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Choosing Difficult, Choosing Important in Fifth-Grade Read-Aloud

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Choosing Difficult, Choosing Important in Fifth-Grade Read-Aloud

Chiara Di Lello

In fifth grade, read-aloud can feel like a luxury, a secret bonus level unlocked any time a task goes faster than expected or students pack up for dismissal with five minutes to spare. In my homeroom, I am a defender of read-aloud for many reasons, but foremost as one part of the school day we unequivocally do together. Recently, I found that read-aloud provided my class of fifth-graders some of the richest opportunities all year to talk honestly and openly about identity, bias, racism, and family. I didn't go looking for a read-aloud on a "difficult" topic. Rather, I chose to center authors and characters of color, specifically Black women and girls, in my choice of read-aloud. The resulting experience, taking place over the course of the spring semester, brought both joy and deep engagement with these important topics to the classroom community.

In this essay, I share my critical reflections and pedagogical choices (some more successful than others) while using a whole-class chapter book read-aloud to engage my students in conversation about complex topics, including racism and gender, which we might not have discussed otherwise. It is my hope to model one small way I as a White teacher have tried to disrupt Whiteness in my classroom as part of a larger commitment to anti-racist teaching, and help teachers feel more prepared to undertake similar work in their own settings.

Too often, teachers say "difficult" when we mean "uncomfortable," or more specifically, "uncomfortable for me." This comfort or discomfort is directly tied to privilege. As a White woman teacher, I benefit from White privilege daily, including the privilege of Whiteness being the cultural default in so many spaces, including my own school. Personally and professionally, I have the privilege of being able to choose when I engage with that "difficulty" by broaching the topic of race.

To work against the grain of that privilege and White-as-default, I made a commitment before beginning my first head teaching job to center books in my classroom that featured children of color, written by authors of color. This commitment was based on a variety of factors, one being the desire to teach an inclusive, multicultural curriculum where the experiences of people of color are not limited to "heroes and holidays" (see Banks 1993, among others). Another factor was and is the overwhelming Whiteness of publishing for children.

In 2018, statistics compiled by the Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison showed that just 10 percent of American children's books featured African American characters, compared to 50 percent featuring White children and 27 percent animal or personified object characters (Huyck and Dahlen, 2019). While that represents a slight increase for books featuring African American characters (up from 7.3 percent in 2014), numbers for Latinx and particularly First Nations characters have barely budged. In fact, most of the decrease in the share of White characters (from 73.3 percent in 2014 to 50 percent in 2018) has been taken up by animal/object characters, which increased by 15 percent between 2014 and 2018. Unfortunately, this problem is not new: calls to diversify the racial makeup of characters and authors in the field have been ongoing for decades (Welch 2016, p.368). It takes active, constant work to make headway against this kind of inequitable representation—which I learned, at first, by failing to do that work.

Going with the Flow

In the fall of 2018, diving into a new grade at a new school, I took every toehold of structure or familiarity I could get. When it came time to choose a read-aloud for my fifth-grade homeroom, I literally went by the book: my edition of *The First Six Weeks of School* (Anderson, 2015) suggested *The Mysterious Benedict Society* (Stewart, 2007) as a whole-class read-aloud for fifth or sixth grade. I had read the book several years earlier in my class of fourth graders and enjoyed the moments of grownup-level wordplay throughout the story. The story had action, humor, and suspense. It was a known quantity. I'll take it, I thought, not knowing that it would be the seed of the following semester's read-aloud adventure.

In going by the book, I ignored the commitment I had made the year before, and Whiteness-as-default promptly fell into place. It is not surprising that a book recommendation from a company as mainstream as Responsive Classroom would reflect the overwhelming Whiteness of children's and young adult literature. *The Mysterious Benedict Society*, written by a White man, centers on a White boy and his mostly White group of friends and mentors. As Beverly Daniel Tatum writes, "Because racism is so ingrained in the fabric of American institutions, it is easily self-perpetuating. All that is required to maintain it is business as usual" (1997, p.11). As a White teacher that semester, "business as usual" included me.

