

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: Land Most Lovely, Province Most Faithful:  
Tourism, Sustainability, and Revolution in Holguín, Cuba

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This thesis provides an interdisciplinary view of contemporary tourism development in Holguín, a province on the northeastern coast of Cuba. Sustainable tourism lends the overriding framework for this study, which looks at the ways in which the Cuban government and regional communities interpret and implement global notions of sustainability in the province. This focus on local autonomy and experiences continues throughout the work.

The thesis begins with an overview of Cuban tourism development, from the 1940s to the late 1990s, centering around the Cuban state's use of tourism as a development tool and nationalist symbol. Then, the work hones in on 21<sup>st</sup> century Holguín tourism policy, following provincial development as Holguín becomes a national focal point for sustainable tourism promotion. Under the umbrella of sustainable tourism, the Cuban government and tourism providers have fostered historical, cultural, and ecological tourism offerings.

Holguín tourism planners must reckon with a number of severe socioeconomic, political, and environmental issues in order to create a genuinely sustainable industry. Despite these challenges, the province serves as a valuable example of localized tourism, in which politicized articulations of sustainability, ideals of socialist revolution, and regional desires interact.

*La Tierra Más Hermosa, La Provincia Más Fiel*

Land Most Lovely, Province Most Faithful:  
Tourism, Sustainability, and Revolution in Holguín, Cuba

By

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## Discussion on Translations

While there were a number of texts that I was able to access in their translated form, including some political speeches, policy frameworks, and tourist marketing materials, and many of my scholarly works were in English, I did undertake a fair amount of translation for this thesis. All of my field materials were spoken, written, or presented in Spanish, and I translated these materials myself. I also translated a number of Cuban media sources and political documents when I could find no English-language version.

## Chapter One

### Global Goals, Domestic Desires: Cuban Tourism and Sustainability

*A hand-painted billboard, perched high on the steel and concrete skeleton of a hotel under construction, announced: "To defend tourism is to defend the Revolution." Perhaps so, but we would have to see for ourselves, would need to examine Cuba's gritty mix of tourism and revolution in a society grinding its way toward an uncertain future without benefit of patron...*

C. Peter Ripley<sup>1</sup>

#### Section i. Introduction to Holguín

With a crescent of white sand curving along a splendid turquoise bay, Guardalavaca Beach seems like any other Caribbean resort area. Beyond the thatched-roof beach bars and striped umbrellas, hotels stretch on endlessly. An incongruous mix of bungalows and high rises lies scattered around the flat landscape, surrounding an untold number of sinuous pools, wet bars, and pulsating *discos*.

From the small motorboats that putter around the bay, this sweep of the Holguín shore looks no different than the luxe Bahamian coast just across the water. But all around Holguín province, which lies just north of the Sierra Maestra mountains where the 1959 Cuban Revolution once triumphed, a *tourism* revolution is brewing. With its untouched ecological preserves, rich cultural heritage, and lack of large-scale tourist development until the early 'aughts, Holguín province has become the epicenter of Cuba's sustainable tourism transformation. While sustainable development still faces serious challenges, state and local

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<sup>1</sup> Ripley, C. Peter, *Conversations with Cuba* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999), 8.

actors are implementing some aspects of sustainability in Holguín with heritage-based, cultural, and ecological tourism offerings on the rise.

For nearly a century, the Cuban state has used tourism as a powerful development tool and symbol of nationalist pride, imbued at times with revolutionary promise, yet also with severe, persistent shortcomings. With this legacy in mind, my thesis aims to ask: how is Holguín's tourism emerging within global, national, and local contexts of contemporary "sustainability," and what advantages and obstacles must responsible tourism development navigate?

Many current sustainable tourism initiatives center on Holguín, a relatively new tourist area, developing its eco- and heritage tourism offerings in an attempt to avoid the most harmful aspects of Cuban and larger Caribbean tourism. However, serious challenges to true sustainability remain, including economic and racial inequities, problematic government actions, and tourism's negative social and environmental impacts. Because it touches on many of the political, economic, cultural, and environmental issues faced all over the Caribbean basin, Holguín's heterogeneous tourist development can, and should, inform future policy in Cuba and elsewhere in the Caribbean.

In Holguín, the international concept of sustainable tourism — centering around the balance of societal, ecological, and economic needs — takes on both national and local significance. These global standards coexist alongside Cuban state politics and Holguineros' (Holguín residents) own hopes and concerns, engendering a complex, sometimes contradictory interplay of priorities. My thesis explores the historico-political background of Cuban tourism development, examining how the Cuban state has articulated its tourism ideals in the past, and how notions of sustainability and revolution shape Holguín's emerging tourism landscape.

## Section ii. International, Caribbean, and Cuban Notions of Sustainable Tourism

Of course, Holguín tourism — and its greater relevance— can only be fully understood within the larger discourse on sustainable tourism, and in its particular Caribbean and Cuban regional context. In the past two decades, sustainable tourism and its niches of cultural, historical, and ecological tourism, have ascended in the policy lexicon, becoming shorthand for an idealized industry that would benefit every actor involved, from local workers to foreign visitors to national governments.

Sustainable development emerged in the 1980s and 1990s as a moderate approach to economic growth and modernization— a direct response to unbridled development practices which had led to debt, inequality, environmental degradation, and frequent crises in many countries.<sup>2</sup> The early Brundtland Report definition was formulated at the landmark 1987 World Commission on Environment and Development, and focused on managing natural resources responsibly, reviving economic growth and changing its quality, meeting basic human needs, and stabilizing populations.<sup>3</sup> As sustainable development progressed, it came to be understood as a simple question: with our planet’s finite resources, how can development balance the needs of human society, economy, and environment? Parkin describes the most common visualization of sustainable development, a Venn Diagram overlapping and balancing the needs of society, economy, and environment.<sup>4</sup> This straightforward concept, known as the triple bottom line, is

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<sup>2</sup> Elliott, Jennifer A., *An Introduction to Sustainable Development*. Routledge Introductions to Development Series. (London ; New York: Routledge), 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Parkin, S., F. Sommer, and S. Uren, “Sustainable Development: Understanding the Concept and Practical Challenge.” (*Engineering Sustainability* 156, no. 3, September 2003): 169–71.

often used by businesses attempting to become (or be perceived as) more sustainable, and by governments and NGOs trying to promote sustainable development practices.

Although the UN had been considering ethical practices in tourism for several decades, it was Jost Krippendorf's seminal work *The Holiday Makers* in 1984 that first applied some of the objectives of sustainable development to tourism, a "utopian undertaking" as the author himself admitted.<sup>5</sup> Krippendorf framed the new notion as a humane rethinking of travel, advocating mass tourism which took human and environmental interests into account, including the needs of both tourists and local residents.<sup>6</sup> His ideas, as an extension of sustainable development, were expanded and formalized at the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development, popularly known as the Rio Conference. The Rio conference produced the Declaration on the Environment and Development and Agenda 21, which considered social and economic development, resource management, stakeholder participation, and the means by which these new sustainable ideals would be implemented in tourism and other fields.<sup>7</sup> Finally, the first World Conference on Sustainable Tourism, in 1995, created the Charter for Sustainable Tourism, applying the triple bottom line concept — the primary international definition of sustainable tourism I'll be working with in this thesis — to tourism more comprehensively.<sup>8</sup>

It's no wonder that governments, communities, and international organizations alike yearn for sustainable tourism: the benefits are seemingly infinite. As one analyst explained, "studies have shown that this type of tourist [interested in nature and heritage tourism] stays longer, spends more, and is more respectful of local cultural traditions and the environment than

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<sup>5</sup> Elliott, *An Introduction to Sustainable Development*, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Krippendorf, Jost, *Holiday Makers*. (Routledge), 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Elliott, *An Introduction to Sustainable Development*. 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

other tourists.”<sup>9</sup> These sustainability-focused tourists are highly coveted for their potential to improve a region’s environmental, cultural, and economic landscape.

The Caribbean is one of many areas that has recently jumped on the sustainable tourism bandwagon. As the most touristic region in the world, the Caribbean stands to gain the most with sustainable practices, which could help diversify its heavily beach-focused tourism industry and extend benefits to the people who have been impacted the most by unhealthy development in the past. For these same reasons, however, the Caribbean also faces some of the most severe difficulties in fostering sustainability. Nearly all Caribbean tourism specialists lament the dearth of cultural, heritage, and ecological offerings in the region, with a “general neglect” of sustainable tourism perpetuated by apathetic governments and disinterested international corporations.<sup>10</sup> Decades of “mass tourism with a focus on the sun, sand, and sea model” have transformed the region into a popular holiday destination, however, they have also made many countries heavily dependent on the caprices of the international tourism industry, decimated coastal ecosystems, and left foreign visitors with little sense of the rich history and diverse cultures of the islands.<sup>11</sup> Recently, this has begun to change as state planners and international companies alike have begun to develop sustainable offerings around the Caribbean, with several UN-affiliated Caribbean Action Plans focused on drawing out the region’s cultural and ecological strengths and attracting responsible tourism via state policy, regional collaboration,

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<sup>9</sup> Bernd von Droste zu Hülshoff. “The Growing World Heritage Tourism Market: A Major Challenge for Conservation Management.” (In Thematic Expert Meeting on Wooden Urban Heritage in the Caribbean Region, 21–26. Georgetown, Guyana: UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2005), 23.

<sup>10</sup> Jordan, Leslie-Ann, and Lee Jolliffe. “Heritage Tourism in the Caribbean: Current Themes and Challenges.” (Journal of Heritage Tourism 8, no. 1, February 1, 2013): 2.

<sup>11</sup> Pattullo, Polly., and Latin America Bureau, *Last Resorts: The Cost of Tourism in the Caribbean*. (Global Issues. London: Cassell), 1996.

and public-private partnerships.<sup>12</sup> Still, much remains to be done to foster genuine sustainability in the Caribbean, which must swim upstream against its own tourism past to succeed.

Yet I was drawn to Cuba because, in many ways, it defies these Caribbean tourism patterns. Both the timeline and the nature of Cuban tourist development differ greatly from the regional norm, fostering distinct conditions for sustainability in areas like Holguín today. While Cuba does promote a sizeable beach and resort tourism industry, many aspects of the island's tourism diverge from Caribbean tropes. As I will describe in the next chapter, Cuban tourism began decades earlier than it did in most of the region, then retreated after the 1959 Revolution and subsequent shift to socialism, and finally the industry returned in the waning years of the 20th Century. This unusual chronology, along with related economic stagnation and political shifts, have left Cuba as the most ecologically (and perhaps culturally) preserved country in the Caribbean, with incredibly biodiverse ecosystems and manifestations of so-called authentic culture, include nine UNESCO World Heritage Sites, that draw tourists just as the beaches do.<sup>13</sup> These ecological and cultural assets give Cuban sustainability an enormous advantage over neighboring countries, allowing the island to exploit existing features rather than build a sustainable tourism industry from the ground up. As environmental researcher Daniel Whittle describes, Cuba is at a crossroads,

facing extreme economic difficulties, and the temptation to cut corners and sacrifice long-term sustainability for short-term gain will be great if economic recovery is prolonged... Many countries have failed to strike such a balance [of responsible resource use and profitability], but Cuba — by virtue of its human capital, its current

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<sup>12</sup> UNESCO World Heritage Center, and Caribbean States Parties to the 1972 Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, "Caribbean Action Plan for World Heritage 2015-2019." (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, November 28, 2014; Carl Bro A/S. Caribbean Sustainable Tourism Policy Framework. St. Michael, Barbados: Caribbean Tourism Organization), 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Whittle, Daniel., Kenyon Lindeman, and James Tripp. "International Tourism and Protection of Cuba's Coastal and Marine Environments." (Tulane Environmental Law Journal 16, 2003: 535; "Cuba." UNESCO World Heritage Centre), Accessed December 6, 2017.

environmental policies, and the relatively good shape of its marine and coastal ecosystems — has a unique opportunity to build a different path.<sup>14</sup>

Cuban tourism is already known for cultural offerings, and to a lesser extent for ecological offerings, allowing the island to draw upon existing tourist perceptions rather than start from scratch. These resources are by no means untouched, and Cuba's continued economic difficulties are an enormous challenge, but the island's ecological and cultural preservation nonetheless represent a significant strength over many Caribbean states which have underinvested in these areas.

The Cuban state's socialist, "revolutionary" identity and centralized economic control have also deeply influenced tourist development, shaping the ways that Cubans may realize tourism, sustainability, and "revolutionary" mores in the present — and challenging the conventional belief that successful mass tourism must take place in an open, globalized, capitalist state.<sup>15</sup> Finally, sustainable tourism has the potential to transform not only the Cuban economy, but the political system itself. As scholar Florence Babb puts it, "tourism often takes up where social transformation leaves off... if travel enhances rather than diminishes opportunities for positive cultural exchange, then international tourism development and the tourism encounter may help lay the groundwork for a more just and democratic world."<sup>16</sup> I have already observed this type of political opening in Holguín tourism, where the industry sometimes allows space for Cuban citizens' much-needed political critique and individual autonomy, even as it also funds the powerful state system created after the Revolution. Cuba's exceptional

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<sup>14</sup> Whittle, Daniel, "International Tourism and Protection," 2003, 535, 537.

<sup>15</sup> Babb, Florence E, *The Tourism Encounter: Fashioning Latin American Nations and Histories*. (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2011), 14.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 15.

political and economic background provide a singular backdrop for current tourism development in Holguín, with conditions that simultaneously facilitate, hinder, and alter the notion of sustainability itself.

As the Cuban state and Cubans themselves chart “alternative paths of development” for modern tourism in Holguín, the implications extend beyond the small province itself, giving us a powerful primer on how these big ideas — sustainability, authenticity, autonomy and even socialist revolution — can (or cannot) be translated into a local context.<sup>17</sup> All too often in tourism scholarship, as Babb argues, “Eurocentrism prevails and more attention is given to the active part of tourists from the global North than to the agency of host nations, communities, and individuals of the global South.”<sup>18</sup> Holguín helps reveal the ways in which these larger-than-life international concepts can be used, manipulated, and even take lives of their own as they interact with the particular conditions of a less developed region. In the province, the Cuban government and local Holguineros (Holguín residents) attempt to wrest control of their representation away from international tourists and organizations, combining domestic goals with global ideas as they articulate their own approaches to *Cubanidad* (Cubanness), identity, and sustainability within their lives and sociopolitical structures. I hope that my work in Holguín encourages tourism scholars, planners, and tourists themselves to view tourism as a holistic, interdisciplinary system, and to explore how the global concept of sustainability interacts with local desires, government goals, and socioeconomic circumstances to create regionalized forms of tourism and sustainability that may challenge the capitalist, globalized status quo.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 5.

### Section iii. Caribbean and Cuban Tourism Literature Review

Several scholars have focused specifically on critiques of contemporary tourism in the Caribbean, and their techniques and perspective informed my approach in Holguín. Polly Pattullo does not specifically address the possibilities or challenges of sustainable tourism in the Caribbean, instead outlining the many unsustainable practices and dynamics present in Caribbean island tourism.<sup>19</sup> She pays particular attention to the region's ongoing dependence on wealthier foreign nations and companies, a dynamic that's exacerbated and exemplified by the tourism industry's use of foreign airlines, tour companies, hotel chains, and so on. Pattullo critiques the racial and colonial tensions inherent in the descendants of slaves serving white foreigners at resorts and hotels, the many leakages and inequalities that exclude locals from tourism's gains, and the growing presence of all-inclusives that limit interaction between tourists and residents.<sup>20</sup>

George Gmelch similarly highlights the many problems in Caribbean tourism, however, Gmelch is crucial to my work not for his focus on these general issues, but for his on-the-ground fieldwork in Barbados, which personalized Caribbean tourism and provided the local voices often lacking in tourism scholarship.<sup>21</sup> Gmelch, whose remarkable book *Behind the Smile* provided a much-needed view inside the Anglophone Caribbean tourism industry through oral interviews, criticizing tourism scholarship for focusing too heavily on top-down tourism policy and its failure to include local perspectives and voice.<sup>22</sup> While Gmelch and other anthropologists

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<sup>19</sup> Pattullo, *Last Resorts*, 1996.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Gmelch, George, *Behind the Smile: The Working Lives of Caribbean Tourism*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012.)

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., x.

have begun to fill this significant gap in the field with oral history and interview projects, they tend to focus on well-established tourist outposts like Barbados and Havana. I hope to add local, humanizing perspective from an emerging destination in Holguín rather than an established one.

Other scholars focus specifically on Cuban tourism, highlighting the industry's many challenges. L. Kaifa Roland has turned her exacting anthropological lens on Cuba for over a decade, strongly critiquing tourism as a major force of social and racial division. Roland explores how international tourism has imposed a new geography and sense of place onto the Cuban landscape, excluding everyday Cubans from resorts, beaches, hotels, and bars intended exclusively for tourists.<sup>23</sup> She equates this system to a contemporary form of apartheid, with its racialized connotation intact, condemning the tourism industry's tendency to hire lighter skinned employees and exclude Afro-Cubans from tourism's newfound prosperity.<sup>24</sup> Sarah Blue broadens this racial critique to other aspects of the Cuban system, noting not just racial discrimination within tourism, but also the structural issues that exacerbate racial divisions — for example, as the tourist economy allows new spaces for private restaurants and guesthouses, the disproportionate number of Afro-Cubans with few resources and poorly maintained public housing find it nearly impossible to participate in these newfound opportunities for advancement.<sup>25</sup>

Another common critique of contemporary tourism in Cuba is the presence of unequal, possibly exploitative sexual dynamics between Cubans and foreigners. Sex tourism has attracted

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<sup>23</sup> Roland, L. Kaifa, *Cuban Color in Tourism and La Lucha: An Ethnography of Racial Meanings*. (Issues of Globalization. New York: Oxford University Press), 2011.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>25</sup> Blue, Sarah A, "The Erosion of Racial Equality in the Context of Cuba's Dual Economy." (*Latin American Politics and Society* 49, no. 3, September 1, 2007): 35–68.

a great deal of scholarly attention, in part because this was an issue in prerevolutionary tourism that the Castro-led government sought to correct, retraining prostitutes in other trades and condemning the so-called imperialist exploitation of Cuban women.<sup>26</sup> The irony of sex tourism's re-emergence in post-revolutionary Cuba was not lost on the scholarly community, and the subject has become a major academic focus on the island.<sup>27</sup> In perhaps the most comprehensive and intriguing work on the subject, Megan Daigle employed interviews with sex tourism workers and consumers to provide in-depth accounts of the industry, critiquing sex tourism's echoes of exploitation, poverty, and neocolonialism from a previous era, and the Cuban state's harsh response to the rise of sex tourism, which has often included arbitrary arrests of darker-skinned women suspected of selling sex to foreigners.<sup>28</sup> While my work doesn't specifically focus on sex tourism, the practice has become a growing issue in Holguín, and I kept Daigle's approach in mind. Her work centers on the individual, independent choices that Cuban sex workers make, often in direct opposition to state doctrine, to gain autonomy over their bodies; Daigle assigns her subjects agency rather than generalizing them as a desperate, powerless mass. Other scholars, including Patullo and Roland, maintain a broader focus on Cuban and Caribbean tourism, but cite sex tourism as one of its most troubling modern facets.

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<sup>26</sup> Lewis, Oscar, Ruth M. Lewis, and Susan M. Rigdon, "A Prostitute Remembers." In *The Cuba Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, edited by Aviva Chomsky, Barry Carr, and Pamela María Smorkaloff, 260–63. (Latin America Readers. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.)

<sup>27</sup> Cespedes, Karina Lisette, "Ay Mama Ines!: A Decolonial Feminist Critique of Cuban Nationalism, Tourism, and Sex Work." (Ph.D., University of California, Berkeley, 2007); Guitart, Jenn, "Sun, Sea, Sex, and Socialismo: Discourses on Cuban Sex Workers." (NetSpace Project, 1999); Cabezas, Amalia L, "Between Love and Money: Sex, Tourism, and Citizenship in Cuba and the Dominican Republic." (*Signs*; Chicago 29, no. 4, Summer 2004): 987–1015.

