

## CHAPTER 8

# FLEXIBLE COSMOLOGY AND AN ONTOLOGY OF SIMULTANEITY



Two Gitano phrases seemed to carry extra importance for the Gitanos of el Rastro, in terms of how often I heard them during fieldwork, the variety of the situations they appeared in and their emotional intensity: *‘Lo que te da te llevas’* (‘You carry [with you] what you get’) and *‘Vivo con lo que Dios me da’* (‘I live with what God gives me’). These two phrases, together with others, such as *‘todo pasa’* (‘everything passes’) and *‘todo tiene su tiempo’* (‘everything has its time’), reflect, in my eyes, the Rastro Gitanos’ view of the cyclical nature of life’s opportunities and challenges: good and bad things will come and go; objects and experiences might last a lifetime but not necessarily generations; and one cannot achieve or suffer everything at the same time, as ‘there is a time for everything’. Taken together, these utterings and the Rastro Gitanos’ worldviews paint a picture of an unstable and highly changeable life that moves up and down as waves in terms of economic prosperity or failure and that involves feeling great uncertainty for the future and relatively little reflection on the past. It is in no way linear, nor is it circular or repetitive. Rather, it alternates between moments of eruption and periods of calm, moments of materialization and periods of dissolution (e.g. Chapter 3–6). Economically, the Gitanos of el Rastro must deal with fluctuating markets; politically, they navigate changing policies of segregation, assimilation and integration; religiously, they manage their altering faith and doubt, religious conduct or lack of such; socially, they have to cope with the varying facets of conflict and peace; and bodily, they must attend to issues of health that may be life-altering or merely temporary. In sum, all of this points towards a kind of *flexible* cosmology, reflective of not only a responsiveness towards shifting material circumstances but an invocation of Christian moral rhetoric and how life should be lived

'*a la manera Gitana*' ('the Gitano way'). In the following, I dwell on this 'flexible cosmology' and its broader implications for processes of meaning making in the ethnographic context.

As a prolongation of the material and spiritual circumstances of the concept just described, 'flexible cosmology' is equally descriptive of the Rastro Gitanos' particular practice of attributing meaning to objects and signs, persons, relations, situations and events in a seemingly *flexible* manner. This also implies a direct engagement with the very constitution of 'truths', 'realities' and 'knowledge'. More specifically, rather than 'freezing' objects, persons or processual phenomena as exact entities, I propose that the *comerciantes* at the market and the *creyentes* in *el culto* emphasize the potential of objects, persons and situations, and view life as the unfolding of these potentialities. Only through this unfolding of potentiality can someone or something obtain a (temporary) status of identity or reality.

Moreover, the flexible cosmology that I seek to address in this chapter is not to be understood as boundaryless, free-floating or random, rather it contains the dual nature of *improvisation*; a combined emphasis on structure and practice, convention and the break with convention, innovation and conservation, rigidity and flexibility. The dual nature of improvisation is further part of the Rastro Gitanos' 'ontology of simultaneity' in the context of *el culto*. In this chapter, however, I engage with several examples from outside the sphere of *el culto* from an auto-ethnographic perspective (e.g. Ellis 2004; Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011; Holman Jones 2005).

With an auto-ethnographic approach, the anthropologist seeks to describe and systematically analyse his or her personal experiences within the ethnographic field, in order to understand cultural experiences of the people he or she is studying. A focus on the situatedness and subjectiveness of the anthropologist is not new to ethnographic research. The postmodernist-inspired 'crisis of confidence' in social sciences in the 1980s serves as an important point of reference. Auto-ethnography can thus be seen as yet another self-reflective turn in anthropological research, with a particular focus on the 'epiphanies' experienced by the researcher in field (Bochner and Ellis 1992; Couser 1997), and an aesthetic and literary approach to the analysis and description of these epiphanies – within the research context (Ellis 2004; Pelias 2000; Moro 2006). So far, I have emphasized a phenomenological approach to the field of study. When I bring the issue of auto-ethnography up now it is because the preceding ethnographic examples do not reflect a phenomenological account. Broadly speaking, this thus implies a move from phenomenology and experientialism to hermeneutics and auto-ethnography. With that said, the auto-ethnographic account presented here is still phenomenological in the sense that it carries descriptions of my *own* experiences – bodily and otherwise – of the phenomenon

of Rastro Gitano ‘flexible cosmology’. Hence a complete cut with phenomenology is not the case.

## TWO HALF-TRUTHS

In my initial encounters with the Gitanos in Madrid, I leveraged – on occasion – two central half-truths with my Gitano companions; that is, I gave them the impression that I was married and that I was a Christian, as I believed that both statuses would be important for my position in church and among the Gitanos more generally. I was neither married nor Christian, but I had recently started a relationship with the love of my life, and where religion was concerned, I was certainly open to the reality of transcendental phenomena. Hence, I felt that, as self-representations, they were not too far from the truth. When people asked me, ‘Are you Christian?’ I would answer something like ‘Mmm ... in Norway we are Protestants’. However, once I developed more intimate friendships with some of the Gitanos, it became more difficult for me to maintain these dubious moral claims. Thus, I started replying ‘No’ to the same questions. This ‘No’ resulted in a tremendous increase in conversion pressure, scepticism and even hostility towards this, in their eyes, foreign, free-floating figure detached from all social ties and obligations (i.e. religion, family, husband and children).

With time, I came to better understand the Rastro Gitanos’ manner of relating to such statements and we developed a greater mutual understanding of their reality status; I got the impression that they understood why I had served them my half-truths and my closest friends even built on these ‘realities’ when they introduced me to other Gitanos in el Rastro: ‘Her mother is a Baptist. She has given her a communion Bible’; or ‘Yes, she is a Christian, but they do not believe in miracles where she comes from’; or ‘Well, she has not quite completed her journey towards God, but you should see how she “eats the Word” [*come la Palabra*], and her effort in church and her conduct is tremendous’; or ‘Yes, her husband [*marido*] is a very important professor at the university, a man of great character, a very good man in every manner’. In these introductory statements, there seemed to be no limit to the praise and glory I received, and this also extended to my ‘husband’ and family.

