

## Danger of words:

risk and (mis)comprehension in consultations

with the spirits of the *povo da rua*<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Mediators between different realms, the spiritual entities known as the people of the streets can be taken as the very materialization of the principle of indeterminacy, being considered to be at once dangerous and powerful. Such indeterminacy acts upon processes of objectification and subjectification that unfold at the very heart of ritual. I turn my attention to the sessions of consultation, taking that encounter between clients and entities as a moment of instability, where the vulnerability of language - the danger of words - is at the center of ritual efficacy. If all human encounters involve a risk of un-understanding, such risk is certainly intensified in the session of consultations with the people of the streets, where instability is an implicit quality of the type of knowledge one seeks in such encounters, which are centered on issues of love, disaffections, betrayals and lived violences, all domains inherently unstable.

**Keywords:** language; performance; ritual; Afro-Brazilian religions; *povo da rua*.

## Risco e (des)compreensão nas consultas com o *povo da rua*

### Resumo

Mediadores entre diferentes esferas, as entidades conhecidas como povo da rua podem ser tomadas como a própria materialização do princípio de indeterminação, sendo consideradas perigosas e poderosas. Tal indeterminação age sobre os processos de objetificação e subjetivação que acontecem no ritual. Me volto aqui para as sessões de consulta, tomando o encontro entre entidades e seus clientes como um momento de instabilidade, onde a vulnerabilidade da linguagem – o perigo das palavras – está no cerne da própria eficácia ritual. Se todo encontro envolve um risco de des-entendimento, tal risco é certamente intensificado nas sessões de consulta com o povo da rua, onde a instabilidade é uma qualidade implícita do tipo de conhecimento que ali se busca, o qual envolve questões de amores, desafetos, traições e da violência vivida, todos domínios inerentemente instáveis.

**Palavras chave:** linguagem; performance; ritual; religiões de matriz africana; povo da rua.

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# Danger of words: risk and (mis)comprehension in consultations with the spirits of the *povo da rua*

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In a recent article, Sarah Green (2014: 2) posed the question as to what might count, in anthropological terms, as intervention in the contemporary world. She argued that her question was concerned with “thinking about anthropological engagement within the world of which anthropology is a part—not so much in terms of the activism of particular anthropologists, but more in terms of the political implications of different ways of thinking anthropologically”. She further argued that such a conception of “intervention” demanded imagining anthropology in a mutually constitutive entanglement with the world, unable to unravel knots or to keep things separate between them.

Whereas Green’s intention in that article is explicitly aimed at a reflection on specific developments within anthropology – and the knots they tie –, I take her notion of intervention to return to my own ethnographic research on sessions of consultation with the *povo da rua* (people of the streets), the spiritual entities also known as *exu*, in the city of Rio de Janeiro. This appropriation of Green’s question points to the political implication of imagining a certain kind of anthropological engagement with those rituals within the Brazilian political scenario in which I write. I thus take intervention as a doubly charged movement, highlighting at once what a particular inflection on the performative approach to ritual has to offer to anthropology, and how such an approach ties particular sorts of knots to the world that unravels around those rituals.

For well over a decade, I have been attending sessions of consultation with *Cacurucaia*, a female spiritual entity, one among the many male and female spirits who are known as *povo da rua* in a small religious house, a *centro*, in a suburb of Rio de Janeiro, among practitioners of *macumba*<sup>2</sup>, an Afro-Brazilian religious practice. In rituals of consultations and in rituals of public celebrations, spirits such as *Cacurucaia* respond to the call of song and drums, presenting themselves in the bodies of mediums to dance, drink and work amongst their followers. Whereas I turn to the consultations with the *povo da rua*, other spiritual entities are also sought after for their help, such as *caboclos* and *pretos velhos* (lit. old black people), who provide valuable aid in deciphering the cause of ailments and offer precious advice in alleviating their affects.

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<sup>2</sup> I refer to the religious house as *macumba*, even if that usage might surprise those familiar with the field of studies on Afro-Brazilian religions, given that it is no longer used by anthropologists, even if it does surface in one’s text through the voice of our interlocutors. In the city of Rio de Janeiro, the contemporary popular use of *macumba* commonly connotes two intertwined meanings. It is often used to mean superstition (on the part of another), implying distance and disbelief on the part of the speaker. It is also frequently used to suggest fear (of other persons, and of their practices). *Macumba* is used, paradoxically, just as commonly to refer to all religious practices deemed to belong under the very loose category of Afro-Brazilian religions, as it is to pejoratively distinguish the practices thought to be too “syncretic” and to be not much more than (often much feared) “witchcraft”.

Despite its allusion to a non-legitimate status, *macumba* is often used in people’s everyday speech about religious practices. And not only in reference to the practices and beliefs of an ‘other’, as it was not uncommon in my ethnographic encounters for people to refer to themselves as *macumbeiro(a)* – a *macumba* practitioner. Unable to fit under the propriety of a name – such as *candomblé*, the Afro-Brazilian religion deemed to be closer to African practices, or *umbanda* – an Afro-Brazilian practice with strong influences of European Spiritism, whose incorporation of various cultural traditions has been hailed as the religious expression of the idealized racial miscegenation of the Brazilian nation – *macumba* eludes the fiction of bounded identities. To call oneself a *macumbeiro* is then not a moment of categorization but a process of naming through a subtle discursive play on the divergent meanings that converge under that sign. The term thus retained great social currency, taking part in a semantic play that refers to the myriad of rituals of consultation that take place around the city, in religious centers as well as in small rooms temporarily transformed into ritual spaces, without actually naming or providing these rituals with the appearance of a fixable identity. In fact, if an unknown person were to ask the *mãe de santo* for her religious identity, the “priestess” would undoubtedly answer by saying that she was either a *espírita* – Spiritist, or an *umbandista* – an *umbanda* practitioner.

