EMPLACEMENT AND "COSMOBILITY": RURAL-URBAN MIGRATION AND INDIGENOUS FUTURES IN ALASKA

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ABSTRACT

Migration from rural to urban Alaska has led to renewed concern about the future role of rural places for Alaska Native communities. Key to this concern is the question of whether, and in what way, place will remain relevant to a strong sense of Alaska Native identity and cohesion. Drawing on recent ethnographic work, I highlight two distinct versions of indigenous future-making vis-à-vis territory: emplacement and cosmobility. Emplacement is the framing of contemporary Alaska Native interests in terms of the moral necessity of working against migration and restoring attachment to place. In contrast, cosmobility entails a positive reinterpretation of mobility, not as displacement, but as the extension of vibrant Alaska Native culture and cosmologies, which, in this view, can persist autonomously of territory. In drawing attention to these two projects, I attempt on the one hand to restore a sense of history to the essentialized politics of emplaced indigeneity, and on the other to interrupt narratives about the inevitability of Alaska Native outmigration as cultural loss.

KEYWORDS: displacement, Alaska Natives, indigeneity, identity

INTRODUCTION

The diverse examinations of displacement in this issue of the *Alaska Journal of Anthropology* all hinge on the disruption and reorganization of geographical place as an ordering principle of distinctive social and cultural ways of being in the world. We have taken as our definition of displacement "the forced removal from a place" (Mason, this volume), while recognizing that in practice it is most often impossible to distinguish between structural coercion driving removal and migrant desires for a better life.

Displacement, even in Alaska, is not an isolated phenomenon, but is linked to global—yet asymmetrical—flows of people, goods, information, and ideas (Appadurai 2008). Global flows generate reflexive valuations of displacement, mobility, and cosmopolitanism, on the one hand (Salazar 2010), and rootedness, place, and autochthony, on the other (Malkki 1992); negotiations of "local" Alaska Native subsistence and territory rights, for example, now take place within the globalized category of indigeneity (Muehlebach 2001) and the transnational framework of human rights (Niezen 2003).

Situated practices have long been vital to the survival and autonomy of Alaska Native subsistence communities; more recently, it has also become necessary for indigenous groups to explicitly mobilize demonstrations of place-based knowledge, affect, and memory in order to secure and defend status and rights (Povinelli 2002; Stevenson 2006). Yet even as Alaska Natives have gained a measure of political success vis-à-vis territory (Mitchell 2001), migration from rural communities to urban parts of the state has accelerated (Goldsmith et al. 2004), leading to serious concerns about the future role of rural places for Alaska

Native communities. Key to this concern is the question of whether, and in what way, place can, or should, remain relevant to a strong sense of community cohesion. I use "place" in the abstract sense and do not refer only to physical geography. Rather, place is meant to denote multiple dimensions of social, cultural, and historical attachment that make these geographies legible.

In this article, I draw on recent ethnographic studies pertaining to the role of place for arctic indigenous populations to counter-pose two very different strategies previously applied to the question of displacement: *emplacement*[1] and *cosmobility*.[2] Emplacement refers to the framing of contemporary Alaska Native interests in terms of the moral and political necessity of working against displacement and deepening attachments to place, and in particular, to subsistence landscapes. Emplacement can be understood as a specific kind of restorative "place-making" which, according to Anna Tsing (2008:77), is:

> always a cultural as well as politico-economic activity. It involves assumptions about the nature of those subjects authorized to participate in the process and the kinds of claims they can reasonably put forth about their position in national, regional, and world classifications and hierarchies of places.

In contrast to this project, cosmobility entails a positive reinterpretation of mobility, not as involuntary displacement but as an extension of vibrant Alaska Native culture and "portable" cosmologies, which, in this view, can persist and flourish autonomously of territory. Cosmobility is meant to capture the balancing act through which Alaska Native students, business leaders, and community representatives attempt to simultaneously inhabit the apparently incompatible social categories of indigeneity and cosmopolitanism. In drawing attention to these two different modes of being indigenous relative to place, I attempt to restore a sense of history and caution to essentializing politics of emplaced indigeneity and to interrupt narratives about the inevitability of Alaska Native outmigration as cultural loss.

