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The Past in the Present in Black Canadian Drama: A Study of Lorena Gale's *Angelique*, George Elliott Clarke's *Beatrice Chancy*, George Boyd's *Consecrated Ground* and Andrew Moodie's *Riot*¹

By
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Abstract:

Situated within the mainstream Canadian history, race and black culture and their concomitants of dislocation, eraser, rape, violence, capture, torture and death, this paper adopts the postcolonial approach to discuss Lorena Gale's *Angelique*, George Elliott Clarke's *Beatrice Chancy*, George Boyd's *Consecrated Ground* and Andrew Moodie's *Riot*. The main objective is to trace their dramatic writings' constant search for alternative spaces for the dismembered, the dislocated, the uprooted and the oppressed. Via their literary imagination, the playwrights adopted the dramatic narratives, stage dream-like imagery, and humorous scenes to discuss serious issues. Cultural memory, adaptations and juxtaposition devices are vehicles to map the Blacks' past and present traumatic experiences. As plays of resistance, of refusal and of anger, their targets are to speak on behalf of the 'othered' and of the oppressed; implementing the historical dialectic and the psychoanalytic approach for the treatment of alienation, forced assimilation, racial discrimination and the self/other relationship. This is discursively done via cosmic manifestations of black slavery with the aim of conflating the personal with the collective along with the transhistorical without challenging the boundaries.

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In his *Black Skin, White Masks* Frantz Fanon (2008) skillfully emphasizes the importance of interrogation as the sole path for giving meaning to man. "Oh my body, make of me always a man who questions". In light of this Fanonian dictum,

Did literary theorists' and writers' attempts to transcend the historical boundaries succeed in figuring out the real history of Blacks in Canada? What are the historians', sociologists', thinkers' and literary writers' and critics' tendencies toward the history of Blacks in Canada? Are there any future alternatives to mobilizing the intellectual resources of world universities in the direction of erasing such negative issues that objectify humans and disown them of their real selves, regardless of their race, culture or belief at a time of drastic change and in a world plagued with social, political and economic instability?

Does the Canadian formal and institutional discourses succeed in bettering the Canadian image in as much as the traumatic experiences of blacks throughout history are concerned? Is there a possibility for erasing slavery as a brutal phenomenal institution? In what ways do the playwrights in question vary their dramatic methods in mirroring oppressive power relations? Are historical practices of dislocation often shared with younger generation? Are there any differences in Canada between the past image of racism and the present? Would intertwining the dramatic narratives of resistance with black history be able to destabilize the dominant Canadian cultural identity? Does the dramatization of disembodiment and objectifications of women deepen the dark side of the nation? Are the plays of Gale, Clarke, Boyd and Moodie decolonizationist works?

This paper is an attempt to consider the tacit and fragmented forms and erased chapters in the history of slavery in Canada as dramatized in Lorena Gale's *Angelique*, George Elliott Clarke's *Beatrice Chancy*, George Boyd's *Consecrated Ground* and Andrew Moodie's *Riot*. The linking element among these plays visibly pivots around the dialectical

relationship between location and community and their concomitants of identity, values and the self/ other relationship, the intergenerational relationship and the discussion of its resultant issues of slavery, race, culture and politics. Gale, Clarke, Boyd and Moodie with their decolonizationist *Weltanschauung* seek to discuss possibilities for cultural convergence and interaction between varied types of identity in the wilderness where identity is no longer regional or an embedded aspect of the writer's imaginative faculty as Northrop Frye claims, but rather, as Marita Sturken argues, is "a field of cultural negotiations through which different stories vie for a place in history" (1997, 1). The four plays rework history to explore the transhistorical contours of black Canadians in the Montreal of 1734, in the Annapolis Valley of 1801, in the Halifax of 1965 and most recently in the Toronto of 1992.

These plays turn to be havens for the ghosts of blacks alive and dead who lived, suffered, beaten, pursued, uprooted, dislocated in these empty spaces; devoid of identity and disowned of their own history.

