recently with gestures to the farmers’ painstaking commitment to providing healthy food, and viable and self-sustaining lifestyles. Farmers also express that they see themselves as providing a service to the people and the island. They are putting the land to good use. In an almost Leopoldian sense of ethics, many see idle or uncultivated land as negative and unhealthy. Land, in their understanding, should be used for the benefit of the community. Roy, a farmer who has lived and worked on St. Croix for over 40 years, remarked, “It is a shame to not make use of the land. So much of it is lying idle when we could be using it to feed ourselves something better.” Additionally, there is the sense of using the land to beautify it. As I understand it, the sentiment being expressed in beautification, is that idle, overgrown land needs to be tamed. Only then does it become beautiful. Roy continued:

“You used to drive up Centerline and it just heavy with trees and bush then houses and businesses here and there. Now you see cultivation. Bush cut away to neat rows of pepper, and cucumbers... You even have a bunch of sugarcane. But the land is trimmed and neat. Orderly. Even if it currently don’t have a use, we could keep it looking nice...people see and appreciate that... Farming is a good thing, is beneficial to tourism too. The place looks good when things not wild and gone bush.”

Roy's views might have proved surprising, had I not heard similar arguments from almost all the farmers with whom I spoke. Since the recession, perceptions of farming and agriculture have evolved, and the appearance of farm plots has also undergone physical changes. Many previously appeared as overgrown gardens with rusted, galvanized scraps of wood and wire repurposed as fencing. While there were always some farms along Centerline Road (also known as Queen Mary Highway), the main thoroughfare that runs through the middle of the island, the farms often remained invisible as a result of the large trees and overgrown brush that grew along the road's shoulder. Now they are a main part of the scenery, and many have expanded. There is also a uniformity to many farm plots now, with areas lined with small plants growing through black weed mat, rows of irrigation lines, uncultivated areas planted with a cover crop or brush kept low by animal grazing. Most likely there is consistency now because weed mat and irrigation materials are available through VIDOA. However, tourism encourages uniformity and order, as does neoliberalism. Organized aesthetics speaks to modernity and success. Further, visible plots under cultivation keeps farming, quite literally, at the forefront (of both thought and sight).

In addition to modernizing themselves to dispel stereotypes that suggest farmers are backward, market successes also allow farmers to gain increased legitimacy. "Capital accumulation is not an end in itself" but it facilitates the self-reinvention (Freeman, 2011: 356). In his farm's blueprint, Dean specifies, "We diversify what we can provide and how we provide it, to meet demand, to create demand". He implies a flexibility in practices that does not currently exist in addition to a modernized self. Dean envisions a modern farmer who is not only an independent businessman but more so, a good and

moral citizen who assumes personal responsibility for himself, while also attempting to save the community and the economy. This is achieved through farmers' involvement in sustainability practices and advocacy to improve the island's nutrition. This notion of the re-imagined farmer speaks to the type of personhood necessitated by neoliberalism. As Rose (1999) has asserted, neoliberalism requires a "governing through freedom." Under neoliberal policies, as the state shrinks, power becomes de-centralized. The onus of self-governing/self-regulating falls on the citizen who is both free and responsible for realizing his own personal goals. "Neoliberal logic requires populations to be free, self-managing, and self-enterprising individuals in different spheres of everyday life – health, education, bureaucracy, the professions, and so on. The neoliberal subject is therefore not a citizen with claims on the state but a self-enterprising citizen-subject who is obligated to become an "entrepreneur of himself or herself" (Ong 2006: 14).

Whereas neoliberalism reduces the role of the state, it also opens the state to criticism that it no longer does enough for its citizens. Dean criticizes the government's lack of attention to and investment in agriculture, even as people relied exclusively on it for maintaining the industry. He noted, "We often times look at agriculture in the Virgin Islands and even in the rest of the Caribbean as being of a slave-oriented mentality. Total reliance has been on the government to provide promotion and development of the industry..." A desire for more autonomy in its self-governance has pushed the government towards more immediately profitable businesses, such as manufacturing and tourism, at the expense of agriculture. However, farmers affecting change are not calling on the government to fix agriculture. Rather their solution is to 'fix' themselves. Their success will force the government into recognizing its negligence.

Crucian farmers have already fashioned themselves into modern entrepreneurs and begun doing business (farming) in new ways. They have adapted their practices to both create and meet new demands. Drawing on Emily Martin's (1994) work on the body's immune system's swift reaction to changes, Ong extends a similar adaptability to areas of body management (the corporeal self) and corporate organizations under neoliberalism (Ong, 1999:19). Its flexibility joins the workplace and the body as sites of production, where the self is constantly shifting (re-training) to keep up with the ever-changing market economy. New entrepreneurs "must simultaneously hustle to provide new services and goods for the rapidly changing global marketplace and to consume new goods and services in an effort to fashion themselves as flexible, self-aware, and innovative actors in a new era" (Freeman, 2011:355). Given the long period of stagnation in farmers' practices and agriculture as a whole, especially through previous economic ebbs and flows, flexibility and adaptability is illustrated in the adoption of innovative practices from more collaboration to experimenting with new products.

Jake is a Crucian born farmer, whose family came from Italy and raised cattle on the island. He is also an artist who has long been inventive in both his art and what he plants. Like Dean, Jake is at the forefront of pushing for modernized structures in agriculture.

"There's no promotion. No new ways of thinking and conceiving of agriculture on a bigger scale on the island. You have to figure out a plan. It's been the same for a long time. We, the farmers, have to come together and make way for ourselves. I try to offer diverse products so I grow a bit of everything rather than a lot of one thing. Our partners fill the gaps. We do this business here on the farm but we also take part in all the community events. That's important. Farming is a business that should be taken more seriously. I think it will be..."

Jake champions diversifying products and innovation as improvements to his farming methods. He grows small quantities of a large variety of products from root vegetables to salad greens to fruit. If customers have demands for produce he cannot provide, he partners with other farmers to sell them at his farm stand. New partnerships and collaborations build relationships among farmers as well as expand community networks. Jake notes a separation of sort between the business on the farm and the participation in community events. Marginalized farmers operated separately. Current farmers are deliberately present; promoting themselves, their farms and making themselves integral to the community by being a participant in it. Moreover, to exert themselves as entrepreneurs in contrast to earlier farmers infers having a business plan. Those farmers engaged in an improved agriculture have indeed mapped out ‘blueprints’ and shifted their methods. Yet, there is inconsistency among farmers. Farmers on smaller acreages and food producers utilizing small gardens, do not necessarily plan what they grow, contributing to the continuing lack of variety available at markets. For example, having returned to full-time farming after being laid off from the oil refinery, Samuel illustrates this inconsistency among farmers who have embraced new practices versus those who have not:

“I used to sell on the roadside in Frederiksted. That is where I started. Then I went and I try to get a spot in the La Reine Farmers Market. Which I did get the spot and started to sell there. But after a few years selling there with some of the farmers here kind of like... We don’t have innovative farmers here on the island. They don’t want to try new things. If somebody successful in one thing, then everybody going to try the same thing. And when you try to tell them that you have to be innovative in order to make people come to the market... bring variety, they get mad. You can’t emulate each other. If ten of us bring the same product, we cannot get it sold and they wasn’t listening to me. So I started a market (roadside stand) on the East End.”

Some farmers are not ready to take risks. Those who still utilize the farmers markets as their only outlet to sell their produce, have been less likely to change their practices. To ensure they had produce to sell on a weekly basis, some farmers continue to plant crops they know will grow easily and quickly. Others plant only what they prefer to eat. A few farmers, who have managed to build regular clientele or contract with supermarkets, focus on growing only the products requested. Hal, a transplant from Illinois, for example, consistently grew cucumbers for two different supermarkets, which requested a total of about 1,200lbs a week. As he harvested one line of cucumbers, he would immediately install a new line. To meet that demand also meant he planted at least one new line of cucumbers every day. Farmers like Hal are on the outskirts of the new movement. While attempting to pursue commercial success in farming, he continues to operate on an individual level, and not as part of the larger community.

Further, in diversifying their offerings by engaging in collaborations with those who do not, Dean, Jake and others, have helped to create opportunities for farmers without a plan to participate in the new agricultural movement. This belies the idea of independence but again allows for variability in the roles of those who define themselves as farmers. The desire for security (food, money, etc.), along with the need to be central to their community, means an entrepreneurial self who is successful, hard-working, values-oriented and integral in providing support to those who need it. “The success of neoliberal projects has increasingly come to rely on alternative forms of capital, particularly those forms that are measured in terms of qualities of modern personhood, such as ‘attitudes,’ ‘feelings,’ and other determinants of emotional ‘adequacy’ (Ramos-Zayas, 2012: 13). Still, why farming? Why a return to agriculture? To these questions,

many farmers expressed love and satisfaction for what they do. Thus, could love – which farmers derive from satisfaction of a successful harvest, their usefulness to the community, their willingness to promote better nutrition and health, forming relationships with people over food, or the ability to help and support ones family -- be a driving force? Could love also offer an opportunity for farmers to reinvent themselves?

From another perspective, many customers who attend farmers markets and frequent roadside stands look to farmers with admiration. To be clear, beyond that centered on the rewards of honest and hard labor, this admiration is a recent phenomenon. In efforts to redefine themselves, farmers also have helped to alter the perceptions of their roles, as well. Farmers are providing locally grown produce under new conditions that have generated increased demand. They are providing what the customer desires and these customers are grateful. The lack of available farm labor and the small numbers of new farmers may be viewed as indicative of the negative stigmas that surround agricultural work. This is largely among younger generations who remain disenchanted with the industry as a source of profitable work, and not necessarily because of the backbreaking labor that farming necessitates. Nevertheless, even these attitudes are undergoing changes, as the larger community has come to view farmers more as an integral part of St. Croix, especially as they help sustain Crucian cultural traditions. As an example, Shelley, who works as a docent at the Estate Whim Plantation Museum, shared, “I guess you could say they’re akin to culture makers or maybe keepers of culture. At least they are maintaining our Caribbean traditions. We need to preserve who we are.” The main museum is housed in the preserved Great House. There are slave quarters, a cookhouse, the animal driven mill, other historical equipment used to make sugar and a

sugar mill. The museum hosts school trips, local family reunions and historical festivities throughout the year – preserving history as a reminder of “who we were.” Increased social capital also increases respectability. Many in the community also regard farmers as necessary components in the fight for food security. Nadia, a public school teacher who is also part of a farm-to-school lunch program advocacy group, argued “It’s so important now in these times. We have to think about the health of our community, access to organic local produce and eating well. We have to be able to provide for ourselves.”

The 2008 U.S. recession affected the U.S. Virgin Islands in many ways, including primarily, increased living expenses and dwindling revenues. As businesses closed, unemployment rose. Whereas, in the previous year, their GDP had peaked and unemployment rates were near 6%, (which was then less than that of the U.S.), by 2010, the unemployment rate was 8.1%. In 2013, a year after the closing of the Hovensa oil refinery, unemployment for the entire territory reached an all time high of 13.4%, while St. Croix’s unemployment alone sky-rocketed to 15.4%.²⁸ Additionally, upsurges in the cost of importing food meant rising consumer prices. Rather than focusing inward to deal with fall-out and devise ways to boost local entrepreneurship, the government borrowed against bonds, paid less into pension plans and continued to look for economic solutions abroad.

