



# INTRODUCTION

## Against Exoticism

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The exotic, in its countless connotations, stirs our imagination. Marvelous and mysterious, dangerous, deceptive, or corrupt, the exotic is an inherently relational term that presupposes an awareness of Otherness. Etymologically, it is rooted in externality, derived from the Greek adverb *éxo* (outside) and adjective *exotikós* (from the outside).<sup>1</sup> Seen as what comes from the outside—the strange, the outlandish, the unexpected—the exotic predicates evaluations, metaphors, and categories of knowledge (Fernandez 1986; Lévi-Strauss 1962).

For many, anthropology as an idea and as an academic discipline begins in the encounter with the exotic. The exotic here is conceived as what lies outside ordinary experience, a meaning rooted in the etymology of the term, which projects a view of exteriority. This association of exteriority provides the term with broad meaning and guides much of our discussion here. There are some additional, value-laden connotations linked with the exotic. Barbarism, for example, indicating forms of life at the edge of civilization (as defined by the ancient Greeks and the historian Herodotus, who is sometimes described as an early anthropologist), or the ‘savage slot’, a term introduced by Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s (2003) critique of the anthropological domain in the context of colonialism and the neo-imperialism of globalization. Such negative associations darken the anthropological encounter with the exotic. They reproduce a pervasive dualism between the Self and the Other, in which ethnocentric values provide the measure for evaluating difference. Much of the negativity that forms around the idea and imagination of the exotic in anthropology is contained in the charge of its Orientalism.

The overall critique of Orientalism is tied to anthropology's beginnings as a discipline that focused on the subject peoples brought within the net of imperial expansion. The exotic Other was defined and described in relation to the non-exotic ideal of the Western metropolitan Self. In this, early anthropology was thoroughly participant in a colonizing, civilizing discourse whereby an interest in the expansion of knowledge concerning the exotic Other was linked to interests of political control. In this respect, Enlightenment reason was a legitimating ideology in excess of any justification in science. This involved an unscientific version of evolutionism based on an ethnocentric conception of 'progress' and a hierarchization of cultural knowledge and practice. Max Weber's all-embracing global comparative scheme that opposed Western Protestant-influenced rationality to that of China is one major example. The exacerbation of this orientation in anthropology, as Clifford Geertz (1984) points out, often enhanced its value in an intellectual merchandizing of the exotic, threatening to elaborate preexisting stereotypes of a racist nature. Anthropology, of course, was far from alone in such orientalizing, simply one of the more egregious examples of a self-admiring Eurocentrism that underpinned much, if not all, academic disciplines at the time of their establishment. This is not to excuse the discipline but to suggest that the matter of orientalizing exoticism is more profound than the charge of Orientalism and associated critiques allow.

By and large, late-twentieth-century anthropology attempted to turn away from the exotic. It aspired to expunge its scandal by following one or more redemptive approaches—for example, by (a) renouncing earlier interests to do with the non-modern (understood as the chief domain of what might be termed the anthropological exotic), (b) modernizing the discipline by focusing on more contemporary issues (see MacClancy 2002), or (c) insisting on universalizing theories shorn of problematic evolutionist and racist assumptions. Such reaction is frequently more cosmetic than anything else—as, for example, the excision of the concept of tribe from the anthropological lexicon. Thus, more deep-seated problems connected with the Eurocentricity—not just of anthropological thought but also of the modes of thinking and theoretical reflection in the humanities and sciences as a whole—can contribute to the risk and persistence of exoticism or Orientalism, despite an intention otherwise.

The dualism of much Euro-centered thought, and sometimes a restricted view of rationality and the nature of reason, is a factor in the creation of an exoticism of understanding, for want of a better expression. We cannot find a more pervasive example than the social-evolutionist, linear view that conceives human reason as progressive, evolving from unreason to reason with Western thought at the higher end. Such issues have long been at the center of methodological debate in anthropology and are tied to an aim to overcome exoticism and in fact to de-exoticize understandings of difference. In this objective anthropologists have anticipated the critique of Orientalism and, furthermore, have—in their own methodological angst—revealed the dangers of exoticism even in perspectives that would expressly eschew it. We address aspects of this in the following discussion, in which we will sustain

the importance of the concept of the exotic in anthropology, although definitely not exoticism.

Our notion of the exotic expands on the idea of the exotic as the outside in the more abstract, as well as the more concrete, sense of practices and/or ideas or values that demand the reconsideration of prevailing conceptual and theoretical understanding. Additionally, we are concerned to deterritorialize (also detemporalize) the concept so that the exotic in our usage is a potential of any practice or value in any space or time whatever. From this broader point of view, all is potentially exotic to everything else. It is through the exotic, or the potentiality of it, that anthropologists can reveal continuities and similarities underpinning apparent as well as critical differences that may open toward a more general understanding of the fundamental unity of human beings despite and perhaps because of their very diversity.

Starting from this deterritorialized and detemporalized perspective, we set out to explore the exotic in two broad senses. Our first and main concern is to examine the exotic and the problem of exoticism as an issue of particular methodological import for anthropology—a discipline that is concerned with understanding the human being in its cultural and social diversity, through its differences and similarities. Comparison is central in anthropological practice, and the concept of the exotic is vital to the anthropological project and to what we will discuss as its methodological openness: in particular, the idea that certain practices and ideas may express perturbations and potentialities that are irreducible to prevailing general or universalizing understandings. The awareness of the exotic in anthropology, the value that is placed on the exotic, even in our specific usage, always risks exoticism: that is, a misrecognition of difference through the inappropriate application of descriptive/analytical categories, or else the constraint of interpretation to unsubstantiated highly localized and, in effect, relativist modes of comprehension. These matters are at the heart of anthropological methodological discussion and what we will by and large concentrate on in this introduction.

Our second concern relates to the exotic/exoticism as a sociocultural practice or as a dimension of the way the exotic—as difference, the strange, the unusual—enters into everyday processes of sociopolitical construction (e.g., nationalism) or into the imaginary in the routine formation of social relations or into memory. Here our interest is in the exotic as a value in social discourse and some of the varieties of its effects. In this focus there is some overlap with our methodological examination of the role of the exotic in anthropological understanding, and we attend to certain aspects of this. An example concerns the exotic as a method of anthropological distancing or of accentuating the strangeness of a phenomenon in order to highlight an analytical problematic. In such an instance, the very familiarity of practices to the analyst can obscure understanding, which clothing them in the language of the exotic may overcome. This is what Horace Miner (1956) famously attempted in his well-known study of the Nacirema. In effect he employed exoticism in an anti-exoticizing intention. Our broad aim in the second part of this introduction is to engage the exotic as an ethnographic phenomenon.

