

Exploring the (Musical/Political) Power of Diaspora in Colombia: *Champeta* Music in Cartagena, Colombia

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Abstract

This essay aims to underline the multiple dimensions of the diasporic condition in Colombia to unveil its inherent political strength. Addressing how the concept of “Diaspora” operates in “real”/cultural time in the neighborhood of Olaya Herrera in Cartagena de Indias, this study emphasizes the significant political impact of champeta music as a vehicle for self-affirmation and political organization among Afrodescendants. In this context, champeta music creates translocal connections that aid in the reconstruction of the paths that descendants of Africans have been forced to carve for themselves in their new realities.

Keywords: Champeta, Afrodescendants in Colombia, African Diaspora, Olaya Herrera, Cartagena de Indias

Resumen

Este ensayo tiene como objetivo subrayar las múltiples dimensiones de la condición diaspórica en Colombia para revelar su inherente fuerza política. Al examinar cómo el concepto de “Diáspora” opera en tiempo “real”/cultural en el vecindario de Olaya Herrera en Cartagena de Indias, este estudio enfatiza el significativo impacto político de la champeta como vehículo para la auto-afirmación y organización política de los afrodescendientes de esta área urbana. En este contexto, la champeta crea conexiones translocales que ayudan a reconstruir los espacios que los descendientes de africanos esclavizados han sido forzados a edificar en sus nuevas realidades.

Palabras clave: Champeta, afrodescendientes en Colombia, Diáspora, Olaya Herrera, Cartagena de Indias

The first objective of this essay is to underline Colombia’s rightful and undeniable place in the African Diaspora.¹ Although for many of us it is a long-acknowledged fact that Colombia occupies such a place, discussing the African Diaspora in Colombia is a task meets with innumerable obstacles. It is safe to say that the conceptualization of the term “Diaspora,” as it applies to the Colombian space, is still in the making. For those individuals for whom the Diaspora determines their everyday life, it is essential to add more concrete information to the multiple dimensions of the diasporic condition, to engage in the reconstruction of the path and the journeys that Africans were forced to follow, as well as of the ensuing cultural and linguistic diversity that the forced displacement of enslaved peoples brought forth in this geopolitical area, and to understand how these elements continue to contribute to the cultural landscape of the Americas, and more importantly, the political strength inherent to the diasporic condition. It is within the realm of the latter that this essay aims to do its part in helping reveal the immense legacy of resistance and lived practice of cultural resistance in Northern coast of Colombia. I also wish to underline the value that the local urban experience has in order to offer a more circumscribed analysis of how the concept of “Diaspora” operates in “real”/cultural time, emphasizing the enormous political impact of music, in this case of *champeta*,² as a vehicle for self-affirmation and political organization among Afrodescendants in the neighborhood of Olaya Herrera in Cartagena de Indias. In this space context, music creates *translocal* connections that aid in the reconstruction of the paths that descendants of Africans have been forced to carve for themselves in their new realities. In the process, the manner in which *champeta* maps the city emerges, exposing an urban cartography delineated by “exclusion and dispossession,” in David Harvey’s terms (18).

1. Urban Cartographies/Human Geographies

For most mainstream intellectuals, marginality is mysterious, enticing, sexy and full of wonder, and an endless source of inspiration. On the flip side of it, marginality is also a space outside of the system of “property,” that exists outside of “legality,” usually inhabited by blacks, mulattoes, *mestizos*, displaced peasants and indigenous people grouped by dispossession.

In such surroundings, individuals are compartmentalized and kept in check, and thus they are forced to configure their space by creating new ways of expressing identity while making every effort to remain contestatory, to challenge the forces that alienate them and hold them in contempt. Urban journalist Robert Neuwirth urges us to stop discrediting cities' "free soil," the so-called slums, and to cease to "ignore the hard work it takes to build a community" (15-16). At this juncture, music emerges as a vehicle to culturally and politically organize active communities of Afro peoples of the Diaspora in their contemporary local urban space, to affirm their right to participatory democracy.

