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Spirits, Spies and Lies in Havana: Unwitting and Paranoid Entanglements Between Ethnographer and Field

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In this article I argue that caution, suspicion and even paranoia are natural outcomes, as well as processes generative, of the behaviour of knowledge and of knowing in the Cuban religious cosmos, and beyond it. “Knowers”, here, may be variably absent, invisible, or immanent in the social plane, which implies necessary, if temporary, vacuums of knowledge and of certainty. I start with an anecdote from my fieldwork in Havana, Cuba, among spirit mediums, of being accused by one of my interlocutors of being a spy for the Cuban government. I then reason that this paranoid “intrusion” into my self-definition was less a case of what went wrong but of what went *right*. Spirits of the dead are master instigators of both relations and fracturing suspicion between people, and the economy of Afro-Cuban religious knowledge is one with many absences and invisibilities, generating pervasive doubt and spiritual insecurity. In order to come to grips with this distressing accusation I had to reflexively reconstitute my own forms of extreme proximity with practitioners and their *muertos* (spirits), the ontological uncertainties that were implied by this proximity, and the role of non-living entities in the equations of everyday life, including mine.

Keywords: Afro-Cuban religion; spirits; witchcraft; paranoia and suspicion; fieldwork

1. Introduction

This article is based on fieldwork conducted in Havana between August of 2005 to November of 2015. The bulk of my work was done with spirit mediums of varying Afro-Cuban religious inspirations in mostly informal ways. Throughout their history Afro-Cuban religions have developed mainly in underground settings, in people’s homes, away from the public eye, although there are exceptions. I followed these networks of independent-minded practitioners from one house to the next, observing and participating in their conversations, rites, and ceremonies. This means I developed a clear empathy for my interlocutors – their spirits, and spaces of praxis – with whom I shared frank dialogue born from an intersection of their cosmos with mine. In a sense I build here on Edith Turner’s desire to acknowledge the existence of spirit entities in my analytics (cf. for eg. Turner 2016). However, the main argument in this paper is that researchers do not need to experience the empathy that I clearly did to be the recipients of all manner of effects in their fields, which are themselves products of constant interactions and relations in the field. This is particularly so in Cuba where spiritual actants are often invisible, generating all manner of paranoia in their wake.

One of the most personally alarming and perplexing moments of my fieldwork in Cuba came in the shape of an accusation of my being a spy, about a year after I had ended the bulk of my fieldwork in late 2006. It was a warm day in early January, and I had spent it with one of my close friends and interlocutors – Elias, an Afro-Cuban architect in his early forties, who was also an experienced spirit medium whom I had met on my initial fieldwork foray. On this particular day, we had had a beer, strolled through the Old City, and Elias had taken me to see an art exhibition and to listen to salsa. As was the norm between us, we had talked about the dead, reincarnation, spiritual evolution, and the work his Spiritist society does on a weekly basis and which I had followed closely during the first few months of my fieldwork. Suddenly, the mood takes a right turn and Elias withdraws from the conversation. He began to simply watch me, while we walked down the Malecón: I had an increasingly uneasy feeling. Then he turned to me and told me he had something he wanted to “clarify” with me. I asked him what he wanted to know, and he responded that during the year that I had been away, many “suspicious” things had happened to him. For one, he’d been feeling observed, a feeling confirmed once by a passing comment of one his friends, an “insider” of sorts in the government, who had warned him that the government (Cuban State Security, was the implication here) did have “information” on him and was indeed keeping an eye.

“But why would you pose any threat to Government”, I asked naively? “Who would want to watch you?”

“You tell me”, he answered. “What do you know about this?” His eyes fixed upon me intently, as if he had just caught me lying. I was speechless.

“Are you suggesting that I’m some sort of *spy*?” I asked unbelievably (and, most incredibly, in my mind, for *Fidel Castro*?).

According to Elias, there was no one else but me that knew the things that he was told “they” knew about him. Still, he waited for me to confess. I did not. Suddenly, despite myself, my utter incredulity turned to outright anger. Elias was piecing apart our friendship in front of my eyes in what seemed then like a baseless and unjust form of Cuban paranoia. Genuinely irritated with his frank lack of vision, I retorted soberly that he could not be as good a medium as he thought he was – after all, had his guiding spirits been so enlightened, surely they would have known I had nothing to do with this. Or perhaps his own spirits had “planted” the paranoid sensations he was articulating, for one or another reason. I walked away at that moment and effectively, our relationship ended there. There had been nothing more to say. He had accused me, and I had accused him too.

To be fair, my history with Elias had never been as transparent or free of controversy as I would have liked to believe. Elias was not the paranoid or obsessive sort – he was an educated, conscientious man who had preached an emotionally balanced and religious fanaticism-free approach to life. However, when I think about it, there had been a power game in these accusations that escaped me then, while making me feel highly uncomfortable. Elias was, in this sense, *claiming* me for himself, and expressing it implicitly through an explicit and confrontational accusation. These power dynamics were all too familiar in Cuba, especially to women. His explosive paranoia, in this case, was clearly not only the means of calling my attention, but eventually, of breaking his

affective tie with me. Nevertheless, certain events had undeniably led up to that point, although among was not, needless to say, any covert espionage on my part. Understanding Elias's accusation required of me no more ontological imagination that I had been capable of during my initial fifteen-month fieldwork period in Havana among Cuban mediums and their *muertos* – the omnipresent protective spirits that give certain individuals their vision into the workings of the supramundane. Indeed, I suspected that the dead had been intimately involved in the generation of Elias's growing disquiet in relation to my identity and intentions.

