

Spreading through the Caribbean.
 It have Rasta now in Grenada,
 It have Rasta now in St. Lucia,
 But to run Carifta, yes you getting pressure.
 If te Rastafarian movement spreading
 And Carifta dying slow
 Dem is something dem Rasta done
 That dem politicians don't know.
 So dey pushing one common intention
 For a better life in de region
 For de women and de children,
 That must be the ambition of the
 Caribbean Man. (quoted in H. Campbell 1987: 170)

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Espiritismo

Creole Spiritism in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the United States

Ese constante sabor por comunicarnos con el más allá. (That constant fondness for communicating with the other world.)

—Angel Suárez Rosado

In the mid-nineteenth century another component was added to Caribbean Creole religiosity. While African-based religions were undergoing a consolidation throughout the region, the Spiritualist and Spiritist practices of North America and Europe were making their way across the seas to the Caribbean. The enthusiasm for Spiritist philosophical, religious, and healing notions can be understood as a response to several important factors in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Caribbean societies, among them the social upheaval created by the quest for democracy and the diaspora of Caribbean peoples to the United States. In the Caribbean, the creolization process led to the creation of distinctly Cuban and Puerto Rican varieties of Spiritism—*Espiritismo*—and, in the diaspora to the United States, *Santerismo*. A Creole spiritual healing practice with roots in the United States, Europe, Africa, and the indigenous Taíno Caribbean, *Espiritismo* amplified and transformed European Spiritism in its travels back and forth from the Old World to the New.

In 1848, three young sisters from Hydesville, New York—Leah, Kate, and Margaret Fox—began hearing strange knocking sounds in their parents' small cottage. The knocks, which they took to be communications from the dead, slowly developed into a code—one rap for yes and two for no. Through these wall rappings the sisters came to believe that the spirit with whom they had been communicating was that of a murdered peddler whose body had been buried underneath their cellar (male remains were

actually discovered years later). Spiritualism, the belief in the ability of the living to communicate with the dead in and through such practices as table rappings, levitations, and trances by persons called “mediums” (mediators through whom communications are supposedly transmitted to the living from the spirits of the dead, a process also referred to as “channeling”), was born of these events and immediately became popular in the context of religious revivalist movements in the United States. It later captured the European imagination through such prominent Spiritualists as England’s Queen Victoria and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

In France another philosophical movement developed at this time in response to North American Spiritualism but with a more “scientific” and doctrinal approach: Spiritism. Based on the beliefs and philosophies of the French educator Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail (1804–1869), better known by his *nom de plume* Allan Kardec (a name supposedly based on previous reincarnations ascertained from mediumistic communications), Spiritism was a moral philosophy rather than a religion, incorporating the ideas of Romanticism and the scientific revolution to bridge the gap between the material and spiritual worlds. Having already published widely in the field of pedagogical reform, Kardec began to study spirit communication through mediumship. In 1857 he published *The Spirits’ Book* and in 1859 *The Mediums’ Book*. These were the first two books of several that explain the basic principles of Spiritism, an expansion of Spiritualism from a series of sporadic psychic experiences to an organized cult. (*The Spirits’ Book* has been translated into numerous languages—in English it was translated as *Spiritualist Philosophy: The Spirits’ Book*—and is still widely read today in Caribbean communities in the United States. Its widespread popularity is evident in the botánicas or herbal-religious shops in U.S. Latino neighborhoods.)

The Spirits’ Book is the principal text of French Spiritist doctrine and was written with the assistance of two young mediums (Kardec himself was not a medium) using the method of automatic or slate writing to question numerous spirits, among them Saint Augustine, Socrates, Ben Franklin, and such Catholic reformers as Saint Vincent de Paul. Kardec’s work as an educational reformer is clearly evident in the book as he interrogates his spirit interlocutors in a question and answer format with hundreds of answers organized by categories in what David Hess describes as an “otherworldly ethnography” (1991: 61), with lengthy recapitulations and elucidations of the spirits’ replies. Thus one discovers such exchanges

as the following under the categories of “Spirit and Matter” and “Progression of Spirits”:

23. What is spirit?

“The intelligent principle of the universe.”

—What is the essential nature of spirit?

“It is not possible to explain the nature of spirit in your language. For you it is not a *thing*, because it is not palpable; but for us it is a *thing*.”

24. Is spirit synonymous with intelligence?

“Intelligence is an essential attribute of spirit, but both merge in a unitary principle, so that, for you, they may be said to be the same thing.”

25. Is spirit independent of matter, or is it only one of the properties of matter, as colours are a property of light, and as sound is a property of air?

“Spirit and matter are distinct from one another; but the union of spirit and matter is necessary to give intelligent activity to matter.”

114. Are spirits good or bad by nature, or are they the same spirits made better through their own efforts?

“The same spirits made better through their own efforts. In growing better they pass from a lower to a higher order. . . . Spirits acquire knowledge by passing through the trials imposed on them by God. Some of them accept these trials with submission, and arrive more quickly at the aim of their destiny; others undergo them with murmuring, and thus remain, through their own fault, at a distance from the perfection and the felicity promised to them.” (Kardec 1976: 8–9, 47)

The Spirits’ Book describes the other world and offers moral guidelines for actions in this one; although it rejects such key Christian tenets as the divinity of Christ, it stresses charitable acts and embraces Christian morality, espousing the Christian golden rule of “doing unto others as you would have others do unto you.” Given the scientific discoveries of the age that challenged traditional Christian theology (including Darwin’s theory of evolution, published in the same period as *The Spirit’s Book*), for Kardec Spiritism “bridged the gap between science and religion, provided a rational basis for faith, linked social progress to spiritual progress and equilibrated natural laws with moral laws. His doctrine spanned the gulf in ideology just as the spirit medium bridged the gap between this world and the other world” (Hess 1991: 61). Kardec defined a life in spirit in the above-mentioned works as well as in *The Gospel according to Spiritism*

(1864), *Heaven and Hell* (1865), and in other books that struck a chord with Europeans and with many Latin American and Caribbean peoples of his time.

The nineteenth century was an age of scientific discovery, and one of its dominant doctrines was Positivism, developed by the French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857). Positivism maintained that metaphysical questions are unanswerable and that the only true knowledge is scientific. Primarily a social reformer, Comte's goal, described in *The Course of Positive Philosophy* (1830–42), was a society in which nations and individuals would live in harmony and well-being. He considered religion the highest science, but it was a human-centered religion, lacking metaphysical implications. Earlier in the century, Claude Henri de Saint-Simon (1760–1825), one of the founders of modern socialism, had advocated a different Christianity in *The New Christianity* (1825). He conceived of Christianity as a spiritual force for progressive human development. But Kardec differs from Comte and the utopian socialists in emphasizing inward spiritual reform. Nineteenth-century European scientific concepts of philosophy and psychology combine in Spiritist goals for the moral and social development of mankind, accomplished through the evolution of the spirit.

Kardec departed from Anglo-American Spiritualism through his strong belief in reincarnation, preferring the term "Spiritism" to distinguish his ideas from the "trickery" of the Spiritualists. According to the tenets of Spiritism in *The Spirits' Book*, the primary purpose of life on earth is to master, through knowledge and participation, the lower nature and to be guided and influenced by the higher aspects of the divine spirit within. The universe, according to Kardec, was created by an eternal, all-powerful, just God who comprehends all beings "animate and inanimate, material and immaterial" (1976: xiv). The corporeal world is constituted by material beings, souls or "incarnated spirits" (the physical body is its "envelope"); the spirit world is the abode of "discarnate spirits." Man is composed of three things: "(1.) The body, or material being, analogous to the animals, and animated by the same vital principle; (2.) The soul, or immaterial being, a spirit incarnated in the body; (3.) The link which united the soul and the body, a principle intermediary between matter and spirit" (1976: xiv).

The link is the perispirit, a type of "semi-material envelope" or vital fluid that unites the body and the spirit (analogous with the "perisperm," the fleshy part of the seed of plants that surrounds the embryo); in dreams

the soul, still connected to the body by the perispirit, journeys on earth and in space to communicate with other spirits while the body is asleep. Birth represents the reincarnation of a spirit. Upon death the soul, "the immaterial and individual being which resides in us, and survives the body . . . the vital fluid" leaves the body but the spirit remains encased in the perispirit and may be seen or heard by those in trance; it eventually abandons the earth to join other incorporeal or disincarnated spirits after a period of time (1976: iii).

Free will affords the spirit choices to create its own destiny and the possibility of spiritual evolution attained through knowledge and the experiences offered by repeated reincarnations in physical existences. The spirit can grow morally and achieve enlightenment to approach perfection and the ultimate goal of becoming a pure spirit, or remain backward, suffering and postponing evolution. One's "guardian angels" and "protector spirits" guide human beings through life's "tests"; communication with these spirits is therefore fundamental. Spirits are categorized in a hierarchy according to the degree of perfection they have attained: "pure spirits" have attained maximum perfection and love of goodness; and are the so-called "angels"; good spirits aspire toward goodness and support humans in their earthly trials, but have not yet achieved perfection; imperfect or ignorant spirits tend toward evil and the inferior passions and incite humans toward the same. A person's qualities are a reflection of those of the incarnate spirit. The soul's individuality is preserved after the body's death; in reincarnation it may recall the actions of its former lives.

As a consequence spirits exert an influence on the physical earth and interrelate with human beings: the good ones inspire and sustain one through life's trials; malevolent spirits take pleasure in creating suffering and in deceiving and causing harm. Advanced spirits, when contacted, are distinguished by their dignified, refined language and enlightened, high-minded ideas; less advanced spirits are distinguished by their coarse expression and ethically flawed arguments. Spiritism's goal, therefore, is the enlightenment of dark or "intranquil" spirits in need of light, redemption, and progress through reincarnation, and the advancement toward spiritual perfection. Reincarnation for Kardec is associated with the principles of choice and free will in the evolution of human beings across incarnations, and the law of cause and effect that governs the accumulation of karma according to the appropriateness of one's deeds.

