

On Walker Evans' *Havana Citizen*, 1933.

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On a spring morning in 1933, Walker Evans strolled the streets of Havana with a camera in hand, “dressed in a lightweight suit, straw boater, and a pair of perfectly round glasses.”¹ Around mid-day, given the light in the photograph, he shot one of the most iconic photos of his brief visit: *Havana Citizen*,² which genesis and iconography I would like to explore.³

Walker Evans acquired the theoretical framework for his future photographic vision in 1926-27 Paris reading French literature, particularly Charles Baudelaire (his concept of modernity and the flâneur) and Gustave Flaubert (detached realism); he became smitten by photography in New York City 1928-32; and matured his craft during a three weeks working visit to Havana. Early in 1933 he accepted an offer from the J. B. Lippincott publishing company to photograph life in Cuba under the dictatorship of President Gerardo Machado. The photos were for a polemical book, entitled *The Crime of Cuba*, by the leftist journalist Carleton Beals. Machado was elected President in 1925 with the full backing of the United States and in 1929, as Cuba’s economy staggered due to the global depression, he extended his term in office and his power. By 1930, a forceful and wide opposition led by university students took to the streets to depose him. Machado fought back with increasing violence. Civil war broke out in Cuba reaching a fierce climax in the spring and summer of 1933. Under tremendous pressure from the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration and an ever-widening relentless opposition, Machado resigned on August 12 and flew to Miami.

Evans accepted Lippincott’s offer on his own terms. He made his intention clear from the beginning: “I am not illustrating a book, I’d like to just go down there and make some pictures but don’t tell me what to do.”⁴ The closest he came to show the violence in the streets under the repressive Machado dictatorship was to appropriate a few graphic photos from newspaper archives and include them in his final selection for the book. His own work in Havana consists of portraits, such as that of José Antonio *Fernández de Castro* (1887 – 1951), a Cuban journalist who was one of his main contacts and whose photo has been widely reproduced, but never before identified.⁵ He also photographed cityscapes, sometimes reduced to a sign on a wall, a few landscapes, and for the most part people in the streets, like the print *Havana Citizen*. He used two cameras, a medium format 2 ½ x 4 ¼ for hand-held shots and a 6 ½ x 8 ½ with tripod for deliberate static compositions. He took some 400 photographs and published 31, which he chose and organized for Beals’ book.

Evans was highly conscious that he had arrived in Cuba at a time of political strife and street violence, “... I did land in Havana in the midst of a revolution.”⁶ He described the city as “half savage, forgetful and unsafe.”⁷ His words reflect excitement and apprehension, which may have contributed to his attentiveness to every detail of the city as seen in the photographs: the eclectic architecture, myriad of signs, murals, multi-racial citizenry, the

¹ Belinda Rathbone, *Walker Evans, A Biography*, Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1995, p. 80.

² I use the title given in Gilles Mora, *Walker Evans: Havana 1933*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1989. Most complete book on Evans work in Havana.

³ Thanks to Giraldo Cruz Tápanes for helping me to gather information for this essay and for feedback on the identity of Evans’ *Havana Citizen*.

⁴ Thompson, Jerry L. *Walker Evans at Work*. (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1982): 82.

⁵ Mora, 34.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁷ Rathbone, 80.

street atmosphere, incandescent light at mid-day, and even the designed-tiles of Spanish descent he walked on under the arcades in the central part of the city.