<sup>28</sup> Daigle, Megan, *From Cuba with Love: Sex and Money in the Twenty-First Century*. (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015.)

The environmental impacts of tourism in Cuba, while a significant issue, have received much less outside scholarship than the industry's many social implications. Daniel Whittle provides an excellent overview of environmental conditions, policy, and challenges in Cuba, praising the island's relatively impressive legal conservation efforts and nascent ecotourism industry while also cautioning against the risks of irresponsible growth, unenforced protections, and beach tourism's financial temptations.<sup>29</sup> The work of Cuban scholars (and state tourism planners) Norman Medina and Jorge Santamarina takes a comprehensive look at ecotourism in Cuba, classifying different types and highlighting areas with nature-based tourism potential, though they largely overlook most Holguín ecotourism attractions.<sup>30</sup> Anthony Winson contributed his outside perspective to Cuban tourism and ecology, examining whether the island's socialist political system influences the success of ecological preservation and ecotourism; Winson concludes that state efforts thus far have had mixed results.<sup>31</sup> As Cuba continues to develop its many protected and unprotected natural areas as tourist destinations, more scholarship may emerge — and my work contributes to this field as well, examining both tourism's impact and ecological potential in Holguín.

Other scholars have taken a more in-depth look at how Cuban tourism functions within the postrevolutionary socialist system. Roland unpacks the Castro regime's framework for Cuban tourism under a socialist state, explaining how international capitalist elements have been allowed to exist and even thrive, justified by the state as part of the difficult transitional stage

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<sup>29</sup> Whittle, Daniel, "International Tourism and Protection," 2003.

<sup>30</sup> Medina, Norman., and Jorge Santamarina, *Turismo de Naturaleza En Cuba*. (Ciudad de La Habana, [Cuba]: Ediciones Unión, 2004.)

<sup>31</sup> Winson, Anthony. "Ecotourism and Sustainability in Cuba: Does Socialism Make a Difference?" (Journal of Sustainable Tourism 14, no. 1, January 15, 2006): 6–23.

between capitalism and true communism under Marxist doctrine.<sup>32</sup> Roland argues that this Marxist justification, along with Cuba's economic dependence on tourism, explain why the state has tolerated a high degree of inequality and other social tensions within tourism, despite the regime's purported egalitarian values. While this paints quite a negative picture of Cuban tourism, Florence Babb balances socialism's tensions and failures with its potential to construct an alternative to the tourism status quo. Babb wonders whether post-revolutionary Cuba may be able to develop tourism that benefits from the globalized capitalist system without becoming subsumed by it, using regulated international tourism to actually sustain the state's socialist system.<sup>33</sup>

While all of these issues are at play in Holguín, including questions of inequality, sex tourism, racism, environmental impact, and socialism's role, they haven't yet been closely studied in a provincial or Eastern Cuban context. Tourism's varied impacts they complicate the narrative of sustainability promoted by the Cuban state and the tourism industry alike, and question whether the reality of tourism matches up to its lofty rhetoric. Nearly all of these studies of Cuban tourism, however, focus on Havana, Varadero, and other western Cuban tourist hotspots, where the industry is already highly developed and has a long legacy of unsustainable practices. By focusing on Holguín, an oft-overlooked eastern province that's trying to think outside the box of Caribbean mass beach tourism, I intend to apply these longstanding critiques of Cuban tourism to an area that's received little academic or international attention.

Only a handful of texts have specifically addressed sustainable tourism in Cuba. Rochelle Spencer's book *Development Tourism: Lessons from Cuba* often touches on issues of

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<sup>32</sup> Roland, *Cuban Color*, 2011, 13.

<sup>33</sup> Babb, *The Tourism Encounter*, 2011, 11.

sustainability, with a focus on tourism as a tool for economic development.<sup>34</sup> Spencer explores the ways in which the tourism encounter can be improved with more equal, respectful, and culturally informed interaction between tourists and locals.<sup>35</sup> Within Cuba, Spencer sees NGO-sponsored tourism and other types of community-based visits as a crucial step towards sustainable development.

One of the few texts that has focused specifically on Cuban sustainable tourism is a 2016 Spanish-language analysis by Richard Feinberg and Richard Newfarmer of the Brookings Institute.<sup>36</sup> They attribute the current rise in Cuban tourism to the economic difficulties of its benefactors, particularly Venezuela, Brazil, and China, and the wave of Americans who legally visited the island following the Obama-Castro normalization of relations in 2014. Feinberg and Newfarmer emphasize Cuba's great tourism potential based in its beauty and cultural richness, analyze the largely state-controlled tourist industry, and recommend economic liberalization and increased foreign investment to stimulate the industry.<sup>37</sup>

While these analyses contributed greatly to a sparse field of study, they have their limitations, and much work remains to be done. My work is less broad and removed than the Brookings Report, and more location-specific than Spencer's work, allowing me to analyze the microcosm of a developing province as a case study in state-led sustainable tourism promotion. And while Spencer, Feinberg, and Newfarmer simply apply the globalized, capitalist notion of

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<sup>34</sup> Spencer, Rochelle, *Development Tourism: Lessons from Cuba*, (New Directions in Tourism Analysis. Farnham, Surrey, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010.)

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>36</sup> Feinberg, Richard E., and Richard S. Newfarmer, "Turismo En Cuba En La Ola Hacia La Prosperidad Sostenible." (Latin America Initiative. Brookings Institution, FIU Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center, December 2016.)

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

sustainability to Cuba and recommend development plans aligned with this perspective, I delve into the Cuban socialist system and explore whether a particularly Cuban sustainability could actually coexist with international sustainability.

#### Section iv. Methodology

Inspired by the interdisciplinary approach of a handful of tourism scholars, including George Gmelch, Roland Kaifa, Florence Babb, and Bella Dicks, I set out to provide a holistic, well-rounded tourism analysis. Tourism scholarship — especially sustainable tourism scholarship, like the Brookings analysis described in the previous section — tends to emphasize top-down policy and larger international factors.<sup>38</sup> To counteract the field's narrowness and fill in its blind spots, I tried to examine Holguín tourism from all angles, giving credence to international perceptions and marketing, but also to state efforts, regional planning, and local autonomy. This approach heavily informed my thesis structure, which begins with tourism's historico-political background, then appraises state policy, tourism offerings themselves, and industry critiques, weaving in local voices throughout.

As I attempted to gain as many perspectives on Holguín tourism as possible, this holistic methodology also guided my source selection. To this end, I was able to visit the province twice, in January and September 2017, and collect observational field notes of tourist sites, hold interviews and informal conversations with Holguineros and tourism workers, document on-site archival sources, and amass a variety of sustainability-focused touristic materials and marketing at the Turnat Ecotourism Event. The contacts I made in the province, including tourism workers and regional scholars, provided invaluable insight into the lived experience of Holguín tourism, and the hopes and concerns they hold for their beloved province.

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<sup>38</sup> Gmelch, *Behind the Smile*, 2012, x.

Both of these trips were extremely brief, however, and due to the deteriorating diplomatic relationship between the United States and Cuba, I was unable to receive a professional visa for my planned return to the island. These challenges prevented me from returning on a third, more in-depth trip scheduled for December 2017, in which I intended to complete my oral interviews and collaborate with University of Holguín tourism scholars. Fortunately, I was able to access a number of state-run media articles, policy frameworks and documents, and official statements, from both Cuban sources and international archives. Due to the constraints of my field research, I consulted with University of Michigan digital media librarian Shevon Desai, and chose to supplement this research with excerpts from Cuban online media engagement. This included tourism-related online comments and social media engagement on state-run news websites, which I used as a limited, yet rich source of public opinion. These comments proved to be a valuable source of public discourse, as Cubans' newfound internet access gives them increased (though by no means full) autonomy and anonymity to express their feelings about their government, which rarely tolerates in-person dissent.<sup>39</sup> I hope that the combined effect of these highly diverse sources provides an intimate, yet sweeping view of Holguín tourism, highlighting the dissonances between varying perspectives on the industry.

#### Section v. Conclusion

International sustainable tourism policy and critical tourism scholarship both deeply inform my perspective on Holguín's emerging industry. Sustainability frameworks provide important benchmarks to evaluate provincial tourism in Holguín and encourage its responsible, culturally and ecologically sensitive development going forward. Tourism scholarship has shed

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<sup>39</sup> Henken, Ted A, "Cuba's Digital Millennials: Independent Digital Media and Civil Society on the Island of the Disconnected." (Social Research: An International Quarterly 84, no. 2, August 25, 2017): 429–56.

light on many of the issues that Caribbean islands, including Cuba, face as they depend more and more on international tourist revenue.

But all too often, both sustainable tourism planning and Caribbean tourism scholarship focus on optimistic new policies or narrow issues, rather than the holistic reality of tourism on the ground. In this thesis, I contribute a more well-rounded portrait of how tourism has developed in one enigmatic area. In Holguín, as elsewhere, tourism is intimately wrapped up in the themes rarely covered in tourism analyses: rich heritage, contentious politics and history, notions of Revolution and of sustainability, well-intentioned state policies and sorely overlooked hardships, race and class and gender and the day-to-day experiences of Holguineros themselves. I hope to bring these issues into my tourism narrative, to give you a sense of what Holguín looks and feels like, as a tourist and as a local: to create a fuller picture of what tourism means there. In doing so, we get a firsthand view of the rich local tapestry, with its own particular strengths and challenges, that international tourism must reckon with when it enters any region. This is essential to gain a better understanding of the role of place, politics, and identity in forging a more sustainable future for tourism in Holguín, Cuba, and elsewhere in the region.

In Chapter Two, I will delve deeper into Cuba's tourism history, examining the legacy of decades of state policy and global economic conditions, and what they mean for tourism development and sustainability today. In Chapter Three, I hone in specifically on Holguín province, looking at Holguín's state tourism policy frameworks and how they articulate notions of sustainability and revolutionary values. In Chapter Four, I present Holguín's current sustainable and niche tourism offerings, from heritage to culture to ecotourism. Chapter Five addresses the severe challenges facing Holguín tourism's aspirations to sustainability, including issues of inequality, race and gender, ecology, and the role of the Cuban state. Finally, Chapter

Six provides a brief summary of the thesis and highlights the important lessons — for both tourism scholars and planners — that this study of Holguín can contribute. Through this holistic, interdisciplinary approach, I aim to take stock of the province's development, and to deeply consider how Holguín illuminates the rich interplay of global tourism, sustainable hopes, and revolutionary values in Cuban society today.

Chapter Two  
An Island Apart:  
Cuba's Unusual Tourism Timeline

*Are they servants of capitalism's open-market demands? Or are there exceptions... places that are charting alternative paths of development and change that might collaborate with capitalist interests, but on their own terms?*

Florence Babb<sup>40</sup>

Section i. Introduction

The relatively undeveloped frontiers of Holguín may appear to be a blank slate for new, innovative forms of tourism, but the complex legacy of Cuban tourism and governance still looms large over the province's fledgling industry. In order to understand Holguín's burgeoning tourism, we must first unpack Cuba's particular conception of sustainability, influenced by decades of tourism development and political and historical circumstances on the island. Cuba departs from many Caribbean norms, perhaps nowhere more than in its tourist industry; in fact, both the nature and history of Cuban tourism set it apart from the region.

The impossible balance between healthy, responsible tourism and economic need has always driven Cuban tourism, from the most conservative to the most radical regime. As I described in Chapter One, from the 1980s onward, this tension between immediate needs and responsible development gained a new name in international circles: sustainable tourism. I'll examine how this balance was negotiated in the past, revealing the foundations upon which today's hopes and plans for sustainable tourism rest.

The island's historical circumstances and political system, past and present, distinguish Cuban tourism from the rest of the Caribbean in many ways, including Cuba's timeline of tourism development, the role of heritage and nature in tourism, governmental policy, and

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<sup>40</sup> Babb, *The Tourism Encounter*, 2011, 11.

domestic accessibility. These differences impact how Cuban tourism, politics, and sustainability emerge today, at times giving the country advantages in sustainability that other Caribbean nations could only dream of, and at other times severely limiting tourism's benefits to Cubans.

The island's tourism background not only affects the conditions in which sustainability will thrive or fail in Holguín (and elsewhere in Cuba), but the very notion of sustainability itself. Long before sustainability became an international buzzword, the Cuban state articulated its own concepts of ideal tourism — concepts which both converge and diverge from the international sustainability standards which have emerged. Rather than relying solely on the global paradigms we discussed in Chapter One, Cuban ideas of sustainable tourism often contain domestic criteria such as equality, accessibility, and centralization, values rooted deeply in the island's historical and geopolitical background.

Beginning in earnest in the mid-20th century, Cuban leaders have attempted — and often failed — to foster a more responsible tourist industry on the island, long before sustainability itself entered the lexicon. These attempts reveal how historical conditions and state attitudes have fostered specifically *cubano* conceptions of tourism, and lend insight into the Cuban government's role in Holguín tourism today. In this chapter, I will look at tourism development and policy during three major periods in Cuban history: the 1940s-1950s prerevolutionary era, the decades following the 1959 Revolution, and the 1990s-2000s Special Period. The history, politics, and economics of these periods continue to influence Cuban tourism, and are essential to interpreting contemporary trends in Holguín.

#### Section ii. Prerevolutionary Tourism: 1940s - 1950s

As tourism became a national economic priority during the two decades preceding the 1959 Revolution, the Cuban state undertook efforts to diversify tourism beyond its sun, sand, and

play reputation. These attempts to expand the industry's offerings were motivated by many factors, including economic and political shifts, the need to compete with neighbors for discerning tourists' dollars, genuine hope for more beneficial tourism, and the desire to promote Cuba as a modern, civilized nation. While these state efforts were often unsuccessful in the face of Cuba's reputation as a summery tourist playground, they highlight how, much like today, tourism promotion and policy are shaped by the interwoven threads of economy, nationalism, culture, and identity.

During the 1940s and 1950s, Cuban leaders promoted many forms of economic diversification, trying to break free from the island's neocolonial dependence on sugar and tobacco by growing new crops, expanding trade networks, and fostering higher quality, more varied tourist offerings.<sup>41</sup> The National Tourism Corporation (CNT), founded in 1934, and its later counterpart, the 1952-founded Cuban Tourism Institute (ICT), both saw diversification as a necessary step to appeal to demanding international tourists.<sup>42</sup> These state agencies developed and marketed cultural offerings like religious heritage tours, Afro-Cuban dance performances, and even art and architectural tours of Havana, to satisfy rising industry expectations.<sup>43</sup> Oftentimes, the state promoted these efforts in partnership with universities, students, and private businesses in an attempt to keep up with international tourism trends and challenge conventional expectations of a Caribbean beach destination.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Formento, Manuel Castro, *La obra de la revolución cubana: Aspectos relevantes entre 1952 y 2016* (Tomos I y II, ibukku, 2017.)

<sup>42</sup> Colantonio, Andrea., and Robert B. Potter, *Urban Tourism and Development in the Socialist State: Havana during the 'Special Period.'* (Aldershot, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 93.

<sup>43</sup> Gustavsen, John Andrew, "Tension under the Sun: Tourism and Identity in Cuba, 1945–2007." (Ph.D., University of Miami, 2009), 74, 98, 80; Rodríguez Domínguez, Mercedes, *Turismo y República*, (La Habana, Cuba: Ediciones Balcón, Escuela de Altos Estudios de Hotelería y Turismo, 2009), 105.

<sup>44</sup> Rodríguez Domínguez, *Turismo y República*. 2009. 90.

Cuba's tourist industry faced stiff competition from its Caribbean neighbors, who were rapidly developing the same beach resorts and swanky reputation as Cuba, drawing more and more tourists to the shores of Puerto Rico, Mexico, and elsewhere.<sup>45</sup> Cuba desperately needed to offer something new to tourists with dozens of appealing options. To this end, Cuban leaders began promoting the island's ecological and cultural diversity in order to stand out among tourist destinations. One national economic conference in the late 1940s encouraged the country to seize upon Cuba's ecological richness and biodiversity, from mountains to wetlands, as a major facet of tourism.<sup>46</sup> Around the same time, the CNT sponsored a competition to design nature tourism lodgings in the countryside, and plans for tourist-friendly national parks and eco-reserves constantly swirled around various state planning agencies.<sup>47</sup> But as with cultural tourism, these early efforts at fostering diversified, nature-based tourist offerings stagnated within relatively ineffective, poorly coordinated government tourism planning, and remained mired in the planning stage throughout the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>48</sup>

On top of these purely economic incentives to diversify, the state was also motivated by tourism's potential to improve Cubans' quality of life as a development tool — a theme that has continued throughout subsequent political regimes. Prerevolutionary governments in Cuba saw tourism as an opportunity to connect the island through infrastructure projects, using the spread of tourism investment as motivation to construct an efficient national highway and rail system that greatly benefitted Cubans and visitors alike. Even current Cuban scholars, who often take a

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<sup>45</sup> Gmelch, *Behind the Smile*, 2012, 5.

<sup>46</sup> Gustavsen, "Tension under the Sun," 2009, 34.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>48</sup> Colantonio, *Urban Tourism and Development in the Socialist State*, 2006, 93.

critical tone towards the prerevolutionary period, acknowledge that tourism did improve national infrastructure and regional connectivity during the 1950s.<sup>49</sup>

The prerevolutionary state attempted to spread tourism's benefits around the island, with very limited success. While Havana and the nearby resort area of Varadero still reigned supreme in the tourist imagination, the CNT and ICT did try to promote regional tourism around the island, built around specific niches such as agricultural tourism or camping.<sup>50</sup> Local Tourism Committees organized regional festivals celebrating agriculture and provincial identities, regional museums told localized tales of colonialism and the independence struggle, and state-sponsored guides encouraged tourists to venture away from Havana and explore the heritage and ecology of Viñales, Trinidad, Cienfuegos, and other then lesser-known destinations.<sup>51</sup> The state considered tourism diversification to be not only an economic necessity, but also an appealing way to bring the industry's benefits directly to local communities and integrate more remote provinces into a cohesive political and economic system — and a cohesive, state-promoted Cuban narrative.

Finally, the tourist industry gave prerevolutionary leaders the ability to communicate certain messages about Cuban identity, culture, and history. Often, this messaging revolved around a strange dichotomy: on one hand, the prerevolutionary state billed Cuba as a state-of-the-art modern country with all the amenities of Europe or the United States. On the other hand, it recognized the Western desire for an exotic other, simultaneously promoting Cuba's modernity and its idyllic exoticism. In Havana, the prerevolutionary state developed the capital's modern

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<sup>49</sup> Rodríguez Domínguez, *Turismo y República*, 2009; Villalba Garrido, Evaristo, *Cuba Y El Turismo*, (Economía. La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1993.)

<sup>50</sup> Gustavsen, "Tension under the Sun," 2009, 35.

<sup>51</sup> Maribona, Armando, *Turismo en Cuba*, (Habana, Cuba: Editorial Lex, 1959.)

identity with high quality museums, European and American-style architecture, cutting edge infrastructure projects, and clean, hygienic public services — and boasted about these features in travel guides, articles, and advertisements.<sup>52</sup> Museums put forth selective, nationalist narratives of Cuban culture that celebrated White Cuba, presenting Cuban history as the inevitable march of progress from colonialism, to US-facilitated independence, to the island’s glorious ascent as a modern nation.<sup>53</sup> Meanwhile, state promoters and private advertisers depicted the Cuban hinterland as suspended in time, an idyllic “antidote to urban modernity” populated by quaint *campesinos* (peasants), pastoral views, and untouched nature.<sup>54</sup> Rural and urban Cuba seemingly offered two different worlds to tourists, giving them both the modern familiarity and the exotic, timeless *other* they craved.

