Towards Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, Belonging:
Critical Posthumanism, New Materialism, and Theatre Pedagogies Transversalities

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Abstract

This article maps the overlap of critical posthumanism, new materialism, and a specific theatre pedagogy called the *neutral mask* and suggests that this transversality can help further the aims of equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging (EDIB), especially in the training of pre-service and in-service teachers. I take up Braidotti's (2019, 2020) theoretical figurations of nomadic subjectivity, politics of location, and new materialism to Carter's (2022) reconciliatory praxis and auto-phenomenology, and Lecoq's (2000) physical training for actors called the neutral mask to do this. I argue that the entanglement of these threads of theory and practice in the form of professional development for teachers prior to EDIB training provides them with an embodied experience of *dis/identification* that may help them perceive instances of inequity, racism, exclusion, and isolation that they otherwise might not have seen.

Keywords: Critical posthumanism, New Materialism, education, EDI, theatre-based pedagogy

Prelude

This essay presents an entanglement between theories and bodies, temporalities and geographies, voices, gestures, and matter. It started as an experiment that eventually found collaborators, fiddled with shape, encountered obstacles, and ultimately negotiated pluralistic identities. It located a structure but couldn't let go of its beginnings, thus some of these entanglements remain in the form of vignettes that offer insight into the transversal nature of both the project's unfolding as well as the plurality of my identities as they evolved.

Difference Matters

Continuing calls to decolonize education mean that teachers are increasingly expected to have competence around handling issues of equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging (EDIB) in the classroom. Institutions have hurried to put together standards for such competencies for the purposes of teacher training and professional development (Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec, 2021), but new standards are likely not enough. As one study notes, teachers themselves are often a notable hindrance to classroom EDI (Lester B. Pearson School Board, 2021). Indeed, a teacher's inability to recognize their racialized practices and blind spots or biases makes developing things like "sufficient open-mindedness to accommodate perspectives other than their own" and "mindfulness of their own biases toward students and learning," two dispositions identified by Quebec's Reference Framework for Professional Competencies for Teachers as desirable, much more difficult to achieve.

My training and many years of experience as a theatre director, actor, and drama teacher suggest a primary reason why teachers are hindering EDIB training may be that such teachers are clinging to a rigid self-concept that prevents them from genuinely appreciating others who are different from themselves. It is well understood in theatre that actors must divest themselves of such a rigid relationship to their identity in order to embody other characters. Theatre pedagogy offers multiple strategies to help developing actors learn to see themselves in more expansive and dynamic ways. This essay will thus, introduce and propose a specific set of theatre-based practices developed by theatre pedagogue Jacques Lecoq called neutral mask training, predicated on improvisation and *mimodynamics*, as a method to prepare teachers for EDIB training. Mimodynamics is a dynamic that can be expressed through the miming body (Grogan, 1998).

A theoretical framework that can both explain the phenomenon of rigid self-concept in teachers in relation to EDIB training and guide the selection of practices which might overcome it, is also required. To that end, I turn to critical posthuman theory and feminist new materialism. Critical posthumanism, in particular, emphasizes a shift in subjectivity away from Eurocentric Humanist ideology because this ideology insists on the value of the individual at the expense of the collective, privileges the rational at the expense of the affective, and persists in its attachment to dualism, such as, mind/body and nature/culture. A decision to use critical posthuman theory and feminist new materialism together as a theoretical framework rest on these theories' commitments to (1) acknowledging the presence, contributions, and value of minoritized peoples as well as non-humans and (2) centering the feminist principles of embodiment and positionality, two concepts which are also fundamental to theater-based pedagogies as preparation for EDIB work.

Lastly, as a theatre and drama teacher/practitioner/researcher, I cannot separate these aspects of my praxis. My positionality as a relatively nomadic human—born in Brazil, lived and trained as an actor/director/dancer in nine countries thus far—has helped me develop the kind of self-understanding called for by critical posthumanism, one that is not fixed but flexible, dynamic, and plural. Here, on the page, things happen linearly, and audiences demand clarity. But as a performer, I am compelled by the complexity and dynamism of stage performance, by the sheer number of elements in play at any given time; I find the linearity of the page restrictive. Thus, to satisfy my need for complexity and nuance, to share something of myself as an actor, scholar, and human, and to lend some affective weight to my argument, I am including personal experiences that appear in the form of vignettes interspersed throughout the essay.

