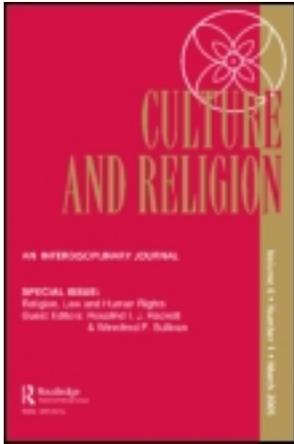


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Staging transformation: Spiritist liturgies as theatres of conversion in Afro-Cuban religious practice

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Of the religious formations to have crystallised during the transatlantic slave trade, Espiritismo continues to be among the most popular. While most previous studies of its Cuban and Puerto Rican-style ceremonies have approached them as either a type of health care or field of cultural resistance, this article analyses Spiritist services as theatres of conversion for those not already interpellated by Kardecist discourse and persuaded of mediums' authority. Drawing on research among African-American practitioners of Lucumí, often called Santería, it argues that Spiritist ceremonies have instructed participants in the reality of superhuman entities; the normative conditions of access to them; and the benefits of proper intercourse with the divine in both Yorùbá- and Kongo-inspired initiatory traditions. In contrast to scholarship that treats ritual as drama, this article distinguishes Spiritist liturgies from plays in crucial respects and asserts that they more closely resemble modern operating theatres and theatres of war. It aims thereby to furnish scholars from a range of disciplines with an ethnographically informed perspective on the potential of ritual to configure sensori-motor dispositions and affective states and thus to transform religious subjectivity.

Keywords: diaspora religions; Black Atlantic initiatory traditions; Espiritismo; ritual practice; subjectivity; conversion

Of the religious formations to have crystallised in the African Diaspora during the transatlantic slave trade, Spiritism continues to be among the most popular. In contrast to such traditions as Afro-Brazilian Candomblé and Haitian Vodou, Spiritism, or *Espiritismo*, remains undertheorised, although its adherents may be found in most major urban areas throughout the Americas. The ritual practices of Spiritism typically involve attempts to communicate with the cosmopolitan entities termed 'spirit guides', in addition to participants' ancestors, in gatherings called *misas blancas*, 'white masses', or *veladas*.¹ Spiritist history and the distinctive aesthetics of Cuban and Puerto Rican-style 'Espiritista' altars have garnered some critical attention, yet most previous studies of its ceremonies have approached them as a type of alternative health care for Latinos and as a field of cultural resistance cultivated by women's leadership.² Spiritist services have not, however, been understood as 'liturgies' in sociologist Martin Riesebrodt's definition of the term: 'staged performances' of 'the rules of interaction between humans and superhuman

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powers as well as the promises and expectations institutionalized in [them]' (2008, 31). In other words, Spiritist *mises-en-scène* have not been seen as transformative for those not already interpellated by their discourse, persuaded of mediums' authority, and assured of the spirit guides' reality.

It was in conducting ethnographic research that I discerned the need to elucidate the relationship between the attendance of Spiritist ceremonies and affiliation to Lucumí, popularly called Santería. After several years of participant observation in a Chicago-based African-American Espiritismo and Lucumí community, called Ilé Laroye, *misas blancas* emerged as one of the settings in which newcomers to these traditions gradually came to acquire the intersubjective frame of reference that has bound practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions into an interpretive community.³ Although this group's conceptualisation of 'spirit guides' and its worship of Lucumí deities, or *orishas*, was singular in some respects, salient features of the *misas* celebrated at Ilé Laroye have been commonly attested, and included encouragement to undergo rites of passage and receive the *orishas'* ritual *sacra*, among other consecrated objects, viewed as essential for religious progress (Moreno Vega 2000; Pérez 2010; Polk 2004; Robaina 2001; Santiago-Saavedra 2004). While not always overtly spectacular and seldom straightforwardly didactic, *misas* devoted to externalising the existence of ancestors and spirit guides promoted 'practices of the self' that effectively constituted 'modes of subjectivation', and turned participants into servants of the spirits.⁴ The 'white masses' of Ilé Laroye thus structurally resembled the historical 'theatre of conversion' devised within Christian missionary churches and monasteries for pedagogical purposes, yet they also shared similarities with two other domains of interaction set apart from everyday life: the operating theatre and the theatre of battle.⁵

In what follows, I am interested in examining *misas* as liturgies that catalysed religious commitment to Lucumí by immersing participants in affectively charged theatres of diagnostic endeavour and martial conflict. One of the dangers of using the term 'theatre' to describe ritual activity, of course, is that it connotes an audience passively watching, at a remove from performers portraying 'make-believe' scenarios. The notion of theatre as primarily a feast for the eyes – and a mimetic representation judged primarily by visual criteria – has a lengthy history. As Schneider (2006) writes, scholars have traditionally located the advent of Western theatrical practices as distinct from religious ritual in ancient Greece, when written scripts attributed to biographically verifiable human authors allowed for the repetition of dramas 'word by word'. At that moment, performances ceased to be at the mercy of oral, manual, and otherwise corporeal transmission of their contents. Schneider contends:

[T]he institution of theater art could be (arguably falsely) distinguished from 'primitive' ritual when disembodied vision took place as a primary mode of reception: as a ritual participant became spectator, imagined as a nonacting, nontouching viewer, determined foremost as one who sees and hears but does not, in the same moment, act. (2006, 237; emphasis in original)

To justify applying the term 'theatre' to the diverse arenas of interaction in misas blancas, it is crucial to re-introduce sensible bodies, and contingent processes of embodiment, to the concept of the theatrical.

Anthropologists of the 'dramaturgical' school, such as Victor Turner and Clifford Geertz, have been criticised for providing dehistoricised accounts of ritual practices as role-playing exercises, neglecting the situated discourses of religious actors, and equating acts of cultural performance with agency.⁶ It may also be said that models of society as drama more generally have failed to fathom the deep interanimation of the senses in ritualised settings.⁷ For the argument I pursue in this article, it is vital to point out not only that ceremonies have tended to capitalise on the aesthetic pleasure of sensation; they have actively remade the senses through an expansion of their limits, redredging sensori-motor channels to convert them into conduits of subjectivation (Warnier 2001). Every 'felicitous' ritual affords its participants opportunities for alchemical encounter and for mimetically creating, 'the copy that is as much a construction as a copy, sentient contact that is another mode of seeing, a gaze grasping where the touch falters' (Taussig 1993, 30). To apprehend fully the multilayered theatricality of misas, it is necessary to look anew at sight itself. Marks (2002, 17–18) has coined the term 'haptic visuality' to refer to a 'tactile, kinesthetic, and proprioceptive' mode of ocular receptivity more reliant on other senses than optical perception is customarily construed to be.⁸ In misas, participants' eyes served as 'organs of touch' and palpated visible surfaces, bringing material objects viscerally 'up close' to their beholders.

Theatre has long been used as a telescoped metaphor with respect to Afro-Diasporic religions. In the early twentieth century, scholars seized on the language of drama to contest the stereotype of possession practices as either charlatanism or lunacy (Dianteill and Hell 2008); for instance, Ortiz (1951) compared the rituals of the Afro-Cuban religious brotherhood Abakuá to ancient mystery plays, exclaiming, 'Tragedy! The Supreme Theatre!' Conversely, writing on Vodou, Métraux (1955, 1958) analysed possession as 'comédie rituelle', prompting Leiris to view the same phenomenon as offering participants a 'vestiaire de personnalités' ('wardrobe of characters') to slip on and off according to the exigencies of the moment (Janis 2006; Sansi 2007). In turn, Bastide (1960, 1970) was guided by Leiris' approach to possession as 'lived theatre', or *théâtre vécu*, in his research on Candomblé. Reflecting her own debt to Leiris, Brown McCarthy (1991, 2000) argues that in the 'possession performances' of Vodou the spirits both personify the forces that shape reality – thereby revealing the dynamics of everyday life – and, by compelling their servants to collaborate in interpreting their words and gestures, foster community. Other scholars have appealed to drama as a means of accounting for the efficacy of Spiritist ritual in the absence of participants' belief (Romberg 2009) and to the concept of performance to emphasise the improvisational and ludic qualities of Yorùbá ritual over its scripted features (Drewal 1992).