2. Local Diasporic Space-Making and the Colombian Nation-State

The racialized discourses that rule the processes that determine how cities and citizens are plotted are, however, still being disputed, especially in Colombia, where debates on the subject are mid-way towards being consolidated into a sound corpus of critical work on ethnicity and national belonging. The proliferation of works on *Colombianidad* derives mostly from the inception of the new Constitution of 1991,³ which recognizes the nation as a plurilingual and multicultural space; allow for the materialization of the same contestary discourses with which the State now wrestles. Many discussions and writings that address the challenges pose by constitutional change, and the city and its role in promoting, or not, national sentiment, have been produced in the Northern coast of Colombia, through institutions such as the Observatorio del Caribe Colombiano, and both scholars and students at the Universidad de Cartagena, in its program of *la Nueva Historia*, "the New History."⁴

Abroad, Colombia's modern face is projected internationally by musical icons like Shakira, Juanes and Carlos Vives. The urban revival of Cartagena de Indias as a major tourist destination, made it an equally important icon of Colombia, and has become a key tool in the struggle to project the country as a modern nation. This has been sought through Cartagena's *museumization*, a term used by Richard Price to indicate the act of re-investing former colonial sites with new meaning and value (xiii). But, far from solving Colombia's image issues on the world stage, Cartagena poses a problematic paradigm: while its colonial baggage gives a sophisticated veneer to this entry-port visited by thousands of tourists, beneath that surface, in places where most upper and middle class *cartageneros* would rather not go, the space of Olaya exists at the beat of a much different tune, defying a vision of a global order that intends to fit all national and urban spaces into one and the same model.

In *La isla que se repite*, Antonio Benítez Rojo defines *el solar* (the yard) or *el muelle* (the pier), as the "other" Caribbean city, a space contained within any given Caribbean city. Benítez Rojo states that "[en] realidad se trata de una abigarrada célula social, un denso *melting-pot* de culturas en

el cual se cocinan religiones y creencias, nuevas palabras y pasos de baile, imprevistos platos y músicas" (251).

The neighborhood of Olaya Herrera in Cartagena fits Benítez Rojo's definition of an *other* Caribbean city, a yard-like space, *un solar*, contained in Cartagena's city proper, even in regards to its ethnic composition, since not surprisingly blacks dominate the racial make up of this space. These *other* cities, says Benítez Rojo, are products of the plantation economy and even the anti-plantation, precisely because they were built and are inhabited by blacks and mulattoes (252). Before delving into the element of music mentioned before, it is important to point how, in the current "neoglobal" moment, these *other* Caribbean spaces continue to proliferate and grow as a product of "la polarización social y económica en las ciudades globales," as per Saskia Sassen (cited in Zimmerman et al 44).

If we consider the dramatic transformation that Cartagena's "modern" and colonial areas have undergone since the 1950s through processes of gentrification, urban development and tourism, common vehicles of "change" in the name of progress, it is easier to understand how a space like Olaya can emerge. "Centers for tourism," says Saskia Sassen, "[are one] of the three types of sites for the implantation of global processes" (41). The problem with the implementation of urban tourism, in particular, is that it "increases the inner-city resident population," says David C. Thorns (141), by "increasing the separation, or disarticulation, between cities and sectors within cities that are articulated" (Sassen 41) by processes of (neo)globalization. In the case of the walled city of Cartagena and its surrounding marginal neighborhoods, the dynamics projected by the tensions and alienation that exist between these two realms clearly depict the outcome of what Sassen calls the "devalorization" (41, 142) of the areas outside of the primate urban center, and the "overvalorization" (41) of, in this case, the colonial *museumized* (Price xiii), hence commodified, city.

But this dynamic must also be perceived from a more empowering angle. Returning to music as one of the products "cooked" in what Benítez Rojo defines as the *other* Caribbean cities, "una nueva geografía de marginalidad" (Benítez Rojo 52) emerges that points to a diasporic/translocal reality that connects people and cultural products beyond the very restrictive borders that contain them. Within this paradigm, a cultural product like *champeta* music, borne out of transnational contacts amongst Africans and their descendants elsewhere rooted in an urban reality, as stated in the lyrics of *champeta* songs that address the trials and tribulations of poor urban Blacks in Cartagena, becomes a vehicle of resistance that acts as a way to question the very process of transnationality "desde abajo," from below, "como un proceso particularmente evidente en las ciudades [neo]globales" (54).

