



UDK 792.01:911.3:502

DOI 10.51937/Amfiteater-2026-1/92-108

Abstract

This article explores the dialogue between Island Studies and Performance Studies through two theoretical perspectives emerging from different contexts. The essay first reconstructs some of the key genealogies through which Island Studies has developed as a field, highlighting the shift from insularity as a fixed geographical condition to islandness as a relational epistemological lens. The article then examines two conceptual contributions that bring Island Studies into conversation with Performance Studies. Rebecca Schneider's notion of the *shoal*, developed from an Atlantic perspective, foregrounds littoral zones as epistemological thresholds where bodies, histories and environments meet in unstable and transformative relations. Diana Looser's concept of *transpasifika*, emerging within Pacific Studies and transpacific scholarship, proposes a relational framework for analysing how performances circulate across islands, diasporic communities and global networks. Read together, these perspectives reveal how performance and islandness can be understood as relational processes shaped by movement, instability and ecological interdependence. The encounter between Island Studies and Performance Studies thus opens a productive analytical terrain for investigating how artistic practices participate in the reconfiguration of insular worlds and their broader epistemological configurations.

Keywords: island studies, performance studies, oceanic epistemologies, *shoal*, *transpasifika*

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Introduction

This article emerges from the ongoing research project “@PERIL. Performing Islandness. Performance, Dramaturgy and Curatorship of the Island since the Seventies”, based at Università Iuav di Venezia.¹ The project investigates the relationship between performance and insularity, exploring how artistic practices and critical theories engage the island both as a theoretical object and as a specific ecosystem, thereby enabling the rethinking of relations among bodies, ecosystems, imaginaries and utopias of dwelling. As understood in this article, performance designates theatrical and artistic practices not only in a strict sense but also, more broadly, as an embodied mode of enacting, transmitting and generating cultural knowledge (Taylor; Schechner, *Performance Studies*).

The article is structured in three parts. It first outlines some of the key genealogies through which Island Studies have taken shape as a field, with particular attention to the shift from insularity as a fixed condition to islandness as a relational epistemological lens. It then explores the dialogue between Island Studies and Performance Studies through two theoretical perspectives situated in different oceanic contexts: Rebecca Schneider’s notion of the *shoal*, articulated from an Atlantic perspective, and Diana Looser’s concept of *transpasifika*, developed within contemporary Pacific Studies debates. Analysed in their respective specificity and brought into dialogue, these contributions open a space for thinking the relation between performance and islandness, revealing both the analytical terrain they share and the productive tensions in which they differ.

¹ This article was developed within the panel “Eco-Epistemologies: Transdisciplinary Horizons in Performance”, proposed by the research unit PerLa | Performance Epistemologies Research Lab (Università Iuav di Venezia) and presented at the *Amfiteater* symposium Ecology and the Performing Arts (9–10 October 2025, SLOGI, Ljubljana). The panel brought together five contributions exploring different intersections between Performance Studies and Island Studies, Blue Studies, Critical Performance Ecologies, Environmental Necropolitics and Digital Space and Environment, with the aim of investigating the epistemological potential of transdisciplinary approaches to performance and ecology.

Island Studies. Genealogies and New Critical Perspectives

Over the past few decades, Island Studies has developed as a field committed to formulating critical perspectives through which to read the forms of thought and practice that emerge within insular geographies. Islands are approached both as localised laboratories of complex socio-ecological relations and as conceptual devices through which to observe some of the decisive polarities of past and present. If islands have long circulated across different traditions of knowledge as privileged sites of philosophical, literary and political inquiry, the consolidation of Island Studies as a recognisable academic field belongs more specifically to the late 20th century, when a constellation of institutions, conferences and research networks began to give visibility and continuity to a dispersed but growing body of work.

One of the earliest attempts to define the field came in 1994 from the anthropologist Grant McCall, who proposed the “Nissology” as the study of islands “on their own terms” (2). McCall’s intervention sought to affirm the island as a geographical, historical and cultural unit irreducible to mainland perspectives. However, the emancipatory force of this gesture was accompanied by a typological impulse that risked stabilising the island as a bounded and exceptional entity and the islander as a singular subject defined by territorial coherence and cultural specificity. The field’s foundational moment is therefore marked from the outset by a productive tension between epistemological autonomy and essentialising closure.

