Queer Ecologies
One Year Later

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IT'S HOTTER THIS YEAR. Much hotter. The sounds are the same—at least they seem so. Motors. Birds. Louder motors. More birds. Crunch-crunch-fwap-fwap: my footsteps are heavier, and my breathing as well. I am sweating a *lot* more. I have to pick my days carefully for revisiting the two locations, much more carefully than last year, because I don't want to get stuck in a sudden torrential downpour or thick cloud of smoke and dust from Canadian wildfires. News anchors pleasantly tell us this "hottest summer on record" is probably going to be called the beginning of the rapid upward trend we will nostalgically look back upon in a decade or so as the last time we were comfortable. We already experience the pain of extreme climate disasters to come, a living *bukimi*[1] (Appelbaum, 2011) of anticipation for the turning point beyond livable to slow and excruciating human extinction (Aravamudan, 2013).

I am re-visiting sites of a sound-art project I contributed to an exhibition last year, "We're Where? Hear Here: Que're Queer?" Hosted jointly by the William Way LGBTQ Community Center of Philadelphia and Bartram's Garden National Historic Landmark, the Queer Ecologies project sought to "explore our relationship to nature as a queer community—how we are inspired by, engaging with, and perhaps most importantly, understanding ourselves as part of nature" and to ask, most importantly, "How are we, in turn, leveraging our experiences to provide unique solutions to the social and environmental challenges we are facing?" (WayGay, 2022, para. 2). The proposal I had submitted juxtaposed the artificial binary created by the two sponsoring institutions and the intention to locate works of art in the two locations—one in the heart of urban Philadelphia, the other a nature preserve outside the center along the Schuylkill River—with other common binaries relevant to queer ecologies.

The very structure of two locations, separated geographically, culturally, and in terms of their histories and missions, served as an analogy for the ways that binaries operate in our culture and society in general: binaries such as male/female, straight/queer, concerned/unconcerned about climate change, urban center/outlying nature preserve, and so on, establish in our thinking simple assumptions and potential solutions to problems and crises. Posters and signs explained the work in strategic locations for both sites, with a QR code that serendipitously brought curious visitors to the installation website. The website introduced the project and offered several options for

soundwalks beginning near the signage, curated streaming sounds accompanying instructed paths to follow while listening. Visitors following the instructions walked along paths for soundwalks that took place at the *other* site, streaming to their earbuds.

What was a sound art installation for the purposes of procuring a grant from the exhibition (I now own very nice recording equipment purchased through the stipend, and the installation website is still live with the purchased domain name, Appelbaum, 2022) was simultaneously an experiment in public pedagogy. My return to the sites is a form of embodied reflection one year later. I ask myself, after a community-based art provocation designed to confront assumptions about human-nature dichotomies through a queer lens and during a period of increased catastrophic climate change experiences, how do we continue to pursue public, arts-based curriculum projects? What can be proposed as "knowledge," "ways of knowing," "ecological expertise," "categories of people," or "institutions of learning"? Reflection on these points of significance raises questions for arts-based curricular practice. Can we hear the destruction of our planet? Are we listening? What are the sounds of sufficient change?

The "one year later" in my title ironically evokes theories of "queer time" informed by queer theory (Freeman, 2007; Halberstam, 2005). Queer lives often experience time in non-linear ways (in comparison with normative, linear time)—coming out, dating, and forming intimate relationships for the first or second time, transitioning, becoming sexually active, and so forth, come earlier, later, overlap with each other, and defy sequential description. Futures are enacted as already present—in the present. In this version of time and space, the question, "What are we going to do?"—once translated into objectives with justification ("Why are we doing *this*?")—becomes, "Do I know or even need to know right now, why I am doing this?" In other words, it is not, "What are we going to do?" but instead, "This is what I am doing, and I am doing this because …" (a) It is something I feel I need to do in order to meet my own expectations; or (b) I want to work with these particular people, because …; or (c) I enjoy doing this!

Yet, even as we project one year later from the presentation, the publication of this article is going to be even later than the reflection, which in turn is one year later than the exhibition that sparks the reflection. Nested "laters" anticipate and evoke memories of past futures. And future pasts.

