Identity, Migration, and the Arts: Three Case Studies of Translocal Communities

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For marginalized populations separated from their homelands, the arts are one of the most effective ways by which groups negotiate their identities at the crossroads of various cultures and influences. Through both hybridized and traditional artistic presentations, translocal and transnational communities engage the issues of identity in ways that renegotiate, challenge, and define the unique characteristics that make them who they are. This article examines three distinct cases of translocal populations as well as the ways by which the groups’ artistic activities help to inform a larger reconstruction of community presence and solidarity. Specifically, these three models focus on theater performances by Sudanese “Lost Boys” living in Syracuse, New York; visual art representations by Cuban exiles in Miami; and flamenco musical initiatives by Gitanos in southern Spain. While such examples are not meant to provide a formula by which translocal populations adapt and engage artistic representations, they nonetheless serve to inform a critical discussion on the ways in which the arts—music, dance, theater, and visual arts—are inherently linked to conceptualizations and representations of ourselves and of others.

KEYWORDS arts, culture, identity, migration

INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of studies about immigration and globalization over the past several decades is indicative of the changing nature of national identities in our contemporary world. As patterns of human movement shift, large numbers of individuals and groups self-identify in ways that defy political boundaries and challenge the notions of rigidity and homogeneity pertaining to national culture.1

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Nowhere is this clearer than in the case of translocal populations. Whether fleeing from ethnic conflict or emigrating due to economic pressures, translocal and transnational communities engage the issues of identity in ways that renegotiate, challenge, and define the unique characteristics that make them who they are.

While scholars have long accepted the arts as an important aspect of culture (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 40), it is the realization that the arts are not merely passive reflections of a community but rather an active and adaptive force that makes the arts a key element in migration studies. Thus, the arts are not an “imitation of life” but rather are “the very stuff of life” (Turino 2004, 10). In marginalized populations that have been separated from their homeland, the arts are one of the most effective ways by which groups negotiate their new identities at the crossroads of various cultural influences.

Through three distinct yet related case studies, this article aims to examine how the arts contribute to identity formation, maintenance, and transformation among transnational and translocal groups. Specifically, the authors highlight the Sudanese “Lost Boys” of the DiDinga tribe, Cuban exiles producing art in Miami, and historically nomadic Gitano, or Roma, populations of southern Spain. These examples are not meant to represent a formula by which the arts may be incorporated as cultural markers; there is no set pattern by which the arts intersect with displaced communities. Rather, the studies presented here serve as three examples of the varying ways by which the arts apply to a broader understanding of cross-cultural and cross-national human movement. Furthermore, these three cases provide specific illustrations of the ways in which the arts—music, theater, and visual arts—are inherently linked to conceptualizations and representations of ourselves and of others.

These particular studies have been chosen specifically because they represent distinct models while still sharing the use of the arts as an active force in identity negotiation. Furthermore, these cases present three types of translocal groups—refugees, exiles, and historical nomads—as well as three different art forms—theater, visual arts, and music. Thus, these studies should provide the reader with an idea of the multiple possibilities that exist in relation to the arts and diasporic populations while still allowing for other patterns of implementation. Additionally, we have specifically chosen to use both “translocal” and “transnational” in this article. In the case of Cuban exiles, migrants are clearly “transnational” in that they relocate across recognized national political borders; for the Roma of Spain, however, “translocal” is a more appropriate term since it does not have the political connotations of bounded nation state. Thus, we use both words in order to incorporate a wide spectrum of displaced and migrant communities.

Our discussion of these examples draws from a variety of theoretical backgrounds but particularly relates to contemporary dialogues within the fields of anthropology, ethnomusicology, cross-cultural communication, public policy, sociology, and arts management. We approach the cases with the conviction that
culture is flexible, contextually situated, heterogeneous, and socially constructed (Hall 1976; Berger and Luckmann 1966). This acceptance of cultural fluidity is necessary in understanding the forces at work in translocal identity maintenance. The hybrid identities and arts that result from migration, diaspora, and exile are framed here by a poststructural and postmodern theoretical base that focuses not on cultural constants but rather on change, human agency, and situational representation. By recognizing the various forces taking place in the conceptualization of identity in translocal communities, we seek to place the arts at the center of dialogues on transnationality and cultural representation occurring across a wide variety of academic fields.