Cultural memory and dramatic narratives are used as vehicles to recall the history of black Canadians with the aim of positioning it into the mainstream Canadian history. To epistemologically consider the Canadian Black experience is to understand the Blacks' culture and their ways of thinking. Relevant to this is Lawrence Levine's argument of the folk thought of Blacks as a way to understand their value systems (1978). From a diasporic perspective, the plays in question focus on the boundaries of 'inclusion' and 'exclusion', of 'belonging' and 'otherness' of 'us' and 'them,' which according to varied criticisms, are viably challenged. And from a hybrid perspective, the plays to some extent, seek to develop a commonly shared ground between generations of young blacks to understand their own history which though seems to be, like any other thing, disowned from them and directed to serve the pride of the whites, it creates a double consciousness which provides blacks with the dialectical abilities to know about their history and feel the attitude of the others towards them and between knowing and feeling they can pursue a path to go through in attempts to find avenues to belong. A notion of compromise that Clarke strongly objects to due to his notional view that "a mass ignorance of slavery and its brutal practices continues to exist across generations".

Towards the end of *Riot*, from the backyard of his home in Ottawa, Alex recalls via his cultural memory of his childhood the entire Canadian landscape when he states: "I would flop on my stomach and grasp fistfuls of grass and I would hug Canada. And you know what...if you stay really really still, after a while; it almost feels like Canada is hugging you back".

And I miss that feeling. I really do”(1997,95). After the 1992 Toronto riots as we approach the play with some detail later, Alex is disappointed in the idealistic image of Canada he knew as a child. In *Angelique*, Gale travelled far back in the history of Montreal of 1734 to discuss the tragedy of a slave and dramatize a historical event that might have been forgotten.

It tells the story of 29 years Marie Joseph Angelique a black slave who was accused of torching fire that destroyed large parts of the old city of Montreal. Under illusions, Angelique believed that those people might change their minds of her being guilty, in the end she was forced to find her own ways to run away across the border to New England in the United States. Her white worker friend Claude abandoned her. She is captured, tortured and burnt alive in the end. The play inaugurates with a generalized abstractified statement that states: “And in seventeen thirty-four a Negro slave set fire to the city of Montreal and was hanged” (5). Theatrically, the last word is repeatedly echoed to signal the point that it's enough to be black to be accused and executed. Historically, Angelique's great parts of her life seem ambiguous and subject to controversy. The controversies open the gate for diverse discussions that revolve around whether Angelique was in the first place the one who set the fire and if so, whether this act was for revenge from her mistress who continuously reprimanded her or torching the fire was for love.

To officially beautify the scene, “the first African Canadian Governor-General, Michaelle Jean, according to Tomkins, recently acknowledged, “that while no-one knows if Angelique actually set the fire, the details matter little now.” (2009, 17) Further, Gale focuses on the silence of Angelique to state that her silence “speaks untold volumes of her diasporic history” (quoted in Tomkins's article, 20). Even critics differ in their views as to the event of whether Angelique torched Montreal and the biased artists drew paintings of her to manifest the global commerce of human flesh that has been practiced over the three past centuries where three quarters of the world population suffered from slavery. According to a 2013 statistical survey still 30 million people around the world suffer slavery; most of them are in India, China, Nigeria and Pakistan.

Angelique is not so much a kind of historical memoir but rather a state of ceaseless attempts to ‘belong’. In this connection, Tomkins states:

The play does not seek to be a memorial to one woman: rather, it seeks a place to belong. Angelique's tough existence in Canada ends with an escape attempt at the time of the fire, followed by

herrecapture and herbrutal execution. As a black slave, is unlikely to find a place in 1734 Montreal(except as a scapegoat), yet this resourceful woman manages to establish somefragile room for herself, a “Diaspora space” of sorts.(17)

Journeying back and forth, Gale manages to comparatively deal with this historical event to discuss the socio-cultural and political scene at present. To theatricalize this event, Gale uses the 18th century costumes and as the dramatic action progresses, the props and other theatrical paraphernalia are replaced by contemporary ones that suit of the Montreal life at the moment with the aim of shortening the historical distance.

In this regard, Tomkins states:

Corsets and long skirts give way to contemporary business suits,while eighteenth century carpet-beating implements cross pathswith electric vacuum cleaners. Angelique’s enslavement is thus cross-referenced with African Canadians in the present...However; Galestresses the point that in spite of the differences that seem between the Montreal of the past and that of the present in terms of the growth of the city, the city fails to include people of different classes and walks of life (14).

