Introduction

This book is about insignificant experiences, fleeting events, and minor intimacies felt at the limits of our reason. It is about registering such experiences, which are of no consequence until they are collected, agglomerated, and allowed to become forceful, which is to say influential, in our lives. It is about respecting the inconsequential and finding in insignificance a turbulence that makes all the difference, that lends direction—to perceptions, substances, and lives. In short, it is about instabilities at the limits of awareness and relation, or sociality, such as the tremble of an eyelid or the tiny catch in a person’s voice when telling a version of events.

It is a book about the Kongo-inspired society of affliction called Palo and its practitioner-teachers in Havana. It is about the education these men and women impart to their initiates, whom they instruct in forms of thinking that celebrate the fleetingly visceral apprehension of the dead as the basis for knowledge and action. It is also about the collections of healing-harming substances cared for at the heart of Palo practice. These are called prendas, ngangas, or enquisos, and they take the shape of cauldrons or urns packed with soil, sticks, and entities called nfumbe. This is also an account of being befriended by two teachers of Palo who for the past decade, but especially for eighteen months between 1999 and 2000, have guided my research under the rubric of a Palo apprenticeship.

Put simply, Palo is a craft of working with the dead to transform the fates of the living. The works [trabajos, obras] that Palo effects both heal and harm. For this reason, Palo is widely feared in Cuba as a form of witchcraft [brujería]—a tag practitioners of Palo do not reject. Palo craft includes rites of cleansing, the making of protective bundles, the crafting of dangerous strikes of fate meant to frighten or kill rivals, and, ultimately, the manufacture of the prendas-ngangas-enquisos that teachers of Palo keep at the center
of their craft and from which all other works emerge. Each work engages the dead where these are found: in materials such as dirt, sticks, feathers, and the remains of animals and people. Those highly knowledgeable in Palo craft also work the dead in less palpable, but no less concrete, registers, such as allusions and rumors. Palo is as much the art of crafting matter into fatefully powerful substances as it is a narrative art that creates shapes of hope and fear from the silences that pervade our everyday lives. Despite the considerable air of dread that surrounds it, Cubans of all sorts are drawn to Palo when their immediate prospects seem to sour and despair enters their lives.

1990s

I first traveled to Cuba in 1992 to gather an experience of the Cuban Revolution, which I was sure would soon disappear along with the rest of the Soviet Bloc. From Ann Arbor, where I had just finished my undergraduate degree in political science at the University of Michigan, the Cuban Revolution appeared to be teetering on the brink of collapse without the aid it had for decades enjoyed from the Soviet Union. On that first visit, which I made independently, I had only a marginal interest in Cuba’s African-inspired forms of thought and practice. I had no knowledge of Palo and only vague understandings about Ocha/Santo [Santería], by far the most public form of African-inspired association in Cuba. My interest in Marxist political economy led me to study the national generation of wealth, income distribution, political power, and social justice during the economic crisis. I was there for four months.

Havana in 1992 was unreal to my eyes. Basic markers of a large city were missing—the streets were empty of taxis, buses, and cars; there were no signs designating storefronts, no window displays, no shoppers on the sidewalks. Those places where jeans or televisions might be bought were hidden behind mirrored glass and impassive attendants. Without cars or buses, the city’s formidable columned thoroughfares—Malecón, Calle 23, Carlos III–Reina, Infanta, Ayestarán, Belascoaín, and the winding Calzada del Cerro—were silent. The movement of people was minimal, and the lines for public buses wound in baroque entanglements seeking shade under trees and covered sidewalks. The collapse of the transportation infrastructure was so grave that getting to the countryside beyond Havana was impossible. The standstill was near total, and except for an occasional heavy truck, only bicycles plied Havana’s wide avenues as people covered tremendous distances in search of food and cooking fuel. Money and food seemed
impossible to come by, but, with the economy at a stall, time was plentiful and there was always enough to resolve [resolver] the scarcity.

At night, with the foraging and gleaning behind them, entire sections of Havana went without a single light, and in their gloom and stillness the streets were eerily alive with the faint sounds of thousands of people going about their evenings at home. Silverware clinked against china as tables were cleared, doors closed quietly, discussions waned. These sounds haunted public space and betrayed a hidden, or hiding, population. Occasionally, more exuberant sounds would unstill the night—laughter, brawling, and crying.