I depart from these precedents here by elaborating on the 'liturgical' quality of misas, demonstrating that they instructed practitioners in the behaviours attributed to spirits; the normative conditions of access to them; and the benefits thought to issue

from proper intercourse with them. Drawing on long-term ethnographic research, I argue that misas have served as theatres of conversion and derived their transformative potential from mediums' ability to produce these sites of experiment, revelation, struggle and, ultimately, metamorphosis. I begin by detailing the components of misas in Ilé Laroye with reference to the concept of sympathy, then locate Spiritist rituals as a genre of religious performance. After discussing the role of 'props', I compare misas to operating theatres, paying particular attention to the ways that mediums deconstructed and rearticulated participants' bodies. Finally, I consider the theatres of war that misas became when practitioners collectively envisioned the social world as a battleground. I intend for this article to contribute not only to the literature on Afro-Diasporic traditions by establishing that the sentiments of affinity generated in these ceremonies have conduced to the practice of both Spiritism and Lucumí. I also present this argument as an occasion for scholars from a variety of disciplines to reconsider the influence of ritual practice in shaping religious subjectivity, especially with regard to 'ideological becoming' (Bakhtin 1981, 294).⁹ It is my hope that future studies of emergent religious experience continue to expand the trope of the theatre to reflect the ceremonial reconfiguration of sensori-motor dispositions and affective states, and to explore the relationship of Spiritist liturgies to other quintessentially modern arenas of self-fashioning.

Setting the scene

Since the late nineteenth century, practitioners of the Lucumí tradition have venerated deities of West African Yorùbá origin, the aforementioned orishas, observing ritual protocols formulated in Cuba during the transatlantic slave trade. They have also sought initiation in Palo Monte, an older Kongo-inspired Afro-Cuban 'society of affliction' dedicated to praising the spirits called *mpungus* and charging the ritual objects called *prendas* with the energies of the dead for the purposes of both healing and 'mystical aggression' (Ochoa 2010; Palmié 2002, 26). Lucumí and Palo ritual specialists entered the USA in significant numbers immediately after the Cuban Revolution, and again during the 1980 Mariel boatlift. In 1986, one such Havana-born priest initiated Nilaja Campbell into Lucumí, and she went on to found the house of orisha worship Ilé Laroye. Along with most of her religious protégées, termed 'godchildren' according to Lucumí convention, Nilaja was born and raised in the USA, and identified as African-American. During the course of my research, Nilaja was sought after as an orisha praise-singer, sixteen-cowries diviner and Palo adept. She was also in demand as a Spiritist medium.¹⁰ In celebrating these rituals, Nilaja hewed to the teachings of Allan Kardec, born Hippolyte Léon Dénizard Rivail in 1804, whose books on spirits and mediumship became sensations in Latin America and Caribbean in the mid-nineteenth century.¹¹

Following the tenets of Spiritism codified by Kardec, Nilaja taught that everyone carries an invisible 'cuadro espiritual', or 'spiritual portrait', usually a cadre of five to seven spirit guides thought to influence the proclivities and

behaviour of the person to whom they are attached, and to reveal their character mainly in the context of misas.¹² A plethora of proto-Spiritist practices preceded both Kardec and Lucumí in eastern Cuba, however, and gave rise to hybrid non-institutionalised varieties such as espiritismo ‘cruzao’ (Spiritism ‘crossed’ with African-derived practices) and muertera bembé de sao (Dodson 2008). Spiritist forms more heavily indebted to Kardecist thought such as espiritismo de mesa (‘Spiritism of the table’) and de cordón (‘of the cord’) also seem to have become established first in rural Cuba and travelled to Havana in the early twentieth century (Román 2007). The main factors contributing to their proliferation on the island appear to have been Kardec’s endorsement of women as mediums with abilities equal to those of men; the widespread interest in communicating with the dead in the aftermath of the Ten Years’ War (1868–1878), a conflict that resulted in massive civilian casualties as well as the brutal forced resettlement of local populations; and the ability of Spiritism to provide an ideological bridge between folk Catholicism and African-inspired initiatory traditions (Bermúdez 1967).

Other Caribbean variants of Espiritismo include the Afro-Cuban ‘cajón pa’ los muertos’, less a style of association than a hybrid ritual form that invites the participation of persons and spirits from across religious boundaries, and the organisation of religious communities into ‘centres’ that sustain large numbers of practitioners and observe distinctive ritual practices in both Cuba and Puerto Rico (Nuñez Molina 1987; Pérez y Mena 1991; Warden 2006).¹³ Recent scholarship has also begun to examine charismatic leaders and healers, such as those called ‘man gods’, that emerged from the Spiritist milieu of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Cuba and Puerto Rico (Román 2007). Rich case studies of the contemporary urban misa have examined its ritual space as a site of sociality and demonstrated that the relationship between ‘spirit guides’ and orishas differs from site to site; not all Spiritist forms have proven ritually and cosmologically interdependent with Lucumí as intensely as in instances of ‘Santerismo’ or ‘Espiritismo popular’ (Argyriadis 1999; Brandon 1993; Schmidt 1995, 2009). Personnel may alternate between Lucumí, Spiritism and Palo Monte traditions as they see fit while maintaining ceremonies for their respective spirits almost entirely separate, and observing rigid divisions of household spaces for the ritual paraphernalia of each tradition (Argüelles Mederos and Hodge Limonta 1991; Cabrera 1954; Millet 1993; Millet and Garcia 1996).

Nilaja’s approach to Spiritism was of this type, and she learned to conduct misas from a Puerto Rican mentor when she was introduced to Lucumí. Along with the majority of her working-class community, Nilaja earned her livelihood from a secular career, and did not support herself on the proceeds from her religious activities. She also shared important facets of her ancestry with most members of the Ilé: by and large, they were the children and grandchildren of Black American Southerners propelled North during the successive waves of the Great Migration in the early twentieth century, in pursuit of relief from environmental catastrophes, such as historic floods, and the constant threat of lynching, among other forms of racist mob violence. They had been steeped in the rich family traditions of

distinctly African-American forms of religiosity – in the Spiritual Church and Pan African Orthodox Christian Church, as well as mainline Protestantism and Roman Catholicism – but had turned away from the religions of their upbringings long enough to see the possibilities of the Lucumí tradition (Pérez 2010). Nilaja, along with her son, husband, sister, and eldest godchild, had visited Cuba and Nigeria to search for the roots of the form of orisha worship they had adopted, yet they had not sought to delve into Espiritismo to the same degree, no doubt in tacit recognition of its even more radically deterritorialised character.

During the time of my research, the opportunities for Lucumí practice in Chicago were few, compared with cities such as Los Angeles and Miami. There were only 15 or so houses in Chicagoland – including the suburbs of Aurora and Waukegan – that occasionally came together for major events such as ceremonies, conferences and Ilé Laroye's annual offering to the orisha Yemayá.¹⁴ Yet, on any given Saturday, there could be any number of different types of Afro-Cuban drumming rituals being performed within the city limits: a *tambor* for the orishas, during which a set of consecrated *bàtà* drums would be played; a *cajón pa' los muertos* for the ancestors; a raucous Congo party, for the spirits, or *nfumbi*, of Palo Monte Mayombe; and so on.¹⁵ In their own version of the Great Migration, numbers of Puerto Ricans came to the Midwest in search of manufacturing jobs in the 1950s, and the heavy concentration of *Boricuas* in Chicago made Spiritism a feature of many houses (Ramos-Zayas 2003). The religious supply stores called *botánicas*, often owned by Puerto Rican or Mexican Lucumí initiates, dotted the landscape on the north side of the city, and in 2007, *botánicas* filled a third of a column in the local business white pages. West Indians, along with Central and South Americans, were a vital and visible presence in both Latino and Anglo-American houses of ocha (McPherson 2007).

I began attending misas at Nilaja's home in 2003, some as small as six participants, and others as large as three dozen. Most misas lasted between one-and-a-half and two hours. A white cloth covered the surface of a rectangular table in either the basement or living room, and one large goblet of water was filled with cool water into which a metal cross was inserted. Six other glasses of water were arranged around this one. Vases were set on the floor with the light-coloured, mop-shaped flowers, such as chrysanthemums, most often used for 'cleansings' during misas.¹⁶ Persons also had to be in their proper places for the misas to start; mediums instructed participants in the assumption of both corporeal and cognitive postures conducive to the arrival of the spirits. Nilaja 'blocked' participants like actors on a stage, telling them where to sit according to her perception of the ideal hierarchical and religious order. She and the mediums – mostly initiated Lucumí elders – also insisted that participants' bodies had to assume the proper posture, teaching that they had to be 'centred', calm and sitting in a stance of receptivity: feet flat on the floor, spine erect, eyes closed and hands resting on their thighs, palm-up if possible.¹⁷ According to Nilaja, 'spirits can't work with you in [a] hunched-up position'; participants' bodies had to be 'open' so as to achieve an elusive yet obligatory quality of poised sentience.