My key entry into ecological curriculum theory (Dentith, et al. 2022; Payne, 2006) is my conviction that direct study of crises and catastrophic predictions reproduces the anthropocentric fixation (Lupinacci & Happel-Parkins, 2016) on "What knowledge is of most worth?" (Spencer, 1860, as quoted in Schubert, 1985, p. 4). The soundwalks were inspired by this conviction. I seek with David Abram (as quoted in London, 2023) alternative provocations in all of my recent curriculum projects: "It is not by being abstract intellects that we are going to fall in love again with the rest of nature. It's by beginning to honor and value our direct sensory experience" (para. 52). Knowing things is magical, empowering and individually self-fulfilling. Yet, we can learn from those indigenous traditions in which the magicians and shamans simultaneously offer prayers and ritual gestures to other animals and to the powers of the earth and the sky. Otherwise, they might heal someone in the community and someone else would fall sick, and then they would heal that other person, and someone else would fall sick, *ad infinitum*. The obligation is to ensure from the edges of our village that we always return something back, that we maintain a two-way flow, guaranteeing that that the boundaries between human culture and the rest of nature stay porous and

overlapping. What we know will not cure the world. Sharing what we know will not save the world. Developing forms of leadership, entrepreneurship, and civic engagement that enrich and expand reconnection with stewardship has a chance to do so.

Taking a walk in the urban neighborhood surrounding the community center or in the natural grounds of the Bartram's Garden estate was designed to return the walkers to their presence in place. What we need, suggests Abram (2010), are new kinds of storytelling that direct us back to our physical senses in our locations. Returning our bodies to our senses in our embodied location refers to the practice of becoming more aware of our physical presence in the world around us and using this awareness to inform our actions. Nevertheless, sounds streaming in our ears while we are walking, step by step by step along a path in a particular place, destabilize the "where" of the "here we are" … and forcing them to come "from that other place" was intended to mirror the problematic binaries established by the exhibition design. What someone thinks they are experiencing and how they are understanding their environment is not so obvious. How different are these two places? What are the differences? What a natural environment "is" or "is not" varies depending on how one understands location, place, and space, and sound has the ability to help people to "hear" the "here" they are living. As Gershon (2019) eloquently interrogates, sensory understandings are forms of educational, relational politics; the interwoven visual, auditory, olfactory, and emotional encounters both challenge our senses of balance, place, and time, and implicitly ask why we carry "those" expectations into this collection of appellations.

The artist's statement, found on the website, proposed some initial questions to visitors:

- What is the relationship between LGBTQIA+ identities and the natural environment? In what ways does each serve as a metaphor for the other?
- What is a "natural" environment? One in which someone naturally fits? Something to do with nature?
- In what ways do our experiences of man-made "nature" and naturally man-made experience mirror assumptions that people make about identity, fluidity, change, and the natural itself?
- What sounds like nature to you???
- What is naturally sound (logical) in your experience?

Whether we are located on the grounds of Bartram's Garden or in the William Way Center neighborhood, the general soundscape is surprisingly similar! One would have thought that the grounds of Bartram's would be dominated by nature sounds—animals, birds, the wind rustling through the trees, the water lapping at the dock … While expectations for the streets of Philadelphia's Gayborhood promised traffic, construction, sirens, crowds … In actuality, the soundscapes are more similar than different! They are both dominated by the humming of motors, and the piercing refrains of birds! A potential binary of nature versus human-made sounds is revealed a false notion by the Queer Ecologies in this project! The "nature sounds" of Bartram's Garden and the "city scape" of the Gayborhood surrounding the William Way Center neither purely adhere to the expected binary nor blend or blur boundaries between the binary. Instead, the overwhelming sound of motors takes over virtually all experience in any soundwalk we attempt. And, despite the dominance of humming motors, a duet of birdcalls and wind is present at all times of the day, demanding respect in the face of the onslaught of never-ending motor sounds.

- Listen to the sounds of either location, where you are, or with the streaming sounds that have been collected through countless hours, at numerous times of day, in both locations, and you hear much the same thing! If there were ever a way to deconstruct a binary, this is surely it.