Tomkins continues to argue:

Little has actually changed in almost three hundred years as the Montreal of today also fails to make adequate room for people of different classes, races,and genders attempting to inhabit the same space. In the frequent flickering from past to present and back again, Angelique and Cesar remain domestic (and are alwaysworking),(14)

In her Note to the play, Gale states that “unless otherwise stated, the slaves are working in every scene in which they appear either in a modern or historical context” (3).Again, enslavement imprisons the black women in a way that they cannot escape the sexual advances of their masters. Her mistress knows who has fathered the children...Francois and Therese continue to amass the wealth they have built on both the backs and souls of others” (15).Quoted in Tomkins, Gale states:

It’s convenient to forget such a history, but vital that we remember:[if] all we learn from her experience is that slavery was a demeaning and inhuman chapter in the history of mankind, then we walk away with the knowledge

that we went through it-black and white, vslave and master-together
in Canada. Slavery is not black history. It is Canada's
history (Gale "Writing", 20).

In her pessimistic view signaled trans-historically in the impossibility of finding an ultimate solution for black slavery in the past and at present, Gale argues that the Canadian landscape fails to help Angelique in the past and her children at present to make them belong to the mainstream Canadian life. If Angelique has no geographical space to belong in the 1734 Montreal, "what place does she have", as Tomkins so rightly interrogates, "in twenty-first-century Montreal?" Quoted in Tomkins, Filewod argues that Angelique "comes to believe that neither she nor her children will ever negotiate a place in this new country: there will always exist a blackness that borders the map of the cultural imagination"(16). "Her children", Tomkins proceeds to argue, will (not) belong, a response that echoed in Angelique's words that close the drama:

In the vista of tomorrow

Stretching out before, I can see this city...
swarming with ebony.

There's me and me and me and me... My brothers and my sisters!

My brothers and my sisters... Arrested for their difference. Their misery. A
silent scream rising to crescendo and falling on deaf ears.

There is nothing I can say to change what you perceive.

I will from twisted history, be guilty in your eyes (70).

"Falling on deaf ears, "unfortunately, seems to be a relative characteristic feature of the contemporary Canadian sensibility. Angelique seeks constantly to untwist history with the hope to uncover the mystery beyond the real burner of 1734 Montreal.

In a Socratic-like debate critics and artists differ as to who set the fire that burnt large parts of the old city of Montreal in 1734? They decided to say that Angelique set the fire for revenge, not for love. Adopting this view sustains the point that Angelique avenges the 'indignities of slavery', the 'violation of her freedom' and her rights to 'the ownership of her body': her rights to share her body with the person she chooses to love'.

Historians' and writers' commitments are shown in their decision not to allow the voice of Angelique to die. In this regard, Gale pictorially depicts the desperate feeling of Angelique in her relation with her master. In Act I, Scene 16 where Francois "pumps her like he is f...king her from behind". Angelique makes believe, Gale states, "that the ecstasy she feels

is that of being freeeee”washed up on the shores of her beloved Madiere”.But the moment waves and she realizes that she is still in hell:

I am here

I see the dog has caught the cat. The mouse is playing dead

You think you own me. This body that complies That never fights. The best you feel is white hot rage scorching the inside of my mind

A blazing fury I bite back. Fire I would spit into your face. If you would face me coward. You would know...one day...Thus, slavery as a brutalized institution denied the black Canadians their voice, their presence and their spiritual and physical needs of true love. And this might have probably urged Angelique to have torched fire into the old city of Montreal.

In April 7 of 2006 almost 272 years since Angelique was captured, tortured and burned alive, the Governor General who is a Montreal immigrant herself, descendant from Haitian slaves, lays a bouquet beneath a plaque in Angelique’s memory. What would one imagine Angelique would say in this occasion? She states;

She touched the cold bronze metal and the words that are raised etchings opened the gates of time to send it brail Messages felt on her finger tips awaken me.I,Marie Joseph Angelique nee Portugal am resurrected from the dark past. Freed from a body dismembered unjustly condemned to a crystal ash .Michaelle,you weep. Our tears are one. For we have been apart so long waiting for this moment when I celebrate you, and you my past. I have walked these cobbled streets a Montreal felt its derision, felt the chirurgien finger grope Announcing my lost innocence to merchants who dismissed my self-respect to promiscuity. Your eyes cry the Pieta’s tears that purify my wounds. Your touch soothes and heals our festering sores.

