



ARTICLE

Food-for-words

Sacrificial counterpoint and oracular articulatory in Cuba

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By critically engaging with anthropological theories on sacrifice and religious “mediation,” this article offers a doubly indigenous ethnographic theory of sacrifice and much beyond. Using material on Afro-Cuban divination and Fernando Ortiz’s notion of “counterpoint,” it goes beyond dominant scholarly understandings of sacrifice as a dialectical mediation between the “sacred” and the “profane,” and an act of substitution and annihilation. Rather, it offers an account of sacrifice as part of a much wider praxis and field wherein it serves, among many other offerings, materials and sensibilities, as a *counterpoint* and crossroads of exchange. The outcome is a dynamic transformation of a *point of view* into a “path” that is guided and forged through the ignition and further cultivation of *oracular articulatory*.

Keywords: Afro-Cuban religion, counterpoint, divination, perspective, sacrifice, mediation

Every sacrifice involves a divinatory component
—(Valeri 1985: 42). [And vice versa, I would add]

Because the victim is distinct from the sacrificer and the god, it separates them while uniting them
—(Hubert and Mauss [1964] 1981: 100).

The sacrifice of sacrifice

What if sacrifice, as part of a wider praxis of offerings, facilitated a crossroads and assemblage of a clash of opposites, not as they mediated each other? What if these opposites, in their non-dialectical and non-hierarchical contrasts, created “counterpoints” (mainly between identification and differentiation in the present ethnography) that generated the conditions for a flow of various articulations? How would sacrifice as such, in and out of all its ethnographic singularity, be able to provide a critical articulation of the culturally and scholarly established view on it? What if the “sacred” was neither a distant nor proximate to the “profane” subjectivity but an (in)articulate “point of view,” hungry to be fed with that

kind of food that would fuel a whole path of “articulatory”? An oracular and inspirational one!

Just as with points of view, articulatory does not refer simply to images or words. It involves perceptual, affective, intellectual and physical positionings that harness biographical “paths” (*caminos*) as they cross each other as points of departure from deviations and stagnations. Thus, “food” and “words” are analytic and metaphoric shortcuts of a broader field that this paper is an account of. Sacrifice, in its catalyst condition of offering is, too, a point of departure and not an end in and of itself.

In a recent article, Joel Robbins (2017) argues that classic theories of sacrifice anticipated current debates in the anthropology of religion and “mediation,” led by people like Birgit Meyer, Matthew Engelke, and Webb





Keane. Theories advanced by scholars such as Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss ([1964] 1981) or Luc de Heusch (1985) emphasize that it is “about both disjunction and conjunction . . . The mediator keeps the sacred and the profane apart even while facilitating their contact” (Robbins 2017: 472). Valerio Valeri (1985: 48) qualifies sacrifice as a kind of “transgression” which brings about “the mixture of identification and distance” between the human and the divine. Here lies both a contribution of such theories and a critique.

The contribution is the dynamism which is offered through sacrifice. Between the perils of radical identification, proximity and immanence of the profane with the sacred, and radical differentiation, distance and transcendence, sacrifice seems to be a vital mediator: “This procedure consists in establishing a means of communication between the sacred and the profane worlds through the mediation of a victim, that is, of a thing that in the course of the ceremony is destroyed” (Hubert and Mauss [1964] 1981: 97). The “destruction” of the sacrificial victim is part and parcel of the relationality between distinct “entities” (the divine and the human, in these theories); it foments their exchange, keeping their differences yet bringing them together.

The critique, that runs throughout the paper, is that some notions are taken for granted, suggesting a “universalism” of sacrifice that can be ethnographically contested (cf. Mayblin and Course 2014). Normally taken for granted are, firstly, the distinction between the sacred and the profane and, secondly, the notion that sacrifice is an act of substitution and (death-as-)annihilation, yet both problematic elements carry a dialectical weight that elides the full co-presence and reciprocity of sacrifice itself. Sacrifice, then, is itself “sacrificed,” in the annihilatory sense. A critical approach to sacrifice, I argue, can offer an equally critical view to “mediation,” religious or otherwise.

My ethnographic experience of Afro-Cuban religiosity and divination has been characterized by an apparently problematic status of sacrifice. What is “problematic” and, thus, anthropologically interesting about Afro-Cuban sacrifice is its *radical mundanity*: it happens all too often; it is theorized by adepts all too seldom; and it lacks the arguably Euro-American and Christian, dramatic connotations. No matter how intense and visceral animal sacrifice may be in the Afro-Cuban religious milieu, this is consummated in the act and does not acquire a magnified archetypal uniqueness and existential demanding. The analytical void left by such lack of ar-

chetypal uniqueness (such as that of Christ sacrificing himself for humanity) and existential demands (humanity, in its turn, sacrificing itself individually, offering its whole life; whether to this Christian archetypal uniqueness or to more secularized goals, such as the nation-state) is ethnographically filled with a more operational (not always functional) function, wildly proliferating, as a tropical jungle does, and on a flatter dimension, as it were. This “mundane” element is accompanied by the fact that sacrifice is part of a larger whole rather than playing the role of a whole as, ideologically or analytically, the Euro-American and Christian tradition has so much accustomed us. So, this paper both is and is not about sacrifice. It is not about sacrifice *as we know it* and it is about sacrifice, but of a different *kind*. Sacrifice is an indigenous term (*sacrificio*), although it often alternates with words like “offering” (*ofrenda*) or “food” (*comida*), which is not limited at all to the killing of animals but extends to a really ample variety of “objects” offered to the material assemblages of an equally ample number of entities. Afro-Cuban sacrifice cannot be seen in isolation to such assemblages.

This “operational” role of Afro-Cuban sacrifice makes it the potentializer (the ignition and combustion fuel, as I call it) of such larger whole and here lies its particularity and significance; hence, and as reflected in the title, its adjectival position. The paper is about sacrifice as long as this gives rise to this larger whole, one of “counterpoint” and, by extension, “oracular articulatory” (and, by further extension, its blocking too, as we shall see). *Sacrifice is the nodal point of the transformation of a “point of view” into “articulatory” by means of “counterpoint.”* Counterpoint is the horizontal coexistence, the crossroads, of opposites and their creative outcomes, in both their continuities and transformations: neither a matter of faithful reproduction or complete annihilation, nor of their mediation.

