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Student activism in a time of crisis in South Africa: The quest for 'black power'

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Higher Education in South Africa has been in crisis over recent years. University systems in many parts of South Africa have witnessed student protest, as well as ongoing violence, resulting in many campuses turning into spaces of violent confrontation between students and police. This paper examines student social activism in the higher education sector in South Africa, especially the Nelson Mandela University, as well as the patterns that exist and frame student social activism in pursuit of 'black power.' Furthermore, the paper notes the strong sense of solidarity and unity amongst students, despite these existent challenges. The paper will also present a historical analysis of student activism in South Africa with the aim of demonstrating the longstanding and persistent student politics as well as the student dissatisfaction with, the way in which the higher education has been governed in South Africa.

Keywords: black power; higher education; representation; student activism

Introduction

"Student participation, a key element of university citizenship, includes transformational and activist dimensions" (Keet, Nel & Sattarzadeh, 2017:80).

This article is based on a research study conducted by the Centre for the Advancement of Non-Racialism and Democracy in 2016, which aimed to investigate Nelson Mandela University student's intuitive understanding of non-racialism (Queench, Stuurman & Zinn, 2016). It serves to open dialogue about student social activism in the institutions of higher learning, using the Nelson Mandela University as a case study to reflect and build on the original study. The aim is to contribute to the ongoing discussions and conversations nationally about the recent student protest and student activism, and to locate such narrative in the context of black students, who are calling for a 'black power.'

During the period of the rise in student protests against apartheid and its separate and unequal education system, student activism in South Africa was linked to other societal struggles, particularly for black people. Black men, women and children were massacred in Sharpeville in 1960. Similarly, in 1976 during the Soweto uprising by mainly school learners – which has been distinguished from all other political uprisings within the same period as having the highest number of casualties resulting from a single instance of political protest – the police killed 195 persons, injuring a further 410 (Franklin, 2003:210). This societal struggle infiltrated predominantly black university campuses. Franklin (2003:210) notes that "The increased state repression in the form of mass arrests, bannings, torture and executions that began in the mid 1960s created a political vacuum for black South African activism that was soon filled by students." Recently in 2016, students of the Nelson Mandela University demonstrated a similar commitment to student social activism, which resulted in the university being shut down for approximately six weeks (Spies, 2016). During this period, campuses were turned into battlefields marked by the presence of heavily armed police. Many students faced criminal charges and were subjected to different forms of violence. It ought to be noted that this trend was not unique to Nelson Mandela University, but was prevalent to other universities across South Africa.

Access to quality free education was reported to be the main concern generating student protest and student activism in higher education nationally. An increasing number of young people wanting access to higher education was argued to place a strain on the country's available resources, resulting in a potential macroeconomic meltdown (KPMG, 2016:7–8).

Student Social Activism in South Africa

Student social activism is a highly complex and multifaceted phenomenon. It tends to be very difficult to explain and even more problematic to predict (Altbach, 1989:97). Osipian (2016:217) defines activism "as a doctrine or practice that emphasizes [sic] direct vigorous action especially in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue." Therefore, student activism can be viewed as a form of action or practice that seeks to make changes to how the university systems function, or which challenges a particular paradigm, be it politically, socially, economically or otherwise. Further related to activism is protest, which is defined as a response to ongoing disagreement or the condemnation of a certain viewpoint; it is also defined as a situation in which people assemble and demonstrate strong opposition to something (Altbach, 1989:99). Student protests, violent and peaceful, en masse or otherwise, are forms of student activism. In most cases, student protests are instigated by issues that have a direct impact on students, or matters that concern students on and off campus, especially those that are very close to their hearts. Among the many understandings of the phenomenon of student activism, Ozymy (2012) who most notably states that participation in student activism is premised by a

certain self-interest, which may arise in order to stress such determinants as student living conditions, economic imbalances, and high tuition fees, to mention a few (Osipian, 2016).

According to Van Gyampo (2013:50), the question that must be interrogated is as to whether it is justifiable to confine the importance of student activism to its function of appointing leaders, or removing them from office? Certainly, a majority of African scholars, such as Austin (1964), Awoonor (1990), Chazan (1983), Gyimah-Boadi (1993), Oquaye (1980) and more in recent times, Nunyonameh (2012), portray and inappropriately limit the significance of student activism in democratisation by providing support by means of demonstrations, lobbying, and appointments to power. These scholars argue that student activism also utilises the same means to remove elected powers, especially when such leaders are in "breach" of the "social contract."

