

Suited Up in the Compositional Realm of Morrison, Walker, Wright, Ellison, and the ‘The Artist Formerly Known as Prince’: Identity, Belonging, and Acceptance in Hanif Kureishi’s The Black Album

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In the introduction to his novel The Rainbow Sign (1986), Hanif Kureishi introduces himself to the reader as a “Londoner born to an English mother and Pakistani father” (9). Kureishi’s father, Rafiushan, he claims, “came to England from Bombay in 1947 to be educated by the old colonial power” (9). Kureishi maintains that his (own) childhood was filled with cousins, aunts, and uncles, whom he saw as “important, confident people” (9). His relatives frequently took him, in taxis, to hotels, restaurants, music houses, and other places of interest during his growing-up years in London. The taxi rides, he professes, were fun and exciting, and he greatly anticipated the trips outside his neighborhood. In The Rainbow Sign, he recounts childhood incidents where his Pakistani heritage became a dominant focal point in his life. Although Kureishi has claimed that the novel is fiction, the work can be construed as a semi-autobiographical narrative of Kureishi’s life.

Kureishi’s primary school years were full of unsettling experiences. He recounts how, when he was nine or ten years old, “a teacher purposefully placed some pictures of Indian peasants in mud huts in front of me and said to the class: ‘Hanif comes from India.’ I wondered: did my uncles ride on camels? Surely, not in their suits. Did my cousins, so like me in other ways, squat down in the sand like little Mowglis, half naked and eating with their fingers?” (9). “In the mid-1960s,” writes Kureishi, “Pakistanis were a risible subject in England, derided on television and exploited by politicians. They had the worse jobs, they were uncomfortable in England, and many of them had difficulties with the language. They were despised and out of place” (9). Although Kureishi’s father worked at the Pakistani embassy and earned a sizeable income, which in turn allowed the family to live comfortably, Kureishi suffered enormously during his primary school years.

Kureishi contends that because the representation of Pakistanis was so brazenly exploited in all forms of public visibility, he set in motion an ultimate denial of his Pakistani heritage from the beginning of his awareness of these very prominent images: “I was ashamed. It [his heritage] was a curse, and I wanted to

be rid of it. I wanted to be like everyone else. I read with understanding a story in a newspaper about a black boy who, when he noticed that burnt skin turned white, jumped into a bath of boiling water” (9). In his youthful naiveté, Kureishi pondered such an act in an effort to rid himself of what he perceived to be a vile image. He elected instead, however, to forego such extreme thinking and to seek less dramatic recourse. That such a horrific tale nestles itself into a child’s consciousness and rears its head years later in literary recollection speaks to the author’s unresolved childhood reflection of himself as well as his standing in society. It is this writer’s contention that Kureishi, still conflicted about the primitive depiction of his Pakistani heritage, endeavors to work through the boiling waters of his early days as he comes to terms with the difficulties of a childhood wrought with pain and suffering.

When Kureishi was in primary school, he recounts in The Rainbow Sign, one particular instructor, regardless of the lesson at hand, always spoke to him in an acerbic manner, articulating a “Peter Sellers” Indian accent. Another lecturer refused to identify him by his birth name, calling him, to the absolute delight of his young classmates who chuckled uncontrollably, “Pakistani Pete” instead. In retaliation of the teacher’s offensive names, Kureishi refused to call the instructor by *his* name, using the lecturer’s nickname instead. The daily play-on-names inevitably led to trouble for Kureishi. As a defense mechanism to alter—as well as avert—the daily occurrences, he constantly argued with instructors, escaped school by leaping over walls and manicured hedges, and enjoyed his new-found liberties away from the source of his pain and embarrassment. Eventually, however, his wayward behavior led to numerous detentions and suspension from school. Dismissal, according to Kureishi, “played into my hands, this couldn’t have been better” (9).

The word games engaged between Kureishi and his instructors proved to be an early introduction to the power of verbal discourse. They also became a way of antagonizing authority figures. Most of all, however, the dual exchanges became, according to the novelist, the genesis of his teacher-student relationship, teaching him how to converse intelligently about issues of significance with persons in positions of authority. He learned, he says, to gauge the strength and capacity that exists between the powerful and the powerless, and how to establish and maintain academic and scholarly relationships.