3. *Champeta* Music in the *Other* Cartagena

In the dyad African Diaspora and city in Colombia, a national space constantly striving for an elusive modern condition, the Afro subject is often kept in the realm of folklore and the rural dimension of the nation. Since the inception of the new constitution of 1991, the national body has been forced to reconstitute itself into an inclusive anatomy, recognizing the need to construct a new concept of citizenship. Borne out of the local forces of oppression, dispersion and dislocation, the space of Diaspora in the urban sphere finds expression in the cultural realm to offset the wretchedness of marginality and the terror caused by official persecution and survival-related criminality. Performing culture also codifies demands for social, economic and political inclusion, articulated in interesting ways to challenge dominant cultural practices. Cartagena de Indias, and more specifically the marginal neighborhood of Olaya Herrera, offers the scenario for these dynamics to unfold, establishing the uniqueness of the performance of Diaspora in the urban space.

As a diasporic site, Cartagena's racialized processes of development and urbanization generate a productive space in which music creates borders as much as poverty and marginality do. The walled city now converted into national cultural capital, and the *other* Cartagena, constituted by *cinturones de pobreza*, poverty belts, or as they were donned in the 70s, *barrios populares*, stands as testimony of the price of modernization, racialized processes of nation formation, urban development, and a desire to tame problematic cultural practices. In these marginal urban spaces, *champeta* music has become a discourse of resistance and ethnic affirmation that destabilizes a racist urban cartography intended to keep the poor, the black, and the mulatto populations out of the tourist areas and the spaces reserved for the upper class spaces, out of sight mainly, while present only in the various lowly occupations required to keep this tourist center operating and bringing the dollars and euros.

"The nation," states Lola Aponte Ramos, "and the space of the citizen are part of the crucial factors in the production of a racialized corporality; the environment of the participatory gesture provides the context for the coordination and constitution of the civil body" (349). In the case of Colombia, the nation remains, however, an imaginary body, delineated by geopolitical borders that contain a highly fragmented, mostly urban and poor national space. The city, the physical space, in contrast with the imagined nature of the nation, is intentionally designed to keep individuals in their place. Cartagena, one of the many cookie-cutter Latin American colonial cities, offers the perfect layout to maintain people and rhythms circumscribed to the spaces they are allotted. In these neighborhoods *champeta* reigns, and one only rarely hears any other type of music coming out of the giant *picós*, the mobile discotheques that organize the cultural, political, social, and economic rhythm of this area of the city.

"El liso en Olaya," a *champeta* hit first released in the 1990s became Olaya's hymn. Composed and sung by one of the most prominent *champeta* singers, Louis Towers, "El Rasta" or "El Rasta Towers," illustrates many of the attributes and characteristics of *champeta* I have pointed out. Its *alegre* (happy) sound and poignant lyrics refer to a bad "dude" who dares to transgress *champetudo* territory and to seduce a *champetudo*'s lady, two themes common in "traditional" *champeta* songs. In addition, the song's lyrics are full of *champetudo* expressions that have made *champeta* unappealing to the guardians of the national grammar:⁵

No seas liso, saca la mano
que te la van a mochar.
No seas liso, saca la mano,
que te van a golpeá.
Que el marido es champetuo,
y te puede lavar.
Que el marido es champetuo
y te puede lavá.

El vive en Olaya, papa
Y no come de ná. (bis)
No seas liso, papa,
porque el man te puede lavá. (bis)
No seas liso, papa,
porque el man te puede lavá.

II

El vive en Olaya papa
Y no come de ná... (bis)
No seas liso papa
Por que el men te puede lavá... (bis)
No seas liso saca la mano
Que te van a golpea
Que el marido es champetuo
Y te puede lavá

Sacala (7 veces)
Saca la mano liso...

Que te puede lavá...liso
Que te puede casca...liso
El anda mancao...liso
Te puede achacá...liso
Corta el viaje yá...liso
Que te puede achacá...liso
Que te puede lavá
Que te puede cascá
El anda mancao
Te puede achacá
Corta el viaje ya
Te puede achacá
Liso, liso

Que él es liso, que él es champe
Que él es liso, que él es champe

III

Saca la mano liso que el champe
Te la puede mochá
A ese no hay quien lo aguante liso
Y te puede lavá... (bis)
A ese man yo lo vi en la candela
no le vaya a inventá
no le toque su geva liso
que te puede lavá... (bis)
wa ia ia ia ia ia ia iauo uo ayyy
Que te capa liso el champe
Que te achaca liso el champe
Que te va a capa
Que te va a achacá
Que te cascá lavá..liso

IV

Saca la mano liso que el champe
Te la puede mochá
A ese no hay quien lo aguante liso, Y te puede lavá

[Don't be fresh, take your hand out
your are going to have it cut off.
Don't be fresh, take your hand out
that you are going to be beaten up.
The husband is a champetudo
and he can wash (kill) you.

