

The Body as Wound

Possession, *Malandros* and Everyday Violence in Venezuela

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Abstract ■ During the 1990s, Venezuela saw both an intensification in the levels of everyday violence and in the ideological operations blaming the poor for this state of affairs, resulting in a large-scale criminalization of shantytown dwellers, especially young men. This production of social stigma is of one piece with the implementation of repressive state policies. Based on one-year's ethnographic fieldwork on the well-known spirit possession cult of María Lionza in the shantytowns of Caracas, this article discusses one relevant aspect of the extensive social trauma taking shape in the shadow of these events. As an emergent form of popular religion where different styles of embodiment are constantly being produced, the cult quickly activated spirits of a particular type dormant in its populous pantheon: the delinquents – *malandros*. These spirits, which became an instant success among young spiritist mediums, trace out the tragic encounter of scores of poor Venezuelans with the change of the century.

Keywords ■ delinquents ('*malandros*') ■ embodiment ■ memory ■ shantytowns ■ social trauma ■ spiritism ■ Venezuela ■ violence ■ youth

Spiritism has neither a beginning nor an end. This is something you have to make clear in that story you are writing. (Hermes, spiritist, Caracas)

A murmur in the forest

Sssssssshhhhhhhh! Danielito kept his voice to a whisper throughout. There he was. Early December 1993. Already four and a half months into my fieldwork on the Venezuelan spirit possession cult of María Lionza, after hearing again and again about the current 'epidemic' of *malandro* – delinquent – spirits in the ceremonies, I was faced for the first time with one of them. Danielito's spirit was taking the body of Johan, a young medium from the city of Valencia. It was deep in the night on the mountain of Sorte (Yaracuy), the main pilgrimage centre for Venezuelan spiritists. There were only five of us, in the middle of the forest, in the light of a few candles. Danielito moved around in streetwise manner. Softly shaking hands while casting suspicious glances. Small talk. He was high on drugs and desperate

for a drink. Typical of malandro spirits, I was told. Smoke, drinks, parties, street life, love affairs, bragging, violence, this is what they care about. But why was the spirit whispering? As spirits come and go through the bodies of the mediums, all spiritist ceremonies are full of laughter, screams, thickened voices, discussions, noisy breathing, loud songs, lively drumming. Luis, my companion on that field trip, pointed to a cabin on the far bank of the River Yaracuy. 'The National Guard is too close. He does not want to be detected by them. Remember, even when he is dead, he remains a criminal.'

My brief encounter with Danielito further fuelled my curiosity about these naughty spirits, which for me until then had been no more than local – if very promising – gossip. In barely a couple of days, Danielito's performance had materialized in my field notes as an invaluable prize for a young anthropologist who was interested, as many were at that time, in the 'resisting ways of the subaltern':¹ a distinct 'muted voice', a dreamt-of metaphor for the stigmatization, repression and incarceration of a whole lifestyle by the hegemonic forces at work in Venezuelan society. In this light, his whispery voice suddenly sounded to me like an unsettling collective howl.

The cult of María Lionza is a widely popular social phenomenon organized around the presence of mystical forces – *fuerzas*. It is certain that most spiritists, who come from all social classes but mainly from shantytown dwellers, fully believe in the reality of these entities. The cultural logic of the cult is based on the fact that spirits of dead people – colonial Indians, peasants, soldiers, prostitutes, national heroes, maroons, doctors, saints – can and do enter the bodies of people who are alive.² They use their limited time back on Earth to mediate among the living, counsel, heal, gain *light*, and thus *expiate their sins and progress spiritually*. This therapeutic attribute of trance is crucial to understanding the predicament of the ghosts of malandros. Mediums, in turn, *lend* their bodies to the spirits, at great risk, in order to gain spiritual force, social prestige and, often, money to make ends meet.

For an anthropologist carrying a blend of soft Catholic education and a chosen agnosticism, all of this was at first disconcerting. Yet during my year of fieldwork among Venezuelan spiritists, I became familiar with interactions with spirits. In the course of a few hours, I could easily switch from speaking to a medium, to chatting with whatever number of spirits possessed his or her body during a ceremony, to sharing a few exhausted comments back with the medium in the wee hours of the morning. I could perfectly understand the logic of what was happening in front of me, but I clearly did not believe or experience it in the same ways that many followers did.³ For me, spirits were lived-in, deeply embodied collective experience, which I was ready to interpret as incarnations of *popular memory* as well as *social critique*.⁴ As such, they became very tangible to me. In time, spirits became first-rate informants – even friends; some mediums took issue with my style of fieldwork and turned out to be surprisingly sceptical

of their own practice, insisting that I should *distrust* certain aspects or practitioners of spiritism,⁵ and I became an occasional ritual assistant, a solicited local cameraman and an unskilled medium.⁶

The cult of María Lionza is a 'hybrid' popular practice, in García Canclini's sense (1989: 16–25). Its complexity lies more in its capacity to innovate and recycle than in a permanent set of traditional beliefs and practices.⁷ This 'emerging' quality, to use Williams's notion (1977: 108–27), permits constant crossovers between sacred – the ceremonial settings and practices – and everyday spaces of social interaction. By following spirits, mediums, cult sympathizers and 'clients' around the streets and shantytowns of Caracas or the slopes of Sorte, my research was designed to discover the patterns of the ongoing reciprocal mapping of the cult's forms of embodiment and broader social practices, a process that the Kleinmans envision as a dialectic of 'infolding' and 'outfolding' (1994: 710–11). In this framework, my interests initially included spiritism's distinctive ways of producing space, both geographical and embodied; its interfaces with Venezuela's oil economy and political ideologies; its connections with everyday life in the shantytowns and the informal economy; its role in popular healing and the intensification of medical pluralism; and the way popular memory is deployed through possession.⁸

As it turned out, after my encounter with Danielito in Sorte, malandro spirits started to show up in many ceremonies I attended. For my part, I questioned my acquaintances – both spiritists and spirits – more insistently. Malandros quickly grew to be a crucial subplot in my research and analysis, eventually pushing a relevant portion of my work into what Sztompka calls the 'discourse of trauma' (2000: 450). The upsurge of the malandros in the early 1990s was unmistakably related to increased rates of violence running throughout Venezuelan society.⁹ Their novelty and instant popularity in many spiritist quarters was, in turn, a testimony to the cult's dynamism. What were then the main routes of this infolding/outfolding of malandros between shantytowns and spiritist ceremonies, repressive policies and collective representations, everyday and possessed bodies? Exploring the ways in which these spirits connect this popular religious practice with everyday violence was bound to provide some hints about the cult's continuing relevance in Venezuelan society. In reverse fashion, looking at the universe of the malandro spirits, deciphering the corporeal routines they inscribe in their mediums, had the potential to become a significant window into the nitty-gritty workings of everyday violence in the Venezuelan shantytowns.

In between these broad mediations, more specific questions remained to be answered. Why were the malandro spirits able to displace so quickly some other types of more consolidated spiritual entities in the cult's broad pantheon? Why were so many youngsters becoming spiritists, fascinated by these spirits? Why were many of them so thrilled about having malandros running wild up and down their bodies during their trance? Why were

older mediums so confused and ambivalent about these spirits? Which were the 'hidden transcripts' (Scott, 1990) brought to light as corporeal dramas by these death delinquents?

