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From Fear and Anxiety to Vulnerable Collective Action: Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children*

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In a seemingly tranquil cottage along the coast, Lucy Kirkwood's The Children *(2016) delves into the profound anxieties and vulnerabilities arising from an ecological crisis. Set in a post-nuclear disaster Britain, the play follows three retired nuclear scientists grappling with the consequences of their past decisions. Amidst a world in chaos, Kirkwood portrays the fragile relationships and emotional struggles of her characters, reflecting the anxieties prevalent in our own reality. Drawing on affect studies theories—such as Lauren Berlant's "cruel optimism" and "inconvenience," Sianne Ngai's "ugly feelings" and Clare Hemmings' "affective dissonance"—this analysis explores how these concepts shed light on the characters' experiences. Berlant's ideas help us understand the characters' necessity to adhere to routine as a means to avoid confronting larger, more pressing issues. Ngai's "ugly feelings" expose the anxiety and discomfort that pervade their lives, while Hemmings' "affective dissonance" highlights the internal conflicts and moral dilemmas they face. By emphasising these struggles, the play invites audiences to reflect on their own vulnerabilities and consider the need for collective action in the face of adversity. Deliberately refusing catharsis, the play underscores the persistence of unresolved crises, prompting viewers to engage with the issues presented on stage and consider their implications beyond the theatre.*

In a seemingly tranquil cottage along the British coast, Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children* presents its audiences with a story that explores the anxieties that come from confronting an ecological crisis. The play uses this setting to reflect the pervasive fears surrounding environmental collapse and highlights the characters' vulnerability while emphasising the need for collective action. Set in a post-nuclear disaster Britain, the drama reveals how the apocalyptic has disturbingly become the new norm. Premiering at London's Royal Court Theatre in 2016, the play immerses its audience in a world reeling from disaster, where three retired nuclear scientists – Hazel, Robin, and Rose – are confronted with the result of their past decisions. In this play, Kirkwood engages with pressing issues that affect us all, such as the environmental crisis, ageing, and the pervasive sense of a world now stagnant in the wake of a nuclear catastrophe. While she writes worlds in chaos, at the core of her play we encounter fragile relationships and vulnerable characters experiencing anxiety and fear,

demonstrating an emphasis placed on the everyday emotional experience that connects us with that around us. Affect studies, particularly Lauren Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism" and their exploration of "inconvenience," offer a lens through which *The Children* encourages audiences to connect personal experiences with broader societal issues, especially focusing on vulnerability. Berlant explores the tension in holding on to hope that simultaneously brings harm, which is evident in the characters' attempts to maintain normalcy amid the looming disaster. This tension is further complicated by the "ugly feelings" described by Sianne Ngai – emotions such as anxiety and discomfort that persist without resolution, reflecting the characters' struggle with guilt and responsibility in a world that offers no easy answers. Clare Hemmings' idea of "affective dissonance," the unease provoked by conflicting emotions and encounters, further deepens our understanding of the characters' inner turmoil. This growing discomfort aligns with the anxieties highlighted by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, who highlight how people live with constant "anxiety about being disconnected, rejected [and] abandoned" (quoted in Liz Tomlin 54). These negative feelings, though uncomfortable, can provide valuable insights into the current socio-political climate and interpersonal dynamics. Amid economic instability, social inequality, and environmental catastrophe, the premiere of *The Children* in 2016 coincided with a broader societal shift towards anxiety as a defining feature of the contemporary world order. In *The Children*, the pervasive feelings of fear and anxiety experienced by the characters create a mood of unease that mirrors the affects commonly felt in contemporary society. In *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant argues that the present is "a moment in extended crisis" (7), characterised by precarity that extends into the public and intimate spheres. Even when discussions of the present seem superficial, they are imbued with concerns about how to make sense of the world and navigate the uncertainties of the future (4). This paper aims to illuminate how the depiction of negative affects in *The Children* encourages audiences to reflect on their own experiences within society. By exploring the portrayal of fear, anxiety, and unresolved tension in the play, this analysis will demonstrate how these negative feelings not only create a powerful atmosphere but also encourage viewers to examine their shared vulnerabilities.

