



The Common as Cultural Action: new arrangements for a politics of the culture

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ABSTRACT – The Common as Cultural Action: new arrangements for a politics of the culture – The article aims to observe the rising of new ways of dealing with the Brazilian cultural policy, which began to be tested in the last decade and in the current days become more critical due to the termination of the Ministry of Culture in 2019. The Festival *Olhares Sobre o Corpo*, the actions of the collective *Estopô Balaio* and of the *Trupe da Lona Preta* were analyzed. To collaborate with the debates that, like the selected experiences, problematize the recent decisions of the State, the concept of commonism as cultural action is presented. This is a proposal still little researched at the Brazilian universities. Therefore, it could open new ways to think about the relation between politics of the culture and collective action.

Keywords: **Politics of the Common. Culture. Necropolitics. Cultural Action. Politics of the Culture.**

RÉSUMÉ – Le commun comme action culturelle: nouvelles dispositions pour une politique de la culture – L'article examine l'émergence de nouvelles façons de traiter la politique culturelle brésilienne, mise en place et testée au cours de la dernière décennie et qui, avec l'aggravation de la situation depuis l'extinction du Ministère de la Culture en 2019, deviennent de plus en plus importantes. Le Festival *Olhares Sobre o Corpo*, les actions du collectif *Estopô Balaio* et de la *Trupe Lona Preta* ont été analysés. Afin de collaborer aux débats qui, en tant qu'exemples de ces expériences choisies, problématisent les décisions récentes de l'État; le concept de commun-isme en tant qu'action culturelle est présenté. C'est encore une proposition peu recherchée dans les universités brésiliennes. Donc, elle devrait ouvrir des nouvelles voies à la réflexion sur la relation entre la politique culturelle et l'action collective.

Mots-clés: **Politique du Commun. Culture. Nécropolitique. Action Culturelle. Politique de La Culture.**

RESUMO – O Comum como Ação Cultural: novos arranjos para uma política da cultura – O artigo observa o surgimento de novas formas de lidar com a política cultural brasileira, iniciadas e testadas na última década e que, com o agravamento da situação a partir da extinção do Ministério da Cultura em 2019, tornam-se cada vez mais importantes. Foram analisados o Festival *Olhares Sobre o Corpo*, as ações do coletivo *Estopô Balaio* e da *Trupe da Lona Preta*. Para colaborar com os debates que, a exemplo destas experiências selecionadas, problematizam as decisões recentes do Estado, apresenta-se o conceito de comunismo como ação cultural. Essa é uma proposta ainda pouco pesquisada nas universidades brasileiras. Portanto, poderá abrir caminhos inéditos para pensar a relação entre política da cultura e ação coletiva.

Palavras-chave: **Política do Comum. Cultura. Necropolítica. Ação Cultural. Política da Cultura.**

It is broadly known that, since 2016, public policies for culture and private financing have been gradually reduced or deprived in Brazil. At first, this article lists some of these events to contextualize the presented discussion by introducing theoretical concepts that, even though developed in different countries, such as South Africa, Belgium, and Slovenia, contribute with some local issues, as explained at the beginning. Next, some practical experiences made in different Brazilian regions will be shared, those that, in their way, add to the debate by showing unusual ways to propose cultural actions, even in the most precarious conditions that seem impassable.

In Brazil, the new federal party management that took place in 2019 ended up the Ministry of Culture and delegated the cultural area firstly to the Ministry of Citizenship, and later, still in 2019, to the Ministry of Tourism. The sponsorship of public and private companies assigned to several artistic groups and companies were canceled, or drastically cut off. Besides financial issues, a moral agenda has been responsible for characterizing many productions as enemies of the Brazilian (morality) society.

After some years with initiatives that showed to be promising, such as the implementation of *Pontos de Cultura*¹ and the project *Mais Cultura nas Escolas*², Brazil seems to go through a regression, that affects culture in a negative and radical perspective. What once contributed to the flourishing of cultural politics presently seems to be managed by a cruel project of cultural necropolitics.

