

Residues of History Affect, and the Resonance of Revolutionary Spirits in Two Cuban Forms of Spiritism

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Article abstract

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Residues of History Affect, and the Resonance of Revolutionary Spirits

in Two Cuban Forms of Spiritism

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Abstract: The figure of the Revolutionary or independence fighter, or indeed the Afro-Cuban maroon, is a fundamental trope of efficacy in Cuban Spiritism. But the question of the vestiges, or residues of resistance and ruin in bodies is an interesting one to ask in the light of Cuba's socialist Revolution and its obvious traces of trauma in people's bodies. I will look at two cases, in different historical periods, that understand Revolution as a material dimension of the body; in the first case as a molecular structure of the body enmeshed with the dead — which must be necessarily disentangled; in the second case, as an attrition, a worn-out ideal, which, when manifest as the disenchanting, pragmatic street-wise spirits of a post-1980s Cuba, perpetuate the remnants of something “lost” in people's sensory experiences. In both cases I will follow Kristina Wirtz's proposal of applying the concept of “chronotopes” to Afro-Cuban religion, as well as looking at affect as an intensive force that manifests as a bodily awareness of Revolution modulated through states of possession.

Keywords: Cuba; chronotopes; affect; spirit mediumship; bodily histories; revolutionary spirits

Résumé: Dans le spiritisme cubain, la figure du révolutionnaire, du combattant de l'indépendance ou encore du marron afro-cubain est un trope fondamental d'une grande efficacité. Néanmoins, il est intéressant de poser la question des vestiges, des résidus de résistance et des ruines, à la lumière de la Révolution socialiste cubaine et des traces visibles de traumatisme qu'elle a laissées sur les corps des individus. Dans cet article, j'examine deux cas, correspondant à des périodes historiques différentes, dans lesquels la Révolution apparaît comme une dimension matérielle du corps: dans le premier cas, la Révolution est une structure moléculaire du corps entremêlée avec les morts – laquelle doit nécessairement être démêlée; dans le second cas, elle est une usure, un

idéal usé, qui, lorsqu'ils se manifestent sous la forme des esprits désabusés, pragmatiques et débrouillards du Cuba post-1980, perpétuent les restes de quelque chose de « perdu » dans les expériences sensorielles des individus. Dans les deux cas, suivant la proposition de Kristina Wirtz, j'applique le concept de « chronotopes » à la religion afro-cubaine et considère l'affect comme une force intensive qui se manifeste en tant que conscience corporelle de la Révolution modulée par des états de possession.

Mots-clés : Cuba ; chronotopes ; affect ; médiumnité ; histoires corporelles ; esprits révolutionnaires

Introduction: Entangled Temporalities

Milagros, an Afro-Cuban woman of about sixty years, is what Cubans call an *espiritista*, a spirit medium. She has a long and tragic history of spiritual development. For many years her family, particularly her mother, had taken her for “mad” (*loca*), and she was forcibly medicated. In 1982, Milagros travelled as a nurse to Angola, on an internationalist mission. She understands this trip as destiny. On the second of February, her spirits “came down” (*bajaron*) for the first time, unexpectedly, in a transit hotel where she was staying with other nurses. Unbeknownst to her then, all of her colleagues had hidden “beliefs,” and helped her through it. It was Francisca, her African spirit, who came first. She began to work her spirits, including a male entity called Francisco. “Francisco and Francisca were a couple. But they were the parents of my great grandfather. They didn’t come to Cuba, they were left behind, forgotten.” Milagros recalls having dreamt of the Francisco/Francisca pair since a very young age. She had even seen them, an event brushed off by her own mother, an avid Revolutionary at the time, as a hallucination. She still sees Francisco now, years after ceasing to take medication. When he’s present, she feels a sharp pain on her left leg, and she relates this to the pain that his *son* — her great grandfather — felt when he was enchained and taken to Cuba as a slave. Francisco is none other than the spirit Milagros inherited from her great grandfather, who, unbeknownst to her, had been a slave, and subsequently a maroon (*cimarrón*) during the time of the final independence war with Spain. She had inherited his spirits. He had never put his name down in the civil registry because he had been a maroon, and the name passed down to her mother’s family had been that of her *maternal* great grandmother — Filomena Linares y Friol. Filomena was known in her village endearingly as Mamita, and Milagros

describes her as having been a great seamstress, but also midwife, doctor and surgeon to the maroons and the *mambise* (revolutionary) troops. But it was only in Angola that things started rolling for Milagros. “It was only after I was thirty-seven that I understood that the mystical side of me was that I was Mamita’s descendent.” She sat down with her elders — her great granduncles who were left — to listen to their stories; stories about slavery, war, and the struggles of life as maroons that had been hidden from her but that she had felt in her body for years.

Milagros’s Francisco (her slave spirit) is uncannily similar to others in Cuba and beyond. Elizabeth Pérez, who writes about a house of Espiritismo and Orisha worship in Chicago called Ilé Laroye (2011), argues that spirit evocation rites here “affirmed participants’ emergence from a dense matrix of relationships and histories that stretched over centuries and continents beyond their individual births, yet in which they were still profoundly implicated” (2011, 338). It is unsurprising that Billal, one of her main interlocutors, “had” a spirit of an old slave who had shackles on his feet (Pérez 2011, 352). Levi, as the slave was called, was closely associated with Babalu Ayé, the saint of cripples, portrayed with crutches and a dog in popular imagery. Possession with these spirits, Pérez suggests, seems to “mount a stirring critique of the past from the perspective of the present, and erect a vision of deceased entities through whom the here-and-now is protested” (Pérez 2011, 354). But indeed, protest, resistance, rebellion, and revolution are not just the property of spirit mediumship. According to historians, observers and participants of the Cuban independence wars, slave maroon communities, the Cuban Revolution, as well as Afro-Cuban religions, it is built into the very fabric of Cuban bodies.

