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Digging for Deeper Connections:
Building Multimodal Text Scaffolds

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> *"Comrades!" he cried. "You do not imagine, I hope, that we pigs are doing this in a spirit of selfishness and privilege? Many of us actually dislike milk and apples. I dislike them myself. Our sole object in taking these things is to preserve our health. Milk and apples (this has been proved by Science, comrades) contain substances absolutely necessary to the well-being of a pig. We pigs are brainworkers. The whole management and organization of this farm depend on us. Day and night we are watching over your welfare. It is for your sake that we drink the milk and eat those apples."*
> (Orwell, 1946/2009, p. 60)

As we consider what advocacy, activism, and agency mean within our own lives and especially within our work with young adults, it is impossible to ignore the current state of affairs in our country, due in part to our complicated political landscape. No matter where our individual political leanings and belief systems guide us, we can all agree that the world feels very unsettled. While the day-to-day lives of a small few of our students and colleagues seem mostly unaffected by the recent world events, countless others are reeling from the challenges, policies, and potential threats to their security and ways of life.

As educators who are often confident in our positionalities and approaches to teaching controversial topics and discussing polarizing world events, many of us have been discombobulated by the current rhetoric used in our daily popular culture media and social media feeds. Terms such as fake news, alternative truths, alternative facts, and post truths have entered the vocabulary of the mainstream media and the vocabulary of our students. Such doublespeak harkens back to a time when controversial discussions centered around the world as it once was, instead of as it currently is. The texts we used to highlight hard lessons society once learned can now be framed in light of mistakes we don't want society to make again.

The reality of teaching a canonical text, whether by choice, by district or school requirement, or by curriculum, is a challenge for many of us who strive to engage our students in a text-as-mirrors-and-windows experience. Canonical texts such as *Animal Farm* (Orwell, 1946/2009)*, 1984* (Orwell, 1949/1989), and *Brave New World* (Huxley, 1932/2006) offer a renewed sense of purpose given the post-truth world in which we find ourselves. And yet, these canonical texts have the same teaching challenges that have always existed. Teachers have struggled for decades to help students find relevancy in or motivation to engage with canonical texts. But with clear contemporary ties to popular culture, and the scaffolding of traditional and nontraditional texts, including young adult literature, we can embrace the challenge of opportunities to engage with these polarizing issues with our students. The current political climate allows us the perfect opportunity to do so.

Through young adult literature, students have the opportunity to engage with the same themes that emerge from the canon in a way that is more relevant to their lives. By making text-to-self connections with young adult literature, students identify ways in which

the themes of the canonical works relate to them, motivating them to continue to engage in such topics in more complex ways. Whether students need motivation to read the canon or not, young adult literature provides a window offering them a holistic view of the theme as well as an opportunity to engage in several rich, diverse reading experiences. These reading experiences, in turn, allow for complex skill building of not only text-to-self connections but also text-to-text and text-to-world connections.

Layering Literacies with Reading Ladders

In our work as teachers and teacher educators, we plan our instruction through the creation of reading ladders, or scaffolds of print and nonprint texts, both canonical and contemporary, on various thematic issues. Ideally, a teacher wouldn't jump directly into a difficult or complex text such as *Brave New World* (Huxley, 1932/2006) without an opportunity to engage and motivate students with conversations within and about the themes that exist, scaffolding the information and learning opportunities to prepare readers for the experience. Lesesne (2010) introduced the concept of reading ladders, which allow for gradual development of layered reading opportunities with multiple genres of text. With a reading ladder, we can guarantee that the curriculum incorporates texts and technologies that are not authored by "dead white guys" (Wolk, 2010) and instead speak to today's students, to real life (Lesesne, 2010). We show the flexibility of reading ladders as we consider them in multimodal ways.

We challenge our teacher candidates to create reading ladders that balance the reading experience of a required or canonical text with contemporary young adult literature and other texts. It's important to note that while a ladder suggests a hierarchy of importance or value, in this case, we use the ladder as more of a sequential tool to help our teacher candidates better understand the layers of scaffolding necessary to prepare readers for more challenging reading opportunities and experiences. As Lattimer (2010) suggests, a text that motivates students is first and foremost an authentic experience that connects to the real lives of students. Authentic texts include everything from scientific research articles to consumer ads to websites to poems to media to song lyrics; they embrace the multimodality of the 21st century lives of our students.

