

Felipe Pichardo Moya's "La comparsa"

Afro-Cuban Carnival as Sinister Spectacle

El lector que viva o haya vivido en Cuba habrá visto en las noches de carnaval, o en ocasión de festejos públicos, pasear por las calles abigarradas comparsas formadas por las capas inferiores de la sociedad. A la cabeza de la comitiva poliétnica marcha un sujeto, negro generalmente, sosteniendo una pintarrajeada linterna de papeles multicolores, no siempre desprovista de efecto artístico. Tras él, otros individuos con disfraces chillones y con otras muchas linternas, y rodeándolos a todos una muchedumbre en la predominan los negros, gritando con voces destempladas, y con frecuencia aguarentosas, una cantinela repetida hasta la saciedad con monotonía desesperante.

[The reader who lives or has lived in Cuba will have seen passing through the streets on carnival nights or during public festivities, multi-colored *comparsas* made up of the inferior strata of society. At the head of the poly-ethnic procession marches a subject, usually a Negro, holding up a lantern daubed with multi-colored paper, not always lacking artistic merit. After him, other individuals with gaudy costumes and with many more lanterns, and surrounding all of them a crowd in which Negroes predominate, screaming, with untuned and frequently drunken voices, a chant repeated endlessly and with exasperating monotony.]

Fernando Ortiz, *Los negros brujos*

Madera de esclavos, carne de barracón, tribu refractaria a la higiene social y corporal, canalla inmundada: eso es el cuerpo de una comparsa.

[The temperament of slaves, flesh of the slave barracks, a tribe refractory to social and corporal hygiene, filthy riffraff: that is the body of a *comparsa*.]

Ramón Vasconcelos, "La fuga hacia la selva"

The publication of Felipe Pichardo Moya's "La comparsa" in the Cuban magazine *Gráfico* in March 1916 corresponded to a period during which racial tensions in Cuba were especially acute. Memories of the Racist Massacre of 1912 were still fresh, and many whites lived in fear of Afro-Cubans, their customs, and especially their alleged potential for future rebellions. According to De la Fuente, in the years following the massacre,

rumors often surfaced that “blacks were preparing to avenge the killings of 1912” (81). “The first of these rumors circulated in 1913, after the Liberals’ electoral defeat,” and allegations of an imminent and supposedly well-prepared black uprising emerged again in the final months of 1915, prior to the general elections of 1916 (81).

During the same period, haunting images of murderous and lascivious black *brujos* and *ñáñigos* were irresponsibly disseminated by the sensationalistic press, and served to stir up an ever-increasing sense among the middle-class majority that concerted efforts needed to be made to suppress Afro-Cuban religions and other cultural manifestations. Spectacles that involved large gatherings—such as carnival *comparsas*—were specifically targeted since they were seen to pose the greatest threat to public safety, to the nation’s civility, and to its image in the eyes of foreign tourists. That traditional Afro-Cuban *comparsas* were subjected to intense official criticism and negative press during the years following the Racist Massacre is hardly surprising since it was widely held that these collective festivities were atavistic throwbacks to the slave era and hotbeds of moral depravity and criminal violence. In this chapter, I will argue that even if it is an important precursor to the poetry of Afrocubanismo, Felipe Pichardo Moya’s widely celebrated poem about an Afro-Cuban carnival ensemble is essentially a faithful reflection of the time in which it was written, and that his depiction of a *comparsa* is very much in keeping with contemporary attitudes toward these and many other expressions of African-derived culture.

In her brief remarks on “La comparsa” in her book *Sugar’s Secrets*, Vera Kutzinski notes that it is ironic that the poem was “written and published at a time when actual *comparsas* were banned in Cuba” (181). Though her observation is not completely off the mark, it does not adequately address the nature of the bans that were put in place, nor does it reflect the particular circumstances surrounding *comparsas* in 1916. First of all, when considering the long-running controversy that surrounded Afro-Cuban carnival ensembles in the early decades of the Cuban Republic, it is important to keep in mind that despite the numerous official bans against them, it was not at all uncommon for Afro-Cubans to defy the authorities by parading through their own neighborhoods such as Regla, Jesús María, and Los Sitios (Guzmán Moré, n.p.). Secondly, many bans were not strictly enforced, and *comparsas* and *congas* often managed to

slip into the highly regulated carnival processions that paraded through Havana's thoroughfares during the pre-Lenten festivities.

