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Scopic Regimentation of Cuban Popular Religious Altars

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Abstract: Cuban popular religious altars command attention with their elaborate presentations of statues, dolls, figurines, photographs, vessels, and offerings to a host of spirits and saints. The altar is cosmogenic: any given altar in all of its inventive particularity is a diagram that figures a world of relations between the living practitioner and the constellation of spirits who work with that practitioner. The concept of *scopic regimentation*, adapted from what Christian Metz (1975) and Martin Jay (1988) call the scopic regime, describes how the location, arrangement, and qualities of altars and their objects dynamically figure possibilities and tensions in developing spiritual relationships. Four dimensions of the altar's work of scopic regimentation are described. First is the altar's work as a *prism*, in which the altar's objects refract general spiritual presence into distinct spirit figures. Second, the altar's arrangement as a *constellation* diagrams multiple, complex relationalities among spirits as an image of the evolving spiritual biography of the altar's owner. Third, the altar's work as *interface* shapes multimodal communicative engagements between spirits and religious adherents. And fourth, the altar serves as an *aperture* in diagramming the limits of knowledge about spirits in its play between revelation and concealment.

Keywords: altar visuality; Cuban Spiritism; semiosis; scopic regimentation

Figure 1. A view of the central altar in the altar room of Pedro, a Cuban religious practitioner from the doorway. The altar's verticality is shown in multiple representations and doubling of the Virgin of Caridad del Cobre (in gold at apex) and the African spirit Josefina, identified with the oricha Ochún (in gold on floor). They are linked by a golden axis of other figures and adornments and surrounded by a host of other figures and offerings. Santiago de Cuba, August 2008. Photograph by author.

Introduction

To come before a Cuban altar populated with figures and adornments is to come face to face with a scene whose direct, frontal pragmatics demands attention (Figure 1). Statues, dolls, and figurines seem to gaze back at or just past the viewer, and countless other, perhaps less scrutable, objects present themselves with differing degrees of openness and recognizability. What *are* these objects, and what do they *do*? The theatrical totality of visual contrasts, juxtapositions, and resonances on display challenges the viewer to understand relationships among the altar's component objects, as well. Most simply put, the altar is cosmogenic: any given altar in all of its inventive particularity is a diagram that figures a world of relations between the living religious practitioner who maintains the altar and the ever-present spirits. This paper responds to the altar's insistent visuality to account for its contribution to organizing religious practice.

What follows is an interactional approach to the study of scopic practices—of seeing and being seen. I aim to demonstrate the agentive force of the altar's visuality in regimenting relationships between the living and the spirits (Gell 1998). I will trace four dimensions of regimentation provoked by the altar's visual textuality to show how scopic practices bring a biographically meaningful constellation of spirits and their productive connections with one another into focus as well as mobilize a ritual economy of reciprocal demands that drives an ongoing deepening of those relationships and the practitioner's spiritual knowledge. My argument will depend not just on showing how altars become a focus of interaction (and in particular of ritual), but how the resulting visuality of the altar configures a world in which human-spirit relations unfold. What Yelle (2013:56) says of ritual performance is equally true of the altar: it "makes a claim on the world." That is, the altar is performative, communicative, and metapragmatically oriented to close a particular "gap" between the spiritual and material domains, as these are understood by the Cuban religious practitioners that are the center of my ethnographic focus.

The Cuban popular religious practitioners who construct and maintain altars situate them in ordinary, domestic living space. In such spaces, their practices of interactional engagement with altars shift any given altar and its components between foreground and background of shared attention, as well as from diagrammatic display to communicative interface. The altar's insistent visuality is reinforced by strictures—for example, to greet the altar and to never turn one's back to the altar during a ceremony[1]—as well as by assertions—such as that the objects on altars watch over a household and make demands, not just during ceremonies but always. Such metapragmatic understandings, which are often left implicit and emerge most clearly in what practitioners do—and don't do—with altars, regiment not only the predominant visuality and materiality of the altar and its objects, but forge connections across sensory modalities, ritual functions, and spiritual understandings.

In what follows, I draw on what I have learned from two decades of ethnographic engagement with Cuban popular religion, in all of its glorious, Caribbean ritual piracy (Romberg 2005). I argue that four dimensions of scopic regimentation are apparent in practitioners' interactions with altars. First, altars differentiate spirits important to the altar's owner in individual altar portraits, which I liken to the refractive work of a *prism* dividing white light into its constituent frequencies. Second, altars diagram relationality among spirits and between spirits and the living according to principles of multiple representation and the doubling of images as conduits of spiritual power. I use the metaphor of the *constellation* to describe this dimension. Third, their frontal addressivity facilitates their role as *interfaces*, shaping participation structures of mutual witnessing and facilitating two-way communication. And fourth, their figuration of visibility and concealment as *apertures* indexes limits to knowledge about spirits.

In the second half of the article I turn to two practitioners and their altars. These practitioners describe themselves as Spiritists who work with spirits of the dead. The owner of the altar in Figure 1, Pedro (a pseudonym), offers consultations in his home by reading cards—a common divinatory practice among Cuban Spiritists. His main altar, called a *bóveda* by Spiritists, occupies an entire, small room in the middle of his home.[2] Pedro's spectacular altar-room highlights altars' situation in domestic spaces and temporal cycles, their material qualities, and their principles of design within the overall semiotic economy of Cuban popular religion.[3] I describe how the altar's location, arrangement, and objects achieve the four regimenting effects.

While the first case seeks to account for the visual force of the altar and its workings in domestic space, the second case considers an altar's changes over the span of fourteen years, alongside the biography of the Spiritist and Santería priest who owns it. Mirta (also a pseudonym) cares for her family, including her godchildren, just as she cares for—and receives the care of—a host of spirits and deities. Her bóveda takes the more common form of a single table, covered in a white cloth. While this bóveda is set amid many other smaller altars located throughout her home, Mirta has expanded the central bóveda over time to incorporate many of the elements of those separate altars, producing new relationalities across them.

Before delving into these cases, I first present the theoretical framework for my argument describing the four dimensions of the altars' scopic regimentation, followed by an orientation to my ethnographic locus.

Visuality and Scopic Regimentation

Visuality, or visual textuality, can be defined as the "social fact related to vision" and to processes of sight, which are always perspectival, meaning that acts of seeing and being

seen are context-sensitive and shaped by semiotic processes of regimentation (Foster 1988; Mirzoeff 2006).[4] There are many possible visualities, arising from different ideological perspectives (Jay 1988; Mitchell 1986). Visuality approaches visual images as texts—that is, as chunks of signs that cohere in relation to previous texts by being situated in some intertextual history (Gal and Irvine 2019; Silverstein 2005; Silverstein and Urban 1996). Visuality here applies to the spectacle of the altar as a material display.

A semiotic approach to linguistic modes of textuality has provided an analytical apparatus that can be applied to visuality as well. Foremost is to analyze how texts come into being through interactional processes of entextualization and contextualization (Bauman and Briggs 1990). These processes involve tracing connections across interactional and denotational aspects of texts (Wortham and Reyes 2015). Nakassis (2019) has proposed that poetic figures and other aesthetic forms constitute an additional aspect of textuality that he calls the *image-text*, which is not just found in visual images but describes the abstract aesthetic figurations that can emerge in any semiotic modality and even cross modalities. It would be a mistake to think of "image" in this sense as something fixed or pre-ordained. Just as texts can take on new meanings when brought into relation to other texts, textual orders of visuality are emergent in the dynamics of referential, aesthetic, and interactional orders that produce them, including in each act of seeing and being seen.

I argue that it is through distinctive religious acts of creating and seeing visual images that sensory and emotional experience—both the sensations of the spiritually sensitive and the sensations attributed to spirits themselves—is regimented to bring discrete spirits, arrays of spiritual force, and energetically-charged communicative channels for action into focus for religious practitioners. To understand the relationships between what one does with an altar and what an altar thereby comes to demand as a diagrammatic image-text of spiritual relationships, I adapt what Jay (1988), following Metz (1986) calls the *scopic regime* in order to delineate the *scopic regimentation* through which images and acts of seeing produce religious engagements with the agentive force of spirits. My aim is to show how the altar's scopic regimentation heightens the practitioner's reflexive attention to *always* being surrounded by spirits and subject to spiritual agency.

The altar works as a *prism*, in which the altar's plethora of objects refract a generalized sensation of spiritual propinquity into a differentiated array of spirits. Consider how, in Figure 1, each object or grouping of proximate objects constitutes a portrait of a spiritual entity in relation to one another and to the viewer, and in which placement, color, and attributes of the objects themselves call for interpretation. The altar's arrangement also contributes to a second aspect of scopic regimentation, which is to diagram multiple, complex relationalities among its many entities, which I describe as an energetic *constellation*. The altar presents a constellation of entities—spirits, rather than stars,

positioned relative to one another from some (earthbound) viewing perspective—that maps latent potentials and tensions that require ongoing attention and care. Of many possible metaphors, the optics of constellation emphasize the diagrammatic work of drawing connections to produce new figures, just as stars become the points defining images in the night sky. Given the endless possible connections, constellations thus project something about the observer, presenting the altar as an external image of that person's spiritual perspective.

Far from being static displays, as my altar photographs and prism/constellation metaphors might falsely suggest, altars make demands of their owners: in requiring care, each object opens a channel of action-potential for the practitioner to make demands of their spirits. Practitioners frequently characterize these ongoing, mutual obligations as loving, if also demanding, acts, invoking idioms of kinship such as parent-child relations. Moreover, the altar objects do more than "represent" entities or relationships. Religious practitioners also make use of the affordances provided by the material qualities (qualia) of altar objects to express devotion and develop spiritual knowledge and efficacy.

The metasemiotic regimentation of those same qualia produces an indexical relationship idealized as making the entity present *in* and *through* its representation on the altar, allowing communication and growing knowledge about the entity and one's relationship to it. I describe this third dimension of the altar's work of scopic regimentation as the *interface*. The altar's work as interface shapes multimodal, emotionally-charged engagements between spirits and religious devotees. Consider, for example, how the anthropomorphic figures in Figure 1 gaze back out of my photograph. Readers familiar with Hinduism may see resonances with the concept of *darshan*, the two-way "ocular exchange" triggered when a devotee gazes at the image of a deity and is in turn seen by the deity, in a recursive production of intersubjectivity (Gell 1998:118–20). While there is no comparable exegetical label among practitioners of Cuban popular religion, there is a similar attentiveness to the efficacy of witnessing.