In Achille Mbembe's essay, where the concept of necropolitics is proposed, the Cameroonian philosopher explains that life production forms of contemporaneity are increasingly producing death. From this statement, he inquires how the new configurations of new types of social existences guide to shaping *living deads* (Mbembe, 2018). In other words, necropolitics not only produces literal death, but also the process of anesthesia and loss of the subject's voices as if it were a sort of inertia or death in life. In this sense, the necropolitics regime, beyond impacting individuals and populations, is also a methodological disoperation of many politics. The cultural one is not an exception.

Instead of having increased the quantity and quality for funds to cultural production network (production-distribution-exchange-consumption), it is observed an effort to disable these elements, what impacts not only the people involved (artists, producers, curators, and the audience), but also disarticulates ideas, proposals, and actions.

Fortunately, even in face of this scenario, some investigations and practices emerge not only as propositions of resistances to the present context but also as initiatives that point to other possible formats for cultural actions. The domain of the common, a greyish area between State and market, seems to ground several civil movements that invite us to perceive cultural and artistic actions with a fresher look.

The commonism as possibility of action

The researchers Nico Dockx and Pascal Gielen have called attention upon the centrality of culture in the processes of social formation. Dockx and Gielen invert the Marxist logic, in which culture is the superstructure, instead of the root of relations (economy-State-ideology-culture). For this reason, according to the authors, interpersonal relationships must be understood as the root of the value of the politics of commons. They observe that some practices that investigate new arrangements consider that human relationships are the most essential capital, which supports that the so-called commonism³ survives. “Commonism is concerned with the total person in his or her context and global environment” (Dockx; Gielen, 2018, p. 55).

Culture is responsible for the production of meaning of those who are part of and form the common. It is the ignition of all the other flows: economic, legal, ecologic, and politic. Dockx and Gielen support the idea that just like the communism, the commonism is an ideology. These authors follow Slavoj Žižek’s understanding, for whom ideology is created through different levels, which are not always conscious and verbalized – which constitutes a tacit knowledge that is very friendly to the catches of the capitalist system. Based on Žižek, Dockx and Gielen explain that ideology never exists in itself, but through relations established in subjectivation processes; thus, ideology works as a modulator of subjectivities.

From that hypothesis, and with contributions from many other artists and researchers, Dockx and Gielen have been investigated what they name as “aesthetics of the real”:

What an aesthetics of the real means: a way of giving form to society and our contemporary human condition. With Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, we understand aesthetics as ‘the art of thinking beautifully’ about what could be beyond the horizon [...] In the aesthetic of the real, fiction can become reality and reality is constructed in the shadows of human imaginations (Dockx; Gielen, 2018, p. 58-59).

Art, creativity, and cultural manifestations could be considered essential resources for the creation of commons, even though there is a great challenge ahead for them to actually consolidate themselves as a public policy. Dockx and Gielen show that there are significant differences between artistic groups that organize themselves in communities and those that seek for a logic of the common. For them, the community’s role is to keep social cohesion and to support an integrative feeling of *ourselves*. On the other hand, artistic practices based on commons explore an unknown area between the market and the State. The basis of the common is grounded in the attention given to the social, and this is how commonism can enter the realm of politics. Dockx and Gielen claim that this is why artistic practices developed under this value are often ignored by both the market and public funding policies. A possible cultural politics for these artistic practices could be a cosmopolitics.

New arrangements imply other methodological configurations so that the group’s interaction flow can occur. Punctuating the differences between practices based on communities or groups that follow a new logic, such as that of the common, is crucial to signal not only new aesthetics but also new ethic arrangements.

Olhares Sobre o Corpo Festival: ignitions that emerge from the common

Although the most significant cuts in the field of culture are recent, forms of the civil organization seeking other possible policy formats are not. Whether due to low budgets or the need to trigger other links between a local community and artistic production, initiatives that operate within the

common look for creative strategies to continue existing. Most of the time, they are not widely mediatized, since in many cases, their existence is dependent on the need to remain invisible – at least to the State and the market. Whenever they are mediatized, they tend to modify themselves drastically, causing previously established principles to be completely corrupted.

