

# **Street Naming as a Civil Rights Issue: Teaching Spatial Justice and the Politics of Remembering Martin Luther King, Jr.**

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## **Abstract**

In order for us to advance the teaching of place names beyond simply memorization and the mapping of naming patterns, we must “place” these names and the study of naming within the lives and struggles of people. Doing so requires focusing on the capacity of place names to serve as “cultural arenas,” sites of contest, debate, and negotiation as social groups, particularly minorities, compete for the right to name the landscape and cast legitimacy on their cultural histories and identities. Naming streets for slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. is a common practice in many U.S. communities. Yet, the road-naming process is frequently characterized by intense debates about King’s legacy, questions of race and racism, and where best to situate his name in public space. For many proponents, finding the most appropriate street to identify with King comes with the difficulty of convincing the white establishment that his name belongs on major roads and that his legacy has relevance and resonance to everyone’s lives. King’s namesakes are more than just monuments to the Civil Rights Movement. They are also extensions of the ongoing struggle for civil rights, racial equality, and the African American “right to the city.” Within the geography classroom, the street name politics of remembering Dr. King serves as an effective way of teaching about spatial justice, a concept that recognizes the important role that geography plays in social life and campaigns for justice. A critical reading of street naming disputes involving King allows students to understand the spatial context of two well-established concepts—procedural and distributive justice. Procedural and distributive barriers in naming hinder the full realization of the cultural rights of African Americans and the creation of a landscape that truly reflects the teachings of King. The paper ends by describing a student exercise developed to assess roads named for King in the context transportation justice, livable streets, and walkability, thus pushing the teaching of place names toward critical landscape study and planning.

## **Introduction**

Place names have long played an important role in the study and teaching of geography—from the rote memorization of capitals and physical features to more sophisticated spatial and cultural analyses of naming patterns (Randall 2001). Traditionally, geographers have collected, classified, and mapped place names as cultural artifacts, using them to reconstruct the direction and timing of human migrations, the location of past settlements, the original vegetation and land use of an area, the boundaries of vernacular regions, and the contours of national and regional identity and commemoration (Leighly 1978; Zelinsky 1988). Yet, a focus simply on naming

patterns does not fully capture the naming process and the people behind these patterns. As Withers (2000, 533) astutely observed: “Attention to the name alone, either on the ground or on an historical map, runs the risk of concerning itself with ends and not with means; of ignoring, or, at best, underplaying the social processes intrinsic to the authoritative act of naming.”

Over the past several years, geographers have taken on the task of examining the social processes to which Withers refers and studying place naming as a contested spatial practice that sheds light on social power relations and struggles (Azaryahu and Kook 2002; Kearns and Berg 2002; Light 2004; Berg and Vuolteenaho 2009). While this shift in approach is increasingly evident in the basic geographic research, there is little sign of it within the discipline’s pedagogical literature.

The purpose of this paper is to offer, conceptually and empirically, a means of bringing a socially critical perspective of place naming into the geography classroom. A case study of streets named for slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. affords students an opportunity to explore place naming as a cultural arena for minority struggles to shape the public identity of landscapes. King’s namesakes are more than just monuments to the Civil Rights Movement. They are also extensions of the ongoing African American claims for civil rights, racial equality, and a “right to the city” (Dwyer and Alderman 2008).

Within the geography classroom, the street name politics of remembering Dr. King serves as an effective way of not only teaching the contested politics of place naming but also *spatial justice*, a concept that recognizes the important roles that space, place, and territory play in questions of social equity and fairness. The paper concludes with a field exercise for bringing the analysis of King Streets into the geography classroom. The exercise is designed to broaden

the geographic empathy of students as they examine of an under-analyzed component of spatial justice—transportation justice and the role of walkability in creating “livable streets.”

### **A Cultural Arena Approach to Place Naming**

Newer approaches to place name study stress the cultural politics of naming. From this perspective, “assigning a name to a given location does much more than merely denote an already-existing ‘place’.” Rather, “the act of naming is itself a performative practice that calls forth the ‘place’ to which it refers” and thus participates in the social construction of the landscape and its meaning to people (Rose-Redwood et al 2010, 454). Moreover, place names do not simply *reflect* people’s religious beliefs, ethnic origins, perceptions of nature, and political values. They also *project* and work to legitimize these beliefs and values, affecting the sense of place of future generations and what they perceive as the natural or assumed order of things (Azaryahu 1996).