In 1992 I lived against the terms of my tourist visa by taking up with a family near the intersection of Águila and Monte, which marks the boundary between the neighborhoods of Jesús María, in La Habana Vieja, and Los Cittios, in the more modern part of the city called Centro Habana. This was the family of the woman who made my bed in the hotel behind Havana’s interstate bus terminal to the west, on the Plaza de la Revolución. Milagro, who along with her husband lived with her parents and her older brother, ran significant risks by taking me in. She could have lost her job for plucking me out of one of the Revolution’s hotels, and though I did not understand why Cubans weren’t allowed to take in a traveler, or how exactly she calculated her risk, I believed her when she said that she wouldn’t be caught. Over the next two decades I would time and again defer to Cubans in calculating political and legal risk. Milagro’s neighborhood was among Havana’s poorest, and the poverty and despondency of her family and neighbors made evident the violence of the U.S. embargo on the faltering Revolution.

Living in Jesús María and Los Cittios in the early nineties was a crash course in Cuba’s arcane centralized economy and, more important, a tough introduction to its yet more inscrutable underground markets. Despite crushing shortages at state-run distribution depots that left ration cards unfilled for months, there was hardly a necessary product or service that wasn’t somehow available illicitly. It was a matter of having the time to find things and the money to buy them. The same functionaries who provided state-rationed goods and services (such as rice, refrigerator repair, or oral surgery) sourced the illicit markets for each, so people knew where to start looking for their food, their condenser motors, their antibiotics. Goods that disappeared from behind counters where they should have been available at subsidized prices reappeared under those very counters at ten to a hundred times the price. There was rarely bread at the corner bakery, but for twenty times the subsidized price the baker would bake all the bread anyone wanted. Until the midnineties, much of the centralized economy collapsed while neighbors and friends kept from going hungry by devising their
own schemes on the vast underground channels that keep Havana alive to this day.

Milagro’s husband, Pedro Pastor, was a garbage collector on extended work leave due to a stab he received in a street fight, or so he said. While Milagro worked at the hotel, Pedro introduced me to their life in Havana. He was gifted at maintaining an argument and explaining economic and social chains of cause and effect that were invisible to me, not least because I sustained illusions about Cuban socialism. At the time, he made money from the tiny commissions he received as a numbers runner for Havana’s immensely popular and illegal numbers game [la bolita, la charada china]. We spent the mornings walking the streets of Los Citios, hailing his clients in the balconies above and taking bets in code—ten cents on “butterfly,” a peso on “dog shit,” three on “the cemetery.” Afternoons were spent chasing the family’s dinner across Pedro’s formidable illicit networks, which would yield a few eggs, some bread, whatever, just enough to get by. Electricity and natural gas were two utilities that could not be resolved at all in the early 1990s, and without them the most mundane aspects of life could be unbearable. Many afternoons were spent with Pedro doing nothing but carrying water up several flights of steps to fill a barrel in their apartment because the pump for their building was never on. The refrigerator was useless, so there was no way to store food like milk or meat. In fact, without electricity the refrigerator was more like a locker, not so much for food as for despair born of hunger. Milagro’s mother, Ydolydia, cooked on an improvised kerosene burner that regularly flared to burn her and tainted our hard-fought meals with soot. We ate dinner in turns around the light of a single smudgy lamp.

I returned to Havana a year later, still traveling alone, and again lived with Pedro, Milagro, and their family during the autumn of 1993. Economic dissolution had spread, and the political discontent of people during that visit was palpable. My emerging understandings of Havana’s formal and informal economies allowed me to appreciate social suffering more subtly, and I was touched deeply by the economic hardship and political disenfranchisement of everyday people. On one occasion, for example, the dentist about to remove an impacted wisdom tooth from Milagro’s brother, Oswaldo, claimed he had no Novocain until we offered him hard currency.

I was introduced to Palo on that second visit to Havana. Pedro and I were on a run for one thing or another when he unexpectedly popped into the house of a woman he knew. Pedro was facing two court dates, one of them a criminal case against the man who had stabbed him. The other was a charge against Pedro himself for an attempt to leave Cuba in an improvised raft in the months before we had met. His mother had encouraged him to
see her cousin, Celia, who practiced Palo in the neighborhood and could help him with his situation. The conversation between Pedro and Celia was impossible for me to understand, except that he was dubious about the long list of materials the healer requested to revalue his fate. It took us many days to gather those materials using all of Pedro’s contacts and calling in many debts he could have saved for another day.