Many of these initial efforts at fostering diverse, sustainable tourism were thwarted by the state’s paradoxical desires. Cuba’s planners wanted healthy, culturally beneficial tourism but remained dependent on revenues from gambling and other tourist-attracting vices.<sup>55</sup> They wanted Cuba’s many regions to benefit from tourism, but graced Havana and Varadero with inordinate spending and publicity. They hoped the island would be seen as a modern and sophisticated cultural destination, but saw Cuban culture and heritage as inferior to that of Italy, France, and the United States.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Rodríguez Domínguez, *Turismo y República*, 2009, 88-92.

<sup>53</sup> Gustavsen, “Tension under the Sun,” 2009, 102.

<sup>54</sup> Dicks, Bella. *Culture on Display*, (Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill International (UK) Ltd., 2007), 2; Gustavsen, “Tension under the Sun,” 2009, 115.

<sup>55</sup> Schwartz, Rosalie, *Pleasure Island: Tourism and Temptation in Cuba*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 113-115.

<sup>56</sup> Gustavsen, “Tension under the Sun,” 2009, 98.

Early Cuban tourism could serve as economic boon, impetus for responsible development, and builder of national identity all at once. Remarkably, tourism continued to inhabit these roles, albeit with a very different political regime, throughout the revolutionary period. While a great deal has changed in Cuba since the 1940s and 1950s, these prerevolutionary efforts reveal how the conflicting desires of tourism stakeholders, and the gap between state vision and reality, have always been a part of the island's tourist industry.

### Section iii. Revolutionary Tourism: 1960s - 1980s

Because the regime installed after the 1959 Revolution maintains political control to this day, the revolutionary period from 1960 to the late 1980s can teach us even more about the circumstances, policies, and attitudes that created today's conditions for tourism and sustainability. While tourism changed drastically following the Revolution's success, it continued to play similar roles for Cuba and its new leaders as an economic tool, nationalist symbol, and opportunity for diversification.

Directly after the Revolution, however, Fidel Castro's newly empowered but cash-poor government actually tried to maintain the prerevolutionary tourism status quo. Initially, the revolutionaries preserved the tourist policies of the previous administration, advertising Cuba's beaches, casinos, and resorts internationally and assuring tourists that the island was safe to visit.<sup>57</sup> But the tourist industry faced foreign disinvestment, bad press abroad, counterrevolutionary violence at home, and the death knell of the US embargo against the island, causing tourism to drop off precipitously. International tourism declined from its prerevolutionary peak of nearly 300,000 visitors a year in 1957, to a low of only 168 Western

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

tourists just six years later.<sup>58</sup> When the new government's attempt to preserve the status quo failed, policymakers had more freedom to change tourism based on their values and ideals — the Cuban state couldn't depend on the industry for much-needed revenue. In other words, there was suddenly so little tourism that radical change could no longer impact the nearly defunct industry.

This moment of revolutionary change occurred throughout the 1960s and 1970s as the Castro regime took stock of the industry, aligning tourism with his new national values. A variety of changes swept the Cuban tourism industry throughout the early revolutionary period, including the rise of socialist state control, emphasis on domestic tourism and accessibility, and newfound expressions of national identity and history. While not immediate or all-encompassing, many changes were quite dramatic. As Florence Babbs sums up,

Hotels were nationalized, clubs were closed, and prostitutes were “reeducated” to become seamstresses and other morally correct citizen-workers of the new society. Ordinary Cubans were offered the chance to enjoy the pleasures of the island that were formerly the exclusive province of the elite and foreign visitors.<sup>59</sup>

Because of the low volume of foreign tourism during the 1960s and 1970s, the era's tourism policy hasn't received much scholarly attention, other than a comprehensive dissertation by John Gustavsen, but the early revolutionary period remains crucial to understanding the unique features and challenges of tourism in socialist Cuba.

With the Revolution came a swift and lasting shift in the tourist industry's power dynamic, from largely private ownership to far-reaching state control of tourism. The Revolutionary government nationalized many hotels, golf courses, and other hubs of private commerce. As Western capitalist tourism to Cuba rapidly declined, the state often found other

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<sup>58</sup> Villalba Garrido, *Cuba y El Turismo*, 1993, 25, 167.

<sup>59</sup> Babb, *The Tourism Encounter*, 2011, 25.

uses for these structures, converting some into conference centers, schools, and other public spaces.<sup>60</sup> This high degree of centralization extended to tourism policy-making as well. President Fidel Castro himself took over the ICT, the prerevolutionary Cuban tourism ministry, ensuring that every aspect of tourism would be both centralized and closely scrutinized, with a higher degree of state control over the behavior of foreign businesses, international visitors, official Cuban tour guides, and many Cuban-foreign interactions.<sup>61</sup>

This concentration of state power over tourism, which continues in many ways to this day, can be seen as beneficial or detrimental to the sustainability potential of Cuban tourism. On one hand, the state had a unique opportunity to counteract tourism's negative effects, from prostitution to economic exploitation. Because of the state's socialist structure, many state-earned tourism profits went towards public services rather than allowing foreign businesses to profit, keeping much-needed revenue on the island.<sup>62</sup> On the other hand, the state began to exercise tight control over interactions between Cubans and guests, stifling genuine intercultural communication and entrepreneurial opportunities for small businesspeople.

The Castro regime also sought to make tourism a symbolic harbinger of the social equality promised by the Revolution. It did so by shifting the national conversation from foreign tourism to domestic tourism, initiating a "Cuba for Cubans" campaign that promised all Cubans newfound access to the island's most exclusive tourist spaces.<sup>63</sup> Just a month after the rebels declared their victory in Havana, they created the Department of Beaches for the People,

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<sup>60</sup> Villalba Garrido, *Cuba y El Turismo*, 1993, 125.

<sup>61</sup> Gustavsen, "Tension under the Sun," 2009, 141.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>63</sup> Roland, *Cuban Color*, 2011, 11.

providing Cuban citizens free access to beaches, resorts, and clubs formerly reserved for tourists and the wealthiest Cubans.<sup>64</sup> Soon the new administration established the National Institute of the Tourism Industry (INIT), which provided free domestic vacations and access to cabarets, restaurants, and even health spas for loyal members of the new Workers Unions.<sup>65</sup> This early commitment to accessibility represented a dramatic change to the highly stratified and segregated tourism industry, which had long excluded many Cubans. “Cuba for Cubans” established tourism accessibility as central to the Revolution’s push towards both socialism and nationalist pride.

Just as the prerevolutionary Cuban state used tourism to communicate certain ideas about national identity and history, revolutionary leaders quickly seized upon national and international tourism as tools to project their new notion of *Cubanidad* throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Immediately after tourism’s swift decline in 1960 and 1961, the Castro regime banned gambling and drugs, and retrained former prostitutes, sending a clear message that the regime would break with tourism’s supposedly licentious, unhealthy past.<sup>66</sup>

As Cuba shed its unstable 1960s reputation and many foreign nations normalized their diplomatic relations with the country, the government allowed international tourism to return and grow in a steady, controlled fashion throughout the 1970s and 1980s. By the end of the 1980s, tourism had returned to its prerevolutionary levels, and state-run tourism contractors like Gaviota and Cubanacan had constructed some new hotels and other facilities.<sup>67</sup> As early as the 1970s, President Castro began praising *his* iteration of Cuban tourism as a healthy development tool

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<sup>64</sup> Colantonio, *Urban Tourism and Development*, 2006, 104.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>66</sup> Gustavsen, “Tension under the Sun,” 2009, 177-188.

<sup>67</sup> Colantonio, *Urban Tourism and Development*, 2006, 105-6.

which would never again rely on “drugs, gambling, and vices” to lure visitors.<sup>68</sup> Instead of designing tourism around foreigners’ wants and needs, the state emphasized expressions of pride in Cuban culture, heritage, and the Revolution itself.<sup>69</sup> This strong sense of anti-imperialist nationalism spurred national designation of heritage sites and international promotion of Cuban culture.<sup>70</sup> Cuban heritage sites flourished, and the Castro government applied for many UNESCO World Heritage Site designations and was awarded nine — a remarkable achievement for any country, let alone a fairly small island nation in the Caribbean.<sup>71</sup> On the domestic level, Cuba created many nationally designated heritage sites and ecological preserves throughout the mid-Revolutionary period, enshrining heritage and history preservation in the 1976 Cuban Constitution.<sup>72</sup> Culture gained a larger role in national identity, a shift that would have far-reaching consequences for Cuban tourism up to this day — for all its faults, Cuban tourism would never be known solely for beaches, gambling, and the like.

The first three decades of the Castro government brought momentous change to many aspects of Cuban life, not least of them tourism. Yet despite the state’s desire to differentiate itself from prerevolutionary norms, tourism continued to occupy an influential, problematic place in the public consciousness. Early in the Revolution, tourism became a political punching bag for the new regime to criticize, yet at other moments, leaders saw it as an opportunity for

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<sup>68</sup> Castro, Fidel, “Castro Addresses Plenum of Basic Industry Workers.” (Transcript. Havana Domestic Radio, December 9, 1970. Latin American Network Information Center, University of Texas); Castro, Fidel, “Castro’s Jamaica Press Conference.” (Havana Domestic Radio, October 30, 1977. Latin American Network Information Center, University of Texas.)

<sup>69</sup> Gustavsen, “Tension under the Sun,” 2009, 214.

<sup>70</sup> Centre, UNESCO World Heritage, “Cuba,” (UNESCO World Heritage Centre. Accessed December 6, 2017.)

<sup>71</sup> Centre, UNESCO, “Cuba,” 2017.

<sup>72</sup> República de Cuba, “Programa Nacional de Medio Ambiente y Desarrollo,” (1993. Centro de Patrimonio Cultural de La Habana), 91.

revolutionary transformation. Gradually, a moderate tourism industry returned to the island, undoubtedly different from what had come before — but not by any means fully reformed, sustainable, or even revolutionary. As the state developed tourism at a cautious pace through the end of the 1980s, global events would irreparably change Cuba’s economic prospects, making tourism a more attractive, yet risky way forward for the island.

#### Section iv. Special Period Tourism: 1990s

The 1990s were a watershed moment for Cuban tourism. During this era, sustainable tourism finally entered the national and international lexicon, yet new economic conditions also presented the Cuban government’s most severe challenges since the Revolution itself. Just as tourism was developing in a slow, controlled manner, the 1991 collapse of Cuba’s economic benefactor, the Soviet Union, caused extreme hardship on the island.<sup>73</sup> The state’s search for alternative revenue sources prompted over a decade of rapid tourism growth, exacerbating many of the industry’s problems.<sup>74</sup> The rapid growth and economic liberalization the state undertook, however, paved the way for small private businesses and more contact with diverse foreign visitors, giving Cubans new autonomy over their own lives and employment. The 1990s ushered in an era of privation, liberalization, and individual ingenuity that in many ways continues to this day in Cuba. The island’s government made huge concessions to the capitalist tourist system practiced around the globe — including some adoption of sustainable standards — yet still emphasized the nationalist, revolutionary nature of Cuban tourism. Whether the state was successful in forging a real alternative to global touristic hegemony remains to be seen, but the

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<sup>73</sup> Colatonio, *Urban Tourism and Development*, 2006, 110.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

Cuban policy and rhetoric shifts initiated during the 1990s have only deepened in years since, making this difficult period crucial to interpreting current tourism conditions on the island.

Soviet aid to Cuba, previously a major source of Cuban state revenue, essential imports, and subsidies, vanished with the Soviet Union's disintegration in the early 1990s. Following this loss, the Castro regime entered its worst decade, with extreme scarcity of resources forcing many Cubans to scavenge for food and earn newfound livings outside of the state-sanctioned economy.<sup>75</sup> This prompted the revolutionary government to declare the "special period in peacetime," in which official concessions to capitalism and economic liberalization were undertaken to mitigate the hardships Cuba experienced; this became known popularly as the Special Period.<sup>76</sup> In a quest to preserve the revenue that enabled its socialist policies, the state allowed some small private enterprises to develop, albeit with strict regulation and economic limitations.<sup>77</sup> They also devised a new dual currency system, in which foreigners used American dollars, or the equivalent high-worth Cuban Convertible pesos (CUCs) starting in 2004, and most nationals used and received less valuable Cuban pesos (CUPs).<sup>78</sup> The state justified Cuba's newfound economic reforms, heightened poverty, and inequality issues with Marxist theory, summed up thusly by Roland Kaifa:

In the socialist stage, then, it is understood that some vestiges of inequality and material motivations required under capitalism remain because communism has not yet been accomplished. This pragmatic capitalist loophole that socialism offers to Communist doctrine is what has allowed the Cuban government to make such unorthodox moves as

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<sup>75</sup> Ritter, Archibald R. M., and Ted. Henken, *Entrepreneurial Cuba: The Changing Policy Landscape*, (Boulder, Colorado: FirstForumPress, a division of Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2015.)

<sup>76</sup> Castro, Fidel, "Castro Gives Speech on 30th CDR Anniversary." (Havana, Cuba: Havana Domestic Radio, September 29, 1990. Castro Speech Data Base - Latin American Network Information Center, LANIC.)

<sup>77</sup> Ritter, *Entrepreneurial Cuba*, 2015.

<sup>78</sup> Blue, "The Erosion of Racial Equality," 2007, 36.

the wide-scale dollarization of the economy, acceptance of foreign investment, and opening to mass international tourism.<sup>79</sup>

Cuba entered more public-private partnerships than ever before, engaging closely with foreign companies and the world capitalist system to construct hotels and other tourist amenities on a large scale. Economic liberalization policies during the Special Period gave more and more Cubans the opportunity to make money autonomously — and depend less on the state for income and necessities. Cubans started *paladares* (private restaurants in homes) *casas particulares* (tourist guesthouses), and sold artisan goods, tobacco products, and other souvenirs to international visitors.<sup>80</sup> On a state level, the foreign currency flowing into government coffers allowed Cuba to continue offering the public services, from education to healthcare to rations, that it had long guaranteed its citizens, although persistent shortages limited the value of these offerings.<sup>81</sup> Outside Cuba, many development experts regarded these changes as important steps forward for the island, integrating it more deeply with the global economy,<sup>82</sup> while many Cuban leaders believed the opposite, hoping for a return to the fully state-run economy of previous decades.<sup>83</sup>

Intimately connected with these economic reforms was the dramatic rise of mass tourism, which reached levels never seen before in Cuba.<sup>84</sup> In the search to fill the enormous gap

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<sup>79</sup> Roland, *Cuban Color*, 2011, 13.

<sup>80</sup> Colatonia, *Urban Tourism and Development*, 2006.

<sup>81</sup> Blue, “The Erosion of Racial Equality,” 2007.

<sup>82</sup> Feinberg, *Turismo En Cuba*, 2016.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., and Castro, Fidel, “Discurso pronunciado por el Comandante en Jefe Fidel Castro Ruz...en la Inauguración del Hotel Guitart-Cayo Coco, en Ciego de Ávila,” (Cuba Portal, November 12, 1993. Discursos e intervenciones del Comandante en Jefe Fidel Castro Ruz, Presidente del Consejo de Estado de la República de Cuba.)

<sup>84</sup> Colatonia, *Urban Tourism and Development*, 2006, (Calculated from Mintur, 2001; ONE, 2002; ECLAC, 2000; Pérez Mók and Garcia, 2000.)

in state revenue left by the Soviet Union, the revolutionary government turned to tourism as a valuable source of international currency.<sup>85</sup> Despite Cuba's continued isolation from its closest neighbor, the United States, the island's annual number of international tourists increased dramatically, rising from 340,000 in 1990 to 1.77 million by the end of the decade.<sup>86</sup> As the Cuban state invested huge sums in tourist development, it constructed and allowed the private construction of many tourist projects, from all-inclusive resorts to restaurants to tourism infrastructure, and began the historic restoration of Old Havana and other heritage architecture.<sup>87</sup> Government spending on tourism did have some positive effects on development during the 1990s, generating much-needed demand for domestic goods and services, like food and transportation, and financing development projects that benefitted other spheres of Cuban life.<sup>88</sup>

While Cuba rapidly developed mass tourism and liberalized its economic system out of desperation, many in the Cuban state, including President Castro himself, portrayed tourism as an extraordinary possibility for responsible growth and, once again, as a nationalist symbol. At a hotel opening in 1993, Castro stressed that tourism was the only way to safeguard the Revolution following the Soviet Union's collapse.<sup>89</sup> But just as he had promised throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, Castro declared that Cuba would never "develop just any tourism," but instead an "ideal tourism, a perfect tourism" which would avoid the mistakes made elsewhere in the Caribbean.<sup>90</sup> He criticized countries which had destroyed their natural and cultural resources in

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<sup>85</sup> Colatonia, *Urban Tourism and Development*, 2006.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., (Calculated from Mintur, 2001; ONE, 2002; ECLAC, 2000; Pérez Mók and Garcia, 2000.)

<sup>87</sup> Babb, *The Tourism Encounter*, 2011, 25.

<sup>88</sup> Colatonia, *Urban Tourism and Development*, 2006, 44.

<sup>89</sup> Castro, "Discurso Pronunciado," 1993.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

pursuit of tourist dollars, promising that Cuban tourism would not only integrate, but enrich the island's fragile ecosystems and rich cultural heritage.<sup>91</sup> Implicitly, Castro used the rhetoric of sustainability to emphasize Cuba's moral superiority over other Caribbean nations, promising that his Revolution would never sacrifice the people or the environment for economic gain, as other countries supposedly had. His rhetoric of sustainability and revolution within tourism not only served as a nationalist tool, but as a technique to resell mass tourism to the Cuban public, making the industry palatable to his political base.

National policy did begin to align with global sustainability norms during the Special Period, though these policies' lofty aims didn't always match up with the complex reality of Cuban tourism. Most significantly, Cuba created the landmark National Program of the Environment and Development in 1993, inspired by Agenda 21 of the UN Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro the previous year.<sup>92</sup> The new program was an early representation of the Cuban government's relationship to sustainability: the policy is deeply conscious of international norms, but nonetheless articulates its own, politically charged ideas of what sustainability means.

The National Program of the Environment and Development enacted sweeping legal protections for natural and historic areas, set up an extensive network of state programs and smaller regulatory bodies to promote sustainable, cultural, and ecological tourism practices.<sup>93</sup> The Environment and Development Program placed particular emphasis on ecotourism, and to a lesser extent, on heritage tourism, as key forms of niche tourism which could foster more

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> República de Cuba, "Programa Nacional de Medio Ambiente y Desarrollo," (1993, Centro de Patrimonio Cultural de La Habana.)

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

sustainable practices.<sup>94</sup> These niche tourism initiatives aligned well with Cuban resources and state interests, considering the island's relatively healthy natural environment and the government's long history of heritage promotion. Ironically, the Special Period actually improved environmental conditions for the island's land and water, as Cubans, already deprived of many farming technologies, lost nearly all access to pesticides, fertilizer, and other efficient but environmentally damaging technologies.<sup>95</sup> New initiatives promised to plan, evaluate, and implement responsible tourist projects that complemented the existing Cuban system.<sup>96</sup>

Many of the Environment and Development Program's goals aligned closely with international standards of sustainable tourism, as articulated at the Rio Earth Summit. But its uniquely Cuban focus on the revolutionary spirit, domestic accessibility, and a highly centralized state set it apart from run-of-the-mill sustainability policy. Throughout the program's policy framework, it's clear that Cuba's revolutionary character remains intact, at least in theory. Intriguingly, the Cuban state saw its own socialist, one-party rule as crucial to the success of sustainability, citing the "participative character of society" and "the unity of the people with the Party" as key factors that would help sustainability thrive.<sup>97</sup> On paper at least, national pride and the values of the Revolution still took precedence over tourist dollars, with tourism seen merely as a controllable tool to improve Cuban life.<sup>98</sup> Vestiges of the Revolution's early Cuba for Cubans campaign lingered as well, as state policy still emphasized that Cubans would be able to

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>95</sup> Perrottet, Tony, "A Cuban Island That Has Played Both Paradise and Prison." (The New York Times, January 2, 2018, sec. Travel.)