The setting and atmosphere in *The Children* are the first elements that become apparent in conveying the play's themes of instability, environmental crisis, and ethical tension. Kirkwood's choice of a room "*at a slight tilt*" (4, italics in the original) as the primary

setting immediately establishes a sense of disorientation and unease, reflecting the precarious state of their post-nuclear disaster world. The kitchen's tilt "*should not be obvious to the naked eye*" (4, italics in the original) yet, when Hazel leaves an apple on the table "*it rolls down the table away from her*" (9, italics in the original). Reviewer Frank Scheck comments on the effectiveness of Miriam Buether's set design, noting that it is "tilted just slightly enough to suggest there's something seriously off about the lives of its inhabitants." This slight tilt serves as an unsettling reminder of the precarious condition in which the characters exist, reflecting their everyday experience in the aftermath of the nuclear disaster. While a kitchen is usually associated with domesticity and comfort, in *The Children* this intimate space becomes a site of tension and conflict. The stark contrast between the familiar setting and the underlying dread of the nuclear disaster's aftermath heightens the sense of unease and discomfort for the audience. This instability was perfectly portrayed through the set, which featured a room "surrounded by a wall of darkness at a precarious angle, as if the ground beneath is falling away" (Sara Holdren). This visual representation of a fractured and unstable world further amplifies the tension and anxiety felt by the characters, and at the same time makes the audience aware of the precariousness of their situation.

To delve deeper into these emotional experiences, affect studies provide a valuable lens for examining how these anxieties manifest and are navigated. Berlant explores the ways in which individuals remain attached to unachievable fantasies of "a better life" (*Cruel Optimism* 4). These attachments, they argue, are forms of "cruel optimism" because they promise fulfilment but often lead to disappointment or harm. Berlant defines cruel optimism as a relation in which "something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project" (1). This occurs when the very things that promise stability and happiness are the same things that inhibit our ability to achieve such goals, creating a situation where optimism becomes 'cruel'.

This duality is clearly reflected in *The Children* through Hazel's attachment to her home, where the comfort of familiar surroundings contrasts sharply with the environmental collapse. As Lisa Woynarski observes, "home is made up of a duality between a rooted stability in a material location or a stable identity and a kind of oppression or loss" (149),

capturing the conflicting emotions Hazel experiences as she clings to the past. When recalling the day of the disaster, Hazel describes how she "saw the road cracked down the middle" and then the wave, which "looked like the sea was boiling milk" (Kirkwood 11). She then describes the time when they went back to their house after the explosion, where it felt like she "could see the radiation hanging in the air, a sort of filthy glitter suspended" (12). Despite this devastation, Hazel and her husband Robin decided to move to a cottage "only ten miles from the house," which for Hazel is "just a little bit extra but it makes a world of difference to our peace of mind" (12). Hazel's attachment to the house is evident when she explains how "leaving the area entirely felt somehow … disloyal, to the land" (12). Additionally, she remarks that "retired people are like nuclear power stations. We like to live by the sea" (13), a comment followed by both Rose and Hazel laughing. This laughter signals the absurdity of their situation, where maintaining a semblance of normalcy is juxtaposed with the reality of the nuclear disaster that has marked their lives. For Hazel, the laughter seems to serve as a coping mechanism, a way to momentarily ease the instability brought on by the ecological disaster, with those around her reinforcing this fragile sense of stability.

The audience may experience a range of complex emotions similar to Hazel's in the face of the current ecological crisis. Sarah Walker and Fleur Kilpatrick describe the tension in people's everyday experiences, where they "are scared but also acclimatised" having "been living with this for so long" (86). This reflects a state of "suspended, anticipatory grief," where, despite being accustomed to the climate crisis, you still "check your emails. You eat" (86). Their observations illustrate the balance people maintain between an ongoing sense of loss and the necessity of continuing with their daily routines as they strive to preserve some sense of normalcy despite the climate threat. Walker and Kilpatrick further note that the theatre of climate change embodies "unresolved distress, the mundanity of catastrophe" (86-87), highlighting how the climate crisis has become so entwined with daily life that it becomes challenging to effectively tackle. The overwhelming nature of the crisis often leads individuals to focus on personal responsibility and cling to a sense of normalcy, as confronting the broader issues may feel too daunting. As a result, the anxiety and distress associated with the climate crisis seeps into everyday routines, emphasising the difficulty of escaping its impact. This normalisation of catastrophe reflects how deeply the crisis has permeated daily existence, making it an inescapable part of contemporary life.

