5.1 Fat body as resistance in visual arts: Elisa Queiroz's fat activism

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Abstract

This article analyzes the development of fat activism in Brazil considering Elisa Queiroz's artworks. The artist developed dialogs related to visual arts and her body, reflecting on prejudices still strongly present in Brazil and offering a rethinking and re-envisioning of the fat body. Queiroz uses the body as provocation, as a struggle against the imposition of hegemonic discourses, making a point to stand out as 'marginal', rather than striving for normativity. Considering works that address the fat body in European and North American scenarios, I seek to understand the development of fat activism in Latin American territories, recognizing the scarcity of studies focused on the subject. The results indicate the possibility of recognizing a record of fat activism in visual arts in Brazil, allowing the subversion of corporeal standards and making room for emergent discussions about gender, culture, and identities.

Keywords: art, body, gender, fat activism, queer.

1. Introduction

Unlike the United States and some European countries where the terrain of fat activism has been quite consistent for some decades, in Latin America and especially in Brazil, the movement is still forming. Nevertheless, at the end of the twentieth century in the field of visual arts, signs of these actions were already apparent in the works of Elisa Queiroz. The artist produced artworks that reckon with the power to represent the fat body[2] in contemporaneity, which challenges norms arising from artistic and aesthetic standards, from medical, scientific, and psychological points of view, fashion rules inscribed by thin-centric culture, and gender inequality.

The key point of this discussion is to present evidence of fat activism in Brazil through visual arts and create a record of its emergence in this national territory. Queiroz reveals the power of the margin in the disruption of hegemony. Her body, excluded and considered anomalous by the hegemonic discourse, function politically because it appears with a sense of provocation aimed at empowerment. We will see below how the artist offers the possibility of examining these counter-hegemonic issues from the point of view of fat activism.

Queiroz started her work in the 1980s as a result of the oppression of being fat in a context that considered her desexual, ugly, and unhealthy. In addition, her artworks are based on self-representation. This reinforces the possibility of intersections of identities or subjectivities and allows the construction of narratives and meanings, thinking within the scope of collective experiences, contributing to a socio-historical understanding of the perception of fatness.

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2. It should be noted that when we refer to 'the body' we are dealing with something that is both social and biological, as suggested by sociologist and anthropologist Marcel Mauss (2003). 'The fat body' is employed to indicate the presence of adipositivity (Cooper, 2016).

We can also consider Queiroz artistic practices as a relevant element of identity politics as promoted by Homi Bhabha (1998). This theorist, concerned with the subject under colonialism, helps us understand Western discourse to be founded on binary oppositions. By proposing thinking under the instance of "in-between", Bhabha (1998: 20) offers the possibility to challenge the legitimacy of those dualistic constructions in a way similar to queer theory. As David Cross (2006) indicates, Bhabha's notion of the in-between destabilizes binary constructions such as normal/abject and beauty/ugliness. These ideas of the benefits of liminality can be applied to the visual representation of the fat body in Queiroz's artworks.

Queer theory developed at the end of the twentieth century out of political, economic, and social relations. Annamarie Jagose (1996) states that the term has broad elasticity; Guacira Louro (2004) complements this view:

> **Queer is a way of thinking and being that does not aspire to the center or want it as a reference; a way of thinking and being that challenges the regulatory norms of society, that assumes the comfort of ambiguity, of 'between places', of the undecidable. Queer is a foreign body, which bothers, disturbs, causes, and fascinates**
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> **(Louro 2004, pp. 7-8, translated by the author)**

Depending on the context, 'queer' can be a slur to mean 'maladjustment'; a sentiment shared throughout most of the twentieth century in Western psychiatry. However, in the last few decades, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other sexual and gender minority (LGBTQ+) communities have typically used the term positively. Jagose (1996) emphasizes that queer is much more a category in constant construction – and mutation – than something solid and static.

Héctor Ruvalcaba (2017) indicates that queer theory has its origins in the so-called Global North, but that in Latin America, "queer thought and representations have gone and still go through multiple processes of resistance that end up constituting alternative identities and undertaking a politics of recognition, of liberation, and of the establishment of rights" (Ruvalcaba, 2017, p. 3). This notion makes possible thinking about resistance by connecting points related to queer theory to postcolonial considerations, especially because the Brazilian artworks we analyze deconstruct North American and Eurocentric genealogies.