As usual at that time in his career, Evans was prone to strolling, being a *flâneur*, and taking multiple views of a scene in one encounter. “It is impossible to say what went on in his mind, but his work shows he frequently found that more than one exciting picture could be made during a single encounter with a subject.”⁸ One day on his brief visit Evans walked under one of the many arcades that characterize the center of the city (*Centro Habana*), offering protection to pedestrians from the relentless sunlight and bursts of rain so that they could leisurely window shop, eat and drink coffee in restaurants open to the arcade, buy a newspaper or magazine, shine their shoes, or just people watch. On that particular stroll, he joined the crowd of people, took in the myriad of sights, sounds, and smells, actively discovering the place and looking for the subject of his next photograph. This he found in the interception of Belascoain and Reina streets.⁹ There he came upon a shoeshine chair and newspaper stand, its young workers bored, reading newspapers as they waited for customers. There he took the first of a series of at least three photos. The print, entitled *Havana Shopping District*, (fig. 1) shows the side of a young man with a wooden leg sitting and reading a newspaper. His partner, a child, sits at the bottom of the chair and looks at Evans, raising his right hand to his head, seemingly curious. The overlapping of the two figures has the rigor of a cubist composition. Looming next to the shoeshine chair is a newspaper and magazine stand showing the covers of wide circulation newspapers, like *El País* and Cuban weeklies, such as *Carteles* and *Bohemia*. Crowning the stand is a Coca-Cola sign. This is a small but fitting symbol of Beals’ complaint of U.S. imperialism. The counterpoint of figures and signs, organic and geometric forms, light and dark areas make for an eye-catching image. One that, upon noticing, subtly suggests the gap that exists in modern cities between the realities of the working poor and the alluring fantasy of advertisement.

After the first shot, Evans turned his head to the left, pointed his lens towards the sidewalk and took a photo of three Havana citizens (fig. 2). This one shows, slightly from the back and left side, a slender Afro-Cuban man dressed in an immaculate white linen suit and boater hat. He is framed by the same newspaper stand of the previous shot, and by two look-alike rotund men in dark suits and boaters.

Evans then moved into the sidewalk and took one more photo of the scene. The last shot, which resulted in the photo *Havana Citizen*, (fig. 3) is an early manifestation of Evans’ stealth and feel for stance, framing, and light, all in a moments notice.

The figure of the Afro-Cuban citizen projects a strong presence due to its classical contrapposto pose, the dramatic black and white contrast of skin and suit, the man’s impeccable dress down to the sparkling recently shined shoes, and the intimate yet distanced view of the subject, who is looking intensely and suspiciously in the general direction of the photographer, but not at him.

⁸ Thompson, 10.

⁹ Found the location where photo was taken in José Toirac & Meira Marrero, *Orbis: Homenaje/Tribute to Walker Evans*. (La Habana: Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, 2008): 46.



Fig.1



Fig.2



Fig.3

This almost crossing of stares between the subject and Evans creates a certain psychological tension, which is one of the captivating aspects of the image. He may have used a right angle viewfinder to capture the subject while giving the appearance of taking a shot of something else. Evans wrote for the dust jacket of *The Crime of Cuba*, "None of the pictures with people is posed."¹⁰

Although pose, light, and distance make the figure the central theme of the photo, his framing is highly evocative. On the edges of the composition are two curious motifs, lending a surrealistic note to an otherwise straightforward image. To the left, are partial figures showing a man's arm seen from the back juxtaposed to a man's leg seen from the front, and on the other side a wooden leg. More notable are the images around the figure's upper body: magazines with predominantly women in their cover, a reproduction of Rodin's *The Thinker* practically leaping from the figure's head, and part of a Coca-Cola sign. Is *The Thinker* meditating on this modern Havana urban scene? The multiple signs around his head are at once random and suggestive.

After printing what he must have recognized as a significant photograph, Evans went on to make another print from the same negative, a cropped version of the *Havana Citizen* (Fig. 4). This version emphasizes the juxtapositions of the citizen's head with the magazine covers from the newspaper stand behind him. One set of relationships that stands out is the three close up faces of white woman and one half-naked dancer facing the subject. The female gazes, particularly that of the middle face, are sensual and submissive compared to the stern male gaze. Although their looks do not cross, the concurrence of female faces, and in one case a half-naked female body with the male face, insinuates sex and power relations, accentuated by the placement of the subject's right hand next to his crotch in the complete print. Moreover, the potential sexual relations between black men and white women in a post slave society like Cuba adds to the psychological tension. The allusion to sex and the figure's appearance may have suggested to Evans that the Havana citizen in the photograph was a pimp.