With a childhood friend, who later became the central figure in the film My Beautiful Laundrette (1986), Kureishi roamed the streets of London, becoming a reputable thief on the one hand and a lover of literature on the other. In the duality of these self-associations he immersed himself in films, hid in the woods and read what he terms “hard books.” It is perhaps this interesting and mixed academic, social, and cultural beginning—this diametrically opposed

behavior—that accounts for the eclectic text of The Black Album, Kureishi's 1995 novel which emerged six years after a fatwah, an open invitation to murder, is issued against fellow writer Salman Rushdie for his (Rushdie's) polemical text, The Satanic Verses (1988). Kureishi's rather brash and risqué narrative of life among British Muslims of Pakistani origin, functions, in this reader's eyes, under the banner of quasi-intellectualism, tempered radicalism, and an identity crisis bordering on his own sense of despair, feelings of insecurity, and issues of "belonging."

Kureishi presents a level of quasi-intellectualism in the novel by scripting a text of sundry characters that are similar to his earlier emotional longings, looking for love, acceptance, and identity in all the wrong places. There are, in this tale of crises, vestiges of Kureishi's early years on the streets and in the schools of London. In remembering his childhood restlessness and semi-ruthlessness, Kureishi makes an appeal for acceptance and a need to fit in as well as an imploration and resolution to the perennial question: Who am I? This self-interrogation of identity transports itself undeniably into the framework of the text, where the author weaves an inquiry into English, Pakistani, and Muslim cultures.

With the exception of Shahid Hassan, the novel's young Pakistani protagonist whose background contains, according to critic K. Anthony Appiah, "a modicum of Pakistani cultures, not Muslim piety" (The New York Times Book Review, 42), the misguided and misdirected figures in Kureishi's text can be described as destitute, desolate, and void of substance. Despite constant pop culture references throughout the novel regarding the substance and meaning of the compositions of (primarily American) musical artists of the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, there is scant emotional bearing evident within the central figures who act impulsively and oftentimes with an immediate and intense will to forge ahead despite the known and absolute consequences of their actions. Even though Kureishi's projection of his adolescent life upon his fictional constructs is a compelling and brave inclusion in the novel, critic Tom Shone comments that The Black Album "isn't a novel at all, it's a play with extended bits of scenery . . ." (Times Literary Supplement, 21). The "play," as Shone sees it, is replete with a cast of memorable figures who are, in their most significant roles, reduced to sociological stereotypes. "Old habits," asserts Stone, "die hard" (21).

Shone further argues that the characters' dialogue is constrained and their performances are confined to singular dimensions. The narrative structure, he maintains, is restricted:

The Black Album is set in 1989—something of an understatement, in fact, given its feverish attempts to date-stamp itself: the Fatwah, the homeless, portable phones, the collapse of the Eastern bloc, the

birth of the “rave” scene, all queue up obediently to receive their due. Kureishi doubtless thinks he is bringing the recent past to pollute life, but he succeeds merely in flattering it into a cardboard backdrop. “Rusted and burned-out cars” litter the streets, maybe left over from the set of his petulant anti-Thatcherite film, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*; while, all around, swarm people whose eyes burned with blame and resentment. (Shone 21).

Shone’s reference to the condition of the cars and the “people whose eyes burned with blame and resentment” alludes to Kureishi’s reference of the resentment shown him by his teachers during his years as a student in London’s schools. Kureishi and his “kind” were, in his (Kureishi’s) vision, to blame for much of society’s decay. While he may have been present and accounted for in the literal sense, he was still invisible in the eyes of many. Shone’s allusion is an apt metaphor for Kureishi’s view of himself in the presence of others.

Shahid Hassan, who struggles to create an identity for himself while torn between his own Asian heritage, is a Pakistani residing in Kilburn, a multi-cultural district in London. He attends an unpolished and unrefined two-year institution where the racial make-up is comprised primarily of black and Asian students. The bleak and uninviting landscape of the school does not offer an environment conducive to structured academics. It is through the character of Shahid, however, that the reader is introduced to the sights, sounds, and hip-hop happenings of London and to the primary reason for his presence in the city, which is to learn and “discuss . . . the meaning and purposes of the novel, for example, its place in society...” (*The Black Album* 28).

