Cacharros: The Persistence of Vintage Automobiles in Cuba

by
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Photographs by the Authors

Introduction

Cuba has been called the world's largest open-air antique car museum. To anyone who visits Cuba, it is all but impossible to miss the pre-1960s American-made cars that daily ply the roads (Figure 1). The vintage cars from such manufacturing giants as Ford, Chevrolet, Oldsmobile, and Chrysler as well as long-forgotten DeSotos, Nashs, Packards, Studebakers, and Edsels are ubiquitous on Cuban roads, especially in Havana. As the volume of international tourists (especially from the U.S.) increases, and articles in the popular press about the Island become more prevalent, awareness of this fleet of old American cars continues to grow. But few visitors understand the lengths to which Cubans go to keep these classic cars running. What is the cultural message carried in some of Detroit's most

extravagant creations? What explains the extraordinary efforts to keep the *cacharros* (jalopies) running? The purpose of this article is to identify some of the forces behind the existence of an entire fleet of aged automobiles in Cuba.

During its heyday – the first five decades of the 20th Century – Detroit and its environs were home to hundreds of automobile manufacturing companies (Wise, Boddy, and Laban 1983; Berger 2001). Many of the “steel sleds” assembled throughout the Great Lakes region were exported to various parts of the world including Cuba. For most of the world, the *Chariots of Chrome* succumbed to old age and gradually disappeared from the landscape. Yet, in Cuba their numbers have remained strong. There is considerable debate as to how many pre-1960s cars still exist in Cuba and a contemporary car count

is problematic. One source asserts there are about 200,000 automobiles in Cuba of which 167,000 were made in the United States (Schweid 2004). Yet, other sources place the vintage fleet at 60,000 (Navarro 2002) or as few as 31,000 (Luxner 2004). Whatever the number, the survival of even 31,000 pre-1960 working cars is remarkable in light of the half-century U.S. embargo on any replacement parts reaching the Island and the efforts made by the Cuban government to eliminate most things American from Cuban soil. So why do the American-made cars survive in Cuba?

There may be as many cultural explanations for why Cuba has so many old automobiles as there are models of vintage cars in Cuba. A common explanation we heard is that Cuba has a strong affinity for beauty and the arts. Thus, the classic cars are maintained because of their unique design and shapely style that mirrors Cuban society. Another explanation frequently heard is that Cuba has a strong culture of recycling; a practice prevalent in many developing countries (Drackner 2005). Running counter to America's current disposition for disposability, it is much more cost effective to repair a worn out or broken item rather than discard it and purchase a new one. Our research reveals that although the above explanations may all be correct to an extent, we have discovered three additional explanations why Cubans are motivated to maintain thousands of American-made cars far beyond their intended or practical life expectancy.

Methodology

Data for this article were initially derived from a synthesis of disparate secondary sources. We perused books, journal articles, video documentaries, news reports, popular magazines, trade journals,

Figure 1. A plethora of vintage, American-made automobiles in downtown Havana, Cuba (Photo by Jeffrey Smith, January, 2011).

web pages, and blogs that focused on vintage automobiles in Cuba. After an initial understanding of the affinity Cubans have for the vintage cars, we ground-truthed those findings through field work in Cuba. Between December 2010 and January 2011, we conducted approximately 40 semi-structured interviews with a wide cross section of Cubans including car owners, taxicab drivers, mechanics, government workers, and local residents. Unless otherwise noted, the informants preferred to remain anonymous. Our fieldwork focused primarily on the greater Havana metropolitan area, but we also conducted research in western Cuba as far away as Pinar del Rio (Figure 2). We documented our findings in daily field journals and captured over 350 digital photos.

The Revolution and Transportation in Cuba

Cubans have had a long love affair with American-made cars. By the early 1950s, Cuba was the leading foreign market for North American models. In 1952, 77,000 of Detroit's finest were at home on the Island and by 1955 the number had increased to 125,000 (Pérez Jr. 1999). So lucrative was the Cuban market that in 1956 some new models were premiered in Havana before being unveiled in the States (Schweid 2004). The first appearance of the 1957 Chevrolet in Cuba with its oversized tailfins drew an admiring crowd of 40,000 people and total new car sales for the year exceeded 14,000 (Schweid 2004).

