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Overview of Latino Children and U.S. Public Education

Robert K. Ream and Lillia Vazquez

The history of Latinos¹ in U.S. public education is fraught with contradictions, none of them more basic than this: schooling serves both as the pathway to the proverbial American Dream and as the threshing floor on which Hispanic students' cultural and linguistic knowledge is so often separated and then swept aside. A recent study based on data gathered by the U.S. Census Bureau reveals impressive advances over the course of the 20th century in Hispanic educational attainment from generation to generation. Mexican immigrants born between 1905 and 1909 averaged only 4.3 years of schooling. Their American-born sons, averaging 9.3 years of schooling, doubled the years of schooling, and their grandsons were high school graduates, averaging 12.2 years of schooling (Smith 2003). These gains notwithstanding, the rates of socioeconomic progress for many U.S. Hispanics over successive generations have been decidedly slower than the rates for European immigrants of the 19th and early 20th centuries (Chapa 1988; Gans 1992; National Research Council 2006). So while there is some merit to the notion of public education as "the great leveler of the social hierarchy" (McMurrer and Sawhill 1998), Hispanics count disproportionately among exceptions by almost any measure of the American Dream narrative popularized in the 19th century in Horatio Alger's hackneyed tales of self-made success (Pew Hispanic Center 2009).

1 On the West Coast the meta-categorical term *Latino* is generally preferred to *Hispanic*—the latter adopted in the 1970s and first employed in the 1980 U.S. Census (Bean and Tienda 1987). Yet if U.S. Latinos/Hispanics are asked to choose between the panethnic terms, Hispanic is preferred to Latino by a 3 to 1 margin (National Research Council 2006). We use both terms interchangeably. As mere labels, however, neither adequately describes the diverse ethnic and cultural heritage of the populations in question.

Widespread disaffection with schooling among Hispanic youth can be traced not only to historical burdens of poverty and nativist hostility, but also to longstanding subtractive schooling practices (Valenzuela 1999). By the term *subtractive schooling* we refer to the practice of many U.S. schools of divesting the children of immigrants of the cultures and languages they bring to school from home, and thus on a basic level of the formative experiences, imaginative resources, and rudimentary identity derived through family life and tradition (Moll 2001; Portes and Rumbaut 2001). Dropout rates among Hispanic students are three times those of non-Hispanic whites (National Center for Education Statistics 2005). Notably, schools employing subtractive practices are implicated in, though by no means entirely responsible for,² our country's continuing history of racialized inequality, as measured by educational inputs and outcomes (Gibson, Gándara, and Koyama 2004; Ream 2005; Valenzuela, 1999).

Perhaps the best evidence regarding racialized gaps in test score outcomes is derived from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), widely known as the nation's report card. NAEP trend data demonstrate persistent, if fluctuating, test score gaps running back to 1971. According to the 2007 NAEP data, by the time they are in fourth grade Hispanic students are already lagging one year behind their non-Hispanic counterparts in both mathematics and reading (Ream, Espinoza, and Ryan 2009). For too long these patterned differences have been referred to as "achievement gaps," a term that is considered by many to be a problematic misnomer. Indeed, by reframing outcome gaps as the shameful product of a long history of discriminatory gaps in educational inputs, Gloria Ladson-Billings argued in her 2005 presidential address to the American Educational Research Association that the "achievement gap" could

2 James Coleman was a sociologist at Johns Hopkins University when his controversial 1966 report to the U.S. Congress, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, became the first national study to offer a systemic description of ethnoracial differences in academic achievement among children of various ages. To his surprise, Coleman found that (1) while schools certainly influence student achievement—much of what tests measure must be learned in schools—and (2) although school quality varies widely in the United States, the large documented differences in the quality of schools attended by Hispanic versus white children fail to explain most of the difference in average levels of achievement between Hispanics and whites (Miller 1997). These rather controversial findings have been cross-examined by many researchers. Few, if any, dispute Coleman's fundamental claims (Rothstein 2004).

be more accurately understood as a historically accumulated “educational debt” that the United States owes to minority and poor students who have been inadequately served by the education system (Ladson-Billings 2006). In the sections that follow we look back at one of the earliest school desegregation cases in U.S. history, specifically the 1931 Lemon Grove Incident, and then consider a series of subsequent judicial rulings and legislative events that lend support to Ladson-Billing’s perception of a longstanding educational debt. Although we would have liked to cover more ground, we can account here for only a fraction of the many events in history that have influenced education outcomes for U.S. Hispanics. In our closing remarks, however, we take a look at an emergent new and potentially historic chapter in the making, one that seems especially suited to a book designed to celebrate Latino children’s literature and literacy.