While there may be a series of tangential factors that contributed to his suspicion – that in Havana I lived with two rather unorthodox Cubans (one being a charismatic and self-proclaimed anti-Castrite, and the other a well-known figure in the city's growing New Age movement and experienced practitioner of Santería, Cuba's best known religion of African inspiration); that I often (rather unwisely, I admit) talked politics; and that I consistently resisted the possessiveness of any of the highly-organised Spiritist groups that I observed, including his – I believe that the catalyst can be traced to a single ritual moment, preceded as it was by a sequence of events. Very briefly, and in order to illustrate, there had come a point in our friendship where Elias had expressed a romantic interest in me. I had refused him the first time, but he had insisted a second time, despite my denial of his advances, claiming that his spirits were alerting him to the fact that I was *afraid of*, not *adverse to*, a relationship with him. It was obvious to him that my need "not to complicate things" did not remit to matters of the heart but something else I wasn't telling him. At a spirit mediumship ceremony that we had both attended once, Elias took advantage of the moment and confirmed his intuition with one of the *muertos* incorporating a medium at that time. The spirit – a wise, old African slave – told Elias that indeed I was hiding something, since I had feelings for him too. After this episode, Elias's attitude increasingly reflected his understanding of me as concealing of my true self: if, before my departure, he had become seductive and intensely charming in what appeared to be a last bid for me to reveal myself, after my departure, this would turn into a deepening commitment to the idea that I had been fake, or worse, manipulative (for some end neither him nor I were ever clear about) at the expense of his feelings and mine. I never returned to confront the African spirit to ask him what, in turn, he knew about me (that perhaps I did not), or why he misled Elias. But the point was that embroiled in the net of impressions, suspicions, gossips and denials were agencies that transcended Elias's and mine but that were nevertheless as consequent or more. The spirits had been direct instigators in the demise of our friendship (regrettably, at least to me).

"Do misunderstanding and understanding relate to each other like error and truth?" asks Johannes Fabian (2001: 31). While committing mistakes is clearly a very real scenario, he suggests, such as in translation errors, Fabian also says that we should not forget the fact that the process of knowing "signals a notion of understanding as a praxis of constant transformation, rather than as the accumulation of understandings and the elimination of misunderstandings" (ibid: 49). In line with this idea, my feeling is the above anecdote suggests not misunderstanding or failed communication, but in fact the opposite – knowledge flow. If, as Fabian argues, context works dialectically, that is, it is constituted via individual practices and intersubjective histories, and is *not* something that pre-exists such interactions, or which functions as some sort of self-explanatory backdrop to be cited as the cause of something else (ibid: 51), then we must understand under what terms suspicion and paranoia, such as that manifest

above, is *also* an understanding. That is, we should be asking not what went *wrong*, but what went *right*. While my reaction to Elias's accusation was temperamental at the time (he hadn't been a good medium, I had retorted!), on closer inspection I would be foolish to attribute the event to him alone; nor would I be wise in locating it exclusively in the specifics of a political climate which makes otherwise sane people paranoid. Less still as a consequence of a religious "belief system" which creates a "delusional" trust in metaphysical sources of information, such as the African spirit. Rather, one single event may have not one cause but many; may be the outcome of not one voice but many, entangled, causally, and cosmologically. Including my own, in this case.

My argument in this paper is that caution, suspicion and even paranoia are natural outcomes, as well as processes generative, of the behaviour of knowledge and of knowing in the Cuban religious cosmos, and certainly beyond it, as the next section aims to show. As a colleague of mine once remarked, given the pervasive logic of concealment and mistrust in Cuba, we should be asking what the possibilities are for the opposite to be true, if indeed it can be. I take my embeddedness in the circulation of this knowledge and knowing here as evident. As Fabian says: "Ethnography is biography is historiography" (ibid: 51). For Fabian, knowledge is a dialectical concept, and the problem of ethnography is not an ontological one, of knowing what knowledge is, but a communicational one (ibid: 52). However, as I shall also argue, in Cuba how knowledge is communicated (or not) is exactly relevant to what it *is*, particularly amongst religious communities. And this is also an ontological problem. Knowledge is not necessarily propositional (Espirito Santo 2015b) but substantial, sensual even; it has weight, and can effect physiological changes. In the same way that context does not pre-exist experience, we cannot divorce the suspicion "event" from the myriad agencies from which it emerged. We are not just talking about the generation, transaction, transmission, authorisation or manipulation of knowledge by experts or other social actors, classical topics for the anthropology and sociology of knowledge (cf. Barth 1987, 1990; Keesing 1987; Simpson 1997). We are referring to a distribution of information, and of "knowers", that may be variably absent, invisible, or immanent in the social plane. This distribution in itself arguably already implies necessary, if temporary, vacuums of knowledge and of certainty, sometimes leading to moments of what De Boeck (2009) has called "spiritual insecurity". In my view, this remits less to questions of belief than to the structure of these knowledge systems themselves, into which the world of spirits and deities is weaved, and to knowledge as a "thing" itself, with effects beyond the epistemological. Cubans effect constant forms of negotiation and sacrificial diplomacy with their *muertos*, where these entities are volatile, temperamental and conflict-ridden. Elucidating sources of paranoia in this context requires of us more than a look at the socio-political Cuban context, then. It requires an understanding of the disruptive as well as constructive effects of cosmology, including from the point of view of the ethnographer and their own experience. In writing myself reflexively into this article, I will also explain the effects of these structures on my own phenomenological experiences and decisions in the field.

2. Political witching and paranoia

I began with a personal story, but one that is refractive (not reflective) of at least two major facts of life in Cuba, facts that relate intimately to each other, historically and pragmatically. First, the continued existence of a strong ethic of vigilance and self-

ensorship that is pervasive and engrained in the texture of social life and its performance, and indeed, part of its logic; and second, the intense complicity of religious cosmology in the unfolding of the 'social drama' (à-la-Turner) of everyday life, particularly, the extent to which spiritual intervention and mediation determines the modes and possibilities of relating, or lack thereof. In this section, I deal with the first point. In the next section I will attempt to understand the indissociability of Cuba's social and spiritual forms in terms of the economy of knowledge that characterises religious exchanges; an economy whose life and effectiveness is at once generated by information and its absence, and in which the ethnographer enjoys no independent existence.