<sup>96</sup> República de Cuba, "Programa Nacional de Medio Ambiente," 1993, 70-71.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 9.

enjoy Cuban tourism, not just international visitors.<sup>99</sup> Even as Cuba reintegrated with the globalized capitalist system, the state's socialist values extended to the Special Period, with policy detailing a vast, highly centralized bureaucracy to keep tourism in check, with countless action plans and local technical committees designed to assess every step of tourist development.<sup>100</sup> The Environment and Development Program may have brought Cuba's tourism standards closer to global norms of sustainability, but it also featured rhetoric that reflected the government's own socialist, egalitarian self-image.

But despite the Cuban state's purported intentions to foster inclusive, economically sustainable, and ecologically and culturally responsible tourism, the island's urgent need for mass tourism revenue sharply limited its pursuit of these ideals. Special Period tourism's most dire problems were the heightened "social apartheid" separating tourists and Cubans, an increase in sex tourism and prostitution, and worsening racial inequality among Cubans themselves.<sup>101</sup> In an attempt to appeal to beach-going tourists, the Cuban government constructed many all-inclusive coastal resorts, nightclubs, and restaurants during the 1990s — luxurious, modern spaces in which most Cubans were unwelcome except as lower level employees.<sup>102</sup> This reality fell far short of the "Cuba for Cubans" dreams of domestic accessibility which many Cubans continue to hold dear. Especially amongst the economic desperation of 1990s Havana, prostitution became a more visible sight, with *jineteras* (female prostitutes) attracting an international clientele, global scholarly attention, and harsh state repression in the form of

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>101</sup> Pattullo, *Last Resorts*, 1996, 83.

<sup>102</sup> Roland, *Cuban Color*, 2011, 13.

arrests, police harassment, and reeducation camps.<sup>103</sup> Beneath the Cuban state's rhetoric of sustainability lay moral discomfort about the echoes of Cuba's prerevolutionary reputation as a tropical sex destination — and many young women suffered, and continued to suffer, the consequences of their “unrevolutionary” behavior<sup>104</sup> Even the egalitarian racial gains of the Revolution were put into question by Special Period Tourism. Selective hiring practices within the tourism industry provoked widespread discrimination against Afro-Cubans, providing choice tourism jobs to lighter-skinned Cubans and exacerbating racial tensions.<sup>105</sup> These increased social divisions appeared particularly stark in a purportedly egalitarian state, which had always promised to eliminate prerevolutionary tourism's uglier aspects.<sup>106</sup> Cuban policymakers envisioned a healthy tourist industry centered around ecology, culture, and social equality, but in reality, the cash-starved state was unable to manage the same negative effects that plagued mass tourism all over the Caribbean. These issues may have emerged most distinctly in the Special Period, but they continue to threaten Cuban tourism's sustainability today.

While the Cuban state promoted its singular vision for tourism in sweeping policies, speeches, and idealistic new programs, the reality of the Special Period strayed far from the Castro regime's egalitarian promises. The seeds of contemporary Cuban tourism were planted as far back as the 1940s, however, it was the Special Period which most directly influenced Cuban tourism's contradictory amalgam of idealism, politics, nationalism, and hardship.

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<sup>103</sup> Daigle, *From Cuba with Love*, 2015.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Blue, “The Erosion of Racial Equality,” 2007.

<sup>106</sup> Babb, *The Tourism Encounter*, 2011, 3.

### Section v. Brief Update on Post-Special Period Tourism (2000s)

In the years since the Special Period's darkest moments, many of the changes the crisis initiated have been expanded. The state has deepened its liberal economic reforms, particularly since President Raúl Castro took over from Fidel Castro in 2006, and today it is easier than ever — though still challenging by Western capitalist standards — to open a small legitimate business oriented towards tourists.<sup>107</sup> Cuban tourism, still dominated by the state, has continued to diversify, with a profusion of public-private endeavors and more niche tourism offerings than ever.<sup>108</sup> These efforts, along with increased international access to the island, have caused an impressive surge of tourism; international tourist arrivals began the 1990s at less than half a million per year, and ended 2017 at over four million visitors.<sup>109</sup> This increase is especially remarkable, considering Cuba is the only Caribbean country which has been largely unable to attract nearby American tourists due to the ongoing embargo. Instead, Cuba draws tourists from farther afield, with Canadians, Italians, Spaniards, Argentines, and even Russians visiting in large numbers.<sup>110</sup>

The brief American travel opening in 2016-17, initiated by improved relations with U.S. President Barack Obama and a relaxation of U.S. restrictions on travelling to the island, promised an enormous new source of visitors a few nautical miles away.<sup>111</sup> The Trump

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<sup>107</sup> Ritter, *Entrepreneurial Cuba*, 2015.

<sup>108</sup> Leogrande, William, "Will History Absolve Fidel Castro?" (Foreign Policy, November 26, 2016.)

<sup>109</sup> Figueredo Reinaldo, Oscar, "Asamblea Nacional: ¿Cómo se ha comportado el turismo en Cuba?" (Cubadebate, December 20, 2017.)

<sup>110</sup> Figueredo Reinaldo, "Asamblea Nacional," 2017.

<sup>111</sup> LeoGrande, William M., and Peter Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba the Hidden History of Negotiations between Washington and Havana*, (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015.)

Administration has since tightened restrictions, but travel to Cuba for Cuban-Americans remains relatively relaxed, allowing many Cubans to access luxury Cuban tourism for the first time via hotel and resorts with well-heeled Cuban-American relatives.<sup>112</sup> But this mass tourist influx, from Americans and others, came with its own dark legacy of exploitation and leisure — and an unprecedented tourism rise that threatened to divert much-needed resources, from food to medicine, away from Cubans and into chic private restaurants and shops for foreigners.<sup>113</sup> I'll explore the the specifics of modern Cuban tourism and its sustainability initiatives in more depth in Chapter Three, and its ongoing challenges in Chapter Four. Even as Cuba strives to create a sustainable future for tourism on the island, some of the inequities exacerbated by the Special Period have become more, not less, conspicuous.

#### Section vi. Conclusion

While Cuban leaders have used tourism as a political symbol and economic tool since the industry arrived on the island, the 1959 Revolution profoundly changed tourism's relationship to the world, and to Cubans themselves. In the years since, Cuba has emerged as a country apart, in a sea of beach destinations and deeply unsustainable tourism practices. The Cuban notion of sustainability has grown to encompass the standard "triple bottom line" concept of culture, ecology, and economy, with the addition of particularly Cuban elements of socialism, state management, and domestic access to tourist spaces. These uniquely Cuban criteria must be navigated just as delicately as the more common international tenets of sustainable tourism, in

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<sup>112</sup> Morales, Emilio, "Cuba's Internal Tourism Boom." (Havana Consulting Group, July 20, 2017.)

<sup>113</sup> Morales, Emilio, "Growth of Tourism Is Affecting Cuba's Infrastructure." (Havana Consulting Group, November 27, 2015.)

order to satisfy the sustainability needs of the international community, tourists, the Cuban state, and most importantly, Cuban citizens.

But as mass tourism returned to Cuba at the end of the 20th century, even small Revolutionary gains waxed and waned, with no guarantees of long term well-being for Cubans. It has yet to be seen whether Cuba's current transformations will reconstruct the country sufficiently to foster fuller, freer tourism, or whether tourism will slide further into unsustainable practices. As Holguín rapidly develops its diverse tourist offerings, it will be closely watched for hints of tourism's future on the island. In the next chapter, I'll appraise state tourism policy in Holguín since the Special Period, looking at the ways in which the Cuban government continued to articulate and implement its tourism ideals on a provincial level.

### Chapter Three Holguín Tourism Policy and Planning

*We can avoid the mistakes made by nearly every country that has developed tourism.*  
Fidel Castro, 1993<sup>114</sup>

#### Section i. Introduction: Background on Holguín Tourism Policy

Just a month after the Revolution's victory, Fidel Castro — a native son of Holguín, in fact — returned to the province to speak to his supporters. From an ornate balcony perched above Holguín city's central plaza, Castro, tellingly, asked Holguineros “if they had beaches, if there was good communication with them, where they wanted beaches, and what needed to be done in the case of Guardalavaca beach.”<sup>115</sup> In this way, Castro and his revolutionary government singled out tourism as a major focus in Holguín — though in the early decades of the Revolution, this mainly led to greater accessibility to beaches and tourist facilities for domestic tourists, not international ones, via the national “Cuba for Cubans” campaign described in greater detail in Chapter Two.<sup>116</sup> Still, the revolutionary state clearly recognized tourism's economic value in Holguín, and after promoting these domestic travel efforts, the state invested in Holguín's first small wave of international tourist development along Guardalavaca Beach in the 1970s, along with several large hotels in Holguín City during the following decade.<sup>117</sup>

As tourism ramped up during the acute economic desperation of the Special Period, the Cuban state pumped even more money into beach resorts and all-inclusives, building several new

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<sup>114</sup> Castro, “Discurso Pronunciado,” 1993.

<sup>115</sup> Fernández, Eduardo Puente, and Daylén Vega Muguercia, “Turismo... en tierras de Holguín,” (Cubadebate. May 6, 2017.)

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

properties along Holguín’s central northern coast, and expanding or renovating older offerings built in the 1970s.<sup>118</sup> With the exception of small-scale, early stage ecotourism projects in Holguín’s pine forest and northwest coast, tourism remained extremely concentrated in this small area of the province, with state-owned resorts supplemented by a measure of private investment from international hospitality groups, who partnered with the state to build and manage joint-venture hotels.<sup>119</sup> As Holguín tourism expanded in the last quarter of the 20th century, it provided geographically limited opportunities for Holguineros themselves — centered around construction work, resort employment, and tourist entertainment — and industry growth primarily benefited state coffers and a few small coastal communities.<sup>120</sup> Frequent, sometimes devastating hurricanes made tourist expansion even more difficult, and remain a major issue.<sup>121</sup> From the 1970s through the 1990s, tourism began to play a role in Holguín’s economy, but the industry remained geographically constrained and relatively modest in scale.

#### Section ii. Tourism Policy and Current State Efforts in Holguín

Then, on a cloudless day in 2003, Fidel Castro traveled to northern Holguín to unveil the Revolution’s latest achievement: not a workers’ collective or ballet school, but a five-star coastal resort, the Hotel Playa Pesquero.<sup>122</sup> At the Playa Pesquero, the last hotel that Castro inaugurated

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Castro, Fidel. “Key Address by Dr. Fidel Castro Ruz, President of the Republic of Cuba, At the Inauguration of Playa Pesquero Five-Star Hotel and Holguín Tourism Resort,” (Cuba Portal, January 21, 2003. Discursos e intervenciones del Comandante en Jefe Fidel Castro Ruz, Presidente del Consejo de Estado de la República de Cuba.)

<sup>120</sup> Castro, “Key Address,” 2003.

<sup>121</sup> Castillo, Elena, and Luis Mario Rodríguez Suñol, “Una Provincia de Mucho Futuro,” (Holguín: La Tierra Más Hermosa, Revista de La Asamblea Provincial Del Poder Popular, 2015), 2-3.

<sup>122</sup> “Weather History for Holguín, Cuba,” (Averaged Metar Reports, Weather Underground, January 21, 2003.)

before his death, Cuba's president outlined his vision for a new, sustainable, and revolutionary future for Cuban tourism. Castro promised to fight

for peaceful, safe and healthy tourism that can be enjoyed by children and families, young people, adults and senior citizens; for tourism aimed at wholesome recreation, culture and leisure; for tourism without casinos and gambling; for tourism without unemployed people and beggars; for tourism without drugs and crime, in the country that is advancing with giant steps, unstoppable, towards the highest possible degree of comprehensive general culture.<sup>123</sup>

It was no mistake that Castro's speech — his first and only speech to specifically focus on sustainable tourism<sup>124</sup> — occurred in Holguín. What might have been a simple ribbon-cutting ceremony for another leader was a political opportunity for Castro to articulate a brave new future for Cuban tourism, with Holguín as a national showpiece for sustainable and revolutionary values alike. This 2003 speech remains a landmark in the development of Holguín's tourist industry, still referenced by ministers and journalists at tourism events in the province.<sup>125</sup> But its implications extend beyond Holguín. This was one of very few speeches Castro gave on tourism since the Special Period began, and the only one to specifically focus on sustainable development.<sup>126</sup>

Castro's 2003 speech at Playa Pesquero was, indeed, the first modern framework of Holguín sustainable tourism, and remains one of the most significant to understand both the rhetoric and the reality of development here. His ideal vision for Holguín tourism was profoundly influential, and even as he stepped down as the island's leader and passed away in 2016, his presence is immense on the island. As I rode across Cuba to Holguín only a few

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<sup>123</sup> Castro, "Key Address," 2003.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Tesoro, Susana, "Inauguran FITCuba En Holguín Con Registro de Dos Millones de Turistas En 2017." (Cubadebate, May 3, 2017.)

<sup>126</sup> Castro, "Key Address," 2003.

months after Castro's death, signs adorned barn roofs, rural elementary schools, and dozens of private and public buildings: *Nosotros Somos Fidel, Fidel Viva* — We Are Fidel, Fidel Lives On. While these often express the state's propagandistic views rather than the admiration of all Cubans, Castro's influence indeed looms large over many aspects of life, particularly state policy. Echoes of this landmark speech can still be found in nearly all subsequent policies and frameworks promoting sustainable tourism in Holguín.<sup>127</sup>

Using the Cuban leader's speech as a jumping off point, this section will explore state frameworks for sustainable tourism in the province, in order to understand how the state articulates this national priority within the specific cultural, economic, and ecological background of Holguín. From Castro's speech 15 years ago to current plans, these frameworks walk a delicate balance between international standards of sustainability and government-sponsored revolutionary values, emphasizing tourism's power as a development tool without threatening the state's carefully maintained status quo.

#### Subsection a. International Sustainability Rhetoric in Holguín Tourism Frameworks

Castro's vision for Holguín tourism, along with the concrete Holguín policy frameworks and other official efforts that followed in the 2000s, often align closely with international norms in their promotion of diversified niche tourism. They sought to put the province's cultural and ecological riches to use in newfound sustainable tourism offerings that would enrich Holguín's economy and society, avoid the negative consequences of traditional beach tourism, and attract sustainability-conscious investors and tourists. Castro's speech set the benchmark for this new reliance on sustainable tourism rhetoric and policy in Holguín. He asserted that the state was already beginning to achieve sustainability in its new wave of tourist growth in Holguín. Using

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<sup>127</sup> Tesoro, "Inauguran FITCuba En Holguín," 2017.

rhetoric that closely echoes international standards, Castro described how the state designed and constructed the Playa Pesquero hotel as a paragon of sustainable values:

Protection of biological diversity, sustainable development, rational use of natural resources, harmonious insertion of the facilities into the natural environment, protection of the latter, maximum integration with nature, recovery of cultural and historical heritage: all of these have been essential and unwavering components of its conception and development.<sup>128</sup>

As an international researcher, I was unable to confirm Castro's assertions about the rigorous environmental and cultural planning that went into the resort's construction. But regardless of its validity, his statement makes the state's development priorities clear: sustainable use of cultural and natural resources, with tourism as a tool to promote and incentivize beneficial, healthy development — and, potentially, to appeal to an international market increasingly conscious of sustainable standards.

Castro even expressed these goals in rhetoric that closely mirrors the international gold standard of sustainability, “optimal use of social, natural, cultural and financial resources for national development,” set forth by the Caribbean Tourism Organization and UN World Tourism Organization.<sup>129</sup> Castro praised Holguín's “natural, historic and archeological wealth,” from mud baths to shipwrecks, for both its intrinsic local value and its tourism potential.<sup>130</sup> He also promised that tourism has had, and will continue to have, a “positive impact on the development of other fields and sectors of the economy, as well as the construction of works that benefit the local population.”<sup>131</sup> He emphasized that despite the growth of international tourism in Holguín,

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Carl Bro A/S, “Caribbean Sustainable Tourism Policy Framework,” (St. Michael, Barbados: Caribbean Tourism Organization, 2010), 13.

<sup>130</sup> Castro, “Key Address,” 2003.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

the state would ensure that local Cubans benefited from tourism and shared in its gains, including access to tourist sites. Castro cited sustainable tourism as a powerful development tool which had already created 13,470 new jobs, and would continue to sustain the Revolution itself.<sup>132</sup> Once again, Castro's vision and rhetoric echoed the CTO and UNWTO approach, which see sustainable tourism as a development tool for increased equity, quality of life, and national autonomy in the region.<sup>133</sup>

Castro's use of international sustainable tourism rhetoric influenced a variety of Holguín frameworks, particularly in their stated commitment to culturally and ecologically responsible development. One of the island's most prominent post-Castro proponents of sustainable tourism is Manuel Marrero, the current Cuban Tourism Minister, who often echoes global sustainability standards in his speeches and public appearances. At a scientific conference in 2017, he gave a presentation entitled, "Tourism's Perspectives and Challenges to Guarantee Sustainable Development in the Cuban Sector."<sup>134</sup> Referencing the UNWTO's announcement that 2017 would be the Year of Sustainable Tourism, Marrero paid special attention to the ecological side of the industry, pledging the government's "absolute commitment... to care for the environment and confront climate change" through meticulous oversight of vulnerable coastal areas, thoughtful, informed planning that built eco-friendly developments *only* in areas that could sustain them.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Carl Bro, "Caribbean Sustainable Tourism Policy Framework," 2010, 13.

<sup>134</sup> Sinfonte Díaz, Yunier Javier, "Turismo cubano por un desarrollo sostenible y respetuoso con el medio ambiente." (Cubadebate. October 25, 2017.)

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

That year, Marrero also extolled Holguín as a promising frontier of sustainable tourism, alluding to both international standards and Castro’s 2003 speech as guiding forces leading provincial tourism toward a healthier future. The Tourism Minister commended Holguín’s “sun and sand, historical, and cultural” attractions as the reasons the state has chosen to single the province out for sustainable development.<sup>136</sup> Speaking at the same resort Castro had inaugurated over a decade earlier, Marrero encouraged visitors to spend their time not just at the beach, but at cultural festivals like the annual *Romerías de Mayo* and the nearby *Bioparque Rocazul*, an ecological preserve.<sup>137</sup> Memorably, Marrero has praised tourism as “*la industria sin humo*,” the industry without smoke, revealing the state’s faith in tourism as the means to improve economic conditions without the physical and social ramifications of other industries.<sup>138</sup>

Just as Castro set the tone for national policy, Marrero set the tone for provincial policy. Several of Holguín’s most comprehensive regional policy frameworks share his internationalist rhetoric about sustainable tourism, particularly in their plans for cultural and ecological tourism growth. One regional state plan, which outlines a “Touristic Value Enhancement Strategy” for Holguín cultural heritage, focuses on enhancing the quality of existing cultural events and institutions, like museums and festivals, and improving training for cultural tourism professionals and guides, to attract more international visitors.<sup>139</sup> The planners critique current tourism as overwhelmingly centered on beach resorts and argue that by expanding cultural and urban tourism offerings across the province, they can use the industry as an invaluable “resource

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<sup>136</sup> Tesoro, “Inauguran FITCuba En Holguín,” 2017.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> “La puesta en valor turístico del Patrimonio Cultural en el municipio Holguín / Cuba.” (Holguín: OECD, February 2017), 1.

for local development,” rhetoric which once again echoes international organization’s views. Marrero and other policymakers have made it clear that they intend to realize Castro’s vision of tourism — and its many nods to global sustainability standards — and make Holguín as the centerpiece of state aspirations.