## Anthropology and the Aporia of the Exotic

Much methodological debate in anthropology centers upon the issue of how social and cultural (or value) differences, sometimes of an irreducible and radical kind, can be grasped in a way that recognizes their integrity while simultaneously showing how they contribute to a general understanding of human being as a whole. In this regard, anthropology is generally concerned to give authority to those who are involved in the creation or construction of the realities in which they live. This, to some degree, has a distinct emphasis according to whether the orientation is relativist or universalist. Relativists tend to give general priority to the values integral to the constructions and practices of the anthropological subjects. For universalists this tends to be a first-order strategy in analysis that will eventually become subordinate to a logic of conceptual and theoretical understanding that transcends the phenomenon as it has been constituted by its practitioners.

The distinction between relativism and universalism in anthropology has further significance in the context of our discussion of the exotic and exoticism. In relativism, the exotic—with which the concept of culture was virtually synonymous—was overvalued. In universalist perspectives, the exotic was undervalued as something to be explained ultimately through universal modes of understanding that achieved their veracity in their apparent deconstruction or de-exoticization of cultural difference. This opposition still persists, as some of the chapters in this volume illustrate. As we have indicated, the culture relativist/universalist contradiction or opposition is endemic and virtually the aporia of a discipline that asserts the unity of human kind but is also alert to its radical, often irreducible, differences. Methodological discourse in the subject is broadly directed to the resolution of this contradiction, which contributes, we consider, to the particular dynamic of the discipline. In this, relativism and universalism are better conceived as complementary and dialectically interwoven rather than simple opposites.

Anthropology in our opinion is not as theoretically driven, or at least not in the same way, as many of the other social sciences—e.g., economics, psychology, sociology—with which it is cognate. Theory is more a point of arrival than a starting place or, more accurately, a continually shifting horizon of open potential. This is certainly the orientation of relativists, such as Geertz (1984), whose relativism, as we read him, does not necessarily rule out the establishment of universal theoretical and conceptual understanding. What he stresses, in effect, is that global cultural and social diversity is such as to limit, at the present moment, a universally or generally valid conceptual and theoretical scheme. This is so especially for universalist theory that is initiated within Western perspectives and grounded in their value assumptions, which is one of the points of Geertz's celebrated essay on the Balinese cockfight.

There is a strong sense in Geertz that the only possible universalism, if paradoxically so, is relativism itself—that is, given the global view of anthropology, difference is all there is. The best that can be hoped for, through specific ethnographic investigation, are some concepts (and perhaps theoretical schemes)

that have some application beyond the particular ethnographic instance from which they may be derived. An example might be Geertz's concept of the 'theatre state' that he develops from his Bali research. But this is already founded in a universalizing vision (one that threatens a Eurocentrism based as it is in Goffman-esque drama-conceptual metaphors of 'performance'). This is true also of his concepts of 'status bloodbath' and his employment of Gregory Bateson's notion of 'deep play' in the cockfight essay. For all his relativism, Geertz's work is founded, from the very start, in universalist perspectives that are premised on certain a priori assumptions and frequently of a strongly Western kind.

If in Geertz the falsity of a relativism/universalism opposition can be easily detected, this is so in general. Moreover, as Geertz does not escape universalist perspectives in his relativism, the same is true the other way about. Universalist conceptual and theoretical orientations in anthropology can recognize relativistic difference but generally, as we have said, as a first step in analysis (a setting of the problem at hand), which is dissolved when processes are examined in their depth. Relativism, for universalists, is a surface phenomenon that obscures underlying unities. However, the unities that are postulated may nonetheless embed relativist assumptions that the generalizing theory that is propounded does little more than substantialize ethnographically in an exercise of teleological confirmation.

Both relativism and universalism risk exoticism either in the form of mistaken difference—sometimes impelled in that ideology of anthropology that celebrates its practitioners as “merchants of astonishment” (Geertz 1984: 275)—or in the search for unity that is motivated to ignore or reduce that which otherwise refuses categories of general understanding in grand acts of totalizing theoretical narrative. It is in the failure by anthropologists to recognize their relativism within the universal that they can fall into the trap of exoticism, that is, misconceive a real difference as merely a variation in the universal. Levy-Bruhl's participation perspective insisted that much magical and ritual practice could not be reduced to the universalizing pretensions of Western reason, a point that Wittgenstein also made in reaction to anthropological analyses of Azande witchcraft. Many stock concepts in anthropology, indeed those of magic, witchcraft, ritual, fetishism—to list but a few—derive their force in an exoticism impelled in a rationalist universalism deeply centered in Euro-American commonsense and theory. This is not to deny their appropriateness when directed, for example, to describe the irrational consequences of certain ideological political and economic rationalities in American and European realities with global effect in contemporary processes. Nonetheless, the conceptual labels of such irrationalism rest on a potential exoticism of the Orientalist kind resting on evolutionist assumptions concerning the lesser rationality of other cultural practices.

Broadly we consider that the exoticizing difficulties of relativism and universalism are aporetically endemic to anthropology. Anthropologists have by and large recognized this. It is nothing less than a key problematic of the discipline that it is continually oriented to overcome, and here rests its methodological contribution in the humanities and sciences for the understanding of human

beings as a whole. This methodological potential, we add, is continually unfolding in a constant differentiating diversity of existential circumstances. Human being, if not a story without end, is far from over, and for this reason, we think, the idea of a final totalizing all-embracing conceptual and theoretical system is unlikely. In anthropology conceptual construction and theoretical formation is in continual process. Our reconceptualization of the idea of the exotic is intended to communicate the conceptual and theoretical openness of anthropology that at once acknowledges the problematic imbrication of relativism with universalism (that in many ways is inescapable) and attempts to transcend an opposition between them in opening to novel possibilities created in the flux of human action. The exotic is a concept that is open to potential and allows for the continual realization of novel possibilities.