Kenneth Routon has demonstrated how closely aligned discourses of witchcraft are with the all-purveying eyes of the State, especially in the post-Soviet economic milieu (2010: 7):

The economic crisis had not only inflamed morally suspect activities such as hustling, prostitution, stealing, and other petty crimes, it had also fuelled what many believed to be an unprecedented rise in predatory forms of *brujería* (magic and sorcery)...(But) As the promise of socialist modernity waned, which effectively diminished the state's moral authority and its hold over the public imaginary, these religions and their magic offered a wealth of imagery upon which to base new visions of power and authority.

As an inseparable component of this religious repertoire, Routon argues, *brujería* belongs as much to the ritual arena as it does to political discourses that register the circulation of power and chronicle misfortunes and afflictions of the everyday kind (ibid: 8). Indeed, in their book on witchcraft and rumour, and rumour as a kind of witchcraft, Stewart and Strathern have noted that "in times of crisis, the citizens of a state are often urged to be "on the alert" more than usual"; "actions otherwise considered innocent may be viewed with suspicion" (2004: 30).

From the point of view of the Cuban Revolution, or at least of its official stance, the political, economic and socially corrosive threat originating from the "outside" is imminent and ongoing, the public projection of which can be found in the many and varied imaginative posters throughout Havana that warn Cubans of the dangers of the enemy, so close to home, ready to pounce at the slightest whiff of weakness. From an outsider's point of view, this discourse of immanent threat and the consequent call for collective alertness is arguably embedded in the very definition and legitimation of the Revolution itself as a "process" subject to constant self-sacrifice (Holbraad 2013), ever-perfecting but forgivably imperfect due to just such external pressures. Indeed, while crisis – at all levels – is experienced in a very real sense by the common man and woman in the myriad difficulties he or she faces in the resolution of basic needs, such as food, there is a sense in which invisible forms of crisis management perpetually accompany the more palpable ones. Suspicion is, in Cuba, arguably a way of living, rather than a state of mind, just as the Revolution is a process and not an end-point. Most Cubans have been born into this state of permanent alertness. "A revolution does not, by definition, stand still", writes Antoni Kapcia, "neither, therefore does the need for self-definition" (2000: 208). Historically, this need for self-definition was to manifest not just in the will to expand or export the Revolution, such as through Cuban military or medical missions abroad, but also in the need to root out from within those that represented what the revolution was not. In practice, there was and continues to be little room for dissidence, ideological or otherwise. State-controlled

media project the Party's hardline discourses with little tolerance for political grey areas or intellectual subtleties, and subversives are sidelined or purged at government level (or invited to leave the country, in the best of cases).

At local levels, an effective "horizontalised" political system also required that the people become their own watchdogs, guardians of their own morality. This had repercussions. For example, institutions such as the CDR's (Committees for Defense of the Revolution), neighbourhood-level organisations designed to co-ordinate community-support work, but more importantly, to act as constant local checks for anti-social behaviour ('in each neighbourhood, Revolution!' is their slogan), have traditionally become hubs of overly-keen Party informants, where rumour and gossip have a central place in the generation of potentially damaging information. The *doble moral* (double morality) of deceiving appearances was born under such conditions, or at least that is what Cubans say; an individual's official "face" often hid a more socially performative and critical one, one not voiced in public. It has become normal for Cubans to "take care" (*cuidarse*) of their image in public, and for private life and opinion to be "guarded" from the eyes of potential fervent Communists or of the jealous.

For religious communities this guardedness was even more imperative, at least until the early 1990s, when Fidel Castro promised a more tolerant attitude towards religious manifestations of various sorts, which had been sorely missing before. Until that point, religious leaders and adepts of all forms of credence were routinely discriminated and subjected to restrictions and abuse, professionally and socially. While the 1976 Cuban Constitution in principle guaranteed an individual's freedom of expression, including religious and sexual, reality was a different matter. Practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions such as Santería, Palo Monte and even Spiritism¹, would routinely perform their ceremonies and initiations in secrecy, or face hefty fines, harassment and even jail. Johan Wedel cites several authors who complain that many practitioners and believers were accused of antirevolutionary sentiment and activity, and their meetings subject to restrictions or banned (2004: 33). Guardedness, under such conditions, brought in the best of circumstances cohesion, mutuality, and solidarity between religious folk, as well as frustration. Ritual experts shared their resources and aided one another's godchildren. Some of these forms of cooperation and trust would see subsequent erosion.

It is important to note here the extent to which the collapse of the Soviet economy in the 1990s, and its tremendous impact on Cuban lives (the years that followed it became known ominously as the Special Period in Times of Peace, or *período especial*), intensified pre-existing structures of paranoia, generating with it a multiplicity of other forms of suspicion in its wake. Afro-Cuban religion, in particular, newly tolerated by the regime, would flourish in the sea of fear and insecurity that washed over the nation. As Cuba plunged into what would be the most difficult and scarcity-ridden years of the Revolution, Cubans counted more than ever on their patron saints, their *orichas* (Afro-Cuban deities worshipped in Santería) and their dead (accessed through spirit communication cults of Spiritism and Palo Monte). Spirits and experts

¹ Santería is Cuba's most popular religion of African inspiration, associated with slaves of the West African Slave Coast (Nigeria, Benin, Togo); it worships deities called *orichas* in elaborate ceremonies. Palo Monte is known informally as Cuba's most potent form of witchcraft, associated with Bantu-speaking slaves. Spiritism, as it is practiced in Cuba, is a creolised form of Anglo-European spiritualism (cf. Espirito Santo, 2015).

both found their niche in this crisis, passing on messages from concerned otherworldly beings that urged the living to acquire potent ritual protections and initiations, and to watch themselves from those who could easily stab them in the back. As Afro-Cuban religion became increasingly perceived and cultivated in the public sphere as a cultural commodity or tradition, rather than a burden of an irrational past (Ayorinde 2003), Santeria's *iyawós* (novices) reappeared in the outdoor markets to complete their ceremonies; *babalawos* (divination priests) and *santeros* publically wore their religious *collares* (necklaces) around their necks and wrists; spirit mediums replaced their glasses of water on their altars without fear of the control induced by sanitation inspectors, and some even consulted on dusty street corners with their cards and their gypsy spirits. But for many, however, the consequences of religious freedom took a wrong turn.