Spiritism's belief in reincarnation appealed to Christians in Europe and in the Caribbean and to practitioners of African-based religions as well:

Kardec's doctrine includes beliefs that have historical origins in hermetic and esoteric traditions (the astral body, vital fluids, and spirit communications through mediums), Indic philosophy (reincarnation and karma), highly reformed Protestant theology (a unitarian doctrine and the interpretation of heaven and hell as psychological states), Catholicism (the emphasis on spiritual hierarchies and the mediating role of an extrabiblical doctrine), social reformism (the emphasis on equality, progress, freedom of thought, and education), as well as modern science (what Kardec called the "experimental" side of Spiritism which later became known as psychical research and still later as parapsychology). (Hess 1991: 2–3)

Although often identified as a popular religion, Spiritism was in fact a spiritual movement, an option for persons of various social classes. For French Catholics it was an alternative to the mainstream religious practice of Roman Catholicism, reflecting "a new pluralism of religious choice in nineteenth-century France" (Sharp 1999: 283). Enlightenment and revolutionary critiques of Christianity in the era led to attempts to find other spiritual explanations. French Spiritist challenges to the Catholic Church came from all sectors of French society, although Spiritists were generally found in the *petit bourgeois* and the urban working classes (rural Spiritists existed in smaller numbers), each group interpreting the messages from spirit guides according to its particular needs and perspectives: "Spiritism created alternative meanings that integrated 'tradition' and 'modernity' and continually created new forms of the marvellous" (Sharp 1999: 283–284).

Although Kardec believed that Spiritism was compatible with all religions, the relationship between Spiritists and the Roman Catholic Church in France was largely adversarial as Spiritists denied many of the Church's tenets, were anticlerical, and avoided the parish church. But they did not necessarily reject Christianity and their practices and beliefs generally followed Christian moral values. The Catholic Church condemned the practice as early as 1853 and, although it clearly could not deny the spiritual and supernatural aspect of Spiritism without threat to itself, denounced the manifestations of the spirits as the work of Satan, and Spiritists as profaners of the dead (Sharp 1999: 288–289). "Catholic dealings with spiritism illustrate the church's attempt to maintain control over the supernatural in the face of the materialist challenge of science as well as the spiritist challenge" (1999: 292).¹

Spiritism's adaptations of popular tradition and belief to changing cultural values in Europe resonated in Latin America and the Caribbean where it became an urban spiritual philosophy for a middle class who also disavowed the Church's traditionalism in a protomodern world. The unorthodox doctrine of the evolution and enlightenment of the spirit allowed Cuban and Puerto Rican freethinkers to incorporate the Enlightenment values of reason and science into their spirituality as they turned their backs on a religious institution too closely identified with the oppressive colonial powers. The class and ideological division between an upper or middle class with a preference for a "scientific" approach and a lower or middle class with more religious tendencies was true of Anglo-Saxon Spiritualism, French Spiritism, and later the Latin American varieties that evolved in Brazil, Argentina, and other parts of the Americas. In Cuba and Puerto Rico, two islands under Spanish colonial rule until 1898, French Kardecian Spiritism also became one of the ideological factors facilitating the growth of a national consciousness. Such Puerto Rican political and social leaders as Rosendo Matienzo Cintrón and Luisa Capetillo, for example, discovered in *Espiritismo* a practice that reflected their break with conservative Roman Catholicism and their nationalist ideals. "At a time when all things French were revered among Latin American intellectuals, who were working through French-inspired revolutions to achieve national independence, Spiritism offered an anti-clerical, anti-catholic but profoundly christian religion" (Koss 1977: 32).

The ideas of Anglo-French Spiritualism, combined with Spanish Spiritism transported by persons returning to the region from study abroad, filtered beliefs proscribed by the Spanish colonial government into the islands. Although Spiritism initially had its greatest impact on the literate middle-class sectors in Cuba and Puerto Rico, other classes began practicing their own variety of Creole *Espiritismo* in a culture already prepared to absorb a doctrine that reinforced existing spiritual beliefs: the spirit-oriented popular and folk Catholicism of the rural peasant populations—the Cuban *guajiro* and the Puerto Rican *jíbaro* who had been largely ignored by institutional Roman Catholicism—and African-based religions. As a result, when "the literate classes represented by the incipient bourgeois, in their political protest against the Spanish Church and State invested energy and time in the diffusion of the spiritist belief system and with the Africans' ancestor worship present in Puerto Rico, its diffusion was not difficult" (Pérez y Mena 1991: 27).

Cuban Variants of Espiritismo

In chapter 2 we observed the influence of Espiritismo in certain Regla de Ocha/Santería rituals, in particular the *Misa Espiritual* or spiritual mass that precedes the important *Kariocha* initiation; Espiritismo has influenced the Conga Regla Palo Monte, especially in the variant called Mayombe. According to José Millet and others, Espiritismo itself is among the most deeply rooted of “popular religions” in all sectors of Cuban culture. “The lack of an orthodox Catholicism, even in the loftier sectors of the Cuban society of the time, contributed to the emergence of a type of believer who mixed Catholicism with cults of African origin. This led to syncretism, the enriching exchange among systems of belief like Santería, Regla de Palo, Espiritismo, Vodú, and a distinctive type of Catholicism,” which Millet refers to as “Espiritista-Catholicism” (1996: 9).

During the Ten Years’ War of Insurrection, the first Cuban war of independence against the Spanish regime (1868–78), the collaboration of the Church with the colonial government became evident. Consequently, Cubans in favor of independence began to consider Spiritism more liberal and progressive than Catholicism:

Some progressive Creoles of that region, in favor of any tendency that was “contrary” to the colonial mindset, established that to be an overzealous churchgoer was to be in favor of the Spanish regime; to become a Protestant meant one was a party to United States annexation; becoming a believer in Regla de Ocha was to assume elements of slavery, and affiliation with Vodú was the same as calling oneself a foreigner. (Argüelles Mederos and Hodge Limonta 1991: 177–178)

The eastern rural zone of Cuba, an area harshly affected by the cruelty and bloodshed of the war, was described as undergoing a “spiritual epidemic,” as people turned to Espiritismo and supernatural solutions to their suffering. By the 1880s Espiritismo had spread throughout the island, provoking its condemnation by the Cuban Catholic hierarchy. A vigorous Espiritista defense of the doctrine emerged in numerous publications from 1879 to 1890, as Espiritismo centers were established throughout the country (Argüelles Mederos and Hodge Limonta 1991: 178). The simplicity of its ritual and the possibility of direct communication with the spirits of the dead help explain Espiritismo’s rapid diffusion, especially in a period of social crisis. Before long, however, this option, outside traditional Catholi-

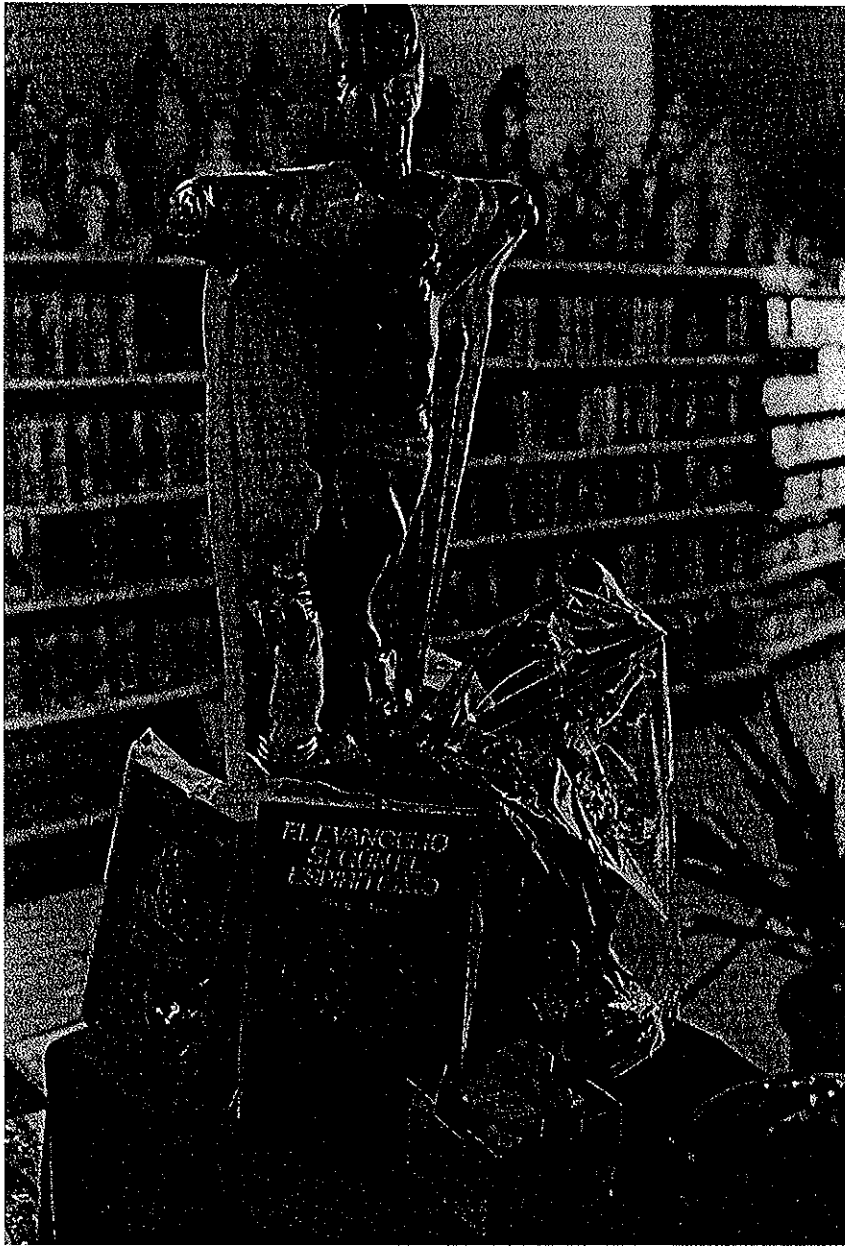
cism but also distinct from African-based creeds, began to incorporate elements of both in its rituals, expanding and creolizing the original Kardecian concepts with local nuances that evolved into three principal Cuban variants: “Scientific” or “Table” Espiritismo (sometimes referred to as “White Table”), *Espiritismo de Cordón* or “Cord Spiritism” (practitioners are called *cordoneros*), and *Espiritismo Cruzao* [*cruzado*], “Crossed [Mixed] Spiritism.”

“Scientific” or “Table” Espiritismo

“Scientific” or “Table” Espiritismo, originally an urban practice, closely follows Kardecian concepts; practitioners consider themselves scientists and study the writings of Kardec and others as part of their practice. The practice derives its name from the fact that believers are seated at a table, usually covered with a white cloth, from which they invoke and communicate with the spirits in a *séance*. Considered by practitioners to be a scientific philosophy rather than a religion and a more rigorous and elevated form of Spiritism than the others, the rituals are carried out by mediums who have demonstrated their “faculties” or abilities with respect to communication with the spirits. Those present, who do not share these faculties, nonetheless consult the spirits when they manifest themselves through the mediums, to ask questions and request solutions to different problems. Followers assume a meditative position and use music, hymns, readings of prayers from Kardec’s works (typically from his *Selectea Prayers* or his *Gospel according to Spiritism*, known as the *Evangelio*), and poetry during typical Table Espiritista sessions. Such sessions usually consist of small groups, although private consultations also exist. Spirits will manifest themselves differently depending on the level of the spirit: elevated spirits will communicate verbally in a refined and dignified manner, while the less evolved spirits’ language will reflect their lower status. The abrupt or brusque movements generally associated with spirit possession are not usually evidenced in this type of spirit communication.