Published in the same year, 1994, Epeli Hau’ofa’s “Our Sea of Islands” redirected that tension in a radically different way. Against colonial and developmental narratives that imagined Pacific islands as small, remote, vulnerable and structurally dependent, Hau’ofa foregrounded the everyday movement, kinship, exchange and navigation, proposing Oceania not as a scattered set of little lands but as a vast and connected sea of islands: “there is a world of difference between viewing the Pacific as ‘islands in a far sea’ and as ‘a sea of islands’” (201). The shift is well known but remains crucial: the ocean ceases to appear as a separating void and instead becomes a connective medium, dense with relations, histories and affects. Hau’ofa’s intervention has expanded the scale of insular thought and displaced its coordinates, making relation, circulation and oceanic mobility central to the field’s future elaborations.

The field entered a new phase of consolidation in the early 2000s, especially through the work of Godfrey Baldacchino, who explicitly described the “coming age of Island Studies” (2004). This early text, drawing on the insular anthropology of Margaret Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), from which it borrows its title, takes the first steps toward the consolidation of Island Studies by: moving beyond a singular and archaic definition of insularity; and advancing an interdisciplinary methodology

capable of recognising the extended significance of local phenomena, without reproducing the rigid dialectic between globalisation and localism.

In the editorial of the first issue of the *Island Studies Journal* in 2006, Godfrey Baldacchino recapitulates the stages through which Island Studies had achieved institutional recognition and calls for a renewed transdisciplinary expansion of the field. In this brief text, Baldacchino programmatically relaunches a new key concept for Island Studies (“Editorial” 9): *islandness*, preferable to *insularity*, which seems to retain the semantic connotations of backwardness and isolation (“The coming” 272).

“Islandness operates as a variable: it does not determine events, but shapes and orients their unfolding, influencing physical and social processes in specific – and specifically significant – ways” (273). The shift to islandness marks a decisive move away from deterministic conceptions of the island and its inhabitants. If McCall’s nissology advances an ontological understanding of the island as a stable typological unit endowed with identifiable and measurable traits, islandness does not distil an essence – whether geographical or communal – but rather points to a situated and specific insular condition. In his subsequent contribution introducing the first reader in Island Studies, *A World of Islands* (Baldacchino ed., *A World of Islands*), islandness is further mobilised as a notion capable of shifting the perspective from islands in the world to a world of islands, with a clear echo of Hau’ofa’s formulation: islandness rescues the island from being understood as a pure trope or social microcosm and instead foregrounds it as a site of action, not an isolated point on the map but a node within an archipelagic network. From this perspective, an island-based gaze does not reduce the islander either to the triumphalist category of resilience or to the deficit-oriented ones of marginality and exclusion; rather, it holds together the epistemological duality of a perspective that looks from and for the island, as well as with the island.

Since then, islandness has become a “contested concept” (Foley et al. 1808), increasingly less concerned with refining definitions of the island as a fixed and static object – confined within the land/sea dichotomy and opposed to the continent – and more inclined to investigate the dynamics of interconnection and movement between islands. This shift has favoured what has been described as the “relational turn in Island Studies” (Pugh, “The Relational”). In doing so, it moves beyond the study of relations between islands towards a greater consideration of the relations between islands and the sea, and between islands, the sea and broader land–sea assemblages (Pugh, “The Relational”). Within this perspective, islandness evolves from a variable capable of modulating physical and social processes into an epistemological lens through which relations, flows, infrastructures, practices and imaginaries that exceed the visible surface of land can be observed. Without

abandoning insular specificity, islandness becomes invested with a relational constitutivity that positions the island within nodes of archipelagic, oceanic and transnational networks.

This relational turn has also brought the field increasingly into dialogue with new epistemologies that seek to decentre continental frameworks of thought (Glissant, *Poétique*; Glissant and Obrist, *Archipelago*) and foreground relational logics of mobility and connection: from Ocean Studies to the Blue Humanities, from wet ontologies to political engagements with the contested concept of the Anthropocene.