Although my initial methodological approach was of course fairly questionable, my use of half-truths enabled me to better understand the Rastro Gitanos’ own conceptualizations and constitutions of ‘truth’, involving various degrees of reality. They seemed to comprehend the ‘truths’ I had told about myself as ‘fit enough for purpose’, and my impression was that they recognized why I *needed* to be ‘married’ or ‘Christian’ in my initial

meetings with them. They perhaps even acknowledged that my ‘truths’ were attempts (albeit meagre ones) to live up to their moral standards and were thus offered as tokens of respect. Although I was unaware of it at the time, the fact that I presented such ‘truths’ may have actually demonstrated my competency in handling morally charged issues *a la manera Gitana*.

### KEEPING THE DOOR OPEN

As an improvisatory act, being open to the possibilities of the moment – by saying ‘yes’ to propositions and appointments even when you mean ‘no’ – means always ‘keeping the door open’ to what we might call ‘the realm of potentiality’ (Lorencova, Trnka and Tavel 2018: 202). During my fieldwork, I repeatedly experienced that there were Gitanos who were initially very open to meeting with me but later seemed unable to, had changed their mind or feigned complete ignorance about our appointment. For instance, every time I ate dinner at Manuel and Bobola’s house, they would invite me for dinner the following day. I always struggled with these continuous invitations, feeling that I was intruding on their family life. Thus, I developed a strategy of calling them about an hour before dinner, to check if the invitation still stood. They always seemed surprised to receive my call, in the manner of: ‘Why are you calling, we have already said that you should come!’, ‘Why are you calling, Bobola is sick, and Manuel has to work’, or simply, ‘Why are you calling?’ On all these occasions, I felt stupid, and it took me a long time to discern the logic underlying their communicative practice.

Similarly, when Gitano friends gave me the contact details for relatively high-standing people in the Gitano community whom I did not know, they would always respond positively to my requests to meet but would say that they were very busy at the moment and that I should call them back the following day or week to make an appointment. I would always be very excited about the prospect of these appointments, as they felt like they could be something of a breakthrough, thus, I would call them back only to receive the message: ‘Why are you calling?’ or ‘Do I know you?’ At times, angry wives would even claim that the man I was seeking did not exist.

As a final example of the practical logic of ‘keeping the door open’ to all possibilities, I will convey the story of my first encounter with it, when I experienced the puzzling predicament of having many appointments booked for me at the same time.

It is market day in el Rastro and, at 2 PM, Daniela’s provisional *bocadillo* (‘baguette’) bar is completely packed with customers. After an

hour or so, the situation calms down and, upon seeing me, Daniela takes off her apron and plastic gloves, drags me out of the bar and asks her husband to watch the counter for a few minutes while she introduces me to some people. 'I will present you to my father, my brother and then we will see', she says. She drags me into a small shop behind the bar – into what turns out to be a kitchen. I find myself facing a tall, balding man with big eyes and pale skin, wearing plastic gloves. He is making baguettes with Iberia ham to sell in his store. 'Paco, this is Marianne, a friend from work', Daniela says to her brother, and continues, 'she is studying "*Gitanos elitistas*" ['Gitano elites'] in el Rastro, and she would like to talk to you about various things'.

'Very good', her brother replies, claiming that he will be glad to talk to me and help me with whatever is necessary. We arrange to meet in his shop the following Sunday at 10:30 AM, before the hordes of customers begin to arrive.

'Now I will present you to my father', Daniela continues, as we enter the antique shop next door. An elderly man stands alone inside a dimly illuminated space filled with electrical items, secondhand radios and more modern CD players. 'Papa', says Daniela, before repeating what she had said to Paco. Her tone is mild, agreeable and polite. 'Very good', says Pedro (her father), answering that he would be glad to help me. We arrange to meet in his shop at 10:30 AM (!) the following Sunday. I am both grateful for his help and slightly anxious about how I will work out the two concurring appointments.

Leaving the shop, Daniela seems focused. 'Now you have a couple of people to start with. Little by little I will present you to more people, but little by little.' We pass a friend of Daniela's just outside her bar. She introduces me in the same manner as with her brother and father.

'Come here next Sunday at 10:30 AM' (!!), he says, 'and we will talk'.

'Perfect!' I reply, happy about the three appointments but even more bewildered as to how I will work out the '10:30 AM next Sunday' issue.

The following Sunday, I head for my three 10:30 AM appointments in el Rastro. Daniela's father, Pedro, greets me with a kiss on each cheek and smiles with his mouth and eyes. 'What can I do for you?' he asks, showing me inside. 'What do you want to talk about?' He looks at me with mild eyes. I relay to him my intentions, motivations and wishes.

He smiles, nods and says that Sundays are bad days to talk, but he is at the shop every day and would gladly talk to me any time.

'What about tomorrow?' I ask.

'No, tomorrow I am on a journey, but I will return in the middle of the week.' With this, I head off to talk to his son, Paco, next door. There, I meet Paco's teenage daughter, with her lips coloured 'Coca-Cola red' and her clothes in the same shade. She tells me that her father has gone out to buy tomatoes. When Paco returns with his tomatoes, he repeats his father's phrase that Sundays are not good days to meet but that we could make a new appointment for Wednesday.

Daniela's friend, the final man I am to meet on this Sunday at 10:30 AM, is nowhere to be found.

Ultimately, of my initial three appointments, I only managed to get Paco in conversation, although only for a couple of minutes. Daniela's friend lost interest in me, as did her father. Although the practice of 'keeping the door open' to all possibilities was confusing for a novice in the field such as myself, in this context it can be considered something of a socially produced virtue of being open to the possibilities of the present moment.



**Figure 8.1.** What about a fur or leather coat for winter? Photo by Sunniva Hammerås

At a theoretical level, this perspective requires the reality status of objects and phenomena – which such an openness creates – to be continuously adjusted in accordance with the ever-changing context and situation they are part of. In other words, it requires people to continuously and consciously engage in the creative process of ‘existential beginnings’ of the perceptual, objectifying and signifying kind (Csordas 1990, 1997; Merleau-Ponty 1962, 1964). Thus, as the example of my encounter with Daniela’s family shows, while a ‘yes’ can indeed mean ‘yes’, it can easily change to ‘no’ if circumstances change. For the *comerciantes* of el Rastro, this practice of engaging directly with the constitution of meaning, objects and signs in sales relations can be seen as a vital resource, a source of value, providing a bank of ‘infinite’ potential to draw from. Indeed, much of the work of these self-employed traders involves the constant creation of new possibilities and relaying the grounds for new opportunities to arise.