This duality of fear and normalisation mirrors Hazel's attempts to maintain her routines that remind her of a normal, stable life. The cottage is decorated with recycled materials, such as "*wild flowers in milk bottles*" and "*candles in wine bottles*" (4, italics in the original), reflecting Hazel's desire to maintain a well-kept and cosy home. This attention to domestic detail amidst chaos further shows her attempt to impose order on a fractured world. The use of recycled materials also highlights her resilience and resourcefulness, as Hazel repurposes what is available to create a familiar environment. Despite not being able to use tap water and having no electricity, limiting them to cold food, Hazel feels lucky for the "peas and the beans and the tomatoes" that have "been tested" and are "perfectly alright" (14). As Siân Adiseshiah notes, Hazel's avoidance of the reality of ageing is reflected in her daily routines like yoga, which serve as a way to navigate and manage the ongoing crises she faces (26-27). She practices yoga because she is "aware of the risks" associated with ageing (Kirkwood 14), even though this routine prevents her from recognising the need for more radical changes. Berlant describes lives shaped by crisis as "an impasse in which people find themselves developing skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on" (*Cruel Optimism* 8). An impasse is then "a time of dithering from which someone or some situation cannot move forward" (4). The character of Hazel represents an individual grappling with constant anxiety, fearing imminent threats and yet still striving to maintain "a relatively safe, middle-aged status quo" (Julia Hoydis 88). Her home and her routine provide her with a feeling of order and normalcy and serve as a coping mechanism, but they ultimately prevent her from confronting their reality.

While these routines represent a sense of security for Hazel, this is disrupted by the arrival of Rose. The play opens with Rose as the sole character on stage, her bloody nose immediately capturing the audience's attention and sparking curiosity. Rose stands in the middle of the kitchen in silence and "*looks around the room and does nothing to tend her nose*" (4, italics in the original). A "mortified" (5) Hazel[1] then enters the stage, surprised to see a friend she has not seen in forty years. Struggling to mask her confusion, Hazel states, "I don't know why I got so frightened, just I thought I was alone" (6). By introducing the character of Rose, Kirkwood creates what Basil Chiasson refers to as "situations of intrusion,"

[1] She asserts: "I am mortified" (5).

a characteristic of Harold Pinter's dramaturgy that features aggressive encounters between characters to disrupt the action and further induce a sensation of suspense in the audience (quoted in Graham Saunders 13). Similarly to the audience, at first the couple does not know what the motives are for Rose's visit. Clare Brennan explains how the play's "direction cannily develops the suspense so that the audience's curiosity mirrors the couple's: why is Rose here?" When Robin comes into the scene, Hazel describes Rose's arrival and once again expresses her fear: "I turned my back for a moment and suddenly she was just standing here, it scared me. Even after I realised … she's just got that sort of presence, hasn't she?" (38).

Rose's presence challenges the fragile stability that Hazel has constructed. The reappearance of the couple's old friend brings back unresolved tensions and conflicts, destabilising the normalcy that Hazel has been trying so hard to maintain. Through Rose's arrival, "their precariously ordered existence is disrupted" (Michael Billington) and it leads Hazel to experience what Berlant refers to as "inconvenience." In *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, Berlant argues how inconvenience serves as a basis to understand and interrogate negative affective experiences that occur in everyday life. Inconvenience encompasses "an experience of everyday aversion, adjustment, minor resistance, and exhaustion" but also exposes individuals to moments of vulnerability, which in turn may build "solidarity and alliance" (*Inconvenience* 6-8). Berlant further describes relations of inconvenience:

> We cannot be in any relation without being inconvenient to each other. This is to say: to know and be known requires experiencing and exerting pressure to be acknowledged and taken in … To attend to inconvenience is to attend to our constant exposure to stimulations that need to be processed. (7)

Rose's arrival is not merely an inconvenience but a catalyst for confrontation with reality. Halfway through the play, Rose finally announces her true motive for visiting the couple – to ask them to return to the nuclear plant:

> I'm going back. To work at the power station … These … young people these children, basically, actually with their whole lives ahead and it's not fair it's not right it seems wrong. Doesn't it? Because we built it, didn't we? Or helped to, we're responsible. (47-48)

With this announcement, Rose embodies the external pressures and issues that Hazel has been avoiding, drawing attention to them. Rose's physical presence, her bloody nose, and her unexpected arrival serve as stark reminders of the reality outside their familial environment. At first, Hazel's immediate response is to refuse help: "How dare you come here. Show up unannounced and bring, bringing this / poison" (53). When refusing Rose's request for help, Hazel experiences what Clare Hemmings denominates "affective dissonance." Hemmings describes affective dissonance as a phenomenon emerging from interpersonal encounters marked by discomfort, where negative affects force individuals to feel displeasure to reevaluate their perspectives and "know differently" (159). This dissonance arises from the clash between Hazel's desire to maintain her stable everyday life and the truth of the ecological crisis and consequences that the nuclear plant disaster they helped build brought to the area.

Hazel does not feel responsible at first for the disaster, asking "[w]hat am I supposed to feel guilty about? I've done my bit" (Kirkwood 54). Robin's reaction to Rose's request, however, differs from that of Hazel. Initially, while he does not automatically accept Rose's request, he urges Hazel to "hear her out at least" (54), but when Hazel leaves the room in frustration, Robin stays behind to talk with Rose. During their conversation, Rose asks him about the cows, a question that reveals the contrast between Robin and Hazel's coping mechanisms. Hazel, who claims to be "attached" (20) to the cows but "more attached to not getting cancer" (20), has mostly been staying at home, taking measures to protect herself from radiation. Robin, on the other hand, has been going to the farm daily to care for and milk Daisy, Bluebell, and Heisenberg, despite having "to throw the milk away" (22). This daily routine initially appears to be Robin's way of creating a sense of normalcy amidst the chaos and a way of being responsible for his past actions. This act of maintaining the illusion that the cows were still alive also subtly reinforces Hazel's need to believe that some semblance of their life prior to the disaster is still intact. Robin's silence about the cows' death can be seen as an attempt to preserve Hazel's fragile sense of stability, knowing that this belief helps her cope with the overwhelming reality of their situation. This denial allows Hazel to cling to the idea that life somehow continues as before, reflecting again Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism," where the attachment to certain ideas – like the semblance of a normal life – becomes an obstacle to confronting reality.

Yet, Robin's confession to Rose unveils a more painful reality. The cows have been dead all along, and his daily visits actually consisted of "digging graves," conducting "a little service" and saying "a good poem" or singing "a good song" while "crying for … six or seven hours" (60). Robin's routine is not only a simple act of care towards the animals but a symbolic attempt to make amends for the irreversible damage caused, reflecting his sense of guilt and responsibility. In this way, his care for the cows becomes a metaphor for the need to care for those affected by the disaster – a reflection of the responsibility that the characters, and society at large, must bear for the consequences of their actions. Robin's actions can be viewed as an act of penitence, an acknowledgment of the consequences of their past collective actions. This notion of care extends to their sense of responsibility for the younger generations, the real "children" of the play. The title, *The Children*, carries significant weight in relation to this. As Holdren puts it, the title invites the audience to ponder:

> Who are the children? They are angry Lauren and her three siblings; they are Hazel and Robin's grandchildren; they are the 'young ones' trapped in the nuclear plant; and they are Rose, Hazel, and Robin, who have such life and desire beating within them still.

