The Paradox of Carnival

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The Paradox of Carnival

BY DAVID CARRASCO

TO WALK INTO THE “ENCOUNTERS WITH THE Americas” gallery of the Peabody Museum at Harvard is to experience a paradox of time. The floors of the oldest anthropological museum in the United States creak under your feet and there’s a sense that ancient dust hovers in every corner. The towering gray casts of 5th-century A.D. Maya stelae and the 19th-century style glass cases with their ancient and ethnographic objects combine with these sensations to signal to the visitor a very old part of the New World. This impression of a static long ago shifts as flashes of bright color beckon from the far corner of the hall to the large and brilliant Day of the Dead Altar. Mexico’s vibrant festival tradition has come to Harvard in orange and blue walls, climbing jeweled feathered serpents, a grinning calavera sprouting ceramic flowers from its head, magenta and green papel picado, bread for the dead, marigold flowers, photographs of the beloved deceased (humans and animals) and a miniature performing skeleton band of musicians showing that a carnival of life and death is permanently underway. Looking up at the top beam of this ofrenda, the visitor reads the playful Mexican saying “¡El Muerto al Cajón, El Vivo al Fiestón!” The dead go to the casket, the living to a festival!

The Mexican writer Octavio Paz proclaimed that [we] Mexicans “somos muy fiesteros,” but it’s been the multi-ethnic Harvard community and its Boston neighbors who have attended a thrilling festival every Day of the Dead/All Souls Day at the Peabody Museum for the last eight years. During the second half of October hundreds of school children visit the exhibit, often leaving private written messages to deceased family members and pets in a basket set aside for these tender and sometimes irreverent offerings. “Boo Dog, you were my first dog and I will never forget you. I hope you are having fun terrorizing all the cats up there!” And “Tupac and Biggie Smalls-R.I.P.” Plus “Papa, Pensamos mucho en usted. Su hijo que lo ama mucho”. Then “Dear Johnny Cash, thanks for speaking out against injustice and helping my Grandfather and I bond.” Topped by “Dear Chris Farley, thanks for being the greatest comedian of all time. You made everyone laugh.”

On the night of November 1, more than 600 people gather, some dressed as calaveras with scary painted faces, others as the coquettish, ghoulish La Catrina, to view the stunning altars, eat tamales and pan de muertos and watch the Harvard “Mariachi Veritas” band sing rancheras and Mexican love songs. The electricity and joyousness of the evening raises the question, “What is the meaning of this festival at Harvard?”

The magnetic centerpiece of these overcrowded, loud, delightful fiestas has been a second, temporary Day of the Dead altar in the form of a decorated pyramid constructed by Harvard students (working with Peabody Museum curators) in William Fash’s and my class on “Moctezuma’s Mexico: Then and Now.” A few weeks into the semester we introduce our students, the majority non-Latinos, to the traditions of Día de los Muertos, which combine Catholic and Aztec symbols and invite them to choose that year’s theme for the altar. In 2011 they chose 9/11 and constructed an ominous skyline of New York City with the fallen towers. Another year the student altar memorialized immigrant deaths in the U.S.-Mexico desert. This year the class chose the Boston Marathon bombings and death by gun violence to highlight in their memorial. The result was a spectacular four-sided altar with miniature statues of gods, skeletons, saints, fruit baskets,
The hanging cards from the altar were created by David Carrasco's and William Fash's “Moctezuma's Mexico” students (with help from the Harvard Museums of Science & Culture exhibit department). The other altar was created by Peabody Museum staff with help from Concilio Latino and HUMAS (Harvard University Mexican Association of Students).
Fiestas reveal the vicissitudes and potentialities of human life. They generate a “carnival spirit” with its potency to transform our experience of time and place.
show, Latin American peoples everywhere organized what Turner calls “cultural aesthetic mirrors,” grand and dynamic dramas which are powerful stories people tell to themselves about themselves in collective formats. These “mirrors,” in the forms of festivals, reflect and reveal critical commentary as participants gawk and gesticulate, mask and disrobe themselves and unmask the “emperors” of their world. When the architects of “official stories” and state media cast up their cultural and political slogans of reality, they usually exclude and diminish the fullness and complexity of the individual and society. Carnivals and festivals flash back shocking, ironic, outrageous, sometimes wicked demonstrations that unmask and often undress official hypocrisy and “good” manners as well as the wounds caused by authorities who strive to appear absolute. Yet in another paradox, it was the Spaniards who held the first great carnivals in Latin America, partly to dramatize their own official, absolute authority of the conquistador. The centerpiece of the first great Mexican carnival was at the Plaza of Mexico City in 1538 when it was transformed into a spectacular Roman Circus by the Spaniards.

THE SPANISH CARNIVAL OF CONQUEST
A jaw-dropping description by the conquistador Bernal Díaz del Castillo shows how the plaza was turned into a fabulous series of theatrical stages where riotous hunts, a naval sea battle, lavish processions and actual killings took place in a recreated 1st-century A.D. Roman Empire.