**DIDINGA REFUGEES IN SYRACUSE, NEW YORK**

We begin our discussion with an exploration into the community of Sudanese refugees living in Syracuse, New York. Refugees are a unique and complex subset of translocal migrants, since their movement across borders is involuntary. As they migrate from camp to host community, refugees encounter circumstances that challenge and mold identity. The confusion encountered by the redefinition of self and other is further exacerbated by the trauma that refugees experience in the countries from which they flee. Separated from family and friends, refugee populations suffer from a lack of contextual clues to elucidate who they are and what defines them.

In these refugee groups, as in others, identity markers are drawn not only from the language that a population speaks but also from the songs, dances, and oral traditions associated with the group. For cultures in which traditional theater arts pass from generation to generation orally, as is the case with the DiDinga, the implications of displacement pose a greater threat to cultural continuity. Bill Ivey writes of the importance of maintaining a connection to past traditions, since such links provide “a solid bridge of real world sounds and images linking the present with decades past” (2008, 30). For cultures such as the DiDinga, however, there can be no material preservation of artistic culture; it must be preserved in performers’ minds and reiterated through practice in order to survive. In the case of DiDinga refugees cut off from older generations’ reinforcements, then, the question is whether or not the memory of a past identity is powerful enough to continue in new environments and contexts.

As previously stated, we acknowledge that culture is never static and that notions of self are frequently negotiated through contact with different locations, circumstances, and people. These shifts in identity, particularly in refugee groups, can be examined through changes in artistic traditions. As the asylum seeker moves from host culture to refugee camp and finally to a new home, artistic traditions prove malleable, continuously morphing to include new forms of expression. The result is not unlike the refugee’s identity: a hybridization of new and old, inherited and acquired, learned and created.
Folklorist Felicia Faye McMahon’s research on the recontextualized theatrical performances of a particular group of “Lost Boys”—Sudanese refugees of the DiDinga group—living in New York illustrates this point. This group of young men left their homes as boys after civil war erupted in Sudan. The DiDinga sought asylum in Ethiopia, only to be expelled by the Ethiopian government. Their native land still a war-zone, the boys were forced to trek over 600 kilometers to Kenya, where a refugee camp was established. There are now over 3,000 of these young men who have resettled in the United States (McMahon 2005, 356). The Lost Boys, many of whom were born in rural, remote villages, have subsequently become acculturated into American life: they hold jobs, drive cars, and have adopted new technologies.

In addition to acquiring new customs specific to Western life, the Lost Boys have brought with them a mix of cultural traditions from their native communities as well as newer traditions learned in the refugee camps. In New York, as in other regions where these individuals have settled, the Sudanese often perform for American audiences. These performances serve not only to educate Americans about the heritage of their new community members but also to give the refugees an outlet for expression. Guglielmo Schinina states that staging a theatrical event can help with “the construction and reconstruction of individual, group, and collective roles, on community building, on the creative reelaboration of mourning and anger” (2004, 49). Performing traditional songs and dances in a new environment can also have empowering effects, as it links the performer to his native culture. Apart from these benefits, the staging of performances in the host community facilitates identity construction among refugees because it disseminates knowledge about the refugees’ heritage. By imagining and visualizing the experience of the “other,” the audience of such performances takes a step toward cross-cultural understanding (Chayes and Minow 2003, 284).

Location and circumstance also affect the artistic traditions of the DiDinga. Separated from family and culture at a young age, the Lost Boys have only a limited knowledge about their own theatrical traditions. While in Kenya, the boys attended missionary schools, where they learned Western artistic practices and musical structures such as three-part harmony; in the U.S., the boys were further exposed to diverse artistic styles. While the boys may not have been conscious of the ways in which these exposures affected their traditional theater, it is certain that they played a part in the molding of diasporic artistic expression. “Popular music and culture meet,” writes George Lang, “despite traditional esthetic claims to their autonomy . . . They are not running alongside each other, but are mixed together” [sic] (Young 2002, 206).