“(T)he Cuban is a revolutionary (*el cubano es revolucionario*), and it goes a long way back, to the Mambises,” the independence fighters of the nineteenth century, Martin Holbraad’s interlocutor tells him (2014, 384). “Fighting is in our blood — the Cuban is a warrior,” she says. Through his interlocutors in Havana, Holbraad understands revolution in terms of service, self-sacrifice, which lends revolutionary politics, and its clear shortcomings, a very particular ontological foundation. It is an “all-encompassing totality,” a world with “no outside” (Holbraad 2014, 370); a world that creates very specific forms of relating in which the distinction between people and state is essentially eroded, or in which there is a constant project to do so. In this article I attempt to understand this same impulse — not of state, but of *nation* and its tropes — through the spirits that emerge in spatiotemporally-entangled cosmologies of the body. In Cuba it is

very common for spirit mediums to “work” with spirits who have been maroons (*cimarrones*), for instance, or “African” slaves, and who come with enormous amounts of vitality and aggression, or indeed, to receive messages from both martyrs and intellectuals of the independence wars. It is no less unusual to have revolutionary women spirits, like Mamita, Milagros’ great grandmother, or medicine men and women, and religious shamans and experts who helped the cause more informally. This is the flipside of the encompassing political cosmology Holbraad speaks of. Here, alternative histories are generated in bodies that encompass and transform the ruins of a historical imagination, refracting it. The past, as Palmié and Stewart (2016) suggest, cannot be understood purely on its own terms, nor solely in chronological code. But neither does it simply “pollute” the present. Rather, spirit mediumship is an exercise in a constant restructuring of affective space-time.

Fidel Castro’s guerilla insurrection in the 1950s from Eastern Cuba, its appeal to the poor, popular masses, especially in the countryside, and the final triumph of the Rebel Army in 1959 has led to the glorification of the figure of the revolutionary rebel, who perfectly embodied a sort of *cubanía rebelde* (rebel *cubanía*), vital to a new Cuban self-identity. This *cubanía*, according to Kapcia, fed from earlier (sometimes contradictory) versions of a nationalist sentiment but exacerbated it, proposing a “*Cuba Libre* socially, racially, and politically united, equal and collectively defined” (2000, 87). In essence, it “responded to the shameful inequalities of slavery, the countryside, the urban slums and racism” (Kapcia 2000). A vision of the “New Man,” worker was to be derived of this initial combatant, clad in military or peasant worker uniform. But this romanticist vision has clear roots in the nineteenth century with the figure of the independence rebel, the *mambí*, and the call to free Cuba from colonialism, embodied principally by those most oppressed: Afro-Cuban slaves, to whom freedom was promised through enlistment in the rebel army. During the Ten Years’ War (1868–78), begun by Carlos Manuel Céspedes with a call to arms (Grito de Yara), the insurgents were overwhelmingly black (Ayorinde 2004, 30). Among the leadership of this war were Generals Antonio Maceo, Guillermo Moncada, and Quintín Barreras, all Afro-Cuban. Many slaves, whose owners did not concede of their absence for the liberation armies, fled and either presented themselves to the revolutionary authorities (Gallegos 2018, 28), or founded maroon communities that forged paths of resistance of their own. In the last, successful war of independence (1895–98), many maroon communities provided rebels for the forces.

In this article I will explore the effects and the affects of revolutionary “ruins” or “remnants” in the bodies of Cuban practitioners of espiritismo, a practice of contacting and incorporating the dead with widespread appeal throughout the island with roots in nineteenth century Euro-American forms of spiritualism (Espirito Santo 2015). The work here presented is based on almost fifteen years of fieldwork on creole forms of mediumship and spirit possession in Havana (begun in 2005 for my doctoral project). It is therefore the result of long-considered notions of spirit, en-spirited bodies, as well as “affect,” which I take from Deleuze and Guattari (1994) as a non-representational intensive force, which can be gauged as bodies come into contact with one another. Affect is the resonance between these, a way of knowing that does not have necessarily indexical cues; it is not a propositional or individual feeling, but something that is both present and accrues in consciousness through sociality. I argue that in Cuban spirit mediumship, affect is intimately related to a historicist understanding of the past, and in this case, with “ruins” of varying kinds. Affects, proposed in the ethnographic analysis, as Massumi says, “are our angle of participation in processes larger than ourselves. With intensified affect comes a stronger sense of belonging, with other people and to other places” (2015, 6). In affect come the creative freedoms to connect and dissolve connections, to move the body in particular ways. “Ruins” — as enabled by and experienced through bodies during spirit possession — have both an affective dimension, and a “chronotopical” one (Bakhtin 1981), mobilized in different configurations and accents according to the two modes of espiritismo discussed.

Bakhtin’s notion of the chronotope is reworked in the Afro-Cuban world of performance by Kristina Wirtz (2014, 2016). Wirtz explores how historical imagination is unfolded in spectacles that rely on chronotopes of “blackness” — “sedimented in the body — a matter of habit and memory as much as is the past” (2014, 31-32). Chronotopes, according to Bakhtin, who wrote about written genres, are “temporal and spatial frameworks of subjective experience” (Wirtz 2014, 9) — time-spaces, which can be reread through spaces of performance and folklore. Cuban espiritismo is replete with what Wirtz calls elsewhere “chronotopic multiplicity” (2016, 344), which works exactly because it draws from the affective collective, but is, at once, heterogeneously employed, biographically specific, and fully indeterminate. Milagros’s story at the beginning shows this well. Hers is a spiritual biography layered with spatiotemporal multiplicities,

affective at their core, generated by a personal genealogy resonating in her body itself, discovered discursively and phenomenologically over time, encounter, and place.