That day came the following summer, during the excruciatingly hot month of August 1994, when Pedro again tried to flee Cuba along with tens of thousands of other rafters who joined in a mass exodus. Those with excellent underground networks were the ones who got the best tractor inner tubes, wooden planks, and electrical cable to lash the rafts together, not to mention the plastic jugs to carry fresh water, or the hardboiled eggs and grapefruits the makeshift argonauts would need on the open sea. Trustworthy illicit markets were a matter of life and death as people cobbled together precarious launchings with what their friends and neighbors delivered. I later learned that it took Pedro less than a week to put together a vessel for his second attempt to flee Cuba, and then, with two friends from the block and his new teenage lover, he was gone. I also learned from his mother that Pedro went to see Celia for Palo craft during that frantic week. That Pedro would have added anything to the already urgent tasks of gathering materials to construct a raft, breaking up with his wife, and saying good-bye to his mother and family still impresses me. Unbeknownst to me, the realization that Pedro spent the week hunting not only for parts to build the raft that would carry his life but also for countless insignificant materials Celia needed to transform the fate of his crossing became the seed of this book. Pedro disappeared not into the depths of the Florida Straits, as did so many on that occasion of mass flight, but into a new life in the heavily Cuban comings and goings of Miami’s Hialeah section. Last I heard, he was in Tennessee.

UNDERGROUND MARKETS RELEASED

The exquisitely intricate social and economic situations I experienced in early 1990s Cuba led me to anthropology. During the first years of my graduate studies in the midnineties, Cuba began to experience unimaginable changes, many of them decreed by the Revolution’s leadership to bring its illegal markets under control. Many illicit forms of making money—from shoemaking to sandwich peddling to welding—became licensed forms of self-employment, which under Cuba’s centralized economy had not existed
on the island for thirty years. In 1994 the U.S. dollar was decriminalized [*despenalizado*], and Cubans were encouraged to make contacts with exiles. The previously despised “maggots” [*gusanos*] and “scum” [*escoria*] of Miami, Union City, and Barcelona became overnight, in the new official language, “the Cuban community abroad.” Not surprisingly, dollars in the form of remittances started flowing in enormous amounts from family outside of Cuba. State-run stores that accepted *only* U.S. dollars soon opened ostensibly to carry luxury goods, the sale of which the Cuban state has used since then to recover [*recuperar*] the remittances. By 2000 the “shopping” stores—Cubans had dubbed them with the English word—had mutated into socialist-capitalist monstrosities selling staples such as cooking oil, milk, and chicken, at prices wholly incommensurate not only with the average Cuban wage, but also with the currency in which the Cuban state pays its people. To this day, the shopping stores are among the Revolution’s principal means of netting hard currency, though with significant overhead. More recently, fees on U.S. dollars changed into “convertible currency” are netting the Cuban state a handsome return. These state-mandated exchange rates and fees, along with adjustments in prices at the shopping stores and cigarette price fluctuations, are among the primary mechanisms used to regulate the value of the U.S. dollar in Cuba’s slowly decentralizing domestic economy.

Over the past twenty years, these changes had marked effects on domestic underground markets but did not eliminate them. Since the mid-1990s, the Revolution has made massive capital investments in tourism that have yielded yet new underground economies, while supercharging the existing ones. Within a couple of years, prostitution and tourist hustling, which hardly existed between 1961 and the early 1990s, became important means for snaring foreign currency to buy cooking oil and milk in the hard currency–only stores.

It was during these intense years of economic and social change in Havana that I started thinking more about Palo. The Revolution’s tourism strategy began to take on a life of its own. Young women and men offered themselves to tourists for sale in dollars; artists and artisans of all sorts did too, as did anyone with a craft or knowledge that could be sold for a tip or “donation.” Cuba’s African-inspired societies were no different: Ocha/Santo, Palo, and the Abakuá men’s societies have each engaged in some form of commodification in the new exhibition-for-dollars arrangement. Of these societies it is Ocha/Santo that has most efficiently adjusted to the new trade. Palo and the Abakuá men’s societies have approached tourism with more circumspection, but with no less interest in finding a way to earn the tourist dollar.
PETRIFIED THOUGHT, THE OBJECT

Tourism and its influence on Cuba’s African-inspired societies interested me, but not as much as other anthropological concerns, such as how to understand hierarchy and subordination in a highly urbanized, economically complex, and politically vertical social situation. The beginnings of my work in Palo were marked by my abiding concern with how force emerges and spreads from even the tiniest pores of political and economic hierarchies, and especially how it is deployed at the faintest limits of social interaction to constitute control. Such limits are largely those of language, and I was interested in how power is exercised and felt, “sensed,” in Gilles Deleuze’s terms, where matter and language touch in a fold. In short, I wanted to know how authority over another person was crafted through absolutely subtle uses of force. My study of Palo addresses this concern through my emphasis on the art of insinuation, which is so important to Palo craft.

