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The Novel as Dislocation: Latin America and the United States in Paz Soldán's *Norte*

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> "Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more the more labour it sucks. The time during which the worker works is the time during which the capitalist consumes the labour-power he had bought from him."
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> (Marx, *Capital*, 1990, 342).

In a 2011 essay, Carlos Alonso wonders about the future of the novel as a genre given that writers such as Edmundo Paz Soldán have taken leave "from Latin American history" to insert themselves into circuits of market-driven circulation (3).[1] Alonso

[1] Alonso makes these comments in the context of an ongoing conversation and builds here on Josefina Ludmer's observation that the contemporary Latin American novel's autonomy from political and commercial exigencies has been compromised by the transnational circuits of circulation it navigates in today's globalized world. If in the past the novel was a mirror for the social, today the novel's commodification has rendered it indifferent to questions of political relevance or literary worth. See Carlos Alonso's "The Novel without Literature" and Josefina Ludmer's "Literatura postautónoma" and "Literaturas post-autónomas: otro estado de la escritura".

laments that the "commodification of culture" by contemporary serious writers spells the end of "great continental or national epics" produced by the stalwarts of the Boom generation (3). In the same year as Alonso's critique, however, the publication of Paz Soldán's *Norte* undercuts the critic's commentary. An academic as well as a novelist, Paz Soldán calls into question the academy's so-called autonomy from said networks of capital.[2] It is the academy, after all, whose theoretical edifices ultimately produce Latin America, the United States and the physical, political, and cultural borders reinforcing them as discrete discursive categories. For Paz Soldán, continuation of the novel as genre relies on its openness to all influences, its inherent polyphony. To maintain the multivocality, the novelist must revolt against the rarefied—and, arguably, exhausted—domain of academia, where literature is categorized as American or Latin American, or high or popular. To the degree that the academy reinforces borders, *Norte* suggests, the novel must strive to transgress them.

A novel about the process of writing a novel, *Norte* self-reflexively positions itself both as the effect of transnational capital and its interrogator. Its overarching narrative consists of a loose interweaving of several narrative strands set in the United States. Two of these strands dramatize historical people: the serial killer Jesús and the Mexican artist Martín Ramírez.[3] A shorter strand depicts the waitress and daughter of Bolivian immigrants, Michelle. This shorter narrative thread, which focuses on Michelle's attempt to write a graphic novel, weaves together the other accounts into a jagged chronicle, which resists being co-opted into any "national or continental epic" (Alonso 3).

In plotting the gradual emergence of Michelle's graphic novel, *Norte* lays bare its own production process as a precarious assemblage of fiction and documentary, of canon and pulp, of Latin American and American, and of art and crime. In its anarchic couplings of high and low, this creative process subverts the academy's drive to distill heterogeneity into abstract theoretical formulations. By day, Michelle works as a waitress at Taco Hut, and by night, she writes and sketches her text. *Norte* focusses on

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[2] Paz Soldán has been a Professor of Latin American Literature at Cornell University since 1997. He is part of the McOndo generation, and his works include the novels *La materia de sueños* (2001), *Sueños digitales* (2000), *El delirio de Turing* (2003), *Palacio quemado* (2006), *Los vivos y los muertos* (2009), and *Iris* (2014).

[3] The character of Jesús is modeled on Angel Maturino Reséndiz, also known as the Railroad Killer. Between the 1980s and the 1990s he was responsible for a spate of murders of women along the US-Mexico border. The character of the artist, Martín Ramírez, is also a historical figure. Ramírez, like his character in *Norte*, is today recognized for his folk art. Indeed, his work is considered "a stirring testimonial on themes of poverty, alienation, immigration, confinement, and, above all, memory" (Guggenheim.org).

the heterodoxic readings that this writer draws on to assemble her hybrid text. An avid reader of American kitsch and a former graduate student of Latin American literature, Michelle seeks to "mezclar [sus] escrituras de la Hamilton con las de Rulfo" (3.1).[4] Specifically, she seeks to braid Laurell K. Hamilton's 1993 vampire novel *Guilty Pleasures* with Juan Rulfo's 1952 canonical short story "Luvina" to produce a graphic novel set in a town populated by vampires and zombies.

In both texts, popular joints—a diner, Denny's, in *Guilty Pleasures* and an unnamed tavern in "Luvina"—figure as places where power is negotiated. In Hamilton's novel, St. Louis is a dystopian city, where vampires run the thriving business district after pushing humans to the periphery. In this bleak urban setting, protagonist Anita Blake operates as a successful necromancer, raising the dead for a living. Because of their economic clout, the vampires are now recognized as humans. Non-vampire humans as well as werewolves and wererats resent the vampires' legitimization, which threatens the very foundations of human religious, social and political relations. Blake shares these anxieties, and her meeting with a wererat and werewolf at Denny's is the prelude to the final confrontation with the vampires that ends with their overthrow. In Rulfo's "Luvina," the precursor of his novel *Pedro Páramo*, a tavern is the site for the encounter between two men, one returning from and the other travelling to Luvina, a phantasmal town lacking any precise coordinates. A teacher returning from Luvina describes the town's spectral geography to his silent companion, preparing him for what awaits him there. A distinctive characteristic of Rulfo's text is the ambiguous framing of narratives. An unknown narrator frames the teacher's account of Luvina to the silent interlocutor, and it seems that this first narrator concludes the text with a description of the teacher slumped over the table in the tavern.

Imbricating *Guilty Pleasures* with "Luvina," *Norte* teases out the metaphorical and the metonymic dimensions of the figure of vampires and werewolves to meditate on the idea of Latin America and probe the contours of the U.S. as a nation-state. In what follows I show how, through these juxtapositions, Paz Soldán critiques the academy as a bastion of capital that produces and bolsters territories such as Latin America and the United States. If Alonso mourns the novel's abdication of its traditional role as a "balm against the dislocations of modernity," Paz Soldán suggests

[4] All quotations from *Norte* in this essay refer to the novel's Kindle edition, which does not indicate page numbers. The novel has several chapters, and each chapter has numbered sections. I have provided these numbers in parentheses after the quotations to refer readers of this article to the corresponding chapters and sections.

that today, it is the novel's embrace of dislocation as a precarious narrative site, where many genres intersect and where all identities are immanent—but none reified—that will ensure the novel's vitality as a genre (Alonso 1).

