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# When Biographies Cross Necrographies: The Exchange of 'Affinity' in Cuba

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**ABSTRACT** *In Cuba one might encounter a lively exchange occurring between the living and the dead (los muertos), one which is often described in terms of 'affinity'. This involves a reciprocity among the biographies of the former, the past (biographies) and present condition ('necrography') of the latter, who are not in the least limited to ancestors or previously intimate to the living persons. The intensification of such exchange takes place within a dynamic and multiple field of identifications and differentiations, wherein the dead slowly become dead in a parallel process of un-becoming living, through becoming 'affinity' muertos of their living counterparts. This could be said to be the point of what is going on, but things, when they get so radically mobilised through exchange, might also go beyond the point of conclusion.*

**KEYWORDS** *Cuba, death, exchange, biography, divination*

Behind what seems to be an uncompleted culture, there is in fact a systematic corpus of thought and emotion constantly modelling itself out of death. (James Figarola 2008: 36)

## The Others

Today I am visiting Fernando, with whom I am supposed to talk about his experiences in Afro-Cuban divination. Upon knocking on the door of his apartment, Lucia, his wife, opens and welcomes me in: 'Fernando is coming, have a seat. Do you want coffee?' I reply positively and sit on a very uncomfortable armchair in the small living room. On the sofa are seated three children who greet me somewhat indifferently and continue watching the loud TV. Lucia

serves me the typical black and sweet Cuban coffee and sits on a stool. Exchanging a few conventional words, I soon realise that Lucia is as much absorbed in what is on the TV as her children. They are watching a film I recognise, 'The Others' (directed by Alejandro Amenábar in 2001); set in an isolated mansion and depicting a nightmarish realisation of the protagonists – a mother (Nicole Kidman) with her two children – of being dead, although not aware of it and acting as if they were alive until the end. Lucia interrupts their silent devotion: 'This is why we, the living, play such an important part in making the dead realize their condition; you cannot imagine how many times I have experienced similar situations. If you don't grant them acknowledgement they wander in despair and provoke mischief.' Her words come out with no intention to provoke any deep existential discussion about life and death and are not explicitly directed at any one of us present. They float in the room as a factual and mundane comment would do, not awaiting any response; and so it happens. We all keep on watching 'The Others' slowly realise their 'otherness'.

All kinds of bondings and assemblages, be they societies or socialities, cultures or subcultures, dividuals or individuals, have their significant others. Cross-culturally and historically, the dead and death in general have proved to be a persistent kind of significant Other. This might be because death in itself is a process of radical *othering*. One could venture the universalist claim that humanity holds as a basic intuition or perception that death is a significant kind of transformation (cf. Kellehear 2007). However strong this intuition may be, what perplexes things is that there is no universal consensus about where exactly this transformation leads to, even more so when the living are an integral part of how this transformation will take place. Typically and starting from Hertz (2004), death signifies a linear transformation of the familiar into the unfamiliar and then back to the familiar (see Seremetakis 1991: 12–15, 47–48; Course 2007; Tsintjilonis 2007). That familiarity is the starting point is evident in the predominance of the kinship ties that are severely affected by death. If death is *a* transformation, the centre of attention becomes how the living and the dead related in kinship terms may renegotiate, most often through (post-)burial and mourning practices, their pre-established and now shaken intimacies (see Rosenblatt *et al.* 1976).

The anthropological archetype of the dead has been the kinfolk; death and the subsequent practices and rites transforming them into de-individuated or culturally and psychologically adequately confronted ancestors (see Palgi & Abramovich 1984; Metcalf & Huntington 1991; Kan 1992; Bloch & Parry 1996;

Robben 2004; Kaufman & Morgan 2005). Furthermore, the body of the deceased and how it is handled play a very central role, while an unexpected destruction or absence of it becomes highly problematic and traumatic (see Merridale 2000; De Boeck 2005; Cassia 2006). Perhaps the second most predominant category of the deceased to appear in the ethnographic record is the 'famous' or, even, 'infamous', that is, those people who due to their social standing, ideas and deeds (including the circumstances of their death) enjoy a reputation wider than the more restricted reach of kinship and enter a wider field of politics or collective representations (see Verdery 1999; Lomnitz 2008; Kalusa & Vaughan 2013). Thus, whether kinfolk or not, the most recurrent significant others-as-dead are those who used to be significant others while in life; or, at least, became significant others in their very death. If we almost always start from a certain kind of familiarity, then it is likely that our understandings of death will tend to be filtered through these categories. For instance, Harrison argues that the dead become significant others only in their 'genealogical, sentimental, or institutional relation to the surviving' (2003: 93).

In Cuba there are occasions, quite diffused in some sectors, wherein the appearance of the dead, *los muertos*, is not necessarily and directly linked to either the event, time and place of their death, or their corpse, its treatment and the grieving process and the intense affective expression that often accompanies it (see Danforth 1982; Rosaldo 1984). Equally so, the identities of the deceased are not exhausted in the realm of kinship or other familiarities. Yet, as the present ethnography will show, the relations forged between these *muertos* and the living are ones of vivid reciprocity. One common term that describes and qualifies such relations is that of 'affinity' (*afinidad*). Non-kinfolk, even completely unknown personages, often forms part of one's 'affinity' *muertos* without the quality of 'affinity' being compromised. Reversing Harrison and the absolute monopolising ethnographic norm in the literature, the present ethnography of the dead *is not* dependent on the genealogical, sentimental or institutional relations that exist prior to or, at least, are formed with the event of death.