We have one understanding of a past that transcends.

According to Reginald Harris who reviewed the drama, the real trouble with Angelique lurks in her inability to hold her tongue before the Judge. She states:

Judge Pierre Raimbault: why did you go three or four times into the street to in the direction of the roof, having no reason to do so?

Angelique: I was on the street several times but I never looked in the direction

of the roof, having no reason to do so.

Raimbault: Wasn’t it because your mistress reprimanded you harshly th threatened to burn her or cut her throat several times?

Angelique: I never threatened her for such a thing [...] whenever my mistress mistreated me-which was not very often-I would become angry and leave the house. But I never said anything close to what you are asking me (234-235)

In his *Beatrice Chancy* (1999), Clarke journeyed back in history to set the drama in Annapolis Valley of Nova Scotia in the year 1801 to africanize the indignities, brutalities and stupidities of slavery by connecting location with the community. Beatrice is the daughter of a black slave who was raped by her white master. Upon her return to Annapolis Valley from Halifax to where she was sent to cultivate her whiteness, Beatrice announces her love for Lead Raised in her white master's house, Beatrice is, according to her author, beautiful, clever, kind and cultured". Her love to Lead creates the dramatic tension culminated in the monstrous sexual attack of her by her own father who intentionally seeks to torture the spirit of Lead. And as violence breeds violence, Beatrice killed her raper and she is hanged for his murder. In this connection, Clarke significantly cites Bradley to depict the cosmic representation of the awful reality of slavery from the remote past to the present. Clarke states:

...if the African belief is true, then somewhere here with us,
in the very air we breathe, all that whipping and chaining
and raping and starving and branding and maiming and
castrating and lynching and murdering-all of it-is still going on.

Although Clarke implemented history as a vehicle to envision black slavery in Nova Scotia with the aim of figuring out its repercussions on the contemporary Canadian socio-cultural and political scene, he claims that:

Beatrice Chancy is not a work of history but of imagination.
It is not a polemic, but neither is it a passionless. For,
being a Nova Scotian of African Canadian origins (i.e. an African),
I will never know the furthest origins of my African heritage.
I do know that it was disrupted by a ship and ruptured by chains

Adopting the opera as an artistic form to involve collective emotions into the being of the dramatic situation to express a contestatory attitude towards the Nova Scotia officials for disregarding the brutal image of slavery, Clarke seeks to configure ideas of nationhood. On her M.A. study on collective memory and performance, Amanda Montague, stresses

the role of the opera in this regard... “Through the immediacy of operatic performance, Amanda argues, “*Beatrice Chancy* contests Canada’s systematic silencing of a violent history of slavery and oppression”(2011,1).

By adapting Shelley’s verse drama *Beatrice Cenci*, both Clarke and the opera composer James Rolfe attempts to approach the contemporary Canadian sensibility. He transatlantically imported the drama of Shelley, recontextualizing the European sociopolitical and cultural history of slavery and violence to discuss brutal scenes of slavery, torture and oppression within the confines of the main stream Canadian history via Beatrice’s decision to avenge her tortured self by killing the raper, Francis.

Clarke focuses on implementing this tragedy of revenge by the use of opera as vehicle of collective black consciousness with the goal of erasing the brutalities of slavery via Beatrice’ murder of the raper. By so doing this, first by naming the raper, by the decision of Beatrice, Lead and Lustra to take revenge not just for Beatrice but rather for many other black women who painfully lived this traumatic experience of incestuous act, rape and spiritual death, Clarke made such historic achievement by injecting the nightmarish history of Africadia in the very body of the dominant Canadian culture and history.