EMPLACEMENT

During the first half of the twentieth century, many arctic and subarctic indigenous groups were displaced through government education and settlement policies intended to accelerate acculturation (Hirshberg and Sharp 2005; Kelm 1998). More recent forms of migration are, at face value, the result of voluntary decisions made by individual laborers, students, patients, and consumers as they seek to improve their standard of living. Thus, it is increasingly difficult to classify displacement as straightforwardly "forced." Nonetheless, the end results of modern-day rural-urban migration may prove just as profound for arctic indigenous communities as past forms of forced displacement and acculturation.

Recognizing the importance of attachment to local subsistence landscapes for Alaska Native identity and self-determination, anthropologists have worked as indigenous advocates to counter both physical and cultural displacement, directly contributing to the crafting of an emplaced Alaska Native future. Ethnographers and indigenous elders have collaborated to record "memory ethnographies" of traditional local practices, both within an applied traditional ecological knowledge framework (Gearheard et al. 2006; Tyrell 2008) and within a more widely circulating genre of elder biographies intended to serve as sourcebooks for future generations (e.g., Andrew and Fienup-Riordan 2008; Bodfish et al. 1991).

Beyond the practical work of rendering local ecological knowledge concrete, scholars have begun to produce rich ethnographic records of the everyday experience of living within the ethics of emplacement itself, showing how members of northern indigenous communities are grappling in everyday life with the politically inflected task of holding onto the significance of traditional territories, including the relationships, histories, affect, and knowledge that enmesh inhabitants (Cruikshank 2005; Stevenson 2006; Thornton 2008). Despite representing a wide range of theoretical approaches, these authors can all be described as working within emplacement, as a discursive project of

1. My use of the term *emplacement* is cognizant of, but departs from previous use of the term by Lovell (1998), Englund (2002) and Cobb (2005). Englund's use refers to the situated embodiment of subjects of globalization, Cobb's to the way in which people are "drawn into places" (Cobb 2005:564). Lovell's usage is closest to my own; where Lovell means to invoke the role of physical places in mediating social relations, my use is meant to additionally capture the constitutive role of reflexive ideologies of place in mediating social and spatial relationships.
2. Noel B. Salazar has previously used this term in his ethnography of tourism to refer to "figurative cosmopolitan mobility" (Salzar 2010:16). In contrast, my use of the term refers to the mobility of indigenous world views, or cosmologies, beyond the geographic and discursive bounds of traditional territory.

(re)embedding Alaska Native communities in territories of subsistence sociality in order to achieve moral correction in relation to ongoing processes of structural violence.

Julie Cruikshank, for example, has made a key contribution to recovering our sense of the possibilities of place-making by denaturalizing hegemonic Western ways of relating to geographies of the natural world. Her ethnohistorical account of Southeast Alaska, *Do Glaciers Listen?* (2005), shows us how the settler-state's project of mapping Alaska's "new land" materially and rhetorically erased the presence of prior human societies and converted peopled landscapes into "wilderness." By highlighting historical moments of rupture between presettler and postsettler conceptions of territory, Cruikshank reveals how apparently neutral terms such as "resources" and "land" bear a distinctive ideology regarding the status of humans and nature: that nature is a resource, available for human use, but fundamentally separate from human communities. Cruikshank shows that this ideology continues to be challenged by present-day Tlingit views of landscapes as sentient and responsive. That is to say, within Tlingit lifeways, glaciers *do* listen, and respond to human actions—sometimes violently. Glaciers, like humans, are emplaced in the sense of being locally accountable within a reciprocal social and moral order. Perhaps, Cruikshank suggests, environmental change will ultimately force us to take this particular understanding of localized, attentive human-nature sociality more seriously as a valid framework for indigenous *and* nonindigenous futures, rather than as merely generative of data for use in resource management.

Where Cruikshank uses historical trajectories to defamiliarize instrumentalist (as well as purely romantic) Western relationships with land in order to allow us to entertain the possibility of an alternative kind of place-based existence, Thomas Thornton (2008) attends to present-day Tlingit experiences of living with territory. Like Cruikshank, Thornton demonstrates that a unique relationship exists between Tlingit people and their territory, and argues that the lived dimensions of this relationship push up against the limits of our English language. For the Tlingit, ties to particular geographies are not simply defined by "use" but have been configured through the multiple dimensions of social organization, language and cognitive structures, material production, and ritual processes.

