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Political Agency: The Subject and the Citizen in the Time of Neoliberal Global Capitalism

Abstract: Today the notion of the 'subject' in the first capitalist world is reserved only for the citizens (fully acknowledged) as such of the first capitalist neoliberal world. Therefore the 'old' political 'subjects' are seen as a form of an archaic subjectivity and delegated to the so-called third worlds' capitalisms. The consequences are terminal regarding political agency. Or to reformulate this going back to the most significant shift in the historicization of capitalism, the shift from biocapitalism to necrocapitalism (the shift, break and simultaneity of biopolitics and necropolitics and as well biopower and necropower), we see a twofold mechanism at work. First, if necropolitics presents a new mode of governmentality for neoliberal global capitalism that is a decision over the administration of death (as being opposed to biopolitics as a control over life) then we must ask in which concrete, political, economic and social ideological situation the sovereign decision over death without impunity is normalized and accepted. Second, who are those that are 'selected' and targeted as the goal of this necro 'sovereign' decision? The answers will pull a paradoxical difference inside the notion of the subject and as well respond to why any demand regarding political subjectivities in the time of a neoliberal global capitalism seems a bad joke and something obsolete.

Keywords: citizen, subject, biopolitics, necropolitics, biopower, necropower, sovereignty and governmentality

We are witness to a perverse shift of agency in the Occidental world from the modernist notion of human subjectivity toward a nation-State's citizenship (mostly today framed inside the EU, the Occidental city polis). This perverse shift allows for a further systematic dehumanization and complete abandonment of all those hundreds of thousands of humans that are refugees trying to enter the European Union after real and proxy wars by imperial global powers taking place in the Middle East and Africa. Under the direct threat of death, also because of different intracommunity, religious, political and identity reasons in their countries of origin, the refugees advance toward the 'former' Western Europe. In the last two years Western Europe radically changed its humanitarian biopolitics into a necropolitical abandonment and ban of

the refugees. This is striking, as the Occident has established a proper agenda of democracy based on human rights protection. Until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 the protection of human rights was a bastion of democracy for the Occidental world.

We see that after the fall of the Berlin Wall the agenda of protection of human rights by the Occident steadily and continuously started to fail, and we witness a violent process of unstoppable dehumanization. Humanity is today relegated to the status of being a citizen (though many are symbolically, socially, politically economically, second- and third-grade citizens in the EU), while the refugees are non-citizens. Even more, the citizen today is given an added value through the managing of the city polis. Through its (pragmatic) administration of the city the citizen gets a political 'force' that was before attached to the (Occidental) human subject. The refugees are today caught, foreclosed and immobilized in enclaves and camps in the EU, in bordering states with the European Union or in states in agreement with the European Union, performing a sanitary cordon to stop the refugees from entering the EU. This is due to hyper questionable deals with the EU (mostly to get financial help and other possible benefits in return).

The outcome of this situation is that huge abandoned populations want what is given to the 'EU' nation-State 'humans' that are today only citizens linked directly to the blood and soil of the nation-State, though as I emphasized there are many second-grade citizens (LGBTQI communities in the former Eastern European states, second and third generations of children of migrants that came to work in the welfare states in the Occident, also postcolonial subjectivities). The asylum-seekers, Roma minorities, refugees and others as non-citizens are foreclosed, ghettoized, and immobilized. However, refugees are empowered with mobile phones and with knowledge that in the EU citizens have a certain quality of life guaranteed. Therefore the refugees insist on reclaiming a proper humanity as precisely subjectivity.

The reality is on the other side, a systematic, hyper-violent racialization process of discrimination, marginalization and exclusion of refugees is happening in the EU. That this is happening and that this is increasingly less disturbing is because of a much broader shift in reconceptualization of life and death, from biopolitics to necropolitics. Therefore we detect changes that led to a situation of a loss of political agency and the total neglect of the category of the human subject.