Espiritismo de Cordón

Espiritismo de Cordón derives its name from the form of its ritual: believers stand in a circle, hand in hand, then they turn and walk counterclockwise, chanting and praying, beating the floor forcefully with their feet, and swinging their arms intensely and rhythmically until they fall



Kardec's *Evangelio* in a Boston botánica. Photo courtesy of the artist Héctor Delgado.

into a trance. While maintaining elements of Kardecian Spiritism, *Espiritismo de Cordón* also assimilates elements of folk Catholicism and to some extent trance aspects of African creeds. Healing is the principal focus of its practitioners; the prestige of a medium is generally based on the extent of his or her skill in solving problems. According to Joel James Figarola, the Cordón variant evolved in the provinces of Oriente and Camaguey from several sources. Among these were the Congo funeral rites in which the recently dead were invoked collectively by a group of people forming a circle to question if the deceased had left items to be resolved on earth (dead ancestors of the recently dead were also invoked to assist the deceased in his or her first entry into the other world). Historical events originating during the Ten Years' War in which the insurgent civilian population was slaughtered ferociously by Spanish forces also inspired aspects of *Espiritismo de Cordón*. The terror created by the repeated massacres and the distance of the civilian population from the combating Cuban forces created a sense of peril, insecurity, and outbreaks of collective hysteria. Cordón ceremonies in which whites held hands under the guidance of their former Congo servants to invoke the spirits, hoping to discover the fate of family members or friends fighting in combat, or their own, offered solace to the besieged population (1999b: 136).²

Cordón Spiritism does not have a uniform or structured set of beliefs; cures are stressed over theory, and elements of possession analogous to those of the African-based religions combine with ideas considered scientific, distancing the practice from the "superstitions" and "fetishism" of the "blacks" and the authority and classist nature of the "whites" represented by Catholicism, uniting in one practice what Cubans are more likely to accept: "a Catholicism removed from the Church, a simplified system of spiritual beliefs, and a trance similar to that of the Africanized religions" (Millet 1996: 15–16). And, like all *Espiritista* practice, it is open: initiation rites are not required in order to actively participate in all the rituals, as distinct from the Afro-Cuban religions. There is no official clergy in *Espiritismo*. The principal or Head Medium directs the "temple," an informal ritual space, and conducts the spiritual work, although he or she is usually not included in the human "chain" during the session. Other levels of medium participation are the strong ("fuerte") mediums with specific faculties of development, and simple or ordinary mediums, with less developed faculties.

In a typical *Espiritista* center of the Cordón variety the altar occupies a large area, designed with the intervention of the spirits. The space has

been ritually purified to dispel evil spirits; the entryway is protected by means of a large bowl of water. All who enter must wet their hands as a precaution, to avoid the spiritual contamination of the space with the entry of malevolent spirits. A table covered with a white cloth holds a large glass of water in the center directed toward the spirit guides of the temple. There are additional glasses of water as well; the mediums, apart from their individual spirit guides, make contact with the spirit guide or protector (discussed below) of the temple director as well. The spirits of the dead are usually grouped into so-called *comisiones* or commissions, a grouping based on race, origin, or similar cause of death.³

Underneath the table a bowl of water is placed to gather the harmful thoughts of those who arrive in search of cleansing or healing. Generally characterized by sobriety and economy, the *Cordón* centers will probably also include photos of deceased mediums, friends, and family members who were important in the work of the mediums in the temple, and lithographs of the Virgin Mary and of Catholic saints (in front of the photos of deceased mediums and of the saints one might find a glass of water and flowers, as it is believed that flowers strengthen the spirits and water offers clarity). Among the saints an image of Saint Lazarus might be included, for example, but not in the representation of Babalú Aye as in *Regla de Ocha*; believers energetically refute any connection to the Afro-Cuban religions in their *Cordón* practice.

The spiritual work is accomplished by contacting the spirits, which is begun at the table. At the beginning of the ritual sessions prayers are said to obtain God's permission to form the *cordón* and works by Allan Kardec are read to invoke the dead. After the prayers, the mediums rise and form a type of circular chain, holding hands and thus creating the circular cord that passes a "mediumistic fluid" (*fluido*) through the human chain.⁴ The leader begins a chant and the rest respond with a rhythmic chorus, repeating it over and over again. Guttural sounds accompany the rhythm of the chants, deep breathing, and contrapuntal movements of the arms as the members of the group forcefully hit the floor with their feet. The Head Medium will guide the session, at times interrupting the cord to direct them to place their hand on the ground and lightly touch the floor with the tips of their fingers without breaking the chain and raise their hands to the heavens. According to Roger Bastide, the breathing and stamping sound patterns are akin to the sounds produced by the drumming and chanting in African cults, creating a hypnotic effect. And despite the denial of any African influences by *cordonero* practitioners, "It is clear that what

we have here is a reinterpretation of the African ancestor-cult and cult of the dead through Allan Kardec's spiritualism" (1971: 168).⁵ The work continues until the mediums go into trance and explain the source of a person's problems. Healing may take any one of several modalities, including a *despojo* (spiritual purification/cleansing), baths and/or *santiguación* (massage/blessing), discussed below.

El Espiritismo Cruzao (Crossed)

As Joel James Figarola and others make clear, none of the Cuban religious systems can be considered in isolation, nor are they encountered in "pure" form; one must approach them with the intent of finding mutual mixed or overlapping tendencies, or both, and affinities. The name of the third major Cuban Espiritista variant, *El Espiritismo Cruzao* (Crossed), illustrates this concept. A combination of the other variants of Cuban Espiritismo and the traditional Afro-Cuban religions—especially the *Regla de Palo Monte*—and folk Catholicism, it is one of the most widespread Espiritismo practices on the island. In addition to the elements described above in the scientific and *Cordón* variants, Espiritismo Cruzao includes the *Regla de Palo* cauldron, *Eleguá* artifacts, the sacrifice of animals, the representation of Catholic saints, offerings of fruits and sweets, considerable use of tobacco smoke to invoke the spirits and elicit the trance state with the assistance of the medium's spirit guides, cologne (typically *Agua Florida* or Florida Water), candles and flame, all meant to attract and please the spirits exhibiting the "diverse forces that are part of the work" (Millet 1996: 27). Among the spirits received by a medium there will commonly be an African slave, generally a Congo, who speaks in the typical broken Spanish *bozal* that she or he might have used in life. The practice is not exclusivist: if during the ritual the proceedings are deemed too "weak," followers might form a cord in the *cordonero* fashion to strengthen the spiritual flow. Healing is an important element for the *Espiritista cruzao*; private spiritual consultations are also provided by esteemed and proven mediums.

One of the more important ceremonies is the syncretic *Misa Espiritual* (Spiritual Mass), the Espiritista ceremony that precedes the initiation of *Regla de Ocha* novices to invoke beneficent spirits and exclude maleficent or "intranquil" ones who may "contaminate" or impair the spiritual work (see chapter 2 on *Santería/Regla de Ocha*). The Mass for the Dead carried out by devotees of Espiritismo (and in many cases of *Santería*) is a crucial

Espiritista ceremony that merges several religions.⁶ A table called a *bóveda* (crypt or vault) dedicated to one's personal ancestors (found in the homes of most Afro-Cuban religious practitioners), covered with a white cloth symbolizing purity is located in a space that has already been ritually purified with herbs to alienate "perturbing" or negative spirits; all present must bless and cleanse themselves with water before the *bóveda* prior to the ceremony. Goblets of water, lit candles that "give light" or illuminate the path of the spirit toward a joyful afterlife, photos of the deceased, and cologne applied to family members and participants are all meant to attract the spirit of the dead who has made his or her desire to communicate with the living evident in dreams or visions. The dead continue to be seen as important family members who can intervene in the affairs of the living. Communication with deceased family members consoles those who believe that a connection is still possible and each can affect the other: spirits can be elevated, thanks to the mass, to a higher status in the otherworldly spirit hierarchy. After contacting the deceased through the medium, a meal is shared and a sense of peace and joy often animates family members who have celebrated the departed.

According to Jorge and Isabel Castellanos, the Misa Espiritual is a crucial part of Afro-Cuban religions nowadays; indeed, many practitioners and spiritual leaders of Regla de Ocha, Regla de Palo, and the other Cuban Reglas are also Spiritist mediums. As Lydia Cabrera's informants in *El monte* declared: "Ocha or Palo . . . doesn't it come to the same thing? Spirits all! Doesn't one fall into trance with the saint as with the dead? In religion everything is to do with the dead. The dead become saints." As Cabrera explains, "saints and spirits are daily visitors in the houses of the Cuban people" (1983: 31). Honoring the dead has always been an essential element of Afro-Cuban practices. The dead (*egun*) play a fundamental role in the Congo Reglas and, as we observed in the discussion of Santería/Regla de Ocha in chapter 2, before the orishas are honored the ancestors must be propitiated, whether they are blood relations or of one's religious lineage. Egun shrines are located at ground level inside the house, in the bathroom or basement, or outside.⁷ During a Misa Espiritual the spirits who speak are not necessarily one's ancestors; they may be any of a range of spirit guides and protectors. Food offerings on the *bóveda* reflect the syncretism of Egun veneration and Spiritism: "spiritual" items—incense, candles, tobacco smoke, cologne, and prayer—are offered to the spirits while food and other "material" offerings are made to the dead.

Given this history it is understandable that Espiritismo would exert such a powerful influence on Cuban society. As Castellanos and Castellanos observe, the Spiritual Mass is noteworthy because, while not a Spiritist session per se, it merges Espiritismo, Catholicism, and the Afro-Cuban religions in its ritual, fusing the diverse elements of the "Cuban cultural continuum":

Of European origin, believers of orishas and ngangas celebrate it. It uses crucifixes, cane liquor and tobacco. Spanish and *bozal* are spoken. Our Fathers are prayed, hymns to the "beings" [spirits], and all during a ceremony that precedes the installation of the orisha Ochún in initiation. To the *ashé* of the Lukumí and Congo religions are added that of the Catholic Church and the occult forces of Espiritismo. That is Cuba or, at least, a part of Cuba. (1992, 3: 202)

The presence of Espiritista centers in Cuba grew throughout the country at the beginning of the twentieth century, with contacts established between Cuban and other Latin American Espiritistas. The Sociedad Espirita de Cuba (Cuban Spiritist Society) was founded in 1915 and held its first Congress in 1920, demonstrating a considerable presence on the island; in 1936 the societies of all the Cuban provinces were grouped under the Federación Nacional Espirita (National Spiritist Federation) to organize national meetings and events, especially in Bayamo, Camagüey, and Havana, where most of the societies existed at the time. Local and popular Espiritista centers, not usually formally affiliated with the organized "scientific" societies, also continued to flourish (Argüelles Mederos and Hodge Limonta 1991: 183–184). After the Cuban Revolution in 1959, Espiritistas continued to practice their beliefs in Cuba; with recent economic hardships, an increased religiosity has been noted in the country and Espiritismo maintains a presence in Cuban society, predominantly in terms of its healing and charitable work.