If this is how student social activism is to be understood, unfortunately, for democracy and social justice, the role of activism "can only produce low quality democracy" (Diamond & Morlino, 2005:49). Contrary to this ideological framework, Keet et al. (2017:91) suggest that "the major issues that students formulated during these informal discussions suggested that despite the democratisation of university spaces through human rights related policies, the intuitive justice expectations that students have are not adequately facilitated by rights-based regimes." In other words, the practical expression of rights does not necessarily correlate with recognition.

This means that student social activism has made a significant contribution to the re-centering of students' voices in decision-making processes in higher education as well as in holding government accountable. This viewpoint is supported by Keet (cited in Van der Merwe & Van Reenen, 2016:vi) who argues that in addition, demands for 'Africanisation' and 'decolonisation' of higher education, vibrantly articulated by the 'new' student social movements, have now surfaced in South Africa and elsewhere as powerful critique and form of resistance that is insistent of its own criticality.

Black Power and Student Activism

During the 2015–2017 student protests, higher education institutions in South Africa saw a significant move towards 'black power' social activism that strives to rethink black consciousness. At the Nelson Mandela University, and in other universities across South Africa, there was a call for the betterment of 'black students' conditions,' and to reconfigure university curricula, which are believed to be Eurocentric. For instance, during a student assembly that was held at Wits University in 2016, black power was at the centre of

discussions; where there was the call for universities to recognise the existence of "black bodies," especially in historically white universities (Malabela, 2017:133). Indeed, it was emphasised that programmes, cultures, sport and ideologies associated with blackness had to be prioritised and brought into the mainstream in South African universities.

This condition advanced a new paradigm shift that was significant in higher education. The assembly noted that the majority of the people of South Africa are black (Statistics South Africa, 2016); but that their voices are marginalised and silenced in the institutions of higher learning (Malabela, 2017:133). Mbele (2015:3) concludes that it is not surprising that those who are rebelling against high fees and related injustices are black students. Black students are first and foremost part of the black community, and, whether they know it or not, their struggle is actually part of the broader struggle of the black people as a perpetual underclass.

Theoretical Framework

For the purposes of this article, representation is used as a theoretical framework for understanding student social activism. Many authors who have published on representation argue that it comes in different forms, and that it usually depends on a particular context. Mugume and Luescher (2015:5), who cite Pitkin (1972:9), state that representation "means the making present in some sense of something which is nevertheless not present literally or in fact." This means that representation is a process that enables one who was absent to be present. However, it is also essential to ascertain the feasibility of that process, especially that of 'replacing' a formerly absent person. Some argue that, in order to do so, one must understand that the fundamental power of the representative must be evaluated against their commitment to the needs and the desires of the people they represent.

Indeed, there are factors that must be considered when representation is advanced; these factors include transparency and accountability, responsibility and commitment, and leadership. Even though Mansbridge (2003) and Pitkin (1972) provide different viewpoints on processes of representation, there are similarities in the ways in which they define and categorise it.

These scholars' work on representation provides a thorough framework for the purposes of this study. Historically and presently, student representation has been viewed as a pivotal necessity in the context of higher education. Institutional activities and operations are generally deemed "undemocratic" if students are excluded from the structures and processes thereof, particularly when issues that affect them are discussed. These issues range from the political, to

the social and the economic. In addition, representation becomes important when it comes to the quality of services that students receive. Exclusion, therefore, means that the quality of service delivery could be compromised, where as a result, students may resist and protest. In summary, similarly to Luescher-Mamashela (2013:1448), the inclusion of students in the processes of decision-making means decisions are made by inclusive bodies, which may result in better decisions that are accepted with less resistance by the student community.

The study described in this article has noted some factors that must be considered when representation is proposed, as discussed in the next section. According to Prinsloo (2012:8), "accountability, transparency and integrity are essential elements of democratic institutions and process." This means that, in a democracy, when leaders or representatives take action or make decisions, they must be willing to bear the consequences of such decisions. Indeed, people are also interested in knowing whether leaders are accountable and respect their followers, and whether leaders will follow the rules that govern their operations and decisions. For the purpose of this article, this process is referred to as responsibility and accountability.