The farmers who vacillate between loving what they do (and simultaneously being their own bosses), and complaining about the lack of support are the farmers that diligently labored prior to the 2008 recession. They, along with a small number of

²⁸ Virgin Islands Department of Labor. 2016. Employment Situation [Historical Data] www.vidolviews.org/gsipub/index.asp?docid=430

influential newcomers are putting themselves and their industry at the center of a potential economic recovery for St. Croix. They are reframing their marginality by reinventing themselves as independent businessmen. Moreover, they are appealing to the concerns of the larger community by selling health, security and culture, which they have centered upon tradition, local, and sustainability. Self-promotion via social media, in addition to their willingness to collaborate with each other and the community, is as much an attempt to sell their products (local produce, honey, etc.) as it is a political statement. They are frustrated and desperate to make ends meet during a time of severe scarcity like everyone else. However, they are no longer waiting for change, but are themselves the agents of change. Tara noted, “Necessity is the mother of invention but our food has value. We have value.”

As independent businessmen, can Crucian farmers either generate the capital to propel the agriculture industry forward? Or can they generate enough capital to draw the attention of the government, as a way to have them finally invest in the profitable potential of agriculture? With the ongoing loss of other businesses, a successful domestic agricultural industry could replace or lessen the need for food imports on a small island like St. Croix and in the Virgin Islands, as a whole. The revenue that is no longer geared towards the purchase of imports could subsequently nurture other needs and bolster investments in other enterprises.

Chapter 4

Consuming St. Croix: Tourism and Agriculture

“Our food wasn’t fancy. It was just necessary. Fungi, callaloo, fish, vegetables... was filling and healthy. For a time, we looked down at ground provisions because we took issue with down-islanders²⁹. We ate mostly American because that’s what was in the stores, easier, more available and sometimes cheaper... When the money is flowing and it is what you have, it’s easy to go to the supermarket.” While making a purchase of guava and coconut pastries, I had struck up a conversation with Marjorie who worked at a bakery just off the main thoroughfare on the island. It was 10a.m. on a Tuesday in late June 2015, but already she was consolidating the trays of pastry to make room for additional food. Marjorie, who appeared East Indian, explained that they also provided a lunch service of local dishes and utilized vegetable purchased from the large farm stand across the street. “It’s not the same anymore,” Marjorie continued. “Our local food is plentiful. Our tastes are larger and we are doing more with it... Local food places used to be for local people and other restaurants were for tourists. We ate at home. Tourists ate out eating American or Italian or whatever. It’s different now. I am selling to tourists too.”

Marjorie raised important points in her recollection of local food on St. Croix. First is the change that locally grown produce and local dishes has undergone- naturally over time as tastes change and expand due to outside influences. However, demands for local food have also changed over time as the result of recession and necessity. As discussed in Chapter 2, small-scale farming of vegetable crops began as a replacement of

²⁹ Fungi is a savory cornmeal pudding almost like polenta.

Down-islander refers to people from the former British colonies. In the mid-1960s through the 1980s was the height of discrimination against these non-native groups.

sugar cultivation but without resource support or markets. This shift at a time where new industries were being introduced to the Virgin Islands economy (like manufacturing and tourism) pushed local agriculture to the margins as well as diminished its larger value and importance to the majority. The sudden influx of immigrants as temporary workers from former British colonies especially into the service industries to support burgeoning tourism, created tensions in the Virgin Islands as U.S. immigration laws changed to accommodate these workers' needs over Virgin Islanders' desires. A distancing of Virgin Islands *natives* from immigrants as a result even extended to food, stigmatizing the yams, dasheen and other ground provisions closely associated with them.³⁰

Second, is the place that local food holds in relation to imported products. A critical aspect of the ongoing colonial relationships and these territories as additional U.S. markets is the availability and cheaper price of American goods in comparison to local products. At one time, however, locally grown produce held less value than imported products. In the Caribbean, food was imported in the beginning to support the plantation economy including maintaining the slaves. This practice also established an association of certain foods with slave, subordinate, or lower class. Despite that, all on the plantation relied on food imports, a social hierarchy was maintained by differential access to certain items. For example, staple items like salted fish and meats were available to slaves and

³⁰ This period saw an increase in one third of the immigrant population with a decrease in the native population as Virgin Islanders emigrated to the U.S. in pursuit of better jobs. When Congress amended the Immigration and Naturalization Act (INA) in April 1970 to allow temporary workers to bring in their spouses and children to facilitate family unification, it opened the door to possible increased legal admissions to 'down-islanders' (Leibowitz, 1989: 281). Changes to U.S. H-2 visa rules also allowed temporary workers to move to other employers when seasonal tourism work ceased. Reeling from these changes, the Virgin Islands government attempted to create policies that would restrict immigrants' access to schools, housing, welfare and other benefits. This was upheld as discriminatory by the U.S. courts, which built up hostilities between the groups occasionally resulting in violence (Gore, 2009: Leibowitz, 1989).

free laborers. Luxury items like tea, sweets and confections, etc. were available to owners and elites.

In Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste (1984), Bourdieu argued that cultural capital was foundational to social life and defined one's social position. The more capital one possessed, the more powerful or higher position assumed in society. Cultural capital of which Bourdieu illustrated in three forms: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized, referred to categories like skills and credentials, tastes, or material belongings. Elite power is defined in their consumption, imbuing certain foods and tastes, clothes, and mannerisms with more value over others that “can help or hinder one’s social mobility just as much as income or wealth” (Kamphuis, et al. 2015). Wilk, in examining the colonial regime of consumption in Belize, additionally noted, “Goods were positional markers within the hierarchy, both the means by which culture is internalized as taste and external symbolic field through which groups identify boundaries and define differences among classes” (1999: 250). The majority of available food after the end of plantation agriculture continued to be imported.

Marjorie also alludes to a blurring of the local and tourist spaces. Under the current agricultural revitalization and local food movement, locally grown produce and local foods have come to embody Crucian culture in the same way farming is viewed as heritage and tradition. In this Chapter, I explore how farmers have redefined the local, seeking to promote and popularize it both in the community and through tourism. Having identified food tourism as a mechanism for economic survival, the local is being re-positioned for their social and economic advantage. The push by farmers to collaborate and connect their farming with tourism is a strategic effort to appropriate meanings that

once imbued imports with class and social status, and transfer it to local food and culture. “Food nourishes but it also signifies” (Pietrykowski, 2004: 310; see also Fischler 1988). Food is identity and culture and farmers are utilizing what they grow, partnering with the community and selling their craft through tourism. During the annual Taste of St. Croix event in April, attendees are invited to literally consume St. Croix. The event initially showcased famed U.S. chefs and their food creations using local produce. In the last two years, however, more farmers have been featured as chefs providing dishes made from the produce they have grown themselves. Growing participation by the local population in agricultural events and their increased consumption of local products are helping farmers to also establish vital social relations with the community. Further, farmers’ collaborations with traditional tourist spaces of hotels and most restaurants are reshaping St. Croix as less about the sun, sand and beaches to more of a culinary destination. These successes additionally enable farmers’ self-advancement as independent businessmen. It aids in their validation. What they may have begun in performance and self-refashioning, is solidified in the increasing consumption of the local, - in the consuming of St. Croix.

Finally, farmers markets and roadside stands are spaces where culture is both on display and being played out. For Virgin Islands ecologists and historian, Olasee Davis, agriculture and the market are historical places that begun with the practice of slaves growing and selling foods from provision grounds. Davis also remembers growing up in the mid-1960s on both St. Thomas and St. Croix, before there were large supermarkets. In a series of editorials on farming and agriculture in the Virgin Islands Daily News, (February-March 1996), he recalled: “Everyone had things growing right in their backyards, and every weekend, the farmers on the island would bring their produce down

to the market square... [I]t was a tradition for them to come down and buy fresh stuff from the farmers.” For Davis, engagement in the markets is a continuation of historical practices and social communal gatherings – “a wonderful repeating of our history”. I will examine the intersection of tourism and locally produced food in the context of the market. Within these spaces both food and farming are legitimized and reaffirmed as Crucian culture.

Eating local, eating St. Croix

Public recognition of farmers markets, farm stands and roadside stands as central points of tradition and culture on St. Croix has increased more in the past six to eight years than ever before. This recognition is part of the process of reclaiming the local and re-educating the public to love it again, now that it represents so much more than just food. Food, or more precisely, local produce, is packaged as health, culture and tradition in the community supported agriculture programs’ monthly boxes or in the free food bag give-away for seniors and retired government employees. More importantly, farmers understand their local produce as their best chance of economic security and autonomy.

The La Reine Farmers Market, which was constructed in the 1970s, is the most popular of the markets on the island. Perhaps because it is centrally located (mid-island) and just off the main thoroughfare, but even so, it has regular vendors and loyal customers who come to the market every Saturday without fail. Some have been a part of the market from its very beginnings. Ironically, while the local movement acknowledges local food, and these spaces as cultural and historical, the Agnes Heyliger Vegetable Market, in the town of Frederiksted on the Western end of the island and the Christian

‘Shan’ Hendricks Market, in the town of Christiansted on the Eastern end of the island, are hardly used. These two markets have been in existent since the mid-1700s but do not share the same popularity as the La Reine market. They are the historical sites where slaves and freed black populations sold food and craft items. For decades, they have remained under-utilized and in disrepair.

In 2013, then commissioner of the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture (VIDOA), Louis E. Petersen Jr. noted in a media release that it was a good idea to refurbish the venue for farmers to sell their produce and revive activities in these markets that had been mostly dormant. “We would like to see increased economic activity at this historical place which means so much to the residents of St. Croix,” Petersen said.³¹ Despite renovations, however, Frederiksted’s market is largely unused except when cruise ships are in port. Then it is crowded with vendors, like Jo, selling homemade treats, food, drinks, jewelry, art and crafts. Regularly, it serves as a hangout for vagrants or the occasional dominoes game. At the Christiansted market, wild chickens outnumber the two to three vendors who are regularly present on Saturday mornings. Evelyn, an elderly woman who I met in summer 2014, had faithfully been coming to the Christiansted market for over forty years despite the absence of other vendors. She sold old-fashioned remedies and in-season produce. When I came upon her at the market around 8:00am on a Saturday morning, she was alone selling a few jars of tamarind stew and some yellow passion fruit. She had no chair and stood at the table with a pull-cart near her feet, which meant she probable walked to the market from a home close by. There was little traffic of people or cars in the area but Evelyn expected that would

³¹ St. Croix Source, online news publication, October 26, 2013

change once the nearby post office opened at 9a.m. In contrast, the La Reine Farmers Market, which I had just left, had been bustling since opening at 6:a.m. La Reine Farmers Market was often described as the place to see and experience Crucian culture.

“If you want to see culture and farming, you can get a sense of that from the La Reine crowd. The culture of agriculture is more social rather than a business on this island,” commented Hal. He was in his late fifties and had retired early from a career in public relations and marketing. Once his youngest son had left home for college, he and his wife relocated from Illinois to settle permanently on St. Croix. They had been visiting as tourists for years. Others in attendance also expressed Hal’s description of La Reine Farmers Market as a hub of Crucian culture and agriculture, as a social rather than business activity. However, it did not preclude that people were there with the intent to purchase items at the market. This only stressed the camaraderie and small knit community. “There’s nothing more heartwarming than to go to the market and socialize on a Saturday morning. It reminds you of old time community,” laughed Miguel who had previously commented on whether Agatha was a farmer or not. La Reine Farmers market represented a place to see and catch up with old friends rather than just a venue to purchase local produce, for Miguel, and so he spent several hours at the market every Saturday.

