



# **Drawing Diversity: Representations of Race in Graphic Novels for Young Adults**

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## **Abstract**

*In light of the recent focus on diversity in books for youth as exemplified by movements such as “We Need Diverse Books” and “Reading Without Walls,” the authors sought to understand how race is depicted in graphic novels for teens. A textual analysis was conducted on a sample of books from the Young Adult Library Services Association’s 2015 “Great Graphic Novels for Teens” booklist to answer the questions: How many people of color are depicted in the sample of graphic novels? How are people of color characterized as main character, supporting character, or background characters? What are the races of the authors and illustrators of these graphic novels? Analysis of the data suggests a higher-than-expected number of characters who are people of color are depicted in this sample of graphic novels, and that those characters often play central or significant supporting roles. The researchers also found that this sample of graphic novels was, for the most part, produced by white authors and illustrators.*

## **Introduction**

### **Background**

Each year the Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC) in Wisconsin publishes a set of statistics that reflect the number of books received the previous year that were written by and about individuals who are people of color. (According to the FAQ page (n.d.) at the CCBC website, most large trade book publishers in the U.S. send the CCBC review copies of their new books.) In their analysis of the 2016 findings, Kathleen T. Horning, Merri V. Lindgren, and Megan Schliesman wrote that the atmosphere in the field of literature for youth is full of both excitement and frustration. The excitement, they said, comes from the publishing world’s response to the #OwnVoices movement that calls for more youth literature written by people of color about their experiences. About the frustration, they wrote:

The frustration is familiar, however. It's explained by numbers that haven't changed drastically in the 32 years we've been counting. It's explained by the fact that the conversations we are having now, about the importance of multicultural literature, about the importance of publishing books by authors and artists of color and First/Native Nations, about the importance of calling out racism in books for youth, still need to take place. And it's explained by the fact that these conversations have been going on in one form or venue or another for well over 70 years. (2017)

The statistical data collected by the United States Census Bureau (USCB) supports the CCBC's assertion that diverse representations in children's books are not reflective of the actual diversity found in society. In 2010 the USCB reported estimates of the U.S. population by race; the results indicated that 22 percent of people living in the U.S. are people of color. The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2017) estimated, based on the USCB's annual census update, that 49 percent of children under eighteen years of age living in the United States in 2016 were youth of color. In contrast, the CCBC reported that only 22 percent of the books received at the center in 2016 featured characters of color (2017). Opportunities for children to read about white people seem to abound, but the same cannot be said for reading about people of color.

This is not a new or surprising finding. Nancy Larrick first made the call for diverse, multicultural youth literature in 1965, and in 1990 Rudine Sims Bishop expounded on that call with her seminal work about the transformative nature of literature and the imperative need for it to show and reflect a spectrum of human experiences. More recently, the "We Need Diverse Books" campaign was developed as a response to this well-known but little-discussed issue. The campaign has since become an important movement that has called for changes in the publishing industry so that more children's literature that features characters and stories of people of color would be produced. The 2016–2017 National Ambassador for Young People's Literature, Gene Luen Yang, made the issue of diversity central to his platform. In an interview, Yang, who is an award-winning graphic novelist, discussed the importance of graphic novels for young readers and the great need for diverse books. He named his platform "Reading Without Walls," a name that suggests that kids should be reading books in diverse formats about people of diverse cultures and ethnicities (Yang and McEvers 2016).

Yang's point is an important one. Research about children and graphic novels has established that children find reading graphic novels enjoyable and compelling (for example, see Gavigan 2011), that graphic novels can infuse some readers with feelings of academic success in ways that traditional books do not (for example, see Frey and Fisher 2008), and that children are more likely to read graphic novels than read nothing at all (Krashen 2004). The appeal of graphic novels documented by those researchers has also been acknowledged by authors, publishers, librarians, and teachers, who have helped increasing numbers of these books find their way onto bookstore and library shelves and into kids' eager hands every year. More and more, graphic novels are helping to shape children's ideas of what is normal, acceptable, and powerful in a society they are just learning to navigate on their own. The combination of image, text, and story that graphic novels employ makes their influence a visceral and powerful one.