Infiltrations

Michelle's fledgling graphic novel, "ambientada en un pueblo de vampiros y zombis que coexistían pacíficamente […] hasta la llegada imprevista" of her protagonist, suggests that she seeks to shatter the mechanized routine shackling her fictional town into a dead time of vampire capital (3.1). The graphic artist's own trajectory mirrors this intent to sabotage the regimentation that organizes modern life into high and low domains. A former graduate student, Michelle deserted the ivory tower with its highbrow reading lists for the grime and din of work at the Taco Hut. In moving to this communal setting, she also embraces a more derelict readerly practice, where the canon and the kitsch permeate each other. In her quest to integrate these texts into her own developing one Michelle fumbles "con la perspectiva, con el diseño […], con los colores" (3.1). In short, the graphic artist struggles to retrieve and organize new imaginaries from the morass of existing ones. This quest for the contours of a nebulous materiality, neither fully American nor Latin American, illuminates her reading of Hamilton and Rulfo's texts as narratives, where the roadhouse—the Denny's in Guilty Pleasures and the tavern in "Luvina"—figures as the site of articulation as well as subversion of dominant imaginaries.

As the site of transactions, a roadhouse—be it a diner, a tavern or a fast food place—is a space where imaginaries are shared, negotiated, and reconfigured. Such public places are also a compass that shuffles and orders the relationship between all other places. Subversive ideas mingle here with established norms to challenge status quos. The roadhouse is also, to borrow Peter Hitchcock's term, "the space of time" teeming with multiple temporalities whose constant intersections and divergences trigger infinite narratives (67). Drawing on the Bakhtinian chronotope, Hitchcock formulates the space of time as illuminating "both the time/space relations in a concept, and the time/space conundrum from which it speaks" (73).[5] As a space of time, then,

[5] Mikhail Bakhtin conceives of the chronotope as the "intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships" (84). Every narrative produces a "carefully thought-out concrete whole" by fusing "spatial and temporal indicators" (84). A chronotope calls attention to how the material context inflects the passage of time and how space, in its turn, responds to the movement of time. See Bakhtin's "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics."

the roadhouse resonates with the different temporalities rifling through its space. No space-time conjunction succeeds in erasing the others. A reader is also like a roadhouse, where multiple narratives cross paths to disperse in multitudinous directions. From her vantagepoint in a restaurant, Michelle discerns in these texts the roadhouse as a site of infiltration, a site facilitating the cross-pollination between infinite narratives.

In effect, in Rulfo's text the tavern's polyphony constitutes a macro chronotope that carries within it innumerable potential chronotopes, i.e., where several narratives incubate. Rulfo's tavern literally and figuratively frames the production of the town of Luvina as a pre-linguistic expanse, as ontology. Roberto Echavarren notes that the tavern in "Luvina" "es el lugar de las transacciones [...] de la planificación" (160). The tavern locates the juncture where two versions of the same narrator cross paths. The teacher returning from Luvina shares his recollections of the town with the other man on his way there, and Luvina's lexical image begins to coalesce from the encounter. In describing Luvina as godforsaken wilderness, the teacher silences its inhabitants' points of view, in a discursive operation akin to, as Francoise Perus argues, the Spanish chroniclers' subordination of "mundos desconocidos o ignorados" (335). For Perus, this colonizing discourse "metaforiza la relación del maestro" with Luvina and its inhabitants: Luvina becomes a silenced and passive referent for the master's discourse ("Posibilidades" 208). However, intent on evoking Luvina as a sterile wasteland, the teacher is oblivious to the fact that his own account is encompassed within the tavern's polyphony. The story ends with his head slumped on the table, framed by the doorway, from where distant strains of children's laughter and the river's waves stream into the dark interior. The tavern facilitates the teacher's representation of Luvina as wilderness, but the intrusion of other voices into its setting also undermines this account.

Norte exploits the open-endedness of Rulfo's tavern at a metatextual level and at the level of Michelle's writing. At a metatextual level it insinuates its own narrative into a trans-border signifying grid. "Luvina" opens with a cryptic description: "De los cerros altos del sur, el de Luvina es el más alto y el más pedregoso" (1). Yet south of what or where? *Norte* builds itself up as the north of this unlocatable coordinate. Luvina has been drained of its youthful energy by capitalism's insatiable need for labor. Its young have abandoned the town in search of work. *Norte's* narrative constitutes the spatial and temporal vastness of the U.S., where Mexicans like those from Luvina are adrift.

Within the metatextual chronotope of this unanchored North, Michelle tries to rewrite "Luvina" as a tale about zombies. The howling winds in Rulfo's "Luvina"

are transformed in Michelle's initial rendition of the canonical text into "todos los zombies de Luvina, sus figuras negras […] como si fueran sombras" (4.1). In doing so, Michelle begins to stamp the text with her own predilections even as she also slowly encroaches upon its barrenness to lay the foundation of her more polyphonic territory. Rulfo's text is a sparse monologue, where the teacher recounts his sojourn through Luvina to a silent interlocutor, with a silent bartender, Camilo, hovering in the background. In Michelle's irreverent rendering, the silent listener and Camilo fuse into a single figure who interjects to make her own wishes clear: "Yo no quería saber de los cerros. Quería escuchar de los zombis" (4.1). This interlocutor becomes Michelle's alter ego, who does not just absorb stories but actively steers them in accordance with her own predilections and her own lived experiences. Passive submission to elite narratives turns into transgressive readings. Through these apocryphal insertions, Michelle's nascent text begins to take on the contours of a transborder tavern, where the accumulative chronotope of capital—a narrative buttressed against all infiltrations—can be breached.

The Taco Hut waitress' subversive adaptation enables Rulfo's desolate tavern and Hamilton's grimy diner to become metonymies for the power of, and resistance to, dominant narratives. In rewriting "Luvina," Michelle foregrounds the tavern as a site where the subaltern interrupts the colonizing narrative to interpose her own predilections. In her reading of *Guilty Pleasures*, she interprets the diner as the site that manifests as well as thwarts capitalism's vampire time. Blake conspires with the city's oppressed at a local Denny's to overthrow the vampire masters. Michelle reads Hamilton's vampire novel as a text integrating the quotidian and the phantasmal into a seamless urban narrative, where vampires and werewolves frequent "el mundo cotidiano, y bomb de Middle America, con [sus] Wal-Mart y Denny's" (1.2). Since Denny's is open twenty-four hours, there is no pause in the consumption of labor power. In effect, in the diner one discerns the extra-ordinariness of the ordinary time of capitalism: the humdrum life indexes the ceaseless consumption of labor as well as the clients' assimilation into an economy of passive consumption.