Because of the cultural power of naming, social actors and groups place great value on controlling the messages communicated on and through the place name landscape. Humans name places to create a sense of order and familiarity, frequently choosing names that affirm the importance of their point of view or cultural identity. Naming represents a means of claiming or taking ownership of places, both materially and symbolically. It is little surprise then that in many world regions, a renaming of geographic features accompanied European colonial exploration. Explorers and mapmakers not only projected their Western values onto the landscape but also excluded and de-valued the naming systems of original inhabitants, in effect writing off native knowledge. In this regard, the absence of a naming pattern can be as revealing as the presence of one; for it can shed light on the selective way in which place names give voice to certain worldviews while silencing others.

While place naming can be conceptualized as a form symbolic control, this domination is rarely complete and can be challenged. Indeed, an important part of the “politics of place naming” approach is recognizing that naming is not always controlled by elites and traditionally dominant groups. Naming can also be appropriated by less powerful stakeholders who wish to construct a more prominent public identity and have a greater democratic role in the fashioning of the landscape. In this respect, place naming has the capacity to serve as a form of *symbolic resistance*, recognizing of course that this resistance can elicit its own resistance from opponents to changing the status quo (Alderman 2008).

The metaphor of “cultural arena,” which I have developed in other work (Alderman 2002), focuses on the capacity of place names to serve as sites of contest, debate, and negotiation as social groups compete for the right to name the landscape and cast legitimacy on their linguistic and cultural history and identity. Place names are increasingly arenas for asserting and debating minority cultural rights and the growing social importance of multiculturalism. Governments are under growing pressure from racial and ethnic minority groups and sympathetic whites to be sensitive to the place name interests of these historically marginalized groups. Australian officials, for example, are moving toward the restoration and use of Aboriginal place names and the involvement of these indigenous communities in the naming process. Events in Australia are part of a larger global geography of place name politics worth exploring in the classroom; for it can assist students in understanding the changing and contested nature of place and identity and how minority identity politics increasingly (re)shape the landscape. In my case, I would like to offer a view from the United States, addressing the contested geography of Martin Luther King, Jr. Streets.

## **A Street Fit for a King?**

The contested nature of place naming is especially evident in the use of these names for public commemoration as people struggle to decide who has the right to determine what is remembered (and forgotten) publicly and officially. Racial and ethnic minorities in the United States, for example, are increasingly turning to place naming as a political strategy for addressing their exclusion and misrepresentation within traditional, white-dominated constructions of heritage. This strategy has led to the removal of racially and ethnically derogatory place names as well as the renaming of places in ways that recognize the historical importance of minorities (Monmonier 2006).

African Americans have been especially vocal in calling for changes in the place name landscape of the United States. In arguing for a greater public recognition of their experiences and struggles, African American activists have carried out a campaign of: (1) removing place names that commemorate white supremacists or purveyors of racial inequality, and (2) renaming places to celebrate black historical figures, particularly from the American Civil Rights Movement. These name changes reflect an effort to create a place identity and image that can assist in reconstructing and enhancing the group identity of African Americans. By naming landscapes in ways that talk about the historical importance of minorities, African Americans seek to change the way they are valued in the present and, in turn, the future (Alderman 2006).

Removing racially insensitive place name references has proven especially controversial. Florida's Palm Beach School Board finally decided to remove the name of Jefferson Davis from a middle school after several years of resistance from parents and white Civil War heritage groups. School officials and African American activists interpreted Davis, the only president of the pro-slavery, southern secessionist government called the Confederacy, as an inappropriate

identity for the school and its student population (Alderman 2008). Events in New Orleans, Louisiana also illustrate the importance that some African Americans see in rewriting the historical identity of schools through renaming. In the early 1990s, the Orleans Parish school board passed a policy that prohibited school names honoring slave owners and others who did not respect equality. The names of many white historical figures (including the slave-holding first president of the United States, George Washington) were removed from schools and replaced with names commemorating prominent African-Americans, including Martin Luther King, Jr. These name changes, especially the removal of Washington's name, sparked a nationwide debate.