The Special Period generated forms of competition and individualism fuelled by desperation, compounded by Cuba's opening to tourism and the exclusive economy it quickly created, where only a few could obtain hard currency (cf. Rosendahl 1997, Eckstein 2003). Access to dollars, and to foreigners, would become a socially divisive and often racially determined question, with white communities benefiting ahead of black; racial and social tensions would ignite. Cuba would turn into a society separated by two currencies and the social, moral and ideal worlds that these would generate: the dollar on the one hand (or Cuban Convertible Peso, after 2004) and the goods it could buy, and the national Cuban peso, on the other, and the life it *couldn't* buy. But this foreigner influx also led to what many religious believers describe as the "commercialisation" of Afro-Cuban religion (Argyriadis 2008), the selling of its soul. From the mid-1990s, accusations of religious exploitation and profiteering became widespread, and indeed, this inter-religious suspicion would constitute an important part of boundary making discourses between experts to this day. The spiritual seeker navigating amongst Afro-Cuban religious houses must now distinguish carefully between the serious and the charlatan, the real and the fake, and clean and the possibly deadly religious specialist. The crisis provoked an underlying and entrenched paranoia of witchcraft and evildoers, as well as a search for solutions that still strongly reverberates. Knowing that "not everyone I meet has good intentions" was practically the first thing I learnt when I arrived in Havana, and explained to a certain extent, some of the possessiveness I experienced with groups and individuals who saw themselves as my protectors. There is a sense in which some of these groups attempted to "encompass" me within their folds, to control the output of my work, on the one hand; and on the other, to protect the reputations of their practicing community among an increasingly competitive and hostile religious environment.

Devotees and clients of Afro-Cuban religious practices in Havana must now arguably deal with an embedded sense of uncertainty in relation to the viability of experts, opening up questions of legitimate spirituality, as well as morality. Leonel, friend and long-term religious expert tells me:

... [from the Special Period onwards] they began to emerge, the opportunists and the charlatans, and they're still there. But you're also finding that humble person who works hard, who does things from his heart, and who is not just after money. He still has to charge you, because he needs to live, but he charges you reasonably so that anyone who needs his help can reach it. But, yes, the opportunist exists. That person who doesn't practice his religion with faith or in any clean way, but who uses it to [achieve his aims], even religious leaders sometimes. It's a kind of power, that's the

problem. This power can mean contact with foreigners, travel, or having access to someone outside who can even help them financially. You'll see many groups in Havana like that.

But in my telling of Elias's and my story above, I wished to call attention the idea that among religious communities, both causes and actions have a distributed, non-local dimension. In particular, one in which a host of beings may be implied as "knowers", and in which power relations are not simply a function of human activities but of the wider nets of relations in which these are performed. This means that action itself is distributed, as Latour has suggested, or rather, "dislocated" (2005: 46), belonging not to single minds or bodies but to collectivities of agencies, and the actor, not the source of action but the "moving target of a vast array of entities swarming toward it" (ibid). This brings us to my second point, which is that an understanding of the generation of a suspicious environment requires more than an analysis of the sociological antecedents and dimensions of religious competition: it requires an appreciation of the role of non-human entities in the equations of the everyday.

While I consider myself lucky to have avoided any truly destructive bouts of suspicion during my stay in Havana, in reality, I was the object of much suspicion, often unbeknownst to me. I lived illicitly in a building where people asked who I was all the time, mostly in a friendly manner, but sometimes, by the government workers who routinely came into our apartment to count refrigerators and televisions or to fumigate when there were epidemics of disease. Later I discovered that official attention was invariably deflected from me by a "nice" middle-aged housewife living in the apartment on the floor below me. As I was to discover, this housewife had held quite an important post at government level (according to local gossip she had been chief of state security), and, perhaps because she had taken a liking to me, she protected me. But during the first month or so of my stay I was also observed by a more unorthodox presence in the house: a spirit. For weeks I battled with my imagination to make sense of the feeling that someone or something was literally prodding me, touching me gently but sternly on my shoulders and arms, as a curious child might do to a stranger in her house. I had been quite startled by this. On one or two occasions, in an empty house, I also heard what sounded to me like a whistle, directed at me, and on other occasions, my name being called out. It may have come as some comfort to me that my flatmate didn't think I was going mad: in his interpretation the "prodder" was one of his own spirits, namely, the most important guardian of the house, who was testing my limits as a newcomer. Apparently I had not been the first to feel the brunt of his suspicion. But as I soon understood this situation had a flipside: I discovered that I also had spirits who were suspicious of others, as on one occasion where one of my own spirits drifted over to the house of a medium I was to meet the following day, in the middle of the night, and woke her up. According to her, the spirit had wanted to ensure that she was a good person for me to hang out with. She was. As an *extension* of my person, so to speak, this spirit was tentacular in its geographical and sensorial dimensions, touching the medium – literally – and waking her from her slumber.

