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3 **Changing consumption, changing tastes? Exploring consumer**  
4 **narratives for food secure, sustainable and healthy diets**

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6  
7 **Abstract**

8 Mirroring trends across the Caribbean and the West Indies, the Turks and Caicos Islands are  
9 seeing an increase in the consumption of foods associated with diet-related disease and ill-  
10 health such as diabetes, obesity, hypertension and heart disease. These shifts are often  
11 attributed to the changing food preferences of consumers, as islanders are thought to be  
12 aspiring to a modern and 'Americanised' diet. Drawing on accounts derived from group and  
13 individual interviews with Turks and Caicos islanders – chiefly the women who are  
14 responsible for feeding work - this paper unpacks the notion that changing diets are a  
15 symptom of shifting tastes and preferences. Rather, narratives point to interlocking  
16 ecological, economic and social shifts that over time compound the effects of losing access  
17 to a culturally valued local source of healthy protein: fish and seafood. Taking an  
18 ecofeminist sociological perspective, this paper argues that challenges of food insecurity  
19 and diet-related ill-health share both mutual problems and pathways to common solutions.

20  
21 **Keywords:** Consumption, production, food security, ecofeminism, sustainability.

22  
23 **1. Introduction**

24 Problematizing the notion that changing diets are a symptom of shifting tastes and  
25 preferences, this paper discusses data derived from case-study research conducted across a  
26 tropical small island archipelago: the Turks and Caicos Islands (TCI), West Indies. TCI is  
27 composed of 40 different islands and cays, only 8 of which are inhabited; five of which have  
28 major population centres on the islands of Providenciales, South Caicos, North Caicos,  
29 Middle Caicos and Grand Turk. While the imaginary of the Caribbean and West Indies  
30 conjures images of an abundance of fresh seafood and plentiful exotic fruits and vegetables,  
31 small islands are facing growing food insecurity due to a number of interlocking factors, the  
32 most salient being environmental degradation, changing climate and the increasing reliance  
33 on imports (FAO Stat 2013).

34 Alongside this, research has noted the problem of rising obesity and diet related ill-health  
35 associated with increasing consumption of salty and fatty foods (Sharma et al. 2008; Asfaw,  
36 2008; Wall-Bassett et al. 2010; Goff et al. 2014, Schwiebbe et al. (2011). This rise echoes  
37 Kearney’s (2010) observation that consumption patterns are changing on a global scale,  
38 particularly in parts of the world experiencing rapid transition and development through  
39 trade liberalisation and urbanisation. Concurrently, increased consumption of foods  
40 associated with diet related ill-health is often attributed to the changing food preferences of  
41 consumers, who are thought to be aspiring to ‘modern’ and ‘Americanised’ diets (Tull et al.,  
42 2013). Meals comprising conch, pear-bush hominy and crawfish salad, thus become  
43 replaced by fried variations such as crack’ conch, chicken, canned goods and synthetic  
44 products.

45 Lamenting the loss of traditional diets based upon fresh seafood ‘hominy’, or traditionally  
46 milled corn ‘grits’<sup>1</sup>, concern is often met with efforts to promote food literacy, which is  
47 geared towards re-educating consumers as to the benefits of locally sourced foods prepared  
48 in traditional ways. However, rather than deciding which diets should be upheld or  
49 restored, this paper argues that research is needed to explore variation in food preferences  
50 across communities, in tandem with historical analysis of the dynamics of social, political,  
51 economic and environmental changes experienced over time. The role of research is, after  
52 all, to co-create knowledge that “matters to people” (Sayer, 2011), in informing less  
53 individualistic policy pathways for a food secure future. Such attention to the dynamics  
54 shaping food consumption is central to addressing the material, biological, cultural and  
55 social dimensions that shape the food system, if we are to take seriously the need for an  
56 ‘ecological public health paradigm’ (Lang and Rayner,2012) . This is no simple feat, for food  
57 often bears the signs of struggle over valued material and symbolic resources (Paddock,  
58 2015, and 2016).

59 Exploring the policy problems of food insecurity and diet related ill-health that currently  
60 face the TCI, and the region more generally, this paper takes an ecofeminist position in  
61 seeking to unpack this notion that changing diets are the result of changing consumer  
62 tastes. By drawing on sociological perspectives that seek to connect micro, meso and macro  
63 level dynamics, the paper explores narratives expressed through group and individual  
64 interview accounts with women across the island archipelago. Doing so highlights the  
65 undercurrents of change that shape variations not only in their practices, but the tastes and  
66 preferences that policy discourses presume to guide the problematic consumption  
67 associated with ill-health, and are often mobilised to justify succumbing to the inevitable  
68 development force of commercialisation that undoubtedly undermines their food security.  
69 Providing a counter-narrative, islander accounts emphasise both tensions and potential  
70 solutions shared by food security, health and sustainability agendas.

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<sup>1</sup> Grits and hominy are savoury dishes made with boiled corn meal, usually served for breakfast (akin to porridge) or mixed with seafood as part of a fuller lunch-time or evening meal.

71

## 72 **2. Food insecurity and shifting diets**

73 Diets across the Caribbean have been widely noted to have been increasingly formed of  
74 nutrient poor and fast-foods, which Sharma et al. (2008) suggest lead to the rise of chronic  
75 non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular disease and  
76 cancer. Moreover, the overweight and obese make up over half of the Caribbean population  
77 where childhood obesity is also growing in prevalence (Schwiebbe et al. 2011). This  
78 predicament often results in the call for intervention via public policy initiatives that target  
79 consumers to make better, more educated choices about the foods they purchase, prepare  
80 and eat. Asfaw (2008) contends, however, that a key reason for this shift towards diets  
81 comprised of foods considered poor in nutritional quality is the lack of fruits and vegetables  
82 available for consumption, with only one third of the sampled Caribbean countries  
83 understood to be able to meet the World Health Organization's recommended intake per  
84 capita. Indeed, there are problems of availability and affordability acting as barriers to the  
85 consumption of healthier foods, with increases of foreign imports commonly linked to these  
86 conditions.