Bullets hot and cold

Malandro spirits emerged and now operate in an environment characterized by pervasive violence and the diffusion of social stigma on a massive scale in Venezuela. Many commentators agree that the overall levels of violence in the country intensified after the military crackdown on the 1989 'IMF-riot' known as *El Caracazo*.¹⁰ This popular uprising, 'the largest and most violently repressed revolt against austerity measures in Latin American history', was decisive to Venezuela's self-consciousness as a society reaching a 'state of emergency' or 'alarm', and was the terminal point of a populist political fiction established in the mid-1930s and expressed in a supposed pact between the elites and the lower classes (Coronil, 1997: 376–8).¹¹ In Elias Pino Iturrieta's apt words, in 1989, Venezuela became 'a truer and more dramatic country' (1989: 11).

This is a very complex state of affairs deserving more detailed analysis.¹² In this section, I will focus on the aspect of this process directly related to the surfacing of malandro spirits, namely, on the expansion of *common delinquency* and on its parallel *hegemonic representation* as one fundamental indicator and result of Venezuela's fall from grace. If it is true that the economic crisis starting in the 1980s, the scarcity of economic opportunities and the precariousness of everyday life¹³ increasingly pushed a sector of the urban poor into unlawful activities to make ends meet, it is no less true that the state's response to the crisis has contributed significantly to its current catastrophic dimensions.¹⁴ Nobody doubts the dramatic magnitude of delinquency, violence and insecurity in the streets of Venezuela's main cities. What is more contentious are the prevailing analyses produced to describe and understand the situation, the 'common sense' that has come to prevail in the social groups that control media and political resources and discourses – that absorb and spread these explanations throughout Venezuelan society – and the associated, largely repressive policies designed to confront the problem.

Some analysts of Venezuela's urban reality have denounced the fact that influential voices in civil society, the mass media and the political arena alike, in a blunt exercise of collective deceit that has provided the prevailing template for the interpretation of urban violence, suspicion and fear in the country, commonly blame the impoverished inhabitants of the shantytowns – the *barrios* – for the upward spiral of violence prompted by the economic crisis and the riots, thus obscuring its historical and structural roots.¹⁵ This train of events is broadly attributed, as the 1989 riots were, to a 'lack of character' of barrio or *red zone* dwellers, often depicted

as an anonymous 'mob' of 'savages', 'barbarians' or 'primitives', holders of a 'chaos culture' (Coronil and Skurski, 1991: 322–34; De Freitas, 1995: 155–8; España, 1993: 160–1).¹⁶ In recent decades, in elite political discourse, the 'people' or popular classes have ceased being the 'virtuous foundation of democracy' to become, instead, 'an unruly and parasitical mass to be disciplined by the state and made productive by the market' (Coronil, 1997: 378).

Within these hegemonic representations of the roots and agents of urban violence, the *malandro* has emerged as a particularly tenebrous presence. Generally considered to be one of the most genuine and foreseeable products of the shantytowns, the *malandro* has become one crucial embodiment of collective everyday violence, in the same way as Northern Ireland's phantasmagorical 'Blackman' (Feldman, 1991: 81–4). The terrorizing efficacy of this image of the *malandros* as ruthless criminals does not lie in its exceptionality, but rather in its association to a very extensive and visible category of people. As the Venezuelan anthropologist Julio De Freitas argues:

... the characteristic features of a delinquent, as established by the media's crime chronicles – *crónicas rojas* – and police discourses, are *per se* a series of pieces that combined in any possible form produce a model identical or very similar to any barrio youngster. What is considered evidence is just pure stigma: the colour of the skin (being *niche* or *moreno* [dark skinned]), the face (have the face of a *choro* [thief]), the way of walking (walk like a *mono* [monkey]), the style of speech (talk *malandro* or *calé*), the dressing code (dress like a *tierrío* [inhabitant of the mud]: basketball shoes, black leather or Jean jacket, flashy T-shirt, baseball cap and other clothes wearing the emblems of US sport teams), the music that they listen to ('*salsa* is just for *malandros*'), their place of origin ('there are only *malandros* there') or even the degree of schooling ('where they come from they do not read, they just consume drugs'). These elements are so ingrained in the imaginary of urban violence that anyone encountering someone matching these features in the streets will immediately activate his/her defence mechanisms. (1995: 3–4)

In these dominant discourses, the social, psychological and cultural profile of the stereotypical thug of the shantytowns communicates a disturbing image of a tough male, drug addict, heavy drinker, lawbreaker, sexual predator, irresponsible father, a man bent on easy and fast money, a treacherous gambler, mostly uneducated and coarse, one deeply immersed in the culture of weapons, unreliable, criminal, vengeful, fearless of an early death, a ruthless assassin, someone who would kill for just a pair of shoes and, ultimately, a man who is thoroughly incorrigible and does not have a legitimate space in Venezuela's future.¹⁷ In kaleidoscope combinations, these traits compose the prevalent images of barrio youngsters that the middle and upper classes find realistic, and that form the basis of a good deal of the political common sense and news coverage on urban violence.

This massive process of production of delinquent and disposable

bodies has had dramatic consequences, for it turns most youngsters and men in the shantytowns, regardless of their particular biography, personal character or life project, into potential targets of systematic discrimination, arrest, torture and often violent death by the state and its agents. Through the convergence of their most common racial, social and cultural traits into a generalized category of 'suspicious appearance', shantytown men become instant suspects once they penetrate the central spaces of the city, or when police interventions – some of them massive, involving hundreds or thousands of arrests – are staged in the shantytowns for media consumption, according to spurious political motivations. These operations frequently involve extensive human rights violations, overlooked or directly promoted by the political authorities in charge. As an example: in 1991, Venezuela's Attorney General was forced to acknowledge that the police had organized an 'extermination plan' against delinquents involving summary executions.¹⁸

Tosca Hernández (2000) has argued that these police interventions have had another *criminogenic* quality: the steady fabrication of penal antecedents and jail terms for many shantytown males.¹⁹ That is, the combination of the state's disciplining discourses and practical actions has contributed to the *production* and *consolidation* of a whole category of social outcasts, which in turn *requires* further action. As new troubling categories such as the 'predelinquent' – *potential delinquents* according to the stereotypes of popular maleness described above – enter public discourse, this mechanism of translation of social stigma into legal and police evidence does not even seem to be necessary any longer. The scope of the repressive interventions over what are, to a great extent, negative stereotypes constructed and transmitted in political, police and media discourses, has proven to be chilling. For example, in 2000, the Vice-Minister of Urban Security, General Belisario Landis, lamented that around 2000 of these potential delinquents – that is, barrio youngsters lacking criminal antecedents – were killed by security forces between January and August. 'This is a situation that I regret, because we are talking about young people who could participate in rehabilitation programmes, but they leave us little room when they start shooting one another or the police', he declared.²⁰

As a result of this complex destructive process starting in the early 1980s and reinvigorated after *El Caracazo*, weapons and killings abound in the streets, local gangs chase one another even during the daytime, the average age of people involved in miscellaneous crimes has dropped, there is a state of reciprocal 'death penalty' between security forces and many shantytown men, the cruel penal system keeps on producing marginalization and corpses, and insecurity has become a crucial worry of most Venezuelans. In politics, particularly during electoral periods, the 'war against delinquency' – largely articulated in tune with the dominant discourses and stereotypes outlined above – has turned into a main subject of discussion. Slogans as crude as *Plomo al hampa* ('Gun down delinquents')

or *Mano dura con el hampa* ('Strong hand for delinquents') are not uncommon in electoral campaigns in the last few years, anticipating new repressive policies for containing the unruly and violent poor.