Nilaja often prefaced misas by commenting on their format and the objectives to be attained during the ceremony, for the benefit of newcomers. Bearing in mind the number of strangers to the *ilé* in attendance, she relied on her fluency in the *lingua franca* of so-called New Age ‘metaphysical science’, spirituality and contemporary *Naturfrömmigkeit*, inflected by a Schleiermacherian orientation to religion as feeling and mystery, to explain the proceedings. More than once, Nilaja explicitly connected the practice of mediumship to moral-ethical principles, asserting that there is no absolute good or evil, and that misas assist participants in ‘find[ing] attunement with ourselves so we can be together with God-consciousness’.¹⁸ At the beginning of one *misa*, Nilaja defined the reason for participating as ‘to make an association with something higher than ourselves ... The main thing we want to be is intelligent’. Such statements attested to Nilaja’s conversance with western esoteric and occult literature as well as an older corpus of mystical texts published by Chicago’s DeLaurence Company and globally influential among practitioners of African descent since the early twentieth century.¹⁹ She also recommended volumes for her godchildren to study, such as Allan Kardec’s *Book of Mediums* and *Book of Spirits*, to ascertain more about mediums’ ideal ‘comportment’.²⁰

A hermeneutic of sympathy: summoning the dead, with feeling

This theater consists in unmasking the forces at work behind human appearances, in making masks in order to unmask. (de Certeau [1970] 1996, 88)

Nilaja always set the first song of the *misa* in motion, requesting help and protection from the Cuban Virgin of Charity, associated with the Lucumí deity Oshún.²¹ A number of hymns appropriated Christian personages and concepts, redescribing them in Spiritist terms; others referred to the themes and pantheon of spirits belonging to Palo Monte, using the Kongo-inspired compositional form called *mambo* and a distinctive, fast-paced rhythm. By singing to attract supernatural entities, practitioners not only demonstrated their familiarity with these beings’ wishes, habits and sensibilities. They also invested in what I would call a hermeneutic of sympathy: a mode of interpretation that assisted in the fabrication of affinities and affective bonds with agentive beings, whose materialisation practitioners increasingly viewed as central to their own agency. To quote Taussig (1993, 107–08), writing of Cuna medicine-songs, ‘These verses create[d] magical power ... For the chant [was] not so much instructing the spirits as, through the mimetic faculty, bringing them to life.’ Yet, in order to be conjured, the spirits had to be known. For instance, Nilaja once raised the possibility of an ‘Arabic spirit’ forming part of someone’s *cuadro* spiritual. The dead, Nilaja asserted, are not bound to the living based on common race or place of origin, as a primary ‘frame of reference’, and are ‘not exclusive’, but want to assist anyone with whom they feel sympathy.²²

Nilaja added that any relationship with this patron would be drastically compromised by a potential benefactor’s ignorance; without the ability to sing a song whose lyrics, rhythm and melody could assist in calling this spirit during a *misa*,

the chances of forging a connection would be slim at best. The importance of musical motifs points up one of the characteristic features of Espiritismo: its racially, ethnically, and religiously differentiated 'cast' of spirit guides. Misas in Ilé Laroye, as elsewhere, have been premised on the social and cultural heterogeneity of the Afro-Atlantic world (Bettelheim 2005; Wehmeyer 2000). Accordingly, misas have not only set a place at the white table for Native Americans – 'Indians' sometimes classified according to specific nation or people – and Africans – Congo warriors, 'Guinea' slaves, Madamas – but also created room for Europeans (especially Roman Catholic clergy); Roma ('gypsies'); East and South Asians; Arabs; and, more recently, Black North Americans, to act as ancestors and spirit guides (Flores-Peña 2004; Pérez 2011b). Since the advent of Spiritism, practitioners have endowed these *comisiones*, or categories of spirits, with well-defined tastes in sounds, sights, smells, textures and flavours mediated by such factors as perceived skin colour, physiognomy, national origin, gender, legal status, and social location (Wirtz 2011). Sympathy for the spirits has thus always involved contending with racial, ethnic, gendered and class-based taxonomies.

In misas, participants learned the proclivities and conduct of different groups of spirits to recreate their signature ways of being in the world and thus compel them to return to it briefly by 'passing' through the body of a medium in possession. More often than not, the way to a spirit's heart was through his ear. Yet, singing was just one of the embodied actions performed sympathetically to enter into the experience of the spirits and motivate them to get involved in the misa. Other gestures, such as puffing on cigars and donning clothes reminiscent of those worn during the spirits' lifetimes, were believed to operate in a similar fashion.²³ It was not uncommon to see participants sitting with red sashes tied around their waists, or sipping rum; the spirits to be contacted were thought to have done these things, or to want to be doing them now. Mediums often instructed participants to engage in such activities within their own homes to draw close to the guides in their own cuadros espirituales. For instance, if a 'gypsy' spirit was to be developed to help a woman with wanderlust stay in one place, or to enhance her talent for prognostication, she would be told to shuffle playing cards, wear items such as jingling bangles, hoop earrings, bells or fringed shawls, and indulge in expressions of feminine exuberance.²⁴ Such sympathetic impersonation of the spirits harnessed the power of mimesis – 'the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other' – to change practitioners' self-understandings and 'prove' the efficacy of their ritual labour (Taussig 1993, xiii).

While most of the energy expended during a misa went towards representing spirit guides, the mediums' imitative technique was the very opposite of method acting: rather than substituting their own feelings for those of the spirits to create the illusion of verisimilitude, participants assumed the spirits' postures in pursuit of a self-transformation that would collapse the distinctions between actor and audience, living and dead (Verducci 2000). Their simulations were carried out in considerable tension with both modern media technologies that privilege naturalistic depictions of social phenomena and popular cinematic portrayals of

Spiritist séances as empty shams – vulgar, histrionic and eclectic to the point of absurdity.²⁵ I once heard Nilaja announce to a roomful of guests gathered for a *misa*, ‘This is not Hollywood. We will not have any levitations.’ She felt it imperative to acknowledge that everyone present probably had been exposed to stereotypes of mediums as flamboyant charlatans, and she was hoping to dispel hyperbolic misconceptions in the most down-to-earth manner possible, under the circumstances.²⁶ At another time, Nilaja declared, ‘This is not a theatre group,’ to convey that for her, what was about to happen in the *misa* – the ‘passing’ of spirits, the cleansing of bodies with flowers and rum that would leave participants dotted with petals and glazed with liquor – would not be a performance, in the sense of a fictional narrative concocted, rehearsed, and enacted to entertain a crowd. Everyone, whether she remained silent or not, would be regarded as a participant.

Misas’ representations of the spirits, particularly in the hexis-appropriating gestures of the participants, were meant to trigger action, inciting the spirits to come and continue what the mediums had begun.²⁷ While misas did not serve as playhouses, they may be viewed as theatres, in at least two senses of the word at a conceptual remove from the dramatic arts. At times, the *misa* resembled an operating theatre: a site for healing, experiment and revelation, effected through the detection of traces in and around bodies, ‘the very material evidence, indications, symptoms, and impressions of something absent, hidden, excluded’ (Schramm, Schwarte, and Lazardzig 2005, xv). The *misa* was also a theatre of battle: it was the scene of events, the arena that made an uncertain, hostile encounter possible, and the stage provided for the resolution of conflicts. While misas were not scripted or blatantly didactic, they fulfilled a number of pedagogical purposes. The most explicit of these was the education of the spirits in attaining a higher level of ‘civilisation’ and ‘evolution’, equated among Spiritists with both moral–ethical discernment and intellectual comprehension. The educational process was understood by the elders to involve a medium’s domestication of the spirits in her *cuadro espiritual*, and her socialisation of them, over time, into a mutually beneficial relationship based on trust. However, misas ‘civilised’ and ‘enlightened’ participants as well, training them in the service of the spirits.