### FRAUDS AND FAKES

This process of remodelling and refashioning the meaning of sales wares could, from time to time, create some friction at the Rastro Sunday market. As in Jane Guyer’s (2004) examples from Nigeria, both customers and merchants are aware of the difference between frauds and fakes. In el Rastro, there is an abundance of Gucci bags and Tommy Hilfiger shirts. The grading of products as ‘original’ or ‘fake’ is not, however, necessarily based on *who* produced the items – a Gucci facility or a random Chinese mass-producing factory – in that respect, all Gucci and Tommy Hilfiger sold in el Rastro is ‘fake’. Rather, grading is based on the quality of the items. So, if the customer asks, ‘is this shirt original?’, the *comerciante* would confirm the shirt’s originality with reference to its quality and perhaps compare it to the bad quality fake shirts sold at the neighbouring stand. An ‘original’ Tommy Hilfiger shirt is thus sold at a higher price due to its great quality, than a ‘fake’, low quality Tommy Hilfiger shirt – although both shirts are produced at a random Chinese or Bangladesh factory. In this sense, most (returning) customers to el Rastro accept the ‘fake’ nature of the items sold. It is fraud and its non-transparent character that is ill-regarded.

For example, from time to time I observed Payo customers – old ladies – in el Rastro being quite aggressive and derogatory towards the Gitano *comerciantes*, accusing them of tricking customers and ‘shaping’ or ‘fixing’ their sales objects in deceitful ways. Even returning customers might say ‘you people, you always try to trick people like me’. The *comerciantes*, on their part, rightfully felt offended but normally responded in a calm and dismissive way, asking the aggressive customer why she would

say such a thing and perhaps why she kept coming back if she felt tricked, and would then ask them to leave if they did not stop harassing them.

This brings up the issue of lying and deceit, truth and falsehood. The following anecdotes from *el culto* illustrate well how the Rastro Gitanos thematize and operate with a seemingly clear divide between the two (lying and deceit), with the help of Christian moral and conduct.

At the culto session on Whit Sunday, the pastor says to the congregation: 'How many eyes do we have?'

'Two!' shouts the gathering.

'How many ears do we have?'

'Two!' they respond.

'What about hands?'

'Two!' they reply.

'How many tongues do we have?'

'One!' they rejoice.

'Yes, if I had more, I would have inflamed the world [referring to the Holy Spirit]!' The congregation laughs roarily. The pastor laughs too, saying that he has one tongue and that he speaks with the same tongue to his wife as he does to everyone else. 'One tongue!' He holds a finger in the air and continues, 'You should talk with one tongue. Don't be inconsistent. Do not say one thing today and another tomorrow. Neither should we sin today and leave goodness for tomorrow. One tongue!' He concludes that he is fully open to criticism because he always tells the truth, and when he tells the truth, no criticism can affect him.

Although accentuating the Christian virtue of truth telling in an educational manner, the above anecdote highlights the immanently dual nature of the Rastro Gitanos' practices: they depend on performative artistry and improvisatory skills at the market and in church, and as we have seen, on occasions this artistry may resemble something closer to fraud – a notion picked up on by some Payos eager to have their discriminatory prejudices confirmed.

The next example illustrates the dynamics and difference between lying and conceptual artistry as accentuated by a group of female *creyentes*:



A small group of women is gathered for a culto session. Bobola takes my hand and tells the other women that my mother is 'more or less' a Baptist, that we do not believe in miracles but that my mother has given me her Bible. The other women are content with this explanation. 'So, your mother is Christian. That is why you are here.' I sit in silence next to Bobola, grateful for her palatable and somewhat elevated description of my Christian belief and belonging. When el culto comes to an end and the church door is about to be locked, Bobola exclaims that the key to the door is hers. The others disagree and the discussion goes on for some time. In the end, it emerges that the key does not belong to her after all. Bobola laughingly admits that she has known this the whole time, even though she claimed otherwise. The other women tease her, saying: 'Hey, we are in God's house now. You can't lie here!' Bobola laughs warmly and surrenders: 'Yes it's true.'

The example shows the dual nature of Bobola's speech. Bobola intentionally exaggerated my Christian background to encourage my acceptance among the other women, yet later, her direct lie was not accepted by the others, as it did not serve anyone well (although it was met with great humour). A few days later, there was another culto, and the topic of the evening was *conducto* ('conduct'). The pastor told the story of the milkman, *el lechero*:

*El lechero* used to sell his milk as the cleanest and best milk in the world, even though he used to water the milk he was selling. But then he converted to Christianity. 'Do you not water the milk anymore?' a man asked him.

'No', said the milkman. 'Since I converted, I have lived with *buen conducto* ['good conduct'].'

As preached from the pulpit, a Christian life is about having *buen conducto*, in contrast to *soberbio* ('self-centeredness', 'egocentrism', 'arrogance'), *envidia* ('envy') and engaging in *critica* ('criticism') and *engaño* ('fraud'). Although this Christian rhetoric says little about the *creyentes'* actual practice, the combined Christian and bourgeois quality of *buen conducto* was nevertheless emphasized repeatedly by my Gitano companions, as a central virtue for the *creyentes'* spiritual and religious work, both inside and outside church. However, it stands in interesting and somewhat paradoxical relation to other more flexible dimensions of ways of dealing with the reality status of objects, situations and relations – as former examples have sought to illustrate.

To sum up then, although deceitful acts and fraud may of course occur in a market setting as that of el Rastro, it was not the *modus operandi* of the Rastro Gitanos as I observed it, and it is not reflective of my analytical interest. Generally speaking, I am interested in what the examples of the *comerciantes*' engagement with the 'existential beginnings' of their sales objects (e.g. Csordas 1990; Merleau-Ponty 1962, 1964) can tell us about a general human tendency to constantly engage in a social-creative process with a 'reality' – for instance the reality of an object – none of us can entirely encompass – that is, a reality that requires conceptual or material adjustment to serve our needs and wants (e.g. Peirce 1992, 1998; Hardwick and Cook 1977). All of us engage in such processes all the time – this is the very core of social constructivism (and ontological pluralism) – and the examples from the Rastro Gitano *comerciantes* at the market, highlight, in my view, such endeavours.

