

Three Kings Day

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Spanish painter and writer Víctor Patricio Landaluce (Bilbao 1830-Havana 1889) witnessed the carnival celebrations of colonial Havana. The great admiration, the Three Kings Day celebrations inspired in him caused him to immortalized them on canvas. His paintings would be quite different today if he were to take his inspiration from today's carnivals.

In those festivals, where the syncretism of two cultures helped shape a unique nationality, whites, blacks and *mestizos* enjoyed the dancing, music and colorful costumes that were no longer African, but were also not entirely non-African. Everyone equally enjoyed these events, whether as spectators, artists or vendors of foodstuff and crafts. Even if only for Three Kings Day, blacks could imagine themselves kings and princes of their far off Africa, regardless of whether or not they were simple village people, hunters or fishermen back there.

Those monarchs, who were not monarchs at all, but acted as though they were, earned through their hard work and civilized behavior the right to celebrate their pagan feasts within the society's rancid and hypocritical Catholicism, despite the fact that they were secretly conspiring to gain their freedom.

Today, the descendants of those Lukanis, Congos, Mandingas and Carabalí display in their carnivalesque celebrations a

behavior that would inspire shame in their ancestors. Young black people go to these celebrations prepared as if for war; any white weapon will suffice: from razor blades to machetes, anything that can be used to wound, scar or kill. The victim does not even have to be an enemy; he can be a total stranger that the occasion offers the killer.

Hundreds of arrestees and dozens of dead and wounded are the end result of these feasts in which nothing at all is celebrated. They are used as justification for unleashing the frustrations, hate and rancor of a society deeply divided along political, economic and racial lines. As one might expect, most of the people who end up in police jails these days are black.

Outside, waiting for these detainees, are the family members, also black; mothers, fathers, wives, siblings. All have little education, purchasing power or knowledge about good manners. Their common attitudes toward the authorities range from submissiveness to frequently, uncontained rebelliousness, which in reality expresses powerlessness. The excuses they offer to help out their loves ones are often ridiculous, e.g., a mother explains that the razor blade the police took off their son was really for shaving. In saying something that foolish, it would seem that she is taking on the blame for having raised a child with no moral values. Even she doesn't recognize him.



“Carnival” in colonial Havana. Painting by Víctor Patricio de Landaluze

These young blacks understand nothing of what is happening to them; neither do their families. One generation after another has lived in cramped Havana tenement yards with shared bathrooms, in the same marginalized neighborhoods, hearing the very same drum beats to deaf or sleeping Orishas who never rescue them from so much poverty. They drink the same cheap alcohol that their fathers and grandfathers drank, and sleep on the same, cheap mattresses, with their odor of sweat and semen.

Landaluce was familiar with nineteenth-century, black feasts in Havana, and also knew a city in which most artists and artisans, as

well as merchants, were also black. A half a century of republic for whites, and another half century of socialism for whites have managed to degrade a large portion of these black youth, which does not identify itself as inheritors of a centuried and rich culture.

The greatest aspiration of men and women now is to marry a foreigner—no matter what sex—and move away as quickly and as far as possible. Alcohol, drugs, music, violence and sex are other forms of escape, and they abound at carnivals, like in one of those bad, Saturday night movies that keep us up at night.