The broad aim of this paper is twofold. Firstly, through the ethnography of the *muertos* and their unfolding biographies, what I call 'necrographies', I intend to embark upon a descriptive and analytical path that so far has remained largely untrodden, wherein the phenomenon of death is not dependent on the biographies of the dead as the already familiar. The ethnographic and analytical edge in this case becomes the notion of 'exchange', drawing inspiration from Baudrillard (1993), as a counter-perspective on the linearity that

has been commonly attributed to death-related phenomena and as an extremely original and dynamic framework of both identity and alterity; something that ambitiously and hopefully goes beyond the limits of the *muertos* as they appear in this paper. Secondly and on a more sociological level, I try to explore, rather suggestively, what this 'necrographic' distance from kinship might reveal about Cuban society at large and, in general, about contexts within and beyond the Caribbean and Latin America where kinship is not the monopolising archetype of reciprocity between life and death.

### The Crossing of Paths

The crossing of paths as a generative instantiation of a kind of destiny that is understood not so much as a form of fatalism as it is a breakthrough (*from* fatalism) has been a strongly occurring theme in my ethnographic explorations in Cuba. This is not limited to the realm of Cuban popular religiosity and divination. Historically, both the 'discovery' of Cuba by Columbus in 1492 and the Revolution in 1959 can be seen as powerful moments of such breakthrough. The deep and prolonged social, political and economic crisis that was ignited by the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the advent of the 'special period' (*periodo especial*) in the 1990s has had profound effects upon Cuban life which are felt up to the present day (see Benzing 2005; Hernández-Reguant 2009). These negative effects can generally be said to create a sense of desperation or aimlessness, even dullness. Unable to give detailed examples here, I report a very diffuse and dominant 'feeling' I have been aware of since 2006. Life-courses, often depicted as 'paths' (*caminos*) in the Cuban-Spanish idiom, suffer from either a wrong direction or the lack of it, that is, deviation or stagnation. Cubans are highly conscious of all this. Things 'stumble' (*tropezar*), 'deviate' (*desviar*) or become 'heavy' (*pesadas*) and people constantly find themselves in a state of 'struggle' (*lucha*) so as to 'make things walk' (*hacer que las cosas caminen*).

Often things start 'walking' or, even, 'running' (*se echan a correr*) when a significant encounter occurs at a visit in a house or a public place, in the street and at other kinds of 'crossroads' (*cruces*) that might be instantiated in the meeting of (at least) two 'paths'. Interminably desperate and ever-present bureaucratic obstacles can surprisingly be overcome by the sudden appearance of the right acquaintance; a hunch or a dream might give you the winning numbers of the illegally run lottery; a tourist might buy you a beer, obtain medicines for your ailing grandmother or even marry you. Cubans are equally fascinated and nurtured by a dynamic interplay of personal skills, charisma and miraculous

coincidences. Within such a context, many Cubans are also fascinated by the appearance of perspectives that are thought to come from *muertos*. This crossing of paths between the living and the dead is a relatively widespread phenomenon, but it is never an official or conventional practice (see Román 2007), and it is almost always followed by the adoption of perspectives that shed fresh light on, and give a direction to, one's *camino*. People cross paths with the dead through crossing paths with those individuals who are able to perceive them. This crossing is not so much a one-instance occasion for reflection as it is a whole redirection of one's 'path', a 'path' that is nurtured by and nurtures the paths of the dead (see Ochoa 2010; Espíritu Santo 2015). 'Affinity' between the living and the dead is, thus, accompanied by the exchange of perspectives with a highly oracular quality and which are able to re-establish positive directions to the previously stagnant or aimless *caminos* of both the living and the dead.

### The 'Acknowledgement' of 'Affinity': Opening the Path to Exchange

In Cuba and especially Havana, where my research has been based, those who can 'sense' (*sentir*) the dead are referred to interchangeably as *espiritistas*, *mediums*, *videntes* ('clairvoyants'), *de larga vista* ('of long sight') or, less often, *muerteros* (most commonly used in the eastern part of the island). The ability to discern *muertos* refers most directly not only to the visceral capacity to perceive their presence but also to an apparently distinct skill, that of being able to perceive things that are deemed otherwise impossible to know. Indeed, in the broader Cuban society *espiritistas* may be more famous for the latter ('long sight') than the former ability (to sense *muertos*). It is very common for an *espiritista* to tell you something extremely personal and intimate that you may or may not have known, or to deliver a warning concerning an imminent incident. There are other kinds of diviners also reputed for their extraordinary 'visions', pertaining to other popular Afro-Cuban religious traditions (see Holbraad 2012; Palmié 2013; Wirtz 2014; Espíritu Santo & Panagiotopoulos 2015), such as the *babalawos*, *santeros* and *paleros* of *Ocha/Ifá* and *Palo Monte*, respectively. *Espiritistas* may be distinguished from these other diviners by the ability to 'see' things more directly and often in more personalised detail, without necessarily being dependent upon a ceremonial protocol, a ritually induced spirit possession and the employment of specific objects as oracles (see Panagiotopoulos 2011; Espíritu Santo 2013).

*Espiritistas*, when describing their perceptive abilities, often say that they see things as if they were watching a 'film' (*película*); or that they hear messages being whispered or that thoughts and intuitions come to their minds, in

wakefulness or sleep. Perceptually, mediums experience a parallel manifestation of a 'message' to be articulated and of something that appears and articulates itself as a *muerto*. They also perceive a sense of that *muerto* 'belonging' (*pertenecer*) to a specific individual, be that those *muertos* who belong to themselves or to others. Very often *espiritistas* interpret their perceptibility of other people's *muertos* as a capacity and experience that are mobilised through their own *muertos* (Espíritu Santo 2012: 257).