Thornton is realistic about the degree to which this relationship has been subjected to displacement; his ethnographic work painfully demonstrates that "what is lost in the first instance [by indigenous people] as a result of dispossession is knowledge of places" (Thornton 2008:191). Yet Thornton is unwilling to relegate knowledge of places to history but instead advocates for a renewed commitment to emplacement as a practical necessity for indigenous continuity: "The key to future success lies in cross-cultural recognition of biological and cultural health as two sides of the same entity: place" (Thornton 2008:196). Anthropology, in this view, has a mandate to ameliorate displacement by helping to create conditions of knowledge and discourse under which place can be recovered.

Taking a more recursive approach to place-making, Stevenson (2006) shows how widely traveling values attached to emplacement have been taken up and self-consciously reworked in the context of everyday Inuit life in Nunavut. Within the multicultural, future-oriented Canadian state, Stevenson argues, recovering and perpetuating an emplaced existence has become both a practical and political necessity for sustainable, autonomous community survival. Remembering ways of being on the land in Nunavut has therefore been recast in Inuit communities as a moral obligation, an "ethical injunction to remember" (Stevenson 2006:168). Stevenson documents the proliferation of everyday forms of emotional labor—attention to the past, elders, and the land—that this injunction demands. Increasingly popular culture camps, for example, provide opportunities for youth to enter into this affective economy of indigenous memory by cultivating emplaced knowledge about how to survive on and relate to the land.

These ethnographic accounts serve as important antidotes both to official versions of recent arctic history and to dominant rhetorical and material reductions of socially laden landscapes into wildernesses free of human interference. As these studies make clear, indigenous arctic communities have a unique, long-lived, and enduring relationship with their traditional territories that is at the same time dynamic and self-aware. However, just as we have come to understand that Western concepts of nature are in no way "natural," we should also be cautious of essentializing indigenous relationships with territory. Arguably, the emplacement project circulating today, with its emphasis on the moral value of being bound to place, is not without its own history and has to some extent grown out of the cultural translations between sedentary and nomadic societies entailed in the processes of land settlement and continued political struggle for subsistence rights (Cobb 2005; Dombrowski 2002).

As Michael Jennings has argued, the crafting of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) of 1971

was "fought out in a Western political arena, not a traditional one. As it had done for centuries, the U.S. government allowed at the negotiating table only voices that it recognized" (Jennings 2004:69). In order to open the way for resource development, Alaska lands had to be delineated as discrete plots with clear functions (Haycox 2002). As the state went to work gathering testaments to regular land use and classifying land claims as legitimate or illegitimate according to a sedentism-centric worldview, the possible forms of Alaska Native land use were gradually and subtly narrowed from extensive nomadic and seminomadic patterns to a more intensive, fixed existence on the land.

Arguably, this history has contributed to the key paradox of indigenous cultural politics in Alaska today: community representatives (and anthropologists) continue to recognize and advocate for the importance of distinct territories for identity, recognition, and cultural continuity. At the same time, the historical reduction in patterns of mobility and the legal detachment of subsistence rights from land claims that has occurred within the messy translation of indigenous land use into the terms of a sedentary state has meant that it is increasingly difficult to materially realize the spirit of Alaska Native political victories. Successfully occupying the indigenous slot within modern-day settler societies imposes conditions on mobility—whether nomadic or cosmopolitan. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987:23) presciently observed, "History is always written from a sedentary point of view . . . even when the topic is nomads."

In addition, there is at least one worrying side effect of the way in which indigenous claims have been handled within a settler-state such as Alaska: the merging of racial and spatial orderings. Through a history of cultural translation around land settlements, indigenous citizens have come to appear symbolically as well as physically displaced in the context of urban environments (Esbach 2004). Matthew Kurtz (2006) argues that the solidification of a rural-urban divide subtly recuperates elements of a much older racism. As Alaska Natives, of necessity, made themselves "legible" within geographies of identity-linked compensation (Scott 1998), "rural" versus "urban" has come to be code for "Native" versus "White" in popular discourse. This essentialized version of ethnic orderings carries with it a normative message: that Alaska Natives "belong" in rural areas, while white citizens are the rightful inhabitants of urban areas.[3]

