

ORAL HISTORY LAB (OHL)

University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez

Oral History Interview with Ismael Pérez Cordero, March 12, 2022

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview of Ismael Pérez Cordero conducted by Ana B. Acosta González on March 12, 2022. This interview is part of coursework done by students at the University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez.

Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Interviewer: Ana Acosta

Interviewee: Ismael Perez Cordero

Date: March 12, 2022

Location: Friends Café Litoral, Mayagüez, PR

Ana [00:00: 00]:

I'm going to start with an introduction. My name is Ana Acosta, I am at the Friends Café on “El litoral de Mayagüez” with Ismael, whom I will be interviewing. Ismael, can you tell us your full name?

Ismael [00:00: 14]:

Ismael Pérez Cordero [Noise] Ismael Pérez Cordero.

Ana [00:00: 19]:

Can you spell the first and last name for recording purposes?

Ismael [00:00: 25]:

I-S-M-A-E-L P-E-R-E-Z

Ana [00:00: 34]:

How old are you?

Ismael [00:00: 35]:

28

Ana [00:00: 36]:

And where are you from?

Ismael [00:00: 37]:

Isabela, Puerto Rico, even though I've been in Mayagüez for a few years.

Ana [00:00: 41]:

Well, disclaimer number one is that you are aware that this project is for my oral history class and that this recording is going to be shared with my teacher and possibly other students. Do you consent and agree?

Ismael [00:00: 57]:

Yes.

Ana [00:00: 59]:

Disclaimer number two is that this class is collaborating with different archives around the island and at the end of the interview I will give you a permission slip and you will have the option to mark with whom you want your information and your story to be shared with.

Ismael [00:01: 18]:

Okay.

Ana [00:01: 21]:

Disclaimer number three is that, of course, this story is yours. At any time, if you want to stop the recording or there is a topic that you do not want to talk about, you tell me, and we do not include it. Also, after the interview is over, if there are any details that you forgot now, but you want to be included as part of your story, you can send it to me later. During the process I will be sending you the transcripts, translations, and the final product. If there is something after the interview is over that you want to be edited, added or whatever, you let me know.

Ismael [00:02: 04]:

Perfect.

Ana [00:02: 06]:

So, you told me you grew up in Isabela.

Ismael [00:02: 09]:

In Isabela.

Ana [00:02: 10]:

¿How long were you there?

Ismael [00:02: 13]:

Well... still. My parents are still there so... I was raised in Isabela since I was a baby. Before that I think I spent some time in San Juan. I have, no memory of it so... like Isabela has always been my home.

Ana [00:02: 28]:
And where in Isabela?

Ismael [00:02: 30]:
Well, that's where I've been *del tingo al tango*. I spent some time in Llanadas which is more towards the mountains in Isabela... an area towards the mountain. Afterwards, I moved to an area like a neighborhood and finally I was... well I've lived near Montones Beach because I have a disabled brother and we give him therapy on the beach walking on the sand and that sort of thing.

Ana [00:0:2 58]:
Can you more or less describe to me the environment in which you grew up? Like, physical environment.

Ismael [00:03: 05]:
Well... in Isabela? Because I have several because of my grandmother's house in Jayuya and that's another different environment so...

Ana [00:03: 17]:
So, you are used to the countryside from what I see...

Ismael [00:03: 21]:
I'm more so from the coast, right? But, yes, I had experiences with my grandparents in Jayuya. They had a river in the back of the house and sometimes I would walk upstream with my grandfather, the booties... I wasn't very fond of nature. I didn't like to get dirty, but yes... I did have... that kind of atmosphere of crossing rivers, also of being on the beach, walking... Sometimes I would go out on a Monday afternoon to walk along the beach with my brother and what not... So, it was quite nature oriented, I guess you could say. Like I always had that contact and those two different fields, because it's the beach versus the mountain. Well, I was always familiar with both

Ana [00:04: 11]:
How would you describe your childhood?

Ismael [00:04: 18]:
Well, my childhood... it was more directed towards, as I told you, my disabled brother that has autism and he's epileptic, so he convulses. So, my childhood more so revolved around all the situations regarding my parents going to hospital and all those different interactions. So, really just being that older brother that maybe my brother needed. There I don't have... like the most I remember about that time and all that is being there, you know... of going to different places and supporting in whatever I could, so... well I don't know if that... there are more things obviously, it wasn't the only thing I did, but...

