

MAKING DREAMS  
SPIRITS, VISION AND THE ONTOLOGICAL  
EFFECTS OF DREAM KNOWLEDGE  
IN CUBAN *ESPIRITISMO*

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ABSTRACT

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In this paper the significance of dreaming and dream communication in Cuba is explored, principally from the point of view of mediums in the Afro-Cuban religious practice of *espiritismo* in Havana. I suggest that dreams are both continuous with, and epitomize, the experience of mediumship and prophecy, where 'vision' is a fundamental trope, and are thus important sources of insight and extended spiritual perspective. In a cosmos where knowledge is both indicative and generative of a spiritual flow, and where its retention on the part of mediums has physical consequences, salient images and information received through dreams act as catalysts for the development of spirit mediumship, signaling the inherent porosity of the body as well as the potential mobility of an individual's spirit. I also propose that dream knowledge be conceptualized ontologically; specifically, as possessing the agency to produce certain effects once it is formulated into language. This perspective undercuts purely representationalist views of language, as well as placing the communicative act in an essential cosmological light.

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Keywords: dreams, Afro-Cuban religion, spirit mediumship, knowledge, agency, ontological effects, communication

*Introduction: spirits in dreams and dreams of spirits<sup>1</sup>*

For many of the inhabitants of the city of Havana, dreaming can be a precious source of information, vision and prophecy. Dreams are often seen to be 'received', not just perceived or experienced, where their appearance at this or that other time is deemed necessary and non-coincidental. It is not unusual for Habaneros to discuss their dreams at length with others, friends or family, unpicking and exploring their meaning in ways that betray fundamental everyday concerns with economic, physical, social and spiritual wellbeing. As I will try to show, in dreams these domains of reality coalesce and become mutually specifiable via the agency of the spirits who punctuate the normal flow of life with special insight and necessary knowledge. While the dream may sometimes be regarded as a 'passive' event, if acted on it can become infused with potentially very real effects. In this paper, I am interested in understanding the nature of those effects and in theorizing them adequately.

If we were to pursue the most obvious or direct implication of dreams for the everyday, then the city's widely popular underground gambling system, known as *la bolita*, would be a good example of how symbols and images experienced in dreams can be informative and even lucrative (see Holbraad 2005). Here, dreams link up with 'effects' in the most unapologetic of manners. The weight and significance that many ordinary Cubans—especially religiously inclined persons—attribute to daily signs, events, premonitions, special dates and, particularly, dream content, become remarkably salient in determining which numbers people choose to play and when. In what has become a powerfully idiosyncratic and diffused illicit betting system, every number from 1 to 100 is associated with a 'thing'—be it an animal, a profession, an object, a kind of person, a spirit or deity, or an aspect of nature. While each neighborhood's local bet collectors have the odds carefully worked out, often providing their customers with clever riddles with which to arrive at each week's favorable numbers, it is paradoxically in the truth-bearing power of cryptic or symbolic imagery, thought to be placed in dreams by guardian spirits, saints and other entities, that most gamblers trust. "It was the 17<sup>th</sup> of November last year", says Alberto, a friend and occasional gambler, "and I dream with an old girlfriend of mine who had gone to the United States. I dreamt she was returning to Cuba—'foreign country' (*país lejano*), I thought: number 42. I will play the 42. And then I reasoned—if it is the spirit (*muerto*) who is giving me this number then I'll play the number 8—*muerto*—so I did. I won 870 pesos that time", as indeed he had at least on one other occasion he recalled:

I was worried about my grandfather's birthday (who was turning 100 years of age). I wanted to have a celebration for him but I had no money with which to throw a party. So I asked whatever it is that exists out there to help me out. I fell asleep, and I dreamt about two European women, as white as you. In the dream I knew these white women weren't from Cuba! They call me over. "Come here", one of them said to me, and when I go, she says "Elegguá likes it when you give him flowers". I was surprised—how did this white European girl know about Elegguá?<sup>2</sup> I ask her which hotel she was at, and she says "up here, third floor, eighth door". And before waking I see a table, and on it there's a glass of water. So I grab it and I drink it all to the last drop, and then I wake up. As soon as I did I grabbed a pencil and paper and I told myself: a white woman who tells me Elegguá likes flowers. Flowers—54, Elegguá—3, woman—23, and finally, water—89. I didn't have much money to put down, but when the numbers 54 and 89 did come up and I won the money the first thing I did was buy flowers for Elegguá.

Money, then, is a much-anticipated effect of such dreams.

But we can track the idea that in Cuba dreaming has 'effects' even further, and the clue is in the above citations. If in every society where dreams figure prominently there can be said to exist a dream theory or theories (Lohmann 2007), then, like in most other such societies, in Havana both the act of dreaming and the dream itself are indissolubly linked to notions of personhood, cosmos, knowledge and even destiny. The dream underscores some of Cuban society's most basic ontological premises. A preoccupation with prophetic dream visions, such as those evidenced in *bolita* stories, is suggestive of more than a will to relieve economic difficulties by coming into easy cash. Such examples instead point to the significance of the body as a source, recipient and generator of knowledge for many Cubans, and more importantly, to the existence of a universe of entities who can enter into knowledge relations with their living counterparts, guide certain states of affairs, be coerced into intervening, heal and even allow the latter to 'see' what needs to be known at the right

time. In Cuba, both in religious realms and beyond, the dream is conceived as one of the main forms of spiritual rendezvous: along with states of pure ‘communion’ such as possession, in dreams cosmology is crystallized and rendered visible for the good of the mundane, and the result is knowledge. That many people ‘try’ to dream lottery numbers or solutions to other misgivings is merely the corollary of a latent commitment to something greater than the dream itself: a world of metaphysical beings that transcends one and yet is made real exactly through such problematics.

Florencia, a professor at the University of Havana, whose deceased childhood friend Maria appears in her dreams (and also causes certain dreams) to warn her of the perils of her competitive social, professional and religious environment, tells me the following:

We were always together when we were children, the three of us: there was Maria, Ana and I. Inseparable, until she died. So one fine day I start to dream with her, but they were more than dreams, they were revelations. Once she told me not to consume anything dark in anyone’s house, like coffee or rice and beans [in case someone places witchcraft substances inside], for look what had happened to her! And then she presents me with another dream. I was working at a school at that time, and in the dream she presents me with Ana, my other friend, and with the secretary of the school we were at—Yenny. Both of them were gesticulating, flustered. I told Maria’s mother about the dream and she told me—“all of this means she’s with you, she protects you, but don’t tell Ana because she might be jealous”. A month goes by and a refrigerator arrives at the school [as an incentive prize for the workers]. I claim it because I was *vanguardia* [militant]—I was the secretary of the Juventud [communist youth party]. But so does Ana. And when she understood that they were going to give the fridge to me and not her, she completely turned on me. She went to Yenny to tell her that I’d missed my *guardia* [volunteer duty], and everything got very nasty...all because of a refrigerator! That was my first real proof [from Maria].