All in all, the fifth-graders and I enjoyed our run with *The Mysterious Benedict Society*. We finished it in a marathon read-aloud the day before winter break. The class humored me and my silly character voices, thrilled over the various cliffhangers, and cheered when Reynie and his fellow kid-spies triumphed over the evil Dr. Curtain. We even had some good conversations about friendship, doing the right thing, and how authors weave themes into literature. Was it enjoyable? For sure. Was it a source of deep conversations? Not exactly. A nagging sense of curricular regret followed me throughout the semester. Even before the book was done, I had promised myself to make good on my commitment—I knew my class better, the curriculum was humming along. It was time to take more of a risk.

Choosing the "Tricky" Side of History

As a second semester read-aloud, I chose *One Crazy Summer* by Rita Williams-Garcia. Published in 2010, it was a National Book Award finalist and went on to win a Coretta Scott King Award and Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction. Those metallic stickers were one form of vetting, a way to know that the book had institutional approval as a work of literature, a representation of African American experience, and a work of historical fiction. It centered Black characters, and specifically Black girls. The three main characters – Delphine, Vonetta, and Fern—travel cross-country from Brooklyn to spend a summer with their estranged mother, Cecile.

The book caught my interest in another way: the "summer" of the title was 1968 in Oakland, California. The Black Panther Party featured prominently. I knew this was not history my students were learning about in social studies or as part of occasion-specific lessons, such as during Black History Month or the lead-up to Martin Luther King, Jr. Day.

Many educators are likely familiar with the ways in which Civil Rights history is watered down and downright distorted in elementary school, leading to student misconceptions along the lines of "Dr. King solved racism," "Rosa Parks was tired," and the misleading idea that it is exceptional individuals, not coalitions, that drive social change (see Kohl, 2007). In this paradigm, Dr. King is quoted for his message of love, nonviolence, and tolerance, but never for his anti-war sentiments or critiques of class. No

mention of his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” or his assertion that “a riot is the language of the unheard” (CBS News, 2017).

No wonder, then, that the Black Panthers don’t make it into most elementary lesson plans. And a strong bias remains against the Panthers for their unapologetic platform and the perceived “hateful” or “violent” aspects of their activism, such as the perception that members were anti-cop or hated White people. I knew that *One Crazy Summer* would provide a different angle, focusing on the social programs the Black Panthers led that made a difference for kids, families, and communities, and a perspective that would put the stereotypes in enough context to understand the group with greater nuance. I looked forward to the chance not just to teach a less familiar part of Civil Rights history, but to make it come to life through the eyes of a character my students’ own age.

When I call the choice of *One Crazy Summer* a risk, it might be better to characterize it as a book that called for greater responsibility on my part. First, I knew it would come with the responsibility to provide context for the genre and the history being told, and help my class of mostly White students make sense of the historical and fictional parts of the narrative. I also had to be prepared to teach a book that did not mirror my own White identity, in front of a class with Black, multiracial, and Asian students, but with a White majority. Like difficulty, risk is in the eye of the beholder, and my sense of risk was undeniably linked to my privilege. I did my best to begin our second semester read-aloud with these responsibilities in mind.

Pictures Worth the Words

It started with a picture of the Golden Gate Bridge. *One Crazy Summer* opens as Delphine and her sisters finally descend into San Francisco on their flight from New York City. “Can you picture the view?” I asked my class. When most of them said no, I quickly pulled up an image of the Golden Gate Bridge and dropped it into a PowerPoint slide. “Oh, that looks familiar!” said a few. But as the story goes, if you give a mouse a cookie... In the first few chapters alone, I got almost a dozen more queries:

“Who’s Cassius Clay?”

“Who is Muhammad Ali?”

“What’s an Afro?”

“Who’s Jackie Kennedy?”

“Wait... how is her suitcase *oval*?”

“Who is Mata Hari?”

“Can you show us a picture?”

Image search after image search, the photos built up—mostly black and white, and in color when I could find them. Some searches were completed during the lesson itself, on demand, others I had to track down during prep time. Finding an image of Black models in Jackie Kennedy-style outfits took more digging than I expected. We also had to confirm a handful of other facts: Was Martin Luther King, Jr. still alive in 1968? What about Malcolm X? And President Kennedy? In retrospect I’m surprised I didn’t end up making a timeline, too.