My interests in the subtle force of domination echoed in an intellectual register for me, and I connected it to the problem of reification as posed in critical theory, which points to forms of social organization whereby conscious thought becomes petrified and remote. To paraphrase Hegel, what is apparently closest to one is in truth most removed. My sense was that such alienation of a person from his or her consciousness had to be imposed on the individual, but to be sustainable such force had to be imperceptible, pleasurable when felt, and nearly inscrutable. There are strong intimations by Hegel, assertions by Karl Marx, and emphatic appeals by Georg Lukács that the principal device used in the transfer of this subtle social force is the object, which, like a gleaming jewel, seems forever to embody more social potential than its simple matter can possibly hold.

But the object is not only a “mechanism” of control; it is also an agent of transformation capable of inspiring entirely captivating landscapes of desire, as later interpreters of Marx and Hegel, such as Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, insist. This insight lies implicit in Hegel, whose own fascination with the object is often overlooked, as is the role he accords it in the constitution of human consciousness. It is the object—in Hegel’s famous narrative that thing of beauty fashioned by the slave that makes the master feel desire—that is responsible for lifting human consciousness out of a consuming immediacy characterized by absolute vulnerability, or in Hegel’s understanding, infinite receptivity.

Hegel’s lesson, which I sought to explore in my study of Palo, is that properly manipulated the object can transfer forces that solidify one version of reality, just as it can create a tear in the screens of petrified, fated thought.
and for an instant make fluid thinking possible. The object, as I understand it, is a daunting point of control and enchantment, just as it holds tremendous potential for change—of thought, of fates, and of lives. From what I learned, Palo practiced and taught a form of craft that cultivated at the center of its labors exquisitely complex “objects”—prendas-ngangas-enquisos—through which marvelously ambivalent transfers of social and conceptual force occurred.

“INSPIRATION”—THE NEW

I use the words “inspiration” and “inspired” when writing about the African-inspired societies of Palo and Ocha/Santo. Palo is central African, specifically, Kongo-inspired. I use the term instead of “African-derived,” which is common among researchers but implies that the topic under discussion is in some way a degraded form of an immutable African essence to which it is beholden. I also choose it because of my discomfort with the term “Afro-Cuban,” also popular among researchers, but which binds people and the materials they engage to an originary and inescapable African past. Neither of these commonly used formulations necessarily acknowledges “the new” that is so crucial a part of diaspora and Creole culture. “Inspiration,” as I use it here, functions as a hinge between the past and the future, inspiration being the active, forward-looking, creative spark linking past forms with objects, powers, and rules born anew. Inspiration implies a playful attitude toward past and future, as opposed to a perspective marked only by the trauma of dislocation and impossible recovery. Inspiration is a force of the moment that arrives unannounced and has little time to recognize its debts before being swept up in the currents of its own prodigious, and often unexpected, creation.

I also ask “inspiration” to do the work of the term “religion,” which I try to avoid in this text. Religion is, for me, overladen with European assumptions of form, doctrine, and homogeneity, in short, with a static sense of belief and practice. Inspiration seems less defined; it is a more mobile term that has nonreligious usages important to my description of Palo’s overflowing creativity. In the ambiguities of this term I find a space for Palo, which is best understood as a fluid mode of engaging the dead in matter to transform fate in a flash.