Few American-made cars in Cuba captured more attention or were more popular than the icon of extravagance, the Cadillac. It is variously reported that by the mid-1950s Havana either had the greatest number of Cadillacs of any city in the world or the highest per capita ownership (Baker 2004; Bemelmans 1957; Pastore and de Gamez 1954). A good number of the Cadillacs likely carried American Mafiosi about to their nefarious negotiations, yet many wealthy Cubans also drove these symbols of financial success (Garcia 2003).

In 1959, Fidel Castro assumed political control of Cuba and immediately launched an aggressive campaign to radically restructure every element of Cuban society. Confiscation, collectivization, socialization, and nationalization were the mantras of the revolutionary government. Embedded within this campaign was a purposeful and dedicated effort to abrogate the multitude of North American cultural institutions that had penetrated the Island (Orlean 2003; Ross 2001). Examples include the rechristening of the Havana Hilton as the *Habana Libre* and the toppling of the American Eagle from the monument to the Battleship Maine. However, in Castro's mind, few things bespoke of U.S. economic and cultural clout more than the opulent Cadillac. Shortly after declaring the *revolución* a success, Fidel admonished his fellow Cubans:

"The Cadillac costs thousands of dollars of our foreign exchange. The Cadillac does not plow, the Cadillac does not cultivate, the Cadillac does not produce. What the Cadillac

does do is waste 12 gallons per kilometer... The Cadillac does not provide jobs for anyone. The Cadillac does not increase the wealth of the country, it diminishes it."
(Pérez Jr. 1999)

Numerous cultural icons bequeathed by the hated colossus to the North were purged from Cuban society, but two were so entrenched they survived – baseball and American-made automobiles. *Béisbol* survived owing to a national addiction and aptitude for the sport. Even Fidel Castro is purported to have possessed considerable talent on the baseball diamond. Survival of the vintage American-made automobiles is not fully explained in existing literature. Our intent is to help fill that gap.

Necessity and Income

When the trade door slammed shut in the 1960s, Cubans were left with a transportation system dependent upon a finite and fixed stock of American-made cars, trucks, and busses. Not only would it be years before a sufficient number of Soviet imports would arrive, but as the revolution gained momentum, the government's position on private ownership became apparent. According to Cuban officials, private ownership of an automobile afforded individuals greater status and reinforced class distinctions (Guevara 1968; Chomsky, Carr, and Smorkaloff 2003). By comparison, public transportation was the great leveler of society. Thus, for yet another reason, 1959 became a watershed year within Cuban society.

Individuals who owned a car in 1959 or before were granted full private ownership of their vehicle and issued a *traspaso*. In Cuba a *traspaso* is worth its weight in gold because the critical document allows the family sedan to be legally sold, traded, pawned, inherited, or used as collateral. After 1959, full private ownership of cars was prohibited. According to one of our sources, a 1966 Russian Lada or a 2006 Czech Skoda can only be driven, fueled, and repaired; it is like a leased car. At the end of its assignment the car is sold back to the government at an officially dictated price.

One might ask why, if everything else was being nationalized, would the Cuban government under Fidel Castro allow for the private ownership of (detested) American icons? The most plausible explanation we found is that many of the revolutionary leaders had a penchant for the American-made cars. Government officials

Figure 2. Map of Cuba (Cartography by Jeffrey Smith).

including Fidel, Raul, Camilo, and “Che” appropriated cars that had been “donated to the revolution” by Cubans who fled the country for places like Miami. Of particular note, Fidel Castro favored the Oldsmobile (Schweid 2004).

When the Soviet Union withdrew financial support in the late 1980s, Cuba’s Transportation Ministry was most adversely affected. Growing financial constraints coupled with a diminishing supply of subsidized oil led to severe interruptions in public transportation services. Chronic late arrivals, overcrowding, and cancellation of routes became commonplace (Figure 3). Nearly everyone became reliant upon a faltering public transportation system (Figure 4). Once the reality of socialized transportation was internalized, the value of privately owned automobiles, including *cacharos*, became readily apparent. *Cacharos* could help fill important voids within a household. Within the limits of fuel supply and cost, full ownership of a car (even an old one) in contemporary Cuba affords households the luxury and flexibility of scheduling their own trips to work, shopping, or errands. Thus households with a functioning automobile have a slightly higher quality-of-life than their carless counterparts. By the same token, the classic cars can also be a source of much needed income.

