
Breaking the chains: coffee, crisis, and farmworker struggle in Nicaragua

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Abstract. In the early 2000s the coffee crisis emerged as a central object of study for commodity chain scholars. In this paper I revisit the scene of the coffee crisis in Nicaragua to understand violent processes of devaluation and disinvestment that devastated the countryside for more than five years (2000–05). Employing a commodity disarticulations approach, I argue that conventional explanations of the coffee crisis as one of overproduction and devaluation generally failed to unravel the layered spatiality of dispossession that enables coffee chain formations. Digging below the surface text of the crisis narrative, I illustrate how the coffee crisis in the central highlands was exacerbated by an aggressive land grab by a consortium of agroindustrial capitalists called CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI that had dispossessed farmworkers of land rights and accumulated the spoils of the Sandinista-led agrarian reform over the previous decade. When CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI folded in 2000, an unemployed farmworkers movement surged to reclaim land promised to farmworkers in the popular revolution. Using this alternative reading of the crisis in Nicaragua, I aim to bring into focus the ongoing processes of dispossession that render coffee workers vulnerable to hunger, exploitation, and abuse.

Keywords: disarticulation, dispossession, coffee crisis, farmworkers, land reform, Nicaragua

“ ‘We were laid off from our jobs at the farms’, said Xiomara Lopez, 22 as she waited with her two barefoot, crying children for some bread and soft drinks brought by a university group. ‘We had no food. Instead we go to the market and get some vegetables from the garbage. We take the best part and give it to the children.’ ”

Xiomara Lopez, quoted by David Gonzale (*The New York Times* 29 August 2001)

In 2001 coffee prices on international markets dropped to record lows. Hailed as a crisis of overproduction, the devaluation of farm-gate coffee prices triggered disinvestment by banks and cost-cutting austerity measures by coffee producers around the world. In Central America the coffee sector confronted a catastrophe of epic proportions.⁽¹⁾ Farmworkers like Xiomara Lopez who were dependent on wage work to feed, clothe, medicate, and educate their households felt the crisis most acutely. In 2001 alone, an estimated 500 000 farmworkers were reportedly unemployed, amounting to salary losses of US\$140 million (Varangis et al, 2003). Civil unrest rocked the region as workers, peasants, and producer groups demanded state support for the coffee sector. Fearing the countryside would erupt in conflict, the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras responded with price supports, provided rescue capital and called for moratoriums on debt repayments by farmers to ensure some measure of stability. In Nicaragua, however, there was no such state response.

⁽¹⁾In Central America revenue from coffee exports dropped from US\$1.7 billion in 1999 to just US\$700 million in 2001. Coffee commodity chains employed 28% of the active rural workforce (Varangis et al, 2003).

While rural communities throughout Central America suffered tremendously amidst devaluation and disinvestment, Matagalpa, Nicaragua⁽²⁾ was arguably the epicenter of the economic disaster that rocked the region (Bacon, 2005; 2010). In 1999 the Nicaraguan coffee sector employed an estimated 175 000 permanent workers and 300 000 seasonal workers, 42% of the rural workforce and the highest percentage dependent on coffee wages in Central America (Varangis et al, 2003). In the region surrounding Matagalpa it employed roughly 90 000 permanent and 155 000 seasonal workers. But with farm-gate coffee prices hovering around US\$0.50 per pound, the private banking sector and export houses in Nicaragua cut their lending from 90% of total production in 2000 to just 5% of total production in 2001 (Rocha, 2001). Capital for coffee production was nearly absent in Matagalpa (Orozco, 2000). An estimated 2000 coffee estates reported zero access to credit (Mayda, 2001).

By 2001 permanent employment had dropped by 50% and seasonal employment for the coffee harvest had dropped by 20% (Varangis et al, 2003). The large majority of estates shut down operations almost entirely, as one worker stated “letting the coffee go black on the trees.” Private banks foreclosed on estates, kicking permanent workers out of their homes, and other workers reported that estate owners owed back wages of up to two years. The World Food Programme (2002) estimated that more than 100 000 people suffered from acute malnutrition caused by loss of income. Hunger and misery gripped the countryside (Sarmiento, 2001). Makeshift encampments of homeless workers swelled along the northern highways. Images of unemployed and desperate Matagalpans circulated around the world depicting the devastating effects of the global coffee crisis (Gonzales, 2001).

On 14 September 2002 five thousand unemployed coffee workers representing tens of thousands more from Matagalpa formed a human road block for ten hours across the Pan-American Highway. The protest stopped all traffic for hundreds of kilometers in both directions from the border of Costa Rica to Honduras. It was arguably the largest roadblock in Nicaraguan history. Expecting a slow government response, unemployed workers set up encampments occupying the sides of the highway near a little village called Las Tunas. Reciting the call of Matagalpan union organizer and worker leader Bernardino Diaz Ochoa, protesters chanted their demands for land: “No somos peces para vivir del mar. No somos aves para vivir del aire. Somos hombres para vivir de la tierra.” [We are not fish to live from the sea. We are not birds to live from the air. We are men to live from the land.] The government responded by sending in riot police to break up the demonstration and stop the gridlock. But the protesters held their ground. National and international observers and journalists flocked to the barricades. Over the next forty-eight hours representatives for the farmworkers and a council of government officials negotiated the *Las Tunas Accords* to provide 6000 temporary jobs and redistribute land from nineteen coffee estates to some 2500 families. In what seemed like just a matter of days, the farmworkers at Las Tunas achieved one of the most sweeping land reforms in Nicaragua since the Sandinista Revolution.

Although the protests at Las Tunas are often interpreted as a spontaneous response to the global coffee crisis, in this paper I demonstrate that the causes of this mobilization are more complex and began well before 2001. Drawing on oral history interviews with farmworkers, union organizers, and other movement participants, I illustrate that the grievances expressed in the Las Tunas protests were rooted in anger over iterative dispossessions and ignited by a violent land grab perpetrated by an agroindustrial conglomerate called CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI. From 1994 to 2000, CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI appropriated roughly 18 000 ha of formally worker-owned estates created as a result of peace accords to end the

⁽²⁾Matagalpa and Jinotega produce 80% of Nicaragua’s coffee exports. While small-scale farmers are prevalent in the region, in Matagalpa the coffee sector is dominated by the plantation model of production and the highest concentrations of coffee workers in Nicaragua live in the valley stretching from the city of Matagalpa north through San Ramon, El-Tuma-La Dalia to Rancho Grande.