Indeed, one could argue that the rise of vampire novels attests to the ever-widening reach of transnational capital. With its compulsive need for more markets and cheap labor, capital homogenizes subjects as labor and, thus, also ceaselessly shuffles all boundaries—be they ethnic, political or national—separating them. These scrambled borders confound representational schema structuring narratives about the collective. Part of a 1980s and 1990s wave, vampire novels like Hamilton's *Guilty Pleasures* index

this growing complexity of the social body. In these popular texts, the vampire figure registers at once the heterogeneity of the social body, anxiety about this increasing diversity, and a predicament about its representation. For Jules Zanger, the vampire novel's popularity is indicative of a shift in the semantic function of this figure. If traditional literary vampires operated as metaphors for a non-human evil, today, Zanger says, the vampire works more as a metonymy for the "social deviant" (18). Hamilton's novel and its reading by *Norte's* Michelle develop the political and literary ramifications of this shift.

Hamilton's dystopian St. Louis, where humans share the urban landscape with vampires, zombies, werewolves, and wererats, subsumes the heterogeneity of the contemporary social space within a unitary representational domain. As an undifferentiated posthuman expanse, this conceptual field registers a paradoxical movement: on the one hand, it is symptomatic of capital's dominance, while on the other hand, it signals a social space that subverts capital's dominance from within. The diner situates both the mechanized time of capital and the location that detonates its ultimate unravelling. The midnight rendezvous at Denny's where Blake, an African American werewolf, and a wererat with pronounced Mexican features, plot the downfall of the vampires who control the city's commerce illustrates this paradoxical role of capital. Open twenty-four hours, the joint is a site of perpetual labor consumption, but its time of unremitting labor also enables resistance to capital's domination.

It is this subversive dimension of capital's vampire time that *Norte's* Michelle discerns in *Guilty Pleasures'* portrayal of Denny's. She wants to model her graphic novel on the way "los vampiros [en *Guilty Pleasures*] eran parte de la vida rutinaria de la ciudad" (1.2). The routine portrayed in *Guilty Pleasures*, however, represents a vampire temporality: during the day, humans work for the vampires while they sleep; and, at night, when the vampires are awake, humans feed them with their blood. Michelle reads the radical potential inherent in this vampire temporality through her own experience. She too works by day at Taco Hut, and by night, she writes her novel, seeking to shatter the mechanized routine that has reduced humans to zombies. *Norte's* own disjointed narrative provides the context propelling Michelle's text. A haphazard collage of three narrative fragments—the 1930s California incarceration of a Mexican painter, Martín Ramírez; the 1980s serial murders by a Mexican, Jesús, in U.S. border towns; and the early 2000s' unravelling of an Argentine academic, Fabián, in an American university town called Landslide—comprises a heterogenous macro-chronotope that frames the production of Michelle's novel.

How does one represent Latin America within this maze of diverging and converging heterogeneous temporalities? Or, rather, what constitutes Latin America in this tangle of times? *Norte* meditates on these questions through a counterpoint between the writing of two texts: Fabián's highly theorized monograph of Latin America as a timeless essence, and Michelle's graphic novel with its inroads into both canonical Latin American fiction and kitschy U.S. bestsellers. Fabián strives, but unsurprisingly fails to compress myriad discourses within his totalizing theory. Michelle reads both Rulfo's and Hamilton's texts as narratives about vampires and animators to assemble her own graphic novel, where "todo es más ambiguo", where the vampire and the animator could in fact be the same entity (1.2).

In positioning Michelle as the reader of "Luvina" and *Guilty Pleasures*, *Norte* also illuminates the animator's ambivalent role as both the reinforcer and the destroyer of domains. Rulfo's narrator recreates Luvina's desolate expanse, but his discursive power also consigns Luvina to a dead zone, subordinating its inhabitants' accounts to his own narrative. Hamilton's Blake is a necromancer who raises the dead and executes the undead, i.e., the vampires. But it is a vampire's kiss that inoculates her against their power and allows her to liberate her city from the stranglehold of vampire capital. As a graphic artist, *Norte's* Michelle is also an animator. She strives to give life to her graphic narrative about Latin Americans in the U.S, unfettering the domain of Latin American literature from literary theory, the vampire that, though ostensibly giving shape to Latin America, actually suppresses the unruliness of its lived experiences to erect neat but static abstractions. Yet, like Hamilton's Anita, Michelle's power to revolt against abstract theory also flows from the kiss of the vampire. The graphic artist is a renegade student of Latin American Literature and the estranged lover of Fabián, whose totalizing abstractions about Latin America, much like the teacher's discourse in "Luvina," also reduce the continent to a spectral realm populated by phantoms impervious to the wear and tear of time. Like the teacher's narrative in "Luvina," Fabián's efforts to write the treatise break down as does Fabián himself. In contrast, Michelle works to sabotage the stranglehold of preconceived notions of American and Latin American literature. Her in-progress novel can breach the boundaries that this knowledge bolsters because, as a former denizen of the academy, she has penetrated its secret apparatus. Thus, casting the animator as a Janus-faced figure that can build domains but also dissolve them, *Norte* interrogates the representational operations through which the alien is posited as the other of the citizen.

When the alien infiltrates the state's territory, does she become a metonymy for the citizen, or does she serve as a metaphor for the non-human? As a transborder site, *Norte* situates itself as an unstable domain, where metaphors turn into metonymies and vice versa. As David Sapir notes, while metonymies establish an equivalence between two objects belonging to the same domain, metaphors establish equivalence between objects belonging to two distinct domains. Inversely, domains themselves arise from the function attributed to the terms in question (4).[6] Metonymies turn the abstract figure of the citizen into one replicable within a certain space by reinforcing the contiguity of the inhabitants of a given territory. Through their contiguity, these subjects become the citizens of a common territory. Metaphors bind these identifications by equating them to more personal narratives such as the family. These concurrent operations create the "empty time of the nation," a temporality that subsumes all difference (Anderson 9).