Kurtz supports his argument with evidence that some urban Alaskans are posed to actively enforce these spatial and ethnic boundaries. In a particularly brutal example, three members of my own suburban high school filmed themselves patrolling the streets of Anchorage in 2001, armed with paintball guns. The high school students harassed and mocked Alaska Natives walking on the streets in Anchorage before shooting them in the face with frozen paintballs (Alaska Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 2002; Kurtz 2006; Porco 2001). Nor was this merely an isolated incident; since 2001, there have been other premeditated attacks targeting Alaska Natives in Anchorage. In 2003 a young Alaska Native woman was the victim of a paintball attack. In a 2009 incident, eggs and glass bottles were the weapons of choice. Bizarrely, these most recent accused perpetrators also filmed themselves, suggesting a disturbing trend of performative urban "Eskimo hunting."

While we should not attribute any more self-awareness to these perpetrators than is warranted by the senselessness of their attacks, it is worth examining the local meaning structures in which such attacks could have become conceivable. Specifically, "hunting" is a particularly potent way of framing violence towards indigenous people in Alaska. First, because it refuses to recognize the humanity of Alaska Natives, instead treating them as an exploitable feature of nature (which does not belong in urban areas), and second, because it tries to undo the core cultural identity of Alaska Natives as self-sufficient hunters. This latter subtext connects to several decades of painful political battle over the legitimacy of commercial versus subsistence hunting and urban versus rural subsistence priorities in the state.

In short, while the political and cultural project of emplacement has been, and continues to be, absolutely vital for Alaska Natives' ability to recover and secure territory, identity, and community from the pre-ANCSA period to the present, emplacement is ultimately a two-edged sword that has resulted, at times, in an over-determination of what it

3. In fact, there are both Alaska Natives and non-Natives in communities deemed "rural" or "urban" in federal subsistence regulations, which presume that communities with populations over 7,000 are nonrural but include several exceptions (*Federal Register* 2007). Title VIII of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA), the enabling legislation for federal subsistence management in Alaska, was first written to refer specifically to subsistence opportunities for Alaska Natives. As a last-minute compromise in order to pass the law, the language of the act was changed to give subsistence opportunities to all rural residents, Native and non-Native.

means to be indigenous within settler-states. Alaska Native communities have by necessity defined what it means to be indigenous within a Western framework of land ownership and definitions of nature—as well as what it might mean to "live close to nature." Contradictions now arise between the representational parameters of emplacement and the practical necessity of being mobile in order to survive in a mixed subsistence economy and beyond. Although the normative momentum of an over-simplified version of emplacement may not always be apparent, it is periodically revealed in moments of urban violence towards Alaska Natives.

"COSMOBILITY"

In a recent press conference on his book *Fifty Miles from Tomorrow* (Hensley 2009), Iñupiaq author William Iggiagruk Hensley's daughter asked him a question. To paraphrase: "If our identity is rooted in rural Alaska, isn't there an obligation on the part of the state to support our villages? What will happen to our culture otherwise?" Hensley, who played a pioneering role in securing land claims settlement for Alaska Natives, responded in a way that at first surprised me: "Spirit and community are more important than land. Our people have always been mobile. They can take their culture with them."

Anthropologist Ann Fienup-Riordan (2000:153) has articulated a vision for the future of Yup'ik communities:

> I invite you to turn this picture [of rural to urban migration as cultural loss] on its head. Yup'ik communities are not disintegrating, their lifeblood gradually seeping away. Many can be seen as actually expanding and recreating themselves in unprecedented ways until today, when they are as strong and vital as at any time in their 2,500 year history.

In this view, territory is reimagined as a "touchstone" (Fienup-Riordan 2000:155). Although homelands continue to play a vital role in reproducing traditions, one does not—at least according to Fienup-Riordan—have to actually inhabit these territories in order to maintain culture and community. Although displacement involves a physical rupture in geographical habitation, it does not necessarily bring a weakening of ties between culture, identity, and specific places. That is, displacement does not always entail "deterritorialization" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), or the weakening of ties between culture and place. Places can simultaneously act as the original context of a community *in situ*, and, following displacement, as a common source of situated memory around which new kinds of community may congeal, albeit with varying degrees of success.