Given this set of circumstances, we wondered whose stories graphic novels tell. It is in the spirit of Yang's campaign and the greater focus from the children's literature community on issues of race and diversity that we wanted to better understand if and how people of color are represented

in graphic novels for teens. This research will help to further the current conversations about diversity in books for youth by extending it into the domain of graphic novels, a format that continues to gain in popularity, yet too often escapes critical attention.

## Critical Race Theory

In our approach to studying this research topic we used the precepts of critical race theory (CRT) to guide our inquiry. CRT was developed initially in the 1970s as a reactionary ideology based in the legal community in response to the failure of legal and social reform for people of color in the post-Civil Rights era in the United States. Although originally based in the law, this theory has since been employed by various disciplines to better understand race in the United States.

The precepts of CRT begin by acknowledging that while race is a social construct and not a biological reality, it does exist in our society. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic noted that failure to acknowledge that race exists leads to a kind of liberalism that affirms the notion of a “color blind” equality culture and fails to take into account how race factors into issues of privilege and status in everyday life (2012). Another principle of CRT is the idea of “interest convergence” or material determinism. This concept suggests that the consequences of racism benefit the majority population in America. CRT scholars believe that interest convergence prevents the larger society from forming an attack against racism (Delgado and Stefancic 2012). Finally, CRT values storytelling as a way in which people of color can communicate their stories based on their own experiences. Storytelling also serves to relate stories that the dominant culture does not often hear. Delgado and Stefancic argued that without storytelling, people suffer from empathic fallacy. They explained, “Most people in their daily lives do not come into contact with many persons of radically different race or social station. We converse with, and read materials written by, persons in our own cultures. In some sense, we are all our stock of narratives—the terms, preconceptions, scripts, and understandings that we use to make sense of the world” (2012, 33–34). Delgado and Stefancic also noted that individuals can develop empathy for people who have other cultural experiences, but that developing this empathy takes time and practice.

The use of CRT allows researchers to acknowledge that, although race is only a social construct, it is a *deeply embedded* social construct. Therefore, “race still matters” (Ladson-Billings 1998, 8) when we examine how society functions. CRT has been used as a theoretical lens by other researchers for the purpose of examining racialized images of people in children’s literature. Sandra Hughes-Hassell and Ernie Cox (2010) and Melanie D. Koss (2015) found persistent problems with inadequate representation of various racial characters and situations as well as stereotypical representations of characters who are people of color.

The significance of this theory in the research of the graphic novel format was emphasized by Terry Kawashima when she noted, the “visual reading process operates at a level below everyday awareness and is thus naturalized; it is central to the ways in which ‘race’ itself is conceptualized, perpetuated, and constantly reconfigured” (2002).

## Research Questions

Building on the research described above, we wanted to know whether stories of people of color are being told in graphic novels—both fiction and nonfiction “novels.” Our research questions were:

- How many people of color are depicted in the sample of graphic novels?
- How are people of color characterized as main character, supporting character, or background character?
- What are the races of the authors and illustrators of these graphic novels?

## Methodology

### Sample

The sample for this study consisted of a subset of the books listed in the 2015 edition of the “Great Graphic Novels for Teens” (GGNFT) booklist produced and promoted by the Young Adult Library Services Association. The books in this sample are titles that are distributed by conventional literary publishers aiming at the teen market, as well as those published by adult publishing houses or publishers of traditional comics. This list was chosen because school librarians and public librarians serving youth rely on this booklist as a tool when making selection decisions for their collections. The 2015 GGNFT booklist contained seventy-nine books (a mix of fiction and nonfiction), eighteen of which are manga.

Manga is a style of Japanese graphic novel that often adheres to certain conventions, based on variations of manga genre. Western readers of manga often understand the racial depiction of manga characters to be white, due to what Kawashima has called “reading from a socialized understanding of race [and] exaggerated features [in manga]” (2002). Olga Antononoka claimed that the character depictions in manga transcend race (2016), while Kazumi Nagaike wrote that the visual representations of manga characters reflect popular culture in Japan (2009). The character depictions in Japanese manga can prove challenging when reading to understand race and ethnicity and, due to the dearth of research about race in manga, it is a subject that deserves its own separate examination and proved to exceed the bounds of the research described in this paper. Therefore, the manga titles on the 2015 GGNFT booklist were not included in the sample for our research.