Guilty Pleasures responds to the demographic shifts in American society, which impede any neat binary of the citizen and alien. The vampire's assimilation as a kind of human in Hamilton's text (and in other vampire texts) is a discursive mechanism for resolving the predicaments of a society increasingly deviating from the norms of homogeneity underlying constructions of national identities. In Zanger's words, the vampire "has become in our concerned awareness for multiculturalism, merely ethnic" (19). Arguably, this undifferentiated domain where the vampire has migrated from being a metaphor for non-human evil to becoming a kind of human also produces a conceptual vacuum, viz. who is the new metaphorical other of the human? In dialoguing with *Guilty Pleasures*, *Norte* implies that in a context where the "demythologized vampire" now shares "that single perceptual domain we call the 'human," the figure of the alien, the non-citizen, has become a kind of non-human (Zanger 20). The vampire's humanization also expresses the dehumanization of the alien. The daughter of Hispanic immigrants, Michelle reads Hamilton's novel in terms of this double discursive operation, and the plot of her graphic novel reinforces this point. Her protagonist, Samantha, is a fugitive from an alien planet who discovers that "gente de su planeta se hallaba infiltrada en la tierra. Tomaba la forma de todos los mitos más aterradores de su nuevo hogar: podrían convertirse en zombies, en vampiros,

[6] Thus, for instance, a dog and a man can be seen as metonymies of all life forms, or a dog can be read as a metaphor for a man: in each case, a distinct function is being attributed to the term "man," and both are predicated on certain assumptions made about each of the two terms.

en chupacabras" (2.1). As mythic vampires migrate to the human domain to become metonymies, immigrants are edged out of the human domain to become metonymies of their ghastly myths.

A facile rehabilitation of the immigrant or a condemnation of mainstream American society is, however, not *Norte's* objective. Rather, through these readings, the novel seeks to extricate the very concept of the human itself from discursive consolidations such as the citizen, immigrant, American or Latin American that, as its narrative suggests, are the effect of forces of capital, which "vampire-like lives only by sucking living labor" (Marx 163). Consequently, through Michelle's readings of *Guilty Pleasures* and "Luvina," *Norte's* vampire emerges as the figure of accumulation that perpetuates itself by erasing the human presence.

Gatherings

Originally titled "Los muertos vivos", Michelle's graphic novel plots how people "se convierten en muertos vivientes cuando pierden su capacidad de rebeldía, se adaptan al sistema, se casan, tienen hijos, un trabajo de ocho a nueve" (1.2). That is, they become the walking dead when they adapt to a capitalist order. Michele's protagonist Samantha seeks to slay such zombies, but she has trouble figuring out how to destroy them. This conundrum is the initial conflict that propels Michele's narrative. This narrative rebels against a system that lulls its subjects into a state of passive consumption. Michelle's appositional readings of Rulfo and Hamilton resonate with her disdain for the graduate literature degree she has abandoned. When apprehended through her readings, all three settings emerge as metonymies of spaces from which capital has erased human agency: "Luvina's" desolate wilderness, *Guilty Pleasures*' phantasmal District, and the American academy's theory-infested literature departments. Each exemplifies the effects and the workings of capital. As a space of non-labor, the ghost town Luvina is drained of its productive ability. *Guilty Pleasures'* Vampire District is the consolidation of capital enabled by the labor of workers, and yet, here the human presence has been obliterated. And, finally, in *Norte* itself, Michelle regards the academy as consolidating knowledge about Latin America as abstract theories that can only be sustained by suppressing the traces of human contingencies.

Like Michelle's zombies, Luvina's denizens are also trapped in an unremitting tedium of day and night, a temporality foisted on them by the narrative of capital and production. Unanchored from geographical coordinates, Luvina's spectral space subsists, as Echavarren notes, as "el sitio del no-trabajo, de la catástrofe y de la carencia"

(160). Its treeless summit, bereft of any "cosa verde para descansar los ojos", and covered in "el calín ceniciento", locates the wasteland of the industrialized world (Rulfo 1). Drained of all activity, Luvina foregrounds the chasm between the epistemological order and the ontology to which it refers. Echavarren notes that in Luvina "no hay agentes propiamente humanos. Los agentes son los elementos", i.e.—air, wind, fire and water (160). This absence of human subjectivity explains the absence of "la noción del tiempo [y] la cuenta de los días" (Rulfo 5). Time can only be recalled as "recuerdo" in the tavern, "donde no tienen parecido ninguno" (Rulfo 3). An unlocatable place, Luvina configures the refuse left behind by narratives of production.

In contrast to such barrenness, where the unstable frontiers between humans and nature erode any possibility of a grounded epistemological structure, Hamilton's Vampire District, once known as the Riverfront, signals the entrenchment of the underlying epistemological order. The vampires now control this dystopian St. Louis' space and its temporal organization. Their legalization is both a cause and a result of St. Louis' hyper-capitalist identity, where the façade of a democratized social space cloaks totalitarian policies. The seeming egalitarianism between vampires and the city's humans enables the former to exploit the latter with impunity. Once a site of human-owned businesses, where it had been difficult to find a parking spot during daytime, the District now lies dormant until the blood-red neon signs flash on at night. Hitchcock notes that the space of time articulates the relationship between space and time as the "expressive content" of a society (69). By its very nature, the social body's "expressive content" works in tandem with the mutating contours of its lived experiences, which in their turn inflect collective understandings of space and time. Shifting understandings of space and time shuffle the subject positions, and in their wake, shifting subjectivities also continuously reconfigure the nature of space and also time. The bastion of vampire capital, the Riverfront is impervious to these vicissitudes because a vampire signals the persistence of a subjectivity beyond death, i.e., beyond space and time. This petrified subjectivity at once territorializes space but also renders it inert by stripping it of its malleability, its ability to morph into other configurations. In this way, the Riverfront has immobilized the fictional St. Louis' expressive content. Consolidated into a timeless and spaceless sovereign power, vampire capital upends the meaning of life and death in its drive to sustain itself.