Exposure to new styles of theater and music are not the only factors in the recomposition of DiDinga performance; oftentimes, novel elements are added out of sheer necessity. DiDinga dances are traditionally accompanied by specialty instruments such as hand bells and reed trumpets. Unable to obtain these instruments in the refugee camps, the young men utilized found objects such as spoons, pots,
and tin trays as music makers. Habitualized from years of using these makeshift
instruments, the stand-ins actually became the norm, obviating the need for tra-
ditional hand bells and reed trumpets. In other words, the DiDinga found ways
of overcoming challenges presented by external circumstances by negotiating and
molding a major component of their artistic identity. It is interesting to note that
later, when local folklorists presented the DiDinga with a few of their traditional
instruments, the group still chose to use spoons, pots, and tin trays (McMahon

Some question the authenticity of this hybridized form of DiDinga culture. Ac-
cording to Zolberg, Western purveyors of African theater (presenting venues and
concert houses) prefer old to new, thinking that the primitive has more authenticity
because it embodies “elemental human nature as opposed to civilized artificiality”
(Zolberg and Cherbo 1997, 56). In this school of thought, DiDinga hybridized
theater performed in the U.S. is not considered an authentic representation of the
culture’s art. The Lost Boys’ ancestors would likely agree with this point, seeing
the hybridized performance as defective or contaminated. However, the art of the
Lost Boys is indeed a valid cultural expression, created through a collaborative,
self-selected process by a subculture of the DiDinga. As McMahon writes, in order
to define an authentic diasporic identity, “we need to know whether those involved
in the negotiation process are insiders or whether decisions are being dominated
by outsiders. Because those involved in the negotiation stage are all Lost Boys,
consensus has been possible” (2005, 375). In other words, because the impetus
for the incorporation of new performance techniques came from the Lost Boys
themselves, this new definition of their cultural identity is a valid yet hybridized
incorporation of the myriad influences accompanying their travels from refugee
camp to adopted homeland.

CUBAN ART IN MIAMI

The case of Cuban art represents the way in which professional artists contribute
to a new definition of identity within the context of exiled communities. Devel-
oped in an era of political and social upheaval, the paintings of early twentieth-
century Cuban artists reflect a national inclination for change, both thematically
and stylistically (Sicre 1987). Each subsequent generation of painters grew from
this inventive adaptation of artistic traditions. What distinguishes Cuban visual
art and allows it to be utilized by transnational communities, therefore, is its ex-
ploration and exemplification of national identity (Gracia, Bosch, and Borland
2008, 2). Cuba maintains a long history of political, economic, and social unrest,
which generations of artists have sought to explore through a variety of mediums,
especially visual art.

La Vanguardia, considered to be the forefathers of Cuban art, engaged in
discovering and defining national identity (Martínez 1994, 2). This exploration
allowed future generations to examine their identities outside Cuba’s geographic
borders. Exiles that relocated to the United States during the 1960’s were forced to negotiate a balance between maintaining their national identity and incorporating a new American self. Although there are many circumstances under which Cubans left their home country, the result has been the creation of an artistic mode of discourse through which migrants explore and express the experience of exile.

*La Vanguardia* used their art as a tool for the development of cultural identity and the advancement of Cuban society, and “their art grew out of the turmoil of a country in the midst of reconstruction” (Martinez 1994, 2). The works of this generation sought to create symbolic representations of Cuba, to identify what it meant to be Cuban. By constructing a visual narrative they could bring the awareness and cohesion of a national cultural identity into the public realm of reality (41). Trained in European traditions, these Cuban artists took the styles learned abroad and adapted them to create an artistic codex that would come to define Cuban art. These artists were able to view the country through the eyes of a foreigner as well as a native and to understand the importance of creating communicative subjects, which allowed for the production of a common artistic language.

Whereas *La Vanguardia* laid the foundation for future generations of Cuban artists and codified the essence of Cuban culture through art, the first generation of Cuban artists to leave Cuba en mass was *La Vieja Guardia* (The Old Guard). These artists were born in Cuba and developed their skills on the island. As Cuba’s political climate began to change and many individuals were forced to leave their homes, such artists were forced to confront the realities of displacement by creating art in response to the phenomenon of being Cuban outside of Cuba.