We critically address three major orientations in anthropology that exemplify the idea of the exotic as open potential. In each there is a relativist/universalizing mix that is given in the primacy of ethnography in anthropology but is secondarily directed to its transcendence or a capacity to extend, through the ethnographic, a larger conceptual and theoretical understanding of human cultural and social diversity. In other words, the perspectives we address here, albeit briefly, are different attempts to arrive at a more general or universal understanding that variously attempts to avoid an exoticizing Eurocentricity.

### *Lévi-Strauss and a Structuralist Universalism*

Lévi-Strauss' structuralism is the major initiator of an anthropology with a universalizing ambition that both gave primacy to the ethnographic and in certain ways attempted to decenter Euro-American authority (e.g., *The Savage Mind* and its particular attack on the hegemony of Sartre's existentialism). He, of course, drew from within Western Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment modernist philosophical traditions (of Kant, Hegel, Marx, and Freud). Much criticism has been directed at his Euro-centered dualism—notably his universalist assertions of a nature/culture opposition and binary mentalism (see McCormack and Strathern 1980), and an ahistoricism: for example, that so-called cold societies (the worlds of an anthropology examining realities at the edges of imperial expansion) are outside history, which Marshall Sahlins resolved with a historical structuralism and Eric Wolf overcame in an insistent historical materialism. The latter especially but also Max Gluckman (1965, 1966), well before Wolf, stressed that those apparently outside history were still well within history and particularly the hot centers of colonializing and imperializing America and Europe.

While we recognize the point of many of the major criticisms of Lévi-Strauss, we stress that he largely refused what we discuss as exoticism—that is, the creation of peoples marginalized (and dehumanized and destroyed) in the relentless push of capital into objects for the touristic gaze, and/or to become regarded as primitive forms of the modern (as Werbner also argues in chap. 2). Rather, he represented them as exotic in a value-free and exteriorizing sense: as forms of existence independent and/or outside of the modern—of the hegemonically

dominant in contemporary realities—whose practical comprehension of the nature of human realities is no less legitimate. The idea of the exotic here—as an outside, a formation of human potential in itself (see Kapferer 2013)—implicitly indicates a mutuality of the exotic: that is, the hegemonically dominant (e.g., systems organized within the terms of Western capital) are no less exotic than those they often too easily demean.

The anti-relativism of Lévi-Strauss is thoroughly concerned with establishing general understandings through the exploration of the exotic, or that which demonstrably stands outside and threatens currently prevailing understandings of the nature and potential of human being. Lévi-Strauss's paradox is that he asserts a Western cognitive and conceptual way of organizing and sensing phenomena that for many he fails to transcend. Effectively he is bound to the Kantian paradox within which he begins and does not transcend its dualism. In other words, the moderate relativism—conceived here as a social and historical standpoint—that is part and parcel of the positioning of any anthropologist is not, for many of Lévi-Strauss's critics, overcome in his universalism. In other words, an exoticism remains Lévi-Strauss's possibility. This is the matter that directs what may be regarded as major poststructuralist developments in anthropology, approaches inspired by Lévi-Strauss attempting to overcome his specific dualism. Two in particular stand out: Philippe Descola (and to a lesser extent Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Marilyn Strathern) on the one hand and Louis Dumont on the other.

### *Descola, Viveiros de Castro, and the Poststructural Ontological Turn*

The recent so-called ontological turn is a move toward overcoming, in effect, false generalism or universalism and is strongly influenced by philosophical directions such as that of Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze. There are different anthropological examples (e.g., Holbraad 2012; Holbraad and Pedersen 2016), but the best known are the perspectivist and cognitivist approaches of Viveiros de Castro (1998, 2004) and Descola (2013). Descola relativizes the Euro-centered dualism of Lévi-Strauss, specifically that of the nature/culture distinction that has been at the crux of much criticism, reconceiving it as a particular ontology of naturalism. The notion of ontology at first thought might appear to be linked to Lévi-Strauss's concept of the overarching paradigm, or paradigmatic logic, for action. But the idea of ontology engaged is far more foundationalist—ontology as the orientational ground for thought and action in which being in the world is constituted and directed. Thus, for Descola, what we have discussed as the exotic—another potentiality of being human outside prevailing conceptions—can, if established as such through ethnographic investigation, manifest an orientation to existence that is effectively ontological in import.

Descola does not necessarily eschew universalism.<sup>2</sup> What Descola does is develop a set of ontological possibilities or combinations from a basic set of principles that he claims underpins any ontological cognitive and relational order. He generates a total set of possibilities, not all of which have so far been

discovered to exist through a search of the ethnographic and historical record. In his analysis the total set of ontological possibilities reduces, in effect, to a fourfold ontological set—naturalism, analogism, animism, and totemism. These major ontologies are then deterritorialized in Descola's development so that they are to be found potentially in a diversity of geographical locations and without any necessary historical connection (e.g., through diffusion).

Descola's major contribution is that he gives no particular ontology commanding or overarching authority, not privileging one over another. Furthermore, the various ontologies, which are actualized in historical societies—there are many logical possibilities in his schema that as far as is known have not eventuated—are then brought into play by Descola in developing a general anthropologically and ethnographically grounded understanding of human being as a whole. Through them he can understand the global differentiation and distribution of human institutional arrangements and related practices (e.g., cosmic kingship, human-animal interactions, orientations to the environment and ecology, sacrifice).

Despite his ingenuity, Descola does maintain the Kantian formalism (and nominalism) of structuralism. This is so despite an effort to engage Husserl's phenomenology, which in itself is Eurocentric (and naturalistic) and especially so in Descola's usage (see Kapferer 2014). It also continues to insist on an ahistoricity (see Kapferer 2014; see also Ramos 2012 and Nugent in chapter 3 for criticisms that apply the Marxist criticism of earlier structuralism to Descola's development). Descola may still be seen to risk an exoticism founded in the overriding value given to Euro-American philosophical and scientific assumptions even though they receive a degree of relativization. Nonetheless, it is an important attempt to overcome Lévi-Strauss's paradox while continuing in his tradition. He maintains the highly exotic categories (e.g., animism, totemism) that are subject to the Orientalist critique. However, he reconfigures their value effectively, giving them equality with other ontological possibilities, for example, the naturalist ontology of Euro-American thought and action. Descola has lifted old anthropological categories from out of their evolutionist and hierarchical meanings of earlier anthropological usage. By revaluing them, he has reinvented them as relatively distinct ontologies that stand in an exotic relation—as an outside (see also Kapferer 2013)—to Western ontologies and vice versa.

