

Connections Among People, Things, Images, and Ideas: La Habana to Pina and Back

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This paper is a photo essay of images of Cuba taken by the authors in the fall of 2003. Through an analysis of the photos, our initial goal is to deconstruct reigning tropes and myths surrounding Cuba. By implicitly asking, “what is a photo?” the essay also tackles the larger issues of representation, meaning creation and understanding—of marketplaces, consumption, brands, and culture. We suggest that photographer and subjects are both agents and producers of meaning and ideas in which the interplay becomes the source for analytic understanding. In the deconstruction we offer our sense of Cuba. In the end, the essay is a journey, intellectual and otherwise.

Keywords: Cuba; Culture and Consumption; Photography; Tropes; Anthropology



Figure 1

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Commodifying Images and Ideas

The allure of Cuba lies precisely in both its suffering and its surviving collapse. (Dopico 2002, 463)

While exploiting Cuba's exceptionalism (its transgressive status and revolutionary reputation), the image machine reproducing Cuba for a global market in fact relies on tourism's capacity to camouflage revolutionary Havana into consumable mirages, visual clichés that disguise or iconize the city's economic and potential crises. (Dopico 2002, 464)

The above quotations were taken from Ana María Dopico's insightful and important 2002 essay, "Picturing Havana." Focused primarily on documentary works of still photography as well as video and film that have been internationally distributed during the late 1990s, e.g., the 1999 *Buena Vista Social Club*, Dopico aptly delineates the way visual tropes and cultural fantasies coincide in the production of images that become strategic commodities in the cultural and political projects of varied nations as well as global tourism. She points to the way that imagery of suspended and slowed down time has appeal for "consumers overrun by speedup" (Dopico 2002, 452) and notes how imagery of Cuba serves "as a contrasting and broken-down background for first-world travelers and their luxuries" serving purposes of both politics and nostalgia (ibid., 453–54). For instance, she calls our attention to the recurrent signification of contradictory temporalities in representations of Cuba: Cuba becomes a place of movement where time has stopped through images of vintage American cars, bicycles and manually powered taxis on otherwise emptied streets, and decaying colonial structures. Cultural and consumption practices that seem to belong to (an idealized) time in the past live currently and vibrantly. There is often a juxtaposed focus on the very young and the very old, or on the voluptuous among the ruins. These are sentiments and tropes that are also in evidence in the photographs that open this essay. (Figures 1–2).



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

With the exception of the image of the two young boys using cement blocks as their own building blocks, these opening photographs (Figure 3–7) were not taken in Havana, but rather in the smaller town of Güines, at the extreme outskirts of Havana, and Morón, a mid-sized town located in the central island province of Ciego de Ávila November 2003. We took these and the photographs that follow through the multiplicative lenses of personal travelers, anthropologists, and consumer researchers. We originally prepared for this essay by selecting, cropping, and framing the photographs which we thought could best tell the story of the connections between people and things as well as between people and people in Cuba. We selected photographs that highlighted people's gaze and hands upon objects. We included photographs that represented the relationships among people, as seen in the closeness and touch between their bodies as well as in their gaze at us. Importantly, we cropped out background in order to bring the focus to the hands, connection, and gaze. Note, for instance, the ways hands and eyes touch bikes, utensils, food, people in Figures 9–16.

Ultimately we wanted our photographs to illustrate our experience of Cuba as a place where connections between people constituted the infrastructure, were a currency more salient than money, and were among the most important elements of exchange (see Appadurai 1986, Mauss 1990, Weiner 1992; also see Holbrook 1998 and Schroeder 1998 on the use of photographs in consumer research). We were not intending to participate in fantasies of Cuba or to replicate simplistic tourist tropes. Nor were we interested in replicating and reinforcing the simplistic myth that consumption is opposed to sociality, or any of the other important myths of consumption that Miller (1995a) has outlined (e.g., consumption's opposition to authenticity or global homogenization or heterogenization caused by mass consumption). Rather we hoped, as anthropologists and consumer researchers, to bring theoretical traditions and research experience to bear in a way that could