Susan Edgerton (2023) recalls the beginning of the pandemic lockdown, "walking around the city where all the closed businesses and offices looked like a kind of war zone … It was quiet. Animals began to retake the streets and parks" (p. 43). Susan believes the pandemic offered a unique opportunity, a glimpse in real time of a revitalized environmental commons. Yet, she evokes curriculum theorist Chet Bowers (2016) as she writes that we have returned to the pre-pandemic scene: we should not underestimate "the power of mythical thinking to distort awareness of what should be obvious to everyone … [including] how the exploitation of the natural environment is not leading to progress, but to greater scarcity and impoverishment" (p. 43). Contrasting "the pandemic experience" with the Queer Ecologies exhibition helps us hear Tyson Yunkaporta's (2021) point that the natural world is taking its own actions to restore balance. Can a soundart curriculum make this lesson better heard?

Human experience is rarely "in the moment." Whether a person is listening to the sounds of the Gayborhood while strolling the grounds of Bartram's Garden or streaming the sounds of the dock at Bartram's Garden at a location in the Gayborhood, the streaming sounds serve as a metaphor for typical human life, never only in their body's "place" at that precise clock time. Our experience of time and place folds in on itself in layers and intersections … While in one "place" we are thinking about what happened or will happen in another location. While listening to one sound, its meaning, and our understanding of it, is a reverberation of our lifetime of events that coexists with similar sounds. What we are seeing "now" unfolds through our memories and unconscious projections of our futures. What we are hearing now is very much the same sort of non-linear, layered tapestry of past, future, future dreams of possible pasts, and past dreams of possible futures. We are never really just "here" "now" but are always in, at, around, through, over, under, with, against, where, and when we have been, will be, were, never will be, and more.

Queer time captures well the disturbing *bukimi* of rapid climate change through its recognition that the traumatic anticipation of catastrophe does not match up with common cultural expectations for a sequence of milestones. Slow understanding "over time" of non-normative experience, recognition of community(ies), establishment of personal relationship(s) with one's identity(ies), and so on, form a cultural encounter that is importantly distinguished by the lack of an "appropriate" or expected sequence of experiences through which one achieves "maturity." All ecologies are "Queer Ecologies" (Anderson, et al., 2012; Mortimer-Sandilands & Erickson 2010; Seymour, 2020). Ecologies are relationships with Queer Time and Space.

Sound collection for the original installation, as is the case for these return visits, was somewhat random, or perhaps a better word is "serendipitous." I visited each site numerous times, at different times of the day, on different days across weeks of sound collection. Nevertheless, specific sound files and specific walking path locations were edited, curated, sequenced, and organized through a painstaking process similar to what a poet, painter, or sculpture might experience … working as a sound artist required me to consider how my work interacts with the conceptual motivation for the project itself, the subject(s) of my art, and the medium(s) that I am working with. Decisions about my placement of sounds within the particular walking paths created dialogues and references to other works of (sound) art in the history of this kind of artistic effort.

- Some may call this a "game" I am playing with art historians and critics. Others, I hope, recognize the specific choices as important commentary on my subject, the processes of sound art creation, and potential futures for sound, art, ecologies, queer theory, and so on. Do you think you heard a connection to another work of art, or a version of queer ecologies? Share this with others!

Now What? Past Futures, Present Pasts

Public pedagogy is amorphous and ephemeral. While the installation website continues, any one soundwalk encounter is gone in the very moment it happens. Some visitors listen to the soundwalks vicariously without even following the curated paths described on the site. Others engage with the website and its conceptual provocations without even attempting the intended re-embodied sensual experience of place and time. Any possible engagement is a curriculum; what can be said about this?

The curricular "content" of the project might be described as applying the metaphor of non-binary and fluid queer identities and life experiences to the embodied experience of place and time. Do we need to worry about demonstrating that content objectives have been reached when we create such a form of public pedagogy? Anecdotal evidence of observed site visitors confirms the disorientation caused by the common sounds from each location (mostly birds and motors) that belie the differences, and that call attention to the ways that both human and "natural" forces permeate space and time. The installation amplified the porous two-way flow among boundaries identified by Abram (2010) as critical. Initial disappointment at finding the sounds to be remarkably similar slowly dissolves for many into an epiphany: human impact is everywhere, a violent incursion symbolically represented here by the motors of industry, the motors of transportation, engines of mechanization; yet nature is always seeping into the cracks of civilization, as evidenced by the cutting sounds of bird calls even in the densest construction sites and through the blaring of music above 90 decibels. How might this be leveraged for future extrapolation?