87

88 FAO STAT (2013) cite CARICOM's food import bill increasing from US\$2.08 billion in 2000 to  
89 US\$4.25 billion in 2011. Not only impacting foreign exchange levels, social programmes, and  
90 displacing local production, FAO suggest there is a correlation between this rise in imports  
91 and the rise of obesity and non-communicable disease observed in the region (FAO 2015).  
92 Making a wider argument about the detrimental effects of such trends for climate change  
93 adaptation and mitigation strategies, Wilson (2015) suggests that the ways in which food  
94 and nutrition policy is grounded in corporate control of food and agriculture - Freidman and  
95 McMichael's (1989) 'food regime' (see also McMichael, 2009) - is a core culprit in the rise of  
96 food insecurity for Caribbean nations. As corporate food regimes displace local agriculture  
97 through the promotion of industrial agricultural practices, not only are carbon emissions  
98 increased, but come to increase reliance on imports from the United States. In turn,  
99 powerful vested interests are invited to the table, shaping decisions about what is imported,  
100 when, and at what price. In this way, the mounting social, ecological and economic effects  
101 of commoditization of food systems are considered highly visible in the Caribbean context.  
102 Perhaps unsurprisingly, Dewey (1989) found in her study of food systems and nutrition  
103 across the Caribbean and Latin America, that the greater the independence of a family from  
104 the market economy, the better off the family were in nutritional terms, particularly for  
105 those families with low cash incomes. Commoditization of food thus has direct effects in the  
106 substitution of traditional foods with purchased food, which, in turn, influence dietary  
107 diversity while also bringing dependency on foreign exchange. This latter effect is  
108 compounded by conditions of trade that are often unfavourable, leaving them in a position  
109 of comparative weakness in macro-economic policy terms.

110 In seeking to address the symptoms resulting from these issues, policy recommendations  
111 tend to err on the side of educating consumers to return to traditional, long-established  
112 modes of food preparation and eating, or for increasing the consumption of fresh fruit and  
113 vegetables in place of processed foods. Schwiebbe et al. (2011) suggest - in the case of  
114 childhood obesity in Bonaire - that healthy eating habits are to be stimulated through  
115 programmes based on physical activity. Sharma et al. (2008) recommend nutritional  
116 interventions that simply replace the most common sources of fat with lower fat or lower  
117 sugar alternatives, or encourage cooking methods that replace frying with steaming, grilling  
118 and stewing. However, we might question the premise of this problem representation; that  
119 consumers have made a conscious choice to eat in such ways that exacerbate these  
120 conditions of ill-health. Moreover, projects that assess the impact of various determinants  
121 on the potential for consumers to realise more sustainable diets (for example, Johnston et al.  
122 2014) arrive at a similar conclusion, by suggesting that what is needed is to develop new  
123 and better metrics to enhance the effectiveness of marketing strategies aimed at  
124 encouraging the consumption of sustainable foods. While effective marketing and  
125 educational campaigns may form one part of the puzzle, wider influences shaping food  
126 consumption practices must be more fully understood. This demands a focus wider than  
127 consumption, urging us to look instead to the myriad modes of provision that serve the  
128 contemporary diet. Research questions might guide investigations into the kinds of foods  
129 that are affordable, accessible and appropriate to consume, and how this has changed over  
130 time.

131 This line of thinking is expanding in food security research. Sonnino et al. (2014) , in their call  
132 for a more systemic approach to food security research that expands beyond a focus on  
133 production, that has so far imparted explanations for issues related to availability and access  
134 of food, but at the expense of food utilization, as similarly noted by Ericksen (2008). Noack  
135 and Pouw (2015) have since maintained that unless we understand how food is utilised in a  
136 particular cultural or social context, we are ill-equipped to formulate effective solutions to  
137 problems of unaffordability, inaccessibility, inappropriateness and instability. Furthermore, I  
138 suggest that it is crucial to recognise how tastes and preferences are shaped, and how these  
139 are met by different food system configurations. This echoes Agarwal's (2014) argument  
140 that international development projects have suffered from lack of appreciation of  
141 communities' own vision(s) of the 'good life', which Li (2014) illustrates in her study of Lauje  
142 highland farmers and their transition into corporate agriculture on the Indonesian island of  
143 Sulawesi. Here, the farmers who switched to producing mon-cropped cacao allegedly did so  
144 without pressure from state or corporate actors, and was a choice that resulted from the  
145 desire for some material and social advancement. Although this did not lift these islanders  
146 from poverty, we can see that their intention might have been to exercise their right to  
147 ameliorate conditions of food insecurity and their relative detachment from broader society.

148 Further illustrating that what people want, and how they eat, is entangled with long  
149 trajectories of interlocking social, cultural, political and economic processes, Wilk (1999)

150 regales an incident in Belize, where the leader of the new People’s United Party, George  
151 Price – elected once Belize was granted limited powers for self-governance from British rule  
152 – attempted to create a national cuisine as a means to push forward the project of  
153 decolonization. His popularity somewhat arose from promising equal access to the foods to  
154 which Belizeans had become accustomed. “Ham and eggs for all”, he pledged.  
155 Demonstrating the intensity of attachment to such food, Wilk notes the public outcry at  
156 Price’s later suggestion to decrease reliance upon imported goods by returning to traditional  
157 foods. ‘Bush’ foods, by then, were thought to symbolise a denial of social and economic  
158 progress.