In Afro-Cuban religious experience “food” is assembled in order to be ritually consumed in expectations of a more favorable alignment of “the beyond,” an integral part of which is the flow of oracular articulatory. As we are dealing with a highly complex and prolific supernatural cosmos of deities and spirits of the dead, a polytheistic multitude, all such entities are said to “eat” (*comen*) and to be continually in need of food. These entities, through their human mediums and diviners, also “speak” (*hablan*). Oracular articulatory is produced in order to show, as well as direct and administer, the need for “food” which, in its turn, fuels “words.” A vicious (voracious



and vociferous) circle of sacrificial food and oracular articulation is thereby created wherein humans and other-than-humans are mutually and inextricably implicated as both producers and consumers of words and food. More than just a hunger for food, this is a hunger for words!

Magnetic fields of oracular articulation: Crossed paths of departure

The following discussion explores religious and oracular experiences with the somewhat counterintuitive choice not to begin with already-known traditions and the entities that populate them. I wish to highlight dimensions usually ignored, not only in presentations of Afro-Cuban religiosity, but more generally in the anthropological literature. Even if people have previous familiarity with a religious tradition, specific biographical events and encounters will usually bring them closer to it than mere *a priori* or “hereditary” attachment. Even Cubans who were brought up within an Afro-Cuban religious milieu often highlighted the chain of events that made up a complex puzzle in which their religious life was “born” and not mechanically inherited (I use the verb “born” because it also alludes to the fact that initiations in Afro-Cuban religious traditions, such as Ocha/Ifá, are framed as “births”). My approach also suggests ways of understanding how people engage with distinct but intercommunicating religious traditions, because they all form part of an intricate network of “independent [but not unrelated] ‘sovereignities of fate’” (Ochoa 2010: 10).

Partaking in a whole paradigm shift in the social sciences, emphasis is put on the dynamic aspects of religious traditions. This is reflected in contemporary scholarship on Afro-Cuban religiosity and similar phenomena, with scholars drawing mileage from their “dialogical” (Wirtz 2016) and “motile” (Holbraad 2012) dimensions, often highlighting their “plasticity” (Espíritu Santo 2016: 88), even “electric” (Beliso-De Jesús 2015) quality, whether this is affective, discursive, intellectual, or perceptual: traditions indeed, but creative versions (see Espíritu Santo and Panagiotopoulos 2015) incorporating slow but constant “cooking” (Palmié 2013) and profound “inspirations” (Ochoa 2010: esp. pp. 8–10).

In close dialogue with such dimensions are the more theoretical preoccupations of the paper which draws inspiration from the work of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and what could be condensed under the label of “per-

spectivism.” I do not mean to transpose Amerindian “perspectivism” to the analysis of Afro-Cuban *oracular articulation* but, rather, selectively extract from it and be inspired by two principal premises: firstly, the proposition that the *point of view creates the subject* and, secondly, the central role of exchange (see Viveiros de Castro 2004). Comparison rather than strict reproduction also applies to the usage of these premises. Just as reflected by the ethnography itself, these “inspirational” theoretical considerations are treated as motivations in which both identifications and differentiations are at stake. A vivid exchange of perspectives takes place whose protagonists are not necessarily “ordinary” humans. In the same vein as de Castro’s perspectivism, “extraordinary” perspectives (*the point of view*) create “extraordinary” entities (*the subject*) and not the reverse. Unlike Amerindian perspectivism, though, what is “extraordinary” about a perspective(-cum-subject) is not necessarily either a radical (ontological) difference or a point of punctual revelation but a matter of a much more extended and reciprocal alterity. Sacrifice becomes part of a general and contrapuntal ignition process connected with these perspectives and their exchange, rather than just focusing on the distinction and mediation between the “sacred” and the “profane,” as it has been traditionally framed (see last section). This is instantiated by the ethnographic notion of crossing “paths” (*caminos*). It is through this path-harnessing and crossings that the potentiality of a “point of view” is actualized to become a fully-fledged *articulation*. The passage from one to the other is not automatic or granted but has to be achieved precisely through “sacrificial counterpoint;” hence its ethnographic and analytic significance. What does this crossing involve? In order to answer that, I offer ethnographic depth to what I find as yet underdeveloped in the Afro-Cuban religious literature: this is the oracular significance of such phenomena to all the various existing traditions and the Cuban society, without focusing on just one of them. This is mostly accounted for in this section, while the subsequent sections show how this is achieved through “sacrificial counterpoint.” The last section provides a meta-ethnographic (and, even, meta-theoretical, as one of the reviewers suggested) reflection of the significance of “sacrificial counterpoint” as related to articulation.

It is October 2006, soon after I and my partner, Angela, arrived in Havana for the start of my PhD fieldwork on Afro-Cuban religiosity. After a hot, humid afternoon, we decide to take a stroll in our neighborhood



in Vedado, a formerly well-off residential area near the center of Havana that stretches along its north-western coastline. We are accompanied by a recent acquaintance of ours, a Mexican woman studying medicine, who shows us around Vedado's wide streets of tropical vegetation and beautiful, rundown, colonial-style buildings; eventually, we stop to rest in a big square. Here, our paths cross that of a middle-aged man whose lazy pace comes to a halt in front of us. He looks directly at our friend and in a very gentle but also self-assured manner says, "We are complete strangers; please excuse my intrusiveness, but I have to tell you that you suffer from a gynaecological problem in your ovaries, which might create future complications in your attempts to get pregnant." Taking a tiny sealed bag out of his pocket he adds, "Keep this always with you except when you are menstruating. This is important to remember, don't ever have contact with it during the days when you have your period." Our friend, after overcoming her surprise, tearfully thanks the man and we continue on our way. She admits to us that she does indeed have the gynaecological problems to which the stranger alluded, and she puts the small gift into her pocket. All of us have long since left Cuba. Three years later, we learned from our Mexican friend that she had finally managed to get pregnant with twins but, unfortunately, suffered a miscarriage.