The rituals of consultation are central to the ongoing relation between the spiritual entities and their followers, as through them people approach the spirits of the dead to request their intervention in this world and their help in solving the mundane and extraordinary problems of everyday life. That is not to say that *macumba* is restricted to such practices. As part of the complex set of practices generically named Afro-Brazilian religions, to come into *macumba* and become part of a religious house is to undergo a series of initiatory procedures that seek to *develop*, as practitioners call the process, one's ability to embody the spirits of the dead and thus to allow those spirits to *carry out their work*, their meddling in the affairs of the living. Even if those procedures are punctuated by certain timely rituals, they are taken to be a lifelong process where both spirit and person are transformed. This involves at once an individuation of the spirit of the dead and a process of composition of a person and his or her spirits.

The rituals of consultations are, then, one among a diverse set of practices that constitute the various contemporary forms of Afro-Brazilian religions<sup>3</sup>. Such practices unfold in a space charged with socio-political tensions, where, while Afro-Brazilian religions have gained a certain—albeit limited—degree of legitimacy and respect within Brazilian society, they are still the object of renewed discrimination for not being properly religious. The coexistence of such double standards has once again come center stage, as *umbanda*, one of the various forms of Afro-Brazilian religions, was included, on November 8th, 2016, in the list of the intangible cultural heritage of the city of Rio de Janeiro, as a sign of “the need for public policies regarding the respect for the religions of African origin” in the city, as was reported on national media<sup>4</sup>. In the same week, however, the same news outlet recorded that the Supreme Court had agreed to hear a case regarding the legal status of animal offerings in Afro-Brazilian rituals<sup>5</sup>. Framed as a questionable exemption of the federal law regarding the prohibition of maltreatment of animals, the case re-signifies the religious offerings within Afro-Brazilian religions as “cruelty”<sup>6</sup>, to be prohibited or tolerated.

This new episode, while certainly made more poignant in its effects given current conservative political tides, many of them heightened by the 2016 coup<sup>7</sup>, is but the modernized version of the by now old accusations that such offerings are actually part of malefic dealings with the devil and/or do not belong in the sphere of the truly religious. Extending beyond the offerings of animals in themselves, such framings have certainly been closely linked to one of the central figures in the ritual proceedings of the diverse forms

3 The very way of referring to those practices, be it as Afro-Brazilian or as religions of “African matrix” (*religiões de matriz africana*), is in itself not a mere nominal variation, but an “intervention”, in the sense alluded to by Green, in that ethnographic writing is always intertwined with processes of construction and definition of its ethnographic “context”. Whereas I retain “Afro-Brazilian” as the English term, I tend to agree with Márcio Goldman’s argument that *religiões de matriz africana* (*religions of African matrix*) not only echoes the native usage, but also expresses the repeated reference to Africa as origin, not in an essentialized sense, but as referring to a bringing forth, in an existential sense. It also allows for a conceptualization of the transformation amongst the various religious forms beyond a spatial or temporal axis, pointing to a *matrix of transformations* (Goldman, 2011).

4 “Umbanda é declarada patrimônio imaterial no Rio”, G1, 08/11/16, <http://g1.globo.com/rio-de-janeiro/noticia/2016/11/umbanda-e-declarada-patrimonio-imaterial-do-rio.html> Access on 12/11/16. In 2003, the city of Rio de Janeiro instituted the Registry of Intangible Cultural Heritage as part of a public policy aimed at the “preservation of the social collective memory” of the city (Municipal Decree 23.162, <http://www.rio.rj.gov.br/dlstatic/10112/4368015/4108310/00DECRETO23162InstituioRegistroddeBensCulturaisdeNaturezaImaterial.pdf> Access on 12/11/16). After UNESCO recognized the city of Rio de Janeiro as a World Heritage Site on July 1st, 2012, the registry came under the tutelage of the newly created Rio World Heritage Institute (<http://www.rio.rj.gov.br/web/irph/principal> Access on 12/11/16). In 2016, the Municipal Decree 42.557 declared Umbanda to be the 40th item in the list of cultural places and practices recognized as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of the City, creating at the same time the registry of Umbanda Centers in the city (<http://www.rio.rj.gov.br/dlstatic/10112/4368015/4176955/40DECRETO42557CadastrodosTerreirosdeUmbanda08112016.pdf> Access on 12/11/16). The list is very eclectic, congregating, among others, certain music styles, particular street markets, traditional bars, food items and religious practices deemed to be traditional markers of the city’s cultural-historical identity (<http://www.rio.rj.gov.br/web/irph/patrimonio-imaterial> Access on 12/11/16).

5 “Após vetar vaquejada, Supremo vai julgar sacrifício religioso de animais”, G1, 06/11/16, <http://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2016/11/apos-vetar-vaquejada-supremo-vai-julgar-sacrificio-religioso-de-animais.html> Access on 12/11/16.

6 As a counterargument, practitioners deny that they are requesting an exemption to such law, given that the mistreatment of animals would be antithetical to such rituals. The legal defense of animal offerings within Afro-Brazilian religions, in turn, outrightly rejects the framing of the discussion under the sign of “cruelty”, arguing that the practice should be properly referred to as “religious slaughter”, the term used in European and American laws to refer to the legal slaughter of animals under Jewish, Muslim and other ritualized prescriptions.

7 Editor’s note: On August 31, 2016, the Brazilian Senate approved president Rousseff’s impeachment. She was accused of fiscal accountability crimes regarding to budget-spending decrees unauthorized by the Brazilian Congress as required by law. Michel Temer, who was elected as vice-president in her ticket, took over the presidency after the impeachment process. Those who criticized this procedure refer to President Dilma’s impeachment as a coup d’état.

taken by Afro-Brazilian religions, that of *exu* - be they recognized as one of the West African *orixá* deities; or as the spiritual entities known as *povo da rua*, people of the streets, spirits of dead men and women who, as their name already indexes, spent their lives in the streets.

My aim here is not to counter such political forces through any reaffirmation of the religious status of the ritual practices I encounter in my ethnography, but rather to reject the very framing such forces presuppose. Rather than counter the re-strengthening of the demonizing of such religious practices – a framing of its religious otherness that, in fact, has been present throughout Brazilian history – I turn precisely to the rituals of consultation with spiritual entities who are deemed to dwell in the crossroads, in the gates or passages between different realms, opening connections and diverting paths at their will. Spiritual entities also known as *pomba giras*, *malandros* and *ciganas* - prostitutes, hustlers and gypsies - the *povo da rua* transgressed the boundaries of moral propriety and evaded the confinement of social rules in their life time, while in death they transgress the boundaries of life and death, of past and present, of this world and the spiritual world, to rejoin the living and the dead in the contemporary life of the city.

