"IT IS NECESSARY TO BE ANTI-RACIST": RACIAL DISCRIMINATION AGAINST UNIVERSITY STUDENTS – AN ANALYSIS BASED ON GENDER

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ABSTRACT

Racial discrimination in Brazil, historically linked to the slavery past, remains present in various social spheres, including the university environment. This study aimed to analyze experiences of racial discrimination among university students based on the gender variable. The research, with a quantitative, descriptive, exploratory and cross-sectional approach, was carried out between September and December 2023 with 829 students from five higher education institutions in Ceará. Data collection took place in a hybrid way, using an electronic form with sociodemographic questions and the Racial Discrimination Experiences Scale, validated in Brazil. Statistical analysis was performed using frequencies, means, standard deviation and Fisher's exact test, with a significance level of $p < 0.05$. The results revealed that 30.2% of women, 31.7% of men, 50% of non-binary and 100% of those who did not identify themselves reported experiences of racial discrimination, without statistical significance ($p = 0.059$). Discrimination when looking for a job was significant ($p = 0.031$), with a higher prevalence among non-binary (50%) and unidentified people (33.3%) compared to women (9.9%) and men (12.7%). Discrimination by the police or the judicial system showed a highly significant association ($p = 0.001$), affecting 11.9% of men, 4.8% of women, 25% of non-binary and 33.3% of the unidentified. An association was also observed between gender and the way of dealing with injustices ($p = 0.013$), with women (79.9%) and men (73.2%) reporting that they usually talk to other people about these experiences. Although concerns about racial injustice during childhood and adolescence were more reported by women (66.8%) than by men (59%), this

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difference was not statistically significant ($p = 0.052$). It is concluded that the intersectionality between race and gender influences exposure to discrimination, especially in institutional spaces, reinforcing the need for anti-racist public policies that promote equity and well-being for the black population in higher education.

Keywords: Racial discrimination. Everyday racism. Students.

INTRODUCTION

Among the countries of the American continent, Brazil stands out negatively as being the one that received the largest number of enslaved people on the African continent during the period of Colonial and Empire Brazil. Millions of Africans were forced to be transported to Brazil in deplorable conditions, forced to work on large coffee and sugarcane estates and/or to serve these plantation owners while having all their human rights disrespected. This historical context has had important implications for the sociocultural and economic formation of the country that reverberate to the present day (Rafael, 2021).

In addition, due to strong pressure from the British for slavery to be abolished in order to sell their goods, on May 13, 1888, the Golden Law was signed, which officially abolished slavery in Brazil. However, in addition to the delay in this information spreading throughout the country, as well as the resistance of merchants to free the population considered captive, the lack of support by public policies and the prejudice intrinsic to 388 years of slavery made it impossible to practically free themselves from slavery (Vieira; Alves, 2024; Pires *et al*., 2024).

In view of this, even with the significant change identified in the 2022 Demographic Census, carried out by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), which showed that 55.5% of Brazilians declare themselves black or brown, racial discrimination still persists in various spheres of society, affecting different groups, including university students.

The higher education environment also stands out for its historical perspective of elitism, especially in relation to certain courses that are predominantly occupied by white men and with better financial conditions (Fredrich *et al*., 2022). In this way, students who are part of ethnic-racial minorities face constant challenges to remain in higher education, such as external factors that prevent them from remaining in university or discriminatory situations that these students may be targeted at (De Oliveira Valério *et al*., 2021).

Consequently, it is denoted that racism is integrated into Brazilian social structures, influencing the marginalization of blacks in numerous areas, such as the restriction of basic rights and the multiplication of cultural stereotypes that portray black people as unskilled or uncivilized. Thus, as exposed by Costa, Queiroz and Muniz (2024), The impact of racism on black subjectivity is considerable and comes from a Brazilian society structured on the foundations of slavery, which built and perpetuated an ideal of white superiority.

This environment influenced many black people to deny their identity in the hope of achieving social ascension. In addition, it is also possible to highlight that structural racism occasionally affects the self-esteem and sense of racial belonging of the black population,

which can generate obstacles to recognizing and valuing their origins. By making Afro-Brazilian history and culture invisible, Eurocentric education strengthens this system, helping to gradually accentuate inequalities and marginalization of this population (Costa; Queiroz; Muniz, 2024).

