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# From Development to Repair: Dismantling Racism and Its Role in Shaping Poverty Today

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This article discusses the multidimensionality of poverty, how it is shaped and maintained through colonial logics, and how this understanding requires a holistic process of reparations. Reparations is a key part of decolonizing development. Anti-racism with integral intentions can be an expression of reparation as we actively dismantle hierarchies entrenched by racism (such as coloniality, apartheid, and caste systems). Drawing from a research project on race, ethnicity, and poverty conducted by Christian Aid, the authors reflect on what faith-based international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) must do in order to make these recognitions and move toward repair through working towards eradicating poverty.

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## Reparations as a Theological and Moral Imperative

A key focus within international development discussions regarding climate justice has been that of “Loss and damage.” Loss and damage, as formally understood, is a mechanism adopted at COP 27 through which economically disenfranchised countries, those often facing the most significant impact of climate change, can receive monetary assistance to cope with the impacts of extreme weather events. The adoption of this scheme is connected to significant mobilization by indigenous and small island nations regarding the connection between colonial extractivism and climate change. In particular, it is some level of recognition that longstanding forms of colonialism have helped increase the vulnerability of specific people and places to the adverse effects of climate change (IPCC 2022). As scholars such as Amitav Ghosh and Gurminder Bhambra and Peter Newell have long argued, climate change is a broad planetary crisis that can and must be understood in terms of processes of resource extraction and settler cultivation that have dramatically altered the environment on which life depends (Ghosh 2021). The unequal effects of climate change are linked to the moral and structural logic of the European colonial project that saw certain communities and natural resources as sites of continuous extraction and elimination (Bhambra and Newell 2022). Loss and damage could thus be a form of reparations from Global North countries that profited from colonialization to countries in the Global South that

have been impoverished and made more vulnerable due to these historical processes.

The concept of climate reparations is not new, as political geographer Keston Perry outlines. It is a wide-ranging and appropriate mechanism for recognizing the magnitude of the climate crisis, as well as creating a response that centers history and ethics (2020). Perry’s emphasis on the ethics of the issue is important, and it provides an anchoring point for our discussion here, which focuses first on how the systems of reasoning and morality entrenched during the European colonial project maintain poverty and exacerbate vulnerability to extreme events, and second on the role of reparations in responding to these historical injustices. In doing so, the argument aligns with those of others who see reparations as a moral imperative and a fundamental necessity for the process of healing that must occur for formerly colonized nations (Moffett 2017). Kenyan theologian Bob Kikuyu, for example, argues that the goal of reparations is reconciliation. Such a process of reconciliation must include not only monetary reparation, but also relational healing, both a repairing of relationships and a repairing of the relationship with creation (2022a). In other words, reparations can be seen as the holistic healing of all human relationships (Maluleke 1997; Harris 2017).

The road to reparations is complex and challenging and cannot be achieved without a significant understanding of the multidimensionality of justice. In this article, we focus particularly on how policymakers, international development organizations and others with decision-making power need to understand

poverty. Our particular emphasis is to engage faith-based INGOs that have, historically, been unwilling to recognize their role in perpetuating the colonial project (Goudge 2003; Duffield and Hewitt 2013; Kothari 2005; Wilson 2013; Silvey and Rankin 2011). This is significant because, as activists and scholars have noted repeatedly, the international development industry has always struggled to conceptualize the poverty prevalent in the Global South. Indeed, poverty is a major focus for the knowledge activities of the industry, particularly, as Jayati Ghosh points out, in terms of “defining the poor, categorizing the poor, analysing the behaviour of the poor, assessing policies designed to assist the poor or to alleviate their poverty, and so on” (2011).

