
Sensing the Spirits: The Healing Dramas and Poetics of Brujería Rituals

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Abstract: Following the path suggested by Joseph Murphy more than a decade ago, this paper explores the sensuous spirituality of healing rituals in Puerto Rican *brujería*, stressing their performative, embodied nature and significance. Carefully crafted gestures, meticulously manipulated objects, poetically strung words, and before spiritually inspired music and dance create dramatic experiences. The voices of Spiritist entities, Santería orishas, and the recently dead reveal sources of afflictions and solutions in a totalizing, emotional event involving all the senses. This is where healing begins. The interpersonal, present-oriented pragmatic space that emerges during *brujería* ritual challenges notions about the centrality of belief in healing rituals.

Keywords: Puerto Rico, *brujería*, spiritism, symbolic healing, performance

Résumé : En suivant les chemins suggérés par Joseph Murphy il y a plus d'une décennie, cet article explore la spiritualité sensuelle des rituels de guérison de la *brujería* portoricaine, en soulignant leur nature et leurs significations performatives et incarnées. Des gestes soigneusement reproduits, des objets manipulés avec précaution, des enchaînements de mots choisis pour leur évocation poétique, des musiques et danses d'inspiration spirituelle déterminent des expériences dramatiques. Les voix des entités spirituelles, des orishas de la Santería et des défunts récents dévoilent les sources d'affliction et leurs solutions dans des événements émotionnels complets, accaparant tous les sens. C'est alors que commence la guérison. L'espace interpersonnel pragmatique axé sur le présent qui émerge durant les rituels de *brujería* remet en question les notions relatives au caractère central de la croyance dans les rituels de guérison.

Mots-clés : Puerto Rico, *brujería*, spiritisme, guérison symbolique, performance

The skin is faster than the word.

—Massumi 2002

In the last few years, anthropologists have been revisiting issues related to the body and the senses in postcolonial contexts as critical lenses through which to explore those histories from below or counterhegemonic embodied memories that have been silenced in colonial archival records. Inspired by this scholarship and following the path suggested by Joseph Murphy (1988, 1994) for the study of the religions of the African Diaspora, this article explores the sensuous spirituality of healing and magic rituals in Puerto Rican *brujería* (witch-healing). Like in other vernacular religions of the African diaspora, the interpersonal, present-oriented, albeit “inter-temporal” and “inter-ritual,” pragmatic space that emerges during healing, divination and magic rituals challenges the assumed precondition and centrality of institutionalized beliefs and doctrines, suggesting instead their essentially performative, embodied nature and significance.¹ By stressing the performative aspects of ritual, Murphy is able to show how spirits “are worked” in communal ceremonies in the various religions of the African diaspora (1994), their major similarities and specific local differences, and invite a renewed reflection on the socio-historical processes that have shaped and are shaping such similarities and differences.²

From an embodied performative perspective, the transmission and articulation of socio-cultural, esthetic and religious values—drawn from home and host countries—informing processes of religious recovery, continuity, creolization and adaptation in the African diaspora have taken place not just through discourse but mainly from *one body to another* (cf. Stoller 1997, my emphasis).³

Building on these premises, I draw on my ethnographic work in order to focus on the dramas and poetics of such “workings” in Puerto Rican *brujería* rituals. Through detailed, intimate ethnographic vignettes, I show how carefully crafted gestures, meticulously manipulated

objects, poetically strung words, and spiritually inspired music and dance create an inter-temporal and inter-ritual, dramatic experience that is in itself healing. When the voices of Spiritist entities, Santería *orishas*, and the recently dead become suddenly manifest during brujería rituals, divination, trance and the making of magic works, their power is sensed, their immateriality embodied (see Csordas 1990, 1993). This is when the spirits reveal to the living the sources of affliction and their solutions in a totalizing, emotional event that involves all the senses, where the body and the mind, as well as otherworldly and this world causes, are treated in tandem; in sum, where healing begins. Marked by impromptu interventions of the spirits, these and other spiritual manifestations of brujería derive from a “spiritual economy of affect” that also informs the performative significance of healing rituals and magic works, their embodied nature and their effectiveness in transforming the emotional, proprioceptive and (to some extent) physiological states of participants. Here I build on the idea of “moral economy” (Romberg 2012b) in order to address the simultaneous material and spiritual concerns of brujería with well-being. The added analytical framework of “economies of affect” will help me in making the connection between charisma, embodiment and healing.⁴ Some aspects of this spiritual economy of affect will be explored by focusing on the visible, albeit mostly obscure, ways in which healing and magic rituals proceed.

Unlike Santería, Vodou and Candomblé, brujería is not based on a stable community, a pre-established hierarchy or initiation-based membership. Rather, brujería rituals are more indeterminate in their ritual procedures and the attributes of their participants. Since brujería rituals are heavily dependant on the emergent nature and spontaneous ways in which the spirits manifest themselves, it is impossible to uphold the assumed centrality of institutionalized doctrines and worship, especially among groups of heterodox followers of brujería.⁵ The resilient nature of brujería also challenges any type of determinism—whether historical, political, or self-oriented—in relation to the shape and place that the body, the senses, and affect take in ritual dramas (see Aretxaga 2005; Crossley 2001; Desjarlais 1997; Lock 1993; Navarro-Yashin 2007; Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987; B. Turner 1984). This is where I see the contribution of Alain Badiou’s (2007) insistence on the potential transformative and innovative power of emergent situations, which begin with an exceptional (even if) ephemeral break in the flow of normative reality. Such breaks occur each time the spirits manifest themselves in mediums or in objects during consultations and rituals. Having briefly situated the

unique heterodoxy and indeterminacy of brujería practices, I center my analytical discussion on the emic notion of *manifestaciones* (manifestations), a root paradigm and generative ritual anchor for “working the spirits” in brujería and other Afro-Latin religions (Romberg 2009). Manifestaciones encapsulate both the embodied and pragmatic nature of these religions, and explain the sensuous, dramatic and poetic ways in which the spirits are summoned and “worked” during ritual events.⁶

In the last three decades, anthropological perspectives inspired by phenomenology, poststructuralism and postcolonial studies have discussed the sensuous theatricality of healing rituals in terms of experience, the body and performance.⁷ The questions I pose here, however, emerge directly from the particular pragmatics of brujería, the eclecticism of its rituals, the heterogeneous character of its participants, and the heterodoxy of its moral economy. How is it that people of diverse social class, ethnicity and gender—most of whom actually “do not believe in these things”—come to consult with *brujos* and other types of healers when they feel their lives are coming apart? How could I, also among those who “do not believe in these things,” sense even for a flash the presence of entities that had been foreign to my life until then, and be moved and transformed by them? Before proceeding further, however, a few comments about the peculiarities of brujería are in order.