Palo, then, is Kongo-inspired. It is a form of inspiration capable of sovereignty and equal in its fate-transforming capacities to west African–inspired Ocha/Santo. Despite the presence of central African slaves in Cuba nearly
since the beginning of the Spanish colony, Palo dates to the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, when it emerged from a cauldron of myriad Kongo inspirations. Important among these were the healing rites Victor W. Turner has called “drums of affliction,” the central African form of which John M. Janzen has treated under the name of Ngoma. Of these, one inspiration was Lemba, the long-lived trading and healing society that developed on the north bank of the lower Congo River in the mid-seventeenth century and thrived until early in the twentieth century. Lemba was a response to disruptions caused by the trade in slaves and goods initiated by contact with the Portuguese; like so much of Kongo sacred life, Lemba survived the Middle Passage. Another Kongo society that made the passage before becoming an inspiration for new associations in Cuba was Nkita. Among the people of the lower Congo River, who in the nineteenth century were ravaged by slavery, Nkita addressed ruptures in lineage succession. Through initiation Nkita reaffiliated members of the society, in Janzen’s terms, “with the ancestral source of their collective authority.” Given the defining role integrated kinship networks played in determining freedom and slavery in Kongo life prior to and after contact with Europeans, this reaffiliation in the Caribbean can be seen as fate transforming indeed. Both Lemba and Nkita are directly cited in Palo today, as are their practices of keeping socially potent substances for revaluing the fates of their members.

During the century and a half between 1725 and 1875, more slaves were delivered to Cuba than in all years prior. These inspirations and others from diverse central African peoples were nurtured in Havana’s Kongo-organized mutual aid societies [cabildos]. Lemba and Nkita were but two among what must have been many inspirations that recombined fortuitously and creatively, just as surely as they struggled against one another for the hearts of people seeking counteragents for the misfortunes of slavery. These inspirations fused into newly relevant forms within the crucible of the cabildo structure, and when they emerged in discrete form from the ruin of Spanish colonialism at the turn of the twentieth century they did so as Palo, which in Havana is referred to as La Regla de Congo, translated as “Kongo Rule” or “Kongo Law.”

Palo has four branches [ramas], each of which is ritually, musically, and perhaps linguistically distinct from the others. These branches are Palo Mayombe, Palo Briyumba (Villumba, Vriyumba, or Biyumba), Palo Monte, and Palo Kimbisa. This book is largely, though not exclusively, about Palo Briyumba. Each branch proliferates into smaller communities called munansos, which I call “praise houses” because they coalesce in the home of practitioner-teachers and around the prendas-ngangas-enquisos they keep
and feast there.¹⁵ In the mid- to late 1990s Palo Briyumba and Palo Monte praise houses were predominant in Havana, with the latter apparently more pervasive than the former. Perhaps this explains why La Regla de Congo is often referred to in scholarly and popular literature as “Palo Monte.”¹⁶ In keeping with popular usage among people who practice Kongo Law in Havana, I have adopted “Palo” as more accurate, if generic, shorthand for La Regla de Congo.

In Havana, Palo is considered a “left hand” to Ocha/Santo.¹⁷ When Kongo inspirations emerged as La Regla de Congo sometime near the beginning of the twentieth century they did so in conjunction with, or perhaps in response to, the emergence of a similar code that established the rules for teaching west African traditions of inspiration, known as La Regla de Ocha. I translate this term literally as “The Law [or Rule] of the Oricha” but refer to it throughout my text as “Ocha/Santo.”¹⁸ The relationship between Palo and Ocha/Santo is exquisitely complex and is superficially characterized by a division of labor wherein Ocha/Santo does the healing and Palo does the harming. Though not entirely false, this distinction is overly simplistic. My approach to treating this relationship has been to recognize Palo’s conceptual, ritual, and organizational autonomy from Ocha/Santo and to accept that the two laws—Kongo-inspired and west African–inspired—exist within mutually productive relations of influence and contention. I think of Palo and Ocha/Santo as independent “sovereignties of fate,” each with its internal laws geared toward transforming the fates of those over whom they rule, and each related to the other through mutually accepted, nearly diplomatic, protocols of contact. Relations between Palo and Ocha/Santo are made yet more complex by the separate postures of subordination and insubordination each law maintains with Spanish Catholicism, which despite fifty years of socialist revolution remains a critical referent for each African-inspired society. A single individual can practice Palo and Ocha/Santo, and be Catholic as well, and though each form of inspiration is sufficiently complex to require that its great teachers specialize, many people benefit from a productive, and conflictive, multiplicity of practice.