This is how spontaneously an oracular utterance might be articulated and also how intense such an experience can be, to the point of tears: the result of raising extremely intimate matters among not so intimate people, perhaps overwhelming the recipient with a sense of nostalgia or bareness, revealing an unexpectedly penetrating perspective. The phenomenon is loosely invoked by the popular Afro-Cuban expression: *Pa' que tu me llamas si no me conoces?* ("Why do you call me if you don't know me?"), which, strictly speaking, refers to Afro-Cuban deities in the ceremonial act of invoking them to "descend." But it could be taken to depict more broadly the sudden intimacy created among not so intimate persons, human and other-than-human. This spontaneity, intensity, and sudden (almost intrusive) intimacy are a great part of the attraction of oracular utterances and how they are received in the most private or public of spaces, and throughout the laziest or busiest of hours of the magical yet modern-day city of Havana. Past the language barrier, the touristic insulation of a Caribbean beach and the mojito-scented bars of the big hotels, beneath the apparently encompassing presence of the Revolution, one is faced with a myriad "mouths," willingly

awaiting the opportunity to spell out their oracular words. What is sociologically interesting, especially given the relatively rigid and unidimensional speech monopoly of the Revolutionary leaders, is that there are also myriad "ears" willing to listen. What is anthropologically intriguing is that both "mouths" and "ears" come into multiple dialogues within a very complex, underground, yet popular network of Afro-Cuban religiosity.

One does not have to be an initiate or an active member of such a network to encounter it, as it is widespread throughout the city and, though lacking formal public temples or a centralized institutional authority (or maybe exactly because of this), it has a subtle but powerful grip on Cuban society. Events like the one just described can be one-off experiences which, although intensely lived in the moment, do not develop much. They remain, so to speak, at the initial level of "points of view." Nonetheless, even for the many Cubans (and foreigners) who do not undergo full initiation, the multiple and decentralized network from which oracular articulation emanates may become a powerful magnetic field with its own laws of attraction (and repulsion).

Most of those I have encountered who have made the oracular network a significant point of reference describe their first experiences—mostly dealing with specific and very personal issues—as intermittent, accidental, and not widely shared in their familiar, social, or professional circles; they were also imbued with miraculous coincidences and revelations that prompted curiosity. A seemingly accidental crossing of paths resulting in a significant oracular pronouncement is only part of (sometimes an introduction to) an underground world comprising a multiplicity of divination-emitting sources without organized or proactive proselytizing intentions, waiting patiently to be "heard." An intermediate instance between spontaneous and premeditated encounters is to be found at the public (meaning, open to non-initiates) ceremonies that take place within the context of Afro-Cuban religiosity, the majority of them in private houses. A solemn utterance might be received, but communication is usually more elaborate and not necessarily from a single source. Alternatively, and amidst wild drumming and dance, a common outcome may be spirit possession which usually becomes a collective divination event in which the possessed person circulates among those present making references to their personal life circumstances.

Whatever the form in which it is experienced, Havana hosts an extended, underground, multivocal oracular net-



work. This creates a point of attraction, which simply lies there to be heard if one wishes; once this happens, however, a curious magnetism is created. Oracular words are often accompanied by materials, so as to potentialize a more extensive and ideally favorable path of relationality between the person and the emerging points of view. In the case of our Mexican friend, the utterance was followed by the sealed bag. As the level of communication remained at that of a point of view, the offering too remained at this minimal level of acquisition and interaction, with the incitement to carry it always except when in menstruation; menstruating blood, perhaps, working at the opposite direction of sacrificial one.

An initial crossing of paths with an oracular utterance might create a path of multiple crossings, that is, create a point of departure from a previously perceived stagnant or deviated life-course; a *camino* that makes divination a significant point of reference and action. This signifies the passage from a point of view into *articulacy*. People will seek out and visit a *santero*, a *babalawo*, an *espiritista*, a *palero* or, more generally, an *adivino* (“diviner”), an *oraculo* (“oracle”), *una persona de larga vista* (“a person of far sight”), or a *brujo* (“witch”)—all common terms used by Cubans. People seeking a one-to-one consultation with a diviner may find one easily, as they are diffused across practically all the neighborhoods of Havana, although there are larger concentrations in the most popular locations.

The decision to seek divination already signifies a less stagnant path, because it mobilizes the seeker in physical, geographical, emotional, intellectual, and practical terms. In other words, it socializes the person (not excluding the anti-social elements condensed under the banner of *brujería* or “witchcraft”) by retrieving and adopting oracular points of view through this prolific network.

Oracular points of view may thus become nodal points of reference wherein notions and experiences of “directed motion” are harnessed (see Holbraad 2012) out of a perceived sense of stagnation and deviation. The term *oracular articulacy* signifies the intimate link between the verbal articulateness of these perspectives with a more general articulation of motion or, at least, its incitement. Rather than an unconditional attachment to religious traditions or “belief” in the existence of the “speaking” entities and the “sanctity” of their mediums-diviners, large numbers of the population are simply confronted with points of view which refer to their personal lives. As much as the terms “magnetic fields” and “crossed

paths” may allude to points of rest, what I ethnographically substantiate here is that they are better understood as *points of departure*, at least potentially.

The case of Alfonso illustrates how oracular articulacy may become a crossing point of departure, although not automatically. Here is where offerings, as part of a more general material assemblage, play their crucial role. As we shall shortly see, a golden chain plays such role, being included in the activation of sacrificial counterpoints, that is, the ignition of contrasts that put paths into articulating motion. When he was in his mid-twenties, Alfonso was in a house where an event took place which he had not previously experienced. Ten people had gathered in the living-room so as to conduct a “spiritist” ceremony. He joined them with mixed feelings of curiosity and skepticism, as he describes it, and mechanically followed the various steps as best as he could. After “cleansing” preliminaries and collective chanting, there was silence.

Their silence was broken by one of those present turning towards Alfonso, who was caught off guard, and telling him that a prison sentence was imminent for something he had already committed, but that his amicable personality would prove helpful in overcoming obstacles, even in prison. This aspect of his character, according to the medium, stemmed from an intimate link Alfonso had with the spirit of a Cuban man who had lived in early twentieth-century Havana. He, too, had possessed a very cheerful personality but his *guapería* (pimp-like, petty-criminal, street-wise behavior) led him into a series of troubles, culminating in an untimely death. Before Alfonso could recompose himself, a woman took the lead and said that the spirit used to wear a gold chain and urged Alfonso to do likewise, adding that “the religion” (*la religión*, signifying Afro-Cuban religiosity in general) would also prove a positive, critical crossroads in Alfonso’s *camino*.