159 These examples emphasise the need to account for the social and cultural dynamics  
160 underpinning food provisioning practice as a means to re-embed policy responses in the  
161 realities of everyday life. We might assume that such attention focused in this way would  
162 lead to alternative recommendations for policy response or avenues for further research.  
163 Conclusions beyond vague calls for awareness-raising or consideration of social as well as  
164 nutritional dimensions are, however, few and far between. This is surprising, given that it is  
165 well documented that there are myriad structural, institutional, social and cultural factors  
166 shaping the outcomes of initiatives and efforts that seek to change food procurement  
167 systems for both the public and private plate, and many opportunities, too (Morgan and  
168 Sonnino 2008; Moragues-Faus and Morgan 2015). Yet, while food and nutrition security  
169 research is alerted to this ‘blind spot’ (Noack and Pouw 2015) we are left wanting with  
170 regard to recommendations that go beyond targeting individual consumer behaviours. We  
171 could see this as an interpretive issue, where we might be lacking the tools to lead us to  
172 alternative analyses and diverse solutions. What do we do once we have asked what it is  
173 that people do and what they want? Do we simply ignore them and move on to recommend  
174 that they simply eat more fruits and vegetables, exercise more, and follow the latest advice  
175 as to what foods make up the sustainable food plate? Such a response assumes a linear  
176 relationship between attitudes and choices, a connection in need of further  
177 problematisation.

178 While it is beyond the scope of this study to report in fine detail the exact foods consumed  
179 by households across TCI, this research asked whether they are eating the foods they like,  
180 and about their aspirations for the future. Before outlining details of the methods of data  
181 collection used, the imperative is to explore the merits of an ecofeminist epistemological  
182 framework in overcoming policy problem framings dependent upon influencing ‘consumer  
183 choices’, and that are grounded in an understanding of *wants* as well as *needs*.

184

### 185 3. Taking a methodological turn

186 Paying attention to the call to bridge the gap between production-based and consumption-  
187 based accounts in research (Sonnino et al. 2014), I argue that the sociology of everyday life

188 and an ecofeminist epistemological lens can together offer a route to moving beyond  
189 'affordability' and 'consumer choice' tropes, which have dominated contemporary policy  
190 agendas, particularly in public health (Dixon et al. 2014). This is important, for how a  
191 problem is framed shapes the response, and as Billings and Hermann (1998) argue, the  
192 problem itself.

193 As is comprehensively argued elsewhere by Warde (2005) and Shove (2010), there is a  
194 wealth of sociological theory that equips us to overcome the behaviourism that results from  
195 separating structure and agency as causal forces for social action (Giddens, 1984). Perhaps  
196 the most instructive of contemporary theories of everyday life to overcome this dualism is  
197 demonstrated by Warde's (2016) analysis of the practice of eating. Here, embodied habits,  
198 routines, dispositions and conventions are emphasised over orthodox 'behaviourist' models  
199 of actions. That is, everyday life practices and their performances by social actors are  
200 understood in connection with wider institutional, material and ecological processes at  
201 different scales over time. This approach is not unique to practice theory, but is well  
202 developed by Glucksmann's (2005) Total Social Organisation of Labour (TSOL) approach.  
203 This relational concept serves to explore the interconnections between different work  
204 activities – across processes from production to consumption, paid and unpaid work, market  
205 and non-market sectors, the relation between work and non-work activities as well as how  
206 these change or stabilise over time. These different modes of connection are taken seriously  
207 for their potential to explain transformations over time and offer ways of drawing  
208 comparisons across spaces and place. Given that workers are also consumers, it is from this  
209 point that Glucksmann (2014) develops a 'consumption work' lens. By identifying the  
210 different components of food work, she presents a comparative analysis of change in food  
211 provisioning systems over time, overcoming dualistic framings of production and  
212 consumption. Practice theory and the TSOL approach thus have in common the attention to  
213 systems and nodes of connection that coevolve in reproducing and changing everyday life  
214 practices. Missing, certainly from the practice theoretical perspective is attention to the  
215 gendered experience of everyday life in the context of sustainability challenges, and  
216 furthermore, issues of ill-health and food insecurity. This is rather surprising given that  
217 when it comes to provisioning the home with goods and services, women  
218 disproportionately carry this burden (Bee, 2014).

219 Ecofeminist analyses have since the 1970's drawn attention to the links between women  
220 and nature, both in celebration and in highlighting their subordination to patriarchal  
221 capitalist regimes. Here, women's work is seen to sit at the margins of public life, despite  
222 their labour being central to its reproduction (Mellor, 1997), as is access to the resources  
223 upon which they depend to effectively do so (Roucheleau et al. 1996). As indigenous and  
224 subsistence focused economies moved towards export-oriented commercial development,  
225 further critique of 'development' processes emerged (Shiva, 1989; Momsen, 2009). While  
226 earlier ecofeminist work can be seen as divided between celebratory perspectives and those

227 that accuse such an outlook of reproducing exploitative gender norms –a debate that need  
228 not be rehearsed here, see Sturgeon (1997) – we are now well placed to move on.

229 Ecofeminist analyses have since strived to consider the ways that sexism and ecology are  
230 linked in ways that reproduce unsustainable social, political, economic and environmental  
231 systems. Doing so, and noting the absence of both women themselves as well as their  
232 concerns, experiences and expertise in climate change debate, MacGregor (2010) points to  
233 both the reality that women are underrepresented in the fields that influence  
234 environmental policies. Moreover, climate change debates are dominated by masculinist  
235 discourses that render invisible the concerns of women, despite the burdens of  
236 environmental harm being disproportionately felt and dealt with by women (Sturgeon,  
237 1997), while they are simultaneously most likely to also be caring for the world’s poor,  
238 children and the elderly. Notwithstanding their experience, women’s voices often not  
239 consulted in matters related to their expertise, and even become the target of policy  
240 interventions built on masculinist assumptions. For example, it is not difficult to see how  
241 behaviour change interventions that simply seek to educate consumers to eat more fruit  
242 and vegetables, without making these accessible, both blames impoverished women and  
243 mothers not simply for poor food choices, but makes them incomprehensibly responsible  
244 for a decline in food quality across whole national markets (Holm, 2003; Smith and Holm  
245 2010). At the root of such symbolic violence is a lack of understanding of both the practices  
246 of daily life that have come to shape contemporary eating patterns, but also a lack of  
247 information about and *from* those who perform these very activities.