The La Reine Farmers Market has been described as “flea market style”. Farmers do not really seem like farmers but rather, “just Crucians with overflowing gardens happy to sell you their excess produce.”³² There are rows of fixed trough-like tables to place merchandise inside. What is sold is an eclectic mix of in-season produce and unregulated

³² Jason Kessler describes the La Reine Farmers Market in his online article for Food Republic, April 26, 2014.

food products. You may find baked goods and other sweets, hot sauces, fruit preserves and stews like gooseberries or tamarind along fresh fruits, vegetable and ground provisions. In an array of assorted recycled food containers, you can also find old fashion healing remedies and body salves incorporating honey, coconut and moringa. Farmers markets and roadside stands have always been a part of the Crucian landscape.



La Reine Farmers Market. Setting up produce on a Saturday morning. Photo Credit: C. Hanley

Utilized most often by locals, they are increasingly becoming popularized tourist spaces. The markets are sometimes included as stops during food tours where tourists sign up to experience the island as a local and “eat St. Croix”³³.

It is important to note that the negative perceptions and stigmas that exist around farming have not been applied to the farmers market. Perhaps because these markets have been seen as historical and social spaces for locally produced goods, it signifies the place for farmers within the community. After all, farmers and agriculture are representative of the islands’ historical cultural identity. Rather, any adverse reactions at the market, tended to be toward vendors selling produce they had brought in from other islands.

³³ <https://www.vifoodtours.com/>

Gwen, a regular vendor at La Reine Farmers Market angrily pulled me aside during one of my visits to point out Vincent, who she accused of selling products from Dominica. “He say it local but you know he just peddling stuff from down island.” She may have been petite in stature but her voice boomed over the noise of the market catching Vincent’s attention. An older gentleman, wearing a straw sun hat and a worn white cotton guayaberra, Vincent looked up with a scowl, sucked his teeth and went back to arranging the produce on his table. However, both buyers and sellers often made allowances, for those ‘local’ Caribbean products, like nutmeg, mace and cinnamon bark, which are not cultivated on St. Croix. Even as Gwen admonished Vincent for selling chayote and ground provisions that he had imported, she admitted to purchasing his nutmeg still freshly wrapped in mace because they made her spice cake “so good”.

Smithers, et al. regards the farmers’ market as “not only a site of exchange, but also as a venue for negotiated meaning in the local food landscape” (2008: 338). The most recent scholarship focuses on the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and New Zealand (Darby et al., 2008; Holloway and Kneafsey, 2000; Kirwan, 2004; Kloppenberg et al., 2000; Joseph et al., 2013; Pratt, 2007; Smithers et al., 2008). These works note that farmers’ markets are constructed spaces within which ideas and values concerning the food and goods exchanged are defined in contrast to retail markets. The farmers market can become an exclusionary space when the process of defining the market extends also to the farmer or vendor who must comply with its notion of authenticity in order to participate as a legitimate actor within its structure (Guthrie, et al. 2006; Pratt 2007). The larger literature on farmers’ markets, while it can point to some similarities in how the space defines the products within it, does not fully capture the

market's function in the Caribbean or specifically on St. Croix; in part because they have always existed as the primary space for locally grown produce.

VIDOA, which manages the farmers markets does not strictly regulate products or limit what vendors sell. Their call for participants, notes:

Markets are open to people interested in selling local produce and other agricultural products such as fruits, vegetables, honey, preserves, plants and pastries made with local fruits.

How local agricultural products are defined, is subject to individual desires.

Local on the island generally means St. Croix and the other U.S. Virgin Islands, (St. Thomas and St. John). It often also extends to the British Virgin Islands whose geographical proximity allows for an almost daily flow of people and other exchanges as well as shared kin. Conversely, local can extend to the Caribbean region as a whole. For example, VIDOA extends vendor invitations to *off-island* farmers to come sell food, food products and crafts at the annual agricultural food fair every February, although the event is described as a celebration of Virgin Islands local tradition and culture. What is the geographical scope of 'local'? How is it understood and how does it function in Virgin Islands food culture? For the Virgin Islands, local food most often means grown in the three islands that make up the territory. On occasion, local extends to the Caribbean region especially if it includes something familiar to and consumed by Virgin Islanders. Problems arise, as in Gwen's and Vincent's case, where items are those also grown in the Virgin Islands and thus competing goods. The politics of localism is not only geographical but also territorial, especially as it relates to a common identity and culture. Perhaps there are allowances to accept nutmeg from Dominica at the farmers' markets, for example. While not grown on St. Croix, it is grown in the Caribbean and is an

ingredient in traditional Virgin Islands foods. However, apples, on the other hand, would pass neither the geographical nor the territorial test in a Crucian farmers market. Apples belong in the supermarkets, the space for imported foods.

Historically on St. Croix, because a majority of available food and food products have always been imported, there is already a clear dichotomy between locally produced food and what is shipped in from beyond the region's boundaries. With almost 99 per cent of food imported to the U.S. Virgin Islands, retail supermarkets became the primary location for purchase. When small crop farming was encouraged after the loss of sugar, an alternate market was provided rather than also utilizing the retail supermarkets. In fact, VIDOA always encouraged the use of first roadside stands and then farmers markets as the main places for farmers and other small producers to sell locally grown produce and food products. In the larger circulation of food items on the island, these have been understood as the space for the local. It is only recently due to growing demand and the willingness of merchants, that organic and local produce can be found in the main supermarkets. Despite the role of farmers markets and roadside stands as the primary spaces for the exchange of local produce, new marketing is again being produced to advertise local goods and reinforce where to find them.³⁴ "It is as if they need to drum it back into the community...but we need to support our farmers," Dean responded as I asked about the posters I had seen around St. Croix during our interview in summer 2014.

Holloway and Kneafsey (2000) explore the farmers market as social space in their works on farmers markets and alternate food networks. They have observed that for some

³⁴ Local meat was already available in supermarkets due to the poor quality of imports upon arrival. Farmers provide supply through their own negotiations with supermarket owners. However, VIDOA must ensure that health and safety regulations are met with all meat coming through the federally inspected abattoir.

attendees it is a fully social event, at which, “informal and friendship networks amongst consumers are as important as mediators of information about this new consumption space” (2000: 289). As a social space, farmers markets maintain relationships in a way the supermarket does not. Farmers markets, farm stands and roadside stands, directly support local farmers and local communities on St. Croix. They provide insight from the producer into the food’s story, its healing qualities or how it was produced. Samuel, whose previous life at the oil refinery has been eclipsed by his passion as a full-time farmer, often relays his growing adventures to customers at his farm stand, especially when selling something new. He tries to grow new varieties he encounters on other islands that would not readily be available on St. Croix. He believes offering something new will help him retain customers and encourage new ones through word of mouth. Samuel often offers samples or a discount urging customers to “try it,” with the request that they return the following week and provide their opinions. “Let me know how it is to you. If you like it, I will get you more,” is a current refrain.

In a small community, these venues forge new relationships and build networks that have large impact. As a result of Samuel’s innovation and attention to customer needs, the non-profit owner of the Taste of St. Croix, Inc. and a customer, selected him to grace the cover of the poster for the 2014 Annual Taste of St. Croix event. This is a week-long event supported by the Virgin Islands Department of Tourism, has recently become centered on farmers and the local foods they produce. After selecting Samuel as the subject for the marketing poster, they selected Jake, farmer and artist, to paint Samuel’s portrait, which was then mass-produced for marketing the event. Since 2014, farmers continue to be an integral part of the Taste of St. Croix events.

Food as cultural capital: Tourism as agriculture's salvation

As agriculture gained more importance following the 2008 recession and production began to increase, the limits of the market became even clearer to farmers. Rose, a former nurse and healthcare worker who took up farming with her partner in order to spend more time with their children, stated that soon after she started, she realized that they could not eat or sell all their produce. VIDOA provided no refrigerated or other storage capabilities. So Rose explained, “I began to think of ways to preserve things instead of seeing them go to waste.” Worried also about the possibility that cargo ships could stop coming to the islands given the economic crisis unraveling in Puerto Rico³⁵, Rose expanded her preserves to sell alongside the fresh produce to provide for the community as well. She sells a variety of products, from pasta sauce to fruit preserves to homemade soaps. While she runs a farm stand on leased land four days a week, she also sells at the La Reine market for added exposure and to grow a regular customer base that will also seek her out directly at her farm for specialty products. Rose’s preserves can sometimes be found at Dean’s farm stand as farmers continue moving in the direction of supporting and investing in each other.

As farmers have made gradual progress in establishing themselves in the community, support for their efforts also continue to grow. Both the former and current Agricultural commissioners, representing a farmer and agricultural researcher

³⁵ When I met Rose in late summer 2015, Puerto Rico had just defaulted on a \$58 million bond payment. The island was already in a financial crisis under substantial debt to the U.S. and unable to meet its pension obligations. What increased panic, to people in the Virgin Islands were the similarities they saw in the USVI government who had also defaulted on loans but had additionally been borrowing against the government employee retirement system (GERS) for a number of years, at the expense of retirees, some of which had been waiting at least two years for their pensions. As a larger U.S. territory with more autonomy, many viewed Puerto Rico’s situation as a foreshadowing of what would befall the USVI.

respectively, are trying to provide more backing in this revitalization. However, with an already limited budget and looming cuts, they are restricted in what they have been able to do. Petersen (the former commissioner) now works with the university's Cooperative Extension Services leading workshops and training programs. Robles, the current commissioner, promotes apiculture in the territory, collaborating with farmers and with university researchers (see Crossman & Robles, 2010). There has been an increase in beekeeping, the sale of local honey, and merchandise derived from beeswax like candles, cosmetics and other beauty products. With a larger social media presence in the last year, VIDOA began highlighting individual farmers and farms. They regularly publish weekly markets and farm stands and rather than touting the Annual Agriculture and Food Fair, the only large agricultural event that has been available as an outlet for farmers, they have created a series of smaller events called "Value added food vendoramas" that serve as additional pop-up markets around holidays or local historical celebrations³⁶ for farmers to sell their produce.

These initiatives do not negate that VIDOA is still largely inefficient in its day-to-day support of farmers. Stymied by crumbling infrastructures and a lack of money, making improvements to provide farmers with vital necessities like water remain problematic. Promises by each newly elected governor to increase funds to support agriculture have yet to occur. Although the 2015 VIDOA administration, under Robles, has gone further than past administrations in supporting farmers and attempting to improve conditions, the government has still made little financial investments. It is the

³⁶ Local historical celebrations include, but are not limited to, the Virgin Islands-Puerto Rico Friendship day celebrated every year in lieu of Columbus Day; Bull and Bread day celebrated on November 1st in honor of David Hamilton Jackson, a labor leader, journalist and community activist on St. Croix and Transfer Day celebrated every March 31st marking the transfer of the Danish Virgin islands to the United States.

will and determination of the farmers to be self-sufficient and successful, nonetheless, which have appeared to be the surest path to agriculture's success. My point here is that while the government takes its time in meeting their needs, farmers have not stood by idly.

Rather importantly, farmers on St. Croix are on the path to creating a national cultural identity where one has not fully existed in the U.S. Virgin Islands. I argue that Crucian farmers have laid claim to local produce and farming as cultural tradition and heritage, turning to tourism to further popularize and reaffirm the notion. They are intentionally re-crafting existing structures to create frameworks to support a more prominent agricultural industry. To facilitate this, farmers are partnering with local non-profits and the Department of Tourism to participate in existing events or bring new events (and tourists) directly to their farms and markets pushing food to the forefront in defining a Crucian (as well as a Virgin Islands) identity.