It is not just seeing and being seen that matter, but also what is *not* visible. The fourth dimension of scopic regimentation I consider is thus the altar's work as *aperture*, controlling degrees of revelation and concealment. The altar's visuality of concealment or partial concealment—of objects whose surfaces index a presence not fully revealed—models the limits of human knowledge of spirits. In Figure 1, drapes of fabric, topped vessels, closed books, and objects whose placement partially blocks our view of objects behind them suggest that not everything is as transparently obvious as the clear glasses of fresh water set before the altar figures (see Gell 1998). The altar's prismatic revelation of particular spirits as surfaces that index a concealed power within, I argue, figures the

central tension driving religious work, which is the quest to develop one's spiritual knowledge.

These dimensions of scopic regimentation structure what visuality *does* in interaction. I now turn to a few key interventions that provide accounts of what Leone and Parmentier (2014) describe as a "circle of semiosis," through which representations of spirits dynamically produce "real" spiritual presence. Silverstein (2004) demonstrates how the unfolding structuring of textuality in rituals is transformative in its effects, achieving *dynamic figuration* of social relations and ritual consequentiality. The elegant example he provides is the Christian rite of the Eucharist, which produces a chiasmatic transubstantiation of wine and bread into the divine body of god and of participants into the Christian ecumene. The resulting image-texts of Eucharist and Holy Cross, as these have been shaped by countless iterations of the central rituals, index these relationships in a semiotic web of events tracing back to (and beyond) the sacrificial event of the crucifixion and resurrection.[5] These effects are forward-looking as well, projecting and propelling future actions in an open-ended semiosis such that, for example, the Catholic symbol of the cross, evident in Figure 1, may be repurposed on the Spiritist's home altar in ways that exceed its Catholic resonances.[6] While most dramatically evident in reflexive moments of ritual, Silverstein argues that textuality's transformative capacity for dynamic figuration extends to all semiosis, including in mundane interactions. His concept of dynamic figuration captures how scopic regimentation gains metapragmatic force in and across interactions.

Dynamic figuration is evident in other examples in which visual image-texts of proliferating multiplicity serve to amplify and extend spiritual potency in ways that illuminate convergences with and important distinctions from my case. Strassler (2014) describes an aesthetic politics of revealing the unseen in the proliferating images of Ratu Kidal, queen of the underworld, in Indonesia. She proposes the idea of "auratic indexicality" in which each photograph of Ratu Kidal can become a conduit of spiritual agency (Strassler 2014:125). Similarly, Canals (2017:127) describes the creativity of varied images of María Lionza, a spiritual power who "is one and many at the same time," in and beyond Venezuela. It does not seem to matter whether the images are religious, nationalistic, folkloric, or commercial—they partake in the same auratic process, driven by how co-texts of their circulation, uptake, and use regiment their effects as arising in the images themselves in an open-ended process of semiosis. Johnson (2018b) uses his example of differing depictions of the Afro-Brazilian saint Slave Anastácia—as suffering martyr, serene helpmeet, or erotic object—to argue that different *modes* of presentation produce different moods or dispositions to action for the saint and for those who use her image. And Kirsch (2014) attends to the "unbounded" and "pulsating" morphology of the Holy Spirit as it is perceived in and beyond Zambia, where the multiscalar forms the Holy Spirit can take are

the key to its pervasive, globalizing mobility. In short, it is not just that the visuality of altars bring spirits into co-presence. It is important to attend to how particular aesthetic forms—image-texts—produce particular trajectories for human-spirit relationality and potentials for mutual action.

Interactions with Religious Objects in Cuban Domestic Spaces

Cuban popular religious practice consists of spiritual "traditions" or modalities that include folk Catholic veneration of particular saints; Regla de Ocha (Santería); several Reglas de Palo (Palo is another domain of Cuban religious practice); several varieties of Spiritism; and—especially in the eastern Cuban city of Santiago de Cuba, the site of my fifteen years of intermittent ethnographic fieldwork—the work of *muerteros*, who work with spirits of the dead (Argüelles Mederos and Hodge Limonta 1991; Millet 1999; Palmié 2002; Wirtz 2007).[7] In practice, many households and individual practitioners combine multiple practices, even while each develops ritual expertise in one principal modality. As James Figarola (1999) has most forcefully argued, these different religious modalities nonetheless share a common understanding of living in a world saturated by spiritual energies, in which events are shaped by spiritual forces that have multiple representations and therefore multiple modes of action, and in which communication among the living, the dead, and the deities is not only possible but essential. Altars' visuality dynamically figurates these shared principles, through the four dimensions of scopic regimentation identified above.

The principle of multiple representation of spiritual entities is diagrammed by the multiple depictions of any particular "saint" or spirit, including anthropomorphic figurations (such as statues, dolls, and portrait-pictures) and indexical orders organizing attributes associated with that entity (including physical items such as iron tools and fans and qualities such as colors and refinement versus rusticness). Spiritual entities are multiplied and linked as avatars or "paths" across what religious practitioners recognize distinct spiritual "traditions." For example, a Catholic folk saint such as San Lázaro corresponds to a deity or oricha in the Regla de Ocha called Babalú Ayé. Each representation multiplies the spiritual force potentially available to the devotee. As in Johnson's (2018b) case, the principle of multiple representation also facilitates ready circulation between the different interpretive keys of the sacred, the folkloric, the nationalistic, and the commercial (Espírito Santo 2015; James Figarola 1999; Routon 2010; Schmidt 2015).

Popular religious practice in Cuba takes place mostly in private homes, in which religious spaces and activities overlap with those of ordinary home life. A religious home that is the center of a larger community of godchildren beyond the godparent's immediate resident family may be recognized as a *casa-templo* ("house-temple"), but even for more modest religious practices, the same logic is apparent in dedicating domestic space to spiritually

charged objects that, in turn, protect the home. Most religious practitioners arrange their domestic space to accommodate small altars and religious objects in multiple locations, starting at the front door.[8] All such objects serve the prismatic function of differentiating particular kinds of spiritual beings out of the world's general saturation in spiritual "energies." Once differentiated, the objects can serve as interfaces for communication and exchange.

For example, many religious practitioners maintain an altar next to the front door in the form of a low wooden box (called the "little house") for the oricha of openings (Eleggua) and the protective "warriors" who accompany him (Figure 2). In two different homes I lived in for extended periods during fieldwork, the woman who owned the house would light a candle on the floor next to Eleggua's little house on Mondays (Eleggua's day) and any time they wished to "awaken" Eleggua's and the warriors' protection. Likewise, they would occasionally put a small offering on or in front of the "little house" such as some hard candies, fruit, or a plate of cake, to keep Eleggua and the guardians energized for their protective work. Shaking a maraca before the altar, perhaps with an accompanying invocation or prayer, serves to get the orichas' attention.

Figure 2. The oricha Eleggua's "little house" sits next to the front door, where each household member's Eleggua and warrior orichas can protect the house. Mirta's "Gypsy woman" spirit is represented by the plaster statue atop the "little house." Santiago de Cuba, August 2008. Photograph by author.

Other objects with religious significance might include religious décor such as pictures of the Virgin Mary or saints or a cross hung on a wall, plaster statues of saints or other spiritual figures placed on tables, and elaborately dressed plastic or cloth dolls occupying seats. Although such objects may be treated as passive adornments much of the time (and their significance as energetically charged, working spiritual entities may even go unrecognized by non-religious visitors), they also receive regular care—not just dusting and cleaning, but renewed offerings such as fruit, sweets, fresh flowers, glasses of clean, cool water, lit candles, and greetings/prayers—and additional, ritual attention according to various weekly and annual ceremonial cycles, such as saints' days. For example, Figure 3 shows a small living room side table converted into an altar to San Lázaro, who has been dressed up in a lavish gold cape and provided with fresh fruit and flowers to celebrate his saint's day, December 17. My host had bought the cape as an offering to San Lázaro and left it on long after the holiday had passed and even the Christmas tree had been packed away.

Figure 3. A plaster statue of San Lázaro atop a living room altar-table has been has been dressed up and adorned with fresh offerings for the Day of San Lazaro, which is December 17. An artificial Christmas tree has been set up next to the altar to mark the upcoming Christmas holiday. Santiago de Cuba, December 1999. Photograph by author.

Figure 4. A spiritual doll representing the oricha Ochún (and the Virgin of Caridad del Cobre) occupies a prominent position on a rocking chair in the front room of a religious practitioner's house, where it faces the front door. The shelf behind the doll holds an elaborately decorated porcelain vessel containing the consecrated embodiment of Ochún. Santiago de Cuba, July 2014. Photograph by author.

Elsewhere in her living room, a large cloth doll in an elaborate dress and headkerchief occupied a wooden rocking chair, rendering it unavailable for anyone else to sit in. Most of the time, the doll just sat there, facing the door and loveseat across the room. In almost five months of living in that household, it never occurred to me to photograph it (Figure 4 shows a similar doll and chair in another household). But once, when I was dealing with a

family emergency abroad and had enlisted my host's son and other friends to help navigate the bureaucracy that would allow me to travel on short notice, as the deadline for a key government office to close for the weekend loomed and we waited anxiously for a response, my host went over to the doll to set her chair rocking, calling out, "*que las cosas se muevan*" (may things get moving)! In the end, our permissions came through and we were able to arrange our travel.[9] Such moments of activation highlight the latent potential of religious objects, which are understood to always be watching, listening, and offering protection to the household, as long as they receive ongoing care to maintain their spiritual energy.[10]

Although the homes of religious practitioners vary in the distribution and saturation of spiritually significant objects, there is always a main altar, usually a permanent installation covering a table, area of the floor, or entire room or occupying shelves or even a cupboard or china cabinet. Sometimes, a special occasion altar will be set up, with altar objects moved to it just for the duration of a ceremony or other festive occasion. These tend to be the most ornate and spectacular altars, intended to impress visitors and spirits alike. I was frequently invited to visit someone in order to admire and photograph a specially prepared altar, even apart from participating in whatever ceremony was planned. Decorating an altar and having it admired constitute offerings that attract and activate spirits to reciprocate by aiding the living. But most of the time, religious practitioners conduct their more mundane spiritual activities—providing small offerings, changing water, flowers, and other perishables, lighting a candle, and even consulting the spirits—using their permanent altars, of whatever size and however basic or elaborate they might be.