Additionally, we left out of consideration those books that contained characters that were solely portrayed as animals or characters that were depicted in such a fantastic way that race could not be determined. Examples of these were *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic, Volume 5* in which all of the characters are animals, and *Adventure Time, Volume 4*, which depicts Finn, who appears to be a white boy, along with his friend Jake, who is a dog, and other characters whose shapes and skin tones vary greatly from those of humans. With this in mind, we conducted a textual analysis only on the remaining fifty-seven books listed in Appendix A.

## Analysis Process

### Overview

Each of us individually read each of these fifty-seven books three times: once focusing only on text; once focusing only on visuals; and once focusing on text and visuals together. As we read, we took descriptive notes and then compared those notes to determine the characters' races and representations. After analyzing each book, we compared our findings and resolved the disagreements we had in our data. For example, each of us initially described the race of the title character in *Mara* differently until we met and shared our thoughts, a process through which we were able to come to an agreement.

### Identifying Race of Characters

We took a holistic approach to the data collection, looking for such textual and visual features as setting, character names, dialect, facial features, skin color, and hair texture to inform our ideas about characters' races. For example, *47 Ronin*'s setting in feudal Japan helped us to identify these characters as Japanese. Similarly, the setting of *The Undertaking of Lily Chen*, in addition to the surname Chen, aided in our classification of the book's characters as Asian. *Strange Fruit* featured people whose hair appeared short and tightly curled, similar to the hair of many people who identify as African American, plus the subtitle of the book referred to "Black History." In *X-Men: Battle of the Atom*, the characters were rendered with varying skin tones; Storm, to take one example, was depicted as having a deep brown skin color, aiding our identification of this character as African American.

We made these judgments about race holistically and as instinctively as possible because we wanted to mimic the process in which young adult readers might engage when they encounter these texts. That said, we fully acknowledge the limitations and potential pitfalls of this type of classification. Further, we both identify as white women, and fully understand that people from different backgrounds may have interpreted these textual and visual cues differently.

Ten of the books in this sample were published in black and white; however, we did not find that the binary-colored texts impacted the way in which we read them for the purposes of our research.

Anthology titles such as *Above the Dreamless Dead* and *Strange Fruit* were treated as one single unit of text.

We used the USCB's terminology to assist in our classification of the characters' races. These USCB terms include: White; Black or African American; American Indian or Alaska Native; Asian; Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander; and More than One Race (United States Census Bureau 2017). According to the USCB's definition of race, those people who are from Northern Africa and the Middle East are classified as "white." Therefore, the characters from *I Remember Beirut* and *Cleopatra in Space*, for example, were classified as "white" for our research purposes because they are Lebanese and Egyptian, respectively, although readers may or may not perceive them to appear to be white. Finally, even though the USCB considers Hispanic/Latino to be ethnicity, rather than race, we have decided to follow the lead of the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) here, including Latino as a category. Otherwise,

we felt that we would be rendering a significant number of characters that would appear to readers as people of color invisible, which would undermine the mission of this project.

### Identifying Characters' Roles

We also classified each diverse character as main, supporting, or background, to get a better sense of how significant a role that character played in the text. We classed as “main” those characters telling the story or around whom the narrative seemed to revolve. “Supporting characters” were those who had speaking roles, whether in one scene or in multiple scenes throughout the novel. Finally, characters not at the center of the narrative and without speaking roles were categorized as “background characters.”

### Identifying Race of Authors and Illustrators

To determine the race of each author and illustrator, we asked one graduate student and one undergraduate student to conduct online research separately. Using the USCB racial terminology, the students were asked to use their best judgment, based on images and textual clues, to determine the race of the authors and illustrators of this sample of graphic novels. The researchers then compared the results prepared by these students and found a high level of consistency. In the few instances in which the results diverged, we conducted our own online investigations to make a final determination.

## Findings

### Overview

We analyzed a sample of fifty-seven graphic novels for characters that appeared to be people of color and then determined their roles in these novels. Of the fifty-seven, we found that forty-three (76 percent) included characters that were people of color.

Three of the books featured casts of characters who were almost entirely comprised of Asian actors: *47 Ronin*; *Gandhi: My Life Is My Message*; and *The Undertaking of Lily Chen*.

