

ACADEMIC ARTICLE

THE NOSTALGIA OF EMPIRE: TIME TRAVEL IN CUBA

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Abstract

This article examines the representation of present day Cuba in North American popular culture. It interprets documentary sources including blogs, travel guides, television documentaries, newspapers and travel company websites and brochures to establish that Cuba has become primarily a site of nostalgia for North American travellers. It argues that the phenomenon of American wistfulness for Cuba is best understood as a condition associated with the original eighteenth-century explanation of nostalgia: as a pathology, an affective-cognitive experience in the form of an inconsolable yearning for a distant past and a vanished place. In fact, it is not Cuba that is 'stuck in time' but rather American knowledge of Cuba that is 'frozen in a by-gone era': a historically conditioned cultural memory borne of prevailing mid-twentieth-century tropes of empire. As a consequence, the article concludes with a warning that the appeal of this nostalgia-driven time travel will cease to 'work' as a marketing device, whereupon the need to fulfil the expectations created by nostalgia for a dark time in Cuban history may well have unforeseen and unwelcome consequences.

Keywords: nostalgia, classic cars, travel, travel writing, blogging

Part of Cuba's charm is the throwback atmosphere – A cross between 1950s Hollywood and Woody Allen's *Bananas*.

– *USA Today*, 21 March 2016

Now that Americans have access to Cuba, it will be possible to take a quick, fleeting trip back into the 50s.

– Ronan McGrath, 'The Classic Cars of Cuba'

Now that tourism is opening up there, I wanted to make sure I got to see (and photograph) the authentic Cuba before it changes. I wanted to see the classic cars.

– Scott Poupis, 'Interview', 29 December 2016

'Cuba'. What comes to mind? For me, cars. Classic cars. And when I booked my trip to (legally) visit the Caribbean island, it's the first thing I thought of.

'The Cars of Cuba', Flocking Somewhere. Experience. Travel. Blog

How utterly implausible. How does it come to pass that American automobiles from the 1940s and 1950s have been resurrected from the dustbin of planned obsolescence to serve as the dominant iconographic representation of Cuba? 'If you think of Cuba, you think of old cars,' pronounced one commentator. 'The image just appears in your head' (*Qbanews* 2016). Photographer Edin Chavez (n.d.) drew a similar association: 'You immediately think of old cars when you think of Cuba,' he offered. The consensus is striking: Cuba 'has become synonymous with its classic cars' (Adigun n.d.); 'when people around the world think of Cuba, they romantically picture a 50's car' (Cubapop n.d.); 'cars are Cuba's brand' (Quartoknows n.d.).

Implausible indeed. Old American cars as the reason to travel to Cuba: Cuba as the destination, the old cars as the attraction – 'at the top of people's list of Havana highlights', one traveller pronounced (Two For The World 2017). 'The cars are among my most favourite aspects and memory of Cuban culture!!!' blogged Anna Williams (n.d.). 'The most fun I had was riding in the back seat of a 1956 pink and white Ford Fairlane convertible,' Marjorie Arons-Barron (2015) recounted the highlight of her visit to Cuba. Other travellers wrote of riding in a pink 1953 Ford convertible as 'hands down our favorite thing to do in Cuba' (Bertaut and Alexis 2017). 'We took hundreds of pictures and had so much fun,' Maria blogged of her experience in a 1951 Chevrolet:

I think the driver thought we were crazy or something, because we didn't want to see any of the sights he wanted to stop by ... We only wanted him to take pictures of us and the car, and we were laughing so much and having such a great time. (Maria's Adventure 2015)

Photographer Scott Kelby (2014) was eager to photograph a 1953 Chevrolet Bel Air:

When we drove by this building I asked our driver if he would park it right there. I jumped out and started framing up the shot from across the street, but it looked

weird with him sitting in the driver's seat, so I asked if he would step out of the car (and out of the scene) and the scene looked a lot better (well, to me anyway).

Travel writer Nicole Bonaccorso (2017) was most assuredly correct to observe that 'one of Cuba's most popular tourist attractions are the classic cars that fill the streets' – 'an object lusted by every excited tourist' (KEEP CALM and WANDER 2014). The idea of Cuba and the image of the old car appear to have become interchangeable and inseparable – the old car 'embodies the culture of a country' (Song 2017). Cuba is coded as old cars, what makes Cuba Cuba – 'the cars have become a part of Cuba's identity' (Harper 2017) – the means through which the authenticity of Cuba is confirmed. 'The classic cars add tremendously to the Cuban atmosphere' (Tripadvisor n.d.); 'part of Cuba's psychic geography' (Cramer and Cramer 2011: 60). Indeed, without the old cars, Cuba would simply not be Cuba – perhaps not worth visiting at all. 'It ain't Cuba without the classic cars!!!' declared one blogger (Instagram n.d.), 'Vintage cars are a symbol of Cuba today,' Michael Wald (2016) affirmed, and 'definitely add to the charm of what is an otherwise poverty-ridden, economically depressed, island nation'. Without the cars, one traveller posited, Havana 'will become just like another place in the Caribbean' (Fpimages 2015); Cuba without the old cars would 'look like everywhere else', CNN pronounced (CNN 2015); without the cars, surmised one writer, Cubans would 'lose much of the mystic element that sets them apart from other Latin American countries' (Brendel 2016) – a loss, Nigel Hunt (2008) predicted, that would be tantamount to a 'total tourism catastrophe'.

