The Politics of Adequacy: Food and Everyday Life in Post-Soviet Cuba

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Abstract: In this talk I examine how families struggle to maintain a decent quality of life as the socialist welfare state declines in post-Soviet era Cuba. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s and ensuing loss of its most significant trade partner, Cuba entered a period of economic hardship known as the “Special Period.” As the government continues to recover from this recession, cutbacks have been made to the fifty-year-old food ration, still the central source of food for most households. Based on 16 months of ethnographic fieldwork within 22 households in Santiago de Cuba, I detail how families engage in a stressful struggle to acquire food. I analyze efforts to assemble a “decent meal,” a morally laden local social category wherein families determine whether food quality and cultural-appropriateness meets their standards. I detail the social and emotional dimensions of the practices of acquisition. I introduce the concept of the politics of adequacy as a way to illuminate issues related to food security, food sovereignty, and the politics of distribution. Finally, I reveal how these ongoing struggles give rise to shifting subjectivities or what my interlocutors refer to as a “change in character.”

Bio: Hanna Garth is a University of California President’s Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Anthropology at UC Irvine. Hanna is a sociocultural and medical anthropologist broadly interested in how marginalized communities struggle to overcome structural violence. Her recent work is focused on the connections between food systems, structural inequalities, health, and wellbeing. Specifically she studies the ways in which changes in the global food system, international trade, and shifts in local food distribution systems impact communities, families, and individuals. She focuses on how scarcity and reduced access to affordable food influence individual and household stress levels. Her regional interests include Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as Latino and black communities in the United States. In addition to her current work in Cuba she has also conducted research in Los Angeles, Chile, Bolivia, Peru and the Philippines. She completed her BA at Rice University with a triple major in Anthropology, Policy Studies, and Hispanic Studies, an MPH in International Health at Boston University, and a PhD in Anthropology at UCLA. She is the author of several publications including a recent article published in Food, Culture & Society, and she edited the volume Food and Identity in the Caribbean (2013, Bloomsbury).