Although an adult, Lauren, Hazel and Robin's eldest daughter, remains highly dependent on her parents. Lauren's daily life is also shaped by feelings of fear and anxiety, and she tends to call her parents because she experiences "a sort of general terror" making her "frightened" (Kirkwood 38). Her fear and dependence also signal the vulnerabilities of future generations who will inherit the consequences of the current ecological disaster. These are the children of the play, those that one day will have to deal with the consequences of past actions. Children are a central theme in plays about climate change, and their figures have gained significant prominence on UK stages over the past years (Ariane de Waal 44). In *The Children*, the absent children represent those most impacted by the environmental disaster, emphasising the vulnerability of future generations. They serve as a reminder that the most vulnerable members of society often come to symbolise "a threat to … society and the 'human'" (Marissia Fragkou 50). Their absence underscores the urgent need to take responsibility for the most vulnerable, those who will bear the consequences of our current decisions. This urgency also becomes evident when considering how the characters in the play exhibit traits commonly associated with children. For instance, when Robin starts to

cough up blood due to radiation exposure, Hazel reacts by bursting into tears and Robin "*comforts her like a child*" (69, emphasis added). By presenting the characters in this manner, the play suggests that the crisis affects everyone, casting each individual in the role of "the children." This representation reflects their own sense of helplessness and the burden of responsibility they face, highlighting the shared vulnerability and the need for collective care.

This state of fear and unease extends beyond the characters, also emphasising the audience's vulnerability in the face of crisis. Such portrayals reveal how neoliberal capitalist discourses have led to precarious situations where individuals have "disavowed the truth of [their] dependence, interdependence and vulnerability" and are forced to pretend that their lives have not drastically changed (Lynne Layton, quoted in David Neilson 186). However, vulnerability can be reformulated into resistance once precariousness is acknowledged and "modes of alliance … characterised by interdependency and public action" (Judith Butler et al. 7) are deemed as necessary. At first, upon hearing Rose's request, Hazel and Robin appear reticent to go back to the power plant to help because they feel responsible for their own children. With this, they represent the individualistic nature of a neoliberal society, one characterised by fear and anxiety, where individuals develop a desire to create gated communities and seek "isolation and insularity" (Engin F. Isin, quoted in Saunders 19). Rose, an unmarried woman without children who has spent many years away in America, struggles to empathise with the couple's fear of going back to the nuclear plant. Rose also explicitly expresses her hatred for their oldest daughter, Lauren: "I wished that child ill. With all my heart, and with great poison" (57). The characters clearly represent a "social antagonism" that negates "an inclusive conception of solidarity" (Neilson 193) and they instead focus on their own well-being, incapable of forms of solidarity.

Despite their initial self-centeredness, the characters gradually realise their shared vulnerability, which becomes evident in the dance scene where, according to the stage directions, they grow "*in confidence and unity*" (65, italics in the original). The choice of cheerful music, James Brown's "Ain't it Funky Now" in the original production, highlights the euphoria that emerges when the three protagonists connect, even if momentarily. Despite their bickering and differences, they dance while facing the audience in a synchronised routine that Hazel came up with years ago, a scene that can make the audience momentarily

forget the larger issues and impending doom surrounding them, offering an instance of emotional release. Ian Farnell writes how the characters "express themselves through movement and music," creating revolution (43). However, rather than inciting a revolution, this dance can remind us of the characters' acceptance of their fate and realisation that "interdependency and public action" (Butler et al. 7) are the only solutions to combat a hopeless reality.

After this fleeting moment of unity, the concept of "inconvenience" becomes prominent again through the overflowing toilet. Initially, Rose lies about having done a "number two," but as the water "*begins to flood the floor*" (66, italics in the original), the unavoidable reality forces them to confront their reality. The water spilling out represents the hidden and ignored issues that can no longer be contained, illustrating how their attempts to maintain a semblance of normalcy are ultimately useless. The overflowing toilet reminds us of Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence, which he describes as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence … that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). The characters are forced to deal with the immediate and unpleasant mess, reflecting how the environmental catastrophe has slowly but continually intruded upon their efforts to create a stable, secure life. Hazel's immediate reaction is a state of anxiety and fear after realising that her security is in danger: "well done you silly bitch" (66). In this situation of stress, Hazel and Robin experience affective dissonance, which instigates "a sense of injustice and then a desire to rectify that" (Hemmings 157). It is also in this instance that Robin decides to join forces with Rose, recognising the necessity for collective action.