The old cars of Cuba occupy a fixed place in the North American travel imaginary. Photographs of old cars dominate the covers of Cuba tourist guide books.¹ The image of a 1950 Plymouth sedan, or a 1955 Pontiac coupe, or a 1957 Ford Fairlane convertible fill the pages of Cuba travel brochures. The books and articles on the old cars have attained fully the status of a proper literary genre.² Countless numbers of 'cars-of-Cuba' wall calendars are published annually and the production of old-Cuban-car posters has expanded into something of a cottage industry.³ The old cars have served as obligatory background props for American celebrities visiting Cuba: Beyoncé and Jay Z, Madonna, Conan O'Brien, Paris Hilton, Katy Perry and the Kardashians have been drawn to and photographed with the old cars. The lyric of Jackson Browne's 'Going Down to Cuba' warms up to the old car. 'It'll put a smile on your face to see a Chevrolet with a Soviet transmission,' Browne (n.d.) croons. The cars of Cuba have come to American television through the Discovery Channel's 'reality' series, 'American Chrome', produced in Cuba and dedicated to the exploration of 'the fascinating time warp that characterizes Cuban car culture' (Discovery n.d.). In April 2017,

YouTube offered a special documentary, ‘The Cars of Cuba’; within one month, the 30-minute programme had registered almost one million views.

Old-car tours have developed into a signature tourist attraction. ‘Classic Cars – the best way to know Cuba’, advertises one tour agency (ClassiccarsinCuba n.d.); ‘book your ride and live the authentic Cuba!’ importunes a competitor (Almendrón 2017). The Classic Car Tour Agency offers a variety of creative ways to celebrate weddings, birthdays and anniversaries with the old cars:

We offer Classic Cars Caravans, we can be in any kind of event giving you exclusive transfers and arrivals in Classic Cars. We create the offer according to your needs. To accomplish this we have at our disposal a varied Classic Cars fleet, mainly from the 50’s, with different models and colors, all very well preserved, with professional drivers of great experience. (Havana Cuba Classic Cars n.d.)

The Dream Tour Cuba agency offers a special one-day ‘classic-cars-of-Cuba’ excursion package:

There is no country in the world, not even America, where more classic American cars (and trucks) are still being driven everyday. This tour is for the car enthusiast, antique-interested persons, or anyone who would take pleasure in the riding in, and even driving, classic vehicles. During this tour you will have the opportunity to physically examine, and even drive, a number of classic cars. You will also be delighted to obtain photographs of these car with YOU in the driver’s seat. (Dreamtourcuba n.d.)

‘There is nothing like taking an old American car to the beach in Havana,’ touted one tour operator. ‘Nothing beats going to the beach in your own 1950’s convertible. Wind in your hair, blue skies, crystal blue water, sun everywhere and a little shade under a pine tree with a *mojito* in your hand’ – and to the point: ‘Driving a classic fifties car is the ultimate Cuban experience’ (Americancarcuba n.d.).

The ‘ultimate Cuban experience’ is thus offered as a matter of transport. But the matter of transport is far more complicated than ‘going to the beach in your own 1950’s convertible’. Transport in this instance implies less a spatial conveyance than a temporal experience, for inscribed into the promise of the old cars is the premise of time travel. ‘More than 50 years of isolation from the rest of the world has forced the city to seem frozen in time,’ the Classic American Car Tour explains. ‘When people visit Havana they feel as if they have traveled back in time to the 40’s or 50’s. This marvellous journey will be unforgettable when you take a ride in a Classic American Car’ (Havanaclassiccartour n.d.).

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After a 60-year hiatus, the Americans have returned to Cuba. The resumption of US–Cuba diplomatic relations announced in December 2014 was followed by a swell of American travel not seen since the 1950s – some 300,000 in 2016, the Cuban Ministry of Tourism reported in 2017 (Cubadebate 2017). And for many, the experience of Cuba has produced paroxysms of nostalgia. An odd development indeed: a sentimental affinity for a place never before visited. ‘I feel certain that I’ve lived here before! Perhaps in another life, or in a parallel life, but I feel certain that I’ve been here before,’ M.C. Mars (2015) was convinced. ‘You know that extended déjà vu feeling which has you feeling like you’ve somehow interacted with something or you’ve been to a place, yet you know there is no chance you could ever have been there?’ one enthralled traveller rhapsodised upon arriving to Havana. ‘Well that’s something which makes a place such as Cuba special to the nostalgia-seeking traveler’ (Dining-guide 2017).