The original installation mostly disrupted location and facilitated recognition that a person is never "only" in one place at one time—we are always in this place recalling other times in this same place, projecting ourselves in this place in futures, experiencing this moment mediated by memories of other places and times similar or different, not able to be in this place if we are listening to sounds from the "other" place, and so on. This article further disrupts the location in time for the theorist-artist. Imagining a future "complicated conversation" inspired by the Queer Ecologies experience, I struggle to hear memories of first thoughts about the initial proposal, the joy of receiving funding and purchasing good recording equipment, the countless hours of recording and selecting excerpts, the design and making of the website, and previous reflections, with my hopes for future projects that will call people to assembly, action, and social change. What stories are told, were told, and might be crafted in the future, about the future, about our pasts?

I honor the Indigenous de-colonization of education as differentiating among "proper stories," "wrong stories," the "law of the land," and the "right stories" (Yunkaporta, 2021, n.p.). "Proper story" is a living landscape model permitting the belief that you can make predictions, delineating limits and obligations of your relationship with the land and teaching how to move with it as it transforms over time. It is an ongoing aggregate of the knowledge of many people who speak for different aspects and diverse bioregions. This approach promotes decentered governance

structures and distribution of power, knowledge, and resources throughout social systems in patterns that align with the complex ecosystems we have inhabited over hundreds of millennia. It is in this sense that "story" speaks the law of and in the land. The "right story" regenerates each entity of its landscape in perpetuity, including our own species, conceived as the custodial species of the Earth. "Wrong stories" take on the character of gossip, facilitating curses, illusions, bad faith, and denial. When wrong stories become the baseline data for modelling, self-termination algorithms blossom in all landscapes all over the planet, including digital landscapes. Nature eventually takes care of these lawless combinations, imposing limits. This natural law acts as a kind of immune system response to multipolar traps in which bad actors seek to misuse landscape for personal advantage, forcing others to adopt the same behaviors at scale or be outcompeted.

We pour our energy and convictions into public pedagogy actions. And then we want to sustain such work through a belief in its efficacy. What other "measures of value" are available to the curriculum maker in this sort of work, other than the self-satisfaction of pursuing art for art's sake? Surely, the joys of soundart making, securing funding, inclusion in the curated exhibition, even in saving a few of the posters are all meaningful. But how do we know if there are people out there who went to the historic garden on a pleasant summer day, happened upon the sign, used their cellphone to listen as they walked, and now are talking about the environment differently with friends, or voting differently on climate-related policies, or choosing a climate-related career path? What forms of motivation do we have, other than to share our personal crisis of self-confidence at an education conference?

Sound's Wrong/Sound Ethics/Listening to the Land

When we take sounds out of their place and by proxy our sensation of sound away from our presence in that place, what sort of trauma are we performing upon these sounds? Maintaining the porous boundaries necessitates a shift away from the human hubris enacted by assuming humans can "own" any sound they "capture." The language there signals an important issue: How can we become more accountable to the factual reality that our lives and welfare are subsidized by a violent and unsustainable (that is, colonial) system, while gesturing toward different horizons, horizons beyond that offered within that system (Stein et al. 2020; Tachine & Nicolazzo, 2022)? Stein and colleagues (2020) strategize a simultaneous unlearning of the assumptions of that system and their associated modes of thinking, being, feeling, sensing, desiring, and relating, as well as learning to be taught by other ways of thinking, being, feeling, sensing, desiring, and relating without repeating harmful colonial patterns of engagements across difference (including extraction, appropriation, instrumentalization, romanticization, and consumption). What are the ethics of appropriating sounds of a location for our (perhaps altruistic) intentions, for our own creative (well-meaning, pedagogical) productions? If they reconstruct ways of working and knowing endemic to the very ecologically devastating epistemologies and metaphors responsible for our current traumatic *bukimi*, we need to shift from them to new relationships and new ethical principles. If we insist on a cost-benefit analysis that justifies the use of sound files in the service of "awareness" or "provoking change," we are in essence preserving the unsustainable economics.

Just as visitors to the *Queer Ecologies* exhibition expect to hear entertaining differences between the sounds of their embodied location and those of the other site, I return to the urban center and the grounds of the historic garden expecting to discern in sounds one year later the changes wrought by a lack of human action on climate and environment. We are deaf to reality.