I hope these vignettes offer readers an additional perspective into my own process of what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) called *deterritorialization*, the process of delinking from establishment ideology around basic concepts like the self. They also serve as examples of how my positionality evolved over time from traveler to nomad in response to deterritorializing travel events.

From Traveler to Nomad: Positionality

> *What country, friends, is this?*
> —Shakespeare, Twelfth Night, 1:2

My positionality, while ostensibly defined by my social status and that of my family in the locals where I have lived, is characterized more by my transition from traveler to nomad. This transition began in the 1970s, but when exactly I am not sure. I go through my memories and try to piece together *Marta's nomadic timeline*. Looking back, I wonder if it didn't start in São Paulo.

March 1971: São Paulo, Brazil

I was born in Brazil, the last of five children. My parent were initially Catholics from middle-class families.

The transition certainly started to happen when I realized that my loyalties lay with the road. I reckoned this was so because, according to Deleuze (Deleuze et al., 2007), the one thing that defines a nomad is her preference for movement.

A nomad might define home not as a fixed place but as a set of relationships with family and community members in various locals. This was the case for me.

February 1978: Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

We moved as a family to Rio de Janeiro, and it was there, at age 10, that I started taking acting lessons and began understanding the actor's craft of becoming someone else through the theatrical convention of suspension of disbelief.

While stage acting and knowing how to act in one situation or another are two different things, they share common elements. Knowing how to act in one's own family dynamic is learned, yet we might never assume that it is different for anyone else until we visit another family and feel that we are somehow foreign to it. I became good at being a foreigner in Brazil. My early experiences were in the form of sleepovers and summer holidays. Families are like countries; each has its own laws and rituals. One only has to spend some time with someone else's family to realize how everyday life can be so different from what you know. Normality takes on a totally different meaning. Defamiliarization can happen everywhere but especially when travelling. Near or far, all is a reminder of different expectations, surprise, possible miscommunication, and possible misinterpretation. In a way, getting to know the other(s) in Brazil was also a way of finding myself because I could not then, and cannot now, do this alone. I need others to see myself in the alterity and not in the mirror.

June 1990: Paris, France

At 19, I left Rio de Janeiro for Paris to pursue theatre studies at Paris 8. My teachers were the main actors of the students' social movement in 1968 and were researchers of the European and American avant-garde theatres.

Even now as a theatre and drama teacher/practitioner/researcher, I cannot separate defamiliarization and family from my praxis. I have lived in nine countries: Brazil, France,

Netherlands, Indonesia, England, Greece, Italy, China, and Canada. I have my own family—three children—which I've raised mainly as a single mother.

The Role of the Teacher Today

Amidst calls for the progressive decolonization of curriculum and a diminishing reliance on master narratives, teachers are increasingly expected to take into account, recognize, acknowledge, understand and accept students' differences in the classroom. In 2021 the Quebec Ministry of Education released the *Reference Framework for Professional Competencies for Teachers*, in an attempt to standardize competencies around equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). Since then, educators everywhere struggle to better respond to calls for social equity. However, the challenge goes beyond encouraging teachers to adopt new standards, as teacher *identities* are involved. A report released by a task force on diversity and inclusivity appointed by the Lester B. Pearson School Board in 2021 notes that "as much as teachers are often part of the solution to the problems of marginalized students, sometimes they are a part of the problem" (Executive Summary, p. 60). The task force suggests that a lack of training is a large part of the problem and recommends frequent EDI training workshops for all teachers as well as ready access to EDI resources. While I absolutely agree, my own experience with teacher training suggests that teachers often possess a rigid self-concept that prevents easy acceptance of new concepts around identity, particularly their own, which in turn complicates the delivery of EDI training.