248 This paper offers an analysis of narratives pertaining to food practice, drawing  
249 methodologically from the sociology of everyday life, which is further underpinned by an  
250 ecofeminist epistemological framework. Specifically, an ecofeminist perspective makes  
251 connections between environmentalisms and feminisms (Merchant, 1992), recognising that  
252 the injustices that cause inequalities are the same that degrade and exploit the natural  
253 environment upon which we depend. The relationship between women and environment is  
254 complex and opened to criticism of essentialising women’s experiences and of failing to take  
255 account of difference between women (Leach, 2007). Whether we agree that women have a  
256 unique or special relationship with nature or not - as Agarwal (1992) has famously argued –  
257 we can perhaps agree that women’s knowledge and experience has been systematically  
258 marginalised by scientific and development practices by their exclusion as experts. By  
259 considering the concerns and vulnerabilities faced by TCI women in their struggles for  
260 resources that they face as the result of processes of commercialisation and globalisation,  
261 we are enlightened also to the opportunities that their narratives highlight. Crucially, this  
262 research is not conducted in a developing world context, but across an island archipelago  
263 that has experienced rapid development over the last thirty years with reorientation of the  
264 local economy towards further commercialisation of their fisheries. In this way, the TCI  
265 offers an analytic microcosm from which to understand the effects that market  
266 reorientation has for a population’s foodways, and pays particular attention to the



267 experiences of the women who feed themselves and their families, and is an effort to  
268 address their lack of voice in environmental politics. Narratives are indeed one way through  
269 which to gain access to accounts of food practices and their relationship with macro and  
270 meso-level dynamics (Paddock, 2017).

271 To access consumer narratives of food practice, the paper draws on archival and  
272 contemporary documentary sources; 60 interviews across all islands with women, girls and  
273 some men and across social groups from permanent residents - those with what is termed  
274 'belonger' status - and with Haitian and Dominican migrants. Interviews were conducted in  
275 English, Spanish and French as appropriate. Two group interviews were conducted on South  
276 Caicos and Grand Turk with the womens' group 'Soroptomist International' in 2014.<sup>2</sup> Two  
277 group interviews were conducted - one with the Soroptomist group on Grand Turk and one  
278 on South Caicos - and individual interviews conducted with those who were not available to  
279 join the group discussion, yet expressed a wish to take part in the research.

280

#### 281 **4. Changing consumption, changing tastes?**

282 To discern how food was framed in policy terms, interviews were conducted with senior civil  
283 servants in various government departments each dealing with a policy area cross-cutting  
284 food and eating; health, environment, social welfare, culture, economics planning and  
285 development, agriculture as well as tourism and gender affairs. Their narratives made clear  
286 their understanding of changes to food consumption practice, which they consider to be the  
287 result of changing tastes for convenience foods. Also common in their talk is the  
288 acknowledgement of the struggles faced by individuals and families in providing sufficient  
289 foods in the face of increasing food prices exacerbated by the islands' reliance upon  
290 imported food.

291 Indeed, over 90 percent of all food consumed on the islands (measured by financial value) is  
292 imported from, or via, the USA. Partly as the result of the fishery having been exploited to  
293 potentially unsustainable levels (Lockhart et al. 2007) and structural transition towards  
294 tourism and offshore finance, the majority of fish consumed on the islands is now imported  
295 (Baker et al. 2015). Nevertheless, local fish and seafood are highly sought-after, but under  
296 unprecedented threat, partly due to the over-exploitation of marine resources that has  
297 served export and domestic markets. Reconstructed fisheries catch data for the TCI  
298 presented by Ulman et al. (2016), captures all removals including catch destined for export,  
299 estimates of unreported catch for domestic commercial use, and for subsistence. They  
300 suggest that catch is more than double the baseline estimate, and far exceeds the national  
301 reported baseline submitted to the FAO (86 percent). These staggering figures suggest

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<sup>2</sup> Soroptomist International is a global volunteer movement working to transform the lives of women and girls, through education and empowerment. In TCI, groups across Grand Turk and South Caicos meet at least twice a month to work towards this end.

302 troubling times ahead for the management of the TCI fishery, with potential management  
303 plans including the cessation of conch exports. With conch and lobster being the most  
304 important commercial species, it is presumed that fin-fish is mainly for local markets and  
305 subsistence consumption.

306 Yet, there is a widespread suggestion among the policy community that the diets of  
307 islanders have moved away from fish as well as seafood, and towards meats and processed  
308 foods. Crucially, this is framed as a choice resulting from newly cultivated tastes for “junk”  
309 and “convenience” foods. They suggest that such foods more readily accompany a modern  
310 lifestyle, particularly where women increasingly engage in paid work in the rapidly growing  
311 service sector, which is predominantly based on tourism. This rise in the employment of  
312 women outside of the home, is understood to have re-shaped domestic divisions of labour,  
313 thus increasing household reliance upon foods requiring less preparation, cooking and  
314 clearing up. Indeed, cleaning and gutting freshly caught fin-fish, drying and preserving conch  
315 and turning milled corn into gritz is the preserve of those with considerably more time and  
316 practical know-how than those employed in the contemporary labour market can spare.  
317 While this seems a plausible explanation of shifting diets – after all, the composition of  
318 meals have been historically subject to much change across time and space, this seems  
319 simplistic when we take into consideration the accounts of a generation of TCI women who  
320 have lived through these very changes. That is, while price and convenience is a  
321 consideration for these women and their families, as noted by Holm (2003) in her study of  
322 the Danish food market, it is not the dominant concern. Price matters, as does lack of time,  
323 but it matters *indirectly*.