Martin Luther King Jr. is important in African American efforts to rewrite the commemorative place name landscape. As a cultural geographer, I have spent the past several years documenting the emergence of streets named for Dr. King and analyzing the place these streets occupy within the lives and geographies of black and white Americans. Street names serve, literally and figuratively, as signposts for directing people in what (and who) is important historically. Martin Luther King Drives, Boulevards, and Avenues are important centers of African American identity, activism, and community—constituting what journalist Jonathan Tilove (2003) has called “Black America’s Main Street.”

By 2010, at least 893 cities and towns in the United States had named a street for King. Although these named streets are found throughout the U.S., they are clustered in the southeastern region. It is in the Southeast where the earliest Civil Rights Movement battles were fought and the current home of a majority of the country’s African American population. As an aside, King’s name can also be found on streets and other public places in a wide range of

countries—Belgium, Brazil, Cameroon, France, India, Israel, Italy, Panama, Russia, and Senegal to mention a few.

At least in the case of the United States, the place name commemoration of King evokes highly public protests and debates about King's legacy and questions of race and racism, thus providing insights into political tensions at the local level. Street naming is an especially potent form of cultural resistance and redefinition because of its potential to touch and connect disparate groups—some of which may not identify with King (Alderman 2000). However, one of the largest obstacles facing African Americans is the prevailing assumption among the conservative white establishment that King's historical relevance is limited to the black community and hence renamed streets should not cut across traditional racial boundaries in cities. For many activists, naming a road that stretches beyond minority neighborhoods is essential to educating the broader white public about the importance of King and all African Americans. These debates about where (and where not) to locate King's name and memory take place between blacks and whites, but they also occur within the African American community. Some naming proponents are more interested in inspiring and mobilizing their fellow African Americans than challenging the historical consciousness of whites (Alderman 2003).

Important to students of geography is the fact that the issue of place plays a key role in these struggles to commemorate King through street naming. Some African Americans have refused to rename a road for the civil rights leader when they believe the street does not have a sufficiently prominent status or identity. By the same token, some opposing whites believe that naming a street for King will stigmatize their street's identity and bring a decline in property value, although there is no evidence to substantiate this. As a result, King's name is frequently (but not always) found on side streets or portions of roads located within poor, black areas of

cities and towns (Mitchelson et al 2007). The renaming of these degraded and obscure streets has, in some instances, changed the streets' symbolic meaning from being a point of African American pride to yet another reminder of continued racial inequality. As some activists argue, to marginalize the commemoration of King on side streets within the black community, particularly in the face of African American requests not to do so, is to perpetuate the same force of segregation that the civil rights leader battled against (Alderman 1996).

The naming of streets for Martin Luther King in some ways says less about King and more about retelling the history of the United States to include a wider, more racially and ethnically diverse society. In this respect, honoring King is about enhancing the cultural identity of America as a country as well as the cultural identity of African Americans as a minority group. Yet, this redefinition and enhancement of identity has come with controversy as African Americans struggle to reverse the control historically exercised by whites over racial and ethnic minorities. These struggles prompt us to consider how the Civil Rights Movement, both in terms of how it has changed society and how it is remembered, is an evolving and unfinished project.

### **Street Naming and the Right to the City**

In teaching an arena approach to place names, I believe it is important for students to think about naming as a cultural right and reflect on how the geography of place names—where they are located and, even more importantly, where they are not—can advance or obstruct the realization of the political goals of historically marginalized social groups. As mentioned earlier, political struggles over naming streets for King often revolve around the issue of location, with proponents and opponents putting forth competing ideas about where best to emplace King's name and memory within the landscapes of cities and towns. In developing these ideas in the

classroom, spatial justice is a useful concept. Spatial justice is of growing popularity not only in geography but across the humanities, social sciences, and planning circles (Bromberg et al 2007).

Spatial justice recognizes that social, economic, and political injustices are frequently based on and perpetuated through the ways in which we organize and use spaces and places. Social life is inherently territorialized and any meaningful effort to create social justice must address the geographic order that constitutes and shapes social relations. Implicit is an understanding that the landscape, rather than a value-free construct, can be constructed to the unfair advantage of certain groups over others, thus reaffirming inequalities based on class, race/ethnicity, gender, etc. (Mitchell 2003). Because the concept of spatial justice recognizes that critical landscape analysis can assist in exposing and hopefully correcting these inequalities, it has profound implications for turning the geography classroom in a place of community engagement and social critique.