On globally reviewing the history of slavery with the aim of pinpointing its geographical space, Clarke maintains that “slavery is slavery and the black slaves in what is now Canada felt every bit as oppressed as their cousins in the United States, the Caribbean and South America”. It is the vital role of committed men-of-letters in general and the African Canadian writers in specific to promote the anticolonial literary and critical discourse. For Fanon “to speak is to exist absolutely for the other”. The black slave, Fanon argues, “is the missing link in the slow evolution from Monkey to man. These are objective facts that state reality”(2008,8). Stressing the importance of language as power, Fanon continues to argue that “it’s no longer a question of knowing the world, but of transforming it” (1). Discussing the plays in question within the Canadian value system and the importance of language as signifier of a dominant culture, Fanon proceeds to state: “To speak means being able to use certain syntax and possessing the morphology of such and such a language, but it means above all assuming a culture and bearing a weight of a civilization”(98). And this exactly what Clarke did in his *Beatrice Chancy*.

Premiered at the Sir James Dunn Theatre in 1999, Boyd’s *Consecrated Ground* takes place in 1965 in Africville the oldest black community in

Canada, a community established in 1848. Consecrated *Ground* ironically suggests certain assumptions that Canada protects civil rights of all Canadians. Meantime, the play shows the Africville residents as a pantheon of black heroes in their determination and persistent attempts to maintain their community, to search for maintaining the scared world of their community at Halifax. As Walker notes, Africville “owed its origin to fugitive American slaves. In this case, they were among the black refugees attracted to the British during the war of 1812 and carried to Nova Scotia and New Brunswick on the promise of free land and equal rights. Neither promise was fully honoured (156).

Clarke was angry about the loss of Africville and strongly expressed that in his *Directions Home*. He states:

Africville was lost because we Africadians refused to sufficiently value our right to exist. Our leaders of the 1960's allowed themselves to be seduced into thinking of Africville as a slum rather than a potentially strong Africadian community-neighbourhood in a prime location on peninsular Halifax.

Had they been strong enough to resist the temptations?

of progress, Africville might have become the spiritual capital of Africadia, the conscious announcements of our existence. (294)

The play tells the story of forcing the inhabitants of Africville to move to Uniacke Square due to Halifax housing development. Appointing a young inexperienced white, Tom Clancy to negotiate with the residents as to the cash settlement is eased by leaving the Africville church standing. Meantime, Clarice and Willem Africville a couple and residents face the problem of the illness of their child. He becomes ill because of the contaminated water supply. On hearing the news of Tully's death, residents understand that not only will the church be removed but that the city has refused to consecrate new ground for Tully's burial. Theatrically representing the physical conditions of Africville before its demolition, Tomkins states:

While the authoritarian city is only represented by the naïve Clancy and the dictates of City Hall Africville's physical presence is set on stage by means of large “hanging cutouts” (8). These cutouts are essentially stylized house and church-shaped flats, but they can be lit so that they can be extinguished in turn as Africville is demolished (15).

Relocating Africville on the part of local authorities is a kind of imperializing the location, culture and spirit of Africadians. In *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, Memmi contends Aime Césaire's concept of thingification:

the colonizer turns the colonized into an object, existing only as a function of the needs of the colonizer. In so doing the colonizer instills the colonized an inferiority complex that renders them submissive and prevents them from acting to reverse colonialism. In essence the colonizer rewrites history, thereby erasing the previous....As a result, the colonized becomes divorced from reality (Memmi, 1991, 106).

Although Africville's physical presence is vanished, the concept of consecration which comes at the centre of the play brings to the literal place, says, Tomkins

“a sacredness that also has metaphoric qualities. Refusing to bury the dead child in the consecrated ground of the church signals the denial of the residents' rights. Clarice said to her husband: “What is Africville if it ain't consecrated

ground!![...]Africville is a consecrated ground”. The African Canadian community turns invisible in the centre of the development plans. What's really more horrific is that Clarice and Willem are forced to move. They are not even given the chance to stay in Uniacke Square because it's a residency for families and because they buried their only child, they have no location there. The plays seek to find alternative avenues for belonging using black history as vehicle to discuss the contemporary scene.

