

Rhymes & Reasons

A Newsletter of the Mississippi State University
Department of English

Vol. 2 No. 5

January 2014

Spotlight on Our Faculty

by Rich Raymond, Department Head, and Kayleigh Swisher, MA student

In the fall semester of 2013, we welcomed **Stacy Kastner** to our faculty. A native of western New York, Dr. Kastner earned her PhD in rhetoric and composition at Bowling Green State University. Before pursuing doctoral studies, Dr. Kastner earned her BA and MA degrees at St. Bonaventure University, where she also served as a visiting assistant professor, teaching composition, critical thinking, and American literature.

Dr. Kastner's research explores writerly identities as they intersect with technology, feminist thinking, and world literatures. In her first year at MSU, Dr. Kastner has taught Writing Center Tutor Training, Composition Pedagogy, and first-year writing; she has also shared her expertise with students at our Writing Center.



Stacy Kastner

In addition to welcoming Dr. Kastner, we would like to celebrate major achievements of two of our faculty, **Dr. Lara Dodds** and **Dr. Holly Johnson**. You'll find their scholarly bios below, courtesy of MA student **Kayleigh Swisher**.

Last semester, Dr. Dodds celebrated the publication of her first book, *The Literary Invention of Margaret Cavendish*. Dodds is a 2004 graduate of Brown University, where she specialized in seventeenth century literature. Her primary interests include the works of John Milton and early modern women's writing. Her new book describes the influence of Milton, Shakespeare, Donne, and Jonson on Margaret Cavendish's extensive body of work, seeking to identify not only what Cavendish read, but also how she read it. "I kept finding references in Cavendish's writing to other writers but realized that none of the published scholarship accounted for her debts to her predecessors very well at all," explained Dodds. "In order to authorize herself as a writer, Cavendish liked to say that she wasn't influenced by anyone, and it seemed that most scholars had taken her at her word." Dodds continued, "I wrote this book in order to figure out both which books she had read and also why she would make this claim that is obviously untrue."

Dodds explains that she initially developed an interest in seventeenth century literature, as this era was one of great philosophical and political change, and her research explores the way that writers in this time are negotiating new political and scientific ideas.

Her book is the work of years of study, and as Dodds explains, the research is often tedious. For this project, the biggest challenge was identifying creative ways to find answers to her questions about seventeenth century reading practices.

“To write this book, I wanted to know about how Cavendish’s reading practices resembled and differed from those of other men and women in the seventeenth century,” said Dodds. “As I discuss in my first chapter, the history of reading produces significant methodological problems because reading doesn’t always—actually rarely—leaves any evidence.”

Dodds hopes her new publication will provide a model for new research into women’s literary history, fitting these female writers into a literary tradition more broadly rather than merely researching their lives. Recently,



Lara Dodds

Dodds has begun a new project which she has tentatively titled “Inscrutable Motions: the Passions and Women’s Literary History, 1600-1750,” in which she will examine how women writers of this period, including Cavendish and others, used negative emotions such as envy, anger, and hatred as a means of literary invention. Currently, she is working on the first chapter of this project, which she plans to present at conferences during the spring.

Dr. Holly Johnson also recently published a new book, *The Grammar of Good Friday: Macaronic Sermons of Late Medieval England*. Johnson is a 2001 graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where she specialized in medieval English literature. Her interests primarily include religious aspects of medieval literature, and her current publication examines the rich imagery of these sermons which aimed to draw their audiences into a meditative experience of the events of Good Friday, a day when Christ’s suffering and death were ritually reenacted.

“The sermons use many rhetorical and literary strategies to elicit compassion and empathy both for Christ and the Virgin Mary,

and most of them retell the events of the passion in vivid detail,” explained Johnson.

A large part of Johnson’s research involves translating Middle English texts, and she admits that transcribing is often the most difficult aspect of the work. Particularly with her latest book, Johnson looked at both Latin and Middle English and explains that the process can be very slow, especially at first. “Medieval scribes abbreviate heavily, and you have to learn a whole system of signs and abbreviations. There are also some words that you can never decipher, perhaps because the manuscript was damaged or smudged,” said Johnson. “I enjoy the sort of puzzles that working with medieval manuscripts offers, but it can be very difficult.”