Finally, this opens up a point of urgency as to how to continue, and also the question what does such a situation do to our academic theoretical, philosophical and critical vocabularies. Some answers come from Alexander G. Weheliye's *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*,¹ which questions the occidental agency with proposing habeas viscus (to have a flesh) in opposition to habeas corpus (to have a body) with which to "animate the elsewheres of Man and emancipates the true potentiality that rests in those subjects

¹ Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014).

who live behind the veil of the permanent state of exception”², where the ‘Man’ is the white fe/male Occidental subjectivity seen as something that has to be left out of the political theorization of the future totally. Because Weheliye states “doing this entails leaving behind the world of Man and some of its attendant humanist pieties”³ in order to, as stated by Sylvia Wynter (who is, with Hortense Spillers, Weheliye’s main theoretical pillar), to point the finger to the “struggle of our new millennium [that] will be one between the ongoing imperative of securing the well-being of our present ethno-class (i.e. western bourgeois) conception of the human, [...] and that of securing the well-being, and therefore the full cognitive and behavioral autonomy of the human species itself/ourselves.”⁴

Of course this is not a utopian proposal but a dystopian one, as it is connected with a transformation to be grasped on the level of the conceptual, demanding to completely rethink our philosophical and theoretical concepts anew, to the point, as formulated by Weheliye, to propose a form of subjectivity as an otherwise human.

Similarly, he is very critical of the power of post-humanist agency, formulated by white feminist new materialism that obscures the term ‘flesh’s potentiality’. So, instead of white posthumanisms that seek to make us more receptive to this Earth, Weheliye “offers a posthumanism informed by the commitments of Afrofuturism: not to earth, but to the stars; not to saving Man’s world from collapse, but to living in full recognition that the apocalypse has already happened.”⁵

The following text has three parts. In the first I expose the shift from biopolitics to necropolitics in relation to agency. In the second I return to Weheliye and reflect, through his analysis of Foucault, Agamben and race, the change of governmentality into sovereignty in global necrocapitalism. In the third I connect what I call necrocapitalist sovereignty management of the human through seizure, confiscation of counter-cultural, political, and social histories. Counter-histories are like the human under harsh processes of racialization, important because without them it is not possible to reclaim the present.

Part 1

Today the notion of the ‘subject’ in the first capitalist world is reserved only for the citizens (fully-acknowledged) of the first capitalist neoliberal world. Therefore the ‘old’ political ‘subjects’ are seen as a form of an archaic subjectivity and relegated to the so-called third worlds’ capitalisms. The consequences are terminal regarding political

² Ibid, 137.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Cf. Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – an Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, 3 (2003): 260, quoted in Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 137.

⁵ Cf. Robin James, “Notes On Weheliye’s *Habeas Viscus*: or why some posthumanisms are better than others,” posted on November 26, 2014, online <https://www.its-her-factory.com/2014/11/notes-on-weheliyes-habeas-viscus-or-why-some-posthumanisms-are-better-than-others/>.

agency. Or, to reformulate this going back to the most significant shift in the historicization of capitalism, the shift from biocapitalism to necrocapitalism (the shift, break and simultaneity of biopolitics and necropolitics, also biopower and necropower), we see a twofold mechanism at work. First, if necropolitics presents a new mode of governmentality for neoliberal global capitalism that is a decision over the administration of death (as being opposed to biopolitics as a control over life) then we must ask in which concrete, political, economic and social ideological situation the sovereign decision over death without impunity is normalized and accepted. Second, who are those that are 'selected' and targeted as the goal of this necro 'sovereign' decision?

The answers create a paradoxical difference inside the notion of the subject and also respond why any demand regarding political subjectivities in the time of neoliberal global capitalism seems a bad joke and something obsolete.

After the numerous refugee deaths near the coast of Lampedusa in 2013, Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta said: "The hundreds who lost their lives at Lampedusa yesterday (that means on that day in 2013) are Italian citizens as of today."⁶ The state burial that the victims received was less expensive than the bodies being sent back to their point of departure. But what about those who survived? According to the law that was in force at the time, not only did they not receive citizenship, but they faced fines and detention for illegally trying to enter a state border of a foreign country. The case of Lampedusa made me rethink what was not reflected publicly, that these dead people got what they wanted but in a macabre reversal: European Union citizenship, but only when they died. We see in global capitalism a formation of a new mode of citizenship that is divided into two from within (something similar to what Agamben did with life). On one side a necropolitical citizenship (*Necro* means death), and on the other a biopolitical citizenship (*Bio* means life).