With the American invasion of Puerto Rico, after centuries of declining Spanish colonial rule, many (rich and poor alike) began to convert to the newly established American Catholic and Protestant Churches on the island (Hernández Hiraldo 2006; Silva Gotay 1985, 1997). As a result, many families ended up being constituted by individuals affiliated with distinct religious traditions in unprecedented combinations (Agosto Cintrón 1996). It was in this eclectic religious atmosphere, with its various logics of practice, that many of the *brujos* I worked with were raised, shaping in great measure their individual ritual styles. Some combined popular Catholicism, Spiritism and creole reworkings of African-based healing and magic practices. Others added American Protestant elements as a result of their upbringing in Catholic families that converted to Protestantism. One of the youngest of all the healers I worked with was raised by an *espiritista* mother in New York, where he had the opportunity to expand his ritual knowledge among Cuban and “Nuyorican” *babalawos* as well as other healers from South and Central America, continuing his initiation in Santería under an exiled Cuban *babalawo* in Puerto Rico. A botanica owner and *espiritista* in her mid sixties (with whom I lived for several months) was raised by a Spiritist

grandmother, and blended New Age versions of Spiritism with an ecumenical form of Christian religiosity (see Romberg 2007). A Nuyorican healer married to a Puerto Rican *espiritista santera* developed a personal style that combined various Asian, Native American and New Age modes of healing with traditional Puerto Rican Spiritism.

In addition to such eclectic religious trajectories, the working experiences of brujos have also shaped their healing and magic styles. As a result of new commercial and state opportunities afforded by the system of welfare capitalism and American commercial investments in Puerto Rico under the commonwealth, brujos—many of whom have experienced working in American-owned factories or state agencies—expanded their previous ritual areas of involvement (Romberg 2003:210-235). Having acquired additional cultural capital pertaining to new systems of production and redistribution, they have been able to attend not only to the spiritual but also the material welfare of their clients (as will become evident below). As brokers among state, business, and professional networks, they are sought out when mainstream medicine, psychology, or social work fail to provide solutions to a variety of health, relationship and economic problems, but more comprehensively, for promoting one's *bendiciones* (blessings) or ultimate success in life.

Defined in terms of both material and spiritual progress, the quest for *bendiciones* has been molded recently by consumer and welfare capitalist values and sensibilities, which add a concern for the material conditions of human existence to the hitherto exclusively Catholic and Spiritist spiritual understandings of *bendiciones*. The connection between spiritual and material blessings is hence established: material success—measured by one's acquisitive power, social status, and overall progress—attests to having been gifted with spiritual blessings and vice-versa (Romberg 2011b). What all this means in matters of ritual practice will become apparent below.

Even though a uniquely personal style characterizes each healer's practices, the similarities, especially concerning basic ritual gestures, communication styles during divination, possession, and even the components of their altars, are too compelling to overlook. These ritual similarities suggest a kind of spiritual lingua franca that enables individuals of various backgrounds and religious orientations (myself included) to move in and out of these various types of vernacular healing systems with quite a remarkable (and, in my case, even unexpected) ease. Part of this ease, I believe, is the result of inter-temporal, historically layered, embodied inter-ritual traditions enacted by healers and eventually recognized by their clients. This

issue needs further clarification in light of the essentially heterogeneous social profile of those who seek help from brujos.

Contradicting the expectations of healers about their clients' predispositions regarding magic (no less than some anthropological interpretations of it), the distinction between belief and efficacy, inexplicable as it might be to some skeptics, highlights the critical role of the performative in the spiritual economy of *brujería*. Where does belief stop, and where do "memories of the flesh" begin (Young 2002)? While these are questions that philosophers and anthropologists of religion ponder, they acquire a different meaning when asked from an ethnographic perspective (see Romberg 2011a). In the case of brujos, for instance, the reality of their own possession is never questioned or predicated on their belief in spirits. Rather, it is the result of the spirits' whims. Furthermore, since no theological learning is involved in *brujería* practices, training their bodies to surrender to the will of the spirits during *veladas* (nighttime séances) is the only type of learning brujos will ever acknowledge. And yet, to assure the effectiveness of their rituals, they do expect their clients to (cognitively) believe or to have faith in what they do during the consultation. Brujos achieve this via performative means, all sorts of proofs and tests of their possession, which often conceal this very purpose, not unlike the theatricality of possession so masterfully conveyed by Michel de Certeau (1990).⁸

What I find particularly challenging in vernacular religious practices such as *brujería* is the performative reality of its consultations. Marked by "continuous and relentless deferral," the truth of healing and magic "is a truth continuously questioning its own veracity of being" (Taussig 1998:247). Given, as mentioned above, that *brujería* practices are structured neither by initiation hierarchies nor by a prescriptive theological or ritual corpus (as *Santería* and *Candomblé*), their legitimation depends heavily on the charisma of practitioners, making the potential fragility of each consultation a constitutive feature of its very experience. The performative reality of consultations is thus highly indeterminate. The charismatic, performative excellence of brujos embodying the spirits, voicing their words, and interpreting their encoded messages generates a wholly multisensorial healing event. A seeming paradox results: whereas this reality manifestly depends on the performative excellence of brujos, consultations are ultimately constituted (and experienced) as the result of the whims and dictates of spirits. "It's not me," brujos often clarify. "It's the spirits telling me to tell you." When brujos reveal that they do not direct the proceedings of consultations—that they are not the

ones performing—they are artfully revealing suspicions of their skilled concealments. It is in such ambiguous intersubjective spaces (Csordas 1997; Jackson 1998) that the ritual dramas and poetics of consultations are created, interweaving the charismatic performance of brujos with their “studied exercises in unmasking” (Taussig 1998:246), the clients’ unresolved tension between belief and skepticism, and the uncanny presence of spirits.⁹

In spite of demands made by healers that their clients do believe in magic to assure its ritual effectiveness, the drama of ritual may have just as overpowering an effect on skeptics as on believers when the adroitness of its performance is such that it connects through invisible chains of resemblance and artifice the here-and-now with unseen social and spiritual imaginaries.¹⁰ Such is the power of theatricality and impersonation, once devalued (as were all the senses) by Platonic philosophies for being deceptive, for diverting us from the apprehension of ultimate realities through our cognition (Diamond 1974). Yet, perhaps, on those rare occasions when artifice is such that we are made to forget impersonation (and cognition), the sensorial excesses of ritual drama can transform mere corporeal manifestations into spiritual realities, aesthetics into emotion. I mean by sensorial excesses, all those impromptu expressive forms of action (verbal and non-verbal), during ritual, that involve ephemeral instances in which otherworldly forces manifest among the living, instances felt and sensed by widely heterogeneous followers of brujería, including those more skeptic, as spiritual.¹¹ Following Allan Badiou (2007) and Brian Massumi’s (1995) take on the transformative, affective potential of emergent situations, when such heterogeneous participants (as, initially, myself)—who are not part of a community of belief—gather in uncanny spiritual events, a sense of unintentionally visceral in-betweenness emerges, which, I want to argue, is in itself healing.¹² This emotional transformation also explains my own sensing of the presence of spirits during rituals and in my dreams during fieldwork (see Romberg 2009).