In Sponsored Identities: Cultural Politics in Puerto Rico, Davila's work centers on the Puerto Rican government's effort to put in place an official cultural policy creating a distinctive national identity for the island (1997). The goal was to unite all the disparate parts of society as well as define Puerto Rico in contrast to the United States. This was accomplished under a national identity based on Hispanic heritage and peasant culture. However, over time corporate sponsorships and grassroots movements have made competing claims challenging this notion of authentic Puerto Rican culture and identity and inserting their own representations. In contrast, definitions of a national identity for the U.S. Virgin Islands vacillates between none, a Caribbean and American identity, or too pluralistic for any common Virgin Islands identity further hampered by

U.S. cultural imperialism (Roopnarine, 2010; Statham, 2003). The implications of this, as argued by Rivera (2009) in his examination of a failed political referendum for statehood, independence or status quo in 1993, is that owing to a lack of national ‘symbols and signs,’ there would be little chance of real political change for the Virgin Islands. Further, license plates proclaiming *American Paradise* and the American Imperial Eagle as its flag indicated an absence of a much needed national identity (Rivera, 2009: 46). The lack of a national identity does not mean that there have not been claims to one. The struggle to define a native Virgin Islander in the past failed attempts to ratify a constitution, illustrate this³⁷. Rather it shows that there has not been a sanctioned official policy for the Virgin Islands in same ways as there has been for Puerto Rico.

Yet, as Davila suggests, cultural nationalism is inherently connected to forms of political action (1997). She notes, “culture constitutes a dominant discourse to advance debate, and legitimize conflicting claims” (1997:2). For non-sovereign territories, like Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, culture is the level at which they have the power to exercise autonomy. “It is this historical function of culture as the only institutionalized channel of nationalism that has since heightened the significance of the idiom of culture as a venue of self-identification and political debate” (Davila, 1997:11). As a result, there are always competing claims and arguments for authenticity but further intensified under transnationalism and global capitalism. Moreover, these constructs of identity are never free from contestation. A cultural national identity based on a heritage of agricultural traditions emerging on St. Croix is due to the assertion of current farmers recognizing their potential under a challenging economy. Tara, speaking to the resurgence, commented:

³⁷ See footnote 2.

“We weren’t ready before. We were small thinking. But without Hovensa, we needed to get serious. Necessity drives invention... Now it’s not just farming and growing demand but food as exposure, food as currency to save the Virgin Islands.”

Farmers became politically charged as a result of the increasing economic crisis on St. Croix after the loss of its largest employer. Food, symbolic of Crucian culture and identity, became the means through which they could advance agriculture and legitimize the importance of farmers to the wider economy. The increased interests in local produce has highlighted the untapped potential of agriculture and recharged farmers to demand more progress in redeveloping the industry. They now understand farming as the internal economic stimulus St. Croix needs and tourism as its vehicle.

Studies of linkages between Caribbean agriculture and tourism have been ongoing for decades as countries tried to find ways to mitigate their reliance on imports by boosting their locally grown agricultural product. These have focused on building relationships with hotels and increasing their purchase of domestic products to build the local economy as well as turning to alternate forms of tourism like eco-tourism, heritage tourism and food tours (Belisle, 1983, 1984; Conway & Timms 2010; Duval 2004; Lundgren, 1973; Momsen, 1972; 1986; Scher 2011; Weaver 2001, 2006; Wilks 1999). Given structural adjustment policies, most Caribbean countries are required to engage in liberal trade policies that continue to position their domestic produce against imports that can sometimes be cheaper or of better quality (Iqbal, 1993; Klak, 1998; Potter et al., 2004; Weis, 2004). Work by Timms (2006, 2008), has suggested studying linkages as relationships and focusing on farmers rather than hotels to resolve issues of production and distribution. The intent is to transform the domestic agriculture sector so that it is first beneficial to the poor by starting at the micro-level of linkages. However, the solution

should not be to just stimulate local agriculture to meet tourism demands but a full transformation also meeting the needs of the local population.

Part of what has sustained the resurgence and continues to popularize farming on St. Croix is its span across various sectors of the island community. Through my observations and attendance at various events, farmers appeared involved in everything related to food and cultural celebrations taking place on the island including the promotion of nutrition and health. For example, farmers took part in chef competitions during the annual Taste of St. Croix event held over a week every April. During that same week, high school students attended workshops on the organic farm, learning how to harvest and then prepare local foods. Some farmers prepared food boxes for a senior living center with VIDO, and others join the non-profit, Virgin Islands Good Food Coalition, in preparing a school garden as part of a growing Farm to School initiative. Many farmers are invested beyond increasing just consumption and demand of their products. A few farmers also devoted to improving both agricultural diversity and health on the island, have begun experimenting with crops not traditionally grown on St. Croix. Jake is growing amaranth, considered a new super grain high in iron, on the island's east end. Others, like Samuel, try to introduce new versions or recapture things that were once plentiful but were lost due to overdevelopment in certain areas of the island.

Nate, owner and operator of the only organically certified farm on the island has expressed as often as he can that the movement as he sees it is not about first growing local food but rather improving the island's health. Originally from Georgia, his work as a field researcher for national parks in US and Mexico inspired his thoughts on sustainability and heritage preservation. His goal as a farmer has not been about profit,

but rather “to first be able to feed at least 1% of the Virgin Islands’ people” and share the experience and education of sustainable living. In 2005, he started farming with a friend on St. Croix and five years later took over the farm. Local farmers initially were unsure of Nate. Sustainability translated into his home being made out of converted storage containers. The farm features such as a central kitchen and living center to accommodate workers, volunteers, student interns as well as several open-air cabanas spread throughout the acreages. Although, his commitment to the island, his agricultural and environmental knowledge, and willingness to collaborate with other farmers and community advocates has made him an integral part of St. Croix’s agricultural revitalization. His motto, ‘Don’t live on a place. Live in a place,’ can be seen in his actions. “But his farming methods and particularly only using about 20 out of 100 acres, at first was very different to the rest of us,” commented a longtime Crucian farmer who had just begun to work for Nate. Nate’s honest concern for the island and its people made many much more receptive to the ideas he introduced and increased their willingness to adopt new practices. Local advocates sought Nate out to assist them with sustainable school gardens and healthy lunches. Student groups, both local and from abroad, spend time on his farm, learning how to harvest their produce as well as how to turn them into healthy meals. Nate started the first Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program on St. Croix that quickly became popular the program was expanded to include St. Thomas and St. John. Following that lead, Dean also began a local CSA program that is eligible for EBT/SNAP programs participation that includes fresh goat meat along with a variety of available vegetables.

Sheller has argued of the Caribbean as a place formed in the collective imagination. It is “an effect, a fantasy, a set of practices and a context” shaped under

colonial consumption practices and the movement of commodities produced under Caribbean slavery and their movement through the Western world (2003: 5). The economic, political, and cultural consumption that bound the Caribbean to the West initially also sets it as ‘a place apart’ whose importance in impelling Europe to predominance is forgotten and erased from their history. Yet these mobilities or ties that bind the Caribbean, Western Europe and also North America (particularly the United States) continue even in present everyday consumption practices. Moreover, while these ties can re-articulate old dependencies and fantasy, there is also overlap, flows and the sharing of knowledge that form new ideas and ruptures creating new ‘sites of agency’ and spaces of resistance. When Sheller urges Caribbean residents (or those living in contemporary post-slavery societies) to “take responsibility for their own practices of consumption” (2003: 7), I understand that Crucian farmers are doing this. They have utilized their food as a vehicle for both social change and political action.

Seasonal CSA’s build new customer bases while other farmers have partnered with VIDOA to provide monthly food baskets to the elderly and government retirees. Some committed to providing for the community and promoting better health and nutrition, collaborate with the Department of Education and the Department of Human Services to provide produce for public school lunch programs, and senior centers and homes. Further, most farmers are no longer satisfied with sitting on the margins and waiting for those desiring local produce to seek them out. For example, through the use of social media and online food blogs, farmers are promoting themselves locally as well as to Virgin Islanders abroad – the expat community that has recently become a popular targeted segment of tourism marketing. Samuel has built a reputation for his roasted corn

social gatherings and melon tastings held on his farm and advertised on Facebook. He has a regular following and even gets inquiries regarding his next gathering from Virgin Islanders abroad who are planning their visits back home. VIDOA has begun a monthly feature on local farmers on Facebook as well – who they are, what they grow and where to find them. Tara's blog is geared towards her homemade recipes using locally grown produce, fish and meats. On occasion she features the farms, stands and fishermen that supply her with the ingredients used.

Farmers are additionally partnering with restaurants, hotels and other local chefs to host slow-down dinners and farm-to-table presentations featuring only the local produce from their farms. As a result, they attract both locals and tourists increasing their shared interactions, which was not the case before. Marketing of events as community-gathering spaces that are inclusive of both tourist and locals further help spread an identity of culture and tradition tied to food and farmers, especially when these are hosted on the farms themselves. Dean hosts slow down dinners on his farm with local chefs. Using produce and fresh meat from the farm, chefs provided a 5-course meal made outdoors on makeshift stoves and grills. Each dish and the ingredients that go into making them are explained as they served. The goal of slow-down dinners and farm-to-table events initially was to educate the community (local and visitor) about sustainable practices and to encourage them to eat local. It is also however, about consuming aspects of Crucian culture from how the food is made, who is cooking, to how and where it is served. On makeshift stoves, pumpkin soup is often cooked and presented inside the pumpkin shell.

Pietrykowski notes that the “slow food seeks to position food as a key constituent in the development and maintenance of community. It seeks to de-center the identification of food and status as a commodity” (2004: 311). Food is more than subsistence. In regards to encouraging sustainable practices, food is not just taste but social cause. More so, it is identity, community and memory. For some locals it is a nostalgic return to foods they remembered from childhood that became replaced by the easy accessibility of imported foods. For visitors it is Crucian culture on display and a chance to learn about and consume it. Slow down dinners bring exposure and build community.

Nate’s organic farm additionally adds an educational factor to some of their competitive dinners. He hosts a four-day Bush Skills Rendezvous event that culminates in a Bush Chef cook-off competition/slow down dinner. Participants can pay for daily events or pay to lodge in open-air cabanas or tents for the full four days. Each day has a unique theme, like Primitive Survival Skills that might include students from the local public high school teaching attendees how to start a fire from natural materials or how to make stone tools. Other days might include a day of learning how to grow and cook with a variety of herbs, use medicinal plants, and help to identify and cultivate edible wild plants. On the final day, chefs (up to four) compete to be the best, setting up outdoor kitchens and making a meal out of the local ingredients found on the farm. Participants judge the dishes and a winner is chosen. “We do this to share new things and remind ourselves what we can do together in nature,” explains Nate. Sometimes, Nate’s farm partners with eco-tourism tour groups to lead historical hikes along paths where medicinal plants and herbs can be introduced and then sampled. Slow down dinners and

Bush Chef competitions happen largely in outdoor settings on the farms usually among rows of growing produce. Chefs are often local farmers or if not, then partnered with farmers and other community members engaged in some form of food production.

Production methods and the tools involved build on the idea of tradition, culture and heritage. This partnered with some historically based education creates an attachment to St. Croix for its attendees - a cultural embodiment to the island.