The necropolitical citizenship is given to those who are left to die (refugees, asylum seekers and primarily non-registered migrants), while EU citizenship is no longer an 'old' form of 'natural' citizenship (it never was!), but just a biopolitical citizenship. Therefore, in global capitalism we have at least two distinct forms of citizenship: necropolitical and biopolitical citizenships, which could be exchanged easily by neoliberal governments in the very near future. When I talk of at least two citizenships I refer to all those categories that are discriminated as second- or third-grade citizens, though having the citizenship of the nation-State.

It is important to state that this shift from biopolitics to necropolitics and their coexistence here and now, rubbing shoulders so to say, shows that contemporary biopolitics through the systematic management of big data, austerity programs and general evisceration of the biopolitical population produces a violence that was once reserved for those seen as not fully human. Therefore if biopolitics is a systematic governing of life of the population then necropolitics is much more than this; it is attached to the whole system of life that is now subjugated to death, as capitalization, austerity, exploitation of the ecosystem, etc. Biopower that is centered on the body of

⁶ Cf. <https://euobserver.com/justice/121681>

a single citizen is now shifted to a necropower that is doing more than just targeting the bodies – it targets the whole space or a scape, to the point that we see a switch from biopolitical populations to necropolitical deathscapes.

The most important element of this shift is that it is not just a division and differentiation but established along the colonial/racial divide. All that we theorize regarding the status of refugees and asylum seekers, including citizenship and conditions for a better life, has to be seen through necropolitical lenses. Furthermore, it is important that necropolitics functions through measures of an intensified racialization. This is not just the old racism, but new forms of exploitation, expropriation and dispossession of people, states, also histories and vocabularies, and finally labor, via the constructed category of race that is today a norm.

That I can claim the existence of necropolitical and biopolitical citizenships, it is necessary that these two distinctive forms of governmentality over citizenship show their modality in the course of a history of the management of life in several passages: from liberalism to neoliberalism, from multiculturalist capitalism to global capitalism, from administration of life toward the administration of death, and from a change in the first capitalist world of imperial nation-States to militarized war-State powers; finally that historical colonialism changed into a contemporary colonial matrix of power, also presenting a change or a reappearance of two forms of power – governmentality and sovereignty. In all these radical shifts of forms of power we also see two different methods of the constitution of the social bond: the postsocialist ex-second world (former Eastern European states) converting into turbo fascist societies, and the old colonial imperialist Occidental states, once nation-States, retaining a postmodern fascist social structure (of a pure individualization, fragmentation and flesh mobilization, with persistent rejection of the ‘other’). A very good example of this process is the analysis by Kirstine Nordentoft Mose and Vera Wriedt. They exposed that a vocabulary of violence is formed in order to deal with systems of surveillance and seclusion that works with abbreviations:

- FRONTEX (European Border Enforcement Agency);
- EUROSUR (European Border Surveillance System);
- NCC (National Coordination Centre in EU countries);
- ENP (European Neighborhood Policy, consisting mainly of bilateral policy agreements between the EU and respective partner countries, outside of the EU).⁷

Biopolitics denominates the relation between life and politics and operates through a multiplicity of regulatory techniques in the everyday lives of people. As conceptualized by Michel Foucault in the mid-1970s, biopolitics designates the entry of phenomena peculiar to the life of human species into the order of knowledge and power, or simply, into the sphere of political techniques.⁸

⁷ Cf. Kirstine Nordentoft Mose and Vera Wriedt, “Mapping the Construction of EU Borderspaces as Necropolitical Zones of Exception,” *Birkbeck Law Review* 3, 2 (December 2015): 278–304.

⁸ Cf. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2010).