Johnson hopes that her work will add not only to our knowledge of sermons but also of medieval devotion and the religious culture of the period, shedding light on rhetorical strategies of the sermons and on the connections between the written texts of the sermons and the liturgy in which they were preached. Supplying translations also helps make these works more accessible to current scholars and students of the medieval period.

Currently, Johnson has begun a new project focusing on the sermons of Robert Rypon, a Benedictine monk who lived in Durham England at the turn of the fifteenth century. She is under contract with Peeters Publishers to produce two volumes of a large selection of Rypon’s sermons with facing-page translations that will be part of the Dallas Medieval Texts and Translations series. She has one article set to appear in *Medieval Studies* and hopes to compile several more articles on Rypon’s sermons along with a monograph.



Holly Johnson

Kayleigh Swisher, MA student

Faculty Publications and Awards

In addition to Lara Dodds's and Holly Johnson's books noted in the previous section, our faculty contributed significantly to the scholarship in their respective fields; many received awards for their work. Selected examples follow:

Tommy Anderson published two essays on Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, one in the Ashgate book *Staging the Blazon in Early Modern Theater*, the other in the journal *College Literature*. He also received the Lindsay Young Visiting Faculty Fellowship from the Marco Institute for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, University of Tennessee.

Ted Atkinson's piece titled "Defying the Cultural Logic of Southern Exceptionalism in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Song of Solomon*" appeared in a collection of essays on *Faulkner and Morrison*.

Shalyn Claggett's essay "The Human Problem" will soon appear in The Ohio State University publication *Feminist/Queer Narrative Theory*.

Amika Press published **Pat Creevy's** novel, *Ryan's Woods*.

Peter DeGabriele's essay on "The Legal Fiction and Epistolary Form: Fanny Burney's *Evelina*" will soon appear in *The Journal of Early Modern Cultural Studies*.

Lara Dodds received the Dean's Eminent Scholar Award.

Lyn Fogle published "Family Language Policy in Transitional Families" in *Issues in Applied Linguistics* and "Parental Ethnotheories and Family Language Policy in Transitional Adoptive Families" in *Language Policy*. Additionally, she has another article and two book chapters in press.

Becky Hagenston published three short stories: "Scavengers" in *Indiana Review*, "Bay of Angels" in *Hayden's Ferry Review*, and "The Upside-Down World" in *Subtropics*.

Shirley Hanshaw's essay on "Sweden as Symbolic North in African American Narratives of the Vietnam

Wars" appeared in *Proceedings* published through Lund University, Sweden.

Nancy Hargrove published another article on T. S. Eliot in the *South Atlantic Review*.

Wendy Herd's article on "Perceptual and Production Training" will soon appear in the *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*.

Holly Johnson received the Arts & Sciences Award for Excellence in Humanities Research.

Richard Lyons published four poems in *The Gettysburg Review*; he also placed "Deep Pools of Rain" and "In the Vicinity of Bird Feeders" in *Diode*.

Mike Kardos published two short stories and *The Art and Craft of Fiction: A Writer's Guide*. He was also named Humanities Researcher for December.

The *Journal of Narrative Theory* published **Kelly Marsh's** essay titled "Empathy, Authority, and the Narrative Ethics of Truman Capote's 'La Cote Basque, 1965.'"

Lecturer **Peter Olson** completed his PhD at the University of Memphis; his dissertation focuses on *American Romanticism and the Politics of Negative Originality: The Dark Passages of Emerson, Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville*.

In addition to publishing her poetry in key journals, such as *Crazy Horse* and *Ploughshares*, **Katie Pierce** received the Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters Award for her collection title *The Girls of Peculiar*. She also received the A&S Award for Excellence in Humanities Teaching.

Rich Raymond published *Writing Visions of Hope: Teaching Twentieth-Century American Literature and Research*.

Don Shaffer's article, "'Harlem is Nowhere': Blues Spaces in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*," won the Yvonne Ochillo Memorial Award from the journal *Griot*.

Robert West placed his essay on "Teaching the Evolving Art of Robert Morgan's Poetry" in *Appalachia in the Classroom*; he also co-edited a collection of short poems titled *Succinct*.