Mediums occasionally expressed concern that psychiatric conditions, such as schizophrenia, could be misinterpreted as intimate rapport with the dead. Nilaja warned repeatedly, ‘If you hear voices, call a doctor.’²⁸ She recommended that her godchildren seek counselling and psychiatric treatment to develop strategies for coping with anxiety and so forth. On the other hand, she and other mediums displayed little enthusiasm for therapeutic discourse, whether of the commercial, highly publicised ‘self-help’ (talk show) or clinical psychoanalytic (talking cure) variety. Spiritist techniques, so often cast as poor (wo)man’s psychotherapy, may be viewed as providing as a critique of this discourse, the emergence of which coincided with the rise of Euro-American bourgeois consumer culture and the cult of meritocratic individualism (Illouz 2008). On one occasion, the subject of an intense ‘investigative *misa*’ seemed to be disavowing responsibility for destructive patterns of behaviour by appealing to her traumatic upbringing.²⁹

'Tell it to Oprah [Winfrey]', Nilaja told her, then repeated, 'Tell it to Oprah', not long before she incorporated her primary spirit guide, Anita. At the bottom of Nilaja's quarrel with psychoanalysis and 'pop psychology' were their voluntaristic notion of human agency and definition of the 'self' as synonymous with biological existence and legal personhood. These concepts were incompatible with the Lucumí concept of destiny, including the idea that while patron orishas largely determine the character of their 'children', their benefactors must nevertheless also acquiesce to the claims of other entities – such as spirit guides – on their persons.

Misas were post-Freudian – if not entirely anti-therapeutic – in that they did not subscribe to the tripartite model of the psyche; affirm the formulation of emotions as discrete presocial or precultural entities; or locate the solution for the riddles of human sexuality and identity formation in childhood memories. For elders, the self was 'dividual', or multiple, rather than unitary (Marriott 1976). To participate in misas was to become accustomed to the idea implicit in both Lucumí spirit possession and rituals of consecration that one is comprised of many selves, some in accord, others in contention; mediums modelled what they deemed to be the proper coordination and expression of these selves in varying contexts. Yet, misas and the discourse of psychoanalysis – what Trilling (1955, 12) once called 'the slang of our culture' – shared some conspicuous features. The very first professional psychoanalytic encounters occurred just as Spiritism was sweeping the African Diaspora at the turn of the nineteenth century, and both may be viewed as addressing the same temporally instantiated problematic concerning the boundaries around, and internal divisions within, the self. As Braidotti writes, the human and social sciences, including psychoanalysis,

innovate[d] by introducing new types of discourse, which are structurally and genealogically connected to the crisis of modernity in that they place the fragmented, split, complex nature of the subject at the heart of their concerns. (1994, 46)

Misas have reflected the crisis of modernity not only through the presence of spirit guides tied to the fashioning of the Afro-Atlantic world, and in its language of enlightenment and evolution, but also through their interest in providing participants with an account of their identity formation.

Misas have differed from psychotherapy in locating the fragmentation and complexity of the subject beyond one's existential selfhood, historically contingent experience and embodiment, in the historical process itself. Misas were superficially similar to therapy sessions in that authoritative figures gave impetus to a narrativisation of the self that was understood to continue for participants long after they had gone home. Yet, in misas, it was not primarily one's own desires and memories to be exposed in the course of self-discovery, but those of the cosmopolitan spirit guides within one's *cuadro espiritual*. And just as the self to be found in mediumship was a composite, rather than a singular, one, the fact-finding mission was not a private affair. The *misa* was a collective enterprise, in

which the data necessary for the development of a durable sympathetic relationship with the spirits could be obtained. While spirit guides may seem to be ideal types – Indians, proficient in the healing and martial arts; nuns and priests, pious and superior in solitary pursuits – they were seen to distinguish themselves as unique individuals little by little, with the misas' participants collaborating to build up details of their appearance, dispositions, and curriculum vitae. For instance, a practitioner in Ilé Laroye was once told that her cuadro contained a tall, sturdy man of African descent who uses a cane and carries a bag of herbs that he grinds into powders on a mortar and pestle. This outline would be filled in during subsequent ceremonies, with the tentative disclosure of this spirit's name, preferences, and the turning points in his biography.

Over time, the person to whom he was perceived to be 'attached' would ideally begin to bear witness to his reality – implementing his suggestions, displaying objects associated with him in her home, perhaps incorporating him physically in misas – and come to see him as crucial in her own self-realisation. For such a relationship to flourish, it would be necessary for the information received at misas to be regarded as clues, and for causal relationships to be inferred between them so that solutions to problems could cohere. 'Misa work is investigative work. We put things together like pieces of a puzzle,' an elder once said. The discourse of the psychoanalytic project and that of Spiritism also appear to run parallel in this sense – thus betraying the historical moment in which they crystallised – for both have framed the task of knowledge production as an epistemological undertaking akin to crime detection (Spence 1987). Nilaja and other elders regarded sensations and impressions from the spirits as symbolic, and not as ends in themselves; they were seen to need analysis beyond the moment of their observation to yield meaning, as warnings, directives or simply evidence for the existence of a particular type of spirit guide. One of their objectives for misas and Spiritist classes was to teach participants how to descry these symbols as indexes of the spirits' agency and to read them 'logically' – in other words, to furnish practitioners with an interpretive apparatus that would contribute to the communal adoption of a religious 'common sense' (Hacking 1992, 13). This ontologically creative style of reasoning was dependent on sympathy as a heuristic device.³⁰ Only by sympathetically 'entering the mind' of spirit guides could participants hope either to goad them into speech, or decipher what they said.

Props and their properties

Every case of possession has its theatrical side . . . The rooms of the sanctuary are not unlike the wings of a theater where the possessed find the necessary accessories. (Métraux 1955, 24)

Despite the apparent resistance of those present to lend their bodies to the spirits, it was not uncommon for participants to fall into trance. Sometimes incorporated spirits would dance wordlessly with their eyes tightly closed, such as Ebony or Santi's; others would address the gathering or specific individuals, as in the case

of Ruthie's spirits. Only Nilaja, however, gave sustained voice and flesh to a spirit guide, named Anita.³¹ Anita appeared in veladas before Nilaja was initiated, and with some prompting eventually gave her name through a medium. Nilaja's incorporation of Anita was usually heralded by a throaty laugh and a shuddering twist of her torso. When she arrived, Anita dispensed earthy advice in a Spanish accent, or by translating Cuban idioms into English. As in the case of other spirit guides, the vocalisation of this spirit indexed her historicity – her gender, class status and racialised cultural origin.³² Longtime participants in Ilé Laroye's misas said admiringly of Anita that she 'comes to work'; they recalled with awe predictions that Anita had made almost a decade earlier and their unexpected fulfilment. This lent credence to Nilaja's persona as not only industrious, but also prophetic. Her ability to sustain incorporation, despite the fatigued disorientation she exhibited afterwards, was also perceived as a demonstration of her own character, and accepted as proof of her decision to submit to the spirits selflessly – or perhaps it might be more accurate to say, with as many selves as necessary.³³

When the spirits did materialise at times such as these, it was not only as a consequence of disciplined introspection, or with the body alone. There were what Nilaja called 'props'; material extensions of the practitioner's intentions and privileged substances that were the indispensable instruments of the misas' operating theatre.³⁴ The most important of these was water, viewed as both a fluid channel of communication for the spirits and a spiritual detergent able to dissolve corrupting 'influences'. While any material could serve as a conduit for the spirit guides, they were seen to draw energy and refreshment from the water in the glasses on the misa table, and use it as a current on and through which their messages would travel. Practitioners also saw the need to purify themselves with water before coming into contact with the spirits. Accordingly, before the misa started, a large stainless steel bowl filled with water was put on the floor and treated with drops of laundry bluing, rum, holy water and perfume, then topped with flower petals. Participants 'cleaned' themselves with water from this basin at least once, at the beginning of the misa, by immersing their hands in the basin then passing their damp palms over the tops of their heads, shoulders, hips, legs and feet.³⁵ The cleansing practices performed in misas dramatised the religious properties of water and other liquids, as the mixture in the basin was seen to revive mediums after spirits had passed through them, or to stem the onset of passing when it was unwanted.

Nilaja instructed attendees in the contents of spiritual baths – white petals and honey for romance, fresh basil and Florida water for good fortune, and so forth.³⁶ Mediums also advised participants to create similar mixtures in smaller quantities and place them on the household altars called *bóvedas*. In several respects, the *bóveda* was a miniature version of the misa table, as a level surface draped in white cloth and set with seven glasses of water.³⁷ For misas, the largest glass was often placed in the centre of an arc formed by the smaller glasses, but most members of Ilé Laroye were counselled to place theirs in the shape of a

chevron. As one elder put it during a *misa*, ‘Just as a [Spiritist] table is set up in an arrow, the ancestors have formed an arrow of light against the darkness and are pushing you forward.’³⁸ The other items chosen for the *bóveda* were selected with a view towards not only reflecting the identities of spirit guides, but also creating effects. For instance, a medium once recommended that a participant attract a business opportunity by boiling star anise or aniseed in water, putting the cooled infusion in a glass with some honey, layering beer on top, and placing this mixture on her *bóveda*. The sympathetic aspect of this combination should be immediately apparent, since the key characteristics of each element are meant to imitate and combine to produce the desired results of the ritual action. In this recipe, sweetness, effervescence, and fermentation become magnets for success in commercial endeavours, just as clean water hypostasises the lucidity of the spirits whose patronage is sought.