The proliferation of religious objects on an altar and the proliferation of altars in a home partake of the same logic of differentiation of a generalized spiritual energy that saturates the world into particular spiritual forces as entities with whom religious practitioners can enter into relationships and more fully come to know. Even a glance at Figures 2, 3, and 4 suggests the range of figurations of spiritual entities. This is the refractive work of the altar as prism, which works to distinguish particular spiritual energies and, inversely, to combine them into a totality of spiritual force (like tracing the prism's rainbow in reverse, recombined into white light). When many clearly diverse elements are brought together on an altar, they are brought into relationship with one another, which I describe as the altar's work as a constellation—a sky-map drawing out otherwise latent or hidden connections. When such diagrams are activated—for example, in presenting offerings—the altar's work as interface comes to the fore. And the choice to situate an altar prominently in the living room or in some more restricted location deeper in the home—a cabinet, back room, or even shed on a back patio—demonstrates how even an altar's location serves as an aperture controlling spiritual access.

These image-texts are available for uptake into particular interactional contexts, and together they shape encounters with altars. Interactional cues, regulating shared attention and activity, draw upon participants' socialization about what there is to notice, feel, and interpret when in the presence of altars and draw as well upon often-tacit spiritual principles and broader ideologies, including ideologies of *image* and *vision* (Mitchell 1986). I have learned from my own long ethnographic socialization into experiencing altars and sensing spirits in Cuban popular religion to regard the spirits as always immanent and never inert. This is akin to the "corpothetic" or embodied aesthetics of the spirits' sensory immediacy that Pinney (2004) describes for Hinduism. But spirits and the objects that embody them need recharging to maintain their spiritual potency, which requires regimens of ongoing care and communication. A person or household's commitment to spiritual development is enacted in maintaining altars and their religious objects, such that altars organize the use of domestic space and caring for altars is embedded into domestic routines.

On any given occasion, altars and their objects may become the focus of different kinds of attention for varying purposes or remain in the background. I have mentioned that practitioners may re-arrange or rebuild an altar, add or move altar objects, replenish offerings, and carry out a range of rituals major or minor, on various overlapping timescales from daily to yearly to exceptional. These rituals include the salutations they make, or expect guests to make, upon coming before the altar. Formal greeting-routines for approaching someone's altar vary by the practitioner's primary religious affiliation and by the occasion. They often include, however, acts of bowing, kneeling, or even prostrating oneself before the altar, as well as acts of calling to or initiating exchanges with the spirits, such as praying, ringing a bell, shaking a maraca, making the sign of the cross, or leaving some coins or small bills as an offering.[11] Such acts may be reciprocated by the host, who may introduce the visitor's name to the spirits, raise the person back to their feet, and squirt perfumed water onto the visitor's hands for a simple purification. These engagements with altars, as the discussion of Pedro's altar in the next section explains in more detail, enact diagrams of human-spirit relations as face-to-face communicative interactions mediated by the altar and its objects. The altar's domestic ubiquity compels those who live alongside them to develop the habits of caring for the altar and being attentive to the ever-present spirits.

Altar Design as Scopic Regimentation

Although I only visited him twice and never came to know him well, I present Pedro's altar in detail because of its overwhelming visual impact. In the next three subsections, a photographic exploration of his altar explains how the altar's location, arrangement of objects, and qualities of those objects accomplish—through practitioners' interactions with their altars—the four dimensions of scopic regimentation. I begin with considering the

siting (and sighting) of an altar as the work of aperture, controlling what an altar reveals, and to whom.

The Altar's Location: Partial Revelations in Pedro's Spectacular Altar Room

There was no vantage point in Pedro's small altar room that afforded a complete view of the entire altar. To step through the doorway into that room was to be surrounded, floor to ceiling on three sides, by altar. Of the dozens of practitioners whom I visited and altars that I photographed or video-taped between 1998 and 2014 (my most recent trip to Santiago), I saw many that were large and ornate, especially when constructed or redecorated for a ceremony, and some altars displayed fancier, more luxurious materials than Pedro's.[12] While the elements incorporated into Pedro's altar and the principles of their arrangement were all typical, my overall impression of Pedro's altar was that it had been cobbled together out of whatever was available at the time, and that much of it had not been changed for a long time. But in the scale of its improvisational bricolage, Pedro's altar stands out in illustrating how fully altars transform physical space.

A mutual friend, herself a santera and scholar of popular religion, arranged to introduce me to Pedro in May 2008 so that I could see his noteworthy altar (Figures 1, 5–11) and ask him about his religious practice as a Spiritist.[13] Upon arriving at Pedro's house, the person answering the door had us sit and wait in his living room, just inside his front door at the front of the house. Handwritten signs posted on the wall announced his hours of consultation (weekday mornings) and fee (10 Cuban pesos, or about $0.50 USD). There were also religious images on the walls and dolls representing spirits he worked with seated on some of the furniture, but a curtain blocked access to the altar room.

Pedro then came into the living room to greet us and brought us through the curtain into his multi-tiered, floor-to-ceiling, immersive altar. The back, right-hand corner of this high-ceilinged room had another curtain separating it from rooms behind it (kitchen and perhaps bedrooms). Curtains are more common than doors as separators across doorways in Cuban homes; even more so than doors, they are partial, incomplete separators of visual and auditory spaces.

It was in interview mode that Pedro presented his altar to us and answered our questions as we sat before it. We treated the altar as a curated display to ask about Pedro's religious biography. My photographs and accompanying fieldnotes provide a record of our shared attention toward particular altar elements and what Pedro told us about them during this initial visit. To approach an altar as a display and a source of information about its owner's spirituality is one kind of interaction its direct addressivity invites.

Figure 5. Pedro sits in front of a doll representing his Gypsy spirit (doll in pink), explaining something to the author. Next to him (left), a plaster figurine of San Francisco is draped with beaded necklaces (some representing orichas). He uses the booklet of prayers on the table to initiate spiritual consultations, in which he reads cards to receive images from the spirits. Santiago de Cuba, August 2008. Photograph by author.

I visited Pedro just one more time, in 2010, in order to renew our acquaintance and receive a spiritual consultation. Again, he brought me from where I waited in the living room through the curtain to sit with him in his altar room, and we first chatted about my life and his. I took no photographs on this visit, but instead asked for a consultation. Although spiritual consultations are not limited to taking place in front of altars, they often do. Mediums and diviners vary in whether and to what degree they make the altar itself or elements of the altar a focus of joint attention with the client receiving the consultation. In Pedro's case, he seated me across from him in front of the small table in Figure 5. We sat almost knee to knee, and he laid a board on his lap to make a large, open surface and proceeded to shuffle a deck of cards while praying under his breath. After asking me to cut the cards into various piles on the board, he turned over the top cards and began to speak as he turned the cards over, as if reading off what he saw about the state of my life in each additional revealed card. The rest of the altar room was a backdrop to the consultation, in which the cards and our face-to-face discussion of the images about my life they revealed were our mutual focus.

Images—mental images inspired in the medium and described aloud—are the most common communicative currency of such spiritual consultations. Although spirit communication is multimodal, and Cuban religious practitioners can use any of several different methods of divination, Spiritist practitioners in particular often describe spirit communications in terms of visual images they receive. Pedro explained to me that as he places the cards he sees things: images that he conveys to his clients. All the Spiritists and muerteros I interviewed concurred in describing this kind of insight as an ability to receive spiritual transmissions, a perspicacity or clairvoyance (*clarividencia*) the spiritually sensitive cultivate that is akin to a radio receiving a broadcast or a wire conducting electricity, where the transmission conveys images. One card-reading Spiritist of my acquaintance, Rosaire, even told me that when she reads the cards it is like watching a video of mental images unfolding.

In spiritual consultations, mediums often use formulations such as, "I am allowed to see…" (*se me deja[n] ver*), thereby indexing the partial, limited character of spiritual revelation. While the sensitive can receive spiritual transmissions anywhere and anytime (most Cubans have a story of a stranger on the street approaching them to share some tidbit of information or warning from a vision), the altar, like an antenna, attracts and focuses spiritual transmissions. But, like the broken-up broadcast received from a distant station, the inspired images Spiritist mediums receive may be no more than glimpses, as when one told me that in looking at me they had been permitted to see the image of spiritual influence (*una acción*) of a balding White man, neither fat nor thin, and stairs, asking whether I knew who the man might be and whether there were stairs in my home.

However vivid and compelling, such fragmented images and the knowledge they provide are incomplete and can demand educated guesswork by medium and client to make sense of them. Like card-readings and other forms of divination and mediumship, altars themselves present a counterpoint between theatrical visibility and what cannot be seen, including the surfaces that partly or fully conceal something behind or within them. These, I suggest, are not just about privacy, including protecting one's domestic space and esoteric knowledge alike (Johnson 2002). As one pole of the altar's work as aperture, concealment diagrams the inevitable limits to human knowledge of spiritual matters and the difficulty of deepening that knowledge.

The location of the altar itself, and specifically how its access is controlled by the household, involves a play of privileged sight and its limits, like the glimpses of insight the spirits allow to the diviner reading cards. On both visits, as I initially was seated in the living room to wait for Pedro, he was finishing a spiritual consultation, and those of us in the living room could see and hear through the curtain that he was giving someone a purification, using perfume and murmuring instructions. The scent of perfume was still

present upon entering the altar room, adding to its immersive visuality. Pedro's entire house, from entrance announcing consultation hours to altar-room curtain that only partially obscures the activity within, serves as an aperture controlling a visitor's encounter with the religious objects and altars it contains.

Altars, too, are arranged to involve a play of revelation and concealment, in, for example, the translucent glasses of water set in front of figures and images on altars that partly block and partly reveal what is behind them, depending on one's angle of sight.[14] These are good examples of a widespread interactional trope of incomplete information and uncertainty that expresses itself visually in the play of partial visibility and masking on altars, in spirits who provide only glimpses of their identity and their messages to those who consult them, and altar objects as evolving portrayals of what is known of particular spirits. House, curtained doorway, and altar all are apertures that partake in the play of visibility, accessibility, and thus of visually mediated connecting and knowing—and their limits. The altar objects thus framed also partake in drawing attention to degrees of accessibility and knowability. The next subsection considers regimenting effects of the arrangement of these objects.