Contra War. In 2000, facing a rapid decline in coffee prices, CONAGRA-AGRESAMI folded, bringing down the estates and banks with it. The collapse of CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI in 2001 and the pauperization of farmworkers in Matagalpa ignited a resurgent movement to demand the redistribution and retitling of lands under workers' names promised in the Sandinista Revolution.

Dispossessed farmworkers like Xiomara who protested at Las Tunas offer a critical perspective on the centrality of land and labor in the articulation of capitalist circuits. Land control is one of the most vital factors in the production of all agroexport crops in the Global South, especially coffee. Dispossession of indigenous, peasant, and farmworker communities from land, just wages, and labor rights in the highlands in Central America remains a key element in the perpetuation of structural inequality the countryside and injustice in coffee commodity chains. The violent dispossession of rural populations from land reproduces and incentivizes an active rural labor force, facilitates financial speculation on land markets, and enables access to high-value agricultural production conditions. However, acts of dispossession have frequently been excluded from research on coffee commodity chains over the past decade. By focusing attention on one such process of dispossession and on farmworker efforts to regain control over land in Nicaragua, my research highlights the layered spatiality of dispossession that reproduces the rural labor force in coffee-producing regions, renders farmworkers vulnerable to the vagaries of global coffee markets, and continues to serve as catalyst for farmworker agitation for land reform in the 21st century.

In what follows I argue that the Las Tunas protestors sought to transform the very conditions of possibility that enable coffee commodity chains in Matagalpa: namely the structure of landownership. My argument is based on seventy-one interviews with representatives from popular organizations and farmworker communities in Matagalpa over a total of sixteen months in 2003, 2005–07, and 2012. My farmworker informants were selected from eleven settlements that were active in the Las Tunas protest. Eight of those sites were selected because they appear in the Las Tunas Accords documents. The other three sites did not appear in the accords but did participate in the Las Tunas protests. Movement participants in these latter sites remain landless and/or reported zero material benefits from their participation. In each worker community I completed at least three oral histories in an effort to grasp the particularities of my informants' experience as well as background on each community. Interviews lasted between one and three hours and were recorded and transcribed. I also conducted interviews with signatories of the Las Tunas Accords, including the mayors of San Ramon and La Dalia, representatives of the Catholic Church, Sandinista (FSLN) party officials in Matagalpa, as well as the Association of Rural Workers (ATC), the Union of Farmers and Ranchers (UNAG), and the National Union of Associated Agricultural Producers (UNAPA) in Matagalpa.

The ATC, at the forefront of the Las Tunas negotiations, was formed in 1978 out of a syndicalist movement of worker committees operating throughout Nicaragua. In the 1980s the ATC played a critical role in negotiating with the revolutionary state over land reform on behalf of farmworkers and calling for labor rights in state-run agroexport farms. In 1990 the ATC also served as chief negotiator of the accords that resulted in the formation of worker-owned properties following the Contra War. UNAG was formed in 1981 as a popular organization representing the interests of small and medium-sized farmers, including land-reform beneficiaries. The ATC and UNAG were the two largest and most politically powerful mass organizations representing the rural worker and peasant classes in the years before and following the popular revolution (Enriquez, 1991, Luciak, 1995). UNAPA was formed in 1994 to coordinate the production and marketing of agroexports by rural worker cooperatives and enterprises affiliated with the ATC.

The paper is organized in the following sections. First, I stake out two interventions in the emerging critical commodity chains agenda that I wish to extend: (1) a critique of inclusionary bias, and (2) closer attention to ongoing processes of dispossession as a key condition of possibility for global commodity chains. Like Werner and Bair (2011), I believe these two interventions provoke critical reflection and open a serious methodological debate about how geographers and other social scientists embark on commodity-centric studies of global capitalism. Second, I begin to reconstruct the chain of explanation for the Las Tunas protest. Here I trace the formation of the movement back to (1) the uneven spatial redistribution of land from the Sandinista agrarian reform, (2) the violent land grab perpetrated by CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI, and (3) the collapse of CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI during the coffee crisis. Third, I explore the formation and objectives of the Las Tunas protestors in Matagalpa. I demonstrate that farmworker demands for land emanated from these repeated acts of dispossession and a desire to escape a situation in which they were forced to work on coffee estates simply to survive. While their struggle at Las Tunas was a success in the short run, I nevertheless also show how their grievances remain unsettled. Fourth, I conclude by arguing that the situation of coffee farmworkers in Matagalpa clearly illustrates the iterative and ongoing acts of dispossession that (re)create property relations and (re)produce labor relations within coffee commodity chains.

Economic geographies of devaluation, disinvestment, and dispossession

This paper contributes to an emerging literature that explores the economic geography of commodity chain dis/articulations (see Bair and Werner, 2011a). A dis/articulations approach to commodity chains calls attention to the social life of economic crises, exclusion, and restructuring associated with the devaluation of particular commodities, disinvestment in particular industries, and ongoing processes of dispossession at the root of capitalist expansion and reproduction. In their path-breaking editorial on commodity chain dis/articulations, Bair and Werner (2011a) press us to consider not only the internalized social relations and the powerful new connectivities evidenced by global capitalism (and its crises) but also the ways in which regions and actors “become disconnected or expelled from commodity chains” (page 989). Rather than reproducing teleological assumptions about the forward march of capitalist development, research on dis/articulations attends not only to the ways places and subjects are made to work for capital circuits, but also to what happens when those places and subjects break the circuits, or when the entire connection shorts out altogether. By looking at episodes, periods, and geographies of economic crisis, disaster, violence, and conflict in spaces of production, Bair and Werner (2011a) urge a renewed focus on the ongoing, processual, and contingent linking and delinking of economic sites and subjects in capitalist circuits. Challenging blind spots in the literature on global capitalism, such an approach echoes the intellectual and political commitments of a range of scholars engaged in antiteleological scholarship on the uneven development of global capitalism, broadly speaking (for example, see Burawoy, 2000; Ferguson, 1998; Hart, 2002; Li, 2007; Nevins and Peluso, 2008; Peluso, 1994; Peluso and Watts, 2001; Schroeder, 2012; Tsing, 2005; Wright, 2006).