Soon after the event, Alfonso was arrested and indeed ended up behind bars, where he spent a total of ten months. His stay in prison was hard, as Alfonso describes it, but his friendly character helped him create a lot of bonds. Some of those he met had similar “spiritist” abilities, even confirming things already articulated, such as his link to the spirit of the twentieth-century Cuban. This aroused his dormant curiosity and he decided he too would wear a gold chain, like the spirit. After his release, he was led to the house of a *santero*, a priest of the Ocha or Santería tradition, with whom he had a consultation and learned that his life was in great peril, due to a possible fatal quarrel. The Ocha oracle indicated the



need for full initiation under the tutelary guidance of the *oricha* Changó, a deity also popularly identified with *guapería*. Alfonso explains that the “confirmed truth” of the spiritist ceremony (the jail prophecy, his character analysis, and its repetition by others while in prison) meant that he also took the Ocha oracle’s pronouncements seriously. The transformation of a point of view into a path of articulation was now well under way.

For the full success of the operation, it was deemed by the *santero* that Alfonso should also “develop” (*desarrollar*) his attachment to the spirit of the twentieth-century Cuban of whom he had been told. “As I understand it, developing my spirit mainly protected me from my own impulses to get into fights; while ‘making santo’ [being initiated into Ocha] prevented more broadly all those factors and people that could lead me into a fight.” Alfonso adds, “My initiation was not just to save my life. It gave me a sort of map, a guide not only to how not to lose it, but also how to live it.” This refers to the set of divinatory pronouncements that accompanies initiations, which, in their turn, are always accompanied by sacrifice and offerings and which are meant to reveal general tendencies in one’s life, strengths and weaknesses, significant acquaintances, and observance of taboos, among other information. An oracular pronouncement at his initiation made reference to the beneficial importance of vision, which Alfonso interpreted as referring to photography, something he had always enjoyed but never taken up systematically. After the oracular hint, he decided to do so and a hidden talent surfaced. He strongly identifies a broader redirection of his life-course, a profound “rehabilitation process” (adopting a post-prison view), illustrated not only by his taking up photography but also by the path, and its various crossroads, forged for him through Afro-Cuban religiosity and, significantly, oracular pronouncements. In that sense, rather than questions of dogma, doxa, strict ritual observance, pious religiosity, or ethereal divine entities, what predominates in Alfonso’s articulation is the significance, the intricate interweaving (to produce a “path”) and the “biographization”—to coin a term—of all these perspectives-cum-experiences. This is where the “magnetism” of *oracular articulation* lies. Numerous are the testimonies of my interlocutors who, rather than adopting *aprioristic* discourses of “belief,” “morality,” and “community belonging” (three of the more recurrent factors understood to solidify religious experience), express a profound sense of combined attraction and external forces drawing them close to this polyphonic field of oracular articulation.

The following section focuses on how articulation is generated through “sacrificial counterpoints.”

The ignition of oracular articulation: Sacrificial counterpoints

The grip Afro-Cuban religiosity has on Cuban society—not necessarily as a faithful, continuous, and open kind of praxis, but more as a lurking potentiality that may draw people to it—lies in its offer of an ample oracular field, the “truth” of whose various pronouncements is usually evidenced in the prolonged laying down of a path with often interconnected crossroads that serve as ignition points. These crossroads provide a sort of “map,” as Alfonso put it. They are reference points, not just for their reflexive or predictive quality, but also for their ability to compel into motion (exemplified by Alfonso’s choice of photography as a career), block it (such as a fight), or “reveal” life’s broad tendencies. As this path multiplies and intensifies as its nodes of articulation “cross,” a certain kind of solidification takes place, the creation of condensed centers of oracular emission which are generative of articulation itself. Such centers are a complex combination and link of perceptual, affective, interpretative, and material elements, and here is where sacrificial offerings are included.

This means that a *point of view* cannot be treated as a merely punctual revelation that “lives” for an instant and then “dies.” Oracular perspectives are suggestive of a much greater spatially and temporally extensive potentiality, of a more ample personhood or subjectivity, if you like: “The point of view creates the subject” (Viveiros de Castro 2004: 467), to recall. Perhaps he obfuscates the derivativeness of the relation out of a need to dispel the reverse “Western” obfuscation that it is the subject that creates the point of view, but I wish to follow the formulation as a point of inspiration rather than dogmatically—exactly as my Cuban friends follow oracular utterances—and demonstrate, in its ethnographic and analytical force, the reciprocal relation between the point of view and the subject (and the object).

A punctual oracular utterance, a point of view, like the one offered to our Mexican friend, may remain as such, no matter its impact on the spot. When utterances start to become part of one’s “path,” however, their degree of condensation, so to speak, also increases. The human transmitter is perceived as the mouthpiece, the “medium” of another kind of source. The various people



whom Alfonso met and who offered him oracular pronouncements, did so in the presence of a spirit of a dead person, perceived as belonging to Alfonso, who was the ultimate origin of the utterances. Such perceptual experiences are solidified under the tradition of Espiritismo Cruzado (“Crossed Spiritism”; see Espirito Santo 2015). Equally, through the Ocha oracle (a set of cowrie shells, called *dilogún*), the *oricha* deities are said to “speak,” exactly as they do when they possess their adepts in festive ceremonies. The importance of divination is exemplified by the existence of a relatively autonomous cult of divination *par excellence*, that of Ifá, with the *oricha* Orula as its principal mouthpiece and the *babalawos* his diviners (see Holbraad 2012). The tradition of Palo Monte also has its oracles, the epicenter being a receptacle (often an iron cauldron called *prenda* or *nganga*) containing the “materialized” spirits of the dead (*nfumbi*) and deities (*mpungos*), entities which are meant to guide, either by way of material oracles or spirit possession, the oracular articulatory of the *paleros* (see Ochoa 2010).

One could delve into the ethnography of the human mediators—diviners and mediums—of all these entities and their traditions. Spirits of the dead appear to *espiritistas* in the senses (especially vision and hearing) and the mind, transmitting both direct and indirect messages. For instance, in Alfonso’s case, the imminence of prison was a direct message transmitted from his spirit to the mediums present in the ceremony; the gold chain was an image perceived by the latter and was consequently translated as a message for Alfonso to follow suit. The oracles of Ocha and Ifá consist of the employment of consecrated objects which are meant to draw, out of a vast totality, the specific oracular signs (*signos* or *oddun*) that apply to the consultation and the person undergoing it. The main body of oracular knowledge, in this case, derives from a collection of mythological stories (*patakín*), which are not only singled out for their relevance but also “interpreted” (a common indigenous term) and translated into the specific circumstances of the consultation. Spirit possession, occurring in all the traditions mentioned, perhaps provokes the most visceral and intense oracular utterances.