#### Subsection b. Revolutionary and Socialist Values in Holguín Tourism Frameworks

Even as Castro and the Cuban policymakers who followed his lead sought to align their rhetoric with global sustainable norms, state tourism frameworks for Holguín have also stayed consistent with the Revolutionary government’s values of nationalist pride, centralization, and identity, reinforcing the notion of a specifically Cuban form of tourism that we explored in Chapter Two. As with the state’s nods to international standards, these revolutionary aspects of sustainable tourism development, from socialist nationalism to centralization, appear clearly in Castro’s influential *Playa Pesquero* speech. In this sub-section, I’ll once again use Castro’s influential speech as a jumping off point to examine the revolutionary elements present in later Holguín planning.

Castro politicized Holguín tourism, using it to celebrate the Cuban system’s — and Cuban tourism’s — superiority to global capitalism and the prerevolutionary state, and defining tourism itself as revolutionary. “From the first to the last stone,” Castro said in his inaugural speech at the resort, “everything has been built with Cuban funds.”

What was on this site before [the Revolution]? A big landlord held an enormous estate here, covering 41,400 hectares. Of this area, 13,319 hectares were unproductive, and the rest were graze land, scrubland, and sugar cane fields. In 1959, it was practically inaccessible.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Castro, “Key Address,” 2003.

After praising the Revolution's many purported gains in Holguín — literacy, healthcare, environmental protections, and so on — Castro depicted present-day tourism efforts not as simply following international sustainability guidelines, but as the natural outgrowth of these decades of revolutionary progress in every field.<sup>141</sup> Castro situated what was going on today in Holguín as part of a great narrative of revolutionary progress: sustainability not as UN dogma, but as revolutionary, as inherently Cuban. In his eyes, Holguín sustainable tourism became a point of nationalist pride. Cubans built and serviced the hotels, produced tourist wares, benefitted from industry growth, and attracted visitors not just with beaches and royal palms, but with their “friendliness and hospitality,” and most of all, with “the interested sparked by the Revolution itself, the country's achievements in various fields and the paths followed in its social development...and the spirit of solidarity and cooperation.”<sup>142</sup>

The emphasis on nationalist identity often appears in discourse about preserving and promoting the “authenticity” and essential values of the Cuban people, especially via heritage tourism. As scholar Bella Dicks put it, “Heritage and ethnic displays provide representations for tourists, consumers and visitors, but these representations also address those whose culture is on display” — and, in the case of Holguín, often serve political and social purposes, as they did years ago for Castro himself.<sup>143</sup>

The Holguín cultural tourism policy framework we looked at in the previous subsection is even more explicit in its belief that tourism can be used as an identity-building and identity-preserving tool. The authors recommend that tourism offerings promote and capitalize on the

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Dicks, *Culture on Display*, 2007, 13.

“*imaginario popular cubano*,” or the Cuban popular imaginary, referring to the set of values and ideas through which a society imagines its cohesive social identity.<sup>144</sup>

For Holguín planners, developing cultural tourism doesn’t just improve the industry — it serves a larger, specifically Cuban and revolutionary mission to preserve the state’s idea of national identity against the incursions of a hostile world. Cultural tourism is imperative to “improve cultural actions in the face of the threats posed by current models of globalization, channeling [our culture] in the struggle for the conservation and progress of Cuban identity and values.”<sup>145</sup> This battle for the Cuban soul, constantly torn between the corrupting temptations of lucrative mass tourism and political-cultural ideals, seems to culminate in tourism as the ultimate opportunity for Holguín to present foreigners with the state’s notion of Cuba, and to defend against unwanted values and systems from the outside world. If the most globally-focused industry of all can remain socialist and imbued with so-called Cuban values, perhaps there is hope after all. Holguín scholars and planners alike arrived at similar conclusions about preserving national and provincial identity, usually expressed as “authenticity” in an interesting mix of the Cuban state’s political attitudes and international sustainability-speak. Tourism Minister Manuel Marrero made it clear that sustainable tourism would be successful in Holguín due to the province’s “100% authentic and public-spirited *pueblo* [people, in the nationalist, collective sense];” he even singled out this regional pride as the most important trait for successful tourism development.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> La puesta en valor turístico,” 2017, 1; Steger, Manfred, and Paul James, “Levels of Subjective Globalization: Ideologies, Imaginaries, Ontologies.” (Perspectives on Global Development and Technology, 2013), 1.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Tesoro, “Inauguran FITCuba En Holguín,” 2017.

These policymakers and scholars portray heritage tourism as a revenue sources, yes, but crucially, also as a means to maintain the sociocultural status quo, foment nationalist pride, and communicate specific messages about Cuba. While the messages themselves may be different, this use of tourism as nationalist PR tool places today's planners alongside the prerevolutionary Cuban, who similarly used tourism to promote certain ideas and narratives of *Cubanidad*, as we saw in Chapter Two. Today, this age-old state use of tourism to promote its own agenda has expanded to include sustainable tourism, sometimes using this term just as it's used elsewhere, and other times, using the rhetoric of sustainability to justify, propagate, or enhance the Cuban political system and its notion of an authentic, revolutionary Cuban spirit. In Chapter Five, I will look more closely at the negative side of certain narratives currently promoted in Holguín tourism.

Castro depicted revolutionary values as essential to Holguín's tourist appeal and international success, and at odds with internationalist concepts of sustainable tourism, he also advocated for centralized state control of tourism development.<sup>147</sup> In addition to the revolutionary nationalism the Cuban state injects into its current sustainable tourism frameworks in Holguín, these proposals often include a high degree of state centralization and control of the tourist industry — though at times, this is tempered by a regional Holguinero desire for grassroots, locally conscious development of cultural and ecological tourism, which at times aligns more closely with global sustainability's emphasis on local participation. In bringing sustainable tourism rhetoric into national discourse, the state may have unwittingly encouraged citizens to push back, albeit lightly, against its own far-reaching mechanisms of control. This difficult balance between the state's impulse towards centralized oversight and the importance of

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<sup>147</sup> Castro, "Key Address," 2003.

community-based, organic development can be found in many state and quasi-state visions of Holguín tourism, from training programs to state-run media coverage.

Sustainable tourism frameworks for Holguín advocate state control and involvement for most aspects of the tourist industry. This centralized approach has led to state oversight of tourism employment as well, including the training process. For Holguineros interested in tourism employment — one of the most lucrative sectors for Cuban workers, due to tips and higher wages— the state-run Center for Tourism Training, known as FORMATUR, offers the gateway to the industry via courses and certification in gastronomy, mixology, English, and a variety of other hospitality skills.<sup>148</sup> Unlike elsewhere in the Caribbean, where private schools and in-house hotel training provide access to tourism work and professional advancement, in Holguín FORMATUR's two outposts, in Holguín City and Rafael Freyre (near the province's tourism hub of beach resorts), allow the state to largely control who enters the tourism industry and how they are taught to behave, interact with foreigners, and represent their country. Beyond basic, quality hospitality training, FORMATUR also teaches students proper “protocol and ethics” for their behavior in the industry.<sup>149</sup> Even though many of these workers enter the private sector, the provincial government, with national oversight, is thus able to maintain a measure of control over the industry.

Policymakers have even worked to imbue tourism employment with Cuban revolutionary spirit, honoring long-term and high-quality tourism workers and providers with provincial awards that weave in revolutionary rhetoric and mythology to incentivize political loyalty among tourism workers. On the annual “Day of the Hotel and Tourism Worker” in 2017,

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<sup>148</sup> Durán, Grethell Cuenca, “Diseña Centro de Capacitación para el Turismo programa de cursos para el sector no estatal,” (Radio Holguín. June 16, 2017.)

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

Holguín authorities held an awards ceremony, presenting a regional tourism developer with the “*Por la Senda de Triunfo*” certificate, which roughly translates to “In the Footsteps of Triumph” in a nod to the Revolution’s victory.<sup>150</sup> Other awards are even more explicit in connecting tourism to Cuban revolutionary heritage: Holguín tourism workers with over 20 years of experience received the Elpidio Sosa González distinction, named for the “[tourism] sector martyr,” a young tourism food service worker who died while participating in the Castro-led storming of the Moncada Barracks in 1953.<sup>151</sup> These aspects of tourism training and incentivization show how centralized oversight of tourism can be used to legitimately improve its quality, but at the same time, serve the socialist state’s desire to supervise and regulate Cuba’s and Cubans’ interaction with foreigners, and further promote its own revolutionary mythology.

While the state still controls many aspects of the tourism industry in Holguín — it manages most hotels, maintains training efforts, and oversees state-affiliated or -run travel agencies — recently, regional planners and academics have begun to gently push back.<sup>152</sup> As we saw in Chapter Two, the state has introduced some measures of economic liberalization, and *Holguineros* have opened small businesses, guesthouses, and restaurants as a result. Regional tourism authorities have taken notice, often crafting policies that respond to the times and encourage greater grassroots engagement. Noted local tourism historian and FORMATUR educator Eduardo Puente Fernández, for example, has encouraged policymakers to not only preserve coastal heritage as tourism developed, but to expand in conjunction with the

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<sup>150</sup> Rodríguez, Lourdes Pichs, “En La Senda Del Triunfo.” (¡ahora! March 4, 2017.)

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Sinfonte Díaz, “Turismo cubano por un desarrollo sostenible,” 2017.

community's "own endogenous development in particular, and that of the entire territory in general," including growing domestic private sector development.<sup>153</sup>

Without this level of grassroots engagement with each community and the surrounding region, even planners themselves worried that top-down state efforts would fall short, relying too much on the Cuban state's paternalistic, one-size-fits-all approaches that may not benefit the region or reflect its unique character — as has happened in the past. An ongoing provincial initiative to develop heritage and urban tourism in Holguín City, for example, ascribed the project's success to its "endogenous process, and [use of] heritage and cultural resources as endogenous mobilizers of local development."<sup>154</sup> This grassroots approach (and, let's face it, excessive if apt use of the word "endogenous") is key to Holguín planners, who believe that community-oriented planning "is of particular importance in the current Cuban context, with a high level of administrative centralization, in which cultural activity and utilization of heritage arrives entirely budgeted by the state."<sup>155</sup> With this attitude, the province's tourism planners attempt to balance state centralization and grassroots organization, taking advantage of valuable state resources without overlooking the crucial local needs and community-specific offerings that are central to sustainability. Yet the state's centralized structure, particularly at a national level, provokes tension between its own sustainable, grassroots rhetoric and its often top-down policies.

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<sup>153</sup> Fernández, Eduardo Puente, and Daylén Vega Muguercia, "Crónicas del ensueño marino de San Fulgencio de Gibara (+ Video)," (Cubadebate. May 2, 2017.)

<sup>154</sup> "La puesta en valor turístico," 2017, 3.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

### Section iii. Conclusion

Over the past decade, the Cuban state has begun to use the rhetoric and policy of international sustainability, with Holguín as both testing ground and showpiece. But on the national and provincial levels, Cuban policymakers have interpreted, perhaps even manipulated, this global concept to suit their own political system. Yet if sustainable development is to have a chance in Holguín, some semblance of sustainability's original intent to foster genuinely healthy, locally oriented tourism must be preserved. It remains to be seen whether the Cuban state will merely exploit sustainable rhetoric for its own political, economic, and marketing purposes, or whether sustainability rhetoric itself may inspire Holguineros to enact their own, highly localized alternative to international *and* state norms.

No tourism analysis of Holguín would be complete without an in-depth look at actual tourism offerings in the province. In the next chapter, I delve into these tourist events and attractions, focusing on history-based tourism, cultural tourism, and ecotourism as the primary forms of sustainable niche tourism being developed in Holguín.

## Chapter Four Sustainable and Niche Tourism Offerings in Holguín

### Section i. Introduction

Just a week after Hurricane Irma swept along the Holguín shoreline in September 2017, Mexican tourism functionaries, German and French travel agents, and mid-level Cuban bureaucrats meander leisurely into a resort conference room decked out with wicker and ferns. A salsa band playing old island standards greets them at the door, while across the hall, Central American professionals decked out in khakis, polos, and lanyards snap selfies with a large, green tropical bird-man wearing a sun hat and red sneakers. Minutes later, the Cuban Vice Minister of Tourism opens the day's events, promising visitors that Holguín tourism will be in perfect post-hurricane shape, an "attractive, competitive tourist destination," by the winter high season.<sup>156</sup> Not only that, but it will be fully sustainable, "based in respect for nature and people."<sup>157</sup>

Welcome to Turnat 2017, Cuba's annual Ecotourism event hosted by state-affiliated travel agency Ecotur. Cuba hosted a number of these events in Holguín that year, inviting international travel professionals and government representatives to experience the provincial vision we discussed in Section 2 in action. 2017, the UNWTO-declared Year of Sustainable Tourism, presenters and attendees generally agrees, had the potential to be a watershed moment for Holguín's emerging tourist industry as the Cuban state hosted its two most significant international tourism events, Turnat and FITCuba (the more general annual tourism fair) in the province, and promoted Hoguín in international trade publications. In these events, Turnat's

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<sup>156</sup> Álvarez, Mayda, "Opening Remarks," (Speech presented at the Evento Turnat, Guardalavaca, Holguín, Cuba, September 26, 2017.)

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

organizers aimed to signal Holguín's transition from sustainable tourism potential to reality, allowing provincial leaders to showcase major cultural and ecological offerings to an influential foreign audience.

As Bella Dicks puts it,

Places today have become exhibitions of themselves. Through heavy investment in architecture, art, design, exhibition space, landscaping and various kinds of redevelopment towns, cities and countryside proclaim their possession of various cultural values – such as unchanging nature, the historic past, the dynamic future, multiculturalism, fun and pleasure, bohemianism, artistic creativity or simply stylishness. These cultural values have come to be seen as a place's identity, the possession of which is key to the important task of attracting visitors.<sup>158</sup>

In Holguín, we get the opportunity to look at a destination that is not yet a *destination*, an aspiring tourist zone without a clearly “legible” identity.<sup>159</sup> Dicks describes the predicament of places like Holguín this way: “Places whose identity seems inaccessible, confusing or contradictory do not present themselves as destinations. They do not, in other words, seem visitable.”<sup>160</sup> As state and local actors strive to attract visitors to Holguín, and lure them beyond its beaches, the province must necessarily undergo a process of transformation and restoration in which spaces become “talking environments” that present visitors with a coherent narrative and sense of place.<sup>161</sup> As the state attempts to make the province a more visitable destination, to engage with and satisfy international standards, and to resolve the challenges of socialist development without a major benefactor, the intellectual and cultural work of constructing marketable regional identity may be seen as one of the central storylines of contemporary Cuban politics.

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<sup>158</sup> Dicks, *Culture on Display*, (Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill International UK Ltd., 2007), 1.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 2.

In this chapter, I'll look at the offerings presented by both Turnat and FITCuba, as well as other cultural and ecological tourism projects around the province. Following the broad plans and revolutionary rhetoric of the previous chapter, here I look more closely at how state planners and local providers are creating sustainable and niche tourism offerings around Holguín, separated broadly into heritage/historical tourism, cultural tourism, and ecotourism. I'll focus mainly on these offerings and the cultural values they both reflect and proclaim, reserving detailed criticisms for my next chapter, where I'll examine at the shortcomings and challenges that remain.

### Section ii. History-based and Heritage Tourism

Holguín draws on its rich economic and cultural history, including many of the aspects we explored in Section 1 of this chapter, to present appealing offerings to its burgeoning tourist market. While historical tourist attractions run the gamut of the province's colorful past, they appear to focus on prerevolutionary history, from Pre-Columbian times to the lavish Republican period of the early 20th century, emphasizing the timeless, untouched side of Holguín rather than its more complex Revolutionary history. This emphasis on the distant past over recent events offers tourists a vibrant picture that features indigenous history much more prominently than elsewhere on the island, but nonetheless presents a distinct, mediated view of the Cuban past influenced by state and local attitudes.

Holguín is known as the heart of Cuban archeology, with an impressive array of Pre-Columbian sites and the earliest human remains found on the island.<sup>162</sup> Due to this unique strength, provincial tourist sites and tours can present a more complete, well-considered view of Cuban history and identity than elsewhere on the island, and even elsewhere in the Caribbean,

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<sup>162</sup> Morejón Barbán, Marisel, "Flashazos a Holguín," (Excelencias Turísticas Del Caribe y Las Américas, 2017), 63.

where indigenous heritage rarely appears in tourist offerings. Long before the current wave of heritage tourism development, the state took measures to study and preserve Pre-Columbian history, making it accessible for domestic and international visitors via several historical sites.

The most prominent of these sites are the National Park of the Bariay Monument, the Museum of the *Chorro de Maita* Aboriginal Burial Ground, and the nearby replica of a Taíno Village.<sup>163</sup> The existence of these sites, and their detailed, respectful focus on indigenous archaeology and ways of life, is exceptional and rare, giving tourists valuable background on the original inhabitants of Cuba. Remarkably, tourist planners often place indigenous and European culture on equal footing in their narratives of the Spanish arrival to Holguín, describing Columbus's landing at Bariay as the "Mutual Discovery of Old and New World Cultures," rather than the conventional narrative of a superior civilization colonizing a more primitive people.<sup>164</sup> However, this is also a rather bloodless, benign way to describe the Spanish conquest of the area, and state tourism authorities usually depict Columbus as the "Great Admiral," promoting Columbus's arrival as a major tourist selling point without criticizing the *conquistador's* problematic actions or the brutal violence that followed.<sup>165</sup> In 2017, the Ministry of Tourism and a state-affiliated tourism agency, Ecotur, even partnered to offer the "Columbus Route," a week-long tour that takes visitors along the path through Holguín that the explorer described in his Navigation Diary.<sup>166</sup> Planners first presented this new tour during the Turnat Ecotourism Event I

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<sup>163</sup> Ministro de Turismo, and Agencia Ecotur, "Ruta de Colón," (presented at the Evento Turnat, Guardalavaca, Holguín, Cuba, September 26, 2017.)

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Rodríguez Suñol, Luis Mario, "Holguín: la tierra prometida," (Revista Excelencias Turísticas del Caribe y las Américas, 2017), 43.

<sup>166</sup> Ministro de Turismo, "Ruta de Colón," 2017.

attended, and while it was clear that they intended to be as culturally respectful as possible in bringing tourists to indigenous sites, they offered no criticism or modern perspective on the dark, complex legacy of the European arrival. Holguín's attention to indigenous heritage provides valuable, much-needed historical context and cultural insight that tourists rarely if ever receive on their Caribbean vacation, however, the tourist narrative sometimes oversimplifies or romanticizes the complexity of the European-Taíno encounter.

Beyond this focus on the Taínos and Columbus, Holguín heritage tourism doesn't delve deeply into the Colonial Period — in part, because the province simply doesn't have the same wealth of dense colonial architecture found in Havana and Santiago. Still, this is a shame, as the province's rich colonial history of pirates, sugar, and independence struggles would highlight a different side of the island's rich heritage, present a nuanced alternative to the Havana-based, Revolution-centric narrative of Cuban history, and give a sense of historical continuity that would counterbalance the province's focus on Columbus and the far past.

While the Colonial era, along with the turn-of-the-century War of Independence from Spain, are still largely overlooked on Holguín's tourist circuit, planners and historians are currently collaborating on several promising projects that could help to fill in this gap. Gibara's colonial-era fortification system, the second to be constructed in Cuba (after Havana's), has received some restoration in recent years and its tiny fort even hosts a cultural center with occasional music performances.<sup>167</sup> During my 2017 visits, however, most of the fortifications remained in very poor condition, with no plaques, visitor guides, or other information that might help tourists to understand their significance or even what they were. Just down the road at the entrance to town, the *Casona Santa María*, a historic sugar mill and estate, lies unmaintained and

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<sup>167</sup> Fernández, Eduardo Puente, "Crónicas del ensueño marino," 2017.

unnoticed by visitors, and even by many Holguineros. Scholars at the University of Holguín recently completed an in-depth study of the *Santa María's* illustrious history, proclaiming it a “jewel of Gibara architecture” of “undeniable prestige in the Cuban arts.”<sup>168</sup> They lay out an ambitious plan to educate locals and tourists about regional heritage at the renovated *Santa María*, communicating provincial culture and history through the estate’s compelling story and architecture.<sup>169</sup> It remains to be seen whether the valuable *Casona Santa María* will gain momentum, or whether it will flounder in the project phase. Elsewhere in the province, there are fewer physical vestiges of the colonial era, and consequently fewer colonial-based tourism offerings.