Shahid’s need to discuss the general purpose of a literary work is, perhaps, the defining theme of Kureishi’s own work. Shahid’s departure from his comfort zone—going in search of the novel’s “place in society”—presents him with the advantage of intellectual uplift:

. . . at home he still had a few school friends, but in the past three years had lost interest in most of them; some he had come to despise for their lack of hope. Almost all were unemployed. And their parents, usually patriotic people and proud of the Union Jack, knew nothing of their own culture. Few of them even had books in their house—not purchased, opened books, but gardening guides, atlases, *Reader’s Digests*. (35)

Early in *The Black Album* the reader is invited into the private quarters of Shahid and into the cultural mix of the tenants of the building where he lives. Kureishi

carefully sets the tone with which the central figures will perform, on cue, to his narrative drum roll: “The many rooms in the six-floor building were filled with Africans, Irish people, Pakistanis, and even a group of English students. The various tenants played music, smoked dope, and filled the dingy corridors with the smell of bargain aftershave” (9). Kureishi presents an intoxicating setting.

He offers, in addition, “a protagonist who sees absolutely no contradiction between reading, writing and raving, and demonstrates this synergy in the course of the novel by alternately snorting cocaine off and vomiting over his Penguin Classics, and then writing reams of jagged prose that expressed him, like a soul singer screaming into a microphone” (*Times Literary Supplement* 20). It is this early performance, the “vomiting over his Penguin Classics,” which foreshadows the novel’s representative act of literary censorship: the book burning of Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*. It is also the performance that foreshadows references to Prince Rogers “Prince” Nelson, ‘The Artist Formerly Known as Prince.’

The introductory chapters of *The Black Album* set up the cast of fictional constructs to whom Shone refers. A lively and thoroughly vibrant group, the assemblage, in addition to Shahid, who curiously resembles Kureishi’s early reality as one who desperately seeks acceptance among his peers, includes Deedee Osgood, a much too hip college professor whose marriage to a stuttering pedagogue is empty and unfulfilled. It is important to note that Kureishi has crafted a minor figure in the novel whose articulation is not proficient and whose language skills are compressed in relationship to the professor’s. What the absence of articulation suggests is that Kureishi is engaging the literary word games he experienced with authority figures, and as he does so, reverts to his childhood issues of status and identity. Bart Moore-Gilbert argues that Kureishi elects to use the romantic genre *Bildungsroman* because it “presents identity as a developmental, unstable and shifting process” (*The Literary Encyclopedia* 148).

Deedee Osgood fosters her own moments of self-absorption: She enjoys the company of dark-skinned men, wraps herself in a blanket of security by sucking her thumb in private and believes that because she can readily identify pop musicians and reel off a litany of the works of best-selling African American authors without hesitation, she is a force to be reckoned with. Her sense of superiority to her darker-skinned students represents everything that Kureishi holds in contempt. Kureishi’s inclusion of Osgood represents the author’s ongoing conflict to exorcise the cultural and ethnic demons which still rest within his psyche. The teacher-student memories of Kureishi’s past haunt him, and it is the free-spirited Osgood who presents the image of that unforgiving past. As a kind of literary retribution for the negative academic experiences of his youth, he constructs Osgood in an unfavorable light.

The professor loosens her scholarly and personal inhibitions with her students, shelters Shahid, and allows him to embrace the full and unrestrained expansion of her flights of liberalism, teaching him—by example—to soar to heights beyond his cultural, sexual, political, and academic imagination. He is, at first introduction, an enthusiastic student of the professor’s ‘forward-thinking’ cultural studies program. In addition to her “freedom of instruction” (38) lectures, wherein she ventures from one topic to another on a moment’s notice, Shahid’s peers are also served grandiose portions of African American music from the pop culture icons of 1960: Sylvester “Sly” Stone, whose signature compositions, “I Want to Take You Higher” and “Everyday People” can very well serve as the professor’s personal anthems. Her repertoire also includes references to rock legend Jimi Hendrix and rock and roll recording artist “Lil’ Richard,” whose mascara-streaked face and processed hair predate ‘The Artist’s’ musical performances and stage attire by more than four decades. The colorfully outlandish performer George Clinton, “pilot” of the 1970s multi-member recording group “Mothership Connection,” also finds a place in Osgood’s daily lectures. While she intersperses references to popular icons in her talks, Shadid, according to Moore-Gilbert, “increasingly questions whether her syllabus does not itself provide a covert means of excluding minority students from the high, cultural canon” (148).