As their presences are invoked in midst of rituals of consultation and in public ritual celebrations, the association of the *povo da rua* to socially marginal figures is performatively embodied by their provocative behavior and foul language, enacting a serious play that challenges social mores. Furthermore, the explicit claim of the *povo da rua* to perform good and bad deeds; their association with the unboundedness of trickster-like powers which demand continuous acts of negotiation; as well as the accoutrements that compose their ritual garb, which often suggest connections to devilish or dark forces, while not simply contained by any Christian notion of evil or the Devil, certainly play upon the dangerous powers attributed to those entities (Cardoso and Head, 2015).

There is a vast body of literature on Afro-Brazilian religious practices, marked by a diversity of theoretical and ethnographic approaches, and reflecting the broad and diverse field itself. Many of those studies have turned to the *povo da rua*, particularly to the connection of those spiritual entities to violence, and to the role of discourses about violence in the relation between Afro-Brazilian religions and its social context (see Contins, 1983; Contins and Goldman 1985; Trindade 1985). The play between sexuality, femininity and the power of the *povo da rua*, has also received attention by several authors, particularly in regards to the transgressive behavior of the female entities, the *pomba giras* (see Birman, 1983; Cardoso, 2004; 2011; Capone, 2004; Contins, 1983; Hayes, 2011).

Certain authors, such as Brumana and Martinez (1991: 285) and Trindade (1985), have emphasized the sociological relations between Afro-Brazilian practices, particularly the one known generically as umbanda, and the “marginal” realms of Brazilian society. For Brumana and Martinez, such practices can be understood under the logic of a triple opposition between current social values, socially marginal mores and the relations that practitioners establish between those two other poles, thus subsuming the specificity of those practices to the logic of a structural opposition between order and disorder. Trindade, in turn, argues that to resort to the power of *exus* - the category of spiritual entities that include the *povo da rua* -, to what she calls “magic thought” or “magical solutions”, is a transference of social conflicts to the realm of the imaginary, preserving “an order based on instability” and which “makes possible [the existence of] rules” (1985:89-90). In contrast to this structural opposition as the key to comprehension of what is at play in those rituals where transgressive figures come center stage, Carvalho (1990), in turn, suggests that we consider the role of violence and chaos themselves in the religious experience.

It is to this potential chaos in the sphere of ritual that Victor Turner, in one of his late essays, published posthumously in *Anthropology of performance* (1987), addresses himself. Reflecting on the presence of *exu* in a public ritual of umbanda in Rio de Janeiro, which he attended at the invitation of Brazilian anthropologist Yvonne Maggie, Turner describes *exu* as the lord of “the *limen* and of *chaos*; the full ambiguity of the

subjunctive mood of culture, representing the fundamental indeterminacy that lurks in the cracks and crevices of all our sociocultural ‘constructions of reality’” (1987: 60). He further argues that the ritual sessions in the Afro-Brazilian religious houses are “a transformative performance, [...], operating through a multiplicity of expressive genres and symbols in the full range of sensory codes, with the goal of relating chaos and cosmos, byss and abyss, flow and reflexivity, to one another in the heightened and deepened consciousness of the participants” (ibid.:70).

For the enactment of this “transformative performance”, Turner then suggests that *exu* is “the one who must be kept at bay if the framed order of the ritual proceedings is to be maintained” (ibid: 60). Turner thus takes *exu* to be the very manifestation of the potential danger of the rupture of order, of an instability that needs to be dealt with by the very structuring power of ritual in order for it to unfold.

Whereas Turner accentuates the grammatical dimension of ritual in its role to reassure the order threatened by *exu*'s potential rupture - even if he does recognize that particular performances of any ritual are not only articulated by their formal grammar, but also “succeed in “blurring” and “melting” its ideal outlines” (ibid.:55) -, I am interested instead in the very performance of such transgressive manifestations. As I turn my attention to the rituals of consultations, I am particularly interested in the role of language in the encounter between clientes and the *povo da rua*. I am thus concerned with these “particular performances”, where the instability of the power of the *povo da rua* unfolds in the very instability of language, and that danger, rather than being contained, takes center stage at the heart of ritual efficacy.

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The *povo da rua* are deemed to inhabit the crossroads and, akin to the place where they dwell, they are taken to open and close paths, interrupting as much as allowing the possibility of connections. A significant part of Afro-Brazilian religious rituals revolve around dealings with these entities, as they are well known for carrying out *trabalhos* - work or a deed - to make things happen or un-happen. In exchange for a counteroffering, be it of money, gifts, gratitude or other means of reciprocity that entangle spiritual entities, people and things in a web of relations of varying duration and configuration, the *povo da rua* perform their work in response to people's request for their aid in solving life's problems.

Acting as mediators - between humans and higher spiritual entities, such as the *orixás* divinities, between different realms, between the space of ritual and that of the mundane - the *povo da rua* are at the same time the very materialization of the principle of indeterminacy, being thus considered to be at once dangerous and powerful. Such indeterminacy conjures the possibility of dislocation in all of its potential of signification as it acts upon processes of objectification and subjectification that unfold at the very heart of ritual. It is precisely to the weaving of such entanglements that I turn my attention, taking the encounter between clients and entities in the sessions of consultation as a moment of instability, where the vulnerability of expression is at the center of ritual efficacy.

An ethnographic engagement with those sessions of consultation that seeks to capture the unfolding of the ritual process might be quite effective in translating its effects into an orderly anthropological narrative. Such engagement and its resulting narrative would certainly be instrumental in expressing the ritual's significance, in conveying the conventions at play and in explaining its power of persuasion within the frame of the religious. However, to intervene in such a way - and I here refer back to Green's notion of intervention - is to restrain our anthropological making from being transformed or affected by our object, and at the same time to force our object to be shaped into, or rather to be illuminated by, the clarity of our frames of understanding.