324 Taking such assessments of shift in islanders’ diets, interviews with residents are conducted  
325 with a view to establishing what they are eating, what they like to eat and how they  
326 perceive this to have changed over time. Contrary to the belief that islanders prefer  
327 convenience foods, we can see that those more readily associated with traditional diets are  
328 coveted, but troublingly difficult to access. Moreover, the fin-fish that scientific estimates  
329 suggest are consumed by islanders for subsistence and small scale commercial trade  
330 appears difficult to source, even for those closely aligned with the fishing industry.

331

#### 332 ***4.1 Discernment, quality and provenance***

333 Working within the limits of the current marketplace, interviewees present themselves as  
334 highly selective and discerning about the foods they consume. Emilia - aged 16 - speaks of  
335 her family’s relocation from Haiti, where they were more readily able to access fresh fruits  
336 and vegetables. She favours a diet without meat, and since moving to TCI abstains where  
337 possible from eating canned foods. Speaking about tinned provisions - a mainstay of the  
338 island’s food basket- Emilia recounts reading the list of additives itemised on a can of food

339 found in her mother's cupboard, stating that while some have grown accustomed to such  
340 provisions, she has not;

341 "my parents have kind of adapted to the synthetics, but I still like, it feels wrong, like I'm just putting a pile of  
342 chemicals in me."

343 Emilia, South Caicos.

344 This speaks similarly to issues of quality. While preserved foods typically line the shelves of  
345 the local food stores, which arrive by boat from the main island, having been previously  
346 shipped from Miami, they can often be found to be months or even years out of date.  
347 Further evidencing islanders' desire for fresh fruits and vegetables is the readiness with  
348 which they await the arrival of "the Dominican boat", which reaches the inhabited islands  
349 approximately every two weeks, or even as little as once a month from the Dominican  
350 Republic (DR) selling varieties of fresh fruits and vegetables, which are ordinarily unavailable  
351 or simply inaccessible for many islanders at affordable prices.

352 For example, Mae, originally from the DR eats a lot of rice, chicken and beans, but really likes  
353 to eat salad, plantain, corn, salsa and fish, but can only access these provisions when the  
354 "Dominican boat comes in". To address this shortfall, Mae used to grow a little of her own  
355 food; sweet potatoes, papaya, tomatoes. She ceased this practice around a year prior to  
356 interview, for the lack of rainfall often meant having to buy water, which she could ill afford.  
357 Mae, as with almost all Haitian and Dominican interviewees, as well as many 'belongers',  
358 state that they rely on the Dominican boat to provide access to fresh produce. However, this  
359 trade is unregulated and therefore lacking formal health and safety protection. For this  
360 reason, the more financially well-off islanders avoid sourcing their fresh foods in this way,  
361 whereas for many, it is their only source of fresh fruits and vegetables. Stocking up with  
362 produce from the Dominican boat secures ingredients for broths and stews, while fruit is  
363 prepared and frozen or preserved for consumption during intervening periods. Produce  
364 from the Dominican boats can also be found in small local convenience shops  
365 predominantly ran and frequented by Haitian and Dominican residents who are all too  
366 aware of the health risks associated with eating high fat and high sugar convenience or  
367 preserved foods.

368 In this way, not only is concern related to the ingestion of what many refer to as "unnatural  
369 chemicals", apprehension similarly arises over the genetic modification of food and use of  
370 growth hormones in food production. With reference to meat in particular, Laticia recounts  
371 a trip to the supermarket made over ten years previously. She had been living abroad and  
372 upon her return found herself in the local supermarket where she was not only surprised by  
373 the size of the chicken breast on sale, but, she says; "I was afraid, I thought it was a turkey".  
374 Concerns over the quality and provenance of imported meats arise across interviews, and  
375 are most saliently followed by discussion of foods they would prefer to be eating; fresh fish  
376 and seafood. More informal conversations with residents of Grand Turk and South Caicos  
377 expose concern that what can be bought in local stores are "full of chemicals" and are

378 “more expensive than before” and that they don’t eat as much “natural foods” as they  
379 would like. Beatrice, for example, begins with an account of the foods she likes to eat,  
380 before qualifying that such foods can be prepared only if she can access them;

381 “I try to be selective in what I eat. I like tuna, so I eat tuna quite a bit and fish. I like fish. If I can get fish, yeah, I  
382 will eat that every day because I like fish and I sometimes fry it and sometimes I boil it, like I do the chicken in  
383 low water with onions and peppers and stuff like that, and it’s pretty good.”

384 Beatrice, Soroptomists, Providenciales.

385 It is not solely a problem of affordability, which I will explore this further below, but a  
386 problem of access. This dynamic is well established in analyses of the foodways of the  
387 Caribbean and West Indies, for colonial legacies continue to shape trade relations, as  
388 domestic goods are redirected to export or to serve the tourism industry that aims to satisfy  
389 visitors’ tastes for ‘terroir’. In TCI, this process has accelerated since the extension of the  
390 airport runway in 1984. While previously ships would bring fresh provisions from Canada,  
391 returning on the homeward voyage with salt, conch, and other fin-fish, the growth of travel  
392 and freight by air is widely understood to have accelerated trade relations with the US.