Hence, with David Graeber (2015: 3), my argument is that 'one of the qualities of this imaginative process is that it always tends to linger on the border between artistry and simple fraud'. While some of the Rastro *comerciantes*' actions resemble deceit and fraud, others can be described more as imaginative artistry, something that made both young and old customers feel like they had struck a great bargain on the perfect item. People do not necessarily visit el Rastro to make sensible financial transactions, but to experience the ambience and allure of the Sunday market. For instance, when I bought a guitar from an old toothless Gitano, the man sang a song for me and told me the most heartbreaking story of the guitar's former owner. He also interrogated me about my guitar skills and forced me to play a few tunes for him before he would allow me to buy it. The rest of the day, the guitar in hand, I received a lot of attention from other *comerciantes*, who showed great satisfaction with my purchase, asking me whom I bought it from and at what price. In this way, a purchase in el Rastro is a personal experience and a meeting between people. Many customers come back every Sunday and develop close relationships with the *comerciantes*. Moreover, in my experience, the more personal these performative acts and encounters become, the less fraud and the more artistry they carry.

In any social encounter, none of us tell the exact same story about ourselves and our surroundings to every person we meet; we adjust, highlight and emphasize different aspects of our identities and backgrounds to create bridges between ourselves and our fellow human beings (e.g. Goffman 1973). For the *comerciantes* of el Rastro, this general human tendency is a central part of their success as middleman traders; they will utilize different aspects of their personal stories – for instance, being of Andalusian heritage, descending from a horse dealer or flamenco family, having Pentecostal beliefs or being interested in old English literature – to build relationships with customers and make sales.



**Figure 8.2.** A salesman testing my newly bought guitar in el Rastro. Photo by Sunniva Hammerås



**Figure 8.3.** Something has caught the interest of a group of female customers in el Rastro. Photo by Sunniva Hammerås

## TRUTH AND SIGHT

Related to the topic of fake items, fraud and deceit are notions concerning the apparent interdependence of truth and sight. In his examination of the link between truth and sight, Maurice Bloch highlights a seemingly 'well-established European connection between seeing and truth which ... [is] often associated with evidence ... The English word "evidence" is based on the Latin verb *videre*: to see' (Bloch 2008: 22). 'Seeing is believing', said Roland Penrose (1937, in Ruffa 2013). Similarly, Bloch writes (2008: 22): 'Stephen Tyler (1984) informs us that the association of truth and sight recurs in all Indo-European languages.' He also claims that ancient Thucydides presumably said that 'in contrast to that based on hearsay, the only true history is that based on the authority of sight (*autopsia*); of the two ways of knowing, through the eye and the ear, only the former gives us a true picture, because accounts based on memory distort or lie'.

Bloch (2008), in close conversation with his Malagasy interlocutors, concludes that (verbal) language enables lying and deceit; as his interlocutors explain: 'social life is a matter of dealing with speaking individuals who can hide the truth in order to further their own ends and trick you' (ibid.: 26). Thus, to the Malagasy, language is associated with lying, and sight is associated with truth. 'What they seem to be saying', writes Bloch, 'is that: via language, truth is vitiated by Machiavellian social intentionality. Sight, on the other hand ... does not involve the dangerous imagined intentionality projected by the source of knowledge' (ibid.).

Evolutionary theory has long made this point. According to Rappaport (1999: 11), language is afflicted with two immanent 'problems': 'the lie' and 'the alternative'. While many animal species engage in deceit, only humans are understood to tell lies. From this, Roy Rappaport suggests that an evolutionary conclusion drawn from all this leads to a connection between the ability to lie and the emergence of religion. Language, he claims, can be used to transcend the concrete, to escape from the present and to approach a foreseeable future. When it is used in this way:

it finally becomes free to search for such worlds parallel to the actual as those of 'the might have been', 'the should be', 'the never will', 'the may always be'. It can, then, explore the realms of the desirable, the moral, the proper, the possible, the fortuitous, the imaginary, the general, and their negatives. (ibid.: 5)

In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, as referred to by Matthew Engelke (2008: 4), the first definition of evidence is 'the quality or condition of being evident; clearness, evidentness'. Engelke follows Bloch's interest in the association between sight and truth as a prerequisite for the creation of evidence.

For the *creyentes*, visions, dreams, prophecies and miracles are signs or small evidence of God's being and presence. Furthermore, with their spiritual gaze and cultic habitus, they seem to be on a constant lookout for such evidential signs of divine existence, perceptually ready to induce the world with otherworldly and metaphysical meaningfulness and connectivity. However, while most of these phenomena observed by the *creyentes* are based on experiences made through a religiously inspired gaze, the *creyentes* equally depend on witnesses and a medium that can communicate these visual occurrences of Godly existence *verbally*. Hence, although the link between sight and truth is inherent in the *creyentes*' visions, dreams and miracles, these nevertheless depend on verbal language and the attribution of meaning to be made socially relevant (glossolalia representing a significant exception). Hence, they also become vulnerable to criticism regarding their authenticity and 'trueness'.

### CERTUM AND VERUM

Lies, as (social) alternatives, are often presented as the 'problems' or 'evils' of truth by the 'establishment' (Buber 1952, in Rappaport 1999) because they carry the potential to create unrest and disorder. In my fieldwork, reflecting their view of the relation between social alternatives and the establishment, the Payos I met in Madrid depicted the Gitanos of el Rastro as 'lying and deceiving and as a source of social disorder'; the latter was exemplified by their presumed littering in the streets of el Rastro, their vulgar way of speaking and gesticulating, and their movement through public space in 'hordes'. In short, they are depicted as uncivilized, uncultured and 'animal-like'. Logically, for social disorder to exist, there must be a pre-existing hegemonic order that enough people (a majority or a governing elite) have agreed upon through convention, tradition or ideological political positioning. Hence, we can see how the Payos' negative depiction of the Gitanos of el Rastro might rest on an idea about their otherness as problematic and potentially harmful, disordering and evil.