As social and political unrest within the country continued through the 1960s, Cubans in the United States were presented with the task of rebuilding the lives they had left behind and maintaining a connection to their shared heritage (Bosch 2004, 23). These exiles invested in the artwork of their community, thereby completing necessary steps to help counter experiences of “culture shock” in their new home (Weaver 2000, 178). As the Cubans developed an art market in Miami, art became the way by which relocated Cuban individuals could remember and retain the lives they had lived in Cuba. This market grew into a thriving environment for artists and collectors alike. Gatherings allowed Cubans to create a space to discuss art, culture, music, literature, religion, and spirituality, all of which are important aspects to Cuban society. The community was able to reclaim the pieces of culture that had been left behind, simultaneously creating a venue for artists to meet with fellow Cubans in Miami (Bosch 2004, 36).

While the themes and styles of *La Vieja Guardia* reflect those linked with the experiences of exile, they remain within the visual vocabulary established by *La Vanguardia*. Having developed their identities fully within Cuban societal contexts, *La Vieja Guardia*’s connection to the homeland was much stronger than that of subsequent generations (Bosch 2004, 159). Consequently, *La Vieja Guardia*
provided a base upon which younger artists and later arrivals would create their own artistic modes of expression.

Arriving in conjunction with this first wave of immigrants were the “Peter Pan Children” who were born in Cuba but whose families sent them to the United States alone. The artists that grew out of this group faced the challenge of negotiating a dual identity: they are the one-and-a-half generation, having been born in Cuba but raised in the United States (Gracia, Bosch, and Borland 2008, 3). As such, their identities were partially formed in Cuba, but since they lost their cultural context during their youth, acculturation into American society also became a significant component of their growth. The art produced by this generation is reflective of the memories retained from Cuban life along with their experiences as exiles in the U.S. For them, exile represents the “rupture and trauma present as cultural continuity and self-definition is disrupted” (Bosch 2004, 64). Similar to the DiDinga living in Syracuse, those living on “the hyphen” of a Cuban-American existence are forced to navigate between what it means to be Cuban and what it means to be American (Gracia, Bosch, and Borland 2008, 4). This dichotomy of identity produces emotionally charged works representing the difficulty of coming to terms with a split sense of self.

Another aspect of Cuban migration that aided identity consolidation in the United States was the fact that all socio-economic levels were ultimately represented in the various waves of migration, thereby allowing the development of a microcosm of Cuban society on U.S. soil. “This provided the artists with a climate of cultural continuity, an environment through which they could retain and renew their Cuban identity along with the acquisition of an American self” (Bosch 2004, 28). Against a new American landscape, these artists could renegotiate their national and cultural identities in a way that many displaced populations cannot.

The tradition of Cuban art was thus established within a climate of change that allowed for the formation of a movement devoted to the identification and maintenance of a national identity by visually representing, challenging, and transforming what it meant to be Cuban. In the case of artistic practices among Cuban exiles, the art itself served as the unifying element in forming identity outside of the homeland. The art of the Cuban exile, therefore, establishes a national identity that transcends the island borders and brings new perspectives to the negotiation of identity outside of the homeland.

CONTEMPORARY GITANOS IN SOUTHERN SPAIN

A third and final example of the role of the arts in transnational identity development can be seen in the Roma populations of southern Spain. Spanish Roma, or Gitanos, provide a contrast to the other displaced communities discussed in this
article, as they are not immediately transnational but rather symbolically and historically translocal. Marginalized from mainstream Spanish society and separated from any ties to a nostalgic homeland, Gitanos must rely on cultural practices as markers of their communal identity rather than on shared ties to a geographic territory. Perhaps the most important of these cultural indicators is the art of flamenco, a musical complex whose essence is inherently linked to that of the marginalized population. Specifically, flamenco affords Gitanos a transcultural language by which to engage mainstream populations as well as a viable socio-economic means by which to earn a living and promote a positive image of “Gitano-ness” in Spain.

Scholars do not agree on the original homeland of the Roma, but the majority of scholars concur that—regardless of their origin—the Roma have been collectively marginalized and ostracized wherever they settle. Roma scholar Engebrigtsen writes that it is “essential to see both aspects: the Roma as an integral part of European societies and as exotic strangers. It is this double position that constitutes their identity and culture” (2007, 13). This ambiguous position of the Roma as outsiders is supported by scholars who contend that Roma have historically fallen into the category of “ethnic other” because they “have no nation state, territory, a holy book, or religion ‘of their own’” (Strand and Marsh 2006, 16). It is precisely for this reason that we have felt it appropriate to include the Spanish Gitanos community in our examination of translocal populations. While we make no claim as to the specific origin of the Roma, we recognize the group’s inherent translocality on the basis that the Roma are and have been located beyond the binding ties of a historic homeland and, consequently, have negotiated their identity by other means.