The Reading Ladder Design Process

When we design reading ladders, we use a five-prong approach that we term "text excavation":

- Determine the required and elective texts.
- Identify the thematic strand.
- Highlight multimodality.
- Situate the texts to self, world, and other texts.
- Scaffold beyond (in spite of) designated reading levels.

Determine the Required and Elective Texts

The first step to text excavation is to consider what it is we are digging for in order to build our ladders. As teachers, we are often given curricula with required readings aligned by grade level or dependent on book resources; as a result, we are assigned a particular set of novels related to the courses we teach. Some of the canonical texts used frequently in middle schools and high schools offer a rich understanding of ourselves and our world (Jago, 2001). But often, the canonical texts we introduce to our students are used only because we've been told to incorporate them into our plans or because we must use the resources provided to us by the district. Our approach to reading ladder design allows teachers to supplement required, canonical texts with an enriching reading experience of elective texts. These particular texts are chosen specifically for what they can add to students' understanding of a thematic strand that we have designed. We work purposefully to find texts that students might choose themselves in tandem with texts that they might never consider choosing if given the opportunity, especially in consideration of genre and mode (see the "Highlight Multimodality" section below).

Young adult literature serves a multitude of purposes in this ladder. The texts act as motivation because they 1) are contemporary; 2) allow students to identify the same themes as those in the canonical text, showcasing the merits of young adult literature; and 3) are approachable and support students in making text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections both within and beyond the texts themselves. As we discover other thought-provoking and powerful texts in our daily readings, we are continually excavating for future reading ladders; we organize our texts in Evernote, one of many online tools and bookmarking apps that work well for this purpose.

IDENTIFY THE THEMATIC STRAND

The next step to text excavation in reading ladder design is a consideration of the thematic strands that tie the texts together. Much of our preservice teacher work builds on Smagorinsky's (2008) *Teaching English by Design*, so we intuitively find ourselves working toward thematic planning structures. We first identify themes that emerge from the multiple texts we initially choose. We then continue to search for elective texts, considering gaps in our ladder and other topics, genres, and forms we might have overlooked.

> While we often differentiate for our students based on text difficulty, our ladder chronology is based on the flow of thematic concepts, the levels of engagement expected through the reading of the text, and the narrative we wish to create through the order we sort and design.

HIGHLIGHT MULTIMODALITY

We believe that it is critical to include a variety of print and nonprint texts, audio recordings, video clips, and Web-based reading and compositing opportunities (such as video games) to engage and differentiate our teaching approaches within the ladder. As our definition of reading and composing expands in the 21st-century world, we consider ways we might weave 21st-century texts together with traditional texts using the same lenses of analysis. We have also learned that the engagement and motivation of the students significantly increases when we can bring the texts they use outside of school into the ladder (Hinchman, Alvermann, Boyd, Brozo, & Vacca, 2003).

SITUATE THE TEXTS TO SELF, WORLD, AND OTHER TEXTS

It is at this point in the text excavation process that we try to determine whether we have provided opportunities for students to make text-to-self, text-to-world, and text-to-text connections while they engage with the texts of the ladder. While YAL serves well for this purpose, oftentimes it's hard to predict where these connections will happen and whether they will happen with every student. What we do make sure of, though, is that if there is a lack of text connection with the students after we launch the reading ladders, we provide other opportunities for them to seek and excavate their own texts to bring to the conversation. We find that our reading ladder experiences only become richer because of their sharing, and we use the pool of texts to populate our Evernote list for future ladders.

