

Engendering Poetic Memory: Nadia Tuéni's *Sentimental Archives* of a War in Lebanon

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archives sentimentales d'une guerre au Liban (Sentimental Archives of a War in Lebanon), first published by Jean-Jacques Pauvert in Paris in 1982, was the last collection of poems published in French by Lebanese poet Nadia Tuéni (1935-1983) before she died from cancer. The collection was published in the middle of the civil war, a particularly challenging time both for her and her nation. In a context in which propaganda was everywhere, and where as Tuéni writes, it was easy to "[prendre] pour montagne la mer" ("[confuse] the mountain with the sea;" *Lebanon*, 83-84)¹ writing by Lebanese women, such as those Miriam Cooke baptized the "Decentrists,"² had emphasized the need for a movement that could eliminate ideological codes. These ideological codes were pervasive during the civil war; they were also, because of the nature of

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- 1 For Nadia Tuéni's works, the following abbreviations are used in the text. *Poetry* refers to *Oeuvres complètes* (Complete Works): Volume I: Poetry; *Prose* to *Oeuvres complètes* (Complete Works: Volume II: Prose); *July to July of my Remembrance*, Lebanon to *Lebanon: Poems of Love and War / Liban: Poèmes d'amour et de guerre*; complete references are in the bibliography.
- 2 See Miriam Cooke, *War's Other Voices*. Cooke called 'Decentrists' a group of seven Lebanese women writers; one of them is Ghada Al-Samman. As an example of her poetic production, here is her dedication poem to her book, *Kawabis Bairut (Beirut Nightmares)*; Beirut: Manshurat Ghada-al-Samman, 1980): "I dedicate this book / To the printers / Who are at this moment arranging its letters / Despite the thunder of the rockets and the bombs / They'll never steal my freedom" (translated and quoted by Cooke, in Cooke, *War's Other Voices*, 49). As Cooke observes, while back in the sixties Chedid mentioned only Tuéni and herself as woman writers in her guide to Lebanon, the seventies saw an explosion and a confirmation of literary talents (*ibid.*, 80).

the conflict and the social and political construct in Lebanon, largely dominated by men. Thus Tuéni had to invent a new language that would counter propaganda from a woman's point of view. In the collection studied here as well as in the previous ones from 1968 on, it seems that she has accomplish this through a central metaphorical equivalency between woman and country that has taken his definitive formulation in *Sentimental Archives*.³

Let us first examine the context of this collection. It should be noted that Lebanon is a diverse country in which Western Mediterranean influences coexist with an Arab identity. Seventeen religious denominations make for a complex social web. Brought up as a Druze (and thus part of a religious minority that is a heterodox Shiite sect), a French Catholic on her mother's side, married to a Greek Orthodox and having lived in Lebanon, Greece and France, Tuéni is at the crossroads of multiple identities as well. It should also be said that Tuéni's personal life was shaped by two events: the loss of her daughter Nayla and a long fight against cancer. As an author, her perspective as an upper-class woman may differ from that of other women writers were more concerned during the war with the daily life necessities. However, like them, Tuéni developed a position that often opposes that of men, characterized in the general context of the representation of the war by a strong display of signs of masculinity.⁴ Before the beginning of the civil war in Lebanon, two events shaped Tuéni's political awareness as a woman and an Arab: May 1968 and the subsequent development of the women movement in France, and especially June 1967 with the Six-Day War, a traumatic event for her as it has been for many Arabs in the Middle East. May 1968 in particular presented Tuéni with a new way to reflect on the relationship between literature and politics, focusing on language and ideology, and this new relationship was particularly important in women's writings.

At this point, it is useful to recall some of the elements shaping women writing in France in the late 60s and 70s. At this time, many women felt deprived of their identity not the least because of what was often described as a history of submission, passivity or mutism. The process of reappropriating the woman's body then began with finding a new voice, a new language giving all its importance to the body. This language found a new space in the holes and margins of the masculine discourse, through a fight against power and other repressive instances. It broke down the unity