The experience of Cuba as a ‘déjà vu feeling’ presents an arresting proposition: how to explain the sensation of wistful familiarity with a place unrelated to actual memory. Cuba entered the post-December 2014 American imagination as a country ‘frozen in time’, contained within itself: a place contained inside the past and suspended outside the world, by-passed by time and passed over by progress, ‘a country where life seems to have stopped some decades ago’, Martino Fagioli (2001: 9, 16, 20) pronounced. ‘Havana lies 90 miles south and 50 years from the Florida coast,’ Ronan McGrath (2008) offered. Cuba depicted variously as ‘the country time forgot’ (Cotter 2016: 15); a ‘well-preserved time capsule’ (Cultural Explorations 2016); ‘stuck in time’ (Moran 2015); a ‘one-of-a-kind yesteryear’ (*InsightCuba* 2016); ‘a culture where time stood still’ (*Montage Magazine* 2016); ‘frozen in a bygone era’ (Ietravel 2016a). ‘Fancy going back in time but can’t quite afford a new flux capacitor for your DeLorean?’ quipped one blogger. ‘Then why not pay the beautiful island nation of Cuba a visit, a country which has been virtually stranded in suspended animation for the past fifty years’ (StumpyVision 2017).

Time travel has developed into the principal representational motif of the experience of Cuba: to be lifted aloft and transported into the past, not exactly H.G. Wells’ time machine, but almost: Cuba as ‘a time travel country’ (Privatephotoreview 2016) – where visitors imagine themselves as a ‘voyager in time’ (Mandel 2013) or ‘a time-traveler’ (Untappedcities 2012). To arrive to Cuba has been likened variously to ‘a total trip back in time’ (Autoscrazy 2017); ‘a feeling of being thrown back in time’ (Hatfield 2014); ‘taking a huge step back in time’ (Belanger 2014). ‘I think that my trip there is the closest to time travel that I will ever experience,’ blogged one traveller. To recall a time past in a different location, ‘I felt I was transported to not another part of the world but to

another era in time,' one traveller recounted. 'The moment you get off the plane and are hit with that massive heat, you feel as though the airwaves are gently guiding you back in time' (Psychologistmimi 2015).

To undertake time travel is not a random excursion into the past, however, for the appeal of 'stepping back in time' is associated with a specific temporal destination, to the 1950s, years many Americans remember with a fuzzy fondness, memories that expand easily into a full-blown ecstasy of nostalgia. To visit Cuba is to board 'a time machine with the dial set to the 1950s', the Cuba Explorer (2016) Tour advertised, 'truly traveling back to the 1950s' (Redmediagroup 2016). Travel to Cuba has assumed the form of nostalgia tourism writ large, experienced as a 'nostalgic postcard vibe' (It's Stunning Here 2016); a place to 'escape into the nostalgia of the 1950s' (Elevatedestinations 2017); to 'find 1950s nostalgia' (Selectedmoments n.d.). Americans overcome by 'a wave of nostalgia' for Havana of the 1950s (Park 2016). 'I got a wave of nostalgia that never let up the entire time we were there,' wrote one traveller (Landry 2017). And another, 'I have traveled here for a nostalgia high' (NDTV 2016).

The phenomenon of American wistfulness for Cuba is best understood as a condition associated with the original eighteenth-century explanation of nostalgia: as a pathology, an affective-cognitive experience in the form of an inconsolable yearning for a distant past and a vanished place. In fact, it is not Cuba that is 'stuck in time' but rather American knowledge of Cuba that is 'frozen in a by-gone era': a historically conditioned cultural memory borne of prevailing mid-twentieth-century tropes of empire. It is American nostalgia that stands outside of time. The discursive logic of empire possesses a proper history, of course. It evolved as an organic ideology, as warrant for the privileged American presence in Cuba, adapting over time, as needed, to changing historical circumstances, until it was overtaken by the contradictions of its own making – and could no longer adapt, in 1959, whereupon it 'froze'.

The Americans return to Cuba with a presumption of familiarity, principally in the form of old knowledge with antecedents deep in the colonial ethnographies of the nineteenth century. Cuba again passes under the colonial gaze as the tropical Other: variously described as one of the 'exotic locations' of the world (Penn State Alumni Association 2016); a 'seductive Caribbean island' (Intrepidtravel 2016); 'a mysterious tropical paradise' (Havanaclassiccartour n.d.); a 'wild sensual island' (*CubaExplorer* 2016); 'dark and mysterious, yet exotic and alluring' (Bernardo 2003); 'Havana that American tourists dream of – romantic, mysterious, and forbidden' (Voanews 2016); 'On this far-away island visitors can immerse yourself in the lush and exotic' (*Artnet* 2016).