One of the cases that illustrates an action of the common in the field of art and culture is the *Olhares Sobre o Corpo* [Glances on the Body] Festival. The festival was held between 2004 and 2014. It took place in Uberlândia (in the state of Minas Gerais), and its core was the language of body art. According to the release of its 7th edition (2010), available for download on the website movimiento.org, its purposes were:

To complexify the thinking about the body and its sociocultural, and artistic-geographic relation in the *Triângulo Mineiro* area. This endeavor is based on the contemporary relationship with the body arts and presents itself in order to research the integrating interfaces of this thought such as dance, visual arts and the performance [...] *Olhares Sobre o Corpo* presents itself as a proposal to intensify the artistic and scientific thought and their affections for the general audience, especially for the artists from the city and surroundings to create ways of meeting with new aesthetic reflections in and outside of our space (Red Sudamericana de Danza, 2010, online)⁴.

The general direction of *Olhares Sobre o Corpo*, by Fernanda Bevilaqua, was not limited to performing. Besides performances, different actions for the relationship between artistic production and the city invited people to not limit themselves only as spectators but also as participants in the building of the festival. As a value, it intended to promote exchanges among the community of Uberlândia, the artists from the city, and other states. The principles were based on the democratization of access to art through the educative process of audience formation.

However, it is essential to mention that the democratization aspect developed by the festival was not limited to access to artistic productions. Isaura Botelho (2016) states that many of the projects based on democratization values have one-sided vector; in other words, an action that leaves from one side to the other, with no engagement and participation of the party that receives that action. The author recognizes that access policies to the cultural goods arise with a perspective that aims the forced inclusion

of individuals within a system of values. This understanding of democratization can be naïve if one considers that appropriation happens merely by bringing the audience and work closer together. It is also important to highlight that, in a country like Brazil, a country with impassable borders and destitute of the most basic services, access policies are still a conquest. Access and participation are not aspects that exclude each other, but elements of the same network that can be developed in combination.

In the case of *Olhares Sobre o Corpo*, in addition to democratizing access to productions and discussions, the value of cultural democracy was at stake as well.

Cultural democracy assumes the existence of diverse audiences, instead of a single and homogenous audience, and the absence of a unique paradigm for the legitimation of cultural practices. It leaves from new studies that intend to overcome variables such as class, income, age range, and home location, which are closely connected to scholarly practices as the only ones relevant to greater or lesser cultural consumption (Botelho, 2016, p. 50-51).

The editions of *Olhares Sobre o Corpo* sought to develop what the curatorship called as *glocal*, that is, a notion that investigated the cohabitation of political and aesthetic principles of the global and local instances. The festival considered the geographical and social structure of the city by observing artistic practices. As described in the release: “These observations allow understanding and effectively participating in a culture, creating possibilities of restructuring political and social crises” (Red Sudamericana de Danza, 2010, online).

The actions for continuity that went beyond the duration of the festival, which were not limited to performance schedules, deserve to be highlighted. While it lasted, the blog of *Olhares Sobre o Corpo* kept consistent updates about artistic productions of body arts, fomented discussions, and promoted creation of networks. There was a live feeling in the festival, and artists, the audience and partners discussed, proposed, and experimented with ways of continuity. One of the discussed and experimented strategies happened a few years later, in the 9th edition, in 2012. That year, *Olhares Sobre o Corpo*, as in all other editions, had small public funding. In the 9th edition, the festival received R\$ 3,000 from the

Uberlândia Municipal Secretary of Culture – an amount that certainly is not enough to pay the most basic needs of an event like that. In the previous editions, besides the town hall's support, the festival applied for edicts, even though it was never dependent on them because most of the time, the structure of *Olhares Sobre o Corpo* was possible thanks to the donation of inhabitants. Donations were a way of inviting people to practice their citizenship as they were responsible for the existence of the event.

In 2012, what was a local practice was extended to the entire country. Through a network of acquaintances (professors, producers, and dance artists), the festival organizers spread 100 piggy banks over all the national territory. It is possible to state that what *Olhares Sobre o Corpo* did is similar to the most recent *crowdfunding*. However, fundraising was not separated from values and principles presented in the previous editions of the festival. Even the fundraising was considered and developed as an artistic gesture.

The opening of piggy banks was a performance that launched the 2012 edition. They were not broken but got through a *minor surgery*. Money was collected, and some seeds covered by a bit of earth replaced it. Piggy banks were destined back to the cities of donation. The professor and critic of dance Helena Katz mentions:

The symbolic force of the image of 'post-surgery' assembled piggy banks testified that is the commitment of each one that makes the change happen. Because the piggy banks had ceased being a place to insert something into to become a place to donate; the gesture of putting in replaced for the flowering gesture of pushing out. The beauty of that action concentrates what *Olhares Sobre o Corpo* does with the city and with those who have privilege for participating and implicating on it (Katz, 2012, online).