**PRENDAS-NGANGAS-ENQUISOS**

Popular discourse about Palo focuses on its purported hierarchy, exaggerated masculine aesthetics including explicit homophobia, and supposedly violent initiations. Before I became familiar with Palo practice I postulated these features were intimately bound-up with healing-harming substances teachers
of Palo gathered and cared for at the heart of their praise houses. I also assumed that the webs of insinuation that cast Palo as the principal mode of African-inspired sorcery in Cuba were somehow spun out of these aggregations of earth, sticks, animal remains, and labored substances packed into iron cauldrons and clay urns. Throughout this text, I refer to these collections as prendas-angangas-enquisos but mostly use the profoundly Creole and popular term prenda, a word with a remarkable proliferation of meanings and translations from Spanish, of which “pawn” or “collateral” and, by extension, “jewel” or “gem” are the most common. Nganga is nineteenth-century Kikongo (the language of the BaKongo people) for “sorcerer” or “healer.” Prenda nganga is thus a healer’s jewel, his or her guarantee against the afflictions of economic, political, and fated indebtedness. As such, the term prenda comprises an explicit understanding of revaluation in the trading of its forces for concrete transformations of fates and lives. Enquiso refers to Kongo minkisi (nkisi, sing.), which are turns of the dead shaped into powerful substances that from the nineteenth century to today define Kongo notions of causality and property. Kongo minkisi, like prendas, are powerful versions of the dead, synonymous with curing and affliction, that were drummed up at the heart of Kongo-inspired healing societies to revalue the fates of those gathered. This is not to say that prendas are essentially Kongo forms, but rather that they are Creole entities specific to the encounter between Kongo-inspired forces and Cuban Catholic and Yoruba-inspired forces, encounters that are yet unreconciled.

Before beginning my long-term study of Palo I had no illusions about the difficulty of working with prendas-angangas-enquisos—Palo is as strict a discipline as any doctoral program in anthropology could invent. I did, however, fancy that my ideas about hierarchy, social power, and the status of “the object” as a relay for imperceptible transfers of force that both petrify reality and render it fluidly immediate, might be nourished by contact with prendas-angangas-enquisos. Yet I quickly found the Hegelian premises of my ideas about objects ineffective in formulating reiterations and paraphrases of practice that my teachers of Palo could recognize. I eventually found negation itself—that most powerful of Hegel’s elements of thought—to be an obstacle in my comprehension of Palo. Prendas-angangas-enquisos, it turns out, do not conform to a Hegelian logic that would limit their social capaciousness to the dialectic of object and subject. Far from being an “object,” isolated and determined by a subject as Hegel would have this, prendas-angangas-enquisos are indissolubly connected with immanent materiality; they emerge from material connection and refuse logical reduction thereby. As such, prendas-angangas-enquisos are not “objects” and definitely not
“fetishes,” which is what European enlightenment discourse calls matter that won’t conform to the designs of a rational subject. They are better thought of as agents, entities, or actors concatenated in asymmetrically realized networks we call “societies.”

ISIDRA AND TEODORO

I met Isidra Sáez in the summer of 1999. I was carrying a letter for her from an anthropologist friend who had taken a rumba lesson from her, and when I dropped by her house Isidra invited me in. She was a practitioner [practicante] of both Palo and Ocha/Santo and we began preliminary conversations about her helping me with my fieldwork. Isidra wasn’t her first name but rather her grandmother’s. She asked me to use it in my writing, not so much to buffer herself and her son from any unintended consequences arising from my publishing our work together (of which she was very conscious), but more to honor her grandmother, whom she credited for her knowledge and whom she wanted to memorialize. Isidra soon became my teacher [madrina, literally, godmother] and principal interlocutor throughout my fieldwork.

I was an apprentice [ahijado, literally, godchild] of Isidra’s, though not exclusively. She introduced me to Teodoro Herrera and the Kongo-inspired community he presided over, the Munanso Quita Manaquita Briyumba Congo praise house of Guanabacoa, on the outskirts of Havana. Though Isidra was ever at my side, it was my apprenticeship with Teodoro and the care I learned for the prendas-ngangas-enquisos (Teodoro also called them kandangos) of the Quita Manaquita house that taught me much of what I know about Palo craft. Teodoro, who was much more impulsive than Isidra, insisted that I use his full name and the name of his praise house in my work—to honor the dead, specifically his late father, Emilio O’Farril. I have not used his name because in his brash style I don’t think he understood the possible repercussions of this, but I have used the actual name of his praise house at his emphatic insistence. Together, Isidra and Teodoro taught me what they could about Palo. At times they struggled against one another with differing interpretations of Palo craft and practice, and in such moments I have tried to make their disagreements evident. This work, and especially the understandings of the dead that ground it, would have been entirely different, if not impossible, without their teachings or their singular rivalry.
THE DEAD

Isidra and Teodoro agreed on one point in their teachings and this was that the most basic sense of African inspirations in Cuba could be had only by drawing close to the dead. This precept applied to both Palo and Santo, but in particular to Palo for those trying to understand the prendas-ngangas-enquisos Palo healers keep. Isidra made it clear that if prendas are complicated, then the dead are more so. I agree with Isidra that one must have a sense of the dead before attempting to write about Palo and its prendas. Isidra and Teodoro taught me the dead through typical Palo pedagogy, which involves stories, songs, and specific styles of talk and recollection, all modes of its singular practice. Importantly, they also taught the dead as a type of visceral apprehension, especially when engaging a prenda-nganga-enquiso.