Thus, it may be fair to say that Descola has realized a positive dimension of the exotic in anthropology whereby the differences established through anthropological ethnographic analysis contribute to the genuine critical understanding of human potential. Despite some of our serious reservations in other respects—including a tendency to over-homogenize difference and a continuing essentialism still rooted in Western philosophical and scientific reason—Descola has addressed the vital paradox in the comparative vision of anthropology: a tension to exoticization whereby one ontological frame (usually Euro-American thought and practice) is given an undemonstrated authority (even a modern evolutionist superiority), both in the definition of others and in the discerning of their general import.

We single out Descola and separate him from other major poststructural and posthuman approaches in anthropology because he advances a comparative perspective that stresses the exotic as consciously attempting to escape exoticism. No one among his four ontological perspectives is necessarily privileged over any other or constitutes the standard against which others are identified as divergent, different, or exotic—which is a major factor in exoticization. Of further interest, and related to our concern with the exteriority of the exotic, is Descola's emphasis on interiority and physicality, which demarcates his fourfold ontological scheme and represents a variety of possible standpoints towards the exotic as the outside.

Strathern's poststructural orientation is another attempt with a similar objective. But in our opinion it tends to privilege a Melanesian perspective<sup>3</sup>—and in this risks an orientaling exoticism, one that is inversionary of a Self/Other dualistic kind. Somewhat paradoxically, Strathern's concept of the 'dividual' (Marriott 1976) can also be conceived as extending within dominant Euro-American individualist value. Moreover, her relational and dividualist perspective bears some consistency with contemporary globalizing even corporate processes as they are often conceived. It is an approach that is as much internal to contemporary modern/postmodern dynamics as it may appear to be external to them.

The same might be said of Bruno Latour's actor-network orientation, which we also note expresses some degree of affiliation with that of Strathern. His perspective intends to break out from the philosophical metaphysics that underpinned major anthropological perspectives particularly in the tradition of Durkheim and Mauss. It is powerfully oriented in the direction of current scientific advances (a cybernetics, engineering perspective), and there is a marked effort to suspend more conventional anthropological emphases on the social/society, as well as on value. The focus is on assembling dynamics that decenters the hitherto anthropological focus on the human and the restriction of agency to human being.

In a broad sense, Latour's approach avoids exoticism both in its suppression of value and in its stress on assembling processes. Effectively, there is no outside (exotic): all difference is conceived as a continually shifting potential of organizational principles that are not constrained within the confines or limitations of particular cultures or systems of value—although specific historical and contemporary instances may give intense expression to the effects of certain kinds of dynamic assemblage. This notion is carried to the extreme by Manuel DeLanda (see Kapferer 2011 for a critique), whose general approach is very close to that of Latour. He argues that any consideration of culture or value does not have any significant consequence for the understanding that perspective promises. Theoretically, there is no outside, no exotic in the sense that we think is crucial to the anthropological contribution. In certain aspects it joins other sociological universalisms such as Durkheimianism, and also some Marxist approaches, but in a vein that many would say is more conservative.

Latour and DeLanda would claim that they are leaving the ideological plane of previous sociologies, although paradoxically such a view likely masks the

potential of a highly ideological position that many Marxists, for example, would detect. Their break with a history of Western metaphysics (this can be wondered at!) and what Latour and DeLanda dismiss as its constructionism (the stress in anthropology on social processes of value definition) may remove a vital factor in anthropological exoticism, but at the risk of reasserting universalizing values of the center (if now global rather than specifically Euro-American). They champion a neorealism (see Harman 2016 on Latour), which risks a return of a kind of positivism that was implicated in the exoticizing evolutionism and hierarchies of the anthropology of yore. Further, the loss of the anthropological exotic, the demonstrated recognition of distinct logics of practice that are not necessarily reducible to a general scheme, neutralizes or radically weakens the potential—indeed the scientific potential—of anthropology either as critique and as a testing of generalizing theory or as an expanding of the ground for the development of concepts and theory of potentially genuine general or universal value.

Another example of neostructuralist confrontation with the exotic can be detected in the popular and stimulating interventions of Viveiros de Castro (1998, 2004). Perspectivism alludes to the acknowledgment of different Amerindian perspectives, which become ethnographically apparent in the negotiation of human and nonhuman subjectivities. The perspectival approach collapses standard Western categorical distinctions between humanity and animality, nature and culture. In this respect, a committed engagement with another (exotic) point of view has provided perspectivism with a spark of originality, the recognition of a world defined by different ontological premises—although the proposition that different worlds exist as alternative realities is an issue resisted by many anthropologists, and with persuasive arguments (see Pina-Cabral 2014a, 2014b).

Much more relevant with respect to our exploration of the exotic is that Viveiros de Castro's perspectival point of view is undertaken in isolation, within an exotic ontological realm that is “only visible to the eyes of trans-specific beings such as shamans” (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 471) and the academic experts who conduct the anthropological interpretation on their behalf. They permit the thoroughgoing relativism of other systems of thought (Euro-American naturalizing reason, for instance), and they may open space for critiques such as those of contemporary ecological movements (see Descola 2013) even though they are centered within the logics of Western reason (and the romanticism that is its potential). A problem with perspectivism is that it may be little more than a situationally specific orientation (relative to hunting; e.g., see Henriksen 2008; Willerslev 2007) rather than fully ontological. This is the counterargument presented by other Amazon specialists (Ramos 2012 and especially Turner 2009), which implies that a more conventionalist Durkheimian and Marxist-influenced universalism maintains relevance.

The powerful implication of these critiques is that perspectivism continues to run the great risk of exoticism. Steve Nugent (chap. 3) puts under critical light the image of the undifferentiated, exoticized Amazonian Indian, which is so central in perspectivism and presents us with a good example of an exoticized

stereotype that has achieved a certain transcendental ahistoricity. As Nugent argues, the image of the Amerindian falls comfortably within conventional Western referents of the primordial exotic: closer to a naturalized ur-condition representative of a mythologized human state before Westernization.