In Havana, most espiritista mediums make a distinction between “espiritismo científico,” considered closer to Euro-American formulations of Spiritualism, and “espiritismo cruzado,” a Cuban “version” of the first (Millet 1996). The former is the name given to societies for the “scientific” study and practice of spiritism, according to specific doctrines and codes, and the latter the designation of creole home-grown practices that are largely syncretic and malleable in character, and designed to provide a platform of relation between the living and their ancestors in the Afro-Cuban religious sphere (Brandon 1997). Milagros would be the latter kind of espiritista. These divisions, as Román has argued (2007), contribute little towards an understanding of the discursive and material forms of boundary-work that are actually necessary to the historical emergence of these categories in a wider field of Cuban science, intelligentsia, as well as Afro-Cuban religions. I am in agreement, and have argued so elsewhere. However, in this paper, I will argue that there is a factor that generates an important and overlooked difference between “domains” of espiritismo, and it is not in their assumptions per se on the ontology of the spirit world, or even on their methods of cultivating it. In certain institutionalized espiritismo “científico” societies in Havana I have studied, founders often psychographed entire treatises from spirits of fallen independence war soldiers and heroes. Chronotopically, the “performances” these gentlemen enacted are located in the historical points of their own existence, retained as they are, and reverberated through doctrinal forms of discussion. In more creolized forms of espiritismo, on the other hand, there is room made for the sensational, corporeal force of affective history. This is true both for *cimarrones* and slaves, such as described in Milagros’s example with the leg pain, for instance, or her nostalgia for Africa derived from an unconscious “spiritual” impulse within her, as well as for the more recent spirits of disenchanted *revolucionarios*. In the last section I will discuss one street-wise entity in particular who embodies the attrition, and the worn-out ideals of a post-1980s Cuba, perpetuating the remnants of something lost, of faded hopes in the medium’s body.

Chronotopes of Resistance and Their Bodies

Palo Monte, a Bantu-Congo-inspired religious complex of spirit practices in Cuba, is the most obvious place to look for the bodily aesthetics of cosmologies of resistance. In “Conjuring the past” (2008), Kenneth Routon tells us of a ritual party for the dead he attended, whereby Arcaño, his interlocutor, was possessed by the spirit of a nineteenth century Congo slave, hunted by the dogs of his plantation owner. The audience chanted to this effect. “Slave driver,” they sang, coaxing the spirit into appearance, “release the dogs!” (Routon 2008, 632). “Face down on the floor, the embodied spirit writhed about in one place with his arms firmly pressed against the length of his torso in a manner eerily reminiscent of the *boca abajo*, a disciplinary tactic that required a slave to lie face down on the ground while receiving lashes” (Routon 2008, 633). But, asks Routon, of this episode, what exactly is being *remembered*? It is certainly not a naïve representation of any kind of memory. As an alternative, he argues that certain historical events, like slavery, “are sometimes reified as magically empowered imagery capable of both causing misfortune and expanding people’s power to act on the world” (Routon 2008, 633). There is no doubt that stories about dead slaves constitute powerful indictments or the brutality of forced plantation labour (Routon 2008, 639). In some sense, this has been the heart of much work on Afro-Cuban religion — a concept of resistance itself, born from the idea that these were practices forged in the crucible of human oppression: slavery. But we need more conceptual tools to understand heterogeneous spirit mediumship arenas.

Kristina Wirtz argues, following Bakhtin (1981), that “our historical imagination emerges through dialogical interactions across multiple chronotopes” (2016, 344). Bakhtin argues that time and space are fundamentally unified categories: “In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history” (Wirtz 2016, 84). Narrative texts construct fictional worlds, or chronotopes. The concept has been used in many disciplines for many purposes. Wirtz suggests that a dialogue of chronotopes is what constitutes historical consciousness: “If the first insight of Bakhtin’s concept of chronotope is the irreducible relationality of time and space as semiotic (that is to say, socially meaningful) constructs, the second is that these semiotically mediated spatiotemporal orders shape our *experience* and thus subjective *feel* for history and place” (Wirtz 2016, 344). This is much more than a proposition of a collective historicity emerging from a given spirit

possession ritual. It suggests that this dialogue is effected through the mediation of very personal histories. Indeed, Wirtz argues that while they may be hegemonic, chronotopes need not be “totalizing” (Wirtz 2016, 345). She proposes that people organize their experiences through “heterochronicity” (Wirtz 2016, 348).

Common chronotopes in Cuba are those specifically referring to eras of resistance, heroic pasts and communities, and patriotic figures, as Wirtz notes (2016, 364). But just as “blackness” is not a natural historical category, neither is any one of these chronotopic configurations more natural than others. Marc Blanchard argues that political resistance has always had a deep relation to the Afro-Cuban religions, the central figure of this being the *cimarron*, or fugitive slave (2009, 383). Heroes, such as this one, as well as those of the Cuban independence and revolution — which includes José Martí, Che Guevara and Fidel Castro — have become “holy men” to Cuba’s “national project” (Blanchard 2009, 384). Blanchard proposes that the mythology of the maroon reverberates with the revolutionary figures as well as with the liberation struggles in which it was created, because it essentially represents “underground culture” (Blanchard 2009, 389). This is exemplified physically in spaces such as *palenques*, maroon settlements, but also in the Sierra Maestra, from where Fidel’s rebels made their move. The *cimarrón* is thus the “choice saint” (Blanchard 2009, 390) of people’s revolutionary practices, immortalized among other ways by a giant statue of the anonymous maroon constructed by sculptor Alberto Lascay in the valley of El Cobre (near Santiago, in the East) in the late 1990s.

Similarly, historian Henry Lovejoy (2019) explains how the “mulata” stock character, as a figure of rebellion, but also of feminine beauty and motherhood — tied to the Yoruba-Cuban deity Ochún, the goddess of fertility and love — became prominent in Cuba, portrayed as La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, representative of the very foundation of a raceless Cuba. The power of her shrine, near Santiago, has not been simply religious, nonetheless. Jalane Schmidt tells us that she became the virgin of the *mambises* or independence soldiers, as they traversed the island (2015, 49). She became the image of an “imagined community” (Anderson 1991, in Schmidt 2015). According to Lovejoy (2019), this ideal of a raceless Cuba was tied explicitly to the symbol of a mixed-race female (*mulata*) that emerged in popular culture in the nineteenth century (227). “By the Ten Years’ War, the *mulata* was a permanent allegory for nationhood” (Lovejoy 2019, 221). As one of the reviewers of this text notes, however, this initial identification between the *mulata* and the Virgin was one surprisingly advanced from the west of the island to the east.