The problem of inclusionary bias in coffee commodity chain research

A key intervention of the dis/articulations approach that I seek to extend in this paper is a critique of inclusionary bias in much of the literature on global commodity chains. Bair and Werner (2011a) write that “the commodity chains literature evidences a general and systematic bias” toward “theoretical and empirical emphasis on incorporation” and tends to “pursue the newest production frontier of a particular commodity in order to analyze how a region becomes linked into a chain and how this incorporation impacts local actors” (page 989). The literature on coffee commodity chains over the past decade presents a

particular case for a critique of inclusionary bias. Coffee was central to the development of the commodity chain literature due to the pronounced political–economic shifts in production and consumption for differentiated coffee markets amidst the deregulation of the global coffee trade in the 1980s (Bacon, 2005; 2010; Daviton and Ponte, 2005; Ponte, 2002; Talbot, 2004). The gourmet coffee boom, characterized by the reconstitution of the ‘identity’ of coffee and the creation of a consumer market for coffee’s symbolic attributes, has been of particular interest to commodity chain researchers, myself included. These new frontiers in quality coffee production, processing, and market standards have reconfigured power relations between producers (read: farmers and landowners), processors, exporters, importers, roasters, retailers, and consumers. And coffee has served as a muse for a generation of scholars exploring the ways in which new market conventions, standards, certifications, geographic indicators, and branding schemes might restructure commodity chains to work in service of more ethical economies. Yet, even though value chain upgrading has opened new doors for some disadvantaged producers, other actors engaged in coffee production have been systematically excluded by policy makers and scholars studying these new commodity chain frontiers.

For more than a decade coffee commodity chain research has said nearly nothing of the farmworkers who maintain coffee orchards and harvest the coffee that makes its way into the lattes consumed in the Global North. The absence of farmworkers in the literature is no small oversight. Farmworkers represent a vast reserve army of labor that is mobilized at extremely low salaries in a range of agricultural and manufacturing sectors, particularly the coffee sector. Permanent and seasonal farmworkers on large, medium, and small farms by far outnumber small-scale farmers in coffee-producing regions, and they often carry out the most critical work during periods of orchard maintenance and harvesting. In Central America, farmworkers outnumber farmers by a count of eight-to-one and in Nicaragua that ratio is closer to ten-to-one (Varangis et al, 2003). Women make up a majority of this workforce and tend to depend upon seasonal harvesting wages to help sustain household budgets. Even on small-scale “family farms” of 2 ha that participate in so-called ethical trade networks like Fair Trade, seasonal wage workers play a vital role in labor-intensive weeding, pruning, harvesting, and processing. Coffee farmworkers are extremely vulnerable to low wages and wage theft, poor working and housing conditions, and mistreatment by farm owners and managers. When coffee farmworkers are landless or land poor they also confront job, food, and housing insecurity, particularly in times of commodity devaluation and disinvestment like the coffee crisis (Petchers and Harris, 2005). Yet, to date, the struggles of farmworkers have not been incorporated into our analyses of coffee (cf Wilson, 2010; 2013) as they have in other agricultural commodity chains such as bananas (Brown, 2013), tea (Besky, 2013), and organic fruits and vegetables (Brown and Getz, 2008).

I argue that the absence of farmworkers from research on coffee commodity chains over the past decade has left important questions unanswered about the spatiality of coffee commodity chains and strategies for reconfiguring coffee capitalism. And in this paper I only begin to scratch the surface. My research explores just one political struggle of farmworkers in Nicaragua who respond to ongoing processes of dispossession as wage workers within coffee commodity chains by demanding land for subsistence production. Not all farmworkers in coffee regions, not even all who participated in the protests at Las Tunas, are presented with such political opportunities to try to change the structure of landownership, nor do they all necessarily pursue land reform as a social movement objective. Indeed, many wage workers, including those who participated in the protests at Las Tunas, struggle for reforms in labor laws, living wages, improvements in living and working conditions on coffee estates, and access to public services such as education and health care. Therefore, I do not wish

to discount, misrepresent, nor essentialize the struggles of farmworkers here by suggesting that those who marched on Las Tunas stand in for all farmworkers and that all farmworkers dream of obtaining land. Moreover, the ability of farmworkers to obtain land does not necessarily reduce their economic and political vulnerabilities, nor does it always solve their problems. Nevertheless, I contend that the landownership regime in coffee-producing regions is still one of the most important conditions of possibility for coffee commodity chains; and the agrarian class structure, labor laws, and working conditions under which farmworkers live and organize in coffee-producing regions still remain deeply rooted in historical and contemporary acts of dispossession that are ongoing and violent.

Ongoing dispossession: conditions of possibility for coffee commodity chains

The second intervention of the dis/articulations framework that I seek to extend concerns ongoing and violent processes of dispossession that reproduce the conditions of possibility for capitalist circuits, particularly the coffee trade. Bair and Werner call for research that engages with the brutal, albeit often invisible, processes of dispossession that divorce people from the means of production and lead to the incorporation of (un)free labor into capitalist relations of production. Building on contemporary readings of Marx (1976), Perelman (2000), de Angelis (2002), Harvey (2003), and Glassman (2006), Bair and Werner (2011b) argue that acts of dispossession, rather than being exceptional, historical, or outside of capitalism, are a constitutive logic and material reality of capitalist circuits. Challenging a teleological view of capitalist development that treats primitive accumulation as only an original sin (rather than a banal and repeated sin), Bair and Werner see primitive accumulation as a “structurally contingent process stretched over and reproducing the terrain of social and geographical difference, which explains [particular outcomes] and underwrites capital accumulation more generally” (2011a, pages 991–992). Indeed, this reading draws directly from Marx’s own definition of primitive accumulation, suggesting that the “history of this expropriation, in different countries, assumes different aspects, and runs through its various phases in different orders of succession, and at different historical epochs” (Marx, 1976, page 876).

Whether defined as primitive accumulation, accumulation by dispossession, or accumulation by extraeconomic means (Glassman, 2006), acts of dispossession, as Hart writes, cannot “be consigned to some distant, pre-capitalist past” (2002, page 11). Dispossession is repetitive, iterative, and ongoing through coercive practices to gain, maintain, and control access to resources for commodity production (Gould, 1998; Hart, 2002). Dispossession also, by extension, facilitates the constant separation of labor from the means of production and undermines any guarantees of existence for people then dependent upon wage work to survive (Bair and Werner, 2011b). This dual process of dispossession, as numerous critical geographers have illustrated, remains a necessary condition of possibility for the continuous reproduction of capitalist circuits (Glassman, 2006). As Hart (2002) demonstrates through her work on the investments of Taiwanese industrialists in South Africa, acts of dispossession are continuously supplemented by, play upon, and are layered over other histories and geographies of enclosure, privatization, and commodification that have already occurred.