In Cuba, religious ancestors, deceased kin, as well as spirits, saints and deities with whom the person of "faith" may establish and develop bonds of varying types, all participate in the outcomes of mundane life, they are hardly ever independent of it. In dreams spirits communicate winning lottery numbers and other prognoses (Maitland Dean 1993), in visions they reveal the identity of envious neighbours or troublesome family members, in possession they pass on advice on whom to be wary of in order to

advance professionally, on how to clean oneself of the witchcraft of ex-lovers, on how to attract potential ones, or on what kinds of offerings to perform to appease a deceased affine or god. And in silence, they fuel incessant speculation on all of the above. Indeed, as most practitioners will tell you, Afro-Cuban religion deals mostly with the here and now, the intricacies of material life, not the after-life: it “resolves”, which, as Katherine Hagedorn says, “implies relying on an informal network of people, both living and deceased, from all parts of one’s life” (2001: 205). It is in the vulnerable and sometimes precarious nature of these relationships that Cubans become aware of their own fragility with respect to the cosmos they engage with and activate through their ritual actions. This would be a fragility I would experience too.

3. The dark side of (un) knowing

In a recent article where he takes a better look at the concept of ignorance, as opposed to knowledge, Roy Dilley argues that, contrary to much anthropological literature, which treats “the issue of knowing as a relatively unproblematic accumulation of what is it is that people claim to know”, knowledge and ignorance are mutually constituting, and “not simply in terms of an opposition by means of which one is seen as the negation of the other” (2010: 176). For Dilley, “if knowledge is transmitted, communicated, disseminated, or exchanged through social relations, it is given form and process by the potentiality of ignorance, of not-knowing, either as an absence in and of itself, or as a willed intentional stance towards the world” (ibid: 177). What Dilley suggests to me here is that knowing and not-knowing exert necessary pulls on each other so that one justifies and shapes the other’s existence somehow. The question is to know exactly how, in each ethnographic case.

These observations are relevant because, in my view, the contemporary practice, and particularly consumption of, Afro-Cuban religions are in part propelled by an underlying desire to create knowledge relations, as well as emotional and physical bonds, between the different realms of existence, including the spirits of the dead and deities (or divinities), knowledge relations which are not always successful, or at least smooth. While not all such entities are regarded as illuminated or transcendent, they are generally thought to have access to information unavailable to their human counterparts, and to be able to transmit it, either through oracular consultation or spirit mediation practices. Indeed, one of the characteristic features of Havana’s Afro-Cuban religious environments is that it is a potentially infinite resource for knowledge: of past, present and future circumstances. And as I have argued elsewhere (Espirito Santo 2011), this knowledge is generally experienced, particularly in spirit mediumship practices, as emergent and spatiotemporally distributed, rather than as a cumulative construction whose origin is exclusive. This means that we are not dealing with a kind of knowledge that would have as its negation its absence, ignorance; or that would have as its antithesis falsity; but perhaps with one that would have as the driving force for its generation the desire for completion, for *more*. To establish knowledge relations with spirits, either through consecration, consultation via mediums, or intuitively, is to participate of, and in this way create a flow of knowing that is also tied to understandings of the self, a self under a perpetual process of self-improvement, evolution, fulfilment of its true path, or whatever other image might be used in this sphere. The creation of knowledge relations, therefore, is not necessarily an anxiety-free trajectory, but rather, balances the security of spiritual connection and knowledge, with the disruptive effects of variable need and necessary incompleteness.

Let's take the three most popular religious practices of "African" inspiration as an example of such a state of affairs. In Santería (Bolívar 1990, Brown 2003, Lachatañaré 2001), a tradition associated with slaves of West African – and especially Yoruba – descent, each person is thought to have both a *camino* (path), ascertained through divination, and a "guardian angel" deity – an *oricha* or *santo*. After full initiation, the *signo* (divination sign) that determines this path is accompanied by a series of sayings and myths, generating prescriptive advice on how to live, eat, and generally behave. But everyone knows the road is full of obstacles and difficulties, and not just on the human end. It is quite common, for example, for two or more *orichas* to fight over a neophyte's "head" (the head is where the person's soul is thought to be and is where the *oricha* is "seated" during the initiation). Being initiated to one and not the other could be potentially deadly, or result in madness. Furthermore, punishment and retribution for disobedience are very real possibilities. In Spiritism, on the other hand, a Euro-American spiritualist doctrine introduced in Cuba in the mid-nineteenth century but mostly integrated into the Afro-Cuban religious dynamic (Espírito Santo 2015a), it is quite common for a protective spirit to be jealous of the material attention given to another spirit, and purposefully wreak havoc in the life of those it protects.

But for Spiritism, the universe is also replete with undesirable, lowly, lost souls who attach themselves to people, unwittingly or otherwise. While the set of spirit protectors (called a *cordón espiritual*) functions as a kind of spiritual immune system, the dangers of inadvertently picking up stray dark spirits, or being sent them through witchcraft, are great. Preoccupations with whether or not someone is carrying a *muerto oscuro*, a "dark" destructive spirit, or a *espíritu obsesor* (obsessing spirit), are usually determinate of whether or not the causes of their misfortune are spiritual in nature or not. The medium's task is to forge such relations explicitly. But these are not the only dangers: Spiritism recognises the existence of needy ancestors and the recently deceased, whose lack of "light" and reticence to accept death may be responsible for family crises or other tragic events; *espíritus burlones* (joking or trickster spirits), entities who pretend to be other than what they are, disguising themselves to the medium's eye; as well as those whose association to more material forms of religion, such as Palo Monte (described below), make them almost impossible to identify clearly and extinguish. Suspicion in Spiritism, is almost ipso facto: Spiritism functions as a means to indicate not just appropriate forms of material homage and acknowledgement for spirits, but to identify the involvement of other modes of ritual engagement (and perpetrators, spirits and persons) in the cause of a designated problem.