From this perspective, questions emerge about how the condensation of various stressors related to racial discrimination – which can occur in the most varied scenarios – can impact the mental health of black university students. The work carried out by Guerra *et al*. (2024), showed that the experiences of racist insults experienced by black academics within the university environment result in uncertainties that exhaust the self-confidence and motivation of university students, directly affecting their mental health and performance in the course.

From this perspective, this study aims to analyze the experiences of discrimination suffered by university students based on gender.

METHOD

ETHICAL ASPECTS

This work carefully followed the guidelines present in Resolution No. 466, of December 12, 2012, of the National Health Council, which integrates the five basic references of bioethics: autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence, justice and equity, in order to guarantee the rights and duties that concern the research participants, the scientific community and the State. Due to the availability of the data collection instrument through *Google Forms*, the guidelines of Circular No. 2/2021/CONEP on research in virtual environments were also followed. The Informed Consent Form (ICF) was integrated into the first part of the electronic form, in which participants could accept or not participate in the study after reading it (Brasil, 2021).

The data presented in this research are part of the broader study entitled: "Racial Discrimination and Mental Health in Universities". The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Vale do Acaraú State University (UVA), according to opinion No. 6,279,258.

DESIGN, STAGES, PARTICIPANTS AND STUDY PERIOD

This is a quantitative study, with an exploratory, descriptive and cross-sectional approach, carried out in five Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), both public and private, located in the state of Ceará, carried out from September to December 2023. The institutions were: Vale do Acaraú State University (UVA), Luciano Feijão College (FLF),

Federal University of Ceará (UFC) Sobral Campus, 05 de Julho College (F5) and IEducare College (FIED). The sample consisted of 829 university students duly enrolled in these institutions.

Data collection took place in a hybrid manner, both in person and *online*. As a strategy employed in the face-to-face mode, students from each institution were invited to participate in the research before the beginning of classes or at the end, with the collaboration and support of their respective professors. Another technique also used was the participation in events in these HEIs so that the invitation to the target audience could be made. The collection in virtual format took place by sending text messages via *E-mails*, *WhatsApp* and *Instagram*. It should also be noted that UVA and UFC made available the *institutional emails* of all students enrolled in the semester.

The data collection instruments were organized and made available through *Google Forms*, including questions about sociodemographic information and the Racial Discrimination Experiences Scale, an instrument that allows measuring discriminatory experiences based on ethnicity, race or skin color, initially published in 1990, in the study *Coronary Artery Risk Development in Young Adults* and, later, reformulated and revalidated for the North American population (Krieger, 1999). Five dimensions make up this scale: response to unfair treatment, discrimination, concern, global issues, and complaint filed. The scale was validated in Brazil and demonstrated high reliability and validity, standing out for its considerable correlation with other instruments for assessing discriminatory experiences (Fattore *et al*., 2018).

The data obtained were processed using the Microsoft Office Excel software for the primary organization, and then the statistical analysis was performed using SPSS 20.0 (version 10101131007). For statistical inferences, the following procedures were performed: descriptive statistics to characterize sociodemographic data and the experience of racial discrimination in social life; calculation of the mean (M) for the age of the participants; standard deviation (SD); and the Fisher test, used to verify the correlation between the items of the Scale of Experiences of Discrimination in different contexts, in addition to the analysis of concerns related to gender. Thus, a significantly low "p" value indicates a statistically relevant association between the variables analyzed. The incorporation of Fisher's test enabled a more robust and safe analysis, in order to improve the interpretation of the data collected (Moore, 2009).

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the sociodemographic factors analyzed, in which it is possible to identify the variables related to gender, municipality of residence, race/color and marital status of the students, through descriptive statistics.

Table 1 – Presentation of the Sociodemographic Profile of University Students, Ceará, 2023.