This of course means that the persistence of poverty justifies the relevance of the development industry, which is tied to the relationship between racism and poverty, an as yet under-researched and under-acknowledged issue in the sector. Scholars such as Uma Kothari and Althea-Maria Rivas, for example, note there is an intentional negligence of “race” in development thinking and practice (Kothari 2006; Rivas 2018). Yet the sector needs to acknowledge and address the continuing legacy of colonial ideologies and the persistence of forms of racialized outcomes and hierarchies in development. In this article, we understand racism and colonialism as having an intertwined and symbiotic relationship that together maintain coloniality. Beyond the political and economic realities of colonialism, coloniality refers to long-standing power that emerges through colonialism. These patterns define culture, labour, interpersonal relations, and knowledge production, and are maintained in books, assessment of academic performance, culture, hope, perceptions of the self, and many other aspects of livelihood (Maldonado-Torres 2008). In paying attention to these patterns of power, we see how power maintains privilege and allows for the control of some groups in society. This means there is also a need to understand how Euro-American ideals influence the sector, and more specifically how authority, expertise, and knowledge have over time become racially symbolized.<sup>1</sup> Any move toward repair must recognize the power of coloniality and must be accompanied by a reconceptualization of poverty in all its complexity. Two key questions for thinking about reparations is “How have centuries of racism

contributed to this relational rupture that results in the multidimensional experience of poverty?” and “What has been neglected that needs healing and repair?”

To address all this, we draw from evidence from a race and poverty study that we conducted for Christian Aid in 2022 (Agyeman and Ranawana 2022). Participants for the study were drawn from a sample of Christian Aid partner communities and staff working in Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe, Colombia, Bangladesh, and Israel/Palestine. The purpose of this research was both to explore how different country programmes engaged with race, ethnicity, and colour in their programmatic work, and to better understand the links between race, ethnicity, colour, and poverty. Focussing on these five countries, we interviewed participants by applying a modified form of narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelley 2000). Narrative inquiry is a reflexive process that invites participants into dialogue to understand how they make sense of concepts, in this case related to race and poverty. We decided to open the dialogue in this way to create space for the voice and agency of our participants to place emphasis as and where they felt it necessary. It was clear from our findings that the issues were about so much more than a lack of access to resources, for we saw that individuals and communities are pervasively situated in spaces that prevent them from breaking out of the cycle of poverty. This implicitly (and at times explicitly) highlighted the political nature of poverty experienced as a result of systems of oppression based on race, ethnicity, or colour. We refer to our findings from these five countries to articulate what has been broken and is in need of repair.

### **The Political and Multidimensional Nature of Poverty**

If reparations are part of a journey towards a world without poverty, then understanding the ways in which poverty exists and operates is important. There is a need to understand the entire ecosystem of meanings, values, ideas, and institutions that maintain poverty. Doing so also supports calls from critical international development scholars to move towards a more complex approach to development that centers different ways of seeing the world and acknowledges a multiplicity of ways of living, being, and living a full life. Before

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<sup>1</sup> For clarification, we understand “Whiteness” here as elucidated by such scholars as Anthony Reddie (2021), Willie James Jennings (2020), bell hooks (1997), and Sylvia Wynter (McKittrick 2015); that is, as a dominant cultural space with enormous political significance, whose purpose is to keep others on the margins. Whiteness separates those who are entitled to have certain privileges from those whose exploitation and vulnerability to violence is justified by their not being White; what Jennings refers to as the constant reproduction of the plantation.

discussing different approaches to reparations, we first draw from our own research to explore this vital topic.

As do many INGOs, Christian Aid believes that poverty results from structural and systemic power imbalances and misuse (Ghosh 2022). This has been an integral part of our global analytical framework at Christian Aid as it identifies the parties responsible for repairing the injustice. Poverty is evidence of the collective failure of society to honour, that is, to assign value to, its most vulnerable members. Poverty is thus political, determined by how resources are distributed in and amongst societies. Our response must therefore ask how reparations can enable us to better honour people living in poverty. The creation of poverty, as well as its repair, are thus both embedded in the structures and systems of power (including racism, patriarchy, and neoliberal capitalism), and reinforced through context-specific ideologies.

The misuse of power results in the manifestation of poverty across multiple dimensions of being. Whilst indices such as the UNDP's Multidimensional Poverty Index and the World Bank's Multidimensional Poverty Measure have brought nuance and complexity to how poverty is understood and assessed, enabling numerical comparison across ethnic groups, regions, and ages, and thus providing important information on patterns of poverty (Alkire and Santos 2010), such indices and measures are nevertheless limited in that they only capture factors such as monetary poverty, education, health, and basic infrastructure services, but do not necessarily expose how power exists and operates structurally and systemically. In addition, they measure poverty against the Sustainable Development Goals, goals that were developed based on norms and standards of what makes a "good life" according to the Global North (Ziai 2016).