A few years later, Florencia began to dream with her dead husband, the father of her smallest child, without whose practical advice and support during her dream encounters she would have found life very difficult, especially during her Ph.D. years. Illnesses, love quarrels, professional crises: his presence, woven into the fabric of her dream imageries, allowed her to foresee, circumvent and resolve. As a result Florencia began to contemplate the idea of ‘developing’ (*desarrollar*) in the religious field *herself*, especially as she saw her dreams becoming increasingly correspondent with her unfolding external circumstances. “I was beginning to think that something existed”, she says: after what seemed like a lifetime of atheism, “I was seeing things”. As a first-order ‘effect’, this conversion to spiritual awareness, to *vision*, so to speak, was a powerful turn in Florencia’s life, initiating, among other things, what would become her religious path as a teacher of Kardecist theology (Kardec was the founder of European spiritism).

Among practitioners of Afro-Cuban religious cults, especially the spirit mediums (*espiritistas*) with which this paper will concern itself, ‘to dream’ is to gain access to an extra domain of knowledge, one in which realities and potentialities (or rather, the potentialities of the real) are revealed to those with sensitivity, lucidity and spiritual development. In as much as to ‘have vision’ (*tener visión*) is seen as constitutive of the natural talent of Cuban *espiritistas* and their spirits—they are ‘seers’ par excellence—to have clarity (*claridad*) in dreams is in a sense a logical extension of such a constitution, so much so that many mediums claim ‘to dream’ as a means of achieving clairvoyance, or even to be ‘dreaming mediums’ in their own right, a category of mediumship on par with ‘trance mediumship’, for instance. Vision here is a gift—the gift of ‘seeing’, both innate (given by God) and

educated into existence: more specifically, the gift of seeing things as they really are or as they will or can be. In my view mediums express in singular ways what seems at the same time to be a diffused Cuban preoccupation not just with the dream as a space of interaction with others or othernesses, in particular with spiritual agencies, but of 'seeing to believe'. Indeed, if a 'Cuban' theory of dreams could be sketched out as a general or representative 'thing', then it should at the very least start by acknowledging the deeply rooted 'alertness', for lack of a better term, that most Cubans have of the dead, their dead's history and their place among the living, articulated in its plainest form in practices of cultivating, communicating with and worshipping the quintessential 'other'—the *muertos*—whose task is precisely one of awakening vision.

My preoccupation is two-fold in this paper. First, I will seek an analysis of dreams that locates them within the fluid and shared cosmology of those who animate and activate the dead on a daily basis—the spirit mediums—whose 'vision' is indispensable for the proper functioning of a broader Afro-Cuban religious cosmos. If the dream can be conceptualized as a special state of 'receptivity' in which the borders of ordinary and extraordinary experience dissolve and the person can become contiguous with what I will call 'otherness', then it is imperative that we understand what this receptivity implies and what effects it is seen to produce, where *espiritistas* play a central role in creating and sustaining this imaginary. The dream's importance to the discovery and growth of the religious self, its relationship to other experiential modes such as possession, and its positioning in the cosmic flow of knowledge in which mediums theorize their mission as communicators, all figure in such an ethnographic description. In Cuba, knowledge from the spirit world becomes available in order to be known: it is always of a necessary sort, and dreaming is a means of accessing this necessity in ways that are predominantly visual—that are there to be 'seen', and subsequently materialized.

Second, I will attempt to go one step further and suggest that a more interesting conceptualization of the 'effect' of dreams may be possible, namely, one that points to the *agency* of dream knowledge and the words that materialize it through the communicative act. Among *espiritistas* knowledge that emerges from dreams is not simply anchored to propositional questions of 'knowing'. Knowing has consequences that go beyond its internalization as 'information'. Instead, knowledge can become a force that produces changes in the world once it has been materialized, particularly once it has been formulated through language and explicitly related to the thing or person it refers to in the world. Communication, as I will show, is a fundamentally transformative and ontological act, not just an expressive one. The story of Milagros, a middle-aged dreaming medium who must 'make dreams' (communicate them) in order to 'cut' their effect, will serve to highlight such observations, as well as point to the need for alternative theorizations. Milagros does not just express her dream—her expressive act is an essentially creative one that brings into existence something altogether new in the world, with corresponding effects. In consonance with Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell's main argument in their 'Introduction' to *Thinking Through Things* (2007), I will propose that knowledge here be approached in an ontological rather than epistemological frame of understanding, where going back to 'things in themselves', meaning holding interpretation at bay in favor of collapsing the experience/analysis divide, may become necessary for the elucidation of the kinds of agencies operative in and unleashed by Cuban dreams. Conception, in their line of argument, is a form of

disclosure—that is, of ‘vision’—in as much as seeing is a form of creating (and vice versa). To put it in other words, what the anthropology of Cuban dreams may need is an approach that does not neutralize alterity (see Viveiros de Castro 2003) by locating the ‘reality’ of dreams inside a subject’s mind, but that is relational: that is, that allows dreams, spirits, people and words to fully be subjects of their relations, rather than just objects on the one hand and subjects on the other. Favoring ‘ontology’ over ‘epistemology’ here means positing a distinction between them, at least analytically, while nevertheless maintaining that one is the corollary of the other. In my view, a focus on the former rather than the latter can help undercut the circularity of the assumption that we live in a single world or *reality*, which is understood and ‘represented’ in more or less cogent ways by those we study. While the task of anthropology has been historically set as an *epistemological* one, where ‘difference’ is often explained via some form of ‘sameness’ (see Argyrou 2002), and therefore ultimately annihilated, a shift in emphasis towards *ontology* brings into question the need to recognize *what* exists for a given set of persons, and the forms of relating, being and seeing that it engenders, rather than what they *think* exists, which is a matter of ‘belief’ and thus, representation.