In her essay “Reading Trauma and Violence in U.S. Latina/o Children’s Literature,” cultural studies scholar Tiffany Ana Lopez perceives a renaissance in children’s literature, spurred in large part by Latino authors such as Luis Rodriguez, Gloria Anzaldúa, Roberto Gonzalez, and Julia Alvarez, who are better known for their contributions to literature for adults (Lopez 2009). As part of an effort to give back to their community, these writers are fashioning stories that can help counter the histories, policies, and educational practices that have so often culminated in subtractive cultural assimilation and have thus promoted racialized gaps in achievement. In Lopez’s view, stories for children partake of a cultural project of documenting Latino experiences, what Lopez refers to as an act of “critical witnessing,” which we believe is itself part of an ambitious project of history-making. In this sense, the critical witness (as performed by children’s literature) describes a way of being “so moved or inspired by the experience of encountering a text as to embrace a specific course of action avowedly intended to forge a path toward change” (Lopez 2009, p. 1). In writing about past and present injustices, these writers figure them as part of a hopeful expectation, as a prologue to a history of Hispanics yet to be written, and for this reason we highlight the educational implications of their history-making work in our concluding remarks.

COLLECTIVE VIGILANCE

Alvarez v. Lemon Grove School District (1931)

In the midst of the Great Depression, the Lemon Grove School Board met in the summer of 1930, ostensibly to discuss the issue of overcrowding in

the local elementary school. In fact, board members sought to appease the predominantly non-Hispanic white community located in eastern San Diego County by approving the construction of a two-room schoolhouse for Mexican Americans only. This “new” school would serve effectively as a pretext to deny Mexican Americans access to the common school they had previously attended, on the grounds that these children “did not speak English and were unsanitary” (Ladson-Billings 2004, p. 5). Standing before the entrance to the Lemon Grove Grammar School on January 5, 1931, the principal prevented the Hispanic children from returning to the classroom in which they had been educated only weeks earlier, redirecting them to the segregated two-room school site later to become known as *La Caballeriza*—“the stable” (Valencia 2008). No National Guard troops were called in to enforce desegregation in Depression-era Lemon Grove, because there were as yet no federal laws to make the actions of the board obviously illegal. Nevertheless, in defiance of the district’s separatist solution to the problem of overcrowding, the parents of the affected children boycotted the school, galvanizing support from the larger Mexican American community. The *Comité de Vecinos de Lemon Grove* (Lemon Grove Neighborhood Committee) subsequently sued the school board in the name of Roberto Alvarez, one of the aggrieved schoolchildren (Valencia, Menchaca, and Donato 2002). In their petition they noted that California, unlike Arizona and Texas at that time, had “no statute allowing for the segregation of Mexican American children based on race” (Valencia 2008, p. 20).³

If the school board justified its decision by citing the need to Americanize “Mexican” students, and to attend specially and separately to their English-language developmental needs, the arguments were riddled with double standards, especially as no such remedy was offered to children who were not of Mexican origin but demonstrated similar needs. In his decision, the judge instructed the district to readmit all students to Lemon Grove Grammar School. For the most part the ruling was considered a local event, setting no immediate precedent for legal struggles against segregation practices in the Southwest (Alvarez 1986). Nevertheless, the Lemon Grove Incident came to be known as the first case of its kind in the United States, a successful class-action lawsuit regarding school desegregation, and an antecedent to the 1946 *Méndez v. Westminster* case—the first to call into question the High Court’s “separate

3 Essentialist laws allowing the segregation of “Oriental,” “Negro,” and “Indian” children did not apply to Mexican Americans, who were at that time considered in California to be “of the Caucasian race” (Valencia 2008).

but equal” doctrine handed down a half century earlier in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896).