Barrett (2004:1) mentions that "moral responsibility assumes a capacity for making rational decisions, which in turn justifies holding moral agents accountable for their actions." For this reason, it is generally expected that when a person takes a certain responsibility, such a person must also account accordingly.

Becoming aware of the intricacies of student activism, a need arose for a localised understanding of student activism at Nelson Mandela University within the context of the call for black power. Therefore, the objectives of this paper were to:

- discover the opinions of Nelson Mandela University students about the importance of student social activism; and
- 2. determine whether the students have a common understanding of the quest for 'black power.'

Methodology

The study described in this article was framed by a phenomenological interpretivist paradigm as a way to provide a critical analysis, as well as a critique of the positivist approach. Equal status was assumed during the data gathering process, and the participants were respected for bringing their own perspectives to the examination of the research questions.

Semi-structured interviews were used as data collection methods. Mertens (1998) notes that semi-structured interviews allow intimate, repeated and prolonged involvement of the researcher and the participant, which enables the researcher to get to the root of what is being investigated.

The data collectors comprised five senior students from the Nelson Mandela University and two senior staff members (based on research experience) from the Centre for the Advancement of Non-Racialism and Democracy. The data collectors were trained by a Senior Researcher of the Nelson Mandela University for five days. The content of the study was thoroughly discussed, and questions were clarified during the training. The five senior students were selected from the Faculty of Humanities at the Nelson Mandela University, and they were all studying towards master's degree, where research was part of their course content. The two senior members were affiliated with a research centre at the university.

A total number of 327 students from the five campuses (including George) of the Nelson Mandela University were interviewed for this study. The students were randomly selected for the interviews. Even though the interviews were not limited to a particular time, a majority of the interviews were conducted during the students' lunch hour between 12h00-13h00. This decision by the data collectors, allowed for in-depth interviews with the respondents that did not clash with lecture times. Furthermore, the interviews were conducted during the period referred to as "quiet-time," where a majority of students do not usually have examinations, essays, or assignments submissions. Lastly, the study was conducted over 25 days, where each campus was allocated a maximum of five days.

Each interview began by asking the participants about their understanding of student social activism and its importance. Follow up questions would contextualise student social activism at Nelson Mandela University, focusing on the call for black power. This was a build-up process depending on participant's responses. A useful final question that was administered was "is there anything else you would like me to know."

Ethical Considerations

Consent was obtained from the Nelson Mandela University Ethics Committee. Additionally, the study was also approved by the office of Deputy-Vice Chancellor of Research and Engagement. During the data collection process, instructions were openly communicated to the participants (Robson, 2002). In addition, participants were made aware that, should they wish to withdraw from the study, they were at liberty to do so at any time, without any prejudice or ramifications thereafter. They were also informed that they are at liberty not to answer any questions they deem sensitive or uncomfortable. The participants were informed that, by completing the research schedule, they were giving consent to participate in the study (Coyne, 1997:623). As a result, consent was

granted, as most participants signed the research schedule and agreed to participate in the study. Importantly, participant anonymity and confidentiality were respected and protected at all times during the study.

Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and coded. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the content, where subsequently, themes were identified from the data. Moreover, each question was critically analysed in order to gauge the opinions of the participants, and to further discover similarities between and trends in the responses. Even though the sample was sizable, a manual analysis of the data remained possible.

The collected data was analysed, after which the following five themes emerged:

- 1. student social activism as a short-term revolution;
- 2. the quest for 'black power';
- 3. student activism and knowledge production;
- 4. re-thinking economics; and
- 5. student political activism and 'action.'

These themes are discussed below according to the questions asked during the interviews.

Student Social Activism as a Short-Term Revolution The findings of the study suggest that an important factor that must be understood as a limitation for ongoing student activism in higher education is the nature of such activism as sporadic. Generally, student social activism does not last for a long time, especially when students' demands are addressed by the relevant decision-makers. For example (all student responses are cited here verbatim):

Bobo. 02.04.2016: "Student activism is generally informed by a moment, and that moment results into revolution. So if the moment is addressed and the students' voice is heard, inevitably, student social activism changes its shape, and the revolution cease to exist in that moment."