Assembled at a distance from the communal ritual, *bóvedas* mirrored participants’ understandings of the objects and substances placed on them. They also reflected the encompassing process through which its members came to accept – and rely on – the existence of congruities between the phenomenal world and the unseen world of the spirits. In Spanish, the term *bóveda* usually refers to a sepulcher or burial vault, and as in the case of tombs arrayed with the favourite items of the deceased, *bóvedas* gave practitioners a place to remember the spirits of the dead and piece together aspects of their pasts, in hopes of effecting their materialisation. It was not uncommon for practitioners to decorate *bóvedas* with statues or dolls that would signify spirit guides (Viarnes 2010; Wexler 2001).³⁹ Mediums called these accoutrements icons and symbols to emphasise that, as ‘sympathetic entities’, guides were drawn to resemblance and familiarity.⁴⁰ But mediums never said that guides wanted drums to play, fans to wave or hats to wear; these items were for them to ‘work with’. As in the case of the *orishas’ herramientas*, or tools, these things provided nodes of access with the spirits and equipped them with materials through which to realise their intentions (Brown McCarthy 1995, 32–33). These objects were both mnemonics for the spirits’ existence and the cause of its accessibility (Gell 1999, 107). Once set in place, objects were understood to be hard at work despite their apparent stasis. They became visual and tangible puns, rendering concrete desired objectives, and promising a measure of control over the hidden forces at play in the daily lives of participants.

Mesa Blanca as operating table

A medium once told one of *misa* participants at Ilé Laroye, ‘Get a statue of Saint Lazarus [for your *bóveda*], lean on it so you’ll never be crippled.’ This statement drew a parallel between the popular image of Saint Lazarus propped up on a crutch and the recipient of this advice supporting herself on him, yet the word ‘crippled’ was not merely a figure of speech. Participants came to *misas* with a vested interest in preventing and overcoming serious ailments, including paralysis. As an operating theatre, the *misa* opened the bodies of participants to

the penetrating gaze of mediums, and offered a space for etiologies of disease that located affliction beyond or outside the body. Mediums often urged participants to see doctors for thorough physicals or medical tests, but they viewed themselves as competent to address the underlying causes of maladies, and to prescribe treatments that made healers of spirit guides, and operating tables of bóvedas. In one typical exchange, Lucumí elder and Spiritist medium Arlene Stevens asked Kadidja Mason if anyone in her family had died from an affliction of the chest. Kadidja named an uncle. Arlene said that she felt a tightness in her own chest connected with him, and stated that he was adamant about Kadidja never smoking. Arlene told her to tie a red cloth to a white one and use both to clean her throat whenever she craved a cigarette, and keep them on her bóveda. Arlene said Kadidja should address the issues that led to her nicotine addiction: 'Pray to start healing that [damaged] process, bring health, happiness and stability into your life.' Smoking was secondary, Arlene said, to the real problem, a 'symptom' of a greater imbalance.⁴¹

The concept of the symptom implicit in Arlene's diagnosis of Kadidja merits further analysis. The chief or presenting complaints – to use the terminology of biomedicine – that brought both Nilaja's longtime godchildren and near-strangers to misas were transformed, in the ritual, from signs of a somatic disorder to indexes of a pre-existing relationship with spirit guides. Ailments were recast as evidence of the spirits' desire for ongoing engagement that could begin as part of a therapeutic regimen, but would need to continue beyond any cure, as part of a religious healing process. Mediums translated descriptions of physical symptoms into the spirit idiom and trained participants in its adoption, sharing the 'rules of thumb' observed by those deemed fluent in expressing themselves through it.⁴² Yet, the identification of a symptom within a misa frequently provided an introduction into the ensemble of religious practices and technologies of the self – altering modes of dress, developing affective bonds with sympathetic entities, deferring to the authority of the elders – that turned the uninitiated into servants of the spirits. In dialogues such as the one related above and in the act of cleaning participants' necks, mediums worked out a religious ethnosymptomology that took anatomical structures as organs of communication with the spirits. Their cleansings healed infirmity less by removing symptoms than by redescribing them in terms common to drums of affliction and central to the practice of Lucumí, Palo and Espiritismo.

Mediums prepared the bodies of participants for further ritualisation by treating them as already implicated in the world of the spirits by virtue of their corporeal and affective suffering. The elders' power to rename illness as a godsend – not an unalloyed blessing, but a welcome sign of the spirits' favour and patronage – was reinforced in interactions that dramatised their jurisdiction over the religious field and their juniors within it. Consider, for example, the diagnostic method used in misas. After paying tribute to the spirits and saying, 'with permission to the mesa', a medium would tell another participant that she saw problems with her legs, bones, liver, stomach, heart or head, and inquire as to whether this perception was correct.⁴³ A brief exchange would ensue, and arrive at a conclusion with the medium's

prescription of a remedial course of action to address the perceived source of the ailment. This dialogical rhetorical strategy achieved not only the assent of the participant chosen as an interlocutor. It also bolstered the confidence of other participants in the mediums' oracular abilities. The verbal exchange appeared to vindicate the forensic approach mediums employed to detect illness and determine remedies, transforming their discourse from merely authoritative to internally persuasive (Lévi-Strauss 1967; Zappen 2004, 12). When a medium received confirmation of an insight, participants said, 'Peace and light to your spirits', articulating the tacit assumption that mediums did not discursively produce knowledge but act as conduits for it and for the spirits' healing power.

Indeed, declarations of ignorance, even in the midst of oracular speech, were common; I often heard, 'That's what your spirits are saying; I don't know.'⁴⁴ Mediums insisted that they were merely vehicles for information, not its source, and that any virtue they had consisted in conveying reliable messages with integrity. Although claiming such an internal partition of voices may seem disingenuous, such statements were construed as epitomising the restraint and humility held out for junior participants to emulate. Most mediums were initiated elders, and the elders sat the closest to the table, with the youngest participants across from it, often on the other side of the room.⁴⁵ The seating arrangement reflected the hierarchical organisation of Ilé Laroye: Theo, Nilaja's first initiated godchild, always sat near her; on the left side of the table was Arlene, usually the person put in charge of food preparation for Lucumí rituals during the period of my ethnographic research.⁴⁶ The arc formed by the seasoned mediums became a stage on which the somatic modes of attention deemed exemplary by the elders were exemplified for the community, with a view towards socialising the unaffiliated or uninitiated into it. It was by watching the elders that participants became aware of ritual competence as the ability to separate and contain the energies associated with different categories of superhuman beings.⁴⁷

Mediums tended to approach the body as the indexical trace of the overlapping relationships in which the person is enmeshed, defining infirmity as a disruption in the field of social relations as the result of others' envy and malice, or one's own immorality.⁴⁸ Although most mediums do not hesitate to recommend visits to physicians, Spiritist practice provincialises biomedicine as a regime of biopower, and parochialises conventional allopathic care as but one form of healing practice among many (Petersen and Bunton 1997). This healing practice is seen both to address present misfortune and future calamity, in the form of accidents. One practitioner, Yomí Yomí, was informed at her first *misa*, 'If you don't get [the orishas called] Warriors, you're going to get killed', and she credited this advice with saving her life when she was involved in a horrific accident three days later.⁴⁹ For her as for others, the *misa* was a theatre of conversion in which a 'symptom' of distress was unveiled as bearing a message, and a medium's discovery of what 'really' ailed her became proof of the spirits' reality, 'Afro-Cuban' religions' validity and the elders' legitimacy.^{50,51} Yomí Yomí put herself on the *misa*'s operating table and discovered her own

vulnerability. She reminded me of a woman who told me that sitting through her first Lucumí divination was like having her midsection unzipped, her entrails laid out on a table and examined, then stuffed back in. ‘But they didn’t fit anymore’, she said.⁵² Such pain was a mark of knowledge, of having learned how much history hurts (Jameson 1981, 88).