Another form of intervention might be called, following something Kathleen Stewart (1991) wrote quite sometime ago, a “contaminated” ethnographic writing. I have elsewhere written about such entanglement of our own storytelling, of our anthropological accounts with its object, as a mimetic act of sorts, inextricably charged by the unfolding events that it seeks to trace (Cardoso, 2004, 2007). To be anthropologically *charged* by the sessions of consultation, is thus to take the instability and indeterminacy materialized by the *povo da rua* from the center of ritual to the heart of my own ethnographic writing and anthropological engagement with ritual.

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Let me turn then to one ethnographic image of a session of consultations. Far from thinking of this image as an illustration, I rather think of it as, in a certain sense, akin to the offerings made to the *povo da rua*, an act that seeks to open certain paths. Here, as there, there is no guarantee of a path without travails, and I too hope to open the possibility of a movement through words, spiritual entities and persons.

*Cacurucaia*, whose sessions of consultation I have been attending for quite some time, is a female spiritual entity of a quality known as *pomba gira*, who, with other entities recognized as *malandros* – rascals or tricksters; *ciganas* – gypsies; and prostitutes such as other *pomba giras*, comprise the *povo da rua*. Along those years, the configuration of the *filhos de santo* - the *children of the spirits* or the initiates -, of the house, the *centro*, in the suburban neighborhood in Rio de Janeiro where *Cacurucaia* works, has changed several times. Also, the *mãe de santo*'s – mother of saint or the religious leader of the *centro* - own tempestuous relations with the various demands implicated in *working with spirits*, has on occasion led to the closing of the religious *centro* and the apparent return of the house to a quotidian existence as a suburban household.

As long as I have known *Cacurucaia* she has offered consultations in a small room with blackened walls, window and door decorated with iron bars in the shape of the devil's fork. She receives her clients seated on a thick red carpet, by a low table where her accoutrements are laid out: cowry shells, beaded necklaces, glass of clear water, lit candle, cigarillos and a thimble of her favorite *cachaça* to drink. Next to her, in a corner, is her *assentamento* - the material elements to which her existence is tightly connected. To her clients, a small wooden stool is offered.

Besides the *pomba gira* and her client, a *cambona* is almost always present. *Cambona*, a sort of assistant, is a person of the spirit's choosing, someone with whom she has a long-standing relation and who she trusts, as the *pomba gira* herself says. For quite some time now, her *cambono* has been a man named Cláudio, to whom *Cacurucaia* refers as “my man” or “my husband”.

Even though I had visited her consultation room many times, in and out of the sessions of consultations, on other ritual occasions and on public celebrations, a while ago *Cacurucaia* invited me to act as her *cambona* for the first time. I had gone that evening to hang out, talking to her and the other *filhos de santo* at the end of the session, a moment when she commonly invites me to share a drink, or more like a bottle, of her *cachaça* (cane spirit). This new invitation came as a surprise, but Cláudio did not seem bothered by this momentary intrusion on his duties. With a smile on his face, he guided the next client into the room and left us.

This was a new client. Carrying a cell phone and a carton of cigarettes in her hands, the woman took the seat I offered her. As I filled *Cacurucaia*'s cup and lit her cigarillo, the *pomba gira* smiled to her new client, seeming silently to assess the woman, who in turn barely noticed me, mine being an expected presence. Before the woman could say anything, *Cacurucaia* asked: “You came here last Wednesday, did you not, woman?” The client confirmed and said that she had been told by Cláudio to return the following week,

at an earlier time, as *Cacurucaia* already had too many clients that other day. *Cacurucaia* demanded to know if the woman's "things" had already shown a slight improvement. To the surprised look on the woman's face, *Cacurucaia* defiantly responded: "You did not walk in this room. But you were outside. And I have been over there already." It was now the woman's turn to ask whether the *pomba gira* had not seen then how difficult "things" were for her. "Can I smoke?", the client asked. Knowing I do not smoke, *Cacurucaia* offers me her glass of *cachaça*. I light up her cigarillo, I take a drink and the room fills up with their smoke.

Their conversation continued for a while, without either the "difficult things" or the "over there" ever being named, without stories really being told. Such tellings or namings seem to be unnecessary, as the *pomba gira* had already been "over there" and whatever she saw no longer needed to be articulated in words. Suddenly *Cacurucaia* asks the woman, "Aren't you strong?". The client shrugs off the question, her cell phone rings. *Cacurucaia* tells her to answer it. A rapid conversation takes place on the phone. Obviously annoyed, the client tells someone to pick up some child at school, as she herself is busy now. *Cacurucaia* meanwhile mocks her, telling me that people like that woman are always bothering her. The call ends and the woman whines to the *pomba gira*, "It is like this all the time. Everyone is at my house." *Cacurucaia* mocks her again, reminding her that she is the one who gave birth to her children. "Now you have to take it all, take it all in, take it all in," *Cacurucaia* tells her, play-thrusting her pelvis and laughing at her own sexually charged play of words and body movements to mock the woman's predicament.

Through the veiled allusions and unfinished sentences, I manage to gather that there is a man involved in this drama, someone the woman desires to bring into her house, but who might disrupt the delicate balance of her everyday life upon which many people depend. But nothing is really said that confirms this frail narrative plot I gather through their conversation.

All of a sudden, the woman stands up, her face contorted into a mask of frustration. She pleads with the *pomba gira*, "Please, be straight with me! I need your help!". *Cacurucaia*'s reply comes in a tone of indignation, "I *am* helping. You are the one doing everything wrong". The woman sits down, pleading again, "Don't do this to me. Didn't I come here? Tell me...". The client turns to me, "Talk to her", she demands. "Why isn't she speaking straight to me?" She lights another cigarette as the *pomba gira* turns to me, "Go ahead, explain it to her!". It is my turn to laugh. What can I explain? I repeat what I believe the *pomba gira* was saying, trying to reproduce their own roundabout way of speaking, the indirections in their speech, the way they seem always to delay stating what it is that they are saying.