From this, we can easily see how the dialectics between socio-symbolic order and disorder relate to the relationship between social alternatives and hegemonic orders. However, these dialectics also concern questions of a cosmological and ontological nature that have to do with the Rastro Gitanos' engagement with 'existential beginnings', of the perceptual, objectifying and signifying kind (Csordas 1990, 1997; Merleau-Ponty 1962, 1964). To explain this, I will take a small detour via the ontological difference between symbolic and physical reality.

Our knowledge about that which we might call ‘symbolic reality’ is essentially different from our knowledge about ‘physical reality’ (Rappaport 1999). While we need to *discover* the physical world in order to understand it, our insight into the symbolic world does not stem from a similar process of discovery. Rather, symbolic ‘realities’ are actively constructed, established and maintained. I have previously argued that we need to see socio-symbolic knowledge as vital to the economic strategies of the *comerciantes* of el Rastro, as it allows them to ‘read’ and interpret the fluctuating – socially constructed – needs and demands of their customers and society, at any given time.

Giambattista Vico articulated a similar divide between physical and symbolic knowledge as early as in 1699, establishing the now well-known epistemological principle that a thing can only be fully known and understood by the consciousness that created it (Rappaport 1999). As I have sought to show in previous chapters, much of the practices analysed so far have exemplified the Rastro Gitanos’ concern and engagement with the creation of their own existence in relation to (and in the midst of) larger, Payo society. Terminologically, Vico differentiated between truths that can be obtained using Cartesian methods (applicable to physical reality) and truths about human nature, which cannot be obtained through the same methods. The first category of truths he called *certum* (‘the certain’), underscoring that such truths can be agreed upon with a degree of certainty. Vico’s second category of truths pertains to a deeper kind of knowledge – knowledge about causes and motives, gained through direct experience, and knowledge about what it means to be (for example) rich or poor, woman or man. He called this latter kind of knowledge *verum* (‘the true’). According to Rappaport (*ibid.*), Vico’s principle makes both an epistemological and an ontological claim, as it not only embraces human omniscience regarding symbolic elements, emphasizing the role of humans in creating the meaning dimension of the world (e.g. Merleau-Ponty 1962, 1964), but it also underscores human omnipotence in this regard, emphasizing the power of humans to manipulate and manage these creations of meaning (*ibid.*). How then do we connect the dialectics between socio-symbolic order and disorder with the idea about the Rastro Gitanos’ engagement with existential beginnings?

*Verum*, ‘the lie’ and religious practices and systems of belief are social fabrications that open up for many truths and many worlds. For instance, in the context of *el culto*, the pastor aims at presenting or producing the Word – that is, the ‘true’ Word (i.e. the Bible). This true Word then becomes an essential foundation and reference point for a variety of culturally significant symbols, conventions and traditions for the *creyentes*. Furthermore, we can see ritual as generative of the Word (Rappaport 1999), implying that ritual

practice is the main productive force behind the cultural reproduction and symbolic re-creation of the Word. Returning to socio-symbolic order and disorder then, I believe there is a parallel between the dialectics of order/disorder (e.g. Blake 1790; Lévi-Strauss [1955] 1961; Turner 1969) and those of *certum* ('the certain') and *verum* ('the true') (e.g. Vico 1699 in Rappaport 1999). Hence, I believe it is futile to argue that the ritual practice of the *creyentes* in *el culto* – their combined efforts of opening up and letting go – carries the potential to integrate or disintegrate taken-for-granted social and conceptual values, ideas and notions, and as a consequence produce order and disorder in the space between *certum* ('the certain') and *verum* ('the true'), extending even outside the ritual context through their flexible cosmology and ontological simultaneity, and in a *communitas*-like fashion, which I will get back to later on.

### TRUTH VERSUS REALITY

In a somewhat different yet associated discussion, Roy Bhaskar reminds us that 'facts' and 'truths' are not synonymous with 'reality'. 'A fact is a statement *about* reality, which has the quality of being true', he says (cited in Graeber 2015: 27). As such, we can say that fact and lie, truth and untruth have varying *statuses* of reality but the same *degree* of realness. In a similar manner, we can say that both material and immaterial phenomena are real but of a potentially differing status. Simply put, an idea of a chair, a physical chair, a photograph of a chair and a painting of a chair are all equally real, though their constitution – and reality status – nevertheless differs.

It is perhaps more valuable thus to argue that each constitution of reality holds a different position in a 'reality hierarchy'. This would hold true, for instance, of a chair considered through the lens of physicality versus aesthetics versus utility. I would therefore argue that while I cannot exclude that the meaning-making practices I observed among the *comerciantes* in *el Rastro* at times might have included aspects of lying and deceit, the analytical point I seek to make is that it stretches beyond these phenomena in the direction of a 'differential ontology' (Røyrvik and Brodersen 2012), where multiple levels of reality operate simultaneously in a differential hierarchy of reality and an 'ontology of simultaneity'. For instance, for the people involved, a 10.30 AM Sunday morning appointment might carry different meanings and ontological content. Similarly, an antique dealer at the Sunday market will sell a gold vase by emphasizing differing aspects of its appearance, origin, quality, materiality or sentimental value, depending on whether the customer is an expert in ancient gold valuables or a well-paid banker looking for a birthday present for his wife. My question then becomes, is it



these same mechanisms of a differentiated ontology (ibid.) that enable the Gitanos of el Rastro to accept God and to integrate *el propósito de Dios* in their lives in the all-encompassing way they do? Certainly, as one pastor put it: ‘God walks around in el Rastro and the Gitanos know him from the time that they are very small.’ I will return to this question shortly.

Graeber (2015) reminds us that one of the most important things shared by all humans is that we must all come to terms with everything we cannot know. This, I would say, is where Bourdieu’s (1977) battle over representation lies, as well as the engagement involved in meaning making and ‘existential beginnings’ beyond the realm of observable ‘certainties’, amongst the Gitanos of el Rastro. Graeber (2015: 24) further defines reality ‘as precisely that which we can never know completely; which will never be entirely encompassed in our theoretical descriptions’. In my view, this is also where magic, religion, selling – and academic education and exploration – find their power and potential. As exemplified in Chapters 5–7 by the Rastro Gitanos’ creative cultic engagement with tensional oppositions, I understand their ontological reflections and flexible cosmology to exist in this space between observable ‘certainties’ and unobservable ‘truths’, in a discourse about life on earth, ‘before’ and ‘now’, the heavenly afterlife and human existence as simultaneously sacred and profane, social and economic, characterized conceptually and socially by an ‘ontology of simultaneity’ (see below).