		N	%
Gender	Female	394	52,5
	Male	350	46,6
	Non-binary	4	,5
	I prefer not to identify myself	3	,4
Age	18 or 19	165	22,0
M=22.8 SD=5.02	20 or 21	188	25,1
Min=18 Max=64	22 or 23	183	24,4
(2 missing points)	24 or 25	94	12,6
	26 to 30	71	9,5
	More than 30	48	6,4
Race	Brown	439	58,5
	Black	93	12,4
	White	209	27,8
	Yellow	10	1,3
Civilian situation	Single	666	88,7
	Married	48	6,4
	Stable union	35	4,7
	Widower	2	,3
What is your religion?	Catholic	446	59,4
	Evangelical	88	11,7
	Spiritist	10	1,3
	Umbanda	10	1,3
	Candomblé	1	,1
	Atheist	37	4,9
	I have no religion	135	18,0
	Other Religions	24	3,2
	Total	751	100,0

Source: prepared by the authors.

As can be seen in Table 1, the item sex is one of the parameters analyzed to recognize the participants by their gender identity, with a great similarity in the percentages of male (46.6%) and female (52.5%) respondents. The mean age parameter is 22.8 years, showing that the participants are composed of a population of young adults. Table 1 also shows that age ranged from 18 years to 64 years, thus denoting the contemplation of one of the inclusion criteria of the study, as well as demonstrating an interesting variability in ages. Regarding race, there was a predominance of the brown population (58.5%). Regarding marital status, the vast majority of participants were single (88.7%). Finally, the Catholic religion (59.4%) was mostly higher than the others.

Table 2 shows the association between the response to unfair treatment and its relationship with gender among university students, performed using descriptive statistics and the Fisher test.

Table 2 – Relationship between the response to unfair treatment and its relationship with gender in university students.

RESPONDING TO UNFAIR TREATMENT	Female (N=437)		Male (N=385)		Non-binary (N=4)		I prefer not to identify (N=3)		Fisher	p
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
I) If you feel that you are being treated unfairly, you usually:									5,247	0,116
a) Accept this as a fact of life	105	24,0	93	24,2	3	75,0	1	33,3		
b) Try to do something about it	332	76,0	292	75,8	1	25,0	2	66,7		
II) If you are being treated unfairly, you usually:									9,705	*0,013
a) Talk to other people about it	349	79,9	282	73,2	2	50,0	1	33,3		
b) Keep it to yourself	88	20,1	103	26,8	2	50,0	2	66,7		

Source: prepared by the authors. * p<0.05

Table 3 shows the participants' responses in relation to one of the dimensions analyzed by the Racial Discrimination Experiences Scale related to the perception of unfair treatment. In the first topic, which addresses how individuals usually react to being treated unfairly, there is a similarity in the percentages of both women (76%) and men (75.8%), because the latter reported trying to take some action against injustice. With regard to non-binary individuals, a small number (25.0%) also adopted the posture of trying to do something about it, while those who preferred not to identify themselves showed greater variation, with 66.7% trying to do something.

In the second topic, which investigates whether the interviewees used to talk to other people about perceived injustice, both women (79.9%) and men (73.2%) stand out when they reveal that they did. On the other hand, a significant portion of non-binary people (50.0%) and those who preferred not to identify themselves (33.3%) answered that they prefer to keep these experiences to themselves.

Thus, the statistical analysis showed significant associations between gender and responses to perceived injustice. The highlighted p-values indicated statistically significant associations between gender and the answers to questions about unfair treatment. In the second topic two of the table, it was possible to identify a difference in the answers

between the gender groups (p=0.013). These distinctions observed in the way participants reacted to injustice had a statistically significant basis related to gender identity.

Table 3 shows the association between racial discrimination and its relationship with gender among university students, based on descriptive statistics and the Fisher test.

Table 3 – Relationship between racial discrimination and its relationship with gender in university students, Ceará, 2024.