### Main Characters

Of the 57 books, fifteen (27 percent) featured characters who were people of color in the role of main character of the story (see figure 2). These included titles such as *Buzz!*; *Ms. Marvel, Volume 1: No Normal*; and *Mara*. Main characters who were identified as Asian were featured in nine (16 percent) books; Black or African American main characters were found in seven (13 percent) books; those characters who were classified as More than One Race were featured in four (7 percent) books (see figure 1). Five of the books had more than one main character of a different race. For example, *X-Men: Battle of the Atom* featured one character that was identified as Asian and one character that was Black.



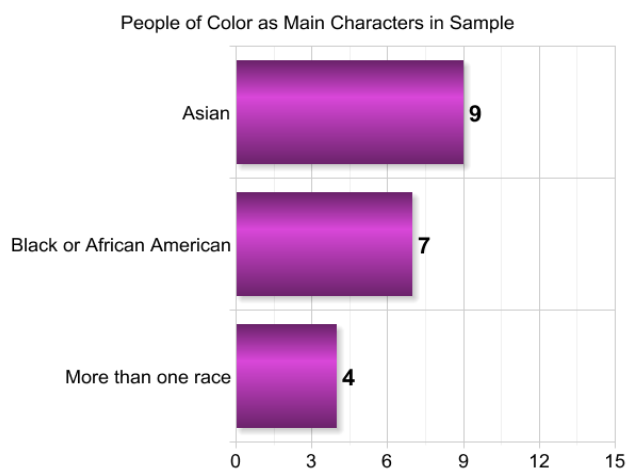


Figure 1. People of color as main characters in sample.

## Supporting Characters

A total of 36 (64 percent) books from the sample featured important supporting characters that were considered to be people of color (see figure 2). These included titles such as *In Real Life; Down. Set. Fight!;* and *Alex + Ada, Volume 1*. Of the fifteen books that portrayed the story of a main character who was a person of color, only one book *Sing No Evil* did not also feature a person of color who was an important supporting character.

## Background Characters

Thirty-nine (70 percent) of the graphic novels books included background characters that were people of color. Examples of these titles were *Andre the Giant: Life and Legend; Trillium;* and *Silver Surfer, Volume 1: New Dawn*.

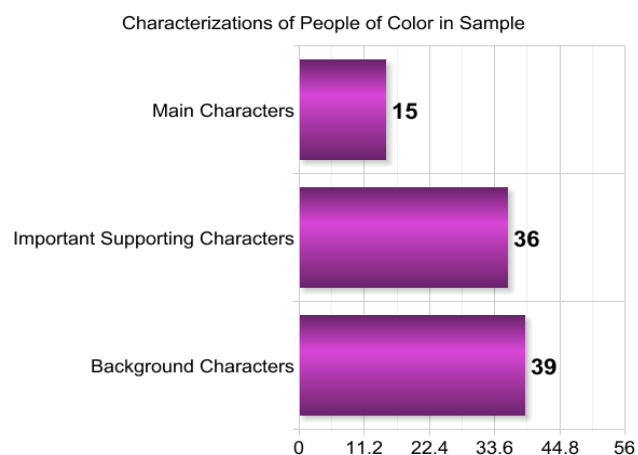


Figure 2. Roles of people of color in sample.

## Authors and Illustrators

Of the fifty-seven titles analyzed, twelve (21 percent) were identified as having either an author or illustrator of color, including eight who were identified as Asian, two as having more than one race, one as African American, and one as Latino. Every book in this subset included background characters of color; eleven of the twelve included supporting characters of color; and eight featured main characters of color. Of the titles including main characters of color, six featured at least one Asian main character. Asian characters also figured prominently in supporting and background roles, with Latino and African American characters also regularly appearing. Many of these titles showcase a diverse cast of characters, such as *Mara*, *X-Men*, and *Ms. Marvel*, while others feature a predominantly African American cast of characters, such as *Strange Fruit*, or Asian characters, such as *Gandhi* and *Shadow Hero*.

## Implications

Images have the power to make something more real, more visceral, and more representational. At a period in United States history in which the nation struggles with issues of segregation, migration, racism, and violence based on skin color and ethnicity, it is important that through multi-racial representation children see both an accurate reflection of the diverse population of this country and the potential for understanding. To that end, the purpose of this study was to understand how people of color are represented in graphic novels marketed to teens.