One other juxtaposition that has escaped attention is even more intriguing: The figure's lefthand closed-fist overlapping the Cuban flag on a magazine cover. This juxtaposition in the context of 1933 takes on social and political meaning. Unknown to Evans, the fist/flag sign was a fitting signifier for the expanded, if limited, rights and power of Afro-Cubans in Cuban society at that time. Machado, particularly in the 1930s when he turned dictatorial and lost support among the white middle class, expanded the rank of Afro-Cubans in the army and police, and gave some support to Afro-Cuban religions and music. Apart from the police and military, there were a few Afro-Cuban politicians in Congress. There was also prominent Afro-Cuban writers, artists, and musicians.

¹⁰ *Ernest Hemingway and Walker Evans: Three Weeks in Cuba, 1933*. (Clinton, NY: The Emerson Gallery, Hamilton College, February 15 - April 15, 2007) exhibition catalogue.



Fig.4

“The army and the police were full of Negros”¹¹ during the Machado regime. So was the *Porra*, a special plain-clothes force whose purpose was to stop any public demonstrations against the government. Also *porristas* were responsible for identifying Machado’s enemies and arresting, intimidating, torturing, and/or killing them. They carried their own identification cards, were on the government’s payroll, and had their headquarters close to the presidential palace. The first chapter of Ernest Hemingway’s *To Have and Have Not* describes in some detail the *Porra* in action: “As they turned out of the door to the right, I saw a closed car come across the square towards them. The first thing a pane of glass went and the bullet smashed into the row of bottles on the showcase wall to the right. I heard the gun going and, bop, bop, bop, there were bottles smashing all along the wall... The car was stopped and there were two fellows crouched down by it. One had a Thompson gun and the other a sawed-off automatic shotgun. The one with the Thompson gun was a nigger. The other had a chauffeur’s white duster on.” Hemingway goes on to narrate a gun battle in which only the Afro-Cuban comes out alive. The men in the car were *Porristas* going after and killing three young men in early morning in Old Havana. The young men were probably students opposed to Machado, who according to the story wanted to escape Cuba by boat. Key West was a favorite destination for the opposition in search for refuge and to collect money and guns for their cause. Taking into consideration the *Havana Citizen* pose of confidence, suspicious gaze, and flawless suit, which he wears like a uniform. Then factoring the preponderance of Afro-Cubans in Machado’s military, police, and the *Porra*. I suggest that the Afro-Cuban in Evans photo belonged to one of those forces.

Long ago, on a hot Spring day in Havana, Evans with a sharp eye and quick finger took one of his most memorable urban images. *Havana Citizen* offers a compelling composition, a protagonist role for marginal Afro-Cubans, and a highly striking image of 1930s Havana street life. In the context of Evans’ work, *Havana Citizen* and for that matter his entire work in Cuba, contain many of the elements he wanted to achieve in his photographic exploration of the modern city. In a February 1932 letter to Ernestine Evans (no relation), he wrote what he hope to capture in his photos:

“People, all classes, surrounded by bunches of the new down-and out. Automobiles and the automobile landscape. Architecture, American urban taste, commerce, small scale, large scale, the city street atmosphere, the street smell, the hateful stuff, women’s clubs, fake culture, bad education, religion in decay. The movies. Evidence of what the people of the city read, eat, see for amusement, do for relaxation and not get it. Sex. Advertisement.”¹²

More broadly, the Cuban experience significantly furthered Evans’ spontaneous, cool, lyric free documentary style. It should be added that his neutral documentary style does not lack a point of view, which in the case of the Cuban photos ranges from social criticism to sensuality. Evans brief Cuban period laid the foundation for the style and content of his better known and influential later work.

¹¹ Thomas, Hugh. *Cuba, The Pursuit of Freedom* (New York, Harper & Row 1971): 683.

¹² Thompson, 98.