*Mediumship, movement and the place of dreams*

Late night spirit visitations are not uncommon in many places in the world. Anthropologists since Tylor have documented their informants’ claims to meet and be met by ‘otherworldly’ beings in their sleep (see, for example, Descola 1989; Hollan 1995). Further, very often dreaming life is subject to the same kind of rules of interpretation as waking life (Carrithers 1982), where dream images are experienced in just as ‘real’ a manner as any other aspect of ‘objective’ experience. In a paper on Yukaghir hunter dreams in Siberia, Willerslev critiques the basic assumption of representationalist views of knowledge which is that people form ‘mental models’ through language and that these determine how they perceive and engage with the world ‘out there’—an assumption commensurate with notions such as “intellectual culture” (Krupnik and Vakhtin 1997, “Indigenous Knowledge in Modern Culture”: 238, quoted in Willerslev 2004: 398), he says. For Willerslev, it is the other way around—it is engagement and ‘dwelling’ that inform cognition, where dreaming is just as being-in-the-world as any other physical state, “sharing basic cognitive structures and processes with waking life” (2004: 413). And, he argues, if we can say that processes of concept formation in dreams and in waking life are equally active, then “we will no longer be able to hold that conceptions of animals, trees and mountains are more real and basic than are those of spiritual beings” (2004: 413). Willerslev’s interest is in spirit-concept formation in the absence of descriptive language for spirits, and he posits the dream experience as essential to such a fact. Unlike Freud, for whom mind was distinct from the world, and thus for whom dreams belonged to the realm of the unconscious (while ultimately originating in experience, needless to say), for the Yukaghir elk hunters “the world of dreams and that of waking life are two sides of the same reality, which together constitute *one world*” (2004: 410), where mind is continuous with world in whichever state of engagement a person finds herself.

These observations are very relevant as a starting point for the next sections: firstly, because in Cuba dreams are also afforded continuity with reality and knowledge, not excluded from it. And secondly, because similarly to Yykaghir dreaming where spirits become explicitly manifest—from an initial state of transparency—when their presence is in some way revealing of something which needs to be known (made salient), in Cuba too such manifestations are imminently linked to earthly states of affairs. One dreams ‘because’, not ‘just because’. Further, as perspectives of sorts, spirits exist in people’s lives to extend their capacities to ‘see’ but also to ‘be’ and ‘do’—they are avenues for action of a normally very mundane type. Dreams are opportunities for both perspective and doing: two sides of the same coin of a cosmos (of people and spirits) that never ceases to move and in turn solicit movement and adaptation.

In what follows I will attempt to unpick these notions from the point of view of Cuban spiritists, who act as activators for this cosmology and the necessity of its movement, particularly through communication.

Contemporary Cuban *espiritismo* draws from a number of simultaneously discrepant and commensurate traditions (see Arguelles Mederos & Hodge Limonta 1991; Bermudez 1967; Martinez & Sablón 2000; Millet 1996). The founding father of modern spiritism, Allan Kardec, left behind a voluminous doctrine based on what he claimed were the results of extensive interviews with enlightened spirits, conducted meticulously through various mediums of high society in mid-nineteenth century France.<sup>3</sup> Kardec’s spiritism was deeply controversial and appealing, while at the same time continuous with Christian faith and morality. It was immediately adopted by the liberal and educated middle-classes in Cuba (Brandon 1997: 86) as a *scientific*, even secular, religion. But it was not long before spiritist practices were absorbed by and molded into existing popular religious practices. Among a population already familiar with the agency of the dead (Castellanos & Castellanos 1992: 192), this new methodology of spirit communication acquired a healing and instrumental flavor, where the *muertos* and spirit guides became as Cuban as Cubans themselves (Brandon 1997: 87), a far cry from Kardec’s world of table turnings, séances and messages from the likes of Plato and St. Augustine.

The various existing ‘branches’ of spiritism reflect this deeply eclectic history, whose strands are as African as they are creole and colonialist: *espiritismo de cordón*, practiced mostly in oriental provinces of Cuba (see García Molina et al. 1998), melds Cuban indigenous with European and Catholic lines of religious tradition; *espiritismo científico*, upholds the late nineteenth-century view of spiritism as science, philosophy and morality, and cultivates an ethic of study and hermetic incorporation rites; and *espiritismo cruzado*, the most widely diffused and popular form of spiritist practice, is thought to be ‘crossed’, syncretic, ‘Cuban’—adapting both to the needs of the spirits it incorporates and to those of practitioners of other Afro-Cuban religions such as *santería*, who regularly need to consult with their dead before any ritual step is taken. In Havana, while such classifications tend to obscure the fact that *espiritistas* generally consider themselves to work with one and the same stratum of metaphysical beings, most spiritists would describe themselves as belonging to the latter category. These *espiritistas* learn to cater to their *muertos* and their respective biographies: they make dolls and icons to represent their Indio (indigenous), Arab, *gitana* (gypsy) or Conga (African) spirits, smoke cigars and drink rum during their ritual possession ceremonies (called *misas espirituales*—spiritual masses) so as to allow the

dead not just to enjoy such pleasures through their bodies, but to heal and cleanse others with such substances, and construct elaborate altars where offerings of candles, flowers, food and decorative attributes are placed. More importantly, over time they develop a profound consciousness of their *muertos*' presence in their lives, guiding their actions, their thoughts, dispositions, talents, inspirations and even illnesses, until this overlap of selves is eventually experienced in implicit as well as explicit ways. The person *becomes* the extension of their *muertos* on a physical plane, just as their *muertos* are their extension on another. In what requires a gradual build up of trust in one's own intuition *as* spiritual knowledge, to learn to be a medium is a long-term process of education (one's own and one's *muertos*): of somatic attention, of intellectual understanding, but more importantly, of 'vision', both in terms of the ability to 'see' in an immediate and sensorial sense—spirits, a client's current circumstances, the future—and the capacity to interpretatively make connections between events and visions to reveal a bigger picture, thus to 'see' beyond immediate affairs, to see causally. 'Vision' here becomes a trope that denotes a medium's precision and reach, which, by extension, are properties of the entities with whom she works. An account of dreams is thus also one of spiritist personhood.

As possessors of unusual abilities to see, feel, intuit or receive information that escapes a layperson's sensory and imaginary apparatus, *espiritistas* have carefully developed themselves in symbiosis with their spirit guides, called a *cordón espiritual* (normally referred to as just *muertos*), whose knowledge and advice they bring forth in the presence of those that seek their help. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere (Espirito Santo 2009a, 2009b), these spirits are constitutive of her very person—it is through their 'eyes' that mediums are *mediums* of information. While not mere passive agents or voices for the knowledge of the spirit realm, theirs is nevertheless a communicative mission—one of articulating such messages and visions for the benefit of others, where stagnation in this flux, caused by an unwillingness or reservation to speak, can lead the medium to experience physical or psychological ailments, such as headaches or back pains. Information can literally become trapped in her, flattened via its non-communication, unable to 'flow' fluidly and reach its target, weighing down on her body instead. Over an extended period of time, refusing to acknowledge one's spiritual 'mission' can have more serious consequences, such as long-drawn-out illnesses, madness and even paralysis. While these may also be seen as punishments from the spirits or the ancestors, where in establishing a weakened or deteriorated state in a medium a spirit can bargain with her or even force her into assuming her responsibilities, ultimately these illnesses are the result of a 'brake' (mediums speak of being *travadas*—in analogy with mechanical brakes) on the flow of necessary knowledge: an interruption of the cosmic order whose effects are literally felt. That neophytes are routinely told to verbalize their sensations, their impressions and the mental imagery they receive during ritual, whether these 'make sense' or not, supports the idea that in *espiritismo* learning to 'see' is also learning to speak—one crucially depends on the other. The imperativeness of a medium's transmissive duties is further reflected in the prevalent fear of *perder la gracia* ('losing one's gift') by refusing to practice it,<sup>4</sup> or by doing so with an immoral intent.