And yet, these broader and deeper aspects of power, especially power dynamics, are, for us at Christian Aid, central to understanding and addressing poverty. In addition to those material aspects of poverty represented in the aforementioned poverty indices, our understanding of poverty at Christian Aid spreads over three interconnected aspects of our being: spiritual, relational, and material. Together, these allow us to think of poverty holistically.

### **The Spiritual Dimension of Poverty**

Multidimensional poverty is the state of being in which an individual, community, or entity can face multiple disadvantages at the same time concerning their income, gender, geographic location, caste, class, race, creed, psychological difficulties, physical disabilities, access to services, access to justice, ability for their knowledge to be acknowledged, their

intergenerational trauma, loss of culture, the loss of spirituality, or multiple displacement. This list is not exhaustive. The journey "out" of poverty, therefore, is not linear, especially given how power shapes it. Where we see the multiple manifestations of poverty as a result of colonial extraction and dispossession, it is because our ways of socio-economic living continually create, maintain, and reproduce systems of marginalisation, exclusion, and silencing.

Our research findings highlighted a relationship between spiritual dimensions of poverty that occur as a result of misused power. From a theological perspective, misused power is one outward manifestation of individual and collective sin that fractures relationships multidimensionally; it is the embrace of greed and therefore, turning away from God (Ranawana 2022; Rieger 1998). What begins spiritually in the hearts of humanity as the sinful desire to possess power and dominate soon manifests in relational dynamics, and eventually comes to fruition in the material through the unjust concentration and allocation of power and resources. This is how poverty can be understood in the spiritual sense, for it shows a movement away from a justice-centered spirituality. The rejection of the likeness and image of God in *all humanity* and the reservation of value and goodness to only a certain portion of humanity maintains a set of logics that have, both historically and into the present, made communities at the "lower end" of any social hierarchy more disposable.

This was highlighted in our research in the topic of the oppression and dispossession of Palestinians by the state of Israel. In particular, the manifestation of intergenerational trauma, both individual and collective, was highlighted as a form of poverty that amplifies the sense of inferiority (and superiority) within individuals and groups. Elena Ruiz describes such structural trauma as "trauma by design" and argues that failures to understand "trauma as a functional, organizational tool of settler colonial violence amplify the impact of traumatic experience on specific populations" (2023). Our findings show too that poverty (and trauma) inhibits the dreams and ambitions of people experiencing it in that it exacerbates feelings of powerlessness, hopelessness, shame, stigma, and humiliation (Patel and Kleinman 2003). In the framework of our biblical prophetic vision focused on the restoration of a broken world and all its systems, such impacts become a serious issue, even though they are overlooked by traditional measures of poverty. At Christian Aid, our work must critically consider all the factors that paralyse the ability of people living in poverty to create a vision of a transformed world and the action needed to build it.

In an approach that values everyone and respects all voices, we need to take care to consider what healing from such trauma means for different groups, and whether there are locally based, indigenous resources that can be helpful in the healing and restoration process. As development organisations, we should resource these approaches courageously to promote holistic flourishing for people who are living in poverty (Peace Direct 2021).

Another aspect of poverty understood in the spiritual sense is the complicity of missionaries and churches colluding with Empires in the European colonial project to construct racist hierarchies that were imposed on Indigenous peoples throughout the world (Cruchley 2020; Mukaria 2020; Carey 2011; Grimshaw and Nelson 2001; Dussell 1981; Etherington 2005). One of those is the Dutch cultivation system deployed in Indonesia as a forced crop delivery system that extracted coffee, sugar, and indigo (Bosma 2013). Such systems stratified labourers into “degenerate types” who were then subject to various systems of administration and instruction dependent on racial categorization (Schrauwers 2001). Jesse Mugambi, connecting colonial legacies to climate injustice, points to how this created a problem of “imbalance” wherein it is not an ignorance of poverty, but the subsummation to a culture of disposability, that ensures there is no political or moral will to transform a system that keeps some poor and others rich (2014). Throughout the world, churches were complicit in propagating this system because of a political choice to search for wealth and profit, and thus turn away from right standing relationship with God. One particularly horrendous manifestation was the “doctrine of discovery,” which established a religious, political, and legal rationalisation for colonisation and violent acquisition of land not inhabited by Christians (Miller 2019). Two papal bulls, in particular, stand out. The first, issued in 1455 by Pope Nicholas V, “*Romanus Pontifex*,” served to grant trading monopoly to the Portuguese with Africa, and ultimately authorised the enslavement of Africans. The second Papal Bull was issued in 1493, by Pope Alexander VI. It affirmed Christian European “explorers” claims to prominent geopolitical strongholds and the assertion of the superiority of European Christianity globally.