## IDENTITY AND DIFFERENCE

To propel the exploration of cosmological and ontological notions further, the following section addresses the Rastro Gitanos’ creation of a particular social world through the dialectics between identity and difference. Critical to the Rastro Gitanos’ identity making processes is the consideration that the identity of any given situation, thing or person is dependent on a web of continuously changing relations. Thus, the idea is that a Gitano’s level of ‘Gypsiness’ will vary in accordance with the people in his or her network of relations. If the Gitano is a *comerciante* who conducts a lot of business with *Payos de la alta sociedad* (‘high society Payos’) and does so *a la manera Gitana* (‘the Gitano way’), his or her status will increase accordingly in *el pueblo Gitano*. If, in contrast, the Gitano takes on wage labour, does not participate in *el culto*, does not prioritize family over their own pleasure and raises his or her daughters as independent women and sons as feminists, he or she will surely arouse suspicion from fellow Gitanos, who will likely question his or her Gypsiness. However, one also has to be *born* Gitano. Hence, as we have seen, Gitano identity (and difference) exists in

the dialectics between potential (limitation) and performance. Similarly, the identity (and reality status) of a sales object will change according to the customer at hand. Interestingly then, in both examples, 'identity' seems to hold a secondary position, while 'difference' – or the constitutive relations that produce identity – holds a primary position. This coincides with Merleau-Ponty's (1962) theorizations about the social world as a creative product of our perception, objectification and the conceptualization of the 'pre-objective'.

At the same time, as the market setting of el Rastro vividly highlights, on a daily basis, the *comerciantes* deal with a multitude of sales objects of varying values and kinds. These objects are certainly concrete – antique vases, picture frames, silk scarves and plastic 'who-knows-whats', and by mere materiality they certainly bring limitations to the way in which the *comerciantes* can conceptually and socially shape them. Hence, the potentiality of the sales situation – for both customer and merchant – exists where knowledge of the material, concrete, visual and tactile properties of the object end and the symbolic qualities begin; in Vico's terms, where *certum* ends and *verum* begins. As with religion or magic, the *comerciantes*' power and potential lie in that which we cannot know – the space beyond certain knowledge – in this case, where the customer's knowledge ends. By making use of this power, I argue, the *comerciantes* engage creatively and continuously with the reality status of objects and phenomena in terms of context, situation and relation.

## POTENTIAL

With both phenomenological and auto-ethnographic descriptions and theoretical support, I have thus far sought to substantiate the understanding of a certain kind of ontological perspective that emphasizes the *potential* of things, persons and phenomena, and a view of life as an unfolding and actualization of this potential. The way talent is referred to amongst Gitanos reflects such a perspective. For example, Bobola once told the story of her 'beautiful uncle' marrying 'an ugly lady'. 'Such a waste of *talent*' was her firm verdict, implying that he could have used his beauty (talent) to attract someone far better and therefore have gained more in terms of honour, respect, joy and identity. Another example is how the Gitanos of el Rastro place special emphasis on talent at the birth of a child. On such occasions, someone close to the family with a particular talent that the family wishes the baby to receive performs the first cutting of the newborn's nails, in the belief that – through this ritual – the talent will be transferred (as potential).



**Figure 8.4.** Eager Madridian customers looking for a good buy in the secondhand section. Photo by Sunniva Hammerås

Again, I often heard Gitanos in el Rastro saying something like: ‘Every person needs to find his own path, every person has his talents, and his way of living’, implying that those who discover their talents and follow their own path will not only be happy but also prosper. Talent in this context, can be understood as skills and emphasis is put on developing one’s skills in order to find a good way of living *a la manera Gitana* and according to one’s inner true self. Relating to such ideas, the pastor often preached about talent, saying: ‘We are all born with one, two, three, four, five talents, and we need to put our talents in the hands of God because God multiplies.’<sup>1</sup> As I interpret it, in the context of el Rastro, God multiplies talent by strengthening it and enabling its success, either in religious, social or financial terms. The Rastro Gitanos’ evangelical understanding of their history as God’s chosen people also emphasizes talent by reaffirming distinct kinship lines (i.e. *raíces*; ‘roots’), which they connect with morality, talent and ability. This imagined past is full of potential, including the potential for prosperity. In *el culto* and the market, as well as in formal and social gatherings, talents are prayed for and played out as a vital aspect of what it means to be Gitano and to live *a la manera Gitana*. Interestingly, these examples point in the direction of a culturally defined prosperity gospel, where ‘talent’ (attributes and skills) and not money is understood as the most vital and stable currency to place in the hands of God for Him to multiply, and also to put to play in social, religious and economic life.

## ALTERITY AND ACTUALIZATION

Building on Victor Turner’s theorizations about liminality, *communitas*, structure and anti-structure (1969, 1974), Lorencova and colleagues (2018) propose that rituals and everyday life represent two distinct ‘realities’; ‘transcendental reality’ and ‘profane reality’. Ritual, in Kapferer’s (2004) words can similarly be described as a ‘virtual reality’. The following sections elaborate on these substantiations of Turner’s theories (1969, 1974) and their relevance for the productive force of *el culto* for the social life of the Gitanos of el Rastro.

Sociality in the context of the Gitanos of el Rastro can be analytically separated into three main arenas: *el culto*, the market and social life outside of these two more formal arenas. In my view, with respect to ‘modes of reality’, the religious sphere stands out fundamentally from the economic and social arenas. Somewhat categorically, while the latter two could be characterized by a profane mode of reality, we can say that the ritual sphere is characterized by a ‘transcendental’ or ‘transcending reality’ (Lorencova, Trnka and Tavel 2018) – or, with Kapferer (2004), a ‘virtual reality’. According to

Lorencova and colleagues (2018), the alterity experienced in everyday life is distinct from that experienced in certain religious rituals. Only through the latter do we gain access to what we might call a transcendental mode of reality. A main issue for Lorencova and colleagues is that the ritual operates as a source of 'reality potentials'. While these potentials can be actualized through ritual, they are simultaneously intrinsically connected to everyday life and reality. Thus, the transcendental nature of ritual and profane reality alternate, as the following example from a female-only prayer session is meant to illustrate.