Knowledge of Cuba dwells within the residual traces of the neo-colonial memory – a country, travel writer Basil Woon described as early as 1928, 'so

completely exotic that [Americans] may be as superior as they please' (1928: 3–4). The collective memory recalls Cuba as it existed during the halcyon days of empire, not as a matter of theory but as an embodied reality, experiences and encounters from which Americans assemble their knowledge of Cuba. The nostalgia of time travel is not without a point of view, or perhaps better said, not without a politics, and never more so than when privilege is absently assumed as normal: Cuba as a cabaret and casino, a good liberty port, a place for escape and escapades, understood by the Americans as licence for indulgence and entitlement, an opportunity for excess and abandon, of glamour and glitz so very much enjoyed as the prerogative of empire, a time when the Americans had run of the place, before Fidel Castro arrived and spoiled everything – and 'life seemed to have stopped'.

The plausibility of time travel implies susceptibility to self-delusion and self-indulgence, of course, enacted as performance of self-serving myth, to push historical time back to the point at which the Americans enjoyed an unchallenged presence, back to the point where ignorance assumed the form of innocence, and thereupon transmuted into the spurious memory by which Cuba is 'remembered'. American knowledge of Cuba totalised out of the 1950s tourist experience, 'frozen' at a historical moment: a coarse and vulgar tourism given principally to commercialised vice overseen by syndicates of organised crime, a time Andrei Codrescu referred to as 'the heyday of American good living in Cuba, when the whole country was a cheap and bountiful mistress' (1998: 35). The received memory is glazed over with a veiled haziness that serves to filter out some of the more egregious facets of the American presence in Cuba during the 1950s, ignoring too that it was precisely this presence that contributed to the conditions that produced the Cuban revolution.

About 60 years later, the Americans return to Cuba bearing nostalgic memory with the desire to experience that remembered past – to visit the 'famous nightspots and hotels of [Havana's] swinging era just before the Cuban revolution' (Harvard Alumni Association 2016) and to visit Cuba 'steeped in 1950s charm' (Extraordinaryjournneys 2017). Americans fancy the idea that it 'is still possible to travel back in time' to return to Cuba of the 1950s, 'and feel like a 50s Hollywood diva in the enormous back seat of a Cadillac, a Buick or a Studebaker' (TheCubanHistory 2016). 'If you long to return to the 1950s', suggested one blogger, 'now is a good time to live out this fantasy before it becomes modernized' (Artnet 2016). Board a flight of fantasy, one travel agency exhorted, to return 'back to the 50s, to live the experience', adding: 'Havana may remind you of ... the 1950s vacation you had always wanted to have' (Cuba Havana Tours n.d.). 'I kinda really wanna to go to Cuba,' yearned one blogger, 'it would be like stepping back into the 50's' (Crimsonhexagon n.d.).

To travel to Cuba ‘frozen’ at mid-century offers the opportunity to experience the ‘nostalgia for the island’s glamorous heyday’ (Ican Holidays n.d.). The present–past time-travel continuum is explicit: it is the advertised charm of Cuba. ‘Journey to Cuba and step back in time into a vibrant, spellbinding world of years gone by’, promised ECE (Enriching Cultural Experiences) Travel Service (Autoscrazy 2017). ‘Hark back to a grander time’, exhorts one travel writer (CNN 2015), and GeoEx (2016) Tours promised to reveal Cuba’s ‘glorious past’. The ‘biggest selling point’ for travel to Cuba? Erika Skogg wrote for *National Geographic*: ‘If you have ever wanted to time travel back to the 1950s (in style), visit Havana’ (Skogg 2015). ‘Ahhh, such an amazing vibe,’ exulted one blogger upon arriving to Havana, with sights ‘that transport you to the good old days of Cuba’ (Dragonflyzephyr 2012).

Time travel is filled with anticipation of the past. Berit Baugher (2017) was thrilled ‘to follow the boozy footsteps of Ernest Hemingway’, while Paul Santana (2015)

imagined what it was like back in the 1950s, when Americans traveled to the island freely, mobster and celebrities frequented the now famous Hotel Nacional, and La Tropicana performed its nightly cabaret. It was a time when Ernest Hemingway, one of Cuba’s most famous American guests, could be found downing rum drinks at La Floridita while contemplating his next literary offering.