The PowerPoint slide filled up, and so did the next one. It started to remind me of the concept boards that costume designers put together to prepare for fabrication, with little snippets of the world of the play collaged together to build up a picture.

Some pictures became conversations in themselves. An image search for Bobby Hutton brings up, front and center, photos of him carrying a shotgun in front of the Oakland police department. The weapon is eye-catching, but so are his thick glasses and earnest expression, and the vulnerability they imply. My students saw the photo and immediately remarked on how young he looked, dismayed to see visual confirmation of what they had just learned in our read-aloud: that just months before the summer in *One Crazy Summer*, this boy had been killed by police while trying to surrender to them. As we talked more about why a 16-year-old was carrying a gun, I shared some background information about the Mulford Act, and connected it to the community patrols mentioned in *One Crazy Summer*. Why, I asked my students, might the Black Panthers feel the need to patrol their own neighborhoods? What was the message behind the Act?

Here, my students' own background knowledge took the lead. They knew about many recent examples of police violence against Black people and communities, including the murders of Tamir Rice (younger still than Bobby Hutton) and Michael Brown by police. I knew they had studied the Great Migration in previous grades, so they understood the impact of systemic racism and inequality on Black people, and that one of the forms that racism took was police brutality. Taken together, they had experiences and schema to understand why Black residents of Oakland might not trust police to keep them safe or even to leave residents alone. Thankfully, my class also knew enough about different forms of social change to put this new information into meaningful context.

It Means Putting Your Body on the Line

At that point, we reached an interesting juncture in the conversation. Yes, police brutality and racism were clearly wrong. Why, one student asked, didn't the Black Panthers or Oakland residents protest peacefully? Why did they choose violence as a way to fight back? This is a go-to response I have heard from students over time, and I always wonder about the factors that lead to it. I believe it is grounded in part in their developmental age: 8- to 10-year-olds are known for their fierce commitment to fairness. Still, I have wondered how other factors, including race and class, play a role.

At a very young age, students with class privilege absorb the idea that money is used to solve social problems—they may suggest a bake sale or other fundraiser, for example, as a way to help underserved communities or combat climate change. I also wonder about the underlying assumptions that White students draw upon when suggesting peaceful protest. While they may not be aware of it, they are picturing a scenario where their protest is noticed, respected, and responded to. They have absorbed the idea that in a society that privileges Whiteness, they will be able to expect redress for their grievances.

Fifth grade is an important developmental cusp because students are more prepared to think abstractly, and to consider questions of representation and power. So when my students questioned the Black Panthers' strategies, I paused, then asked the class if they could think of any other examples of activists who had more and less "extreme" ways of fighting for their cause.

Earlier in the year, we had completed a Language Arts unit about investigating and using primary sources. Students analyzed a set of primary source texts related to the women's suffrage movement in the United States. These included some visual artifacts like photos of the "Silent Sentinels," suffragists who picketed the White House in 1917, and anti-suffrage cartoons whose arguments and sexist humor the class worked together to debunk. My students learned that Alice Paul and some of the other picketers were members

of a more militant group of suffrage leaders—they preferred picketing and civil disobedience to petitions and less disruptive protests. When my students asked what “militant” meant, I said it meant that their methods were extreme, or radical. One thing that made their approach different, I explained, was that they were willing to put their bodies on the line for justice.

With some time to recall this information about Alice Paul and the arrests and hunger strikes endured by the Sentinels and other suffragists, the Black Panthers’ strategies seemed to click for my students. They understood that, bottom line, Dr. King and Malcolm X had similar goals. And they understood how, in oppressive systems, different leaders and groups of people might end up with different ideas of how to fight back. In both discussions, I told them plainly that not everyone agreed with militant tactics and that we might not choose them for ourselves, but it was important to understand them.

Pulling a Gendered Plow

As aptly as my students connected to and analyzed the racial power dynamics in the book, a different attempt to broach a difficult topic from *One Crazy Summer* fell surprisingly flat. Throughout our read-aloud journey, Cecile’s words and actions brought gasps of indignation from my students, who could not understand her coldness toward her own children. It is a testament to Williams-Garcia’s writing that our weighty discussions of civil rights, discrimination, and police brutality did not distract from the emotional core of the book: whether Delphine and her sisters would finally earn the affection of their mother, Cecile.