While acts of dispossession often get naturalized or taken for granted by scholars studying the structuring of commodity production, histories and social relations of dispossession tend to be remembered quite consciously by people who have been expelled from the land or from wage work (Gould, 1998; Hart, 2002). As I illustrate below, iterative dispossessions and struggles against dispossession are not a prehistory of coffee capitalism in Matagalpa, but a living violence that creates and recreates a reserve army of farmworkers through extra-economic coercion and systematic political marginalization engendered by landowners, the political elite, and the Nicaraguan state. In Nicaragua, as elsewhere, iterative dispossessions have established sedimented collective memories that form the basis for social mobilization.

As Gould (1998) in his research on memory and resistance among indigenous, peasant, and farmworker groups in Matagalpa writes:

“the historical process [of primitive accumulation] analyzed by Marx is punctuated by decisive, memorable events of ‘blood and fire.’ Moreover, because this process can cover an entire epoch it is rarely terminated with those first blows of accumulation. These certain moments of accumulation may be experienced as a repetition of previous experiences. It is in those moments that seem like repetitions that may trigger memories either from childhood or those that have been transmitted communally ... the appeal to memory of a key moment in that process may contribute dramatically to communal mobilization” (page 232).

As I demonstrate through the example of landless and unemployed coffee workers at Las Tunas, iterative dispossessions not only created the conditions of possibility for the coffee commodity chain, but also for resistance. Farmworkers with no guarantees of survival sought to reverse processes of dispossession by demanding land, subsequently codified in the Las Tunas Accords signed in 2002. By repossessing land, farmworkers sought to break the chains that forced them into wage work and made them vulnerable to exploitation and expulsion from the coffee estates.

Behind the barricades: reconstructing the chain of explanation at Las Tunas

In what follows I attempt to reconstruct the historical narrative of the Las Tunas protests. Rather than a spontaneous response to the overproduction and devaluation of coffee on global markets, my informants claimed that the Las Tunas protests were the direct result of the failure of the revolutionary state to effectively fulfill its promise to provide land to farmworkers loyal to the popular front and to protect those land claims in the face of opportunistic land grabbers in the 1990s. The story therefore begins much earlier than 2002. The popular revolution in Nicaragua that resulted in the toppling of the Somoza dictatorship led to a massive counterenclosure movement to reappropriate land resources from an entrenched elite class following more than a century of land grabbing by domestic and transnational investors (Enriquez, 1991; Luciak, 1995). As Biderman (1983) wrote in explaining the social context in the countryside prior to the Nicaraguan revolution, land grabbing by domestic and transnational investors established tremendous inequalities in resource control, produced a class of landless laborers, and created the conditions of possibility for successive export booms including coffee. The enclosure of indigenous lands through large-scale acquisition transformed property ownership, class relations, and export production throughout the country in the 20th century. As he explains, the

“process of dispossession and ‘commodification’ of land which began in the coffee areas during the late 19th century was generalized and intensified after 1950 ... In addition to making land a commodity which was increasingly appropriated by larger capitalist producers, the dispossession of small food producers forced them to sell their labor power (at least on a seasonal basis) in order to survive” (page 11).⁽³⁾

In response to this dispossession and commodification of land, the FSLN carried out one of the most highly politicized, widely documented, and thoroughly researched revolutionary counter enclosures in Central America. The scale of the land redistribution in the Nicaraguan agrarian reform from 1979 to 1989 was staggering. In this period the revolutionary Nicaraguan state transferred more than 2.5 million ha of arable land from large-scale, elite-owned *latifundios*

⁽³⁾“Though some proletarianization did occur, the expansion of coffee did not eliminate servile or precapitalist social relations, which continued to predominate ... With some exceptions, the emerging class of coffee growers was of the Junker or landlord type ... However even this interpretation may exaggerate the extent to which there was a real evolution towards capitalist development (as opposed to continued primitive accumulation)” (Biderman, 1983, page 11).

to farming collectives, individual peasant farmers, and state-owned enterprises called *el Area Propiedad del Pueblo* (the People's Property). The size of the landholdings of the elite was reduced from 36% to just 6.4% of the total arable land in the country and an estimated 120 000 families received land when calculating both land transfers to cooperatives and the titling of spontaneously occupied tenant lands (CIERA, 1989).

However, as scholars have frequently described, land redistribution as part of this counterenclosure was uneven and unequal as a result of economic policy, political pressures, rural class conflict, and civil war. The FSLN redistributed land in a way that created a new but highly differentiated rural class structure and produced a complicated spatial organization of property relations among peasants and farmworkers, particularly in Matagalpa. In Matagalpa land reform advanced slowly and state-run latifundios predominated. Although these lands were called "the People's Property", the state-run coffee estates did not radically transform the basic structure of the latifundio system prior to the revolution. The revolutionary state merely replaced private landowners with state administrators. State-run coffee estates encompassed roughly 18 000 ha and employed tens of thousands of rural workers. The exports from these state-run estates were key sources of revenue and foreign exchange for the FSLN's revolutionary socialist project.

Against the more romantic image of unionized estates and the protection of farmworker rights under a benevolent socialist vanguard, my informants described minor concessions such as small wage increases, literacy, education and health campaigns as well as holiday celebrations sponsored by the directorate of the enterprises. Indeed, farmworkers always represented a complicated ally for the FSLN, even though they were envisaged as a core constituency (Enriquez, 1991). Since the coffee-producing region was the backbone of the modern agroexport economy promoted by the FSLN, a steady supply of farmworkers was necessary, although not always available. Shortages in the coffee sector were created by the 'peasantization' of the rural proletariat following land reform and mobilization of large numbers of farmworkers for the war, which drew vital labor away from the state enterprises. Thus, labor shortages and the need for export revenue forced the FSLN leadership to balance widespread land redistribution with strategic nondistribution, in the contradictory form of the People's Property. Ultimately, the coffee workers in Matagalpa and Jinotega represented a large bloc of the FSLN that did not walk away from the agrarian reform period with clear title or even possession of land.⁽⁴⁾

When the Sandinistas lost the elections in 1990 the majority of state-run coffee enterprises were awarded to workers under a peace settlement between the ATC and the Chamorro administration that promised the workers possession of the land in a twenty-year lease with a right to purchase. Under this agreement the People's Property would be renamed the Workers' Property and beneficiaries included rural workers, ex-military personnel, and ex-Contra combatants. The Workers' Property represented a huge victory for the ATC to protect workers' claims in the face of privatizing counteragrarian reforms led by repatriating elites and the Chamorro administration. Without the ATC's intervention, those state assets would assuredly have been returned to past owners, or sold to private firms, thus robbing rural workers of the revolutionary promise of land. In total, the peace accords transferred ownership of thirty-three agro-industrial enterprises including cotton, cattle, and sugar estates to more than 10 000 worker shareholders (Rocha, 2003). Nine of those enterprises were based in the coffee sector and encompassed some 17 000 ha of coffee orchards (Rocha, 2003).