Even though the inclusion of various pop icons dominates her teachings, it is the music of ‘Prince,’ whose 1994 album The Black Album serves as the title of Kureishi’s novel, that advances her pseudo-scholarly interests in the classroom more prominently than other creative artists’ work. While two of the album’s musical compositions, “Strange Relationship” and “If I Was Your Girlfriend,” reflect the social performances of Kureishi’s central figures in the novel, the album’s genre comprises a blend of funk, soul, pop and funk rock. Osgood sees herself as a participant in the genre of her musical references, and her classroom lectures are necessary acts she feels compelled to bring to her students.

Deedee is, to Shahid, a performer perfectly cast in her own public role as an unbound, artsy professor. K. Anthony Appiah maintains that “. . . there is never any doubt that Hanif Kureishi is an enthusiast of the imagination” (42). Marchelle Har Kim argues that “Deedee . . . expands Shahid’s horizons in the classroom and in the bedroom, challenging him to live unbound like the rock/funk icon formerly known as ‘Prince’” (245). Although Deedee “always stimulated him [Shahid] to think” (145), there is not copious evidence of the “expansion” of Shahid’s intellect in terms of “traditional” classroom experiences as this expansion relates to Deedee’s academic and intellectual presentations. Beyond the streets and dance floors of the city, the steamy London bars, and Shahid’s and Deedee’s respective

flats where each retires after episodes of partying, there does not exist a serious or intellectual discourse between the two.

The professor's surname, "Osgood," is purposefully oxymoronic. She is *not good* in the academic tradition of what, historically, constitutes the intellectual performances of a college professor. She is the reality of what a young, idealistic college student might *wish* an instructor to be: professorially and intellectually "good" in terms of a knowledge-based discipline, but not "good" in a professional, academic sense. It is in the assignment of Osgood's last name that Kureishi conjoins an identity with his central figure. The name assignment replicates Kureishi's early London years of name-calling, invisibility, and vulnerability. Shahid is to Osgood as Kureishi was to his primary instructors.

In the classroom, lectures by Osgood are cursorily presented and glossed over. There are few inquisitions from students who sit stoically passive, and the professor offers no critical arguments and engages in little scholarly debate for their benefit. Commenting on the heavy doses of sexual banter and the escapades engaged between Shahid and Osgood, Appiah calls the mere chronicling of the adventures between student and professor "childlike" (42) and their inclusions in the novel unsubstantial and immature for, apparently, a writer of Kureishi's stature. Appiah further suggests that a more substantive inclusion of literary theory should substitute for the over-abundance of sexual scenes present in the novel. The engagements between professor and student are an inconsiderable reflection of Kureishi's banter with his former instructors.

Despite referencing poet Maya Angelou in the novel, there is scant evidence that Kureishi is knowledgeable of the writer's oeuvre to the extent that justifies mention of the writer's memoir *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) beyond its use as a calling card for the reader. While he occasionally cites Angelou, he relishes the establishment of a sound and just literary camaraderie with the African American writer. By including Angelou's name alongside other prominent writers (by way of the half-lectures offered by Osgood), "intellectual inclusion" emerges as Kureishi's singular objective. An unwavering need for acceptance by figures larger than himself harkens back to his days as a schoolboy when he was belittled, mocked, and shunned by those in authority. That he was interested in literature during his youth advances the notion of his choice of writers in this later work.

Michelle Har Kim contends that 'Prince,' the artist, "scores" (*The Nation*, 245) in Deedee's lectures "right up there with [Richard] Wright, [Ralph] Ellison, [Alice] Walker, and [Toni] Morrison" (245), four writers of African American literature. The absence of a scholarly engagement with any of the writers or discussion of a single one of their texts suggests that grouping writers' works—without theoretical arguments, thematic issues, writing styles or critical

analysis—is Kureishi’s foremost objective. Walker’s literary works are unnamed throughout The Black Album, and Morrison’s expansive oeuvre remains anonymous. While The Black Album addresses on a linear level the topic of Muslim faiths, the reference to Wright’s Pagan Spain (1957), without commentary regarding Wright’s intellectual journey to Spain during the regime of Francisco Franco, suggests that Kureishi’s aim is to offer a cursory intellectual claim without putting forth a critical argument for the inclusion.