To explain my view, I offer a brief look at the phenomenon of rigid self-identity through the lens of critical posthumanism and feminist new materialism that historically have had the capacity to consider the nature of power relationships and develop new subjective figurations. For example, there is a tendency to understand role-play as jumping in and out of a character. While the trope of the method actor who cannot "shake off" the character is rare and exaggerated, the encounter with a character can be strong and leave its traces, just as when one encounters another human being and is able to develop a strong bond. This experience of being impressed upon and changed by another creates space and flexibility for other encounters. This often happens in the classroom. A student or teacher comes in as x and leaves as x+y, and so on and so forth. What Zembylas (2007) expresses so articulately in his "pedagogy of desire" as the affective turn in education sees the teacher/student relationship as providing a *landscape of becoming*, "which is a process that produces and develops multiple identities, not fixed essences" (p. 341).

Admittedly, Zembylas' understanding of non-fixed essences came to me through a negative personal experience when I was faced with hidden institutional agendas that were supposed to foster creativity but didn't. I came in as x and they wanted me to be y-x. Despite this, I continued to develop my understanding of power relationships, especially when I would be introduced to physical theatre and Lecoq's (2000) neutral mask training. In retrospect, I see clearly how it aligns with both critical posthuman theory and feminist new materialism. In the text that follows, I show how it may help teachers move past rigid self-concepts and develop a more flexible sense of their own identity and, thus more inclusive responses to changing student identities.

August 1993: Amsterdam, Netherlands

When I understood that French Universities train historians and critics of theatre, not theatre makers, I left for the Amsterdam School for New Dance Development with the hope of developing my own vision of an integrated form of performance that combined mime, contemporary dance,

and theatre. However, I was disappointed again as they only valued their own vision of what new dance looked like.

The Teacherly Identity Through a Posthuman Lens

Teachers occupy an increasingly fraught position in contemporary society. In many respects, teachers are held in high esteem and continue to hold positions of power and authority in society. However, as Carter (2022) suggests, teachers experience a real lack of agency when they engage with most subject curriculums, except arts curriculums. She goes on to say that because of this exception, it is more likely that social justice concerns can be addressed through the arts by way of teachers of the arts. For me, this is why it is so important to address teachers' identity through a posthuman lens during teacher education so that they foster EDIB in their classrooms.

The lack of EDIB training in educational institutions around social issues and the pressure teachers are under to respond appropriately to them might explain the increase in teacher attrition rates and the drop in enrollment in educational programs. However, this pressure/tension is also a particular feature of the present cultural moment where institutional authority is increasingly being questioned for its ongoing negative assumptions about peoples and beings that do not conform to the institutional desire for standardization and a persistent narrative of progress and excellence. Critical posthuman theory helps one question long-standing institutional adherence to Eurocentric humanism and its emphasis on both individualism and human exceptionalism, and in particular, its claims to universality and normativity (Braidotti, 2013). Feminist new materialism scholarship helps us understand both our deep anthropocentrism as well as the degree to which we are influenced by our affective environment (Barad, 2007).

Both critical posthuman theory and feminist new materialism scholarship use a language of *entanglement*, the knotty inseparability of matter and intelligence, of humans and non-humans, of humans and plants and technology and planetary systems etc., to describe our connection to the rest of nature/culture. Such scholarship pushes the conceptual boundaries of subjectivity as well as those of ontology, epistemology, and ethics; however, these last are beyond the scope of this essay. That said, the spiritual nature of art is also not addressed here but merits a mention that is tied to my time in Bali.

February 1995: Bali, Indonesia

I immersed myself in Balinese culture and ritual while studying Topeng, a masked dance-theatre that is traditionally performed in temple ceremonies. This experience has deeply transformed my relationship with performance because the Balinese don't have a word for art; it's all an offering to the gods.

For teacher trainers, the changing language around identity (as it relates to gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, ability, and religion) happening in mainstream society adds a layer of complexity to teacher training that feels unprecedented. Due to the long-standing dominance of Eurocentric humanist ideology in higher education in Western countries, teacher educators have perhaps not perceived the need to help teachers contend with student differences in the classroom before now (Snaza et al., 2014). While institutional authority did grant teachers a degree of academic freedom that allowed them some leeway in determining their own pedagogical stances and practices, notably in the arts program in Quebec (Carter, 2022), teacher education programs have, for decades, focused

primarily on developing teachers' disciplinary knowledge and their ability to control the classroom space (Zembylas, 2007). At present, however, we are experiencing rapid shifts in our understanding of individual identity due to advances in technology and media; teacher educators are experiencing significant difficulty helping teachers even recognize their own biases, let alone help them adopt new ideological frameworks for teaching that reflect EDI values (Bayley, 2018; hooks, 2014; Taylor et al., 2019).