K. Lynn Stoner argues that the image of the female *mambisa*, which circulated widely during the independence wars, “consecrated the nationalist cause by bringing the home onto the battlefield and transforming the war theatre into a moral arena” (2003, 72). To secure a nationalist ideal, women’s bravery was set forth as a way to publicize the *mambise* army’s legitimacy. They “became inspirational fetishes and examples of nationalist will and a modern orientation, but not individuals in their own right” (Stoner 2003, 73). The image of the female fighter or guerrilla evolved with time, as Stoner argues. In the pre-Republic, more than one hundred heroines were “immortalized” in song, poetry, music, photographs, and memorials, such as that dedicated by Enrique José Varona, a philosopher of much renown, for the women who had fought in the Ten Years’ War (Stoner 2003, 78). In the early republic, female nationalists and patriots were depicted as educators, feminists, labor activists, and insurrectionists (Stoner 2003, 79). And in the insurgency period of Fidel Castro’s guerilla movement, they “pledged allegiance to male leaders,” joining the forces with their own guns and artillery (because Castro would not have women on the front line).

It is not difficult to assume an easy transference, so to speak, of historical archetypes, onto the cosmology of spirit mediumship practices such as Palo Monte and espiritismo. But here I argue that however this process has to do with power, as Routon says, it also has to do with affective forms of history-making in particular bodies, with particular genealogical biographies. There is no simple mimesis or embodiment of historical representations, but something more profound that takes into account Stephan Palmié’s point (2002, 51), following (Koselleck 1985), that history is not implicitly uniformitarian nor an ultimate passage from tradition to modernity. In their cultivation and care for certain spirits, mediums demonstrate their embeddedness in relations that are spatio-temporally multiple and manifest as sensational configurations in the body. This means that while there is mimesis, it is a cosmogonical, or world-producing sort of mimesis. Elizabeth Pérez makes a similar point when she deconstructs the notion of spiritist theatre to posit that mediums use sympathy as a point of entry into the spirits’ minds in order to coerce them to speak (2012, 371).

Rey, for instance, a middle-aged white medium from the province of Las Tunas, who now lives in Havana, told me, in 2013, about his main spirit guide, a *cimarrón* called Tomás who appeared in his body when he was only eight years old. “I would have these attacks, people would say I was suffering from nerves, but I was just a child.” Rey would feel chills, and experience convulsions with

Tomás, whom he describes as a “Congo.” He was a “proud and unruly slave” who would, at the same time, make Rey feel “large” and “strong” (*me sentía grande*) when he came. It was as if the bodies of the two were overlapping. “I started to see things. They would call me the *niño prodigio* (prodigal boy) in my village. They would take me to all sorts of spiritual centers and I would tell people the things that I saw.” Rey had a representation of a doll “made” for Tomás, and charged with powerful substances. Tomás greets with an Arab salutation in Cuba known as “Salem Malekum,” an Islamic phrase very often used in Palo Monte, he liked sugar-cane liquor and tobacco, and he transmitted to Rey “songs in Palo,” which, as a non-officiant of Palo Monte, Rey diligently commits to memory. The Congo songs of Palo, the Salem-Malekum greeting, the postures of the slave, his spiritual force and pride, and the objects confectioned on his behalf — all are what Wirtz describes as chronotopic registers (2014), embraced in the body in Rey’s interactions with other mediums, internalized in conversation with others, and materialized into objective forms over Rey’s own spiritual biography. This means that Rey’s understanding of himself is dialogically constituted in interaction with others, and with his outer and inner histories. Language in particular, says Wirtz (2014), through Bakhtin, indexes historical time and place (149). As do certain forms of material remembrance, such as a miniature *bohío* (a timber hut) that Rey constructed for Tomás — according to his memories of where he lived. Objects too, “stabilize otherwise ephemeral processes of recall” (Wirtz 2014, 33). *Lengua Conga* in particular, as opposed to Yoruba (thought in the public imaginary to be more pure and refined — the tongue of the *orichas* and spoken during Santería rites), as well as the chronotopic identities of each, “enregisters” Blackness (2014, 174) as the ultimate voice of Cuba’s brutal past. Wirtz says that in “invoking maroon spirits,” or indeed those of rebellious slaves, “Cuban religious practitioners create possibilities to develop their own rebellious spirit” (2014, 150).

If, as Palmié and Stewart suggest, “history” as a heuristic can be defined “not only as “practices of knowledge production” aiming at forging “relations to the past” but also as “intimations of the past,” since the past can be perceived nonobjectively, or sensed affectively” (2016, 226), then spirit possession for Cuban espiritistas is a process of producing many (sometimes occult, alternative) histories in situ. Not only do societies differ in relation to their forms of making (and understanding) history, but individuals do as well. “Historicity,” Stewart says elsewhere (2016, 82), “interweaves not only the present and the past, but also the future.” Possession makes a “map,” not a “tracing,” in the words of

Deleuze and Guattari (1987), of Cuban histories, and by so doing, creates histories anew, projecting into futures. It thus seems important to understand how this occurs on a phenomenological and material-aesthetic level. In the next two sections I will describe ethnographic case studies of two quite different processes, in different spaces of espiritismo.