In the recent *Rethinking Island Methodologies* (2023), three leading scholars of the field – Godfrey Baldacchino, Elaine Stratford and Elizabeth McMahon – offer an updated overview of the work carried out within Island Studies, critically assessing its outcomes while relaunching its methodological ambitions. Their perspective remains attached to the idea of the island as a synecdoche of the world – where biodiversity and endemism, accelerated extinction and systemic vulnerability become sharply visible – allowing the complex articulation between ecologies, economies, culture and power to be read at scale (12). At the same time, they acknowledge the full co-implication of Island Studies and Archipelagic Studies, emphasising the archipelagic imagination as a new sensibility capable of amplifying the plurality and relationality of islands. The methodological foundation of island scholarship must therefore account for a complexity that holds together the punctual materiality of specific places and their scalar interconnections. This expansion multiplies the reasons for studying islands, archipelagos and the assemblages – human and more-than-human – with which they are entangled, embracing the challenges, strategies, tactics and opportunities offered by insular forms of life.

It is also from within this shift that their dialogue with Performance Studies becomes especially productive: both fields are drawn to unstable grounds, threshold conditions and situated forms of knowledge generated where bodies, environments, histories and imaginaries meet.

Island Studies and Performance Studies: Rebecca Schneider's *Shoal* (2020)

If Island Studies have significantly contributed to the development of ecological thinking – moving away from essentialist understandings of environments and increasingly attentive to the relational, material, cultural and political interdependencies that shape ecosystems – the encounter between Island Studies and artistic practices, particularly performative ones, remains comparatively recent and exploratory (Brinklow, “Stepping-stones”; “Studying”).

Rebecca Schneider is a leading scholar in the field of Performance Studies, which was institutionalised in 1980 with the founding of the Department of Performance Studies at New York University by Richard Schechner. Within the framework of Performance Studies – traced through the work of scholars such as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Michael Kirby, Peggy Phelan, Jon McKenzie, Diana Taylor and Rebecca Schneider – performance is understood as a broad spectrum of actions and practices (Schechner, *Performance Studies*): both as scenic action and, more expansively, as a cultural practice that takes behaviour and the bodily repertoire as its primary objects of study and as a mode of embodied knowledge transmission, a form of doing that participates in the production and contestation of repertoire, identity and cultural memory (Taylor). Rebecca Schneider offers one of the first and most compelling points of contact between Island and Performance Studies. In her essay “This shoal which is not one: Island studies, performance studies, and Africans who fly”, published in *Island Studies Journal* in 2020, Schneider explores the unstable zone in which the two fields begin to share an epistemological threshold.

The essay takes as its starting point the variant stories surrounding Igbo Landing, the 1803 shoaling of the slave ship *York* and the mutiny of a group of enslaved Igbo-speaking Africans who, after revolting against their captors, ran aground near St. Simons Island, Georgia. Schneider is less interested in reconstructing a single historical truth than in dwelling on the undecidability that structures the tale.

The multiple versions of this story resound with still circulating cross-currents of pain and joy, an optimism and pessimism sounding in percussive iterations that do not resolve (or do not only resolve) [...] But perhaps either way and simultaneously—rising into the air to fly away and/or walking into the water to drown—the Igbo at Dunbar Creek refused the plot that the island plantations held in store. So in terms of the variant endings to the tale, perhaps both can be true—drowning and flying. Who is to say what happened? Who is to say that folk in the littoral zones among life and death do not fly? (203)

It is through this unresolved narrative that Schneider introduces the figure of the *shoal*. Echoing Luce Irigaray’s *This Sex Which Is Not One*, the shoal is not simply the unstable sandy geography between land and sea but also a conceptual device that troubles fixed categories: between land and water, Black and Indigenous analytics, history and fabulation, human and more-than-human. Quoting Tiffany Lethabo King in *The Black Shoals*, Schneider understands the shoaling as a form of practice – “combining, merging, and generating new forms of Black embodiment [...] pushing the limits of what is conventionally understood as the human body” (King 117).