They fall back into conversation; the woman speaks of her daughters. *Cacurucaia* remarks on their beauty. She says that they are pretty, just like their mother, but that they are young, their bodies fresh with youth. The woman gives a nervous laugh, gives me a quick side-glance. The story gathers a dark density, but it still unravels through a convoluted path, twisting around something that is never clearly there. After a while, Cláudio knocks on the door to remind us that there are more clients waiting. Time is up.

*Cacurucaia* changes her tone, holds the woman's hands with affection, and, staring into her eyes, tells her: "Trust me! Look at me! Don't you trust me?" The woman agrees and the *pomba gira* lets out one of the loud bellows that are emblematic of the presence of a *pomba gira* spirit in the body of a medium. "It was about time!", she tells the woman, holding her in a tight embrace. She tells the client to come back the following Wednesday and to be confident that in the meantime she would start working on her requests. The woman respectfully takes her leave from the *pomba gira* and is gone into the evening.

As soon as the woman leaves, *Cacurucaia* turns to me, clearly vexed: "Look at this woman. She comes here to ask for the wrong thing! She can't see what is under her nose. If I do what she wants, hell will break loose and people will blame me. They will say, "How come the *pomba gira* didn't see what was coming?". She yells out to Cláudio, and with a tirade of swearwords makes clear her dissatisfaction with having to leave her own affairs to come here to work "chasing men for women like that". I serve her another drink; a smile returns to her lips and she is ready for the next client.

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The ongoing narration of the deeds of the *povo da rua* plays a central role in the very production of the sociality inhabited by the spiritual entities, their clients and *filhos de santo* (Cardoso, 2014, 2007). This ethnographic story in turn evokes other stories in which the characters and their context come into life. The woman who sought *Cacurucaia* that Wednesday certainly must have heard other accounts about *Cacurucaia*, being driven to the consultation room by the desire that the *pomba gira*'s counsel and interventions may achieve, once again, the efficacy narrated in such stories.

In his classic essay "The storyteller", Walter Benjamin tells us that a "counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding" (1968: 86). The sharing of stories about the *povo da rua* operates in a similar way, in the sense that it implicates entities and their followers in a continuous narrative production. Not simply conveying information about the *povo da rua* or about rituals, nor just communicating or reflecting experiences, such narrativization acquires an ontological status as it acts in the very production of narrating subjects and narrated objects. Such narration also plays a fundamental role in the constitution of a sensibility or a being-in-the-world permeated by the presence of spiritual entities well beyond the more or less circumscribed moments of their embodiment.

My considerations regarding the stories in which the spiritual entities are at once object and subject of narration, resonate with, and are clearly influenced by, what Bauman and Briggs have described as critical perspectives on language and social life through the guise of poetics and performance (1990; Bauman 1977; 1986; Briggs 1988; Briggs and Bauman 1992). Also, in so far as I am not referring to a ritualized corpus of stories nor to a repertoire of narratives skillfully composed and memorized for renewed performances, but to a sociality engendered by the circulation of partially told, partially heard stories which crisscross the ritual and the mundane, my writing is inspired by an anthropological engagement with the place of narration in the production of the world (cf. Bauman 2004; Langdon, 2013; Rosaldo 1986; Steedly 1993; Stewart 1996; Taussig 2006, among others).

To regard the role of stories about the people of the streets in such a manner certainly leads to a further blurring of the distinction between, on the one hand, what Stuart McLean calls "the magical-material processes credited with bringing forth both human beings and the material world they inhabit" and on the other, "the cultural expressions [...] through which such processes find articulation" (2009: 223). To take the stories of the spiritual entities as partaking in the "self-making" of the world (ibid.) also resonates, to a point, with Tim Ingold's argument that to tell a story is to weave a narrative thread in which there is no point where the story ends and life starts. Such understanding of narration as a creative action, where creativity itself is taken as a process unfolding in a relational field and not as the product of an individual agency (Hallam and Ingold 2007: 2-3; Ingold 2007; McLean 2009: 215), allows me to suggest an articulation between stories about spiritual entities and their own individuation as powerful entities sought after for their ability to intervene unto the world.

However, whereas Ingold points to a continuity of the narrative thread through a metaphor in which the processes of world inhabitation are described by him as a weaving in which all threads belong to the same yarn, in the stories of the people of the streets the narrative threads rub against each other, cutting across and interrupting one another. If, as I suggested through Benjamin's citation, the consultations open the possibility of participation in a story that is unfolding, such participation implies tense articulations and interruptions. If we are to retain Ingold's metaphor, it might be possible to say that under the sign of the spirits of the *povo da rua*, the weave of the world is spun from another loom.

Let us then return our attention to the encounter of the *pomba gira* with her client to try figure out what kind of story unfolds there. On a quick review of some recent anthropological work on "spirit possession"



- “possession” being a common mode of anthropological reference to the relation with spiritual entities, which is, nonetheless, absent in my own ethnographic field, as possession here only appears as a mode of reference to a malefic presence which needs to be dealt with, while the welcome presence of the entities is addressed through diverse terms that mark a sense of arrival - Vincent Crapanzano suggests that “possession” has a “communicative role”, communications with spirits being “complex, polysemic, and affective as well as intellectual” (2006: 202). A session of consultations could be taken as paradigmatic of the search for communications with spirits. However, if such communication is always complex, as Crapanzano rightly remarks, the session of consultations with the *povo da rua* is also marked by the risk of what would be the very inverse of communication, the risk of a certain mis-comprehension.

I am not simply pointing out the possible need for a semantic translation of a particular lexicon that indexes the presence of a spirit, the translation of words or expressions recognized as “typical” of this or that entity. Neither am I referring to the transcription of instructions from the *povo da rua* regarding the undertaking of specific rituals or offerings, something often done by the *cambono*, for example. In both cases the need for mediation diminishes as the client acquires this new knowledge or becomes more familiar with the ways of the consulting entity. I am, therefore, not speaking of an acquisition of competence that would allow one to move beyond the possible entanglements of un-understanding, to borrow Crapanzano’s coinage from another essay (2014).

