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Compr(om)ising Postcolonialisms: Postcolonial Pedagogy and the Uncanny Space of Possibility

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Compr(om)ising Post/colonialisms: Postcolonial Pedagogy and the Uncanny Space of Possibility¹

“Fear of freedom, of which its possessor is not necessarily aware, makes him see ghosts.

Such an individual is actually taking refuge in an attempt to achieve
security, which he prefers to the risks of liberty.”²

The title of this paper is drawn from a conference of the same name that I co-organized in 1999 at the University of Wollongong in Australia (see Radcliffe and Turcotte). Although the general aim of the conference was to interrogate the notions of the postcolonial, it originally began as a wider discussion about the way postcolonialism had developed as a worldwide industry, and the growing sense that the pioneering efforts of Canadian and Australian scholars in shaping this field had been marginalized. My fear with this juggernaut of an academic industry was that the so-called fringe or peripheral celebration of the field was being recolonized by the old empires. The United States and Britain, somehow, were buying up this potentially radical, interrogative area of academic studies, so that it began not only to speak a centralist agenda, but more alarmingly, the modes of its production were once again made to reside in, and so shape more than ever the interests of, the traditional centres. Routledge, for example, in setting itself up as a monolith, and Carfax, by buying up the key journals in the field and then insisting that scholars sign away their authorial rights in order to be published in these strategic sites, were in a sense, it seemed to me, returning us to the paradigms of old. So that while arguments about the flaws, and even exclusions, of what some critics termed the “failures” of postcolonialism were undeniable, the ex-centric force that allowed for an often profound radicalism to take place was diminished.³

This, as I say, was a starting point for the conference. It rapidly became something else, in part because of a sense both in the classroom and in the theoretical arena, that the way the conference was shaped to speak about such concerns might control the discussion — might

¹ I would like to thank the Government of Canada, and the ICCS, for a Faculty Enrichment Grant which allowed me to participate in the Postcolonialisms and Pedagogy conference at the University of Ottawa where this paper was first delivered, and which allowed me to work with and consult numerous scholars and writers working in related fields. My thanks too to the University of Ottawa, which offered me a Visiting Research Fellow position for the time of the conference.

² Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 1975, 16.

³ For an extended discussion of these issues, and the way they circulated around and through the conference, see *Compr(om)ising Postcolonialisms: Challenging Narratives and Practices*, 2001.

reproduce a range of systemic occlusions and keep out a range of voices which were routinely elided: in particular Indigenous and minority voices. As I discussed the imminent conference with my students in a range of subjects, the issue of institutional control was ever present.

If we accept, as I think we must, the now commonplace assertion that, as Stephen Slemon puts it, “colonialist literary learning is at the primal scene of colonialist cultural control, and that a pedagogy of the book plays a necessary and material role in the strategic production of willing subjects of Empire” (153), it remains for us to decide what sorts of strategies we are willing to put in place to militate against such structures, while also recognizing the implacable power of the totalizing educational system we operate within. As Aruna Srivastava has argued, “the academy is based on relationships that are identical to and indeed a consequence of the imperialistic impulse” (17), and it is precisely this cluster of academic imperatives and practices that we need to dismantle, or at the very least highlight, in the interrogative function of a postcolonial pedagogy.

This, of course, is easier said than done when our funding, job security, teaching surveys, and peer review processes may depend on silence on such issues. But this can’t be the full reason that, as Ajay Heble has noted, “attention to the specific material conditions of teaching . . . is absent from so much writing on critical pedagogy” (148). Maureen McNeil has argued that “much critical theory is rather vague about specific pedagogic activities” (qtd in Heble 148), and this is certainly because many of us find it difficult, not just to strike a balance between the need to “tak[e] sides on heated issues” (Heble 151) and the more traditional demands of a humanistic learning environment that insists on a democratized field of discussion, but also to find ways in which to enact what can be extremely threatening, highly disempowering re/views of traditional power structures and the way so many of us are implicated in them. These politicized interventions can be threatening to us: to the way our job is secured, to the way we’ve been trained to proceed, to the manner in which we take umbrage in a series of collective rights accrued over centuries — all of which can be difficult to surrender.