Indeed, the efficacy of ritual can be paralleled to that of rhetoric (Tambiah 1990:81-83) in that they depend on artifice and roundabout appeals for inducing desired actions and emotions among both visible and invisible audiences. The tricks of magic (like the tricks of the rhetorician) “are not mere ‘bad science’; they are an ‘art’” (Abrahams 1968; Burke 1969:42). At the core of this artifice is the skillful, fluid display not just of correspondences (or performative mimesis), but also of sharp-witted rites of unmasking (Taussig 1998). To address this artful deftness of magic, I draw on a wide range of studies within the performative paradigm in folklore, anthropology, socio-linguistics and

theatre, a list too extensive to mention here. Indeed, not only are brujos like poets, in their dexterous management of resemblances, correspondences and parallelisms, but they are also quick-witted charismatic performers and manipulators of discourse, corporeality and revelation. Drawing on Roman Jakobson (1964) and other Prague School scholars, I suggest that ritual correspondences, like metaphors and poetic devices, make us be aware of and be moved by intangibles while also mobilizing us to take some form of action (see Csordas 1997). This became evident during my participation in rituals, when I saw (and felt) the emotional impact on clients of repetition and parallelism—of words and gestures—as well as of the shifting voices uttered but not always authored by healers in trance (Du Bois 1993). In short, what I show here is that the aesthetics of mimetic correspondences as well as their masking create a multisensorial ritual drama that is in itself healing because it ignites the imagination and the senses, stirring emotions, persuading and mobilizing participants and presumably also the spirits in answering their pleas (see Desjarlais 1992, 1996).

What I want to argue here is that this obsessively mimetic corporeal aesthetics, exposed as manifestations of the otherwise concealed world of spirits, is *also* at the basis of the technologies of magic and healing and essential to their ethics, affectivity and effectiveness (Romberg 2009).¹³ And yet, if one is to be true as much to the immediacy of ritual experiences (E. Turner 1992) as to their indeterminacy and corporeality, a deconstruction of these technologies might have just the reverse effect: creating the illusion of a neatly coherent system that would, in fact, hinder the very experiential sensing of their ethics and affectivity no less than their effectiveness.¹⁴ Something about the multisensorial, intersubjective, emergent experience of ritual, as in other fieldwork experiences, is thus disappointingly irrecoverable in spite of one’s best-intended attempts in contextual maneuvering and textual evocation (de Certeau 1984).

Sensuous Drama: “The Doors of My Heart Are Opened for You”

When the voices of the spirits and the dead become manifest during divination and trance, their spiritual power is sensed, their sacredness is materialized. This is when the spirits reveal to the living the true source of afflictions and their solutions in a totalizing, emotional event that involves all the senses, and when the body and the mind are treated jointly; in sum, this is when healing begins.

Miriam, a young woman in her late teens walks into Haydée’s altar with some difficulty; one of her legs is in a cast from her toes to her thigh. The obvious heaviness

of her pace is matched by the chubbiness of her physique and overall clumsiness of her clothes, as well as by her dull, inexpressive visage. Before opening the cards for her, Haydée makes a few unexpected general comments about this young, sad-looking client. These address the obvious neglect of her parents and her wish to make easy money, which introduces the first warning: "Because of that money you'll shed tears." Suddenly, indicating the upcoming revealing words of the spirits, Haydée sounds the bell several times, bangs on the table a few times, and states, "You're spoiled; you're rebelling; If you do it [drugs], you'll catch HIV. Look, you can't bullshit me; you can't cover up anything with me, because those who come with lies, I throw them out. Here, the *bruja* is I!"

Adding to the unfolding drama, Haydée snaps her fingers up and down several times, proclaiming her vision: "*¡Uy, carajo!* (Oh, Shit!).¹⁵ They want to see you on the ground, like that, on the soil. Your enemies want to see you 'back and forth, back and forth, and up and down'" [a vernacular expression for prostitutes that characterizes their life as an endless going up and down the streets in search for clients]. This was to be the key divinatory aphorism given by the spirits, which alerted to many other potential dangers, with sad consequences, if the warning was not taken seriously. Haydée corroborates that vision with another, "You made that comment [about selling your body] not long ago. But remember that the woman who sells her body is worth nothing."

As mentioned above, the power of the vision increases as the medium disengages from authoring the vision, while reinforcing the authorship of the spirits. "Forgive me, Miriam, for telling you these things. I was given these things [by the spirits] perhaps to open your eyes, to prevent you from falling into that error.... You want to get married in white, don't you?" Sensing now Miriam's emotional state and asserting her own divinatory power once again, Haydée voices Miriam's innermost thoughts, not just in the past but also in the present: "You want to cry." Giving her a hopeful solution, she adds to the vision a future outcome, "I see the blue mantle that shelters [*arropa*] you. ... What do you want to be, a nurse? I want to see you beautiful, all dressed in white. ... Thank God you arrived here. [She bangs forcefully on the table, indicating the spiritual nature of her statement.] You arrived just in time!"¹⁶

As the consultation comes to an end, Haydée writes a recipe for a cleansing bath for Miriam, reassuring her: "Don't worry; I see you dressed as a nurse."

While Reina, the assistant median, and I have been visibly moved by the divination session, Miriam sat in silence throughout most of the time. Offering to pay for

the cleansing products (quite an unusual gesture), Haydée asserted her total commitment to Miriam—a commitment that was elevated to a spiritual timeless bond, articulated and blessed in the following "closing" prayer:¹⁷

My God and celestial Father, at this moment I close this humble altar, which has been opened for the good and closed for the evil. ... Always keep my head high, like you do, my God, because remember that I plead and you give, I plan and you break, we declare but you decide; you're the only one who governs, together with La Caridad, and I put everything in your hands. I beg you to give me strength to continue my *obra espiritual*, to help me to help others.

In this introductory plea, Haydée reasserts in a double move of extreme humility and empowerment that her power to heal stems from God and La Caridad (her patron saint)—it is not hers. And by virtue of this unique position she intercedes for Miriam, who stands as a proxy of Haydée's dead daughter: "Now, look at this youngster. ... [Raising her voice] Take care of her! [In a trembling sobbing voice] Accompany her! I plead with you for her as if she were my own daughter. Don't destroy her! Don't allow anyone to harm this poor soul. You know that she's at the beginning of her flowering youth, beginning her life. ... Remember that she feels lonely. She didn't tell me—but I know what she feels—that she doesn't have a single friend, that she feels there's no one to advise her." Following up on the theme of the "daughter," Haydée positions herself as her "spiritual mother"—another proxy, and asks God that "every time she feels destroyed in her heart, you bring her to the doors of this home... [sobbing]; that I receive her in my heart; that I gather her in my arms as I would my own daughter." Stressing yet another level of somatic mimesis, Haydée "thinks" the thoughts and "feels" the feelings that Miriam has had and has: "All the approaching negativity—drive it away! [Sobbing] Because, remember, that everybody belittles her, everybody humiliates her. [Crying] She didn't tell me, but I know it is so."