All this being said, Viveiros de Castro, Descola, and Strathern give renewed life to that anthropology that is concerned with opening up the importance of different formations of human existence—past or present—for the general understanding of human being, an understanding that decenters dominant or dominating perspectives, including those of some of their critics. As such, their approaches represent important junctures in anthropology's attempt to reposition itself with respect to the exteriorizing and/or orientalizing connotations of the exotic.

### *The Comparativism of Louis Dumont*

Louis Dumont presents another orientation that maintains the importance of the exotic in the anthropological comparative project. It is, in effect, a postructuralism directly intended to overcome the Eurocentric dualism of Lévi-Strauss' structuralism. Moreover, Dumont grounds his approach in the recognition that anthropology is first and foremost a comparative discipline. Unlike Descola, who affirms the authority of Eurocentric scientific and philosophical reason, Dumont is concerned to more thoroughly decenter Eurocentric authority, despite acknowledging that it is impossible to fully escape. Dumont confronts the methodological aporia at the heart of anthropology, giving the discipline, perhaps, a unique position in the social sciences. His approach works strongly in the space of the exotic as one of open potentiality whereby a relatively universally applicable methodology can be built and tested.

Dumont has been singled out as the figure of anthropological Orientalism par excellence, particularly regarding his India research on caste, which comprises the basis for his comparative methodology. However, Dumont's objective is thoroughly antagonistic to Orientalism and anthropological exoticism in general, which he most explicitly locates in Eurocentrism and also in certain modernist universalisms of a well-tried Marxian and Weberian sort. Dumont identifies himself as oriented to a Marxist position and thoroughly in accord with its liberating ideas. But he is wary of the way his political ideology may interfere with an anthropology that, in the interests of being scientific and rigorous in its investigations, must at first be prepared to suspend judgment (a kind of Husserlian epoche).

Caste is conventionally conceived as the extreme instance of inequality largely of a general economic kind. For perhaps most social scientists, caste is the worst instance of class oppression legitimated in religious ideology: an oriental system that could be overcome in a Western modernizing advance. In contesting this still ruling opinion—and without avoiding the undoubted dehumanizing possibilities of caste—Dumont showed how this misconception carried into practice (indeed through an orientalizing imperialism) in effect contributed to new human destructions of caste (and of ethnicity) associated

with the 1947 Partition of India. Developing a new set of concepts—for example, a non-stratificationist notion of hierarchy and the idea of encompassment—Dumont analyzed how caste was part of a specific overarching ideational logic of practice, ingrained in diverse social relations from kinship, through politics to the economic, that could not be reduced to conventional Western-derived sociological understanding.

While Dumont's orientation starts by contrasting India (the Orient) and the Occident, the ultimate aim is not to oppose them—and certainly not as homogeneous totalities (see his Appendices in Dumont 1980)—but to indicate them as historical divergences from out of common ground. Thus, their apparent difference disguises an underlying unity: the societies of Western Europe and North America being a suppression of forces to which India in its diversity gives varieties of open expression. There is no Self/Other dynamic in the comparison that hitherto defined the Euro- and America-centric orientation of much anthropological comparative work. This is how Dumont's arguments have been systematically presented (e.g., Rio and Smedal 2010), and we question such orientation. Dumont's objective is to overcome such dualism: what is treated as distinctly opposed is reframed as emergent in a dynamic of historical differentiation.

From this historical orientation Dumont develops a distinctive comparative method that strives to create concepts derived from underlying unities (demonstrated ethnographically), rather than on the basis of difference, or upon surface and untested assumptions of similarity and difference. Thus, in Dumont's view the concepts of comparative and universalizing Euro-American dominant sociologies assert the validity of concepts (and their theoretical articulation) that are inherently contradictory and oppositional. They are based in assumptions that defy their generalizing purpose, compounded by the fact that they spring from ideologies and values peculiar to a particular and relatively recent Euro-American historical experience.

Dumont's point has some similarity with the otherwise distinct ontological perspective of Descola, although Dumont prefers the term 'ideology' for a similar usage, but, we think, is less closed and homogeneously totalizing. Ideology for Dumont is not a surface phenomenon but deeply layered (like Descola's ontology) in the dynamics of relations constituting, as revealed through analytical abstraction, the overall impetus and organization of social processes in particular contexts. We should say here that Dumont's (unlike Descola's) is not a finished project. Descola's approach is highly formal—logically formulated in all its possibility—establishing a priori categories to be substantiated by ethnographic work. It is a typological frame for comparison as it is a method for identifying exotic difference without asserting Euro-American conceptual hegemony. Thus, it may avoid the Orientalizing type of exoticization and invite the possibility of developing counter-exoticizing interpretations.

Dumont also avoids exoticism by attempting to develop concepts that are both phenomenologically sensitive to the nature of practices in specific contexts and open to refinement in the interests of comparison. The analytical concepts that Dumont tries to develop for comparison are in many respects dislocated.

That is, they are in their pure abstraction independent or outside any extant context while having a potential and particular organicity to specific practices. The concepts (and their logic) to be applied, in Dumont's orientation, needs continual ethnographic demonstration as to their specific relevance, which also involves defining the limits of certain concepts as they are articulated in analysis. In our opinion, Dumont's comparative strategy is more ethnographically grounded than that of Descola. It takes the form of anthropology as an ongoing experiment, a continuing archaeology of the exotic in the constantly differentiating realities of human realities anywhere and everywhere, with an emphasis on the structures of limitation within practices that might restrict their applicability to other contexts. Thus, Dumont is able to show why the logic of caste hierarchy in India might not be expected to operate in Indonesia, where, for example, the relation of power to ritual is markedly distinct. That is, power is identical with ritual potency and not subordinate to it (see Geertz 1980).

We have seen so far how different theoretical interventions in anthropology have attempted to address exoticism in anthropology and especially to overcome the ever-present risk of Orientalism. Our concern also has been to break out of the relativism/universalism oppositional dialectic in anthropology in which the discipline has become needlessly bogged down.

## **The Ethnographic Exotic: A Counter-Exoticizing Opportunity**

It is time to shift our attention from theory to ethnography, focusing on the burdens, but also the advantages, of studying the exotic—this time, adopting a perspective from the grassroots. Once more, the connotations of exteriority, inherent in the etymology of exoticism, guide much of the discussion that follows and encourage us to focus on two emerging challenges.