Enchanting indeed to re-enact the privileged presence of the 1950s, when it was the playground of celebrities and movie stars – ‘a throwback to a time when the rich and famous partied here’, mused one traveller (Mallory on Travel 2012). ‘Famous visitors like Frank Sinatra, Rita Hayworth, and Ernest Hemingway’, Chelsie Fish (2016) wrote of her visit to Havana, ‘romanticizing and glorifying the city at the same time. All memorialized in a deal of nostalgia which have fixated the imaginations of every generation to come after them. Myself included. To be there didn’t even feel possible’. A ‘James Dean moment’, one blogger exulted as he described his ride in an old convertible along the Malecón, ‘soaking in the moment, like fifty years back in time – this was EXACTLY what I hoped Cuba was gonna be like’ (One Step 4ward n.d.). Howard Saunders (2016) climbed into a 1959 Chevrolet Impala convertible and ‘for a moment there I actually felt like a 1950s movie star’. To experience Cuba of the 1950s,

Step into Cuba’s most illustrious bars, drive around in timeless classic cars that take you back to another era ... Follow in the footsteps of Hemingway, Sinatra, Gary Cooper, and Tennessee Williams. Sit in the Tropicana and imagine Nat ‘King’ Cole singing into the hot Havana night. Sip on a daiquiri and see where Hemingway toiled away at his novels ... Visit La Bodeguita del Medio. La Bodeguita’s claim to

fame lies in being one of Hemingway's endorsed haunts where he discovered the mojito ... Stepping into La Bodeguita means you'll be swilling some rum where Hemingway wasn't the only famous patron. Joe DiMaggio, Nat 'King' Cole, Frank Sinatra, [and] Marilyn Monroe also found their way here ... We'll stop by another of Hemingway's illustrious watering holes: El Floridita. Hemingway sat in a corner seat, drank daiquiris, and conceived then wrote *For Whom the Bell Tolls* there. Hemingway must have been a trend setter because the bar also saw visits from Ava Gardner, Tennessee Williams, Spencer Tracy, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Gary Cooper ... Hemingway drank here a lot and drank a lot here. Have a daiquiri and see if you feel some literary inspiration yourself. (Cuba Unbound n.d.)

This is empire as folklore, to look back to a time/a place where mobsters and movie stars were themselves once tourist attractions in Cuba. Their ghosts continue to serve as tourist attractions – just like the old cars: the Americans visiting themselves in Cuba. It is more than a gaze: it is to gawk at the past as in once-upon-a-time-Cuba-was-so-cool. Nostalgia offers a way to confront history as a self-centred experience, to claim whose story is being told. The re-opening of the renovated 1957 Hotel Capri was celebrated as an important addition to the mid-twentieth-century ambience, to recreate the time when actor George Raft served as host of the gambling casino operated by mobster Santo Trafficante. 'The Hotel Capri is a product of the roaring 50s,' advertised one hotel-booking agency. 'Its art nouveau design and clear 50s character makes a perfect fit for those visiting Havana to reminisce' (Hotel Bookings Havana n.d.). The Hotel Riviera offered a similar 'perfect fit' in which to reminisce. 'It hasn't really been updated since the mid'50s,' blogged one traveller

so just walking around feels like magical time travel is taking place. A lot of American mobsters used to gamble and hang here, so I stood at the three story diving board at the pool for an age just trying to imagine a scene from the '50s where Nat King Cole was taking a dip. Literally the best thing. (Woodnot photography 2016)

Guests who stayed at the Hotel Nacional were almost giddy with their experience, commenting on a Hotel Nacional blog site: 'it's easy to see how the stars and gangsters of the 50s enjoyed themselves here'; 'just like the country, it's like stepping back 50 years, you could almost imagine Frank Sinatra and Ava Gardner walking through the lobby'; 'loved the 50s!' To which Antonio Martínez Rodríguez, the General Director of the Hotel Nacional, responded: 'Thank you for sharing your opinion about Hotel Nacional de Cuba ... We invite you to return to the 50s.'

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For many Americans of the aging baby-boom generation, the experience of Cuba lays bare existential encounters with the 1950s, the angst of nostalgia for a time past long ago, remembered with fondness and associated with the innocence of adolescence, a happy time untroubled by history. This is the nostalgia of the last generation to live within Pax Americana as the natural order of things, hardly noticed at the time except as a confirmation that all was right in the world: just part of the way things were. Cuba ‘frozen in time’ serves as something of a surrogate, a stand-in for the lost American past: ‘Cuba will remind you of a simpler time that is a distant memory to American culture’ (Holacubatours 2017); ‘a 50-year step-back for Americans visiting, an exhilarating throwback to simpler times’ (Visiblyme 2016); ‘a place that reminds you of simpler times’ (Redmediagroup 2016). Joyce Landry relived ‘memories of car trips in the 50’s in the old purple Chevy, and a throwback to a more genial time – slower, more deliberate, and somehow richer’ (Landry 2017). Carla Gardina Pastana rhapsodised about ‘feeling nostalgic about Cuba’, a feeling she attributed to ‘our feeling nostalgia for the mid-century U.S’ and imagined her visit to Cuba as if ‘to visit 1950s America’ (Gardina Pestana 2016). ‘Cuba holiday makers’, reflected Emma Lelliott (n.d.):

feel they have stepped into a time warp to that perhaps more innocent age, when Americans sported prim and proper outfits and drove shiny, sparkly-wheeled cars in brilliant colors with fins and chrome bumpers. The cars made driving feeling special ... A time when people were able to take their time and enjoy the good things in life.