3 Cf. Christophe Ippolito in Nadia Tuéni, *Lebanon*, introduction, xxvi.

4 See Evelyne Accad, *Des femmes, des hommes et de la guerre*.

of the subject and a syntagmatic linearity whose center had historically been the male subject. Writing, as an exploration and an investigation of the subject, and with particular attention to what is both real and symbolic in the feminine body (a cyclical time, giving birth), gave a new meaning to a paradigmatic simultaneity refusing masculine versions of sex and Unity. It introduced in the texts ruptures contributing to its fragmentation. Note that the relation between time and body was, is doubled by the one between the body and the particular space that surrounds it. In a woman writer's perspective in the 70s, turning towards History was a way of rewriting it from a woman's point of view, as well as a way of liberating oneself from the oppressive present, in order to answer the needs of both the imaginary (realm) and the very real issues brought up by various forms of gender inequalities. A book like Annie Leclerc's *Parole de femme*, and works by Andrée Chedid (a friend of Tuéni, and author of *Cérémonial de la violence* on the Lebanese civil war), are typical of this kind of discourse.

Writing on trauma, illness, birth, and blood, Tuéni, while feeling the necessity of taking root as deeply as possible in a past that symbolically appears to her as an eternity, also fought discourses shaped and structured by men, History among them. In doing so, she followed a tradition that has echoes in the representation of other civil wars. As Lee Ann Whites observes in analyzing the effects of the American civil war on gender,

[while] dominant groups are frequently ignorant of the manner in which their identities are defined and sustained by their relations with the non-dominant, those without such obfuscating privilege are more fully cognizant of the ways in which they actually construct others, and this very knowledge demands a kind of responsibility, what might be described as a 'loyalty' even to those who dominate and exploit them.⁵

At the same time, Tuéni is part of the particular context of the Middle East as a woman writer, and has been included, even though she is not a avowed feminist,⁶ in an anthology of Arab feminism.⁷ A poem such as the following one shows her interest in a new language for women:

5 LeeAnn Whites, *The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender*, 6.

6 See her statements in "La Femme nouvelle dans la poésie" (*Prose* 19-30) and "Itinéraire avec Monique Sybille" (*Prose* 81-100); see especially *Prose* 99.

7 See Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke, *Opening the Gates. A Century of Arab Feminist Writing*.

Femme, j'inventerai pour toi autre chose, un autre
langage, un monde, une autre voie.
Femme, je retrouverai, dessous les sables dormants,
ta voie.
Femme, ce monde n'est pas tien, tu y es étrangère et
pourtant tu essaies avec tant de grâce de t'y faire.
Femme que ton monde soit.

Woman, for you I will invent something else, another
language, a world, another way.

Woman, I will find, beneath the sleeping sands,
your way.

Woman, this world is not yours, you are a stranger here and
nonetheless you try to adapt to it with so much grace.

Woman may your world be. (*Lebanon*, xv)

In the context of the civil war, inventing a new language for women implies first of all the countering of propaganda. But in order to attempt an understanding of what was propaganda during the civil war, it is necessary to examine what was the place and manner of articulation of propaganda then. Lebanese society was and still is based on a network of communities. Each of these communities develops a particular kind of discourse. For instance, the Christian community (which became more uniform and homogenous during the war) developed themes such as the crusade against jihad.⁸ Many of the themes that are still used by propaganda machines of other nations today were developed then. Ahmad Beydoun, in his book on what he calls the 'Uncivil War in Lebanon', has noted that during the war appeared a number of books by community historians that served to reinforce the respective communal identities and justify their respective fights for survival.⁹ This is notably the case for the Druze community (to which Tuéni's family belonged on her father's side) among many others. Propaganda relied on these newly constructed ideologies, and manifested itself in several ways, in the headlines of some

8 Cf. Tar Kovacs, 37, 62.

9 See Beydoun, *Le Liban: Itinéraires dans une guerre incivile*. Also see Ghassan Tuéni, *Une guerre pour les autres* on the notion of a war caused by, and made for, other countries, in the context of the Cold War. Nadia Tuéni was Ghassan Tuéni's wife.

newspapers for instance. Tuéni stigmatized them as devoid of any meaning by quoting them in one poem of the collection.

“Fierce combat.”

“New mediations.”

“Factions concerned.”

“Combats acharnés”.

“Nouvelles médiations”.

“Parties concernées”. (*Lebanon*, 64-65)

There are also insulting slogans that Tuéni criticized in the same poem:

Always scarlet red the power of words,
more murderous than a gesture.
Those who live in the sunlight of the word,
upon the runaway horse of slogans,
those,
shatter the windows of the universe.