The Aesthetics of Separations

I once asked a young espiritista, Daniel, why so many mediums claim to be “visited” by the spirits of Cuban greats, such as scientist Felix Varela, or of poet and revolutionary José Martí. He pointed at his foot, which was placed on the square-tiled floor of the apartment where we were. “Imagine my foot is the spirit, and the tiles are the different spiritual centres or houses.” He moved his foot from one tile to the other effortlessly, landing it in between tiles. “This is how they can be in multiple places at once.” According to Daniel, these are spirits (Varela, Martí and many more), “luminous entities,” “beings of superior knowledge,” who have “accompanied” Cuban history for two or three hundred years, working towards its “evolution.” These terms — evolution, luminosity, and superior knowledge (as opposed to witchcraft, materialization, moral backwardness) — are very much at home within the elite “scientific” circles of Havana’s espiritismo. These discourses have the effect of pitting “modern,” rational forms of espiritismo against an Afro-Cuban “anti-modern” kind, evaluative parameters that resonate with deeply racialist and racist turn-of-the-century anti-*brujo* campaigns (Bronfman 2004), which depended on an apparatus of political, legal, scholarly, and media domains to criminalize Afro-Cuban practices (Palmié 2002, Román 2007). Whatever the historical motivations behind an emphasis on study rather than spectacle, on calm rather than frenetic rites, this abstraction (and transcendentalization) of knowledge and spirit results in a particular static chronotopic configuration, which while not absent from affective flows, precludes creative freedoms to explore biographical connections and dissolve them within these flows. There are no accompanying forms of materiality to spirits, such as gifts, representations, or objects, which provide profound modes of ontological feedback into the experience and existence of spirits themselves; “de-materialization” is the order of the day. This means that the chronotopic values associated for instance with spirits that have suffered and endured periods of resistance, while recognized, are ultimately extinguished from mediums’ bodies. Or at least that is the ideal.

The example discussed here is of the *Sociedad de Estudios Psicológicos Amor y Caridad Universal*, the most philosophically complex of the “scientific” espiritismo societies I encountered during my initial fieldwork in 2005–06. They held regular Saturday doctrinal lessons, followed by a sober trance session, in one of Havana’s large masonic lodges, as well as smaller-scale meetings for the development of mediumship at the leaders’ houses. The Sociedad was founded sometime in the 1950s by Claudio Agramonte, an uneducated Afro-Cuban peasant in Matanzas, who was approached by three black maroon spirits from the nineteenth century: Rafael, Francisco, and Juan Alava. These three brothers began to “interpenetrate” with Claudio’s body (*matéria*) to bring about spiritual changes in his previous materialistic happy-go-lucky life. These spirits paved the way for the teachings of a more “evolved” spirit entity called José de Luz, a white lawyer and doctor in sciences and medicine, who lived around the beginning of the nineteenth century, but who had committed “errors” due to this social position and wealth. As a spirit guide to Claudio, he would pursue a reformist agenda of a very spiritual nature. It was based, on the one hand, on the kind of spiritual democracy posited by Allan Kardec, the French founder of *spiritisme*, whereby there are no social or racial hierarchies, only individual spiritual paths of evolution; and on the other, a quasi-Victorian scientification of religious language whereby the spirit becomes indissociable from the most intimate molecular properties of the body of the medium.

The Sociedad’s leadership passed to Claudio’s three children, Servando, Carmen, and Antonio, the first two of whom are retired doctors. Antonio passed away in 2009. Claudio, who died in the early 1960s, left behind various treatises psychographed from José de Luz in trance (collectively called *Colección La Luz*), which form the core of the Society’s doctrine. At their basis is “corpuscular theory,” a treatise on the chemical and psychic entanglements between incarnate and disincarnate spirits. According to the literature, there are three types of “corpuscles”: mineral, vegetable, and psychic. These form a bond which is dissolvable only in death, and whose trajectory defines the organism’s spiritual evolution. Indeed, the idea of spiritual evolution itself is based on the notion that as people’s lives progress, they free their spirits of the “material” corpuscles, accumulating only psychic ones. But the majority of spirits do not reach full disentanglement, either because they died violently, or lived lives of immorality, vice, or materialism (such as practicing Afro-Cuban religion). “Emotionalism,” “sentimentalism,” and other affective attachments, are looked on as highly detrimental to “evolution.” The Society sees as its main purpose the education

of the mind for the living and the dead. This is a simultaneous process, because many of the spirits that come in trance have energetic fields that overlap with those of the mediums, and may imprint conflicts, trauma, or illness memories in the latter's bodies, creating the possibilities for these to occur physically and psychologically. The term "metabolizing" is used to refer to the process by which mediums disentangle themselves from such traumatic histories, namely through trance. Thus, history, first embedded chemically in the body as dangerous corpuscles, is ideally dismembered from materiality altogether. The more "evolved" a spirit, such as José de Luz, the more it appears as a collection of ideas and aspirations, and the less the need to "metabolize" through a medium's body. As Daniel, introduced earlier, suggests, the "great" spirits of Cuban history are guides, omnipresent, omnipotent; they don't work spiritist sessions.

As a counterpoint to this, take this example. On several occasions during the first six months of my initial fieldwork, I was invited to participate in the Society's mediumship development sessions for young people. At one point, the eldest of Agramonte siblings, Antonio, noticed that a young man, Rodrigo, was pressing his hands against his head — with a headache. Antonio observed him, and then told him that he had spirit attached to him that we should examine. "Man has two tendencies: one towards humanity, and the other towards animality." He said that the animal instincts predominated in this afflicting spirit because it was being motivated by crude emotion and feeling. He asked Maria, another young medium, to "clean" him. She pressed her head against his and took his arms. Suddenly, the "headache" spirit had descended on her. It was extremely anxious. Speak, Antonio ordered. But it kept pointing to its head and its mouth, making movements that indicated that its tongue had been cut off. Someone gave it a piece of paper and it drew a diagram, which I interpreted as being a cosmogram from Palo Monte. Rodrigo was told not to be afraid and to talk to this spirit. Finally, through persuasion, and the mumbles of the spirit incarnated in Maria, Servando and Antonio found out that it had been the spirit of a rebellious slave-turned-*mambí* whose old slave master had cut out his tongue, for insubordination, and to prevent him from speaking when the slave master raped his wife. The slave-owner's spirit was then summoned into another medium's body, and there was a showdown between forces. The initial slave spirit was extremely resistant to this encounter, even when the former meekly apologized. There was only fury from the slave. Finally, everyone was calmed, and there was a prayer to close the *cuadro*, the chronotopical "episode." Carmen later said that "traumas are badly assimilated if one is either

“sentimental” or “infantile.” There has to be a recognition that the spirit is sick.” Anger, then, even the anger and trauma of ultimate repression and subjugation and even mutilation, must be dispelled. These traumas are caused by, and in turn cause, attachment to matter.