When the girls arrive in Oakland, they quickly realize that Cecile’s priority is her writing. She gives the girls money for takeout dinners and sends them to the Community Center (run by the Black Panthers) each day so they will have meals and something to do. The rest of the comforting, mediating, and caretaking falls to Delphine, who concludes that her mother can only be called that in the biological sense. Some of the most tender moments in the book are when Delphine’s carefully controlled attitude of responsibility and neutrality starts to crack under her disappointment.

But Cecile is far from a detestable “evil stepmother” stereotype—at least to this adult reader. At a key moment in the book, she obliquely reveals to her daughter why motherhood and homemaking hold so little interest for her. Delphine insists on cooking a meal for her sisters, and Cecile relents at last. Watching Delphine cook, Cecile critiques the level of gendered responsibility Delphine has already taken on at age 11: “We’re trying to break yokes. You’re trying to make one for yourself. If you knew what I know, seen what I’ve seen, you wouldn’t be so quick to pull the plow.”

To me, Cecile’s choice of words was a biting indictment of mothering-work. Had we worked through the metaphor and inferential meanings as a group, I am sure the students would have realized the plainer meaning of Cecile’s words: that she sees mothers, or women more generally, treated like farm animals, and she can’t accept that at the price of her creativity and freedom. I assumed that in Cecile’s remark to her daughter that “it wouldn’t kill you to be selfish,” my students would at least pick up on their differing character traits, and conclude that a healthy balance lay somewhere in the middle.

We didn’t get there. I didn’t understand why. I knew my students cared passionately about gender inequality—many of them connected our primary source work on suffrage to gender inequality as it persists today in things like the gender pay gap. They knew that in the past certain tasks were firmly designated as “women’s work.” But their journal entries about the scene fell flat.

Perhaps I was too indirect. We didn't work through Cecile's metaphor in class, nor did we talk about the state of Black women's rights in 1968 or the early 1960s when Cecile fled her family. Aside from the missing historical context, I wondered afterward what understandings of gender expectations and work my students had or felt prepared to respond to. Most elementary school lessons on jobs (usually part of first- or second-grade curricula) focus on "community helpers," glossing over any critical engagement with who has access to what kinds of work, what kinds of work are valued, and why (see Black, 2016). I wonder how my students would have responded to more direct questioning about Cecile's actions and motivation. I wonder if their perceptions of Cecile changed meaningfully upon finding out that leaving her children was in part about defying others' narrow expectations.

"I've Never Had to Think About That"

One possible reason the conversation about motherhood, work, and gender expectations fell flat is because I failed to use a strategy I had drawn on for other parts of the book: I took myself out of the picture.

It would have been irresponsible to undertake a read-aloud of *One Crazy Summer* if I were not prepared to name my own Whiteness. As a general strategy, I believe that authentic conversations about difficult topics cannot happen when we, as educators, enter the conversation with a contrived neutrality. We are "situated beings" (Silin, 1995), not objective or aloof observers. Acknowledging my identity, and specifically my race, as part of our read-aloud was a key way to enrich discussions and model the thinking I hoped to see from my students.

One Crazy Summer is what Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop would call a "window" book for me as a White person, and the same was true for most of my students last year. In her important and influential essay on multicultural literacy, Dr. Bishop characterized books as mirrors or windows—reflecting back the identity of the reader, and/or providing a window into another identity, culture, or perspective (Bishop, 1990). Then as now, "mirror" books for White children abound, while for children of color the harm persists of not seeing their identities reflected in the books they read. This harms White children as well, who develop a distorted sense of their place in the world and may have little firsthand exposure to human experiences across racial differences (Welch, 2016, pp. 372-373). In reading *One Crazy Summer* as a White teacher, I had to be prepared to model the process of learning from, and empathizing with, perspectives and experiences I had not lived.

The commitment to acknowledging my Whiteness was tested early in the book, when Delphine and her sisters are offered money by a White woman at the airport in an awkward, embarrassing scene. "Wow," I said as my students grimaced or gaped in shock. "I get the feeling this is something the White lady thinks is normal and okay to do. As a White person, I'm cringing right now." Students' comments and questions built onto mine: "Was she just not thinking?" "Does she assume they need money?" "Why would she think that?" "This probably wouldn't happen to White children traveling alone."