Misa as theatre of battle

Bearing in mind that the spirits are commonly believed to have led lives waging war, literally and figuratively, misas were as much theatres of battle as operating theatres. Speaking through the mouths of mediums, spirit guides cast themselves as veterans of quotidian struggles, delivering briefs on the ubiquity of enemies and the importance of constant vigilance. Mediums regarded messages from the spirits as clues, organised during the course of the ritual in such a way that ‘actionable intelligence’ was produced.⁵³ This phrase, with its military origins, is particularly apt because misas offered strategies for prevailing in quotidian skirmishes, defensive phalanx movements that involved the performance of technologies of the self, reception of consecrated objects, and cleansing rituals intended to reduce physical susceptibility to the ravages of agentive beings. The investigations essayed in misas became a form of reconnaissance – a survey of social territory, conducted through dialogue concerning the possible motivations of acquaintances and relations, in advance of more thorough ritual operations. Mediums counselled participants to avoid becoming entangled in petty clashes, and let the spirit guides duel on their behalf instead; accordingly, the objects placed on *bóvedas* and in baths were seen as weapons as well as tools. In misas, mediums also sanctioned pre-emptive offensive actions that, in other contexts, could have been viewed in terms of mystical aggression, especially in retaliation for cases of illness and other difficulties caused by envy, umbrage, or malevolence.

Such lessons may seem to be at odds with those articulated through the idiom of healing, in which a person’s reconciliation of others’ needs and desires with her own appeared to be paramount. In fact, misas did not resolve the tension between the individual and the social, but rather held up a magnifying glass to it, as mediums reminded participants of their responsibilities both to themselves and to distinct collectivities in competition with one another. This tension was brought into sharp relief in misas that were referred to as ‘investigative’ and focused mainly on one or two participants.⁵⁴ In investigative misas, mediums offered assessments of participants’ readiness for combat in the social realm, occasionally alerted them to traps laid by others, and armed them with protective techniques seen as necessary to shield them from harm. Such advice was dispensed with heightened urgency during coronation misas, when the loyalty of a Lucumí initiate-to-be, or *aboku*, was poised to shift from family classified as biological and therefore ‘natural’, to the extended ‘fictive’ kin group of the *ilé*. In these investigative misas, mediums cast the first year of priesthood, or *iyaworaje*, as analogous to a military expedition requiring a comprehensive battle plan, due

to the new initiates' emotional fragility, on the one hand, and great religious power, or *aché*, on the other.

Initiates-to-be were seen as carrying 'emotional baggage' interpreted as aspects of their personalities that could hinder their rebirth as Lucumí priests. In misas, mediums also noted social obstacles to initiation, and the prevalence of cultural biases against Afro-Atlantic religions that ran counter to the moral-ethical imperative to serve the spirits. Mediums directed *aboku* to manage their detractors by developing an arsenal of diversionary tactics and stratagems appropriate to their situations. For instance, before her *ocha*, Ruthie was told in a *misa* that someone in her life wanted to embarrass her for getting initiated and force a confrontation to shame her publicly, although the aggressor himself was not very religious. Ruthie confirmed that she had seen someone fitting the medium's description in her dreams, but had never been able to see the person's face; thus, both her antagonist's motivations and identity were unclear. Ruthie was counselled to let the person come forward and say his piece, but not to dignify his remarks with a response, or be lured into conversation about her behaviour or appearance – for instance, about her new white clothing, head-covering, or necklaces. Such coaching was common in misas, revealing the extent of the hostility mediums themselves had faced after initiation, as members of a priesthood that ordered novices to alter their everyday modes of dress, consumption, and interaction. Because entering the ritual family of *olorishas* tended to slacken bonds with peers and co-workers, all *aboku* had to 'watch where they walk[ed]', in order not to put their livelihoods at risk.

The preference for indirection, subterfuge, and 'economy of force' over frontal attack reflects the tactical exploitation of both space and circumstance that has allowed Lucumí to survive in inhospitable environments. Yet, resistance to *orisha* worship was not limited to the living. Those soon to be initiated might be informed that their own ancestors or spirit guides disapprove. One of the few Anglo-American practitioners to become a part of my research, Yomí Yomí described the opposition that she encountered from a deceased relative before her initiation:

When I was in my coronation *misa*, they said, 'A Catholic spirit with you doesn't want you to do this'. It was the nun ... she's a family member, she didn't want me to do it. And in my *itá* [post-initiatory divination session], they said there was a certain [sign] that said you have to remain in your religion, so I still have to go to church once in a while ... I like going to church ... Especially if you're depressed. It'll clean you.⁵⁵

Several points are worth noting. The first is that a message given in a *misa* is viewed as foreshadowing an *odu*, or divinatory sign, underscoring the ideological cooperation between Spiritism and Lucumí in the accounts told by initiates. Second, Yomí Yomí's anecdote indicates that while misas have provided an opportunity for the past to acquire a voice, practitioners have been prodded towards a selective appropriation of their histories, in a manner consonant with their own ethical orientations and aesthetic sensibilities. Rather than dividing a person's loyalties, the propitiation of spirit guides and *orishas* was understood to

furnish practitioners with the religious protection required for sustained ritual labour in ocha- and Palo-centric contexts.

Third, this story forms part of a narrative genre that has featured spirit guides roused into oracular action, and more concrete manifestation, by virtue of a practitioner's decision to pursue initiation. It also sheds light on the relationship between practitioners and their respective ethnic and racial histories, bearing in mind the Euro-Christian dominance of the politico-cultural and religious fields. In some cases, spirit guides of European descent betrayed the prejudices of their former milieus, fighting the initiation of their benefactors tooth and nail. Members of Ilé Laroye said that, instead of rejecting these obstinate spirits, it was necessary to find ingenious means of accommodating them. Cast in the mould of a strict parochial school teacher rather than a cloistered mystic, Yomí Yomí's nun voiced concerns that her other relatives might have expressed, if they had not been estranged or deceased. By not only enjoying the sensory pleasures to be derived from the incense, flowers, and altars of the local Catholic Mass, but also photographing the churches she visited around the world, Yomí Yomí found a way to depart from her religious upbringing without losing touch with her past. She handled her Catholic family the way other initiates came to terms with the Protestant ministers and 'Bible-thumper[s]' in their lineages: by paying tribute yet continuing to wage semiotic guerrilla warfare, poaching on enemy territory, and resisting the religious identity that her family and local community sought to impose on her (de Certeau 1984; Pérez 2011b).

Occasionally, spirits 'passing' through the bodies of mediums accost and joust lustily with each other over whose therapeutic prowess, magical deterrents, and vult sorcery are the most formidable (Garoutte and Wambaugh 2007). This phenomenon is gendered, for – whether identified as male or female – such pugnacious spirits tend to occupy a 'macho' stance associated with the 'exaggerated masculine aesthetics' of Palo Monte, a tradition at least nominally exclusive of homosexual men (Ochoa 2010, 10). Most of the elders in Ilé Laroye had been initiated into Palo Monte prior to their ordinations into Lucumí, and regarded the dead either born in Central Africa or active in Palo during their lifetimes as particularly redoubtable spirit guides. A number of Palo songs sung in misas cite the tradition's main Kongo-inspired consecrated object, called a 'nganga', and contain *puyas*, or ritualised insults, that egg Congo spirits on to materialise and prove their existence. These songs vouch for the virtue, defiance and industry of adepts, even after death, and conform to the bellicose ethos of the Palo tradition as a whole; one *mambo* sets to music the quintessentially confrontational Palo phrase, 'Why do you call me, if you don't know me?' (*¿Por qué tú me llamas, si tú no me conoces?*).⁵⁶ Congo and other guides express their rivalry by trading barbs over the potency of their medicines, illustrating the presupposition that struggle, and the need for healing, continues even beyond the grave (Matory 2007).

Indeed, the theatre of battle and operating theatre not only intersect as genres of performance, but cross-pollinate ideologically to such a degree that practitioners come to re-envision the self as the effect of repeated feint and

armament. To be healed within the context of the *misa* is to be disarticulated, reconstituted, and armored, confident that the spirits are fighting on one's behalf. Espirito Santo (2010a) writes of the 'spiritist immunology' elaborated by mediums and the attitude towards *misas* as 'prophylactic' in contemporary Cuba; the cogency of Espirito Santo's analysis is due precisely to the fact that Spiritism and modern medical science have both embraced martial 'root metaphors' that cast illness as a declaration of war, suffering as an assault, and treatment as an onslaught, complete with ammunition, carnage, and collateral damage (Huglen and Clark 2005). The histories of the modern theatre of war and operating theatre are closely intertwined, with combat zones serving as some of the first theatres of surgical operation, and with fallen soldiers harvested from the former supplying cadavers for them, along with condemned criminals (Das 2005). To the extent that the imagery of conflict has become hegemonic in the Afro-Atlantic world with reference to disease and chronic disorders, its discursive production in secular contexts tends to reinforce the claims made in *misas* concerning the importance of fortifying and cleansing the body. To come to adopt the criteria for health, credentials for healers, and therapeutic regime advocated within Espiritismo, however, requires what one might call a sentimental education.