Ana [00:04: 59]:

Doesn't matter. It's about you. What matters is that it's about you. Whatever you feel.

Ismael [00:05: 05]:

Well, yeah.

Ana [00:05: 06]:

There is no right or wrong answer. So, in the midst of all that, what interests did you have growing up?

Ismael [00:05: 15]:

Well... outside of... Sometimes you know, I was limited. Outside of sports and Game Boy and that kind of thing that you were involved as a little kid... I always... I liked animals and consequently plants too. But I was lousy at it, I didn't have that skill/talent. Every time mom went to buy ornamental plants, I asked for 2 or 3. Mom always got them for me, and I was not a very good caregiver. I ended up killing them... or I was too good, I watered them every day and suddenly the little plant would not thrive. It was very difficult for me to perceive agriculture like "damn... taking care of a plant is complicated". But yeah... I liked riding horses as a kid. On that part... my uncle had horses, so I had that opportunity when I went to Jayuya, to have that contact with the animals. I forgot the question, but I'm still going...

Ana [00:06: 20]:

No, it was: what were your interests? You answered that very well. I got an idea of what you mean. How do you think it contrasts now? What are your interests now?

Ismael [00:06: 31]:

Well, I still think they're aligned with that, right? I formally studied agricultural sciences, specifically animal science. So, like right now my life has been learning all that I can about animal production... how to kill a chicken, how to eat it, right? Prepare it... that kind of thing... how to raise it... and yeah, I think my long-term goal is to be a veterinarian and I'm already in the process of applying, but we can talk about that later.

Ana [00:07: 16]:

You're currently getting your master's degree, right?

Ismael [00:07: 18]:

My master's degree.

Ana [00:07: 19]:

How much time do you have left?

Ismael [00:07: 20]:

I hope to finish now in May or summer because I already applied for veterinary and in August

I am supposed to start veterinary.

Ana [00:07: 33]:

So, you're working with that. You told me that once you're done you want to do vet. So earlier we talked about the plants and your complicated relationship with the plants. What is your relationship with agriculture?

Ismael [00:07: 52]:

Well, right now I definitely consider myself a beginner. Despite having the studies I have or whatever or the practices I've had, or even the experiences. I am fully a beginner. But it excites me, you know... everything that has to do with agriculture. I have my own garden at home on a piece of land, the equivalent of a tiny hallway, and I produce enough food to... not completely feed myself, but to supplement, you know?... For example, I get up in the morning and I'll have a tomato and I'll chop it up and throw it in with my breakfast... really great. I make my own "pique" with the peppers from my yard. I have some bananas right now. I have a bush of acerolas... these aren't from mine, but mine's parent, that little by little it keeps growing and it's going to be there. So, now I have more of that skill/talent that I didn't have before, and I know a little more about that, but yes... You know... I think that's my relationship with plants right now.

Ana [00:08: 57]:

And what do you know about agroecology? What is your relationship with agroecology?

Ismael [00:09: 04]:

Well, right now I consider myself a promoter of agroecology, not so much a producer. I don't have as much experience in the field, but I do like the education and public orientation aspect of it. My master's degree has also given me that opportunity to... to teach... and this I can contribute, not only to the university community, but to the people of Puerto Rico. Well... that's what I'm doing. I'm collaborating... last year I took the El Josco Bravo course, which was basically an introduction to agroecology. I already knew a little bit. I had some topics that interested me, but everything I found through reading and that kind of thing was like in Australia, they were in the United States, many plants that don't grow here, that well... I wanted to know more about what was here, what was from Puerto Rico and that's why I decided to take the course. In addition to the fact that it'd been wanting to take the course for the last couple of years and because of the pandemic I finally had some free time to do it. So... I feel like I start to answer, and I forget where I was going.

Ana [00:10: 16]:

But it doesn't matter, that's what makes a good interview.

Ismael [00:10: 21]:

And yeah... right now that led to taking the course last year. This year well, I'm collaborating with the class. Like I'm basically training myself to be able to teach the class in the future. I know that they would like that future to be sooner than later but, for me, it's a more distant future after I finish my degree and such. But it's something I want to cultivate early on because I know

that if I feed into it now, it's going to be something that can grow and be beneficial and that a lot of people can harvest from the knowledge they acquire right now.