The experience of spiritual and material power, and its corollaries and opposites – sustenance, protection, but also insecurity, vulnerability, paranoia, and self-destruction, can be felt in full force among communities of Palo Monte, a set of religious practices widely diffused in Cuba, and associated with Bantu-speaking slaves from the Congo basin (see for e.g. Cabrera 1986, Ochoa 2010, Palmié 2006). Its central work instrument is the *Nganga*, a cauldron in which a magical micro-cosmos is created and moved, with the help of a primary "slave" spirit, to whom animal blood and other substances are fed. Indeed, Palo Monte is in itself generative of an economy of suspicion, independently of the other forms of worship, but it also presents the Afro-Cuban religious environment with possibilities for effective religious control, possibilities which manifest among other ways, ideologically, via the myriad forms of

witchcraft stories that circulate among adepts and practitioners more generally. These stories create climates of suspicion and mistrust, fuelled by common religious prejudice or conversely, religious know-how, as well as respect. Palo's moral ambiguity in popular conceptualisations derives in part from a stereotyped understanding of the intensity of the power it produces and manipulates, such that both extreme good and excessive evil are potentials, and further, on potentially equal moral and ontological footing. In Havana, the Palero is the "resolver" of the toughest kinds of problems. In Palo, the cosmos is replete with associations and identifications between people and things, people and people, and people and spirits, which facilitate and fluidify magical operations, both constructive and destructive. One Palero, José, for instance, told me the following:

An important factor is someone's guardian spirit, of course, the spirits that surround that person [by which he means the *cordón espiritual*]. But there are jobs that can be done to dominate that guardian spirit, to contain those protections. So that via that domination, work can be done against you. A name, a single name is sufficient. Or a photo, with no name. Hair. But you don't even need a name, a photo, or any hair at all. There's a ceremony that we can do that collects the person's trace [*rastro*, namely, by collecting the soil or dust on which he or she stepped on].

Religious *Habaneros* co-exist with various forms of paranoia, among which is the fear of being the targets of avaricious Paleros or ritual enemies via Palo. The silence in these cases, in relation to the religious economy (and distribution) of knowledge, may be deadening, and even deadly. Palo entities are expert eluders of spirit mediums' perceptual apparatuses; even the *cordón espiritual* will not alert it's protected of impending danger until witchcraft has already taken place. Palo's spirits dwell in the spaces between events, in the absence of knowledge, exemplifying to the extreme the dangers of such gaps, of such forms of invisibility.

I think I may have encountered at least two spirits during my fieldwork in Havana. The first was in a narrow corridor of the ground floor of a building where I stood, outside an apartment, waiting for a typically garish, colourful birthday cake to be delivered by the baker inside for a friend's birthday party. As I stood, leaning against the wall, out of the corner of my eye I saw a man enter the building and come down the dark corridor, then attempt to brush past me. I apologised, stepped out of the way – *perdón*, I had said – then instinctively and immediately looked down the corridor in the opposite direction to see where the gentleman had gone, only to not find him there at all. The second incident was perhaps not as innocuous as this one, as it was explained by some of my interlocutors in terms of witchcraft on *me*.

I had been walking through a crowded commercial street towards a ritual ceremony I was to attend as a guest. A masculine voice called my name twice, loud, through the crowd, and I turned to watch a stranger walk slowly and deliberately towards me. He was a tall, middle-aged and light-skinned black man with piercing, transparent green eyes, and patchy hair, and I had never seen him before. By the time he reached me I had a nagging feeling that I should flee. He said, provocatively, intensely (in Spanish): "every time I see you I fall more in love with you", and stared. Once I felt the hairs on my arms standing on their head, I turned and fled without uttering a word. I made two pit stops that day. The first was a *fiesta de santo*, a party that Cuban practitioners of Santería religion throw to celebrate their tutelary spirits' (*orichas*) birthdays, or more specifically, the day they were initiated to one of them. During the party I chatted with

Luis, a clairvoyant medium and Afro-Cuban religious expert that I was acquainted with, and told him about my experience earlier.

“He had light-coloured eyes and not much hair, right?” Luis said, tuning in, before I could provide him with the full description. “That’s not a person you saw”, he continued, to my surprise. “That’s a spirit. Probably one of Havana’s wandering ghosts. You must have run up against him in your previous trips here, and he recognised you and was playing around. Nothing to worry about”, he assured me. “The city is full of them”. I left feeling puzzled but unflustered. My second pit stop produced an explanation of a different, more worrying order, and eventually, an exorcism. I was set to visit an experienced religious couple, Eduardo and Olga, close friends with whom I had worked regularly during my doctoral research on spirit mediumship practices. They were about to organise an upcoming violin and drum homage ceremony for Gypsy spirits, one that I had paid for and was due to participate in soon. As I sat down with them to go over some of the details of the event, Olga remarked curiously that she had seen “someone” come in through the door with me.

“He’s sitting right behind you, there on the sofa, and he’s murmuring, chuckling, trying not to be seen”, she said, intrigued, her brows furrowed as she looked over my shoulder. I looked back, too. Both her and her husband then proceeded to describe the mystery fellow that had claimed his love for me. “Mulatto man, with patchy or unhealthy hair. And eyes as clear as a cat’s”, Eduardo said. But as they looked closer, through mechanisms unavailable then to my perception (even though they had clearly been working before, that same day), they saw more. “This is bad”, said Olga ominously. “This thing pretends to come with you, to be one of *your* spirits, but it’s not. It’s diabolical. Very strange”, she mused; “it’s like I can see inside it, to the skull and bones, as if the skin could just fall off”. Eduardo confirmed this by saying that he had the impression that this spirit’s appearance, its physiognomy, could just disintegrate, as if it were a mere mask. The spirit, he concluded, or its “look”, was a disguise for what was really inside. It’s not a spirit at all, they finally said - it’s a composite of elements brought together by the work of witchcraft, and animated enough so that it walked and talked like a human spirit. This mind-boggling explanation of alternative spirithood was coupled with a reading of who the culprit was – to my horror, someone I knew well – and the observation that it’s message – that he was in love with me – was the sender’s, not the spirit’s. Fortunately, Eduardo was an experienced Palero, which meant he was well equipped to deal with the offending “spirit”, and the following day he was swearing me under the protection of his magical recipient (the *Nganga*) in front of a handful of his godchildren. I was cleansed with plants, animal blood, and incisions were cut on the skin of my hand to ensure I would be “under the wing” of the religious house’s main *muertos* from now.