Méndez v. Westminster (1946)

While the limited reach of the district court ruling constrained the impact of the Lemon Grove Incident, some fifteen years later the Ninth Circuit Appeals Court established in *Méndez v. Westminster* a nationwide precedent for the cessation of segregated “Mexican schools.” In 1944 the Méndez family resided in the Southern California town of Westminster, where the local elementary school officially admitted only Anglo students. Despite this restriction, fair-skinned Soledad Vidaurri—the Méndez siblings’ aunt—had managed to enroll her own children in Westminster Elementary. The advantages of light complexion and a French-origin surname did not extend to the Méndez children, however. When his children’s enrollment application was denied, Gonzalo Méndez joined cause with other parents in the region who were determined to confront public schools designed for whites only (Valencia 2008; Wollenberg 1974). The group of parents retained the services of civil rights attorney David C. Marcus, who filed suit on behalf of the Méndez group against four Orange County school districts. Although previous segregation cases, such as the Lemon Grove Incident, had proceeded partially on racial grounds, *Méndez* was the first case to assert that the rationale of “separate but equal” did not square with the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

Deploying expert testimony from social scientists, Marcus contended with the logic of segregation itself. Rather than facilitating “Americanization,” as the Lemon Grove School Board had maintained, segregation actually posed barriers to English language acquisition as well as to the assimilation of Mexican Americans (Diaz 2007; Galicia 2007). The introduction of empirical data for the court’s deliberations was a key aspect of this case, facilitating in effect a reinterpretation of the law. In his decision, Judge Paul J. McCormick had obviously been swayed:

The “equal protection of the laws” pertaining to the public school system in California is not provided by furnishing in separate schools the same technical facilities, text books and courses of instruction to children of Mexican ancestry that are available to other public school children regardless of their ancestry. A paramount requisite in the American system of public education is social equality. It must be open to all children by unified school association regardless of lineage (*Méndez v. Westminster* 1946).

Despite the ruling, there were school districts and even some courts that continued to abet segregation practices, and by some counts the practice of separating Hispanic children from non-Hispanic whites actually increased in the wake of *Méndez* (Galicia 2007). Still, the ruling had established a precedent for other court decisions that would gradually tilt state laws toward desegregation (Diaz 2007; Meier and Stewart 1991),⁴ and by reinterpreting the Fourteenth Amendment it had laid the ground for the U.S. Supreme Court's unanimous *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling in 1954 (Gonzalez 1990).

Brown v. Board of Education (1954)

While the *Méndez* decision established, de jure, the illegality of segregating youth of Mexican origin from their peers, a lack of will to implement the ruling posed serious barriers to desegregation efforts not only in California but throughout the nation. It took another eight years for the U.S. Supreme Court to disavow the practice of segregation at the national level and thereby challenge the conventional dual system of public education in American society. Working with empirical data and integrationist arguments much like those employed in *Méndez*, the plaintiffs in *Brown v. Board of Education* also argued that segregation of any identified minority group was contradictory to the protections of the Fourteenth Amendment and therefore unconstitutional. In the final ruling, Chief Justice Earl Warren and the other justices of the court gave legal expression to a changing America as they unanimously rejected the "separate but equal" doctrine that had been established in the 1896 *Plessy* verdict, and thereby created at long last a national standard of equality in educational opportunity (Greenburg 2004; Valencia 2008).

Of course, the consequences of even the most promising court rulings and legislative initiatives depend on the capacity and will of individuals to enact reform in real-life contexts at the local level. In the wake of *Brown*, the limited reach of even the highest court in the land was made apparent, as the call for school integration with "all deliberate speed" moved forward often haltingly and sometimes stalled altogether. Many communities continued segregationist practices in the name of integration by grouping, or integrating, Hispanics and blacks together while leaving well-off whites to themselves (Valencia 2008;

4 Two years following *Méndez*, a federal district court also denied the language deficiency argument for separate Mexican American schools by ruling in *Delgado v. Bastrop Independent School District* (1948) that the segregation practices of that Texas district were in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment (Salinas 1971).