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16

provide a richer, more informative portrait of Cuba as a contemporary site of intriguing consumption and exchange. Nonetheless, as we looked carefully at the images we had shot as well as selected, we realized—with notable chagrin—the degree to which these images reflected, appealed to, and continued many of the same problematic sentiments, tropes, and myths. In the end the more interesting and theoretically challenging story acknowledges these myths head on as well as acknowledges the participation of us all in these myths as observers, as researchers, as photographers, and as theorists.

Documenting the Allure of Scarcity

The gaze of the lens in Havana has accompanied the eye of the market, reflecting the fashionable status and historical exceptionalism of the city as living ruin, and the allure of a scarcity still set apart from the flawed and normative narratives of development, democratization, or global economic integration. (Dopico 2002, 451)

The majority of First World consumers have been almost entirely relieved of seasonality, of distance (once they possess a car) and of scarcity. (Miller 1995a, 6)

The fascination of relative scarcity, modes of non-motorized transportation, and practices that could be interpreted easily as instances of “making-do” (from the vantage point of those accustomed to an abundance of specific-for-this-use consumer goods) proved a temptation hard to resist. Farming with oxen, sides of highways used for the drying of rice, and bathrooms where old phone books served as toilet paper as seen in Figures 17–20 also made comparisons to both the past and other LAW or “Less Affluent World” countries, to use the terminology of Ger and Belk (1996), all too ready and easy. Notions of outhouses and the paper of Sears Roebuck catalogues from a former era in the United States or of a similar practice of rice drying on the highway in China (seen a few years before) were difficult to keep from entering the mind. To imagine that countries follow each other in historical time or that one cultural milieu can exist in a state of some prior historical time of another are forms of conceptual slippage. As anthropologists this is a lesson well-learned and often rehearsed. It was easy to appreciate that farming with oxen



Figure 17



Figure 18



Figure 19



Figure 20

replaced many tractors in the 1990s due to economic hardships faced after the withdrawal of Soviet Union support (Rosset 1998; Warwick 1999). And it was easy to note that the toilet and tiles seemed somehow akin to French bathroom fashions. But rice on the highway in Cuba and in China: how to imagine that it might not have something to do with economic system, i.e., socialism? At the very least the use of oxen for farming, phone books for toilet paper, and highways co-opted for functional uses that had little to do with driving seemed to stem from poverty, from scarcity, from a lack. But this also means that an assumed absence (of something we know, expect, consider important) is supplying the definitional terms. In many ways, then, this again tells us more—or at least as much—about the observer and the observer’s interests than it does about the observed.

As residents of the “More Affluent World” (MAW), we are not accustomed to a general state of consumable scarcity, but of living in a world of goods, even if those goods are not within one’s own personal reach. As professionals who spend much of their time talking with people about the symbolic meanings of goods and brands as they permeate and activate life, the social fact that many goods were not wrapped and surrounded with obvious brand message packaging or with an aura and aspiration of luxury was also striking. Relative scarcity, making-do were clearly themes in our minds as we documented the commerce on a main street in Morón, as seen in Figures 22–30.

Many people live amidst realms of relative scarcity in Cuba. To what extent, though, was it our own picture-taking that further created the view of food and money as a scarce resource? Why the many images of people gazing onto food or money as if it were highly, highly precious, akin to the way a US resident might stare at gems in a Cartier window? Likewise, how do the cultural conceptions and expectations we all



Figure 21

bring to the photographs affect what is seen and read in them? Are the lines akin to the past bread lines of Moscow, so easy for residents of the traditionally capitalist countries to imagine? Or, are they akin to those that currently form for the famed cupcakes at New York City's Magnolia bakery, where no one person is allowed to buy more than a dozen?