What seems to be the most pressing point in the initial crossing of paths between a living person and a *muerto* is the complete reversal of a negative situation. This is the lack of 'acknowledgement' and the very first piece of information that comes to light is a recognition of the *muerto* as a presence. This is why mediums almost always describe and stress the appearance of the *muerto*; such visual information is within the medium's perceptive range. 'It is being presented to me the image of a ...' (*A mí se me presenta el imagen de ...*) are very often the opening words of mediums, followed by a description of facial and bodily features, clothing, and the appearance of objects which might reveal more biographical information about the deceased. As 'acknowledgement' is the initial and pressing need, the information is constitutive of the *muerto's* presence. At these initial stages the information is predominantly biographical, not so much in its depth and wealth but in its intensity; in its capacity to break through from a state of non-recognition to its reversal, a state of recognition. The aim is to give not full and detailed biographies, but rather traces and hints of a past identity that somehow lingers in the present. This lingering is said to occur precisely because of the previous lack of 'acknowledgement' and, therefore, should be somehow overcome. Unacknowledged *muertos* find themselves in a liminal state of confusion, aimlessness and inability to articulate themselves with clarity. Very often mediums describe such *muertos* as not aware that they are dead, something which may haphazardly provoke a similar sense of confusion to their living counterpart. The crossing of 'paths' is, thus, often perceived as an initial state of deviation or aimlessness which affects both the living and the dead, and a subsequent re-positioning through the very event of their paths crossing.

If *muertos* allow biographical (past and embodied) elements to be perceptually 'presented' to the mediums, this is out of a 'necrographic' (present and disembodied) need to be 'acknowledged', both to themselves and to the living, as dead. At the same time, the living receive messages that suggest not only the presence and specific identity of the *muerto*, but also those elements that link the personality and biography of the living with that of the dead. This is

precisely what ‘affinity’ could be said to condense: a sort of middle ground wherein ‘paths’ cross and, in doing so, are set in entangled (see Straight 2006) and directed motion (see Holbraad 2012; esp. pp. 150–153; see also Beliso-De Jesús 2015: 79–113).

Emilia is a woman who was in her 60s living on her own at the time I met her in 2007. Emilia described herself as a medium, able to sense her own *muertos* and those of others. Meeting Emilia for the first time, one might get the impression of an introverted and reserved person. Nevertheless, as I got to know her better she proved to be very generous and warm, eager to talk about her mediumistic experiences, the majority of which touched upon highly personal aspects of her life. Emilia was quite intense in her conversations and she could talk to me literally non-stop for hours.

Emilia ‘has’ one *muerto* whom she calls Mamasita. Once I asked her to tell me of the first time Mamasita appeared. She said that Mamasita had always been there, albeit less obviously, since her childhood. As a child, Emilia would get glimpses of her as an old African woman who would always appear serene. Instead of being afraid, little Emilia would feel at great ease in her presence. Nevertheless, she did not say anything to anybody, because her family did not ‘practice nor understand those things’. It was only when she was a teenager and happened to be at a friend’s house that her secret was revealed. Her friend’s mother told her to pay more attention to a spirit of hers, indeed an old African woman, who would be part of her life and protect her. In order to do so, however, Emilia would have to start listening to the spirit and her needs. It was then that Emilia learned the spirit’s name, at least the one she was known by during her life in Cuba. Mamasita let the mother of Emilia’s friend know that she was an African-born woman of noble descent. She had been captured by an enemy tribe and eventually brought as a slave to Cuba. Her royal upbringing soon distinguished her among the rest of the slaves and she was swiftly ‘promoted’ to house-servant. On that same day Mamasita also said that she liked flowers with intense colours and smell, as well as jewellery, especially silver. She asked Emilia, through the mother, to always have some flowers in one corner of her bedroom and to occasionally wear jewellery. She warned Emilia to be careful of a certain member of the family, a female cousin, who envied her immensely and who could even conduct witchcraft against her at some point in the future. She also said that Emilia, although she was a very capable person, was very timid, suppressing her hidden qualities; that she should start showing more confidence and speak her mind. Emilia commented that this was precisely Mamasita’s manifestation in her, in the



sense that having been a member of royalty in Africa she became a slave in Cuba and her potential (not only to be free but also to reign) had been suppressed. Emilia also stressed that by 'acknowledging' Mamasita, particularly in relation to this biographical information, there were two vital effects.

Firstly, Emilia gained an enhanced awareness of her own timidity. Secondly, this activation of something she had known but not been highly conscious of allowed Emilia to not only know herself better but also move beyond this character trait, partially at least. That is, not only was her timid character more clearly articulated, but she was also able to find a path out of it, so to speak. Emilia linked the increase in her mediumistic ability to having received the aforementioned piece of information and subsequently 'working on it' (*trabajandolo*). The latter was not only about trying to speak her mind, but also about engaging more actively with what Mamasita had been at pains to articulate to Emilia and her own self. The fact that Mamasita was 'acknowledged' resulted in Emilia becoming more articulate by 'working on' her mediumistic ability. Even if she generally remained a timid person, her mediumistic articulateness was a temporal but highly intense breakthrough from such a personality trait. Another important and interconnected effect was that 'acknowledgement' also resulted in Mamasita being able to articulate herself more clearly. Emilia argued that precisely because Mamasita had found a way to 'speak' through her, she was finally able to overcome the suppressed condition she found herself in as a slave. This kind of interpretation by Emilia derived from the fact that Mamasita stopped articulating so much information about her past life and had instead increasingly conveyed messages about Emilia's present life conditions, and about people who needed Emilia's help as a medium.

From the moment a *muerto* appears to be related to a living person through 'affinity', a flow of information is brought forward concerning three broad dimensions: biographical aspects of the living person; biographical aspects of the deceased while in life and aspects of the present state of the *muerto*, what I call 'necrography'. The 'acknowledgement' of 'affinity' crucially brings up these three dimensions as interrelated – partially overlapping and mutually affecting – phenomena. In that sense, reciprocity becomes intense because not only do the 'messages' that are articulated bring these three dimensions into dialogue, but the dialogue itself becomes a vehicle of transformations (cf. Vitebsky 1993).