The first challenge relates to the nostalgic identification of the ethnographer with the ethnographic object. Ethnography always addresses a time other than that of writing. In its attempt to capture social life as enacted somewhere else (or sometime before), ethnographic practice bears the mark of nostalgia. Is this an indelible mark, unredeemable, the ultimate sign of orientalizing exoticism? A deluded desire to salvage what is unsalvageable? Or, as we would like to argue here, ethnographic nostalgia presents an opportunity to reposition oneself with respect to exteriority: to deterritorialize and detemporalize ethnographic practice? And in that process, discover new meaning and unexpected, alternative perspectives?

The second challenge of the exotic for ethnographic writing emerges from its reemployment by the ethnographic subjects themselves: the appropriation and reuse of previous exoticized referents to articulate new identity narratives, which provide (often peripheralized) local actors with new opportunities to renegotiate their cultural representation. We refer to this process as counter-exoticization, and we recognize in it an opportunity for rewriting history from the bottom up, but without departing completely from preexisting exoticizing (mostly colonial) registers. In this respect, and as we are about to show, counter-exoticizing

narratives may reproduce ambivalence and the very source of Orientalism they attempt to deny. This is why we approach self-exoticization, and the exoticization introduced by (more powerful) Others, as mutually constitutive and inter-related processes.

### *De-exoticizing Ethnographic Nostalgia: Salvaging Anthropology No More*

As a wistful longing for how things used to be—themselves more frequently fantasy than not—the nostalgic view can distort the ethnographic project in discreet, not always directly detectable, but often mildly exoticizing ways. To expose the consequence of such distortions, anthropologists have identified a number of distinctive, ideal types of nostalgia (Angé and Berliner 2015).<sup>4</sup> One among them, ‘imperialist nostalgia’, introduced by Renato Rosaldo (1989), encapsulates a longing for disappearing worlds affected by modernizing change.<sup>5</sup> Nostalgic predilections of this variety can be detected in the exoticizing preferences of Western travelers and writers who contemplate exotic worlds, but also in the salvaging motif of some anthropological accounts. Ethnography’s disappearing object is lost and textually reclaimed, rescued at the very moment of its transformation, or presented as resisting the inevitable advance of Westernization (see Clifford 1986; Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986).

Such a deconstructive approach may entice us to approach ethnographic writing as a redemptive Western allegory (see Clifford 1986: 99) and nostalgia itself as a mechanism for rescuing cultural difference: Western anthropology salvaging what Western colonialism has already damaged. Pnina Werbner (chap. 2) places under critical examination these stimulating criticisms. She argues that behind the apparently romanticist, pastoral, or exoticizing outlook of much mid-twentieth-century anthropology, we can detect a committed antiracist and anticolonialist stance. To elucidate her point of view, Werbner focuses on *Tristes Tropiques*, a paradigmatically nostalgic—but for Werbner also historical—book that confronts the question of cultural survival at the face of extinction (see also Kapferer 2013). For Werbner, Lévi-Strauss’s lament for what is fractured and lost emerges from his condemnation of the Western colonial project and its destructive effect on vulnerable colonized societies. His pessimistic tone, Werbner argues, has much to do with the traumatic World War II experience—the Holocaust, the extermination of millions—that informs a view of irrevocable transformation, the uprootedness of cultures.

The critics of late twentieth-century anthropology—Werbner refers to George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer (1986), Marcus (1986), and Geertz (1988)—have, in her opinion, overlooked the anticolonial protest intended by *Tristes Tropiques*; in this respect, their criticism “lacks attention to the very historicity they advocate” (Werbner, chap. 2; see also Fardon 1990). Such thoughts lead Werbner to argue that it is time to reconsider, ideally with a more sympathetic eye, the nostalgia that emerges from traditional anthropological accounts, such as those of the salvaging cultural diversity variety. Ethnography’s disappearing object, she argues, is not a mere rhetorical construct, as James Clifford (1986: 112) has argued—for example, a made-up justification of an ethnographic pastoral. In

some cases, certain societies—or more often, particular cultural practices—are irreversibly affected by Westernization, state policies, consumerist trends, and noticeably postcolonial inequalities.

The anthropological commitment to engage critically with such processes brings anthropologists face-to-face with disappearing, fractured cultural practices, and invites attention to the following dilemma: is it appropriate to consider our engagement with what is irrevocably transformed as salvaging preoccupation? A starting point for resolving this dilemma, we believe, is to draw a firm distinction between, on the one hand, the anthropological commitment to study vulnerable, peripheral societies—a decision that, as Werbner points out, does not in itself engender nostalgia—and on the other, the exoticizing collapse of time and space that emanates from some ethnographic accounts, which may lead to the imprisonment of the ethnographic object in a depoliticized time capsule, an achrony of a sort (see Fabian 1983).

A certain degree of exoticizing nostalgia, argues Theodosopoulos (chap. 1), is predicated on our fieldwork memories and on our reading of the work of previous authors—for example, the literature that constitutes a particular ethnographic record. Field notes and previous ethnographies provide a well-articulated (thematically organized) view of the society under study that, very often, compares unfavorably with the disorderly dynamism of the everyday social reality. From this incongruity emerges ‘ethnographic nostalgia’, claims Theodosopoulos, the inclination to pursue nostalgic connections between a present social reality and the ethnographic record, which often provides the fleeting impression that the past is repeated in the present, as if it has emerged from the pages of a book.

The nostalgic, exoticizing biases outlined so far represent a never-ending challenge for ethnographers: the more distortions we uncover, the more we are bound to discover. As with ethnocentrism, the temptation of the exotic resurfaces in almost every new confrontation with alterity. But are such enticements unsurpassable? We believe that the ethnographic project engenders the very conditions that may lead to the demise of exoticism—or, ethnocentrism, for that matter. The more closely we experience the complexity of everyday social life, the more likely it is that we realize how our nostalgic predilections do not always represent the concerns of the people we study.<sup>6</sup> An engagement with what we (or others) may erroneously deem exotic entails the potential that, in time, familiarity with the Other’s point of view will bring about a de-exoticizing perspective: the detemporalization of exteriority in culturally meaningful and socially embedded terms.