Importantly, however, it is not only farmers who have cemented the resurgence of local food and agriculture by changing old habits and forming new collaborations.

Restaurant chefs and owners also influenced by global food movements to go local and non-profit and community groups attempting to preserve and promote Crucian culture seek out farmers and food events. The Taste of St. Croix is a non-profit organization started by an American restaurant owner who moved to St. Croix in 2001. Her mission was to promote the restaurant and hospitality service industries in the Virgin Islands and to encourage local youth to participate in the industry. The annual Taste of St. Croix program began as an event featuring local (U.S. Mainlanders who had moved to St. Croix) and U.S. celebrity chefs celebrating dishes that highlighted some local produce. However, in its initial years it was geared more towards tourist and was a 1 ½ to 2-day event. Currently it is a weeklong event with multiple festivities per day through out the island. It includes youth apprentices, local Crucian chefs, artisans and farmers. It includes collaborative efforts with VIDO, the Department of Tourism, and the Hotel Association to name a few. The St. Croix Foundation, a local non-profit serving as a bridge to fill the gaps that government and specialized nonprofits cannot, have funded projects in areas of 'Economic Development, Historic Restoration, Public Safety, and Education Reform'.

They host an annual St. Croix Food and Wine fundraiser that brings in experts and enthusiasts from abroad in an event that also highlights local food, farming and sustainability. In addition to the restaurants, farmers are featured at several of the events, serving a representative dish made from their own produce. Judges then vote on the best dish.

“Given the strong relationship between food and identity, it is not surprising that food becomes an important place marker in tourism promotion” (Richards, 2003: 8). However, the serving up of St. Croix as a culinary destination also means food is fashionable. While farmers are central figures in the local events, it is attractive local chefs who have been trained abroad doing the media circuit as culinary ambassadors most recently in Virgin Islands tourism promotions. Beverly Nicholson-Doty, Commissioner of the Virgin Islands Department of Tourism, noted:

“Tourism works best when it is an infusion of the community and the visitor... People take away experiences and that’s what we see, agriculture, farm-to-table and food as a unifying method of one having an experience. So much of your vacation is centered around what you eat and the people that you meet.”³⁸

Making food central to the tourist experience brings added value to the local product. The past 3-4 years have additionally seen a bi-annual food truck sampling event, and Dine VI, a annual restaurant week. There are cultural events that feature music concerts or cultural dancers, all including pop-up agricultural vendor events or food tastings. It is important to reiterate that these events are no longer geared primarily to tourists but inclusive of the local population. By participating in these events and bringing events like slow down dinners and food competitions directly to their farms,

³⁸ Read more here: <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/article66022767.html#storylink=cpy>

farmers allow tourists and locals to gain exposure to their products in hope of creating future demands. Nate also hosts farm-stays, which encourage tourists to experience farming, harvesting and eating local while also enjoying the other natural bounties of St. Croix. Other farmers without this capacity invite students for day tours, workshops or hands on experience. These types of involvement by farmers expand their presence in the community as entrepreneurs while also allowing them to retain their identity as traditional (but innovative) farmers. Tourism has provided a broader market to establish and grow St. Croix's agricultural industry than any official government policy or investment thus far.

Chapter 5

Farmers' Awakening: A Call to Political Action and Self-Determination

It is 9a.m. on a Wednesday morning and the heat is already oppressive. After we walked through what little was left of the drought decimated vegetables Pierre had planted, he directed me towards the most recent water tower constructed by the Army Corp of Engineers for VIDOA. Sweat pools from under his cotton hat into the lines deeply etched in his face. Pierre wipes a cloth handkerchief over his mouth pointing forward. Wrongly assembled, the tower leaks once water got above the one-third mark. Given his farm's location, Pierre relies on this tower to get water to his crops. Only, once the leak was discovered, VIDOA stopped installation of the pipes carrying water to Pierre's leased lands and decommissioned the tower. They intended instead to run pipes from the nearest water reservoir, down the hill and two other farms away. Four months later, Pierre is still waiting for pipes to be connected while also struggling to have produce to sell each week. Even after paying \$90 for a truck of water as a last resort, Pierre has lost over an acre planted in peppers, cucumbers and beets, after watering each by hand. His neighboring farmers are sympathetic. However, they too are struggling from the lack of rain and reliance on the shared but small reservoir. Pierre, originally from Haiti, has been farming since he was 15 years old. At 59, he is quite accustomed to the unpredictability of nature. However, as the provider for his family, especially for his 8-week old baby girl, he, like others, feel frustrated by the lack of infrastructure available to ease difficult times like these.

In 1973, Rudolph Shulterbrandt, then President of the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture, thanked farmers for continuing to labor despite the daily challenges and adversities they faced; from the high cost of land to inefficient labor, from difficulty in acquiring equipment to a lack of available markets, as well as poor access to water and irregular weather patterns (1973:3). Like all other Presidents (now called commissioners), he made promises to resolve these issues and improve infrastructure. Forty-one years



Water reservoir with smokestack ruins from a sugar factory on St. Croix. (Photo Credit: E. Laurencin)

later, farmers continue to face the exact same adverse conditions with almost no improvements to the infrastructure of Crucian agriculture. Rather decades of neglect and lack of investment has left the industry broken. While farmers have found ways in the

recent years to assert themselves, there is still much that must be done to sustain agriculture beyond this most recent resurgence, to become a truly viable economic solution for the Virgin Islands.

Sheller has noted that new forms of cultural activism have emerged in the wake of academic interests in food mobilities and food geographies.³⁹ Food has become an important vehicle to push for change as already seen in global food movements. In the previous chapters, Dean suggests that farmers' efforts to revitalize agriculture and promote local produce, particularly through tourism, is an attempt to force the government to recognize the importance of both farmers and the industry through tourism's profitability. As a direct challenge, it is to make the government realize that economic growth does not necessarily have to come from an external source but that they can invest in and focus on what the islands themselves can provide. I argue that in addition to pushing the government into awareness, farmers, through their political actions are unsettling existing concepts of sovereignty and political self-determination. They are not waiting for change to come through the traditional channels of government support and policy. This chapter looks at three particular occurrences of activism through which farmers have been able to affect change: First, through forming effective collaborations and participating as political actors in tandem with government agencies; second, through deliberately orchestrated verbal attacks on VIDOA to push for drought relief; and, finally regaining control of a historically prominent sugar plantation to further galvanize support of the community for farming by tying advocacy for agriculture to a cultural inheritance of black rebellion. While far from wide sweeping revolutionary

³⁹ Mimi Sheller -- <http://en.forumviesmobiles.org/printfvm/1160>

transformation, these events have made an immediate impact calling attention to needs of farmers and moving towards improving and fortifying agriculture. More over, farmers' actions have helped to establish meaningful long-term investments contributing to real possibilities for a future viable industry.

Election year and time to act

In March 2014, a new age seemed to have dawned on agriculture and farming on St. Croix. Already more popular as the demands for local produce grew, government officials were entering into agreements to further bolster the industry. The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service in the Caribbean Area (NRCS CB) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture (VIDOA) and the Virgin Islands Conservation District (VICD) to help sustain communities and improve water supplies for local farmers. Its main purpose was to develop additional land to support more sustainable agricultural operation and provide additional water resources and better access through additional irrigation pipelines.⁴⁰

However funds from NRCS CB with cost-share from VIDOA were not readily available to begin any of the planned projects. VICD or “the District” as it was referred to locally, was to administer the funds and implement projects. VICD is a grassroots organization originally established under U.S. Virgin Islands law to advocate for farmers

⁴⁰ Specifically the MOU detailed the following: 1) Develop 402 acres of cropland and pastureland with adequate infrastructure to support sustainable agricultural operations; 2) Build three water supply tanks: a 50,000-gallon tank in St. Croix and 50,000-gallon and 20,000-gallon tanks in St. Thomas; 3) Install irrigation pipelines to supply water to the Community Gardens in St. Croix and Estates Bordeaux and Dorothea in St. Thomas; 4) Install drip irrigation systems for crop producers on farm plots in St. Croix, St. Thomas and St. John; and, 5) Build a sediment retention pond in Estate Bordeaux on St. Thomas. <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/pr/newsroom/features/?cid=stelprdb1251911>

and other land users in the community. Resurrected by VIDOA after eight years of inactivity, the District was best known for its work in the 1970's and 1980's when it worked with residents on matters of environmental protection, in particular soil conservancy. Beyond those decades it had been unproductive without directive from VIDOA. In its current reiteration, more importantly, VICD members were now farmers and community representatives working alongside VIDOA and USDA.

Dean was a member of VICD and among those who had signed the MOU when we first met in June 2014. I had come prepared with a list of interview questions but we soon fell into a conversation about farming on the island ignoring the organized format I had planned. After decades of frustration over lack of resources like land and water, an MOU had been signed promising USDA funds that had previously been inaccessible. Dean was irritable and impatient although it had only been just over three months. It was an election year and candidates for Governor were again making promises to address the needs of farmers as they do every four years. Dean referred to this as, "usual chatter that goes nowhere" worried that this step forward would stall by a new administration with no interest in agriculture. Farmers had finally found a sincere supporter in Louis Peterson, the current commissioner, who would likely be replaced by a new administration. I offered that at least VIDOA was doing a good job with the annual agricultural fair. It had grown in the past few years and had recently begun promoting individual farms, farmers and agriculture beyond the territory through its tourism marketing. Dean became visibly upset at this point, but he responded calmly:

"Um, I give credence or kudos to the individuals of the Agriculture Fair but it is not a government entity. On the posters, you would think so. They will say the department of agriculture. They are the main contributors. But guess what? It is a private non-profit. It was a part of the Dept. of Ag but someone was thinking way

ahead or the group was thinking way ahead and they actually pulled it out of the Department of Ag and incorporated it... I don't think the organization in itself is bent on the development or promotion of agriculture, per say. But at least there are a few [people] within the organization who uses it for the promotion of the industry. So what happens includes every governor, every senator in it to keep them conscious that this (promotion of the industry) must happen. That's my opinion...this is how I read into it because as far as I'm concerned they did not have to include any government officials in it being a private entity... So what happens most people in the community thinks it is a government entity but we (the farmers) know the government doesn't do it."

Dean revealed that what appeared to be a government effort supporting agriculture in the form of the annual agricultural fair was actually the action of private residents running a non-profit that chose to support agriculture. Their inclusion of government officials was intended (at least in Dean's mind) to force a continuous awareness of the importance of the industry. That people, formerly affiliated with the department, were working behind the scene to push agriculture validated the larger belief that agriculture and its continuation were important to the community. It additionally supported the notion that while some people at VIDOA desired to do more for farmers, they were restricted by the lack of a budget and other vital resources. In a calmer moment, Dean had noted, "I don't know why someone would want to do a job like that," referring to the VIDOA commissioner. "Even if you wanted to help, your hands are tied... There's no plan and no money." Farmers had found a sympathetic ear in past as well as the current commissioners but without financial resources, there was often little they could do. However, on the matter of a partnership that involved government officials, farmers and others from various sectors, Dean agreed that it seemed a good way at achieving benefits for the agricultural industry. It offered an example, he said, of "how farmers can make change for themselves... with what we have," even as he remained unsure about VICD and the memorandum of understanding.