I am, instead, concerned with something that resists the type of translation that would offer an explanation or a clarification of something otherwise obscure, a translation that in a certain way tames or constrains the potential of mis-comprehension. I am alluding to what is marked in the conversation between *Cacurucaia* and her client by the woman’s plea that the *pomba gira* speak “straight” with her. I am pointing to the emergence of a suspicion that the *pomba gira* might not be speaking as the woman expected, to a certain realization of the very possibility of a mis-encounter in the conversation between client and entity.

In the other essay I mentioned above, Crapanzano discusses the possibility of un-understanding that haunts every human relation, suggesting that what he calls “the opacity of the other” leads to an uncertainty of actual comprehension, be it because we do not share communicative conventions - speech genres or appropriate interpersonal etiquette (2014: 256) -, be it because we are caught by something akin to an “epistemology of suspicion” (ibid: 268), in which something mysterious lies under the surface without us being able to fully discern it. Crapanzano’s discussion of the condition of this mysterious echoes that of Michel Serres regarding the two contradictory conditions of dialogue: the presence of noise against which the meaning of a message takes shape; and the total exclusion of precisely that which dialogue cannot do without, noise (Serres 1982: 65-6).

If, as Crapanzano suggests, all human encounters involve a risk of un-understanding (ibid: 255), such risk is certainly intensified in a session of consultations with the *povo da rua* where instability is an implicit quality of the type of knowledge one seeks in such encounters. Love, disaffections, betrayals, lived violences, are all inherently unstable domains.

Sessions of consultation are certainly ritualized affairs, and as such I should take into consideration that the encounter between *Cacurucaia* and the woman is subjected to certain conventions. In that sense, I could point out that such conventions provide the appropriate conditions, what the philosopher of language John Austin called “felicity conditions” (1962), for *Cacurucaia*’s speech acts to exert their performative force, that is, for them to enact certain things, as well as to provoke certain attitudes and to motivate certain behaviors.<sup>8</sup>

Austin’s formulation about the performative – his differentiation between “constative utterances”, which can be evaluated according to its *condition of truth or falsity*, and “performative utterances”, which act upon the world through its very enunciation – certainly has had an important role in the anthropological analysis of ritual. Stanley Tambiah, who took up Austin’s discussion on language to formulate his highly influential “performative approach to ritual” (2014), suggests that the generalized belief in the magical power of sacred words, aligned with the socially recognized roles of ritual participants, grant the very possibility of the manifestation of their performative power (Tambiah, 1968). Concurring with certain dimensions of Austin’s analysis, it would be the very stability of conventions that sustains the productive qualities of that speech.<sup>9</sup>

Such anthropological engagement with the performative aspect of ritual allows for an attention to language usage in those contexts as modes of *action upon the world*, breaking it away from the constraining role of communication. Other approaches, however, no matter how inspired by Austin, criticize precisely the performative’s turning away from the truth-values of ritual utterances, inasmuch as such a turn would relegate truth to that which is stated by words, not what is done by them. In his analysis of divinatory speech, Holbraad (2012: 58) argues that in the Cuban *ifá* divinatory system, the “claim to truth [is] at the core of their performative character”, that is, “divinatory utterances are able to *do truth*” (his emphasis).<sup>10</sup>

Analyses of the performative aspect of ritual commonly presuppose a stable context, while certain aspects of Austin’s formulation of the performative seem to indicate the existence of a sovereign subject whose utterances carry force. In the case of the consultations with the *povo da rua*, I would like to move us away from the security of such stability and draw attention to another side of the performative dimension of language in the encounter of *Cacurucaia* and her client: that which Veena Das calls the “fragility of expression” (2007; 2014).

In dialogue with another philosopher of language, Stanley Cavell (1986), and his preoccupation with the affective qualities of ordinary language, Veena Das points to the double nature of the speech act: its normativity – the orderliness of speech, its formal character –, and the risk, improvisation and simultaneous vulnerability of every enunciation, the *danger of words*. Das, following Cavell, suggests that we treat “passionate utterances” – utterances such as the paradigmatic “I love you”, or *Cacurucaia*’s plea

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8 In his famous lectures, *How to do Things with Words*, Austin (1962) initially distinguishes between the constative and the performative utterances, placing the performative dimension within the illocutionary force of enunciation. However, later on in the lectures Austin goes on to say that all utterances have locutionary (estate something); illocutionary (achieve something in saying) and perlocutionary force (achieve something by saying). Wolfe (2013: 250) summarizes Austin’s contribution to the philosophy of language by pointing out that his “conception of the nature of utterances is designed to overcome the ‘descriptive fallacy’ prevalent in Western philosophy: the assumption that all utterances [...] are descriptions or representations of essentially ‘inward’ (and thus separate and prior) intentions or meaning-content – what Austin calls ‘constative utterances’. Against this assumption, Austin adduces what he calls ‘performative utterances’ [...] which do not merely report an action [...] but perform it.”

9 It is not my intention here to revise the large body of literature around ritual and language. As Michelle Rosaldo (1982), critically addressing Austin, pointed out, conceptions of language and language use vary widely across cultures, and, if conceptions of ritual are equally variable, it stands as evident that conceptions of the link between language and ritual also differ. It suffices to say here that anthropological approaches to the performative dimensions of those relations have focused on formal properties of ritual speech, on the total speech act as social action, and on the relation between ritual performance and the illocutionary force of speech. Bauman and Briggs (1990) offer an important overview and programmatic statement regarding the performative approach to language analysis, reviewing several of the by now classic studies of ritual and language. For a later analysis, focused specifically on religious language, one could turn to Keane (1997), while for an engagement with the role of ritual as communication, Robbins (2001) provides an important discussion.

10 As I will argue along this paper, in contrast to the context of *ifá*, in the consultations with the *povo da rua* it is not a concept of truth but a concern with efficacy that is at play.

when she turns to her client and says “Trust me” – as a type of performative utterance. The significance of such an analytic move is that those passionate utterances cannot rely on the power of convention as the source of their authority, their efficacy as a speech act, thus making a person vulnerable in their utterance.