The Altar's Arrangement: How Design Principles of Verticality and Proximity Enact Prism, Constellation, and Interface

Main altars like Pedro's draw the eye to a visual field and site of embodied, physical activity that can be characterized as frontal and even theatrical: one comes before an altar to gaze upon it and to interact with the entities on it. The arrangement of altar objects thus serves to diagram relationships or potential relationships: among spiritual entities and between those entities and the person who comes before the altar. Like a prism, the altar distinguishes entities from one another and from a general saturation of the world in spirit energies, while also presenting a totality of multiplied spiritual presence. Like a constellation, the altar presents an image of spiritual entities in relationship with one another and with the practitioner. As an interface, the altar enacts multiple—and multiplying—channels for spiritual communicative action. As an aperture, the altar limits what can be seen, and known.

Every element of an altar is carefully and thoughtfully placed for its spiritual significance, according to widespread but often tacit principles. These include spatial principles, as well as indexical orders organizing color correspondences and kinds of representational objects, including the gender, racial, religious attributes of anthropomorphic figures. Like the living, the spirits are gendered, raced, and sexualized and may be identified by profession, kinship relation, or place of origin—usually in theatrical and stereotypical ways.[15] Every altar object, whether an anthropomorphic figure or not, is an offering to a particular spirit or saint, an identification of one or more of its salient attributes, and

potentially a channel to communicate with the entity. In this sense, the altar in its totality is an offering and a diagram, in which objects such as statues, dolls, figurines, and portrait images are not only placed on the altar as an offering to the entity or group of entities they represent but also embody that entity.

The spatial distribution of elements draws on an indexical ordering of relative height and proximity that starts with altars overall being mostly at the same height as a standing or even sitting person before them, providing a face-to-face encounter, even in exceptional cases like Pedro's altar, where one needs to move position to approach each wall of the altar. Consider Pedro's seated position for giving spiritual consultations, in Figure 5, in which a doll representing his "Gypsy" spirit behind him and the statue of San Francisco next to him are at eye level, facing out just like Pedro is toward his seated client (a position just to the left of my camera's angle). The spatial arrangement of altar figures grouped at the same level as the practitioner diagrams the multiplication of spiritual forces: having been refracted into individual entities, it is as if the prism now directs those differentiated energies back into a multiplied totality working together with the practitioner on behalf of the client.

There is also systematicity in the height at which an altar object is placed, between ground and ceiling and relative to other objects: this vertical dimension presents an axis rising from "earthiness" (associated with powerful, even dangerous African spirituality and with the dead) to "lightness" and ethereality (associated with European religiosity; see note 15 regarding the racialization dynamics of Cuban popular religion). Spiritual beings are also grouped in ways that are meaningful to the altar's owner, so the proximity of particular objects suggests connections between them.

Consider one example of these spatial principles in Figure 1: the center of the altar as a vertical axis of shared color and form connecting very different objects. The apical figure of the Virgin of Caridad del Cobre, Catholic patron saint of Cuba, is related to the figure of Josefina, an "African spirit," set just above the floor in a similar pose. The two figures are linked by the vertical axis they anchor and by the shared color and shape of their dresses, whose skirts are similarly draped wide. This entire, central axis iconically resonates with gold and yellow, colors whose appearance elsewhere on the altar links other entities to the saint who has identified herself as Pedro's spiritual "mother." He refers to the saint as "Caridad," the iconic Catholic Virgin, who is understood to correspond to the oricha Ochún in Santería. Such multiple representations, as James Figarola (1999) calls them, are everywhere in Cuban popular religion, creating a web of associations across what are understood to be different traditions: folk Catholic, Santería, Spiritism, Reglas de Palo, and even Vodún. Additional doubling, as Otero (2020) describes the forging of identifications between spiritual entities, occurs in the associations between spirits of the

dead, *muertos*, and saints or orichas. As practitioners explained to me, a spirit such as Josefina would have her own governing deity, to whom she was dedicated in life and is still works with in death. Pedro's altar diagrams Josefina's connection to and doubling of Caridad or Ochún.

Many practices of communicating with spirits enact these principles of doubling, in which one or a series of entities mediates between human and spirit interlocutors, in a transductive chain (see Wirtz 2018). Multiple representation and doubling not only introduce mediation but also multiply the routes to accessing spiritual power by exposing varied facets or *moods* of the "same" entity that are predisposed to act in different ways, to recall Johnson (2018). Consider that regarding the vertical axis connecting Caridad to Josefina (Figure 1), one can appeal to either anchor as a point of entry into the multiplied spiritual force of their doubling.

Having considered how the arrangement of altar objects enact the four dimensions of scopic regimentation, I now consider what the objects in themselves do.

Altar Objects: Prismatic Principles of Multiple Representation, Doubling, and Activation

The principles of multiple representation are evident in the varied objects placed on altars to stand for particular spiritual entities and serve as conduits or containers for those entities. Such objects present themselves in a productive ambiguity as indexes of always *potentially* present spirits and deities (Wirtz 2009, 2018). In providing some description of the types of altar objects here, my goal is to show their prismatic effect in differentiating kinds of spirit entities and even individuating particular spirits with whom Pedro has developed relationships. Not only their positioning, but their attributes—colors, qualities of materials used—index relationships of doubling and multiple representation across the altar.

Dolls and plaster or ceramic figurines are two of the most eye-catching anthropomorphic elements of these altars and require some explanation, especially given their often racially stereotypical, even caricatured, appearance. The figurines and most of the dolls are mass-produced commercial products with relatively standard iconography, although their dresses and robes are more often hand-made or purchased from local artisans. Most figurines depict (mostly White) Catholic saints, such as San Francisco in Figure 5, but there are also plaster or porcelain figurines of other social types beyond clearly White, European Catholic saints, such as the Black Virgin of Regla visible at the top-left of Figure 1. Many of the figurines of one or another Virgin Mary are dressed in luxurious cloth in the style of Catholic saints throughout Latin America. There are more than a dozen such plaster statues of saints on Pedro's altar. The dolls, representing spirits of the dead with

whom the practitioner works, are fitted with elaborate dresses and headscarves—adornments as offerings whose color schemes signify their links to various orichas (as with Josefina's link to Caridad/Ochún, evident in her golden-yellow dress).

Figure 6 presents a close-up of a plaster statue of Santiago the Apostle, the patron saint and namesake of the city of Santiago de Cuba, mounted on a horse atop a small marble table. In Cuban popular religion, he is loosely identified with the warrior orichas, and on Pedro's altar, in front of the statue, there is a bowl with an offering of a knife and pieces of iron, associated with the warriors (Millet 2008). Behind the statue of Santiago on a wall shelf is a "laughing Buddha" figurine. Various Black and White plastic and porcelain dolls dressed in a rainbow of elaborate outfits are partially visible on the wall shelves above the Buddha. Notice, too, a family photograph of three deceased relatives in front of two of the dolls. In addition to the Buddha, Pedro has a plaster figurine that he said represents an "Arab" (see Figure 7 for a close-up of this seated figure with a turban) which represents not a single spirit but an entire "commission" or undifferentiated spiritual collective of Arab doctors and healers whom Pedro can invoke when he or a consulting client need healing. Notice the small figurine of a Black Magi in front of the turbaned figure, who represents a "doubling" of this commission.[16]

Figure 6. Santiago astride a horse, draped in a rosary and a necklace adorned with metal tools. Iron "warrior" implements and other offerings are arrayed before him. Santiago de Cuba, August 2008. Photograph by author.

Figure 7. A seated plaster figurine with a turban represents a "commission" of "Arab" spirits who work in medicine and health. Santiago de Cuba, August 2008. Photograph by author.

There are easily as many dolls on the altar as statues: some are made entirely of cloth and sold by local artisans, while others are mass-produced plastic or even porcelain. All are dressed up in fancy, hand-sewn outfits, each in its own bright color; most are phenotypically Black: each doll represents a spirit with whom Pedro has a connection strong enough that he has decided to venerate it. Not uncommonly, the spirit itself may have asked Pedro to venerate it with a doll. The ways in which spirits make such requests include a mental image—visual or auditory—of the spirit that the person receives, whether

awake or in a dream; an interpretation of divination signs (e.g., from a card reading); or a message delivered by a medium channeling or possessed by the spirit (including when the person themselves is the medium or is possessed by the spirit demanding recognition, in which case others present in the ceremony would relay the request once the person comes out of trance). Such spirits are not deceased ancestors, but usually represent racial and ethnic “types” that may or may not have individualized biographies known to religious practitioner who works with them: Congos, Haitians, Africans, and “Gypsies” (Roma; phenotypically White but racialized as other) are common.

Figure 8. Another view of Pedro’s altar. Photograph by author. Santiago de Cuba, August 2008. Photograph by author.

Figure 9. A close-up of Pedro's altar focused on a pair of cloth dolls adorned to represent the orichas Changó and Ochún, with closed vessels and rum offerings arrayed below them. On the floor, a plastic doll in a floral-print dress and head-wrap holds an *mpaka* or Palo object made of a horn. Santiago de Cuba, August 2008. Photograph by author.

Figures 8 and 9 illustrate how otherwise superficially similar dolls are differentiated by the colors of their outfits and by the objects accompanying and adorning them. The predominant colors of a doll's dress often signal which oricha that spirit works with or is dedicated to and therefore "doubles," as in the pair of dolls in Figures 8 and 9 that represent spirits linked to Changó (red and white) and Ochún (golden yellow). While a

cigar and a necklace of red and white beads adorn the doll associated with Changó, the doll associated with Ochún wears a crown and has a peacock-feather fan and basket with a tiny brush (for sweeping away negative spiritual energies; a larger one hangs above the dolls). Altars draw upon a highly specified indexical ordering of the orichas or deities of Santería as distinct personalities controlling distinct domains of the world; Ochún, for example, as the oricha of feminine sensuality, wealth, and fresh water prefers the color yellow, sweet offerings such as honey and wine, and elegant, refined accoutrements (peacock-feather fans, satin and gold brocade, violins and violin music).

Candles, flowers (fresh and artificial), rosaries, ribbon, feathers of buzzards (which connect heaven and earth in religious iconography), books, and large and small bottles for perfume, florida water, or perhaps a special liqueur preferred by a spirit are also evident. While the possible items are limitless, as tokens they are regimented by conventionalized indexical orders relating contrasting qualities—colors, textures, hardness or softness, et cetera—to contrasting characterological and sociological traits, such as crudeness and refinement, which in turn index gender, race, and class. Whereas violins, pianos, and flowers represent refinement, metal represents battle-toughness, and "earthy" and organic objects such as clay and gourds—associated with Africa and with enslaved Africans of the colonial era—convey the power of the dead. A similar contrast in qualia distinguishes "pure" water, offered in clear glasses and goblets to "refresh" and "cool" the spirits, from the rum and cane liquor preferred by rustic African spirits. Bottles of rum (Havana Club and Santero brands) sit with ceramic cups for pouring libations.