One of the places where our research showed this was significantly apparent was in Zimbabwe, where many institutionalized Christian churches own a significant amount of land and hold major investments linked to agriculture and other sectors. The transferred ownership of some of this land was inherited from the colonial era (Edelman, Oya, and Borrás 2016). In all this history in Zimbabwe, what we see explicitly is how,

in the search for wealth and profit, churches turned away from the truth that all are made in the image of God to concentrate and increase their own power and influence.

### **The Relational Dimension of Poverty**

Histories of the doctrine of discovery and countries like Zimbabwe connect directly to our views on the role of power in creating and maintaining poverty, especially in terms of how poverty must be understood as a result of exploitation. That is, poverty results from a complex set of social relations through which “value is appropriated from nature and labour and accumulated as wealth and capital” (Bernards 2023), a situation that has been labelled “relational poverty” (Lawson and Eldwood 2018). Entrenched within our social systems is the stratification of value based on race, and the reorganisation of society on this same basis. Racism can be understood as hierarchies of power, knowledge, value, and respect that are rooted in racial identity (including ethnicity, caste, colour, and tribe). These hierarchies are framed by collective systems and structures and manifest in our individual behaviours, and such historically structured racial lines continue in the present. The global political influence of racism (and other identity-based hierarchies) results in the inequitable and disproportionate distribution of resources along these stratifications, driving up racial inequality and poverty experienced by those at the so-called “lower end” of this socially constructed hierarchy. Relational poverty, therefore, can be conceptualised as “the result of the different terms and conditions on which people are included in social life” (Lawson and Eldwood 2018).

This was a key point of discussion in our research exploring how race and poverty were related in Zimbabwe. One case examined unequal race relations between Chinese business owners and Black Zimbabwean workers within the mining and construction industries and how the imbalance of power between these groups exacerbates poverty outcomes. Research participants we spoke with noted that there is a sentiment and perception of Chinese-owned companies in Zimbabwe as exploitative of the labour of black Zimbabweans and referred to it as a form of neo-colonialism. Zimbabwean labourers working for Chinese firms are often underpaid and work in unsafe conditions, according to a Zimbabwean legislator who is challenging Chinese companies that abuse workers and do not generally adhere to local laws (Chingono 2022). Negligent mining and construction-site practices in particular increase pollution and contaminate water supplies, which increase the risk of

detrimental health outcomes and diminish livelihood security (Siziba 2022).

The rights of workers and residents are also affected by a lack of accountability within the national government. Left unchallenged, inequality and unequal power relations based on race and colour work together to dehumanise and sustain the exploitation of black Zimbabweans. The racial inequality that has so greatly marked the national identity of Zimbabwe both before and throughout the colonial period now forms the building block of continual racial inequality evident today in the relationship between black Zimbabweans and Chinese business owners. Arguably, the neglect of rights and the failure to protect Black people in Zimbabwe from wealthy Chinese migrants is propped up by implicit racial hierarchy that perpetuates the exploitation, suppression, and oppression of Black people, within Africa and around the world. In this context, a critical question one of our participants posed was “*What does the Black Lives Matter movement and the decolonial journey mean for Black people in Zimbabwe who are on the sharp end of both poverty and racism?*” To this, we would add the following question: “Does the movement run the risk of only being meaningful for Black people in Western contexts, or is this an entry point to affirm the rights and resources of Black people everywhere?” Relational repair requires us to interrogate the implications of privilege and power in who is afforded racial justice in this sense. Such critical reflections are important for how the aid sector thinks about reparations. Watershed moments of social justice movements cannot neglect the well-being of people who bear the greatest weight of racism, poverty and inequality.