393

#### 394 **4.2 From ‘making do’ to commercialisation and trade**

395 Referring to Jamaica Kincaid’s *‘A Small Place’* Houston (2007) points to the impacts upon  
396 local culture and foodways that are driven by imbalanced trade systems that emphasise  
397 export-led growth . Kincaid illustrates that goods such as sugar, coffee, cocoa and tobacco  
398 are typically taken from the Caribbean to be refined, processed and packaged before being  
399 sold back to them for the benefit of wealthier nations. In TCI, we can see such a dynamic  
400 unfolding around the time of the decline of the salt industry in the 1960’s and the rise in  
401 export of ‘spiny lobster’ and ‘queen conch’ as facilitated by the many fish processing plants.  
402 Barb describes these as “the golden years”, where the benefits to the local economy of  
403 exporting conch and lobster to Miami markets were clear. Fin-fish, conch and lobster are  
404 described as having been in abundance, bringing “so much money you couldn’t count it”  
405 (Laura, South Caicos). Such days were numbered, for what is left of the conch and lobster  
406 fishery is destined for export or for consumption at the restaurants and resorts geared  
407 towards serving visitors on the island of Providenciales, whose demand for locally caught  
408 seafood has placed additional pressure upon TCI’s marine resources (Klaus, 2001).

409 “Nowadays though, these are so expensive, I had an experience over the weekend that I must never ever repeat.  
410 I told my family I was going to go cook some ochre and rice, you know we want, we put dry conch and ochre and  
411 rice, and I went to this lady who [...] was going to Provo. How much were the conch? Oh, a bag is for \$20. I got  
412 a bag, when I returned; four little conchs - four little conchs.

413 Louisa, Grand Turk

414 This is compounded by the expense of other imported foods that have become a mainstay  
415 of the diet. Louisa recounts that a can of corned beef or carnation cream can reach up to ten

416 US dollars. This marks not only the accelerated commercialisation of their fishing industry,  
417 but and its effect upon islanders as they see a decline in quality and access .

418 "Fish processing plants led to exports of fish. First there was one, then there was three. Five years ago you could  
419 get fish. Now you can't get them. Local fishermen now go to sell in Provo [Providenciales]. The fish here is  
420 expensive. You can sell a fish in Provo at 10 USD. Hardly ever get lobster anymore, it's too expensive, the  
421 fishermen do not give it to you. The plants get all the lobster. Fisherman are only interested in making money.  
422 It's more selfish than it was. They used to share fish but not anymore. There are days and weeks when you can't  
423 get fish, and the quality of food you get from the US is lower than when you buy it in the US"

424 Soroptomists, South Caicos

425 Resisting the exploitative capitalist relations through 'making-do' is significant in Caribbean  
426 food cultures (Houston 2007: 107). Putting together dishes created from whatever one can  
427 find or catch, inventively adapting recipes in order to avoid waste, or by reusing and  
428 recycling items are all ways that women in TCI are 'making do.' Specifically, this finds  
429 expression in "pen on"; meaning that what is cooked depends on what fish or seafood is  
430 caught or brought home by a member of the family that day, and is typically accompanied  
431 by staples such as rice and gritz or other preserved, foraged or purchased items. Now, "pen  
432 on" takes a new meaning in that it depends on what you can afford, and depends on  
433 whether one can access any fish or seafood at all - "we don't get no fish no more" (Lucile,  
434 Grand Turk). Again, this is not solely a matter of price, but an issue of fish or seafood being  
435 far more difficult to access via local channels or markets.

436 "Right now in South, it's easier to buy South Caicos fish abroad than to buy it on South Caicos because what the  
437 fishermen do, they will take it that that is their mark et of Provo, so you go down to the dock and you're  
438 standing out there, they're not paying you any mind because that is their market. You have the people who are  
439 selling the fish to Provo, they're at the dock, they're stationed at the dock, so when the boats come in, they just  
440 buy up the fish, so it's very difficult.

441 Barbara, South Caicos

442 Indeed, not simply an issue of fish plants purchasing the majority of seafood catch, but  
443 dock-side middle-men who process catch to sell to resorts and restaurants across the islands.  
444 Roberta evokes memories of fishermen selling to women who would wait at the dock to  
445 purchase fish for their evening meal. At times, she recalls, fishermen would simply give fish  
446 away.

447 "Caring fishermen have retired. Young fishermen are all about profit. Currently it is not easy to by fish as a fish-  
448 buyer at the docks buys it off the fishermen and then sends it to Provo."

449 Roberta, South Caicos

450 As Bella relates below, such days are no more;

451 "Can't get no fish. Even when you ask them for fish. You only will get a fish if you've got a dear friend and that  
452 friend got to know you too to offer you a slice of grouper or what have you. When I was growing up they came  
453 to your door with a big buggy of fish but not today, he will be down on the dock. And sell the fish. My fish for  
454 Provo, [the fishermen say] I get dollars for that. That's what they always tell you, they won't even get the head  
455 off it."