Audio speakers (Figure 8, bottom) and a whole corner of the altar (Figure 11) where cassettes, compact discs, notebooks, religious manuals, and other supplies are stored, remind us that offerings before the altar also include the performed ephemera of music, prayers, invocations, and even dancing.

Some of these altar objects, even as they index key attributes of a spirit, also can be used to conceal additional objects of spiritual power, including attributes of a spirit that are hidden rather than presented. In almost every figure, there are containers and vessels whose contents are not visible. It would be easy to miss the stacked ceramic containers below the paired Changó and Ochún dolls in Figure 9; they likely contain consecrated stones in which the spiritual power of these oricha reside. Below them on the floor, another plastic doll representing an African spirit holds an *mpaka* (or horn) filled with esoteric ingredients, sealed in with wax around a mirror, so that anyone looking into it will see their eye reflected back. The mpaka is a tool of Regla de Palo practitioners that is emblematic of the play between seeing and being seen and of concealment and visibility on altars. It thus works as a dynamic figuration of mutual witnessing in the development of spiritual knowledge and its limits.

Figure 10. A close-up of Pedro's altar focused on two high shelves holding photographic portraits of deceased relatives, among other objects. Santiago de Cuba, August 2008. Photograph by author.

Figure 11. Another part of Pedro's altar, showing a Santa Rita plaster figurine on a shelf, with other saints' images, surrounded by cassettes, compact discs, notebooks, religious manuals, a speaker, and other supplies. Santiago de Cuba, August 2008. Photograph by author.

Finally, there are many framed pictures on the altar, which include Catholic religious prints and lithographs, sometimes doubling the image of a saint figurine, as on the bottom-left of Figure 10. Figure 10 also shows an image of the Egyptian queen Nefertiti behind a water glass (I did not ask Pedro, but assume she represents a spirit or commission of spirits he works with), as well as formal photographic portraits of deceased family members. Such photographs are never of the living, whose spirits reside in their bodies but only those deceased family members whose spirits work with the practitioner. When a beloved relative dies, the religious family offers spiritual masses to help the spirit of the deceased accept their death, feel peace, and move toward enlightenment (Espírito Santo 2015). It is only in cases where the spirit lingers or returns to attach itself to a living person that their photographic portrait will be incorporated onto the person's altar.

A moment from my first visit with Pedro illustrates how such portraits on altars serve to not only anchor memories of deceased relatives but to demonstrate the ongoing role of their spirits in the practitioner's life and spiritual practice. When my friend and I asked about how Pedro had developed his spiritual practice and altar, he responded that he has always been very religious and worked in "the spiritual field." His whole family was religious, and his grandmother was the one he especially learned from. He then turned to the altar and pointed her and his aunt out in photos up on a shelf. He explained that, as spirits, they continue to help him and are very important spirits for him because they serve as his spirit guides.

Notice how Pedro incorporates his altar into his biographical narrative about his religious development: he points out the photographs of the relatives who taught him just as he points out the central, apical altar figure of Caridad as his "mother." As I recall, I made a point of photographing my close-up of the shelf with the photos (Figure 10), and then the photo in Figure 8 (showing most of the left wall), precisely because Pedro had pointed out the photos when telling me about the history of his religious involvement. Unlike the dolls, the photographs are relatively unadorned by additional objects, except for the glasses of clear, fresh water in front of each, to "refresh the spirit."

Pedro told me that one barely visible doll with a phenotypically White porcelain face, seated on the right side of a lower wall-mounted shelf and only partly visible behind a glass of water provided to her, belonged to his grandmother and represents a spirit she worked with. Here, we might say there is a doubling of Pedro's grandmother's spirit (represented in a photograph in Figure 10) with the spirit she had worked with, crossing generations and multiplying spiritual potency.

Throughout this section, the salience of scopic regimentation is apparent in the altar's work as prism, constellation, interface, and aperture. In the selection and arrangement of

altar objects to represent the spiritual forces Pedro works with, he conveys who those entities are and how they are related to one another and to him, and thus presents a complex image of his own religious biography. His spiritual development over time has been materialized and displayed as a multimodal—but predominantly visual—text of auratic simultaneity, with all spiritual relationships immanent in the here and now, before the altar. Pedro professed to having grown up religious, in a religious family, and the relatives who guided his spiritual development in life continue to be present on his altar through their photographic portraits (Figure 10). Pedro, no doubt, continues to add to and modify his altar, based on spirits' affinities, proclivities, and demands, as these make themselves evident to him, via dreams, insights, divination results, and spirit communications received during ceremonies. The resulting altar, at any moment in time, presents a productive, composite image of these histories of relationality.

In this section, I kept focus squarely on the visuality of Pedro's altar itself, at a single point in time. The following section provides a more processual and biographical account of the altar's work of scopic regimentation in the life of a religious practitioner, in order to consider the altar's role in a practitioner's spiritual development.

Dynamic Figuration in the Altar as Prism, Constellation, Interface, and Aperture

I met Mirta (a pseudonym), my long-time interlocutor and self-appointed godmother in matters spiritual, near the end of my dissertation fieldwork in the spring of 2000, when a mutual friend sent me to her home to meet her. I subsequently visited Mirta every time I was in Santiago, and she generously granted me long interviews about her life and spirituality as well as arranging spiritual consultations and masses for my wellbeing. What my long, close relationship with Mirta permits is seeing how an altar changes over long periods of time, reflecting Mirta's own ongoing spiritual development, punctuated by moments of crisis and revelation. Although I had never planned to track her altar longitudinally, the series of photographs I took between May 2000 and July 2014 illustrates that an altar at any particular moment presents a cumulative spiritual biography and an interface that promotes and that is in an ongoing spiritual development.

In the following two subsections, I first consider the altar's scopic work in refracting diverse spirits and their interrelationships as a constellation of tensions and latent possibilities that propels spiritual development over time. What I learned from Mirta and many other religious practitioners was the extent to which those tensions are expressed in idioms of love: she adored the spirits and saints she identified as her mothers, fathers, protectors, and guides. Spiritual relationships of responsibility and reciprocity were intertwined with her responsibilities to her living family, including godchildren like me. In the second subsection, I return to the issue of the primacy of visuality in spiritual

revelation and the special role of altars in the scopic regimentation of religious life. Altars work as apertures and interfaces for spiritual work, charting a path for knowledge and trusting intimacy amid indeterminacy and uncertainty.

The Altar as Prism and Constellation: The Practitioner's Spiritual Biography Made Immanent

As a skilled Spiritist medium who worked with the dead and the saints (as an initiate in the Reglas de Ocha and Palo), Mirta was an acute receiver of "transmissions" from more than a dozen spiritual sources she could identify. In addition, she worked with multiple "commissions" of spirits in an ever-expanding constellation of spirits attracted to her multiplying spiritual energies. For spiritual consultations, Mirta uses a Ouija board: sitting knee to knee in front of her central altar in her living room, she places it across our laps and we put our hands together on top of it. But then, instead of using the board's planchette to spell out spirit messages, she closes her eyes to pray and sing for the spirits to come, and when they do, they seize her body, which gasps. Then, with her eyes closed to slits, they speak through her. Herself the transmitter through which her spirits speak, her voice changes from singing to quavering and even rough-edged, and then, increasingly focused, it approaches her ordinary speaking style.[17] Mirta's spirits are also materialized on her altar in complex constellations that amplify and double particular sites of energy, such as maternal love, paternal protection, and healing.

In numerous conversations, Mirta described the development of her religious expertise as a necessary response to affliction brought on by spirits attracted to her natural spiritual sensitivities. Mirta's account of how and why she came to work with spirits coincides with many others in my research and in other published work regarding the intractable suffering and resulting discovery of spiritual sensitivity and perspicacity. Mirta once told me that she started being a spirit medium at three years of age and that, as a child, her early sensitivity to spirits resulted in family panic. Her father, a doctor and pharmacist, took her to psychologists and other medical specialists, not accepting that her affliction was the spirits demanding her attention. Over the years, Mirta decided to develop her spiritual perspicacity, both by consulting with a range of religious experts—including her Havana-based godfather in Ocha and Palo, who oversaw her initiation as a "daughter" of the oricha Ochún—and by participating in and eventually hosting Spiritist gatherings, such as spiritual masses and festive drumming ceremonies (*bembés*) to develop relationships with the spirits who manifested themselves to her.

Mounting altars and a bóveda (Spiritist altar table) to the saints and spirits whose presence she recognized was also key to developing her spirituality (Figure 12). As we saw with Pedro, altars are highly personalized and unique constructions. Like their owners, no two are the same, because the constellation of spirits who guide, protect, and

work with a person will also be unique to that person, and even to that moment in time, since new spirit connections can always emerge. And Mirta's altars have grown and changed over the years to reflect—and prismatically refract—the host of spirits she has come to know. Mirta's altars, over time, thus serve as an evolving self-portrait showing her maturing spirituality.

Espirito Santo (2015) has compellingly described how Cuban popular religious practitioners develop spiritual skill and self-knowledge by "developing the dead," where these relationalities between the living, the spirits, and the deities constitute porous, dividual selves. Elsewhere, Espirito Santo (2019:96) explains that "the developed dead can assume physical and societal certainty: they are thought, felt, acted, and seen into existence." As should by now be apparent, although sensing the spirits is not limited to sight, visualization is at the heart of this process. For example, during one visit, Mirta took me to her balcony and pointed out the sign to a shop on the street below. She told me that it had provided the inspiration for her to connect with an African spirit with the same name: "Margarita."[18] On another occasion, after Cuban television had broadcast a program about Harry Houdini, Mirta told me that she was now working with a spiritual commission of magicians headed by Houdini himself.

Mirta's altar, as I saw it develop over the years, presented certain configurations—constellations, as I have been calling them—that seemed to attract new spirits who amplified existing potentials in her altar. For example, maternal and paternal energies seemed to multiply, as did healing potentials through "doctor" and "healer" spirits. Mirta would most frequently and prominently describe herself as a "daughter of the two waters," referring to the orichas Yemayá and Ochún, who "double" the Virgin of Regla and the Virgin of Caridad del Cobre, who are venerated in Cuban popular Catholic devotions to the saints. Her altar also came to reflect her growing reliance on paternal spirits: not only her oricha "father," San Lázaro (a healer associated with infectious diseases), but doctor-spirits as well. And her relationship to African spirits also deepened over the years.