It is interesting to account in detail for the experiences of these mediators, especially under the analytical and methodological light I am proposing here: that of the importance of focusing on the *point of view*, rather than *a priori* religious traditions. Oracular perspectives crop up out of “mindful bodies” (to echo Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987), sense perceptions, material signs and

mythological narratives. One could argue that the various traditions are, in large part, distillations and combinations of different broad fields of oracular articulatory and their sources of stimulation (whether an object, a myth, a perception, a thought, a premonition or a loss of normal consciousness). An equally interesting and complementary task is to account for the final receiver’s experience. In that way, not only is the social and cultural significance of oracular articulatory kept within a larger perspective, but also the full generative force of the “paths” it creates; and this is because we can thus appreciate oracular articulatory beyond its immediate dependence on the perceptual and interpretative sensibility of its mediators. Hence the significance of the point of view as the primary ingredient, as it were, from which sacrificial counterpoint departs and harnesses a *camino*. What happens *after* such sensibilities are aroused and a point of view has been articulated?

The perception or interpretation giving rise to a point of view that is perceived as accompanied by a certain entity leads to the creation of a material/spiritual “assemblage” (echoing Beliso-De Jesús 2015) that throws such a point of view into a “magnetic field” of dynamic dialogue with its human interlocutor, instead of rendering it a “dead” utterance. Such assemblages involve materials that draw the entities near. Offerings and sacrifice are catalysts for such activation but, as we shall see, not automatic and unproblematic vectors of articulatory. The point of view solidifies so as to expand, even transform, and thus becomes a crossroads of departure, as noted above. “Speaking” entities are thus results of this very “speaking,” or at least, simultaneous (not *a priori*) presences (see Holbraad 2012: 99; Espirito Santo 2016: 103). Entities are the “paths” of oracular articulatory, the crossroads between the point of view and its receiver: the mediators of oracular articulatory and the (crossing) points for its further cultivation.

“Prison is imminent,” Alfonso was told that day, and it was indeed. No matter how extraordinary and miraculous a revelation this might have been, if taken in pure isolation it would soon have been rendered a mere facticity (or fallacy). Certainly, its extraordinary and predictive facticity made it extremely interesting; but what made it even more attractive was the broader dimension of its “truth” (cf. Holbraad 2012). A point of view, in such a context, is hardly a single piece of information or utterance. Apart from his imminent imprisonment, Alfonso was also told of his character (and how this could shape his prison experience), of positive and neg-



ative tendencies, and even offered a curious but apparently unimportant suggestion that he wear a gold chain. All these different utterances came together; they were *crossed* under the umbrella description of Alfonso's spirit and did not stem from just one person. There was a certain incremental and collective building-up of his spiritual "character," starting from that very first day at the "spiritist" ceremony, passing through his period in prison and continuing up to his initiation in Ocha and beyond.

This collective building-up is a process of solidifying the link between Alfonso and his spirit, in which the latter starts acquiring "flesh," so to speak. It would be tempting to understand this as a process of gradual identification, materialization, and embodiment. For instance, the usage of the gold chain could be viewed in this way and is, indeed, described as a crucial point of attachment between Alfonso and his spirit. This is common when spirits of the dead are perceived by mediums, who may, either due to visual perception or the explicit urging of the spirit itself, suggest the usage of materials, such as adornments, that are linked to the spirit. This is said to draw the two into a tighter and more conscious bond. The gold chain *ties* the two parts into a reciprocal relation and common "path," but identification, materialization, and embodiment are also accompanied by their opposites, that is, differentiation, dematerialization, and disembodiment. The relational term that predominates is that of exchange, as I will substantiate, through a kind of *sacri-ficial counterpoint*.

Alfonso highlights the significance of the decision to wear the golden chain as a qualitative transformation. He does not make clear whether this is in a direct sense (i.e. the chain "magically" confers its attributes by the mere act of wearing it) or in a more indirect, even metaphorical way (i.e. it *reminds* Alfonso of certain behaviors). This indifference to choosing one sense at the expense (at the total sacrifice) of the other is, I believe, an integral part of the oracular "game," as it is a common and interesting stance I have encountered throughout my ethnographic research. What I wish to highlight here is that the chain works as a point of both identification and differentiation. Alfonso is drawn closer to the potentially positive shared attribute of a cheerful character and, at the same time, is distanced from the negative propensity to fight, something which his spirit did not manage to avoid while in life; in fact, it was the reason for its loss. A controlled link must be forged, because both radical distance and radical proximity are seen as perilous.

Alfonso, like many of my other interlocutors when referring to the employment of materials as a means of linking them to spirits, explains that the chain is part of drawing the spirit closer, a minimization of distance which is the most automatic effect, but one that is neither one-way nor blind. Because the spirit has been drawn closer, there is a danger of reducing the distance to negative as well as positive tendencies; thus "measures" are taken to create relative proximity as well as distance. Relative, here, should be better understood as a *relational* qualification rather than a relativistic one, because the aim is based on a fully reciprocal and non-relativistic foundation. The non-relativistic element lies in the fact that proximity and distance, identification and differentiation, materialization and dematerialization, embodiment and disembodiment are the means by which oracular articulation flows. While the means might seem relativistic, in the sense that they are not strictly preordained but are of a more experimental nature, the intended aim of flow is absolutely clear. Whatever facilitates this flow is "correct;" whatever blocks it is "wrong." Yet, because of this experimental nature, blocking the flow may, whether intentionally or not, also be part of the frame.