For instance, Emilia's timid character was crossed with Mamasita's condition as a slave. Two distinct biographies have a common point of reference. But it is something more than a mere analogy; it is a manifestation and an implication.

The commonality is instantiated in their very crossing and not in their a priori similarity. This crossing between Emilia's timidity and Mamasita's enslavement undergoes a further transformation. As soon as 'acknowledgement' takes place, Emilia finds a way out of timidity, crucially through the development of her mediumistic abilities, and Mamasita finds a way out of slavery in the sense that as a piece of information, as a memory, it never reappears, at least not as a dominant narrative theme. It is as if Mamasita forgot her enslavement by way of initially remembering it by reminding Emilia of it. Therefore, the 'acknowledgement' of 'affinity' seems to be a dynamic process whereby deceased people attract the attention of the living so as to be able to initiate a previously blocked and inarticulate process of becoming dead. All this crucially involves an initial 'flash' of memory of biographical aspects with the ultimate goal of escaping them so that the *muerto* is able to de-individuate, disembodiment and, thus, reach a fuller state of death-hood. Following Hertz's (2004) understanding of death as not happening at an instant, one could argue that disembodiment too is a transition in potential. A particularly large number of *muertos* seem to, phenomenologically and initially at least, come from the same 'pool' of undifferentiated lingering dead. Some finally stand out through 'affinity', whereas others linger on in this amorphous mass or 'sea' of dead that surreptitiously saturates the Cuban social landscape (see Ochoa 2007).

Not all *muertos* are linked to the living by way of 'affinity'. A medium may perceive the presence of a *muerto* who does not 'belong' to anyone, who is somehow lonely, confused and not fully conscious of being dead. Normally, such *muertos* are perceived in instances when some kind of misfortune occurs, either to those who frequent a specific place inhabited by the *muerto* (a house or a cemetery) or because the *muerto* 'catches' (*coge*) a specific individual. In such cases the medium's role is to identify such 'attachments' (*apegos*) or incidental crossings of paths and dissolve them, sending the *muerto* back to its aimless and inarticulate state, so as to prevent this state being passed on to the living. Such spirits are often described as 'wandering' (*vagantes*) or 'dark' (*oscuros*). There are also others who are perceived as indeed 'belonging' to a third party, but as a 'pacted' with (*pactado*) and intentionally 'sent' (*enviado*) *muerto* rather than an 'affinity' *muerto*. This latter instance often refers to the *nfumbis*, spirits of the dead that are handled within the tradition of *Palo Monte* (see Espírito Santo *et al.* 2013; Palmié 2002: 159–200). In general, whether 'dark', 'wandering' or 'sent', the ability of these *muertos* to stand out from the amorphous mass is occasional, usually has negative outcomes and is perceived

as poor in its potential to create fuller 'pictures' (*cuadros*), wherein biographies and necrographies cross, inform, form and transform each other.

### 'Materialising' and 'Developing' 'Affinity'

The previous section focused on the initial generation of the flow of reciprocity between the dead and the living, and the opening up of the path to exchange-cum-'affinity' by way of 'acknowledgement'. This section will consider how this flow is further 'materialised' (*materializarse*) and 'developed' (*desarrollarse*). Although there are some patterns that are commonly followed, the ultimate measure and effect of 'affinity' is the flourishing of exchange itself. Everything that affords this flow is, by trial and error and only then by definition, the correct kind of 'materialisation'.

Out of a multitude of 'materialisations', I will focus on a predominant one. An unobstructed flow of exchange with the dead is generated by a balanced degree of materialisation, whereas an excess of materialisation or its opposite, absolute dematerialisation, tends to block, ignore or get rid of exchange. One of the objects that most vividly and uniquely bring the dead into life, so to speak, is dolls. Dolls in this case are not only sites of intense emotional attachment and identification (see Robertson 2004), but also active agents of ontological constitutions and transformations (cf. Schattschneider 2001). Moreover, half the necrographic 'game' consists of identification. As I intend to argue, the other complementary and necessary half is differentiation and this is where exchange reveals fully its dynamic potentials.

It is not uncommon to enter a house in Havana and encounter dolls (usually made of cloth or plastic), sitting in the corner of a sofa, on the floor, on miniature stools or on shelves and other furniture. A hasty look would probably give the impression of ornaments of a somewhat kitsch-baroque taste or a nostalgic lingering of childhood. A more engaged observation would reveal that these dolls are themselves surrounded and adorned by very detailed ornaments, such as jewellery, a cigar, or playing-cards. They can also be white or black in colour; they can resemble nuns, gypsies, Arabs, Indians or half-naked African slaves, and they are very commonly dressed in bright colours (Figure 1).

A 'thicker' description would have them as 'materialisations' of *muertos*. The way they look is linked to the way the spirits of the dead appear to mediums; visual traces of their past life, as well as habits, likes and desires that still persist or are newly aroused in their transforming state of being and becoming *muertos*. 'Materialisations' such as dolls are not seen as mere representations of *muertos* but as dynamic sites where the *muerto* recognises itself, manifests itself



**Figure 1** Photograph taken by the author at Eduardo and Olga's place, to whom I am deeply indebted both for letting me publish the picture and generally for welcoming me into their lives.

through them, cultivates its 'affinity' with the living and, ideally, 'develops', 'evolves' (*evoluciona*) and 'acquires light' (*obtiene luz*). However, this does not represent a strictly linear or forced effort to dematerialise.