II

He lives in Olaya papa (daddy)
and he does not take anything. (bis)
Don't be fresh papa
because the man can wash (kill) you. (bis)

Don't be fresh, take your hand out.
You are going to be beaten up.
The husband is a champetudo
and he can washed (kill) you.

Take it out (7 times)
Take your hand out dude...

He can wash (kill) you...
He can hit you dude...
He goes around armed dude...
He can hurt you...
Stop your trip already dude...
He can hurt you dude...
He can wash you
He can hit you
He goes around armed
He can hurt you
Stop your trip already

He can hurt you
Dude, dude (liso)
He is fresh, he is champe[tudo] (bis)

III

Take your hand out dude cause the champe can cut it off.
There is no one that can take him dude
and he can kill you. (bis)
I saw that man on fire
don't say anything wrong/don't tell lies about him
don't touch his woman dude
cause he can kill you (bis) etc.]

As many critics have indicated, the machista dimension of the song, as in most *champeta* songs, jumps out of the verses, projecting an ideology of male dominance and violence. Here, I will simply underline the elements present in relation to space-making in the African Diaspora in Colombia, since I find “El liso en Olaya” to be a perfect song to exemplify the dynamics of place and space in Cartagena and how they are defined by music, as much as by racial, social, economic, and political markers. The song affirms that Olaya and Olaya’s men are to be reckoned with, subverting marginalization, stigmatization, and subjugation, and the area’s lack of access to services, food, education, proper housing, etc. In fact, in the song, Louis Towers consciously underlines a marked combative *champetudo* subjectivity and grounds it in Olaya, defining the latter as a space of power that defies the condescending and menacing gaze of the local white and whitened elites. I argue that the language that on the surface appears to be concerned only with macho prowess and the objectification of women, elements that are in fact present in the Northern coast, is, in greater part, a metaphor of defiance directed to the local government, political elite and the paramilitary groups that help maintain the status quo. “El champe” de Olaya, as Louis Towers defines the Olaya man whose wife is being pursued by the male outsider, is an Olaya man that the local elites should fear because “he is armed/está mancao (línea 28 versión original en español)” and capable of killing to defend himself and his family. The Olaya man, the *champetudo*, stands for the many Olaya men, as well as the men from the Nelson Mandela neighborhood and other poor areas of the city, who have been kidnapped to forcefully participate in paramilitary armies. Many men in these neighborhoods are found dead on the streets, shot by local police, or as a result of local feuds.

Often, the media depicts Olaya and *olayeros* as threats to the well being of the city, defining them as a threat to an urban *museumized* space still at odds with an elusive modern condition. In the song, Olaya transcends the limits imposed upon it in order to become what David Harvey calls an “active,” not a “passive,” space, conscious of its relation to Cartagena’s other spaces, the spaces that are not Olaya. As a space conceptualized by the dominant political and cultural elites as a dangerous war turf, Olaya rises to engage in this war musically, embracing *champeta*, not *vallenato*,

nor *salsa* or *cumbia*, as the musical genre that best performs its expressive collective identity as black, diasporic and plurilingual, one that no one should try to meddle with, lest he/she is willing to pay for it with his/her own life. The song also underlines transnational and translocal elements, as it addresses the connections that exist between *champeta* and Congolese *souscous*, and the collaboration that has existed between *champeta* artists and Congolese singers and their music, affirming *champeta*'s reach from the *barrios* of Cartagena to Congo and the Parisian neighborhoods populated by Congolese immigrants and others from different areas of Africa.