Valencia, Menchaca, and Donato 2002). In still other cases Anglo school officials cynically used Hispanic children deemed “white” to offer the appearance of cooperating with federal racial integration orders;⁵ and, in response to tactics of this sort, African Americans and Hispanics often collaborated in resistance (MacDonald 2004). Moreover, the *Brown* ruling had not addressed de facto segregation practices rationalized on the premise of language deficiency (Diaz 2007). Not until the civil rights movement would legislators, this time in advance of the courts, develop bilingual education programs to address the literacy needs of English learners without the punishing effects of segregation.

Bilingual Education Act (1968)

It was in Florida in response to the influx of refugees of the Cuban Revolution that the first modern-day dual-language and biethnic education program was implemented in 1963 (Garcia and Wiese 2002; Valencia 2008). Three years later, in the widely read report *The Invisible Minority . . . Pero No Vencibles*, the National Education Association (NEA) proclaimed bilingual education a key strategy for improving the educational experiences of Hispanic children in the Southwest (National Education Association 1966). Shortly thereafter, Democratic U.S. Senator Ralph Yarborough of Texas went on to sponsor an amendment to the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (the original version of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001), which provided federal funding for bilingual programs in schools with Spanish-speaking students. Subsequent legislation by Democratic Congressman James Scheuer of New York was designed to meet the “special needs” of all non-English-speaking children by providing federal financial assistance to local school districts, so that they might develop and implement bilingual education programs. Signed into law in 1968, the Bilingual Education Act did not require school agencies to participate, and many districts failed to take advantage of the newly available resources. In fact, less than 3 percent of the Mexican American student population in the Southwest was enrolled in bilingual education a full year after the act had been signed into law (Valencia 2008). Even among those districts and schools that attempted to capitalize on this new opportunity, implementation of the law was impinged by vagaries of purpose (no particular program of instruction had been

⁵ As a glaring example, the *Ross v. Eckles* (1970) ruling stands out for granting authority to school districts to treat Mexican Americans as whites so as to facilitate segregation by other means (Meier and Stewart 1991; San Miguel 2001).

recommended) as well as by lack of capacity among educators and by funding irregularities (García and Wiese 2002). This compelled further litigation and subsequent policy activity.

Lau v. Nichols (1974)

In 1974 the U.S. Supreme Court was once again called upon to adjudicate a major class-action lawsuit pertaining to educational quality and equality. When Chinese Americans in San Francisco filed the case soon to be known as *Lau v. Nichols*, English remained the only required language of instruction in U.S. public schools and most English learners (ELs)⁶ were still precluded from a meaningful educational experience (Roos 1978; Valencia, Menchaca, and Donato 2002). Though it is commonly thought of as a language rights ruling, the Supreme Court's decision in *Lau* did not require school districts to implement bilingual education as the means to provide language minority students with an equitable educational opportunity. It did rule, however, that public schools must provide a curriculum comprehensible to students who did not speak English, and recognized bilingual education as one such avenue for addressing the special needs of minority students. Furthermore, since the ruling obligated the Office for Civil Rights of the U.S. Department of Education to ensure compliance, policymakers and educators began to search in earnest for better ways to instruct ELs (Gonzalez and Lam 2007). In 1976 California became the third state, after Massachusetts and Texas, to pass legislation that exceeded the prescriptions of either the 1968 Bilingual Education Act or the 1974 *Lau* ruling by requiring schools with specific numbers of English learners to offer bilingual education. Other states followed suit: 31 states had bilingual education provisions in place by 1979 (Crawford 1989; Gary et al. 1981). A decade later, however, bilingual education had become a contentious and highly politicized topic of debate, and by the late 1990s the reaction against bilingual education sentiment reached a tipping point with the 1998 passage of California's Proposition 227, which was designed to limit the practice of native-language instruction in public schools (Guerrero 2002). Shortly thereafter Arizona voters passed a similar measure, Proposition 203, which effectively dismantled bilingual education in Arizona public schools in favor of single-year English-immersion programming.

6 We use "English learner" to describe students who initially learn a language other than English in their home. The term includes students who are just beginning to learn English and students who are approaching proficiency in English but may need additional assistance in schooling situations.