DISCRIMINATION	Female (N=433)		Male (N=385)		Non-binary (N=4)		I prefer not to identify (N=3)		Fisher	p
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
… suffered the experience of discrimination, ... Because of your race, ethnicity, or color?									6,711	0,059
No	305	69,8	263	68,3	2	50,0	0	0,0		
Yes	132	30,2	122	31,7	2	50,0	3	100,0		
a) At school									6,441	0,071
Low exposure	299	69,1	264	68,6	2	50,0	0	0,0		
High exposure	134	30,9	121	31,4	2	50,0	3	100,0		
b) When looking for a job									8,187	* 0,031
Low exposure	390	90,1	336	87,3	2	50,0	2	66,7		
High exposure	43	9,9	49	12,7	2	50,0	1	33,3		
c) At work									4,744	0,160
Low exposure	384	88,7	342	88,8	2	50,0	3	100,0		
High exposure	49	11,3	43	11,2	2	50,0	0	0,0		
d) When buying a house									5,166	0,237
Low exposure	425	98,2	369	95,8	4	100,0	3	100,0		
High exposure	8	1,8	16	4,2	0	0,0	0	0,0		
e) Seeking medical care									6,343	0,094
Low exposure	394	91,0	359	93,2	3	75,0	2	66,7		
High exposure	39	9,0	26	6,8	1	25,0	1	33,3		
f) Requesting service in a store or restaurant									6,814	0,060
Low exposure	356	82,2	310	80,5	2	50,0	1	33,3		
High exposure	77	17,8	75	19,5	2	50,0	2	66,7		
g) When applying for credit or bank loan									5,781	0,141
Low exposure	419	96,8	369	95,8	4	100,0	2	66,7		
High exposure	14	3,2	16	4,2	0	0,0	1	33,3		
h) On the street or in a public establishment									5,212	0,121
Low exposure	336	77,6	290	75,3	2	50,0	1	33,3		
High exposure	97	22,4	95	24,7	2	50,0	2	66,7		
i) By the Police or in the Forum									18,503	0.000
Low exposure	412	95,2	339	88,1	3	75,0	2	66,7		
High exposure	21	4,8	46	11,9	1	25,0	1	33,3		

Source: prepared by the authors. * p<0.05 *** p<0.001

The present analysis is based on the application of the Racial Discrimination Experiences Scale, validated in Brazil, which has demonstrated high reliability and validity (Fattore *et al*., 2018). The results allow us to understand patterns of exposure to

discriminatory experiences among university students, considering the relationship between discrimination and gender.

The analysis revealed that both female (30.2%) and male (31.7%) students reported having suffered racial, ethnic or skin color discrimination. However, the prevalence was higher among non-binary people (50%) and those who chose not to identify themselves (100%). Despite these differences, no statistical significance was found in this association (p=0.059), indicating that, although the trend suggests greater exposure for groups that do not conform to the gender binary, the data do not allow robust statistical inferences.

On the other hand, discrimination when looking for a job showed a statistically significant association (p=0.031), showing that non-binary people (50%) and those who chose not to identify themselves (33.3%) reported a substantially higher exposure compared to female (9.9%) and male (12.7%) students. These findings suggest that gender identity may act as an aggravating factor in the experience of racial discrimination in the labor market, possibly due to the intersectionality between racial and gender prejudices.

Experience of discrimination in interactions with the police or in the judicial system was the only variable that demonstrated a highly significant association (p=0.001). In this context, the data show that men (11.9%) were more exposed than women (4.8%), while non-binary people (25%) and those who chose not to identify themselves (33.3%) had an even higher rate. These results reinforce a pattern of institutionalized discrimination that affects racialized groups differently, with a more pronounced impact on those who challenge gender norms.

The other contexts presented in the analysis did not demonstrate a statistically significant correlation, which suggests that discriminatory experiences may vary according to the social space and the interactions involved.

In sum, the findings indicate that the intersectionality between gender and racial identity plays an important role in exposure to discrimination, particularly in institutional settings such as the labor market and the justice system. Although no statistical significance was found in all the variables analyzed, the differences observed are indicative of structural challenges faced by minority groups within the broader university and social context. Future studies can further explore the mechanisms that sustain these dynamics and propose strategies to mitigate their impacts.

Table 5 shows the association between concern about racial discrimination and its relationship with gender among university students, based on descriptive statistics and the Fisher test.

Table 5 – Relationship between concern about racial discrimination and its relationship with gender in university students, Ceará, 2024.