Figure 22



Figure 23



Figure 24



Figure 25



Figure 26



Figure 27



Figure 28



Figure 29



Figure 30

Likewise, we initially thought to include a set of photographs taken in Güines (Figures 32–33) that evoke a feel of people's desire for goods as well as a sense of scarcity, rather than Figure 34 of the young market seller in Havana. Is it because the photograph of the seller in the Havana market evoked a sense of plenty as well as indifference to the displayed meat? He requested a copy of the photograph and handed over an e-mail address. Surely there is a story about commerce and connection here as well.

Brand (E)Scapes

Of course, we came to Cuba and Cuba comes to us all with much richer and complicated histories and realities. It is not only photographs, nor is it only immediate experience. We had a prior sense that desired (and basic) items were scarce because of the recommendations of those who had spent time in Cuba of what to take along: Band-Aids, pencils, aspirin, ibuprofen, vitamins, notebooks, soap, shampoo, and so on. We had stocked up at a Miami drugstore before leaving. We also brought coffee, as an earlier trip in 1987 had made it clear that this was a beverage not always readily available. In 2003, for those with dollars to spend, coffee was no longer in scarce supply. Yet in one private home, the home of a physician in Pina, we were given apologies for not having any coffee to offer.

News that Cuba had faced serious economic problems and significant shortages after the break up of the Soviet Union has also been widely reported in the international media. Less well reported, or perhaps less noted, are the economic measures



Figure 31



Figure 32



Figure 33



Figure 34

and agreements put in place under the “Special Period” and other provisions of the 1990s and early 2000s (Dopico 2002; News Bites 2002; Warwick 1999). In October 1990 Fidel Castro declared “a special period in time of peace” meant to address increased hardships encountered after Soviet assistance stopped. In the mid-1990s the US dollar was legalized, foreign investment and joint business ventures were instituted (Canada and countries of Western Europe have been important players), and now there are even agricultural agreements with the United States (Leake 2002).

Although, as Dopico (2002) mentions, the Special Period also ushered in tremendous growth (and an aura of chic) in the global circulation of Cuban imagery by and for scholars, journalists, and tourists (inclusive of Americans in all of the above), the most common aspects of knowledge about Cuba for US citizens are a sense of US-Cuba political differences and trade and travel embargos. Timing of our own trip, in fact, was hastened as new laws put in place by the Bush administration were to go into effect at the start of 2004. These new regulations made it even more difficult for US citizens to travel to Cuba. Yet the word “sense” regarding knowledge of trade and travel is carefully chosen. Little about the specifics, including the aforementioned agricultural agreements, is widely disseminated or known. “Embargo” is what is

known. Thus surprise is a tame word for the shock we had when we realized that the chartered flight we took from Miami was giving out Continental branded boarding passes and using Continental branded planes. One of us is a gold elite member on Continental. It was only half in jest that we asked if frequent flyer miles were available. The agent laughed.

As anthropologists and consumer researchers, the impact and dissemination of brands across national and cultural boundaries is an important and intriguing question (Appadurai 1996; Ger and Belk 1996; Johansson 2004; Ritzer 2000; Solomon 2003). As Americans accustomed to hearing a fairly steady refrain of “no trade with (communist) Cuba,” things like the Continental charter or the Coca-Cola (Figures 35–36) we saw on sale at a highway rest stop were their own humorist tropes of the power, reach, and interests of global commerce as well as human ingenuity and endurance. Do Coke and Sprite arrive via Mexico, the same way that many “illegally” traveling Americans do?

As attuned and interested as we may have been in brands and the cultural interplay of brands, the romance of times past, the allure of scarcity, the revelation of the ingenuity of improvisation still had the ability to cloud vision. Thus, for instance, what does one focus on in the scenes and artifacts depicted in the photographs following. In observation of the actualities as well as observation Figures 37 and 38, does one focus on the age of materials, the improvisation in tools, the ingenuity in keeping things (from cars to the economy) moving or the cargo pants? Does one revel in the age of the car or wonder about just how long Chevrolet has used the brand logo affixed to the rear window and how it got onto that particular car window in any case? Does one question the presence of the VW in Figure 37?