The Williams Case (2000)

Although our brief historical review has focused mainly on cases of collective resistance to school segregation pursued through legal channels, it is important also to recall the perpetual debate over school finance and resource distribution pertaining to segregation issues. Indeed, school segregation and school finance are historically and fundamentally intertwined in ways that bear heavily on children from Spanish-speaking households. English learners, the vast majority of whom are Hispanics, are especially set apart in schools where facilities and conditions are poor. Furthermore, they are more likely than any other group of children to be taught by emergency-credentialed teachers who receive little professional support and development aimed at bolstering their capacity to teach children whose home language is Spanish. If the numbers of children were declining the situation might not be critically important, but the situation is entirely the opposite: approximately 14.5 million children are English learners nationwide, and the numbers are on the rise. In many California schools more than one quarter of the student body is not fluent in English (Rumberger and Gándara 2004). Due in no small part to concerns of this nature, Eliezer Williams and nearly one hundred other students filed a class-action suit in San Francisco County Superior Court against the state of California in May 2000. The advocates for *Williams* charged the state with failure to provide safe and decent school facilities, qualified teachers, and equal access to instructional materials (Oakes 2004). The students most affected by these problems were Latinos and other underrepresented minorities. The case was resolved out of court in 2003 when Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger took office and asked the state's attorney general to negotiate a settlement. As a result, California schools are required to report the overall condition of their facilities, the number of teachers assigned to instruct classes for which they lack credentials, and the availability of textbooks or instructional materials. Moreover, millions of dollars in additional funding have been allocated to California public schools deemed to be performing below average levels (see: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/eo/ce/wc/wmslawsuit.asp>).⁷

7 Critics of the ruling assert, however, that it fails to guarantee a high-quality education to all the state's children and "merely seeks a minimum threshold for educational provisions, below which no child must be made to suffer" (Oakes 2004, 1891).

BRIEF SUMMARY

Although at least some empirical data suggest the American Dream remains an important narrative for explaining Hispanic intergenerational mobility (Smith 2003), we have emphasized in this chapter that a critical reading of the history of Latinos in education requires us to see the Hispanic “achievement gap” as a historically unreconciled “educational debt.” To avoid placing the onus for attaining the American Dream solely in the hands of individuals, we have attempted here to shift the narrative for American self-understanding to another well-recognized story that extols the idea of the national community—a story of neighbor helping neighbor as part of the ongoing process of becoming a better nation (Reich 2005). The 1931 Lemon Grove Incident exemplifies this second version of American narrative, in which a community (within the larger national community) pried back open the doors to educational opportunity on behalf of young Roberto Alvarez and his classmates. So, too, in 1946 the Méndez family and their friends made a similar push to advance educational opportunity through the courts; and only eight years later the plaintiffs in *Brown* successfully argued against the longstanding practice of segregated education in which schools were imagined “as separate as the fingers,”⁸ thereby debunking the notion that schools might be segregated but no less equal. More recently, the Bilingual Education Act (1968), *Lau* (1974), and *Williams* (2000) show how collective action and empirical research can effectively destabilize rationalities built upon individualistic cultural narratives, which when left unchallenged perpetuate the status quo.

By communal acts such as those we have considered, the possibility of individual liberty and upward mobility through quality education has been at least partly restored not only for Hispanic youth but for all children thanks to educational reforms spurred by historically underrepresented groups. Although our focus here has by necessity been limited and even selective, in effect accounting for only a small portion of the history of Latinos in public education, there is a significant pattern here. On the strength of that pattern of collective advocacy we want to turn by way of conclusion to what might be

8 Once the most famous African American in the United States, nothing brought Booker T. Washington more notoriety than his 1895 speech at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta, where only one year prior to the U.S. Supreme Court ruling legalizing segregation in *Plessy* (1896) he proclaimed that “in all things purely social we can be as separate as the fingers” (Hahn 2009).