And for students who just want to read a good book, having their entire ethico-political point of view held up for scrutiny tends to take the shine off a favourite novel. There’s no question that even with the most successful strategies for discussing these issues, for examining “how we privilege and institutionalize certain knowledges” (Srivastava, 13), inevitable resistance arises, expressed via attacks on political correctness and over-sensitivity, through charges of reverse racism, and so forth.

With this in mind, when I sat down, as coordinating organiser of “Compr(om)ising Post/colonialisms,” I decided to try a different approach to the process of structuring a conference, and in particular to the way Indigenous participants are often invited to be involved. I contacted many colleagues, artists, writers, politicians, and elders in Indigenous communities, and, together with a cultural adviser, asked these Indigenous figures both *if* they would be involved in the project, and if so, *how* they wished to participate. Slowly, through a lengthy process of consultation, we put together a provisional program of Aboriginal involvement. Some chose to do keynote addresses, others to organize panels, and still others insisted that they wished to stay peripheral to the project, to set up storytelling, basket-weaving, video and web installations on the margins of the conference venue, where people could “drop by” and participate, or ignore their efforts altogether, without these initiatives being contained by the conference. Once this was in place, I began to plan the non-Indigenous components of the conference.

Many who were there seemed to revel in both the academic rigour, but also the innovative and dynamic cross-cultural participation that the conference produced, despite its location in an academic setting. What it also meant was that many rules of conference protocols were constantly being redefined by different cultural and intellectual paradigms. Starting times, participants, subject matter, abstracts — all of these operated, at times, provisionally rather than prescriptively. As word spread of the spirit of the organizational strategy for the conference, Indigenous participants from all over Australia sent word to say that they might drop by. And when they did, the more senior people took their places on a panel or workshop instead of the scheduled speakers. A now-famous Aboriginal dance group arrived to inform me that they’d added six members to the company, so that twelve rather than six performers would be present. Unbeknownst to all but a few, our conference program was a moveable feast, driving our printery to distraction until the very last moment.

One of the ideas, of course, was to interlink this conference with previous course topics, and to use this as a lead-in to up-coming academic subjects. To do this I wrote to or telephoned scores of my undergraduate students who had studied particular subjects, and who I knew were enrolled in courses that would be connected to the subject matter, to alert them to the conference, and to signal that it could be used in their forthcoming academic work. Postgraduates working in the specific areas of postcolonialism were heavily involved, and not just as gophers, but as participants, chairs, advisers, so that, to this day at least two of my PhD

students still communicate regularly with writers and theorists they first met there. Another international student chose to study in the English Studies Program because of the conference.

The idea was to create a living project that both involved and yet existed independently of the academic enterprise, and that somehow shifted some of the traditional paradigms that govern so many of our gatherings. It's important to say that I'm not claiming here that I and my colleagues were necessarily successful at this. I'm sure we fell far short. Rather I'm signalling what we hoped for, while being entirely aware that the institutional frame probably made our utopic hope nonsensical. But it was a way, for me at least, to begin to think about a postcolonial pedagogy that did not resist, or merely gesture towards, a community activism. It was a way to take the university out into the community, and to compromise, in the best sense, our rather rigid borders.

In doing this we were aware of Spivak's caution that, as Slemon phrases it, "The moment in which we infiltrate Third World 'knowledges' into Western literary education . . . we become complicitous with the information-retrieval systems of imperialist custodianship, and thus we become complicitous in the founding of a 'new orientalism' on the site we had hoped would function as an agent of resistance" (Slemon 154). We saw many Indigenous participants, schooled by years of participation in European projects, opting to do formal conference papers; many proposed these projects because they expected it to be what we wanted.

When I invited a renowned Aboriginal chef to prepare the food for an historic exhibition of Indigenous art works, bringing Tasmanian fibre works and their artists to the mainland for the first time, I was both surprised and nervous about the choice to produce a traditional Bush meal. Not because I was worried about disenfranchising European pallets, but because I feared being accused of buying into cultural stereotypes. Ironically, when I announced to the two octogenarian matriarchs from the Tasmanian group that the food we'd be serving might include witchety grubs and kangaroo balls, one of them turned to the other and said, "Looks like we're having McDonald's again tonight."