While in prison, Alfonso wore his gold chain all the time. After being released, as we saw, he ended up in the house of a *santero* who warned him that, this time, death was imminent. The ritual steps suggested included initiation in Ocha after passing through a process of "development" of his link to his spirits of the dead. The latter occurred in a "spiritist" ceremony, specifically organized to this end, in which Alfonso received further advice from the spirit he already knew, and was also told of more spirits that were accompanying him, each one affecting his "path" in different ways according to each spirit's "character." Among other advice, he was told that he should not wear the gold chain constantly because that was drawing the spirit too near. In common "spiritist" vocabulary, the spirit should be "taught" to act like a spirit of the dead (and not the living person it used to be) through its link to Alfonso. It should learn how to treat its past biography as such: as a past and not a present. A parallel process of remembering and forgetting was established, wherein the chain was better placed near a "materialization" of Alfonso's spirit in the form of a glass of water. Alfonso put the chain around the glass and distanced it from his own body because, according to the indigenous understanding, too much identification with Alfonso prevented the spirit from disembodiment and becoming fully conscious of its new state of per-



sonhood. Water is a common element to which spirits of the dead are perceived to be drawn, but has the double quality of undercutting the memory of a previous embodied life by recalling its now disembodied (liquid?) “path.” Too much identification with both its past life *and* with Alfonso himself would lead to a stagnant or deviated “path” for the spirit, which, in its turn, would provoke a similar effect in Alfonso’s “path.”

The glass of water and the chain around it created a more solid center for the emission of oracular articulation. The spirit became accessible to a more flowing evocation, because now intense and unreflexive embodied memories were not obstructing it. Alfonso, though not a medium in the full sense (he cannot perceive his spirits or those of others directly), claims that after the “materialization” and “development” of his spirit, there was an increase in its manifestation. The spirit appeared more often than previously to other mediums, and its messages not only increased but also focused more on the nuances and events of Alfonso’s life, rather than on a biographical exposition of its own past life. Certain “premonitions” or “visions,” as Alfonso calls them, also intensified. For instance, Alfonso narrates how he once dreamed of his being dressed in white, his head shaved and lying on a mat on the floor. Although physically not a comfortable position, what accompanied the dream was an intense feeling of fullness and serenity, of “profound satisfaction.” This image and sensation were going to become reality when, almost a year after the dream, Alfonso found himself in a similar state as in the dream, undergoing full initiation in Ocha and its prescribed five-day ritual seclusion.

Let us return to the glass of water as the “materialization” of the spirit, through creating an assemblage, a crossroads, that ignites and further cultivates oracular articulation. The glass of water becomes a nodal point of emission, reference, and attention. Alfonso repeatedly calls it an “offering” (*ofrenda*) to his spirit, especially the act of changing the water. The chain is also termed an offering. Additionally, and this has also been articulated in various “spiritist” ceremonies, every now and then Alfonso places small pieces of candy next to the glass: “My spirit always had a sweet tooth!” Alfonso exclaims.

If these sacrificial offerings “tie” or “sweeten” the spirit (*amarar* and *endulzar* are indeed common indigenous terms referring to spirit/human interactions), they do so in connection with an object that is said to attract spirits of the dead, that is, spirits that are in a process of differentiation from their previous embodied life. Perhaps the most emblematic objects to serve as “material-

izations” of spirits are dolls. Dolls “represent” the spirits by way of a general resemblance to the hints that appear visually or verbally through mediumship, and are also very often objects of offerings, from small items representing the spirits’ preferences and habits to animal sacrifice. Celia, a medium, argues: “The doll is and isn’t the *muerto* [spirit of the dead]” (Panagiotopoulos 2017: 959). Another medium, Eduardo, confirms the point by claiming that there are some things that draw the spirit near an object, which in its turn, makes it clear to the spirit that it is no longer a living embodied entity. Offerings and sacrifice bring the spirit near an assemblage that simultaneously *reminds* the spirit of its evolving condition. A parallel stagnation or deviation from a “path” of articulation becomes the center of an attention that strives to go past it, to reverse it. From being stagnant in parallel, the “paths” of the living and the dead *cross* each other and, in their crossing, ignite the flow of articulation.

Sacrifice becomes the “technical” part, so to speak, of a generalized counterpoint wherein, by means of identifications and differentiations, materializations and dematerializations, embodiments and dis embodiments, memories and oblivion, oracular articulation flows. A *point of view*, from a seemingly arbitrary or isolated perspective, becomes a generative assemblage, crossroads, or node of articulation. Sacrificial counterpoint becomes the “fuel,” the flint-stone, of such ignition. The relation is not dialectical, however, in the sense that the contrapuntal elements (identification and differentiation and so on) do not flourish at the definitive expense of one against the other, creating rigid hierarchical schemas (see last section). Instead, they enter into a fully dynamic field of exchange in which they co-exist in relative autonomy but also mutually and intensely feed each other: *counterpoint!*

Spirits of the dead, as we have seen, are assemblages of points of view that appear in the senses, revealing biographical elements which, when “materialized” next to glasses of water or dolls, obviate strict and unreflexive attachments to the biographical stagnation and deviations that accompanied them (and are always potentially in danger of resurfacing, now in the crossed “paths” with their living counterparts). Other points of view find a better condensation point in different ways. Material oracles may offer mythological narratives, singled out and interpreted, to become referential nodes to the object of divination. The transformation of a (limited) point of view into (extended) articulation occurs through the acquisition of consecrated objects. Initiation signifies the intimate link between the person and a multiple (poly-



theistic) and quite idiosyncratic combination of oracular centers of emission of articulation. Clay pots, necklaces, cowrie shells, and little stones (*otán*) constitute such centers; they become the abodes of perspectives-cum-entities, such as the *orichas*, from which they are said to adopt a “speaking” position and to which offerings and sacrifice is directed in order to ignite articulation.

A specific divination transforms a mythological narrative into a point of view, that is, a narrative that is crossed with the life-course of the object of divination. An initiation transforms a point of view into a broader field of articulation. Initiates either “receive” (*recibir*) or “make” (*hacer*) the *oricha* deities. Both acts attach oracular signs to the individual, that is, a set of mythological stories, advice, pertinent aphorisms, taboos and positive and negative tendencies. The diviner utters them and notes are taken down in the initiation “notebook” (*libreta*) so that the neophyte has them at hand. The difference between a simple divination and an initiatory one is that the oracular signs of the former are said to be of a limited or not fully confirmed reach and, although both are thought to refer to “past, present, and future,” it is the latter’s significance to the initiate’s “path” that is more definitive and permanent. “Receiving” an *oricha* is seen as receiving oracular signs with a peripheral or complementary attachment, while “making” one creates the most intimate link to the signs and their tendencies, cementing their (a-)temporal dimension, “past, present, and future,” into an ever-present potentiality. The most extended state of affairs in terms of initiations, nowadays, is the “reception” of a number of complementary (*adimú*) *orichas* and the “making” of the “tutelary” *oricha* (*tutelar*) or “guardian angel” (*angel de la guarda*). If one adds the various perspectives-cum-articulation of the spirits of the dead, what is laid down is a “path” of multiple crossings, creating a vast, interconnected and ever-expanding and transforming combination of oracular centers of oracular emission.