The importance of analyzing Queiroz's artistic projects from a queer perspective lies in her non-compliance with normative discourses and her appropriation of elements considered anti-aesthetic to oppose the cultural system. Additionally, with a focus on the queer, Latin America has benefited from new possibilities for aesthetic expression and social participation as suggested through the artworks discussed herein.

2. Historical contexts of bodies and fatness in Brazil

Denise Sant'anna (2016) indicates that the history of the fat body is configured as ambivalent and non-linear. In Brazil at the beginning of the twentieth century, the age of modernization, there was on the one hand, the association of fat to wealth and, on the other, the condemnation of bodily excesses due to the influence of American/European trends related to the idea of thin athleticism and glamour.

With regard to the Brazilian woman's body, one notices the intense construction of new demands on her

silhouette from the 1920s onwards. From 1920 to 1940, the country was going through significant social, cultural, and economic changes due to the Revolution of 1930 and the crisis of the First Republic. This was also the period in which discourses emerged related to the desirable body and sports practices that contributed to the idea of body care as something linked to health, beauty, and productivity. In this context, if we go by the visual culture's bias towards thinness and its proclivity for the commercialization of women's bodies, it is possible to notice the propagation of fashion products that valued lean bodies and that revealed previously unseen body parts. Hollywood actresses were frequently used as a reference in Brazilian fashion magazines, showing their bodies and make-up, and sharing diets, exercises, and "beauty secrets." Body anxiety increased and the thin silhouette became representative of glamour. A slim and athletic body was seen as synonymous with elegance and refinement (Goellner, 2003).

This discourse spread during the remainder of the twentieth century through fashion, medicine, and the mass media. It is important to highlight that, although the Brazilian territory is vast and has regional peculiarities, what spread as hegemony was a thin waist and fat 'in the right places' (i.e., breasts and buttocks), especially from the 1950s to the 1960s when the 'hourglass' figure became popular. This was strongly dictated by the male gaze reflected through lyrics and poems, as suggested by Sant'anna (2014) in her study of the history of beauty in Brazil.

If we direct the analysis to the end of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first, a period corresponding to Elisa Queiroz's emergence as an artist, we observe the reinforcement of appearance ideals based on lean and athletic bodies. This can be seen as related to the influence of fitness magazines that propagated the 'feminization' of weight training and to advertisements of athletic brands such as Topper, Adidas, and Rainha (Sant'anna, 2014).

Research by Naumi Vasconcelos, Iana Sudo, and Nara Sudo (2004) reinforces these premises by seeking to understand the construction of social representations and senses about the fat body through articles published by Brazilian newspapers and weekly magazines from 1995 to 2003. According to the authors, the printed media, as a channel of information and reproduction of a discursive, and therefore ideological, practice socializes the 'facts' and norms about body aesthetics. In addition, it acts as an organizing agent of social space, occupying, therefore, a central role for the consolidation of these bodily representations that then assume a collective normalizing character in the constitution of a national bodily identity and subjectivity.

Gradually, as Sant'anna (2014) indicates, the fat body became a pathology in the Brazilian scenario, becoming commonly associated with laziness and carelessness. Prejudices spread and fatness became a public concern that captured the attention of people in the street, causing curiosity and discomfort; feelings that led Elisa Queiroz to occupy the public sphere in her artworks, resisting discrimination about her bodily forms.