Another important "window" moment takes place when Delphine's youngest sister Fern is teased by "Crazy" Kelvin for having a White doll, her beloved Miss Patty Cake. The doll is pale pink, blonde, and blue-eyed. Kelvin tells Fern it's wrong for her to be so attached to a White doll. As a class, we stopped and talked about Kelvin's point of view, and several students agreed that he was pointing out a real problem—it wasn't fair that Black girls like Fern couldn't find toys that looked like them (they were quick to point out that this problem can still show up today).

I then added, “As a White person, I haven’t had to think about what Fern is thinking about. Maybe this is true for you too, but I have always had an easy time finding toys that looked like me.” Others replied that, at the same time, Fern associates the doll with her mother, so it’s understandable why she’s so attached to it. In that moment of the read-aloud conversation, multiple points of view came to the surface in empathetic ways. Acknowledging my own race and how it affected my reading of the scene helped normalize the idea that each of us would bring different perspectives to it.

Lessons Learned

While read-aloud was just one part of our busy days last year, I recognize that many factors led to my class’s experience with *One Crazy Summer*. Here are some of my reflections on what helped me and my students explore the topics we did.

Training makes a difference. As a White teacher, I have lots of work to do to unpack my own biases. Foundational experiences in my teacher training program helped build the commitment I began this essay with: to center characters and authors of color in my classroom. Some examples: as a graduate student, my history of education instructor chose to include Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois, and the 1968 Ocean Hill-Brownsville teacher strikes in the syllabus; all students in field work placements participated in discussions about racial identity and teaching; my master’s project focused on culturally responsive teaching and racial equity as part of progressive practice.

Many professional development experiences have helped build my understanding of systemic racism, White identity, and anti-racist teaching practice. These include the teaching and mentorship of faculty from the **Center for Racial Justice in Education (formerly Border Crossers)**, the **People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond**, the **CARLE Institute**, and the **National Diversity Practitioners Institute**. The breadth and depth of these trainings and experiences have helped build my knowledge and skills. Underlying all that, a commitment to teaching the whole child is, bottom line, the best motivation to bring important, difficult, real learning into the classroom.

Mindset makes a difference. When engaging critically with race, gender, and other “difficult” topics in the classroom, I know that my learning is never done. I continue to seek out and learn from the perspectives and expertise of Black and Indigenous educators and scholars, and I use social media intentionally to keep up with conversations about race and literacy, diversity in children’s publishing, social justice education, and more. (A non-exhaustive list of the educators and experts I am grateful to learn from is included at the end of this essay.) Knowing that the work is ongoing also helps build my tolerance for uncertainty and mistakes, the “necessary messiness” of critical literacy and anti-racist teaching. I know that I cannot let my apprehension keep me from engaging, because that is the “business as usual” that upholds White supremacy in schools and in society.

Colleagues make a difference. Related to training and mindset, the colleagues we listen to and learn from are critical to engaging with “difficult” topics in and through literature. Earlier this year, one educator compiled data on the books teachers were recommending to each other via Facebook groups as middle-grade read-alouds (Twitter, 2020). Nearly all of the top 100 recommendations were by White authors, and many titles were published before 2000 (when I and teachers my age were ourselves in elementary school!). This example reminds me that I have to think carefully and critically about who I’m going to for recommendations. I have to expect that mainstream sources (such as *The First Six Weeks of School* or the uncritical hivemind of social media) will only replicate the dominant and mostly White list.

I am lucky to work with and know several wonderful, committed anti-racist librarians—they are an invaluable resource when choosing read-alouds like *One Crazy Summer*. They are also the reason I know what a Newberry or Coretta Scott King award is, and why it matters. Social media can play an important role here as well, to make sure I am listening to and amplifying colleagues committed to anti-racism, even if we don't work at the same institutions.

Be ready to bring your real self to it. If we as educators are feeling the need to bring up “difficult” topics in the classroom, it is because we know that our students are affected by racism, sexism, poverty, violence, mass incarceration, homophobia, transphobia, climate change, and other forms of injustice. Be real about how these affect you, too, at the very least by being ready to share your feelings authentically, and when appropriate, to name the impact on your own identity. Make emotions and empathy part of the learning and healing that can happen when you make space to talk about difficult issues in your classroom.