Collaborative partnerships was the model he had put forth for his own farm and a couple of months later Dean and his partnering farmers along with two non-profit groups made a passionate plea at the 2014 Democratic Primary Election Forum on the importance of improving and supporting local agriculture for economic development.⁴¹ The group called for an election platform to include a complete restructuring of VIDOA, and an increase in their budget. They requested the University of the Virgin Islands and VIDOA work together to assist existing farmers and create avenues for new ones through a degree program in agricultural science. They called for all land held in various government divisions be reassigned to VIDOA and that these lands then be redistributed to old and new farmers and finally reiterated an urgent need for an improved physical infrastructure to support it. Dean noted on his PowerPoint presentation the importance of partnerships and working together – “The power of our community, Government and Private Partner moving in the same direction economically could change the social, political, economical, and environmental and wellness of our VI community through developing our territory agriculture”.

Farmers like many in the community had always supported the campaigns of friends and family members but seldom had they ever advocated directly for themselves at a large platform. For every push forward, very little progress seemed to be achieved. This time, however, beyond the presentation, Dean and others continued advocating through social media, on radio shows, local TV programs and at agricultural events. As local produce and farmers continued to grow in popularity in part due to increasing

⁴¹ Of the non-profits Dean presented with, one was affiliated with the government’s economic development commission and another without government affiliations but focused on agricultural development.

tourism, more and more farmers found themselves invited to take part in public events. Farmers and farming were everywhere and community support continued to increase.

Although restricted by a lack of funds and other resources dedicated to agriculture, the new commissioner sworn in in late 2015 began to work more closely with farmers input to begin to improve the department's services. In addition to Virgin Islands Conservation District (VICD), he created the Virgin Islands Agriculture Advisory Group (VIAAG), made up of farmers, government officials, private entities and non-profits. The group purpose is to support a viable industry and enhance life in the islands through providing technical support and funding to farmers, focusing on matters of conservation of natural resources and environmental issues. VIAAG also promotes education, training, and marketing with the goal to further develop the agricultural industry.

Small but tactical efforts can bring about change. With VIDOA's help, a portion of promised USDA funds and cost-share was secured the following year. Actual work on proposed projects like a community garden and improved irrigation would still be delayed until the funds were actually received this was still closer to it becoming a reality. Further, Dean and other farmers illustrated that while they could not disengage from the system that constrained them, they could still alter it to their benefit. They continued to push back believing that their efforts additionally helped in facing the drought of 2015.

The drought of 2015 and persistence

Farmers have always known that weather-related disasters are part of the normal struggles of their lives. Additionally, they have also accepted that despite their continual

complaints, the government would consistently fail to provide the adequate sources they needed to support recovery. In the current period, however, farmers have become less complacent. Having recognized the legitimacy of their needs and their value to the community, farmers are choosing to push against the once familiar impediments. Their previous acceptance of their hardships recalls Arcadio Diaz Quiñones' take on Puerto Ricans living their lives in a space inhabited by *la brega*.⁴² While literally translating to struggle, Quiñones understands it as coping or dealing with life's hardships and choosing ones battles. At the same time, this space of *la brega* is open to negotiations. It is not passive but also not characterized by intense or direct action. Change occurs 'little-by-little', through small but deliberate actions.

After more than seven months without adequate rainfall in July of 2015, farmers were in dire straights. Expected harvests were decimated leaving little to no crops to bring to market. Those raising livestock, without water and places for animals to graze, hurried to prepare to cull herds that were already dying. However, they found the government-run abattoir closed when they needed it most. Without a federal inspector on site, abattoir operations must cease and the inspector who serviced the entire territory was detained on St. Thomas attempting to deal with dying cattle. Farms on the already arid east end of the island, in addition to similar worries, were in fear of brush fires.

Typically, in mid-July through August, farmers who could afford to would shut down operations. They would allow the land to rest during the hot and dry period, spending the time to work on preparations for new planting in September barring any tropical depressions, storms or hurricanes. However, because of the lengthy period

⁴² In *Dream Nation: Puerto Rican Culture and the Fictions of Independence*. 2014. Maria Acosta Cruz. Rutgers University Press. Pp.69-71.

without rainfall, harvests had been small throughout the year and farmers continued to try to bring in an income with whatever they could grow. This was not atypical of Virgin Islands weather, which often is punctuated by periods of drought or heavy rains. The duration was unexpected⁴³ but the lack of planning and absence of resources to ameliorate somewhat predictable circumstances compounded the issues increasing anxiety and anger among farmers and their supporters. The fears were additionally heightened as a result of the economic crisis the islands were embroiled in.

Therefore, when Puerto Rico successfully received U.S. federal disaster relief related to the drought in July, Crucian farmers and other community members took to social media and newspaper editorials in anger to attack VIDOA for not doing the same and for not attempting to provide any immediately needed help. Calculatedly, online criticisms were further highlighted with pictures of devastated fields and dead animals. A livestock farmer lamenting what he called the “Cruzian (sic) Great Depression” wrote on Facebook:

“The island of St Croix is slowly watching it's livestock parish(sic), along with the grass, while being in the midst of the worst drought in years. So far no government agency has issued an agricultural state of emergency. The most that was done was an advisory to let the farmers know to stock up on grain, and that was in June 2014. A whole year has passed and things have not gotten better... Why hasn't the government issued a state of emergency. We are in a Dust Bowl like state, you might even say it's our Great Depression. With the lack of jobs and dramatic decline and numbers of livestock on island, many farmers must choose between feeding themselves and their animals...

What fate lies ahead for the Cruzian livestock farmer? If attention isn't paid to our dilemma, I foresee a bleak future ahead for those who raise cattle and any small livestock. To curtail this scenario I encourage everybody to open their eyes and see it for what it is, A livestock genocide. While government officials ignore this issue our FOOD is slowly withering away and dwindling in numbers.

⁴³ Worst drought in the Caribbean in five years

<https://weather.com/climate-weather/drought/news/caribbean-worst-drought-five-years-impacts>

Warning some pics might be graphic for those blind to the truth.”

After 15 years raising sheep and being one of the few Halal farmers on island, he feared that 2015 would be his last year. Other farmers responded in anger, in prayer or in affirmation of joint support for each other. Still others set up links to contribution sites to support island wide farmers to be able to purchase feed and water. However, thanks to social media, outcry and criticism of VIDOA and the government in general, reach far beyond the U.S. Virgin Islands to reach expatriates angrily making inquiries on behalf of their families and friends. Business owners joined in also admonishing the government for doing nothing.

To apply for relief, VIDOA needed to provide data like rainfall yields over the course of the year and statistics on related crop losses and animal fatalities. In an interview with a deputy commissioner at VIDOA, I was told that official rainfall data had not been kept and that this was delaying efforts to assist farmers. However, the National Weather Service⁴⁴ of the National Centers for Environmental Information already includes some data on weather conditions in the U.S Virgin Islands as part of its regular reports on Puerto Rico and surrounding areas. More problematic, was the lack of information on farmers’ losses. The rather frustrated deputy commissioner who had also been fielding phone complaints about both the drought and abattoir, argued, “farmers don’t tell you about yields, crop losses, animal fatalities. At the same time they want services but won’t share information on their crops or how much they sell for, how much they make... they don’t want you to know their business.”

⁴⁴ https://www.weather.gov/climate/local_data.php?wfo=sju

Indeed farmers are distrustful and resentful because they believe the organization should be doing more to help grow the agricultural industry. They deliberately kept information to themselves as if to demonstrate that if VIDOA would not help them then neither would they offer to help VIDOA. This distrust, as I learned from farmers on leased land, stems from the lack of support or the poor quality service they provide. At the same time, VIDOA blames the governor for not prioritizing agriculture and therefore not providing them with an adequate budget to be able to do more. During a group exchange, Roy, who had been farming for 40 years on St. Croix, declared angrily, “They don’t help us farmers... If they do show up to help you plow, they don’t even clean off the wheels from the previous farm! They don’t help you with the cultivation and they make you pay!”



Drought ridden grazing field on St. Croix. (Photo credit: K. Finca)

Henry angrily chimed in, “You put in a work order, two weeks gone and you don’t see anyone. If you go there to ask, they get kind of aggressive and then they don’t

come for another month... They have 12-14 tractors just sitting there and see the men just sitting down. I have thing to plow... If you don't put thing to grow in the ground you can't live." There is also a sense that to openly complain is just as bad as receiving their help. Either way, it is the farmer who suffers.

Weather related issues could not be prevented. Nonetheless, as a regular occurrence, measures should be in place to handle emergency situations. The argument could be made that planning on the part of both farmers and VIDOA are warranted. As previously mentioned the independence claimed by farmers still appears a paradox in the face of their dependence on VIDOA. However, agriculture has historically been managed in an official capacity (by government). For the majority of farmers on leased land, it is still so. To ensure that they are adequately prepared for such emergencies means working with VIDOA to put planning in place. Nevertheless, even without drought conditions, water and access issues remain a problem on the island for all. Deforestation of the islands to create plantations led to a great deal of erosion over time. The soil in many areas is high in clay content and drains poorly. Rainfall becomes less effective in light of the increased water evaporation (Cheslek 2003; Johnston, 1998).

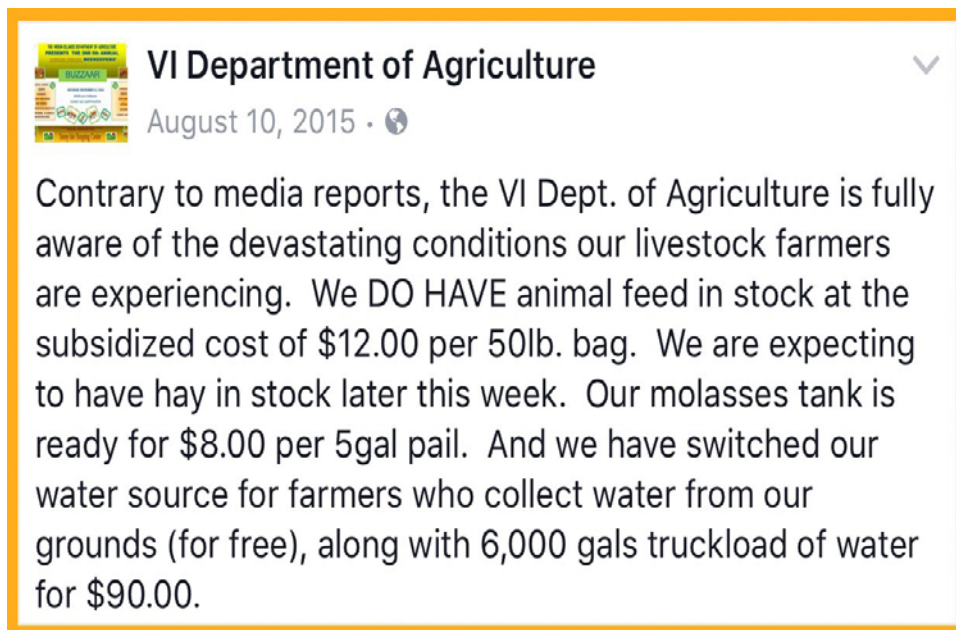
Farmers on leased lands share water towers and ground reservoirs. In some cases, older hand dug wells are accessible but often with very poor quality water. There is no limit on how much they can use so a farmer with 20 acres ultimately makes use of more water than a farmer with 2 ½ acres. As a result, it is not unusual for a farmer to find they are unable to draw adequate water for their crops because water levels in the tower have gotten too low and there is no immediate assistance from VIDOA to refill it. Some farmers attempt to provide supplemental sources of water when needed. These are also

problematic. Henry, a farmer in his late 60s whose 2 ½ acres bordered Pierre's, showed me the concrete slab where his 50-gallon water buffalo had sat near the makeshift shed before it was stolen that Spring. As a result he got to his farm as early as possible each day to water crops as he shares the same tank as the farmer with 20 acres. If he is late or experiences a lack of water from the tank, he must carry buckets from the small reservoir nearby. Of note is that during the drought, farmers on private lands were better prepared, either because they had cisterns or other water storage capabilities. Malik, who previously leased land from VIDO, was given the opportunity to farm on currently unused family land when plans to build a house had been delayed. He considered himself lucky to have a finished cistern on the land to capture water when it rained but noted, "Even that doesn't make it easy... Cisterns don't refill without rain. When it get bad, you think do I buy some food and more seeds or buy a truck of water?" Unfortunately, these farmers on private lands are the minority. The majority lease government lands. On short-term leases, most are ineligible to qualify for federal agricultural loans or grant programs. Without adequate or stable incomes to secure loans, farmers cannot afford to purchase their own land.