Puerto Rican Espiritismo

As in the case of nineteenth-century Cuban Espiritismo, educated Puerto Ricans opposed to the Spanish colonial regime perceived the Espiritismo doctrines of justice and charity to be inspirational in their quest to liberate the island from Spain and its oppressive institutions. Organized in secret

—those who were discovered were arrested and prosecuted by the government for their affiliation with “revolutionary factions,” and condemned and ostracized by the Catholic Church—the movement grew nevertheless. Espiritista ideas had entered Puerto Rico just as they had in Cuba: the sons of the middle class who returned home from study abroad in Europe imported Allan Kardec’s ideas, which took root in the Puerto Rican intellectual community. Kardec’s books entered the island clandestinely, as was the case with so much of the contraband that entered a colony living under the rigid, monopolistic control of the Spanish colonial regime.

The movement spread despite repression by government and Church authorities, creating Espiritista centers throughout the island. The earliest of these is believed to be “Luz del Progreso” (Light of Progress) founded in 1888 in Mayagüez. Espiritistas encouraged educational and health care reforms, organized libraries, established numerous newspapers and magazines, founded several health care facilities, including free hospitals (at a time when the public welfare system was neglected by the colonial government), children’s homes, libraries, and courses of study. In short, Espiritista centers promoted progressive intellectual and moral standards as Puerto Ricans struggled for political reform.⁸ When the Treaty of Paris ended the Cuban-Spanish-American War in 1898, giving the United States direct control of Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines (the United States invaded and took over the island of Puerto Rico just six months after Puerto Rican liberal politicians had finally wrested autonomy from Spain), Espiritistas were allowed to openly espouse their doctrine under the First Amendment guarantees. In 1903 the Spiritist Federation of Puerto Rico was founded to unite and organize Espiritismo centers and societies, and to develop the movement further.

While Puerto Rican Espiritismo in the Kardecian scientific mode began as a middle-class movement dedicated to the progressive moral and social development of the society as a whole, another variant of Puerto Rican Spiritism emerged among the urban and rural lower classes. Referred to by Mario Núñez Molina as “indigenous Espiritismo” (1987, 2001) and by others as “popular Spiritism”⁹ (disparagingly referred to by the scientific Spiritists as *espiriteros*), this Espiritismo was centered on “a framework for understanding healing and treating illness” (Núñez Molina 2001: 117).¹⁰ As Núñez Molina explains, this “indigenous Espiritismo” combines the native healing systems of the Taino (Arawak) Indians of the island—represented by the medicine man or shaman called the *bohique* who prayed to the spirits using massage, tobacco, herbs, and magic to effect cures—

and the herbal medicine and folk healing practices of both the Spaniards and the enslaved Africans. All these were syncretized to create an indigenous, healing-oriented, popular Espiritismo which “integrates different healing systems and religious traditions that had evolved in Puerto Rico for hundred of years,” providing a coherent worldview (2001: 118). Koss-Chioino notes that the spread of Spiritism in the latter part of the nineteenth century was partly the result of the disenfranchisement of popular folk healers—*curanderos* (faith/folk healers), *sobadores* (massage healers), and *comadronas* (midwives)—by the new Spiritism supported by a “scientific” discourse, and by the harassment of the Catholic Church and the *protomedicates*, the licensing boards established by the Spanish colonial regime in 1844. “The Spiritist medium took over the social role of the *curandero* (or rather the latter became an Espiritista)” (Koss-Chioino 1992: 13).

“Indigenous Espiritismo” is therefore autochthonous to Puerto Rico and not a European import. It is also the most popular variant of Espiritismo on the island. Núñez Molina describes Espiritismo as a “community healing system” and like others regards it as an important mental health resource for Puerto Ricans, a healing alternative.

Certainly Kardec may have provided the intellectual aspect of Espiritismo through his books. . . . But one cannot ignore the fact that a linkage to this type of tradition of practices and visions existed since the early days of the island. It is in the space inhabited by Espiritista altars where resistance is maintained because this is the space of the people. That is where one perceives the mingling of the Indian, the Black and the *jíbaro* [peasant]. It is the space of constant germination, of fecundation that leads to thoughts of the new space that is America. (Suárez Rosado 1992: 125)

Puerto Rican “scientific” or White Table Espiritismo closely follows its Kardecian counterparts in Cuba and elsewhere in Latin America, seeking to communicate with the spirit world through intermediaries or mediums—a role that anyone with the necessary “faculties” can play—and protection and assistance in dealing with *pruebas*, life’s tests or trials. The spiritual development of human beings and of spirits entails a reciprocal relationship: both elevated and ignorant spirits require the help of human beings to transcend their limitations, and incarnated beings cannot progress toward higher levels of spiritual development without the assistance of spirits. For White Table practitioners too Espiritismo is more a science

than a religion: dogma and ritualistic cult practices are against Espiritismo's "true" principles. They gather for Espiritismo sessions in centers called "schools" and "institutes" lacking the paraphernalia found in indigenous Espiritismo—incense, candles, anthropomorphic representations of God and the saints, spiritually purified water—for they consider these to be elements of superstition that attract ignorant spirits. Study and moral development are essential; spirit possession is deemphasized.

However, as in Cuba, Espiritismo in Puerto Rico did not restrict itself to the middle classes; the popular classes identified aspects of Espiritismo beliefs with elements of Puerto Rican culture. Spirit belief was already present on the island and had been for a long time. Folk Catholic rituals were introduced into Espiritismo practice: given traditional Catholic teachings, the prospect of communicating directly with guardian angels and saints did not represent a leap of faith, and Espiritismo's philosophy of attaining moral perfection through trials and suffering appealed to those who could appreciate that worldview (Núñez-Molina 1987).

The religious atmosphere on the island was altered once again at the beginning of the twentieth century with the forceful reintroduction of North American Protestantism and a change within the Roman Catholic Church from Spanish domination to an Americanized Roman Catholicism. According to Eduardo Seda, Spiritism, "the psychiatry of the poor" (1973: 119), underwent a revival in Puerto Rico at this time as a result of Puerto Ricans' collective insecurity and the destruction of a sense of community created by the attempted Americanization of Puerto Rican culture and its colonial relationship with the United States (1973: 152).¹¹ For Andrés I. Pérez y Mena and Marta Moreno Vega, however, Espiritismo is not a result of social dysfunction but a continuation of Puerto Rican ancestor worship based on Taino and Afro-Puerto Rican cultures.¹² Their ideas largely correspond with Roger Bastide's assertions that for enslaved Africans Kardecism represented a means by which they could revive their ancestor cult on a "higher level" through a "fashionable theory" that was indulged in by their masters: "if they had simply kept up their ancient customs, they would have been written off as unassimilable savages" (1971: 107). Nineteenth-century upper-class Puerto Ricans turned to French Spiritism to "whitewash" the African and *jíbaro* folk elements of their society with a European practice, although, according to Pérez y Mena, "by practicing Spiritism [they] provided legitimization of the ancestor worship already flourishing in Puerto Rico" (1991: 25).

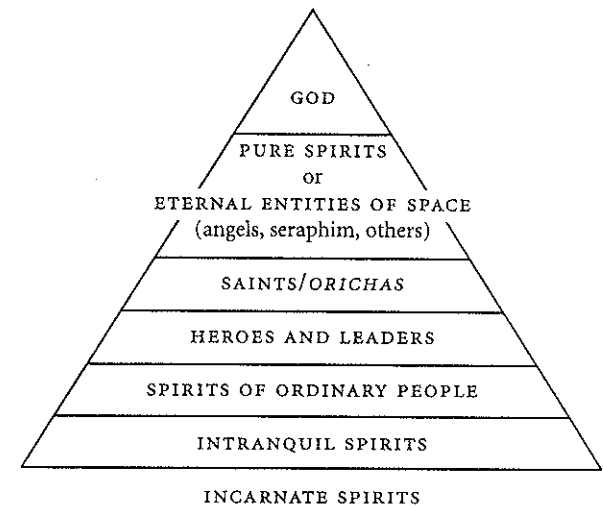
In the twentieth century Puerto Rican Espiritismo continued to creolize further, giving rise to "new forms of the marvellous." Whereas in nineteenth-century Cuba White Table Kardecian doctrines had combined with African-based religions to produce such variations as Espiritismo de Cordón and Espiritismo Cruzao, and Espiritista practices, particularly the Misa Espiritual, became a standard element of Santería/Regla de Ocha ritual, in Puerto Rico this combination of Espiritismo with Santería or other African-based religions came about as a result of the immigration of Cuban exiles to the island subsequent to the Cuban Revolution of 1959. In his 1987 doctoral dissertation Núñez Molina asserted that it was impossible for him to find Spiritist centers in Puerto Rico that integrated Santería into their practices; the indigenous Espiritistas he interviewed did not perceive Santería as representing a higher stage of development. Instead, they related Santería to sorcery and practices that attract ignorant spirits: "As Santería becomes more popular among Puerto Ricans, the practice of indigenous Espiritismo will become more syncretized with Santería" (1987: 132).¹³ Indeed Santería did become popular in Puerto Rico after 1959, facilitating syncretism between popular Espiritismo and Santería.

The same phenomenon is observed among Espiritistas in Puerto Rican communities in the United States: the influence of Cuban exiles in the United States and a syncretized Spiritist practice from Puerto Rico influenced by Cubans in Puerto Rico resulted in the establishment of syncretized Spiritist temples or *centros* (centers) in U.S. Puerto Rican communities. According to Pérez y Mena, the emergence of this variant was tied to the search for ethnic and cultural identity in the Puerto Rican diaspora. Pérez y Mena describes it as one example of the "Afro-Latin" beliefs practiced in the United States, and identifies it as "Puerto Rican Spiritualism"¹⁴ (also referred to by others as "Santerismo"¹⁵ and "Puerto Rican Santería," different names for practices reminiscent of Espiritismo Cruzao in Cuba). African worship became more acceptable in the "mainland" environment than it had been on the island on account of several factors: the popularity in the 1950s of Cuban and Puerto Rican band music which was influenced by Santería chants and instruments and, more significantly, the social consciousness movements in the 1960s in the U.S. Puerto Rican community that identified with African American struggles, leading to a positive reassessment of African cultural identity.¹⁶ As Migene González-Wippler makes clear, however, "all santeros are spiritist (*Espiritistas*), but not all spiritists are santeros" (1989: 274).