Ana [00:11: 03]:
Do you like to teach?

Ismael [00:11: 05]:
I like to teach. Sometimes... I have... it's a struggle, right?... sometimes I have to like... right before giving a topic or something, I'm preparing and what I didn't know before I started teaching is how well prepared you have to be to be able to discuss a topic. That you probably thought that the teacher just arrived and "damn, he knows a lot" and that's not the case he probably had to review the material. You know enough, but you always have to review, you always have to look for more. So, I find that part like, "Wow, you have to prepare a lot for this". But once I feel well prepared and being in front of the students and seeing their interactions and seeing that maybe you're driving something positive, that they're learning... I don't care much about the grades, but I kind of want to see the interaction of my students and how they develop and unravel. It's quite gratifying I would say. That when the day ends, that feeling of like "oh, today was something positive, today was a good thing". I've also had my days that I say "Damn, today I don't want to know anything about teaching again" but I think it's a love hate relationship that I like. Communicating sciences, is something very difficult to do, and agroecology, even though it's not the science you focus on when taking courses, it's still a science, it's just more complicated.

Ana [00:12: 48]:
We mentioned El Josco Bravo. What would be your biggest take away? Both when you took the class and now that you are training in the course.

Ismael [00:13: 02]:
Well, look, wow, that question...

Ana [00:13: 06]:
It's loaded.

Ismael [00:13: 07]:
Yeah. Well, look, I say that there is something that I don't know if I heard somewhere, I don't know if I heard it in a dream or it occurred to me, but something that I love and I have continued to repeat ... and your brother has probably heard it occasionally. I've realized that agriculture creates abundance and abundance creates community. Having that... I've repeated that quote like 20,000 times and at the same time I have realized that for agriculture to be sustainable, well, the community is a very important component. So, I think that El Josco, beyond any technique or practice, which everything they teach us is super useful, but I think they cultivate a lot of what is teamwork and community and doing things in a way that is conscious. That protects our soils, that protects our resources, because some of them are not renewable. For example, it can take a lot of years, thousands of years, for soil to produce just a teeny tiny layer. Using these techniques

also helps us preserve it, but if you're doing that alone, it's complicated, right? So, when we're a team, there's plenty of us working, we get along well, we support each other, that's where you see the real fruit of agriculture.

Ana [00:14: 46]:

Was El Josco your first introduction to the concepts of agroecology or did you have prior knowledge?

Ismael [00:14: 58]:

In practices yes. I hadn't put them into practice. I had read a lot, but I was locked in my apartment during the pandemic, and I had a lot of interest. In fact, El Josco's videos... they had a few videos on YouTube. I had already seen almost all of them and I was like "oh this is super cool", and it was a little bit like "wow those connections that they're making" and having read... all this is very complex, all this is well elaborated. So, yes, in practice my first experience was fully with the course with El Josco and well yeah, and here I am, trying to pass it on.

Ana [00:15: 40]:

Well, then, do you have any experiences or stories, anecdotes of how you might've have seen firsthand that agriculture or agroecology has impacted someone?

Ismael [00:15: 58]:

Well, yes. Having taken the course, I realized talking to my grandmother's sisters and looking... talking to them whenever I went to Jayuya... they're from Jayuya. So, when we went there, we always talked to them... and then we were telling them about the course, because it wasn't just me who took the course, my cousin also took it in another section. I took it in Mayagüez, he took it in Ponce. So' we had two different perspectives. Also... like what we talked with Santiago earlier, that they have a different soil over there. Well in Ponce it also happened. It doesn't rain as much versus Mayagüez where it rains a lot. So, it was super cool. We were always talking to her about it, and they had... well practices and things that we communicated that she said, "ah yes, my dad did that" and they were techniques that perhaps we are seeing now as modern, but back in the day that was tradition, it was what was normally done. Like, for example, planting beans so that they fix nitrogen in the soil and then we plant corn after we take out the beans so that then the corn can take advantage of the nitrogen that was fixed, right? Those are things that blow your mind. Like, "how did you know so much?", and they were practices that were commonly done. I forget the name of that. I wanted to ask your brother, but they make a mixture that's like beans with corn and pumpkin and in Puerto Rico that has a name. I can't think of the word right now, but we can ask later. And it's a good combination of the 3 because they complement each other, right? Versus what we may see in today's agriculture that it's like a "plot" or an entire farm of only corn or a whole property of only pumpkins and nothing else, without taking into consideration what ecological or environmental effect that could have. So, knowing that those techniques were commonly used before and that there are still people who remember. Yeah... my grandmother... "My dad did that." She talks about her dad, but sometime later he dies and the one who keeps the land and works the land is my great-grandmother and her 7 daughters, that my grandmother was the oldest of. So that was a story I've always been told since I was little. I knew