Moreover, aging farmers, (the average age is 55), struggle to plant, care for crops and harvest often on their own given the lack of available labor. Henry, for example, worked mainly with the help of his wife. Occasionally, he could convince friends "to come out for a morning here and there to put in some potatoes or weed... But is hard to afford someone to really help." After years of hard work and raising his family, he had looked forward to both him and his wife retiring. Unfortunately, the recession meant they needed supplemental income to pay the bills so he continued farming. "You would think

at this stage with your youngest being twenty-eight and with grandkids we could retire. But things expensive...” Some current farmers who had followed the path of parents or other family members who were once involved in sugar cultivation into farming, now encourage their own children to look for futures elsewhere. In spite of high unemployment rates, farm labor remains unattractive given the difficulty of the work and the low wages.

All of these frustrations, heightened by dealing with a lengthy period of drought and increased tensions led to an extremely contentious community meeting in late July. By early August, VIDOA received the input needed from farmers to request emergency support.



While VIDOA disagreed on Facebook, Dean gladly basked in success, saying, “We have to make the changes for ourselves... It’s up to us farmers to do things differently.” In mid-August, bales of hay, molasses and water were finally available for

farmers albeit at cost. Farmers saw this as a victory. They had risen up against VIDOA, employed social media to their advantage and ‘won’.

Ironically, a year later at a US Drought Monitor meeting where plans were being put in place to better track and monitor precipitation and climatic conditions in the U.S. Virgin Islands, VIDOA Commissioner Robles noted of the drought in 2015, “We had to develop an on-the-ground story before we convinced the USDA Farm Service Agency and the Secretary of Agriculture to make a declaration of drought in the Virgin Islands,” Robles explained, adding that newspaper articles and Facebook photos of starving livestock were part of the evidence the VI Agriculture Department gathered.⁴⁵

Farmers especially on leased lands tried to distance themselves but were unable to fully break away. The structure of farming on St. Croix (in the U.S. Virgin Islands) is such that they need VIDOA. It was first part of the colonial project, and then part of the government project to maintain levels of economic stability. Even farmers on private lands must register with VIDOA if they want to receive tax exemptions or qualify for emergency assistance. These refashioned independent and self-sufficient farmers are ironically reliant on the government, for land, water, equipment, markets and other aid. This is further intensified by limitations imposed on the islands as a result of their political status as unincorporated territories of the United States. Mainly that US agricultural trade restrictions do not allow Virgin Island farmers to export their produce outside of the territory.⁴⁶ This severely affects the possibility of expansion of the

⁴⁵ <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/pr/newsroom/features/?cid=nrcseprd1257018>

⁴⁶ In a 2013 press release to the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture then Lt. Governor, Gregory Francis requested an appeal to existing trade restrictions: “The long term sustainability of our agricultural industry largely depends on our farmers’ ability to reach new markets. We were once the breadbasket of the Caribbean, and our farmers have made significant investments of their time, money and effort as they have painstakingly worked to revive our agricultural sector. They deserve the benefit of a level playing field

agricultural industry or consideration of being able to incorporate commercial farming for export alongside small-scale cultivation for local consumption.

The drought appeared a last push into action given the already heightened anxiety around the economy and food insecurities. Farmers complained after previous droughts but never took to sustained action as in their continuous calling out of the government. Finding victory in having forced VIDOA to provide drought relief in the manner they did illustrated a coming to political action that is not exemplified by large loud protests but rather smaller acts that allow them to make headway towards achieving greater autonomy -- increased self-sufficiency for themselves yet also social improvements for the community. Yet it comes while still working within the many everyday constraints.

The St Croix Farmers in Action: Reclaiming the plantations and resurrecting the old

Working to effect changes in their circumstances while doing so within the existing structures is in line with Bonilla's concept of "strategic entanglement" (2015:43). She defines strategic entanglement as "a way of crafting and enacting autonomy within a system from which one is unable to fully disentangle" (2015: 43). In her text, Non-Sovereign Futures: French Caribbean Politics in the Wake of Disenchantment (2015), Bonilla specifically speaks to Guadeloupean union leaders adopting historical narratives

with the same opportunities to ship their products just like their counterparts in the mainland and across the Caribbean... Our economic wellbeing is linked to our ability to create new revenue opportunities, and the territory must continue to aggressively explore every possible angle that enables economic growth and sustainability of these initiatives."

The appeal was not granted. However, I want to point out two issues with the above. On one hand, many of the farmers while appreciative of the gesture also viewed this as disingenuous given the lack of investments that were made on the part of Governor de Jongh's and Lt. Governor Francis' administration from 2007-2015, the height of economic decline for the islands.

<http://ltg.gov.vi/press-releases/lt.-governor-francis-seeks-to-level-playing-field-for-virgin-islands-fa-14.html>

of marronage to effectively illustrate their agitation from within. The concept of marronage they espouse, however, is not grand marronage that represents an absolute break with the plantation but more specifically petit marronage, a disruption of, rather than separation from the system. These historical narratives are utilized to express the possibility of attaining autonomy outside of the traditional understandings of sovereignty premised on complete political independence. They can affect change within political constrictions.

Comparably, on St. Croix, narratives of the past are being utilized to push farmers and agricultural supporters into further action. The St. Croix Farmers in Action (FIA) is literally attempting to “bring back lost culture” by working to restore the Bethlehem Sugar Plantation. It was one of the first plantations on the island and ironically the last, which brought an end to sugar cultivation in the Virgin Islands. The FIA are intentionally working towards a restoration so the site will serve to “encourage a spirit of rebellion” in farmers and their supporters in order to continue to “defend and advocate for agriculture”, noted the organization’s chair.

Originally founded in 1997, FIA, a cooperative of farmers, established non-profit status two years later. In 2001, with funds awarded through the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act, they leased a portion, about 22 acres, of the original plantation for a 50-year term for restoration and to explore the concept of an Afro-Heritage Museum. Actual clean up to begin restoration, however, did not begin until late 2015 with plans to also build a cannery and food processing plant with refrigeration for farmers. Little progress beyond cleaning up the land has occurred to date. However, many gatherings, celebrations and meeting among farmers are being held on the site.

FIA's immediate goals are to stand in support of all farmers by reclaiming agricultural history, championing Black history with a particular focus on Crucian Black history and questioning the islands' political status. First reclaiming agricultural history entails clearing and restoring of some of the existing buildings and grounds, leading tours through Crucian Heritage and Nature Tourism, (CHANT)⁴⁷ and promoting an educational component through school visits. CHANT already leads walking tours through historical areas on the island, like the Free Gut neighborhood in Frederiksted, where the freed colored population owned homes and hikes to Maroon Ridge, a steep bluff where run-away slaves built short-term communities until they could manage escape from the island. Tours of Bethlehem Sugar Plantation would include seeing it from the worker's view- that is both the view of the slaves and then that of the early laborers and their families that lived and worked there in post-emancipation. This aspect of reclaiming agricultural history entails reliving it in the physical landscape on the plantation or through tours of historical spaces. This is reminiscent of Bonilla's article on memory walks through which labor activists reconnect to the past through sensorial engagement with the landscape (2011). The walks produced a sense of historical intimacy that not only connected labor activists to the past (of slave uprising, labor conflicts and anticolonial struggles), but also created a link to the future (2011: 316).

⁴⁷ CHANT – Crucian Heritage and Nature Tourism is a non-profit that works with existing heritage and nature tourism providers to offer tours and other cultural venues (music and dance) to visitors or local groups to experience St. Croix culture and traditions. Their mission statement notes that "CHANT will help spark a sustainable tourism renaissance on St. Croix by establishing our island-community as one of the leading heritage and nature tourism destinations in the world. By focusing on development from within. CHANT's heritage and nature tourism program will serve as an engine for sustainable economic development, contributing to a new era of increased broad-based prosperity and community pride." <http://www.chantvi.org/index.cfm>

Second, championing black history has meant broadly celebrating black history month with a focus on historical island events, figures and cultural traditions. From Buddhoe, a freed black who is believed to have led the slave rebellion that resulted in emancipation; to Fire Burn, a female led labor rebellion to improve working conditions for free laborers that burned and destroyed a significant number of plantations including portions of Bethlehem; to David Hamilton Jackson, an educator and labor activist who promoted civil rights and workers' rights. Championing black history and cultivating historical narrative additionally includes gathering for traditional Moko Jumbie⁴⁸ or Quadrille dances and Quelbe⁴⁹ music. The intent is to remind participants of these historical moments and traditions, and help them recapture the spirit of activism and black rebellion⁵⁰ to advocate and lobby for the agricultural industry. Bonilla noted "...how the relationships of the past – particularly those of slavery and slave resistance – are made salient to the political projects of contemporary labor activists" (2015:5). FIA believe recalling events from the past will shape and inspire modern action. Finally, questioning the island's status currently involves a lecture series and forum on self-determination. This latter event is less well supported. It is important to note that discussions surrounding their islands' political status gained interest amidst preparations for the centennial anniversary celebrations marking the transfer of the islands from Denmark to the United States in March 2017.

⁴⁸ Moko Jumbies are stilt walkers or dancers. They have been a part of Virgin Islands culture for over 200 years and said to have originated in 14th century central Africa. Moko Jumbies are thought to ward off evil spirits through mockery and are symbolic of Virgin Islands culture and heritage.

⁴⁹ "Quelbe also known as Scratch Band Music or Quadrille, is an indigenous, grass-roots form of folk music which originated in the U.S. Virgin Islands and has spread to other parts of the Caribbean. A form of oral history, its lyrics are used to immortalize significant historical events."

<http://www.jamesieproject.com/history.html>

⁵⁰ Refers to slave rebellions

The FIA is consciously calling for the community to reclaim a spirit of rebellion that slave and early laborers inhabited. Their aim is to continue to cultivate it through constantly making the past present, physically in the restored grounds and buildings of Bethlehem, but also present in everyday thought through continued celebration of events and practices that recall history or memories from the past. “We cyan’t be complacent. We must be ready to always act for our interest,” argued Lloyd. He was one of the first members of the organization whose family had “always” been involved in farming on St. Croix. He felt organizations like FIA had to be prepared to defend agriculture by continually reminding others of its importance to the island’s history.