An additional observation by Alan Harwood with respect to the blurring of socioeconomic differences as migrants become a minority group in a new setting (observed in the Cuban exile community with regard to the participation of a range of races and classes in the Afro-Cuban religions outside Cuba) is also a key factor in explaining the syncretism of Mesa Blanca and Santería traditions outside the island: whereas in Puerto Rico Mesa Blanca and popular *Espiritismo* are divided along class lines, in New York City and other parts of the Puerto Rican diaspora in the United States, the demographic composition of *Espiritismo* practitioners is more heterogeneous. This is consistent with the socioeconomic realities of the Puerto Rican migration, contributing toward the blending of several traditions:

Since the extremes in class variation that obtain in Puerto Rico are by and large not present in New York, people in the narrower socioeconomic range in New York may, in the absence of the extremes, interact more readily and thus opt for either tradition. This homogenizing factor is further reinforced by the social organization of New York City, where the salient status for Puerto Ricans, regardless of class origin, is their ethnic identity, and sociocultural differences that are relevant on the island become much less important in this new context. . . . Whatever the specific reasons behind the growing syncretism between Mesa Blanca and Santería in New York, however, its effect is that many New York Puerto Ricans are competent in performing the rites of either tradition, and cults that go under the name of either Santería or Mesa Blanca (or *Espiritismo*) in New York are usually a blend of the two traditions. (Harwood 1977: 52)

Harwood conducted the fieldwork for his influential research on *Espiritismo* as a mental health resource for the Puerto Rican community in a low-income area of Manhattan called Washington Heights. There is an abundance here of botánicas¹⁷ or herbal-religious shops and such folk healers as the *santiguadores*, who specialize in setting dislocated bones and in curing a type of indigestion called *empacho* with healing massages, usually in the form of a cross. Harwood participated as a member in the activities of three *Espiritista* centros, one of them Mesa Blanca and two influenced by Santería. They were located in storefronts and the basements of buildings with varying numbers of members ranging from six to forty. Harwood observed several other centros over a two-and-a-half-year period, identifying three fundamental aspects of the phenomenon of Spirit-



Harwood's *Espiritismo* pyramid

ism: "(1) spiritism as an identity, a way in which people can classify and define themselves for others; (2) spiritism as a sub culture, a set of standards for what it is (i.e., beliefs) and what one can do about it (i.e., ritual); and (3) spiritism as a cult, a religious group with a certain structure of social statuses and roles revolving around the central status of medium" (1977: 34–35).

Espiritismo is not exclusivist. Certain Spiritist beliefs are shared among the wider Puerto Rican and non-Puerto Rican cultures (the belief in spirits—*espíritus*—and in the possibility for harm resulting from feelings of envy—*envidia*—or hostility and competitiveness), and adherents are not prevented from practicing other religions. *Espiritismo* represents an alternative doctrine of beliefs and values, with widespread individual variations. Harwood discovered that the Spiritist centro contributed to the psychological and social well-being of its adherents by serving as a voluntary community organization, a religion, and a cultural identity. It provides for many of the needs of Puerto Ricans and other urban Latino migrants (centros in New York City are usually multiethnic in leadership and/or clientele) living in the midst of an alien urban metropolis like New York City.

Harwood's oft-reproduced pyramidal diagram of the spirit hierarchy in Spiritist cosmology is based on concepts generally accepted by all *Espiritistas*. Although Mesa Blanca and Santería worshipers differ in the number

of ranks and the occupants residing in each of the spatial planes, Harwood's diagram portrays a generalized ranking representing "points of agreement" in the two traditions. Intranquil spirits at the lowest level of the spirit hierarchy, bound to the earth after a premature or violent death, or having failed to fulfill their spiritual potential in life—*espiritus poco elevados* or spirits of little enlightenment—are helped to advance to the next spiritual rank by the living—"incarnate spirits"—who recite prayers, light candles, and make offerings. They do so in order to *darle la luz al espíritu*, "give the spirit light" and to prevent sorcerers from employing restless spirits to harm their enemies.

A further division of the spirit world is that of the cadres (*cuadros*) by which each division of the higher-ranking spirits assists those below them in achieving the moral perfection that leads to advancement in spiritual rank. At birth each incarnate spirit receives a guardian angel who assists the person to make right decisions; the guardian angel is aided by lower-ranking incorporeal spirits from within the cadre into which the person was born, all acting as intermediaries to protect incarnate spirits and transmit their supplications to higher spiritual ranks (Harwood 1977: 41–42). This protection is attained through a bond realized in prayers and offerings; the ultimate connection, although less common, is achieved through development (*desarrollo*) as a medium, at which time one acquires an additional spirit guide.¹⁸

The identification of a spirit as either a protector or a *causa* (a spirit that creates problems or misfortune) is determined during trance, the focus of the Espiritista ritual (which is not limited to the mediums; everyone can join in calling the spirits). In a typical Mesa Blanca meeting the Head Medium (*Presidente*), with his or her assistant mediums (*mediunidad*) and the *novicios* (developing mediums) sit around a table. Covering the table is a white cloth upon which are placed a goblet of water and a candle, in the presence of a number of *creyentes* (believers) who have attended to take part in the session (*velada*). Through prayers (usually from Kardec's books and the Apostle's Creed of the Catholic religion) and concentration, the Presidente and the mediums summon the spirits to the table to aid the assembled congregation in their trials and in their relationship to the spirit world.

After an invocation—typically "*Este centro se abre para el bien y se cierra para el mal*" ("This Center is open for goodness and closed for evil")—the spirits will manifest themselves in the mediums: the spirit guide will begin by opening the way for other spirits to manifest themselves with the

guide's protection as the mediums are employed in spirit work. As the spirits manifest themselves in the mediums, the first stage of the healing process, *buscando la causa* (determining the cause of the problem), commences.¹⁹ Mediums display the reception of a spirit by their facial expressions and at times by shuddering and jerky bodily movements; the individual thoughts and feelings of believers are ventilated (such terms as *evidencia*, evidence or proof, and vision are used to describe communication with a spirit); members of the centro and mediums relate to each other in a shared exchange of spirit communication. Once the cause of the illness or predicament is discovered, the Presidente will interrogate and persuade the malevolent spirits (*seres*) to depart from their suffering victim, a process referred to as *trabajando la causa*, "working the cause," to have the spirits lifted (*levantadas*).

Lifting or elevating the spirits is one of the principal healing objectives of Espiritismo. While an individual medium with the help of her or his spirit guides can discover the causas and cleanse the client spiritually, the working or elevation of spirits is generally carried out in a session with other mediums: one will "mount" the *causa*, another medium will interrogate it, and additional mediums present will assist the medium in trance in the event that a troublesome spirit is destructive or aggressive. In the final phase the spirit undergoes a *despojo* or purification wherein it is convinced that it is indeed a spirit and no longer a part of the world of the living, and is taught how to attain a more advanced level of spiritual evolution. The entire group generally participates in the cleansing ceremony.

Espiritismo cult groups vary widely: some are spontaneous, neighborhood-type community groups, meeting in the home of the leader, while others are organized as "churches" in which members pay dues to defray the cost of the center's meetings and celebrations, and occasionally to assist other members. Mediums may serve a healing role in the prescription of herbal and other spiritual remedies—candles, oils, perfumes, baths—available at the botánicas, where one discovers

a seemingly unfathomable mélange of books, statues, herbs, candles, soaps, powders, spiritual lithographs and leaflets—few are aware of their cultural and functional diversity and complexity . . . shelves of multicolored "solutions" in a variety of forms claiming power to effect important changes in one's life—from a remedy for a problematic love life to the cure for a serious illness or relief from distress. . . . [W]ith a pluralistic and eclectic worldview, botánicas are a community enterprise, a heritage and a

symbol of Caribbean cultural healing, a palpable representation of medical *mestizaje*, or syncretism.²⁰

The *Espiritismo* centro does not comprise a ritual family in the sense of the *casa de santo* of Regla de Ocha worship, however. Although the *Presidente* retains control of all the major activities of the centro, clients and mediums who may defect to join other centros or form their own frequently challenge that authority.

Santerismo

Santerismo, as its name suggests, is a merging of *Espiritismo* and *Santería*; the African influence is clearly demonstrated in the connection to the spirit world via the *santos* or *orishas* of the Afro-Cuban religion, considered elevated spiritual beings, as well as to African spirit guides or *Congos*. Santerismo mediums communicate with lower-ranking spirits as well but are possessed by the *orishas* in a ceremony that varies in many respects from that of the *Mesa Blanca*.²¹ One of the first differences one notes is the fact that in Santerismo centros the leader is referred to as the Godfather (*padrino*) or Godmother (*madrina*) as in the *Santería* religious kinship system (but lacking the lifelong bond established in the Afro-Cuban practice) and not as *presidente*. Pérez y Mena has observed a ceremony in which a Godfather stands in red Roman Catholic ecclesiastical vestments placed over white *Santería* garb (used in the latter part of the session), surrounded by “godchildren” dressed in white with colored scarves around their waists. The Godfather prays at the altar and later sits with the mediums at a table where a collective spirit possession session takes place in the midst of music varying from traditional conservative religious music to Afro-Cuban chants praising the *orishas*.

A ritual purification or *despojo* to remove evil influences occurs prior to the ceremony; after the customary invocations through prayer and readings that lead to the attraction of good spirits and possession, the *causa* or spiritual diagnosis takes place followed by the spiritualist cure of “working the spirit.” The meeting may end with a ritual “exorcism” or *despojo* of the entire assembly, achieved through one or more of several methods: the area in which the session is to take place is purified with a type of fumigation called a *sahumerio* consisting of such items as burned charcoal with crushed garlic, incense, and pungent herbs to expel evil influences, and a washing (*riego*) with holy water, herbs, and cologne to attract beneficent

ones. During the ceremony extensive use is made of cigar smoke and/or of fire burning in a flaming pail (a few drops of lit alcohol) to purify the session. The preliminary ritual would include prayers to *Eleguá* to protect the doorway or entrance from intranquil spirits.