Capital epitomizes a vampire power that subdues its victims not by mere brute force but through seduction. As Pil and Galia Kollectiv observe, "with his organizational capacities, his weaving of historical myth, his hypnotic power over an

almost willing victim, [the vampire] is the law of Capital, operating through structural violence, ideological a-historical myth and the 'free choice' of labourers to enter into a relationship of domination." In Hamilton's novel, as vampire establishments gradually encroach upon all human-led initiatives, tourists flocking to the District's vampire-run nightclubs become the city's main economic lifeline. The police regularly patrol the area as the District's orderliness is essential for tourism. Thousand-year old vampires rule the nightclubs and the traffic in human flesh from the District's dungeons. In this way, in these vaults, the erased human subjectivity accumulates as time, which then congeals into vampire power. The more vampires feed on human blood, the longer they live, and the longer they live the more powerful they become. Ironically, even as the Riverfront's consolidation as the commercial hub consigns humans to bare life, it has become fashionable to proclaim one's support of the vampires' human rights, and many residents sport badges declaring that "Vampires are People too" (Hamilton 10). Thus, ostensibly popular culture broadens the scope of human identity, even as it simultaneously instrumentalizes humans to feed an unrelenting quest for profits.

Hamilton's novel alludes to the paradoxical relationship between popular culture and the erasure of human agency by the capitalist apparatus that produces the same culture. Paz Soldán's *Norte* explicates this commentary by situating vampire capital not in a commercial citadel but in academia, i.e., in the university-industrial complex, where cultures are consolidated and then controlled as knowable wholes. For several years, Fabián has been trying to construct "una teoria unificadora capaz de explicar toda la literatura latinoamericana" (2.6). His project is ambitiously titled "Acerca de todo ausente" (2.6). The quest for that singular theoretical paradigm—a domain—that organizes Latin America heterogeneity invariably also entails winnowing from it all material experiences. Like the Riverfront in Hamilton's novel, ultimately the literary canon is also capital, albeit this time intellectual capital, consolidated and continued by erasing the living flesh of the social body. The resulting identity conglomerations in *Norte* are products of this vampire capital that territorializes spaces, erects frontiers and controls human movements to facilitate its own flow. These abstract treatises on absence, in effect, erase human presence even as they seek to reify national or continental identities. This erasure entails the smoothing over of particular narratives of space and time into a single homogenizing narrative. Recalling Hitchcock's notion of the space of time, chronotopes are not just the integral units of space/time axes constituting the narrative flow of a text; the text itself is the product of a specific space/time coordinate and its attendant contingencies. By extension, theories about

such texts are also products of macro chronotopes and so on. No single theory or canon can, therefore, envelop the entire gamut of literature produced because it cannot fully apprehend the role of time in shaping its own space of articulation. Constructs like American, Mexican, and Latin American literature are similarly tenuous because they assume a static space and time as the ground for their formulations.

Paz Soldán's portrayal of the academy counters Alonso's commentary, which, while critical of the novel's commodification in the neoliberal marketplace, assume the critic's autonomy from the same forces. In *Norte*, however, the vampire intellectual has been reduced to a cog in the larger machinery of the academy's vampire complex. The success of Fabián's first book illustrates the way in which academia co-opts all positions, canonical ones as well as those contesting the canon's authority. He sought to dislodge the modernist artists from the vanguard in Latin American social and political thought, yet his scholarship had been co-opted by the canon. Academic success reduces Fabián to fodder for the university's publishing factory. In granting him tenure, the university expects Fabián to write another work that rivals his first book's success. Dereliction of duty and troubling behavior—missed classes, drug abuse, and domestic violence—are excusable so long as Fabián is productive, as long as he feeds the university-complex's insatiable hunger for intellectual labor. Thus, the academy also is a vampire that feeds off academic labor. Fabián's unravelling treatise on absence is, in fact, a metonymy for the institution that houses it. Like the work itself, the institution is also a storehouse of "absent" knowledge. The knowledge generated within its ramparts erases the materiality of the social body so that it can be marshalled into its domain.

Trafficking in abstractions, the university-industrial complex's representational enterprise erases the social contingencies that give rise to aesthetic expressions. Despite its tenuousness, this representational enterprise flourishes in academia. Indeed, the more this project fails the greater the experiences that must be excised from the chaotic materiality to stabilize its propositions. Fabián acknowledges that the enterprise of "representing" Latin America and its literature is utopian and, thereby, unmoored from any concrete place, i.e., unanchored from Latin America as a material chronotope. Utopia exists through its non-existence. As the agent of representation, the critic is an agent of vampire-capital, territorializing spaces through empty formulations to facilitate its flow. It is this indictment of the critic that Michelle's simultaneous reading of Rulfo and Hamilton conveys. Her graphic novel, itself a rebuke of the academy's snobbish canon, aligns Rulfo's ghostly Luvina with Hamilton's spectral District and implicitly

compares the academic production of an "absent" Latin America to "Luvina," where language fails in its representational enterprise.

In Rulfo's short story, the men and women awaiting death in an interminable stupor are the obverse of the empty site of consolidated power. The bastions of vampire capital are empty because in their bid to consolidate their power they have erased all human unruliness from their midst. Luvina is vacant because vampire capital extracts its labor force to build its site of power. Inactivity characterizes both centralized power and powerlessness. The academy's portrayal as the site of production of an absent knowledge dissolves the boundaries between high and low and between the U.S. and Latin American literatures. In doing so, *Norte* critiques the formulation of theories territorializing Latin America as a trafficking in ahistorical constructs financed by the capital of the university complex.

These juxtapositions seek to deterritorialize the concentrated empty spaces of capital. As a unit of space-time that molds the expressive content of a narrative, the space of time is discernible only in its evanescence, through its ceaseless intersections with other space-times. Thus, physical and aesthetic activity reside in the passages linking or separating these "chronotopes" from each other. Through her readings of "Luvina" and *Guilty Pleasures*, Michelle identifies the space of the tavern as the site where meanings are transacted, and semantic domains shuffled. Functioning as a passage between "Luvina" and *Guilty Pleasures*, this animator remaps the late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century U.S. as a postnational space-time, wherein identities morph—like werewolves—from one form to another, and the specter of the alien, the other, is always immanent in the figure of the subject. Neither human nor animal, or both human and animal, the werewolf is what Hitchcock calls an "almost metaphor" whose conceptual ambivalence interrogates the reality to which it alludes (68). As an almost metaphor, the werewolf thus calls attention to the social schisms and shifts that constitute the very conditions for its possibility. Neither a metaphor for the human nor its metonymy, the werewolf evades assimilation into a single unifying narrative, a single chronotope, and thus configures the site of resistance to the hegemony of consolidated capital.