FIA’s largest successes have been in protesting the use of former agricultural lands for commercial development in two specific instances. First, when the Governor and the Board of the University of the Virgin Islands decided to build a research and technology park on St. Croix, plans were drawn to locate it directly across the campus on mixed acreages of residential, commercial and agricultural land. This plan would displace eight farmers and cut into land currently used for livestock grazing. From the perspective of the governor and university, it opened up an opportunity to attract new business interests and investors. To farmers, the plan was another example of the callous disregard for farmers and a lack of support for agriculture on the island. During the same period, the governor announced plans to build a depot for official government vehicles again using former agricultural lands. FIA lobbied and defended against this use of agricultural lands. They along with other farmers and community members stood in support of all farmers and the agriculture industry. There were community meetings with

university and government officials. FIA held strong until it was finally announced that the scopes of both projects were decreased to use only non-agricultural land.

In all three situations, there were no sweeping revolutions. Rather farmers were able to navigate the constraints of their situations to bring about some positive and beneficial changes. That farmers were driven to take political action was the first victory given the marginalization under which they began. Bonilla argues that it is not success or failure that is important but rather the transformative process individuals undergo as a result of their actions. She writes:

“Political participation, even in a failed strike, conditions expectations of social struggle, shapes hopes and aspirations for the future, and influences the willingness to engage in collective action – both positively and negatively. I thus argue that the long-lasting effects of political struggle cannot be gauged through a simple measure of material and economic gains. Instead, they need to be more subtly rendered through a qualitative analysis of the affective and subjective transformations that characterize political life” (Bonilla, 2015: 5).

As suggested above, the small successes gained by farmers, reaffirmed that they were right in taking political action. It increases the likelihood that they will continue to advocate for themselves and agriculture, as it shows that change is indeed possible through their concerted efforts. At the same time, had farmers been unable to have any demands met despite their actions, it may have put an end to the momentum they were already building under this period of revitalization. Yet, as Bonilla notes, neither positive or negative outcome, nor measurable gains, can speak to the long-term effects of political struggle. Rather it is the transformation experienced by the individual participant that matters. While Dean was disappointed that a formal MOU had not immediately resulted in improved access to water and greater irrigation on the island for farmers, he continued

to advocate for agriculture. His and other farmers' persistence led to change within VIDOA, which then increased its efforts in assisting farmers more than they had done in the past. Without an increase in their budget, VIDOA's simple acknowledgment of farmers by celebrating individuals on their Facebook page or creating additional markets for farmers through pop-up vendoramas, validated the pivotal role that farmers had made an effort to occupy within the larger community. While these changes were not what farmers had initially envisioned, it was more than they had achieved previously as complacent farmers waiting for the government to make improvements to their lives.

Postscripts: Larger victories attained

In the year following increased efforts to ensure their futures, farmers were able to experience the concrete rewards of their actions. Tourism had increased and St. Croix was experiencing increased popularity as a food destination⁵¹. In the summer of 2016, a path to create new farmers, which farmers had demanded for many years, finally came to fruition. The University of the Virgin Islands joined the network of educational institutions offering federally funded residential summer programs as part of the AgDiscovery network. The program geared to middle and high school students offers a chance to explore careers in animal science, veterinary medicine and agribusiness, to name a few. Secured by an agreement between the university's Cooperative Extension Services, led by Lewis Peterson, a former VIDOA commissioner, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (USDA-APHIS), it includes both local and U.S. based students with the aging farmers of the

⁵¹ <http://www.travelandleisure.com/food-drink/st-croix-caribbean-local-eats>
https://www.magzter.com/articles_new_reader/detail/12420/202066/5869fe4eb2d44

territory in mind. The program incorporates the local farmers and their farms as sites of instruction. Farmers remain an integral and vital part of the continued success and development of the industry⁵².

Additionally after more than forty years without adequate access to reliable sources of water and a failing infrastructure, construction started in late 2016 on an irrigation expansion project and an improved pump system to provide more water to farmers. Funds were secured through VIDOA and the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Services Environment Quality Incentive Program. On June 28, 2017 VIDOA and the Virgin Islands Agriculture Advisory Group announced the completion of an irrigation expansion project to support a new St. Croix Community Gardens which includes supporting thirty-five farmers who will be sustained by over 5,000' in buried pipes, and a 24hp diesel pump to provide up to 160,000 gallons of water. Beyond this project, VIDOA also made improvements to existing water towers and added additional water tanks at the department for open access to farmers.

Dean's efforts to continually advocate on behalf of farmers and to politically make demands during a Democratic forum; farmers deliberately agitating and calling out the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture in order to force drought aid; and Farmers in Action utilizing history to spur others into action, reflected an increased level of political activism among farmers. That they have been able to achieve increased measures of self-autonomy through these actions suggest that the power to make change need not reside only at the level of the government or even with political officials. Instead, this level of sovereignty can be located in the ordinary citizen. Furthermore,

⁵² The second program held its closing ceremonies on August 12, 2017 with preparations underway for summer 2018.

these achievements not only benefit the farmers but also impact the larger society in a way that could not have been as easily accomplished working through traditional political processes.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

This dissertation has focused on how farmers are challenging existing concepts of power in their determination to secure their own futures. Rather than remain reliant solely on the government for support, they are relying on themselves and turning to non-traditional sources of assistance through collaborative relationships among the larger community and through tourism to achieve greater levels of self-autonomy. In their efforts, they have helped shape a revitalization of the islands' agricultural industry, creating a legitimate future for themselves while additionally helping to stimulate the economy after severe financial crisis. Most importantly, however, is that the increased self-sufficiency that farmers have secured for themselves forces a rethinking of traditional concepts of powers. Mainly that power no longer resides at the level of the state but rather is located in the individual citizen.

Bonilla (2015) has argued that when citizens of non-independent countries, particularly of the non-sovereign small states of the Caribbean, choose options outside of the traditional political options, they force us to rethink the concept of sovereignty itself and open up new possibilities in the current period. For example, in an ethnographic analysis of the 2009 mass strike in Guadeloupe, Bonilla notes that strikers, representing a broad coalition of organizations from political unions to cultural associations, never vocalized achieving traditional ideas of independent from France. Rather they fought particularly to improve their economic conditions. Through a society-wide 44-day strike, (that was more social movement than strike), the coalition forced a dialogue re-examining the historical colonial exploitation (economic and cultural) that extended into

the present. Because of their organized protests, they not only gained higher wages but also achieved greater cultural sovereignty in the acknowledgement of creole as the regional language. The coalition fought to create new ways to politically participate in a Guadeloupe they could imagine as belonging to them even while still dependent on France.

Most discussions of sovereignty within the realm of political science or international relations treat the political institution of the state and the territorial entity of the nation as an epistemological given. But in the liberal democratic tradition, it is also possible to locate sovereignty in the people, rather than in a territory or in institutions of government. If we define Sovereignty as a form of self-determination, one could conceivably argue that the ability of social movements to force the hand of political and economic actors is an act of popular sovereignty (Bonilla, 2013: 222).

Crucian farmers, in the context of this dissertation, were able to transform themselves and the agricultural economy to achieve greater autonomy for both themselves and the community. They were arguably able to do so in a way the territory's government would not have been able to. Thomas also reminds us that the "state is no longer the primary locus around which sovereignty is organized" (2013:180). Instead it is an "embodied and deeply contextualized process and practice," illustrated in the ways people take action, protest, resist, even work through everyday tasks (2013: 2013: 167). We will not find new futures for the Caribbean, if we are looking for large movements. Thomas suggests we reorient our gazes, "in order to see the forms of politics that are constantly emerging as people on the ground express, indeed grab, their citizenship in a variety of ways and on a variety of levels" (2013: 180). Rather it is people on the ground inserting and asserting their citizenships in new ways that will affect future political change.

Eastmond notes that, “stories are part of everyday life and constitute means for actors to express and negotiate experience” (2007: 248). There remains a need for ethnographic study of the socio-cultural aspects of agriculture and small-scale farming in the import-dependent Caribbean in light of increasing local food movements and agricultural renaissances; particularly on the daily life and everyday struggles of farmers and their functions in the larger community. Eastmond further argues that stories, “provide a site to examine the meanings people, individually or collectively, ascribe to lived experience” (2007: 248). Perhaps the stories told by those I have interviewed can provide greater ethnographical insight on the present status of Caribbean agriculture through the specific context of St. Croix as a precarious small island limited by environmental factors and its political status. Unfortunately, without comparative research, even the St. Croix story can provide only a limited insight to the recent agricultural resurgences and renaissances that can be seen throughout the Caribbean region or speak to why many are returning to agriculture and the obstacles renewed interests might face.

Examining the Anglophone Caribbean for example, Weis wrote that given the present economic crisis, the region’s agriculture held a “historic opportunity” for transformation (2007:112). It afforded a perfect opportunity to reposition the small farmer, challenge traditional ideas regarding the agricultural market and support local food production. However, past practices and ongoing reliance on exporting agricultural products while heavily importing food has not only created a deficient and unhealthy diet but has been “accompanied by a pervasive lack of consciousness about food” that continues to disregard the significance and importance of the small farmer (Weis,

2007:114). Nevertheless, he believes radical change and possibilities exist within this economic moment to bring forth change just as the strict U.S. embargo in the 1960s forced Cuba to introduce agro-ecological practices and support small farm operations to deal with its dire food shortage. Most of the Anglophone Caribbean will also be constrained by regulations related to IMF and other structural adjustment programs (Slocum, 2006; Stiles, 1990; Thomas, 2015). Therefore, these will also shape any changes or resources directed to support local food production as well as they way an agricultural resurgence will unfold.

Even across U.S. territories in the Caribbean, agricultural renaissances diverge on the ground. Holt-Giménez (2013) describes the agricultural movement in Puerto Rico, spurred by the 2008 recession and ensuing economic fallout, as a “re-peasantization.” He sees what is happening as a taking back of the land and the food system to a time where agriculture produced a large portion of the island’s GDP. Like elsewhere in the Caribbean, there is a heavy reliance on food imports, health and nutritional deficiencies, and rising costs. Puerto Rico’s current agricultural movement may harken back to its past farming peasantry but today it is also a political and national movement. It is according to its participants, a stance against the ravages of global capitalism that have eroded the island’s ability to provide for itself and so there is a purposeful intent in building what is happening now upon the symbolism of the *Jibaro*, the country peasant or small farmer who is viewed as the backbone of Puerto Rico’s national culture (Guerra, 1998).

Even where there is expected commonality, the outcomes continue to vary. St. Thomas, while also a U.S. Virgin Island, is not St. Croix, historically or otherwise. Given St. Thomas’ geography as well as the development that has occurred to support an

economy focused almost entirely on tourism, there is less land available for agriculture. Most of the population is employed in the tourism sector and while living on the island, they are less involved or connected outside of that sector. Driven by a Rastafarian based community of farmers, St. Thomas' resurgence is focused on health and spirituality – the tenant of the Ital diet and clean living practices that undergird Rastafarianism.

Weis writes:

Food is something through which people encounter productive relations very intimately, multiple times each day, and an increased understanding of the problem and prospects of small farmers could play a role in shaking historical inertia, catalyzing opposition to neoliberal economic prescriptions and re-invigorating transformative politics (2007:116).

This dissertation examines the flexible subjectivities that arise out of changing neoliberal processes and the specific turns it can take under the particular constraints of a particular location – specifically manifested among Crucian farmers in the midst of an agricultural crisis. It affirms the adaptability of neoliberalism as it is molded to meet the needs of people in emerging situations. St. Croix's agricultural revitalization tells only a portion of the story of Caribbean agriculture today. Comparative research will endeavor to tell us more.

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