SCAFFOLD BEYOND (IN SPITE OF) DESIGNATED READING LEVELS

Perhaps one of the most important tasks in text excavation comes at the end of the design process, once the texts have been selected. As we sort, we label each text on a piece of paper and physically move the texts to various places in the chronological ladder, designing the scope and sequence of the ladder based on the students in our classrooms. We make sure that a thought-provoking, multimodal text launches our work and believe that the required texts do not have to culminate or start the reading ladder. For example, in the *Animal Farm* (Orwell, 1946/2009) reading ladder below, we believe the text connections that students make with *The Port Chicago 50* (Sheinken, 2017) and *Outcasts United* (St. John, 2013) are far more powerful than those made with *Animal Farm*. In fact, we believe the students' understanding of *Animal Farm* is strengthened as they tie the reading of the YA texts back to their shared reading experience of *Animal Farm*. When they read *Matched* (Condie, 2011) or *Delirium* (Oliver, 2011), students engage with a main character who is closer to their age, allowing them to connect on a personal level and consider how abstract themes, such as "abuse of power," matter to them as young adults. *The Port Chicago 50* and *Outcasts United* also allow students to engage with texts that are classified as YAL but are written with equal style, structure, and merit of even the most valued canonical work.

Additionally, we do not scaffold our ladder based solely on increasing text difficulty. While we often differentiate for our students based on text difficulty, our ladder chronology is based on the flow of thematic concepts, the levels of engagement expected through the reading of the text, and the narrative we wish to create through the order we sort and design.

"All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others" (Orwell, 1946/2009, p. 192).
Themes: abuse of power, revolution, class stratification
This reading ladder scaffolds a variety of texts specifically related to *Animal Farm* and includes a selection of fiction and nonfiction young adult literature, music, and video game connections. Students are given multiple textual examples that show abuses of power and stories that feature the multiple dimensions of revolution, including the aftershocks that impact the lives shattered by each. Young adult literature is the first novel in this reading ladder, exposing students to the themes of abuse of power, revolution, and class stratification with an approachable text that allows students to make text-to-self connections. By incorporating choice reads, students take "the drivers' seats" in their instruction and learn how to identify texts they want to read versus those they do not want to read, which is critical for the development of their reader identities (Miller & Kelley, 2014). Reading the canonical text after exposure to video games as well as the young adult literature allows students to consider similar concepts within different levels of stories. Incorporating further texts in this reading ladder *after* the canonical work allows students to work their way back into how the canonical text might matter in the real world. This offers opportunities for students to gain a well-rounded and holistic view of how literature impacts society and vice versa.

Texts	Genre	Description
St. John, W. (2013). *Outcasts united: The story of a refuge soccer team that changed a town.* Chicago, IL: Ember Press.	YA Nonfiction	In the town of Clarkston, Georgia, a refugee resettlement center, Luma Mufleh works with youth refugees to form the Fugees, a youth soccer team that inspires and challenges their community, breaking down barriers of discrimination and preconceived notions of refugees. By using YAL to finish this ladder, not only are students able to get a rich text experience with a variety of different forms, but they also begin to recognize the merit of YAL by identifying the same themes that are present in the canon.
Sheinken, S. (2017). *The Port Chicago 50: Disaster, mutiny, and the fight for civil rights.* New York, NY: Square Fish Publishing.	YA Nonfiction	In 1944, on the segregated Navy base of Port Chicago, CA, an explosion occurred, killing hundreds and injuring many more. Refusing to go back to work until the unsafe conditions were attended to, hundreds of men faced mutiny charges, some with the threat of execution. Much like the connection made with Sutherland's piece, students are exposed to diverse, contemporary literature that engages them in a holistic exploration of the major themes of the reading ladder.
Sutherland, J. (2017, January 27). How George Orwell predicted Donald Trump. *The Daily Beast*. Retrieved from http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2017/01/28/how-george-orwell-predicted-donald-trump.html.	Opinion/Online Reportage	Sutherland examines the origins of Orwell's approach to his works and the parallel between the political upheavals of the 1940s and today's current political climate that lead to the election of President Trump. Students engage in this contemporary text explicitly related to the state of affairs in the United States; this experience allows students to move "full circle" to see the ways in which the canon and the themes within the canon impact today's society.
Orwell, G. (1946/2009). *Animal farm*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.	Novel	In this allegory, a farm is taken over by its overworked, mistreated animals. The animals set out to create a utopia of progress, only to dissolve into tyranny and totalitarianism. The canonical text allows students to use the terminology and the different texts they have read so far to analyze Orwell's intentions as well as making text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections.
Codcom0. (2013, July 29). Animal farm: Cops n robbers style map *[Digital image]*. Retrieved from http://www.planetminecraft.com/project/animal-farm-cops-n-robbers-style-map.	Video Game	This is a downloadable Minecraft map of *Animal Farm*. Pictured is the stable, the barn, Mr. Jones's house, the pond, the roads leading to the farm, and the very important windmill. This allows the teacher the opportunity to fly around and explore *Animal Farm*, as most computers can run Minecraft, and it could be played on a projector at school. By using the video game, students are engaged in prereading strategies of both prediction and visualization.
Oliver, L. (2011). *Delirium*. New York, NY: HarperCollins. or Condie, A. (2011). *Matched*. New York, NY: Speak. or sample chapters from each	YA Fiction	In *Delirium*, love is a disease that forces all 18-year-olds to have the Cure, which prevents them from falling in love in the future. Lena is ready for the treatment that will save her, until she meets a boy who makes her question everything. In *Matched*, society has everything perfectly planned and the needs of all citizens met. Cassia is matched in life with her best friend, Xander, but wonders if the relationship is meant to be. Cassia begins to recognize Society's façade, and finds her own ways of fighting against the system. YAL, in this case, offers exposure to themes in *Animal Farm* in novel form, as well as a motivating and relevant read to engage students in making text-to-self and text-to-world connections.