Toujours écarlate la puissance des mots,
plus meurtriers qu'un geste.
Ceux qui vivent au soleil de la parole,
au cheval emballé des slogans,
ceux-là,
brisent les vitres de l'univers. (*Lebanon*, 64-65)

One of Tuéni's verses also plays on the form of the slogan or rather here a counter-slogan and a kind of *sententia*, as all words of this verse are capitalized:

AN IDEA IS SHOT AND A MAN DROPS DEAD.

ON TIRE SUR UNE IDÉE ET L'ON ABAT UN HOMME. (*Lebanon*, 64-65)

I want to mention briefly here an example of propaganda, the way in which rumors, frequent in periods of insecurity, are integrated into political strategies. The headline of *L'Orient-Le Jour* (the leading Francophone newspaper in Lebanon) for October 27th, 1977 was “[the]

war against false rumors ('La guerre aux fausses rumeurs').¹⁰ Rumors added to the general confusion generated by a war in which it was not always clear, as bishop Grégoire Haddad once jokingly said, who was fighting whom (right versus left, Christians versus Muslims, Palestinians versus Lebanese, cold war imperialism and zionism against neighboring countries.¹¹ Also, an important dimension of rumors is that they are unverifiable and are thus difficult to counter effectively. Adding to the general fear, they lasted for years and some of them still are part of today's mental landscape and collective memory. Anchored in the communities among which they circulated, they still stand among the main legacies of the war. To give but an example, there is a rumor, analyzed by Tar Kovacs, according to which during the war some Christian militias were killing people in order to increase their reserves of blood for the fighters.¹² Rumors also relayed a pervasive exhibitionism of death telling stories of dead bodies used as trophies, be they hanged to poles or loosely attached to the speeding cars of fighters.¹³

The role of a poet like Tuéni is then to oppose to rumor and ideology a memory rooted in both a personal and collective history, and producing a poetic discourse in which meaningful words fight the general confusion of words and the stereotypical, meaningless slogans. This was a way for her to fight against the madness of the war.¹⁴ It is also for this dying woman, diagnosed with cancer in 1965, a way of dealing with her own death (*Prose* 83). While Tuéni did not write a book on her poetic art, she did make a number of statements about the practice of poetry that are disseminated throughout her lectures, articles and interviews from the early 60s on.¹⁵

10 Cf. Tar Kovacs, 10.

11 Cf. Tar Kovacs, 28.

12 Cf. Tar Kovacs, 75.

13 Cf. Tar Kovacs, 35.

14 In Cooke's words, "Nadia Tuéni in much of her war poetry questions the individual's relationship to the homeland which must be defended. Her overriding concern is the effect the war has had on the individual's relationship to, and identity with, the land" (*War's Other Voices*, 164).

15 Tuéni was influenced as a poet by new, post-war poetry such as that written in Arabic by Adonis, but also by French symbolist and Surrealist poetry, a fact even more apparent in *Sentimental Archives*. A contemporary of Stétié and Schehadé, her poetry bears little resemblance to theirs, except for the collection that rewarded her with a French Academy Prize in 1973, *Poèmes pour une histoire* (Poems for a Story). However like them, she completely

First of all, she insists at length (and this is consistent with her fight against propaganda) on the essential difference between poetry as based on images, and conventional language. To her, poetry is a way to overcome conventional modes of conveying meanings: the poetic language does not name but suggests, beyond the limits imposed by linear time (*Prose* 49). As a way to acquire knowledge, it recreates a world of feelings, impressions and visions that is not addressed properly by everyday language (*Prose* 57). Poetry, far from being a mere verbal exercise, is then an eternally fresh way of looking at our world, she adds (*Prose* 13, 29), a way of playing with syntax, a way of liberating oneself of all constraints (*Prose* 20, 21, 48, 49), through words that, liberated from their conventional symbolism, better translate thought, knowledge and wisdom (*Prose* 13). In conventional language, according to her, someone who would be 'prisoner of the words' may see his or her thought undermined by the very representation of it (*Prose* 14).