4. Urban Systems/Nation-States

“Urban systems” states Saskia Sassen, “are coterminous with nation-states” (33). Cities determine entrance into the realm of the modern, concentrating all resources into primacy models of urban development designed as centers of concentrated economic activity with the intention of establishing order, and of channeling human and material capital, says Sassen (33-41), which solidify national realms. Cartagena is yet another example of these accelerated urbanization and gentrification processes that have created great chaos and further inequality. Taking into account what Robert Nirwirth has termed “shadow cities,” in the eponymous book, Olaya’s presence stands as testimony of the perseverance of people displaced whether by force or necessity, who act on their right to have a home and place in the world. Olaya’s place in the urban landscape also asserts the right of every citizen to partake in the use of land, claiming equality by *other* means. Faced with the impossibility of subverting these circumstances, *los champes* de Olaya (the *champetudos* of Olaya), as bearers of a rich cultural legacy, further enhanced by the contributions made by displaced peoples from various former *palenques* from the area, been able to transform the scene of *champeta* into the locus of a counter-culture that resists the stigmatization imposed on their space and upon them. Using Harvey’s proposed matrix of spatiality, a lived space in which creative satisfaction, social solidarity, loyalties to place, class and identity, challenge alienation, isolation, deprivation, injustice, lack of dignity, and anger (143), the tone of bravado and *machista* deportment immortalized in “El liso en Olaya” carve a space of representation of a *champetudo* identity deeply rooted in its African origins. As a result, a growing consciousness of origin and an African heritage have solidified. Louis Towers’ more recent song, “Mama Africa,” affirms this outcome, highlighting a common origin, Mother Africa:

Recuerdas en donde naciste
Te acuerdas
Y la madre que te parió
Eso que tu corazón dice
Lo que eres tu propio yo

Sientes muy dentro de ti
Algo que te grita vuelve
Esa es la propia raíz
Que no se corta y que crece
Mama África te llama
Te llama mama África... (bis)

Si un día mientras caminas
Te pones a bailar
Al son de algo que no escuchas
Puedes escuchar
Piensa serio no es excusa
Esa es la verdad
No se trata de una bruja
Esa es tu mamá
Que te llama
Vuelve
Que te grita
Vuelve
Que te llama
Vuelve
Que te grita
Vuelve
Elelooooooooooooo,elelooooooooo... (bis)
Salino pa tiela ugere
Minino pa tiela mí
Bukeno jende suto
Bukeno gende mí

Luis Tower’s “Mama Africa” immortalizes Palenque de San Basilio, a Black kingdom by royal decree declared free in 1692, through the mention of *palenquero* in the song. The lyrics of this *champeta* song establish a direct connection to Africa, the Motherland, implying a disconnection with the national space in which *palenqueros* and *olayeros* exist. Simultaneously, El Rasta’s call to his fellow *palenqueros* and *olayeros* aims to join them in kinship in the spaces allotted to them, to celebrate a common Afro heritage, expressed in message, language and rhythm. The song, says Louis Towers, resulted from an increasing desire to uplift his fellow Afrodescendants to prompt them to realize the power that lies within them and the political might that they can exert upon their local realities, in spite of the dire conditions in which they live. By “going back” to their origins, even symbolically, and identifying with each other and the many Afrodescendants forcefully displaced, Louis states, “by listening to the rhythm that cannot be heard,” at least not by everyone, Afrodescendants everywhere in Colombia can find their *real/cultural* space within the Colombian Diasporic reality; a space for resistance, survival and creation, in which they can rightfully project their voices.

Elkin, a gang member that calls another marginal neighborhood of Cartagena his home, voices a vivid awareness of his own alienation and disenfranchisement. In

an interview published in *El Espectador*, one of the leading national newspapers, under the title, “Los heroicos somos nosotros que sobrevivimos,” (“The Heroic Ones Are Those of Us Who Survive”), a powerful statement that questions Cartagena’s standing as *La Heroica*, The Heroic City, Elkin says:

Aquí decimos que hay dos ciudades, la histórica y la heroica, o sea nosotros, que somos unos héroes porque la supervivencia no es fácil. Yo sólo lo veía por televisión, así como los edificios de Bocagrande y la bahía de Manga. Es que para uno esa vaina es como Hollywood. ¡Uf! Es muy bonito y es aquí mismo, en Cartagena, pero eso no es con uno (Arrázola Julio 4 2009 “Noticias” *El Espectador*)