In a studied exercise of unmasking, to dispel any doubts about the authenticity of her mediumship, Haydée bewilderingly asks, "Oh my God, why do you permit me to shed tears for this young woman who is not my daughter?" Pondering whether there's an ultimate purpose, according to the Laws of Spiritism, she continues in a breaking voice, "Oh my God, I had my child and you took her away from me, and who knows, couldn't this be my daughter reincarnated, the one you took, the one I always saw as suffering, always felt my heart aching for?"¹⁸ Finally placing her mediumship in a general quest

for national recovery, in line with the ethos of Spiritism, Haydée situates her spiritual work with Miriam within the public preoccupation with the drug-related violence hitting the island, pleading, “God, I ask you to always stay inside me so I can help ... and host all the troubled youth of Puerto Rico in my heart like my own children.” Reassuring Miriam of her new spiritual mother and protector, Haydée continues, “I know, my God, that from today on you will open your sky, your celestial mansions; you will shelter her with the mantle of your mother, La Milagrosa. My God, allow me to help her; don’t ever let me say *no* to this being, keep my arms open for her. ... I ask you to insert her in my heart even more than I now have her. In your hands I leave everything. [Banging the table] Amen!” Addressing Miriam in a soft voice now, Haydée gently embraced Miriam’s temples as she offered her unconditional support. “Remember, for you, my doors are always open.” After kissing her on the forehead, she blessed Miriam with, “May God look after you!”

Still shaken by the drama that unfolded in that tiny altar, Reina and I were moved equally by the gravity of the revelation, the tragic, defenseless presence of Miriam, and Haydée’s visceral motherly response, especially knowing Haydée’s history of multiple child loss. While Reina and I are shedding tears in a state of heightened communion with “Haydée, the mother,” “Haydée, the medium,” and Miriam, we realize incredulously that Miriam has remained stoically seated, her face immutable all this time. I can hardly describe the feeling of having sensed the spirits and the experience of having shared a mystically sponsored journey beginning with Miriam’s initial forlorn state and ending with a state of total acceptance, of opening doors and hearts... (What I then interpreted as unresponsiveness may have been, instead, the signs of total disbelief, shock and awe.)

Recognizing the cathartic (and, in Spiritist terms, cleansing) nature of Haydée’s prayer, marking—like the Via Crucis—the gradual passage from a state of pollution and disgrace to one of purification and salvation, Haydée proposes we all hear it again. It is the first time she has made such a request. I quickly and eagerly rewind the tape, satisfied at my being able to fulfill such an impromptu significant request. As the tape begins to replay, Haydée reflects aloud, “This is something to remember.” (I couldn’t have imagined that my Sony tape-recorder would ever morph into a cleansing apparatus and reservoir of sacred memories.) Still mesmerized by the original, the four of us savor its replay emanating magically from the black box. Though only a minute or so had elapsed between that originating moment and its commemoration, an imperceptible phenomenological distance had been created during this interval: Miriam and

Haydée had just become characters in a mythical encounter, a drama that might be relived again and again in the future (and which I myself relived when transcribing this tape). Befitting such a dramatic encounter, Haydée bids Miriam farewell: “May I fall before you do!”

As mentioned above, Miriam’s passivity during the divination session had been overwhelming. It amazed me to see her as a sacrificial lamb, unreceptively absorbing whatever was being delivered about and for her. Neither rebelling against nor acknowledging the truth of the revelatory messages offered by the spirits, Miriam submissively accepted their verdict. She was “the perfect patient,” patiently acting as an empty vessel ready to receive all the spiritual action—the harsh warnings and disparaging comments issued in her (ultimately) best interest. Lack of will, passivity, and idleness are assumed in the case of those unfortunate individuals who (as a result of their weakness) fall victim to bewitchments (following cross-cultural witchcraft discourses), and those who fall prey to bad peer influences and dangerous anti-social situations (following sociological discourses of deviance). Miriam showed signs of being a victim in terms of both types of discourses.¹⁹ Despite her apparent loss of “kinesthetic attentiveness” (Desjarlais 1996:144) or perhaps because of it, Miriam had let herself become the receptacle of salvation wholeheartedly, transformed, via processes of divination and cleansing, into an object of love, care, and blessings, which will help her develop into a productive social being. The future outcomes the healing therapy desired to achieve were achieved during the very process of setting up its goals.

When Lévi Strauss (1963) contrasted the passivity of the Cuna patient in regard to the shaman attending her, and the active role expected from patients of psychoanalysis vis-à-vis their analysts, he pointed out the responsibility of the psychoanalytic patient to actively engineer the desired transformation expected from therapy. In non-mainstream therapeutic systems such as *brujería*, divination, cleansing and exorcism rituals can be seen as liberating, healing experiences in themselves, regardless of the specific content of the spirits’ revelation and what the client ends up doing as a result. What I am suggesting is that healing might occur regardless of actions taken after the ritual (and regardless of whether the spirits spoke the “truth” about the cause of the problem and its solution) because rituals “do” in the process of their performance.²⁰

Here I am inspired by John. L. Austin (1975) on the performative or illocutionary force of propositions that “do” because the actions embedded in them are linked to certain legitimating institutions or social frameworks.²¹ When Haydée ritually repeated, “I want to see you

beautiful, a professional woman all dressed in white... I see you dressed as a nurse," her words acted as a "verbal missile" (Malinowski 1935:248). It was a powerful invocation, imbued with the spiritual power and strong emotions accompanying the manifestation of the spirits' revelation of the future. Austin's performatives suggests that the ritual effectiveness should be sought and measured in the process of enactment, no less than in results after the ritual event (Abrahams 1977). Robert Desjarlais (1996) seems to arrive at the same conclusion. He quotes the reflections of a patient who underwent a Yolmo healing ritual, "When the spirit returns...it feels like a jolt of electricity to the body" (159), and stresses that the goal of these rituals is "to jumpstart a physiology" (160). Indeed, according to Jeanne Favret-Saada (1989), certain gestures, words and attitudes within the realm of ritual "do"—they effect immediate results beyond their functional materiality when performed within the framework of "magic." She described a case where the head of a farm had been bewitched and an unbewitcher consulted. By performing the minute acts of "indirect violence" and "aggressive defense" (50) the unbewitcher prescribed, the farmer's wife effected a drastic change of the conditions instigated by witchcraft without any participation by her husband, the witchcraft's object. Empowered by and feeling the pleasurable effects of efficient action, the wife had promoted the beginning of the whole farm's recovery, eventually evidencing the truth of the un-bewitcher's diagnosis.