Following the Colonial Period, the War of Independence from Spain, which saw Cuban, Spanish, and American troops fighting all over Holguín, is a major facet of provincial history that has yet to be developed. In my studies, I haven’t come across any battlefields or other independence sights designed for international tourists, despite the province’s integral role in the struggle, the international nature of the war, and its lasting significance for relations between the United States, Cuba, and Spain.<sup>170</sup> Many plans have been proposed, many sites have been studied, but planners have yet to do much but, well, plan. Holguín’s fascinating colonial heritage could be a boon for both locals and tourists, but much work remains to be done before this slice of history is readily accessible to visitors.

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<sup>168</sup> Infante., Mirallis Ramírez, Carlos Manuel García Leyva, Ellen de los Milagros Fernández Flores, and Yunaibis Hechavarría Creach, “Propuesta de Plan de Acciones para el Rescate de la Significación Socio Patrimonial de la Casona de Santa María en el Municipio Gibara,” (Holguín, Cuba: Universidad de Holguín, Facultad de Ciencias Sociales y Humanísticas, n.d.), 2.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-9.

<sup>170</sup> Lemus Nicolau, Antonio de Jesús, Interview by author, (Personal Interview with notes. Gibara, Cuba, September 24, 2017); “Historia,” (Holguín, Cuba: Portal de Holguín. Accessed January 19, 2018.)

The Republican era — roughly between Cuba’s independence from Spain in 1898, and the Cuban Revolution of 1959 — receives considerably more tourist attention in the province, thanks in large part to the trade and prosperity that Holguín received during this time.<sup>171</sup> Hotels are the primary recipient of Republican-era historical restorations, as state-employed historians, local architects, and international hospitality firms have collaborated to renovate several mansions in Holguín City and Gibara into boutique hotels.<sup>172</sup> Several Republican-era museums have recently been renovated as well, including the Gibara Historical Museum and Natural History Museum, both of which reopened in October 2017.<sup>173</sup>

Beyond these historically-conscious restorations, 20th Century Republican and Revolutionary history isn’t a major feature of Holguín tourism. State planners and marketers tend to emphasize the province’s far past, especially Columbus’s discovery, and capitalize on the beautiful, lavish architecture of the prosperous early 20th century, largely overlooking tourists’ interests in other historical eras, particularly the Revolution. This is a shame, as Holguín is known domestically for its political loyalty to the Revolution — the province’s motto is “The most faithful province” — and for the town of Birán, the birthplace of Fidel Castro, where a small museum marks his birthplace but remains almost unknown to international tourists.<sup>174</sup> These omissions leave out Holguín’s significance in major historical events, including the Revolution, and fail to promote a more comprehensive understanding of provincial and national history.

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> “FITCuba 2017: Oficializan a Gibara como destino turístico,” (Cubadebate. May 3, 2017); Carreras, Juan Pablo. “Opera En Holguín Nuevo Hotel Para El Turismo de Ciudad,” (Cubadebate. March 11, 2016.)

<sup>173</sup> Peña González, Yasmani, Interview by author, (Personal Interview with notes. Gibara, Cuba, September 25, 2017.)

<sup>174</sup> Nadal, Leonel, “Otro Mapa de Cuba,” (Excelencias Turísticas Del Caribe y Las Américas, 2017), 48.

While planners and historians have begun to restore structures and historical sites in Holguín, more often than not, provincial tourism retains an ahistorical feel, as these structures add a faded grandeur and aesthetic charm, removed from their historical context for the tourist eye. State marketing bills the province as a place “with no today nor yesterday,” with seaside Gibara as its Macondo, a “magic place...stuck in time.”<sup>175</sup> As Holguín heritage tourism develops, this sense of timelessness — derived, perhaps, from the province’s relative isolation and economic stagnation, as we saw in Chapter Three — may remain part of its appeal. But in searching for a cohesive narrative to present tourists, Holguín planners may find that timelessness is not enough: the province’s deep, colorful history can and should become an essential part of the tourism fabric.

### Section iii. Cultural Tourism

Cultural offerings abound in Holguín, and have been a major focus of the state’s tourist redevelopment in recent years. These attractions range from religious processions to film festivals, traditional artisan goods to contemporary art. Many of Holguín’s tourist-focused cultural displays present visions of traditional provincial culture, promoting the “Cuban popular imaginary” of classic national heritage described in Chapter Three.<sup>176</sup> These traditional cultural events and sites have immense promise to give tourists insight into local heritage and offer a different experience than they might receive in more well-known, touristy parts of the island — providing the “authenticity” that many destinations now cultivate and tourists have come to desire from their

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<sup>175</sup> Rodríguez Suñol, Luis Mario, “Gibara: Ciudad de Encantos,” (Holguín: La Tierra Más Hermosa, 2015); Rodríguez Suñol, Luis Mario, “Holguín: la tierra prometida,” (Holguín: La tierra más hermosa, 2015), 42-45.

<sup>176</sup> “La puesta en valor turístico,” 2017, 1.

travels.<sup>177</sup> Beyond these long-established cultural tourism offerings, a small number of Holguín events and institutions present the province's contemporary culture. Some attractions even hew closely to tourists' preconceived notions of Cuba, imitating Havana's iconic sites and forms of expression rather than Holguín's own way of life. By promoting more regional cultural development and continuing to develop cutting-edge offerings alongside its traditional cultural forms, Holguín can foster a richer, well-balanced tourist experience for visitors and encourage provincial innovation.

Holguín's more traditional cultural displays provide visitors with insight into regional heritage and way of life in the "Cultural Babel of Eastern Cuba," as one local publication billed the province.<sup>178</sup> Most prominent among these offerings is the *Romerías de Mayo* (The May Pilgrimage), a Catholic procession, street party, and cultural celebration rolled into one in Holguín City every spring.<sup>179</sup> The *Romerías* give visitors a glimpse into Holguín's deep religious beliefs, but since the festival was updated in the 1990s to attract young Holguineros, it also highlights local history and youth culture, providing tourists a well-rounded view of provincial life.<sup>180</sup> The province hosts an impressive variety of other seasonal festivals, from its lively, community-oriented *Carnaval* to Holguín Culture Week's art shows and cultural displays, the Spanish-based Iberian Culture Festival to the *Son* folkloric music festival.<sup>181</sup> Holguín also boasts

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<sup>177</sup> Guzmán-Vilar, Laritza, Reyner Pérez-Campdesuñer, and Jorge González-Ferrer, "Evaluación de la autenticidad del patrimonio en una localidad turística," (Ciencias Holguín 19, no. 4, October 4, 2013): 95–105; Dicks, *Culture on Display*, 2007, xi.

<sup>178</sup> Hernández Maden, Claudia, "Holguín: La Babel Cultural del Oriente Cubano," (Holguín: La tierra más hermosa, 2015), 34.

<sup>179</sup> "Las Romerías de Mayo," (Holguín City, the Cuban City of Parks, n.d.)

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Hernández Maden, "Holguín: La Babel Cultural," 2015, 36.

permanent cultural institutions, with a focus on heritage Cuban music and culture for tourist and local consumption. Holguín City is home to the province's outposts of the *Casa de la Trova*, a Santiago-inspired venue, and several other traditional Cuban music venues for *son*, *salsa*, and *rumba*, along with modest cultural centers in Holguín City, Gibara, and several smaller municipalities.<sup>182</sup>

While these cultural festivals and venues have a great deal to offer visitors, from traditional music to poetry readings to religious demonstrations, most offerings are not yet highly developed or marketed to an international tourist audience. The state began concerted efforts to raise the profile of traditional Holguín cultural displays during Turnat 2017 and FITCuba 2017, taking foreign media to the *Romerías de Mayo* and touting other offerings in state-run and international media, but these initiatives have been limited.<sup>183</sup> As Holguín cultural offerings become better known to tourists, state authorities and local tourism providers appear to be retaining their focus on notions of provincial and Cuban “authenticity” and heritage.<sup>184</sup>

Holguín's contemporary cultural tourism offerings are considerably less developed, creating an imbalance that emphasizes tradition over the cutting-edge. Intentionally or unintentionally, this plays into foreign visitors' expectations about visiting a supposedly non-Western or underdeveloped destination. Tourists, the conventional belief goes, often travel abroad to experience a simpler, exotic, or more traditional way of life that differs from their highly modernized daily experience.<sup>185</sup> Cultural tourism can play into this belief, again

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid.; “Holguín.” (UNEAC, August 20, 2015.)

<sup>183</sup> Santiago, José Carlos de, “FITCUBA 2017 en el paraíso,” (Excelencias Turísticas del Caribe y Las Américas, 2017.)

<sup>184</sup> Guzmán-Vilar, “Evaluación de la autenticidad,” 2013, 95–105.

<sup>185</sup> Dicks, *Culture on Display*, 2007, 8.

borrowing Dicks's formulation, devolving into tourist-oriented "theatricalized performances of heritage" that "contrast [modernity] with the heritage on display."<sup>186</sup> While Holguín's cultural displays are still in their nascent stages, remain quite culturally respectful and diverse, and are rarely theatricalized or designed solely for tourists, provincial authorities should foster more contemporary offerings to mitigate this risk as cultural tourism progresses.

While they remain few and far between, Holguín contemporary cultural tourism displays have already begun this process of diversification, presenting tourists with a more nuanced, accurate vision of the province's complex culture and providing a much-needed outlet for artists to gain visibility and support. The Gibara International Film Festival has become the most famous contemporary attraction in the province and a main factor in its tourism revitalization since its inception in 2003 — just as Fidel Castro and his government began to direct their attention and investment to Holguín's new tourism wave. Founded by acclaimed Cuban filmmaker Humberto Solas, the festival began as the International Festival of "*Cine Pobre*," so-called Poor Cinema, which loosely translates as low-budget or independent filmmaking.<sup>187</sup> Since then, the state-funded festival has expanded to include a wider variety of films and budgets, attracting both foreign and domestic filmmakers and fans from around the world.<sup>188</sup> I've personally observed the multiple purposes the festival serves in the region: promoting the Cuban state's self-image as a patron of progressivism and the arts, attracting tourists, raising Holguín's international profile, and serving as a point of strong local pride for many Holguineros and Gibareños I've spoken to.

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<sup>186</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 8.

<sup>187</sup> Ricardo, Rosana Rivera, "Luces, Cámaras... Festival." (*jahora!* March 4, 2017), 6.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*.

Beyond the film festival, Holguín also boasts several art galleries and music venues with a contemporary focus. Holguín City’s art center and Gibara’s annual Culture Week both expose locals and tourists to talented provincial artists and their work, but these offerings suffer from a lack of publicity and international attention.<sup>189</sup> Like many elements of Holguín traditional culture, state media outlets and Caribbean tourism media have begun to feature these offerings, but much remains to be done for them to gain significant international exposure. By developing and enhancing contemporary cultural tourism alongside traditional culture for visitors, provincial authorities can encourage heritage preservation *and* cultural innovation, expanding popular conceptions about the Caribbean as a beach destination and refuting assumptions that Havana is the undisputed epicenter of Cuban culture. Developing this touristic balance will help foster a more equitable, beneficial “tourism encounter” between visitors and Holguineros.<sup>190</sup>

I’ve noted a final type of Holguín cultural tourism which merits a brief discussion: Havana-style imitations intended to appeal to tourists unfamiliar with Holguín. With its diversity of cultural offerings, scattered geographically around the province and not always well-known or appealing to tourists, the state has struggled to market Holguín in a consistent way. Perhaps to remedy Holguín’s lack of a coherent cultural identity for tourists, state planners have sometimes simply borrowed from Havana’s tourist identity. During the 2017 Turnat and FITCuba tourism showcases in Holguín, in particular, the Cuban state often packaged Holguín in the familiar sights and sounds of Havana’s longstanding international tourist industry to appeal to visitors unfamiliar with the lesser known province. For instance, several provincial cabarets attempt to copy the world-renowned Tropicana Cabaret in Havana, with its fruit hats, scantily clad dancers,

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<sup>189</sup> Hernández Maden, “Holguín: La Babel Cultural,” 2015.

<sup>190</sup> Babb, *The Tourism Encounter*, 2011.

and over-the-top revues.<sup>191</sup> At the Turnat Ecotourism event, a cabaret performance opened the festivities, with dances and costumes eerily similar to the Tropicana alongside eco-dancers painted with water patterns, snails, and tropical rainforest scenes.<sup>192</sup> Holguín City even constructed a replica of the famed *La Bodeguita del Medio*, the Havana tavern once frequented by Ernest Hemingway, for the FITCuba exhibition. Serving up mojitos, daiquiris, and other Cuban standards, the planners' aim was to "recreate the Bodeguita identical to that of Havana in setting and service; although, this one will have the very particular hallmark of this region."<sup>193</sup> In reality, the imitation's celebrity photo-adorned walls and bland, tourist-centric ploy had more in common with the cheesy *Bodeguita* copies in Cancún, Australia, and even Ukraine than it did with vibrant local culture — planners had exported Havana's distinct marketing of *Cubanidad* not only outside the island, but within it.<sup>194</sup> This copycat strategy may appease tourists in the short run, but Holguín needs to forge its own unique tourist identity, not to produce lower-quality imitations of Havana cultural features that can easily be enjoyed in their original form just a few hundred miles away.

While many of Holguín's touristic cultural displays do communicate certain ideas about Cuba and local life, the sum of these offerings doesn't offer a singular, legible narrative to tourists about its culture or history. Instead, it presents a bewildering mix of offerings and messages, featuring avant garde film alongside ancient cultures, flashy Havana-style cabarets alongside deeply local traditions. While this may not create the easily digestible identity many tourist destinations work towards, Holguín's cultural and artistic diversity may prove its greatest

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<sup>191</sup> "Holguin: A Replica of Bodeguita Del Medio as FitCuba 2017 Nears," (Radio Angulo. March 31, 2017.)

<sup>192</sup> Author, Evento Turnat. (iPhone Video. Guardalavaca, Holguín, Cuba, 2017.)

<sup>193</sup> "Holguin: A Replica of Bodeguita Del Medio," 2017.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

strength as provincial planners strive to develop sustainable, well-balanced tourism that benefits locals and pleases visitors.

#### Section iv. Nature-Based Tourism

Holguín also offers an increasing variety of ecotourism attractions extending far beyond its beloved beaches. Holguín ecotourism, just like cultural and heritage tourism, often takes its cues from both the province's specific background and larger state aims. Holguín's natural diversity and lack of heavy economic development have facilitated today's promising ecotourism, as we saw in the previous chapter. And just as Holguín cultural/historical tourism puts identity on display, ecotourism in the provincial landscape also serves a broader purpose, "making environments communicate" the state's self-image of environmental progressivism and conservation, often closely intertwined with cultural identity, to an international audience.<sup>195</sup>

While Holguín ecotourism may promote the province's identity as an ecological destination, many popular activities and attractions do not yet qualify as responsible ecotourism. I will save more detailed critiques, however, for the following chapter, as this section simply aims to provide an overview of the province's nature-based tourist offerings and their basic implications for Holguín identity and development. Loosely following the categories used in *Natural Tourism in Cuba*, a comprehensive state-affiliated overview of the field, I have separated Holguín's nature-based offerings into coastal tourism, inland ecological preserves, and the less-developed area of agricultural tourism.<sup>196</sup> While for organization's sake I will not specifically cover the cultural or historical facets of these attractions in-depth here, keep in mind that Cuban state planners rarely view ecotourism and cultural/heritage tourism separately, and

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<sup>195</sup> Dicks, *Culture on Display*, 2007, 2.

<sup>196</sup> Medina, Norman, *Turismo de Naturaleza En Cuba*, 2004.

many of these ecological offerings are considered “mixed sites” or “cultural landscapes” that blend nature, culture, history, and sometimes even politics together within a single site.<sup>197</sup>

With its long shoreline, warm waters, and impressive natural beauty and biodiversity, it should come as no surprise that coastal tourism forms the core of Holguín’s current ecotourism industry. While traditional beach tourism is rarely environmentally sound, I include coastal tourism here because many activities do include ecological elements, and because attractions billed as “ecotourism” around the world are not always eco-friendly. Based on the many tourism brochures I’ve collected and broad analysis of Holguín ecotourism materials, it appears that these coastal attractions, from isolated keys to nature preserves to dolphinariums, attract many beach tourists on day trips and excursions, rather than longer-term, immersive ecotourism experiences.<sup>198</sup>

Holguín’s greatest coastal strength is its lack of environmental damage or pollution, allowing for high quality snorkeling and scuba-diving at sites along the coast, with 47 diving points along the coast.<sup>199</sup> An underwater diving site, “Balcony of the Ladies,” along Guardalavaca Beach with deeply submerged remnants of the island’s militarized past, including land-based and amphibious tanks and artillery.<sup>200</sup> Some marine tourist activities are less eco-friendly, including motorboat tours and deep-sea fishing excursions, which the state still bills as ecotourism, bragging of its biodiverse fish populations as it encourages their exploitation.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Medina, Norman., and Jorge Santamarina. *Turismo de Naturaleza En Cuba*. 232 p. Ciudad de La Habana, [Cuba]: Ediciones Unión, 2004, 63.

<sup>198</sup> Oficina de Información Turística, and Agencia Ecotur. “Guía Naturaleza Brochure.” Publicitur S.A., 2015, 62.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

Finally, the province's well-preserved coastal environments have also engendered several ecological preserves with tourist pull, including the Naranjo Bay National Park, which contains a dolphinarium and dolphin/sea lion shows, and Cayo Saetía, home to rich local wildlife and, strangely, exotic wildlife imported by the Cuban government as a domestic and international tourist attraction some years ago.<sup>202</sup> While Holguín's coastal ecotourism attractions vary in their environmental responsibility, they all benefit from the province's continued preservation, a reality that will hopefully promote greater eco-consciousness as the state continues to develop these offerings.

A number of ecological parks and excursions, on the other hand, offer a more sustainable, pure form of ecotourism to visitors interested in Holguín's lauded biodiversity and natural beauty, and an opportunity to improve and protect provincial ecosystems. The province boasts several immense inland national parks, including part of the famed Alejandro de Humboldt National Park, a UN World Natural Heritage Site that features rainforest and mountain ecosystems, dozens of endemic species, and the greatest biodiversity on the island.<sup>203</sup> Holguín also contains large swaths of Pico Cristal National Park, an internationally recognized site for bird species preservation, which features hiking paths up the province's highest peak, and La Mensura-Pilotos National Parks, home to extensive karstic cave systems, limestone outcroppings known as *mogotes*, the popular waterfall *Salto del Guayabo*, and even more biodiverse plant and animal species, including birds.<sup>204</sup> Spelunking, vigorous hiking, rock-climbing, horseback riding, and sometimes even ATV safaris are becoming increasingly popular within the parks, providing

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<sup>202</sup> Morejón Barbán "Flashazos a Holguín," 2017, 63.

<sup>203</sup> "Alejandro de Humboldt National Park," (UNESCO World Heritage Centre. Accessed March 15, 2018.)