Figure 12. Mirta's bóveda or central Spiritist altar in her living room, holding offerings of lilies, goblets of water, and lit candles, Santiago de Cuba, May 2000.

Figure 13. Snapshot of Mirta, the author, and Mirta's daughter before Mirta's bóveda and painting of her spiritual "mother," the Virgin of Regla (corresponding to the oricha Yemayá), Santiago de Cuba, May 2000.

Consider Figures 12 and 13, which were taken on my camera during my first visit to meet Mirta, in May 2000. Figure 12 is a close-up photograph I took of Mirta's bóveda, on which statues of San Lázaro (top-left) and the Virgin of Regla (top-right) are the most prominent

altar objects. Note, also, amid the profusion of offerings of fine china, flowers, glasses of water, and lit candles, that there are two small devotional lithographs of saints (top shelf) and, on the lower level, just visible behind a chalice of water, a sepia-toned formal photograph of Mirta's deceased mother in her youth, with a similar formal wallet-sized photo of her deceased father in his youth leaning against it. Figure 13 is a snapshot Mirta's husband took with my camera of Mirta, her daughter, and me that also shows the painting on the wall above the bóveda, a large image of the Virgin of Regla, who is identified with the oricha Yemayá—Mirta's spiritual mother.

Figure 12 illustrates the altar as a constellation of tensions as well as potentials, in revealing multiple claims of motherhood among those pictured: both Yemayá and Mirta's mother appear on the altar, although Yemayá (as the Virgin of Regla) clearly predominates as the apical figure. Less apparent is Mirta's other spiritual mother as determined by her initiation into Ocha: the oricha Ochún, whose yellow beaded necklaces Mirta and her daughter wear, as initiated "daughters of Ochún." It sometimes happens that the oricha who claims an initiate during the divination that precedes Ocha initiation is not the oricha the person already feels is their "mother" or "father." Mirta has resolved this tension by pledging herself to both Ochún and Yemayá on the basis of their similarity as "the two waters." For her, "the two waters" are maternal figures, and Mirta is herself a mother and godmother.[19] Her pose in Figure 13, standing above me with her arm on my shoulder, diagrams exactly the maternal claim Mirta made during our very first meeting to being my godmother—a claim she has never yet wavered in fulfilling and calling on me to reciprocate.

Motherly love—and filial love in return—are potent and often beautiful. But they can also be a source of tension, including in how she and I have differently understood my ethnographic project. Such love incurs responsibility and ongoing mutual obligations, starting (but not ending) with the lavishing of attention. The small altar's abundance of fresh offerings attests to Mirta's attentiveness to her mothers and models for her daughter and me our obligations to Mirta.

As a person's religious development proceeds, they continue to add to and modify their altar to reflect new and changing spiritual relationships. Consider now Figure 14, another May 2000 photograph I took of the wall to the left of the images in Figures 12–13. In this photo, a small grouping of Black cloth dolls sits atop an old television, with two large oil paintings on the wall above them. Mirta had commissioned these painted portraits of portraits of her mother, herself, and also her two children from a local artist, providing a photograph of her mother for him to work from. Her mother had already passed away by the time her portrait was painted, and her children had still been teenagers at the time, not the adults I knew. Together with the painting of the Virgin of Regla, this portrait gallery

further complicates any spatial separation between spiritual and domestic living space or emotional distinction between living family, deceased family, and spirit family. Motherhood is evident as a central, unifying trope, uniting distinct living and spirit entities into a powerful constellation guiding Mirta's trajectory.

Figure 14. Mirta's *muertos africanos* or African spirits, posed as a family atop a large television set, below oil paintings of Mirta's mother and Mirta on the wall in her living room, Santiago de Cuba, May 2000.

In short, an altar presents a person's history of spiritual development in one simultaneous image—as the distinctive constellation of spiritual beings recognized as being in relationship to that person. That constellation is emotionally charged and, to borrow from Benjamin, "pregnant with tensions" that are generative of new, spiritually and emotionally charged potentials for action by the living and the dead (Benjamin 2007:262).[20] As Cuban religious practitioners develop their sensitivities to the spiritual energies that surround and saturate the living, they feel their way toward relationships with specific spirits, eventually incorporating a materialized image of the spirit on their altar. Spiritual entities are not only brought into clearer focus on the altar. By being placed into the altar's arrangement, spirits also enter into a field of overlapping spiritual demand and aid. The altar's regimenting function as prism and constellation facilitates its work as aperture and interface, as the next section further illustrates.

The Altar as Aperture and Interface: Spiritual Revelation through Evolving Portraits

I now wish to compare the May 2000 photographs (in Figure 12–15) with later ones taken in May 2007, August 2008, and August 2011. Over the span of eight years, then another year, and then three more years, the central placement of Mirta's images of devotion to her mother and "the two waters" as central spiritual mother-figures did not change. But much else did. Comparing Figures 12–15 with Figures 16–19, the biggest changes are in the arrangement of the altar objects, which are now brought together around an expanded bóveda. The other obvious change is the addition of altar objects, some of which have been moved from what were previously separate altars throughout her home, and some of which are new. Mirta would often spontaneously tell me about new spirits or spiritual commissions she was working with, or they would become apparent to me when she invoked them and they delivered messages to her during spiritual consultations and masses we always planned during my visits.

Figure 15. Close-up of Mirta's *muertos africanos* or African spirits, posed as a family atop a large television set in her living room, Santiago de Cuba, May 2000.

Figure 15 provides a close-up of the arrangement of five dolls atop the television set during my first visit with Mirta. She presented them as a family of African spirits with whom she works. In the course of my visits over the years, Mirta told me more about these spirits. The principal spirits in this family grouping are a mother and son. The son is Mirta's beloved spirit protector, an African spirit she knows as the "Fine and Precious Little Black Doctor," who can be seen in the photos as a well-dressed doll—black cloth face and hair, red lips, white tuxedo, with a cigar. Mirta has no genealogical connection to the Fine and Precious Little Black Doctor. What she can know of this spirit is limited to what he reveals of himself to her. Mirta knows that the Doctor was born long ago in the Congo, and despite living during the era of transatlantic slavery, he trained to become a doctor in Paris. On another occasion she told me he was "Angolan born in Rwanda, with an elegant face, and fluent in five languages." As a spirit, he continues to heal people through her. As his appellation suggests, he is elegant, refined in his tastes, and knowledgeable, as can be seen in his materialized form in the doll. Like most African spirits on Cuban altars, he likes a cigar, but a higher quality one than the typical cheroot.

The Fine and Precious Little Black Doctor's mother, Gaifa, also works with Mirta, another doubling of the maternal presence of Mirta's spiritual practice. Indeed, Mirta once told me that Gaifa directs a spirit "commission of mothers." Given that Mirta's own father and son are doctors, this family of African spirits is not unlike her own living family. Although beyond the scope of this essay, racializing dynamics are evident. As I have described elsewhere (Wirtz 2014b), Mirta has emphasized the racial distinctions between the many

Black and African spirits she works with and her own racial identification as completely white. She told me she has a closer genealogical affinity to her “Gypsy woman” spirit guide (whose altar statue is visible in Figure 2) because of her own Spanish ancestry. And her father and mother’s physical appearance in their altar portraits, as well as their professions (doctor and teacher, respectively) are, in fact, essential to her co-mingled claims of racial purity and class status in a country and region that often celebrates racial mixing.

Figure 16. Mirta’s Spiritist bóveda in her living room, Santiago de Cuba, May 2007. Photograph by author.

Figure 17. Mirta's bóveda prepared for a spiritual ceremony with lit candle, perfume squirt bottle, flowers, cigars, a serving of cake, and a packet of incense sticks, Santiago de Cuba, August 2008. Photograph by author.

Figure 18. Side tables next to Mirta's bóveda hold dolls representing the Ibeyi or twin orichas (far left), an encased statuette of the Virgin of Caridad del Cobre against a blue background, and dolls representing African spirits, in a family grouping, Santiago de Cuba, August 2008. Photograph by author.

Figure 19. Most of Mirta's Spiritist bóveda in her living room, Santiago de Cuba, August 2011. Photograph by author.

Figures 16–19 show Mirta's bóveda in May 2007, August 2008 and August 2011. This accidental series of photographs—I had never planned to track her altar over time—shows the growth of this central altar over time. It is apparent that once-separate altar elements, such as the African spirit family, have been moved into closer proximity to the central table, as have larger statues of San Lázaro that, in May 2000, occupied an altar on top of a credenza in Mirta's dining room but that, by 2011, were now on a chair next to the bóveda. In Figure 19, a phenotypically White plastic doll representing Mirta's "Gypsy woman" spirit now sits alongside the dolls representing the African spirits, perhaps representing a joining of spiritual forces.

Altars are accretive works in progress, and their re-arrangements reveal new relationships between the spirits on them. The Fine and Precious Little Black Doctor is no longer posed with his family but has a much more prominent placement on the central bóveda, as befits his role as her principal spirit protector. New elements have been added, too, but without losing any previously present elements: the central bóveda now holds a larger framed photographic portrait of Mirta's father (an enlargement of the previous, wallet-sized portrait), with her mother's same, small photo tucked into the corner of the frame in an inversion of their relationship on the May 2000 altar.

At some point after 2000, Mirta began working not just with the family of African spirits whose dolls are a constant in my photographs, but with a *cabildo* or co-fraternity of maroon spirits—escaped slaves who, she told me, had once made a settlement right on the site of the apartment building where she now lived. During a conversation in 2011, she

explained that the maroon cabildo is led by a couple, Taita Benjamín and Mamá Rosita, who in life were African healers (*curanderos*). Figures 16, 17, and 19 show the central place occupied on her bóveda by a carved wooden statue of two heads, representing this fundamental presence in her spiritual practice, which she started referring to as itself a cabildo. This altar object stands out not just for its prominent placement but for its distinctive qualities as a large, hand-carved wooden object.[21] By 2008, Mirta had also acquired another tourist item: an elaborately dressed doll of the Virgin of Caridad del Cobre posed on a pedestal and enclosed in a plastic case (visible to the left in Figure 17); recall that this Virgin doubles the oricha Ochún who is one of Mirta's "mothers." Her son and daughter find their ideals as children in the dolls representing the male and female twin orichas or Ibeyi—on the right in Figure 16 and on the left, closer to the African spirit family, in Figure 18.