Performative and passionate utterances are thus no longer taken as two distinct types of utterances, but as “two possibilities of the speech act – the first opening up the possibility of participation in the order of law (as reflected in the orderliness of speech and its ritual or formal character) and the second as the improvisation stemming from disorders of desire in which the speech act renders the speaker vulnerable to risks” (Das 2014: 284). Rather than a balancing act of language’s orderliness and improvisation, what is highlighted here is the “double nature of speech acts themselves” (ibid.), the productive instability of language in its ordinary usage, in an everyday darkened by “shades in which doubts arise” (Das 2014: 279) and where “uncertainty [...] is embedded in the concreteness of relations” (Das 2007: 4; 2014: 279). Whereas desire, passion and emotion foreground this aspect of language in “passionate utterances”, the “danger of words” that Das speaks about, where their ends are not predictable nor their effect guaranteed, is a latent quality of every enunciation.

It was my own encounter with the potentiality of mis-comprehension in the consultations with the people of the street that made me turn to Veena Das’s reflections on the vulnerability of language and Crapanzano’s ruminations on the creative and imaginative possibilities of the mysterious. I would like then to take us through another ethnographic story to dwell further on this danger of words, here charged with renewed forces.

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Let us then return to Rio de Janeiro, to another session of consultations, on another Wednesday. This one was marked by tension, the air heavy with apprehension. The *filhos de santo* were clearly agitated as they told me that once again one of the nieces of the *mãe de santo* was coming to consult with *Cacurucaia*, this time bringing her very ill baby. They feared that she would arrive, as usual, “charged with bad things”, therefore affecting everyone with her “bad energies”, with whatever “she was carrying”. They would all be expected to *trabalhar*, that is, to incorporate the particular entities of the *povo da rua* they each *worked* with in order to aid *Cacurucaia* in the difficult job of cleansing the woman – and everyone else – of such negative presence. No one would go home early that evening.

The misgivings about the whole affair were palpable, as people remarked on the frequent and recurrent work done to help the young woman, Mônica. Every single time she had returned to her daily life, not fully following her aunt’s or *Cacurucaia*’s advices. She had taken her children with her to her new home in a local neighborhood famed for high levels of violence and heavy drug trafficking, where she now lived with the father of her baby son, a young man who was said to be a small-time *manager* in that drug traffic. That was a place deemed to be charged with bad energies, and to return to such a place was to be inevitably touched by the negative affects of such forces. Some of the *filhos de santo* had managed to move away from that neighborhood, but Mônica had followed her new love and chosen to move there – be it out of her own will, be it out of necessity.

That Wednesday afternoon she was finally bringing the father and her son to see *Cacurucaia*. I heard whispers that the *pomba gira* had conditioned the visit to the absence of any weapons in her house. “But do they really go anywhere without guns?”, was the question posed in anxious jest that afternoon, a reminder that danger knows no boundaries.

In the early evening, Mônica and her husband, a scrawny young man, finally arrived with their baby. All eyes turned to them as they walked across the yard and into *Cacurucaia*'s room, nobody missing the fact that the young men who accompanied them had stayed outside the gates to the house. If the *povo da rua* are deemed to guard the passageways, the young men doubled their role as guardians at the entrance on that evening.<sup>11</sup>

After what seemed to be a long time locked up in her room, *Cacurucaia* stormed out. Cláudio looked deeply worried while Mônica cried quietly. Placing Mônica and her baby in the middle of the ritual space, *Cacurucaia* announced that she was going to take the baby. Swearing and demanding more drinks, the *pomba gira* warned that someone was going to die, she could no longer prevent it and the baby should be the one to be taken. A general commotion took over the room, people pleading for the baby's life. *Cacurucaia* exploded in anger, swearing at everyone, warning again that things were beyond her power. The prefiguration of death unleashed a macabre spectacle.

Mônica remained silent. With clear disdain, *Cacurucaia* proclaimed that taking the baby was his own mother's choice. By then Cláudio could no longer contain himself, and angrily pointed out that it was *Cacurucaia* who had made Mônica choose between her life and the baby's. Letting out a frightening laughter, *Cacurucaia* confirmed the predicament and spat out that Mônica had indeed chosen to remain alive. "So I'm taking the kid!", reaffirmed *Cacurucaia* matter-of-factly. Mônica remained silent in the center of the drama that unfolded around her. Cláudio once again spoke on her behalf, saying that she had other children to care for. "If she dies, the children will be left motherless!" *Cacurucaia* turns her back to them, and demands that I give her more to drink. She drinks, I light her another cigarillo. We all wait. Mônica's husband is standing against the back wall, forgotten by all. *Cacurucaia* turns again to Mônica, and amidst more insults demands that she confirms what she had said earlier. Silence is Monica's response once again. Another woman comes into the conversation, pleading with *Cacurucaia* to save mother and son. Now it is *Cacurucaia*'s turn to be silent. She merely smokes. The bustle of the *filhos de santo* gets louder, people argue over the drama being enacted there. *Cacurucaia* insists with Mônica, who finally responds with a slow shake of the head and asks the *pomba gira* in a whisper that she be the one to be taken. The *pomba gira* yells at her, ordering her to speak up. Mônica confirms her request that she should lose her life, instead of her child. A nervous charge spreads across the room, and people rush to plead again with the *pomba gira*. *Cacurucaia* silences everyone with her loud announcement: "So I won't take anyone! Now that you have made the right choice I will save you and your child, you wretched woman."

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Let this last encounter linger momentarily at the edge of comprehension, haunting my ethnographic narrative for now, as I first return to the reflections on the vulnerability of language as a means to consider the potentiality of mis-comprehension in the encounters with the *povo da rua*.

As I said before, instability is at the heart of the encounter with the *povo da rua*. The power of the spirits is not measured by a consideration of incontestable evidence, nor by the evaluation of enunciations whose truth value could be subjected to verification, being rather an expression of the efficacy of their meddling in the affairs of their clients and *filhos de santo*. In the encounters behind the iron doors of *Cacurucaia*'s consultation room, the possibility of mis-comprehension or un-understanding, to recall Crapanzano's formulation, is charged by the fear that the *pomba gira* might not be speaking straight, by the risk that

<sup>11</sup> At the entrances to religious centres one encounters the *tronqueira de exu*, often-small structures where the forces of those entities are *firmadas* or *assentadas*, seated or materialized in diverse objects, a presence fed by diverse offerings and illuminated by candles. These are said to guard the gates of the *centro* and remain lit throughout the unfolding of ritual.

words might be used or apprehended in a manner that might lead to misguided actions. At the same time, the client strives to evade the call for a full revelation of herself in consultation, an unveiling of the self that might heighten even more the vulnerability of her position. There is a constitutive tension in the session of consultation, as one seeks the *pomba gira* to receive counsel, at the same time that it is widely known that the *povo da rua* can and will trick us. The efficacy of a session of consultation then depends upon a skillful steering through a tempestuous relation, depends on a skillful enactment of such an unstable encounter.