Hensley and Fienup-Riordan seek to link a nomadic past with the cosmopolitan present, a version of indigenous resilience that I have come to think of as "cosmobility," or enactments of Alaska Native worldviews as portable and enduring beyond their relationship with territories. While this version of indigenous future-making runs counter to dominant discourse on cultural politics, and indeed, may seem implausible to some readers, it does sanction a second look at the work of anthropologists who have documented trajectories of indigenous mobility across the indigenous Arctic over the last fifty years (e.g., Blackman 2008; Fogel-Chance 1993; Graburn 1969; Honigmann and Honigmann 1965; Kishigami 1999, 2008; Lee 2002; Sprott 1994).

Nancy Fogel-Chance (1993) was one of the first ethnographers to argue against the assumption that Alaska Natives moving from subsistence landscapes to urban areas necessarily leave their values and lifestyle with the land, being subject to assimilation once living in the city. Through her ethnographic work with twenty-five North Slope Iñupiaq women living in Anchorage, Fogel-Chance shows how rural-urban migrants are able to strike a balance, simultaneously "living in both worlds." "Worlds" here refers to cultural rather than physical terrains. While Iñupiaq women have become primary household earners in the urban workplace, they have combined this adjustment with a home life that self-consciously emphasizes traditional means of child-rearing and gender relations, family obligations, and social reciprocity.

Although Fogel-Chance's work shows that indigenous ways of being have successfully traveled to Anchorage—indeed, her work may lead us to question the very notion that Alaska Natives living in Anchorage should be thought of as perpetually "displaced"—she also cautions that this apparent cosmobility in fact depends on the continued cultivation of social networks in rural communities. Specifically, her work implies that Iñupiaq ways of living and viewing the world can only travel as far as subsistence food networks. Interjecting in ongoing political debate about subsistence rights in Alaska, Fogel-Chance (1993:106) warns, "greater recognition needs to be accorded to how the loss of these foods to urban households would eliminate a crucial element reinforcing Iñupiaq identity there." Territory, therefore, although distanced, remains a significant limiting geographical factor in projects of Iñupiaq cosmobility.

Molly Lee (2002) has likewise documented the persistent role of subsistence foods for Yup'ik women living in Anchorage, as well as the length to which Alaska Natives living in urban areas will go to access these subsistence foods. Lee's collaborator, a Yup'ik artisan living in Anchorage, travels to rural communities to visit her friends and relatives and exchange "city foods" for caribou ribs, seal meat, and salmonberries. By following this "cooler ring" in action, Lee (2002:4) comes to understand the cooler as a symbol for the "ties that bind these women to the land." In doing so, Lee represents the viability of urban indigeneity as at least partially contingent on ties to a home village and to relationships with hunters in that village. Ties to territory provide a foundation for community strength, even under situations of displacement. However, when territory is understood as the core of Alaska Native identity, these displaced ties can form a nexus of vulnerability. While Lee's informant had the financial and social capital to travel to home villages, maintain large social networks, and continue to access traditional foods while living an urban lifestyle, not all Alaska Natives living in urban parts of the state are so lucky. Lee's work thus points towards the possibility that cosmobility is generative of new culturally based class divisions between groups of rural-urban migrants.

Intriguingly, Lee suggests that the "portability" of worldviews and practices, although viable through maintenance of ties to home villages, is unevenly distributed according to Yup'ik gender roles. Because women have traditionally worked as gatherers and processors of food, "the urban woman's continuity with the past is asserted every time she flenses a seal on the laundry room floor or stirs up a pot of basket dye on the kitchen stove" (Lee 2002:6). In contrast, because the role of men has traditionally been as hunters in the primary stages of subsistence harvesting, male identities are tied more fundamentally to specific places and knowledge about those places. It is true that Alaska Native women are far more likely to spend at least part of their lives living in Anchorage than their male counterparts (Hamilton and Seyfrit 1994). Ironically, then, the apparently successful cosmobility of Alaska Native women may in fact be perpetually dependent on the continued emplacement of Alaska Native men.