This is where the *misa* becomes a theatre of conversion, if we understand the term to denote both reciprocal transformation and, more conventionally, a shift in religious affiliation. To return to the definition of 'liturgies' as 'staged performances' concerning 'the rules of interaction between humans and superhuman powers', *misas* can be seen to demonstrate the conditions under which human and divine agents may not only communicate with but also transfigure one another. In *misas*, mediums do not mime the movements of their guides as a way of simply appropriating their energies; practitioners insist that the spirits must recognise themselves in their supplicants' mimicry to materialise in their midst. Thus, according to elders, *misas* furnish a space less for participants to produce the presence of their spirits than for the guides to bring their mediums into being through the amplification of their clairvoyance and related qualities. *Misas* convey these principles of engagement with the spirits, as well as the *raison d'être* for their exchanges with human beings; to wit, guides enter into benevolent rapport (referred to as 'charity') with participants in order to right wrongs they committed in their past lives on earth and absolve themselves of offences that have impeded their 'evolution' into higher forms of existence. *Misas* assist practitioners in adopting such motives and procedures for interaction within a liturgical structure that, even at its least dramatic, features change as both method and objective, means and end.

Concluding reflections

In the foregoing, I made the case that *misas* prepared participants for deeper involvement in Afro-Cuban religions by fitting them with the hermeneutical lenses and sensori-motor dispositions of Lucumí practitioners. I maintained that *misas*, while neither catechetical nor evangelical, have served to activate concatenating

interpellative processes and have thereby engendered a distinctive form of religious subjectivity, characterised by submission to different categories of spirits, as well as their human representatives. I prioritised the impact of mediums' pedagogical methods in turning misas into theatres of conversion; for instance, I demonstrated that their interpretation of both phenomenal events and physical states as messages from tutelary spirits succeeded in convincing misa participants of their presence at the level of everyday somatic experience, and to conceive of themselves as engaged in combat that resembles the battles fought by their spirit guides. In addition, I theorised that misas shifted from operating theatres to theatres of war in response to the problems posed by participants' desires not only to obtain superhuman assistance in achieving corporeal well-being and mend interpersonal relationships, but also to negotiate their estrangement from individuals and corporate bodies outside the religious community. Mediums addressed these concerns, I observed, by switching nimbly between the idioms of healing and self-defence.

Of course, the religious self-development that occurs in misas does not inhere solely in the training of bodies to incorporate the spirits – as distinct as possession performances in Espiritismo, Lucumí and Palo Monte tend to be – although the tutoring of sensori-motor dispositions may be seen as foundational for participants' competent incursion into the domains of these traditions as initiates. Nor are misas merely a mechanism for religious recruitment, even if misas are many practitioners' first experiences of regularly attending rituals within a house of ocha. It should be underscored that self-development in Lucumí and Palo Monte is understood as an expansion of 'moral potentialities' accomplished in no small part through the intervention of spirit guides (Asad 2003, 92). The modes of religious becoming practitioners go on to achieve in other arenas are tied to those attained through the disciplines of Espiritismo and the 'care of the self' required by their maintenance of household bóvedas and other rituals (Foucault 2005). The totalising process of religious self-development continues far beyond these ritual contexts. For instance, some practitioners (often women and gay men) acquire mastery in creating meals for the spirits from the sacrifices offered to them and specialise in preparing their animals for food (Pérez 2011a), while others obtain proficiency in cleaning their godparents' ilés; constructing altars; conducting divinations; dressing and eating in accordance with ritual prescriptions and proscriptions; dancing, singing, or drumming.

In closing, it may be profitable to reflect on the hierarchical dimension of ritual as staged performance, and the capacity of seasoned actors to elicit sentiments of affinity for themselves and affiliation to the communities they have led. I contended that the hermeneutic of sympathy to be internalised in misas has acted both to aver the spirits' reality and anchor senior mediums' authority in the perceived authenticity of oracular speech, ultimately broadening the reach of both into the space of participants' private homes. I suggested that misas have set in motion not only an *imitatio* of the spirit guides, but also emulation of the mediums. Indeed, it became evident in my research that sympathising with respected elders – in the sense of learning to anticipate their desires – was the starting point for sympathy

with the spirits. The ethnographic data on Spiritist ceremonies encourages the view that, by exhibiting mastery of different performative registers, Lucumí elders accumulated cultural and religious capital in misas that could be transferred into the realm of orisha worship, resulting in heightened demand for their ritual expertise in orisha-centred contexts. Future research would do well to investigate Spiritist pedagogy in connection with the Lucumí tradition along lines complementary to those laid out here, and to examine the assumption of eldership within Afro-Diasporic initiatory communities, especially behind the liturgical scenes.

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Notes

1. Spirit guides are regarded as ontologically distinct from orishas; spirit guides are thought to have once lived on earth as human persons, while orishas are, for the most part, considered to be transcendent beings whose sacred energies were present at the beginning of time, and contributed in some way to the creation of the phenomenal world. The protocols, languages and metaphors for misas blancas and most Lucumí rituals are quite different – the latter largely operating according to the idiom of ‘feeding’ and misas, that of ‘cleansing’. The discourse of ritual purity in Espiritismo could fruitfully be compared with that of Brazilian Candomblé; see Matory (2001). During the period of my ethnographic research in Ilé Laroye, between 2005 and 2009, personal ancestors, called *égun*, were sometimes thought to convey their wishes to descendants during misas, but most were propitiated separately, in rituals that were of a more pronounced ocha-centric character. These rites involved singing in the liturgical language of Lucumí (derived in part from Yorùbá, and almost entirely absent from misas); displays, or *plazas*, of traditional Afro-Cuban dishes (including Cuba's national stew, *ajiaco*), and Yorùbá foods in multiples of nine, indexing the orisha Oya's relationship with the dead; and the performance of sacrificial offerings.
2. Until very recently, Espiritismo has been given short shrift in the social sciences, apart from a spate of articles and volumes in the late 1970s and 1980s, evaluating the potential of attendance at Puerto Rican Spiritist centres as a therapeutic alternative to Western biomedicine. Representative works include Morales-Dorta (1976) and Harwood (1977). Texts focused on female mediumship include Nuñez Molina (1987), Koss-Chioino (1992), Prorok (2000), Romberg (2003), Singer and García (1989), Pérez y Mena (1991), and Schmidt (2009). In the literature on Lucumí, Spiritist practice has remained a peripheral concern, partly because it has appeared to promise little in the way of African ‘retentions’ or ‘survivals’, and research on Afro-Diasporic religions has tended to be conducted with a view towards substantiating the ‘authentic pasts’ of practitioners (Scott 1991).

3. All ethnographic references to Ilé Laroye are based on four years of IRB-approved fieldwork, 2005–2009. I have changed the name of this community and of all my interlocutors in it for reasons of confidentiality.
4. As Foucault (1985, 28) writes, ‘there can be no specific moral action that does not refer to a unified moral conduct; no moral conduct that does not call for the forming of oneself as an ethical subject; and no forming of the ethical subject without “modes of subjectivation” and an “ascetics” or “practices of the self” that support them’.
5. For uses of this concept, see Hodder (1993) and Edgerton and Pérez de Lara (2001). An overview of the pedagogical impact of religious theatre may be found in Filippi (2005). On the cultural conventions that govern operating theatres, see Goffman (1961). For the influence of religious architecture and pageantry on local populations, see Lara (2004).
6. Critiques of this approach are diverse; among the most cogent may be found in Asad (1996), Bado-Fralick (2005), Denzin (2003), and Taylor (2003). For more fully fleshed out distinctions between ritual and theatre, see Schechner (1994). On the concept of drama, see Geertz (1983) and Leiris (1958).
7. A corrective may partly be found in Romberg (2009), which may be distinguished from the present work by noting that Romberg does not dwell on the pedagogical aspects of ritual practice, the relationship between Spiritism and Lucumí, theatrical spaces that are not of a dramatic nature, or religious transformation as such.
8. Optical perception is the form of visibility implicated in both the scopophilic male gaze and mechanisms of panoptical surveillance outside and within the self. See Mulvey (1975) and Foucault (1977).
9. Since religious subjects are not constituted solely through language, however, I present conversion with reference to Foucauldian ‘modes of subjectivation’ and the ‘techniques of the self that undergird them.’
10. Although, according to the elders of Ilé Laroye, everyone has spirits to guide them, not everyone is meant to ‘work with’ them, or contact them for the purpose of developing mediumistic faculties; sometimes initiates are forbidden from attending misas and practicing Spiritism in their itás. These people seemed to be in the minority, however.
11. The man who changed his name to that of a previous incarnation could not have envisioned the significance his rituals would come to have for devotees of Lucumí, particularly in conjunction with spirit possession. Kardec did not view the trances experienced by mediums in white masses as spirit possession per se (Hess 1991, 79). To denote the removal of a disruptive spirit from an individual, Kardec employed the term ‘disobsession’ rather than ‘exorcism’, because he viewed the problem in terms of ‘spirit obsession, or the ability of certain perturbing or earthbound spirits to influence the thoughts and health of the incarnate “obsessed”’ (Hess 1991, 21). This notion of obsession articulates well with the Yorùbá concept of wayward, mischievous spirits, rather than the Christian one of Satan and devils.
12. Mediums locate spirit guides’ desire to assist the living in the past lives of the guides themselves; by rendering a service to those for whom they feel sympathy, spirit guides are thought to achieve ‘enlightenment’ and peace. They are often perceived as having left some matters unresolved at their deaths, and motivated by a need to make up for some episode in their checkered pasts.
13. Academic references to Brazilian Spiritism are too numerous to cite here.
14. It was covered by *The Chicago Tribune* on 6 November, 2005.
15. The size of the Lucumí social scene is such, however, that if one has left a religious house in bad odour, it is difficult to avoid running into former godparents and godsiblings at ceremonies around the city.