Among other things, this witchcraft incident had the curious effect of spurring in me an ethnographic and theoretical fascination with the “substance” and “composition” of spirits, and how people understood “deadness”, rather than merely “aliveness”. I was to work on this theme in subsequent fieldwork forays. But it had also instilled in me a disquieting feeling of bodily and spiritual vulnerability in relation to my own position in the religious sphere. After all, if one of my own *friends* had exercised his power over my own emotional and physiological existence – assuming the spirit was “designed” to interfere in my will towards him and to eventually fall in love with the sender – how could I ensure my physical safety from the myriad sorcerers that I had contact with

during my work and who might not wish me well? I became increasingly paranoid myself. I quickly found myself listening to the counsel of my own spirits, through the mediums I visited, being careful to whom I gave my surname to (surnames are traces used for witchcraft), and learning the signs associated with the presence of undesirable dark entities (headaches, for instance), or Palo's deadly *muertos oscuros*. I too, like my interlocutors, feared spiritual and ritual persecution. After this bout of witchcraft I was once more a victim of it, knowledge of which reconfigured existing relationships to informants, friends, and strangers. Not surprisingly, I was to receive some minor health-inducing Santería initiations from Eduardo on a subsequent trip (the so-called *guerrero orichas*, the "warriors") – initiations he maintained would "tie me down to earth" rather than see me become the victim of something which would release me from it – and became tied (*presa*) to undergoing full-blown initiation at some later, unspecified date.

The point of all these personal observations is simply to note that at no time during my learning of this new conceptual religious language could I simply treat it as a "language", devoid of operative causes and effects, for I was very much a part of these causes and effects in the environments through which I routinely traversed. In Cuban religious circles there is little room for genuine scepticism (scepticism makes you easy prey to the evil of others). At no time was I ever asked whether I "believed", except by unbelievers, who are normally Marxist or foreign. To fail to have been affected by these agencies to which these languages referred, and on which they operated, would have been to fail to grasp the most basic insight of this environment: that information – and more importantly, communication, or *lack thereof* – makes the world go around, whether it comes from the living or the dead. Information, in this sense, is not something contained in minds, and transmitted. Information creates sensory and emotive-scapes that quite escape any propositional understanding of their content but instead evoke particular moods and inclinations. Witchcraft is certainly one of the most pervasive of such encompassing sensory-scapes.

There has been much written on the "modernity of witchcraft", especially in African contexts (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993, Geschiere 1997). As Bonhomme recently argues, "Discourses about witchcraft are shaped by globalised imaginaries and spread through modern means of communication", thriving in sectors of society such as politics and the economy (2012: 210). But Bonhomme also crucially highlights the need to examine what he calls the "microsociological" aspects of witchcraft, which he does through an analysis of the spread of rumours in West and Central Africa – rumours such as penis snatching through mundane encounters with strangers, and mobile phone numbers that kill the receivers of their calls. Bonhomme's argument is that in order to come to grips with how witchcraft works, we need to do something other than simply focus on globalisation and other facets of abstract modernity. His interest lies in how "the wide-ranging dynamics of modernity translate into the basic substance of everyday interaction on a smaller scale" (ibid). For example, he connects penis-snatching rumours to the phenomena of urban anonymity, tracing them to marketplaces where there is much interaction and contact between strangers and where friendly gestures are treated suspiciously, putting "urban sociality to the test" (ibid: 215). According to Bonhomme, it is the abstract figure of the "unknown" or the "stranger" that causes witchcraft accusations or rumours in this context, be they other ethnicities or foreigners (ibid: 216). Witchcraft, then, represents the "dark side of anonymity" (ibid: 225). While in Cuba the sorcerer is also generally "anonymous" (until

revealed, for instance, by other sorcerers like Eduardo), evil is not just a question of morality, but ontology (Silva 2015) – it is pervasive and all-consuming.

In different ways, the religious practices that I briefly described at the beginning of this section encapsulate well the notion not just that most knowledge is knowledge-under-construction, even when it comes from higher sources - and thus, that there is always a potentially obscure dimension of information - but that even those higher sources may be conflict-ridden, temperamental, and volatile. The constant negotiation and sacrificial diplomacy required between ritual expert or medium and their entities, in order to sustain balanced and productive relationships, alerts us to the often-tenuous nature of trust here. These are not separate aspects of religious experience, in my view. Understanding the nature of knowledge and mistrust as aspects of one another brings us closer to one of the main themes of this paper – the “spirits” of suspicion.

4. Concluding remarks

In this article I have tried to theorise paranoia, mistrust, and to some extent, conflict, not as destructive or negative phenomena necessarily, but as reflective and generative of a certain ethos in Cuba, one in which knowledge is not simply something propositional but absent, in certain cases, occulted in others. Experience and participation in these extended religious systems is not a matter of belief, but effect, so to speak, where the ethnographer is not exempt from bearing the brunt of phenomena such as witchcraft, for instance, or from becoming embroiled in situations that are beyond her control proper, but remit to broader cosmologies.

One of the harsh lessons of the field may be that anthropology is not about “truth” at all – in the sense of faithfully *representing* something that exists in the world – but about relationships: the anthropologist’s own assumptions to those of the culture she studies; her understandings of Otherness to her personal experiences of it; her expectations to those of her so-called “informants”; and so on and so forth. None of this is controversial. As Kirsten Hastrup (1995: 51) has stated: “If reflexivity is part of ethnography, this means that the anthropologist becomes her own informant”; I would add that her presence in the field inevitably alters it, and it is only through the reverberations of these constant alterations, materially, socially, and emotionally, that she arguably attains any degree of connectivity and thus, empathy. That we are necessarily “implied” in the fabric of our “fields” inasmuch as we live and work and *know* in them is, I think, a given. Favret-Saada (1980) demonstrated this rather poignantly in her study of witchcraft and words in France. If the ethnographer chooses to engage in her natives’ discourse, to ask questions, to utter words, then she too will be “caught”, her fate tied and untied by the kinds of positions she produces at any given moment, and the statements about herself that these invariably engender. Indeed, in a more recent paper, Favret-Saada ventures to say that “confronted with an incomprehensible cycle of unfortunate events, anybody – whatever his culture – may adhere to the ideas of Bocage witchcraft” (2012: 48). But the more interesting question Favret-Saada raises seems to be raising is how exactly we define our “field”, particularly when we write anthropologies of the “unseen”, “unheard”, or the otherwise intangible and its effect on the unfolding of our research (cf. Blanes and Espirito Santo 2014).