We refuse to listen to the trauma, finding comfort (for now) in our air-conditioned, air-purified buildings. The history of sound art in general seems to be a collective pursuit of impact, to serve a public pedagogic role (Appelbaum, 2019).

The very juxtaposition of sound in the liminal terrains of imaginative and creative efforts, scientific data, medium of expression, craft and technical skill, and social interaction, as aesthetic rumination, advocacy or abstract investigation, calls into question the boundaries of conventional scholarship and supposed scholarly distance, the ethics of art, and the relationships between the artist or scientist or craftsman or advocate and their worlds, material, social, political, cultural, and ideological. Is "impact," therefore, a primary criterion of sound as technology of knowledge, as medium of art, as tool of advocacy, as location of inquiry? Can we shift our epistemologies and methods toward strategies of unlearning, as suggested by Stein and colleagues? Manipulating sounds to create a "story," as if the sounds themselves are neutral, is not going to work well. It is not as if the sound editor is the location of the ethics alone. Nor is it ethical to displace responsibility onto the visitors, who use or hear the soundwalks according to their own interests and pleasures. Yet we cannot ignore the ways that coloniality grows and flourishes in music, sound art, and sound studies of any kind, as much as any other social institutions and flows of consumer products, knowledges, and cultural capital.

Tyson Yunkaporta (2020) proposes that we listen to the "yarns" that emerge from a group mind rather than write our own stories to compare. Wahinkpe Topa (Four Arrows) and Darcia Narvaez (2022) shift my attention from soundscapes to "existencescapes," which embraces me within reciprocal sensations of my place, more than using one of my senses, such as hearing, to guide a cross-sensory way of being "here." The "problem" with sound art as public pedagogy, if there is one, is the way that the "curriculum" distances the listener from the place, even in place. The message has been there all along: listen to the trauma of humans treating the place as a commodity. Buzzing motors and blaring horns interrupting the ecosystem of the nature preserve along the river. Transportation and multistory fortresses collaborating on the insistence that culture unfolds independently of the animals, plants, air and water between the Delaware and Schuylkill Rivers. "You are looking for the way home, without realizing you never left," says Brilliant Miller (2020, n.p.), and Tyson Yunkaporta agrees, elaborating that looking for the connections you see in your experience of the land enables you to live in a new way with that land. Our listening to how the rivers and rain, wind and mountains, hear *us* brings us to knowledge rather than trauma.

Cities expect unlimited growth based on finite material, combined with by necessity outsourcing the consumption of materials beyond themselves (Yunkaporta 2020). In some ways, cities define civilization, that is, contemporary human existence. Receiving signals from the land helps us see that cities push the pain and trauma away from people who can't see or hear them. Outsourcing pain is temporary. You will eventually hear the screams and, then, feel the pain yourself. I can create soundart for myself and others, but I probably should not imagine it as a transformative public pedagogy unless it takes the form of transforming our ways of listening to our place. But of course, I knew this before I even proposed the curated soundwalks. This is not a tale of progressive knowing moving through linear time.

In anticipation of the gathering monsoon, Harshavardhan Bhat (2022) begins with the body and its senses, the "stickiness" of living inside an ocean that has taken to the air (p. 221). The Monsoon is all around us, through seasons and cycles, worlds of wetness very different from a personified Rain, yet still establishing relationships with us. Stickiness refers to a kind of clinginess, a dependency, a fondness of sorts, an undetachable form of trouble and something that is also sensed between different beings, processes, and materials. It is an embodied connection

with monsoonal atmosphere and is a relational descriptor that can be used to deploy ambiguities and uncertainties opened up by the monsoon: its weather, climates, waters, relations, and so on (Bhat, 2022, p. 221). Bhat's personal experience of Monsoon connects with others' stories, not by individualizing the Monsoon as a thing to which one relates, but as a sticky collection of cosmologies, approaches, materials, and processes by monsoonal stickiness itself. It is through this characteristic of many different artifacts—rains, winds, airs, relations—that stickiness emerges with its own methods and implications. "To study the monsoon," writes Bhat, "to follow atmospheric concerns, to collaborate on it, is in many ways also about the monsoon making presence and study possible" (p. 222). It seems to instigate conversations with "multispecies others" (Bubandt et al., 2022; Khan et al. 2023; Kirksey & Helmreich 2010).