Rocita, a 30-year-old Gitana, suddenly says: 'I just had a very strong vision that I would like to share with you. I am in a courtroom, a large one, and there is a trial. And then suddenly the large doors at the end of the room open and a man comes in. He has long brown hair, and he wears a white robe. Oh ... I am shaking. Look at my hands, I am shaking. He comes in with his arms unfolded. "This is my court", he says and walks up to the front, "and you are all my children". And yes. That was the vision. Oh my God, I cannot stop shaking. I am really nervous. It was very strong. It has affected me a lot because I think we are in a time where the final trial is about to come, and with all the troubles lately with the men in the congregation and in *el pueblo* [the community], I think we must be careful because I think it was God I saw, and God has the final word. And I really think the final trial is about to come, and you know who God punishes first, his children, his faithful, us, because if he punished the non-Christians first, we would only say that they got punished because of that. No, he will punish us first of all.'

In this example, we see how problems within *el pueblo Gitano* are translated into a drama of cosmic and existential proportion.

Alterity can be accelerated through ritual – especially those rituals in which the boundaries and categories that otherwise mark people's everyday lives and perceptions of time and space are dissolved. Transcendental reality tends to distort, turn and twist, and even cease our experience of time and space. Lorencova and colleagues (ibid.: 202) call this realm of distorted time and space 'the realm of potentiality'. This realm includes a priori possibilities and potentials, which, through ritual, might be actualized. In my fieldwork, I frequently observed the *creyentes'* perceptions and experiences of time and space as they unfolded in *el culto*.

The pastor exclaims from the pulpit: 'I know that God is with us here tonight, Hallelujah. God is together with us. We cannot see God as I

can see you. God is like a good perfume. God is the best perfume in the world. You cannot see the perfume, you only notice it, you sense it, feel it, smell it. God is like the best fragrance that exists. I also believe that there are angels with us here tonight. I believe so, ahhhh ... I don't know it, but I believe, I believe, I believe, I believe. I don't see them, but I believe they are here.' The congregation responds with a big 'AMEN!' and there is additional buzzing in the dark: '*Es verdad ... es verdad ... es verdad ...*' ['It's true ... It's true ... It's true ...'].

On other occasions, the pastor would say things like: 'God is here. This is not something I just say because I must. God is here with us tonight. Hallelujah'; or 'The Israelites await a visible Jesus, a visible miracle, a visible return. We don't. That is not what we wait for. We wait for an invisible return. Jesus crosses the laws of time and space. He can walk through shut doors, "santa iglesia" (holy church), Jesus is with us here today!'

In addition to referring to sacred crossings of the natural laws of time and space that enable divine presence on earth, it seems like the pastor and the *creyentes* also perceptively alternate between materialization and distortions of time and space in their vacillations between light and darkness, representing profane and sacred space-time, respectively (as explained in Chapters 5–7). In *el culto*, the transcendental mode of reality, which involves the transgression of self, others, time and space, seems easier to reach in darkness, when visual sight is turned inward and replaced by *vision*, and when the music and rhythms fill ritual bodies, transforming them from several singular bodies into one synchronized and intersubjective cultic body. Like a spontaneous 'communitas' (Turner 1969), the cultic method of achieving individual trance and transgression relies on the collective – that is, the intersubjective dynamics and emotional interference that occurs amongst them during the rite.

It is certainly true that the *creyentes* are present at *el culto* in 'flesh and blood', so to speak; however, at the same time, during a rite they enter a parallel, spiritual mode characterized by non-locality. This dual existence is equally manifested in the *creyentes*' contrasting expressions '*vivir en el espíritu*' ('to live in the spirit') and '*vivir en la carne*' ('to live in the flesh'), a simultaneous moral claim and descriptive reality for life both inside and outside church. For the *creyentes*, their everyday existence on earth is accompanied by divine powers; God, Jesus and *el Espíritu Santo* are felt and believed to be present, as are Satan, angels and demons. During the ritual practice of *el culto*, both the church and the *creyentes*' physical bodies become spaces for the non-material dimension of life to be accentuated and strengthened – that is, life in the spirit rather than life in the flesh. Intellectually though, I would argue that the Rastro Gitanos make no clear

distinction between their everyday mode of reality and their transcendental mode of reality (as experienced in *el culto*), which I propose is partly explained by the half-sacred, half-profane inner embodied space of their ‘cultic habitus’. Rather, the *creyentes* seem to switch between these modes (structure/anti-structure) or inner dimensions (spiritual/material) in an automated and seemingly tacit manner, making it possible for them to quickly leave one mode for the other.

### THE LOGIC OF A THIRD POSITION

In our everyday lives, we constantly bump into empirically observable actualizations – that is, conceptual or material entities that we act on. According to Trnka and Lorencova (2016), these actualizations cannot stand in direct opposition to each other, telling different stories about the same phenomenon. When working with differences, our brains prevent us from accepting that something is ‘A’ and ‘not A’ at the same time. However, within certain ritual settings, we can experience simultaneous potentials in the process of becoming actualized; something can be and not be at the same time. Although this is a somewhat complicated affair to put into words, I will try to in the following section.

With the empirical material presented thus far, I have sought to show that the *creyentes* engage with, work on, unite and elevate opposite positions and phenomena – dualities and dichotomies – to produce a categorical ‘third position’ of simultaneous existence. For example, in Chapters 5–7, I explored how joy and pain, attraction and repulsion, light and darkness exist simultaneously in *el culto* – not merged into a tentative middle ground (e.g. black + white = grey) but simultaneously existing as frictional and creative opposites (e.g. black + white = black-white). The dependence of each *creyente* on an actively engaged cultic collective – and the transgression of this *creyente* against this collective – in order to achieve the sufficient spiritual energy to bring forth states of ecstatic trance is also an example of this ‘third position’ logic. Similarly, as explored in Chapter 6, I take the explicit engagement with light and darkness during *el culto* to underscore a double movement between life and death, whereby life seems to emerge from death, light from darkness, continuation from change, creation from destruction. Ultimately, I argue, it is the very creative friction between these poles that opens up the cultic ‘realm of potentiality’ (e.g. Lorencova, Trnka and Tavel 2018: 202).