16. Passing, or incorporating the spirits, was described by the mediums as a cleansing in itself.
17. This was the same pose to be assumed when undergoing a rogation of the head, an orisha-centred ceremony intended to impart the coolness and clarity associated with Obatalá through the application of 'white' substances to the crown – where the orishas are ritually 'seated' in initiation – and cardinal points: throat, nape, palms, inner elbows, feet between the first and second toes. Rogations usually lasted less than twenty minutes, however, while misas could go on for two hours, and the length of the exercise made a discipline of it, since most participants sat on hard folding chairs and benches.
18. Personal communication, 12 May, 2006. For the concept of 'God-consciousness', see Schleiermacher (1999).
19. See Albanese (2007).
20. See Roberts (1972).
21. It was not uncommon, after this song, for participants to pray a round of Our Father's and Hail Mary's.
22. 22 January, 2006.
23. The definition of sympathetic magic as operating by means of imitation, on the one hand, and contact, on the other, is apposite here.
24. This would include dancing alone or singing to oneself within one's home.
25. The association of West African spirit possession with inauthentic performance can be traced to one of the first accounts of it. See Bosman (1705) and Johnson (2011).
26. Her familiarity with cinematic conventions, particularly in musicals, informed her sense of the fantastic, and provided a vivid contrast with the 'authenticity' and 'realness' of ritual practice.
27. For the use of 'hexis' in this context, see Bourdieu (1984, 192–93).
28. Personal communication, 18 December, 2005. See Agnew (2012) for a brief comparison of the psychoanalytic consultation to both a theatre of battle and operating theatre.
29. While, as I will go on to elaborate, all misas are 'investigative', a misa designated as such is conducted mainly for the benefit of one individual in particular. In Ilé Laroye, the person to whom a misa was dedicated sat on a chair in the middle of the circle with a lit candle on the floor under her chair. Before the misa, she was urged to list as many ancestors as she could recall on a piece of paper so that they could be called out at the beginning of the ceremony, and participants were instructed to focus their mediumship on the individual in their midst. Most of the messages were viewed as somehow relating to her.
30. Mediums approached the spirits' symbols as idiosyncratic, asserting that the basis for deciphering them was not familiarity with symbolism in general, but with the signs favoured by certain spirits in manifesting themselves to practitioners. Nilaja's favourite example of a symbol widely used yet without a universal meaning was that of the serpent: for someone with a mortal fear of snakes, dreaming of a snake shedding its skin could portend danger, while a person with pleasant memories of a childhood pet boa constrictor might interpret the same dream as a sign of renewal and regeneration.
31. By contrast, in drum rituals, those mounted by spirits stared out from wide-open eyes that seemed lit from within. Nilaja has said that her more dominant spirit is male, but that he poses greater difficulty for her to let him 'come through'.
32. For more on verbal registers, see Wirtz (2005) and Kearney (1977).
33. The aftereffects of 'passing' seemed to me to be almost identical, if less severe, than those shown after possession by an nfumbi or an orisha.
34. *Espirito Santo* (2010b) approaches the objects used in Spiritist rituals from a different theoretical angle.

35. The use and placement of this basin has intriguing parallels to the use of water-filled bowls and barrels in the antebellum period by North American slaves during worship services in their cabins, to 'catch' the sound of singing and dancing. This practice was reported in the recollections of the formerly enslaved.
36. These ablutions shared some similarities with *ebó*, or sacrifices for the orishas, with common ingredients, including eggs and *efún*, that contributed to the association of everyday substances with religious qualities, transforming them into artifacts that were 'agentive and constitutive of relationships' (Kendall 2008, 165). Nodal and Ramos (2005) provide a taxonomy of *ebó*.
37. Most practitioners are advised to put seven glasses on a *bóveda*, unless the person is a child of Oyá, whose relationship to the dead and the number nine will usually indicate the placement of nine glasses of water.
38. 22 September, 2006. Illumination of a *bóveda* could be accomplished by candles or lamps, and the water in these glasses was to be clear, in order to encourage the presence of elevated spirits. As Nilaja once said, regarding the use of artificial light on *bóvedas*, 'We are training the spirits to work with Edison's discovery'.
39. In Cuba, dolls commemorating deceased family members and cherished spirit guides have been passed down through the generations, offered food and beverages, and had their clothing changed regularly.
40. 23 September, 2006.
41. 28 October, 2005. This anecdote also illustrates that a substance viewed as sacred in one context – tobacco – can be a source of illness if used in another. The same could be said for liquor.
42. This is not to say that mediums did not offer up remedies intended to alleviate pain and promote well-being; indeed, the elders of Ilé Laroye prided themselves on being conversant with the properties of many herbs and other natural extracts shown in recent medical studies to be efficacious. Mediums often hewed to conventional wisdom in determining the basis for a condition, as when abdominal pain was cited as the somaticisation of stress, and issued directives that appeared straightforward, practical, and mundane.
43. Just as saying 'permission to the mesa' was the convention that everyone except incorporated spirits used – 'the mesa' serving as a synecdoche for those spirit guides present on it – 'peace and light to your spirits' was said to anyone recognised as having received a message from their guides for someone else. Although even those who had never attended a *misa* were encouraged to speak, it was more common for initiated elders regarded as mediums to do so.
44. Romberg (2009, 10) records a similar formulation: "'It's not me", [mediums] often clarify "It's the spirits telling me to tell you"".
45. I served as *amanuensis* for over a dozen *misas*.
46. Visiting mediums were seated as close to the table as possible without displacing regular senior attendees.
47. See Brown McCarthy (1987).
48. Avila (1999) examines the colonial Spanish debt to contemporary concepts of the evil eye, hexes, and illness due to sinful behaviour that are prevalent in the Americas.
49. Personal communication, 13 August, 2007.
50. While there are accounts of oracular pronouncements not coming true as it were, their failure to predict the future seldom calls the truth value of the divinatory operation itself into question.
51. In characterising the '*pruebas*', or confirmations, that *Lucumí* initiates understand themselves to receive, Holbraad (2008, 104) writes, '[They] exist by virtue of being implicated in further acts of transformation, and that is what makes *pruebas* not only

- logically sensible but also pragmatically necessary'. Holbraad calls these types of 'inventive definitions', or ontological redefinitions of phenomena, 'infinitions'.
52. She said that everything in the reading happened within four days. Personal communication, 15–16 April, 2005.
 53. I have been unable to find the origin of this phrase; influential in its use appear to be Kahaner (1997) and Iwicki (2004).
 54. In the type of investigative *misa* called a coronation, a person about to be initiated into *Lucumí* was 'crowned' with his or her main spirit guide. During this sort of *misa*, a glass of water was placed at the same spot on the head that was to be 'sealed' with the *aché* of her titular *orisha* during initiation.
 55. Personal communication, 13 August, 2007.
 56. As Matory (2007, 407) writes, 'The Congo spirits are usually imagined or depicted as petroleum-black slaves – whether as raggedly dressed and muscular field hands or as elderly, white-clad and whitehaired house servants'.

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