A typical Santerismo altar is a paradigm of the creolization process; the Puerto Rican artist and devotee of *Espiritismo* Angel Suárez Rosado describes the space as a reflection of the “aesthetics of accumulation” (1993: 125).²² The white tablecloth touches the floor to communicate with the higher beings; items used for the *Espiritista* session are placed on the table—a cross, a crucifix, goblets of water, pencil, paper, candles, rubbing alcohol, cologne, cigars, and Kardec’s books of prayers. The chairs for the *Presidente* (*Presidente de mesa*) and the mediums are situated at the table in front of an altar which may have several shelves behind it on the wall. A variety of objects are represented on these shelves: another crucifix, flowers, candles, numerous and varied effigies and chromolithographs (*estampas*) of Catholic saints (particularly of the patron saint of the centro). In addition one would probably find the stereotypic representations of various ethnic spirit protector guides of the centro mediums who offer advice, diagnose illnesses, and witness events in the spirit world: the *Madama* dolls, a Black “mammy” type, turbaned and rotund in a gingham dress, representing the *curandera* or faith healer, akin to the West Indian Obeah woman;²³ a North American Plains Indian, male and/or female, with typical headdress, representing a heightened warrior spirituality; the Hindu or Arab, a judicious philosopher spirit; the gypsy (*Gitana* or *Gitano*) who is in touch with the future; a Congo, a wise old African man or woman, familiar with nature, magic, and time-honored healing remedies. The mix of figures is undoubtedly based on healing cult practices from diverse earlier traditions, although one might also see representations of historical heroes.

In centros syncretized with the Orisha traditions the Seven African Powers (*Siete Potencias Africanas*)—*Eleguá*, *Ogún*, *Changó*, *Yemayá*, *Obatalá*, *Ochún*, and *Orula*²⁴—in their Catholic representation and in the colors and attributes²⁵ that symbolize them are also represented at the altar. Santerismo centros vary in their degree of syncretism with Cuban *Santería*. The syncretic process of identifying *orishas* and Catholic saints is also individual and localized: the *orisha* *Orula*, for example, identified with Saint Francis of Assisi in Cuba, is celebrated as Saint John the Baptist, patron saint of the Puerto Rican capital city, among Puerto Ricans in New York City (Pérez y Mena 1991: 45).



Seven African Powers

Water is an essential component for all Espiritistas, to dispel intranquil spirits or petition elevated ones; flowers for the saints and Agua Florida cologne applied on those present serve the purpose of attracting the spirits. Clothing in Santerismo sessions ranges from a simple scarf around the neck or forehead to a complete vestment in the style and color attributed

to a santo; shoes are removed to avoid interrupting the flow of spiritual *fluido* throughout the body. Music dedicated to each of the major orishas (the Seven African Powers, while not referred to as such in Afro-Cuban Santería in Cuba, are often the major saints propitiated in Santerismo ceremonies)²⁶ and the use of their representative *collares* (bead necklaces) in ceremonies prepare the way for the possession of the medium and the manifestation of a spirit. His or her spirit guide(s) will reveal the client's predicament, which is interpreted by the other mediums present. The client's *causa* can now be "worked" with such methods as *pases*, labeled by Harwood as "spirit-inducing movements" (1977: 66), gestures and strokes to the back of a client's head, neck, shoulders, and arms which are then raised above the client's head by the medium and abruptly thrown down so that the "magnetic influences" left by the spirits are removed. In another form of hand passes the medium moves his or her hands several inches from the client's body to come in contact with the client's "aura." He or she then performs a cleansing to rid the client of malevolent spirits and invoke the aid of the client's guardian angel. A water bowl nearby is tapped by the medium periodically during the procedure to release the negative effects of the cleansing into the water.

As we have seen, the principal method of Espiritista therapy is to discover the *causa* and convince the intranquil spirit to depart from its victim. Spiritists are consulted when clients believe that the source of their problems is spiritual or if medical treatment has not proven satisfactory. Once it has been determined through trance that the sources of a client's problems are spiritual—a tormenting, intranquil spirit, difficulty with one's spiritual protectors, human envy, sorcery, a trial or *prueba* sent by God to test one's moral strength—measures are taken to "give light" to spirits in need of elevation and strengthen the relationship with protective ones. The therapy may also include a number of tasks—baths, offerings, or ritual purifications of the home—that actively engage the client in the healing process.

It is generally believed that the two principal origins of spiritual misfortune that would bring a client to a practicing Spiritist are envy or *mala fé* (bad faith) and sorcery (*brujería*). Harwood distinguishes sorcery from witchcraft, the usual translation for *brujería*, because its properties as related to Santerismo are closer to the anthropological definition: "*brujería* involves the manipulation of material objects and spells to work harm, which is the defining property of sorcery, rather than a personal, psychic power which may be used to molest others (witchcraft). In the context of

spiritism *envidia* is closer to the anthropological definition of witchcraft” (1977: 85). The language and techniques of *brujería*—charms made with something belonging to the intended victim and directed to its destination by the medium’s spirit servant (*perro* or dog) summoned in spiritual rites—recall those used in Afro-Cuban *Regla de Palo Monte* ritual activities for creating harmful spells, following Frazer’s concept of contagious magic. Harwood notes, however, that “Mediums who develop relationships with these ‘dark spirits’ are believed eventually to lose their beneficent spiritual guardians—a belief that deters some mediums from practicing sorcery entirely” (1977: 85).²⁷

One of the more common *causas* among people who have problems with personal relationships is the *mala influencia* or evil influence of an attached spirit from a prior existence who impedes the client’s involvement with living persons; the Spiritist must enlighten the spirit and convince it to depart. And another typical *causa* is the suffering of an untrained medium whose *facultades* or mediumistic abilities have not yet been determined. The uncontrolled possession of spirits can cause depression, uncontrolled seizures, and/or repetitive dreams (those focusing on a dead relative who had been a medium in life often confirm the diagnosis). Developing one’s faculties as a medium is the usual recommendation.

Health and Healing

Spiritist “psychotherapy” as a form of indigenous and/or community healing among Puerto Ricans has been studied by Harwood, Koss, Garrison, and Núñez Molina, among others; Koss has traced the history and evolution of Spiritism as therapy in comparison with Euro-American mental health sciences in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries:

if Spiritism had not been arrested in its social evolution by Euro-American cultural imperialism in the medical sciences, it would have developed into a prestigious, more systematic and highly organized social movement instead of the cult religions and occult sciences of its present status in Latin America. Moreover, its better cultural fit as a treatment for many emotional disorders would have enhanced its potential function as a creative ideology and an organization supportive of healthy societal change. . . . [B]oth the psychological sciences and Spiritism share a common

birthright and ultimately derive from parallel intellectual currents of the last half of the eighteenth century. (1977: 23)

The diagnosis of a Spiritist is similar to that of a psychiatric diagnosis in the search for a category to describe a client’s state that would lead to a method of treatment, but it differs in one important respect: “In spiritism, clients do not play an active role in providing the diagnostician with information about their symptoms. It is the diagnostician’s duty to uncover clients’ symptoms” (Harwood 1977: 94). At this point the healer assigns a label (*envidia*, *brujería*, *mala influencia*, and the like) and a treatment procedure. Ignorant or malevolent spirits can cause controlling thoughts and actions called an *obsesión* (obsession), subjecting their victims to physical and psychological disturbances that can range from minor headaches to serious illnesses.

As mainstream psychotherapy has not always been found to be the most effective method in helping people from areas in which traditional and modern cultures coexist, Núñez Molina stresses the need to recognize the value of indigenous healing systems such as *Espiritismo* to improve mental health services for Puerto Ricans on the island and in the United States (2001). Núñez Molina and Harwood have studied the development of Spiritist mediums who, lacking any formal training in psychotherapy, have been found nevertheless to be effective in some cases, either alone or in collaboration with psychotherapists. *Espiritista* healers do not necessarily compete with mental health professionals, but offer complementary services that the community may be unable to receive from professional mental health systems.²⁸

Most studies of *Espiritismo* as therapy deal with the practice as a form of short-term psychotherapeutic crisis intervention to deal with problems related to such interpersonal relationships as the death of a loved one or a life transition. Harwood observes that Spiritist ceremonies shift the locus of responsibility for a client’s behavior outside the client within the spiritual realm, in contrast to mainstream psychiatric therapies that emphasize the client’s responsibility for his or her condition (1977: 190–191). And, compared to psychotherapy, Spiritist therapy does not stigmatize a client as being *loco* (crazy); it is a culturally accepted method of treatment for many in the Puerto Rican community. The fact that the medium-healer shares the client’s ethnicity and culture is another advantage: advice and treatments fall within the shared cultural premises and expectations of the client.

An example of the relationship of *Espiritismo* and psychotherapy is found in the treatment of a common psychiatric diagnosis from the 1950s through the 1980s, the so-called “Puerto Rican Syndrome,” popularly referred to as *ataques de nervios* (nervous attacks), one of the supposedly “culture-bound” illnesses affecting the Puerto Rican community.²⁹ The malady varies in its description according to one’s perspective, be it medical, anthropological, or political. It was first reported among Puerto Rican male patients in U.S. veterans’ hospitals on the island in the 1950s and 1960s; their sudden hostile outbursts and partial loss of consciousness, among other symptoms, were attributed to an inability to adapt to the “highly competitive culture” of the U.S. military and to child-rearing practices that created “personality deficits” in Puerto Rican men (De La Cancela, Guarnaccia, and Carrillo 1986: 436–437). In the 1970s and early 1980s, Latino mental health professionals began to describe *ataques* as a social phenomenon, a culturally sanctioned response to stressful situations. Among medical anthropologists, connections were drawn during the same period that linked manifestations of the *ataque*—seizures, aggression, and dissociation at “inappropriate times,” observed in some members of the Puerto Rican community (particularly women)—and Puerto Rican *Espiritismo* (linking spirit possession with the exhibited behavior).

From a feminist perspective, the *ataques* were considered a reaction to machismo, “the idiom by which further male violence is prevented or by which women attempt to extricate themselves from untenable situations and gain caring attention” (De La Cancela, Guarnaccia, and Carrillo 1986: 441). And within a wider framework that includes other U.S. Latinos, *ataques de nervios* have been viewed as a symptom of colonialism and dependence: “the triggering of *ataques*, the behaviors manifested in them, and the impact they have on others is understood through socioeconomic circumstances of colonialism experienced by *ataques* sufferers. *Ataques de nervios* provide Puerto Rican and other Latinos opportunities for displacement of anger, secondary gains, and direct rebellion against repressive conditions” (De La Cancela, Guarnaccia, and Carrillo 1986: 432). Spiritist therapy and rehabilitation for those who suffer such emotional illnesses have been successfully utilized in collaboration with mainstream mental health therapies: “since non-pharmacological psychotherapy depends heavily for its efficacy on the words, acts, and rituals of the participants, spiritist therapy has the particular merit of allowing both healer and sufferer to deal with the latter’s problems within a shared symbolic framework” (Harwood 1977: 20).