Indeed, there are factors that influence such activism, which are generally associated with structural and institutional forces. For instance, during the protest, some students were primarily concerned about their academic commitments, along with the impact that a prolonged protest would have on these. These students were not in agreement with the notion that the academic life of students ought to stop, but instead, they advocated for a parallel process that would allow protest and academic instruction to co-exist. This factor has indeed limited some students from participating in the protest. A final year student stated that:

Brenda. 08.04.2016: "I really do not understand the rationale behind shutting down the university completely. Yes I understand the significance of the protest, but it is so unfair to restrict students from accessing the campus. I am a final year Accounting student, and I have been offered to do my article

next year [...] now this."

Similarly, another student mentioned:

Buzwe. 18.04.2016: "This protest is indeed legitimate, and we all support student activism, but it must not at the same time disadvantages us, so that post-protest, we don't regret our own actions."

The majority of the students, however, believed that a parallel process would weaken the protest and would deem their demands to be secondary to academic instruction. This aspect has continued to divide the students of Nelson Mandela University. For instance, another student noted:

Qhawe. 24.04.2016: "Once we go back to classes, the system will not take us seriously; as a result, our demands will not be addressed. So yes, as painful as it is to all of us, but the campus must be completely shut down."

Similarly, another final year student mentioned:

Mthembu. 02.04.2016: "This revolution must continue, and as long as our demands are not addressed, I am also willing to sacrifice this academic year, and not graduate next year. This is not about me, the revolution is bigger than individuals. And indeed, this revolution will not last forever; once an agreement is reached, we will go back to classes."

Indeed, there was sufficient evidence to conclude that structural factors can be a limitation to student political activism.

Furthermore, the results of the study reveal that student social activism is an ideological phenomenon, where as student leaders come and go, new ideas emerge and others vanish, which also changes the outlook and focus on particular issues. In the Nelson Mandela University context, student leadership through there has been contestation between the Student Representative Council between the Democratic Alliance Student Organisation, and the South African Students Congress. Historically, these two student structures have different political ideologies. Therefore, when the leadership shifts from one student political party to the other, it is inevitable that the ideology will also shift. One student claimed:

Bobo. 02.04.2016: "As student leaders, we are guided by our political ideologies and political affiliations. So if my candidate wins elections here at the university, automatically my level of activism rises, so that we advance our political stance. But if another party wins, unfortunately, sometimes we clash, and I become unable to support them fully."

However, another student did not share the same sentiment, and suggested:

Chosi. 08.04.2016. "We as students we must support each other, because we feel the same pain at the university, so really our political differences are not helping us, but dividing us. I have seen some students with great ideas, but because another political party is in power, those students will keep those brilliant ideas to themselves."

This situation, according to the study findings, affects the momentum of student activism.

The Quest for 'Black Power'ii

The results of the study also provide some support for 'black power.' Significantly, students believed that black people in the so-called conscious community are often dismissed as theorists, who are expert philosophers on the black condition but are 'on voicemail' when it comes to generating and executing practical solutions. This idea was advance by a student, who claimed that:

Chris. 18.04.2016: "We have great black minds in our universities, who are critically advance on scholarship and academic achievements. Unfortunately, all that becomes flawed because what we need now, and what our people need is not a theory, but solutions to improve the conditions of our own existence here."

In addition, it is suggested that one of the weaknesses of the 'conscious' community is the fixation with sounding learned, quoting books, and being able to use convoluted and verbose English formulations as opposed to simplifying what they know and say, as one student highlighted:

Chwayita. 24.04.2016: "... with the view to enhancing group consciousness and cohesion amongst black people. Yes we must know and respect theories and read books, but ultimately what is important is to convert that theory and book literature into action."

One of the things that the 'radical' section of black activists has as part of their political and intellectual repertoire is the call for 'black power.'

Unsurprisingly, there are a number of understandings as to what the concept 'black power' means in practice. This argument was noted during the interviews, where a number of participants indicated that to fully appreciate the call for 'black power' and locate its proper place within black radical practice, it is perhaps important to first understand that, because of the history of slavery and colonialism, through a global and politically engineered system of white supremacy, black people have been transformed into:

Joe. 18.04.2016: "permanent slaves', whose lives (in every respect), are controlled and determined by others, and not by themselves, and unfortunately this is through slavery and colonisation."