When a mythological narrative becomes a point of view, it has already commenced an intricate journey of dynamic identifications and differentiations. Out of the totality of signs and stories, only some are singled out to refer to a given person. Then, the stories have to be “interpreted,” in other words, made relevant to the person’s life. Remember Alfonso’s case. A mythological narrative about the benefits of visual perception (an already “interpreted” conclusion of the narrative by the diviner) was translated as the presence of photographic skill. Conversely, an only dormant attraction for photography was transformed into an active decision, leading to a fulfilling

engagement. Not only do mythological characters and events have to find their equivalent in the life of the person being consulted, a process which attunes the two ends to a transformative meeting point, but also certain events that are deemed negative—just like biographical dimensions of the spirits of the dead—have to be avoided because of their perilous proximity. Tato, an experienced *babalawo* of the *Ifá* tradition, argues:

People, when they make *santo*, think they become that *oricha* on earth. This is wrong if taken literally. The *oricha* is a mouth that speaks [*una boca que habla*]. You become an ear that listens [*una oreja que escucha*] and corresponds. Also, people think that by making *santo*, that’s it, all your problems are magically solved in an instant. You have to be in constant dialogue and attentiveness. This is why you periodically converse with the *orichas*’ oracles and why you constantly offer them your gifts and sacrifice.

Sacrificial blood is spilled on and in the pots that host the objects that constitute the *orichas*’ oracles, their mouths. Food goes in and words come out, as is the case with most mouths! And along with words, all this potentiality of what Holbraad calls “directed motion,” and of articulation, as I have called it, comes into its full-blown force. But the opposite tendency is also in play. *Inarticulation* (cf. Vitebsky 2008) is also a potentiality, not only when one forgets or does not pay heed to the oracles’ utterances, but also because the link between the points of view and the person are now intensified; with the constant peril of invoking their negative aspects too. The field of experience that most intensifies the dynamic interplay between articulation and inarticulation is that which is commonly labeled as “witchcraft” (*brujería*).

Brujería has an aura of urgency, if not emergency, and of more direct (human) manipulation. When a sudden and great misfortune occurs, *brujería* is commonly sought. When one has been the victim of it and wishes to block or dissolve it, it is also invoked. In these cases, *brujería* might even be returned; or it could be “sent” (*enviar*) to gain a beneficial position at someone else’s expense or merely to materialize negative feelings such as envy. As Alfonso narrates this long process of building up a *camino*, he mentions a case of *brujería* as an abrupt obstacle to the flow of things. At some point in his post-prison and post-initiation life, he began to drink excessively. He comments that his life was otherwise good as he had achieved professional and artistic success in photography: “I stayed at home stuck, in no mood



to do anything or go out, as I used to, every day, all day, throughout the whole of the city, so as to expand my photography contacts and shoot my photos. And I kept on being stuck and drinking.” This sudden sense of being “stuck,” despite a previously flowing *camino*, came out of nowhere: “It was as if I was not myself; as if I was constantly possessed by something else.”

This “something else” was detected by a neighbor when they happened to meet at a corner shop. His neighbor, not an intimate friend, persistently asked him what was wrong. Alfonso tried to escape the intrusion but his neighbor insisted, saying that things looked really bad and inviting him to his house for a consultation; he was *palero*, a diviner-priest of the *Palo Monte* tradition. He told Alfonso that *brujería* had been conducted on behalf of a relative of his, who was jealous of the positive direction Alfonso’s life was taking; a “dark spirit” (*muerto oscuro*) had been sent by another *palero* to obstruct his “path.” The ritual steps that ensued annulled the forced “attachment” (*apego*) and “sent back” (*virar*) the *muerto oscuro*. Alfonso extracted himself from his involuntary state of housebound drunkenness, and avoided frequent contact with his jealous relative. Here again, one can appreciate the ethnographic significance of the dynamics of articulacy and inarticulacy that are honed within this oracular Afro-Cuban cosmos. If the common and ideal route within it is to transform a state of inarticulacy into articulacy, the inverse is also a potential. Inarticulacy, too, is entertained, invoked, and provoked. Afro-Cuban oracular crossings become nodal centers of reference and instantiation of both articulacy and inarticulacy, of their co-existence, their mutual annulment and multiple transformations of one into the other.

Counterpoints of inspiration

Let us explore what the ethnography has done to the category of sacrifice by returning to Robbins’s (2017) article, wherein he argues that theories of religious mediation perhaps overemphasize the given distance of the divine from the human and the subsequent desire and effort to overcome it by acts of mediation such as sacrifice. Drawing from his ethnography of the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea and their progressive conversion to charismatic Christianity, he argues that the desire is the exact inverse. While traditional Urapmin religion, through a focus on sacrifice, created distance between the sacred and the profane, charismatic Christianity, through the central experience of possession by the Holy Spirit, creates intimate “copresence” (2017: 466). This has its equiva-

lent manifestations in terms of sociality, that is, relations among people. The sacrificial religion “modeled and legitimized” (2017: 466) distance among the Urapmin themselves, while charismatic possession engendered proximity.

Sacrifice and possession in Cuba do not belong to opposing religious traditions or to diametrically inverse tendencies. As with the Urapmin, in Cuba possession may instantiate excessively intimate communication and proximity, but sacrifice is not a linear tendency in the other direction. Sacrifice creates the appropriate proximity *and* distance so that oracular articulacy may flow. Here we reach the limits of an understanding of sacrifice as the mediator between the sacred and the profane as well as substitution and annihilation (see Strenski 2002). One of the boldest efforts to overcome this is by Rane Willerslev (2013).