Students and Alumni

Brad Campbell, MA 2008, has accepted appointment to the board of the Southeastern Writing Center Association. He has also taken a position as the Director of the Writing Center at Ole Miss. Assisted by **Daniel White**, MA 2008, Brad also helped East Mississippi Community College to begin a writing center.

Melissa McCool, MA 2003, has been named department chair at the Raymond campus of Hinds Community College.

Laura Varnor, MA 2008, pursues her PhD at Arizona State University.

The following recent and current MA students presented papers at the Mississippi Philological Association: **Whitney Acton, Megan Crutchfield, Rachel Mordecki, Charlyn Watson, Kirk Cochran, Seth Dawson, Taylor Garner, and Corey Lockhart.**

Leslie Joblin, BA 2012, has begun PhD studies at Penn State University.

Craig-Ellis Sasser, MA 2008, was named Humanities Teacher of the Year at Northeast Mississippi Community College.

Janelle McConnell, MA 2012, has received a full-funding scholarship to pursue her MFA at Boston University.

Jessica Temple, MA 2012, attends the PhD program in creative writing at Georgia State University.

Lisa McMurtray, MA 2012, attends the MFA program at Florida State University.

Anna Bedsole, MA 2012, teaches English at Tuscaloosa Academy.

Christie Collins, MA 2011, pursues her PhD in creative writing at the University of Louisiana-Lafayette.

Caroline Baker, MA 2013, received second place for her thesis presentation at the Graduate Research Symposium. She also received the Masters Graduate Teaching Assistant Award.

Natalie Nations, MA 2013, received the Master's Thesis Award in the Humanities from the Conference of Southern Graduate Schools.

Hannah Rinehart received the Brasher-Dazey Award for her paper titled "Language and Loathing: Words as Postcolonial Weapons in *The Tempest*."

Rebeckah Boden and **Nichole Harlan**, BAs 2012, were admitted to MSU's Society of Scholars.

Nick White, MA 2010, has finished his MFA at Ohio State and has begun the PhD program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

James Redd, MA 2009, completed his PhD at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and currently teaches as a lecturer at MSU.

Leslie Adams, MA 2008, completed her MFA at Southern Illinois University.

Field Brown and **Molly Beckwith** won first and third prizes respectively in the Humanities division of MSU's Undergraduate Research Symposium.

MA student **Rachel Mordecki** received a fellowship to study last summer at the Martha's Vineyard Institute for Creative Writing.



front row, left to right: Loree Long, Laura Puri, Tom Lammert; back row, left to right: Matt Morgan, Robin Walden, Nick Mears, Wilson Knight, Sava Kolev, Jermaine Thompson

In Their Own Words: On Being an English Major at MSU—and a Rhodes Scholar

Dr. Thomas Anderson's sixth installment in a series of profiles of our English majors

Donald Mayfield ("Field") Brown is the Department of English's first Rhodes Scholar and the first at Mississippi State University in over 100 years. After graduating in the spring of 2014, Field will attend Oxford University, where he will continue his research on race and American literature and culture. Field has received prestigious research scholarships to attend the University of Iowa and Stanford University, and he spent a summer in the Shackouls Honors College Oxford Study Abroad Program. I asked Field to share with us how his experience in English prepared him for the Rhodes Scholarship.

The Department of English gave me confidence from the first day I got on campus. Professors were always willing to spend time with me, letting me work out my ideas about literature and race. I was encouraged to pursue those ideas, and the Department gave me both intellectual and financial support to develop my ideas into a coherent project. Whether I was brainstorming ideas for an essay, studying for the GRE, preparing a CV, or writing a statement of purpose, I could always meet with a professor. My academic advisors always seemed to be able to visualize a future for me in ways that I simply could not. That is to say, I might have wanted to become a Rhodes Scholar, but it was only a vague idea in my mind. The Department of English gave me concrete plans for how to



Donald "Field" Brown

get there, such as going to important conferences, presenting papers, doing research during the summer, and studying abroad.