Here we say that there are two cities, the historic one and the heroic one, meaning we, who are heroes because survival is not easy. I only used to see it in television, along with Bocagrande’s buildings and Manga’s bay. The fact is that shit is like Hollywood. ¡Uf! Is very beautiful and is right here, in Cartagena, but it has nothing to do with us (Arrázola Julio 4 2009 “Noticias” *El Espectador*- translation mine)

Elkin’s words express with chilling clarity the plight of his fellow poor, who experience first-hand the disastrous effects of unsustainable development and racist urbanization strategies. The legacy of “El Enrry,” a well-known gang leader and community member from Olaya, immortalized on walls around the neighborhood upon his death, speak to the violence young Afrodescendants must resort to for their survival, the very violence Luis Towers’ song addresses, transforming it into a productive and creative diasporic locus of culture.



Photo of one of the many graffiti drawings in memory of “El Enrry” in Olaya Herrera. Photo by David Lara.

Notes

- 1 For an exploration of the concept of Diaspora, its use and applicability to the Colombian space, see Aldana's "Memorias/Ritmos Diaspóricos: La champeta desde donde sea," Wade's "African Diaspora and Colombian Popular Music in the Twentieth Century," Tian-Sio-Po's "Place and Presence," Scott's "Preface: Diasporas of the Imagination," López Roper's "Diaspora: Concept, Context, and its Application in the Study of New Literatures," Tiyanbe Zeleza's "Africa and Its Diasporas: Remembering South America," Preziuso's "Mapping the Lived-Imagined Caribbean: Postcolonial Geographies in the Literature of the 'Diasporic' Caribbean," and Jeter's "Reaching Out to the African Diaspora: The Need for Vision."
- 2 To examine the trajectory of *champeta* music, see Aldana's "Policing Culture: *Champeta* Music Under the New Colombian Constitution" and "Memorias/Ritmos Diaspóricos: La champeta desde donde sea," Martínez Miranda's "La Champeta: una forma de resistencia palenquera a las dinámicas de exclusión sociorraciales y culturales, puestas en marcha por las élites 'blancas' de Cartagena y Barranquilla entre 1960 y 2000," Bohórquez Díaz's "La champeta en Cartagena de Indias: Terapia musical popular de una resistencia cultural," and Pacini Hernández's "The picó phenomenon in Cartagena, Colombia," Mosquera and Provansal's "Construcción de la identidad caribeña popular en Cartagena de Indias, a través de la música y el baile de champeta," Contreras's "Champeta/Terapia : Un pretexto para visitar las ciudadanías culturales en el gran Caribe," Abril and Soto's *Entre la champeta y la pared. El futuro económico y cultural de la industria discográfica de Cartagena*. For an incisive linguistic explanation about the origins of the word *champeta*, see Manuel Hernández Valdés' analysis in Martínez Miranda's "La Champeta: una forma de resistencia palenquera a las dinámicas de exclusión sociorraciales y culturales, puestas en marcha por las élites 'blancas' de Cartagena y Barranquilla entre 1960 y 2000."
- 3 See Constitución Nacional de la República de Colombia. Senado de la República de Colombia. Información legislative. <http://www.secretariasenado.gov.co/senado/basedoc/arb/1001.html>. For further information on the new constitution, see, Vinson III's "Introduction: African (Black) Diaspora History, Latin American History," and Rincón Murcia's "Reflexiones ante una propuesta: La cultura en la Constitución."
- 4 See Posada Carbó's *The Colombian Caribbean: A Regional History, 1870-1950*, Palacios and Safford's *Colombia: País fragmentado, sociedad dividida*, and Fals-Borda's *Historia doble de la costa*, for a general history of the region and its relationship with the rest of the country. For an alternative history of the region and the country, addressing the exclusion of blacks and mulattoes in the process of nation formation, in spite of their active participation in the wars of independence, see Múnera's *El fracaso de la nación: Región, clase y raza en el Caribe colombiano (1717- 1821)*, and *Fronteras imaginadas: la construcción de las razas y de la geografía en el siglo XIX colombiano*.
- 5 For an incisive linguistic explanation about the origins of the word *champeta*, see Manuel Hernández Valdés's analysis in Martínez Miranda's "La Champeta: una forma de resistencia palenquera a las dinámicas de exclusión sociorraciales y culturales, puestas en marcha por las élites 'blancas' de Cartagena y Barranquilla entre 1960 y 2000."

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