Notions of scarcity (and having witnessed both the need and the use of reflectors on slow vehicles traveling amidst fast moving cars on unlit streets) might have initially made it seem that the Mercedes hubcap on the vehicle depicted in Figure 39 was serving as not much more than a functional reflector and that its irony was solely that. But is this possible? In an age of global and electronic circulation of media (as well as the international visibility of this icon on diplomatic vehicles), how could the affixer not



Figure 35



Figure 36



Figure 37



Figure 38

know the symbolic meanings that circulate around and with this global brand? And is he—or she—not thus also making a contribution to that conversation? Likewise, as we gaze upon the photograph in Figure 40 is it the scarcity and improvisation in the accoutrements for a (long since internationally disseminated) chess game that summons our attention? Or, is it the contemporary fashion statements that also pop up in varied global locations: the backwards baseball cap or the half-shaved, half-saved haircut that can itself be seen as a modification of the once popular (and politically incorrectly named) Mohawk?

Consumers as Producers

As Miller (1995b, 1) has so aptly characterized the contemporary world of consumption, “very little of what we possess is made by us in the first instance” and “to be a consumer is to possess consciousness that one is living through objects and images not of one’s own creation.” In the world of affluence, one often does live through objects not of one’s own creation. This general truth and the implicit comparison to what we saw people doing in Cuba with goods, their improvisations and interactions with things that seemed crucial not only to the maintenance of these as pre-produced goods but also for the actual production of these and other consumables, helped fuel a kind of “romance of the pre-modern.”

But this is a romantic dream state for many reasons. First, it overlooks what Cuban consumers might wish to have—whether originally of their own creation or not. Second, as the work of Miller (1995a, 1995b) has also so clearly shown, it is the implicit notion of a production-alienated person that we have derived from



Figure 39



Figure 40

European philosophical and intellectual traditions that helps fuel the dream. But this notion allows for only a partial appreciation of what it means to be a consumer in places like the United States today. Clearly, brands such as The Home Depot, Hobby Lobby, Crate and Barrel, and Pottery Barn have been successful in the United States *because of* consumers' interests in production. And even when one does not produce the objects and goods that live in and around the home, the office, or on the body, consumers are very actively engaged in creating—in producing—the desired look and effect. Homes and bodies are palettes for creativity; these are sites of production



Figure 41

for consumers in the affluent world even while using goods originally produced by others (see Belk et al. 1991; Curtis 2004; McCracken 1988, 1995; Miller 1987, 2001; Thompson and Hirschman 1998). Finally, romantic dreams of a (pre-modern) way of life as time of production versus life as a mode of consumption glosses over the fact that in a society such as the United States people *are* actively involved in the production of objects and images that they and others live through and with. Imagery as well as many of the consumables (as goods or experiences) for brands such as Disney, Microsoft, Intel, or McDonald's are produced as a result of people's work in the United States.

Taken as a whole, we are all both producers and consumers actively involved in the co-production of consumer goods and experiences through creation, appropriations, resistances, rejections, uses, and in endowments of goods and experiences with meanings—both personal and public. Meanings of goods and brands, and thus in many ways the objects and brands themselves are produced in the conversation, in conjunction, in the interactive webbed connections between “producer” and “consumer” and this is the case for both the more and the less affluent world. There is always more than one side to everything, and usually multiple facets. Thus it is also in the particularity of interaction and the specificity of circumstances—past and present—that the Cuban photos should be seen.

In the End ...