‘Present-day Cuba gave me a longing and nostalgia for a time in American history I hadn’t ever experienced’, blogged Emily Braden (2016). Ralph Obenauf (2016) expressed surprise that the nostalgia of Cuba ‘was beyond my expectations’, and to the point:

For me it was taking a step back to my youth. It was like the 1950’s in Pittsburgh ... Soot spewing from the steel mills, kids enjoying a pick-up ballgame in alleyways, people gathering on their front steps and street corners to converse with their neighbors.

For Americans too young to indulge a personal nostalgia of the 1950s, Cuba evokes a fake nostalgia sustained through popular cultural products, principally Hollywood films about the 1950s. Cuba insinuates itself easily into the cinematography of the American imagination: ‘As we stroll these streets [of Havana],’ the International Expeditions commented in wonderment, ‘it is like being on a

movie set' (Ietravel 2016). An instance in which life imitates art: 'traveling across Cuba today you could easily believe you were living in a 1950s movie' (Vernon-Powell 2016); Havana 'seems trapped in time like a 1950s movie stage set' (Baker n.d.); the old cars 'make you feel like you're in a 1950s movie set' (America Arias 2016); 'walking in every city is like being in a 1950s movie' (Modeling the SP 2015); Cuba 'looks like something straight out of a 1950s movie' (Buddingnomads 2017). 'I felt like I was in a movie,' Katie Thompson (2015) recounted her experience in an old car. This is Cuba as if a 'Hollywood set of Happy Days' (Nashen 2017); Cuba 'truly gladdened the heart with images of Happy Days swirling around' (Globalgary 2017).

It is in this sense that the old cars elicit powerful emotions and serve as a captivating marketing device for an American demographic. The old cars resonate as a source of wistful memories of baby boomers, associated with coming of age: memories of drive-in movies, of petting in the back seat, of the exhilaration associated with owning one's first car. 'Welcome back to the 50's!' exulted one traveller, for whom 'one of the definite highlights of the trip was the chance to be surrounded by, and even ride in, countless cars of our baby boomer youth' (Topretirements 2014). Mary Stachnik could hardly contain her excitement at the sight of the old cars, 'mind-blowing relics of an affectionately remembered era'. She continued,

The rush of nostalgia in seeing the old cars was a delight beyond expectations ... I was like a kid in a candy store ... Back then, you dated up a storm, and it helped if the guy had a great looking car. I rode in many of those same cars when they were new. (Cogswell 2015)

Teresita Abad Doebley (2012) commented on how many in her tour group 'were really reliving their pasts ... I felt like I was an actress in an old movie, the setting equally as old or older' (Doebley 2012). 'It's like walking down memory lane seeing all those cars right from my childhood in the 1950s', Erica Elliott (2015) recalled. 'Every day was a classic car show', blogged Rich Mancini (2012), 'and every evening like "cruise night" at a 50s-era drive-in'.

This is Cuba as catharsis, the old cars as an emotional encounter. Shirley Showalter (2015) was drawn to the old cars because

they remind me of Daddy, who died in 1980 and could express love for cars almost better than love for his family ... I brought Daddy with me to Cuba in my heart and eyes! That's why I peered out of the windows for every old car I could see ... That's why I wanted to bring back paintings of cars I could hang on the wall. I wanted to remember Cuba. But all along I was remembering Daddy.

And the emotion of coming upon the cherished first-owned car. ‘I felt as if I had been transported right back to my teenage years in 1950s Indiana,’ wrote Jerry Edgerton. ‘A red-and-white Chevrolet glistened in the parking lot, flanked by a two-tone 1954 Buick and a blue 1954 Plymouth. But it got even better when at last I spotted a version of the very first car I ever owned: a well-used 1949 Ford’ (Edgerton 2016). David Cogswell recognised a 1957 black Ford Fairlane – ‘the first car that I owned’, adding: ‘This was no mere car, it was a tangible relic that served as a nostalgia trigger to thrust me vividly back to a period of my life that is mostly forgotten, the year I had that old black Ford’ (Cogswell 2015). ‘One of the fun experiences while traveling around Cuba recently was seeing all the old cars of my youth ...’, one blogger recounted. ‘And last but certainly not least, my one and only “put me to sleep” dream that carried a young man through high school and well into college. A 1955 Chevrolet Bel Air convertible’ (LaComb 2017).