The findings of this research suggest that the number of characters in this sample of books who were people of color far outpaces the figures reported by the CCBC for the same year. While only 22 percent of the traditional fiction and nonfiction books (that is, books that do not tell a story or convey information by means of sequential art) received by the CCBC portrayed characters of color, 27 percent of the graphic novels from this sample featured characters who were people of color, and whose story and perspective were the focus of the stories. Additionally, the fact that the majority (64 percent) of the books portrayed an important supporting character who was a person of color suggests that characters of color play a significant role in these stories, even when theirs is not the primary story being told. The inclusion of multi-racial background characters in 70 percent of the books sampled could be viewed as a reflection of the racially diverse world in which these characters live. It is certain that young adults are seeing a diverse world and hearing the voices of people of color in many of the graphic novels they encounter, and this is welcome news indeed.

The author/illustration portion of this study yields results that are more ambiguous. Only 21 percent of this sample was produced by an artist or author of color. Of those authors/artists, 75 percent were identified as Asian. Therefore, the voices producing these texts are still overwhelmingly white, and races other than Asian are almost entirely missing. This data suggests that the experiences of these storytellers is fundamentally white, a circumstance that is far from ideal—particularly in light of the emphasis critical race theory ascribes to storytelling by people of color who are best able to share their own perspectives and experiences as people of color (Delgado and Stefancic 2012).

As Laura Hudson noted, “...bringing in a wider range of voices is simply a way of correcting a fundamental creative imbalance, one that permeates the mainly white, male world of mainstream comics” (2015). Sheryl V. Taylor (2000) and Violet J. Harris (1999) argued that people of color



are best qualified to write and evaluate books about their own racial groups because they will comprehend subtleties, nuances, and context that others may miss.

In a blog post about the expansion of the “We Need Diverse Books” movement, Kayla Whaley wrote about the #OwnVoices campaign that is advocating for more voices of people of color in both publishing and reviewing. She noted:

There’s a long history of majority-group authors (white, abled, straight, cisgender, male, etc.) writing outside their experience to tell diverse stories. Sometimes the characters and stories they create are wonderful! But many times, they’re rife with stereotypes, tropes, and harmful portrayals. Time and again, marginalized people have seen their stories taken from them, misused, and published as authentic, while marginalized authors have had to jump hurdle after hurdle to be published themselves. Many feel they must fight to receive even a fraction of the pay, promotion, and praise that outsiders get for writing diverse characters’ stories, and that’s when they’re allowed in the door at all. (Whaley n.d.)

Debbie Reese (2017) and Edith Campbell (2017) have written about the recent dramatic uptick in the number of conversations taking place about cultural appropriation in youth literature. The discussions, many started by youth services bloggers, have had significant real-world results, spurring revisions to works and publishers’ decisions to postpone or cancel the publication of problematic titles (Campbell 2017). In essence, many children’s literature scholars and authors agree that there should be more published titles authored by people of color or marginalized groups. However, this agreement does not mean that these topics or characters are off-limits to others. Rather, authors outside of the groups they choose to write about are encouraged to be diligent in their research and respectful of input and feedback. In the world of graphic novels as represented by the sample analyzed here, the number of diverse authors telling their own stories is quite low. Whether the white authors/illustrators who tell these stories have been sufficiently diligent and sensitive in their representations would make an interesting and informative follow-up to the study conducted here.

Critical race theory describes interest convergence as a way in which the dominant culture makes financial gains based on the racist actions of the larger society. For example, in writing about the larger comic industry, Gene Demby (2014) suggested that publishers and networks have an idea about who they want as an audience, based on people’s purchasing power and habits. Therefore, these expectations work to set the standard of “who gets to be a superhero” in comics: mostly white males. Many white authors write about people of color. While not an inherently negative thing, white authors’ writing about people of color—rather than people of color writing about themselves—has historically been a pattern in the publishing world. This circumstance suits the interests of members of the white middle class profiting from telling stories from perspectives that don’t arise from the storytellers’ own experiences. The extent to which this practice is a result of the commodification of co-opted racial and ethnic experiences needs further researching.