Theatre-Based Methods as Critical Posthuman Pedagogy

Theatre-based pedagogies like role-playing have long been adopted in teacher training as a strategy for working with emotionally laden concepts or situations. Role-play is frequently used for its capacity to open participants' minds to new ideas, particularly when followed by discussion. For example, Boalian's Forum Theatre (2008), inspired by Freire and Macedo's (2018) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, explores role-play as a method for introducing teachers to difficult scenarios and unpacking possible variations and pedagogical responses. In *Smallest Circles First* (2022), theatre pedagogue Mindy Carter devises an auto-phenomenological approach to role-playing, which she suggests generates reconciliatory feelings among participants who are asked to "[walk] in [their] own shoes" before venturing into someone else's (p. 110). Building on Crenshaw's (2017) concept of intersectionality, Carter's self-reflexive approach is based on the understanding that each person has multiple and overlapping identities. The critical posthuman theory takes this understanding up a notch, positing that identity is something that is not decided upon by an individual but is shaped in-relation-to others and to multiple others, who may or may not be human. As I reflect on Carter's (2022) approach, I realize that I first began to appreciate the effects of co-habitation, in the larger sense, on identities in 1996 when I was in England.

June 1996: Guildford, England

Once back in Europe, for my Master's thesis in Dance Anthropology, I studied Northern European identities in the practice of Capoeira, a Brazilian Art form, using Bourdieu's concept of habitus.

The idea that individuals are both entirely unique *and* emerge in-relation, seems to reflect broader social understandings of identity as well. A student comment included in the report prepared by the Lester B. Pearson School Board's EDI task force called out one teacher's refusal to acknowledge his preferred gender identity due to the teacher's own religious identity, saying: "Mr. Vlaming, you may have your religion…but you need to respect who I am!" (Executive Summary, p. 60). The student's insistence on the impact of their mutual relation is no less persistent than the student's determination on being respected as an individual. We cannot ignore the influence of our environment, and our identity is not a cognitive decision. Teachers, as beings in the world, have long lived in an environment where hierarchical relations are the norm and thus assumed their superior role in their relationship with students as fixed and incontrovertible. This relation between students and teachers is what is changing. Having to account for (acknowledge and respond to) student differences can feel antithetical to the concept of academic freedom[1]. It's for this reason that simply presenting information on EDI is not likely to alter teachers' deeply embedded and embodied beliefs.

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[1] According to Encyclopedia Britannica, academic freedom is defined as the freedom of teachers, among other things to teach in the manner they consider professionally appropriate.

It may also explain why role-play can be so effective. Role-play defamiliarizes a person's experience of their environment and invites them to explore alternative perspectives. Role-play offers experiential, embodied learning where one becomes aware of how other bodies might feel in the world. It can be incredibly transformative. However, my concern, born out of experience, is that too often, role-play is structured so that participants spend more time exploring other identities and little time interrogating their own. To be sure, one of the central issues that critical posthuman theory addresses is a refusal of the Humanist belief in the primacy and superior ability of human reason as the seat of knowing; we tend to believe new knowledge is only acquired through cognition. Given the difficulty teachers have in recognizing their own biases, a method that aligns with critical posthuman theory and thus facilitates embodied introspection might help teachers experience and confront their beliefs in generative and non-cognitive ways that may by-pass the pitfalls of our cognitive habits.

As I think of my time in Greece, I am reminded of how cognitive habits can have a way of polarizing people into us vs. them.

January 2001: Athens, Greece

During my 5 years stay in Greece, I looked for the lost ancestry of the Dolianiti(s) family. At the beginning of 1900, my great-grandparents migrated to South America. When looking for clues of their origins in Greece, it became apparent that the locals disapproved of the subsequent mixing of my Greek ancestry with other races—a hybridization that I was and am particularly proud of.