Initially content with their isolation, the three protagonists unite in the face of overwhelming unease, recognising their shared vulnerability, and expressing a desire for solidarity. When horror becomes ubiquitous, "solidarity and cooperation is in the interest of the survival of all and each of us" making it "the only rational egotist thing to do" (Slavoj Žižek 68). In the final scene, a frightened Hazel asks Robin to call their daughter to let her know about his plans to return to the power plant. In the meantime, she picks up a yoga mat to "*perform a yoga routine*" (79, italics in the original) together with Rose while Robin sweeps the water out the door. In the final scene of *The Children*, the audience gets immersed in the play through sound:

very gradually, the sound of a wave building.

It grows and grows.

It crashes upon us.

Silence. (79)

Moreover, water is projected onto the stage, with waves appearing to engulf the protagonists as the lights dim. Alongside this visual imagery, the sound of a submerged church bell plays a crucial role in creating an affective experience for the audience. The bell's tolling, "*distorted but unmistakable*" (79, italics in the original), adds a haunting quality to the atmosphere and evokes a palpable sense of doom. This combination of sound and visual elements immerses the audience in the scene, heightening the emotional impact and reinforcing the play's themes of crisis and shared vulnerability. While Hoydis interprets Hazel's decision to join Rose as an inspiring gesture of hope (93), the play itself does not explicitly state Hazel's final choice. Instead, it concludes with a non-cathartic ending that deliberately resists resolution or relief, leaving Hazel's ultimate decision ambiguous.

This non-cathartic ending aligns with Ngai's concept of "ugly feelings." These feelings—such as envy, irritation, anxiety, or guilt—are defined by "a flatness or ongoingness," making them "weaker and nastier" (Ngai 7). They are "non-cathartic" and thus offer "no satisfaction of virtue, however oblique, nor any therapeutic or purifying release" (6). Despite this, Ngai views ugly feelings as having "critical productivity," (3) especially in relation to artworks, as they provoke ongoing reflection and engagement. The play concludes without offering a definitive resolution, mirroring Ngai's argument that "'discourse time' becomes considerably longer than 'story time'" (13). By leaving Hazel's ultimate decision about joining the others unresolved and not clarifying what the outcome of their help at the power plant will be, the play prolongs the audience's engagement with the dilemmas presented, emphasising the ongoing nature of the crisis. Furthermore, the sound of waves engulfing the audience ensures that the emotional tension lingers long after the play ends, illustrating how "the play is as disturbing to replay in your imagination as it is to see in the first place" (Jesse Green). This refusal of catharsis may leave the audience feeling "confused about what one is feeling" (Ngai 14), but this very confusion can resonate deeply with their own reality and the challenges we all face in confronting the ecological crisis. By refusing a clear resolution, the play underscores how daunting it can feel to effect real change,

emphasising how the solutions we are offered often feel inadequate, reinforcing a sense of helplessness in altering the course of the ecological crisis. The open ending serves as a reminder of the imminent and unresolved nature of the crisis. Although the play does not offer any "salvific future-oriented logics" (Waal 56), it relies on affective dissonance to evoke "a sense of injustice" (Hemmings 157), encouraging audiences to critically reflect on the broader implications of the crisis and prompting a collective responsibility to confront these issues.

This paper has examined how *The Children* portrays fear, anxiety, and other unsettling emotions. Through this, we gain a deeper understanding of the personal and collective vulnerabilities that characterise the current geopolitical moment. As Woynarski notes, "climate change needs to be understood as violence in order to understand its effects" (5), and precisely by immersing the audience in the characters' world, *The Children* encourages a profound reflection on both personal and societal levels, asking viewers to react to their own realities. Kirkwood resists offering simple solutions or utopian visions and instead demonstrates the overwhelming nature of confronting issues that affect us all, a struggle she describes as reflecting "how overwhelming" the process of making changes "might feel" (Kirkwood, quoted in Sarah Corridon). The play's refusal of catharsis at the end aims to create a sense of unease in the audience to reflect on the events presented on stage and "defamiliarise and restructure our experience of our own present" (Fredric Jameson, quoted in Trish Reid 76). The audience is constantly reminded of the fragility of their world, creating a sense of unease throughout the play that represents society's anxiety, a feeling that has "become central for the understanding of socio-political phenomena and community life" (Emmy Eklundh et al. 1). This exploration of negative affects and their overwhelming nature opens up conversations about how we engage with and address the pressing issues of our time, both within and beyond the realm of theatre.

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