Espiritista “healing dialogues” with tormenting spirits are used to deal with problems in personal relationships—the inability to form a lasting romantic attachment, for example—a recurring dream of a dead family member, or a chronic incapacitating malaise preventing one from leading a productive life, the types of problems that would precede a visit to an *Espiritista* healer. In his study of a Puerto Rican town in the early 1960s, Eduardo Seda observed the social functions of the practice in the community and noted the “psychodrama” of one type of Spiritist therapy in which “the spiritist session places the intrapsychic conflict of the patient in a drama in which the spirit demands reparations for offenses committed by the patient” (1973: 117). The following is an excerpt from one session included in Seda’s study in which the temple president Don Perico, the second president Tulio Gerena, Doña Felipa, an eighty-year-old woman suffering from leg cramps she attributed to the actions of tormenting spirits, several middle-aged mediums, and a congregation of believers all participated. The session began with an invocation by Don Perico who read from Kardec’s *Gospel according to Spiritism*. He asked God to open the temple for healings, and requested that “the spirits that come to this temple and take part in this table not be able to leave taking anyone who has come here. The spirits have to be admonished so that they never come back again.” At this point Doña Felipa fell into trance.

Felipa: (shaking and lamenting bitterly): Forgive me, Father.

Tulio: (to mediums): Come on now, come on, all right. Rub her hands real hard.

Perico: Now raise your hands up high, and don’t bring them down till all those things have gone away. Ask God’s forgiveness.

Felipa: (yelling): My God, forgive me! Oh Lord, forgive me! . . .

Tulio: Go away! Go on, leave! . . .

Perico: May you find a happy future for yourself and for your children. I want you to do something for her, but she has many faults against her since she did not fulfill her obligations. (To mediums assisting him) Keep it up, go on till it has left. Let’s go, keep it up, go away, put your hands on the table. . . . Detach yourself from her. Don’t you hear me? . . . She’s crying now. She realizes that she’s made a mistake, and she knows that she has to be good. It happens to us all.

Felipa: Oh Lord, forgive me! My God, forgive me! (She continues, crying and sobbing in great despair.)

Perico: You have to cure yourself, and you don’t have to cry. Leave her

now. I tell you, don't make her cry like that, more and more. Do as I say, come over here, so that you can find happiness for your children, as I've always encouraged. (The congregation joins him in the Our Father.) (1973: 120–121)

An excerpt from Pérez y Mena's report of a New York *Espiritismo* centro session describes a dialogue with the causa of a young woman who had been suffering from serious emotional problems. After having undergone the purification the young woman was unwilling to reply in either Spanish or English and the Godfather addressed her mother:

Godfather: When did you, after having this female child, think that she was crazy (*estaba loca*)? . . . You began to think this at about what age?

Mother: At about 10 years of age. (Mediums and congregation at this point in unison say "Proven!" "Comprobado!" Some gasping and marveling at the Godfather's pinpointing the problem via the spirits . . .

Godfather: To how many Spiritists (Spiritualists) did you take this young woman to have her cured?

Mother: Many.

Godfather: Then you were of the faith? You left the faith! (Here the audience gasped—"Proven!") . . . This daughter suffered a frightful experience; they tried to do her a harm. (*Un daño* means specifically rape or sexual abuse.)

Mother: Yes, that is the way it was. (Congregation responds dramatically with "Proven!" . . .

Godfather: You have to walk the streets looking for her.

Mother: Yes. (Mediums got frenzied and again demanded that the young woman not look at the Godfather and that the mother keep her hands on the water. Both mother and daughter had their hands atop water goblets. (1991: 90–91).

The mother left, hoping that the Godfather would help her deal with a troubled loved one whose life had been severely harmed by a childhood experience of sexual abuse.

Family influence often leads people to become followers or healers in a belief system such as *Espiritismo*.³⁰ The decision to develop one's faculties as a medium is usually preceded by a serious illness, an "initiatory illness," as described by Koss-Chioino (1992), or by some type of personal crisis; the advent of a life-threatening experience has been the route to initiation

into the healer role in many cultures (Lewis 1971). Thus, for example, the Spiritist medium in New York City interviewed by Carolyn Prorok who leads Santerismo ceremonies in her home was severely burned in a fire as a child and was also saved from drowning; both events, she believed, were signs that she was chosen to serve the saints (Prorok 2000). A client exhibiting the behavior associated with *ataques de nervios* may be told that she or he is in fact a medium who has not developed the faculties for communicating with spirits, particularly if she or he is inordinately sensitive to others or has obsessive ideas or dreams. Such a person will receive a recommendation to become an apprentice medium to a more developed and experienced one.

Typical of the "initiatory illness" experience, an alteration of everyday consciousness "is the "deathlike state" or experience of death and rebirth observed in religious healing in many cultural contexts. It is the initial step to personal transformation and a sense of mission to help other sufferers. The "wounded" healer heals herself while helping others (Koss-Chioino 1992: 37):

Anna was twenty-two years old when the spirits literally "threw her to the floor." Her family described these as "convulsive attacks" that did not appear to be epilepsy. As a result, Anna began to frequent Spiritist *centros* and often "transformed into other people." She said she actually took on the personalities of other people. . . . After a while, she stopped going to the *centros* because she "did not like the way they worked."

Later, Anna again took the healer role in a *centro* in Puerto Rico, one that conformed more to Kardecian practice. She was observed having the same sort of "convulsive attacks," but they did not lead to possession by spirit beings. During these attacks, the other mediums merely left her alone unless she became aggressive which sometimes occurred, and then they would exert control over her through their *guías*. At other times, she became possessed in the accepted way; spirits spoke through her with "great clarity." (Koss-Chioino 1992: 35)

Most researchers have noted that the outcome of Spiritist healing intervention has been approximately the same as that of patients treated by mainstream psychologists, but with a difference—Spiritist practice prefers the idea of "healing" (*sanar*) rather than "curing." "Healing" means accepting and living with wounds as well as changing the perceptions of distress" (Koss-Chioino 1992: 199).³¹ Not a single treatment for disease or distress,

Spiritism is an ongoing process toward personal transformation and evolution of the self.

Both psychological and traditional healers intend to work with elements of self beyond those that are conscious and visible, beyond verbal expressions and behavior: psychiatrists use “psyche” or “personality,” psychologists use the “unconscious” . . . and Spiritists work with “spirits.” All of these are culturally constituted constructs about human “beings” that structure individuals’ awareness about themselves (Koss-Chioino 1992: 200).

In Brazil, Spiritist medicine rivals that of the medical profession. Hess has observed that a substitution of “unconscious” for imperfect spirits would lead to the realization of how close Kardec’s nineteenth-century discourse on spirits and spirit possession is to that of modern psychiatry; Spiritism occupied an “interstitial space” between the popular healing practices and the medical orthodoxies of the time. Hess’s comments regarding Brazil, a South American country that is “one of the world’s richest laboratories of religious syncretism” (1991: 2), are also applicable in the Caribbean context:

“Interstitial” seems to be the appropriate term for Spiritist doctrine in general. Spiritism occupies the space between existing institutional and ideological boundaries, between popular healing and orthodox medicine, between Catholicism and Protestantism, and among the various reformist and utopian movements of the day. If one were to skip ahead to Brazil, the word “syncretic” would perhaps be a more appropriate adjective. Indeed, the ideological multiplicity and flexibility of Spiritist doctrine was clearly a factor behind its enormous success in this Afro-Latin country. (Hess 1991: 79)

Women and Espiritismo

It has been observed that in general women are more actively involved as mediums and as participants in Espiritista centros (although not necessarily in leadership positions) and adhere for a longer period to Spiritualist solutions than men. “Thus men as Spiritist healers (although there are fewer of them than women) are usually leaders and organizers of *centros*,

while women carry out most of the healing work by taking spirits into their bodies” (Koss-Chioino 1992: 33). Harwood notes that in a Spiritist Puerto Rican family the wife/mother’s responsibilities are to the spiritual as well as the material needs of the home. Her spiritual duties include a periodic spiritual cleansing with smoke or *sahumerio* followed by a washing or *riego* to prevent or dispel evil influences; the use of incense, flowers, or candles to attract the spirits; and the maintenance of a home altar similar to those seen in Espiritismo centers. Glasses of water are regularly replaced on the altar and in other parts of the home (1977: 144–145).

And in a manner analogous to other possession cults, Espiritismo confers a special status on mediums in the community. When Harwood’s book was published in 1977, he noted that this status transformation most directly affected Puerto Rican women who, given their subordinate position in Puerto Rican patriarchal society, had fewer outlets than men to achieve formal leadership roles in other Hispanic religious organizations. Harwood suggested that the importance of mediumship as a path to prestige would decline among Puerto Rican women as they progressively achieved a higher status in the occupational sphere (1977: 183).

In Puerto Rico the experienced Espiritista healer is much sought after; one such healer was influential in the research path of Mario Núñez Molina. Raised in a family and community of strong Espiritista believers in Lares, Puerto Rico, as a boy Núñez Molina suffered from a serious condition that doctors claimed would require surgery.³² In desperation his parents turned to an Espiritista healer named Gumersindo:

The first thing he did was to put a cup of water on a table. Then he laid his hand on my head and stomach, performing several *pases* (spiritual cleansings). After this, he took the cup of water and said to me: “Drink it, thinking you will be cured.” I drank the water as he told me, believing it to be the medicine I needed to be healed. The last thing I remember from this experience was my parents asking Gumersindo, “How much do we owe you?” He responded: “It is free. The healing power has come from God and the good spirits. I am not responsible for it. Your child has been cured.” He was right: from that moment my health problems completely disappeared. This pivotal healing experience motivated me to study the therapeutic dimensions of Espiritismo. It also contributed significantly to the development of my experiential approach to the study of this healing system. (2001: 122)

Typically there was no charge for Espiritista healing services: it was considered a gift of God. As a student conducting fieldwork, Núñez Molina sought out the work of Doña Gela, a Puerto Rican Espiritista healer renowned in her community for her “spiritual injections.” Although skeptical at first, the researcher soon discovered for himself the authenticity of her unusual therapeutic approach. While Núñez Molina observed the Espiritista-client relationship at the Center, Doña Gela noted that he appeared tired and began to massage his back and stomach, administering one of her spiritual injections. Attempting to maintain his objectivity as a researcher, he nevertheless reacted to them. “It was somewhat painful. I told Doña Gela: ‘These injections are too strong.’ Everybody in the room began to laugh, and Doña Gela smiled at me, continuing her massage. When she finished, I looked at my stomach and arm and saw three red dots at the places in my body where I had been ‘injected.’” (2001: 123).