Under the Revolutionary provisions, all taxi cab drivers are considered official government employees and highly regulated (Figure 5). Predictably, a black market emerged with many cabbies operating outside the law (Miller 1992). At times Fidel Castro reacted to the “gypsy” cabs with socialist indignation, confiscating the owners’ vehicles. In recent years the government turned a blind eye to the proliferation of unlicensed taxis because their service is so desperately needed. The current administration under Raúl Castro has gone so far as to encourage anyone with a private automobile to apply for a taxi license (*New York Times* 2009). As an aside, it should be noted that eleven months after our visit (on 10 November 2011) the Cuban government eased restrictions on the sale of personal cars. As of February 2012 the ramifications of this government decree were starting to become apparent as the number of cars being sold among Cuban citizens began increasing significantly (*Economist* 2012; *USA Today* 2012).

Therefore, private ownership of a car has become a source of household income in the form of taxi service. According to one informant, numerous trained professionals

Figure 3. Cubans waiting in line at a bus stop in downtown Havana (Photo by Jeffrey Smith, January 2011).

Figure 4. A horse-drawn bicycle near Pinar del Rio, Cuba (Photo by Jeffrey Smith, January 2011).

including engineers and university professors have opted to drive a cab because potential earnings exceed their fixed professional salaries. And, compared to the small Asian or Russian sedans, the spacious American models of the 1940s and 1950s are ideally sized vehicles for the *ruteros* (taxis that ply a fixed route). A four-door 1955 Cadillac with extra jury-rigged seats can hold at least eight riders and a 1953 Buick station wagon provides even more space for passengers (Figure 6). Plus, because the *cacharro* cabs charge national pesos (the

currency reserved for Cuban citizens) instead of CUCs (the currency reserved for international visitors) they are cheaper for average citizens. Under these economic conditions even a “Yank tank” with mounting age holds its value or appreciates as the numbers available decline. Should the classic *cacharro* finally reach that point beyond repair, it is still a source of income for its precious parts. Traveling through Cuba one will search in vain for a junkyard of outdated models. A cannibalized auto carcass is rarely spotted on a side street but if so

Figure 5. A 1954 Chevrolet taxicab waiting for passengers near Castillo del Morro, Havana, Cuba (Photo by Charles Collins, January 2011).

Figure 6. A 1953 Buick taxicab unloading passengers in downtown Havana, Cuba (Photo by Jeffrey Smith, January 2011).

there is assuredly little of value left from such skeletal remains. Thus, in a practical sense, an old American-built car kept in running order is akin to a salary plus a bank account. But necessity is not the only reason for the remarkable survival of vintage cars.

Nostalgia

Geographic proximity assured that the cult of the car, so central to American

culture, diffused to Cuban society at an early date. So virulent was the infection that by 1929, Cuba boasted 13 cars for every 1000 residents with Havana having more cars per capita than New York City (Pérez Jr. 1999). Ever tighter economic, political, and social relations with the U.S. fed a growing appetite for American-made vehicles and by the eve of the Revolution in 1958, 24 automobiles existed for every 1000 Cubans (Pérez Jr. 1999). In 2008, the

rate stood at a lowly 21 vehicles, whereas the U.S. had 450 passenger cars for every 1,000 people (World Bank 2012). Yet, there is still a vestige of Cuban society that savors the car culture of the mid-1950s. No doubt there are surviving Cubans who relish the memory of an era when each year new car models arrived on the Island. But what role does mere nostalgia play in the extraordinary survival of *cacharros* in Cuba?

According to a 2009 PBS documentary, there are numerous Cubans who take delight in being the third generation owing and using the same vehicle (PBS 2009) and they maintain a deep affection for the old machines (Navarro 2002). Despite Tom Miller's (2004) assertion in the *NY Times* that the cars are not loved, just tolerated, several sources document what can only be classified as a love affair with Detroit's "Chariots of Chrome" (Bell and Fischer 2004; Schendel 2002). Cubans far too young to have purchased one of these cars when they first came off the assembly line speak of the classic era of American automobiles and yearn to return to the 1940s and 1950s (Schendel 2002). For example, on the ride from the airport to our hotel the cab driver, perhaps in his mid-20s, pointed out, named, and gave the year of manufacture of numerous *cacharros* that we overtook. He actually seemed pleased with our reaction to the vintage models. Obviously, this may have been part of the official promotion of tourism, but if so the young man carried it off with what seemed genuine delight.