Dispersions

Giorgio Agamben theorizes the werewolf as a "passage between animal and human, […] exclusion and inclusion" (105). Thus, constituting the nebulous periphery of consolidated power, the werewolf enables the territorialization of power through its

own exclusion from its ambit. The construction of any chronotope of political power, a unitary space encrypted in homogenous time, can only unfold through a containment of the werewolf, a figure that is neither a metaphor nor a metonymy for the human subject. As part animal the werewolf cannot be understood as a kind of human, but neither can it operate as its metaphor because it straddles the domain of the human. Inversely, the werewolf is the monster that, to borrow Mabel Moraña's formulation, "sirve como contra discurso identitario" (31). All identitarian discourses build themselves against the werewolf's alterity. In his analysis of sovereign power, Agamben focuses on the strategies deployed to contain the werewolf's inherently disruptive presence. The werewolf configures the nebulous threshold where the rights of the subject can be enforced but also suspended. This state of exception where life can be killed with impunity sustains the absolute nature of sovereignty. The werewolf is the other whose inclusion as exclusion stabilizes all narratives of collective identities, be they national or continental.

But Michelle's in-progress graphic text situates this protean figure as its protagonist to animate a fluid space which belongs to the north by the day and shifts to the south by night. Its shifting space/time, ungovernable within any one sovereign power, is thus a space where the werewolf reigns supreme. This subversive intent explains Michelle's fascination with Hamilton's text, which, despite being "puro kitsch," had some salvageable parts for her (1.1). In effect, it is the agency that *Guilty Pleasure* ascribes to the werewolf that redeems this American popular novel for Michelle.

In Hamilton's novel, the District's contradictory role as both destroyer and maintainer of human activity foregrounds sovereign power's latent vampire-like nature: it absorbs the human into citizen to such an extent that for life to be sacrosanct it should first be acknowledged as citizen. In other words, as Agamben observes, in the biopolitics of modernity the human "vanishes into the figure of the citizen" (127). Inversely, the elusive subjectivity of the werewolf locates the site of resistance to this pervasive control. Rafael, the wererats' king, chafes against the domination of the vampire master because, as her "animal to call," the wererats must do her bidding. But, as he says, "we are not merely rats, but men, and we have a choice" (63). The concept of "choice" brings out the significance of time in the lycanthropic subjectivity in Hamilton's text. Reacting to its stimuli, the animal lives in the present. A human, on the other hand, lives in time, a series of events that shape and condition the next. Aware of the workings of time, the human tries to maneuver the outcome of its future. The difference can be explained in this way: animals are tactical whereas humans possess

the ability to be strategic. Both animal and human, the werewolf (and the wererat) straddles tactical as well as strategic time. In Hamilton's text, this werewolf temporality, embodied in the wererats, is what ultimately shatters the thrall of the District, the site where time leached out of humans accumulates as vampire capital.

For Michelle, the contemporary novel too must launch itself into this werewolf temporality to ward off what otherwise would be a certain death. She asserts that the days of literature as a closed-off domain are numbered. In an observation that reads like Paz Soldán's response to Alonso's criticisms of the post-autonomous novel, the graphic artist declares that the new century belongs to the "relato gráfico, los vooks, las novelas electrónicas en las que uno va a poder hacer links a Wikipedia, con Youtube" (2.1). These technologies might change the form of literature, but they would also rescue it from obsolescence by adapting it to the protean cartographies projected by their polyvalences. Academics like Fabián, in contrast, hasten literature's demise by seeking to imprison the organic anarchy of narratives, their ebullient multiplicity of times and spaces, within the "cauce unificador" of theory (2.1). Indeed, one could speculate that Fabián's creative impasse is a consequence of the same technological platforms that signal a new temporality, what Josefina Ludmer calls the Internet's "tiempo cero" (19). For Ludmer, this technological "tiempo cero" reinforces Latin America's place as the periphery because even as its velocity blurs the differences between far and near, it also fragments time into many zones. Mired in this vertiginous temporality, Fabián cannot conceive of a unifying theory for Latin America.

By the same token, the ascendance of the graphic novel or the digital novel beckons towards the subversive potential inherent within the "tiempo cero" to thwart hierarchies and divisions of power, old and new alike. The novel must now envision a new format, where these shards of time blasted out of a unitary temporal structure by neoliberalism can be mobilized to resist the very forces that engendered them. Thus, *Norte* envisions itself as a novel about the novel. Fabián's wry comment about his monograph, "Escribo que escribo," also holds true for *Norte's* own narrative. In narrating the halting genesis of Michelle's graphic novel, *Norte* tracks the gradual unfolding of this werewolf text, which resists capital by enabling it. In this new avatar, the novel can no longer be coopted as a vehicle for the nation, not only because the genre has capitulated to global circuits of capital but also, and more importantly, because the genre counters the global circuits of capitalism that make it possible.

As a werewolf text, the production of Michelle's graphic novel highlights the "teatralizacion precaria de [...] conflictos irresueltos" of global capital (Moraña 406).

The form of this fledgling text draws equally from the Latin American canon and American kitsch. Its content reverberates with the voices of a delusional killer, Jesús, a demented artist, Martín, and the renegade scholar, Fabián, all of them united by their shared abandonment, all the flotsam and jetsom of a capitalism that organizes people into citizens and aliens to facilitate its own flow. The relentless displacements of these itinerant Latin American subjects configure in Michelle's developing text the story of a painter living with her scientist husband and a young daughter in the fictional setting of La Línea. Michelle's readings of "Luvina," where capital has sucked the life out of the spectral town with *Guilty Pleasures*, where capital has usurped the city from its human dwellers, enable her to envision La Línea as a border zone, animated by the precariousness of these Latin Americans adrift in the United States. A frontier city, La Línea belongs to the North by day and by night switches allegiance to the South. Her characters' oscillating movement from the South to the North, from day to night, from a humdrum present to an apocalyptic now, and ultimately, from art to science, never allows any perspective to entrench itself as reason nor any space to territorialize itself Both South and North and therefore neither fully South nor entirely North, La Línea is a tenuous chronotope framed within but also disrupting the macro chronotope of capital, thereby evading all consolidations.