Most importantly, however, Kutzinski overlooks the fact that in February 1916 Havana Mayor General Fernando Freyre de Andrade rescinded his 1913 prohibition of *comparsas*, and allowed several groups to participate in that year's carnival celebrations. His decision, which ended up being reversed after just a few weeks, was vehemently attacked by Havana's elite and middle-class majority—whites and blacks alike—and provoked a flurry of testy editorials in Havana's newspapers. Ramón Vasconcelos, for example, voiced his fervent opposition to *comparsas* and other similar African-derived cultural manifestations in several editorials that were published in *La Prensa* in his column, "Palpitaciones de la Raza de Color: Crónica escrita para negros sin taparabos, mestizos no arrepentidos y blancos de sentido común" [Palpitations of the Colored Race: chronicle written for negroes without loincloths, non-repentant *mestizos*, and whites with common sense]. This provocative title, which appeared above the majority of his editorials from the period, served several purposes: it called attention to the racial tensions in Cuba, underscored the hierarchical divisions that existed among Cubans of color, and reflected the polemical nature of the subjects that Vasconcelos tended to address.¹

In an editorial titled "Comparsas," which appeared on March 2, 1916, Vasconcelos denounced the mayor for permitting spectacles that so many "civilized" Cubans considered to be humiliating examples of Afro-Cuban atavism and barbarity:

Dentro de dos o tres semanas tendremos otra vez las comparsas por las calles, pregonando la barbarie negra. Barbarie he dicho y no me arrepiento, aunque debí decir degeneración . . . al son del tambor selvático, ululando, con movimientos lúbricos, recorren la ciudad para exhibir su vergüenza como si fuera un trofeo glorioso.

La bandera del retroceso, la confesión de la incapacidad de adaptación al progreso, tales son las comparsas, o las congas, como las llaman en su jerga esas buenas gentes que no tienen la culpa de su retraso. (4)

[In two or three weeks we will again have the *comparsas* in the streets preaching black barbarity. I have said barbarity, and I do

not repent, even though I should have said degeneration . . . to the sound of the jungle drum, shrieking, with lubricious movements, they go through the city in order to exhibit their shame as if it were a glorious trophy.

The banner of regression, confession of their incapacity to adapt and progress, such are the *comparsas*, or the *congas*, as those good people that are not to blame for their backwardness call them in their own slang.]

In more than one editorial Vasconcelos warned of the violence that he—and many other middle- and upper-class Cubans, for that matter—believed to be part and parcel of traditional Afro-Cuban *comparsas*. On March 5, 1916, the last Sunday of that year's carnival season, his fears were confirmed when a fight erupted among members of two rival groups, supposedly over a stolen *farola*, or giant, multicolored paper lantern. In “Al primer tapón, zurrapas” [Well, the First Shot Was a Failure], a scathing editorial published the following Tuesday, Vasconcelos condemned the incident, which he believed necessitated the immediate and total suppression of *comparsas*:

El primer domingo de exhibición antropomórfica . . . la culta y progresiva capital de la República, residencia de los altos dignatarios y centro de turismo, vio a dos hombres acuchillarse, en plena vía pública y en pleno Siglo Veinte: por la posesión de una ridícula farola. (4)

[The first Sunday of the anthropomorphic exhibit . . . the cultured and progressive capital of the Republic, residence of high dignitaries and the center of tourism, saw two men stab each other in the middle of a public thoroughfares and in the heart of the Twentieth Century: over the possession of a ridiculous *farola*.]

Echoing Fernando Ortiz's *Los negros brujos* and *Los negros esclavos* as well as investigations into forensic pathology by Israel Castellanos (“El tipo brujo” [The Brujo Type](1914), *La brujería y el ñañiguismo en Cuba desde el punto de vista medico legal* [Brujería and Ñañiguismo in Cuba from a Medical and Legal Point of View](1916)), in which both authors compared Afro-Cuban religions and cultural practices to pathogens, Vasconcelos made use of pathological metaphors in his editorials in order to illustrate his opinion that *comparsas* were like a highly contagious social illness

that could only be "cured" through total eradication. In "Comparsas," for example, he referred to *comparsas* and *congas* as "social ulcers," and posed the following question: "¿Cómo se combate el mal? . . . Yo creo que el enfermo [la comparsa] no tiene cura. La extinción es lo más seguro" (4) [How does one combat the illness? . . . I think that the patient does not have a cure. Extinction is the surest remedy.] Several days later in "Suma y sigue" [And It's Still Going On], Vasconcelos warned that the "plague" of Afro-Cuban *comparsas* was infecting the nation from Havana to Matanzas, to Cienfuegos, to Sagua, to Guantánamo, and finally Santiago, where, he claimed, illicit *congas* were multiplying at an alarming rate. He contended that *comparsas* and related social "ills," such as Afro-Cuban religions, must be isolated and aggressively eradicated to prevent them from being passed down like diseases from one generation to the next:

Y no piense que el ñáñiguismo, la brujería y los rezagos africanos se pierden con la generación del bocabajo. No. Pasan como un legado precioso a los hijos, y los nietos, que apenas echan el primer diente ya son "hijos" de "Yemayá" o de "Changó" y bailan el "bembé"² en los brazos de su madre o de su abuela. (4)

[And don't go thinking that *ñáñiguismo*, *brujería*, and other African remnants are lost with the generation of the lackey. No. They pass like a precious legacy to the children, the grandchildren, who hardly have sprouted their first tooth when they become "children" of "Yemayá" or of "Changó" and they dance the "bembé" in the arms of the mother or grandmother.]