Perhaps evidence of the heartfelt appreciation and attachment to the golden era is seen in the extreme effort required to keep the *cacharros* running and with a semblance of their original appearance. The end of trade between Washington and Havana meant no more cars *and* no more parts. One example of Cuban ingenuity is the effort to maintain the lavish chrome trim that characterized many of the models. Chrome readily succumbs to Havana's tropical sea air and the only available replacement is hand-shaped stainless steel laboriously polished to a chrome-like luster (PBS 2009). An elaborate grille or massive bumper requires weeks to duplicate in backyard garages because no commercial outlets have been established by the government to serve this market (Figure 7).

Another example is paint. Paint does not significantly affect functionality but it does reflect a genuine concern for appearance (Figures 8a and 8b). Many, if not most, of the vintage vehicles have been re-painted, some repeatedly. Yet, quality

paint can be expensive and difficult to acquire. As Joseph Scarpaci and Armando Portela (2009; 15) indicate, “paint is often stolen from shipyards or is surplus household latex paint.”

It is evident that some owners are fully dedicated to their *cacharro* apart from its utility and earning power. Vintage car clubs provide a basis of support and encouragement with occasional group tours when sufficient fuel can be obtained (PBS 2009). Some owners, in or out of clubs, devote much time and scarce capital to maintaining a car for the sole purpose of demonstrating their pride of ownership and devotion to a bygone era (Baker 2004).

Photos of Havana from the 1950s show a city bustling with commercial activity and many cars cruisin’ the

Malecón. Unfortunately, the photos do not show the inequities, unemployment, and poverty of the countryside. The surviving *cacharros* provide a very selective nostalgic memory of a time that was undeniably different from present-day Cuba. Excluding the poorest of the poor, the vintage cars are a reminder of a much more glamorous time in the nation’s life.

National Identity

Given the strained relations between Cuba and the United States for the past half century, it is counterintuitive to think of old cars from the reviled North as a symbol of any aspect of *cubanidad* (Cubanness). Yet, there are several examples to support this very idea.

As an artist and caricaturist, René de la Nuez enjoys widespread popularity in Cuba. Among the wide-ranging subject matter of everyday life he depicts, *cacharros* occupy a prominent place. Caricatures by Nuez commonly depict the old U.S.-made cars with huge chrome bumpers, exaggerated tail fins, and customized wheels the likes of which are commonly seen plying the streets of Havana. However, it is what Nuez writes about the *cacharros* that bears upon the idea of vintage cars and Cuban national identity. In his opinion “these old American cars, with their grafted parts and innovative adaptations defy the passage of time in order to survive and triumph ... in the same way Cubans must invent life daily in order to survive, but with an extraordinary energy that is unique to this nation” (Piñera 2010). Nuez also says, “they [vintage, American-made cars] move about Havana with their cargo of Cuban identity like the ever transforming soul of the city” (Castañeda 2010). The *cacharros* mirror and match life in Cuba where institutions and people are tattered from neglect, mismanagement, and oppression. For both (cars and people) daily existence is maintained with persistence and clever invention. A sense of this dilemma is captured in the oft-heard phrase “*hay que resolver*” (we must resolve to fix this).

The second example of how the *cacharros* embody an aspect of Cuban national identity is seen in the public’s reaction to the government’s efforts to sell the vintage automobiles abroad (Alpert 1990; Brouw 1992). When the Soviet Union withdrew its generous aid in the late 1980s, the Cuban national economy experienced freefall. Sale of vintage cars became one of many strategies adopted by Fidel Castro during the “Special Period”

Figure 7. A 1957 Ford waiting for passengers on the Plaza de la Revolución, Havana, Cuba (Photo by Jennine Pettit, January 2011).

Figure 8. (a). A bright red 1950 Chevrolet on the streets of Havana (Photo by Jeffrey Smith, January 2011). (b). A polished, blue 1952 Chevrolet near Central Park, Havana, Cuba (Photo by Charles Collins, January 2011).

(roughly 1989 – 1994) to raise much needed foreign currency. Based on the government's assumption that the old cars were in great demand among foreign collectors, officials began to buy them from private owners or to offer a new Lada in trade (Garcia 2003; Schweid 2004). Designated locations in Havana became *de facto* used car lots where mainly Canadians and European collectors bought several hundred vintage vehicles.