Here, it is imperative to mention two broad tendencies concerning the attitude towards the dead among *espiritistas* in Cuba. One claims a more faithful link to the origins of *Espiritismo* as a tradition, traced back to European and North American Spiritism which flourished in the nineteenth century and drew upon, to a great extent, the writings of a French pedagogue, known as Allan Kardec (see Espírito Santo 2010). Briefly put, this kind of Spiritism places a highly moral value on the progressive dematerialisation of spirits. The dead find themselves in a linear kind of 'evolution' in which they dematerialise and obtain light. In Cuba, this approach is associated with *Espiritismo científico* ('scientific Spiritism') and its adherents, quite limited in number, engage not only with already 'elevated' spirits but also in a very dematerialised manner. Direct communication with such beings is not so evident and, if it occurs at all, it tends to be fairly inconspicuous and muted. Rather than a high degree of exchange derived from the *muertos* and the intimate links created through 'affinity', the 'scientific' groups gather and propound universal values of equality, charity, general well-being and morality. Even if a *muerto* appears among them, it will most often reflect tenuously on these values rather than deliver extraordinary, personalised and visceral messages directed to a specific individual. This latter phenomenon is reserved for the rest of the *espiritistas*, who identify themselves as *cruzados* ('crossed') and are much more popular.

Of course, in all of this there is a significant element of moral discourse, which is linked to notions of materiality. From the 'scientific' perspective, the practices described in this paper are deemed too 'material', revealing 'backward', 'ignorant', 'immoral', 'obscure', primitive' and 'African' ways of thinking and acting (see Palmié 2002; Wirtz 2009). Both non- and 'affinity' *muertos*, and their mediums, are considered to be too material. This is why one could consider *Espiritismo cruzado* to be part of the Afro-Cuban religious milieu rather than the Euro-Christian one (Espírito Santo 2010). But as Espírito Santo rightly argues, we are dealing with not only a moral economy, but also a perceptual and cosmological one: 'it is only of consequence in an Afro-Cuban religious context to denominate something as material since it also denotes its capacity to be spiritual' (2010: 66). In other words, what makes the 'crossed' *espiritistas* and *muertos* 'Afro-Cuban' is not only a morally and externally imposed judgement-cum-stereotype, but also an internally accepted attitude, which is held with pride. *Espiritistas* and *muertos* are Afro-Cuban in the sense that materialisation is neither necessarily evil nor backwards. Equally, dematerialisation is not absolute or an imperative moral stance.

What is at stake here is the correct balance between materialisation and dematerialisation so that 'affinity' may flow with ease. To a great extent, the measure of this is an unobstructed flow of exchange. So, instead of the presence being a problem (*sensu* Engelke 2007) and materialisation an impure act (*sensu* Latour 2010), the 'problem' (if there is any) is to achieve the correct kind of materialisation and presence in light of their necessary and unproblematic absence. In this case, the only problematic scenario would be to privilege excessively either one or the other, because that would threaten to block or do away with exchange; something which occurs much more intensely both to non-affinity or unacknowledged 'affinity' *muertos* and to highly elevated ones. This interplay between materialisation and dematerialisation is an organic part of a more general exchange; an exchange that ultimately relates in a fully dynamic and dialectical way biographies and necrographies, in both their identifications and differentiations.

Celia, a middle-aged woman who became a good friend of mine, told me that there were important and immediate effects from 'preparing' a doll for her *muerto*, Francisca. Francisca increased considerably her appearances, sharing information, advice and warnings about various issues that concerned Celia and her immediate environment, ranging from health and finances to social and family relationships. In general, Francisca augmented her protective role towards Celia by increasing the quantity and quality of her oracular

messages. At the same time, the making of the doll had another transformative effect. Previously, Francisca would appear to Celia in a way that revealed intensely her past life. For instance, she would appear as an image of a woman who walked with extreme difficulty due to an ailing left leg. Francisca had once revealed that she had had an accident while taking a stroll along Havana's western coastline, Malecón; that she had tripped over some rocks and had seriously damaged her left knee. Interestingly, Celia had also developed from early adulthood a pain in her left knee and, in the absence of a definite diagnosis, the doctors had called it something like 'early rheumatism'. According to Celia, her pains had been progressively worsening up until the making of the doll. After that the pain swiftly became less intense and more bearable. This change was simultaneous with Francisca appearing without a limp. As Celia said with conviction, this was due to the fact that Francisca was 'evolving' as a spirit and this involved a progressive loss of memory of her past life, of her biography, at least of things that were not necessary or pleasant. Celia's claim is that the doll, as a 'materialisation', was crucial to this evolution.

This is all highly pertinent to what Celia had at various times highlighted as the importance of the *muertos*' 'development'. Such development is seen not necessarily as a linear and obligatory effort towards fewer and fewer materialisations. Rather, it is an initial and partial building and reconstruction of the *muerto*'s biography, and a subsequent and progressive effort to get away from it, replacing it (and the memories of it) with a more present- and future-oriented state of being; the path that lays ahead that intimately brings together the trajectories-cum-destinies of the living and the dead. *Muertos* start revealing some of their biographical traces, most often the way they looked while in life, their physical features, such as ethnic or racial origins, clothes and adornments they used to wear, their profession, their likes and dislikes and so on. All of these features, often in response to the *muerto*'s request, can be made manifest in the doll that 'materialises' it. Yet, the biographical information is not an end in itself, since it is never complete or fully pursued by the living. After all, the exchange with the *muertos* is praised for its at least partial relevance to the personal situation of the living. What many of my friends, including Celia, have repeatedly stressed is that complete identification may lead to the exact opposite, that is, complete alienation.