Postmodernism's call for reflexivity seems to have little to say about how we personally deal with what Stephan Palmié has called "disqualified forms of interpretation" (2002:20), regimes of knowledge such as dreams, rumours, visions, spirit communications, as well as our own "paranormal" experiences, which are usually taboo in the academic world. This silence is directly related to the first problem, it seems: namely, one of determining who counts as "actor" in this field - inasmuch as this is defined by the power to direct and produce change - as well as *what* counts as legitimate "anthropological" experience from our standpoint. And this also bears quite significantly, I would add here, on our over-reliance, as anthropologists, on concepts of "belief", which necessarily crystallise notions of extra-human agency as epiphenomena of the mental processes of "believers". One of the problematic assumptions in the anthropology of religion, argues Catherine Bell, "is the ease with which we grant belief a prior existence in order to cast it as the a priori shaper and instigator of action" (2002: 107). But "while belief may well work this way some of the time, we have no evidence that this happens most of the time" (ibid). Indeed, what cases of suspicion and paranoia in spirit-driven environments show us is exactly the opposite: belief is secondary to effect, to event, to knowledge. And knowing does not occur within a context of belief; it *is the context*.

A couple of observations are pertinent here, specifically, regarding what can be reasonably understood as the "field" in *fieldwork*, and its constitutive entities. On the question of what the "field" is, Barak Kalir says the following:

We seldom give serious practical and theoretical recognition to the role of the field. While anthropologists regularly account for all sorts of constraints in the field, these are often simply treated as static circumstances, rarely integrated in a dynamic way into the conceptualisation of our own position and actions. (2006:237)

Instead, Kalir follows Bourdieu's definition of a "field" as a "configuration of collective relations between positions" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:97, ibid), relations determined by certain rules. While I do not find Bourdieu's concern (and Kalir's for that matter) with the structured/structuring facts of the field relevant to my material – such as existing sets of rules, structures of power or the habituses of others, all of which impinge upon our possible responses, and so on – I take Kalir's point that we are often faced with power relations that escape our immediate control and even perception, and which we are forced to acknowledge nevertheless, sooner or later. However, while fieldwork methods are designed in principle to help the anthropologist experience the "field" from the point of view of local ontologies, and to deal reflexively with alterity as a natural component of our personal encounters, there tends to be a bias towards understandings of power as that wielded exclusively by people. But, as Eduardo Kohn argues, in relation to dreaming dogs, significance "is not the exclusive province of humans" (2007:5); it can inhere among "non-human selves", be these animals, natural forces, or invisible beings. The first observation here, then, is that in order to understand difference in fundamentally social ways, *relationally*, we must, as the anthropologist Viveiros de Castro says (2003), be willing to see *all* relations as social, including those that would ordinarily escape the anthropologist's own demarcated ontological frames, i.e. living people. Working the "field", as it were, is to also to accept and work with a fundamental ontological exposure, one that is processual and relational, not fixed in cosmological givens.

Nils Bubandt (2009) has suggested the usefulness of treating spirits as “informants” proper, as “methodologically” (if not quite “ontologically”) real beings. It makes sense, he says, to “treat spirits anthropologically as informants because that is how people in Ternate [Indonesia] treat them” (2009: 295). Describing a possession ceremony which resulted in heated political discussions between multiple spirits, including those of sultans and pre-Islamic leaders, many of which through the body of a single medium – Ibu Lan – Bubandt states that the spirits, each one, “in their own right were historical persons that could be treated as informants”. For him, “the idea of treating these spirits as informants is only counterintuitive because the category of ‘informant’ remains linked to conventional, philosophical idea(l)s about the bounded self. This vestige of individualism that continues to inform the concept of the informant is odd” (2009: 296), he comments. What he calls the “one-body-one-person-one-mind model” of the self, which obviously has dividends for the category of informant, is just inadequate to his data, and also to mine. Like Bubandt in Indonesia, in Cuba I encountered a lot more “selves” than there were bodies to account for them in any given room. I take from this my second observation for this conclusion: that while it is necessary and desirable to take spirits as “methodologically real” actors in the fields we work, we are in the end not looking for a suspension-of-disbelief, which at some later time will be unsuspended to give way to the way things really *are* (unbeknownst to the natives themselves). As Marcio Goldman argues in an article which begins with a description of one of his own mystical experiences, where he hears some drumming attributed by his Candomblé friends to the dead in the distance – it matters very little whether the phenomenon in question is true or not, what matters was that he was *affected*, in the manner proposed by Favret-Saada. I translate and quote: “Maybe our task is more modest”, Goldman argues, “to develop ethnographic theories capable of returning what we study to its dailyness” (or mundaneness);

...to reinsert whatever it is that we study into life and to carefully avoid the kinds of literalisations and over interpretations that are, at the end of the day, the weapons of the powers that-be; and finally, to at least try to glimpse at that which, in life, and in often silent ways, escapes this same dailyness or mundaneness. (2007:171).

Any concern with the ethics of fieldwork in suspicion-laden environments (and even more so, *religious* environments) should, I think, begin with these premises, so that we are able to look at the field as the *totality* of (knowledge and other) relationships in which we are actually implied, emotionally, sensually, spiritually.

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