Quitney, J. (2012, November 6). Communism 1952 (Cold War political education) [Video file]. Glenview, IL: Coronet Instructional Films. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v = bvcLwcRRl0k.	Video	A succinct and not very subtle explanation of Communism from an American perspective in the height of the Cold War, this video highlights the two conflicting ideas of communism and capitalism, or totalitarianism and libertarianism. It allows students to make cross-disciplinary connections in its provision of an overview of different government styles and approaches. It also prepares students to utilize these terms when they approach analysis with the literature they will read.
Commerford, T. (2000). Testify [MP3]. On *The Battle of Los Angeles* [CD]. New York, NY: Epic Records. (Brendan O'Brien, Producer. Rage Against the Machine.)	Song	The band Rage Against the Machine (RATM) made a name for itself doing exactly what the animals of *Animal Farm* did, but through music. Known for being anti-establishment, anti-wealth, anti-everything-to-do-with-politics, RATM carried a fairly sophisticated philosophy of egalitarianism. Students learn how to read different forms of texts through this song and engage in the different philosophies that tie into the concept of abuse of power.
Seuss, D. (1971). The Lorax. New York, NY: Random House.	Children's Book	Before students can fully grasp Orwell's *Animal Farm*, it seems necessary that they understand how authors use allegory. Seuss's *The Lorax* is an allegory about how humans are destroying nature and themselves in the process.
Guthrie, W. (1944). This land is your land. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v = wxiMrvDbq3s. and Spitzer, N. (2012, February 15). The story of Woody Guthrie's "This land is your land." Retrieved from http://www.npr.org/2000/07/03/1076186/this-land-is-your-land.	Song, Video, and Opinion/ Reportage	Partnering the recording of Woody Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land" with Spitzer's NPR article highlights the political motivations of the song lyrics Guthrie wrote in the 1940s as a social commentary on the current state of affairs. This introduction to the theme allows for students to identify text-to-self connections as well as analyze texts in depth.

1984 Reading Ladder

"Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past" (Orwell, 1948/1989, p. 32) Themes: propaganda, historical revisionism, surveillance, doublethink After 9/11, the United States increased its level of surveillance of both suspected terrorists and, according to information leaked by former operative Edward Snowden, ordinary US citizens. Students can be provided with opportunities to debate the balance between national security and individual privacy, as well as the very current 2017 examples of historical revisionism by elected officials and their spokespeople. This reading ladder begins with an introduction (or review) of the idea of Big Brother through media and song. It alternates between media and news related to surveillance in contemporary society as well as the political movements that frame the events in the texts. Young adult literature is used several times in this ladder as a way to engage students in the themes of propaganda and surveillance while offering connections to a 17-year-old protagonist (*Little Brother*) and an alternative universe with social media on steroids (*Feed*).	