Thus, on her part, there is an attention to a vanguard that has subverted, fought ideological codes (established by religions and political factions), and to poets such as Rimbaud or Lautréamont (*Prose* 95); there is an interest in hermetism as a way of rejecting simplifications and expressing the complexity of life¹⁶ (*Prose* 16), but also, even more fundamentally, an attention to herself, coupled with a celebration of introspection (*Prose* 27): she thinks of poetry as a cry expressing an inner earthquake at work in her body (9) and goes to describe inspiration as an emotional state (*Prose* 8). How is the poetic work accomplished? To her, the poet, identifying with its subject matter, becomes its own material (*Prose* 16). In the process, selected elements, mostly taken out of Nature, are associated with images and become highly significant; these words-images are for instance the sea, the night, the sun. She gives a comprehensive list in a letter to a student (*Prose* 102). At the same time, she adds, these natural elements have an overarching importance for her own body. She goes on to define her body as a poetic land (*Prose* 50-51), insists that women are, more than men, linked to both mystical and natural elements (*Prose* 98-99), and sees the poetic phenomenon as associated with the sexual process (*Prose* 15, 20), while emphasizing the

departs from pre-war poetry as it was written by such poets as Hector Klat, Jeanne Arcache and others at the beginning of the century.

16 Note that Tuéni has been brought up within a Druze culture which has a strong spiritual dimension, as she has herself acknowledged (*Prose* 123).

decisive role of maternity and reproduction (*Prose* 23), as in the poem "Woman may your world be."

How are these statements consistent with her poetic production? The following elements prepare the way for *Sentimental Archives* in Tuéni's works: starting with her first post-1967 collection, *Juin et les Mécréantes* (June and the Miscreants, 1968), a constant identification between body and country occurs (*Poetry* 105, 137, 140, 174, 179, 197, 206, 213, 254, 265, 266, 303, 305, 355). In the same collection, reflecting on clichés and stereotypes, she formulates a wish to give a new life to words rendered meaningless by their conventional use, and questions people who pose as defenders of truth (*Poetry* 117). In the 70s, in the collection *Poems for a Story*, she offers a defense and illustration of a living, breathing memory ("la respiration des mémoires;" *Poetry* 234) previously described in religious terms as the poet's lone tool ("avec pour seul outil une sainte mémoire;" *Poetry* 153). She considers the remembrance of things past as an absolute requirement ("accepter l'exigence du souvenir;" *Poetry* 347). While it may be partially linked to her reading of leading feminists, such a statement may also shed light on her literary influences; in a sense, she is closer to Adonis and his conceptions on poetry than to the Decentrist women writers studied by Cooke. Adonis' position on poetry and modernity had a profound influence on Arab poetics in general and Lebanese poets in particular, and his theoretical position seems to inform that of Tuéni as a poet. For Adonis, poetry cannot be only about current events. According to him, "the most modern goes beyond the present moment, or goes against it. Poetry does not acquire its modernity merely from being current. Modernity is a characteristic latent in the actual structure of the poetic language."¹⁷ This kind of modernity seems to structure the poetic language of an author who also wrote that for her there is no history without image, no image without memory, and no memory without light ("Pas d'histoire sans image, / d'image sans souvenir, / de souvenir sans lumière;" *Poetry* 232). Memory (and this is an aspect of her poetry that differs from that of Adonis) is associated several times with the feminine body—with her own body itself: "où les souvenirs dérivent, entre sang et mémoire ... c'est toi mon corps qui officies" ("where memories drift, between blood and remembrance ... you, my body, are celebrating a mass;" *Poetry* 142-143). The main image of her poetry is clearly that of creation itself: "chaque image un matin" ("each image [is] a morning;" *Poetry* 371); "il s'agit d'un matin qui m'échappe des doigts" ("a morning

17 Cf. *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, 86.

escapes from my fingers;” *Poetry* 188). The main variation of this image appears to be the powerful image of giving birth, what we could call the umbilical cord subtext. Follow some of the verses of a poem of this collection, verses that are organized around that image:

De tout ce qui est terre j’accepte le message. De ce qui est jardin j’accepte
la puissance.

Une odeur d’avenir s’installe et bouscule un enfant sur son trajet.

...

De ce qui est lumière je penserai la nuit (ne dites rien c’est chose faite).

...