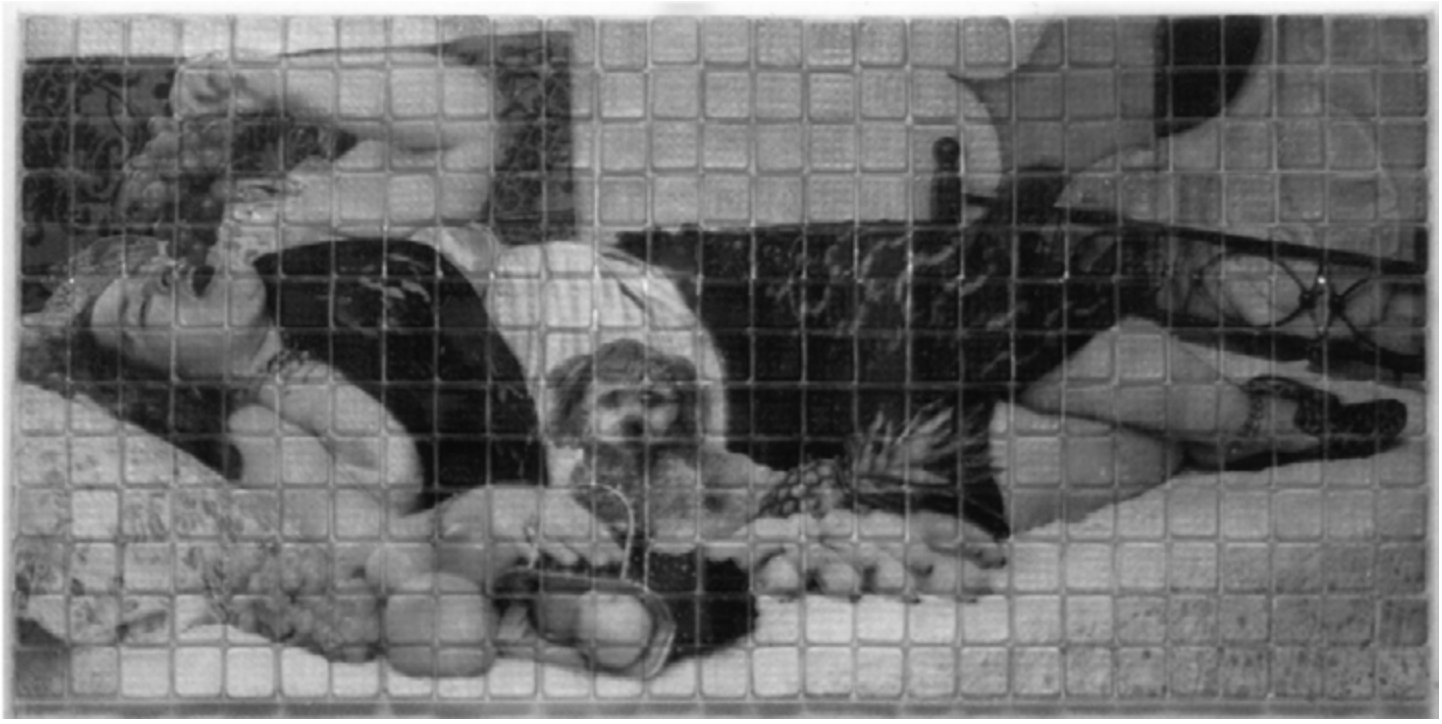
In late twentieth century Brazil, the scenario of repulsion to fat was so striking that there was no openness to a political discourse in defense of the fat body. From the artist's own narrative, it is possible to perceive the oppression she faced: "I create pieces to discuss my identity and my power of seduction, using playfulness to reread the perception of the disembodiment that my corpulence suggests to contemporary western society, reconditioning the viewer's gaze" (Queiroz & Mendes, 1998, p. n/p).

Here we see the political power of confrontation to the disembodiment and oppression faced due to socio-cultural demands that appear associated with the discussion proposed by Kathleen LeBesco (2001). The author explores fatness and transgression suggesting that the dominant concept of fat appears to be linked to the etiological (e.g., finding the cause of 'obesity' as a disease), pathological (i.e., anxieties about overconsumption), and psychological (e.g., compulsive eating as the manifestation of an emotional problem). These methods for conceptualizing fatness as a problematic 'condition' were produced by the medical establishment, which is a significant influence on contemporary hegemonic views on fatness, as Hannele Harjunen (2009) reminds us. According to LeBesco (2001), fat is usually seen as something repulsive. But in the last decades of the twentieth century, fat activists began to modify that notion by arguing that our view of fat is not something natural but is naturalized. We will see here how these ideas are embedded in the Queiroz's works.