Another example from our study comes from Bangladesh. In conversations with research participants, we discussed the tensions resulting from the liberation struggle of the 1970s, and how the rights of ethnic and other minority communities are either not recognized or otherwise contested. Activists working at these interstices in Bangladesh generally agree that such tensions are connected to struggles over lands that had been owned by minority communities, but were then taken by majority communities after liberation. Research participants, as well as scholars and activists working in the region, also point to the challenges raised by the constitution of Bangladesh that make the recognition of ethnic minority issues difficult. In particular, the constitution designates Bengali as the sole state language and declares that Bangladeshi citizens would be known as Bengalis (Article 6), leaving little room for diverse identity markers that are not Bengali (Van Schendel 2020). Observers note that ethnic and religious minorities continue to face

persecution, land dispossession, and violence, with successive governments neglecting to address their root causes (Lam 2006; Christian Aid and EIDHR 2022). Ethnic and religious minorities are thus impeded from participating in political life and from accessing educational and other social resources and services that could support their social well-being.

During interviews, comments were often made about “fairness,” “lightness,” and how, rooted in the Brahmin caste system, lighter skin tones are regarded as superior, a view that has been reinforced through imperialism and coloniality across South Asia. When talking about the complexity of conceptualising race, complexion, and colour, one participant reflected: “*It is not as clear as ‘Black versus White’, but it is [a] socially constructed issue of lighter complexion and dark complexion.*” The socially constructed nature of these colonial and racist ideologies reinforces deeply unequal systems that position people with darker complexions as inferior. This makes them more vulnerable to mistreatment and more likely to be excluded from basic services, such as education and healthcare, and therefore more likely to live in poverty. Research participants we spoke with noted how such racist ideologies become internalized. In conversations with colleagues, we also discussed how this mirrors much of the landscape in South Asia.

### **The Material Dimension of Poverty**

When discussing material poverty, we understand it as the consequences and physical impacts of the oppression and exploitation of people relegated to the lower end of socially constructed hierarchies. An example from Sierra Leone illustrates well how these socially constructed hierarchies entrench material poverty. Participants highlighted the link between poverty and what they called “ethnoregionalism,” which has increasingly become part of the socio-political relations within Sierra Leone and is in many ways, as one participant noted, “a nomenclature for tribalism.” Ethnoregionalism is the socio-political construction of cultural and regional groups that bears a significant influence on the political identity of individuals, families, and communities, which in turn actively shapes political ideologies, practices, and participation across regions within the country (Kabba 2018), and which have tangible implications for where power is concentrated and how it is exercised in Sierra Leone. The ethnocentric divide can be traced back to the transitional period of independence in the 1960s, and has deep and complex roots in Sierra Leone’s social and political context. While all groups in society have varying senses of their own power (related to the understanding of their rights, entitlements, behaviours,



rules of engagement, and the structural and systemic inclusion or exclusion and inequality that characterises their community) (Gaventa 2006), our interviews spotlighted the ways in which material poverty is shaped by ethno-regionalism in Sierra Leone. One colleague explained that this happens when “*people see themselves as belonging to particular ethnic groups and as a result they should advance the cause of that group to be in power and governance. And once they are in governance it's all about their own sets of priorities.*” What we then see is that resources, basic services, and economic benefits across the country are unequally distributed, with communities and ethnic groups (particularly minority groups) that are not represented in spaces of political power more likely to be underserved by political leaders and, therefore, to experience greater poverty.

The measurement, monitoring, and reporting of material dimensions of poverty have received the most attention and resources within the aid sector (Sen 1999). Indices such as the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative’s (OPHI’s) MPI can be tools that countries use to analyse where poverty is concentrated, who experiences it, and how, but understanding how both the legacies of colonialism and attendant ethno-regionalism influence the process of resource distribution further enables INGOs meaningfully to respond to the depth of poverty that people experience.