Texts	Genre	Description
Atwood, M. (1986). *The handmaid's tale.* New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin.	Adult Fiction	In the Republic of Gilead, Handmaids are chosen to bear children for elite couples. Offred, the handmaid of the Commander, shares through flashbacks how the architects of Gilead devised their scheme to first crumble and then rule society and how she fights to escape to freedom.
Robertson, A. (2016, November 9). In Trump's America, *The Handmaid's Tale* matters more than ever. *The Verge.* Retrieved from http://www.theverge.com/2014/12/20/7424951/does-the-handmaids-tale-hold-up-dystopia-feminism-fiction.	Opinion/ Reportage	Robertson draws parallels between current events in the United States with the gendered harassment and misogyny in the *The Handmaid's Tale.*

Reference	Type	Description
Doctorow, C. (2008). *Little brother*. New York, NY: Tor.	YA Fiction	Marcus, a 17-year-old tech genius, and his group of friends are detained by Homeland Security after a terrorist attack in San Francisco. His week-long abusive interrogation leads him to fight against the ever-increasing government surveillance. *Little Brother* parallels Orwell texts and contemporary policies, such as the Patriot Act.
Orwell, G. (1949/1989). *Nineteen eighty four*. London, UK: Penguin.	Novel	In the superstate of Oceania, citizens are oppressed by government surveillance and manipulation, with independent thought characterized as thoughtcrime. Newspeak is required to control the language and the people. Big Brother is always watching.
Crouch, I. (2013, June 11). So are we living in 1984? *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/so-are-we-living-in-1984.	Reportage	Edward Snowden, the intelligence contractor who leaked classified information about the United States, sheds light on the government surveillance issues, drawing Crouch to make comparisons to *1984*.
Anderson, M. T. (2012). *Feed*. New York, NY: Candlewick.	YA Fiction	Televisions and computers are directly connected to people as babies, where most individuals are without original thoughts or actions. The teenspeak and world revolving around technology speak specifically to young adults.
Kardaras, N. (2016, August 27). It's digital heroin: How screens turn kids into psychotic junkies. Retrieved from http://nypost.com/2016/08/27/its-digital-heroin-how-screens-turn-kids-into-psychotic-junkies/.	Opinion/ Reportage	A controversial article that equates the time we spend on electronic devices as a society with habit-forming heroin. A fantastic article for debate or Socratic Circle.
Seeker Daily. (2015, August 15). What is fascism? [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v = aUcYU95kCAI.	YouTube Video	A short video that highlights the definition and origin of fascism, totalitarianism, and nationalism. Showing this video helps students develop vocabulary for describing the ideas they encounter in *1984*.
Eurythmics. (1984). For the love of Big Brother. On *1984 (for the love of Big Brother)* [CD]. London, UK: Virgin Records. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v = DiYnLh_PXIo. Shapiro, A. (Executive Producer). (2000). *Big brother* [Television series]. Universal City, CA: Dreamworks Television. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/user/bigbrother.	Song, Video	Recorded for the motion picture *1984*, the Eurythmics used Orwell's text to influence their music and drew quotations from the text as lyrics in many of the songs. "For the Love of Big Brother" introduces the concept of Big Brother within the context of the world and beyond the TV show they know. For scaffolding purposes, the link to the *Big Brother* YouTube channel is also included. Caution should be used in selecting any video clips from this site, as many are not edited and contain controversial language and situations.

"But I don't want comfort. I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness. I want sin" (Huxley, 1932/2006, p. 66). Themes: consumerism, technological control, delusions, fake news, superficiality, cynicism	

Themes of technological control, cynicism, and fake news layer well with today's newsfeed and *Brave New World*. Layering poetry and art with fiction and film, we shed a brighter light on the nonfiction pieces in the ladder. YAL serves as a culminating experience in the various multimodal readings students engage in; *Unwind* serves as a fast-paced, engaging read to be used in connection with *Feed* and other texts in this ladder. The YA texts allow students to experience a world one step away from the current political system, and the nonfiction media and texts throughout the ladder help students explicitly draw connections between consumerism and technological control.