3. Elisa Queiroz's Fat Activism

Elisa Queiroz (1970-2011), born in Rio de Janeiro, was recognized for her self-referential works, including videos and installations. In the early 2000s, the artist began to work with self-representation in installations made out of food and drinks, including cookies, pasta, jams, and tea bags. These ephemeral materials have brought

a strong anthropophagic[3] effect to the artworks since the artist's body was printed on them, creating a clear relationship between her bodily 'excesses' and the food offered to the public. In *Portrait Album* (2002, Figure 5.1.1.), for example, Queiroz approaches the representations of Bacchus, God of Greek mythology associated with carnal excesses and pleasures.



- Figure 5.1.1. – Elisa Queiroz, *Portrait Album*, 2002, Installation. Printed in cookies. 165 x 80 x 2.5 cm
- Source: LEENA archives. Accessed in September 2021

The panel was made out of cookies filled with a popular and high-calorie Brazilian marshmallow-like dessert called Maria-mole. The structure of the artwork is similar to a mosaic and the technique to transfer the image to the biscuits was edible printing[4]. Queiroz uses humor to symbolically offer her body to the public, parodying poses of muses and Greco-Roman characters portrayed in European traditional art history.

If we consider Caravaggio's painted representation of *Bacchus* (approx. 1598), it is possible to note some similarities to Queiroz's *Portrait Album*, such as the fruit, pose, and the attempt to mimic the toga through the draping work. However, unlike the Bacchus portrayed by the Italian painter, here the artist devours the grape instead of drinking the wine. The image suggests an insatiable appetite, implying excesses and sensuality through the transparency of the fabric that covers the body. The tropical fruits open the way for the interpretation of a Brazilian version of the mythology. Since the artist associates food with self-representation, this evokes the public's imagination to metaphorically decipher the taste of her body in this anthropophagic relationship.

Queiroz's provocation can be amplified if we consider the appropriation that the artist, as a fat woman and Latina, makes of elements consecrated in colonial discourse: valorization of classical mythology, European scenery, privileged class, white, thin, young, able, and sexualized bodies available for the supposedly heteronormative artistic genius. Through the artwork, Queiroz destabilizes those associations by injecting unconventional imagery of fatness, gender, race/ethnicity, and class, thereby creating visible possibilities that cross transnational and symbolic boundaries. This thinking can be intertwined with scholar Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of 'Borderlands/La Frontera' (2012 [1987]):

> *Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them (...) The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. Los atravesados live here: the squint eye, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the halfbreed, the half dead (Anzaldúa, 2012, pp. 25-26).