This ominous situation affects mostly barrio men and youngsters, but it resonates strongly with the population of the shantytowns at large. Those all-too-common stray bullets that kill innocent bystanders, unwary neighbours or children sleeping in precarious shacks are locally known as *balas frías*, or 'cold bullets'. The massive criminalization and the mostly repressive discourses and policies articulated to *turn around the situation* spiral all the way up from the concrete wounds made by specific projectiles to a collective *cold-bullet effect*, deeply hurting the social fabric. In this complex gang/police/political/judicial/representational shoot-out, too many people who have no weapons are being hurt. Cutting across the 'brute facts' of everyday violence and the persuasive force of hegemonic discourses, there opens up a mystified world of social trauma.

The inhabitants of the barrios, victims of overt and symbolic violence and their numerous intertwining,²¹ experience their everyday lives within a *wounded space*.²² I use this notion to describe an ambiguous sociological, geographic, corporeal, symbolic, existential space, simultaneously tough and vulnerable, traumatic and trivial, common and extraordinary, tense but quotidian. This wounded space is ultimately precarious, articulated in the socio-economic periphery and in the shadows of suspicion, poverty, mourning, stigma and death. The malandro spirits are the offspring of this wound, collective bearers of the 'devastating injuries that social force can inflict on human experience' (Kleinman et al., 1997: ix). In what follows, I will analyse where the malandro spirits stand in the social domain of experiences and representations of barrio delinquency in Venezuela. Although these spirits and their emergent bodily plots absorb important elements of the dominant stereotypes of barrio maleness described above, they do not exactly conform to them, thus providing a view from the other side of social stigma and a peculiar space of social critique.

Little stories in distress

The eruption of malandro spirits in the cult of María Lionza since the early 1990s has been impressive.²³ Still in the early stages of the *rehabilitation track* provided to all spirits by possession, they lack spiritual power – *light* – and, at the time of my fieldwork, they did not yet have a well-established healing style, iconography or ritual paraphernalia. Although images of presumed delinquents abound in the media, on wanted bills, or as mug shots or corpses, only recently have they started being portrayed in commercial statues or printed prayers – *carnets* – as part of the spiritist devotion.

The most famous spirits among the faithful of the cult are *Petróleo Crudo* ('Crude Oil'), Ismael, Freddy, Miguelito, *Pez Gordo* ('Fat Fish'), Luis

Sánchez and Juan Hilario.²⁴ All of them inscribe in the bodies of their mediums some form of violent death, either summary execution or in confrontation with the police, during armed robbery or in *culebras*²⁵ with rival gangs. Take the one narrative I recorded about Ismael's death. In this version, he was born in Lídice, a barrio in Caracas, and was killed by a knife wound in a gang fight. He left behind a mourning mother, who kept (and wept over) a small coffer with his belongings. Few knew about the specifics of his death beyond the fact that it was early, tragic and happened somewhere in the streets. Yet, as the most popular malandro in the cult, everybody had an opinion on him. Ismael is alternately remembered as an inoffensive street-corner bully, an unfairly accused youngster, an effective defender of his own urban territory against other malandros, a bank robber who would distribute the spoils with the poor, or a road assailant who stopped trailers loaded with goods at the foot of the hill where his shantytown begins to let his neighbours pillage at will. There are multiple stories circulating in the cult which stress Ismael's 'good faith', 'humanity' and 'solidarity' in spite of, or maybe because of, his unlawful life style and his constant run-ins with the police.

Differing from hegemonic representations of delinquency, these emergent popular memories have a narrative 'rhythm' of their own (Connerton, 1989: 19), constituting what Mary Steedly calls a 'fugitive's eye view' (1993: 118–43). According to her, this subaltern point of view is made up of an unsteady conglomerate of partial voices characterized, necessarily, by their indeterminacy. The circulation of these fragmented voices, usually intertwined with personal, intimate stories, does not rely upon a globalizing interpretative framework. Rather, they produce meaning only in their own fragmentation and lack of closure (1993: 135).²⁶

Alongside this well-known set of spirits, many malandros do not yet belong to the collective patrimony of the cult. Rather, they are constantly sprouting out of the personal biographies and experiences of the *marialionceros*. Such is the case of Marisa, Carlos Alberto Peña, Alexis, Monchín, Jesús Eloy González, Danielito and others. A key to their forceful arrival to spiritism is their condition of *ánimas* – souls wandering in pain after a violent death, bent on haunting the living. Gordon (1997: 8, 23) has recently proposed the factoring in of ghosts and haunting in the understanding of many aspects of social life. This author argues that haunting is a vigorous 'way of knowing' that offers the analyst fresh insights into the 'relationship among power, knowledge and experience'.

One late afternoon in a shantytown in the south of Caracas, I was confronted with the significance of haunting in the (dis)organization of wounded memories. When we were about to leave E.H.'s place after one short ceremony, we were called by his mother Rosa. She wanted to tell me about her sons lost to the streets. Right in front of the entrance of her shanty, there was a white wall covered with family pictures. Rosa pointed to a big photo at the centre containing the beaming half-body portraits of five

small children, two of whom had been murdered in the streets a few years after it had been taken. She called my attention to a smaller picture hanging on top of the main doorway of one very young man, its glass stained with a black cross drawn with a quavering finger, in memory of her third child lost to the streets of Las Mayas. E.H., standing by, was one of her two sons still alive but, as the bullet scar in his right elbow could testify, that was only a piece of luck. As much as she regretted her children's lack of nerve in the streets, where three of them had allowed themselves to be killed like helpless animals, she had grown to believe in the protective power of their wandering animas. Her sparse family album had turned into a *space of mourning*.²⁷ In the last few years, a string of slight signs – sudden blinks, facial movements, and blows – much like a protective breath, had already stopped a number of break-ins by presumed malandros.

I was not yet through with the presence of perturbed ghosts in the everyday life of the shantytowns that afternoon. It was already late and E.H. – a former street child, petty thief, occasional jailbird and now spiritist and informal worker in a nearby market – decided to accompany me downhill to get the bus home. He was taking considerable risks. The route down was truly intimidating and I had to do my best to remain low-key, holing up in E.H.'s shade. On our way, E.H. drew me a dense topography of street violence which associated names of bands, marked guns, shoot-outs with rival gangs and police forces, victims – 'may they rest in peace' – and perpetrators with every street corner, stairway, alley, curve and threshold. All circulation pathways were taken over by vigilant youngsters, trading drugs and checking for possible intruders. Each act of mutual recognition with E.H. carried shared recollections of tragic events, threads of suspicion, attempts at identifying past and present street allegiances and potential danger. Our imminent encounter with the killer of his third brother, who had later on assaulted those attending the funeral, was fortunately frustrated by some fast action in a neighbouring passageway which demanded his attention. The foot of the hill was menacingly empty. I gasped in relief when I finally took the bus.

It is not uncommon for the pervasive animas of victims of street violence to force themselves into the bodies of the mediums. Ana, a low-rank public officer living in a different shantytown in Caracas, told me the following story:

I have had lots of [living] malandros at my altar. They have been my protégés and also my clients. . . . Let me tell you about the experience of this one young guy. He was not a killer or anything of the sort, but he was involved in the local drug market. He was a great son, he loved his mother, but he got lost. All his brothers were drug addicts also and had already been in jail at one time or another. His mom knew that I had an altar at home, so she'd come here to pray to the spirits and stuff. She was very distressed by all of this You want to help because you know that these guys only have prison or the graveyard as a future. I managed to get him out of jail once doing a spiritist job with the *mano*

poderosa [Powerful Hand]. . . . Then, I eventually told him that he was going to get killed, but he didn't pay me any attention. He didn't want to wear the [spiritist] protections as he should and once, a guy he had mugged some time before, when he was barely seven years old, ran into him and smashed his skull with the butt of a gun . . . and then shot him three times. Later, I had to tell him off because [his spirit] started to haunt my place. When I received him in my body, he used to cry out.