The way the gesture of donating was installed and developed by *Olhares Sobre o Corpo* went through the curatorship from end to end. That is, money donation was not something that happened before the event started – because it was already part of the event. Nor did it finish at the end of the festival, because the principle of the donation explored not only financial aid but also the participation and commitment of everyone.

Katz stresses that due to the low budget conditions, *Olhares Sobre o Corpo* never was able to extend its activities over many days. However, the

schedule concentrated in three or four days was enough to trigger ignitions that were not thought by the biggest dance festivals in the country. *Militant creativity* (Katz, 2012, online) was established as a counterpoint to festivals engaged with market and sponsorships by tax reduction.

In 2012 edition, everyone involved in the festival worked voluntarily. The money raised in piggy banks paid airplane tickets and lodging (some inhabitants and city artists hosted some people coming from other places). Meals were paid through scholarship exchanges at *Uai Q Dança* dance school, a company run by festival director Fernanda Bevilaqua. Katz recognizes that while *Olhares Sobre o Corpo* lasted, there was a structure and a very singular force, which could only be felt through a direct participation experience. There was a “close combination between affects and wisdom that guided the festival with a political vision on the dance field, what extended its reach” (Katz, 2012, online, n. p.).

It is possible to consider that the exchange and participation dimension created and improved by the *Olhares Sobre o Corpo* editions are close to the action of commons, previously mentioned by Nico Dockx and Pascal Gielen (2018). That is, beyond the economic logic, new ways of the financings were found and experienced.

Practices of commons in the current São Paulo context

The lack of public and private funding of artistic and cultural actions has pushed groups and companies to search for other ways of surviving. Although São Paulo city has municipal grant projects, such as *Fomento ao Teatro* [Funding for Theater] and *Fomento à Dança* [Funding for Dance], many artists need to find out different ways to continue with their works. Two examples are in the city outskirts: *Coletivo Estopô Balaio* and *Trupe da Lona Preta*.

Coletivo Estopô Balaio is formed by several artists, most of them living in the Jardim Romano neighborhood, in the eastern district of the city. It became widely known due to a flood in 2009 that affected the inhabitants' routine for several months. Many of Jardim Romano inhabitants and almost all *Estopô Balaio* members were born in the northeast region of Brazil and migrated to the city of São Paulo.

One of the collective's latest creations, *A cidade dos rios invisíveis* [The city of invisible rivers], addresses such issues. The theater play started at a train station near downtown, a place where countless people pass by to go to study and work during the week. Migration was both subject and dramaturgy in the play: migration between the country's regions (Northeast-Southeast), as well as inside the city.

Following the scenes that happened during the train trip, the theater play continued with the walking of the audience across Jardim Romano. The place that could have been summarized as a passive scenery for the narrative had become as significant as the actions developed by the actors. Some inhabitants and their houses were active elements in the work: their narratives crossed with the actors', deepening on the levels of description addressed in the performance.

The bonds developed between the *Estopô Balaio* and the neighborhood are not limited to this theater play. The engagement of Jardim Romano inhabitants in *A cidade dos rios invisíveis* was a result of work developed over time. Furthermore, there are many other actions promoted through the *Estopô*-Jardim Romano partnership.

Between 2017 and 2018, the group followed a schedule that has its headquarter, *Casa Balaio*, as a place that gathers several artistic and cultural actions. The house, rented from one of the *Estopô Balaio* members, is managed autonomously by the group. Income is generated by activities developed by them, such as selling books, T-shirts, DVDs, and products in the bar that is open during some events. However, the funding by public edicts is still the central *Estopô*'s budget.

In 2018, the group proposed the project *Próxima estação: Casa Balaio* (*Next station: Balaio House*), for the Cultural Action Program of the State of São Paulo (Proac), with the objective of continuing the actions they had been developing for seven years. In this project, the group listed the activities carried out in 2017 and 2018, in partnership with the local community and other artistic groups from São Paulo's eastern district: monthly presentations of *Sarau do Peixe*, on the third Saturday of each month; *Cine Varal Romano*, on the second Thursday of each month; *Show Cabaré D'água* performances, presentation of *Concerto para Espinho e Fulô*,

theater play by *Cia do Tijolo*, and *As três Marias*, by *Chicote de Língua* group, among many other actions.