Spanish Gitanos have lived in Spain for five hundred years but have never truly been accepted into Spanish society (Charnon-Deutsch 2002). Even today, Gitanos primarily live in ethnic enclaves on the margins of Spanish cities. Travel writer Giles Tremlett argues, “Spaniards as a whole have never learned to love their gypsies—who are estimated to number some 650,000. Even today polls show that many would rather not live beside them” (2006, 149). Spanish historian Lou Charnon-Deutsch has shown, furthermore, that Spanish mainstream populations base their hostility toward Gitanos groups on both economic and racial grounds, despite liberal egalitarian laws within the country (2004, 236).

Flamenco flourishes in such ethnic Gitanos enclaves, as community members support artistic practices that they view as being vital to their group identity. Since “the roots of flamenco essentiality are perceived as embedded in . . . gitano ethnicity” (Nair 2002, 48–49), it is no wonder that group members engage the music as a marker of their values, history, and identity. Ethnomusicologist Peter Manuel argues that “since the mid-1970s, musicians have self-consciously used flamenco as an explicit and concentrated vehicle for Gypsy identity” (1998, 184). Despite contentions that flamenco is folkloric rather than Gitanos in nature, Gitanos
nonetheless perceive and claim it as belonging to them and, as such, employ the art form as a community marker, regardless of its actual origin.

*Gitano* discourse about flamenco clearly focuses on “ownership.” In conversations with flamenco aficionados, author Tremlett reveals that many proponents (both *Gitano* and non-*Gitano*) believe that “access to duende, the mysterious, magical force that inspires the best flamenco, was . . . available only to true gypsies” and that “you could not do [flamenco] properly unless you had gypsy blood in your veins” (2006, 167). In cases where prolific performers are not *Gitano* (such as in the case of flamenco guitarist Paco de Lucia), *Gitanos* frequently confront such incongruities by engaging in discourses that create a symbolic “Gypsification” of the musician. By referring to non-*Gitano* artists as having a *Gitano* soul or exalting the performer’s *Gitano* attributes, community members symbolically legitimize the art of the non-*Gitano*. As such, group members discursively exert control over the ethnicity of the musicians and dispel any tension that might arise from acknowledging the talent of an outsider.

Flamenco music is not, however, merely a passive facet of cultural pride. Rather, it is an active force employed by *Gitano* communities to negotiate a space within contemporary Spain. In a practical sense, flamenco allows *Gitanos*—who are frequently barred from typical workplaces by a variety of socio-economic and political factors—some measure of financial gain. As Nair states, flamenco “provides these gypsies with both an occasional means to a living and a forum for the musical performance of shared cultural inheritance” (2002, 270). Consequently, flamenco becomes a socio-economic marker as well as a cultural one.

The connection of *Gitanos* to flamenco is further strengthened by the fact that flamenco has become a dominant tourist attraction in recent decades. Specifically, “flamenco music has migrated from a folkloric ghetto to international stages and screens” (Santaolalla 2002, 59). This process is similar to that which occurred in the United States with African-American jazz: what was once foreign, transgressive, dirty, erotic, and exotic became, with time, a “high art” form practiced around the world (Mitchell 1994). In this way, flamenco has become an internationally facing representation of Spanish identity that places *Gitano* identity at the forefront of a global dialogue on ethnic music.

The possibilities for the *Gitano* inclusion of flamenco as a cultural marker offer a wide range of opportunities for future negotiations of the community’s place within Spain and beyond. New flamenco, or *nuevo flamenco*, blends a wide range of musical styles from reggae to salsa with traditional flamenco in order to create a fusion that defies the essentiality of national musical borders. Quintana argues that flamenco hybridizations “should not be seen simply as passive expressions of social reality but as active participants in the formation of a new urban identity” (1998, 193). As flamenco increases in popularity and gains a wider appeal through the incorporation of various styles, it stands to serve as a vehicle for *Gitano* legitimization within a larger sphere of influence. The creation of a “multi-national
and multi-ethnic community of subaltern groups” (Nair 2002, 283) through the fusion of musical forms and genres has the possibility to help Gitanos gain access to outside support systems and revenue sources.