Perhaps the transformative, healing and reconstitutive power of divination rituals resides in the multisensorial drama they create, engaging healers and clients in a spirits-driven script that supersedes their individual wills and the status-quo. Actors are not really responsible for what happens. During possession, brujos become vessels for their ancestors and guardian spirits, their bodies becoming amplifiers of the spirits' messages. On occasion they host the evil forces that have attacked their clients, order them to stop pestering their victims, expiate their evil deeds, enlighten their spirits, and send them off to celestial mansions. Clients, too, become receptacles as they fall victim to negative forces and as they absorb the divinatory and redressive acts brujos perform on their behalf. Even though they are believed to unfold according to the whims of spirits, not humans, rituals have the power to transform how we feel, think and act.

After a few days, having removed the cast herself without the intervention of a doctor, Miriam came to see Haydée again. For several weeks, Miriam joined in with the few habitués at Haydée's home-altar, receiving regular treatments for her recovering leg, and nurturing and



Photograph 1: Haydée blows the sacred smoke of the Indio on Miriam's leg (photo by author).

caring for her spirit. Completely free of charge, Haydée applied herbal compresses regularly on Miriam's leg, infusing this sacred mixture with the healing powers of the Indio (an Amerindian spirit) through puffs of smoke from his cigar. Between treatments, Miriam participated in Haydée's daily routines as a surrogate daughter, dining with Eliseo (Haydée's son) and occasional guests. She just hung out all day at the house. Haydée called her *mi ahijada*—my godchild—and bestowed on her (as promised during the improvised prayer at the end of her first consultation) the intimacy and demands of a mother.

After Miriam's leg was almost healed and she had recovered most her ability to walk, Haydée decided it was time to conduct a special cleansing ritual, which, due to the gravity of her case, was framed as an "exorcism." Haydée set up a whole afternoon free of clients and recruited Reina and Armando (a *santero-espiritista* just arrived from New York) to assist her in this expectedly difficult exorcism. We all gathered in her living room. Reina, Haydée and Armando danced and sang to *música santera*, playing Yoruba and Catholic praise songs to the Afro-Cuban rhythms of rumba that celebrate and summon, one by one, the orishas/saints. Haydée fell into trance, after which we all heard this message: "She needs a bit of love. But [the spirits] tell me that she has a beautiful *cuadro* [set of guardian spirits]. Because what she has, is a sad *arraastre* [drag, incarnated negativity], which she doesn't have to carry by herself. Because she is not to blame for what happens to her. Because God will hear

her sacred wish; God will give her what she needs.” The words of the spirits were intercepted by a series of “¡O, cará!,”²² “So be it,” “Love, Faith, Hope, and Charity!,”²³ and cleansing spells such “Cleansing ... *Sambia* [the highest cosmic force of Palo] upward ... *Sambia* downward ... Cleansing ... Gathering ... Throwing ... Cleansing ... Gathering... Throwing. ...” while Miriam stands motionless in the middle of the living room. She has been anointed with flowers; her head and face wiped with a blue handkerchief symbolizing La Milagrosa’s energies and touch; her face and neck rubbed with ice cubes to cool her negativity; her lips wet with red wine (Christ’s blood) mixed with the petals of red flowers.

At the center of all this cleansing, Haydée voiced a long exposition in a Biblical oral register about the mercy of God with those who are rejected by society:

There are those who need love and are rejected.²⁴
 There are those who are sad and hopeless.
 But there are those who extend their arms
 And always find a smile of peace and harmony.

There are those who sob and are heard.
 There are those who plead and are rewarded.
 There are those who deserve because they speak up.
 There are those that say, “I’m sad,”
 And their tears are wiped away.

But there are those who sob,
 And their tears are wiped away by Papá Dios.
 Because they tell me that in this moment
 This girl is lacking everything--
 Or *had been* lacking everything.

Because they say everything has arrived for her,
 Especially light, love, peace and happiness;
 Because everything she’ll ask for she’ll be given,
 Not only in material, but also spiritual ways.

Because there are those who plead, but are not heard.
 There are those who knock, but doors close upon them.
 There are those who implore and are turned down.
 Because they [the spirits] tell me, God pleaded and
 was heard,
 God spoke and was heard.
 God sobbed and was consoled.

Because there are people who betray those creatures,
 daughters of God;
 Because everything that God gives, he gives in abundance;
 Everything that God asks for and everything he does,
 he does for goodness.

Say that this creature will be blessed, starting today,
 Because she’s a daughter of God.
 Don’t suffer. Don’t cry. Don’t agonize.

Because you found someone who will liberate you,
 You found someone who will console you,
 You found someone who will help you.

Because they [the spirits] say that those who rejoice
 with you
 Enter the celestial kingdom,
 Those who disparage you will be humiliated,
 And those who are humiliated will rejoice.

Because, my Celestial Father in the Sky,
 May the window of a home open to feed the beggar.
 They [the spirits] say that those who open the door to
 cry with the one who cries will be blessed,
 To laugh with those who laugh, to plea and to give
 Because those who plead will receive.

From now on you’ll have a spiritual and a material
 mother.

Everything you’ll desire you’ll have.
 In the name of the Father, the Celestial Father
 And in the name of the Virgin of Charity, you’ll gather,
 Because everything of yours will be deposited in the
 bottom of the sea from today on.

Because God says, “Ask and I will provide,” “Search
 and you will find,”
 Blessed of the Skies,
 Because the doors will be open for the humble to gather:

Because from today, my girl, my virgin, my saint,
 You are cleansed;
 Because you are a saint,
 You are not just a woman.

Because you came with a bewitchment,
 But this [bewitchment] ended today
 Because God freed you,
 And then La Caridad in union with Santa Bárbara—
 because they are the same, united
 Even if your father and mother have abandoned you,
 I will gather you.

Through a multisensorial alchemy, Miriam was publicly transformed. She was now a Santa: The doors of Haydée’s heart had been opened for her. La Milagrosa sheltered her. The purifying energies of flowers and wine fed her own energies. And from then on, the hands of God would accompany her wherever she went. Through the drama of exorcism and “the evocation of experiences with the sacred,” Miriam had been cleansed and healed (Csordas 1996). In order to reveal and expiate the pain, and effect the cleansing and healing they desire, Haydée and Armando have reenacted what the spirits said Miriam experienced before seeking help. Perhaps the spirits directing Miriam’s exorcism understand that a play’s concreteness spurs visceral, cathartic reactions that evade the possibility of deception or repression.



Photograph 2: Miriam's exorcism (photo by author).

The spiritual trajectory engineered dramatically through sacred and poetic words, and vivified in material symbols, beckoned a parallel spiritual transformation from a marginal, beaten, polluting youngster into a Santa. But unlike Turner's (1974) pilgrimages, Miriam's transformation emerged from an internal progression within herself.