The Balaio House presents itself as a kind of artistic residence for *Estopô Balaio*, but also for the local community. By developing activities over time, the house became a space of reference and resistance:

Balaio House is settled at 47 Adobe Street, next to Jardim Romano train station. Its schedule is managed through a close relationship with the inhabitants from that street and surroundings, since they are co-organizers of events, and other actions done with the group members. The means and modes of production are within a space management spectrum that has a relational field with surroundings as the raw material for developing such actions. In contexts like Jardim Romano, the house is not only a symbol of residence but also of resistance because floodwaters profaned it as a condition of shelter and reverie. In this sense, the occupation of a neighborhood house, making itself a kind of memorial house that narrates inhabitants' life trajectory, needs to be made in a shared manner, as it has been becoming Jardim Romano artistic and social memory symbol [...] In addition, the house has itself the social role of cultural equipment that resignifies the urban space of the farther east through artistic interventions that leave the headquarter and get in streets, surroundings, houses, and commercial establishments. In places with the absence of cultural equipment, the management of an independent space aligns with the idea of art and community, in which space-sharing actions create aesthetic contours in the form of cultural activities conducted by artists and residents⁵.

At another end of the city, in the western district, a similar case to *Estopô Balaio*: the theater and circus ensemble *Trupe da Lona Preta*. The group is made up of artists from the city outskirts and often acts in the farther places of the city. Similar to *Estopô Balaio*, the funds to maintain the group's activities are collaborative.

In 2018, for instance, *Lona Preta* held a season at Teatro de Arena, downtown São Paulo. In a partnership between the managers of Teatro de Arena and members of *Lona Preta*, it was decided that the ticket payment would be voluntary, and the value raised would be shared between the company and the Teatro de Arena's staff. In 2019, *Lona Preta* repeated that action with *Galpão do Folias*, home of another theater group in São Paulo, *Folias D'arte*.

Also, in 2019, in a partnership with *Engenho Teatral* – a group that deserves to be praised as well, due to the actions of common it develops –, *Trupe da Lona Preta* had a short season with an open rehearsal of its new work. At *Engenho Teatral* home, the ticket paid was voluntary, like the cases abovementioned.

Starting from critic readings of the current economic and social scenario and based on the educational principles of epic theater, *Lona Preta* develops an audience formation based on popular actions. The voluntary ticket paid is not a barrier to the access, and it also raises the question about the value of a theater show.

At a time when it is debated whether or not democracy (participation) is relevant in relation to the democratization (access) of culture, actions developed by *Trupe da Lona Preta* call attention to the absence that still exists in several places of a city that is considered a cultural pole. For participation and engagement of an audience, access is also required.

In 2015, the group was invited to participate in the I Heliópolis Theater Exhibition. The *Companhia de Teatro do Heliópolis*, the event organizer, invited artists, students, and researchers to write on actions and performances. In one of the critics' review on the theater play *O concerto da Lona Preta*, the artist and Professor Luiz Eduardo Frin, before talking about the performance itself, observes the way the audience display is set up:

In ancient Greece, theatres were built up by availing the geography. In this way, the grandstands carved out of mountain slopes ensured viewers could see and hear the tragedies and comedies on the scene.

Many centuries later, on a late afternoon in the now mild winter of São Paulo, artists from *Trupe da Lona Preta* are preparing to perform the show *O Concerto da Lona Preta*.

The place of the presentation, the Padre Pedro Balint Square, on the Sacomã neighborhood, is not surrounded by natural slopes, but is located under the spiral ramp that leads to the walkway at Juntas Provisórias Street.

In this ramp, which allows a privileged overview of the place, many people realize the movement of artists who, when preparing in the street, begin to perform, resist passing and begin to stay.

Even though the square is squeezed between lanes, buildings, walkways, and even trees, there is still a lot of space. Similar to the traffic agents, artists and event organizers start to signal that passers-by also resist the temptation to go on and on to watch a theater performance. With the spectators of the cabin,

or rather at the walkway, and with those who stayed in the square, with a lot of kids composing the audience, the *Concerto* begins (Frin, 2015, online).