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The paradigm of time travel serves to exalt circumstances of changelessness as a desirable condition, of a people uncorrupted by the bane of chain stores, fast-food restaurants, and shopping malls, uncontaminated by global market forces – ‘a culture before it becomes tainted from the outside world’ (Lenhart 2015)– to be preserved to satisfy American nostalgic longings for an idealised past. ‘I hope Cuba would never change ...’, artist Tracie Lee Hawkins fretted:

My hope is that it will remain the only place on Earth with no fast-food restaurants, franchises, modern buildings, or new cars. While I support Cuba’s desire to improve the lives of its people, I see real value in preserving the richness and beauty of its environment remaining untouched by modern society. (Lee Hawkins 2017)

The arrogance of nostalgia is arresting ... ‘Imagine a nation still pristine and innocent – where strip malls, billboards, neon lights, McDonald and Starbucks are absent’, extolls one tour operator (*CubaExplorer* 2016). (To visit Cuba before the arrival of McDonald’s and Starbucks is to experience the ‘pristine’ time of Woolworth’s, Nedicks, and Howard Johnson.) The delight of Cuba is inscribed into a condition of changelessness – ‘the most beautiful aspect of Cuba is undoubtedly the fact time stood still’ (Every Day Is a Saturday 2016); ‘the charm and intrigue of Cuba’ due to the fact that it is ‘stuck in time’, ‘with few shops [and] no global brands’ (*Daily Mail* 2014); ‘the unchanged 50’s lifestyle that makes Cuba so unique’ (Crimsonhexagon n.d.) – thereupon to serve what journalist Steven Rattner (2016) envisioned as ‘the ultimate tourist destination – a theme park that is not merely a collection of facades’.

But the post-December 2014 master travel narrative implies a far more insidious message, for the proposition of Cuba as ‘so unique’ as a function of ‘the unchanged 50’s’ serves to fix the ‘essence’ of Cuba as a condition of a mid-twentieth-century world order. The future so desired by Cubans is perceived as a threat to the past so celebrated by the Americans, who in the guise of disinterested solicitude protest that change and transition threaten the existence of the ‘real’ Cuba: ‘catch Cuba before it changes forever [and] you’ll be able to catch the real Cuba now before commercialism takes over’ (Jaffe n.d.); ‘the real Cuba is disappearing – go now’ (KLM n.d.). Threatened, too, is the ‘authentic’ Cuba: ‘there is an urgent need to go see the authentic Cuba before it changes’ (Leong 2017); ‘enjoy the authentic Cuba right now – before it changes forever’ (Friendly Planet 2015); ‘you can still see and experience the authentic and sensual Cuba before it is too late to experience it as it is’ (Latin America Journeys n.d.); ‘we know that the authentic Cuba, which has stolen the hearts of visitors for many years, will begin to disappear ... If we want to experience the Cuba of legend, it must be done, now’ (All Things Cruise 2015). Photographer Kevin Slack (2015) travelled to the island to photograph ‘Cuba’s endangered authenticity’ and before ‘Cuba lost its innocence’. Change will doom Cuba – ‘get to Cuba before it loses its 1950s nostalgia’ (Kahn 2015) – whereupon it was ‘almost bound to become like any other place in the world’ (Scarlet Jones Travels 2016); once Cuba ‘opens up to the world, much of what made it unique [will be] lost’ (UCLA Alumni Association 2017). Visit Cuba ‘before it changes too much’, exhorts Fodor’s, ‘and just becomes another Caribbean vacation island’ (Fodors 2016). Change will result in Cuba ‘losing its character’ (Cogswell 2015). The moral was plain: ‘See Cuba while it’s still Cuba’ (Akman 2016).

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There is a dark anomaly to the representations by which Cuba serves to gratify American nostalgia, of course, for the conditions over which Americans was nostalgic are in fact manifestations of an economy in disarray. Decades of withering American economic sanctions have combined with years of Cuban economic mismanagement to reduce the economy to a condition of utter prostration. This is Cuba mired in circumstances of unrelenting hardship offered as a source of nostalgic delight and photogenic objects of the sightseer gaze – ‘everything is ridiculously photogenic’, pronounces one photographer (Allen 2015) – a people living under impoverished material circumstances whose plight as a historical condition is marketed as a sightseeing attraction. Nostalgia tourism serves to fetishise poverty, to render the economic adversity of the many for the pleasure of the few.

The modifications of US travel regulations announced in June 2017 change little of the travel narrative. On the contrary, that organised ‘people-to-people’

tour groups remain as the only authorised US travel mode implies renewed competition among travel providers and tourist agencies to market Cuba as a travel destination within the narrative of time travel and the sub-text of ‘visit Cuba before it changes’.