Recent decades showed that neoliberal global capitalism, in order to progress, not only did away with the Berlin Wall (1989) but intensified a rupture in the modes of its proper established governmentality. The formula of biopolitics is recuperated by me as 'make live and let die' (in the 1970s, of all other worlds outside the first Western world). Departing from the seminal text by Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics",⁹ published in 2003, which is already a historical text after 9/11 in 2001, we see the implementation of a military corpus that presents a governing over death (*necro* means death in Latin). Similar to biopolitics, I defined necropolitics as 'let live and make die.' To 'make live' was the 1970s welfare-State slogan for the first capitalist world, which after the crisis in 2008 undoubtedly changed into 'let live' for most of the populations in the first capitalist world.

In the post-Yugoslav space and Central European space (Austria) I introduced Mbembe's necropolitics through an elaboration in 2008 in *Reartikulacija* (a self-organized journal platform for political, theoretical and discursive interventions) as necrocapitalism. In the meantime the financial crisis of 2008 and until today presents a rampant neoliberal global capitalism with harsh processes of financialization, debt-burdened conditions of life and an enduring augmentation of misery. Necropolitics confronts us with the horrors of the human condition: death and killing, which means to talk about the new relation between life and death.

With this proposed and evidenced shift in governing life from biopower to necropower we reclaim a basis for rethinking the relation of sovereignty and governmentality. What is possible to formulate as a thesis is that we see a shift from governmentality to sovereignty that is key to understand the change of biopolitics to necropolitics. Along with this is the change in agency from the modernist notion of a political subject toward a citizen. This is why emancipatory potential is given to an almost old but re-born politics of managing the city, while the State is corrupted, hegemonic and militarized.

So in neoliberal times we have two machines of power working at the same time. The thought presented by refugees in the media until recently (which has decreased after the many terrorist attacks in Europe) was a clear 'are we not humans, as you, EU[ro]-peans'? In this we see a fundamental reorientation from the figure of agency, from subjects to citizens.

Sovereignty decides on the death of these human subjects who are claiming their humanity historically, though they are not citizens. Governmentality is today in a direct relation to biopower, and is relegated as apolitical force to citizens that now have a full right to 'govern' the city in something of a travesty of the Greek polis. This is only possible as the state fully exercises its sovereign necropolitical mission to get rid of 'new subjects' – as refugees and as non-citizens – within occidental Europe. Citizens and second- and third-grade citizens (as occidental biopower citizenship's darker side) are now allowed to govern the city polis in a differential manner. These citizens are mostly differentiated through a sexual othering inside the patriarchal lines of the

⁹ Cf. Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics" *Public Culture*, 15 (2003): 11–40.

neoliberal biopolitical Western world, which hides racial and class divisions attached to sexual difference. In a certain way it is possible to state that sexual difference is present only as a brand of the body of the sexed subject in patriarchal society.

It was Giorgio Agamben, in the 1990s, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, who in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*¹⁰ conceived of the banished life in the figure of Homo Sacer. This figure signals the return of sovereignty as no longer a question of power and order but as a form of authority grounded in ultimate violence that decides over the life and death of populations. Governmentality is central to the circulation of biopower and sovereignty is central to the circulation of necropower.

I propose a further thesis, and this is a genealogy of governmentality and sovereignty after the Second World War. In Foucault governmentality and sovereignty are separated, in Giorgio Agamben they are conflated and in Achille Mbembe they are projected onto each other and simultaneously duplicated. In Agamben the biopolitical 'make live and let die' is conflated with the necropolitical 'let live and make die'. This is why abandonment shifts to a ban. Abandonment was long the status of economic migrants; they were needed for cheap labor but prevented from entering any public discourse in the Occidental public space. When economic migrants were outside of the labor-capital relation in welfare capitalist States they were in reality abandoned in their needs, subjectivities, and desires, and therefore abandonment soon changed into a ban. The forms of abandonment differ historically; today mandatory integration is also a form of banning. When they are not dismissed as economic migrants or seen as potential threats, asylum seekers and refugees are frequently positioned as "speechless emissaries" whose wounds speak louder than the words they say.¹¹