Ana's bittersweet narrative contains many of the themes running through delinquency, personal relationships and everyday violence in the Venezuelan barrios: common tragedy and mutual protection; fractured family ties; drug addiction and tenderness; neighbourhood and fear; supernatural foresight and blindness to danger; 'deviance', jail terms and collective rehabilitation; youth and trivial death; filial love and excess of violence; grieving and crying from the 'other side'.

Misgivings about the presence of the malandro spirits in the bodies of the mediums are also expressed in their sociological profile. As, in the most broadly accepted logic of the cult, all spirits need to have been *out of their bodies* for around ten years before they can start possessing mediums, many of the malandros descending in the 1990s belonged to those generations of delinquents that roamed the streets before the *Caracazo*. That is, they are the now-popularly idealized *malandros viejos* – 'old delinquents' – or, as the sociologists Pedrazzini and Sánchez have proposed, *malandros integrados* – 'integrated delinquents' (1992: 87–114). In the popular imaginary, these were mostly street-corner bullies whose trade took place in symbiotic relationship with the territories they controlled and their inhabitants, before they were displaced from the streets by bands of armed children (*malandros nuevos* – 'new delinquents' – or *malandros niños* – 'child delinquents') and their arguably more random violent practices. Ismael and the rest of the members of the court of malandros are seen as contemporary urban versions of Robin Hood, as my friend Hermes and many other spiritists stated explicitly, and their illegal practices evoke among the faithful of the cult nostalgic memories of popular justice and communal solidarity, residues of a time where street violence had less destructive codes that could be negotiated on a more equal footing. This is how Hermes expressed it:

I know Ismael, Luis Sánchez didn't go to Hell, because they didn't kill anybody the bad way. I mean, if he did kill somebody, it was merely in self-defence. These spirits have nothing to do with today's malandros, who are a tremendous waste. They didn't used to hurt the community, they protected it. OK, they'd rob the rich to give to the poor, you know, like trucks full of spaghetti. And yes, *they were considered criminals* [by the authorities], but God will give them their worth in time, *for there was some good in what they did. Even when they all ended up being killed in the streets.*

Due to the 'moral complexity' (Antze and Lambeck, 1996: xxiv) present in the type of traumatic memories of the short term represented by Ismael

and his peers, these spirits will continue to be a controversial presence in the spiritism of María Lionza, as they are in Venezuelan society. Hermes understands the reasons of their constant arrival in the cult for, as spiritists believe, *possession offers them an opportunity to compensate for their former misconduct*, yet he discourages their presence at his spiritist centre. 'It is fine if they behave', he told me. 'But often times they only come down to mess around and fuck up. Some people put up with them all right, but in my case, it all depends on their attitude.' Yet it is not easy to get rid of them. Malandros are seldom invoked by the *marialionceros*, as the rest of the spirits usually are, but rather, they tend to sneak into the mediums without previous notice. Thus, in their picaresque manner, they are perceived by many as imposing their presence on the ceremonies, just as they do in the streets and in the social imaginary. Although E.H. and others assured me that 'these spirits will eventually kill, you'll see, they will kill', the sacredness of the situation and the ultimate restraint of the malandros – immersed in a process of spiritual and social therapy – diffuses the potential for conflict and provides safer spaces for open dialogue – quotidian, corporeal, moral – with and about delinquency and everyday conflict in advantageous terms which are difficult to achieve anywhere else.²⁸

Like their savvy dashing into the bodies of the mediums, these fugitive tales of malandros cannot be fully understood without tracking in detail the ways they unfold along bodily paths during trance. In what follows, I shift my focus from the collective memories of dead malandros as traumatic *stories of social distress* to their 'echoes' (Halbwachs, 1980: 45) in the concrete embodied experience of the mediums. The sensorial fields characteristic of the cult of María Lionza are a crucial environment in which the life stories, memories and rumours of delinquency circulating in the popular imaginary become lived experience and intertwine with the everyday in its most intimate spaces.

Permeable bodies

Possession is an elaborate form of permeability between bodies and social environments of all kinds. Paralleling Sacks's premise of an embodied continuity between internal and external 'melodies' (1984: 117–18), there is a clear correlation between the ongoing renovation of the corporeal attributes of trance and the new rhythms and sensory clues associated with the tumultuous growth of Venezuelan cities. Possession is thus a paradigmatic case of what Csordas (1993: 138–9) calls 'somatic modes of attention', a concept designed to apprehend the nuances of the 'cultural elaboration of sensorial implication' in the world.

Becoming a medium or a *banco*²⁹ entails the learning of novel sensory configurations through intensive 'body work' during initiation (Wacquant, 1995: 73). This thorough process of 'bodily reform' (Comaroff and

Comaroff, 1992: 70) implies the development of a new style of being-in-the-world that enriches the range of sensuous exchanges with the environment. In the sensuous atmosphere of spiritist ceremonies, the spiritual flows unfold – either delicately or violently – into the mediums, usually feet upwards, and blur or expand vision, leave their idiosyncratic traces as tastes and smells, inhabit breathing, modulate speech, reconfigure hearing, penetrate muscles, contract articulations, pound bones, lull consciousness. Although stereotyped, spirits are not homogeneous *corporeal blocks*, and manifest in more or less definite ‘corporeal schemata of perception, appreciation and action’ according to the degree of expertise and dramatic qualities of a given medium (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 16).

Trance is thus a continuum of sensations which ranges from slight contact with the spirits – *toques* – to profound possessions. During a ceremony, mediums navigate this sensory continuum back and forth, at times fully possessed, at other times only partially so. In the lower level of trance – where many of the clients, occasional spiritists and, I can testify, anthropologists who come to the spiritist centres often remain – there is a myriad of possible body contacts of different intensity with *energy flows*, expressed in sensations such as tremors, headache, dizziness, anxiety, distorted voice, blurry vision and so forth. What interests us here is one such mode of spiritist engagement specially affecting the malandros: the so-called *recostamientos* (leanings), which refer to forms in which the sensory clues of trance overflow from the ceremonies into everyday life. Once the mediums have tuned their bodies to the presence of spiritual forces in their surroundings, they remain sensitive to them in many other circumstances. Mediums describe these *recostamientos* as unexpected moods that come to them, or as gestures characteristic of certain spirits which suddenly invade their everyday corporality.

Danger zone: the flesh and blood

Since the body is a crucial danger territory, a *red zone* where a good deal of everyday violence unravels, it was just a matter of time before flesh, violence and trance came together. The expansion of the spirits of malandros in the cult has resulted in an ever-expanding mapping of the urban spaces of violence in the mediums they possess, usually youngsters. The emergent bodily plots of these spirits are numerous.

Malandros are often considered spirits of ‘low light’, ‘cold’, still close to sin, desire, temptation, treason, envy and, in general, all the ‘moral weaknesses’ of the mortals. This coldness also has *cadaverous* qualities. ‘Animas are not yet completely detached from their bodies and the circumstances in which they lost their lives, and thus they carry that coldness along with them, the *coldness of death*’, Daniel told me. Besides their occasional appearances as crying spirits, they generally bring to the bodies of the mediums

an unconcerned mode of being-in-the-world consistent with the ephemeral nature of life and death in the shantytowns. In their characteristic street-wise manner, many times enveloped in a caustic sense of humour, malandros demand cheap anisette and drugs to get high,³⁰ flirt, brag about their courage, or tease and argue about blood feuds. They do not remain unarmed, though. A most contentious characteristic of these spirits among many faithful is their desire to carry a weapon (usually a sacred dagger) which, in another theatrical inscription of peril in the flesh, is often embodied by mimicking with their hands the shape and mechanical cadence of a pistol.

