

Three Kings Day

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Spanish painter and writer Víctor Patri-
 cio Landaluce (Bilbao 1830-Havana
 1889) witnessed the carnival celebra-
 tions of colonial Havana. The great admi-
 ration, the Three Kings Day celebrations
 inspired in him caused him to immortalize
 them on canvas. His paintings would be quite
 different today if he were to take his inspira-
 tion from today's carnivals.

In those festivals, where the syncretism
 of two cultures helped shape a unique nation-
 ality, whites, blacks and *mestizos* enjoyed the
 dancing, music and colorful costumes that
 were no longer African, but were also not en-
 tirely 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 behav-
 ior 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 Lu-
 kumis, Congos, Mandingas and Carabalis
 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 ma-
 chetes, 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, fa-
 thers, 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 of-
 ten 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 Victor Patricio de Landaluce

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 centuries 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.