that part, but I didn't know she was a farmer. I came to find out now that no, yeah, she was a farmer with her papers and everything, she had a coop. Things that little by little I was discovering. I always knew that she had chickens, that she maybe had a cow, but I saw it as "yeah, people used to live like that." Well, no, she had...

Ana [00:19: 07]:

Almost like an enterprise.

Ismael [00:19: 08]:

Yeah basically, basically, but that the primary reason was to feed her children. In fact, what she did was that, once she was widowed, she sent 6 of her 7 daughters to study and kept one. And that daughter who stayed, worked the land with her and did the day-to-day things. She had like a daughter staying. Next year, that one went off to study and another one arrived. So, they survived that way, in fact, I think... I'm afraid to say that they all graduated, but I think they did. I'm pretty sure all 7 did. My grandmother was the oldest, so... of the... we've had great aunts who are... My grandmother was a teacher, so she went to college. She was one of the first people in Jayuya or first women so to speak in Jayuya to have her education. Back then it was like a teacher education, but you could also finish a university degree. She did both. Of the smallest sisters or more towards the middle, some of them did master's degrees and one of them was the first female superintendent in Jayuya... of schools. So that's something like... that my family holds with great pride. Like "Look, that's our aunt and she was superintendent" and when you put it in time and location it's not common. It was not common to see a woman in that position, one could say, with so much power. And everything, everything, everything, all of this was driven by my great-grandmother and her work with the land. And that she could help them move forward and succeed when the normal thing for that time was to find a husband for each one and then basically have the husband support them financially. Well, that wasn't the dynamic. In fact, my great-grandfather... my mom tells me that he had... my great-grandfather had employees there and once he passed away my great-grandmother, knowing that she had 7 daughters, the first thing she does is that get rid of all of them. She fires them and says, "I have 7 daughters, something might happen..." You know it's a certain malice people used to have, and she eliminated all the employees and that's where she's dedicated herself to doing this. I never met her; I would have loved to meet her. My mom talks to me very... my mom was the youngest in the... of the eldest daughter, the youngest daughter of the eldest daughter, so... well, like the baby of the bunch. You know when you're the youngest of 5 kids, that was my mom... there were 5, well, mom has a very intense attachment. Always, always, always, always likes to tell me things about her grandmom. Even about birds, which I love now. My master's degree right now is in poultry, in poultry farming, and sometimes I talk to mom and tell her things like "because we're doing this, we're doing an incubation because we're going to do this" and she tells me stories of my great-grandmother who would go to the yard and see an abandoned chick and take it and put it in her pocket and walk around with the chick and mom never understood why and I'm like "Well mom, it's because the chick needs heat and whatever and it needs this" and they were things that, in the case of animal management and all that, my great-grandmother knew how to do and knew how to make the most of it.

Ana [00:22: 58]:

So, you had an influence, with respect to all these topics, that you didn't even know was there?

Ismael [00:23: 06]:

Well, no. This is something that I have been discovering, on the agriculture side, over time. Like my grandfather was a truck driver, my grandmother was a teacher. That's on the mother's side, that's on the great-grandmother's side. But then, on my father's side, my grandfather was an agronomist and... I don't know, I guess that I must have realized, because his yard was always like up to date with irrigation systems and what not, and for me that was going to my grandfather's house and seeing irrigation systems. It was like the most normal thing in the world, and I think to this day, I was talking the other days with my brother, and he says "I haven't seen again... you know the sprinklers that come out and water the yard like tsh-tsh-tsh? because I have not seen a house that has an irrigation system again. Like a house, like for the grass of your house, no... I haven't seen them again" and it's kind of like "wow, Grandpa had that up to date." But yeah, to my knowledge growing up, my grandfather was a teacher. He was an agricultural teacher, but I never saw it as "ah, he studied Agronomy", which is what I studied. It wasn't until I reached college, he already had Alzheimer's, so the conversations I could have with him were limited, that I found out "your grandfather studied that too" and I'm like "what?". Even though the people were there, the influence, and my grandfather had an orange tree and plants of this and that... In a very small space he had so much general production, but I saw it as "yeah, he just knows about that", I never saw it as "oh, it's also formally agriculture". That indirectly, I guess that yes, is as you say. It's been there, but it hasn't been so much like "come, let's go and I'm going to teach you how to do this, I'm going to teach you..." that kind of perspective, I didn't have it as much, I didn't have it that much.

Ana [00:25: 21]:

So now that you're all grown up... Now that you've found all of this about agriculture and agroecology, even animal production, do you feel more connected to your family or your family roots sort to say?

Ismael [00:25: 40]:

Definitely, like... I'm not saying that. I feel much more connected, but also seeing... my aunt once told me... well, my grandmother, my great-grandmother, what they tell me she did is that when the hens got old, they no longer laid as many eggs, so they made a broth with them. So, I think one of the things that impacted me a lot was the face or like the reaction. It wasn't her face, but the reaction of my aunt, my grandmother's sister, my great aunt, when I said "titi no, I... [inaudible: 00:26:21]" and she says, "I have a chicken over there" and I'm like "let's do it. Come on, we kill it, we process it, and we make a broth" and she sees that and seeing that maybe her perspective... I don't know, she was better to interview her for this than I was but... that she told me that "you guys are so young and you know how to do this" and like think that she saw a generation that dodged or basically decided not to learn all these things that were necessary to live before. Now not so much because now you go to the supermarket and the chicken is already there cooked. You can buy it cooked, you can buy it raw and it's already clean. You didn't see

when they killed the chicken. You didn't see... like it has disconnected you from that part of what agriculture and animal production is. And her seeing me like "no, yeah, ta-ta-ta-ta. Give me here, I'll do it", she was kind of excited and wanted "ah let's do another one" and being able to have that connection I think with my aunt at this time and with my grandmother back then. My grandmother passed away in August 2020 and maybe that's why I don't talk to you as much about my grandmother from when I started my agroecological journey. But at the same time, yeah, it was something that among themselves as sisters, my grandmother's sisters, each one learned a different technique with their mother. For example, the two... I mean all of them sow; there were 7 daughters, but I have more contact with 3 of the 7 because there are some in the United States, there are others that... but 3 of the 7 have a very intense connection with agriculture, with ornamental plants, and whatever. One of them talks to me a lot and always keeps urging me to "because with the moon..." and learn to sow with the moon and that is something that I always ... whenever I go to Jayuya she says, "and what moon is it today?" and I "ah titi, no, I haven't reviewed". I don't have that and it's something I'd like to learn a little more about how to sow with the cycles of moon and all that. That those are practices that they learned over time, and, in fact, I see them like "today we are going to sow because today it will be...", I do not know these things well, right? But "today is going to be a full moon, today we are going to sow". I don't know how it's done, but whenever I go, I try to have the conversation, I try to develop it, but since I have so many things on my plate... It's something that I admit that after a while I kind of forget, it escapes me, I let it be ... and I have to do it again and I have to take advantage of it because they're old already and they are not... I have to take advantage of it now while I have them.

Ana [00:29: 08]:

You have to absorb as much as you can while they're there.

Ismael [00:29: 11]:

Exactly.

Ana [00:029: 12]:

Well, you mentioned that maybe now there are certain practices that were done in the old days, that there are some people that might think they are not as relevant anymore because, as you said, because you go to the supermarket and things are already there. However, knowing... getting to know you and knowing my brother, seeing this new generation of people interested in agriculture and agroecology... well, for starters, I feel there's more interest. Second of all, there are many people who are realizing that these practices are not as irrelevant as we thought and that here, if things go downhill, what we thought is in a supermarket is no longer there, right? and how do you think... this is a very long question. Sorry, I'm building it up, but how do you think agroecology, even what you're studying about animal production... How do you think that could impact food security here?