The gradual development of Miriam's self engineered during the exorcism evokes other contexts, other worlds of meaning. The unfolding stages of her transformation parallel the sequence of actions driving the development of adolescent fictional heroes as suggested in Vladimir Propp's morphological study (1968) of Russian fairy tales. Victor Turner found (1974:37-42) similarly patterned sequences of actions exemplified in the historical dramas that produced the martyrdom and sainthood of Canterbury Archbishop Thomas Becket (1118-1170), and the patriotic heroism of parish priest Miguel Hidalgo, in 19th century revolutionary Mexico. What is shared by fairy tales and historical dramas ending, respectively, with the triumph of a beaten adolescent and the establishment of a religious or political icon is a parallel between the progression of the action (beginning with a conflict, followed by a magical intervention, leading to a resolution) and the development of the persona.

Turner suggests four phases of public action for "social dramas" (1974:37-42) that might identify this progression: a "breach," moving to a "crisis," rising to a "redressive action," and ending with the "reintegration" of the main character, now transformed. In Miriam's case, the "breach" is her polluting, marginal state, vividly

depicted as a girl whose cries are unheard, mocked and shunned even by those closest to her. Her marginality reappears in the "crisis" stage, as her willingness "to sell her body," putting her health, and probably her life, at risk. The ritual progresses to the third stage with the enactment of a "redressive action," in which all the insults and offenses Miriam had endured are set right, compensated by the magical aid of Haydée and the promise of future protection and guidance by God, the spirits and saints. In the fourth and final "reintegration" stage, Miriam emerges as a transformed "sacred" self. Through an inspiring yet arduous journey driven by a progression of sensuous images—closing doors, mocking eyes, opening hearts, sheltering saints and guiding hands—Miriam enters (at least for the duration of the ritual) the symbolic domain of a sacred existence, becoming—like pilgrims, Becket, and Hidalgo—a "total symbol," that is, a "symbol of totality" (Turner 1974:208).

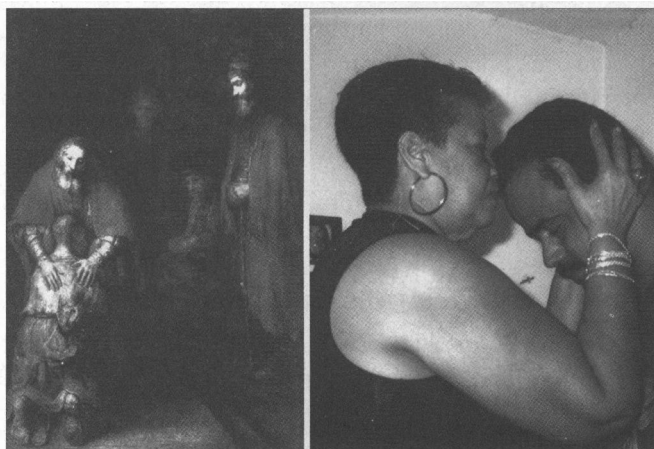
Images and Gestures that "Do"

Have Mary Magdalene, Becket and Hidalgo become root metaphors and symbols, engendering a wide range of future associations and motivations for action? As long as at least some groups continue to recognize their meaning and imbue them with renewed transformative power, historically-constituted religious and national root symbols such as Mary Magdalene, Becket and Hidalgo tend to persist and engender new realities, even if in vastly different contexts from those in which they originated and regardless of how they originated. Without such human tropes, how could we experience ritual, be transformed, or even *recognize* that transformation in ourselves or in others? In Massui's terms, how could we feel the feeling?²⁵

The power of symbolic gestures within Spiritism is evidenced, for instance, in cleansing gestures. As "root" gestures they encapsulate the basic belief in the spiritual component of our "self" and its connection to other selves—past and present, living and dead—and to the cosmos. The gestures performed in cleansing the body from evil influences, for instance, evoke in practitioners particular feelings and sensations with respect to freeing their spirit and mind from negative influences and thoughts. Outsiders might "see" nothing but hands moving up and down, and around, the body.

Within *brujería*, the spiritual effects of symbolic actions and images vary. When Haydée encircled Miriam's body—in the same manner I had seen her encircle her own body and those of others—her arms traced whirlpools of air from Miriam's head to her toes, marking off a trajectory along which harmful negative thoughts and feelings could be safely swished away. As she was cleansing Miriam, when Haydée mentioned the sea and its

saltiness, she evoked Miriam's suffering and the taste of her tears. She also directed Miriam's tears far away from her to the most remote location for depositing human suffering and from where there is no return: the dark depths of the sea. In the kiss Haydée placed on Miriam's forehead, centuries of religious iconographic traditions ignited infinite associations: it was not simply Haydée who was kissing Miriam; and, in this ritual context, that simple earthly gesture acquired a sacred significance and became godly.



Photograph 3: Images and gestures that “do” (photo by the author, with fragment from *The Return of the Prodigal Son* by Rembrandt).

These images—embodied in narrative and iconic depictions of religious piety from previous eras—provide the content and associative chains pertinent to ritual elements in the present. Imbued with inter-ritual and inter-temporal layers of meaning, these embodied images help generate a sense of “spiritual time” during rituals that connects the past, present and future through chains of mimetic resemblances.²⁶ As such, these images linger between desires and outcomes in that ethereal space colonized by magic and shared by metaphors and riddles.

Within the rituals of institutionalized religions, the distance between certain objects and their magical effects has been effectively naturalized by means of hegemonic practices to the point where most Catholic worshipers, for example, would never question the transubstantiation during mass of the wafer and the wine into the body and blood of Christ. But, except among shamans, brujos, sorcerers, children and some artists, the metaphorical “as if materiality” of objects is not commonly accepted outside of such contexts. Because it defies commonsensical inferences about the spatial and temporal boundedness of the sentient material world (at least according to Enlightenment and modern theories that assume axiomatically the “disenchantment” of the world), the ethereal distance

between the materiality of objects manipulated by magic and their trans-spatial and trans-temporal effects are not as easily naturalized.²⁷ But, strangely enough, once objects are represented in iconic or narrative forms they are less bound by their physicality and assumed inertness. It is as if we have learned to accept their spirituality and transcendent effect on us—as with commodities that have acquired a fetishistic meaning for us. Only a select few of the world's mundane things and places become “representations” embedded with metaphoric, fetishistic significance. Once recognized as such, the relationship to the objects and places represented forever changes our somatic and emotional reactions to them.

A mundane understanding holds that, even if spiritual powers are real, there is no connection between them and material objects; instead there is only an empty space, a space that separates rather than connects them. The concept of manifestaciones contradicts this view and proposes that the space between things and spiritual powers connects rather than separates the two worlds. To manifest, then, is to cross the space that at once connects material things to spiritual powers, and spiritual powers to material things. The practices that emerge from this basic Spiritist idea of manifestaciones (also shared by other Afro-Latin religions) are the means by which spirits and their messages come to appear in things such as famous apparitions, extraordinary events, dreams, visions and in the bodies of mediums in trance.²⁸ By means of certain carefully staged frozen gestures, brujos magically summon a desired outcome, cross the space connecting things to spiritual powers, and recreate religious images of their collective sensuous memory in the present, refueling them with new meanings, thereby assuring their continuity.