At this point, Schneider turns to Island Studies scholar Jonathan Pugh’s argument that islands should not be understood as discrete geographical entities but as assemblages composed of ocean, island and ship (Pugh, “The Relational” 1042). Drawing on the

Deleuzian notion of assemblage – ultimately rooted in Spinoza – Pugh invites us to resist thinking of sea, ship and island as separate entities and instead to approach them as dynamic configurations shaped by shifting relations between human and more-than-human forces. To articulate this idea, Schneider highlights that Pugh turns to performance, specifically the Barbadian Landship dance tradition. In the Landship, dancers embody maritime orientations through choreography, producing bodies that are simultaneously “at sea” and “on land”. Although the performance is deeply rooted in the cultural history of Barbados, it also incorporates layered temporalities that recall different maritime regimes, from the slave ship to the steamship and to the contemporary cruise liner. These shifting references reveal how capitalist relations have historically operated through changing configurations of island, sea and ship (Pugh, “The Relational” 1055).

Seen from this perspective, the simultaneity enacted by the Landship resonates with the irresolution that structures the stories of Igbo Landing. Just as the dancers are both at sea and not at sea, the Igbo rebels are said both to have drowned and to have flown. The narrative remains suspended at a threshold, in a shoal, refusing a definitive resolution. Rather than deciding what a body can or cannot do, attention shifts toward the relational conditions through which bodies, environments and histories are continually composed and recomposed.

According to Schneider, this convergence between Island Studies and Performance Studies is not accidental. Performance has long been theorised as a liminal field. In Victor Turner’s influential formulation (*The Ritual Process; From Ritual to Theatre*), liminality occupies the central phase of ritual, designating a condition of betweenness between established social states. Early Performance Studies (Schechner, *Performance Theory; Performance Studies*) adopted this concept to describe theatrical or performative spaces as zones in which actions are neither fully real nor entirely unreal; they are spaces where reality may be suspended and alternative configurations explored. Nevertheless, liminality has also been widely debated within Performance Studies, where scholars have questioned whether it functions merely as a transitional corridor that ultimately restores the dominant order; or whether it can instead generate more radical forms of suspension and instability.

In this sense, performance operates much like the shoal itself. Acts such as storytelling, dance and theatrical gesture are at once singular and iterable: they reappear, transform and circulate across bodies and media. In relation to the broader “solid ground” of the real, performative acts are neither fully real nor fully unreal, just as the dancers of the Landship are neither in the sea nor entirely outside it.

Performance studies may share something with island studies if the shifting aqueous netherworld of sea and shore shares something with the movement into and out of materiality and immateriality that characterizes zones of performance. Dance, theatre,

orature, and gestures that repeat are at once singular and citational, continually de- and re-composing. Considered in relation to the larger landmass of “the real”, theatrical or performance-based acts such as stories, dances, and plays are not real but not *not* real, just as Landship dancers are not at sea but not not at sea. In the netherworld of performance, solid states oscillate toward becoming undone, and fluid states syncopate with stasis. The so-called human, too, laps at its own borders as one so-called human plays at becoming another; speaks through another; or takes the shape of a spirit, a stone, a tree, a ship, a wave, a dream, a bird. [...]

The suggestion here is that thinking with shoals, and liminality/littorality in general, may enable a capacity toward what we do not/yet/know. To be caught upon a shoal is to be arrested out of flow from within flow, but it is also a fulcrum point for the potentiality of otherwise ways of knowing. (207)

The force of this relationship lies in the fact that both performance and islandness occupy an unstable in-between. Neither fully fixed nor fully fluid, both are continually de- and recomposed through repetition, erosion, drift, recurrence, and return.

Both are, in this sense, “on a shoal”, which names a littoral condition of knowledge. It marks a threshold where forms do not resolve into identity but remain suspended in oscillation: between land and sea, stable ground and pure flows, appearance and disappearance, materiality and immateriality, body and more-than-body. Islands and performances, from this perspective, can both be approached as situated modes of knowing generated in conditions of interruption, friction and unstable relations. To think with shoals, Schneider suggests, is to think with liminality/littorality not as a passage toward resolution but as a suspended and generative threshold, one that may “enable a capacity toward what we do not yet know” (208).

Island Studies and Performance Studies: Diana Looser’s *Transpasifika* (2021)

If Rebecca Schneider’s reflection situates the encounter between Island Studies and Performance Studies from a North American Performance Studies perspective, Diana Looser approaches a related set of questions from a different geographical and intellectual horizon: that of contemporary Pacific Studies. Her work develops within the framework of Transpacific Studies, an interdisciplinary field that since the mid-2000s has sought to rethink the historical, political and cultural relations that traverse the Pacific region. Emerging at the intersection of Asian, Southeast Asian and American studies, this field moves beyond earlier geopolitical designations such as “Asia-Pacific” or “Pacific Rim”, foregrounding instead the movements of peoples, materials, imaginaries and infrastructures that have shaped the region across different historical moments.