More than Fogel-Chance or Lee, Blackman (2008) places indigenous mobility, rather than subsistence roots, front and center in her ethnographic work, highlighting the (neo) nomadic past and present of Nunamiut Eskimos who travel back and forth between Fairbanks and Anaktuvuk Pass in order to gather supplies and maintain social relationships. Blackman documents the complex meanings that city life has come to represent for Nunamiut travelers over time. In doing so, she demonstrates that modern forms of mobility are vital to the maintenance of Nunamiut identity. In fact, her work hints at the impossibility, for Nunamiut, of living a truly emplaced life. The ability to maintain ties to territory cannot, in the end, be separated from the necessity of traveling to urban areas and hub communities.

One of the more revealing moments of Blackman's essay is her observation that nonindigenous travelers arriving in Anaktuvuk Pass are strictly greeted as "visitors" rather than tourists. Blackman's account of this adherence to guest-host sociality has several implications. By claiming the right to act as hosts, Nunamiut tour guides are communicating their status as rightful inhabitants of their territory (Urban 2010). Less obviously, guest-host sociality negates a commercial relationship in favor of a gifting relationship. By describing tourists as "visitors," Nunamiut in Anaktuvuk insist on the possibility of a reciprocal visit; as guests in waiting, they subtly break the mold of emplaced indigeneity in favor of a more commensurate relationship to geography.

"Traditional" anthropological approaches to the Arctic have tended to focus on territory and its recovery (Riches 1990). Fogel-Chance, Lee, and Blackman depart from this model, to varying degrees, in order to highlight the resilience and flexibility of actual Alaska Natives, who are able to maintain a sense of community and identity beyond the borders of indigenous territory. A closer reading of these accounts of cosmobility, however, suggests that these ethnographers worked with a distinct portion of the Alaska Native urban social universe: women who possessed the financial and social capital necessary to successfully "live in both worlds" by maintaining ties to subsistence culture through travel and social networks.

Although such a cross-cultural balancing act would be difficult in any context, it is especially challenging in Alaska due to the extremely high cost of travel to and from rural parts of the state, which lie off the road system. This cost poses an obstacle to the multiple geographical strategies necessary for cultural and physical survival, for rural as well as urban Alaska Native residents. As Ann Fienup-Riordan (2000:165) has observed, "Yup'ik community members are painfully aware of the problems and contradictions of continuing to live off the land when this

comes with a price tag that only those with a steady cash income can afford." In urban areas, in particular, subsistence foods are likely to become scarce. At what point, then, will mobile rural-urban migrants have to "cut the network" (Strathern 1996), breaking off reciprocity towards those urban relatives and friends who cannot afford to live within the circuits of indigenous cosmobility?

CONCLUSION

Place-making in Alaska is not only a matter of remembering and renewing ways of living in local geographies. It is a wider genre of discursive and political behavior that seeks to negotiate the value of place in a world of global flows. In this paper, I have argued that the implications of rural-urban displacement in Alaska can only be fully understood once we have examined the ways in which place itself is imbued with meaning in the context of indigenous cultural politics within the settler-state. Drawing on recent ethnography, I have identified emplacement and cosmobility as projects that diverge on the role of territory in constituting indigenous identity and community; each posits a particular view of the proper relationship between culture and place for robust, self-determined Alaska Native futures.

Discussing the future of Alaska Native communities solely in terms of their ability or inability to support sustainable lives in fixed geographies leads to a limited and essentialized understanding of what it means to be indigenous in the modern world. In recent years, anthropologists have drawn attention to the flexibility and ingenuity of indigenous migrants in the Arctic, who, despite living apparently "displaced" lives outside traditional territories, have often maintained a strong sense of identity and community cohesion, indicating a dynamic relationship between culture and place. However, this focus on cosmobility carries its own hazards: an unmitigated celebration of emergent indigenous cosmopolitanisms overlooks the fact that not all Alaska Natives can afford to cultivate a mobile lifestyle that integrates the resources of rural and urban worlds.

Anthropologists have a key role to play as advocates for sustainable rural lifestyles, but they should likewise turn their attention to the differential stakes of rural-urban migration for differently positioned social actors, and to the new forms of social and cultural life that this mobility engenders or forecloses. Who can be mobile, and who cannot, and at what cost? In what ways do economic resources structure continuing participation in sharing networks and legitimized cultural membership for urban Alaska Natives? How might the need for increased mobility create new divisions between those who are "inside" or "outside" culture?

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