Texts	Genre	Description
Shusterman, N. (2009). *Unwind*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.	YA Fiction	Unwinding exists as a solution to abortion, the cause of a civil war. Teenagers between the ages of 13–17 can be unwound by their parents or guardians, allowing their body parts to be harvested for use in adults. The book follows three teens as they fight being taken to the harvest camps.
Wachowski, A., Wachowski, L., Reeves, K., Fishburne, L., Moss, C.-A., Warner Bros., . . . Silver Pictures. (1999). *The matrix* [Motion picture]. Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video.	Motion Picture	Mr. Anderson (Neo) learns that he has been living in a computer program created by machines, making human birth an artificial process. With the help of Morpheus, he battles the machines in order to save mankind.
Huxley, A. (1932/2006). *Brave new world*. New York, NY: Harper.	Novel	In London in 2540, citizens are genetically bred and controlled through psychological and technological manipulation. The novel follows a couple as they explore a world they didn't know existed and challenge the very technologies and gadgets we have come to depend on today.
Anderson, M. T. (2012). *Feed*. New York, NY: Candlewick.	YA Fiction	Televisions and computers are directly connected to people as babies, where most individuals are without original thoughts or actions. *Feed* is used again in this ladder as a way to support our belief that we can revisit texts we love to highlight particular themes.
Postman, N. (2005). *Amusing ourselves to death: Public discourse in the age of show business.* New York, NY: Penguin.	Critical Media Theory	Postman's critique explores what happens when media and politics become entertainment.
McMenamin, E. (2017, January 4). Did Neil Postman predict the rise of Trump and fake news? *Paste Magazine*. Retrieved from https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2017/01/did-neil-postman-predict-the-rise-of-trump-and-fak.html.	Opinion/Reportage	McMenamin examines Neil Postman's (1985) book *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* and considers whether he predicted our current fake news scenario.
CBS News. (2017, March 26). What is fake news? *60 Minutes*. Retrieved from http://www.cbsnews.com/videos/whats-fake-news-60-minutes-investigates/.	News	The *60 Minutes* news program investigates both Fake News, as termed by politicians who are unhappy with what news sources are reporting, as well as user-created Fake News, false news stories generated purposely to drive Internet clicks and shares (the method of payment for the creators).
Rockwell, N. (1957). Lift thine eyes [Oil painting]. Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Museum of Art.	Art	Rockwell depicts New Yorkers walking past a church without looking up to engage with one another, to notice the beauty of the church, or to consider what the church marquis has to say. Rockwell had a great deal to say about the loss of religion in America as well as the encroachment of cynicism in our daily lives.
Eliot, T. S. (1925/1969). The hollow men. In *The complete poems and plays of T. S. Eliot* (pp. 81–86. London, UK: Faber and Faber.	Poetry	The idea of cynicism rings loudly from Eliot's poem and provides a starting place for discussion on the cynical nature of society, a reflection of one's life, and the likelihood of mankind to blindly follow one another.

Sample Reading Ladders

Below we offer three sample reading ladders. When navigating the ladders, begin from the bottom and work your way up.

Conclusion

Admittedly, there are countless resources we didn't excavate to design these ladders, and there are countless ways we might have approached the instruction of these themes and novels. (Additional reading ladders can be found in the "Theory to Practice Connections" section of the Initiative for 21st Century Literacies Research page: http://www.initiativefor-21research.org/theory-to-practice-connections.) Whatever the approach, we believe that YAL should be a part of it; the motivation and engagement factors alone allow students to read approachable texts that invite strong text-to-self experiences. By including YAL (and innovative multimodal texts), students engage in a more textually complex reading experience and are able to connect to the texts on an aesthetic level more than is possible with only a "cold" reading of a canonical text.

As a note, these reading ladders could be viewed as quite dark and dystopian. However, we wholeheartedly believe that young adults need safe places to talk about the real issues that concern them and our society. While teachers may not feel comfortable using every text in the examples provided, we want to encourage our colleagues to use popular culture to connect texts we love to teach and those we are required to teach.

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