Another student noted that, if this is the understanding then, at a fundamental and practical level, 'black power' should be a project that primarily aims to

Chwayita. 24.04.2016: "... infuse black people with the capacity (theoretical and practical) to control and determine all aspects of their lives."

If this is a widely held understanding, in the context where black people find themselves today (in South Africa and elsewhere), the study findings suggest that the project to build 'black power' ought to enable black people to address the following issues.

Student Activism and Knowledge Production

During the interviews, as part of legitimising 'black power,' students maintained that a central question that ought to be asked was as to what extent do black people control not only the schools that their children attend, but also understand what their children are taught at these schools. To illustrate this point, one student mentioned that:

Mthembu. 02.04.2016: "In the context of the black experience, "true education" must be able to repair the castrated personality of the individual black person; produce a new, confident, knowledgeable person, who does not see him/herself as an extension of someone else; and who possesses the requisite tools to advance themselves and their community; and who does so in a manner that enhances the dignity of both."

To be able to do this, students mentioned that black people must constantly fight to preserve learning institutions that will ensure that, from the lowest to the highest level, black children receive the education that is designed to serve their developmental needs, and that of their communities. Significantly, this should not be an education that transforms the black child into a "confused cultural non-entity" as one student noted, whose sole aspiration is

Joe. 18.04.2016: "... whiteness and an aloof life that is based on the illusion of bling."

During the interviews, the students constantly asked to what extent black people in control of the universities and research institutions, choose the content of what 'they' teach and research? For example, one student asked:

Bobo. 08.04.2016: "Are our universities and research institutions geared towards solving the fundamental problems of black people, and Africans, in particular?"

As people, they believed, we must build truly black universities and research institutions, which will, as a matter of priority, investigate all aspects of black life and come up with knowledge and insights that are meant to solve existing "black mysteries." As it was suggested by one student - if universities and research institutions want to genuinely contribute to knowledge production and transformation in higher education, the findings suggest that they have to profoundly change what they teach and how they do it.

Re-Think Economics

It emerged that, for any self-respecting person, the capacity to produce for themselves is central to their self-worth. To develop the capacity to feed themselves and engage in other forms of commercial activity, as a people, one student suggested the following:

Chris. 18.04.2016: "the university and the curriculum must strive to prioritise black

economies. We must build entities and associations that will unapologetically ensure that black people (regardless of size) trade with each other, and that the money from such trade circulates within the black community."

Furthermore, another student recommended that:

Mthembu. 02.04.2016: "We must really be in control of our own economics, and we must strive to create our local sustainable economies. And part of our activism is advancing that aspect. Unfortunately we are not there yet. Black people generally are so comfortable to be spending their monies on western markets."

Therefore, these findings suggest, black people ought to rid themselves of the slavish mindset of seeing themselves as nothing more than consumers of what others produce, and that they ought to internalise the culture of spending their money on black businesses.

Student Political Activism and "Action"

In further probing students' understandings of black power and student social activism, the findings point out that this is probably the one area of endeavour with the greatest potential to bring people close to realising a vision of black power, and perhaps also that which best illustrates the weakness of black people. Owing to the history of slavery and colonialism, the overarching approach to political affairs continues to be one that serves the interests of the very people who have and continue to keep 'others' enslaved. The findings indicated a general approach to black political affairs that invariably entrenches the artificial divisions created by the enslavers, as opposed to seeking to build group consciousness and unity amongst black people. A dominant view put forward by the participants, was summarised by one student, who stated that:

Buzwe. 18.04.2016: "the need to reject the white supremacist conception of politics and power, that has been bequeathed upon its 'others' by the descendants of colonial slave masters, and adopt an approach to black political affairs and power that deliberately seeks to promote a culture of group identity and action on all matters that concern black life."

Finally, the results of the study show that black people must not "fool" themselves into believing that those who benefit from continued slavery (especially economically) will fold their arms and watch while blacks extricate themselves from their "bloody claws," as one student mentioned. For this reason, one student claimed the following:

Qhawe. 24.04.2016: "our enemies will undermine (sometimes with the help of other blacks) our efforts at building black power, including killing those blacks who seem committed to ensuring that more and more black people adopt the black power approach."