Manifestaciones explain what brujos and santeros told me about the santos, other icons, and the ritual objects they exhibit and worship at their altars. What they worship are not the *icons* of saints or orishas in themselves; rather, they view the icons as one way in which the saints and orishas manifest themselves on earth. The idea of manifestaciones allows brujos and santeros to worship spiritual entities in objects that have been consecrated, and to summon them in new objects after they have been ritually prepared, cleansed, baptized and empowered.

The ritual significance of manifestaciones implies that a certain spirituality is summoned (*referenced*, if you wish) by the *brujo's* gestures: they objectify and imitate a desired moral attitude as well as reference previous enactments depicted in numerous religious icons. Manifestaciones can be interpreted both as the objectification of a spiritual entity or creative desire, and as the materialization of a spiritual or creative wish yet to be fulfilled.

The enactment of a wish summons its effect. This basic idea of materialization lies at the core of what brujos do, from their hermeneutical frameworks for dreams, visions, trance and divination, to the operative logic behind their magical works and the actual performance of cleansing, healing and retaliation *trabajos*.

Conclusion

Even though magic and healing rituals appear as the easiest ethnographic materials to document empirically because of their visible gestures, palpable substances and audible sounds, these very qualities are also at the root of the challenges they pose for ethnographic textual authority, representation and theorizing (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Hazan 1995; Marcus and Cushman 1983; Stoller 1994). How do these essentially sensorial and grounded acts accomplish anything beyond the manifestly visceral? The words uttered during divination and healing are meant to be sensed, not just listened to, embodied, and not just understood. The extended ethnographic case presented here has shown the complexities of magic, divination and healing rituals that merge various speaking voices and registers, that encompass the shifting between several speech genres and non-linguistic sounds produced by clapping, banging and bell-ringing.²⁹ In addition to integrating several speech genres—personal narratives, aphorisms, proverbs, magic recipes, each of which defines a particular temporal perspective—when linguistic registers of Catholic priests, Protestant pastors, Black-Church and charismatic media preachers, and santeros are intertwined, a trans-religious spiritual experience is thus generated. Such totalizing ritual events may transport participants into a unique “spiritual time” that contravenes conventional, every day forms of communication, perception and feeling.³⁰

Within this spiritual economy of affect, indeterminacy is key (Romberg 2012a). The spiritual world has its own logic and sensuous modes of working. Within this spiritual economy, clients can hardly expect a usual course of action, which makes the sensing of the spirits open to both long-term and new clients, and believers and non-believers in Spiritism and brujería. Expectations are almost always upset in these open-ended, anxiety-producing events, opening the possibilities of experiencing a truly universal spiritual lingua franca as well as a mystical, awe producing disorientation and puzzlement.³¹ I have argued here that healing works for participants in rituals regardless of belief, when the indeterminacy of brujería rituals provokes an outburst of affect, and their uncertainty stirs a flickering sense of transcendence. When the charisma and artifice of brujos are such that they are not sensed,

they both reinforce the sensing of the emergent presence of the spirits and dispel any remaining skepticism of their true presence, even for a flash.

As spirits are “worked” within brujería in such totalizing, yet impromptu rituals, the spirits are made to be sensed as the originating and directing force of rituals. In order to assure that no maneuvering takes place, brujos relentlessly engage in artful revelations that aim at dispelling suspicions of their skilled performances. These and other proof-providing corroborations performed by brujos are meant to reveal that it is the spirits’ manifestations and their will—not the will of brujos—that which guide the rituals they perform as well as their entire lives. On the surface this might seem contrived. Whereas those who “work” the spirits are charismatic mediums who enact multisensorial, inter-temporal and inter-ritual spiritual events, indeterminate as they might be, sensing the spirits and their revelations is what really heals. Clients are asked to have faith—it’s true—but not in spirits or in mediums. Rather, they are expected to make a leap of faith in trusting the emergent reality manifested during rituals. The words of a client I quoted elsewhere (Romberg 2003) make now full sense to me. While waiting to be consulted a woman said, “I don’t believe in these things, but it works.” Paradoxical as it may sound, the lack of belief does not prevent things to happen, if the right procedures are executed with excellence.

Semantically meaningless vocables, onomatopoeic expressions, sounds produced by banging on a table, clapping hands and tapping on a bell may suddenly be heard in the midst of a consultation, adding to the opacity, excitement, and sometimes the anxiety, of what goes on during divination.³² When brujos reveal that it is not they who speak when they deliver the messages from the spirits, or when they unmask unsuspecting clients as being skeptical about the efficacy of their work, they are skillfully performing the theatricality of manifestaciones, dispelling the craving for certainty that their mystery elicits.

Having been puzzled, seduced, and then moved by the opacity of the discourse of spiritual work (its corporeality, and acts of skillful unmasking), perhaps my own textual rituals of revelation of the poetics and gestures of divination, cleansing and healing experiences remain a surface intimation of occasions during which the suspension of disbelief successfully coexisted with skepticism. By unraveling the technologies of manifestaciones, and indulging in their magnificent performativity and expected effects, I have touched only the “the surface, the fold, the skin, the appearance” (Taussig 1998:243) of spiritual work. Even though I may have become an unwilling accomplice in the ritual unmasking of spiritual manifestations, their truth is

exposed only in their corporeality, and sensed only in their performance. Beyond that, spiritual work, despite my several wrenching attempts to know and dissect it, continues to escape cognition and stubbornly resists analysis.