Or, to be even more schematic, the genealogy is the following: Foucault (governmentality), Agamben (the structure of sovereignty) and Mbembe (sovereignty and governmentality), where governmentality is overdetermined by sovereignty, though both are simultaneously present. The change from biopolitical governmentality of life into necropolitical sovereignty over death decide, as formulated by Mbembe, who should live and who must die. Furthermore, sovereignty is foundational, militarized vertically, and governmentality is de-foundational, apparently horizontal, dispersed and if necessary can be confiscated and seized instantaneously by sovereignty. It can be suspended, social transfers blocked, with public access to knowledge and space immediately revoked.

Part 2

To better understand the differences between these three positions, it is necessary to make recourse to a critique of Foucault and Agamben by Alexander G.

¹⁰ Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

¹¹ Cf. Liisa H. Malkki, "Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization," *Cultural Anthropology* 11, 3 (1996): 377-404.

Weheliye. In *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*, he develops the concept of racializing assemblages to first expose the difference between the body and the flesh. This is important because the citizen today operates with a body, with the biopolitical category within the necropolitical violent process of racial differentiation inside the state, the city, against refugees that only have at their disposal the flesh. This is why when Weheliye insists on the racializing assemblages he is insisting not on the notion of habeas corpus (body) but habeas viscus (flesh). Habeas corpus, meaning literally ‘You may have the body’, is a recourse in law whereby a person can report an unlawful detention or imprisonment before a court, usually through a prison official. It is addressed to the custodian (a prison official for example) and demands that a prisoner be taken before the court, and that the custodian present proof of authority, allowing the court to determine whether the custodian has lawful authority to detain the prisoner. If the custodian is acting beyond his or her authority, then the prisoner must be released. Habeas viscus presents its complete opposite and is valid inside the racializing apparatus of necrocapitalism, as through such a category Weheliye asks for a distinction between those who are seen as fully human (the white, occidental wo/men) and their nonwhite, less-than-human ‘complements.’ We see clearly that mobility and immobility are categories that are from their inception racialized, gendered and sexualized and that constitute the division between citizens’ bodies and refugees’ flesh.

Weheliye’s position is that black subjects have not been “fully assimilated into the human qua man”,¹² but that “the functioning of blackness as both inside and outside modernity sets the stage for a general theory of the human, and not its particular exception”.¹³ The racializing apparatus presents an ‘assemblage of forces’ that allows understanding race not as always already articulated, and certainly not as a biological or cultural marker; therefore racializing assemblages present among other things, the visual modalities in which dehumanization is practiced and lived. Making a reference to Hortense Spillers’ ‘hieroglyphics of the flesh’, Weheliye not only clearly presents what demarcates who is less-than-human from the Occidental ‘fully’ human, but also formulates a critique of Foucault and Agamben. Weheliye criticizes Foucault, as he saw race as ethnic and biopolitical racism, thus naturalizing race as a ‘real object’. Agamben perceives in race an ‘absolute biological substance’ anterior to race/racism. Weheliye argues that there can be no such thing prior or posterior to the operations of racializing assemblages.¹⁴ The discourse on bare life and biopolitics – insistent as it is upon distancing itself from race and gender – provides Weheliye’s entry point for thinking about racialization and the flesh. Whereas Agamben’s and Foucault’s state of emergency is temporally bound and suspends the rights of all citizens (and is thus resolved by the reinstatement of the rule of law), Weheliye refers to another permanent state of emergency where certain individuals are *legally* marked with the hieroglyphics

¹² Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 10.

¹³ *Ibid*, 9–10.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 65.

of the flesh.¹⁵ The juridical acknowledgment of racialized subjects neither erases the apparatus through which certain people are rendered less than human, nor presents emancipatory possibilities. This very same ‘emancipation’ allows for even more brutal subjugations and property relations.