In my view, a concern with the movement and flow of knowledge is one of Cuban spiritism's most distinct characteristics, evidenced in the prevalent use of certain oracles such as cards, where the overt meanings or symbols of the card configurations are clearly not as important as the act of *throwing* them, which is seen to mobilize the spiritual world

and its knowledge, and thus the medium's intuition, precisely through this movement. Corália, a middle-aged medium and *santera*, says that while she typically uses what in Cuba is referred to as *barajas españolas* (the Spanish deck), as soon as she begins to throw *any* deck—a tarot set or a poker deck, for instance—the “cards begin to speak”: that is, she begins to see. This fact of ‘seeing’, as she explains, is not always easy, especially when the mirror is turned inwards: having once seen her own death and ending up in hospital three days later in a grave state, she has rarely consulted her own cards about herself since. But the information, in this sense, had not been contained *in* the cards; it was made available *through* them. Unlike traditional or established Afro-Cuban oracles such as the *caracoles* (cowry shells) *santeros* use in their divination ceremonies, where each configuration is associated with a deity, a saying and a myth, in *espiritismo* knowledge is not received in a digital, linear or even propositional manner. Rather, mediums must often *achieve* knowledge by following *hilos* (‘threads’) of images, symbols, thoughts and sensations that lead to certainties and insights. Mediumship itself is thus predicated on movement: on the necessary transferability of knowledge from one realm of reception (and perception) to another, where the most obvious instance of this principle is of course the movement of information from spirit to person and vice versa. That most mediums ‘receive’ in a variety of ways, further illustrates this point. But the predominance of vision is telling: as a sort of crystallization of the movement of knowledge, ‘seeing’ is the definitive form of certainty for *espiritistas*. Indeed, for Corália, imagery has always been key, whether it is evoked via the throwing of her cards or from ‘signs’, numbers and even people out in the world that may become momentarily salient—“the spirits give me the first clue, and I follow suit”. While she describes herself as a medium “with a very good ear”—that is, she *hears* her spirits—she also says that *what* she hears tends to lead her into the experience of moving pictures in her mind, something that many mediums I have met describe as ‘seeing’ *como una película* (like a movie). It is unsurprising that for Corália, as for many others, dreams are paramount.

If mediumship can be conceptualized as a cognitively and phenomenologically distributed ‘thing’—the ability to receive information at a multiplicity of levels—then it is also predicated on the transferability of knowledge *between* persons, and even *things*. Nowhere is the social and material distribution of information more apparent than in the performance of *misas espirituales*, the spiritist's bread-and-butter ritual, where the generation of knowledge takes on a highly co-operative dimension. Here, the ‘threads’ that a single medium must follow are intimately connected to those of all other mediums and participants, as well as to the entities with whom they work. These threads, also spoken about as *corrientes* (currents—referring both to energy that the spirits bring and to the spirits’ own ethnic/religious tendencies), are picked up as potential strands of information and subsequently externalized in the elaboration of detailed and coherent sets of visual messages, called *cuadros espirituales* (spiritual paintings). That these ‘pictures’ are painted intersubjectively between mediums in an entirely public domain means that each medium's contribution necessarily builds on that of the next, adding to it and transforming it in emergent fashion and, crucially, creating in this process something new for others to see. Thus, where one medium may see the spirit of a limping person, another one may associate it with the Afro-Cuban deity *Babalu Ayé* (whose image is that of a crippled old man with dogs), and yet another may warn the object of the message to be careful with injuring their legs in an accident. ‘Seeing’ here



becomes a shared, albeit not fully predictable, experience, for the appearance of *cuadros* depends essentially on the collective distribution of the mediumistic task—on the sharing of spirit, which on the other hand must be ‘got at’ through each medium’s unique perspective. However, it is perhaps for this reason that mediums find it easier to connect to the spiritual domain during *misas* than on their own; as a critical link in the circulation of the spirits’ knowledge, in *misas* information is literally introduced into the medium’s constitution via her very presence, where she must participate in its materialization or risk paralyzing its motion. Objects too, form a necessary part of this flow. The obligatory presence of water, such as in the seven glasses of water that spirit mediums normally place on their *bóvedas* (altars), and which form the focal piece at *misas*, is a case in point. As the ultimate ‘medium’—liquid, malleable, transparent—it is through water that spirits are thought to transmit their *fluidos* (fluids—energies, but also information). Unsurprisingly, water is commonly used by mediums as an oracle, an instrument with which to ‘see’ through the fog, by peering into it. In the end, however, it is the human body that acts as the ultimate tool for such a flow—through the medium’s mind, her sensations, her words and her motor functions during possession, for instance, the spirit can be felt and acted into existence, moved from a state of non-presence, a potentiality, to one of full presence, a reality. And, as we will see, dreams have a fundamental role in allowing for such creative transformations.

The spiritist concept of mediumship comprehends a varied host of manifestations that include dreams and dreaming, where the nature of personhood and its comprising elements clearly come to the fore, in particular, the notion of bound and unboundedness. Classical Kardecist definitions specify the person as the sum of his or her *espíritu encarcelado* or *encarnado* (imprisoned or incarnate spirit), *la masa grosera* (material body) and a *periespíritu* (perispirit), described as a semi-material connecting substance where the accumulation of one’s earthly knowledge and experience reside. In Kardecist theology this latter component is what prevents the spirit from fatally detaching itself from the body in times of liminal displacement, such as in trance episodes, or through ‘transmutation’ and dreams, where the spirit is thought to be able to travel and interact with other beings in the same state. Under these definitions, dreams can be recollections of an individual’s nightly adventures, some more lucid than others, or of in-body visitations. In Book 2, Chapter VIII (question 402) of Kardec’s *Book of Spirits*, for instance, a higher-order spirit tells us the following:

Be very sure that, when his body is asleep, a spirit enjoys the use of faculties of which he is unconscious while his body is awake. He remembers the past, and sometimes foresees the future: he acquires more power, and is able to enter into communication with other spirits, *either in this world or in some other*.