⁽⁴⁾ Effectively, the state enterprises relied upon a class of landless workers to function. Farmworkers employed by the state only maintained ownership of their homes and patio with no access to subsistence plots for household provisioning or market gardening. Indeed, as Francisco, an elderly worker remarked, on the state-run estates, subsistence plots were prohibited to ensure wage laborers did not divide their time between their subsistence plots and the state's coffee orchards.

By 1993 the worker-owned enterprises were vertically integrated into one exporting company called AGROCAFE which had 2032 worker shareholders and produced roughly 7% of total exports.

As the name connotes, the Workers' Property was again framed as a fulfillment of a revolutionary promise of providing land to those who worked it. However, unlike land-reform titles given to individual or even collectively owned properties, land titles to the coffee estates rested with jointly owned enterprises previously administrated by state officials. In the transition from state ownership to worker ownership, the names of worker shareholders in the enterprises were not applied to the actual land titles for the coffee estates. Indeed, there was considerable ambiguity over who actually had legal title to the coffee estates. It also led to speculation that certain members of the FSLN party leadership actually retained control over the properties and had merely used the workers as a political tool to enrich themselves. As one of my informants Camilo said sarcastically, "they promised us that they were handing over the land to us, but we knew they still had control, these lands are too valuable and too important for them to hand it over to the *mozos*."⁽⁵⁾ Nevertheless, as I describe below, any dreams that farmworkers may have had regarding the autonomous ownership of land in the coffee estates would be again dashed by the aggressive land acquisitions of an agroindustrial conglomerate called CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI. The violent dispossession of farmworkers from what were believed to be worker-owned estates provoked moral outrage. However, it was not until the coffee crisis revealed once again the vulnerability of workers that they asserted their collective power against this act of dispossession.

Violent dispossession: CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI's land grab

CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI's land acquisition focused almost exclusively on directly and indirectly acquiring previously state-owned and worker-owned land assets.⁽⁶⁾ Capitalizing on shifting political alliances, legal loopholes, and land title insecurity, CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI turned the Worker's Property into a coffee empire. Between 1994 and 2000 CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI acquired the title or took over the mortgages of sixty coffee estates encompassing an estimated 15 000–18 000 ha of land. Roughly 80% of those estates were in the possession of worker-owned enterprises. It also acquired one of the largest coffee mills in Central America, positioning itself as the largest single buyer of Nicaraguan coffee and the largest financier of small-scale farmers in the region. According to Nitalapan-Envio (2000), the conglomerate contracted with and financed 10 000 small and medium-scale coffee growers in Matagalpa. CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI grew so large as a coffee enterprise that it was responsible for 40% of total exports in 1999. CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI's acquisition of the Worker's Property did not happen in a vacuum, but rather through largely secretive, closed-door dealing between the management of worker-owned enterprises and CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI officials in the absence of the worker shareholders and the ATC.

⁽⁵⁾ *Mozos* refers to fieldhands on estates. *Mozo* is a word used almost exclusively by landowners and bosses to describe their workers and is inherited from the lexicon of Spanish colonialism. Farmworkers tend not use the term to describe themselves. It symbolically reproduces the master–slave relation.

⁽⁶⁾ CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI was reportedly entangled in the political and economic maneuvering of FSLN party leaders seeking to preserve the collective and personal gains of the 1980s. Interbank, which financed the CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI investments, purportedly had ties to members of the FSLN's national directorate such as Bayardo Arce and Humberto Ortega. Whether or not a direct link can be drawn between CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI and the FSLN (a much longer paper and more complicated research process would be necessary to defend such a claim), what is clear is that CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI had won the consent of the leadership of the major popular arms of the FSLN's rural peasant and worker bases.

CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI was not just a coffee producer and exporter. It leveraged its land assets for further investments in sesame processing and export companies, a sugar refinery, shrimp enterprises, and a cattle-breeding operation, all with links to other worker-owned enterprises. The CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI consortium was seen as such an excellent speculation that investors bankrolled it to the tune of US\$70 million. Interbank, the second largest bank in Nicaragua in 2000, made CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI 40% of its entire loan portfolio. The consortium even acquired backing from international investors through FININSA and Towerbank in Panama, which underwrote Interbank's lending. In effect, CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI leveraged control over the Workers' Property into a key asset within an elaborate pyramid scheme. The base of CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI's financial pyramid was established through acquisition of coffee estates from five enterprises in Matagalpa and Jinotega: Juan de Dios Munoz, Jorge Vogl, Deniz Gutierrez, Chale Haslam, and Alfonso Nunez. Each enterprise managed five to nine coffee estates. The coffee estates managed by these enterprises were positioned in some of the best terrain for high-value arabica coffee production and were also located along well-maintained transportation routes that facilitated the easy movement of harvests.

The landholdings of CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI were extensive, including such massive latifundios as La Fundadora in Jinotega (managed by the agroenterprise Jorge Vogl) and the neighboring estates of La Lima, La Laguna, and Santa Marta (managed by the agroenterprise Deniz Gutierrez) in the municipality of San Ramon. In one of the only published revelations of its dealings with worker-owned enterprises, La Prensa reported that CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI had mortgages on nine coffee estates managed by worker-owned enterprises for nearly US\$6.5 million. However, these reported holdings represented just a fraction of CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI's coffee estate assets and only a small portion of properties that were registered in its name.