The implications of these findings for school librarians relate primarily to issues of fostering readers’ engagement and developing library collections. If educators want to help students make connections with what they read, then students need to see themselves and others reflected in that literature. Additionally, many school librarians who have identified the importance of offering materials that reflect a multi-racial society struggle to find such materials. As it is with non-graphic materials, smaller publishing houses or imprints frequently offer more titles by and about

people of color than do larger publishing companies. Fortunately, reviewers and scholars are making these titles easier to identify. Finally, Sandra Hughes-Hassell, Heather A. Barkley, and Elizabeth Koehler have suggested that part of the leadership role for school librarians should include the promotion of social justice (2009). Intentionally including and promoting materials in school libraries that are produced by and feature people of color is an important first step in developing conversations about race in the United States.

## Limitations and Further Study

As Wendy M. Smith-D'Arezzo and Margaret Musgrove (2011) note, our identities and experiences can greatly influence the ways in which we read and understand texts that feature characters who are similar to and different from us. Thus, we wish to acknowledge that our classification of the race of the characters in this sample of books likely reveals as much about us as it does about the titles we examined. We bring our identities as adult white middle-class women, as well as our individual histories, with us to the interpretation of visual cues. With this in mind, it would be interesting to ask a diverse group of teens to analyze these texts and compare their results to ours.

The findings of this research make it clear that in this sample the representation of characters who are people of color is slightly higher than the representation found when researchers analyzed data from the CCBC about books that were not graphic novels and graphic nonfiction. While this is a heartening discovery, we wonder to what extent diversity impacted the Great Graphic Novel for Teens' (GGNFT) committee's selection process. In other words, did we find more diverse characters because the committee who crafted this list valued and prioritized diversity? Or is it the case that higher-quality titles, generally speaking, naturally feature a racially diverse cast of characters? Would we find a higher percentage of characters who were people of color in all of the graphic novels published in the same year as our sample, 2014? Are these high statistics a trend we would find throughout the yearly selection choices of the GGNFT committee?

## Conclusion

While studies like the one presented in this paper are uncomfortable, complicated, and difficult, we felt that doing this work was imperative. As described by critical race theory, the kind of liberalism that advances the idea of "colorblindness" when it comes to approaching race in the United States does little to counter the effects of systemic racism. Many children are taught both in school and out of school that they shouldn't take into account another person's skin color and that they should strive for "colorblindness." However, to do so is to ignore social and historical context and to deny the ways in which race plays a very real role in the lives of all people. In short, it is important to acknowledge that race exists and to explore the implications of race in the lives of Americans.

In a 2016 interview about his reimagining of the comic *Black Panther*, author Ta-Nehisi Coates noted, "Diversity is important not for soft, touchy-feely reasons—not to reassure people. I think a) you have an imperative to really interrogate what our imagination actually is, and b) you have an imperative to depict the world as it is with some fealty and some loyalty."

Recent developments in the publishing world suggest that decision makers in that industry are paying attention to such messages. *Kirkus*, the long-standing review source for children's and young adult books, has recently launched *Kirkus Collections*, a compilation of booklists that feature reviews of quality titles about diverse characters by reviewers who are either trained to "identify problematic tropes and representations" or "who culturally identify with the characters featured in the story" (Kirkus Media 2017). The aim of *Kirkus Collections* is to make selection of quality diverse books much easier for librarians. Another resource intends to directly reach an extended audience of children, parents, educators, and librarians: the app *OurStory*. This app was created under the direction of the We Need Diverse Books organization, which describes the app as "a book discovery tool that celebrates diversity and strives to include a wide array of titles with diverse content and by creators from marginalized communities" (We Need Diverse Books 2017). The development of these selection tools suggest that our children and young adults need more options when it comes to engaging with literature about racially diverse people and that librarians need help determining how to fill that gap.

Graphic novels have the potential to show a variety of human experiences in a way that is unlike other literary forms, a situation that makes this kind of investigation imperative. This study suggests that the creative and publishing forces behind the graphic novel explosion in the youth literature market understand the need to tell diverse stories and to represent accurately our multicultural world. More voices from outside the mainstream are definitely still needed, but perhaps seeing themselves visually represented in graphic novels will encourage today's diverse readership to become tomorrow's authors and artists, leading to an era of ever-more-varied, rich, and authentic offerings.

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