It is obvious that Weheliye is in search for potentiality, therefore habeas viscus “translates the hieroglyphics of the flesh into a potentiality in any and all things, an originating leap in the imagining of future anterior freedoms and new genres of humanity.”¹⁶

Consequently we must see the processes that oppose this unjust violent system against refugees. This opposition is in the form of the razor blade and acid for refugees, to disentangle the body from a form of hyper-technological data archives and to question the so-called ‘empty’ center of Occidental biopower, supposedly exempted from racialization processes.

The rhetoric of the empty center of power (that is also fundamental for the reinvention of the city and for prioritizing citizens’ rights to a ‘green and harmonious city’) is a problem that fails to see the processes of racialization that are imposed in the forced ‘repatriation’ of the refugee back to supposedly safe homes. This forced repatriation works with the hyper-militarization of the EU, USA, Australia and etc., with border control now assisted by 3D technology and drones. Therefore it is not surprising that Weheliye insists on a category of ‘an otherwise human’ that is not trapped in the systematic procedures of racializing assemblages.

Part 3

What are the consequences of the exposed change from governmentality to sovereignty for history and counter-history movements? Counter-histories are being pressed by racializing assemblages. The genealogy of this suppression is directly referencing biopolitics and necropolitics and the legacies of Foucault, Agamben and Mbembe. In the 1970s we see the imposition of what I can term a biopolitical amnesia that is not seen as a racializing process of forgetting, but presents a deficit in memory. In the 1990s after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and with Agamben’s notion of abandonment, the suppression of counter-history continues as aphasia. Ann Laura Stoler in her “Colonial Aphasia: Race and Disabled Histories in France” presents the case of France that cannot connect the French Republic and the Empire. I quote Stoler: “colonial aphasia is invoked to supplant the notions of ‘amnesia’ or ‘forgetting’, to focus rather on three features: an occlusion of knowledge, a difficulty generating a vocabulary that associates appropriate words and concepts with appropriate things, and a difficulty comprehending the enduring relevancy of what has already been spoken.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid, 88.

¹⁶ Ibid, 137.

¹⁷ Ann Laura Stoler, “Colonial Aphasia: Race and Disabled Histories in France,” *Public Culture* 23, 1 (2011): 121–156. Cf. <http://publicculture.dukejournals.org/content/23/1/121.abstract>

In 2017 French theoretician Marie-José Mondzain published a book with the English title *Confiscation of Words, Images, and Time*,¹⁸ and with a subtitle that can be read as “For Radicality”. She shows that the neoliberal anesthesia of political action works by delegitimizing ‘radicality’. Mondzain is clear: economic liberalism has seized our vocabulary. The word radicalism is equated with terrorism, and we see calls for de-radicalization. But Mondzain does not capitulate before such demands, insisting: “De-radicalization is supposed to act like the awakening that leaves the subject of the nightmare and immediately restores it by proposing another dream, that of the return to order and health.”¹⁹ Mondzain is not naïve, and clearly distances herself from those who train for terrorism. Nevertheless, she calls for a different perspective: “Not only must we not emerge from the crisis, but rather we must intensify it in its radicality, so as to deploy all creative resources and mobilize all revolts in order to bring forth the figure of another world.”²⁰ Seizure is co-substantive with necropolitical racializing assemblages; it presents a confiscation, and therefore an absolute erasure of counter-cultural political histories.

The way history is foreclosed by processes of racialization changes regarding the changes of capitalism after the Second World War, reproducing the relation between governmentality and sovereignty. My last thesis is that the procedures of racializing assemblages imposed onto counter-histories passes from biopolitical amnesia toward the 1990s abandonment and banning in a form of aphasia. This is to attain the form of a necropolitical sovereign seizure or confiscation, a complete privatization of communal counter-histories by those in power, from the state repressive apparatuses to all sorts of cultural, artistic, archival, political, and economic institutions.

Therefore it is time for an awakening.

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¹⁸ Cf. Marie-José Mondzain, *Confiscation : Des mots, des images et du temps* (Paris: Liens qui libèrent, 2017).

¹⁹ Cf. <http://editionslesliensquilibrent-blog.fr/marie-mondzain-radicalite-confiscation/>

²⁰ Ibid.

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