Talkative, armed and high on alcohol and drugs, malandros also elicit in the possessed body the dramas, walls and bars of prison, a crucial location of state violence on the poor. Perhaps the most characteristic ritual marking of their arrival at the ceremonies is the singing and dancing of *salsa malandra* – the kind of tropical music supposedly enjoyed by ‘delinquents’ – in particular a popular song called ‘La cárcel’ [‘The Jail’].³¹ Opposing in its optimistic lyrics the toughness and solitude of jail to the beauty of freedom – ‘let’s enjoy life, may we all live in peace’ – this song is currently the religious leitmotif, the main prayer and a marker of ritual transitions of these spirits, who temporarily metamorphose their mediums into dancing inmates. ‘La cárcel’ is the key moment of collective effervescence, the healing atmosphere, the rhythmic skeleton to the characteristic dance-along malandro body language – *el tumbaito*.³²

Very prominently, malandros spirits leave in the mediums physical marks of their violent lives, such as wounds, scars, amputations, marks of torture and impairments. Take Freddy, an usually well-liked malandro spirit who during his life controlled a broad area in the shantytown of El Valle, and was killed in a confrontation with the police in the mid-1980s.³³ During trance, he paralyzes his numerous mediums’ right arm, replicating the effect of a bullet shot at him by the police some time before his death. These lesions are thought of by many mediums as *courage medals*, increasing the heroism and social prestige of the spirits. If it is true that these forms of wounded corporeality are not new in Venezuelan spiritism – they were already present in the classical matrix in the cult and are unfolding most dramatically in the African and Viking spirits³⁴ – they have become a crucial property of the malandros.

Thus, the entrance of the malandros transforms the possessed body into a danger zone, fully equipped to endure, absorb and resignify the intensities of street violence. Beyond the most widespread features of the malandro spirits discussed above, the firm establishment of a fluid permeability between sacred bodies and everyday violence is constantly producing fresh avenues in the sensorial fields of trance and the actions of the spirits, connected to their instant wit as they react to specific circumstances in the ceremonies. Within this improvisational quality, most sensible clues are turned into signs of cultures of violence and street risk. Remember

Danielito's secretive tone in the forest of Sorte, intended to avoid being detected by the National Guard and, presumably, arrested, tortured or shot. He is not unique in his improvisational qualities.

When malandro Ismael took over Juancito – a young car repairman – in a solitary shrine in the mountain of Sorte, the shadows of the trees and the placid sound of the water trickling down the creeks were temporarily overshadowed by an intense evocation of the everyday sensory geography of the shantytown of Las Mayas, where most of those present lived. After attempting to sell us the statues off the altar so he could get a drink, both his hands stiff as pistols, Ismael pulled out from his pocket an invisible 'list' of active malandros. Carefully looking between his empty hands, he confirmed to E.H. the death of his main culebra, nicknamed Canelón, who had killed one of his brothers.

Once in the spiritist shrines of the coastal city of Anare, Jesús Eloy, possessing Daniel, asked me to please stop taking pictures of him because he could not help but think that the 'click' of the camera was instead the unsettling 'click' of a gun with a silencer. He had heard it many times and it was no joke. On yet other occasions, he could only talk about the pictures I was taking as akin to the mug shots that were attached to his copious police record, his main bureaucratic link to formal society. Even when he had not been subjected to any police interrogation and photograph sessions since his death, he still carried the 'pose' with him, and jokingly faked it for me. Instead of drawing with talcum on the ground conventional healing symbols, he improvised a 'malandro banner' consisting of four fields: a smoking gun, a plant of marijuana, a *bazuco* cigarette and, to sum it all up, the Holy Trinity.

The malandra Marisa, possessing Indira on a different occasion at the same altars misinterpreted my nickname, 'Paco', as a reference to a police corps.³⁵ She immediately pulled out her machete to warn me of the proper distance I should keep. She later forecast the tragic death of an undisclosed friend of someone present in the ceremony and cried, pointing with her forefinger to her tears with insistence. Not everybody was happy with her presence. I was later asked by my friend Rubén, a young medium, to erase the fragment of videotape where I had recorded Marisa.³⁶ A few days later, with the same spiritist group, a malandro spirit who never disclosed his identity struggled to get out of a medium who turned out to be a member of the Metropolitan Police, in whose body he had landed by a dreadful mistake. To the collective singing of 'La cárcel', the malandro managed to escape his fleshy prison to the open laughter of all the present.

Spill over and back

As noted, malandros are the spirits that most frequently participate in the *over spilling of trance* beyond ceremonial settings. An incident that my young

friend Francisco underwent in the shantytown of El Valle while visiting a member of his family turned out to be a research breakthrough. While going up the hill, he ran into a group of youngsters and an argument broke out. A gun was eventually pointed at his head and fired, but it got stuck and he managed to escape. Had he been killed, no doubt he would have added to the statistics of presumed *malandros* murdered in the streets of Caracas. During the following weeks, a new event in Francisco's spiritist life was called to my attention by our mutual friend Roberto. 'We young people and men are having a tough time at this moment in the shantytowns', he told me. 'Listen to this.'

Francisco, who is a good medium, is now incorporating spirits without a good 'channelling'. Like, say, when he was talking with us here [on the terrace] the other day and out of the blue he started to smoke cigarettes, don't you remember? Tell me, when had you seen him smoking cigarettes before? Never in your life. He doesn't smoke. That's Freddy's craving, not his. Yeah, check this out, now he has Freddy's spirit leaning on him all the time. At times it is difficult to tell who is who. I don't know if you noticed that his right arm was stiff and drawn in, paralysed, when he was here talking with us. That is the place where Freddy was wounded once by the police. He feels protected by this [injury].

Francisco then found a job at an arms store, thanks to the experience he had acquired with weapons during his military service, and started to carry bullets in his pockets. This was not a random decision. Many youngsters in the shantytowns ask *malandro* spirits to provide them with such mystical protections against street shoot-outs. In the same logic, as Roberto and other spiritist friends told me, many policemen bless or bite the bullets in a cross before going into an operation, in order to overcome these invisible spiritist protections. Francisco was warned by friends of the tough luck that awaited him if he continued to carry ammunition and happened to run into the police. Yet his attitude in the streets continued to be unconcerned and defiant. He did not fear either the police or his *culebras*. When I left Venezuela after my main fieldwork stay, in July 1994, Francisco still carried a stiff left arm, smoked cigarettes, boasted about weapons and had his speech slightly slurred, *malandreado*. Then, on 25 December 1995, he was shot four times by his *culebras*. Although he was hospitalized in critical condition and underwent emergency surgery, he survived the attack. The fact that he was still alive after these incidents was, for him, a confirmation of the strength of the mystical shield supplied by Freddy.

There are plenty of circumstances where street violence may potentially be encountered in the shantytowns, and it is not always easy to predict how the *malandro* spirits will surface in specific situations. Yet, as happened with Francisco, it is common that *malandro* spirits come down on their young mediums, either partially or totally, in dancing parties, in the midst of a street conflict or during a jealous scene. Although trance entering into everyday life is not a phenomenon that is exclusive to *malandros*, with them it takes on a previously unknown dimension.