After the Rhodes experience at Oxford, I hope to complete my PhD in English literature. My specialty will be African-American literature. As of now, I am trying to understand which African-American authors get canonized and which ones do not. The development of the American literary canon has so many complex political and economic threads to it. I hope to write my dissertation on the way black authors relate to the canon of literature that we read everyday in class. My degree in English from MSU has prepared me to be—and I say this with full confidence—one of the best literary critics in the world if I continue to build on the foundation the department has given me. It is precisely this foundation that instilled in me the confidence to apply for the Rhodes Scholarship and pursue a degree from arguably the most prestigious university in the English-speaking world, the University of Oxford.

But the journey began rather inauspiciously. I can remember meeting with Dr. Anderson near the end of my sophomore year. I was applying for a summer research program, and we were relaying information back and forth through email. Dr. Anderson was attaching his comments to the email, but I wasn't reading his notes because I didn't know how to access the attached notes. I had only been reading his brief comments in the general email, but not the detailed notes in the margin of the electronic document. I really wanted to get accepted into the summer research program, and I was confident that I was prepared, with good grades, a solid personal statement and good letters of support. When I discovered that I wasn't even reading the attached emails properly, I knew that I still had a lot to learn about how to professionalize myself. However, Dr. Anderson and I worked on my research materials in person, and I began to make sure to always read attachments! I suppose the point is that even when I made youthful mistakes that no college student should make, I wasn't discouraged. The English faculty instead nourished my growth and supported my work based upon where I was at unique points in my development. That is special, and I believe that it allowed me to compete for the Rhodes.

William Butler Yeats once said, "It takes more courage to examine the dark corners of your soul than it does for a soldier to fight on the battlefield." For me, the English major fosters that type of courage, and I am a better scholar for it. Reading books that span human history and that tell stories from the perspective of different people across the globe allows us to deal with the deep issues of human nature in serious ways that many people never dare to do. I look forward to discovering more about those deep issues in my studies at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar.

Portrait of a Rhodes Scholar as a Young Man:

An Excerpt from Field Brown's Rhodes Personal Statement

I was born and raised in the poorest state in America and the state that historically is considered by many the most racially prejudiced: Mississippi. Richard Wright's autobiography about growing up in a small town in Mississippi, *Black Boy*, is intimately familiar to me. I had heard versions of Wright's story countless times from family and friends before I read the book. One of those storytellers was my grandfather. A long-time preacher and father of thirteen children, he epitomizes the dreams and experiences found in Wright's novel. I remain in awe of his leadership to fifty blacks in the small town of Vicksburg during Jim Crow America. His life's accomplishments will eclipse anything that I might ever do. However, the legacy my grandfather created during Jim Crow America inspires me to expand his influence through my formal education.

While describing modern African-American community, Ralph Ellison writes, "the grandchildren of those who possessed no written literature examine their lives through the eyes of Freud and Marx." Last summer I left Mississippi to study for the Trinity term at Christ Church College, Oxford. As I bid my grandfather farewell, I went from listening to his childhood stories about picking cotton to sitting in lectures at Oxford's Rothermere American Institute discussing Rousseau. After studying Postcolonial literature at Oxford I spent the rest of my summer on fellowship at Stanford University. After presenting research on the New York Intellectuals there, I returned

home to see my grandfather under his old wooden gazebo to tell him about my summer. Under that gazebo, the big words fail to impress my audience. It only matters that I impact change for everyday people. This precise mixture of formal education and informal experience gives me a different perspective on my research than many others who pursue a graduate degree at one of the world's most prestigious institutions. I am determined to have my research in African-American postwar literature matter for people like the ones in my grandfather's congregation [...]

Focusing on Ralph Ellison's perceived commitment to American individualism, critics often miss an opportunity to explore a larger point related to the impact of Ellison's privileged position in the literary canon. Analyzing Ellison without considering broader connections to the literary forces of the period is a critical mistake. The more pressing question that informs my research involves the nature of the literary developments that enabled Ellison's ascension to fame. By what terms do marginalized minorities become visible in the Western world, and is it worth the compromise? Ellison's ascension is a product of the rise of New Criticism and the emergence of American Cold War politics.