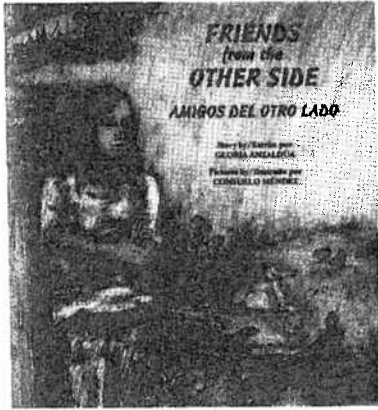
thought of as a prologue of educational events to come, specifically, by attending to acts of “critical witnessing” in new and emergent literature written for Hispanic youth. Such work seems especially important insofar as it challenges the detrimental effects of communal trauma even as it expands our sense of how such trauma works in groups, as a consequence of a shared history of injustice. One area in which the effects of such trauma can be witnessed is in the intergenerational transfer of inequality, which arises from the efforts of minority groups to confront—often with only limited success—the exclusions practiced against them by well-resourced institutions such as those to which we have called attention above. In short, the cumulative effects of being denied equal access to good schools and effective curricula are lasting, intergenerational, and (by the modern connotation of the term) even traumatic. A certain strain of children’s literature written by prominent Latino authors for Latino youth is designed, as we read it, to inoculate readers from the transmitted ill effects of historical injustices. By making Latino children cognizant of (without being merely determined by) injustice, this work inspires a praxis that would instigate change in our understanding of the education experience of minority youth in this country.

MOVING FORWARD: THE ACT OF CRITICAL WITNESSING

According to Tiffany Ana Lopez, the list of scholars and writers who draw from the past as a means to inspire through children’s literature the possibility of corrective action is rapidly expanding (Lopez 2009). Lopez works within the parameters of modern trauma studies, but we suspect that the value of her notion of “critical witnessing” has a broader potential: (1) to stimulate resistance among Hispanic youth to the strains of trauma that perpetuate their sense of “otherness,” and (2) to translate the offenses of the past into present possibilities (Spargo 2002). Insofar as a lack of knowledge perpetuates the traumatic effect, then “the ability of Latina/o children to navigate an openly hostile and debilitating world depends,” Lopez insists, “on their being taught active modes of engagement such as those offered through literatures of critical witnessing” (Lopez 2009, p. 206).

Until fairly recently there had been little in the way of a Latino children’s literature working to make young readers aware of and better able to resist social injustice, and in effect also helping to transform subtractive schooling practices into its opposite, additive institutional praxis. Of late, however, examples of

liberatory children's literature abound. For instance, Luis Rodriguez (author of the memoir *Always Running—La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.*) challenges “the crazy life” in gangs and sees the phenomena of gang warfare, racism, and poverty as interrelated. Ultimately, he exposes the gang lifestyle as a self-defeating response to the historically perpetuated stereotypes and stigmas that bear down



Cover image from *Friends From the Other Side / Amigos del otro lado*. Story © 1993 by Gloria Anzaldúa. Illustrations © 1993 by Consuelo Mendez. Reprinted with permission of the publisher, Children's Book Press, San Francisco, CA, www.childrensbookpress.org.

on Hispanic youth. In her critical account of Rodriguez's illustrated children's books (such as *It Doesn't Have to Be This Way* and *America Is Her Name*), Lopez highlights the role of mentors in helping children to *imagine* beyond the limits of the violence they face on a day-to-day basis and the debilitating alienation that so often follows from it. So, also, the late Gloria Anzaldúa (award-winning author of *Borderlands/La Frontera*) taps the power of imagination in her children's book *Friends from the Other Side* in order to create a new horizon arising from the reader's empathy for the characters. In *Friends* the young protagonist Prietita sees much more clearly than her peers the humanity in Joaquin, an immigrant child from Mexico whose language and comportment make it hard for him to fit into his new American community. Anzaldúa creates a narrative space “driven by empathy and understanding, rather than presumptions

born from stereotypes, fear, or ignorance” (Lopez 2009, p. 218). Through the act of imagining made possible by literature, she extends the engagement with injustice evident in her writing for adult audiences into children's literature, and thereby creates fertile ground both for acts of self-help for “at-risk” youth and for collective efforts to transforming children's lives from the state of being at-risk to the state of being of-promise. Much as Lopez observes the critical and liberatory potential of Rodriguez, Anzaldúa, and a number of other authors, we are persuaded that acts of critical witnessing serve as gifts to the imaginative identity development of Hispanic youth while also potentially transforming the practices of the school personnel charged with their education. For if students are to be protected from the injustices they inherit and face daily—and if we as educators are to be moved to intervene in their traumatic experience—we must first be able to imagine the reality and nature of those injustices and to conceive of ways in which they can be resisted.

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