In each instance, they taught the dead as contiguous and immediate to the living, and argued for a materiality of the dead that was coterminous with that of the living. I want to stress this point because it introduces an argument important to much of what follows, which is that Palo’s understandings of the dead are not only elaborate conceptual affairs that revel in the mutual and indivisible affirmation of matter and the dead, but primarily visceral ones felt in the bodies of the living and discerned in the world around. In this, Palo’s definitions of the dead reside simultaneously in categories that are generally considered mutually exclusive by scholars inspired by the Hegelian tradition: concept and matter, and immediacy and the object.22

I attempt to communicate and interpret Palo’s dead in every page that follows. My characterization of Palo depends on describing the dead as having many versions, mutually coexisting and simultaneously affirmed. My approach asks the reader to sustain multiple (and at times apparently exclusive) definitions of the dead simultaneously. The reader might find this confusing at times, but this method helps portray the baffling proliferation of the dead in Palo’s teaching and craft. When contradictions arise between mutually acknowledged definitions of the dead I do not attempt to resolve them by means of dialectical negation, which is very good at clarifying. Rather, what I propose is a description of the dead that makes good use of conceptual concatenation and entangled implication by affirming each turn of the dead. This method is in keeping with the way my teachers of Palo discussed the dead. In one moment the dead were discrete responsive entities such as a deceased parent or sibling, and in the same moment the dead was
an undefined and pressing mass made up of infinite numbers of unrecognizable dead. This mass simultaneously suffused and constituted the living. The difficulty in characterizing the dead with such variety is that instead of narrowing an understanding of the dead to a single established identity, the logic of affirmation, concatenation, or implication I pursue here leads to a proliferation of definitions.23 If Palo can “identify” the dead at all, it is as an ambient mass, immanently turning out versions of itself.24

To help describe the proliferation of Palo’s dead and the mode of understanding it implies—wherein something can be itself and its apparent opposite without contradiction—I employ the term “version.” A version is a rendering of a given form that is made unique through an exercise of force that changes its direction, which turns its shape or meaning, and thus its appearance. The crucial element here is the physical relationship between force, direction, and meaning. In Palo the dead have countless versions, each a sense of the other. As this book proceeds, the reader will find these versions of the dead spreading through the text, so that before long the dead will be revealed as a feeling of unattributable apprehension and as a bit of sawdust from a powerful tree; the dead will be a song and also a skillful allusion in a fate-changing encounter. The dead are the words of others that return to echo in our minds with uncanny poignancy, and they are bones exhumed from forgotten graves; they are blood and stones. The dead in Palo are best imagined as an uncontainable spreading, each version becoming yet another until the multitude that accumulates overtakes and saturates the very imagination that attributes to the dead presence and volition. One can seek to understand Palo by approaching it through any one of these turns.

Some may rightly point out that a version suggests a grounding in an original form, which generates and authorizes its representation in other forms. The Cuban-Kongo dead, Palo’s dead, however, has no dominant entity or idea to authorize its proliferating shapes.25 Rather, what was described to me by Isidra and Teodoro was an anonymous mass of the dead [Kalunga, el muerto] to which no discrete identity is ascribed, and in which most other forms of the dead are immanent before they emerge in discrete form. I describe this anonymous mass of the dead as an “ambiance” immediate to matter and life. Following my teachers and other practitioners of Palo, I seek recourse in metaphors of fluids, flows, tides, and waves to depict this ambiance. Metaphors will take me only so far, however, because the principal characteristic of this ambient dead is to evade determination, become unstable, remain strange, and forever exceed dominant languages that seek to inscribe it. In Palo thought, the ambient dead, Kalunga, resides
nowhere specifically, yet saturates discrete forms, like bodies. Most often, when it was evident, Kalunga was a vague sense in the wake of an insinuation or a clever imputation. The dead are a studied and refined discourse on the part of the practitioners of Palo, a discourse not only of words, but also of pauses, creative omissions, clever puns, unverifiable implications, and allusions born forever anew, as it were, from the overlap where concept and matter, the felt and the thought, the immediate and the object, touch.