Ellison's legacy emphasizes a bourgeois aesthetic over and against his lineage as a black Marxist. His perceived aesthetic posture was most likely a political move to distance himself from controversial black politics during the Cold War. In return, the literary establishment celebrated his novel's embodiment of the new liberal left's cultural criticism. These critics sought

to convince the American public that the proletarian novels of the Great Depression and early 40s were not artistic works. They were seen, instead, as overtly political and thus not sufficiently complex like important modernist novels. With Ellison as a primary point of departure, my project will explore how politically radical novelists during high modernism have been forced to mute their political ideas in order to become visible and artistically respected. The universal-particular and modernist-proletarian dichotomies exclude proletarian fiction, yet that fiction offers a robust aesthetic informed by viable political options.

I'll never forget the day that I realized art's power. Not yet a teenager, I walked into my parents' room and saw my stoic father crying as *To Kill a Mockingbird* sat on his lap. He said four simple words: "They just killed Tom." After realizing literature's transformative effect, I knew I wanted to research and teach literature. Having already studied at Oxford, I realize that returning there is a logical extension of my two summer research projects at the University of Iowa and Stanford. At these two institutions, I was exposed to intellectuals, but at Oxford I was exposed to an intellectual community. As a college-bound student I chose to remain in my home state's land grant university, to stay close to my grandfather's legacy. By studying English, graduating from the Honors College and pursuing an advanced degree at Oxford, I hope to extend that legacy by making the world of my grandfather's gazebo not so far removed from the university.

English Majors Across the Globe: Kelsey Norris in Africa

Since graduating in 2011, Kelsey Norris has worked as a Peace Corps volunteer in Namibia, Africa. As you will see from her narrative of her experience, she is changing lives everyday with her teaching and mentoring. She has applied for a Fulbright Scholarship to continue this type of work in Brazil in 2014.

“Good morning, class. You may sit down.”

Twenty-seven children in 27 blue shirts shuffle and shove their way into hard wooden seats, their heads bobbing up and down in their struggle to locate pencils or pens, their exercise books, and finally the warm-up activity on my makeshift whiteboard (the backside of a scavenged beer advertisement poster). One head is missing.

“Where is Uatjiua (pronounced *Wash-she-wa*)?” I ask the class, just as the student in question skids into the classroom carrying one cracked and torn leather shoe in hand and no schoolbooks.

“Miss, excuse me for coming late,” he pants, putting the shoe on. “I was having to bring the goats on.”

I smile. “You mean, you *had* to bring the goats *in*?” He nods, not knowing that, wayward goats aside, he’s provided me with a fitting introduction for prepositions, our topic for the day. I have him repeat the corrected sentence before sitting down to begin his work with the others.

In a sparsely populated village in the most sparsely populated region of the third most sparsely populated country in the world, I am trying to communicate the lushness of



Kelsey Norris

If my students, or learners as they’re called here, are hungry, I fill them up with adjectives and verb tenses and the past participle in hopes that it will satisfy. If their realities at home are tiring or bleak, I give them a library book whose fantasy is more adventurous. The classroom, which also functions as the school library, is often stifling and the learners sigh and shift to shake off the weight and strength of Namibian sunshine. But an oasis is supposed to be a little warm anyway, right?

Namibia, the country where I am serving as a Peace Corps volunteer, is hot. Winter lasts 3 miserable months of the year, but temperatures can reach up to 90°F even then. The sun just doesn’t quit. During the school week, I teach 25 periods of English, Library Science, and Arts to learners in grades 5-10. In the afternoons, I open the library and lead a few extra-curricular activities. On any given day, we might play a few rounds of chess or do pregnancy relay races with sand-filled shopping bags as bellies to demonstrate the physical difficulties of teenage pregnancy.

And all the while, we sweat. But this is how I’d have it; I’ve always been attracted to warm cultures, where food brings a

crowd, the women are thick, and music is always accompanied by dance. Spain, India, Africa, Latin America. The allure of these places has always drawn me in, the thick scents and the landscape chiseled by the hot sun. And Brazil. The burgeoning country where, despite social and political unease, the nasal singsong of the language rolls through the balmy air to communicate pride in the nation. Where the Amazon Rainforest calls out in its wild voice while the central *favelas* holler back. I want to learn Portuguese, to participate in such historical moments as a growing nation's hosting of the World Cup and Olympics with the whole world watching. I want to experience the culture, place, and people while also offering what I can as an English teacher.