The creation of the show with scenic resources adaptable for presentations at theaters and streets is *Lona Preta's* trademark. Even when performing in theaters, as is the case with the spaces of the groups abovementioned, they are often quite simple places in terms of structure. On the part of *Lona Preta*, there is a strong desire to approach spaces that demonstrate a commitment to their surroundings.

The examples of *Estopô Balaio* and *Trupe da Lona Preta* present us with attempts to create actions of common. Cultural activities developed by these groups are alternatives to the institutional models of biennials and the most significant art festivals. Such institutions are relevant, according to the Italian philosopher António Negri, as they are spaces of criticism, fighting arenas of ideologies where power is exposed and debated. Moreover, according to Negri, they are a market space (Gielen; Lavaert, 2018). Actions of common developed by the given examples show themselves as alternatives to the management formats implemented by the market and the State. They create zones that seek for a feeling of freedom within the current neoliberal scenario.

Challenges of the common

In an article published in the newspaper *El Pais* on June 5, 2019, the journalist Eliane Brum, writing about a hopelessness that is affecting the new generation of climate-activist teenagers, mentions that what has moved the latest social struggles comes from causes that cross the domain of the common. In the article, the journalist mentions a passage from the psychoanalysis magazine *Percurso*, from the Instituto Sedes Sapientiae, in which Peter Pál Pelbart notes that:

Perhaps the challenge is to abandon the dialectic of the Same and the Other, Identity and Otherness, and rescue the logic of Multiplicity. It is no longer just my right to be different from the Other or the Other's right to be different from me while preserving an opposition between us. Nor is it about a peaceful relationship of coexistence between us, in which each one is tied to their own identity like a dog to a pole and therefore encased in it. These encounters are about something more radical, about embarking and

assuming traces of the other and, with this, even differing from the self, taking off from the identity and creating an unusual driftage.

Similar actions to the *Olhares Sobre o Corpo* Festival, *Estopô Balaio*, and *Trupe da Lona Preta*, besides approaching the commons investigated by Dockx and Gielen, also face the difficulty quoted by Pelbard and Brum on the increasingly hard borders between Identity and Otherness.

In this sense, so that cultural policies can be turned into politics of the culture (Otte; Gielen, 2018), that is, so that they are no longer merely actions regulated by the market and the State, but also the result of civil movements, it is essential that we are crossed by the common. Starting from the recognition of the challenge of dealing with otherness, cultural actions need to be understood as an action that emerges from this context (hostile to the difference), but also as actions that can somehow overcome it to create new landscapes. So that this may have some possibility of existence, it is indispensable that an effort be made that invites us to elaborate on other forms of actions not limited to existing models of cultural policies.

Notes

- ¹ *Pontos de Cultura* was the major project developed by the *Cultura Viva* Project, created by the federal government in 2004 and that became a State policy in 2014. *Pontos de Cultura* sought to build up actions with a social and cultural impact in communities spread throughout the country. They were essential for the social and educational development in farther places from big urban Brazilian centers (Turino, 2010).
- ² *Mais Cultura nas Escolas* was officially regulated by PDDE/FNDE number 30, of August 3rd, 2012, and by complements from PDDE/FNDE number 4, of March 31st, 2014, and by PDDE/FNDE number 5, of March 31st, 2014 (Santana, 2015). The project aimed to provide financial resources to public schools in order to assure cultural activities that could promote the interlocution between local artistic experiences and the schools' pedagogical-political-project (PPP). Thanks to the proximity between the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education, the creation and implementation of the project were possible.
- ³ The authors play with the words *communism* and *commonism*. Similar to *communism*, the "ism" in *commonism* stresses that it is an ideology.

- ⁴ We highlight there are few materials on the internet about this festival. Even its website, created as a blog, is no longer available. This is evidence of the difficulty of maintaining the festival's actions as an artistic event, whose impacts are also visible in the discontinuity of its memory.
- ⁵ The text in Portuguese is from the project applied for Proac. Available at: <<http://www.editaisproac.sp.gov.br/InscricoesEditaisUFDPC/download/downloadArquivo.action;jsessionid=452F04FF89DA8B4FC85084CC72F2EFC8?arq.id=36605>>. Accessed on: 15 July 2019.

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