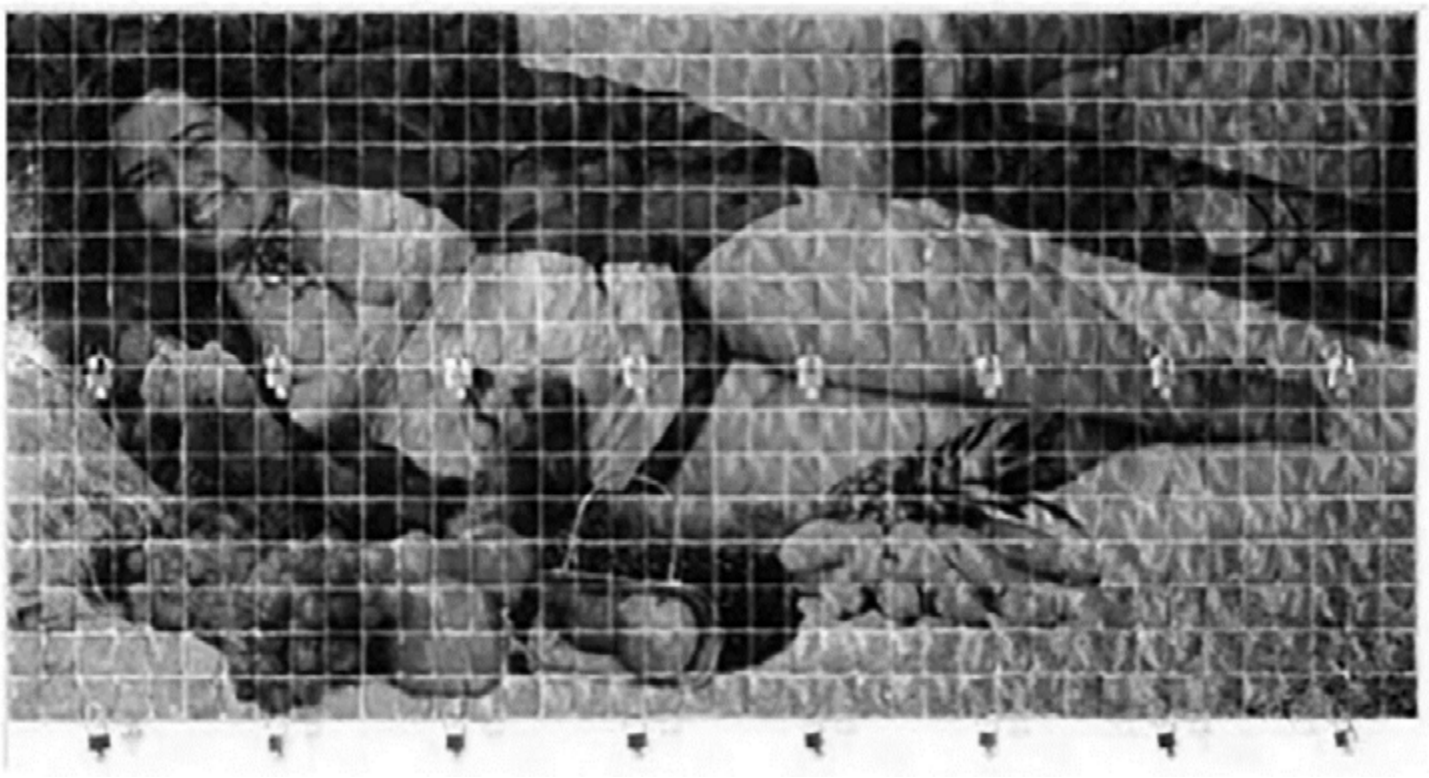
3. In 1928, Brazilian poet Oswald de Andrade wrote the 'Manifesto antropófago', inspired by the Tupi cannibalism rites and this brought relevance to Brazilian aesthetic and social thought. Through the years, anthropophagy became a powerful and resistant alternative to the varied Euro-American historical colonizations, but it also served as a critical element to politics and social oppressions.

4. A technique used to print digital images in cakes, cookies, and food in general.

The Borderlands confront the essentialist discourse around issues of gender, body, race/ethnicity, and sexuality as in the case of Queiroz. Her artworks can be interpreted as a framework to speak out from her place and her own experience on the margins of Euro-U.S. and Brazilian norms.

Like queer theory, fat activism is multifaceted, elastic, and uses different approaches. According to Paul B. Preciado (2011), although queerness is associated with sexuality, we must recognize the power the theory/movement(s) has to resist European and North American models by juxtaposing the movements of other minoritized groups. It is in this sense that Charlotte Cooper (2016) suggests rethinking the activist practices related to the fat body, embracing the antinormative and indefinable character of queer. For Cooper, to transform the fat body into something queer is to abandon the desire to be normal and respectable, and this can be connected with the words of Preciado (2010): "from an aesthetic point of view, queer produces (...) anti-aesthetics, negative aesthetics, ugliness" (Preciado, 2010, p. 52).

The use of the body as it interacts with the contemporary politics of identity can be seen in Elisa Queiroz's *Help Yourself* (2002, Figure 5.1.2.) which is a clear reference to the reclining female figures of the cultural imaginary, such as the ones painted by Vélazquez (1650), Goya (1792) and Manet (1863), that leads us to reflect upon the categories and institutions of art history.



- Figure 5.1.2. – Elisa Queiroz, *Help yourself*, 2002. Transfer, Tea Bags, Wood and Aluminum. 160 x 80 centimeters
- Source: LEENA archives. Accessed in September 2021

Help Yourself includes tea bags printed with Queiroz's image, forming a large panel, like a mosaic. The panel was protected by acrylic doors, but the fragrance of fruit tea penetrated the entire environment creating a synesthetic atmosphere. Below the panel was an acrylic box with keys and a tray containing a kettle and cups, arranged on a small wooden table. The viewers could use the keys to open the acrylic doors, take a tea bag, brew it, and taste the tea. The work is loaded with sexuality since the artist symbolically offers her body to be tasted. Sexuality is a characteristic commonly divorced from fat people, as we can see in this excerpt from an interview with Dr. Alberto Serfaty, a medical professional, in *Jornal do Brasil* (JB), a traditional Brazilian newspaper:

> *JB: What changes a person's sexuality after they lose weight?*
>
> *Dr. Serfaty: It's fantastic. People find out, they expose themselves more, they fuck more. The fat works like armor where the person hides. If nothing bad happens inside the armor, nothing good happens either. Life is there to live, and the worst thing is that nothing happens. (Serfaty, 1998).*

With works like *Help Yourself*, Queiroz demystifies masculine and unilateral discourses like the doctor described in this interview, recognizing the fat body as socially constructed and, through irony, problematizing

the notion of bodily excesses as an anomaly or pathology. The artist shows herself in a positive way, revealing her body without shame; through the exposure of her skin, cleavage, and thighs, she implies sensuality. This artwork critiques the classic imagery of female models in representing women's bodies, especially if we consider it as a parody. Historically, white, thin, and abled women were usually shown as sexually available to the viewer through the gaze of the artist (both presumably men given the constraints of art education and economic access for women). Queiroz challenges the ways people see – and depict – female bodies by exaggerating and ironizing the canon. She confounds the rules of art history by distorting its conventions.

Snider (2010) analyzes artists considered 'deviant' or 'non-normative' (women, People of Color, disabled people, fat people, and/ or lesbians) who, like Queiroz, are seen "as monstrous, excessive and dangerous – to themselves and to others – because their physical and discursive identities have violated the boundaries of the cultural taste of their time" (Snider, 2010, p. 10). As Snider suggests, we can consider that embracing these presumed insults is a way to fight the dominant cultural ideology about the fat body. Through this lens, we can see that Queiroz develops a different perception about her artistic production and her body in society outside of heteronormative, masculinist, able, thin, young, North American, and/ or Eurocentric ideals.

There is a reinforcement of the relationship between fat activism and visual arts in Queiroz's body of work by considering the production of visual representations of the fat body as an important step toward rethinking fatness (Snider, 2010). As Snider indicates, there is still a relative lack of critical and historical writings about visual arts with a positive point of view regarding fat. By reconfiguring the visual culture of the fat body using humor and irony Queiroz contributes to thinking critically about the ethic and politics of the social constructions of fat bodies in Brazil in particular, and in the visual arts more broadly.

4. Conclusion

The artistic practices of Queiroz indicate a transversality of oppression, from the notion that it is not enough to deal with the specificity, for instance, of the fat body. The artist seeks to deconstruct hierarchies in minoritarian discourses to think of strategies that can jointly challenge the entire established cultural system. In this sense, she takes on the process of queerly denouncing exclusions in identity politics. We observe the reinforcement of differences instead of trying to 'fit' within hegemonic patterns. This artist makes possible the construction of new subjectivities by queering visual art practices and challenging norms of visual representation.

Thinking of the fat body in this poetic line allows us to consider the margin as a place of strength to destabilize the center, that is, to think as Cooper (2016) proposes with the figure of the killjoy that creates an opportunity to be productively critical. Sara Ahmed (2017) theorizes the figure of the feminist killjoy describing her with tension and opposition. As she suggests, the killjoy "is getting in the way of something, the achievement or accomplishment of the family or of some *we* or another, which is created by what is not said" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 37). The feminist killjoy is a symbol of discord and incivility that we can see emerging in Queiroz's artworks. These are projects that frustrate the tyranny of idealized anatomy, of normative forms, and of the need to follow conventional canons of art.

Fat activism is a movement made from the margins of the dominant North American and European discourse and works as a response to the spread of dominant body models around the world. Queiroz's artworks use a queer framework in fat activism to construct new dialogues where belonging to the 'normal' is not the focus. Self-representation further proves to be a favorable fat activist device for confronting gender issues and aesthetic standards, especially if it is seen as a strategy of moving female artists from 'objects' to 'creators'. Fulfilling the agenda of fat activism, Queiroz unmasks the fat body, making it visible and present, resisting the constructions of the dominant discourses within and outside of her Brazilian context.

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