And both her father's spirit and spirit-father (the Doctor) come into sharper focus in relationship to one another on her bóveda in Figures 16, 17, and 19: the framed formal photograph on one side and the elegant but racially stereotyped cloth doll on the other, both doctors, like her son. Whatever Mirta's doctor-father's reluctance to acknowledge the spirits may have been during Mirta's childhood, after passing on in the late 1990s, Mirta's father's spirit has become a major presence on her altar and in her spiritual practice during the past decade or so. She speaks of him and her mother, long deceased, with great affection, and her father reciprocates by offering loving, if sometimes pointed, advice to Mirta's family members when, as spiritual medium, she channels him during spiritual consultations and masses. I have noticed that Mirta's father's spirit tends to reiterate the same advice Mirta herself gives her family members. A doctor in death as in life, he also works with her by directing a spirit "commission of doctors," which she described as "under San Rafael the Doctor." As a family spirit, Mirta's father has a complex "doubling" relationship with the Fine and Precious Little Black Doctor.

When my own father passed away in 2007, I brought Mirta his mass card on my next visit, and she tucked it into the corner of the frame with her father's portrait and, having insisted on holding a spiritual mass for his spirit, duly channeled his presence so that he spoke to me through her before the altar.[22] My father's mass card did not have an image of him, instead featuring a landscape photo he had taken. Although Mirta expressed concern about having no portrait of my father, she reluctantly accepted it as better than having nothing representing my father on her altar. Placed together with her deceased parents' portraits, my father's spirit could become another parental spiritual force on her altar, gathering needed energy for his own spiritual journey from the spiritual masses she insisted we hold for him each time I visited. I do not know what has become of the mass card or the potential immanence of my father's spirit in Mirta's practice since my last visit in 2014: it may be that his energy has dissipated, having lost the already-hazy focal point

produced by the portrait-less mass card and Mirta's not-entirely-successful efforts to mediate his voice during spiritual masses.

When I visited Mirta one day in May 2008, I noticed that she had her father's photo on the floor, next to Eleggua's "little house" by the front door (Figure 2). In front of the photograph were a glass of water, candle, and plate of wrapped cookie packets and candies. Alas, I did not snap a photo to accompany my fieldnotes of that observation. Mirta explained to me that, in life, her father did not like to drink or smoke. He did like sweets, however. The photograph's residence on the floor by the door was not permanent (it was off the floor the next time I came by during that May visit): since then, each time I have visited, his portrait has been on her central bóveda.

Some images and figures of spirits are always on the floor or even the earthen ground, as their preferred or even required connection to the earth as domain of power for the dead. Others, including Catholic saints and photographs of deceased relatives, whose spirits seek dematerialized spiritual "enlightenment," are always placed higher up off the ground. However, when the religious practitioner wishes to enlist a spirit or saint's assistance to resolve some intractable problem, they may place the figure on the floor with the promise of re-elevating it once the spirit resolves the problem. Ocha ceremonies always require that the dead be saluted and "fed" first, usually in a special corner of the house reserved for them, in which case the figure or photo of the dead on the altar might also be temporarily moved to the ground. Mirta did not volunteer why she had set her father's photo on the floor next to warriors, and I did not press the matter. In spiritual work, it is well to keep some arrangements private. Spiritual knowledge is spiritual power, and we have already seen that as important as altars are as focal points for spirits, as apertures they limit what they reveal.

More generally, the altar's scopic regimentation as interface enacts an important principle of Cuban popular religious practice, which is that one's connections to spirits must be activated via material offerings (Wirtz 2013, 2018). My photographs of Mirta's altars show the continual presence of fresh flowers, clear water, lit candles, and other offerings that must frequently be replenished. Members of a religious family—especially any godchildren of a practitioners—are expected to contribute more substantially to an altar, by bringing cakes, sweets, and flowers or providing funds for other purchases, especially on the occasion of a consultation or mass. Mirta would sometimes proudly point out some new altar object as a gift from a visiting foreign godchild—an offering that activated spiritual energies and also kept the donor's connection to those spiritual energies charged. I myself have contributed in all of these ways to Mirta's altar, even bringing a new Ouija board from the U.S. when the old one needed replacing. Spiritual energy, and therefore communicative potential and the will of spirits to act in the world, flow through such

material relations. The altar's refraction of particular focal points of spiritual energy—particular entities and groups of entities, with particular domains of action—regiments the practitioner's possibilities for spiritual action, channeling particular spiritual potentials.

Mutuality characterizes the altar's work as aperture and interface. Those who keep and use altars witness the action of the spiritual energies they materialize. And the spirits' acts of witnessing, in turn, also develop the relationships between the practitioner and spiritual entities. Any Cuban popular religious practitioner will affirm that all actions undertaken with the altar—for example, providing an offering to one spirit or saint—are witnessed by all the entities. One must thus take care not to arouse jealousies, one Santería priest told me, and instead explain very well to the entire collectivity of the altar what one is doing and why. Everyday acts such as refreshing the glasses of water or removing wilted flowers cannot be done halfway but must give respect to all the entities on the altar. Some practitioners described for me (or carried out before me) acts of narrating aloud what they were doing and why, when working on or before their altars.

Sitting in Mirta's living room in front of her altars for long conversations allowed the altars to dynamically contribute to Mirta's spiritual self-knowledge, in flashes of insight that Mirta attributed to the spirits' presence. Cuban religious practitioners describe human lives as saturated with spirit presence and thus with immanent possibilities for spiritual communications. Mirta frequently described sensations of feeling spirits all around us—her skin would prickle as if with electricity. As we talked, she might indicate goosebumps on her arms as evidence that the spirits in general were confirming what one of us had said. Or she might point out a lit candle on her altar that had begun to sputter or that had burned down faster than the other candles to indicate that a particular spirit was "working" for her on the issue being discussed. The many eyes gazing back from the altar are a reminder of the ever-present potential for communication between the living and the spirits and, indeed, the likelihood of being watched and overheard by the spirits.

Conclusion

The two ethnographic cases I have presented demonstrate how the visuality of Cuban popular religious altars contributes to the regimentation of sensory and emotional experiences of relationships with spirits, and thus to spiritual knowledge and practice. Pedro's altar, presented at a single moment in time, demonstrates how important aspects of the location, arrangement, and physical qualities of altars and their objects instantiate important religious principles. The location of altars in domestic spaces models the interpenetration of spiritual and everyday matters, including the extension of kinship and lived biography into spiritual domains connecting the living and the dead. The arrangements of altar objects and the qualities of those objects model principles such as multiple representation and doubling of spiritual entities/energies, as well as limits to

spiritual knowledge. Mirta's bóveda, visited occasionally over the span of fourteen years, presents an evolving diagram of her spiritual development and the role of her altar in her ongoing ritual practices and family life. Over time, she added to, moved, and re-configured her altars and altar objects in ways that reflected new insights, amplified relationships with the living and the dead, and produced new possibilities.

Considered altogether, this profusion of ethnographic material centered on my photographs of Pedro's and Mirta's altars demonstrates the cosmogenic role of altars in producing dynamic figurations of spiritual presence and power. Altars refract the often visual imagery of spirit-given insights to provide vivid focal points for the communicative work of mediums who give voice to spirit messages. To borrow Paul Johnson's (2018a) distinction between emissive and transmissive modes of spiritual presence, the emissive mode of creating a "tableau vivant" of spiritual entities on the altar materializes spiritual presences so as to enable Spiritist mediums such as Mirta and Pedro to activate a transmissive mode of spirit presence through mediumship, whether by reading cards or being possessed. Altars and their objects can be approached as simultaneously representations, conduits, and embodiments of auratic presence, which is to say that they dynamically figure possibilities for knowing and working with spirits. They laminate what Henri Hubert (1999[1905]) called a sacred or magical temporality onto mundane temporalities: routine domestic life, its moments of crisis, ritual cycles large and small (from changing out the altar bouquets to holding major annual ceremonies), and various chronotopes of biographical, historical, and even mythic time (Wirtz 2007, 2018).

I have thus approached the visuality of altars as not simply reflecting spiritual practice but as actively configuring its possibilities, via processes of scopic regimentation. Four dimensions of scopic regimentation are apparent in my examples and may well be applicable to the workings of altars in contexts beyond my specific ethnographic site.

1. Like a *prism*, the altar refracts particular spiritual entities out of what the spiritually sensitive describe as a general saturation of the living world with spiritual energy. The visions and insights a person receives over time about the identities and qualities of particular spiritual entities or groups of entities are made tangible in altar objects such as pictures, statues, and dolls. Likewise, the placing of a photograph of a deceased family member on the altar can provide a focus for an ongoing, evolving relationship with their spirit. This process of differentiation and elaboration is evident in the plethora of types and qualities of altar objects, which draw upon widely circulating indexical orders that strongly associate particular colors or locations—such as high up versus close to the ground—to particular spiritual entities or kinds of entities. For example, Mirta's father, as a deceased relative, had a formal photographic portrait on her altar, while her "African" protector spirit, who she knew as the Fine and Precious Little Black Doctor, was instantiated as a cloth

doll, elegantly dressed, but still racially stereotypical and more of a “type” than an individual, with limits to what Mirta could know of him. Mirta nonetheless expressed love and adoration for both of these protector spirits.

2. The altar’s scopic regimentation as a *constellation* presents relationalities between entities as well as with the practitioner, through physical arrangements of proximity and the play of contrasting and shared qualities of altar objects. For example, the central axis of Pedro’s altar used vertical alignment and color to demonstrate a “doubling” link between his “mother,” the Virgin of Caridad del Cobre, high up, and the “African” spirit Josefina, arrayed on the ground below. In Cuban popular religion, colors are strongly associated with particular orichas, so the golden yellow pulsing through this vertical axis also instantiated the doubling of these entities’ maternal protection of Pedro. Mirta’s maternal and family-centered spiritual energies were likewise evident in the large paintings hanging on the walls around her altar, the clearly religious painting of one of the “two waters” who are her spiritual mothers echoed in the family portrait gallery of her mother, her children, and herself. The very simultaneity of the altar’s visual field as a constellation presents an image of accumulating spiritual-biographical history, a vibrant visual diagram showing all that the practitioner has gleaned about the universe of spiritual forces in co-present relations to each other and to the practitioner, her family and her godchildren. New relationships and connections are always immanent.