Ismael [00:30: 37]:

Well, starting with food security, we don't have that here. I mean, tomorrow things stop moving, right now we have a war, and we have several things going on. We even saw it with Maria, right?

Where the ships stopped arriving and it was a problem while they could get here and could distribute it, because that was another issue. Well, if tomorrow things turn for the worse... well, there is no break. We don't have enough to survive in the long run. Agroecology, as you said, yes there is much more interest, there is much more interest. For example, as you can see with El Josco. El Josco has many courses around Puerto Rico and more than 750 people request admission and they can only take 150. So, like there are a lot of people who have an interest and who want to take advantage and who want to learn and maybe I don't feel like they see it as agroecology, but it is a course that is available to people, the general public. I see many lecture on agriculture that they sometimes give for the University and all that and if you do not have the scientific knowledge, the basic knowledge, you will not understand it well, you will not get much out of it; and they usually tend to be "buy yourself some 20-20-20 and just throw it out there" without taking into consideration the soil and those layers of life that may be there. So, agroecology, if tomorrow all the inputs are blocked... inputs as in not only our food, but the fertilizers, those chemicals that we put on the plants ... stop arriving tomorrow, even, imported things that we here, well we import a lot of things, right? ... they stop coming, well agroecology provides an alternative to begin to cover that need. Because then, instead of depending on someone to produce the fertilizer that I need, I can produce it here through compost, through teas from different worms, of different microorganisms that can then begin to improve that soil by adding organic matter. That we are used to... I say it this way, the soil is divided into 3 parts: what is the physical part, the chemical part, and the biological part. What traditional agriculture has done is focus on the chemical part and it neglects the physical part and the biological part. So, what does that do? If we have no life in the soil, the soil loses its ability to continue regenerating or continue to produce and that affects the physical properties. So from having a soil rich in nutrients and all that, which maybe drains well, it can become a very compacted soil that's not as good for sowing, right? It's a system, if we only focus on one, which is what has been done, we lose the other two. So, we have to start seeing... work the land as a component of those 3, so as to not to deteriorate the soil any further or any faster. That soil has a capacity, when it's well prepared, it has a pretty great ability to sequester carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. So, it also helps us with climate change and that kind of thing. So, there are many things that agroecology and its techniques offer because basically it is producing while conserving. So, we are producing, we are benefiting, but at the same time we are giving back to the soil, giving back to the earth what it needs to stay healthy and not do the repetitive cycles, which was always to break the ground, already produced ... what I mean is, what we used to do is take, take, take and it is still done. Take, take, take and we neglect what it could be providing for us. We don't see it perhaps in the short term, but perhaps your children, your grandchildren, will not have the same options, right? Because if you work with a soil as fertile as some of the ones that you can find now, maybe they'll already have more deteriorated soils, which will make it more difficult for them to take this step that we are taking now.

Ana [00:35: 47]:

You mentioned that El Josco is a course that is open to the general public, which does not require technical background from perhaps other courses. Do you think that having a course like this, educational courses that are more open to the public, makes any difference in the awareness about these issues? Or what benefits does it have?

Ismael [00:36: 17]:

It definitely has a lot. The course is called producers and promoters, so not necessarily everyone who is taking the course will get to produce, but it teaches them so that they are promoters and can educate other people. Think that many of these people, on many occasions, have... they can have a role in their communities. Some are teachers who may have an educational role with their children. That part of the children is the part that I want to focus on, because for example, I told you that I didn't know what I was doing as a child and I have seen right now, being a little closer to agroecology, I have seen schools that have given that option to those children and those children know more than I do... when I entered college to study agriculture, agricultural sciences, those children know more than I do, right? I was there like I didn't know. I was like "yeah, pour water on it and add some of that blue powder that I've seen that they add and that's it" and there are children who already know how to have their own harvest and know where it comes from. So, for me, beyond the education that El Josco provides now, it puts into perspective how many of those people who are there taking the course some are parents, others are teachers. Last year, there was a girl who was in 12th grade taking the course with me. You know like... much younger, already fully immersed in the subject, like she's interested in it and sees it as a possible solution to the problem that exists in Puerto Rico. So that perspective in young people is there. If we could encourage that... teach them in advance that it is a skill, a skill that could be learned in school. Much more useful than... no, I'm not going to say it because then...