Sleep, according to Kardec’s spirit correspondents, just like death, partially frees up the soul from the body—it is a gateway between incarnate souls and the spirit world. In Kardec’s writing, this temporary liberation through sleep allows the spirit what he calls “soul-sight”, a faculty he equates with ‘second-sight’ (or clairvoyance), made easier through dream states. In Cuba, these ideas are profoundly resonant: the human body is conceptualized as porous through and through, both by spiritists and practitioners of other Afro-Cuban religions such as *santería*. In sleep, the body’s boundaries dilute further, incorporating and taking on other tones (and tones of otherness). The overlap between mediumship and dreaming is thought to be so striking that one of my friends and main informants, Leonel, tells me that a medium may even fall into trance *while* asleep.

I'm telling you this because I've had the experience. I've been fast asleep, the spirit has come, left its messages, and I have just carried on sleeping until the following day, with literally no knowledge of the occurrence. No pain, no discomfort, absolutely nothing. (...) Trance is also a way of dreaming, where sometimes you seem to fall into a very tranquil kind of meditation. Many things can happen around you, but when you return from it, it is as if nothing had happened. (...) It's deep; you're in peaceful moment. Maybe that's death. You're there but it's as if no time has passed by. There is no time. You lose sense of it, just like you do in a dream.

Absent but simultaneously present then, Leonel suggests that during sleep the spirit finds itself in the quintessential state of openness—freed from time and space constraints, able to achieve 'soul-sight', much like the disembodied souls of the dead which can guide the living precisely because of this. The inherent porosity of the person is evident in the fact that even *laypersons* are thought to be very capable of symbolic or premonitory dreams. But it is by virtue of the spirit medium that this receptiveness begins to engender 'effects', so to speak.

*Espiritistas* commonly 'discover' themselves through complicated illness processes, unexpected episodes of possession or dramatic spiritual sightings: physical and visual experiences that unambiguously signal a need to acknowledge a further register of reality. While every mediumship story differs, it is poignant that a typical biographical narrative will contain references to the medium's own skepticism: "I am [or was] like Saint Thomas", they will say, "I need[ed] to see to believe". This might be followed by an elaboration of the kinds of *pruebas* ('proofs') the spirits or deities gave the person leading up to or during the course of the medium-to-be's spiritual development. Florencia, discussed above, frames her childhood in a similar way:

I would watch my mother [a *santera*]; every time she could she wanted to give me a 'bath' [spiritually purifying], or sprinkle *cascarilla* [a cleansing eggshell substance used in *espiritismo*] on me before I went to school, and I didn't want any of that, I never believed in anything. And when I came of age, I started to tell her, I'm like Santo Tomás, seeing is believing. But I didn't believe in anything, I would just say things like that, things that you say when you don't know. I would say: a person has died, they're dead; what are they going to do... Come out of the earth? But it's curious, because although I didn't believe in anything, ever since I was very little I would tell my mother that I saw things. When I fell asleep, I would say, "Mother, last night I woke up, opened my eyes, and saw a woman like so and so."

An emphasis on the importance of concrete, tangible, and verifiable 'proof' is a concern for many *religiosos*,<sup>5</sup> not just because this rhetoric is thought to counter potential accusations of naivety or superstition, or because it is seen to somehow rally the 'scientific' to its side. In Cuba, religion (of the Afro-Cuban kind) is less speculative than it is pragmatic. In other words, it 'resolves' problems of the worldly sort—it *must* have effects. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, because the spiritual beings with which it establishes relations have proven themselves and their powers of intervention over and over, and the arena of dreams is no exception. Spirits penetrate thought and matter, and resting bodies are vulnerable, devoid of defenses. Consider the following story, told to me by Liana, who sees the spirit of her husband's grandfather in her dreams:

My husband and I were in bed. I had to go to work. But I had fallen completely and deeply asleep. That's when all of a sudden I felt and saw him, I heard him, and I was frightened. He is laughing. He picks me up by the shoulders like this [touching her collar], I was asleep; he lifts me up and tells me

“*Oye!* [*Listen!*] You have to go to work!” And then I felt that he let me fall back down, and I open my eyes and there he is—my husband’s grandfather, long dead. (...) He wasn’t angry, but I really felt that he’d picked me up and then let me fall, and that’s when he lets me see him. Then I wake up. And it’s true—I had to go to work, I was late!

The viscosity of Liana’s experience points to the idea that dreaming can also be ‘felt’ and not just seen, where its perceived ‘reality’ gains further credibility: there are physical effects. More interestingly, waking and dreaming realities become confoundable. This is particularly so with very vivid dreams, which can be just as ‘visceral’ and evocative. Indeed, Leonel, above, distinguishes carefully between what he calls ‘quotidian dreams’, dreams in which our waking conversations and worries are reflected, and the ‘real dreams’, “that dream in which you really see in a different dimension, in which you feel alive in another frequency”, that is, “you see the stone, you touch the object, you feel the smell. There is something direct about it, very specific, *real*”. For him, it is the spirits who take us to those states so that they can pass on information. And it is generally when these states turn out to anticipate future events or images that the Cuban spiritist becomes conscious of what many call ‘proofs’. “It’s difficult to talk about dreams”, Leonel continues; because we don’t know exactly what they are; but on the other hand, “we only know what we live”, and we certainly ‘live’ dreams. On a phenomenological and emotional level, then, dreaming is also living.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, dreaming has effects because during sleep an individual gains an extra kind of ‘sight’ or perspective. Dreams are vehicles for extended vision. In a paper that argues for the relevance of objects as cognitive scaffolds, Morten Pedersen describes how Mongolian shamans are able to attain otherwise unattainable points of view through their shamanic costumes. These artifacts, which he calls “talismans of thought”, constitute highly potent ontological tools in that they are believed to “imbue shamans with the magical capacity to crosscut the boundaries between human and nonhuman beings” (2007: 142). But if in Pedersen’s ethnographic context the shaman gains a skin, so to speak, through his donning of the costume—one that permits him the critical ontological leap of traveling to otherwise transcendent domains—we see that in the Cuban context the spiritist *sheds* a skin through dreams, where the ontological shift is one of being able ‘see’ without the constraints of matter. Where the shaman engages with the “aesthetic trap” (ibid. 153), in Gell’s words, the spirit medium *liberates* herself from it, gaining ground by temporarily losing her body (though never fully, or this would be material death). In both cases new persons come into being at that moment, for both kinds of person are predicated on the capacity for alternate perspectives. While not properly ‘perspectivist’ in the specific sense Viveiros de Castro has proposed in relation to certain Amerindian cultures, which involves animals, spirits and persons, the idea that “the point of view creates the subject” (1998: 476) is highly apt in this ethnography, where the transformation that is seen to occur in dreams approximates that of the spirit-in-body perspective to spirit-without-body perspective. As Pedersen (2001: 421) argues elsewhere, comparing perspectivist exchanges in Northern North Asia and Southern North Asia, a distinction can be made between *inter*-human perspectivism (humans becoming other humans) and *extra*-human perspectivism (humans becoming non-humans and vice-versa). In Cuban dreams this also seems to be the case, albeit slightly differently; it would perhaps even be useful to think in terms of a ‘super-human’ or ‘para-human’ perspective, as was suggested to me by one of the anonymous critics who reviewed this article for *Suomen*