While Michelle's fictional La Línea is both a product and a subversion of capital, Fabián's monograph on Latin American literature, written in a town called Landslide, consolidates capital. The constant movements in Michelle's evolving novel evade the crystallization of any metaphors; Fabían's manuscript, also a work in progress, mobilizes abstract theoretical formulations to transform the intellectual and the text she creates into metaphors for the nation itself. In this discursive operation, the two domains—the text and the nation—reflect each other without ever transgressing their respective boundaries. Ambitiously transcending the national in its quest for the continental, Fabián's treatise reflects, in Walter Mignolo's words, its American "locus of enunciation" more than any putative Latin American essence (4). Fabián crafts a text that has no grounding in the material conditions of the space it seeks to construct theoretically. Instead, its production and its stalling attest to the material conditions of his own academic labor. He must write this monograph "Acerca de todo lo ausente" to save his job at the university. This treatise that seeks theoretically to straight jacket an entire continent and the heterogeneous segments of its history within a unitary space of time is itself a product of the time of hyper-capitalism. Paralyzed with anxiety about losing his job, fearful about being surveilled by his college, isolated from the world

around him, this critic is not an autonomous intellectual but, rather, an agent and a victim of neoliberalism. Consolidating Latin America as a space, his work inversely defines the continent's distance and difference from the U.S. and thus reinforces the borders demarcating the division of power and of resources in the neoliberal circuits of capital. This project's perpetual deferments then foreground the intellectual's predicament: the domain that was supposed to protect her autonomy is also embedded in the same circuits of capital that her work supposedly interrogates.

Michelle's ironic response to her friend Sam's dissertation also illuminates the conceit that leads to these conundrums. Sam is investigating figurations of the intellectual in contemporary Latin American literature. His contention is that "la reconfiguración del sistema cultural había dejado atrás a los intelectuales tradicionales" (1.2). Though talking about culture, Sam's examples are all from conventional literary texts. Michelle points out the omission of the Argentine Héctor Germán Oesterheld's sci-fi comic, *El eternauta*, a text that positions the intellectual as "un hombre de acción a pesar de sí mismo [y] como crítico de la posibilidad de un genuino encuentro con el pueblo" (1.2). In other words, the intellectual is an agent out of joint with her own reason.[7] A mercurial temporality, at once tactical and strategic, reverberates through this disjuncture. But, to consolidate their own theoretical edifices, academic constructions of Latin American literature erase the very workings of this visceral now time. Implicit in such discursive operations, furthermore, is the assumption that the subject of these constructions is herself impervious to the primal temporality, this immediate response to the surrounding stimuli.

Moreover, these discursive operations locate the agent of these constructions—the intellectual—and the object—the collective, such as "people" or "culture"—in separate domains and privileges the intellectual creating them over the collectivity constructed. The separation of the intellectual from the collective formulated is a task akin to a metaphorical operation, because it establishes a relationship between two distinct domains, the subject and the object. In contrast to such top-down consolidations, metonymies lead to a more horizontal, albeit tenuous, collage which can, at any moment, like a kaleidoscope, dissolve into other constellations.

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[7] Héctor Germán Oesterheld's comic novella *El eternauta* is considered one of the most stringent critiques of the Dirty War and Cold War Politics. In the prologue to the text, Oesterheld writes that "el único héroe válido es el héroe en grupo, nunca el héroe individual, el héroe solo". Significantly, the main character is called an ethernaut because he is supposed to be a time traveler.

Michelle's novel—about a United States, "donde se extraviaban y encontraban los latinos", and thus, where signs referring to one materiality float around in another domain—derails the signification process (5.6). Her itinerant characters can neither be fully retrieved for Latin America nor be fully assimilated in the U.S. Their wanderings disrupt both the American and the Latin American domains of signification, thus configuring an unrepresentable place. Splintered narratives and patched-up collages simultaneously produce displaced texts and function as texts displacing territorialities. Implicit in their very production then is their own finitude, their dissolution into another form. In foregrounding these metonymic assemblages, *Norte* interrogates the coordinates of time and space that give form to collective identities such as the people or the nation.

Crossings

The criticism of Fabián's totalizing theory of Latin American literature inversely reveals a more local conception of identity, supporting prevailing opinions about the 21st-century Latin American novel. For instance, Ludmer has observed that in the contemporary novel "los sujetos definen su identidad por su pertenencia a ciertos territorios" (149). Immersed in their respective local contexts, Ludmer suggests, these texts are uninterested in envisioning national narratives. Paz Soldán's novel interrogates the critics whose theoretical formulations erect collective identities on a national or even a continental scale. Fabián's interminable project, which Paz Soldán clearly satirizes, traces a global territory, Latin America, that subsumes local and even regional identities. This academic treatise about everything absent is ultimately predicated on, and also defines, its difference and distance from the U.S., its own locus of enunciation. In this endeavor, this monograph facilitates the policing of borders between the U.S. and Latin America. It is an enterprise doomed by its own ambition. Herculean in its scope, the Sisyphus-like task of corralling the unruly space and time of Latin America within a totalizing formulation defeats Fabián. After a few pages, his manuscript devolves into a nonsensical list of random names from the telephone directory. One could say that the breakdown of Fabián's treatise supports Alonso's lament that the 21st -century Latin American novel has eschewed its erstwhile role as a "balm against the dislocations of modernity" and now revels in the purely local (1).

At the same time, though, *Norte* also problematizes the notion of the local in Alonso and Ludmer's criticisms of the contemporary novel, or what they call the post-autonomous novel. Both critics regard the insertion of the contemporary novel in

circuits of global circulation as an abdication of its literary autonomy, its ability to pour "local material" into "foreign form" (Alonso 5). What Alonso mourns is the form's insertion into circuits of global commerce. Writers like Paz Soldán, Alonso argues, are indifferent to safeguarding literature as a "distinct and privileged social discourse" and are also therefore incapable of representing Latin American reality "in a meaningful way" (4). In other words, to represent Latin America meaningfully is synonymous with safeguarding the novel's elite form. Similarly, for Ludmer the post-autonomous novel is alienated from its own literariness. Disregarding questions of aesthetic discernment, the novel accrues meaning and literary worth through "puros efectos de la circulación global" and each work's relative access to them (Ludmer). However, it is not just texts that move in global circuits. Subjects do so as well. Their navigation of multiple domains molds their construction of territories—social, political and, also, literary.