That night, a strange mixture of euphoria and nervous breakdown took hold. The entire conference, for me, was an exercise in pragmatic, rather than merely theoretical, cross-culturality. It sought to balance a range of interests and forms of (self)representation, attempting (though failing as I've shown) to steer clear of a type of cultural tourism that can sometimes be produced in such events, while also surrendering and reproducing a series of

representational gestures (such as the traditional dancing and Bush Food) insisted on by the cultural activists themselves. I think it's fair to say that this was both one of the most energizing and yet simultaneously terrifying experiences of my life.

I invoke this idea of simultaneity and terror deliberately, to begin to play with the idea of the uncanny. For some ten years now I have written on and studied the idea of the uncanny, the gothic, and the ghostly in postcolonial literatures.⁴ My focus has been in particular on the way Canadian and Australian writing have turned to the gothic to articulate a particularly colonial, and then post-colonial, poetics. And in the last few years I have been especially interested in the way minority writers have re-appropriated uncanny discourses in order to interrogate and either escape or reply to dominant paradigms.

Throughout this work, what has always struck me is the way this uncanny, dare I say this gothic rupture, has infiltrated or indeed characterized the classroom: the experience and space of teaching itself. As well as my research work, I have been involved in core university activities circulating around the issue of pedagogy and teaching skills. This first conference, in fact, emerged because one of my postgraduates lamented that we were always going elsewhere for conferences (in what was a strange echo of early Canlit debates). It was given shape in part by my efforts, over ten years, to teach Canadian literature, and comparative Canadian and Australian literatures, in regional Australia. And it developed because of my keenness to reproduce a number of experiments that I had acted out in the classroom to try to overcome the many difficulties that constantly impeded the way Canadian literature (among other things) was presented to my students.

In one of Freud's most famous essays, on "The Uncanny," he argues that a definition of the uncanny hinges on two (inter)related and putatively oppositional terms: the *heimlich* and the *unheimlich* — the homely and the unhomely. Freud meditates on the way place and experience may be rendered unhomely or unfamiliar precisely by the simultaneity of overlapping or competing moments — particularly where the familiar is made unfamiliar and both conditions co-exist simultaneously. As I've argued elsewhere, it is precisely this quality of belonging and alienation that marks the colonial condition as uncanny — and which sees the postcolonial function similarly.⁵ In one of its myriad definitions, the "post" in

⁴ See Turcotte, 1993 a & b, 1995, 1998 for examples of this work.

⁵ Again, see Turcotte in Works Cited.

postcolonial suggests the after of something that has not yet passed, a semantic piece of sophistry which produces an uncanny terror in both those peoples who accept and who reject its parameters.⁶ It would certainly be true to say that many of my Aboriginal students have been driven to exasperation by the premise that their (neo)colonial state has passed. And definitions that play with the notion of “post” as other than a temporal signifier frequently signal what one of my students referred to as the “having-it-both-ways language of the oppressor.”

Critics such as Gelder and Jacobs use the notion of the uncanny to discuss “the usual binary structure upon which commentary on Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations is based” (24). They speak of the way the “‘uncanny’ can remind us that a condition of unsettledness folds into this taken-for-granted mode of occupation.” And they go on to speculate on the way a “(future) condition of ‘reconciliation’” is imagined and how the uncanny “remind[s] us of just how irreconcilable this image is with itself” (24). I am taken here with a possible connection between this sense of the uncanny and the way it characterizes a politicized though contradictory field (reconciliation politics) and a comparably fraught field like postcolonial pedagogy, in which so often the desires of the field — counter-hegemonic play, anti-canonical gestures, recognition of material realities, and so forth — run up against its uncanny impossibilities, reproducing hegemonic power structures through its institutional frame, its language, the setting up of “canons of the non-canonical,” and eliding the material realities through its theoretical preoccupations and economic barriers. As Srivastava has put it, “postcolonialism is rife with contradictions that reside in the often-unquestioned and rarely contested hierarchies and relations of power in the university or college” (17).