Traditionally, street naming—and place naming in general—have not been studied in the context of spatial justice. This is due, in part, to the fact that place naming, until relatively recently, was not studied as a critical political and social practice. I suggest that place naming represents a means of public expression that advances and casts legitimacy on certain notions of cultural citizenship. Citizenship, as used here, is not restricted to strict legal definitions, but refers in broader terms to the selective ways in communities are organized socially and spatially to facilitate the exclusion or inclusion of certain groups over others. The cultural identities and heritages that the landscape projects (or not) can be of great importance in conferring citizenship or a “sense of belonging” to people. Such a perspective recognizes the important role the landscape expression and visibility plays in social empowerment. Although public visibility does not guarantee legitimacy, it is crucial for traditionally marginalized groups to be able to

create and claim “spaces for representation,” where these groups can be heard and seen (Mitchell 2003, 33).

Based on my observations over the past several years, many African American proponents of naming streets for Dr. King see the place naming process as part of the larger struggle to be recognized and respected publicly, to assert their “right to the city” in the words of Lefebvre. As Harvey (2008, 23) argued, the right to the city is “far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city.” Noting how the right to the city has been defined narrowly by political and economic elites, Harvey (2008, 40) called for the “democratization of that right” in order for “the dispossessed...to take back the control which they have for so long been denied.” Who controls how places are named can be interpreted as an articulation of the right to the city since it has a direct bearing on whose vision of ‘reality’ will appear to matter socially, illustrating that landscapes are not just the products of social power but also tools or resources for achieving it.

In using a spatial justice framework to understand the politics of naming American roads after Martin Luther King, Jr., it is possible to teach the well-established concepts of procedural and distributive justice. Procedural justice refers to fairness in how public disputes over naming streets are settled or resolved. Naming and renaming places involve decision-making procedures and policies in addition to general ideological or cultural considerations (Azaryahu 1997). A procedural justice perspective would address the factors that limit the full participation of African Americans in local government decisions about whether to name a street for King and which specific street to rename. Even when a street is renamed for the civil rights leader, it can still work to exclude African Americans if they have no actual voice in the naming process. This can happen when municipal leaders reject initial requests to rename major thoroughfares and

elect instead to attach King's name to smaller streets, sometimes overriding the protests of the activists who brought the original proposal to city leaders.

There is frequently a spatial context to the procedural (in) justices of naming streets for King. Some local governments enforce a rather narrow definition of "cultural citizenship" when renaming a street. One's citizenship or "right to the street" is defined by where one is located in relation to the street and the economic conditions underlying that locational relationship. In many street name debates, those who own property along potentially renamed streets often play a deciding role in name changes, even though the street (and by extension, its name) is a public space than a private good. Indeed, some cities and towns have responded to controversy over selecting a street to rename for King by establishing ordinances that require a majority (and sometimes even a supermajority) share of property owners located on a particular street to approve a proposed name change. The interests and opinions of a road's property owners are given precedence over those who rent or simply work or travel on the road in question. Placing such clear territorial and class limits on cultural citizenship and whose voice matters in the place naming process has seriously limited the ability of African Americans to honor King on a street upon which they are not the majority property owners. Even when these procedural hurdles are not used in direct opposition to King Street naming, they nevertheless affect the process. Recognizing the difficulty in getting approval from the many white property owners on major road, some African Americans will propose renaming a smaller or less racial diverse road that they know is winnable even if it is not their first choice

Distributive justice is traditionally concerned with ensuring a fair allocation of goods and opportunities among social groups. Place names can be analyzed in broad distributive terms, leading to a consideration of how often these names represent the histories and identities of

previously subordinate social groups versus traditionally dominant groups. For example, exactly how many of our schools, streets, bridges, stadiums, and parks are named for racial and ethnic minorities and women versus white men? Yet, distributive justice, when defined in spatial terms, can be broadened and enriched significantly. Distributive justice can also focus on public access to certain place-based resources as well as the geographic distribution of disadvantaged groups relative to services and economic opportunities. Applying a spatial distributive justice framework to place naming prompts us to go beyond simply determining the sheer presence or absence of a name on a landscape. It is also important to consider the intra-urban location of the place name and how it is situated in relation to wider distributions of people, wealth, and transportation within cities and towns (Dwyer and Alderman 2008). The distributive aspects of place names affect who will have direct contact with the name (and conversely, who will not) as well as the general landscape prominence of the name—all of which impact a minority group's power to reshape the city so that they are seen and heard.