The drama unfolding in the latter encounter manifests something that underlies the first session: the inherent tension that pervades the search for help from a *pomba gira*, a search always already marked by a certain risk. It is true that all oracles speak in mysterious ways, therefore needing to be, to a certain extent, “deciphered”. However, such “deciphering” here does not move towards comprehension as if progressing from a surface of meanings to deeper signification. I want to suggest that here knowledge and comprehension remain unstable, and that such instability is potentialized not only by the fact that the *povo da rua*, as one of their ritual songs tells us, “do good and do evil”, but also because in this purported movement between good and evil the end result might not be the one we had sought.

The haunting possibility of un-understanding or the background of instability that Crapanzano perceives in human interaction, becomes central to the power enacted by the *pomba gira*. In fact, the *pomba gira* herself incarnates such instability, or, to put it in another way, her own state is unstable. On the day of the session of consultations with Monica, the *pomba gira* dragged herself along the floor in the room, unable to stand up. On other days, she dances to the sound of the drums and walks around the room. She says it all depends on how many evil deeds she has carried out lately. Her *cambono* prides himself on not letting any client ask for “evil doings”, but if *Cacurucaia* is deemed to be able to know what her client had meant to ask even before they actually met in person, such control is at best a desire to which the *pomba gira* has to acquiesce.

Several books written by practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions speak of the need to “indoctrinate” the spiritual entities<sup>12</sup>. Such need is often understood as a call for teaching those entities to behave according to a markedly Christian moral vision that either clearly demarcates evil from good deeds, or simply seeks to prohibit evil doings. I would suggest that an important dimension of such indoctrination is in fact to transform the *povo da rua* into manageable beings, to affect – or at least attempt to affect - a domestication of such unstable behavior in order to make it more predictable, and hopefully controllable. Recalling Veena Das, here the order of normativity rubs against the passions that cut across it and foment the very desire to seek the intervention of the *pomba gira*.

While in the first session, the roundabout conversation seeks to circumvent the dangers of desire, in the second session such risks are materialized in the tension between life and death. Violence turned ordinary by the continuously renewed threat of death which very concretely haunts the lives of the young drug dealer and his family, a death held at bay for the moment by the multiple embodiments of guardians at the gates - such is the specter that in turns haunts the other eminent death forewarned by the *pomba gira*. If in the first session, the *pomba gira* remains opaque in face of her client, at the same time that she incites the woman to trust her, inviting a return and thus recasting the woman as a client, in the second session the *pomba gira* tricks her client, reveals her manipulation of the woman’s comprehension of her own role as mother, and affects an operation of change in the woman, however ephemeral or contingent such transformation might be.

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<sup>12</sup> Despite the possible resonances between “indoctrinate” (*doutrinar*) and “educate” (*educar*) spiritual entities, I would like to highlight the difference between what teaching implies here and that which *Espírito Santo* (2014: 51) discusses as *educar a los muertos*, to “educate the dead”, amongst Cuban spiritists. Even if in both ethnographic contexts we encounter the sense of transforming the dead into manageable beings, in Cuba, *Espírito Santo* tells us that the processes of educating the dead is implicated in the “continuous creation of a particular kind of ‘self’ defined by this presence”. That is, “humans are also shaped by other-worldly designs for their destiny”. In both cases, here and in Cuba, what is at play is a renewed transformation of the dead and the living, a process continuously manipulated but certainly not controlled by either of them.

We could possibly suggest that in the second session the transformation comes close to a moralizing conclusion, after all *Cacurucaia*'s manipulation leads the woman to manifest herself according to what could be taken as the expected proper response of a mother – self-sacrifice. But, in fact, there is no resolution to this tale, not in the space of ritual, not in the realm of everyday life. The young men wait outside to accompany mother and child into their ordinary uncertainty, or rather, to the certainty of insecurity, where other kinds of death still lie in waiting. More than offer this or that possible understanding of what unfolds here, an analytical movement that would in itself domesticate the very potential of mis-comprehension, what I am trying to point out is the productive potential of the very “danger of words” that resonates in these multiple stories that cut across and interrupt each other.

In lieu of a conclusion then, we might shortly turn to another story, to one of the myths of *Exu*<sup>13</sup>, the West African deity with which the *povo da rua* are associated. That myth tells us that *Exu* is the voracious mouth that devours the world and disgorges it, creating it anew. It seems to me that a similar creative instability echoes in the sessions of consultations, charging the danger of words that give shape to the stories and to the continuous production of persons, spirits and the world. If *exu* is known for opening our paths, such a danger of words cuts across the unfolding of people's lives, even if only ephemerally, displacing movements and producing interruptions without the assurance or the safety of a known destiny. The personal and the cosmological, the self-making and the world-making, come together under the crossroads guarded by the people of the streets. In this implication of the cultural and the cosmological in the personal realm of experience, social and personal dramas, mis-comprehension and trickery, spiritual entities and persons all become entangled in a process of poesies embedded in the concrete uncertainty of relations.

We could possibly take the drama unfolding in the sessions of consultation as a “passionate utterance” and, if to offer counsel is to utter an invitation to partake in a story that is unfolding, as Walter Benjamin suggested, with Stanley Cavell we might add that as a “passionate utterance” the encounter with the people of the streets is “an invitation to improvisation in the disorders of desire” (2005: 185). We could say that it is thus an invitation into the unfolding of a story that foments the self-making of the world.

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<sup>13</sup> The terms here refers specifically to the West African deity, thus the use of the proper noun.

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