Our Contributions to MSU's Quality Enhancement Plan

by Rich Raymond, Department Head

In 2012 our **Lara Dodds** served on the *ad hoc* committee charged with selecting a topic for MSU's Quality Enhancement Plan, an initiative required for the university's reaccreditation through the Southeastern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). The committee invited professors from across the university to suggest topics, but Dr. Dodds's white paper on "writing across the curriculum" persuaded the committee to select writing as MSU's QEP project, one intended not only to improve student writing but also to improve student learning through writing-centered teaching strategies.

The backbone of a country's development is education, as it builds the capacity of the next generation to lead and grow, and this grant would allow me to help facilitate such growth as well as to continue my own global education. My course of study at Mississippi State University instilled within me a love of language, communication, and all of the cultural elements that follow it, and through my Peace Corps service, I strive to inspire that love—or at least comfort—in my students and colleagues as well. Being selected as a Fulbright Scholar in Brazil, then, would allow me to continue my passion—to teach, assist, and watch as both my students and the nation come into its own.

Having chosen writing as our QEP project, members of the QEP Development Committee—a large committee that included members from across MSU's colleges and programs—realized immediately that we would have to provide training for faculty to prepare them to use writing-to-learn strategies in their content courses. Therefore, the Development Committee, which included English faculty members **Ann Spurlock, Sarah Sneed, Matt Little, and Rich Raymond**—began designing a summer institute that would address this need.

Dubbed the "Maroon Institute for Writing Excellence" (MIWE), this faculty development program, directed by Rich Raymond, began on June 6 and ended on June 27, with a Monday-through-Thursday schedule running from 1:00 to 3:30. This 13-day schedule and 2.5-hour class period allowed faculty participants sufficient time

to learn interactively and to work toward the main objective: a **revised syllabus** complemented by a **reflective essay** that would provide theoretical justification for the writing-to-learn strategies that would drive the students' learning of content. By the end of MIWE on June 27, each of the nine participants—representing programs in forestry, marketing, music, veterinary science, library science, and agriculture as well as English—had written rough drafts of these two documents; by August 5, each participant, including English faculty **LaToya Bogard, Don Shaffer, and Matt Little**—had written final versions of their syllabi and reflective essays so that they would be ready to teach new writing-centered courses in the fall or spring semesters.

I'll close with an excerpt from **LaToya Bogard's reflective essay** on her revised version of EN 2203, Introduction to Literature. Notice the energy in her voice as she speaks of the deepened learning that will grow from multi-drafting:

In addition to freewriting, I plan to use the process method with the three papers I assign. In the past, students simply submitted one draft of a paper for grading. If they wanted feedback, they chose to come to me or visit the Writing Center; it was not required. However, I was only concerned with the product the students presented and not the process. After reading some papers, I knew that many had just begun writing their papers the night before the due date. However, writing is not something that can be completed "overnight, for writing is a demanding, intellectual process" (Murray 3). I know this, and on some level, students know this; however, if they are not required to do it, most will not.

To address this issue in the fall semester, I have revised my course to allow for a prewriting day, a drafting workshop day, and submission of the final draft. One problem that I noticed with my current pedagogy when reading Murray's essay "Teach

Writing as a Process Not Product" is that I need to shut up (5). Those days that I would bore students out of their minds by giving a "mini lecture" on writing were not productive because "you don't learn a process by talking about it, but by doing it" (Murray 5). On prewriting days, the students will have reviewed the paper guidelines via MyCourses. I will post broad topics for them to think about but will encourage students to draw on their journaling and freewriting in order to limit their topics to specific issues they deem relevant. Because we as teachers oftentimes "assign" writing prompts/topics students are not interested in, I hope the prewriting will "tap subjects, purposes, and audiences familiar to students" which might make their writing "quite powerful" (Lindemann, "Cognition" 94). By the end of prewriting, they should have narrowed the focus of their topic to a specific issue that can be discussed in 3-5 pages.

All professors trained in MIWE (which will run each of the next five summers), and ultimately the QEP program itself, will have to gather data to show that these strategies have deepened learning and improved writing, and our **Ann Spurlock, co-director of the QEP**, will lead this assessment effort. But surely LaToya's narrative of pedagogical revision and those written by her peers from across the curriculum should count as evidence that we have begun to grow a culture of "knowledgeable peers" (Bruffee), all determined to teach their students to use writing to learn.



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