*Muertos* cannot identify completely with their past nor with their living counterparts. They are said to be entities that 'evolve' from (once) living persons into now (and slowly and with no guaranteed and linear outcomes)

deceased ones. Their necrographic condition must be harnessed out of a past that transforms into something else; they must make use of this past (partially identifying with it) in order to ultimately differentiate from it. Complete identification with their past or with the living would alienate them from their direction of becoming dead. It can also be argued that to become an 'affinity' *muerto* of a living person is precisely a process of fuller 'realisation' on the part of the *muerto* that they are no longer the living person they used to be, but are instead an entity that is other-than-living; and through this 'realisation', they are able to relate to the living by way of 'affinity'. Celia told me:

The doll is and isn't the *muerto*. Francisca is drawn to the doll because she recognizes herself in it but through it she also recognizes that she is dead. When I made her the doll I felt her differently. In the beginning it was as if she was in a state of shock. For the first time she would feel more dead than ever. Her stress ran through me in the form of chills and a slight feeling of depression. But as soon as she got used to her sight as a doll she became at ease. She saw herself as a doll, reminded of her past but also clear that it was not exactly her. Previously she would manifest herself only through my body [through spirit possession] and that would make her feel more like a living person. This is important for a *muerto* to realize because otherwise it still lives in the past, as if it was the present, and may take power over you to such an extent that she becomes you and you her.

Not only are *muertos* ex-living humans and ex-bodies, but their precarious state of being is based precisely on what they once were and their partial negation of it. What they are and what they are transforming into depend on what they used to be and partially still are, not only as a point of identification but also as a point of departure and differentiation. As Celia's words very graphically describe, the doll simultaneously *reflects* and *deflects* the way Francisca used to look. This is because in its condition of something-like-but-not-exactly her previous self, it takes Francisca a step further in 'realising' and acting like a *muerto*, leaving partially aside her embodied memories and stressing her disembodying condition. In this process, the only thing that is stable as a desire and effort (not as a state) is 'affinity', which is largely measured by and dependent upon the flow of exchange.

The way exchange-cum-'affinity' is put into motion is by an experimental 'developing' of 'partial identifications and partial differentiations' (see Willerslev 2004) that the various 'materialisations' bring about. This necessary and dynamic counterpoint occurs on three levels, for which the terms of their relationship and their bringing together become precisely what must also set



them apart. These three levels are the past life of the *muerto* (its biography), its current state (its necrography) and the life-course (biography) of the living counterpart. Although mutually defined, if conflated and fully identified with each other or, on the contrary, completely dissociated, exchange becomes blocked and the crossing of the *muerto* and the living person becomes either absent or problematic.

In summary, one could say that in Cuba there are a large number of *muertos* that are perceived as lingering on and in need of entering a more definitive process of becoming dead that was denied to them in the moment of their death. This seems to have occurred precisely because previously there were no living individuals who could pay attention to and facilitate such a need. One could say, returning to the terms of Harrison which I outlined at the beginning of this paper, that these *muertos* have remained genealogically, emotionally and institutionally 'kin-less' until 'affinity' came to reverse this state of affairs; in fact 'affinity' created a state of affairs to begin with. If unacknowledged *muertos* are 'orphans' in a liminal position between life and death, 'affinity' becomes a sort of 'adoption' (cf. Harrison 2003: 90–105) so that the full transition to death, in the classical Hertzian sense, is consummated. One could expect, thus, that after 'affinity' has been granted recognition and further cultivated, *muertos* should at some point fully disembody and vanish, at least in their previous visceral intensity.

In other words, if the Cuban necrographic case is somewhat of an 'anomaly' in which *muertos* are 'orphans', with the advent of the 'acknowledgement' and 'development' of 'affinity' things would be expected to 'walk' towards the path of resolution, the dead taking their place to the higher and less individualised levels of Cuban ancestry. Is this not the point of gradually losing their biography and the memories of it? The fact is that the vast majority of 'affinity' *muertos* and their living counterparts that I have met have never radically disjoined. Nor have I ever heard of *muertos* transcending to such an extent that 'affinity' dissolved into a past memory. Even in cases where a *muerto* was somehow put aside, this, according to the explanations of the people I encountered in Cuba, was due to other *muertos* becoming more prominent at that particular phase or the living ceasing to care too much about them. It was never posed as a matter of a higher transcendence taking place. Whether this is absolutely representative of the whole necrographic phenomenon of Cuba I cannot say definitively, but it is true that a large number of 'affinity' *muertos* do stick around. What could possibly account for such a dismissal of the initial suggestion that 'affinity' would eventually set them free from this world?



### **Beyond the Point of Conclusion ... Or Forgetting to Remember to Forget**

Let us sum up, aphoristically, the whole process of becoming dead that the ethnography presented here suggests and try to engage with the question just posed. Becoming dead is not automatic and instantaneous, but a transition (*à la* Hertz), relying heavily on those who are left behind. In order to become dead, a person must forget and be forgotten. In order to forget and be forgotten, the person must first remember and be remembered (cf. Taylor 1993; Conklin 2001; Williams 2003; Vitebsky 2008). If this has not occurred around the event of death and usually by people who were already familiar with the dead person, then the dead must remind the living to remember to forget them (paraphrasing Taylor 1993). 'Affinity' prolongs considerably the process of becoming dead (forging a necrography), as a parallel process of unbecoming living (obviating from biography) through the exchange with the biographies of the living. Too much presence, materialisation and identification (such as that of aimlessly 'wandering', 'dark' or 'sent' *muertos*) just as too much absence, dematerialisation and differentiation (such as denial of exchange as a potential or highly elevated spirits) tend to block the flow of exchange and 'affinity'. On the contrary, a full 'acknowledgement' and 'development' of exchange make biographies and necrographies, the living and the dead, the past and the present, full reciprocal subjects, wherein identity is mutually implicated (exchanged) with alterity.

Analytically speaking, I have been implicitly guided by Baudrillard's notion of exchange in death-related phenomena (1993). If Hertz's *longue durée* is not so long and not so reciprocal after all, then we might find ourselves in need of a broader and less linear kind of reciprocity, one which does not have to anxiously face its extinction, its 'death', at the end of the road. Baudrillard's sophisticated argument is a corrective of a very widespread understanding of death in a characteristic fashion of binary oppositions. On the one hand, there is the view of death as the ultimate annihilation and cessation of life. According to such a view, death is the exact opposite of life. This leads to the banishment of death and the dead from the 'actual' space and time of life and relationality with the living, what Baudrillard calls a 'radical utopia' (1993: 126). The living and the dead do not converse any more, they do not relate to each other. On the contrary, life becomes a project of 'political economy' (1993: 144–148); that is, of constant labour and production as well as of 'rationalisation', a large part of which relies precisely upon the prohibition of death. This is because death, viewed as the end of everything and, thus, of labour

and production, becomes the arch enemy of 'political economy', modern life's main project.