Ana [00:38: 11]:

Say it, say it, say it.

Ismael [00:38: 12]:

This... much more useful than Pythagoras, for example. It's useful, right? I'm not going to say it's not useful. It's useful, but I feel like something to incentivize kids and kids' development, like farming and where things come from and how it's done the right way, well it could be very beneficial in the long run. Always think that those kids are eventually going to pass that information on, and I feel like that's something I didn't have growing up, even though my grandfather was a teacher specifically in that area. It's kind of comedic that I hadn't learned anything from that. Maybe he was trying to protect me, saying "no! go for something else" I don't know, I never... I knew him more with Alzheimer's so... when he entered that stage, right? Because as a little kid I remember that I shared a lot with him, but the other stage well... But yeah, I think the course has that to offer right now, which is to promote these concepts. Not to attack industrialized agriculture but be aware that it has its detrimental effects and that there is an alternative. That things aren't like this just because. Things here can move forward using sustainable techniques and we could reach that sustainability and food security at some point, if we have enough people collaborating and working on that.

Ana [00:39: 47]:

I went blank for a second there.

Ismael [00:39: 50]:

Don't worry, same thing happens to me.

Ana [00:39: 51]:

I'm thinking about the next question... What do you think Puerto Rico needs to achieve that food security?

Ismael [00:40: 11]:

Wow.

Ana [00:40: 15]:

Like, what is a future that you would like to see in that aspect?

Ismael [00:40: 23]:

Well, you see... right now our colonial status... you have to question it when it comes to these issues, right?

Ana [00:40: 30]:

It's part of it. It is important to discuss it.

Ismael [00:40: 33]:

No and I... if it's not the root problem, it's close to being it. I can talk to you... maybe it doesn't have to do so much with plant production and all that, but an example, the quantity... the products they import into Puerto Rico, such as eggs. Maybe this is something that you relate to a little more. Sometimes you go to the supermarket and see eggs at 5 dz for \$3 or 7 dz for \$5. Something like that and we've probably gotten to see it at some point. Which are imported eggs. They are small eggs. While here... there's a lot of like traditional beliefs surrounding eggs, like, for example, the white shell is from the US and the brown shell is from here. That has nothing to do with it; that's preference. That doesn't... nothing happens, but if you notice, the little eggs, the chicken ... it's not a different hen that lays small eggs, right? The hen can lay you a big egg and tomorrow she puts some little ones. That really is just up to the chicken, but what happens is that, United States, if you go to a supermarket over there what you will find are large eggs. Medium eggs, you may find them, but it is not as common as over here. We go to a supermarket and, if anything, we might find local eggs that are large and medium eggs is most of what you can find on the gondola. That's because of a process called dumping. Dumping is basically, they produce... I'm going to explain how eggs work here. The big eggs are the ones that are taken to the supermarket and the medium eggs, the industry here what it does is that it takes them, sells them to restaurants, to bakeries, so that they can use it in other things, because they know that they can't compete with the price of the medium eggs from the US. Well, they do the same thing. In the United States they do the same. Instead of selling it to a restaurant and other things, they send us everything that is left over. That's why you see it at such low prices... so... and when they overproduce, that's when you see them at 7 dz for \$5 and man I have to admit that I am guilty of participating in that, because hello? 7 dz feed you for a long time, right, and competing with the price of a dozen for two-ish dollars versus 7 dz for \$5 ... most people are going to be inclined to have to buy those. So, it doesn't allow the industry here to take off and maybe at some point get

to lower its costs because they're constantly having to compete with producers from out there. Producers from the US think that if they sell then great and if not then it's still okay because their main product was sold in the United States; this is what they had left over, they do not have any kind of... they have no losses if they don't sell it because they already sold the majority, this is just to get a little extra. But at the same time, it neutralizes any chance for people here to make their own product and move forward.

Ana [00:44: 02]:
I feel like I'm in class.

Ismael [00:44: 04]:
My bad.

Ana [00:44: 06]:
No, I say it in a good way, because these are things that are right in front of us but we don't really think about on a daily basis.

Ismael [00:44: 15]:
Literally.

Ana [00:44: 16]:
But yeah... wow, so we have the leftovers and since the leftovers are sold cheap so, then industries here are affected because the competition is...