As embodied and embedded beings who are not used to thinking of ourselves as such, critical feminist theory about the politics of location suggests that becoming aware of one's location and its intrinsic material and discursive conditions requires that one distance oneself from the familiar through some mechanism of defamiliarization to perceive differently. Through this mechanism, one has "a sense of estrangement that is not painless, but rich in ethical rewards and increased understanding" (Braidotti, 2011, p. 16). Indeed, Braidotti (2011) insists that "shedding light on one's blind spots, [through a] methodology of disidentification from the familiar enhances one's consciousness and self-reflexivity" (p. 16). Defamiliarization and disidentifications are thus techniques used by critical posthumanists, and happily are standard fare in theatre training, as role-playing attests (Booth, 2005; Heathcote & Bolton, 1999). However, exploring the self, one's own identity, often requires even more intense practices of defamiliarization, which Jacques Lecoq's neutral mask training offers in abundance. This was never more apparent to me than when I returned to Brazil in 2006.

October 2006: Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

I returned to Brazil, to my hometown, but it did not feel like I was returning; it felt like I was arriving in a different country.

Lecoq's Neutral Mask Training: Defamiliarization + Identification

Of course, there is no such a thing as absolute and universal neutrality, it is merely a temptation.
—Lecoq (2000)

Ordinarily in theater education, voice, text, and movement are offered as separate courses, but this reveals a long-standing assumption about the separation of these systems that one can

separate them. According to Roy et al. (1999), in their documentary film entitled *Les Deus Voyages de Jacques Lecoq*, Jacques Lecoq understood the body differently. They claim that for Lecoq, a man who started life studying sports and physical education, "[t]he body knows things we don't yet know" (Roy et al., 1999, 00:08 - 00:10). This was not a Cartesian understanding wherein the mind is not privy to the realities of the body, rather, Lecoq considered the body as the sensing mechanism through which knowledge enters and informs the whole body, including the mind. Think about how a sound enters the body through the ear, yet the whole body is informed by it. As such, Lecoq asks his students to respect, listen, and join in the wisdom of one's own body, and his methods provide tools to do just that. This was and still is a very unconventional way of approaching actor training, but critical posthuman theory and feminist new materialism provide theoretical support for Lecoq's assumptions about the body-mind and suggest the utility of such training in transversal applications like teacher education.

In practice, then, neutral mask training which changed over the years, to include more exercises, asks students to (1) adopt the bodily mannerisms of various objects, elements, and beings and (2) search for neutrality. The exercise teaches a process of simultaneous disidentification with the Self and deep embodied identification with an Other, primarily a non-human agent such as an animal, element, object, or matter, but eventually with humans as well. The practice, initially conducted without a mask, is always open-ended and improvised. It begins with the teacher describing and analyzing the specific qualities and movement of the material or element in question. The students then try to adopt neutrality so they can attempt to embody that quality. These practical exercises are followed by a debriefing exercise, where students share and discuss their experiences and perceptions with the teacher and give each other feedback. This dynamic process—theme-analyses-experiencing-debriefing-feedback—repeats itself for each new identification.

Of course, the sequence can vary from teacher to teacher as well as how it is experienced by the students. The process, however, becomes carved into the actor's body, creating unique pathways that can later be accessed. This can be called the *knowing body*, a collection of embodied memories and experiences informing not only the work but one's perception of an entangled world of oneself as an assemblage. I witnessed a variant of this pedagogy when visiting the internationally renowned school, The Juilliard School of Performing Arts (Music, Dance and Theatre), in New York City while employed in an international school in Shanghai.

August 2016 - Shanghai, China

Brazil-China-USA. I was hired as head of the drama department by an international school in Shanghai. As part of my professional development, I was sent twice to The Juilliard School, based in New York. There I witnessed very embodied voice lessons and movement lessons that used the spoken word as an initiator and the body as a source or vessel and "transmutator" of expression.