[...] de ce qui est un cri je ferai mon histoire.

From all which is earth I accept the message. From that which is garden
I accept the force. A smell of the future settles down upsetting a child on
his way.

...

From that which is day I will conceive the night (say nothing it is done).

...

[...] from a cry I will build my life. (*Poetry* 180; translated in *July* 5)

Elsewhere she speaks of the “fertile death which becomes garden” (*July* 7) or states” [let] everything begin again from the first gull to the message left by chance in one mouth” (*July* 21), hoping in a poem entitled ‘Exile’, for a “[new] land leading from childhood to childhood” (*July* 19).

Even though the first part of *Sentimental Archives* refers to the poet’s childhood, images of bodies left in the street in the Beirut of the 80s are superimposed on the description of a distant past, isolated and protected from the war in a “cubic space of memory” (“un cube de mémoire;” *Lebanon* 56-57). In another poem, typographic settings (italics versus plain text) oppose “the words that kill” (“les mots qui tuent;” *Lebanon* 60-61) to reassuring childhood memories. Yet another poem describes a land which has “died of beauty” (“mort de beauté;” *Lebanon* 62-63): all positive elements in the symbolic landscape that Tuéni developed at length in earlier collections suddenly turn negative. Beauty is the beginning of terror, as in Rilke’s famous poem: the sweet night turns darker (“darkest night runs through us;” “l’extrême nuit nous sillonne;” *Lebanon* 62-63), while the sun is “extinguished by the water of memory” (“éteint par l’eau du souvenir;” *Lebanon* 62-63); the sky has “a teardrop in the hand” (“une larme à la main;” *Lebanon* 62-63), while the “birds exhale a scent of fear

and take flight” (“tous les oiseaux exhalent un parfum de peur et vont;” *Lebanon* 62-63). In the end, winter comes “[in] the dark mouth of the cities” (“[dans] la bouche noire des villes;” *Lebanon* 62-63), where “tolls the death knell of flowers” (“sonne le glas des fleurs;” *Lebanon* 62-63), and Lebanon is “killed by a burst of laughter” (“tué par un éclat de rire;” *Lebanon* 62-63), while “[a] bombshell in the ground has hollowed out a smile” (“[un] obus dans la terre a creusé un sourire;” *Lebanon* 62-63). In *Sentimental Archives*, a poem such as I, 3 introduces in the collection the umbilical cord subtext:

Ô Nuits élaborées
les Voyageurs d’Orient comptent vos politesses
sur les doigts d’une année.

Le vent et ses alliés
s’ouvrent tels une femme.
Et tout parle de tout.
Les bruits que j’imagine sont rivière ou sanglot.
Ô soleil de la nuit libre comme la mort,
on dirait cet instant où chacun se regarde.
Aussi ai-je enfermé sous ma langue un pays,
gardé comme une hostie.

Oh Nocturnal weavings,
the Voyagers of the Orient count your courtesies
upon the fingers of a year.

The wind and its allies
open themselves up just like a woman.
And all speaks of all.
The sounds I imagine are rivers or sobs.
Oh night sun as free as death,
as at that instant when each observes the other.
That is why I have stolen away underneath my tongue a land,
and kept it there like a host. (*Lebanon*, 58-59)

In the second part of *Sentimental Archives*, titled “Foolish land”, memory also is in danger of dying: the civil war is now in full swing, and Beirut, the “white city”, has become “a tomb” (“la ville blanche est un tombeau;” *Lebanon*, 70-71; writing itself amounts then to an epitaph. In

II, 3, a network of images is organized around the umbilical cord subtext: the poet/narrator watches “the wall of [her] memory sweat” as very prosaic bullets are represented in the text of the poem, then is “sent reeling, her womb red with the blood of all” (*Lebanon*, 72):

je regarde suinter les murs de ma mémoire.
...
je chavire de l'autre côté de mon ventre
rouge du sang de tous. (*Lebanon*, 73)

Without a vanishing memory, the “I” in the poem “[dies] of incoherence / in bursts” (“je meurs d’incohérence / en éclats;” *Lebanon* 72-73). Soon enough though, a memory that comes from the inside of the woman’s body, through senses and perception of scents and colors, takes over: “my breast a thousand memories” (ma poitrine mille memoires” (*Lebanon*, 74-75). And again here, the subtext is that of a mother delivering a baby (and a land), a process doubling the text production and giving a particular aura to authorship: “Borders shift under my skin” (Des frontières bougent sous ma peau” (*Lebanon*, 74-75). It seems that her land and her body are one and the same.