As a writer, Michelle inhabits an unstable territory. A U.S. citizen of Latin American immigrant parents, a former literature student, and currently a waitress, she is finally a graphic artist writing a novel in Spanish about Latin Americans adrift in the United States. Because she straddles these multiple domains, she becomes what I will call a crossing, a site where different trajectories intersect. The texts that inspire her own fictional La Línea create a space that evades any concrete localization. *Guilty Pleasures* and "Luvina" become, through Michelle's readings, crossings shorn of their respective US and Mexican contours. Both feature void-like expanses—tunnels in Hamilton's novel and desolate space in Rulfo's text—where subjectivities are scrambled and reconfigured.

In *Guilty Pleasures*, sterile tunnels connect the city to the vampire District, functioning as channels between bare life and vampire capital. In these tunnels, humans transition to animals and vice versa. The tunnels parallel the "maromas que da el mundo" in Rulfo's story (6). The two travelers—one going to Luvina and the other returning from there—together mark two points in the rotating motion of a single cartwheel. As the narrator describing Luvina falls asleep on the table, human subjectivity cedes to nature's interminable pulsations. From "el pequeño cielo de la puerta se asomaban las estrellas" (6). Beyond the doorway "avanzaba la noche" (6). The phantasmal narrative captures a misleadingly static image even as nature continues to wax and wane into other forms. In the end, the reader suspects that the narrator and his silent listener are one and the same entity, and in this way, the "maromas" indicate the open circle of subjectivity itself. New constellations of space and time are immanent in these morphing identities (6).

Trains configure the unstable crossing that *Norte*'s own narrative constitutes. Motifs of railway tracks, "vías interminables capaces de cruzar colinas […] Diagonales, verticales, horizontales," proliferate in this evocation of the Latin American immigrant experience (3.3). The locomotive's indiscriminate back and forth movement is also like a rotating motion that disorients all notions of space and time. The "línea [parece] no tener secretos" in this vertiginous back and forth, thereby also voiding all political subjectivity, whether that of an immigrant or of a citizen (3.2). Inversely, subjectivity is as arbitrary as the cartography framing it—spatially, temporally, physically and textually. So, a novel that shores up the "dislocations of modernity" to construct a territory is also subject to the same forces of modernity (Alonso 1). Instead of suturing these disjunctures with her narrative, Michelle situates it on their unstable ground. Thus, from being an antidote to dislocations, the novel transforms itself into perpetual dislocation.

As dislocation, the novel can only operate as a metonymy for the social body, not as its privileged metaphor. Consequently, *Norte* suggests, the continent's space of time can only be approximated as a series of incomplete metonymies in an endless field of permutations and combinations. The form of this articulation is as fluid as its content. Thus, the portals that make Jesús the serial killer's and Martin, the artist's accounts accessible to Michelle are also ultimately channels that cycle low art to high and vice versa. *Tabloid*, a radio program about the most sensational murder stories, connects her to Jesús's story, whereas she learns about Martin's art and biography through a book that a university professor is compiling. Finally, her own fraught relationship with Fabián makes her aware of his troubled past. In this way, Michelle also becomes a vehicle between the pulp and academic domains, and between the personal and the collective, and through her creative enterprise, they become metonymies.

In turning dislocation into a location of culture Paz Soldán upends the discussion about the post-autonomous novel's relevance. For Alonso and Ludmer, at stake is literature's ability to be autoreferential, i.e., to operate primarily through metaphors, where the novel functions as a self-contained network of autonomous signifiers that recreate the domain of the real but also contain it within an ethereal epistemology. In this sense, the collapse of Fabián's project into a "lista de apellidos" copied from the local phone book signals the impossibility of this autonomy in the postmodern era (2.6). As with Fabián's attempt to totalize Latin American literature, the totalization of the literary sphere as a unitary autonomous domain is bound to devolve into an anarchy of names.

In its narrative breakdown, the theorist's ambitious construction of a Latin American essence devolves into the purely local, what Ludmer would call "una isla urbana" (132). Except that Ludmer, by this term, refers to the post-autonomous novels' indifference to aesthetic imaginaries that transcend their immediate spatial contexts, contexts that are often circumscribed within a certain neighborhood. It is thus ironic that in *Norte* the theorist's work devolves into this urban island, this compendium of a locality that, from one perspective, the directory represents.

Alternately, one could approach this random listing of names as the reassertion of a distinct mode of reading, evoking a space immanent in contiguity and not territorialized through abstraction. Although the names are subsumed within a common temporality, each name also unspools into a chronotope rooted in its own distinctive space and time axis. The directory forestalls any self-contained epistemology. Its macro-chronotope conveys not a self-referential totality but a maze of heterogeneous chronotopes. In and of itself, the phone book remains an arid compilation, but it also beckons toward a different kind of narrative comprised not just of spatial dislocations but also temporal tears and sutures. *Norte's* disparate narrative strands and its self-conscious allusion to other texts recreate this collision of times as a thoroughfare, where time is both visceral and historic, and where, werewolf-like, subjects must navigate their own morphing into other identities.

As a textual crossing where nothing takes root because everything can pass through it, *Norte* suggests that capital's dominance can only be contested by becoming its channel. Thus, at Denny's, Anita conspires with Rafael, the rat king, to enter the vampires' den and vanquish them. Denny's is also the passage connecting this American text to Paz Soldán's *Norte*. While Hamilton's wererats have Mexican lineaments, Michelle's characters do not have "Hispanic features" (19). In Hamilton's novel, the Mexicans are a metonymy for the working masses who suffer under the weight of vampiric capital. In *Norte*, Hispanic Michelle conceives of her own characters as metonymies for those oppressed by the system, without necessarily identifying them as Hispanic.

In short, narrating or reinforcing a national identity in and of itself does not necessarily imply either activism or literariness. At most, it could be understood as one kind—out of many—of literariness. Problematizing the discursive production of both the U.S. and Latin America, *Norte* not only foregrounds how these categories are fabricated and reinforced by literature and its attendant institutions but also lays bare an undifferentiated discursive expanse where narrative segments ceaselessly converge

with and diverge from each other to project ephemeral islands. It is from within these eddying currents of dislocations that the aesthetics and politics of the contemporary Latin American novel must be approached.

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