It is in this fundamental respect that our treatment of nostalgia communicates a more positive message than that of Clifford (1986) and Rosaldo (1989). Our insistence to continue engaging ethnographically with social reality may—and often does—provoke a multitude of exotic recognitions that pose de-exoticizing challenges to our understanding (see Kapferer 2013). Thus, although exoticism, in the Orientalist sense, cannot be redeemed, the confrontation with alterity—conceived as what comes from outside—invites the consideration of new perspectives: the exotic as a gained opportunity, enabled by ethnography itself.

### *Self-Exoticization as Counter-Exoticization*

Just as native or indigenous anthropologists look inward, making the familiar exotic (Sax 1998; see also MacClancy 2002: 8), so too the everyday protagonists of social life, especially those in the periphery of economic power, look at their own culture from some temporal distance to reflect upon cultural practices of the past and valorize them in terms relevant to the present. In this process they may embark in the exoticization of their own culture. Self-exoticization involves a certain degree of self-distantiation: the repackaging of cultural products and practices—“a curious mix of the intimate and the remote” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009: 3)—that invites foreign consumers of the exotic. In this respect, self-exoticization, as a more encompassing process, may also inspire the re-articulation of local histories—often as representative and prototypical, ideal for repetition in performance, or worthy to serve as symbols that accentuate cultural distinctiveness.

Emerging identity narratives of that type can be broadly contrasted to institutionalized identity constructions, for example, nationalist practices such as those Eric Hobsbawm (1983) described as ‘invention of tradition’. The term ‘invention’ in this use carries its own semantic baggage—a particular association with inauthenticity (Theodossopoulos 2013)—that fails to capture the innovativeness, creativity, and improvisation of local discourse (Bruner 1993; Hallam and Ingold 2007), including cases of self-conscious depictions of the Self as exotic. Instead of invention, Sahlins (1999) recommends the term ‘inventiveness’ as a more appropriate alternative, which better conveys the idealization, irony, and self-caricaturing involved in the bottom-up revaluation of particular representations. The latter may be the product of political or economic contingencies—or marked inequalities—that inspire local actors to take their representation into their own hands and modify previous exoticizing images or narratives to fit new purposes.

From this point of view, we can see self-exoticization as dependent upon, or as a reaction against, notions of the exotic that are externally imposed—for example, previous, already established imaginaries such as tourism imaginaries (see Salazar and Graburn 2014). It is undeniable, however, that self-exoticization subverts top-down exoticization to reconstitute the exoticized subject in new, locally meaningful terms. In this respect, self-exoticization may instigate local, vernacular forms of counter-exoticization, such as the cases examined by Maurice Said in chapter 4, Theodora Lefkadiou in chapter 5, and Urmi Bhat-tacharyya in chapter 6. Such local vernacular types of counter-exoticization invite attention to a significant feature of the self-exoticizing process: its close interrelationship with the exoticizing narratives and images that it attempts to replace, which lead us to argue that exoticization and self-exoticization are mutually constitutive processes. They closely communicate with one another and borrow each other’s referents. It is more appropriate, thus, that they are analyzed in terms of their dialectic relationship.

We can detect this dialectic between exoticization and self-exoticization in the imaginary about capoeira teachers in Bahia, a topic explored ethnographically by Theodora Lefkadiou in chapter 5. There is a particular sensualized

reputation, she argues, about male capoeira teachers in Bahia. The latter are stereotyped by other members of their society as ‘hunters of foreign women’. The racialized stereotype of the attractive, black male capoeira teacher who pursues relationships with foreign female tourists (or capoeira students) rests upon a much wider exoticized imagery about this Brazilian martial art and its practitioners. This wider imagery contributes to the appeal of capoeira and Bahia as a tourist destination. Young Brazilian men, interested to pursue short-term erotic relationships (and establish connections that may help them travel abroad) take advantage of a preexisting sensualized reputation to present themselves in a manner that perpetuates an exoticized myth.

This mutually reinforcing process of exoticization and self-exoticization provides opportunities for local actors to reflect upon and redefine their identifications with Bahia, capoeira, and the wider world. The male capoeira teachers who pursue erotic relationships with foreign women understand that their exotic reputation offers an escape route out of marginalization. Other local actors, however, such as Brazilian women in Salvador and older, more established capoeira teachers, comment disparagingly about the young Brazilian men who engage with capoeira in a performative, flirtatious, or more superficial manner. In everyday conversation, argues Lefkaditou, the Bahians discuss the flirtatious practices of male capoeira teachers with ambivalence: admiration is mixed with contempt—including a growing concern about how Brazilian male sexuality, and the reputation of Bahia more generally, is appropriated by outsiders. The interface of exoticization and self-exoticization in this case poses identity dilemmas for many Bahians who remain so far unresolved.

Maurice Said (chap. 4) explores some similar dilemmas in Sri Lanka. Focusing on the period following the catastrophic tsunami of 2004, Said identifies two exoticizing tropes articulated in local contexts. The first of these involves the stereotyping of the undifferentiated generic Sri Lankan by foreigners (e.g., expatriates or aid workers) who present the local population in either patronizing (e.g., passive victims in need of humanitarian aid) or denigrating terms (e.g., ‘unreliable’, ‘uneducated’, ‘uncivilized’). Local Sri Lankans respond to these exoticizing views with counter-exoticizing narratives of their own, portraying the generic foreigner as businesslike and calculative but also gullible and exploitable. Both of these exoticizing tropes are predicated on contradictions; they inform complicated expectations that oscillate between idealization and disappointment (in the case of the foreigners) or dependency and exploitation (in the case of the Sri Lankans).

The dialectic of exoticization and counter-exoticization engenders identities formed in mutual opposition and reminds us, as does Said, that exoticization is never unidirectional. On a wider scale, the exotic imagery of Sri Lanka as a tropical paradise stimulates economic development. Those locations that are more heavily (or successfully) exoticized have received increased levels of humanitarian aid and foreign investment. In addition, European expatriates have taken advantage of local fears of another tsunami to buy and develop beachside properties. They have attempted to promote Sri Lanka as an untouched paradise, a refuge from the banality of life in Western societies. Unable to sanitize the local

landscape and its inhabitants of Westernizing influences, they see local social life—in its dynamic unpredictability—as an impediment. The local Sri Lankans, on their part, are reluctant to inhabit an artificial paradise controlled by the expatriates. They thus counter-exoticize the foreigners in an attempt to regain some sense of control. Exoticization and counter-exoticization here generate competing narratives in a context where local and foreign actors exoticize each other.