Larger questions of geographic distributions and patterns are especially important in shaping the meaning and efficacy of naming streets after Martin Luther King, Jr. Assessing whether the streets achieve a distributive justice requires asking questions such as: Where are King's namesakes located in relation to the spatial distribution of race and class distinctions within cities? To what extent do streets named for King occupy central civic spaces and are geographically accessible to the larger community, especially whites? To what extent do King streets, because of their location, operate as bridge or boundary between different social and economic areas of cities? Martin Luther King streets—depending upon their place in relation to wider distributions of people and resources—could work to marginalize or raise the visibility and public importance of African Americans. As Raento and Watson (2000: 728) contended:

“Naming and re-naming are strategies of power, and location matters, because this power is only truly exercised when it is “seen” in the appropriate place.”

There are differing opinions about what is the appropriate place for streets named for Dr. King, but a common theme of distributive justice appears throughout the comments of many African Americans who push to have a street named. Important to their vision of honoring King on the “right street” is making sure that the named road transcends traditional racial boundaries and occupies a location that embodies integration and inclusiveness rather than marginalization and segregation. This was captured in comments of Allen Stucks, who led the movement to name a street for King in Tallahassee, Florida: “Rev. King was about togetherness. If his name was going to be on a street in Tallahassee, it had to be on one that connected one neighborhood to another. And it had to be one you could find without having to wiggle through the black community” (quoted in Alderman 2006, 226). While Tallahassee and some other cities have been successful in ensuring that the intra-urban location of King’s name does justice to his calls for integration, this is certainly not the case in all cities and towns. More often than not, African Americans have faced public opposition that limits their ability to touch or impact white neighborhoods and business districts with a street named for King. A common strategy used by cities is to rename only parts of a major street that aligns with the spatial distribution or concentration of the African American community, not allowing the renaming to encroach on white, wealthier parts of the same street. While municipal officials find this spatial strategy to renaming as a way of minimizing (white) controversy, street naming proponents have frequently interpreted it as unfair and have sought to have King’s name extended geographically down the entire length of road, although these efforts often evoke resistance and seldom successful. To use King’s own words, a geography of street naming has been constructed that maintains social

order or a “negative peace,” but does not represent a “positive peace,” which he characterized as a presence of justice (King 1963[1986], 295).

### **A Lesson in Transportation Justice and Geographic Empathy**

In closing, as African Americans pursue street naming as part of claiming a right to their cities, they encounter obstacles that limit their ability to realize this right fully and to achieve spatial justice. Analyzing the political struggle to honor Dr. King allows for the teaching of procedural justice and how local governments enact narrow social and spatial definitions of citizenship that disenfranchise African Americans from the very decision making process that they help initiate. Public debates about which street to rename for King and how that name designation will be situated in relation to a larger geography of racial and economic characteristics provides teachers with the opportunity to explore distributive justice with their students. Distributive justice, as discussed in the context of King’s commemoration, recognizes that African Americans face significant barriers in being able to gain access to and have a voice in shaping the identity of spaces outside of their neighborhoods, even though challenging historically entrenched patterns of racial segregation is exactly the purpose of many street naming campaigns.

One of the hopes of this paper is to encourage teachers (and hence students) to appreciate the politics of place naming and how naming streets for King is envisioned by many of its proponents as part of the broader project of making cities into fairer and more just places where the histories and identities of African Americans are no longer de-valued or segregated. At the same time, a critical analysis of named places should not remain confined to the politics of the naming process or simply representational issues. It is important to engage students in an evaluation of the material, social, and environmental condition of the streets that bear King’s

name, which allows the place naming process to be linked to a critical study of the landscape. One possible route for accomplishing this with students is to explore Martin Luther King Streets in the context of transportation justice.