There are at least three versions of why the vintage car sale was terminated. One is that some officials in charge were pocketing the proceeds (Garcia 2003). It is also asserted that Cuban citizens complained that it was unfair that cars which had only survived owing to their dedication and diligence were leaving the country and passing into the hands of foreigners who could not possibly appreciate them as much as the original owners did (Baker 2004). But the most documentable evidence for the termination of foreign sales is linked to the expressed opposition of two prominent Cubans – Eduardo Mesejo and Eusebio Leal.

Eduardo Mesejo is director of Havana's *Museo del Automóvil*. He asserts that some of the nation's rarest and most collectible models were exported and that these were a source of "national identity" and automotive patrimony (Schweid 2004). But one must ask, how can an "American" car be part of Cuban national identity, let alone Cuban revolutionary identity? According to Mesejo, the key seems to be the concept of *struggle*. For half a century on an almost continuous basis Cubans are called upon to prepare for *battle*, to resist the enemy, to forge an "anti-imperialist" identity and solidarity. But for most people on the Island the *battle* has not been with armed invaders, but with chronic shortages, long lines, interminable delays, a bloated bureaucracy, and a declining standard of living. These are the very same issues that afflict anyone trying to keep their vintage vehicle running. Owing to extraordinary effort and a daunting struggle, the adopted *cacharros* have ceased to be American and have become symbolically Cuban (Schweid 2004).

Eduardo Mesejo's cause was taken up by the official Historian for the City of Havana, Eusebio Leal. As curator and guardian of a heritage dating back to 1519, Leal's professional focus is on the crumbling colonial architecture of the capital city. However, he has also spoken out against the government's sale of vintage cars. For him, the fleet of American-made

cars is a salient symbol of Cuban national identity (Schweid 2004).

It is impossible to discern which group or individual played the pivotal role ending the foreign sale of *cacharros*, but the practice was stopped. Officially, the government now regards antique cars as national treasures and forbids the export of such cultural icons (Baker 2004).

Conclusions

Traveling the highways that link Cuba's major cities one finds that the roads are in relatively good condition yet traffic is very sparse. Similarly, Havana is home to more than two million people, but most streets carry a very light traffic load, and at night the absence of vehicle

Figure 9. Photo of a 1955 DeSoto and Russian Lada on the Plaza de la Revolución, Havana, Cuba (Photo by Charles Collins, January 2011).

Figure 10. The rear grill of a 1955 Chevrolet (Photo by Jeffrey Smith, January 2011).

noise is remarkable. The city is also notable for its volume of people standing in long lines for the occasional crowded bus. For most Cubans, public transportation is at or near the top of the list of pressing problems plaguing *La Revolución*.

Within this context it may be concluded that the preservation of so many vintage American automobiles is primarily a response to need. Since the 1960s, the Cuban government has attempted to pursue a policy emphasizing public transportation. Private cars are a marker of class whereas buses and trains are society equalizers. In this regard private ownership of a car, even a very old one, bestows a degree of convenience and income. Most of the vintage cars in Cuba are working vehicles and not coddled showpieces. Moreover, a 1955 Buick station wagon in running order will most likely appreciate rather than lose value, especially in light of continued faltering efforts to improve public transportation.

However, it would be a mistake to overlook the role of nostalgia in the survival of Cuba's fleet of *cacharros*. Numerous citizens are on public record affirming their affection for the antiquated models that daily grace the streets (Schendel 2002; PBS 2009). It may seem incredible to hear citizens, even some youthful ones, associate the old cars with a golden era in the country's history for that historical era records widespread poverty, unemployment, and a yawning gap separating social classes. Yet, in a romantic sense the cars represent a glamour largely annihilated by the Revolution. This point is underscored when observing a carefully maintained 1955 DeSoto convertible parked next to a boxy Russian Lada (Figure 9).

There is another sense in which the *cacharro* is close to the heart of many Cubans. Through years of adaptation and innovation to preserve the automobiles in some degree of functionality into the second or even third generation, it has become a much-beloved Cuban symbol. The *cacharro* is a surrogate for dealing with life and the system imposed by the Revolution with its shortages, its patchwork solutions, and its unfulfilled promises (Figure 10).

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