The leadership of CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI, the Centeno-Roque brothers, sought to ingratiate themselves with worker communities by paying for recreational equipment and hosting holiday events. These acts glorified them as good boys of the rural working class. As Niplapan-Envio reported,

“public opinion was treated to a rags-to-riches story rivaling those on which the ‘American Dream’ is built. Born in Quilalí and weaned on burro milk, the Centeno children made their living shining shoes and helping their family sell firewood, making clay bricks and roof tiles and cultivating a tiny plot of coffee. Working with dedication ‘until the wee hours of the night,’ they ended up somehow amassing an economic empire that has stunned Nicaraguans learning about it in detail for the first time” (2000).

But many farmworkers had already seen the other face of CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI. In its efforts to enter and take control of coffee operations, the conglomerate's land grabbing also resulted in resistance, armed conflict, and legal disputes. Even in cases where they had unclear title or usufruct rights, these workers and ex-combatants had strong moral claims. Most men in the worker-owned enterprises fought in the civil war and many others had made great sacrifices to win access to land. As such most farmworkers were highly motivated to protect their land claims and many remained armed from either previous military service, in the insurgency, or even in postwar militias such as the *Recontras* and *Recompas*. Workers settled on the properties had suffered tremendously to gain control over those lands and were not going to give up that control without a fight.

To enforce their land claims, CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI contracted with a security firm managed by ex-officials from the military's special operations unit and intelligence agencies. CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI leaders notoriously traveled in helicopters, had heavily armed body guards, and employed an armed militia to settle property disputes. Through the

use of an aggressive security force, the conglomerate projected a threatening image in the countryside. As one of my informants said, “they would fly into the properties in a helicopter and surrounded by men with brand new automatic weapons.” Numerous informants recounted the same story. Describing the effect this image had on the people in the communities another informant said, “Look, you didn’t fuck with them.” Many of my informants saw CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI as an aggressor and people were afraid that they operated with immunity from the law. “They operated outside the law”, one of my informants argued. “They were the law.”

Yet, even in the face of the threatening presence of security forces, resistance to CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI was already brewing in 1999, more than two years before the first efforts to organize workers to reclaim those properties. As was the case on the farm Los Milagros, security forces sought to push workers off the land by slaughtering livestock, destroying crops, burning homes, and holding workers at gunpoint. In three publicized conflicts in the coffee estates of Santa Maria de Wasaka, Los Milagros, and La Pintada, violent conflict erupted between CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI security forces and workers, resulting in numerous casualties. With apparent immunity and a powerful security force, it seemed the quiescence of farmworkers would ultimately be won. However, the conjuncture of moral outrage against CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI’s violent dispossession, the coffee crisis, and the subsequent pauperization of farmworkers actually sparked a movement unimaginable prior to 2001.

Dis/articulations: the coffee crisis and the unraveling of a coffee empire

The coffee crisis was the beginning of the end for CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI. When farm-gate coffee prices began to decline rapidly in 2000, the base of CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI’s pyramid scheme collapsed. CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI suffered massive supply losses, losses in revenue, and losses from production loans that could not be paid back. Interbank, which held the mortgages on CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI’s extensive coffee enterprises and was heavily invested in production and commercializing coffee, folded under the weight of these outstanding loans. In an investigation of Interbank’s failure, state officials and journalists descended upon CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI’s coffee warehouse in 2001 to find thousands of coffee bags filled with rice shell that were being used as collateral for short-term pre-export commercial loans to cover their operating expenses. Interbank’s failure and the spectacular news reports focusing on the “*escándalo de la cascaría*” (rice shell scandal) opened the black box of CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI’s business dealings. The revelation of CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI’s ‘shell game’, its ties to Interbank, and the effects of fraudulent loans, titles, and production figures were suddenly placed in the media spotlight for all to see. Following inquiries, legal battles, and a criminal trial, the leadership of CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI was ultimately convicted of financial crimes and imprisoned in 2002.

The disaster that ensued for farmworkers was staggering to the imagination. CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI cut wages and turned away workers. Worker communities faced the prospect of hunger-based migration, but lack of food was not the only cause of displacement. With the liquidation of CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI and Interbank’s assets and foreclosures on coffee estates throughout the region, many workers were also evicted. And, even in cases where workers were not physically evicted, security forces employed by banks did come to the properties to make workers aware of the foreclosure proceedings and to tell workers to stop foraging on the properties. Beginning in May 2001, workers began to abandon the coffee estates in search of food, work, and shelter, forming makeshift encampments along the highway in the central Matagalpa Valley stretching from the city of Matagalpa to the northeast through the municipalities of San Ramon, El Tuma-La Dalia, and Rancho Grande. In addition to the thousands moving to roadside encampments, by 4 July 2001, an estimated

2000 coffee workers, primarily women, had left the estates or worker villages and sought refuge in the city of Matagalpa. The local Red Cross fashioned an encampment in a city park to treat some 850 people with health problems caused by malnutrition (Rocha, 2001) and the regional campus of the National University created an encampment supported by donations from students, faculty, and community members to help some 1200 people with no place to go. Along the highway to the northeast, encampments included three to four thousand people, and still others migrated to Managua and even abroad to seek work in Costa Rica (Rocha, 2001; 2003). By August 2001 more than six thousand unemployed farm workers formed eighteen encampments from Matagalpa to Rancho Grande along the Northern highway.

Breaking the chains: fighting for the guarantees of existence

“For lack of employment our children are dying of hunger. We want answers!”

Protest Banner, Rural Workers Association (2002)

The majority of the men and women who coinhabited the encampments came from CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI estates and they began to share similar stories of back wages as well as problems of collusion between worker-owned enterprise managers and the leadership of the conglomerate. Whether or not farmworkers had connected the dots to CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI, they understood, objectively, through their experience of hunger, unemployment, displacement, and homelessness why they were paupers, suffering on the side of the road.

The domino effect of the decline in coffee prices had revealed once again that farmworkers in the Matagalpa Valley were expendable. “They treated us like we don’t exist, like we were animals”, said Consuelo, a mother of four teenage boys from San Ramon. Yet, it was not just the decline in coffee prices, or unemployment, or hunger that led to these sentiments. As Marta, a middle-aged woman with two young children described:

“We organized the first encampments out of necessity. We didn’t have food. The children were crying for food, so we went to the encampments. But it was more than that we didn’t have food. We wanted [the state and the landowners] to listen and to fulfill our demands. We no longer wanted to be forced to work on the estates. Many days and nights in this struggle I would cry for this little piece of land where our family could live in peace.”