Transportation justice recognizes that transportation systems—both the infrastructure, policy, and the means of travel—can be organized, intentionally or unintentionally, in ways that discriminate. Transportation does not operate in a race and class-neutral society. A politics underlies the design, use, and meaning of transportation, and not all social groups having equal access to mobility. Streets, as part of the transportation system, can be designed and built in ways that privilege certain modes of travel (and certain types of travelers) (Bullard and Johnson 1997; Bullard et al 2004). Although transportation justice is usually understood or studied in terms of inequity found in highway spending, road improvements, and mass transit planning, it can cover any aspect of the transportation experience—even walking.

In my teaching and community engagement work, I have designed an exercise in which students assess the extent to which roads named for Martin Luther King are “livable streets.” “Livable Streets” is an increasingly important theme in development and planning circles. Underlying this theme are a few key issues. First, some streets and roads are more livable places than others and hence more or less supportive of a certain quality of life. Second, livability is a broad concept that addresses the environmental, social, economic, and health conditions found along streets. Third, livability is a human right and connected to improving people’s well being, including the poor and historically marginalized. The concept of livable streets recognizes that there is an assortment of users of roads from a variety of walks of life. Fourth, the livability of streets is not permanently set but can be altered through good planning, which begins with an assessment of the conditions, problems, and resources found along streets. Non-profits and

activists within the African American community such as Georgia Clients Council (GCC) have begun conducting a critical analysis of life along Martin Luther King Streets, with the goal of “reclaiming” these streets in order to advance community development, public health, political empowerment, a sense of place and belonging, and of course livability.

In particular, the exercise I have constructed addresses the issue of walkability as part of livable streets. Streets and sidewalks are built with public funds and should therefore accommodate all members of the public—the young, the old, the physically able and the physically challenged, moms and dads pushing strollers, kids on bikes, as well as cars and buses and trucks. In any given community, approximately 30% of residents cannot or have chosen not to drive. Walking is the oldest form of transportation and sidewalks are the fundamental building blocks of a pedestrian network. For those who do not drive, walking is a crucial activity for remaining active, interacting with others, and reaching a variety of vital destinations such as shopping, medical facilities, and religious worship.

Unfortunately, many of our streets in the U.S., especially those built after World War II, were designed for motor vehicles and little consideration has been given to the needs and desires of pedestrians. Obviously, many people walk. But many more would like to walk if their community had streets with an adequate pedestrian system in place that made walking safe and enjoyable. Increased walking can lead to better levels of health, less pollution from auto emissions, less paved space needed for parking and driveways, and greater interaction with one’s natural surroundings. A livable community is a walkable one and a truly walkable street does not force people to drive. African Americans have the lowest rate of car ownership of all racial and ethnic groups in the country. Given the central place that streets named for King hold within

the African American community, it is imperative to assess their walkability and identify issues of concern for local governments to address in order to make them more livable.

My exercise is designed to put students in the position of planner and applied geographer. The tone of the assignment is not to encourage students to look down or denigrate the people who live and work on those streets. Rather, the intent is to move the student to develop a “geographic empathy” for communities. Building upon the concept of “historical empathy” (Barton and Levstik 2004), geographic empathy not only encourages students to see the landscape from different and multiple points of view, but also to develop a sense of care about people living in different places and to be concerned with what happens to those people. The exercise itself consists of two parts. In part one, students—working in groups—conduct a walking audit of the street and assess the availability and condition of sidewalks, pedestrian right of ways, road hazards and traffic congestion, neighborhood safety, and disability accommodations. In part two, students conduct interviews with residents about their perceptions of King and the idea of living on a street named after him, attitudes toward walking, safety concerns about the street, and what could be done to make the street more friendly to walkers. Students are then asked to identify recommendations for making Martin Luther King a more “livable street,” which ideally could be presented to government officials for consideration.

Such an exercise may strike some as strange for teaching about place naming, but this says more about how geographic names have been studied traditionally than anything about the exercise itself. In order for us to advance the teaching of place names beyond the abstract mapping of naming patterns, we must “place” these names and the study of naming within the lives and struggles of people. Doing so requires moving beyond a cold analytical frame of mind to developing an empathy and sensitivity to how our named landscapes facilitate or hinder spatial

justice. As Jonathan Tilove (2003, 122) observed, “To name any street for King is to invite an accounting of how the street makes good on King’s promise or mocks it.”

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