<sup>204</sup> Oficina de Información Turística, "Guía Naturaleza Brochure," 2015, 15-16.

new opportunities for visitors to access these ecosystems, but also bringing new risks of damage and exposure.<sup>205</sup>

One project in particular shows immense promise to actually improve ecological conditions and reduce the damaging dependence on mining and logging in northeast Holguín. The Moa area has long been the epicenter of Cuban nickel mining, with logging as well stretching back to the 1930s. While Moa has sustained serious environmental damages, the area is home to incredible biodiversity and over 800 endemic species, according to state reports.<sup>206</sup> Recently, Moa has received greater state environmental protections and reforestation as the *Cuchillas del Toa* Biosphere Reserve and other smaller eco-parks have been established.<sup>207</sup> *Cuchillas del Toa* and other reserves in the area offer the opportunity to revitalize a valuable ecosystem and reorient the local economy away from extractive industries towards ecotourism. Moa's value also lies in how it complicates tourism's simplistic narratives of a destination: Moa shows tourists another side of Holguín, one which is recovering from the ravages of industry, rather than just the conventional narrative of untouched, unspoiled nature that visitors receive elsewhere in the province. But ecotourism also allows the Cuban state to perpetuate its own political myths. Some tourist-directed literature depicts only North American companies inflicting Moa's environmental damage, and the "triumph of the Revolution" serving as a turning point that rescued the area's ecology — when in fact, environmental degradation continued for many years under the Revolutionary state.<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> Rojas, William Parrao, "Moa: Cada Día Más Verde," (Holguín: La Tierra Más Hermosa, Revista de La Asamblea Provincial Del Poder Popular, 2015), 21; Winson, "Ecotourism and Sustainability in Cuba," 2006.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

Various state-affiliated tour companies offer excursions to the parks, including Cubatur, Ecotur, and Holiplus, but the most ecologically responsible and knowledgeable provider appears to be CISAT, a provincial group of scientists who lead environment-based expeditions around Holguín and give tourists the opportunity to learn from on-the-ground researchers, travel more responsibly, and contribute financially to their advancement.<sup>209</sup>

Agricultural tourism, which Norman Medina and Jorge Santamarina describe as “interested in local agricultural, fishing, or small industry productive activities, and the physical environment of the area” as well as “local culture, traditions, and local way of life,” is much less developed in Holguín than other forms of nature or environment-based tourism.<sup>210</sup> After years of tobacco-related tourism in far western Cuba, agricultural tourism is only beginning to emerge on the eastern side of the island, with Cacao and Coffee routes announced at the Turnat Ecotourism Event I attended in fall 2017. These tourism routes focus on chocolate and coffee production in the provinces of Guantánamo and Santiago de Cuba, eastern provinces that abut Holguín but boast more mountainous terrain and thus, more suitable ecosystems for the production of these specialty crops, along with local history and knowledge in their cultivation.<sup>211</sup> This may make it difficult for Holguín to develop a comparable agro-tourism industry, but a few small offerings are promising, including the Casona Santa María (the historic sugar mill from the historic/heritage tourism section earlier) and the Finca Alcalá, a working farm with fruit and

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<sup>209</sup> “Servicios de Ecoturismo Brochure,” (Centro de Investigaciones y Servicios Ambientales de Holguín (CISAT), n.d.)

<sup>210</sup> Medina, Norman, *Turismo de Naturaleza En Cuba*, 2004.

<sup>211</sup> Agencia Ecotur, “Ruta Del Cacao,” (presented at the Evento Turnat, Guardalavaca, Holguín, Cuba, September 26, 2017); Agencia Ecotur, “Ruta Del Café,” (presented at the Evento Turnat, Guardalavaca, Holguín, Cuba, September 26, 2017.)

tuber plantations, livestock, and demonstrations of coffee production.<sup>212</sup> As with other forms of ecological, cultural, or historic tourism, state tourism planners often overlook rural hardships and lack of modern agricultural technology in favor of tourist-friendly “agricultural traditions” and “customs of the Cuban *campesino* [peasant],” as one state brochure puts it.<sup>213</sup> In this way, Cuban authorities may see Holguín agro-tourism as a way to highlight the authenticity and simplicity of rural Cuban life, in addition to its cultural and environmental appeal for visitors.

Holguín’s current nature-based tourism offerings are a mixed, often contradictory assortment of impressive ecological conservation and damaging tourist activities. The state views international ecotourism as a significant development tool for the province, and has already used the industry to improve domestic tourism access and ecological preservation. The number of Cuban visitors to Holguín’s two *Campismo Popular* facilities (domestic-focused sites for camping and other ecological activities), for instance, have nearly doubled in the past decade to over 40,000, indicating that the state has encouraged or facilitated domestic ecotourism alongside foreign ecotourism.<sup>214</sup> And the valuable international revenue and publicity received by Holguín’s natural preserves and coastline in recent years holds the state and Holguineros accountable, giving them economic and social incentives to maintain high ecological quality. While much remains to be done to improve Holguín’s burgeoning ecotourism, the industry could well become a major force for local development, economic opportunity, and environmental preservation.

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<sup>212</sup> Oficina de Información Turística, “Guía Naturaleza Brochure,” 2015, 58.

<sup>213</sup> Oficina de Información Turística, “Guía Naturaleza Brochure,” 2015, 58.

<sup>214</sup> “Anuario Estadístico 2015 Holguín,” (Oficina Nacional de Estadística e Información, 2016), 122.

### Section v. Conclusion

Holguín's tourism offerings vary wildly, from its longstanding sun-and-sand beach tourism to newer, promising additions to sustainable and niche tourism. Even within these history-based, cultural, and ecological offerings, however, contradictions abound — making the province a fascinating and diverse, if not cohesive, international tourist destination. This chapter explored the offerings themselves, along with the complex messages they communicate about Cuba, Holguín, and the state's continued role in niche tourism development and marketing. In the next chapter, I view Holguín tourism in a more critical light, presenting the serious obstacles that prevent the province from fostering a fully local, sustainable, and highly-developed tourism industry.

## Chapter Five Challenges to Holguín Sustainable Tourism

### Section i. Introduction

Among the many restaurants named after famous years — as, intriguingly, nearly all of Holguín City’s restaurants are — Salón 1720 may be the most popular. On a warm Sunday night last winter, a local bachata band played as a mix of locals and tourists sipped strong cocktails and danced. Just across the square sat the local history museum, the contemporary art museum, and a smattering of other restaurants and music venues: all of them accessible, and often affordable, for Holguineros themselves, a rare, impressive achievement on an island with increasingly exclusive tourist and cultural spaces. After all, these features were what drew me to Holguín initially: after a weeks-long trip around the island, I was surprised and delighted to find Holguineros enjoying the same restaurants and beaches that I was, something I’d witnessed nowhere else in tourist Cuba.

But even as Holguín shows promise in sustainable tourism and development, key factors hold it back. Some of these persistent issues are apparent even in this idyllic dance scene. Cubans and foreigners can both access Salón 1720, it’s true — but many of the Cubans here are young women, accompanying much older Canadian or European men as companions, mistresses, or prostitutes. As I sit at a table near the band, several young women dance for, not with, their Canadian “boyfriend,” performing for him as he sits, drunk and pleased. While the band is mainly *mulato* and Afro-Cuban, every patron, waiter, and bartender is white or European-looking. A handsome waiter, blonde and blue-eyed, tells me it’s easier for him to get a tourism job because of his race and appearance — they might as well do without “the blacks,” he says. “You know what they are?” he gestures at the women with the Canadian tourist. “Whores.”

These deep-seated issues of sex and race are just some of the immense challenges facing sustainable tourism in Holguín. Other dilemmas are less apparent to the tourist eye. Despite its lofty intentions, the state's efforts often fall short of both internal and international standards. Due to limited capabilities and resources, the Cuban state often falls short of its *own* vision for sustainable tourism, as articulated nationally and regionally in Chapters Two and Three, but its own policies and attitudes cause sustainability issues as well. In this chapter, I'll outline the complex, persistent problems caused by the state's ineffectiveness and scant resources, and take a look at how Cuban policy itself may sometimes exacerbate and limit sustainable tourism potential in Holguín. I'll highlight the major challenges facing responsible Holguín tourism development today: inadequate infrastructure, inequality, race and gender issues, and environmental concerns.

### Section ii. Infrastructure and Development Issues

One of the state's key limitations, a lack of resources for infrastructure, new public construction, maintenance, and improvement, severely impacts Holguín's ability to develop an extensive, integrated tourist system. This makes life harder for both locals and visitors, hindering domestic access to provincial amenities and expansion of foreign tourism's benefits and opportunities. This lack of resources for quality infrastructure is further compounded by problematic state priorities, with local and national authorities investing heavily in lucrative resort projects and policing rather than general infrastructure.

Nowhere is the gap between the idealistic state vision of tourism and reality more apparent than in Holguín's inadequate infrastructure. Take Fidel Castro's landmark 2003 speech in the province — which I discussed in Chapter Three as a major turning point for Holguín tourism — as a case in point. In the speech, Castro rattled off an extensive list of infrastructure

and development projects his regime would undertake to improve offerings for locals and tourists alike. Some of the projects he praised, including new water supply systems, road maintenance, and increased access to electricity, were already completed, and undoubtedly improved local quality of life — though it was unclear how tourism specifically helped the projects.<sup>215</sup>

Among the state's proposals for new tourist infrastructure development, several were in fact straightforward and relatively easy to complete, like a sugar mill museum in Rafael Freyre, and have been realized to a modest extent in the following years.<sup>216</sup> But while the state vision for Holguín was always ambitious, many of Castro's and others' proposed development projects have never come to fruition. Castro, for example, proposed some projects which appeared cost-prohibitive and unrealistic even then, like a tourist railway connecting Gibara to the beach resorts of Guardalavaca, using authentic "19th century steam locomotives."<sup>217</sup> Other development projects were even more unrealistic, like an island set to house several monkey families trained to play and interact with tourists, or a proposed amusement and water park in a delicate coastal environment.<sup>218</sup>

On my visits to Holguín, it was abundantly clear that the province's abysmal infrastructure affected tourism and locals alike. Holguín City, the provincial capital, is blessed with many architectural riches, but alongside them lie a low, filthy river that winds its way through town, poor road and building conditions, and constant issues with trash and animal waste

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<sup>215</sup> Castro, "Key Address," 2003.

<sup>216</sup> García Fombellida, Aroldo, "En Rafael Freyre, palpita un compromiso histórico," (Radio Rebelde, March 19, 2012.)

<sup>217</sup> Castro, "Key Address," 2003.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

on some streets. These infrastructure and maintenance problems are such a sore point for city residents that a recent local Op-Ed asked, “Is Holguín a dirty city?”, decrying the beloved city’s deteriorating public services for its impact on residents and tourism.<sup>219</sup>

Along Holguín’s coast, its most popular area with international and domestic tourists, infrastructure is constantly threatened — not only by the lack of resources, but by hurricane and storm damage. The infamous Hurricane Irma caused moderate damage in 2017, and Hurricane Ike devastated the province’s northern coast in 2008, severely harming the burgeoning tourist industry and local life, from hotels to seawalls to homes.<sup>220</sup> As regional historians note, the unyielding risk posed by hurricanes’ destructive effects held back Holguín as a tourist destination for nearly all of its history.<sup>221</sup> The province’s authorities acknowledge the problem, describing how after Hurricane Ike and Hurricane Sandy (2012), “the effects were of such great magnitude that we thought we wouldn’t be able to have tourism in the province for a long time,” although rapid recovery efforts temporarily assuaged this fear.<sup>222</sup> Today, rather than discouraging tourist development, it threatens existing construction and makes it difficult for tourists to travel safely and efficiently throughout the province. Holguín’s already bad roads are abysmal along the coast, particularly those that connect the emerging destination of Gibara to its closest beach, Playa Caletones, and to popular Guardalavaca resorts. For example, what should be a spectacular half-hour drive between Gibara and Guardalavaca — and the imagined route for Castro’s old-

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<sup>219</sup> Pichs, Luly Legrá, “¿Es Holguín una ciudad sucia?” (¡ahora! December 27, 2017.)

<sup>220</sup> Vicent, Mauricio, “El huracán Ike amenaza con causar un desastre económico en Cuba,” (El País. September 9, 2008, sec. Internacional.)

<sup>221</sup> Fernández, Eduardo Puente, “Turismo... en tierras de Holguín, 2017.

<sup>222</sup> Castillo, Elena, and Luis Mario Rodríguez Suñol, “Una Provincia de Mucho Futuro.” (Holguín: La Tierra Más Hermosa, Revista de La Asamblea Provincial Del Poder Popular, 2015), 2.

timey railroad, which never materialized — took me over 90 minutes, taking a circuitous inland detour to avoid the crumbling, dangerous direct route along the coast. Inland roads leading to national parks and other ecological attractions face less coastal hurricane damage, but are still poorly maintained and often riddled with potholes.

These shoddy conditions discourage travelers from venturing beyond their coastal resorts or capital city lodgings, holding back the province’s desired spread of sustainable tourism all around Holguín, and tourists’ appreciation of many unique cultural and ecological offerings outside of major provincial destinations. While the state certainly has an ambitious vision for sustainable tourism in the province, advancement has been severely hindered by its inability to maintain basic infrastructure and efficiently develop a network of tourist attractions and amenities. Infrastructure may seem basic, but without addressing it, Holguín will find wide-scale tourism expansion — and extension of the benefits and opportunities tourism could provide throughout the province — very challenging.

The state does face an overall lack of resources, but it may also under-prioritize infrastructure and other projects that could improve quality of life for Cubans, investing more of the national budget into defense and, increasingly, into luxury hotels and resorts. Spending on basic infrastructure has stayed largely static throughout the 1990s and 2000s, with the somewhat narrower “community services and housing” category in the national budget occupying just over one percent of national spending every year, and 10 percent of local spending.<sup>223</sup> (While this budget category may leave out some portions of infrastructure spending, there is no official category for infrastructure in Cuba, and the numbers do align almost perfectly with those Castro

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<sup>223</sup> “Ejecución del presupuesto Gobierno Central,” (Anuario Estadístico de Cuba. República de Cuba: Oficina Nacional de Estadística e Información, 2011, and “Ejecución del presupuesto Gobiernos Locales.” Anuario Estadístico de Cuba. República de Cuba: Oficina Nacional de Estadística e Información, 2011).

cites in his speech *specifically* for infrastructure.)<sup>224</sup> The Cuban state spends much more on defense and heavy policing — expenses which, beyond basic public safety, probably does not improve most Cubans' quality of life and may stifle their freedoms.<sup>225</sup> In order to attract large-scale tourism to Holguín and other underdeveloped areas, the state will undoubtedly need to invest more in infrastructure.

Despite the state's claims that tourism will always be used as a tool to improve quality of life and environmental conditions, its own spending choices tell another story. Even as its insufficient budget has severely limited basic infrastructure spending, the Cuban state has poured more and more resources into international, often quite luxurious tourism projects. While a handful of these developments are multi-use projects, like cultural centers and museums, that benefit both tourists and Holguineros, the vast majority of new state construction appears to be concentrated in resorts and hotels, according to my analysis of state media coverage of new tourism-related development. Of the dozens of Cuban articles I've collected on Holguín tourism, every single one covers only international tourism, many focus on new hotels and resort complexes, and they exclusively promote accommodations in luxury hotels inaccessible to most local residents.

By investing primarily in luxury tourist developments, rather than focusing on infrastructure, the state has greatly limited tourism's potential to expand in the province, and the industry's ability to improve Holguineros' lives. Take Gibara, for example — the small coastal town that's recently become a promising sustainable tourism destination due to its cultural and ecological richness. In just the past few years, three luxury boutique hotels have opened in

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<sup>224</sup> Castro, "Key Address," 2003.

<sup>225</sup> "Ejecución del presupuesto Gobierno Central," Anuario Estadístico de Cuba, 2011.

renovated historic buildings in Gibara alone, and another is planned, in a majestic, dilapidated theater.<sup>226</sup> These costly renovations have yielded beautiful hotels, but in a town that still doesn't regularly attract large numbers of tourists, the sheer quantity seems misguided — during my high and low season visits, the hotels have never been full, or even especially busy, although hotel employees told me that tour groups and the annual Film Festival temporarily bring in larger quantities. These hotels, along with new resort constructions farther east, do offer some employment opportunities and a measure of civic pride for Holguín communities, however, their local benefits are severely limited by their high cost and narrow use: the hotels are too expensive for domestic visitors or even international budget travelers, and they fail to offer the local cultural or ecological amenities the state promised would arrive alongside tourism. The state seems to engage in an “If you build it, they will come” mentality that privileges hotel development and defense/law enforcement spending over infrastructure, but if destinations like Gibara remain surrounded by poor roads and badly maintained infrastructure, few tourists will make the trek to even the most unique and luxurious of boutique hotels. Infrastructure might not be as exciting to tourists or as appealing to state planners, but it remains one of the province's greatest weaknesses in creating a truly sustainable, scaled-up tourist industry that reaches beyond rarified coastal resorts.

### Section iii. Accessibility and Inequality

In a country where domestic enjoyment of tourism's pleasures has been a central value for decades, Holguín's burgeoning tourist industry disappoints many locals with its lack of accessible, affordable offerings. As I mentioned in the last section, the Cuban state has constructed a number of luxury resorts and boutique hotels in Holguín in the past several years

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<sup>226</sup> “FITCuba 2017: Oficializan a Gibara como destino turístico,” (Cubadebate, May 3, 2017.)

and is currently building several more.<sup>227</sup> These properties, constructed mainly in public-private partnerships between the Cuban state and international hospitality firms like Encanto, range from smaller hotels in renovated historic mansions to gleaming beach resorts complete with all-inclusive meals and drinks.<sup>228</sup> There are currently 5,000 international-caliber rooms available in the province, and the state anticipates it could construct 20,000 more in the next few decades (though this projection might overvalue both state building capacity and tourism growth in Holguín).<sup>229</sup>

While Holguín has its share of diverse hotel offerings, almost all medium-to-high quality accommodations have something in common: they are far too expensive for most Cubans, and so, locals are often present only as employees, rarely as guests. This issue is far from unique to Holguín — lack of domestic access and affordability has plagued Cuban tourism at least since the beginning of the Special Period — but, as Roland points out, it has extra salience in a province supposedly developing more sustainable, equitable tourism, in a country whose government has prided itself on major progress in domestic tourism accessibility in years past.<sup>230</sup> These spaces are economically inaccessible to most Cubans, with luxuries that exacerbate the province's existing disparities and divert much-needed resources from residents.<sup>231</sup>

The gap between Holguineros' income and hotel prices is discomfiting, and continues to grow as the province constructs ever more extravagant resorts. Even accounting for informal

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<sup>227</sup> Juan Pablo Carerras, “Ambiciosos Proyectos En Ramón de Antilla Marcan Desarrollo Turístico de Holguín (+ Fotos y Video),” (Cuba Debate. April 14, 2017.)

<sup>228</sup> Fernández, “Crónicas del ensueño marino,” 2017; Fernández, “Turismo... en tierras de Holguín,” 2017.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

<sup>230</sup> Roland, *Cuban Color*, 2011.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

earnings and remittances from abroad, the average Cuban earns US\$50 to \$100 a month.<sup>232</sup> The province's few domestic tourism accommodations are mainly poorly maintained motels and campsites, while good quality lodgings cost anywhere from \$50 to \$400 a night, many times the average Cubans' monthly earnings.<sup>233</sup>

Holguín hotels' impossible expense for locals is so obvious that provincial and national media don't even bother including hotel prices in their coverage of new offerings. In one recent article praising Holguín City's new boutique hotel, the Hotel Caballerizas, comments below the online article angrily request its price and wonder aloud whether any Cubans could even afford a stay.<sup>234</sup> The answer comes from the article's author himself: the hotel costs 90 CUC (a loose equivalent of the US dollar) per night, more than nearly any domestic reader could pay.<sup>235</sup> "As a general rule," the journalist explains, "we almost always cover the luxuries and pleasures we could never enjoy ourselves...and with journalists' salaries, not even imagine."<sup>236</sup> Often, the comments beneath these hyper-optimistic articles about Holguín tourist offerings are bittersweet, with locals expressing pride for their province's beauty, but sadness and disappointment that they don't have the money to vacation, let alone to stay in a nice hotel. On an article praising Holguín's many attractive destinations, one commenter wrote

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<sup>232</sup> "Rose Unveils The New Cuban Consumer Survey At Their Presentation In Havana," (Rose Marketing Ltd., September 23, 2016.)