Their lack of control over land had reproduced the conditions of their exploitation at the hands of whatever landowner—individual, state, party, enterprise—‘forced’ them to work for their own survival. Farmworkers in the encampments described their hunger and displacement as a byproduct of repeated dispossessions that extended back through time and were ultimately unresolved by the Sandinista revolution and agrarian reform process. “First it was the People’s Property and then it was the Workers’ Property”, Rigoberto said, criticizing the repeated promises from Sandinista party leadership without clearly transferring control over the coffee estates to workers. Satirizing what he believed to be the logic of government officials he said, “it is yours [referring to promised lands], but we still need to control it for a while since you can’t do it yourselves.” Expressing resentment over the failure of the revolution to redistribute land to farmworkers and the anger in the encampments Rigoberto went on:

“We gave everything to the revolution, to the party. We fought for land. And there we were living under black plastic [tarps] on the side of the road. Food for mosquitos. Eating grass.”⁽⁷⁾

⁽⁷⁾Eating grass, or *comiendo pastos* is an expression frequently used by campesinos in Nicaragua to describe the structural limitations imposed by poverty. Symbolically it captures the idea of being reduced to an animal and eating something that for humans has no nutritional value.

In the encampments farmworkers came to realize their shared struggle. It was from the encampments that farmworkers began to launch collective actions to reclaim land. As Chepe, an organizer for the ATC in Matagalpa explained,

“A group of women came to us and said, ‘we are going to create encampments so that the government can see what is going on. We are going to use this form of resistance to put forward our demands and demonstrate against the government.’”

Roughly 70% of the farmworkers participating in the Las Tunas protests originated from properties associated with CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI properties and investments. By August 2001 the revelations of CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI’s land grab were circulating through mainstream media and the gossip circles. A picture of the land grab was starting to take shape in the minds of the workers. “We were all so spread apart. We didn’t realize how extensive it all was”, said one informant. Their sudden ability to communicate with one another about their shared experiences in the encampments generated a new-found sense of worker solidarity. Such solidarity had been lost following the postwar period, in the distances between the estates, and due to the decline of active labor organizing in the context of the rise of the relationship between the administrators of the worker-owned enterprises and CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI. As one of my informants said,

“I saw comrades I hadn’t seen since the war. I saw comrades from the ATC. We were together again, scrawny and hungry, in the encampments. [Laughing] We were a mess. But it was good to be together, to see friends in the struggle with us ... even if it seemed we were back in the place we started from so long ago.”

The objectives of the nascent farmworkers’ movement coalesced primarily around land reform, with an explicit requirement to provide land to workers for subsistence production. Second, farmworkers demanded short-term employment and food aid to help them weather the crisis. And, third, farmworkers sought to gain social improvements in housing, schools, and health care. But in the final analysis, the farmworkers wanted the land. As Enrique, an organizer from the ATC, said,

“We knew what we wanted: a bank of lands which could be distributed to the people. Workers need land if there is no work. There must be an alternative food source or source of income. We knew we couldn’t and wouldn’t demobilize until the people had clearly assigned lands and promises for the building of homes, schools, and health care facilities.”

As Enrique makes clear, even as they wanted the state to ‘promise’ to fulfill social reforms, it was access to land that became the nonnegotiable focal point of the movement. The land grabbing by CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI illustrated the worker’s real lack of control over the land for subsistence production. And the coffee devaluation revealed their continued vulnerability as wage workers in a highly unstable agroexport sector.

In late August 2002, in consultation with the ATC, workers in the encampments decided to march to Managua and stage a roadblock to raise the visibility of their cause and to force a negotiation with the government. Three weeks later, they arrived just south of Sebaco in the Department of Matagalpa at highway markers 96 km and 97 km in the village of Las Tunas. On 14 September they blocked the highway in fifteen-minute, thirty-minute, and hour-long periods to force the government to acknowledge their demands and to facilitate a negotiation. The Bolanos administration sent in a diplomatic team of ministers and appointed a chief negotiator, Alfonso Sandino, Vice Minister of Governance, to review the grievances and come to a resolution with representative civil society organization. The farmworkers were represented by negotiator Isaac Jaen from UNAPA and the ATC. Also joining the negotiations were other peasant and worker representatives from the UNAG, as well as other government officials such as the ministers of rural development, education, health and family services,

assembly representatives of the FSLN, and the mayors of San Ramon, El Tuma, La Dalia, and Matagalpa.

With three thousand farmworkers surrounding the secondary school in Las Tunas to force the representatives to the table, negotiators spent two days hashing out an agreement to end the protest. Farmworkers articulated their demands through the development of an explicit agrarian reform proposal to be carried out at the regional scale. Written by representatives from UNAPA and the ATC in consultation with workers in the encampments, they established six clear goals. First, they demanded that lands in possession of CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI be retitled under agrarian reform law in the names of workers occupying those properties with a twenty-year lease. This was feasible since the bankruptcy of the company had left the fate of those lands to be negotiated by state officials. Second, they demanded a new lease agreement and debt relief for worker-owned enterprises due to their manipulation by CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI. Third, they demanded that the government establish a land bank with its existing land assets and construct new settlement projects to house workers in key locations within Matagalpa. Fourth, they called for an emergency employment fund to be created to put 6000 workers in temporary jobs. Fifth, they called for investments in social development projects in education, health care, and housing. And, sixth, they called for the formation of a regional commission to bring together stakeholders in the coffee sector to establish a long-term development plan; a plan that would incorporate the voices, needs, and democratic participation of farmworkers rather than continue to marginalize them.

Without guarantees: postscript to the Las Tunas protest

Although the Las Tunas Accords were touted as a major win for farmworkers, the government did not follow through on all of its promises. It met the demands for short-term employment by offering 2000 farmworkers three months of roadwork at minimum wage. The government also agreed to many of the demands for land set forth by worker representatives from the ATC. Written into the Las Tunas Accords, government officials agreed to assign agrarian reform titles for eighteen coffee estates in the names of 2500 farmworkers with a twenty-year lease to purchase. Twelve of the estates were previously under the control of CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI. Six other estates were still in possession of worker-owned enterprises but carried debts with CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI creditors. However, the government did not immediately retitle these properties to farmworkers. By the next year, with coffee prices still at record lows, farmworkers found themselves in the same position—unemployed and hungry. Without land guarantees and facing continued food insecurity, the movement mobilized once again.