Traditional associations of Gitanos with flamenco music, as shown here, have created a firm foundation for the art form to serve as a marker of group identity in a translocal population defined by cultural actions and lifestyles rather than ties to a particular homeland. In order to engage this facet to its greatest potential, Gitanos must continue to develop, innovate, and energize the art form. If they are able to do so, flamenco has the potential to serve as a site of ethnic contestation, Gitano pride, and cultural negotiation on a worldwide scale. It is through this global forum that these Spanish Gitanos will be able to demonstrate the power of music, song, and dance to influence the formation of marginal identities in Spain and elsewhere.

CONCLUSION

As with the Gitanos and flamenco, the DiDinga refugees and the Cuban exiles use their respective art forms to assert identity in circumstances where notions of self are not clearly defined. Cubans in Miami use the visual arts to hold firm to their cultural roots while simultaneously navigating their way into life in the U.S. In this respect, art is used as a tool for the maintenance and preservation of national identity. For the DiDinga in Syracuse, art represents a separation from generations past and a transformation of identity. Unlike the case of the Cubans, the Lost Boys redefine their native artistic traditions in order to reflect the cycle of fragmentation and recomposition through which their identity has been formed. Finally, for the Gitanos, flamenco is used to bind and define a group that has no state ties and for whom community is not rooted in locality.

We have found that the arts play an important role in identity creation because of their unparalleled ability to be both expressive and nonviolent. As Kaptani and Yuval state, the arts “are exposure, confrontation and contradiction which lead to recognition and analysis, which in turn awaken understanding” (2008, 4). In the three distinct examples presented here, it is clear that the enactment of identity through artistic expression plays a key role in the recognition and consolidation of group characteristics. What is similar about these cases, however, is that they all involve translocal groups rather than individuals. As Zolberg and Cherbo state, groups of marginalized people posses the ability to “band together to effect change” in a way that might elude individuals (1997, 37). It is through this process of group negotiation and decision making that reconstructed art forms are legitimized, therefore becoming valid cultural components.

The policy implications for such statements are staggering in their importance and indicate an immediate need for comprehensive, wide-ranging studies to be conducted on this topic. We find ourselves in an age where natural disasters,
political revolutions, and armed conflicts shift the face of human settlement with relative ease and rapidity. In countries receiving thousands of fleeing refugees as well as in areas where new international divisions of labor push distinct communities into close contact, the arts provide an alternative to confrontation and serve as a force for understanding rather than conflict. As seen in the cases presented here, it is possible to examine the arts as expressive forms of hybridity that constitute alternative spaces for the contemplation of the complexities of adaptation. Thus, we strongly believe that the arts and culture must be present in all levels of policy pertaining to immigration, conflict resolution, and diplomacy. Not only do aspects of culture such as those described in this article raise awareness of the transformations that groups experience in translocal situations, but they also provide a forum for the development of identity, thereby opening an expressive space in which to produce meaningful dialogue between “us” and “them.”

Notes

1. For further discussions of transnational identity formation from differing perspectives, see Bose (2008), Huntington (2004), and Kibria (2008).
2. While in Europe, members of La Vanguardia cultivated their craft studying the modernist movement, which included cubism, surrealism, expressionism, abstraction, and primitivism, to name a few. It was from these foundations that the Cuban artists of the early twentieth century grew and developed.
3. Much of the research in this section comes from author Laura Smith’s experiences during the two years she spent studying Gitanos in Granada (2007−2009).
4. We have chosen to use the term Gitano rather than Gypsy or Roma throughout the rest of this case study since this is the emic terminology that Spanish members of this particular group use. We employ the term Roma only when speaking generally about non-Spanish Gypsies.
5. Although we refer to “mainstream Spanish society,” this term in and of itself is problematic, as Spain is composed of a variety of ethnic backgrounds and culturally distinct regions. For the purposes of this study, we have chosen not to engage these issues of Spanish regionalism; thus, the reader should be aware of the incongruities in the term “mainstream” but should understand it as a generalization whose purpose is to contrast with Gitano culture.

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