The transpacific perspective has opened important possibilities for analysing connections that exceed national or continental frameworks. By tracing the circulation of diasporas, cultural forms and political struggles across the ocean, it has drawn attention to the networks through which Asian, Pacific Islander and American communities have interacted and transformed one another. Yet, as Looser observes, much transpacific scholarship remains structured around the axis linking Asia and the United States. In many accounts, the Pacific appears primarily as a connective medium between continental powers, a space across which flows of capital, labour, military power and cultural exchange take place.

In this sense, the prefix *trans* tends to emphasise passage and connectivity across the ocean, foregrounding movement between distant points rather than the specific worlds that inhabit the oceanic space itself. While this perspective has been crucial for revealing the geopolitical and economic forces shaping the region – particularly the long histories of American military presence and imperial expansion in the Pacific – it can also risk reproducing a cartographic logic in which the ocean functions mainly as a corridor between continents.

As Looser notes, such frameworks may inadvertently obscure the histories, epistemologies and cultural practices of Pacific Islander communities, whose perspectives have often remained marginal within broader transpacific debates. For this reason, her work proposes a partial reorientation of perspective: one that loosens the United States as the central reference point of transpacific cartographies and foregrounds the differentiated histories, local epistemologies and cultural frameworks that structure Pacific worlds. According to Looser, any relational account of the Pacific must remain attentive to the heterogeneous cultural contexts and material conditions through which mobility, exchange and encounter take place.

Within this discussion, Looser also identifies a significant disciplinary gap. Despite the centrality of ritual, dance and performance in many Pacific societies, these practices have rarely been treated as primary objects of analysis within Pacific scholarship. Instead, performative practices are frequently mobilised as ethnographic illustration or metaphorical evidence for broader social processes, rather than examined as complex aesthetic events shaped by specific conditions of production, spectatorship and embodiment.

Pacific studies' primary grounding in the social, political, and natural sciences has tended to preclude performance as a subject of critical inquiry. Instead, performance has been enlisted as a metaphor for understanding ethnohistorical encounters and processes, or the performance event is captured in an ethnographic account as a means of illuminating other social practices and structures. [...]

This situation needs to change, because the analytic tools and perspectives of theater and performance studies are admirably equipped to interpret how the intercultural interactions and their attendant social processes described above are worked out in everyday life and in aesthetic contexts. Performance studies thus has a significant conceptual contribution to make to Oceanian scholarship by showing, for instance, how theoretical abstractions and macro structural forces can be grounded in performance's socio-materialities, and by offering new methods for examining how the intricacies of race and culture are expressed corporeally. (21)

Theatre and Performance Studies offer conceptual and methodological tools particularly well suited to analysing how social relations, cultural identities and political tensions are enacted within embodied and situated practices. By focusing on the material conditions of performance – its spatial arrangements, corporeal dynamics, collaborative processes and audience relations – performance scholarship enables the examination of how broader historical and structural forces manifest themselves within concrete artistic events.

From this perspective, performance emerges as a dynamic medium through which Pacific communities negotiate histories of colonialism, migration and cultural transformation. The stage, the festival, the ritual gathering or the artistic collaboration becomes a site where relations between islands, diasporas and global networks are actively produced and reconfigured.

It is within this broader context that Looser introduces the concept of *transpasifika*, a term she proposes as an analytical lens for approaching contemporary performance in the Pacific.

It is thus less a spatial designation (traversing an area) than a relational one (a way of talking expansively about a sense of relationships among the peoples and cultures of the Pacific world).

“Transpasifika” is a term that embeds multiple interculturalisms. “Pasifika” (“Pasefika” in Samoan) can denote the ocean, but it is more commonly a term designating Pacific Islands peoples in general, while eluding the (derogatory) aggregate of the generic “Pacific Islander” category. [...] “Pasifika” is therefore a collective, relational term, specifying no single culture or essential trait but indicating communities linked through common ancestries or experiences (sometimes amicably, sometimes in deep conflict), and involving multiple habitations, transits, identifications, and modes of place-making. As an indigenized term built on an Indigenous one (unlike, for example, the Māori *tino rangatiratanga*, which steadfastly refuses direct translation) “Pasifika” references and critiques a hybrid history: it both refers to and resists Magellan’s *Mar Pacífico*, acknowledging the legacy of European knowledge and power in constituting the region while insisting on an Indigenous substructure and reemergence, and avowing the agency of Pacific/Oceanian peoples to define space, place, and identity in the present. (25).