The chronotopes that Wirtz describes (2014) could very well be applicable to the society I have looked at. After all, the difference between espiritismo “científico” and “cruzado” is not the racial or social composition of people’s spirits, but what to *do* with them. Spirits’ voices and bodily postures in particular, are especially revealing. While in the episode described above, the spirit had no voice, or at least, fell back on a “memory” of tongueless-ness that unfolded during the few minutes of trance, there were plenty of other indications. The reticence and anger with which the spirit spoke to its “master” fits into a chronotope of Blackness associated with pride, for instance. Wirtz calls this the “idiom of *ponerse hocico* (making a snout)” (2014., 160), familiar to many spirits that come speaking Bozal, in effect, the language of Afro-Cuban *muertos*. But note that the point of the exercise described above is not to perform a familiar frame of rebellion or resistance, or even of slavery or Blackness, but to *let go of it*. Trauma, in this light, is a constraint, not a strength, and certainly not a power to be harnessed for spiritual engagement; it *cannot* be harnessed in the ways envisaged by Routon’s paleros (2008). The chronotopic values of Blackness in Cuba are inverted here. Thus, the bodily sensation of muteness, of rage, must eventually accede to a sensation of release and non-pain that comes with the traumatized spirit’s real consciousness of the futility of such emotions, for the sake of its own “evolution” and that of the medium it occupies. Unlike Rey’s slave spirit, known since he was a child, or Milagros’s maroon, linked to her great grandfather, in the vignette described Rodrigo is not encouraged to cultivate an affective expression of this crippled spirit. Instead, he is to be contrasted to “enlightened” beings, such as José de Luz, who is known only for the purest forms of knowledge he brings, or even of Claudio Agramonte, who was “set right” from his materialistic ways, or indeed the Alava brothers, initially practitioners of Santería who were cured of their Afro-Cuban religious impulses through the guidance of José de Luz. Indeed, the language is one of science, a Victorian science at that, in which personal histories are chemically and psychically erased from more transcendental sorts of purposes.

Espiritismo “científico” is full of such figures, where the idiom of “possession” is modulated and cast as “inspiration” and “mental” forms of mediumship, not possession of the body as such. One example of this is a society called *La Voz de*

los Misioneros de Jesús, founded in the early twentieth century by independence-war veteran and poet Manuel de Jesús Pérez. Pérez wrote extensive poetry of a liberal republican slant, asking for freedoms connected intimately to spiritual purposes. For instance, circa 1913 Pérez writes (printed in a leaflet, my translation):

The current time is of transition, the regeneration is underway, the reformist, edificatory elements of the new era; at the same time, light extends through the events that follow the evolution of the present times and to come, let us march along the paths that have indicated the messengers who bring us peace of soul, love and charity (1913, 3).

Words such as “science,” “moral doctrine,” “instruction,” but also “celestial path,” “harmonious vibration” and “spiritual beacon” all appear frequently in the poetry and writings of Pérez, in what is essentially a call to awaken simultaneously to a new civic and spiritual path. In conversation, Pastor Izanga, the Society’s president, said that in Trinidad, where the society was created, in Pérez’s time, there were many *ingénios* (slave-based plantations), and a great revolutionary consciousness on the part of the province’s Afro-Cubans. While he was fighting in the Ten Years’ War, Pérez, who was Afro-Cuban, met a spiritist who instructed him in the doctrine (Kardecism) and impressed on him the need for a moral and spiritual vision. Once the Republic was established, he founded the *Misioneros*. It had as its initial spirit guide a German scientist “master” whose name was Gabriel Janst; he was the leader of the twenty-four other guides comprising the *Misioneros* — the so-called “invisible directors.” Not much is known about Janst, only that Pérez signed his poetry as “Gabriel Janst,” clearly indicating his inspired psychography of this spirit. “Spirits are very clear and meticulous when they communicate through psychography,” Pastor told me. “The most evolved spirits have no need to come down to pass messages. They do it psychically. For me, for instance, it may be the middle of night, but the spirits will say — Pastor, I really need you to write this down.” The *Misioneros*’ sessions are in fact among the most sober I witnessed in Cuba; only a handful of female mediums sit calmly around a table and receive and pass on messages from anonymous transnational spirits about future events. Communications are almost whispered, loose sentences that come “in” as if they were transmissions caught via local radios, then, forgotten, lost into the ethereal. As a note of conclusion to this section, it is pertinent here to observe that these sessions are not devoid of chronotopes, or of chronotopic configurations that perform segments of history in a particular light. While they may appear devoid of life, or physicality, they also exhibit what Wirtz calls, for the Blackness chronotope,

“a timeless past still among us” (2014, 196). “Science” and “study” — in the absence of their material vectors — constitutes here a timeless, static register for reference and contrast. So much so, that not just Pérez but Pastor himself psychographs from spirits who died two hundred years earlier. But the value of this configuration depends on, for efficacy, as also for the Sociedad Amor y Caridad, a subtraction of the medium from his or her own affective biographical dimensions. Legitimate, valuable “possession” is never physical — in the body — but in the mind. Rather, it is a single voice of the past.