Another example of the third position logic is found in the meeting of the two cultural-spiritual logics of *el Espíritu Santo* (the descended spirit) and *el duende* (the creative principle of an ‘ascended daimon’), which creates new

cultural-spiritual expressions and manifestations within the cultic realm. Here, *el Espíritu Santo* represents the light, heavenly and sacred; the creative principle akin to that of *el duende* represents the dark, earthly and profane. But in *el culto*, both are needed and united to achieve a third position of simultaneity and creativity.

Moreover, as elaborated in Chapters 5–7, the *creyentes*' body, soul, instinct and intellect are equally subject to this process of unification and elevation into a third position that integrates these mechanically disintegrated entities. I further argue that in the liminal space of *el culto* there is an exquisite interchange between preparation and improvisation, rationality and emotionality, control and release, and the conscious and the unconscious. Moreover, in its manifestation of 'in-betweenness' – or simultaneity – *el culto* unites ideas of 'home' (*el pueblo Gitano*) and 'the world' (*el mundo de los Payos*), confirming the idea of the diasporic status of the Gitano collective (i.e. 'communitas') while simultaneously producing a heavy divide between 'us in here' and 'them out there' (*el mundo afuera*).

I believe that the *creyentes*' cultic engagement with categories and oppositions is neither coincidental nor just for fun. Rather, I see their epistemological constructions and conceptualizations as rooted in a highly controlled practice of ontological and cosmological proportions – which, in the end, relates to the dual nature of their existence as strangers (e.g. Simmel 1908) in society. Hence, based on the empirical and theoretical resources presented thus far, I consider *el culto* a ritual that actualizes or accentuates – to varying degrees – boundaries, categories and ideas of time and space that differ from those found in the mundane world, giving the *creyentes* access to a larger spectrum of reality potentials.

Through ritual actualizations then, potentials are given form and identity in time and space, and in some instances, one can argue that the *creyentes*' actualizations in *el culto* challenge those found outside the cultic context. Examples of this would include the visions received by the female congregants on Good Friday (as described above), as well as instances of glossolalia and prophetic dreams. This argument is given further support by the Rastro Gitanos' firm belief that faith and faith-based action are the most important virtues for a *creyente* to possess. Such virtues are made concrete through the many Biblical stories preached during *el culto*, in which 'by faith' Noah built his Ark, 'by faith' the aging Sarah gave birth to Isaac, 'by faith' Moses opened the sea to let his people pass, 'by faith' Abraham prepared to sacrifice his son, and so on and so forth. During my fieldwork, '*Tengo fe*' ('I have faith') was a steady mantra of Rastro Gitanos in all kinds of situations, representing a strengthening and a divine elevation of their ability to achieve and succeed in a particular domain.



In analytical terms then, for the Gitanos of el Rastro, their ritually produced transcendental alterity affects the alterity of their everyday life by disintegrating (mundane) boundaries, concepts and categories and giving them new form and effect, even outside the ritual context. In addition, I would argue that the very *experience* of disintegration itself, brings forth similar changes in practice in the *creyentes'* everyday dealings with boundaries, categories and concepts. Conclusively, one can argue that, among people who engage deeply and frequently in rituals like that of *el culto* – that is, people with extensive experience with transcendental modes of reality – the everyday mode of reality too may be coloured by disintegration and a processual understanding of objects, phenomena and persons. In short, my argument is that the Rastro Gitanos take their disintegrative experiences in *el culto*, as manifested and incorporated in their cultic habitus, with them to other life arenas, such as the market or other social arenas – in turn, shaping their engagement with the ‘existential beginnings’ of ‘truths’, ‘realities’, ‘facts’ and ‘knowledge’.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS: TRANSFORMATION IS, IN FACT, POSSIBLE

Early on in this chapter, I presented the two ‘truths’ that I told people about myself at the beginning of my fieldwork – statements of a dubious ontological and moral character claiming that I was married and a Christian. When I did in fact get engaged towards the end of my fieldwork and communicated this happy news to my Gitano friends (engagement is considered a major event in a young Gitana’s life), I only received positive responses, even though the news revealed my initial lie. Only one person showed some resentment, and that was *la pastora* (‘the pastor’s wife’). She seemed to strongly endorse the ‘thou shalt not lie’ Christian teaching, and she did not consider my revelation socially acceptable. However, people’s general reaction to my news seemed to suggest that the inherent potential of my earlier statement (‘I am married’) was simply waiting for my actualization, which, in the eyes of most of my acquaintances, I had finally achieved.

As for my Christian faith, as mentioned in Chapter 5, my final appearance at church, after a year spent in el Rastro and many nights spent in *el culto*, ended with my highly emotional speech from the pulpit and one of the pastors laying a hand on my head to bless me. I was exhausted from severe illness and at the same time, the crowd was wild with enthusiasm. In their eyes, I had finally become the proper Christian that I had claimed to be in the beginning; thus, again, it was as if the potential of my initial statement had been fulfilled.

In this chapter, I have explored how the products of the Rastro Gitanos' intense participation in *el culto* relate to their broader cosmological and ontological thinking, even outside the church walls. I have connected this relation to their cultic experiences with miracles, their speaking in tongues, God's presence, the disintegration of boundaries, categories and concepts, the crumbling of time and space, the conventional dimension of social causality, and the incommensurable simultaneity of contrasting objects, identities, experiences and phenomena. I have argued that the *creyentes'* cultic transgressions of reality provide concrete, personal and collective experiences, implying that such transgressions and transformations are, in fact, possible. Within such a framework, change is possible, potential can be realized, and the power to actualize such potential lies in the *creyentes'* own hands rather than being given a priori by some external power. Thus, in this perspective, everything between heaven and earth, so to speak – that being a sales object, Christian faith or a meal – are temporary actualization of potential. The implication of all this is that, in their social meetings, the Gitanos of el Rastro leave room to engage directly and creatively in constituting those aspects of the world that lie beyond our knowledge – that is, in the 'realm of potentiality' (e.g. Lorencova, Trnka and Tavel 2018: 202), the 'pre-objective' (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 1964) or the 'virtual' (Bialecki 2012; Kapferer 2004).

## NOTE

1. *'Todos tenemos un talento, uno, dos, tres, cuatro o cinco talentos ... ponetelos en los manos de Dios, ponga tu talento en el mano de Dios y Dios lo multiplica. Dios multiplica tu talento.'*