Not surprisingly given its preoccupations, postcolonialist work is frequently enacted in a comparative dimension. Needless to say, comparative study is always in a sense an uncanny exercise. It is both a presentation of the familiar and of the unfamiliar, and its purpose is often the stress on the idea of fraught simultaneity. The most fruitful exercise of the comparativist is often a type of cross-cultural experimentation, where a familiar text is read against, or beside, or at the same time as, an unfamiliar text. And as anyone who has taught comparatively will attest, the similarities can be fascinating, may even have initially suggested the comparative dimension, but they are often the least interesting part of the process. The fascination derives from the uncanny moment — the moment of rupture where

⁶ Although there are many expressions of this view, see Pam Johnston’s essay, “Reality Collisions: Social

one's own political stance, one's own secure racialized position, one's faith in a system of language, or law, is irrevocably shaken by a type of analogy which the comparative dimension makes manifest. The challenge is in not sanitizing this moment — refusing to make it safe and contained. This, I know, is the hardest part of the process, especially as it is enacted in an overdetermined space like the classroom.

Teaching is almost always, at its best, about elucidation. It is about the opening up of texts to understanding; it is about revealing an unseen dimension of a text, and in turn, of allowing a text to open an unseen truth about ourselves. Teaching, through the tools it uses, should allow for what Jonathan Culler identifies as the unsettling sense of theory:

The nature of theory is to undo, through a contesting of premises and postulates, what you thought you knew, so the effects of theory are not predictable. You have not become master, but neither are you where you were before. You reflect on your reading in new ways. You have different questions to ask and a better sense of the implications of the question you put to works you read. (Culler 17; see also Huggan 260.)

This, too, is a utopic definition, particularly as it emerges about a poststructuralist discourse which is so often attacked for its “language games” and for moving away from actual “political struggles of real people, outside such discursive frontiers” (Tapping in Huggan 260). But the principle is important, and part of the way that a pedagogical practice can escape the same sort of charges so often levelled at poststructuralist and postcolonial methods is by finding ways to enact precisely this moment of unsettlement: this moment where our own solid ground is shown to be both substantial and insubstantial, simultaneously. How this is done is difficult to say. My own suggestions thus far have, often, involved repudiating the very environment I am paid to function in, by dis/locating classes, by creating significant alternative events and urging students to interact with them. But I am conscious, too, that these oppositional events do not replace the academy. They do not obliterate my syllabus. They do not divest me of my power as an academic, or my power to compel, though often they recontextualize that power by introducing me into arenas where I am at best a facilitator, and often not even that.

Ajay Heble, in commenting on the way we can attempt to unlearn privilege, discusses a number of critical arguments, which I believe in, concerning the importance of teaching texts which invite us to “identify sympathetically with individual members of marginalized or oppressed groups,” and of the way such interactions can produce a “kind of sympathetic engagement with the Other [which] is, in fact, often seen as central to the purpose of postcolonial pedagogy” (Nussbaum and Aegerter respectively, qtd in Heble 154). But I very much share Heble’s concern with the implication that somehow “sympathetic engagement with fictional characters who are epistemologically or ontologically remote from our own experience, simply function as a kind of surrogate for actual encounters with real-life ‘others’ in the daily world of our lived experience” (154). Just as dangerous is what Heble refers to as “academic (and often elitist) expressions of affiliation with marginalized and oppressed peoples” (154).

My own strategies for what Heble calls “ethicizing the classroom” have no doubt only partially been effective. Certainly they are not “practical” and they are far from cost-effective (from both a personal and a financial viewpoint). Running a major international conference, or running a series of public parallel events on issues being covered in the classroom (usually six or more a year), or even inviting experts as well as students from marginalized or oppressed peoples to participate on a regular basis in the teaching of my subjects (and remunerating them for this role), only goes so far. It may well produce a range of uncanny effects, but again it doesn’t unsettle/dismantle the entrenched institutionalized hierarchies of power that are marked by the academy. But it does begin to tug at the boundaries that separate the academy from the community. As Slemon has argued,

if, in Gramscian terms, an oppositional or counter-hegemonic practice can be seen to *secure* a politics of oppression simply by *recognizing* that its dominant binaries remain in place, a processive pedagogy of thinking *through* methodological contradiction can also be redirected towards real social *change* at the level of the local. And it can begin that redirection by opening within English Studies itself — the *place* of colonialist management — a cognitive space in which the subject-to-be-educated reads the effects of ideology in *both* personal and political dimensions, and finds within that space . . . something that functions as a “room for manoeuvre.” (159)

In many ways the notoriously self-reflexive and apologetic dimension of postcolonial criticism, which is markedly expressed in response to what Huggan calls the “constitutive

tension” within the field “between ‘revisionary forces’ and ‘institutional containment’” (261), is probably its most energizing dimension. To negotiate these tensions is not only an intellectually necessary critical response, but a sound pedagogical practice, producing at best an uncanny space of possibility. That it is always open to self-serving postulating and to formulaic citational gestures is a given, but this fact does not discredit the method — just the practitioner.