Do you know what happens with this kind of spirits? – Roberto insisted. When mediums drink or are relaxed, their mind is weaker and the malandros, always ready for a party, take advantage of it. You cannot put up a proper defence [to keep them out of your body]. Look, we have a friend, Chencho, who, whenever he goes to a celebration and starts dancing, all of a sudden, it is like ‘What’s up man?, malandro Miguelito is here with you all, *hermanos*.’ But this goes beyond parties. [Miguelito] might possess him anywhere. You know, it is amazing. The malandro displaces him from his own body again and again and starts to dance, smoke drugs, seduce the girls and stuff like that. And then he [Chencho] complains to us like, ‘*Gosh, buddy, all these guys at the party think that I am one malandro, because this spirit doesn’t leave me alone.*’

This is something they share with mainstream views on delinquency: malandros will not go away that easily. ‘*You cannot help but think that the malandro is in Chencho’s body longer than his own spirit*’, said a perplexed Roberto. For young spiritists, being possessed by malandros becomes just another notch in their continuous sliding along the fringes of social stigma. If we think of the processes of identity-making as a flux that only stops occasionally for tactical reasons (Hall, 1990: 44–6), *being* a malandro becomes a *situational identity*, a contingency that eventually enmeshes many men and youngsters from the barrios, either willingly or unwillingly, in the global routines of urban violence. Yet as a ‘sensory arena of counter-memory’ (Stoller, 1995: 34) and a *rehabilitation trail* for deceased malandros, the possessed body develops into a *critical* space of experience where mediums are able to redefine and control the dominant representations of the delinquent that are relentlessly inscribed in their bodies, actions, movements along the urban fabric, biographies, cultures and futures. Malandro spirits thus operate in the transitions between social violence, stigma and the everyday experience of their young mediums. Their potential for *corporeal dissent* is no doubt a key to their current popularity.

Yet in the case of Francisco, a young medium raised in a small village in the Venezuelan Andes who, in order to confront the culebras who were chasing him day after day needed to be more proficient in the interpersonal codes of street violence, his circumstantial approach to Freddy, that is, the partial adoption of his style of speech, his body language, his vital attitude, his prestige and his referential world of violence was also, beyond the realm of social identity and critique, an act of sheer survival.

Jesús Eloy Gonzalez, a late-night body crasher

In this section, I leave the reader alone with a revised passage from my field diary. The following took place on 4 March 1994 at a spiritist shrine in a cave close to the village of Agua Blanca, in Portuguesa. Well into the night only four of us were left inside. Daniel started to receive *spiritual flows* and announced that he was heading into a trance. He then faced the altar and

let go. It was the Indian *Cacique* Terepaima who came down first, and stayed for almost an hour.

Suddenly, Terepaima announced that he was leaving us. Then Jesús Eloy González came down. Daniel had already told me about this spirit. He was a malandro from a shantytown in 23 de Enero who was killed in 1982 by a culebra in a fight over a woman. He was one of Daniel's best friends. Ten years after the death of Jesús Eloy, Daniel had started to make petitions to Queen María Lionza and to his other main spirits so he could go into trance with the malandro. Daniel has turned out to be his only medium so far.

Jesús Eloy seemed completely stoned and, in a street-wise manner, started to joke about the circumstances of the possession. He was not supposed to be there, he had just sneaked in. There was another spirit waiting in line but, man, he just pushed that *chamarro* aside to squeeze his way in. Well, he had barely made it because there had been something very powerful, like a speeding bus, leaving Daniel's body (referring to Terepaima), that had almost run him over. '*Pana* [buddy]! It's kind of dangerous to be out there in the streets.' Now he was ready to go. 'Where is the party? What about the *jebas* [girls]? And what about smoking some bazuco?' Talking non-stop and wandering around the cave, he approached María, the only woman with us in the sanctuary at the time, unsuccessfully trying to get a quick date. Bobo left the cave and headed for our small bus to get a cigarette for him. Time passed and he did not come back. Jesús Eloy was insisting on some kind of smoke or else he would leave for good. Juan went out to look for Bobo.

He came back with grim news. There was something weird going on outside. There was a car pointing its lights at the bus, and a number of unknown people were walking around. Jesús Eloy answered that, incidentally, that was the reason why he had come down. These people were looking for trouble, they were out to rob us – or worse.³⁷ No sweat, he'd take care of it. In any case, he was already dead as one can be, we shouldn't fear for his life anymore. Still, he'd really appreciate a good *hierro* (shotgun) to straighten things up in a faster and more efficient way. We were all very nervous, but Jesús Eloy continued his non-stop chatter, unaffected. Suddenly, he was leading us out of the cave, crossing a small lagoon in rather good spirits.

Outside, the rest of our party (five others) had woken up. The night was very dark. Antonio kept pouring kerosene over the dying coals of our bonfire. In the strong wind, it rose like a tongue of fire, briefly illuminating our surroundings. Two or three unknown people were walking around our companions in a wide circle, and one more was talking to Antonio and Juan. As soon as he set foot outside, Jesús Eloy stole the show. He joined the small group where the visitor was questioning our friends and started to tease and confuse him. 'Man, we all belong to the same people. We shouldn't fear one another.' Our visitor was rather tense, and justified his companions walking around us in the darkness because – so he said – they didn't trust us a bit. After all, what were we doing so late at night in the middle of a solitary forest? He asked us how many people we were, to which Jesús Eloy answered that that there were many – still at least 20 people inside the cave. In fact, we were barely nine in all. Suddenly, Jesús Eloy looked around and, man, wasn't that the Caricuao³⁸ bus that he used to take? He jumped into the minibus and started hanging out its door, waving and shouting to other cars as if in Caracas' heavy traffic. Our visitor was astonished – same as me.

A little while later, it was Juan who got into the bus, and then Jesús Eloy told him that there was no need to reach for the shotgun (which we didn't have) because everything was under control. We were just a nice and happy party, let's have some fun, no? Finally, Juan informed our visitor that Daniel was not being quite 'himself', but, rather, a medium in trance with a malandro spirit. There was a whole change of attitude in the young man. He understood, he claimed . . .

After about an hour of bullshitting, Jesús Eloy told us that he was about to leave. He had an exciting party somewhere else and we were such a bore. And so three of us went back into the lagoon and the cave with him. There he warned us to be very careful. He deeply distrusted these people. They were up to something, but we were protected by the spirits. He hoped he had earned quite a bit of spiritual *light* that night. Not bad, huh? But now he was off and we had better prepare ourselves for what might happen. Then he left, singing 'La cárcel' and envisioning a truly wild party at his new destination, an apartment in the shantytown of 23 de Enero, leaving us to our cold, anxious, weary silence. . .

At first, when he came back from the trance, Daniel could not believe the story we told him. Still, he showed a glimmer of morbid humour and told me that now I had valuable proof that he was not feigning trance because he was a complete coward and would have never been able to deal with such a situation the way the spirit had done. On the other hand, he hoped I could now deepen my understanding of why malandro spirits are becoming so crucial to more and more spiritists.

Once we got out of the cave, we saw a group of people arguing by the car, which still had its lights pointing firmly at our little bus. We were nervous (Juan had pulled out a rusty *machete* from under a seat, the rest of us were gathering sticks and stones), but they decided to leave us alone and left without exchanging a word with us. We never knew who they were. Truly, Jesús Eloy had single-handedly dissolved a potentially dangerous situation. The rest of the night, we barely slept a wink. After this incident, every time Daniel was possessed with his malandro, Jesús Eloy, the latter never missed the opportunity to remind us of the minute details of his late-night heroism. 'That was a good story, my friend, that was cool!'