AESTHETICS OF PALO, AESTHETICS OF WRITING

Unstable as this multifarious discourse of the dead may be, it makes possible a reflection on the sentiments that Palo prizes and educates. These are feelings at the edges of immediate sensation and thus at the limits of attribution and identification—like intuition, inspiration, and creeping fear. Palo loves the implicit and the “given,” which it seeks to turn into something new through a clever play of force. This playing, this turning of substances and situations, this making something new out of fixed arrangements—this is Palo craft. The discourse of the dead in multiplicity reveals the aesthetic values Palo instructs and through which its craft is exercised: the volatility of substances, speed of decision, the use of force against adversaries, and unsentimental action taken to transform fate. A teacher of Palo will say that what is fated has no heart, so neither must Palo when revaluing it. The refinement of these values is what Palo reveres and considers beautiful. These values are cultivated by teachers of Palo, who instruct their initiates to seek them among the ambient dead as affective lines of approach and escape running through a series of the dead, often without apparent affinity or resemblance between them.

To convey this education, which is the shaping of an apprentice’s volition, I have made stylistic decisions that I hope are consistent with Palo aesthetics. I expect that my choices will also engage important critiques of ethnographic authority developed in the discipline of anthropology over the last thirty years. I have sought a language that is self-conscious without centering myself in the text and that values description and considers it important enough to make it the bearer of interpretation, rather than have it forever subordinated to the authoritative voice of explanation.

I have been inspired in my stylistic choices by the philosophical conviction that explanation in writing must value the object of interpretation and insist that thought be lost to the object, rather than the object lost to thought. In this I am aided by the fact that both Palo’s dead and its healing-harming
substances, prendas-ngangas-enquisos, elude dominant forms of rational explanation because of their complexity, or their proliferation into variant and unstable definitions that neither negate nor transcend one another. In fact, their definitions insist on forever becoming minor to one another, as minor as a handful of dirt and a murmured whisper, as minor as a little cut and a bit of ash. Confronted with such materiality, as an ethnographer I have sought to simply be conscious of my will-to-explanation and resist elevating minor definitions to the status of answers, or keys, or transcendent principles, thus negating their brute materiality, baseness, or simple minority. I have tried to convey inconsequential elements like murmurs and ashes in their unimportance and indeterminacy. I ask these minor definitions of the dead to gather haphazardly and accrete slowly so that explanation, when it emerges, does so not under a beam of light but rather in descriptive folds where meager definitions gather, one upon the other. Explanation in the text, then, appears as an unexpected assemblage of prior minor descriptions. One result is that the scenes of Palo practice rendered in this text are necessarily incomplete and despite an air of comprehension they are irremediably impure, not only because a complete revelation of Palo would be impossible—it is infinitely recombinant—but also because incomplete description is one of Palo’s pedagogical values. Impure description is taught as an intentional strategy to protect Palo knowledge and ensure creative, speculative, inventive extensions on the part of those learning.

The creative extension I bring to Palo in this text is to value the turns of Palo’s dead, each in its basic materiality, while allowing each to be spoken for by other versions, in its own irreducible particularity. This choice requires a writing practice that handles matter such that it survives its encounter with system-integrating thought. Attempting to follow Theodor Adorno’s advice, which is to surrender the logic of identity and systematicity of thought, I instead enter into the vertiginousness of a writing that loses itself in its object, à fond perdu. In other words, I venture to record an immanent critique of Palo from within Palo’s substances and forces.

Writing, like all practical forms, is experimental. My approach when confronted with this experiment has been to choose a narrative style. In contrast to the style of dominant social science, which seeks to restrict and limit definition ever in the service of clarity, narrative allows for Palo and its dead to be described in perpetual indeterminacy. Narrative is best when awash in the tension inherent to a series of events or statements that portend more than they clarify. Explanations in this text are permitted to proceed out of contradictory definitions and the paradoxes of mutual affirmation, which
arise as the meaning pleats up on itself. This stylistic choice has analytical consequences, such as the deferral of clear explanation, but I believe it is consistent with the spirit of empiricism that defines ethnography. The reader is left with a text that has a tenuous relationship with resolution, for the life of narrative, like that of Palo, rides on the unresolved.