Postcolonial methodologies have more than ever helped us as teachers to be critically aware of how we bring prejudices, values, and preconceptions to the way we interpret and see things. And it is up to us to press this interrogative space. At times that glimpse of ourselves produces only mundane revelations. More often than not, though, the insights can be groundbreaking. For me, this has often occurred at the level of Aboriginal or minority works, where the effort not simply to teach or introduce non-canonical texts into the equation but also to re-structure the traditional spaces in which these texts are read, has been key. Whatever success I may have had in this has in part been enabled by my migrant status in Australia. If it is true that comparativist study produces an uncanny effect, it is similarly true that migration is an uncanny gesture, especially when one moves into a culture as putatively similar to Canada as Australia.

For me the border crossing which I signal above in terms of classroom or pedagogical dynamics was mirrored by the move I made to Australia, and contributed to the ways I thought about postcolonialism and pedagogy — about hybridity and transitionality. Such an understanding does not guarantee a practical or even ground-breaking approach to ethicizing the classroom, or to unsettling the institutionalized knowledges that contain and perhaps even curtail our best energies as teachers. But it did make me aware of the need to insist on and champion those uncanny moments where the postcolonial can produce a ruptured, fraught space, in which the possibility for change is visible and, more importantly, possible.

For a French Canadian such as myself, who learned to camouflage his Québécois accent to escape a range of prejudices and violence in the English school system in Canada, it’s true to say that I arrived in Australia thinking I’d mastered the system: that I was fluently bilingual, linguistically inconspicuous, and hence feeling overly confident that I would easily fit into a system that used the same language. How could I know that it would be more difficult to live in a culture with subtle linguistic differences than in glaringly different ones? I certainly never expected the sheer volume of gaffes I produced in my early years, fueled by my

misguided expectation that everything should be comprehensible. I made no such simplistic assumptions about Aboriginal culture. I approached it with temerity and respect because I expected it to be different. Indeed, I made few assumptions about the many Aboriginal cultures I encountered. As a result, I think I insulted fewer Indigenous colleagues than non-Indigenous ones; and I realized that the differences were more substantive and might take a lifetime to come to know, however imperfectly. I realized too that many dimensions of this life were not mine for the taking or for the knowing.

Nevertheless, because of my migrant status I was allowed into places I wouldn't otherwise have been permitted to enter. I remember well sitting in a house during the bicentennial protests in 1988 with the renowned poet and activist Kath Walker/Oodgeroo, and being told, "You're here because you're not Australian."⁷ That scenario was repeated countless times. And as I learned a bit more about Indigenous cultures in Australia, I learned, too, to my shame, of my inadequate knowledge of Indigenous cultures in Canada. It reminded me that the learning process is never complete. As a result, I returned to Canada time and again, and met with elders throughout the country. I sat in learning circles and tried at last to find ways to teach about cultures that were so different from mine — even to discover if I should presume to do this in the first place. When I asked Maria Campbell, "Should I not teach Métis texts since I'm not Métis?" she told me, "That would be worse than not knowing about the texts. Learn, instead, to teach with humility, and seek advice. Leave the picture always a bit incomplete and acknowledge that." I'm sure Maria Campbell won't remember my visit with her — but it certainly changed me. I took that message to heart.

When I was asked to teach a comparative Canadian Studies course, and to create an Introduction to Canadian Literature subject soon after my appointment at the University of Wollongong, I made what I think are valiant efforts not to reproduce the much-criticized traditional CanLit syllabus. I had read critiques of what Arun Mukherjee calls the "eurocentric curricular diet" (87), and I was determined not to be guilty of such constructions. To my shock, though, I found that the world of publishing worked against such departures. As I've argued elsewhere,

Canada's greatest folly, and that which most adversely affects the teaching discipline in Australia, is the refusal of major Canadian publishers to meet the demand for books.