Readers are left to ponder specific texts of Kureishi’s references, including Ellison’s signature literary work Invisible Man (1952) as well as his (Ellison’s) compilation of essays, Going to the Territory (1986). Morrison’s novel Song of Solomon (1977), and her collection of essays Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (1992), which addresses the racial politics of American literature as it relates to the inclusive teaching and recognition of African American literature, might also be among Kureishi’s allusions. From what list of Walker’s, Ellison’s and Morrison’s texts is a reader to make a determination of reference? Kureishi does not provide the reader with the literary differentiations. Although each of Wright’s, Morrison’s and Walker’s literary compositions is thematically dissimilar, each work addresses issues of identity, belonging, and acceptance on a level with which Kureishi is familiar. His sense of kinship and an identity affiliation with the writers is grounded in their shared experiences of alienation, rejection, and cultural disenfranchisement, and he appeals for acceptance through writers he deems to be of his social and cultural history. Through the voice of Riaz, Kureishi labels authors as “yarn-spinners who have usually groveled for acceptance to the white elite so they can be considered ‘great’ authors. They like to pretend they are revealing the truth to the masses. . . .” (194). Kureishi’s literary posturing, as evident in Riaz’s comment, governs The Black Album.

In some ways Deedee Osgood is a figure akin to Roby Penrose, the university professor in David Lodge’s Nice Work (1988). While Penrose, a feminist, specializes in the industrial novel and women’s narrative voices, she is also liberal in her performances outside the classroom. Unlike Osgood, however, she takes her duties and responsibilities as a university lecturer more seriously. Osgood’s seminars are, in essence, informal “talks” presented under the guise of scholarship. Her talk on “America” is a condensed view of America’s racial intolerance during the 1950s and 60s, centering on a few significant events that occurred during the tumultuous days of segregation in the Deep South. She conveniently abbreviates her lectures to a few choice incidents surrounding a few well-known facts of the Jim Crow era:

. . . around the time of Presley, Negroes couldn’t even see a film in downtown Washington, their own state capital.

Miscegenation was illegal in half the country. Fifteen-year-old
Emmet Till was lynched in 1955 for whistling at a white woman.
[Her voice modulated with emotion as she spoke of King,
Cleaver, Davis, and the Freedom Riders.] (36)

To Shahid's credit, the history lesson, the "living, breathing history of struggle" (36) piques his interest, and he questions himself in the context of this new-found knowledge. "How," he asks, "had he lived so long without this knowledge? Where had they kept it? Who else were they concealing it from?" (36). Shahid's inquiries suggest that he endeavors to understand the social and political dimensions of the world in which he lives as well as the historical and cultural framework in which he has been deprived of knowledge.

For all of Kureishi's literary posturing, The Black Album's most prominent inclusion is Rushdie's The Satanic Verses (1988), although it remains tactfully unnamed, as does the author's identity, throughout the novel. Kureishi fails to inform the reader much more about Rushdie's Midnight's Children (1981), a tale centered around India's transition from British colonialism to independence, or The Satanic Verses. While one can argue that there is strength in the unnamed, the political intensity of Rushdie's novel might also be the driving force behind Kureishi's concealment of the title. It can also be argued that Rushdie's text, the centered voice of the book-burning scene in The Black Album, is the performance of literary defiance in the Kureishi text.

Riaz Al-Hassan, the self-appointed Muslim leader, seeks, as does Shahid, a solidarity with his peers, but his efforts to de-center the Rushdie text meets resistance from Shahid who believes in the importance of voice. K. Anthony Appiah asserts that Kureishi "handles the whole business of The Satanic Verses with a pantomime of tact: neither Mr. Rushdie nor the book is ever mentioned by name. Instead, as in mimicry of the procedures of censorship, every reference is by indication" (42). Riaz's exclamation that "the mind of the author is what informs us" (39) is countered by Shahid's contention that "free imagination, looking into itself, illuminates others" (194). It is an argument that Deedee Osgood might find dually challenging, in accordance with Shone who contends that the professor's "highest recommendation of a book is that it made her brain bounce" (20).