Dopico, quoting Rafael Hernández, invokes the fable of an elephant described by four blind monkeys. Each able to touch and “see” only one part of the elephant, they derived highly diverse conclusions on the overall make-up of an elephant, despite being true to their (own individual) experience and observation. There are many stories that can be—and are—told about Cuba through photographs and otherwise. For those accustomed to the cultural notion of access regulated by money, other means of regulating access readily appear as human rights violations. Our Cuban traveling companion was not allowed to stay in the same hotels as we were, not because of money but because of nationality. Cubans assured us that there were ways around the restrictions, for instance, one must only know the tricks to get to Caya Coco, the upscale barrier island tourist resort officially off-limits to Cuban tourists. Yet in the tired dark of the night in Morón, after it proved so difficult to find an open bed in one of the private homes officially licensed to lodge overnight Cuban travelers (while the large tourist hotel had empty rooms), was it an overwhelming sentiment of the “senseless” restriction of movement and inequality that produced the composition of the photograph that captures the iconicity of apartheid in Figure 43?

Would a photograph in New York, taken with a backdrop of frustration over lack of funds for a few nights at the Four Seasons or Plaza have led instead to a juxtaposition of an expensive hotel or luxurious goods and a homeless person? Either way, the point again is that what we see and what we report—as observers, as researchers, as photographers, as theorists—always depends on the experience as well as prior experience,



Figure 42

with the theoretical conversation one has in the head as well as with one another, with larger symbols, with history, with comparisons, with context. And as with the co-production of goods on the part of consumers, meaning is always reciprocally produced by sender and receiver.

Dopico praises the photographic representation of Cuba achieved by René Burri in *Cuba y Cuba* (1997), a collection that includes black and white photographs from the



Figure 43

1960s and color photographs from the 1980s. Pointing to the merits of on-going relationship, historical memory, reciprocal gaze of those photographed, a focus on everyday pursuits, and composition that allows for context (including potentially distracting context), Dopico (2002, 482–83) finds Burri’s rendering “the most politically intelligent and critically sophisticated” and “his present Cuba ... the most believable, secular, and complicated.”

With our photographs we ultimately wanted to illustrate Cuba as a place where the connections between people was infrastructure, currency, and social exchange. As part of this plan we took photographs of the people who traveled along with us in our rental car: those whose families bartered with and buttered us up when we inquired for a telephone when the car threatened breakdown; and those we took along for a ride on seeing the wave of a hand, or after a nudge from Charley, our Cuban companion. But these photographs show the connection largely as one of wary relationship (Figure 44). This is a connection between people that harbors much ambiguity. It is a form of relationship; it is a kind of connection that exists between people, but only one kind of connection.

Anthropologists have had a long, and often dismissive, relationship with the accounts and activities of tourists and casual travelers (Clifford 1988, 1997; see also Dopico 2002). Ironically, however, among our own photographs, those that in the end seem to tell the richest and fullest tale of Cuba as place of people and things and of connections between people are those that fall most fully into the “tourist snapshot” genre. We went to Cuba to return the ashes of Sunderland’s father to his hometown of Pina. Without people, and their crucial personal interventions, we would not have been able to do so. It is the photographs of friends caught off guard as well as the kinds of stereotypic tourist photos in which people stand together in “here we are in this place” poses that tell the stories of connection. These photographs (Figure 44) document the



Figure 44

people who organized and took part in the official tour, one of the only ways for Americans to travel legally to Cuba, as well as the connection between our friend, Charley, and the two young men, Roberto and Jordan, who late at night guided Charley



Figure 45



Figure 46



Figure 47



Figure 48



Figure 49

through the maze of Morón streets and private hotels, and thereby forged a bond of friendship among us all.

It is the photographs of Charley (Figures 47–48) as he interacted with us, kidding, explaining, guiding us through the process of what we needed to do (as he was doing in the background of Figure 13) that retain the Transtur rent-a-car location, the interaction, the images that do not flatter ourselves, our own image, or our preconceptions. It is also the tourist photographs, for instance Figure 49 showing Charley now back in Havana recounting our adventures to his girlfriend, that show the way that people, ideas, and images leave their trace and enter others' experience, even when not physically present. And that, we hope to have shown, is one of the more illuminating facets of the connections between people and things, and people and people.

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