WORRY	Female (N=437)		Male (N=385)		Non-binary (N=4)		I prefer not to identify (N=3)		Fisher	p
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
a) When you were a child or teenager (under 18 years old), did you worry about people in your racial group being treated unfairly because of their race or skin color?									7,184	0,052
Low exposure	145	33,2	158	41,0	2	50,0	0	0,0		
High exposure	292	66,8	227	59,0	2	50,0	3	100,0		
b) In the last year, have you been concerned about people in your racial group being treated unfairly because of race or skin color?									2,191	0,517
Low exposure	126	28,8	119	30,9	2	50,0	0	0,0		
High exposure	311	71,2	266	69,1	2	50,0	3	100,0		
c) In the last year, have you worried about experiences of unfair treatment because of your race or skin color?									3,401	0,377
Low exposure	199	45,5	162	42,1	2	50,0	0	0,0		
High exposure	238	54,5	223	57,9	2	50,0	3	100,0		

Source: prepared by the authors.

Analysis of the data in Table 5 reveals interesting differences in concerns related to unfair treatment, especially in the context of gender. First, it is notable that women had higher levels of concern about unfair treatment, both in childhood/adolescence and in the last year, when compared to men. Specifically, 66.8% of women reported high exposure to injustice during childhood or adolescence, while only 59% of men mentioned the same. In the case of concern about the unfair treatment of people of the same racial group in the last year, women also obtained a higher percentage (71.2%) compared to men (39.1%).

On the other hand, when considering personal experiences of unfair treatment, gender did not remain a consistent factor. Although women demonstrated a slight difference compared to men, with 54.5% of women reporting high exposure and 57.9% of men doing the same, this difference was small. This suggests that while there are variations in perceptions and concerns, they are not as marked as in previous comparisons, as in the case of unfair treatment in the context of the same racial group.

In addition, when looking at the responses of non-binary people (50% high exposure) and those who preferred not to identify (100%), it is clear that these groups have similar experiences of exposure to unfair treatment, which adds an important layer to the debate about the impact of gender identity on concerns about racial injustice.

Despite these differences, it is essential to highlight that the results did not indicate a statistically significant relationship between gender and concerns about unfair treatment, either in the context of childhood and adolescence, or in the last year. This suggests that while there are variations in responses from men, women, and non-binary people, gender alone does not appear to have a substantial impact on concerns about unfair treatment related to race or skin color. Thus, other factors may be influencing these perceptions, such as individual contexts, cultural histories, and the interaction between racial and gender identity.

Thus, while the data presented reflect differences in perceptions of unfair treatment between genders, the absence of strong statistical significance indicates that the influence of gender, by itself, is not determinant of reported concerns, suggesting that issues of racial injustice are complex and can be shaped by multiple social and personal dimensions.

DISCUSSION

With regard to the sociodemographic conditions present in Table 1, a trend similar to other studies with the university population is observed. Thus, it is possible to highlight a greater participation of women, single people, young adults and Catholics. Corroborating this, the Map of Higher Education in Brazil 2020, presented by the Union of Maintaining Entities of Higher Education Establishments in the State of São Paulo (SEMESP), points out that 57% of students enrolled in HEIs belong to the female sex. Regarding the age group, most university students are between 19 and 24 years old, single and come from public high school (SEMESP, 2020).

According to the results presented in Table 2, it is noted that most participants, regardless of gender, tend to try to do something when they suffer injustice. In view of this, according to the French writer and philosopher Michel Foucault, resistance is characterized as a power intrinsic to power relations, where power is defined as "an affect and be affected". Resisting, in this perspective, is the ability to conceive relationships that escape the dominant strategies in the political field. Foucault argues that resistance is inherent to domination, because, just as there is the force that controls and tries to manage life, there is also the force that reacts to this control, creating new possibilities of existence, especially when suffering the negative experience of being treated unfairly (Foucault, 2021).

In addition, for experiences due to racial issues (Table 3), women reported lower values to high exposure than men. These results are in line with what is presented in the scientific literature. According to the study by Pina, Pereira and Silva (2020), black women face double discrimination, being simultaneously marginalized both for being women in a patriarchal society and for being black in a racially hierarchical context. An idea also defended by the American philosopher Angela Davis, in her work "Women, Race and Class", Davis exemplifies how black women's struggles for rights often had to engage on multiple fronts, challenging not only racial domination, but also internal sexism within their own communities (Davis, 2016).

Table 4 showed low percentages of self-reported racial discrimination. These results are suggestive of the non-perception of discriminatory attitudes, where situations often happen in a veiled way. For Silva (2021), this lack of perception regarding self-perceived racial discrimination may be related to the form of manifestation of this problem, the author highlights that veiled racism has a high incidence precisely because it is characterized by its adjacency in comments and jokes.