Ismael [00:44: 31]:
Very difficult, very difficult. That's for eggs, if it's in terms of plants and how that works, I think Santiago can talk to you a little more about it than I can. But yes, it's something that I know that no matter what, the cabotage laws and everything else, right? the Jones Act and all that, affects agricultural development in Puerto Rico substantially. There are things that used to produced here in Puerto Rico and now we import them from the Dominican Republic. I am not against there being an exchange between the Caribbean islands and all that, because it is not about that, but its things that can be ... we are not giving or producing something in exchange. We are replacing what was produced here and saying, "oh no, It's better if bring it from over there" and that is not... the only one benefitting is the Dominican Republic. Here we may have the products, but they are products that can be made here just the same, so that's also there.

Ana [00:45: 36]:
So, a lot of the barriers that local producers have, have to do with things that are already established in the Government.

Ismael [00:45: 48]:
With laws, right? and all that.

Ana [00:45: 52]:

Let's see... I wanted to ask you another question and I forgot; did you have anything else that you want to talk about specifically?

Ismael [00:46: 14]:

Well, I don't know. To emphasize and to make sure there's no misunderstanding with these kinds of things, agricultural education and on that side is that I am an advocate of agricultural education and agroecological education at this point where we could say it considers the ecology of what we are doing and of our environment, not to exploit it, which is what has been done up till now. So yeah, it presents a way to in the long-term... perhaps we don't see it now, but in the long term it presents a very large solution to our problems. That is why I admire very much those of El Josco Bravo, who have given themselves the task of educating people of all kinds, because, for example, Santiago and I come from that field and I believe that we both grew a lot within what the subject of agroecology despite having studied agricultural science, right? So, I think they're doing something pretty important for the people of Puerto Rico. I think it's something that changes perspective, changes the way we see things and maybe be gives us some hope that yeah, we can do it, we can develop and have a system to have food security at some point. If things were a little easier for us... here I bring up a lot of the things... legislators and all those people, make decisions based on economics and in Puerto Rico the way you work the gross agricultural income is based on what was produced on the farm until it leaves the farm. Once it leaves the farm, then that money or that income that is generated, right? That income that it generates is not taken into consideration on paper. For example, I am going to give you an example, the chili that I produce on a farm, say that I produce chili peppers, "recao" and a couple of other things that you could make a sofrito with. Everything that is produced on a farm is reported until it is sold, but they don't take into consideration that after it is sold, a lady comes and makes "sofrito" and sells it forward and that "sofrito" is used in restaurants and how it connects one thing with the other. The politicians who are making decisions only see the first number and they see the first number and they see this number is low and they see a number over there and they say "ah, there is more here" and what do they do? Incentivize. Instead of doing things so that the line continues to grow, continues to spread, and continues... well I'm going to take this away to add it over here without realizing that it's affecting the whole line, the whole process. For example, "ah well, those lands are not being used, so I am going to expropriate them, and I am going to make a road to make it easier for traffic to pass through" and they are lands that they could incentivize for production and the long-term effect on the economy could be a positive one. We could depend less on imports, depend less on other inputs and the people who are making decisions are not aware of that. So, what are they going to do? They see numbers. This number is smaller than that one, so forget about this one. I'll keep putting money over there and I don't take into consideration the origin of everything. It has a lot to do with how things are reported and all that, but at the same time... the people who often sign bills that they haven't even read. So, you really expect for them to study something else? They probably see a report that was read by another person who also didn't understand the subject and they see two numbers and they get carried away with "this is smaller, this one is bigger, so I'm going to support this one, not this one, because this one is not generating anything in Puerto Rico", but they don't realize how one thing connects with the other.

Ana [00:50: 47]:

I find it interesting because it reminds me of an analogy that the professor gave us in the class. Which is that many times, with things like that, they focus on numbers and when you take away the human element of those numbers, that is, the people who are carrying out those productions, who ends up benefitting from the decisions based on numbers are not the people, which is very interesting. I like these kinds of conversations that have to do with thinking beyond what's at face value, but I think I covered everything I wanted to cover. Thank you very much, Ismael, it was a pleasure to meet you.

Ismael [00:51: 35]:

Likewise, likewise.

Ana [00:51: 37]:

Well, I think we can end the interview here.