*Antropologi*. On the one hand a person can, through dreaming, momentarily obtain a spirit's 'vision', usually that of a spirit guide or a deceased family member, whose close relation to her allows for this transference; on the other, she may potentially *travel* outside the confines of her body, thus becoming fully spirit, in a sense. Essentially, what we are describing is the logical extreme of the notion of mediumship itself, which is premised not just on the unboundedness of the self (where 'self' and spirit are highly overlapping if not equivalent things), but also on the arbitrariness of its enveloping matter (or rather, its necessity in the reincarnational cycle but its ultimate expendability). For *espiritistas*, real perspective occurs *as* spirit, or *from* spirit, and for reasons discussed above dreams permit hypothetically more direct access to this 'real' vision. Naturally, with such perspectives come responsibilities, which is where communication (or lack thereof) and its effects come in.

*Milagros' dreams: the agency of words and knowledge*

A couple of days before our interview, Milagros, a retired school teacher who lives in the outskirts of Havana with her family, had a troubling dream.

I made [*hice*] a dream the day before yesterday. I dreamt about a girl I know who has a small boy at the school. She has Obbatalá [an Afro-Cuban deity/*oricha* worshipped in *santería*] 'done' [initiated]. I saw her this morning, and I was about to go and find her again when she came up to the house. I tell her, "Listen, my love. I had a dream with you. That you were in trouble with your husband, and that you had to be very careful because he was looking for you to kill you." This morning, sitting right there, she confirmed what I was saying. He'd come to find her. He's still looking, she says, and he's really very angry. I had to do it, to tell it [the dream], so that its power will be lost, so that things will be cut and won't happen, you see?

This was not the only time she alluded not just to having 'made' a dream (*hice un sueño*, as opposed to the more common expression 'to have a dream', *tener un sueño*), but to her responsibility to 'cut' the potential for the negative occurrences revealed in the dream by *telling* it:

There was a girl here [in the building], I saw her, but I didn't really know her or her circumstances, I had been at school when there was some kind of trouble involving her. But I had dreamt about her. So when she passes by I tell her: "Come here, I dreamt about you last night." She says: "What happened?" I tell her: "Listen, I dreamt last night that you were in jail." She says to me: "Milagros, they've just done a *registro* [inspection at her work] in Vedado [a neighborhood in Havana], and I've just come now from the police station..." Do you understand? She was afraid. She tells me: "When you dream of me, please tell me the dream!" I have to do it early, straightaway, so that all of that will be cut.

Milagros' concern with the dream as a site of knowledge reflects, as I have already argued, prevalent spiritist notions of personhood and its contiguity with the spirit world. While she describes having had '*vista*' (vision) since an early age, Milagros says that she has come to have '*luz*' (light) and '*claridad*' (clarity) in her dreams since the death of her spiritual Godmother, whose spirit she invokes often. After having been initiated in *santería*, Milagros spends much time at home and believes that her 'grace' will be lost if she works '*en la calle*' (on the street/out of the house). Her spirits, she says, want her to work her mediumship,

among other ways, through her dreams. Crucially, they want her to *tell* people of the dreams: she *must* tell them. For Milagros prophetic dreams (of the bad kind) portray possibilities, events or circumstances that may be heading toward a particular person, but which can potentially be avoided through the articulation of this knowledge. Communication plays a central role in generating this knowledge. But, in my view, we are not dealing with propositional questions of ‘knowing’, but of the agency of knowledge as a ‘thing’, materialized and put in motion through words. Indeed, if the dream betrays possibilities rather than pre-determined occurrences, Milagros’ speech essentially *creates* a particular reality (one of avoidance) by excluding all others in the process. By speaking of it, she effectively materializes the possibility of a negative event being ‘cut’.

In this final section of the paper, I will attempt to understand Milagros’ statements in ways that highlight the ontological possibilities contained in them rather than reducing these to propositional or representational claims. In *espiritismo*, communication is clearly linked to effects that go to the core of a specific ontology; it is not just a matter for epistemology. Under its logic, mediums are *enablers* (and thus creators) of a cosmology; they do not just express it. Theirs is the task of making the spirit and its knowledge manifest for others and for themselves, of *recreating* it, in a sense, precisely through their communicative acts. Words here do not just reflect, then, they actively help bring the world of spirits *into* existence, and are thus impregnated with agency and subjectivity, not just meaning. They are *movement*. Taking the above mentioned discussion on movement and flow into consideration, we can say that if communicating in *espiritismo* is a fundamentally ontological exercise—in that it transfers knowledge from one domain to the other and is crucial to the mobility of a cosmos which demands that such leaps be made in order to exist—then perhaps we should be unsurprised by the fact that verbal enunciations actually have ‘effects’, not simply cognitive ones (which in turn can lead to behavioral changes), but physical ones, independently of how the knowledge recipient or ‘knower’ now acts. The relationship between *what* is dreamt and what the *effects* are of its externalization is therefore problematized here, where neither representationalist approaches nor symbolic-oriented ones fully do it justice. Instead, we need to allow for dream communications to have truly ontological effects by *not locating these in states of mind*, or rather, by allowing for the possibility that they can transcend such states.