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Notes

- 1 Departing from Julia Kristeva's textual model, I here suggest "inter-ritual" and "inter-rituality" to convey the non-textual, embodied "intertextuality" of vernacular religions. Also, I add "intertemporal" (a term used in economic risk and investment calculations) to convey emic notions of brujería rituals, which aim at "connecting the past, present and future." I discuss this in relation to the unique "spiritual time" that informs brujería rituals (Romberg 2009).
- 2 Crucial socio-historical work on the religions of the African Diaspora has been done by anthropologists, sociologists and religion scholars, without which my own understanding of the wider complexities of the religions of the African diaspora could not have been achieved. Without aiming at exhausting the list of those who have influenced my own work, I can think of the contributors of this issue, George Brandon, Leslie Desmangles, and others such as Roger Bastide, Lorand Matory and Michael Taussig. Many, like myself, began by drawing on colonial archives and socio-historical records in order to trace the macro-processes that could contextualize and explain the rich ethnographic materials they had gathered, and later on added an exploration of the embodied, sensual aspects of these religions in the Americas.
- 3 See Romberg (2011b, 2011c, 2005) about an analytical reworking of creolization processes that takes into account vernacular religiosity, technologies of magic and colonialism.
- 4 I draw on the works of Sara Ahmed (2004) and Richard and Rudnycky (2009).
- 5 Several scholars, such as Michel de Certeau (1984: 177-189) were inspired by Pascal's ledger "Kneel and then Believe" in questioning the role of belief as an a priori condition for religious practice. A recent issue of *Social Analysis* (2008), entitled *Against Belief*, edited by Lindquist and Coleman, expands on this problematic in a cross-cultural vein.
- 6 Parts of the research presented here appear also in Romberg (2009).
- 7 Notably, the theatrical approach to African possession, articulated in the writings of French ethnologist Michel Leiris (Albers 2008), which highlights its ecstatic, Dionysian aspects has been reconfigured by Alfred Métraux in Haitian Voodoo by stressing, instead, a normalizing aspect of the theatricality of possession.
- 8 For a discussion of the corporeality and discourse of spirit possession see Romberg (forthcoming, University of Chicago Press).
- 9 For example, in order to dispel suspicions of deception on the part of brujos, and to increase the power of magic works, they are always made in front of clients, who then are responsible for depositing them in the assigned place, whether a corner in the altar-room, the rain forest (*monte*), the river, or the cemetery.
- 10 Moving beyond purely subjectivist takes on the role of imagination in ritual, I here assume "imagination" (or *imaginaire*, as it is also referred to in French scholarship) as a social practice and a constructed landscape of past and present aspirations and memories (Appadurai 1996:31), as well as a joint intersubjective production (Murphy 2005). See also Crapanzano (2004) about Sufi imagination as a bridge between inner and outer consciousness. In all these respects, I depart from philosophers of affect who base their claims mostly, if not solely, on somatic reactions to pre-representational inputs.
- 11 The implicit analogies with what Brian Massumi (1995, 2002) and others characterize as the emergent embodied nature of "affect" as opposed to "belief" are not coincidental. Performance scholars would frame this as the ability to sense, recognize and report emergent events as meaningful. For affect theoreticians, affect is what makes feelings feel; determining intensity (quantity) of a feeling (quality), in contrast to the ongoing hum of everyday situations (see Schouse 2005 for a good synthesis).
- 12 In stark contrast to Victor Turner's notion of *communitas* and anti-structure, the spiritual economy of affect in brujería does not presuppose a shared, a-priori belief.
- 13 *Comprobaciones* (corroborations) of previous manifestations of the spirits are celebrated and recognized by brujos usually, by means of banging on a table or sounding a bell, followed by the expression "*aché*" (amen, or be it!). They are meant to prove the accuracy of the manifestation of a vision or message given by spirits to brujos, asserting the irrevocable truth of their messages, and the efficacy of their work.
- 14 The first time I assisted a Santería ritual in which animal sacrifice was involved I was astonished to hear jokes and see spontaneous, everyday unplanned actions take place during the performance of the ritual, which contradicted depictions I had read as a student in anthropological works that characterized the serious, sacred sequence and nature of such rituals.
- 15 Such exclamations are not easily translatable; the closest would be "Holy shit!" or some such expression that indexes raw awe and surprise. They signal not only the imminent arrival of the spirits and the trance of the medium, but also that what follows is inspired directly by their words and motives, or is a confirmation of what brujos have revealed to clients. Sometimes the latter are also marked by a loud, ritualistic laugh. All such markers indicate a shift of register from ordinary to spiritual, performative discourse.
- 16 During the course of the divination, the color white was used to refer both to getting married and to being a nurse.
- 17 Haydée used to "open" her altar-room for doing the spiritual work and "close" it every day with special improvised prayers.
- 18 The ethos of Spiritism is ruled by a set of spiritual laws: the law of Cause and Effect, the Law of Love, and the law of Reincarnation, which entail, respectively, that every action has its effect (in this or subsequent lives), that our

actions should be motivated by love (following the model set by Jesus), and that reincarnation gives us subsequent opportunities to improve our karma through the exercise of our free will.

- 19 Her defenseless inaction seemed to be a state of being similar to what Robert Desjarlais describes (1996) as the loss of the sense of presence or the loss of life force that characterizes some states of illness among the Yolmo, a Tibeto-Burman people. When a person suffers from “spirit loss” (when one of the vital components of the self, the *bla*, leaves the body)—the person loses the volition to act and does not care to eat, talk, work, travel, or socialize. In fact, the person “loses the sense of kinesthetic attentiveness or ‘presence’...that characterizes local states of health” (144-146).
- 20 For a review of performative approaches to healing, see Bell (1998); Csordas (1996); Laderman and Roseman (1996); and Tambiah (1968, 1985a, 1985b).
- 21 Several anthropologists of ritual have engaged Austin’s argument, among them Fredrik Barth (1975), Bruce Kapferer (1986), Roy Rappaport (1979), and Stanley Tambiah (1968, 1985a, 1985b).
- 22 This is an expression that indicates the presence of the spirits.
- 23 This is a typical Spiritist blessing and motto.
- 24 I transcribe parts of this ritual in stanzaic form in order to convey their poetic rendering.
- 25 Following a performative approach, the significance of religious and national root symbols (which speak to a wide range of socioreligious contexts) emerge, according to Turner (1974), in historically situated social action (dramas) in particular situations (arenas), where conflicting ideologies and agendas (fields) collide. Motivated by these agendas, and via the concerted symbolic actions of individuals, or the “humanistic coefficient” (Znaniecki quoted in Turner 1974:17), social dramas (as in the theater) are played out after a series of conciliatory moves have been enacted, reaching a resolution or denouement.
- 26 See Romberg (2009) for an extended discussion of what I mean by “spiritual time.”
- 27 I am referring to the notion of “disenchantment” by Weber (2004 [1917]), and its critique, mostly the secularization and rationalization axioms of modernity theories, by philosophers who unravel the “theological” nature of the Enlightenment and theories of modernity, among them Bruno Latour (1993), Peter Gay (1995) and Michael A. Gillespie (2009).
- 28 This may also explain why enslaved Africans were able to “see” their orishas in the images of saints imposed on them by the Catholic Church.
- 29 Here I follow Mikhail M. Bakhtin’s work on speech genres (1986:60, written in 1952-3), in which speech genres determine those relatively stable types of utterances defined by a particular thematic content, style and compositional structure, all of which depend as a whole on a particular sphere of communication.
- 30 Elsewhere I develop the inter-rituality of specific temporal perspectives as they appear in a variety of speech genres during *brujería* rituals (Romberg 2009).
- 31 For clients the overall purpose of consultations is to restore their lost well being, a goal expressed broadly and succinctly

when they say, *Vengo a resolver* (I come to resolve). They know consultations might involve revelations through card reading, messages reflected in the water and glass of the *fuenta* (water-filled glass bowl), or information revealed in trance, and might end with a recommendation for future healing, cleansing or magical work.

- 32 Charles Briggs in his micro-linguistic analysis (1996) of curing rituals among the Warao of Venezuela, attributes metadiscursive power to cries, interjections, vocables, rattles rhythms and onomatopoeias.

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