As a development of the course, the students get to wear an actual neutral mask, designed for Lecoq by Amleto Sartori, made of solid brown leather. It is a full mask that covers the whole face. Lecoq, addressing this *actual* neutral mask, says:

> This object, when placed on the face, should enable one to experience the state of neutrality prior to action, a state of receptiveness to everything around us, with no inner conflict…

When a student has experienced this neutral starting point his body will be freed, like a blank page on which drama can be inscribed. (2000, pp. 36-38)

With the mask on, students are asked to perform actions, such as waking up and saying goodbye in neutral, generic ways. The first identification exercises are done individually; students work on being able to physically imitate specific movements, such as a metal spring bouncing, a balloon inflating, or an ice cube melting. After that, identification is done in pairs or groups, and eventually, students experiment with the interaction of these materials, animals, and elements as prompts for further improvisations. Importantly, the "neutral generic being," who is not yet a character, is able to get in touch with the internal dynamics of the situation and reveals/performs these to an attentive audience through gestures that belong to everyone as well as through gestures belonging to the actor (Lecoq, 2000, p. 38). Actors attempt to divest themselves of their habitual bodily movements and take on another material identity, but as Lecoq understood, "[t]he neutral mask, in the end, unmasks" (Lecoq, 2000, p. 39). The neutral mask reveals the actor's idiosyncrasies.

The embodied understanding that one cannot divest oneself of environmental influences is the lesson and is aligned with both critical posthuman theory and feminist new materialism. Through this understanding, teachers may be able to recognize the degree to which their own subjectivity is informed by their long-embodied experience of unquestioned authority and alignment with Western humanistic beliefs, as well as how other bodies may have been influenced by the environments in which they were embedded.

As one can imagine, actors become deeply aware of their personal characteristics during this process, which suggests that in trying to become neutral, in attempting to shed the layers of one's own characteristics, one becomes aware of one's particularity.

The same happened to me as my environment changed dramatically from leader to learner. As a student, I became very aware of the actor in me.

July 2019 - to present: Montreal, Canada

I am presently researching applied theatre-based pedagogies to teacher education at the Department of Integrated Studies in Education at McGill University in Montreal.

In conducting and participating in neutral mask training, one comes to recognize the value of these exercises that need to be revisited throughout one's career, just like musicians do when they tune their instruments before a performance. Connecting to a "neutral" identity fosters receptivity to the environment and to the Other, a useful preparation for actors preparing for an improvised performance that may help teachers develop a more receptive position from which to teach. Applied to the classroom and to teacher education aimed at teaching EDIB, the neutral mask might be a useful training tool to help students and teachers declutter "social patterns and habits" that accumulate around fixed identities (Murray, 2005, p. 78).

I didn't know when I first began my studies at the University of McGill that posthumanism would play such an important role in my understanding of teacher training and particularly EDIB teacher training. I was introduced to posthumanism in 2020.

July 2020, 2021, 2022: Utrecht, Netherlands

From human to posthuman. I attended three consecutive Posthuman Summer Schools at Utrecht University from 2020 to 2022 because it went online due to COVID-19.

The experience of forming posthuman assemblages through computer images, the environment, and our companion species set me on my journey of using critical posthuman theory and methodology in my research, teaching, and art making. It made me aware that everything is in the state of becoming, as it diffracts from and into each other and gets entangled. The entanglement connects the "I"s, the "we"s, and the other or others that breath the same air and share in and with nature's waters, viruses, digital content, and connections. There is synapsis, communion, and dissent. From this point forward, Lecoq, drama, and EDIB became entangled for me.

Lecoq (2000) believed we all share a "universal poetical awareness" or "fond poetic commun" (p. 47). That is to say, while we share similarities in relation to the physical world, which he considered a common heritage, each will have had experiences and sensations that need to be brought forth and recognized. He says that to develop as an artist, each of us needs to feed off these experiences to develop "understanding and creation" (Lecoq, 2000, p. 48). As I prepare to close this paper, I echo and diffract Lecoq's poetic words taken from a poem written at *Belle Île en Mer* in 1997.

Everything moves.

Everything develops and progresses.

Everything rebounds and resonates.

(Lecoq, 2000, p. 187)

Conclusion

In conclusion, I suggest that Lecoq's (2000) neutral mask technique can be used to help pre- and in-service teachers develop and progress. The role of the pedagogue in the neutral mask workshop promotes spaces for embodied experiences where motion can be set into motion towards creating greater EDIB sensitivity. The same applies to e-motion, as an affective movement from and with the materiality of our world beyond the humanist, individualistic, rigid constructed understanding of "self" and towards understanding concepts of collectivity and becoming with others, both key foundations of EDIB training and posthumanism.

Acknowledgement

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