The professor's claim that 'The Artist' is "half everything" (129) is cause for her own self-examination and understanding of her own identity. I contend that Deedee Osgood does not know who she is, and is in search of herself. The lecturer's image of 'The Artist' reflects not only her own public image but her own private issues as well. If Osgood acknowledges her claim of 'The Artist's' representation, then she must also acknowledge that she, too, is "half everything"

(12), not only because she is the result of a union between a man and a woman, but also because she must recognize herself outside the realm of her own oneness. While she might be on a journey of self-discovery, her attraction to Shahid seems governed primarily by his exotic identity which, in a sense, represents, according to Moore-Gilbert “a subtle form of racism which aligns her liberal multiculturalist attitudes with, rather than against, the more obvious kinds of discrimination which the text anatomises” (148).

Marchelle Har Kim asserts that Deedee “and other postmodern types encouraged their students to study anything that took their interest from Madonna’s hair to a history of the leather jacket. Was it really learning or only a diversion dressed up in the latest words”? (The Nation 245). As Shahid questions the politics of his own beliefs as well as the ideas represented by the constricted vision of Riaz and his following, he increasingly confronts his own consciousness as he seeks answers about who he really is: “These days everyone was insisting on their identity, coming out as a man, woman, gay, black, Jew—brandishing which features they could claim, as if without a tag they wouldn’t be human” (102). As for Shahid:

One day he could passionately feel one thing, the next day the opposite. Other times provisional tales would alternate from hour to hour, sometimes all crashed into chaos. He would wake up with this feeling: Who would he turn out to be on this day? How many warring selves were there within him? Which was his real self? Was there such a thing? How would he know when he saw it? Would it have a guarantee attached to it? (157)

The tone of The Black Album combines sorrow, disorder, and sarcastic wit—mirrored images of the inner struggles of lost souls living on the fringes of their own fears and insecurities. While Kureishi’s commentary of London’s youthful current reveals that he remains connected to the plight of the masses and is indeed cognizant of mainstream city culture, the work also speaks to urban plights that plague many cities. The novel (as does “The Artist’s” musical composition) records scenes of social decay and souls gone astray as well as it dually reflects the author as an enthusiast of literature and the imagination. Janet St. John affirms that although Kureishi writes with “sensitivity” (Booklist, 40) and is a “valid commentator of our time . . . the novel’s tone speaks of a real lack of identity of who and what to believe in” (4). As Shahid contemplates defection from the rigid doctrine of beliefs of the Riaz-ites, the followers of Riaz’s principles, the contemplation may serve as an indicator that he may not be so

inclined to dismiss the idea of what identity really means and what it means to “belong.”

Kureishi does, however, challenge Shahid to extend his imagination beyond his horizons, “to imagine and investigate in spite of barriers . . . away from the authorities toward the margins, where you see things that are usually lost on minds that have never traveled beyond the conventional and the comfortable” (234). In truth, there is a specter of discomfort and insecurity. Although Kureishi permits a semblance of fundamentalist and racial theories to filter through the characters of Shahid, Riaz, and Deedee Osgood, discussions of race and religion are abbreviated in the novel. Marchelle Har Kim declares that discussions are “. . . elusively uncritical, and superficial interrogations of Muslim fundamentalism” (245).

It is evident in The Black Album that Kureishi, the novelist, and Shahid, his alter-ego, are enthusiasts of—and enthusiastic about—literature, advocates of the printed word, and fervent believers of the unbridled imaginations that give depth, structure, and meaning to life. The book-burning scene at the end of the novel, an act of censorship, temporarily shifts the focus of Shahid’s beliefs, forcing him to re-evaluate the significance of the book’s purpose as well as presenting him with an opportunity to recognize a voice not his own. Although the protagonist, still, at the end of the novel, appears to be lost and in search of himself, his partial reconstruction allows him to begin to see beyond himself as he seeks to explore past the boundaries, conventions, and judgments of the larger culture. Even though jagged reflections of his life may sometime appear in lieu of the whole, the core of who he is, where he belongs, and what constitutes acceptance, the center remains a less distrustful reality as he moves toward direction and control of where his beliefs lie within the framework and consciousness of his own being.

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