456 Bella, South Caicos

457 Indeed, fishermen would at one time to sell directly to consumers, whereas Bella now feels  
458 that one needs a “dear friend” in the industry to procure freshly caught fish. Women who  
459 have close family and partners who are fishermen speak of obtaining fresh fish once a  
460 month at the most. Grace, an interviewee residing on Provienciales, claims that if she wants  
461 to eat a piece of local fish, she goes to a restaurant, where she pays at least 25 US dollars a  
462 plate. For consumption at home, staples listed regularly include pork, chicken and beef.  
463 Crucially, meat is not novel to the TCI diet. On Grand Turk, un-tethered cows once roamed  
464 the island feeding on grass. Pigs were once raised on South Caicos, and it was common to  
465 keep domestic chickens for their eggs. These accounts confound a prominent popular and  
466 policy discourse that agriculture is impossible on these islands due to harsh tropic weather  
467 and the chalky, salty, limestone terrain. Despite these conditions, accounts reveal that  
468 tomatoes, squash and corn were cultivated not only on the more fertile grounds of the  
469 “bread basket islands” of North and Middle Caicos, but even on Providenciales and the “salt  
470 islands” of Grand Turk and South Caicos. Moreover, before land was parcelled for  
471 development into condominiums, hotels and golf courses, Gwinnie speaks of how she and  
472 her parents before her cultivated an allotment that served their need for fresh foods. This is  
473 not a memory shared only by Gwinnie. Each of the senior citizens interviewed speak of  
474 rearing animals and growing produce as fundamental parts of their childhood and young  
475 adulthood, with imported fresh goods and other provisions imported from Jamaica and Haiti.  
476 As Lydia recounts;

477 In those days we mostly had fish, lobster and conch. It wasn't where there were plants those days, it was open for islanders as  
478 that's what we mostly live off, and a lot of persons, like my Aunt Mrs. Simpson, they had cows, they slaughter their cows and  
479 sell the beef. They rear pigs, chickens, and we live off the sea and they have the animals on the land and keep it on their  
480 surroundings so they would be clean and everything, but they still had someone to see to it that they were slaughtered and all  
481 was well, and sold to families. They would know when there was a slaughter and then they would go there and buy their meat.  
482 Way back when there was just a few people with refrigerators so everything was fresh and the thing about it, most people  
483 reared their own chickens so a chicken was your good Sunday dinner. There was not much refrigeration.

484 *How many chickens did people keep?*

485 As many as their coops could hold, they have little ones and grow up but then they had them and it was their food, eggs, those  
486 days we didn't have any imports, people had what they wanted in their yards. I can remember my Mom used to get her  
487 tomatoes from, she used to like to grow stuff and a lot of what she grew she used in the house. Tomatoes and stuff like that.

488 When asked when and why these practices ceased to exist, they recall hotel development,  
489 the arrival of tourists and imports from the US needed to meet commensurate increased  
490 demand for food. That is, the arrival of this sector goes hand-in-hand with the reorientation  
491 of the local economy towards serving tourism. As islanders serve drinks and clean hotel  
492 kitchens and bathrooms, they struggle with the rising cost of food. Adding insult to injury is  
493 the assumption that educating consumers to make better choices will solve problems of diet  
494 related ill-health, while neglecting to attribute such problems with issues of growing food  
495 insecurity.

496

497 **5. Discussion: Education to realign food tastes?**

498 These accounts are not intended to present a sentimental picture of past food practice, or  
499 to suggest that this paper offers an original analysis of the trajectories of dependence  
500 experienced by small islands across the Caribbean and West Indies. Rather, this article puts  
501 forward accounts of women who are living with the effects of environmental, social and  
502 economic change across one small island archipelago – the Turks and Caicos Islands (TCI).  
503 Their memories and experiences offer nuanced interpretation of current problem framings  
504 surrounding food and ill-health. In turn, these serve to clear a pathway for policy  
505 interventions that could together address problems of non-communicable disease on the  
506 one hand, and food insecurity on the other. Indeed, the data presented here suggests that  
507 current policy assumptions are misguided, and even offensive. A key misgiving is that at the  
508 root of diet related ill-health of islanders is their taste for highly processed, salty, fatty and  
509 sugary foods. Contrary to this assumption, this data suggests that such foods are consumed  
510 due to the lack of access to “natural foods” such as fish, seafood, vegetables and fruit. The  
511 lengths to which many islanders go to source these ingredients are testament to their  
512 determination to protect both their health *and* a culturally appropriate diet in the face of  
513 the economic and social changes that have clearly impacted upon their access to such foods.

514 It would indeed be a simple argument to make; that if one wants to encourage people to eat  
515 better foods, one should make appropriate foods available and affordable. Literature and  
516 research surrounding food sovereignty and food security is abound with recognition of the  
517 rights of communities, regions and nations to define their own food systems in ways that  
518 suit their own visions of a good life (see Patel, 2009). How a sustainable food system can be  
519 promoted, given the power of the global agri-food complex, raises questions as to how we  
520 move into such a new paradigm (Marsden and Morley, 2014) and towards an ecological  
521 public health (Lang and Rayner, 2012). However, it seems that in TCI, the reliance upon  
522 imports is maintained by the denial of agricultural development, which in turn serves to  
523 justify the trade relations that deepen the islands’ dependence on expensive imported  
524 foods (Paddock and Smith, 2017). Adding to this is the symbolic violence of blaming  
525 consumers for what they have no choice but to consume, for a dynamic that is thought to  
526 drive the so-called demand for poor quality ‘Americanised’ foods. Rather, the narratives of  
527 the senior-citizens interviewed offer a means of unlocking such discursive processes of  
528 denial, for they are a reminder of TCI’s agricultural past, which is now overshadowed by  
529 economic development focused upon tourism and finance. In this way, and as interviews  
530 with younger generations attest, changes in consumer *practice* should not be conflated with  
531 changing *tastes*. By simply asking what it is that participants across islands like to eat, asking  
532 what their favourite foods are and what do they like to cook, narratives connect macro to  
533 micro and past to present, suggesting new possible policy solutions that do not blame  
534 consumers for poor choices. Instead, policies might concentrate on expanding what is  
535 currently a limited marketplace dominated by poor quality imports, perhaps by making local  
536 produce available, and by striving to ensure that imported produce is culturally appropriate,  
537 and serves social wants as well as needs. It is imperative that these wants are not assumed,

538 but understood relative to ecological, political and economic conditions. Indeed, in the same  
539 way as Loring and Gerlach (2009) examine the interaction between ecological, political and  
540 social changes in influencing changes from traditional to store-bought foods in Alaska, this  
541 paper does not delineate the full extent and manner of changes in food systems and their  
542 effect upon TCI islanders, but instead identifies one of the many ways in which a food  
543 system has undermined valued ways of life, health and wellbeing. Moreover, while this  
544 paper does not identify one clear policy solution, it does point towards the symbolic  
545 violence manifesting in problem framings surrounding issues of food insecurity and diet  
546 related ill-health, which obstruct pathways towards more equitable and appropriate food  
547 secure futures for islanders living with the problems that result from social, economic and  
548 environmental change. In unpacking this symbolic violence, several avenues for further  
549 research for better policy development are uncovered, as I set out below.