On the other hand, we have death as 'symbolic exchange'. I will leave aside the 'symbolic' aspect. Suffice it to say that this different view, in stark contrast to the former, relates the living and the dead in full reciprocity and conversation, that is, in a relationship of exchange in non-economic terms. Baudrillard's originality lies in the fact that his scheme of death as exchange preserves the ontological difference of death from life, because their difference is precisely what permits them to enter into exchange. What death *is not* is the annihilation of life; it is different from life but not its opposite. In other words, one could say that by claiming that death is ontologically different from life but not for that matter its opposite, Baudrillard also skilfully gives death an ontological status to begin with; precisely what, according to him, death in 'political economy' lacks. The dead, if they are to be agents of exchange, are equally subjects as the living, with the only difference that they are different subjects:

When the primitive showers the dead with signs, it is in order to make the transition towards the state of death as quick as possible, beyond the ambiguity between the living and the dead which is precisely what the disintegrating flesh testifies to. It is not a question of making the dead play the role of the living: the primitive concedes the dead their difference, for it is at this cost that they will be able to become partners and exchange their signs. (1993: 181)

I believe that this view is of profound reach and goes well beyond some of the widespread, taken-for-granted truisms about death. When the dead are in full reciprocity with the living, this does not mean that they are the same. Paraphrasing Victor Hugo, Baudrillard exclaims: '[B]y dint of being washed and sponged, cleaned and scoured, denied and ward off, death rubs off onto every aspect of life' (1993: 180). Thus, and contrary to a common understanding (see Burke 1952; Demske 1970; Agamben 1991; Bauman 1992; Becker 2014), the radical absence of death and the dead as one side of a coin which has as its other side their radical presence is not universal but only belongs, in Baudrillard's view, to the 'political economy', to 'our', view of death.

The radical difference that is attributed to life from death creates an impossibility of dealing with the latter positively and, thus, this comes full circle to subsume death in life and create between them, paradoxically, a radical identity. Both radical extremes, according to Baudrillard, belong to the same 'cultural' system in which death is denied its subjectivity and full reciprocity with life. On the contrary, where death stands in full reciprocity and exchange with

life, the radical difference between them, just as radical identity, hinders this flow. Exchange is, thus, a relational modality in which alterity and identity become equal (not identical) interlocutors and necessary ingredients for the mobilisation of reciprocity (see also Viveiros de Castro 2004; Descola 2013: 311–321). But here is where Baudrillard can himself be radicalised, because as soon as exchange acknowledges full subjectivity to the exchanging parts, no linear, definitive and conclusive avenue is necessary.

The dynamics of exchange are encompassed in the reciprocity between the identification and differentiation of the triangle: biographies of the dead, their necrographies and the biographies of the living. This kind of exchange is mutually nurturing of and constituted by the flow of perspectives from the dead and their mediums with a highly oracular quality. The presence of and attention to the dead are so intimately linked to what they can offer in terms of shedding light on one's 'path' that it would not be unfair to say that, in a sense, the living take advantage of the precarious and fluid ontological state of the (not-yet-fully) dead, and actively prolong a situation that perhaps could have concluded much earlier. One friend of mine, Julio, described this situation in terms of 'addiction' (interestingly, a similar understanding appears in Palmié 2002: 173):

One gets addicted to the other in a way. The *muerto* gets addicted to becoming part of my life, of my everyday preoccupations, my obstacles that appear in my path, my joys and my frustrations. I get addicted to its capacity to see things the way only *muertos* can and give me extremely useful advice precisely on the above issues. Our paths are so much crossed that it is difficult for the one to let the other go. I feed my *muerto* a bit of life and my *muerto* feeds me with things only they [*muertos*] can; it feeds me a bit of death!

*Muertos*, as the present ethnography has strongly implied, are intimately linked to a wide, complex, marginal yet popular context wherein divination skills and oracular sensibilities are highly valued, sought after (sometimes anxiously and excessively) and cultivated. If a large part of the Cuban population feels that their 'paths' find themselves in a state of stagnation or deviation, it is not hard to understand why divination sensibilities are so highly valued (without implying that they exist only because of this). 'Affinity' *muertos*, of all the various kinds and degrees of being and becoming dead, are those who participate with the most intensity and frequency to this oracular (over)production; to such an extent that is hard to discern what comes first. 'Affinity' and oracular articulacy end up becoming one. Here we can see a multiplicity of 'paths'

coexisting in the same 'cultural' or 'cosmological' system concerning death. This coexistence creates not only a parallel universe but also a 'crossed' one.

One path, what may be called the ideal one, is for deceased people to 'transcend' shortly after their death through the help of their kinfolk or other familiars. As this is an ideal which in Cuba seems particularly unlikely to be realised, a second path appears, one in which after a prolonged period of unacknowledgement things are finally reversed and start 'walking' towards the first path. 'Affinity' presents itself as an amendment effort to redirect paths gone astray from the otherwise and only ideally linear direction of death. The exchange of 'affinity' creates a more dynamic situation than, say, the instantaneous transformation of remembering to forgetting, or from matter to non-matter. But then a third path arises precisely because the process of exchange that is ignited in the second path dissolves the linearity of things and brings to the fore new dynamics.