<sup>233</sup> "Anuario Estadístico 2015 Holguín," Oficina Nacional de Estadística, 2016, 119; "Search Results," (Hotel Bookings. Transat. Accessed February 8, 2018.)

<sup>234</sup> Carreras, "Opera En Holguín Nuevo Hotel," 2016.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

It's true that my province is beautiful, but I've lived here for 23 years, and believe me, I don't know any of these places, not for lack of time, but for lack of money. The fact of the matter is that a tourist who comes from China knows more of my Cuba than I do.<sup>237</sup>

I have encountered this strong local pride, and even stronger desire for equality of access and treatment within tourism, all over Holguín, not just in online modes of expression. One young university student, hoping to work in tourism after he completes his degree, told me about a short trip he took to another Cuban province a few years ago. There, the local cultural center brimmed with people as a Cuban band played and other cultural events took place. The price was cheap enough that any local or Cuban visitor could enter and enjoy the festivities, alongside foreigners as equals, not as servers. "There was no division between Cubans and tourists," he explained, "no distance from the tourist world."<sup>238</sup> This was his ideal of healthy, sustainable tourism for Holguín, one which many Holguineros expressed to me, and which they felt was lacking, but hoped would emerge over time: international tourism which not only benefited Holguín, but treated residents with respect and equality.

With regards to tourism accessibility and affordability for domestic tourists, provincial conditions continue to fall short, despite some areas of progress. The revolutionary state's priorities — domestic access and equality, *and* government need for tourist revenue — compete with one another, as high hotel and restaurant prices bring in additional state revenue, at the cost of local access to these beautiful new amenities. While the high cost of tourist attractions is not often voiced as a major concern in international sustainable tourism frameworks, the unique concept of sustainability forged by the Cuban state's socialist, egalitarian rhetoric complicates matters. In order for Holguín tourism to genuinely benefit local communities, Holguineros have

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<sup>237</sup> Muguercia, Daylen Vega, "Un Paraíso Llamado Holguín," (Cuba Debate. May 6, 2017.)

<sup>238</sup> Peña González, Interview by author , 2017.

made clear — in online and real world forums of public opinion — that they must be able to access the high quality amenities tourism brings to the province.

#### Section iv. Race, Class, and Gender Issues

Beyond domestic access to tourism’s bounty, the profound economic and social disparities between foreign visitors and Holguineros have caused serious, if predictable, problems along racial and gender lines. Holguín is one of the whitest provinces in Cuba, and Afro-Cuban residents face discrimination and rising inequality as they are largely excluded from participation in the new, profitable tourist economy.<sup>239</sup>

As the waiter in this chapter’s introduction made abundantly clear, Cuba in general and Holguín in particular are far from colorblind societies. Race remains a big part of life on the island where slavery was abolished last in the New World, and despite post-revolutionary gains in education, healthcare, and other fields, Afro-Cubans continue to face racial discrimination and a lack of quality housing or opportunity around the island.<sup>240</sup> These challenges are particularly apparent in the tourism industry: black Cubans are often passed over for good-paying tourism jobs, which employers often prefer filled by whiter Cubans, and because many Afro-Cubans were provided with industrial-style public housing units after the Revolution, they are often unable to convert their homes into *casas particulares*, the lucrative guestrooms many Cubans now rent out to foreigners.<sup>241</sup> I’ve observed these difficulties for myself in Holguín, where I have almost never met a dark-skinned tourism worker, though Afro-Cubans are visible in nearly all non-tourism aspects of Holguín life. One Afro-Cuban family I met in Gibara struggled to fix

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<sup>239</sup> “El Color de la Piel según el Censo de Población y Viviendas,” (El Censo de Población y Viviendas 2012, Centro de Estudios de Población y Desarrollo, Oficina Nacional de Estadística e Información, February 2016.)

<sup>240</sup> Blue, “The Erosion of Racial Equality,” 2007.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.

their crumbling, Soviet era concrete housing, located next to the sea but with serious damage from Hurricane Ike, in order to convert their home into a tourist guesthouse — a dream which seemed impossible, considering their lack of resources and the building’s dilapidated state. The one area of tourism in which Afro-Cubans are often present is in *Tropicana*-style cabarets like the one I watched at the Hotel Club Amigo Atlántico, where some Afro-Cubans and lighter-skinned *mulatas* depict scenes of “primitive” Precolumbian natives, whitewashed slave stories, and the sexy, licentious stereotypes of mixed-race Cuban women.

Elsewhere in the province, on the “Christopher Columbus” tours and recreations of indigenous Taíno villages we discussed in Chapter Four, this racial narrative is further complicated. Local tour providers and state planners’ genuine desire for authentic heritage and carefully considered history meets the romanticized, oversimplified world of heritage tourism, sometimes leading to a sanitization of the European conquest, and a disservice to the province’s indigenous roots, with non-indigenous Cubans wearing loincloths as they perform a “festive dance” for tourists.<sup>242</sup>

As you might guess from my description of the Hotel Club Amigo Atlántico cabaret above, Holguín women face issues within tourism as well, mainly surrounding their sexual and economic behavior. As Daigle has explored in her research, sex is a major issue of contention within Cuban society, particularly when it comes to paid sexual relations or even romantic relationships between Cubans and foreigners.<sup>243</sup> While prostitution or sex with foreigners does not appear to be common in much of Holguín, simply because there are still few foreign visitors, it has become much more visible recently in Holguín City and Guardalavaca, with Holguín City

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<sup>242</sup> Ecotur, “Ruta Colón,” 2017.

<sup>243</sup> Daigle, *From Cuba with Love*, 2015.

as the main point of tourist arrival, and Guardalavaca as the province's main beach destination. Based on conversations and interviews with women of all ages in Holguín city, prostitution, along with more nebulous, semi-financial relationships with a foreign "boyfriend" who purchases clothes, food, and other "gifts" for his Cuban lover or mistress, have become more common since the 1990s.

As happened elsewhere in Cuba, the state has focused intense scrutiny on young women suspected of *jineterismo*, or hustling/prostitution, sometimes even arresting *jineteras* and sending them to forced "rehabilitation" camps.<sup>244</sup> These conditions for women in Holguín tourism thus create two challenges to any semblance of sustainability: they reveal how deep inequalities between foreign men and Cuban women (and, to a lesser extent, foreign women and Cuban men) can offer both economic opportunity and complex, perhaps unappealing or harmful personal choices for Holguineros; and they exacerbate the Cuban state's problematic, often controlling relationship with its citizens, violating their freedom of choice and their human rights.<sup>245</sup>

#### Section v. Environmental and Ecotourism Issues

Despite the Cuban state's purported commitment to environmentalism, Holguín continues to face a number of tourism-related ecological issues which hinder its sustainable development, from coastal resort practices to ineffective regulation to "ecotourism" itself. While responsible ecotourism could provide innumerable benefits to Holguineros for years to come, these enduring challenges threaten the province's ability to preserve its delicate marine ecosystems and biodiverse hinterland. At stake is not only the future of Holguín ecotourism, but the Caribbean's most valuable ecology — because it was spared from the heavy tourist development found

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 41-2.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

elsewhere in the region and in Cuba, Holguín and a few other Cuban spots are some of the only relatively healthy ecosystems in the entire Caribbean, making the province a hugely important, yet highly vulnerable site for biology and tourism alike.<sup>246</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the gravest tourism-based issue for Holguín’s environmental health is beach tourism, as both new coastal developments and ongoing resort practices exert an outsized impact on the province’s ecology. Large-scale resort tourism has been a fact of life in Guardalavaca, Holguín, for several decades, but recently the state has expanded beach tourism’s reach across the Holguín coast. Luxurious new developments have sprung up in Playa Pesquero, and an enormous project is underway on the ecologically valuable Ramón Peninsula, where state tourism officials estimate that up to 19,000 hotel rooms could be built.<sup>247</sup> The environmental risks of Caribbean beach tourism are numerous and well-documented.<sup>248</sup> We only have to look to Cuba’s northwest coast for a cautionary, yet alarmingly common tale of overdevelopment: in the major resort destination of Varadero, once an incredibly diverse peninsula of cays, mangroves, dunes, caves, and other ecological treasures, “[o]nly relics of these natural systems/habitats remain and many species that depend on those habitats have been lost.”<sup>249</sup>

The Cuban state, as we saw in Chapter Three, has committed to environmental sustainability when developing new tourism attractions and resorts.<sup>250</sup> These do not appear to be empty promises, as even stringent international observers have praised the government’s efforts

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<sup>246</sup> Whittle, “International Tourism and Protection,” 2003.

<sup>247</sup> Carreras, “Ambiciosos Proyectos En Ramón de Antilla,” 2017.

<sup>248</sup> Pattullo, *Last Resorts*, 1996.

<sup>249</sup> Whittle, “International Tourism and Protection,” 2003, 542.

<sup>250</sup> Sinfonte Díaz, “Turismo cubano por un desarrollo sostenible,” 2017.

to “try to do things differently,” with environmental protections that are nearly unheard of in a tourism-dependent Caribbean nation.<sup>251</sup> But since Guardalavaca’s earliest resort developments date back to the 1970s, some Varadero-style ecological damage to marine systems has almost certainly already occurred. Additionally, despite the state’s best efforts, any beach resort development, however eco-conscious, is likely to impact the surrounding ecosystem to some degree.<sup>252</sup>

Regardless of state environmentalist rhetoric and protections on the books, scientists are worried that growing tourism and climate change will deeply affect the “Crown Jewel of the Caribbean,” particularly delicate, biodiverse areas like Holguín.<sup>253</sup> As David Guggenheim of the research organization Ocean Doctor explains, Cuba’s comprehensive environmental laws and protections are not always fully enforced; while an impressive 25% of the Cuban marine system is technically protected, “it has the legal protection, but it doesn’t have the enforcement.”<sup>254</sup> And while the Cuban government has constructed recent developments with the environment in mind, I find tourism minister Manuel Marrero’s promise to “avoid construction in areas vulnerable” to ecological damage or climate change” quite hollow in Holguín’s case.<sup>255</sup> I analyzed data from Climate Central, a well-respected science research outlet, and found that sea level rise caused by global warming may inflict serious impacts on the Holguín coast in the coming decades.<sup>256</sup> If

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<sup>251</sup> Whittle, “International Tourism and Protection,” 2003, 535.

<sup>252</sup> Elliott, Sheryl Marie, and Lisa Delpy Neirotti, “Challenges of Tourism in a Dynamic Island Destination: The Case of Cuba,” (Tourism Geographies 10, no. 3, July 29, 2008): 375–402.

<sup>253</sup> “Cuba - The Crown Jewel of the Caribbean - But for How Much Longer?” (IUCN, May 1, 2009.)

<sup>254</sup> Perrottet, “A Cuban Island That Has Played Both Paradise and Prison,” 2018.

<sup>255</sup> Sinfonte Díaz, “Turismo cubano por un desarrollo sostenible,” 2017.

<sup>256</sup> “Surging Seas: Risk Zone Map,” (Climate Central. Accessed January 22, 2018. [ss2.climatecentral.org](https://www.climatecentral.org).)

global pollution levels continue as they do today, Holguín’s coastal resorts will become extremely vulnerable in the next century, with land lost to the sea and much greater risks of flooding and hurricane damage (already one of the most serious issues facing Holguín tourism, as we discussed in Section ii.).<sup>257</sup> These risks extend to new areas of development, including Gibara and the Ramón Peninsula, directly contradicting Manuel Marrero’s promise to avoid new construction in vulnerable areas.<sup>258</sup> While the Cuban state’s commitment to environmentally conscious tourism development in Holguín and elsewhere is admirable, it is by no means a catch-all solution to the province’s ecological problems and vulnerabilities.

Holguín planners must surmount a final obstacle to environmentally sustainable tourism: ecotourism itself. Or rather, what provincial tourism providers have billed as ecotourism in Holguín. As I described in Chapter Four, the province offers a wide variety of nature-based tourist attractions, and while some are responsible and respectful of the natural areas they use, others, particularly adventure tourism and animal-related tourism activities, are far from ecologically sound. At the Turnat 2017 Ecotourism Event I attended, I was shocked to see deep-sea fishing, ATV safaris, cramped zoos with exotic animals, dolphin shows, and other environmentally problematic offerings billed as sustainable ecotourism practices by state agencies.<sup>259</sup> By continuing to propagate these types of offerings and billing them as ecotourism, Holguín tourism planners put the pristine environments that draw tourists to the province at risk, undermine their own eco-conscious rhetoric, and potentially lose the patronage of some foreign visitors — especially sustainability-focused millennial and Generation X travelers, the primary

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<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid.

<sup>259</sup> “Ecotur: Creamos Aventuras,” (presented at the Evento Turnat, Guardalavaca, Holguín, Cuba, September 26, 2017.)

consumers of sustainable tourism, who care deeply about the quality and treatment of the ecosystems they visit.<sup>260</sup>

As with the other obstacles facing sustainable tourism in Holguín, environmental issues feature a complex jumble of internal and external factors. While Holguineros and state authorities can do very little to mitigate global climate change or previous ecological damage, provincial planners must improve current ecotourism quality, coastal resort practices, and enforcement of environmental protections for Holguín to become a genuinely responsible eco-destination.

#### Section vi. Conclusion

While I admire the Cuban state's ambitious vision for sustainable tourism in Holguín, it is not always realized, hindered by challenges ranging from poor infrastructure to economic inequality to its own conflicting, sometimes unjust policies. As Holguineros continue to articulate their own ideals for a local tourism that would be not just sustainable, but equitable, accessible, and respectful to locals, I hope that the state learns from these grassroots efforts, ensuring that the province can indeed forge a distinctly Cuban, specifically Holguinero form of sustainable tourism.

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<sup>260</sup> Báez, Ana L., and Turismo y Conservación Consultores, Costa Rica, "El Compromiso Del Turismo Con La Sostenibilidad," (presented at the Evento Turnat, Guardalavaca, Holguín, Cuba, September 26, 2017.)

Chapter Six  
Holguín Tourism: Revisiting Revolution, Sustainability, and Regional Tourism

*His enemies say that he exercised power by talking a lot and listening  
little, because he was more used to hearing echoes than voices.  
And in that his enemies are right.  
But some things his enemies do not say...  
his enemies never mention that Cuba is one rare country that  
does not compete for the World Doormat Cup.  
And they do not say that the revolution, punished for the crime of dignity,  
is what it managed to be and not what it wished to become...*

Excerpt from “Fidel,” by Eduardo Galeano<sup>261</sup>

*They are Cuban. They are the product, victim, and symbol of a revolution.*

Roman Mars<sup>262</sup>

At the end of a pockmarked, almost lunar dirt road lies rugged Playa Caletones. This weather-beaten beach is just 70 kilometers west of the luxurious resorts I described at the beginning of this work, but Caletones reveals a wholly different side of Holguín province. Barring the occasional sunburnt backpacker who somehow stumbles upon the beach, Caletones is devoid of foreign tourists. A tiny town of seaside shacks, the government installed electrical lines here just a few years ago. Caletones may well be the most isolated place I’ve visited in Cuba. The only sign of the world beyond is a row of imposing white wind turbines along the eastern road, which look utterly alien against the dry, scrubby, elemental landscape. Locals told me they were built by Venezuela, once Cuba’s most affluent benefactor, but since the Venezuelan economic crisis began, the turbines have sat motionless. On the windy day I visit,

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<sup>261</sup> Galeano, Eduardo, *Mirrors: Stories of Almost Everyone*. (New York, NY: Nation Books, 2009), 333.

<sup>262</sup> Mars, Roman, and Avery Trufelman, “Viva La Arquitectura!” (99% Invisible. May 26, 2015.)

the strong gusts rolling off the sea overturn the umbrellas and barbecue plates of a few local beachgoers — Caletones is popular with Holguineros — but the turbines don't budge a single *centímetro*.

In this thesis, I've explored the changes and continuities that Holguín is experiencing as international tourism develops. What I can't do, however, is divine the future: provide optimism or certainty, cynicism or solutions. What will happen to this isolated, lovely place — and more importantly, to the Holguineros who call it home, and those Cubans who travel here to enjoy a rare stretch of sand reserved just for them? Tourism, whether it be “sustainable,” “revolutionary,” or both, has the potential to transform life all around the province. Weighed down by ambitious plans and locals' high hopes, tourism could easily end up like the Caletones turbines: a grand vision battered by hurricanes, deflated by international economics and national dysfunction.

Instead of assigning value to current tourism or predicting its future development, I aimed to look at the nature — rather than the objective quality — of tourism in the Cuban province, examining what it revealed about the larger systems, dynamics, attitudes, and circumstances which surrounded it. This small province can sometimes seem battered by these greater forces.

Can places like Holguín manage to survive, even to interact with or benefit from this system without being subsumed by it? Any enterprise that began with questions like these — let alone an undergraduate thesis, constrained by the usual lack of time and experience, but also by the fickleness of international relations between the Cuban government and my own — was bound to produce only more questions. But it remains important to ask these questions, and to seek answers to them in places like Holguín, for more than mere curiosity. As remote and detached as Holguín may seem to the wider world of mass tourism, it is relevant to larger

discourses about how local communities weather international and national systems as tourism develops.

For Cuban and Caribbean leaders, Holguín's lessons are manifold. To understand tourism in this small province is to understand the conflict at the heart of modern tourism: can communities really develop a localized alternative to the damaging, exploitative mass tourism that reigned in the 20th century, while still depending on the global system that engineered tourism's ills in the first place? The system hasn't changed. Can the industry? In Holguín, this dilemma is made clear by the Cuban state's long-standing opposition to international capitalism and the shallow beach tourism of its neighbors — and by the state's apparent hypocrisy in re-inviting these economic forms onto the island. But in other communities, these contradictions are surfacing as well — particularly as the distance widens between sustainable tourism's promises and global market realities.

It has yet to be seen if Holguín will live up to the Cuban state's vision of socialist, revolutionary tourism or the international vision of capitalist, sustainable tourism. In the course of my work, however, I have been able to provide an in-depth look of how a provincial society began to impose its own, regionalized will onto both national and international notions of tourism. In Holguín, I hope that political leaders and scholars alike will see not just a destination, devoid of context and ripe for development, but a global crossroads — a place where international norms and markets meet national politics, contentious history, and regional creativity. Without this context, Cuban planners will never achieve their own stated goals of endogenous, egalitarian development that nurtures Cuban-style sustainability. And the global tourism system, both optimistic and problematic, will certainly never move beyond the rhetoric

of sustainable tourism into feasible ideas that aren't just branded "local," but truly give local actors the autonomy that they desire and deserve.

Sustainable tourism is a powerful concept, and like many powerful concepts, it is also highly marketable and subject to misuse. A century ago, Caribbean tourism began with similar intentions of healthy development that would transform the region into a better, modernized society. Sustainability could easily follow the same path, becoming an empty, generic, and overly technical phrase with no real salience in local communities. We can't allow sustainable tourism to remain in the ivory tower of international development, nor can we allow it to be manipulated by governments or corporations, or the idea will be rendered hollow.

When I began working on this thesis nearly 16 months ago, I worried that Holguín tourism was too narrow and specific a subject, and that establishing its significance beyond Cuba would be a challenge. But within the province, I discovered a microcosm of the tourist world, with people struggling, yet determined, to navigate forces beyond their communities and borders. Holguín led me down a rabbit hole in which everything was about tourism, and everything touristic was also about politics and history and pride and belief and hope.

In Holguín, the Cuban government may be developing an alternative to global norms; but Holguineros have turned the state's proposition on its head, articulating their own notions of tourism and identity and, increasingly, realizing their own personal and economic ambitions. These multilevel tensions are central to my work, and to the future of sustainable tourism in the Caribbean. While the scope of my thesis was fairly narrow, I hope my work encourages sustainable tourism scholars and planners to understand how this global concept interacts with local desires, government goals, and socioeconomic circumstances to create regionalized forms of tourism and sustainability.

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