Discussion

As the study reflects on the data collection stage, as well as the analysis phase, the findings appear to support the conceptual framework of this research, which addresses representation. For instance, it has been a central argument from students that it is important for black students to understand that they cannot claim to have power until they are also able to demonstrate the capacity to maintain and defend themselves against their "enemies." As people, they argue, they will therefore have to build institutions that will empower them with the capacity to defend themselves, both individually and collectively. Furthermore, as demonstrated, students shared the view that, in a world in which having a 'black skin' is reason enough for others to attack and enslave, black power as an approach is not just the most logical, but also the most natural. Moreover, it is also emerged that black people must therefore realise that black pride is a hollow and meaningless slogan if it is not rooted in the people's capacity to control and determine all aspects of their lives, in the present. For this study, the essence of 'black power' is perhaps best captured in a statement by Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe (1949), who said that "we must fight [...] for the right to call our souls our own." Understood in this sense, black power is therefore a quest by black people to reclaim the right to call their souls their own. This, of course, advocates for "absent" black people to be drawn closer to the core and to be represented in decision-making processes.

This examination of student social activism in South African Higher Education reveals several patterns. Student activism, either on campus or in larger society, should be viewed within the context of the larger black freedom struggles taking place in South Africa (Franklin, 2003:214). Viewed from the vantage point of the student struggle, the South African higher education crisis seems to be rooted in oppressive university systems that appear to marginalise and exclude some students. As the study has shown, the fundamental crisis is linked to the lack of representation, which is, and has historically been, prevalent in South African institutions of higher learning. Furthermore, student social activism is a "multi-faceted" phenomenon; as a result, it becomes hard to predict the direction it will take, and its outcomes. It can disrupt academic activities, and result in turmoil for campus life, especially if students believe that their demands are disregarded or ignored. Finally, student social activism is sporadic and can take many forms, as it depends on university structural conditions, student-campus life, and the nature of the challenges faced by students. This study is an attempt to offer the kind of wide-ranging multifaceted outline critical to comprehending student social activism, not only for higher education in South Africa, but also for South African society in general.

Conclusion

"Outdated authoritarian and exclusive methods of decision-making and resolving institutional problems do not expose student leaders to democratic values and practices and thus do not effectively use the opportunity of student involvement in university governance as a training ground" (Mattes & Luescher-Mamashela, 2012).

In this article, I sought to open a new dialogue about the students' opinions on the importance of student social activism, and furthermore, to ascertain students' understanding of the call for black power. In doing so, I have described representation as a theoretical framework for understanding student social activism in higher education.

I have argued that the manner of student activism was informed by the predominant conditions of economic and political crisis, which affected both the material and economic conditions and status of students, and resulted them to infuse student activism and call for black power, seeing both as one and the same struggle. I have sought to address that student activism generally serves as a response of opposition to certain pressures, especially when students feel they are not represented in decision-making process, or their voices are 'absent' when such decisions are taken. In conclusion, this article recommends, similarly to Van der Merwe and Van Reenen (2016), that the incident (student protest) needs to be further contextualised and explored, as it represents the recurring patterns that continue to underlie the crisis in higher education in 'post-apartheid' South Africa.

Notes

- "Firstly, formalistic representation is characteristic of a type of representation where 'a representative is viewed as someone who has been authorised to act" (Pitkin, 1972:39). In this case, power is entrusted to the individual who takes over a specific office. This idea of representation relates to Mansbridge's notion of promissory representation whereby a representative is authorised to represent, but, in this case, only after making certain promises to the represented, for example during an election campaign (2003:516-517). Secondly, according to Pitkin (1972:39-40), descriptive representation refers to the case in which a representative is elected to office because she or he somehow resembles a group that is to be represented. The relevant characteristics in this case may be demographic (e.g. based on class, race, or gender). Mansbridge (2003:520) refers to this type of representation as gyroscopic representation; while there are various differences in the characterisation of their respective types, both authors agree that 'resemblance' does not guarantee that the elected representative will actually act on behalf of the group that elected her or
- ii. Inspired by Black Power Activist Veli Mbele (2015).

iii. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.

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