### Multiple Forms of Reparation

Considering this concept of the multidimensionality of poverty, reparations become a holistic healing of human relationships that result in spiritual, relational, and material repair. The work of healing relationships requires attention to the multidimensionality of poverty and an understanding of colonialism, slavery, and the attendant legacy of structural oppression, imperialism, extraction, and exploitation. Considering what the sinful system of racism has broken, what do reparations mean for persons living in poverty and what are the implications for development actors, especially those who are part of historically dominant “mission” churches like Roman Catholic or Anglican churches? To frame what forms of repair are needed, we use the four levels of racism framework developed by the Multicultural Council of Saskatchewan (2021) to illustrate how different types of brokenness demand different kinds of repair.

The first is repair of structural racism. Structural racism is the process by which hierarchies are established and engrained in society as normative. For Christian INGOs, it is important to challenge ideologies that normalise racialised inequality and the

disproportionate concentration of poverty within minoritized and racialised groups globally. Structural repair requires us to actively dismantle and disrupt socially constructed hierarchies and systems that oppress people based on identity and thus work to uphold equality for all people as image bearers of God. Actions consistent with this goal include, for example, continued global advocacy to end caste-based segregation in South Asia. Addressing structural racism shifts the collective understanding of who lives in poverty and why, towards a collective responsibility to protect the most vulnerable in our society.

Second is the repair of institutional and systemic racism, which must also take on multiple approaches. Institutional or systemic racism is embedded in policies, practices, and programmes of public and private sectors—which is where Christian INGOs may find significant influence. Two lenses can be applied: one is the examination of thematic priorities of Christian INGOs, and another is the examination of our organisational functions and roles within the aid sector more broadly. A thematic priority that may contribute to the repair of institutional and systematic racism, for example, is “debt justice.” Debt has become an insidious framework for both the challenges and proposed solutions that face governments, national organisations, and households in economically dispossessed countries in the Global South. The world over, debt is often seen as a kind of individual failure, and non-payment is met with punishment. We must shift our frameworks for understanding debt and its consequences to see indebtedness as a human rights issue. If we view poverty as multidimensional, and linked to the legacies of colonialism and racism, we must understand that countries in the Global South face insurmountable debts because of other societal failures, including coloniality, and we should start with this understanding as we reshape our responses to debt.

The second approach, examination of our organisational role and function, requires a critical reflection of the power Christian INGOs hold and exercise. This involves critically reflecting on the nature of our international partnerships, and our work with communities living in poverty. First, we must recognise our own collusion in imbalances of power, and then work toward transforming, redistributing, and relocating power more equitably (Bond 2023). This speaks to the theological principle of “repentance,” which does not simply represent concepts of sorrow over wrongs, but is characterised by intentional acts that restore what has been broken. Walter Brueggeman encourages us by noting that when we begin to reflect deeply on repentance, opportunities that arise may be disguised as inconveniences, but are indeed gifts

(Brueggeman 2020). The relational repair that happens in the space of repentance bears material benefits in that the work against poverty and inequality is anchored in deeper and more sustainable transformation (Judson 2022).

There is also a need for the repair of damage caused by interpersonal racism, including the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours of individuals, both conscious and unconscious. Holistic repair cannot happen without honouring and making room for the knowledge, wisdom, and theology of people who have been most affected by racism, poverty, and colonisation. Indeed, they must have the leading role. Kikuyu uses the African philosophy of “Ubuntu” to illustrate this relational co-dependency:

Ubuntu is a recognition that the most valuable aspect of our existence is in our relationships, and that human beings are inextricably bound to one another, making our relationships the essence of life (2022b).

Finally, internalised racism is a fundamental aspect of repair that responds to internalised beliefs of inferiority and superiority in individuals. Repair here requires dismantling and replacing beliefs of inferiority, (such as colourism or anti-Blackness), or superiority (such as Whiteness and the normalisation of White racial identity) with relational ways of being that redeem the goodness between one another (Mokuria et al. 2023). The result, from a Christian theological perspective, is the recentring of the *Imago Dei*. It is imperative for Christian INGOs to resource approaches for reparations that respond holistically to spiritual, relational, and material forms of poverty caused and maintained by racism.

Anti-racism with integral intentions can be an act of reparation that is liberative as we actively dismantle hierarchies steeped in racism, like those based in coloniality, ethnocentrism, and caste. For faith-based organisations, this liberation enables us to transform power and develop new futures and alternative relationships to realise the just and healthy world envisioned by and with people living in poverty.

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