Affective Collapses

About affect, Massumi (2015) argues that, it “is simply a bodily movement looked at from the point of view of its potential — its capacity to come to be, or better, to come to do. It has do with modes of activity, and what manner of capacities they carry forward” (7). Bodies are in constant movement, he says; they are not present to themselves, they are “always bringing its past up to date in the present through memory, habit, reflex, and so on” (Massumi 2015, 8). A body never coincides with its affective dimensions; they are potentialities, avenues for creative action and movement, always overflowing, immanently virtual. This is why they are also indiscernible and indeterminate, while no less encompassing. Massumi says that the “experience of a change, an affecting-being affected, is redoubled by an experience of the experience. This gives the body’s movements a kind of depth that stays with it across all transitions [...]” (4). But: what happens when affective force — the virtual potentialities, as described by Massumi — is locked into the movement (or immobility) of bodies within a crumbling revolution? Moreover, one that implicitly asks its citizens to look beyond the horizon, over and above their own life-worlds and their bodies?

In this section I look at the remnants of revolution as experienced in the body and voice of a medium with a spirit of a man who died in 1980s Cuba. When Robertico, the spirit in question, died tragically in a motorcycle accident in the late 1980s, Cuba was already in the throes of crisis. According to Kapcia, “Long before the 1989–91 collapse of Comecon,” the trade unit between Cuba and the Soviet nations, “the Socialist Bloc and the Soviet Union had created the deep crisis that so threatened the Revolution: the system was already undergoing, and addressing, a more structural series of deep challenges” (2000, 203). The *lucha* (fight) of the everyday was thus in place even before the Special Period in Times of Peace was announced (Eckstein 1994), in 1991. Black markets thrived and some people were forced to earn their dollar outside the parameters of

the Revolution. This *lucha* and the physical exhaustion it provoked and still provokes is doubly evident in the body of the medium discussed, Olga, a woman in her mid-fifties with no steady employment and whose life has been steeped in Cuba's informal economies since the 1990s. I have known Olga and her husband Eduardo since 2006, and they have, since then, become my own religious god-parents in Santería.

Once, in 2013, at an espiritista ceremony called a *misa espiritual*, Robertico made an appearance. He was from Marianao, in Havana. Before he began to speak, his eyes closed, he pursed his lips. Olga spoke softly, quietly, the spirit's voice straining, as if saddled with an enormous weight. "My friend," he said, referring to me, "it's been a long time since we shared a moment on this earth." Robertico and I had met a few years earlier, when Eduardo had announced that a new spirit had joined their folds. He told Robertico this time that he had forgotten to buy him his usual beer, but that for a change, he'd been giving him *aguardiente*, a liquor made of sugar-cane. He put a cigarette in the spirit's hand. Then Robertico told us about his life and its final moments.

In life, I was a cool person (*persona chévere*) who liked to help, but also joke around. You know, my friend, I liked certain things (like 60s and 70s Cuban music bands). But I did many crazy things on this earth as well. I'm not going to say I didn't. My mother used to tell me, Robertico, this or that can happen to you, watch out. But I didn't listen. I was in my own world, with my people, with many parties and my businesses on the side. (...) I had possibilities because I searched for them (*me las buscaba*), and I was like this, quite elegant, with the airplane that I had (his motorbike). I didn't know how to live. I lived in a rush. Whoosh here, whoosh there! I had cash in my pocket but I also liked to help the people who were the most fucked in his Revolution, the ones who needed money and had nowhere to go. I would get into a fight with anyone to save someone else. This would land me in trouble. The day I died I felt strange. That day I wasn't *me*, even my mother said it. But they sent me to pick something up from a place, and I went. And I didn't come back. (...) As spirits we are not limited. We're sent to different places. Sometimes we can help people, influence their thoughts. Other times, we're not allowed. We are not allowed to save that person. Often people want to throw their religion out of the window because their Congo (spirit) didn't warn them about a death of a loved one. But you need to remember that

when the Congo, the enlightened spirit, or the saint, didn't say anything, it's probably because they couldn't. That person was destined to depart, and to one day reincarnate once more.

On another occasion, in 2011, Robertico recalled a happy childhood, spent playing baseball barefoot on the streets of his neighborhood. He hated school. He recalled his father being a car mechanic of sorts, coming home with grease on his overalls. His father never wanted him to own a motorbike. But when he grew up, since early on, Robertico had his own businesses, on the side (*a la izquierda*). With no studies, and no willingness to do poorly-paid state work, and the constant vigilance of the Revolution, he bought and sold small goods in the city's illegal markets. It was a mobile job. "Since I was extremely young, I always fought for my bit" (*siempre busqué lo mío*). The motorbike thus came naturally.