To celebrate the Treaty of Aigues Mortes between the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, the “Lord of Glorious Memory,” and France, the Viceroy of Mexico Don Antonio de Mendoza and Hernán Cortés organized a series of “great festivals and rejoicings” to display the prodigious energies, wealth and excesses of the conquistadors and the new capital. The entire Mexico City Plaza was transformed into the forest primate and then the Battle of Rhodes. First they built a noisy forest with “a great variety of trees as natural as though they had grown there...so perfectly arranged that they were worth observing.” Based on Diaz del Castillo’s accounts, this imitation forest was supplied with deer, rabbits, hares, birds, foxes and jackal, young lions and four small tigers, “for the native Mexican Indians are so ingenious in arranging those things that in the whole universe, according to what many saw who have traveled all over the world, there has not been their like.” Into this forest were deposited a “party of savages” with bows, arrows and cudgels, and when the wildlife was released from their cages the savages “ran after them through the wood and came out into the great plaza” where they killed the animals and each other. This raucous, bloody hunt (observed from nearby windows and seating areas...
Colonized peoples throughout Latin America performed their own “aesthetic mirrors.”

by lavishly dressed Spanish women) was followed by a grand procession on horseback of fifty “cavaliers and negroses and nizzens...suckling their negro children...with their King and Queen” all dressed in necklaces of gold and pearls, precious stones and silver ornaments. This calming display of order, elitism and wealth suddenly exploded into a Spanish and African attack on the indigenous “savages” who were conquered.

The following day, the City of Rhodes was built in the plaza with towers, battlements, turrets and entryways through which paraded “one hundred Knights Commanders with their rich embroidered insignia of gold and pearls...on horseback,” followed by a mock sea battle. Soon, a sea battle was staged with four ships with “main and foremasts and mizzen and sails so natural that many persons were astonished to see them go under sail across the plaza” firing cannons into the air. Masquerading the early successes of Christian evangelization as well, this sea battle included “some Indians on board dressed to be like Dominikan Friars when they came from Castile” with the added touch that some were “plucking chickens and others fishing.” This noisy masquerade merged into full battle between Christian Knights and two companies of Turks...most Turklike with rich silk robes all purple and scarlet and comfits...best wines obtainable, alozza (aloya, a beverage made of water, honey and spice [mead]), chuca [chicha, a beverage made from fermented fruits and cacao all frothed up] and suplicaciones [a kind of thin, light pastry],” all served on a rich table service of gold and silver. In a gesture of verbal masking, Díaz del Castillo wrote that the jesters and “versifiers” recited praise and jokes about the Spanish authorities and conquistadores. Yet he blotted out the sentence in his manuscript that read “and some of them were drunk and spoke...indecently until they were taken by force and carried out, so as to silence them.”

COUNTER-CARNIVAL

Despite the ability of colonial authorities to present overwhelming performances of triumphal domination in the New World, colonized peoples throughout Latin America performed their own “aesthetic mirrors” animated and peopled by indigenous and African myths, gods, spirits, drinking rituals, dance movements, sexuality and the presentation of hybrid costumes and the manipulation of regalia. The immense exuberance of these counter-carnivals was considered scandalous and devilish by ecclesiastical and civil authorities who continually schemed to regain control and suppress what they feared were pre-contact religious sensibilities rooted in Native American and African dreams. William Taylor describes the negotiations by the colonized in 18th-century Mexico when “Indians in central Mexico adopted a whole series of Christian practices that were familiar or readily understandable to them, such as attendance at mass, penitence by flagellation, pilgrimaging, liturgical theater, sacred dancing and other forms of worshipful movement, but carried them far beyond what the priests regarded as decorous and reverent conduct.” This drive and ability to rework the Christian rituals, according to their indigenous traditions and trance-producing practices, was combined with immense aesthetic repertoires and resulted in New World festivals that utterly changed European, ancient and local ritual practices into mixed Latin American styles of sensuality and symbolic politics as so many of the articles in this ReVista show.

CARNIVAL SIN FIN/MAGIC MASKS AT HARVARD

The ethnographic collections at Harvard's Peabody Museum reflect all this history. They are more of a storehouse of possibilities than just a container of old, classified cultural objects. Cultural revitalization happens there through periodic educational festivals. When Harvard student Harleen Gambhir walked out of the Peabody Museum as midnight approached on a recent Day of the Dead Festival, her face was painted as a dramatic Mexican sugar skull and she learned the paradoxical power of masking. She wrote that during the magical evening when she and friends mimed their roles as spirits of the dead, “We played around with the many ways that you could say a lot without saying anything at all. We floated from child to child, staring mournfully, playfully, or inquisitively, as struck our fancy.” Walking to her dorm in the night through Harvard Yard, she wondered if someone would recognize her, “forcing me back into my daily identity.” No one did recognize her because living temporarily in betwixt life and death, recognition and anonymity, she realized that “the mask of the event was so powerful that the magic never wore off.”

David Carrasco is the Neil L. Rudenstein Professor of the Study of Latin America at the Harvard Divinity School as well as a professor in the Anthropology Department. He studies Mesoamerica and Mexican American religious history. Carrasco teaches a course called “Moctezuma’s Mexico: Then and Now (2012)!”