550 The first is securing a middle ground between the promotion of traditional foods and their  
551 contemporary counterparts, while also recognising the need for endogenous food system  
552 developments to decrease reliance on inappropriate food imports. Given that food  
553 provisioning practice is shaped by global and local trade regimes, charging consumers with  
554 responsibility for revolutionising the food system over which they have little control is  
555 simply unreasonable, and worse still, ineffective. Just as Guthman (2011) points to the  
556 political ecology of obesity when calling for political solutions over impugning choices of  
557 consumer, this paper suggests that the voices of these TCI women attest to the need for  
558 science and policy to work together to craft solutions to address their problems and  
559 concerns. The second is the call for more scientific research to capture the reliance of all  
560 islanders – paying attention to the needs and wants of socially differentiated groups (see  
561 Smith-Maguire, 2016) - upon fisheries outside of the benefits they may or may not see from  
562 the further commercialisation of their fisheries.

563 In this way, it seems unreasonable to suggest that consumers no longer eat fish because  
564 they don't like it, or because they prefer the taste of convenience foods more readily  
565 associated with American diets and expedient modes of preparation. If there are aspects  
566 favoured of convenience foods, it is the convenience rather than the food itself. Arguably, it  
567 is reasonable to enjoy relief from the hard work of milling corn or gutting and cleaning fish.  
568 For those who have little time for food preparation due to work or other commitments, it  
569 does not follow that the only option for promoting healthy and sustainable consumer  
570 lifestyles is that those who already carry an unfair share of domestic work return to more  
571 laborious food provisioning work. Furthermore, it seems incongruous to suggest that the  
572 future of agriculture is denied on the basis that it has been historically difficult (it is now  
573 acknowledged that ecological conditions can be overcome by new knowledge and  
574 equipment) or that it is offensive to suggest that a population that carries the cultural  
575 burden of plantation slavery return to 'toil' on the land.



576 The challenge is to find the middle ground between maintaining access to traditional foods  
577 and preserving the benefits of what were labour intensive cooking methods on the one  
578 hand, and processed poor quality and expensive imported foods on the other. People's  
579 taste for fish and more traditional foods should not mean that they must be prepared to  
580 spend more time the kitchen, or to become dependent on the unpredictability of  
581 subsistence farming and fishing. Instead, there may be an alternative way to ensure access  
582 to valued, healthy sources of food that can be secured in affordable ways. Elsewhere,  
583 Paddock and Smith (2017) have argued that fairer trade might be promoted alongside  
584 agricultural development. This paper argues TCI islanders are rapidly losing access to a  
585 fishery valued not only for the livelihoods that their export oriented and artisanal fishery  
586 supports, but for local consumption.

587 Crucially, this finding adds qualitative evidence in support of the conclusions of Ulman et al.  
588 (2016). That is, having reconstructed fisheries catch data, they find that marine resources  
589 are being exploited at an alarmingly unsustainable rate. This data has prompted discussions  
590 with the TCI Department for Environment and Maritime Affairs about moving beyond  
591 seasonal closure of the conch and lobster fishery and even towards an export cessation of  
592 up to five years. Indeed, one might argue that if fisheries resources are depleted to such an  
593 extent, that one should be consuming less altogether, but given the difficulties that would  
594 result from regulating a ban on landings for domestic commercial trade or subsistence  
595 consumption, this could offer an opportunity for endogenous fisheries development that  
596 would deliver benefit to residents and not only tourists. Indeed, small scale fishing activities  
597 are widely considered to alleviate poverty and are actively encouraged (Allison and  
598 Horemans, 2006; Béné, 2003), for it is rarely artisanal fishers that are responsible for  
599 fisheries degradation, given that their methods are considered more efficient and  
600 sympathetic to the marine environment than their industrial counterpart (Mansfield, 2011).  
601 Indeed, to consider the redistribution of marine resources in ways that balance economy,  
602 ecology and society offers a more promising solution to problems of food insecurity and  
603 diet-related ill health than targeting individual consumer choice in constrained commercial  
604 circumstances.

605

## 606 **Conclusion**

607 This paper has presented data collected in order to explore the needs and wants of islanders  
608 living with food insecurity, and rising levels of diet related ill-health characteristic of the  
609 region. Having laid out the ways on which these problems are often framed in both the  
610 research literature and policy discourse as problems of individual consumer choice, the  
611 paper has taken an ecofeminist stance to consider how the experience of feeding oneself  
612 and one's family has affected the lives of some women living across the Turks and Caicos  
613 Islands. In doing so, this paper debunks myths consumers want 'convenience' or 'junk' foods  
614 widely considered of poor quality and detrimental to human health. Instead, we can find in

615 their narratives the desire to eat foods that might be considered rather closely aligned with  
616 a more traditional seafood and fish based diet, but that for reasons attributable to the  
617 commercialisation of their fishery, and the redirection of the local economy to tourism,  
618 there is little that enables access to this nutritionally and culturally important foodway. This  
619 is the result of anything but a consumer choice.

620

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629

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