⁷ For a transcript of the interview that resulted from this meeting see Turcotte, 1988.

There are a variety of reasons for this, and they range from failing to take adequate account of the “implications of geography,” as one critic has argued, to the pressures of American and British copyright restrictions which mean that book prices can be more than doubled by distribution and freight costs. Susanna Moodie’s *Roughing It in the Bush*, published by the New Canadian Library for approximately \$6.00, was for a time available only through British Virago press—for \$28.00! This is a strong deterrent to students who must contemplate the purchase of some eight to ten Canadian titles.⁸

When I wrote this, some six years ago, I thought we’d reached extremes. But these prices correspond to those books most readily accessible in Australia. All those texts which I selected because they were stunning or challenging works, but that were published by minority presses, were often even more expensive, if obtainable at all. Again, a few years back I wrote that,

If there’s a glitch in the ordering, for example, and the books are airfreighted, a copy of *One Good Story, That One* suddenly sells for \$30.00, or *Looking for Livingstone* for \$28.95. It is a grim reality of student life that students will count the number of pages and divide it by the price before making up their minds to buy a book. *One Good Story* and *Livingstone* remained unbought until I successfully pleaded with the bookstore to absorb some of the cost, and brought the price down (and then urged them to process my orders when they arrived, rather than wait until it was too late to get the books by sea mail).⁹

The year after I wrote this, *Looking for Livingstone* arrived in the bookstore with a \$44.00 price-tag! *Ana Historic* retailed for \$46.00. Atwood, Ondaatje, and Munro for approximately \$20.00 each. More insidious were the emails we received from a number of distributors to tell us that books were out of print. Jack Hodgins’ *The Invention of the World*, for example, was “out of print.” When we later checked with the authors themselves about these putatively

⁸ This paper, “True North Down Under: Cross-cultural Approaches to the Teaching of Canadian Studies in Australia”, was presented at the Cross-cultural and Comparative Approaches to Canadian Studies, University of Birmingham, 19 May 1995. Although it was accepted for publication by an unrelated press, the volume never appeared.

⁹ Originally presented as “Teaching Canadian Literature: an International Perspective.” Panel discussion with Christyl Verdun, Robert Thacker, Donna Palmateer Pennee. *A Visionary Tradition: Canadian Literature & Culture at the Turn of the Millenium*. 10–14 November 1999. University of Guelph,

unavailable books we discovered that this wasn't the case. Even when efforts were made to go directly to the small presses, it was often impossible to secure copies for one reason or another.

The effect of this was to conservatize my reading lists; to force me to work with more canonical writers, simply because their books were available in Australia. What it meant was that more effective strategies to contextualize this "list" needed to be put into place. With Indigenous studies subjects I made a point always of working with Aboriginal teachers, writers, and artists — of consulting widely, of opening the classroom to these guest speakers, of organizing parallel public events, and just as importantly, of insisting that the University find ways of remunerating these speakers for their time and knowledge. The effect, as with the postcolonialism conference I first mentioned, has at times been terrifying. Doing this means that I surrender the sorts of control that, as a student, I watched my Professors wield. It means that the idea of rigid plans is often an impossibility precisely at a time when government watchdogs most require them. It also pretty much guarantees that debate will be plentiful, that no one point of view will dominate. And this necessitates developing a great deal of support material for students, who often arrive, in the early years at least, expecting answers, and who get very stressed when they're offered questions instead. I think that this, too, is a systemic thing — a type of control mechanism that has frequently served dominant institutions. And dismantling such expectations is a crucial first step in attempting to shift the paradigms, even in the midst of an undeniable and concrete structure like a university that always already qualifies most of our more radical efforts.

The comparative exercise produces rich and often unexpected texturing of our knowledge base — and sometimes it produces ruptures that are nearly impossible to resolve. Similarly, imposing a critical methodology — even one as contested and multifaceted as postcolonialism — or refusing an expected and accepted pedagogical practice, can be profoundly unsettling. My point in this paper has been to highlight the power of spaces of slippage and uncertainty — a way to make the *heimlich unheimlich*, to problematize if not eliminate racist views, and to "gothicize" the putatively shadowless body of institutions we engage with, be they nations, novels, conferences or classrooms.

Gerry Turcotte

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