Rather than functioning as a comprehensive label for cultural production in the region, *transpasifika* operates as a conceptual lens through which the discourses of transpacific studies and performance scholarship can be brought into dialogue. The term shifts the focus from the Pacific as a space to be crossed to Pasifika as a relational constellation of communities, histories and cultural practices extending across islands, diasporas and global networks.

This reconceptualisation is particularly productive for Performance Studies, where performative practices already unfold within relational and processual fields. Performances emerge through the circulation of bodies, repertoires, audiences and institutions that move between islands, diasporic communities and international stages. Approached through a *transpasifika* lens, performance becomes a medium through which dispersed relations are materialised, negotiated and transformed, carrying genealogies of movement, displacement and belonging that exceed conventional territorial frameworks.

Within this perspective, the *trans* of *transpasifika* acquires a performative dimension. It signals not simply movement across space but the processes through which cultural meanings are produced through embodied interaction, historical memory and shifting political conditions. The meaning of a performance, therefore, does not reside solely in the work itself but emerges from the networks of relations that sustain and transform it.

This relational approach also enables the tracing of the mutable geographies of Pacific mobility. Pacific Islander migrations have historically unfolded through colonial displacement, labour circulation, military presence and diasporic settlement, producing communities distributed across the region and beyond. Performance mediates these conditions of dispersion, enabling the maintenance of cultural practices while generating new forms of collective identification in changing social contexts.

Finally, Looser's proposal foregrounds the political implications of these relational formations. The Pacific has long been shaped by colonial expansion, militarisation, nuclear testing, extractive economies and the accelerating effects of climate change. Within these conditions, performance becomes one of the sites through which Pacific communities articulate responses to these pressures, producing aesthetic forms that address questions of sovereignty, ecological vulnerability, migration and cultural survival. Read through a *transpasifika* lens, such practices reveal how artistic expression participates in the ongoing reconfiguration of the Pacific "sea of islands" (Hau'ofa 201).

To conclude, looking at performance from the island – and at islands through performance – shifts attention away from stable objects toward relational processes. Both emerge as dynamic fields in which bodies, histories and imaginaries are continually recomposed. Rebecca Schneider's *shoal* and Diana Looser's *transpasifika*

indicate two distinct ways in which Island Studies and Performance Studies begin to intersect across different contexts.

If Schneider foregrounds the littoral threshold as a site of epistemological instability, Looser emphasises the relational networks through which performances circulate across the Pacific Ocean. Nevertheless, *shoal* and *transpasifika* are not simply two “oceanic” variations of the same relational framework: they emerge from historically and culturally distinct genealogies. Schneider’s *shoal* is forged within the tradition of the Black Atlantic, its conceptual force inseparable from the history of the plantation, the violence of the Middle Passage and the haunting irresolution of African diaspora; Looser’s *transpasifika* is grounded in Pacific Indigenous cultural studies and in struggles for Indigenous self-determination, shaped by different regimes of colonial violence and by marine cosmologies that Hau’ofa had already charted as irreducible to any continental frame. These are also differently oriented political and critical projects. Schneider’s framework locates its force in irresolution, suspension and the “not yet knowing”: working through haunting and the refusal of closure as modes of resistance, it keeps the violence of the Black Atlantic alive as an open wound rather than a resolved past. Looser’s *transpasifika* moves from a different starting point: the affirmation of Pacific Islander agency, the specificity of cultural identities and the density of Indigenous practices. To read these two frameworks together, as this article proposes, is therefore not to dissolve this difference but to hold it open: as two distinct situated knowledges that converge on the same question – how performance and islandness think together – while remaining irreducibly anchored in their own oceanic worlds.

In this sense, the encounter between Island Studies and Performance Studies opens a shared analytical terrain in which performance and insular worlds can be understood through relationality, movement and instability within broader epistemological entanglements.

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