Life and death in the wounded space

Malandro spirits may mean different things to different people, or modulate their appearances according to circumstance. Yet they are patently ingrained in a broader social process deeply affecting Venezuela's social fabric. With their arrival, trance becomes a moment of osmosis between the bodies of the faithful and the textures of urban violence. These are evolving spaces of reciprocal fertilization which, in their corporeal richness, overflow hegemonic 'truths', breaking apart the bureaucratic stiffness of the official body counts, or the trivializing effect of the crime chronicles and political discourses. The everydayness, morality, ambiguity and biographical detail contained in the malandros cuts across the 'cold

bullet' criminalizing stereotypes circulating and being acted upon in state agencies, the mass media and civil society.

Malandro spirits are thus redeemed from an abstract, diffuse, interchangeable universe of terror. Story after story, possession after possession, they are relocated in concrete bodies, barrios and life stories. They re-encounter their own faces, names, families, social networks, emotions, idiosyncrasies and context. Yet the lived-in memory space offered by the narratives and bodily plots of the malandros in Venezuelan spiritism is not – cannot be – one of direct opposition to hegemonic forms of socially disruptive power and representation. In the 'fugitive' manner evoked by Steedly, it is more of a 'tactical' universe³⁹ organized around an undocile form of corporeality, where everyday forms of violence alternatively blur and come into focus as the strained, deeply ambiguous social experiences they are. Like everything else in spiritism, and in social trauma for that matter, malandro spirits resist interpretative closure.

This analysis of the crucial aspects of life in the shantytowns in terms of a wounded space does not intend to contribute to a 'pornography of violence' of the urban poor (Bourgois, 2001). It intends, rather, to provide a contextualized account of the predicament of the people living in the shantytowns by analysing one powerful bodily language in which social trauma is expressed in all its uncertainty. Venezuelan society is already saturated with words and images dwelling on the most sordid aspects of everyday violence. On the extreme of commercial sensationalism, violence is advertised from the flashy pages of remarkably explicit newspapers like *Crónica Policial* that assault the eyes of passers-by with horrifying wounds, dismembered bodies and dramatic stories of delinquency and passion from almost every newspaper stand, and particularly in the popular areas of the city. But tabloids and the popular gutter press are not the only vehicles for pornographies of violence. Politicians and the most respected middle-class and elite media also indulge in forms of representation that nourish sensationalism, indecency and simplification. Politicians and civil officers accomplish this through obscene demagoguery and melodramatic discourses that turn everyday violence into a deadly instrument of political power and influence. The mainstream press and TV accomplish this by force – cramming everyday violence into snapshot reporting, mug shots of young victims and presumed assassins, morgue body counts and stigmatizing caricatures of events for fast consumption. As a consequence, violence is routinized and domesticated, the analysis of its structural causes and the tragic life stories lingering behind are neglected, and further cycles of distrust, fear and moral panic are set in motion.

Postulating a way of life within a wounded space does not intend to suggest the existence of an insoluble or uniform state of *collective despair* among the Venezuelan poor. Beyond the deep social fractures and the collective and individual trauma caused by widespread violence, shantytowns are also vibrant social, economic and cultural milieus. They are social

spaces where tenderness, humour, hope and solidarity intermingle with everyday tragedy. As time goes on, and modes and perceptions of street violence – and the very cult of María Lionza – are transformed, other stories of malandro spirits will eventually emerge and find their way into the pantheon and the bodies of the mediums of María Lionza. Or maybe they will lose their current significance and popularity altogether, which, if the direct correspondence between spiritism and everyday life postulated in this paper is true, would indicate an encouraging turnaround in Venezuelan society. This is a question I posed to Daniel, who, like most Venezuelans, is tired of endemic violence, blood and mourning.

What is my prediction for the future? The ‘court’ of spirits that I envision coming strongly to the cult is the court of the *encantos* – the ‘enchanted’. They are mostly children, right? *Nenés*. . . . Maybe when you come back you’ll see all the mediums ‘working’ with spirits of babies and kids, playing around, you know, like the mischievous *Joseíto*, or many others. . . . I’ve been around for a few years, and I’ve seen fashions coming and going. . . . Because, you see, we are all tired of this, and all the current euphoria about the malandro spirits will eventually wither away . . .

Notes

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- 1 In the early 1990s, the theoretical tool-kit on ‘resistance’ and/or ‘the subaltern’ that was discussed in some academic quarters included the work of authors like Comaroff (1985), de Certeau (1984), Guha and Spivak (1988), Ong (1987), Scott (1986, 1990), Spivak (1985), E.P. Thompson (1971) and Willis (1990), among others.
- 2 Examples of these possession-based religious devotions in Latin America and the Caribbean – differently intertwined with Afroamerican, indigenous and European elements – are not difficult to come by, and the literature is abundant. Just consider the importance of Candomblé or Umbanda (Brazil), Santería (Cuba, Puerto Rico, New York), Obeah (Jamaica), Vodou (Haiti) or Gagá (Dominican Republic), among others.
- 3 See Desjarlais’ discussion of the difficult ‘cultural conversions’ between anthropologists and informants regarding the experience of trance (1992: 14–29).
- 4 As examples of the diverse literature on the relationships between possession

- and critique, see Apter (1992), Boddy (1989), Comaroff (1985), Kleinman and Kleinman (1994), Lewis (1971), Ong (1987), Steedly (1993), Stoller (1995) or Taussig's book on the cult of María Lionza (1997).
- 5 Quite a few of my informants told me that they were at first very suspicious of the 'reality' of trance until they experienced it in their own flesh. Some others were sure that their time of believing in spiritism would eventually fade. They are also accustomed to being accused of being fakers and/or ignorant, and expect a certain scepticism from newcomers.
 - 6 My use of video in some ceremonies in a 'cine-trance' disposition (see J. Rouch as interviewed in Fulchignoni, 1989) contributed to the exchange of roles during fieldwork (Ferrándiz, 1997–8). On a few occasions, pushed by some spiritists I knew well, I agreed to try possession in my own body, which I only achieved in a limited way.
 - 7 On the controversy over the historical development of the cult of María Lionza, see Barreto (1987, 1990), Clarac de Briceño (1970), Ferrándiz (1999a), García Gavidia (1987), Pollak-Eltz (1972). For a discussion of its plasticity as a social phenomenon, see Barreto (1994), Clarac de Briceño (1992), García Gavidia (1987).
 - 8 For results of this work, both in English and in Spanish, see Ferrándiz (1999a, 1999b, 2003).
 - 9 There is a related spiritist configuration, that of the 'Africans' and 'Vikings', that became extremely popular in the cult at the same time as the malandros and is also directly related to everyday violence in the shantytowns. The corporeality of the Africans and Vikings, in which the production of physical wounds and blood letting is paramount, is radically different to that of the malandros, however. For further analysis of these spirits, see Ferrándiz (1996, 1999a).
 - 10 For reports and analysis of *El Caracazo*, see Catalá (1989), Coronil (1997: 375–8), Coronil and Skurski (1991: 315–26), Ochoa Antich (1992), PROVEA (1992: 9–16).
 - 11 For the 'emergency' metaphors, see Scheper-Hughes (1992: 167–215) and Taussig (1992: 11–36). Academics share them with politicians and journalists.
 - 12 See, for instance, F. Coronil (1997), Tosca Hernández (2000), Tulio Hernández (1994).
 - 13 It is commonplace among critics of Venezuelan modernity to resort to metaphors such as 'malediction', 'bulimia', 'wreckage', 'perversion' or 'devil's excrement' to illustrate the disastrous impact of the oil economy on the economic, social, cultural, political fabric of the country. See, for example, Briceño León (1990), Coronil (1997), Izard (1986), Watts (1992).
 - 14 Violence in the shantytowns is increasingly reaching breathtaking dimensions. A relevant, by no means absolute, indicator is to be found in the so-called 'weekend deaths', resulting from assaults, gang fights and police interventions – *operativos* – in the shantytowns. In 1994, *El Nacional* estimated at 2000 the number of victims of street violence in Caracas during 1993 (25 June 1994) and the number of people killed in the Friday–Saturday periods averaged 40 (see Hernández, 2000). The situation has only become worse. Recent reports put at over 100 the number of persons killed in the streets on Venezuela in any given weekend ('Venezuela: ante la delincuencia, la "justicia popular"', *Proceso* 28 January 2001). On 26–28 January 2001, 101 murders were reported, 43 of them in Caracas and 58 in the rest of the country. See '101 víctimas', *El Nacional*, 30 January 2001.