Comments like these are especially important in the context of the present study since they underscore the widespread opinion that *comparsas* were intimately related to the practices of Afro-Cuban religions and secret societies, which a majority of non-practitioners in Cuba essentially equated with witchcraft and all of the nefarious activities that it implied. It should be pointed out here that in the early decades of the twentieth century, *ñáñiguismo*—which was technically a derogative term for the Abakuá secret society—was used interchangeably with *brujería* to evoke the alleged degradation and criminality that characterized all Afro-Cuban rites and rituals. As David H. Brown has noted, "Ñáñiguismo was associated by the white cultural mainstream and nationalist theoreticians with despotic irrationality, teeming Afro-Cuban *barrios*, malicious

gangs, murder, savage black men with shaved teeth, and dissipated white men fallen into primitive atavism and the lure of black women” (“Glossary” 84). The truth is that associations between *ñáñiguismo* and brutal violence were not altogether unfounded, as feuds between rival *juegos*, or lodges, were often decided by acts of “mortal revenge” as Lydia Cabrera has observed. Cabrera adds that such rivalries unfortunately bloodied many pages of the history of *ñáñiguismo* in Cuba, and led detractors of the secret society to equate its members with blood, petulance, and terror (*Anaforuana* 13).

On March 10, an anonymous response to Vasconcelos’s editorial, signed Lohengrin—evoking the legendary knight of the Holy Grail and the Richard Wagner (1813–1883) opera of the same name—condemned *comparsas* for damaging Cuban society, and called for the immediate formation of a “Comité de Ciudadanos Cívicos” [Committee of Patriotic Citizens], the aim of which would be to “elevate the morality” of black Cubans. In another letter, published in *La Prensa* on March 12, Francisco Mendoza Marrero reiterated Vasconcelos’s central argument that *comparsas* were breeding grounds of violence and other social ills. Echoing the typical sensationalism that characterized negative media coverage of Afro-Cubans and their culture at the time, Mendoza Marrero denounced the “wars” and “tumultuous brawls” among the *comparsas*, and called for an end to “these anti-hygienic immoral and criminal spectacles” (4).

Just over a week after the notorious March 5 incident, officials from the Secretaría de Gobernación, moved by Mayor Freyre de Andrade’s apparent unwillingness to reinstate laws against illicit Afro-Cuban carnival ensembles, stepped in by enforcing an absolute ban on all *comparsas* from the streets of the capital. This decision was applauded by many critics, such as Vasconcelos, who responded to the government’s decision with the following observation: “Hay que aplaudir esa resolución de buen gobierno por los males que . . . evitará: ‘Muerto el perro se acabó la rabia’” (“Dos letras” 4) [One must applaud this resolution of good government for the problems that . . . it will prevent: “Dead dog, no more rabies”].

In order to understand and fully appreciate Felipe Pichardo Moya’s “La comparsa,” contemporary readers must bear in mind these controversies that embroiled traditional Afro-Cuban carnival ensembles in the weeks immediately preceding the poem’s first appearance in the March 25, 1916 issue of *Gráfico*. It is also very important to keep in mind that the original

version of the poem is followed by a brief footnote, which was cut from most subsequent publications, that reads: "Habana, Carnaval de 1916." This automatically conjures up the violence associated with the carnival processions of that year, as well as the harsh condemnation that it received in the local press, and among prominent intellectuals and government officials. The footnote to the poem also suggests that Pichardo Moya himself might have witnessed some of the traditional *comparsas* that marched through Havana's streets during the infamous 1916 carnival season, and that his experiences inspired him to write "La comparsa."

While "La comparsa" is a significant forerunner to the literary movement associated with Afro-Cubanismo and "one of the first poems to explore the literary possibilities of Afro-Cuban music" (Kutzinski 181), it is most noteworthy for its reflection of the deeply ingrained prejudices against Afro-Cubans and their carnival traditions that reigned during the early years of the Republic. In the remaining pages of this chapter I will demonstrate that Pichardo Moya's poem focuses on and calls attention to precisely the characteristics of traditional *comparsas* that contemporary audiences found repugnant, and that had provoked so much controversy: the mysterious and monotonous singing, the evocations of Afro-Cuban *brujería*, the unrestrained dancing, the alleged lascivious behavior of the Afro-Cuban participants, and the disagreeable sounds of the music.

It is worth pointing out briefly here that the illustration that accompanies the original publication of "La comparsa" in *Gráfico* does not necessarily reflect the sinister undertones of Pichardo Moya's poem, but instead offers a highly exaggerated caricature of a *comparsa* that recalls the parodic and racist representations of Afro-Cubans in everything from political cartoons to the *teatro bufo* [comic theater] (fig. 1.1). This particular carnival procession is made up of a motley crew of bulbous-nosed, black participants: an ape-like man ringing a *cencerro* [cowbell], an elderly *brujo* carrying a snake, a young child, and two clownish *diablitos* [male Afro-Cuban dancers in masks and raffia costumes], among others. Though this striking image is not signed, it would seem that it is by Cornado Massaguer (1889–1956), the editor and founder of *Gráfico* who provided many of the illustrations for the publication.

In her book, *La poesía negrista*, Mónica Mansour argues that "La comparsa" contains objective descriptions of a traditional Afro-Cuban carnival procession, and she adds that the poem reveals that Pichardo Moya intended to reassess the value of Afro-Cuban customs that had long been