This central image has many variations in the following poems. In one of them, the “I” “[inundates] with life the sun and its orbit” (“inonde de vie le soleil et sa course;” *Lebanon* 76-77) as Earth has become mere porcelain (“ma Terre est de porcelaine;” *Lebanon* 77). A prophetic call for peace weaves the following poem together: in that poem, the pervading future tense is opposed to the bleak present: “I shall weave light in these mountains, and name it liberty” (“Je tisserai lumière dans ces montagnes; et la nommerai liberté;” *Lebanon* 78-79), as the poet now describes a diffuse, collective memory of the war, characterized as “a vital memory” of “mutilated bodies” (“souvenir nécessaire de ces corps mutilés;” *Lebanon* 78-79). Here memory is no more based on childhood, but on History itself, the history of the civil war, and that is how the poet becomes an archivist of this war. The poem ends with the following verse: “History stands erect upon your shores, while my mountain’s pulse beats” (“L’Histoire est debout sur ta plage, quand bat le pouls de ma montagne;” *Lebanon* 78-79).

The title of the last part of the collection is “the future of my time;” it is subtitled “today.” This doubling of time has nothing to do with History anymore. No linearity here, no collective consciousness left either. This section sees a multiplication of the I-word, and the recurrence of the umbilical cord subtext: “Memories take the form of an umbilical cord,

attached to every face” (“L’évidence du souvenir prend forme de cordon ombilical, arrimé à chaque visage;” *Lebanon* 82-83). In the two following verses, the land becomes for the poet a pregnant mother as it already was the case in the second part of the collection: “the mighty earth holds me in her organs” (“la forte terre me garde dans ses organes;” *Lebanon* 74-75); “oh this hate that fecundates the earth, / like a woman’s warm blood” (“oh cette haine qui féconde la terre, comme sang chaud de femme;” *Lebanon* 78-79). In the last part of *Sentimental Archives*, it seems that the cycle of life is placed at the center of the poems, as Tuéni constantly contrasts images of creation with images of death. In the end, what survives is the work of the poet: “I survive my own ashes, and know from memory the future of my time” (Je survis à ma propre poussière, et connais de mémoire le futur de mon temps;” *Lebanon* 82-83). This prophetic dimension may be partially explained by Tuéni’s religious influences: as a Druze, she was taught to believe in a form of reincarnation that is an essential part of this religious faith.

As Tuéni links her own death to that of her suffering country, the child who is delivered is the nation of Lebanon itself: “I belong to my foolish land: I create it through my death” (“J’appartiens à ma folle terre: je la crée par ma mort;” *Lebanon* 82-83). Indeed, she creates in her poems sentimental ‘archives’ of her land at war, establishing a ‘memory’ that takes the form of an umbilical cord extended between the poetic subject and the land. In this perspective, the metaphor country/woman plays indeed a central role in organizing Tuéni’s poetry in *Sentimental Archives*; it may be used in the context of a reappropriation of Lebanon’s image beyond the atrocities of the civil war and the dominant discourses of that period. Furthermore, these poems published at a critical juncture of the war and just before Tuéni’s death, give through unifying images a symbolic voice to her divided country. The last text Tuéni wrote before her death in 1982 confirms retrospectively the importance she attached to this identification with her suffering country:

J’appartiens à un pays qui chaque jour se suicide tandis qu’on l’assassine.
En fait, j’appartiens à un pays plusieurs fois mort. Pourquoi ne mourrais-je pas moi aussi de cette mort rongearde et laide, lente et vicieuse, de cette mort libanaise?

J’ai dit un jour que je ressemblais à ma Folle Terre : elle et moi expions un crime de double identité.

I belong to a country that commits suicide every day, while it is being assassinated. As a matter of fact, I belong to a country that died several times. Why should I not die too of this gnawing, ugly, slow, and vicious death, of this Lebanese death?

I have written once that I resemble my Foolish Land: we are both expiating a crime of double identity. (*Lebanon*, xxxiv-xxxv)

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