Be prepared to do your own homework. By now, my students' go-to questions are pre-programmed in my brain. I have to expect that they will ask, at least for realistic or historical fiction books, “Is that a real person?” immediately followed by “Are they still alive?” So I may as well check before we open up the book together! Doing my own homework also means filling gaps in my own knowledge about historical context, or maybe getting up-to-date data to put events in the book into context. Maybe it means finding a map, a piece of artwork, or a photograph (or several dozen photographs).

It matters who the kids are. Remembering Dr. Bishop's powerful framework, know when you are providing a mirror or window for the students in your care. To the extent that you can, be prepared for some of their responses and what they reveal about students' subconscious understandings (such as my students' comments about protesting that show internalized assumptions about meritocracy and equality under the law).

When Difficult Means Important

There is a part of me that wondered last year whether *One Crazy Summer* was really that big of a deal to teach, or if my second semester choice made any difference. In the process of writing this essay, I learned that this book was challenged in North Carolina in 2015 along with *Esperanza Rising* by Pam Muñoz Ryan (2000). Parents objected to both books, saying they contained “objectionable themes and questionable values” (ABC News, 2015). Perhaps the biggest lesson, then, was that it was possible for my classroom to make normal what was “objectionable and questionable” elsewhere.

I can't know exactly what the impact of *One Crazy Summer* was on my students. Still, I wonder what it will mean for my White students, for example, to have learned about the Black Panthers now rather than as young adults, and to have at least one opportunity to complicate and rethink their perspective of police officers as benevolent “community helpers.” I hope this read-aloud was just one chance of many for my Black students to read a book as a whole class that reflected parts of their identity, and spoke to issues of representation (like Fern's White doll) that they may grapple with themselves.

I do know that by precluding certain topics from the classroom, we cast them as difficult, uncomfortable, undesirable; but by bringing these topics into our classrooms and engaging students in authentic, empathetic discussion about them, we show that they are important. And that makes a statement. That is its own form of radical.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful for the work and generosity of the following people and groups, who make their literacy, anti-bias/anti-racism, and equity expertise freely available on social media. Thank you for helping me on my journey to practice anti-racism in my teaching, work, and life. The handles are for Twitter, though many of these people are active on other platforms as well:

Melinda D. Anderson (@mdawriter), education journalist and author
Tricia Ebarvia (@triciaebarvia), teacher and co-founder of #DisruptTexts
Dulce-Marie Flecha (@dulceflecha), literacy and trauma-informed educator
Lorena Germán (@nenagerman), educator, writer, co-founder of #DisruptTexts
Liz Kleinrock (@teachntransform), anti-bias/anti-racism educator
Tiffany M. Jewell (@tiffanymjewell), anti-racist educator and author
Jess Lifshitz (@Jess5th), teacher and critical literacy educator
shea martin (@sheathescholar), educator and researcher
Dr. Kim Parker (@TchKimPossible), literacy organizer, co-founder of #DisruptTexts
Dr. Debbie Reese (@debreese), educator and writer, founder of American Indians in Children's Literature (americanindiansinchildrensliterature.net)
Annie Tan (@AnnieTangent), classroom teacher, activist, writer, and storyteller
Christina Torres (@biblio_phile), classroom teacher and writer
Julia E. Torres (@Juliaerin80), educator, writer, co-founder of #DisruptTexts
Marcy Webb (@teachermrw), teacher, writer, and facilitator

I have also learned from the following organizations and groups:

Disrupt Texts (@DisruptTexts): A movement to rebuild the literary canon using an anti-bias, anti-racist critical literacy lens. (disrupttexts.org)

We Need Diverse Books (@diversebooks): Aims to put more books featuring diverse characters into the hands of all children. (diversebooks.org)

Reading While White (@readwhilewhite): White librarians organizing to confront racism in the field of children's and young adult literature. (readingwhilewhite.blogspot.com)

#OwnVoices: A term coined by the writer Corinne Duyvis. It refers to an author from a marginalized or underrepresented group writing about their own experiences from their own perspective, rather than someone from an outside perspective writing as a character from an underrepresented group. (Definition via Seattle Public Library)

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