3. Although Cuban religious practitioners often present their altars as a curated arrangement to be admired, the altar also functions as an *interface*, in which spiritual entities instantiated on the altar means can be made present to receive offerings and be activated to communicate and act in the world. The direct addressivity of the altar demands face-to-face engagement from those who come before it. Water must be frequently refreshed and flowers replaced. The altar must always be kept beautiful and sometimes prepared for special ritual occasions. Spiritual entities embodied in altar objects witness their own treatment and respond generously or with further demands. The altar reminds us that spirits need devotees as much as devotees need spirits. Praise for a beautiful altar is in itself a way of adoring the spirits, who are energized by offerings. Altar objects may be moved, like Mirta moved her father’s portrait to the floor near her front door, in order to activate or even force some kind of spiritual action. Consider too the occasional fast-burning candle on Mirta’s bóveda, which she points to as a spirit responding to our conversation.

4. Finally, the altar’s scopic regimentation as an *aperture* is apparent in its play of revelation and concealment, which models the limits on access to and knowledge of the spirits. Curtains, draped decorative cloths and skirts, and topped containers of all sorts keep some objects out of view or provide only partial views. Consider how Pedro’s altar

so overwhelms its small room that it cannot be taken in all at once, in a single view. One's vantage point makes some altar objects visible, while others are blocked from sight or simply half-obscured behind the glasses of water offered before them. As much as Mirta's altars dominate her living room, as soon as one enters her front door, there are other altars in back rooms of her home that are not on display for all visitors. It is not only what altars display—and don't—about a practitioner and their spirits, but how altars are an aperture for spirits to gaze back, to overhear and oversee the living. Indeed, some of the dolls, statues, and portraits seem to gaze just past us, always seeing more than the living can. These objects, as material realizations of spiritual beings, are witnesses and thus the regimentation of visuality extends to them as well as to the living who would work with them. Perhaps for this reason an altar's owner will often emphasize the importance of any visitor greeting the altar and showing it respect. But at the same time, the altar objects' eyes of wood and cloth and plaster and paint are not real, seeing eyes: the altar as aperture regiments the fundamental incompleteness of spiritual knowledge, which is also an open-endedness permitting new insights.

Like the altars they depict, my photographs and accompanying descriptions may make some things (more) visible, while obscuring others from view. It is in the nature of visuality to bring some things into focus and create relations of foreground and background, while leaving others out entirely or providing only a hint of their adjacent presence. This play of visibility is evident in my photographs and what they do and don't show of the room, occupants, altars, and activities, more or less by accident or because at the time I had some particular purpose in snapping the photo that may or may not coincide with the use I have put it to here. Photography can partake of the same ritual piracy as altars, in seizing and repurposing objects as images.

The concept of visuality allows a more critical engagement with the interactional work of altars by highlighting that acts of seeing and being seen are always ideologically loaded. It is not just differentiating between what scholars may see on altars in contrast to what the religious practitioners who construct, maintain, and interact with altars and spirits see, although this question is undoubtedly important. Visuality has implications beyond just acts of seeing and being seen, since practitioners engage with altars and spirits according to somatic modes of attention that exceed any one sense. Visual images, voices, skin prickles, and vibrations all emanate from work with and before the altar. I have argued that visuality's role is distinctive in refracting and focusing multisensory sensations so as to help religious practitioners clarify their images of particular spirits they work with and, in turn, to direct particular spirits to receive the benefits of ritual offerings and be activated to communicate and act. Altars pulse with emotional energy and spiritual potential. As my religious interlocutors say, the purpose is that *¡las cosas se muevan!* Things get moving!

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Endnotes

1. Although not usually articulated, my partner and I inadvertently elicited just this admonition when, early in my fieldwork in Santiago de Cuba in 1999, he moved his chair during a Spiritist mass to have his back to the altar in order to better face the action in front of it. “He didn’t know any better,” the participants kindly explained. In other contexts, similar strictures have applied to both royal sovereigns and their portraits, for similar reasons.↩

2. Bóveda usually means “vault” or “tomb” but is the accepted word for a Spiritist’s table for the spirits, a choice that emphasizes the *actual seating* of spirit presences on the table-altar. The bóveda’s objects generally share qualia of calm, coolness, purity, and refreshment, such as the color white, transparent glassware, frequently replaced cool water, fresh flowers, and candles. These model the desired state of tranquility and purity to which spirits are said to aspire, as well as encouraging their benevolent action in the world.↩

3. For more about the actual construction or “mounting” of an altar or the production of altar objects, see Brown 1996; Flores-Peña and Evanchuck 1994; Pérez 2016; and Polk 2004.↩

4. Scholars of visuality since Thomas Carlyle, who coined the term in 1841, have sought to describe the differing potentialities of contrasting visualities, encompassing different orientations to the politics of (visual) representation, different regimentations of the gaze, and varied analyses of limits and consequences of seeing and being seen. Much of this scholarship has focused on (Western) art and aesthetics. But as I aim to demonstrate, visuality has semiotic implications beyond its original application to art and to the psychology of perception.↩

5. The sacrifice at the heart of Christianity itself pointed to earlier moments of sacrifice (Delaney 1998).↩

6. An example germane to Cuba is the convergence among the resonances of the Christian cross, the directional compass rose, and Kongo graphic signs, such as the horizontal line demarcating the realms of

the living and the dead, intersected by the vertical temporal axis of growth that connects those realms (Farris Thompson 1983; Martínez-Ruiz 2013).↩

7. I refer the reader interested in learning more about Cuban popular religion and, in particular, work with spirits of the dead, to excellent recent ethnographies by Espírito Santo (2015), Ochoa (2010, 2020) Otero (2020), and Palmié (2013), among many others.↩

8. I leave aside the question of what constitutes an altar to consider elsewhere, since the line between a lone, displayed religious object and an altar is neither sharp nor fixed. Turner (1999) provides a useful discussion of the assumptions embedded in the etymology and European genealogy of the term *altar*.↩

9. As the reader might guess, there was more to this story, including additional ritual action. Some of it is recounted in Wirtz 2007:205–6.↩

10. Wirtz (2009) considers what happens when spiritually charged items are discarded, and what this reveals about notions of spiritual energy, as materialized in objects.↩

11. For example, Figure 8, lower-middle, shows a wood and gourd maraca set before a doll dressed in blue and representing one of Pedro's "African" spirits. And in the bottom-right corner of Figure 9, a *chekere* (gourd rattle) for greeting and a bowl containing offerings of peso notes are just visible in the right foreground.↩

12. Cubans have long lived in an economy of scarcity, especially with regard to consumer goods. What is available at any point in time tends to be homogenous and limited in supply. There are also domestically produced artisanal goods, such as the hand-sewn cloth dolls and doll outfits present on many altars. Those with access to international economic flows, for example through family who live abroad, can access a wider range of more luxurious goods. See Pertierra 2011 and Weinreb 2009. Among those with the resources to afford it, there is a recent trend among santeros toward hiring someone who specializes in decorating altars for special ceremonies, where this professionalized skill is one of many in a growing field of entrepreneurial opportunities related to Regla de Ocha in particular.↩

13. For those wondering about what the act of photographing an altar might mean in this context, it is true that even my negotiations with religious practitioners over when and how I could take photos of altars are telling. Most were eager to have me take photos and videos and then to receive copies that they could enjoy and further circulate—another multiplier of the auratic power of their altar and spiritual practice, especially when accompanied by an appropriate salute and (small monetary) offering to the altar. Only rarely (in the late 1990s, although not in recent years), a religious practitioner would forbid me from taking photographs of an

altar. Most wanted to be photographed with their altar and to have ceremonies audio-recorded, even when they did not want ceremonies video-recorded. In the past decade, video-recordings of ceremonies have become accepted, even welcome. Although I cannot fully account for the shift here, one factor was the relative scarcity of consumer devices such as cameras and the expense of film and developer in Cuba during the Soviet era and in the economic crisis that followed its demise, a situation that was changing as the world shifted to digital media and as Cuba's re-integration into the global economy made consumer electronics much more widely available. By 2005, Cuban religious practitioners themselves were avidly filming altars and ceremonies, and as Beliso de-Jesús (2015) argues, photographs and videos of Cuban altars and ceremonies now expand auratic power across global circuits.↩

14. Ocha altars involve even more concealment, as the embodiments of orichas in stones and other materials are usually inside topped containers that are in turn draped with decorative cloths, much like the skirts of the dolls on Pedro's altar. On Reglas de Palo altars, ngangas present a bristling visible top to a container whose contents are secret.↩

15. The viewer of my photographs may well be uneasy with apparent racial and ethnic caricatures, piracies from other faith traditions, or other aspects of altar aesthetics. To better understand racializing dynamics in Cuban popular religion, see Palmié 2002, Schmidt 2015, and Wirtz 2014a. Regarding gender and sexuality, see Beliso De-Jesús 2015 and Otero 2020. On ritual piracy, see Romberg 2005.↩

16. The plastic wedding cake topper of a bride and groom visible in Figures 1 and 7 is part of the central axis of Caridad and Josefina and represents an attribute of Ochún, who is associated with love and sensuality and would thus be consulted over romantic troubles.↩

17. Although I have documented the dramatic style and register shifts that mark the voice of spirits and orichas in other work (e.g., Wirtz 2007, 2014), Mirta and many other Cuban Spiritists often do not manifest those. Mirta typically conveys some qualities of the spirits who speak through her by changes in voice quality, such as tremulousness, vocal fry, or even stridency.↩

18. This is a pseudonym for the actual name on the sign, which would pinpoint Mirta's address.↩

19. In the iconography of the Regla de Ocha, it is Yemayá whose domain includes maternal love, while Ochún is more closely associated with female sensuality and sexual/romantic love.↩

20. Walter Benjamin (2007:262) writes of encountering history not as an accumulation of events filling empty, homogenous time, but, via historical materialism, as a constructivist process of configurations producing moments of crystalizing shock "where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions."↩

21. In Cuba, carved wooden statues are a staple in the artisanal market for tourists, and while styles and genres vary, depictions of African and African-descended figures and themes are common—perhaps the wood's color provides an affordance for depicting dark-skinned people, and certainly, carved wood in Cuba has rustic associations to link it to rural, folkloric, Afro-Cuban people and cultural forms (Wirtz 2014a).↩

22. Here I leave aside the question of my own experience of Mirta channeling my father's spirit.↩

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