- 15 See Coronil and Skurski (1991), De Freitas (1995), Pedrazzini and Sánchez (1992), Trigo (1992).
- 16 Scheper-Hughes has denounced the media representations of violence in the South African townships, where inhabitants are portrayed as 'senseless, wild, asocial, apolitical', and its victims/perpetrators as 'savages' and 'barbarians' addicted to violence and 'lost' to society (1995: 147–8).
- 17 For a riveting study of the construction of social stigma and the justification of violence in Caracas, in relation to the world of street children, see Márquez (1999).
- 18 'Fiscal no niega que exista plan de exterminio contra delinquentes', *EFE*, 12 January 2001. EFE also states that, in its latest report, PROVEA has denounced 116 summary executions by police forces in 1999. For earlier denunciations of a strategy of extermination of delinquents by agents of the state, see PROVEA (1992: 17).
- 19 In the late 1980s, these operations, originally 'extraordinary', became a permanent feature of the state's response to *criminal violence*. Their 'success' resided in the staging of 'massive arrests of presumed delinquents' in the shantytowns (see Hernández, 2000). In a recent interview, Tulio Hernández reminded us of the infamous Plan Union: in 1981, in barely three weeks, 20,000 people were arrested and mistreated in police operations. Only 42 turned out to be 'certified delinquents', that is, roughly 1 in 500. See 'El 27 de febrero no ha terminado de emerger', *El Nacional*, 24 February 2001.
- 20 '94 homicidios en todo el país', *El Nacional*, 19 September 2000; see Hernández (2000). Nonetheless, he defended the right of his men to protect themselves from criminal aggression and encouraged private citizens to do the same.
- 21 Bourdieu (1977: 191) distinguishes between 'overt' and 'symbolic' violence in the following terms:

... in short, overt (physical or economic) violence, or symbolic violence – censored, euphemized, i.e. unrecognizable, socially recognized violence. There is an intelligible relation – not a contradiction – between these two forms of violence, which coexist in the same social formation and sometimes in the same relationship.
- 22 'Wounded space' is a concept taken from Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster* (1986: 30). This evocative notion has also been used by Langer (1991: 69–76) to characterize the memory of the Holocaust in his extraordinary book *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*. Roberta Culbertson's (1995: 169–95) conversation and writing were also particularly inspiring.
- 23 The sanctification of 'anti-social' characters is hardly an exclusive feature of the cult of María Lionza. For other recent examples in Latin America, see the cases of the Colombian drug lord Pablo Escobar (*El Nacional*, 31 December 1993) or the *narcosantón* Jesús Valverde in Mexico (*San Francisco Chronicle*, 27 February 1996).
- 24 Clarac de Briceño mentions the widespread devotion to malandro Machera in the Venezuelan Andean region (1992: 153; 296–7).
- 25 *Culebra* literally means 'snake', and refers to a string of feuds awaiting revenge. In this context, it can imply either a person or situation that may eventually become violent.
- 26 On this point, see also the interesting work of Yolanda Salas, particularly her *Bolívar y la historia en la conciencia popular* (1987), and that of Renato Rosaldo (1989: 109–43).

- 27 Taussig aptly portrays the very *portales-altares* of María Lionza as wounds, always open, never a resolution (1997: 39).
- 28 What is put forward in this article is a summary of data collected from diverse informants, which is consistent with the most broadly accepted logic of the cult of María Lionza. Yet the cult is by no means univocal. It is obvious, or even indispensable, that alternative or contradictory visions coexist. For example, for the youngsters and men integrated in gangs, or imprisoned, to whom I had more limited access during fieldwork, malandro spirits do not necessarily have this same profile. For an analysis of the cult of María Lionza in jail, see Salas (1998: 20–37).
- 29 A *banco* is a ritual specialist responsible for the well-being of the mediums and the spirits during trance.
- 30 Generally marijuana, but at times also *bazuco* (crack). Usually, the cult members give them a cigarette, which the spirits *pretend* to smoke as a drug, sometimes inhaling through their nostrils. In any case, they frequently come down already high. A common complaint among the mediums is that they leave them *filtrados* (stoned) with the drugs they bring. I also heard unverified stories of *espíritus malandros* actually getting real marijuana in the ceremonies.
- 31 Composed by the famous popular musician Tabaco and performed in the 1960s by his group Sexteto Juventud.
- 32 For an example of the use of this song as an emblem of collective identity in an institutional setting (División de menores de la PTJ, Cohecito [minors' arrest center]) see Duque y Muñoz (1995: 69). The minor narrating the story collected by the authors identifies 'La cárcel' as the 'malandro hymn'.
- 33 Although I have not visited the place, Francisco, a medium of Freddy's, told me about the existence of a popular *capilla* (chapel) at the place where he was shot.
- 34 The spirits of the Indian *Caciques* have long included in their stereotypes of possession the tortures, lacerations, cuts and mutilations inflicted by the Spaniards during the conquest and colonial rule. For example, Tamanaco, who according to legend was brutally decapitated by a war dog named Amigo (friend), usually starts by fixing his head back on top of his shoulders upon possessing some of his mediums.
- 35 'Paco' is a popular denomination for 'policeman' in Spanish.
- 36 Like quite a few of the spiritists I worked with during my stay in Venezuela, Rubén was as involved as he could be on the methodological supervision of my research. On this occasion, his attitude was related to a long personal feud with the medium, 'a faker', and, by extension, with the 'not very clear' spirit of malandra Marisa. Rubén, who had invited me to the ceremony, finally agreed that I could keep the master if I did not include that particular footage in any of the 'audiovisual counter-gift' (Rouch, 1975: 100) tapes I used to give the spiritist groups after the ceremonies.
- 37 We were well aware of the stories of robberies and assaults in the *portales* of Agua Blanca, which we attributed to the snowballing of a couple of incidents, and had downplayed this when we were planning the trip. Unlike some areas in the mountain of Sorte, the Cueva de Don Toribio becomes deserted once the sun sets. Anyone staying overnight is easy prey.
- 38 A neighbourhood in Western Caracas named after an Indian *Cacique*, and famous for its large and complicated shantytowns.
- 39 In De Certeau's terms, that is, 'tactical' as a form of agency characterized by the absence of a proper place, of a global project and of a totalization of the opponent (1984: xvii–xx).

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