Nostalgia has developed as the principal mode through which Americans mediate their encounter with the Cuban reality. It enables Americans to see through the foreground of the chronic hardship of the Cuban present to alight on the background of the ‘good old days’ of the Cuban past. The 1950s as the ‘good old days’ is uniquely an American memory of Cuba; the Cuban memory recalls the 1950s as a time of hardship. One cannot but pause to ponder the meaning of the following depiction of Cuba: ‘Life on the island resembles a time capsule from the past. It is like an anachronism from the 1940s and 1950s which adds to constructing a sweet, nostalgic, cinematic ambiance’ (Ioannasakellarakis 2017). ‘Cuba is fantasy island,’ pronounced one blogger – what could this possibly mean? It is difficult indeed to imagine what *Wanderlust* (2015) travel magazine had in mind when it pronounced that the present is a ‘great time to experience Cuba in all its glory’. ‘Pristine and nostalgic for simpler times?’, rhapsodised one traveller in 2016. ‘There’s something magical and nostalgic about the current state of Cuba’ (Escape Brooklyn 2016). Surely, few Cubans would describe the ‘current state of Cuba’ as ‘something magical and nostalgic’.

It bears mention too that the State is a compliant collaborator with and complicit in the enterprise of a tourist paradigm of a people ‘frozen’ in the 1950s. A cash-starved and credit-hungry Cuban government lends its resources to the restoration of the trappings of the pre-revolutionary past as a ready source of foreign exchange. Ironic indeed that the ‘décor’ of the very past repudiated by the revolution has been restored in the name of the revolution.

Nostalgia is a phenomenon of the imagination, of course, but often with real consequences. Nostalgia longs for coherence and continuity between past and present, for yearnings associated with looking backward lead easily enough to yearnings that inform looking forward. At some point, in the not too distant future, the appeal of a nostalgia-driven time travel will cease to ‘work’ as a marketing device, whereupon the need to fulfil the expectations created by nostalgia for a dark time in Cuban history may well have unforeseen and unwelcome consequences.

Notes

1. See the cover of Francis Smith, *Explore Cuba: The Best of Havana, Varadero and Viñales* (2016); the cover of Christopher Baker, *Top 10 Cuba: Eyewitness Top 10 Travel Guide* (2014) features a 1958 Chevrolet while the cover of *Rough Guides Snapshot Cuba: Havana* (2017) shows a 1956 Chevrolet.

2. For books, see Cristina García, Joshua Greene and D. C. Allen, *Cars of Cuba* (New York, 1995); Simon Bell, *Chariots of Chrome: Classic American Cars of Cuba* (Boston, 2004); Christopher Baker, *Cuba Classics: A Celebration of Vintage American Automobiles* (Oxford, 2004); Richard Schweid, *Che's Chevrolet, Fidel's Oldsmobile: On the Road in Cuba* (Chapel Hill, 2008); Martin Bowman, *Cuba, Cars and Cigars: Classic 1950s American Automobiles* (Oxford, 2013); Wayne Gerard Trotman, *Classic Cars of Cuba* (2015); Tom Cotter, *Cuba's Car Culture: Celebrating the Island's Automotive Love Affair* (Minneapolis, 2016); Rainer Floer and Harri Morick, *Cuba Cars: Classic Cars of the Caribbean* (Bielefeld, 2017). For articles, see Jeffrey S. Smith, Charles O. Collins, and Jennine Pettit, 'Cacharros: The Persistence of Vintage Automobiles in Cuba', *Focus on Geography* 56 (Spring 2013): 1–7; Reif Larsen, 'A Short History of Cars in Cuba', *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 90 (Spring 2014): 24–25; Jerry Edgerton, 'Wayback Machines: The Classic Cars of Cuba', *MoneyWatch*, 22 March, 2016, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/wayback-machines-the-classic-cars-of-cuba/>; Bob Ames, 'The Cars of Cuba: Photos and Stories from Havana', 20 December, 2011, <https://www.hagerty.com/articles-videos/articles/2011/12/20/the-cars-of-cuba/>; Kay Albert, 'The Amazing Classic Cars of Cuba', 24 January, 2017, <http://autoscrazy.com/2017/01/24/the-amazing-classic-cars-of-cuba/>.
3. For calendars see 'Cars of Cuba Wall Calendar', <http://www.calendars.com/Cars-of-Cuba-Wall-Calendar/prod201700006239/>; 'Cuba Classic Car Calendar 2018: Classic Cars on Cuba Streets', <http://www.latinamericafocus.com/cuba-classic-car-calendar-2017-7531/>; '2017 Cars of Cuba 16-Month Calendar', https://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_sb_noss?url=search-alias%3Daps&field-keywords=Calendars+cars+of+Cuba. For posters see 'Cuba Car Posters', <https://fineartamerica.com/shop/posters/cuba+car>; 'Old Cars in Cuba Posters', <https://www.zazzle.com/old+cars+in+cuba+posters>; 'Classic American Car at Dawn, Havana, Cuba', <https://www.redbubble.com/people/buttonpresser/works/5368628-classic-american-car-at-dawn-havana-cuba?p=poster>. Amazon.com offers almost 200 calendars of cars-of-Cuba calendars. See https://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_sb_noss?url=search-alias%3Daps&field-keywords=cars+of+cuba+calendar.

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