I began with sounds that engulf me, saving them and treasuring them to share with others. I turned them into things rather than listening to how they changed my life in place. Bhat began with the quotidian relationship he lived in Dehli, noting how winter conditions for thick, soft, smoggy, misty air came together to establish respiratory allergies to nothing in particular. Aerosols as matters in and of the air contribute temporalities that sparked Bhat's interest in the ways they swayed the monsoon in various ways, collecting, remaking, and being made by them. Agricultural burning, postharvest rice stubble, and their increased additions to air following industrial "improvements" are examples of what is called anthropogenic atmosphere factors that transform monsoon metabolism and becoming ("Anthropogenic" is a term for environmental changes caused by people.). The haze of these anthropogenic clouds participates in disrupting what the monsoon becomes, both as concept and as lived reality. Bhat learned through his grandmother's stories that monsoons (which she referred to as the "time of rains") were in conversation with other times of rains before and yet to come. His mother has had mixed success in predicting the extent of monsoons from year to year yet notes that she is "still doing better than they are" (p. 219), by which she means state institutions. She notes that the scientists learned the importance of monsoon records and predictions from the colonized, "suggesting that the cosmologies of power that held weather knowledges were possibly collected and reassembled from one system of power to another," in the development of colonial science, and monsoon histories do in fact often speak of the role of upper-caste assistants and data collectors in the assembling of colonial science (p. 219).

Steven Khan, Michael Bowen and Douglas Karrow (2023) also evoke rising anthropogenic changes. They wonder about the effects on "the breath in our bones" while drawing upon an analogy with the *abeng*, Ghanian for an animal's "horn" (p. 1). The blowing of the horn in the West Indies called enslaved people to the cane fields and allowed Maroon armies to communicate among themselves (Cliff, 1984/1995). Khan, Bowen and Karrow (2023) "take 'the breath in our bones' literally, that is, how the literal atmosphere through its poetic meanderings comes into the myriad and endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful of some of our multispecies kin" (p. 1). They experience the

> Anthropocene, like the *abeng* as a call to gather, to band together, resist and assist others in their struggle for freedom against current *sequalae* of infections by pathogenic plantation structures, logics, embodiments, and systems, which reduce all of life and life's processes—the breath in our bones—to economic and exchange value. (Khan et al., 2023, p. 28)

They are impatient and worry that curriculum planning and evaluation distracts from the urgency of the *abeng*. Yunkaporta, with Khan, Bowen and Karrow, and with Bhat, Topa and Narvaez, hear

the curriculum already present, without mediation by the artist, collected artifacts of our everyday life experience that function as touchstones for new relationships, at once a call of urgency to communal activity.

The meadow on Bartram's Garden's land feels the stickiness of barge motors on the Schuylkill River, trains rushing along their tracks, air conditioning condensers for the visitors' center, and chomping footfalls of the sound artist exploring the wooden platform walkway over the swampy slope along the river. The streetscape near the community center feels the stickiness of hawks swooping down to catch a rat scampering in the alley, a pair of workers speaking to their cellphones about plans for the evening. The singing birds are allergic to the sticky fumes from buses and cars and steamy dryer vents from the apartments, seeking solace in the shade of chimneys or the leaves of a tree. I trace the paths I chose a year ago, hearing both the sounds streaming on the website from the other landscape and those of the living more-than-human participants here and now. Sounds from the past? Sounds of a future we might be able to hear one day? Time and place are actually *one* (Yunkaporta, 2020).

It's hotter this year. The air makes me cough, orange and red against the sky. I hear birds and motors and engines and horns. I hear wind blowing through the trees, whistling through the alleys. The recorder makes the wind sound louder than the way it sounds when I listen as I walk. I hear the birds more in the recordings. I think they are pleading with us to stop driving cars and cooling our homes with so much energy from fossil fuels.

Notes

1. Inhabitants of Hiroshima used the Japanese *bukimi* (weird, ghastly, unearthly) to describe the experience of impending catastrophe combined with uneasy, continued good fortune in the months before the nuclear bombing (Lifton, 1967; Saint-Amour, 2000). Theorizing as *bukimi* enables us, too, to name this nightmare of alarm, fear, and celebratory delay.

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