The anthropology of dreaming and dreams has been generally punctuated by a concern with distinguishing between the content of a subject’s dream, and its social expression or communication (see Tedlock 1987). Perhaps wary of the often burdensome psychoanalytic baggage of dream analysis and its history, anthropologists have been understandably reluctant to assume an unproblematic correlation between their informants’ deeply subjective dream experiences on the one hand, to which they have no access as observers, and their representation and interpretation through dream telling on the other. They have instead chosen to focus on the sociality of such acts, the social and structural conditions of these articulations and their consequences for cultural processes such as the generation of sacred knowledge and its legitimation. This reticence can be understood in general terms to stem from a critical post-modern awareness of the limits of anthropological knowledge, as well as from the difficulties of producing a balanced and sensitive treatment of what is at first sight a counter-ethnographic anthropological subject matter—a unique and *unverifiable* personal experience. However, as Charles Stewart has argued, “while acknowledging the

personal, psychological dimension of dreams, the anthropological tendency has been to treat dreams as social facts and cultural texts, thereby sensibly placing them inside the recognized framework of anthropological expertise”, where the danger is that we may accommodate ourselves so thoroughly to the idea of dreams as social constructions that “we disregard dreams as experiences” (1997: 878). Confirming Stewart’s hypothesis, for instance, Lohmann even ventures to claim that, “insofar as humans are social animals, dreams do not occur in isolated minds” (2007: 35). Here, we could say not just that the social effects of dreams take precedence over their experience for the anthropologist, but indeed, from the perspective of the analyst, there *are* no dreams except in their capacity to have social effects. What Lohmann did not know, however, is that this observation may be more pertinent for an understanding of spiritist dreams than he could have anticipated, but not because dreams are ‘cultural text’. Indeed, to locate dreams exclusively in the subjective realm, on the one hand, or in the social realm, on the other, seems to be missing the point. We need to understand precisely what the relation is between the two, instead of focusing on one at the expense of the other. The fact that in *espiritismo* knowledge comes into being *because* it must be communicated makes this relationship extremely intimate, and further, intimately necessary.

Questions of agency in dreaming are explored in a paper by Michael F. Brown (1987), who analyzes the role of dreams in Aguaruna notions of causality in Peru, in which he notes the potentially instrumental, even manipulative, character of dream experiences in relation to a desired outcome, such as those of hunting or battle. For instance, “Aguaruna narratives frequently mention men, who, by dint of extraordinary efforts, are able to accumulate ever more powerful visions so that they become renowned warriors and leaders of raiding expeditions”, namely, by establishing control over their dream imagery and thus increasing their ability to structure events in the world (1987: 164). Far from mere symbolic, expressive or emotive experiences, dreams here have the capacity to transform or even *create* reality—that is, they have ontological effects: more precisely in this ethnographic example, because the warrior accesses ancestral spirits through such visions and interacts with them. The dreamer has agency: he is the subject of his dream, not just a passive element of the experience, and this can in turn shape the ‘out there-ness’ that then becomes real. But whereas the Aguaruna conceive of the agency of the dream from *within*, Milagros conceives it also from *without*, simultaneously generated by and contained in the rhetorical act that must follow it. Indeed, telling, communicating, is *making*, creating. As she says: “I *made* a dream.” This points us to the agency of language, or at the very least, of something which language unleashes.

The idea that words and speech can have magical effects was famously noted by Malinowski (1935) in his ethnographic analysis of Trobriand coral gardens. Distinct from ordinary language, and even from the binding character of “legal formulas” such as marriage vows, he compared the Trobrianders’ ritual and sacred words to “verbal missiles”, believed to have the capacity to infuse objects or substances with special power (Tambiah 1990: 73–74). However, for Malinowski, a magician’s spell did not “objectively, causally and directly affect the processes of nature”; instead, “these words and acts did influence the human witnesses and through them produced consequences by affecting their intentions and their motivations and their expectations” (Tambiah 1990: 81). Words are thus performative and efficacious for Malinowski, but only in as much as they “*induce action in*

*people*” or “*motion in things*”, as Kenneth Burke’s own theory of rhetoric goes (Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*: 42, quoted in Tambiah, 1990: 81–82). We are left, then, with the person (be it the enunciator or the receiver) as intentional agent, and the word as the vehicle for her intention. The whole problem may stem, as Webb Keane has argued, from the assumptions underlying a “Western language ideology”, where the normal function of language is seen as one of reference and predication (1997: 680). “This common-sense view of language stresses the capacity of language to point to things in the world, to speak about them in ways that are essentially true or false; and this view locates that ability in the semantics of individual words” (1997: 680). But as Keane has convincingly shown in his analysis of Sumbanese ritual speech, these assumptions are indeed *ideological*, not universal, and this requires us to rethink our own (Western) ideas of agency so that we do not end up by reproducing those of the Dutch Calvinists he describes, who fought tirelessly with the island’s ancestral ritualists over its correct ascription.

In *espiritismo* we know that knowledge is received in mostly non-propositional forms, such as intuitively, or through dreams; we know that the spirits bring knowledge and that this knowledge is a necessary part of a cosmic flow in which mediums play a central role. We also know that communication is constitutive of this role. If a spiritist ‘self’ were to be conceived along the lines of its function as communicator, then to disrupt or block this flow would be to risk perverting or annihilating this ‘self’. I have briefly mentioned the effects for the medium of not speaking when she feels she must: headaches, illness, or loss of ‘grace’. Knowledge has physical weight, and its inhibition or expression can lead to correspondingly physical effects. It is no coincidence that ‘developing’ as a medium is thought to bring health and wellbeing. We are thus dealing both with the agency of spirits *and* with the agency of this flow of knowledge (or of knowing). And it seems that it is the latter that concerns us when we consider Milagros’ statements above. That knowledge may have agency, precisely *through* words, is consistent with the idea that in order to have agency, spirits must be moved into being through ‘things’ such as spirit representations and food offerings. But it also reverberates with the idea that prayer and song are fundamental to the materialization of the spirit world and its agency. Indeed, in *misas*, mediums perform songs that speak to the spirit’s identity precisely so that it will recognize itself through such formulations and appear. Spirits are thus *recreated* before they materialize. And in this sense words are both mirrors of spirits *and* the spirits themselves in another form. In fact, the two seem to collapse in the act of communicating, which is, ultimately, a cosmogonic act—that which brings forth a cosmology. Communicated knowledge is therefore *the* agent *par excellence*: that which fuels the system and which generates effects, the ‘system’ here, however, being conceived as one in continual and processual ‘becoming’.