Robertico tires easily. In the 2013 appearance, he said to Eduardo, "*Puro, está bien así*" ("puro," the affectionate name he has for Eduardo, "it's fine like this"), signaling his desire to leave Olga's body. "Now you go to the light," Eduardo responded, with equal care. Olga began to contort and groan as the spirit left. We said an Our Father prayer. Olga recovered from this trance very slowly. It had been a heavy one, Eduardo told me, because of Robertico's affective load. It can leave her depressed and exhausted, he said, referring to his wife. "He goes, and leaves behind all this affectation" (*afectación*). A recently dead spirit like Robertico brings with him a large emotional charge. In trance, he lets go (*se descarga*) of certain family problems, personal tensions, and other attachments. Touching on highly emotional topics only heightens the spiritual "current" (*corriente espiritual*), according to Eduardo. This notion of "current" is so dominant in Cuba that Beliso-De Jesús has used it as a conceptual vehicle from which to build her argument on transnational spiritual movement, a flattening and expanding of the field of mediation (2015). But here it serves a different purpose — it signals the force of feeling. Eduardo said that Robertico has a feeling of guilt in relation to his mother — of making her suffer through his death, of not heeding her word, of leaving her to practically fend for herself in a degraded Cuba. "These are strong feelings which are amplified in the spiritual world, because there is no physical body to attenuate or mediate them." When Olga finally came to, she said that at the beginning Robertico would come in religious parties and it would often be difficult to *subirlo*, to get him out of her body, because the spiritual "current" was resonating with such force in these "planes of existence" at this particular time in history. Olga would become very tired indeed.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot says that a “critical assessment of modernity must start with the revelation of its hidden faces” (2002, 221). Modernity, he says, has to do “not only with the relationship between place and space but also with the relation between place and time” (Trouillot 2020, 223): the Bakhtinian chronotope. There are multiple chronotopes that are performed through the spirit’s communication. One of them is “evolution,” a fact alluded to by Robertico in his mentioning of the “enlightened” spirit and the “saint.” Another fundamental trope is the informal economies that the degradation of the Cuban state has provoked. Robertico’s story of constant comings and goings, of speed (on the motorbike and in his life), of creating his own opportunities in a city with few occasions for personal economic growth, is also testament to what we could call a chronotope of revolutionary ruin. This chronotope spans years, perhaps even decades of Cuban history, and resonates not just in Robertico but in the body of Olga and her extended self — Eduardo, her home, and those who come into it. Bodily dispositions collapse between the two: Robertico’s disillusionment, manifest as tensions, affectations, depression — becomes Olga’s also, through her exposure to his trance. Indeed, Trouillot’s “hidden faces” of modernity are revealed here as a *collapse* between affect and forms of history-making in the body. But it’s never a full history, or histories, that are revealed. Eduardo says there is a limit to what Robertico will tell about himself. Certain memories are erased from practice, so to speak, and others he is not “allowed” to speak of. There is thus an indeterminacy about his presence, the specifics of which are only caught in the possessed body, as feelings of an indeterminate “something” by Olga, and in the aftermath of the episode with her fatigued disposition.

But it is not just in spirit possession that we see the chronotopes of disaffection, or revolutionary ruin, incarnated and transformed in people’s bodies. In Cuban forms of rap, as Sujatha Fernandes explains (2006), especially underground rap, young black artists signal the “racial blindness of official discourse, and the invisibility in relation to the experiences and problems of marginalized communities,” especially in a society that claims to have *solved* the “problem” of race (975). Rappers criticize the Cuban leadership for failing to deal with entrenched forms of racism which grew, not diminished, after it became counter-revolutionary to self-identify in racial terms (Fernandes 2006, 976). Rappers also complain of corruption, illegal trafficking of drugs, and prostitution (Fernandes 2006, 977). In the song “A veces” (Sometimes), the group Anónimo Consejo locates these problems at the heart of government (Fernandes 2006, 978 – my translation).

The guys with “money” do trafficking from their offices
scream “we resist” and they go around in cars night and day
stealing from the people like a scorpion from its young

Rap, then, draws from chronotopical themes related to black independence fighters to express dissent, protest, and disillusionment. But it also does this by creating new affective landscapes, bodily orientations, and imaginaries, and by connecting a past with the afflictions of the present, in which a black population is still deprived of a voice. Indeed, as one of the reviewers of this article noted, while both *cimarrones* and *mambises* are lionized as heroes in the myth-making of the Socialist State, disaffected youth, such as Robertico and the singers of at least some rap bands, are branded as anti-heroes, certainly anti-socialist. But the argument here does not depend on the State’s branding. It depends on the expression of affectations of revolutionary ruin. In a contemporary setting, since the Special Period at least, it is a chronotope of “la lucha,” a struggle with and within the system, with all that this entails. In a song called Mambí, the group Obsesión sings (Fernandes 2006, 976, my translation):

Those winds that brought these storms
it turns out that (suddenly)
a lot of qualities fell
on top of my race
and many went en masse to pass
a course on how not to be racist
graduated with honors and parties
and to this day they remain hidden
in this phrase:
WE ARE THE SAME
ALL HUMAN BEINGS

Final Note

Palmié and Stewart argue that religious objects, such as the *nganga*, could be seen as “constituting a chronotopic constellation of its own: encompassing a register of potential eventuation with its own coordinates of space, time, and value” (2016, 218). I would argue the same for the medium’s body. But it should not be seen as a static sort of material, or a mirror for expressing cosmologies, but indeed, propelled by the co-presence of multiple affective registers, unfinished. “Co-presence,” a term coined by Aisha Beliso-De Jesús (2015), cannot simply be defined as the dead, or the gods worked by Afro-Cuban religion.

Rather, Beliso-De Jesús speaks of “rhizomatic assemblages” (2015, 13) of co-presences, which are twisted, dispersed, diffracted, and which encompass the bodies and technologies by which entities manifest and move in multiple directions. In her ethnography there is no separation of stories from histories, or representations from reality. In this text I have argued that the body in spirit mediumship practices is capable of articulating history in ways that are both deeply personal and also chronotopic. While in espiritismo “científico” the chronotopic imagination is turned away from the affective intensity of the body, creating a gap between the two in the practice of mediumship, in “cruzado” it is fully embraced and both chronotopic and affective force effectively collapse, creating possibilities for personal creativity within this resonance.

But we could ask, rudimentarily here, how this distinction between chronotopes and affect plays out elsewhere in the Caribbean, or even in Latin America. In Brazilian Umbanda, for instance, Kelly Hayes (2011) looks at biographies of spirits related to Pomba Gira, known in the Afro-Brazilian religious cosmos as the “prostitute” — the “holy harlot.” Similarly to other spirit figures of Brazilian history, such as the Old Black Slave (Preto Velho), or the Caboclo (the “Indian” or native Amazonian), Pomba Gira appears to afford a particular representation of history with regional variations and personal nuances. But as I also show (Espírito Santo 2016), some groups of elite practitioners of Umbanda in São Paulo place all these national spirits as anonymous beings of light that simply “camouflage” as one or another entity. Their transcendentalization of spirits creates an insurmountable gap between bodily experience and conceptual understanding. I am not arguing that all mediumship religions exhibit these divergences, only that we need to attend to the differences as much as to the similarities in our understanding of spirit mediumship.

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