By way of comparison between the biblical event of Abraham’s almost sacrificing his son Isaac, as an act of blind faith, and the traditional, apparently more pragmatic, religion of the Chukchi of northern Kamchatka, Willerslev provides an analytical framework that promises to accommodate two opposing tendencies which, according to him, dominate the academic debate on sacrifice. As he identifies it, the opposition is presented as rigid, each sacrificial tradition made to belong to either one or the other side: “faith versus utility and intrinsic versus instrumental value” (2013: 140–1). By invoking Louis Dumont, Willerslev argues that all sacrificial traditions, whether of one tendency or the other, include in their schema the opposite value, thus creating a hierarchical ladder in which the dominant value encompasses, but is also sustained by, the dominated value. The latter functions as a “shadow” (2013: 146) and, although inferior, its role is vital for the whole structure. The benefits of such a Dumontian perspective are significant (see also Iteanu and Moya 2015). Sacrifice, instead of complete substitution and annihilation, becomes the ingredient of relations of difference through interdependence. Unlike in Robbins’s formulation, here “copresence” (2013: 149) is meant to preserve differences and bring them together into a dialogue. The outcome is less rigid than it may initially appear, because at times and as a lurking potential (even if seen as a peril), the dominant and the dominated values may switch roles and become “reversible” (2013: 146).

Within this framework, sacrifice plays the dynamic role of creating the “right” sort of separation and proximity between man and divinity, so as to forge and sustain an encompassing “hierarchy of distance” (Willers-



slev 2013: 151). Afro-Cuban ethnography, as it has been unraveled in this paper, may offer an alternative analytical framework in close dialogue with a celebrated Cuban ethnographer, Fernando Ortiz, and the notion of *counterpoint*, so as to suggest a doubly indigenous ethnographic theory of sacrifice. In his book *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* ([1940] 2002), Ortiz offers a detailed contrapuntal comparison between two prominent national products: tobacco and sugar. The “counterpoint” is stretched to myriads of features of each product, these varying from historical and socioeconomic, to physiological, to symbolic. For instance, sugar necessitates vast plots of land and produces a highly centralized and industrialized economy; an import of the Spanish colonial elite, it is dry and “civilized.” Tobacco, on the other hand, is produced on small plots of land, sustained by a decentralized manufacturing economy, creating a middle class; it is humid and “savage.”

“Tobacco is born, sugar is made” (Ortiz [1940] 2002: 142; my translation); “tobacco is a liberal reformist and sugar is a retardant conservative” ([1940] 2002: 144; my translation); “[t]obacco is daring like a blasphemy; sugar is humble like a prayer” ([1940] 2002: 152; my translation); and so on and so forth. Two different products growing on the same (is-)land reveal two antithetical modes of production, of poesis and noesis. The most pertinent conclusion from Ortiz’s analysis is that it does not lead to the definitive victory of one over the other, even though he might instinctively sympathize with tobacco. As such, counterpoint presents itself as a framework that accounts for relations of alterity, antithesis, and critical coexistence.

Like the Dumontian framework, Ortiz’s counterpoint accounts for relations of difference, even opposition, without this creating absolute dissociation or over-identification. On the contrary, differences are of necessity in order to forge relationships. Such relationships might contain tension, exactly because of their oppositions, but they remain in a constant state of unresolvedness. The outcome is rather different from Dumont’s “encompassment” because hierarchical structures are not the issue here, but rather a more open-ended, reciprocal and less dialectical kind of coexistence, though still, significantly, through contrasting differences.

Sacrificial counterpoint in Cuba is part of a much wider field of ritual praxis in which materials, invocations, initiations, bodies, senses, affects, and intellect are attuned and uniquely assembled in order to create crossroads in which a *point of view* is stretched to quasi-infinity so as to be generative of *oracular articulacy*. Through sac-

rifice, differentiation and identification, proximity and distance, motion and stasis, are simultaneously entertained, made to clash with each other so that articulacy is ignited and put into flow. Sacrifice does not fully substitute or annihilate (just like death is not the absolute end of existence but a transformation; see Panagiotopoulos 2017). It makes use of the clash, of the counterpoint, in a creative rather than destructive way, “through the poesis of their juxtapositions” (Wirtz 2016: 365). It preserves big parts of the two juxtaposed ends, so that events get into articulating motion. In that sense, a full dynamic field of exchange is produced, rather than annihilatory or hierarchical dialectics. This radically open-ended, even seemingly chaotic and horizontal (anti-)structure does not occur, however, *in order to* clarify or blur the boundaries between the “sacred” and the “profane.” This is so because the categories are not an absolute end in themselves. Rather, they are crossing points of departure. In other words, they are the starting points, the ignition nodes. Sacrificial offerings consist of the flint-stone of such ignition, transforming a point of view into an ideally flowing articulacy. “Sacrificial articulation” (Tsintjilonis 2000: 2) forms a “sacrificial sequence” (2000: 3) and is part of a “larger system” (2000: 4), but the sequence and the system are not pre-ordained nor rigid structures but idiosyncratic, biographical “paths,” of multiple crossings with various points of view.

A mythological narrative selected by an oracle, a specific message appearing in the perceptual sensibilities of mediums, a “witchcraft” case of intense blocking and unblocking of articulacy, all these are hints of points of view to be further cultivated. The “sacred” is just this: a promising perspective (see also Espirito Santo 2016: 103) that could be turned into articulacy by means of sacrifice. There is no absolute “hierarchy of distance” here, but, rather, the recognition of the potentiality and reciprocity of such perspectives and their subsequent full mobilization. The “sacred” is an added perspective to the “profane,” which initially seemed unrelated; yet its “revelatory” quality brings them to a crossroads (see Holbraad 2012: 100–1). What is fomented here is the full and not strictly linguistic, life- and anthropocentric “force” of language (see Tsintjilonis 2004; Course 2012). Points of view of this kind are not merely descriptive, they are inspirational: “forward-looking, [a] creative spark linking past forms with objects, power and rules born anew” (Ochoa 2010: 8). “The other side of sacrifice,” to echo Mayblin and Course (2014), is that it is not limited in substituting, annihilating, or creating hierarchies of



distance. It is the means of exchange between a “sacred” and a “profane” plane, so that a perspective is recognized as such, allowing it to expand into articulatory.

Finally, there are more counterpoints to be explored. If they have to remain undeveloped in this paper (but see Panagiotopoulos and Espírito Santo in press), they could still serve as an inspirational point of departure, simultaneously shedding some suggestive light on what has been presented. In terms of sociality, in a Revolutionary context—wherein both articulatory and sacrifice are comprehended in a “monotheistic” way—of an encompassing *logos* and self-annihilation to further the *universal* (but strongly attached to the nation-state) goal of the Revolution (see Holbraad 2014), oracular articulatory presents itself as an alternative, de-centralized and polyphonic (polytheistic) sacrificial counterpoint. Something like Ortiz’s tobacco when compared to sugar!

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