That ‘knowing’ can have effects beyond ‘knowing’ itself sounds strange, to say the least. This seemingly counter-intuitive idea was brought home to me in an interesting way by a spiritist and friend of mine in Havana, Eduardo, who often warned me of the dangers of transgressing certain domains of knowledge in my fieldwork investigations. “*El conocimiento compromete*” (knowledge commits/compromises you) he would repeat on various occasions, much to my bewilderment. However, I came to understand that for Eduardo these dangers were not inherent to the act of *knowing*, but to the knowledge content *itself*, in which is implied an agency of sorts. According to Eduardo every domain of knowledge is inhabited and accompanied by a specific group of spiritual entities that protects and steers the venturer

in her undertakings within that domain. But these spirits may also come to coerce and control the individual, particularly if she is not ready to commit to the kinds of ontological implications that this knowledge domain entails. Thus, when I told him once that I was reading secret ritual formulas and treatises on certain Afro-Cuban religious practices he admonished me. And he did so not because this was ‘secret’ knowledge and in principle I should not have access to it as an *aleyo* (non-initiate), but because coming into such words might unpredictably summon up entities that could ‘push’ me into these spheres irreversibly without my consent, eventually requiring of me initiations and ritual commitments so that I ‘correspond’ with my newfound knowledge responsibilities, responsibilities which Eduardo deemed were inappropriate for me and my spirits. Even exposure has consequences, he was suggesting.<sup>6</sup> These observations go the heart of the argument of this section, even if they seem to belabor the point a little at this stage. I have been trying to conceptualize how knowing may have deeper effects than merely cognitive ones, and how the communicative act in a post-dreaming context is also a transformative act, not just an expressive one. For Milagros, words ‘cut’ potentially negative effects, that is, they have positive effects, and this occurs after the person (the recipient) has been *exposed* to them. Speaking here is thus a profoundly consequent operation: it is an ontological operation.

#### *Concluding remarks*

As a final consideration in this paper, I would like to suggest that the study of dreams stands to gain from a radically different approach to the ethnographic material, namely, one that does not seek to make it stick to existing theoretical frames, be it of agency, knowledge or dreaming, but searches in such data for the raw material for new theorizations. Vassos Argyrou argues that anthropology does not so much “seek to define Others as to *redefine* them in order to redeem them” (2002: 28); and it has done this mostly by doing away with the discomfort of alterity in one shape or another. But it seems that herein lies the challenge. Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell (2007) have argued that where constructivist approaches in anthropology see different societies as ordering the same ‘reality’ in different ways, what we actually need is to take difference *seriously*, and importantly, as the starting point of anthropological analyses. This means being willing to take *ontologies* as the anthropologist’s true objects, not epistemologies, as Viveiros de Castro has proposed—that is, being able to “think of the other thinking as only (if you will) an actualization of unsuspected virtualities of thought” (2003: 13), virtualities that project worlds that may be entirely different to ours. In my view, such a call-for-arms squares well with the potential counter-intuitiveness of such notions as ‘magical words’, or the ‘ontological effects of knowledge’, by which I mean its ontologically creative capacities. The apparent opaqueness of the dream and the dream process invites precisely a new kind of analytical understanding that does not necessarily rely on old terms or concepts. What is outside and in, what is real and what is imaginal, what is matter and what is immaterial: the premises underlying these distinctions rely on positivistic assumptions that seem to be more hindrances to proper anthropological thought than valuable if outdated crutches. Henare, Holbraad and Wastell indeed propose that things may even be treated *sui generis* as meanings (2007: 3), where what a ‘thing’ is cannot be decided beforehand (by the anthropologist) in any reasonable



way. This refusal to dichotomize the material from the conceptual can be extended to all other dualisms, including the subject/object divide. The point is to search for the *relations* that make people and things and entities into what they are, and not local *interpretations* of what we know is already *there*. This also implies humility.

But what exactly do we mean when we say that the developing medium learns to ‘see’ through her spirits’ eyes or to have access to ‘reality’ or prophecy through visions and dreams? Or when Florencia, above, says that after a lifetime of atheism, she started to really *see* things? Henare, Holbraad and Wastell say that the “point about different worlds is that they cannot be ‘seen’ in a visualist sense. They are, as it were, *a-visible*. In other words, collapsing the distinction between concepts and things (appearance and reality) forces us to conceive of a different mode of disclosure altogether. (...) If, as we argue, the notion of ‘different worlds’ stands or falls by the identification of things with concepts, then it follows that on such an image things disclose themselves not as perceptions but as *conceptions*” (2007: 14). For these authors, to conceive of something is to properly *conceive* it into being—to think it into being. Conception breeds existence, then, which makes perfect sense in relation to the ethnographic facts that I have just presented. But while ending on this note might seem like a good idea, I want to pose a further question in order to open and not close the discussion, and that is whether *conception* can in turn lead to *perception*. The importance of vision in *spiritismo* has, I hope, been made sufficiently clear in this text, where dreaming is both an extension of the mediumistic state and the epitome of the visual experience in movement. In my view, we are not just dealing with concepts but fundamentally with *experiences*, which, as conceptual as they may also be, are products of a structuring of attention and of an education of awareness over time, both of which “bring forth” worlds, in Christina Toren’s terminology (Toren 1999: 108–110). Perhaps, as anthropologists we cannot expect to access such worlds, such as the dreams of others, but neither can we entirely exclude the possibility that in trading a visualist bias for a conceptual one we are actually denying our informants their very real *visions*.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on 16 months of doctoral fieldwork, conducted between 2005 and 2008 in the city of Havana. I wish to thank the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI), and University College London’s Graduate School for their financial support. I am indebted to Fabio Gygi, Matan Shapiro, Dr. Charles Stewart, and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on the text; I also wish to thank Dr. Martin Holbraad for inspiration (more generally). As always, I thank Leonel Verdeja Orallo, who first got me thinking about dreams, among many other things; as well as Milagros, Coralia, and Alberto for their stories. In the interests of privacy, some of the names given in this text are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> Elegguá is a well-known deity—one of the main *orichas*, also known as ‘santos’ (saints)—worshipped in the Afro-Cuban religion of *santería*. For more on *santería* see, for instance, Bolivar 1990; Brown 2003; Lachatañaré 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Kardec posited the existence of a material world and a world of spirits, in constant albeit often imperceptible interaction with each other, and the possibility of direct communication through mediums. He also designated a process of repeated reincarnation, karmic debt and expiation, and claimed a ladder of evolution—spiritual, moral and intellectual—at the top of which sat the spirits of wise men (and some women), prophets and saints.

<sup>4</sup> See Nuñez Molina 1987, for a Puerto Rican example of such notions.

<sup>5</sup> See Holbraad 2009, for a discussion of notions of evidence, proof and truth in the Afro-Cuban religious practice of Ifá.

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, it may be interesting for some readers that I do not see my own 'exposure' to spiritist knowledge by any means as that of a disinterested observer, somehow placed 'outside' a flow and thus positioned to somehow better reflect upon it. Just as the participative act, whether active or passive, is always consequential, I was often aware of the knowledge 'effects' that my own presence in spiritist consultations or collective rituals engendered, for it was assumed that my spirits were also present, and thus, with or without my knowledge, already placed 'inside' the flow. If anything, my observations are a product of a necessary recognition of my embeddedness, and not my immunity to spiritist knowledge.

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