Remarkably, postcolonial strategies in Canadian studies occur mainly in black Canadian drama and theatre. In this regard, Maureen Moynagh argues that while Gale's *Anglique*, Clarke's *Beatrice Chancy* and Boyd's *Consecrated Ground* “rework a historical moment in order to challenge historical oppressions, exclusions and atrocities through enactment of cultural memory”, Andrew Moodie's *Riot* employs a historical event as a point of departure to discuss

themes about slavery within the confines of the contemporary scene (qtd. in Richard J. Lane, 2011)

Moodie's *Riot* is a further example of anticolonial theatre of resistance and of anger. This time is in a contemporary urban setting. It signals the position of the African Canadian community in Toronto of the year 1992. The dramatic action takes place in a rooming house of a group of six

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African Canadians coming from different socio-cultural and economic backgrounds for different targets in their lives. In a sense the play provides “a cultural intermixture”, as Paul Gilroy argues, that would establish a line of reaction and a position for resistance of the dominant Canadian cultural identity. The six African Canadian inhabitants are figured as trouble makers. The dramatic events take place when the Los Angeles case of Rodney King has come to an end.

As it usually appears in any share housing, different views, tensions and disagreements occur and some adopt different political views from others. The inhabitants have different views as to the Rodney King Not Guilty trial verdict. The plot of *Riot* takes place three years before its premiere. The Los Angeles' riots began on April 29 of 1992, in response to the King trial verdict. And continued until May 2. The Yonge Street riots began in Toronto on 5 May 1992 when almost a thousand people gathered before the American consulate for a demonstration by the Black Action Defence Committee. It was peaceful at the beginning, marching against the LAPD officers' acquittal, but it turned to be violent due to the fact that the past weekend a twenty- two year old blackman Raymonde Constantine Lawrence was shot by the Metropolitan police Constable Robert Rice.

Kirk the youngest inhabitant of the house fire a gun to express his frustrations and disappointment due to the difficulties he confronts in trying to find a space to belong. In this connection, Tomkins states: 'Race' and 'Canada' are brought together in a way that conflicts with the nation's more familiar benevolent image: most people do not associate race riots with Canada, but a generalized African Canadian community becomes hyper visible when a protest does get-out-of-hand in Toronto (15)

According to Homi Bhabha, postcolonial literature destabilizes the cultural representations that mirror oppressive power relations". Bhabha defines the third space as the in-between space" where we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves. In his argument of the Canadian formal attitude and state institutions and official narratives, Rinaldo Walcott argues that Canadian official institutions (continue) to render blackness outside, while simultaneously attempting to contain blackness through discourses of Canadian benevolence ("Tough Geography", 39).

Riot opens with an argument by Wendle on a TV. Report about Quebec being a distinct nation, saying that this would give him the advantage of being a black man from Nova Scotia, just as a distinct place as Quebecois (Moodie ,17).This attitude introduces race especially the fragmentation of a Canadian community on ethnic cultural and racial grounds. Characters in *Riot* express their reactions to race relations in Canada while Henry says that he was stopped by the police for making “illegal turn”, his crime was simply being black(Moodie,26).Wendle was also a victim of a trumped-up police charge (28).He states: “This country is racist from top to bottom”(28).Moodie sorted out different stories that indicate a transhistorical record of racism.

In this regard, Tomkins states:

The events in *Riot* expose various fallacies about race relations in Canada, in particular the constitution of a homogeneous African Canadian community. The diverse group of characters in Moodie’s play comes from various countries, cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds that belie any attempts to depict a united African Canadian community.(17)

The riots drive Henry to state that “we all have to stick together” (78). Although characters are under the same riots circumstances, their plans make them react differently, having diverse opinions to the riots. By the end of Act 3 both Effie and Kirk have moved: the “solidarity” says Tomkins, “of a broadly-based African Canadian is even proven to be impossible in this house”.

In dramatizing the Torontonians’ reaction to the King trial verdict, Moodie maps diverse examples of what African Canadians might look like. Having different plans for their future, they agree on very little matters. The firing of a gun in the household links them all except, the shooter Kirk. This indicates their rejection of violence. The relationship between most of the characters changed in various ways. Due to personal motivations and individual plans the African Canadian solidarity appears absent. In this connection, Rinaldo Walcott observes: To be black and at home in Canada is to both belong and not belong” (Tough Geography, 45) Alex’s disillusionment is a natural output of his perception of an idealistic Canada and of the riots. The CNN Reports on riot show a persistent moment of deepened sadness to Alex, a feeling that the drama ends up with to signal in a naturalistic urban setting the impossibility of being an integral part of the city.

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