Rather than 'walking' from remembering to forgetting, from materialisation to dematerialisation, these dynamics proceed by exchanging the two opposite parts in a single and synchronous frame. Remembering is not succeeded by forgetting, but the two coexist and feed off one other. This more radical 'model' of exchange is sustained, tested and 'developed' by the production of oracular perspectives. The measure and guide of exchange (between identity and alterity, life and death) become the continuation of production of these perspectives which are subsequently put to the 'test', so as 'paths', in their crossings, acquire a direction and start 'walking'. This constitutes a transformation of a transformation, which is the radicalising of exchange itself, because 'affinity' *muertos*, as soon and as long as their exchangeability is being 'acknowledged' and 'developed', never actually become dead but are caught in an interminably liminal process of becoming dead. The oracular (over)production that is generated leaves aside the initial and ideal directions and leaves things beyond the point of conclusion and of genealogical, emotional or institutional death. *It finds its path out of dead ends*. To paraphrase once more Taylor (1993), perhaps in the very process of remembering to forget, the living and along with them the dead forget to remember to forget!

Death in Cuba is not a foreclosed case, because it is not exhausted in either an instant or a linear transition, but opens up a more dynamic path of exchange. If the dead we remember are our ancestors, what about the dead we forget? Do they become 'orphans', irrespective of whether or not they were kinfolk in life? Is Cuba in particular a place where there is an overcrowding of 'orphan' dead? Is the Caribbean or Latin America one? Is the colonial and, thus,

postcolonial context particularly fertile for 'orphans'? Perhaps; or maybe there are 'orphan' ancestors everywhere and what makes Cuba particular is that there are ample sensibilities where the 'orphans' and their perspectives are 'adopted'; whereas in many other cases they are never acknowledged or, if they are, they are promptly ostracised and marginalised as 'phantasms', 'vampires' or 'zombies' (for cases in the New World context and Africa, see Bourguignon 1959; MacGaffey 1986; Velzen 1995; Derby 1999).

The most solid sociological manifestation of the bringing together of 'orphan' *muertos* with the (over)production of oracular perception and articulation through 'affinity' is the persistent and, arguably, proliferating presence of 'religious families' (*familias religiosas*). There has been no systematic engagement with their wider role in Cuban society, since their gradual formation along the twentieth century up to the present (for a good overview of their internal organisation in the case of the *Ocha/Ifa* tradition, see Brown 2003: 63–112). 'Religious families' are the basic group unit around which popular Afro-Cuban religiosity is organised. As *muertos* for many a people are implicated in this wider spiritual exploration, they too have their place in these 'religious families', wherein kinship-like terms are employed. For instance, these families are headed by 'godparents' (*padrinos* and *madrinas*) who, by way of initiations, ritual and oracular guidance, create an ideally ever-proliferating spiritual offspring of 'godchildren' (*ahijados*), who in their turn may in the future create their own 'families', thus having 'trunks' (*troncos*) ramifying into 'branches' (*ramas*). 'Religious families' are indeed very complex networks of great sociological significance and their lack of institutionalisation creates a dynamic grassroots form of citizenship (see Hearn 2008; Routon 2010). 'Orphan' *muertos* are 'adopted' within these 'religious families', just as their living counterparts are, as these 'families', in most part, are constructed not in consanguineous terms but in 'religious' ones. Be they dead or living, non-kinfolk are full of potential, through their capacity to exchange valuable (oracular) perspectives and affinities, in creating biographical trajectories that go well beyond the well-trodden paths of conventional genealogies and institutions.

This leaves Cuban 'kinship' and ancestry, just like death, a structurally open matter, always in threat or promise to be redefined or revealed through the crossing of paths which may generate unpredictable mobilisations and redirections. Could all this be related to the very peculiarly Cuban phenomenon that there is no tangible indigenous genealogical reckoning? For most Cubans, ancestry ultimately derives from somewhere outside of Cuba (be that Europe,

Africa or elsewhere). The indigenous population of Cuba has been said to have physically and culturally perished from an early stage of colonisation (Gott 2005: 21–23). This does not mean that Cubans are completely oblivious to this absence, but it creates a seemingly paradoxical, diffused and intangible sense that all and no Cubans may have indigenous ancestry; and in fact, many ‘orphan’ *muertos* are spirits of indigenous people.

Although not possible to substantiate any direct link whatsoever, I wish to mention a phenomenon that runs parallel to what I am describing here and which may be placed as a generalised background that points to the sociological significance of non-kinship elements in Cuban intimacies. This is the phenomenon of adoption, usually through informal, intermittent, diffused and blurred rather than official means. There are far more cases than my European experience, of individuals having been, partially at least or at some points in their lives, brought up and cared for by people other than their immediate family, such as second-grade relatives or even neighbours. The current post-Soviet situation certainly accentuated such a phenomenon, as families were split due to mass migration or because adults at their most active age had to struggle in order to make ends meet. But there are far deeper historical roots, as previously mentioned of the colonial context. Between the very present and the distant past, what lies in between? This should be taken as a point for further elaboration and research and, thus, here it could only serve as a merely suggestive background element.

One could argue that all these hints, along with the dynamism of ‘religious families’, point to the wider sociological significance of kinship ties, so much so that these latter lend themselves as metaphors for other kinds of ties too, be they of actual adoptions among the living, religious or even political ties (see Härkönen 2014). This may well be the case and here Catholicism may have played its part. But if the family is such a valued relational category, this is intensely accompanied by and contrasted with its instability when it comes to defining its constitutive ingredients and units. The ‘orphan’ *muertos* constantly pose to the living Cubans the following question: who are our ancestors? The uprooted and forgotten dead are not a mere anomaly or parenthesis in the Cuban context, but run in the very historical veins of its non-genealogical and non-institutional affinities and adoptions. The significance of *the Others*, as other-than-kinfolk and other-than-living, suggests that what is equally valued is the exchanges of perspectives that are generated in the crossing of paths between biographies and necrographies.

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