Women such as Doña Gela are also protagonists in Puerto Rican and Cuban fictional writing on the island and in the Diaspora. While the theme of Espiritismo may have inspired fewer artistic works than Santería and Vodou,³³ those that exist are just as revealing of cultural norms. This is exemplified by the novel, autobiographical narratives,³⁴ and short stories of U.S. Puerto Rican author Judith Ortiz Cofer and *Botánica* (1990), a play by the Cuban-American dramatist Dolores Prida.³⁵

Ortiz Cofer’s novel *The Line of the Sun* (1989) and Dolores Prida’s *Botánica* reflect these trends in the female characters. In the novel, the rebellious healer/witch “La Cabra” is the town’s most sought after medium, practicing an Espiritismo combined with Santería, one of the “new ways” she had learned in New York (1989: 25). La Cabra’s sexual fascination for the males is matched by the envy and fear she produces in the female population of the small Puerto Rican town (leading to her rejection and expulsion from the community). The novel’s narrator-protagonist’s mother Ramona transports her family’s Espiritista beliefs to their immigrant home in New Jersey, with disastrous results.

In Prida’s play the protagonist Doña Geno, owner of a New York botánica that blends Espiritismo and Santería, cures a variety of ills with healing modalities that combine Espiritismo, Santería, traditional and New Age herbalism, folk psychology, and a hefty dose of common sense. In the following excerpt, written with Prida’s characteristic blend of humor and wit, the protagonist greets a familiar female client who enters the botánica in search of a remedy for her husband’s indifference, an attitude that the client attributes to fading attractiveness:

Luisa: My hair. In the last few months it’s been falling out, it’s become dull, flat. And I had such a beautiful head of hair! . . . What would you recommend, Doña Geno?

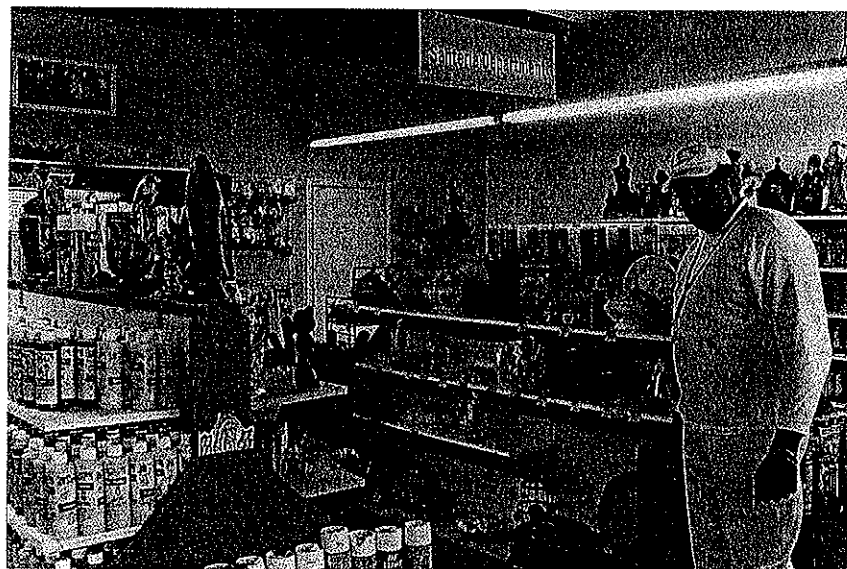
Geno: *Sábila*. The *americanos* call it “aloe vera.” I have it in liquid, gelatin, and capsules. . . . Child, it’s been proven that aloe vera has medicinal properties for the treatment of arthritis, high blood pressure, asthma, vaginitis, bedwetting, warts, hemorrhoids, athlete’s foot, boils, colitis, diarrhea, constipation, flu, apoplexy, dandruff, toothache and . . . baldness! But that’s not all. Aloe vera is also a cleansing, refreshing and moisturizing nutrient for the skin. It stimulates the pancreas, repels insects, and eliminates foot odor; it helps you lose weight, it’s a hair conditioner, and a powerful sexual stimulant.

Luisa: Heavens! Give me six bottles of the liquid, six jars of the gelatin and four bottles of capsules!

Geno: Just in case, I suggest that you burn this “Perpetual Help” incense several times a day, and put a few drops of this “Come with Me” essence in your bath water. I prepare it myself. Also, jot down this spiritual prescription to bring good luck to your home. Listen carefully. Take an egg, tie a piece of white and a piece of blue ribbon around it, put a few drops of your regular lotion . . . place the egg on a dish and light up a red candle. Say three Lord’s Prayers and blow the candle out. Place the egg at the foot of your bed all night. Next day, pick it up and throw it into the river.³⁶

From the perspective of language the two works share important characteristics. The authors of *The Line of the Sun* (in English but with Espiritista terminology in Spanish) and *Botánica* (presented in Spanish with English words and phrases interspersed throughout) both feel confident that their reader/audience does not require religious terms associated with either Espiritismo or Santería to be translated. These generally remain unexplained: a Latino public knows either firsthand or indirectly of the unusual spiritual spells or cures referred to in the works. Indeed it is unusual to encounter anyone from the Caribbean (and increasingly from the wider U.S. culture) who has not heard of such practices.

But beyond the novel and the play’s compassionate vision of ethnic identity and generational conflicts of the type frequently found in U.S. Latino writing, poignant gender issues are also an important theme in their works: the spiritual leaders in these unorthodox practices as well as the nontraditional healers in both works are women. The fact that the



A botánica in Boston and its proprietor, Steve Quintana. Photo courtesy of the artist Héctor Delgado.

proprietor and unofficial “therapist” of Prida’s folk pharmacy-cum-store-cum-temple is female, as are many of those who enter in search of such medical and/or spiritual advice and “ritual therapy” (men, of course, are not entirely absent), is authentic representation. Having played an important role in folk and spiritual healing for centuries, it is not unusual to encounter women managing or presiding over such establishments or in comparable healing venues.

Unfortunately, as portrayed in Ortiz Cofer’s novel, they have endured an unequal share of the vilification and victimization traditionally associated with such practices. The women in these works are healers in the above-mentioned *curanderismo* tradition, which is in fact a complex cultural healing system with common roots in healing modalities found throughout the Caribbean and Latin America. It combines Hippocratic humoral (hot-cold) theories of disease with Amerindian herbal medicine and diverse spiritual traditions ranging from African-based systems to the Spiritist philosophy of Allan Kardec which inspired the creation of spiritual healing centers throughout the Caribbean, Mexico, and Brazil, among

other countries in Latin America—the “integrative” medical resource of the people.

Unorthodox medicine, like its religious counterpart, has been more accessible to women; there they can claim an authority denied them in mainstream institutions and are more at liberty to utilize female traditions of care taking to alleviate their suffering communities. Koss-Chioino observes that spirit possession is “largely a feminine activity” with three to four women Espiritistas to every male and fewer men than women undergoing possession. Some describe the experience as a soothing and tranquil “coolness,” although during healing work an intranquil spirit can be distressful and harsh. Others have described possession in sexualized terms, as a “penetration” of their bodies, being filled up with heat or fluid, expressing feelings akin to being “dominated, oppressed by a foreign force personified (for the sake of description) as an external being” (1992: 82). This has led some Puerto Rican feminists to be ambivalent toward the traditional healer role for women, which they believe reinforces the female subordinate role and lack of entitlement (1992: 43). Koss-Chioino and others consider that the spirits’ guides—the *Madamas*³⁷ and gypsies, for example—serve the function of expressing repressed conflicts and represent a type of psychic resolution for women living in patriarchal cultures where most women cannot go beyond a constricted public space. This type of female spirit guide represents marginalized women, the sorceresses and witches feared and rejected by men and women, but they are also a symbol of repressed feminine strength. They frequently express in possession the explicit sexual desires of women and repressed and unexpressed grievances. “These *guas* are talked about as if they were eternally supportive and powerful, much like an inner wish for an ideal mother” (Koss-Chioino 1992: 43).

The fact that so many believers in *Espiritismo* are women is undoubtedly due to the spiritual possibilities it affords them, that they cannot find in mainstream religions. The spirit hierarchy is egalitarian; spiritual categories are not linked to age, race, class, or sex, and ascending in the spiritual pyramid is open to all. Female empowerment in the leadership role of *Espiritismo*, the position of a respected and admired medium-healer, is attainable if one has the strength of purpose to study the spirit world and strive to realize its moral and spiritual principles. The status women can attain as healers does not require formal education or rigid training. Furthermore, the wide autonomy afforded for personal interpretation and

approach to ritual practice as well as the absence of a centralized organizational authority (as we have seen in other Caribbean religious practices) gives women a sanctioned space in an ideology in which “not only is each man [and woman] his [her] own priest but each *centro* leader aspires to be his own (and others’) bishop!” (Koss 1977: 39).³⁸

Glossary

- Abakuá:** Name of the Cuban secret male societies of Carabalí origin.
- Aché or ashé, or asé, se, áse, ase:** The “word” or “power” that created the universe in Santería, originating from the supreme god, Olodumare.
- ahijados:** “Godchildren,” or protégés, in the practice of Santería/Regla de Ocha.
- alaña:** Owner of a set of consecrated batá drums in Santería/Regla de Ocha. Also Oluañá.
- Añá:** The force or power inhabiting the sacred batá drums.
- anaforuana:** The pictographic writing system of the Abakuá.
- ange:** See loa.
- Arará:** In Cuba, the name given to traditions and persons from the area of Dahomey.
- asiento:** The culminating initiation ceremony in Regla de Ocha/Santería.
- ason:** A sacred beaded gourd rattle belonging to Vodou priests and priestesses and used in Rada ceremonies.
- babalao or babalocha (male) and iyalocha (female):** A priest (priestess) who occupies a central place in the hierarchy of Santería/Regla de Ocha, guides the initiate’s development, and is in charge of specific liturgies, among them divination. The babalao is a high priest in charge of the divination system known as Ifá.
- Babalú Ayé:** One of the divinities whose worship has taken deepest root in Cuba; the god of illness; miraculous yet severe and implacable toward those who do not obey him or forget to fulfill their promises.
- bagi:** In Vodou, the sanctuary room containing the altar to the loa, an elaborately furnished habitation, where the loa can find on display its special things; not only are these pieces of property tokens of devotion preserved by the houngan, but they make up the lineaments and capture the idiosyncrasies of the loa.
- bain démarré:** In the French Caribbean, a special bath given to wash away the effects of the evil eye and bad luck. There are also *bains de la chance*