Starting in April 2003, farmworkers formed encampments throughout the Matagalpa Valley, this time with an even higher turnout than the year before. In July 2003 with support from the ATC and UNAPA, farmworkers launched the “March of the Hungry” to reconverge on Las Tunas with an estimated six to eight thousand protestors. This campaign had one goal: to force the government to fulfill the land-reform portion of the Las Tunas Accords. In early 2004 as a result of a successful march that shamed the government, the ATC continued negotiations and effectively pressed state officials to begin processing land claims for some participating farmworker communities, particularly those from CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI properties. In 2004 the government provided 600 farmworkers the right of possession, not legal ownership, for eight properties through a twenty-year lease agreement. In other words, the farmworkers organized on each property would need to raise enough capital by 2024 to purchase the land and to receive formal title.

Today, however, the demands of more than 70% of farmworker protestors in the Las Tunas movement still remain unfulfilled. And in follow-up interviews in June 2012 I learned that even for those with access to land their livelihoods remain precarious. Banks

discriminated against Las Tunas beneficiaries, making it difficult to get loans to cultivate coffee, the crop they knew how to produce. Without support and technical assistance for efforts at subsistence production or other horticultural production, many land-reform beneficiaries struggled to develop other farming projects. One effort to organize Las Tunas beneficiaries into a cooperative to commercialize their coffee failed, strapping them into very large debts. Beneficiaries live in constant fear that their land is going to be usurped by the state, politicians, or elites. Some beneficiaries have even tried to sell their leases to other workers and farmers to cash in before their only asset disappears again. The precariousness of their situation has led many back into the workforce. Indeed, many household members among Las Tunas beneficiaries work on nearby plantations and harvest coffee seasonally to make ends meet.

While the Las Tunas protests represented a victory for some farmworkers, my informants' experiences in Nicaragua are sobering. They continue to confront discrimination, threats of violence, and intimidation that marginalize their voices and make labor organizing and land-reform demands a life-threatening affair. In follow-up research conducted in 2012 with farmworkers' communities, the immanent threat of dispossession had reappeared again. A new land-grabbing coffee corporation is seeking to appropriate properties redistributed in the Las Tunas Accords. In one property the corporation sent in a private police force to kick Las Tunas beneficiaries off their land. And in another, there was fear that the corporation was trying to carve out influence among some farmworker beneficiaries to take that property as well. Chago, one of my informants from a worker-owned coffee estate who fought in the popular revolution and civil war, and led the march on Las Tunas, said:

“If they come to take my land they will not take it without a fight. I am never leaving this little piece of land. This land is ours, we suffered for it. If they come to my property they better come armed. I will die right here. I will not be moved. I will die right here fighting for this land.”

Conclusion

While the global coffee crisis is frequently depicted as an economic disaster caused by the decline in farm-gate coffee prices around the world, the struggles of farmworkers in Nicaragua illustrate that there is more to the story than abstract market forces. Viewed from the vantage point of the Las Tunas protestors, the devaluation of coffee and disinvestment in the coffee commodity chain in 2001 revealed ongoing struggles that must be traced back through time. Iterative acts of dispossession, the spatial architecture of resource control in coffee latifundios, and the vulnerability of landless farmworkers struggling for survival are also part of the story. Rather than a violence that vanished long ago, dispossession continues to create the conditions of possibility for coffee commodity chains. As I demonstrated, farmworkers who participated in the Las Tunas protests experienced repeated dispossessions that sought to preserve their position as a subordinate wage labor force. My research therefore reinforces Gould's (1998) argument, following Marx (1976), that dispossession is not a completed process, but “can cover an entire epoch” and “is rarely terminated with those first blows of accumulation” (page 232). Rather than being relegated to some precapitalist past, these acts of dispossession remain an open wound, and struggles against dispossession remain a burning fire. Indeed, it was precisely these repetitive acts of dispossession and memories of dispossession that served as a basis for social mobilization when farmworkers marched on Las Tunas.

The protestors at Las Tunas had lived through or inherited the formation of spatial architecture of resource control defined by the commodification and accumulation of land in the Matagalpa Valley by national and international investors. They had fought for land reform in the 1970s and 1980s and they were frustrated by the false promises of the Sandinista

Revolution to give land to those who work it through the state-run enterprises, or the People's Property. Again their dreams of landownership had been thwarted by the failure of the peace accords when the Worker's Property fell under the de facto control of a managerial elite. The protestors at Las Tunas had borne the consequences of the opportunistic and violent rise of CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI. And they had fought against dispossession on the farms and suffered the hunger and evictions caused by the collapse of CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI. Moreover, they had struggled together for survival in the encampments and they realized their shared experiences of dispossession in the Las Tunas movement. They rose up, seeking to break the chains that shackled them to a frenetic capitalist circuit that kept them perpetually vulnerable. And yet, even following their small victory, after some farmworkers won their 'little piece of land', they continue to struggle for survival and live in fear of dispossession again. Indeed it would seem the cycle has started over from the beginning.

It is my hope, therefore, that the story of Las Tunas serves as a point of departure, rather than a conclusion. Every day, farmworkers on coffee estates in Nicaragua and around the world struggle for rights, recognition, and survival, even as they maintain orchards and harvest the lion's share of coffee for global markets, even ethical coffee networks. I believe the Las Tunas protest offers a critical entry point for reconnecting with their struggles. It is critical that researchers in the coffee lands engage with ongoing acts of dispossession that produce and reproduce coffee commodity chains. The greatest achievement for those wishing to perpetuate the injustice of violent dispossession in the coffee lands would be to subjugate and erase these histories of resistance and for researchers to take the continued struggle by farmworkers for granted. In Nicaragua farmworkers have not lost sight of these histories and continue to struggle for the guarantees of existence. And these struggles are not only expressed in terms of gaining or maintaining access and control over land as a means of subsistence. We need even more work exploring how farmworkers organize in the coffee sector to address labor abuses and improve their work and living conditions. Extending this point further it is also critical to consider how ongoing dispossession in the coffee lands and other agricultural regions more broadly continues to separate people from their existing livelihoods and engenders surplus populations that struggle for the guarantees of existence in other urban and rural locales domestically and internationally. Struggles against the disarticulation of commodity chains and ongoing dispossession, as Xiomara's and Chago's powerful words attest, has very high stakes. It is a matter of life and death.

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