In addition, Table 4 also shows that men tend to suffer greater discrimination when looking for a job and also when there is the involvement of public authorities. These data show a certain vulnerability in the link with the labor market and the judicial system with black men, signaling a critical concern with institutionalized discrimination.

In view of this, the study by Machado, Borges, and Soares (2023), explores how racial disparities become evident when analyzing the dynamics of the labor market, where young people from the black community face significant barriers to access and unequal working conditions compared to their white peers. These inequalities manifest themselves in the form of higher unemployment rates among young black people, a higher prevalence of informal jobs, lower wages, and a concentration in menial positions. In addition, these conditions perpetuate a cycle of economic and social vulnerability, limiting opportunities for ascension and deepening structural inequalities in the labor market.

With regard to judicial environments, the study by Lamaison and Gervasoni (2023), which sought to analyze linguistic racism in the Courts of Justice of Rio Grande do Sul, exposes that expressions such as "denigrate" and "mulatto" were recurrent in judicial decisions. The expression "denigrate" was identified in 43 decisions handed down by the Court of Justice of Rio Grande do Sul. The expression "mulatto" was found only in one decision in the period from 2020 to 2022, however, in 2019 a decision containing the term "mulatto" was also located. This demonstrates how structural racism is intrinsic in Brazilian

organizational structures, especially in judicial environments, which should guarantee equal rights for all citizens.

Finally, Table 5 exposes the concern with suffering racial discrimination that permeates several stages of the lives of black students. These findings are in line with the study carried out by De Paula and Rodrigues (2022), on the interface between race and racism in the academic universe. The authors point out that the internalization of racism and the fear of rejection can lead to behavior similar to phobia, causing the black person to avoid environments and situations that can generate experiences of discrimination.

For Fanon (2008) this egoic inhibition leads to a constant conflict between the desire to belong and the fear of being rejected. This fear can imply isolation, emotional desensitization and the psychic collapse of the ego, which can be potentiated by the history of marginalization and exclusion and making the person passive in the face of racism. In addition, racial discrimination experienced or feared can have repercussions on mental health, generating depression and chronic stress, which weakens the ability to cope.

In this context, in which it was found that racism was experienced by students both in the university space and, even more markedly, outside it, the importance of racial literacy among higher education professors is highlighted. As stated by Pereira et al. (2024), this competence is essential for teachers to develop educational practices committed to confronting racism in its multiple expressions, inside and outside the university, collaborating for the formation of a more just and egalitarian society.

CONCLUSION

The results of this research confirm that racial discrimination is not an isolated event, but a structural and persistent reality that crosses the trajectory of black and brown university students. This discrimination manifests itself in a recurrent and multifaceted way in different spheres of academic, social and professional life, becoming part of the daily life of these subjects. Evidence shows that experiences of racism occur both in formal university spaces, such as classrooms and laboratories, and in informal environments, such as living spaces, internship or employment selection processes, and in routine social interactions.

The implications of this experience for the integral health of students are profound. Continuous exposure to situations of exclusion, microaggressions, stigmatization and racial prejudice contributes to the emergence of psychological suffering, such as anxiety, depression and low self-esteem. In addition, the feeling of not belonging and the feeling of invisibility in the face of an academic structure still marked by racial inequalities reinforce

the vulnerability of these students. Such factors represent concrete barriers to full academic, personal and professional development, limiting opportunities for social ascension and full exercise of citizenship.

In this scenario, it becomes urgent to reflect on the role of higher education institutions in promoting racial equity. The survey highlights the need to strengthen public and institutional policies aimed at valuing diversity, promoting well-being and guaranteeing the rights of the black and brown population. To this end, it is essential to invest in the critical and anti-racist training of university professors and managers, in actively listening to students' experiences, and in implementing concrete actions to combat institutional racism.

Finally, the data presented here reinforce the importance of broadening the scope of investigations on the effectiveness of racial inclusion policies in Brazilian higher education. Only through the collective commitment to a truly anti-racist education will it be possible to build fairer, more welcoming and transformative academic environments.

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