Urmi Bhattacharyya further explores the interrelationship of exoticization and self-exoticization as mutually constituted processes. In West Bengal, the referents of the exotic represent an outsider's point of view, emerging originally from a colonial gaze and more recently from images propagated by a postcolonial global economy. A colonial version of the exotic India became apparent in a particular Western discourse of superiority that attempted to redefine the Orient as the subject of imperial control. The representation of the colonized population as an exotic category played a legitimizing role for the colonial project: it concealed the vicious inequalities of domination behind the civilizing quest of the exotic Other. Colonial rule created the exotic in India, a discriminating category of naturalized inferiority, argues Bhattacharyya.

Nonetheless, the exoticization of India as a process externally imposed did not remain unopposed. In West Bengal, a community of artists who paint scrolls of cloth or paper has engaged in a form of counter-exoticization, using as a medium their pictorial art (*patachitra*), and the narratives that explain this art to local audiences. In colonial times, this distinctive local art followed wider anti-colonial trends that resisted discrimination, contributing to the re-articulation of a reviving Bengali identity—an act of indirect resistance. In the twentieth century, *patachitra* scrolls became commodified as popular souvenirs for pilgrims and tourists. By self-exoticizing their art form—following, in part, the exotic referents of a globalized market—the local artists have ensured that *patachitra* is now aesthetically significant at the global level.

A common feature in all these examples of self-exoticization is that bottom-up renegotiations of the exotic articulate with old and new exoticized imagery, although this time, in terms controlled by the exoticized subject. The sense of control that emanates from this process is of paramount importance to peripheral actors: their counter-exoticizing narratives can be conceived as a form of resistance. In this respect, seeing the Self from a position of exteriority involves a reclaimed sense of authorship in identity making. But it also engenders a new variety of grassroot or 'indigenous essentialism' (Howe 2009): the old exoticism is merely replaced, not eliminated. In an effort to de-pathologize the primitivism of colonial exoticization, counter-exoticizing narratives often reproduce and perpetuate the caricaturing referents of the top-down exoticization they try to repudiate.<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusion

Steve Nugent, in chapter 3, argues that the burdensome nature of the exotic is related to "the fact that anthropological usages of the exotic are embedded in a loose conceptual repertoire that anthropologists are at pains to police."

We have tried here to shed some light to this loose conceptual repertoire. For this purpose we have taken a decisive step toward redefining anthropology's engagement with the exotic, highlighting not merely its burdensome Orientalist side but also the opportunities for acquiring new knowledge, the challenge that the exotic—as the outside—poses for reconfiguring previous registers of understanding (see also Kapferer 2013). In many respects, both the exotic (in its colonial vision) and self-exoticization (as a bottom-up readjustment or correction of a colonial vision) depend upon and recycle previous referents of alterity—romanticizing, patronizing, caricaturing. We can easily detect a variety of Orientalizing exoticizations—intellectualist, structuralist, allochronic—and a variety of essentializing self-exoticizations—nostalgic, defensive, or self-idealizing.

But we can also detect a variety of local attempts to reconfigure previous exoticizing stereotypes, which strive to reverse the exoticizing gaze or to counter-exoticize. It remains to be seen how future generations of anthropologists will handle the possibilities that emerge from this bottom-up (self-)exoticization. Will they avoid confronting the exotic—for example, by distancing themselves from the culture concept, universalizing, or confining the exotic in the particularity of ontological models? Will they rush into redefining the exotic in term of preexisting knowledge, previous classifications nostalgically reenacted as typologies of exteriority? Or will they grasp the opportunity provided by the challenge of the exotic—the unique perspectives that emerge from the unexpected, and occasionally subversive, points of view made available by exteriority?

Irrespectively of the trajectories outlined above, the exotic—as the outside, or the familiar seen from the outside—will remain a central concern in anthropology. Exteriority is a defining feature of 'sameness'—the anthropological axiom that "all societies embody the same cultural value worth" (Argyrou 2002: 1). We may even argue, that exteriority—as a demand for the elsewhere, far away or closer to home—has created the broader discourses that defined anthropology. The dialectic of 'the here and the elsewhere' have premised each other to create the West (and its vision of order) (Trouillot 1991: 29, 32). And as Trouillot (2003) has argued, anthropology inherited the conceptual 'slots' that accommodate such previous categorizations. The lessons gained from our confrontation with the exotic indicate that conceptualizations of exteriority that predicate the 'savage slot' are not inescapable or binding. Anthropology can take the opportunity provided by the exotic, conceived not as confirmation of existing hierarchies but as a challenge to well-trodden paths of acquiring knowledge: the new has always been exotic to the old.

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## Notes

1. The term shares the same etymological route with the noun *exotika* (in plural), which in modern Greek refers to supernatural beings that occupy a spatial position of exteriority, clustering “around marginal areas” that “lie beyond the safe confines of the village” (Stewart 1991: xv).
2. A point that similarly applies to Viveiros de Castro’s perspectivist approach.
3. Strathern’s perspective also could be viewed as returning to a dominant Eurocentric perspective. Her approach (as does that of Bruno Latour with whom Strathern’s is connected) can be conceived as relevant to current transitions in the contemporary state form from that of the territorially sovereign nation-state to that of the more deterritorialized corporate state. Strathern’s rhizomic relational dynamic of the Melanesian person has some degree of fit with that of corporate state formations. In other words, as much sociological thought once corresponded with the milieu of the nation-state (most modernist theory), so do the poststructuralist orientations of Latour and Strathern express aspects of the contemporary corporate state formations that are integral to what is frequently described as globalization.
4. For example, Michael Herzfeld (1997) has introduced ‘structural nostalgia’ to capture the yearning for an irrevocable time of balanced perfection in social relations, evident in discourses that compare an idealized past of reciprocal sociality with a less perfect present, while Arjun Appadurai (1996: 77–78) discussed an ‘imagined’ nostalgia without lived experience—which he calls ‘armchair nostalgia’—to highlight how mass merchandising supplies memories of loss that one may never have suffered.
5. Imperialist nostalgia relates to the paradoxical grief of the colonizer for what colonialism has destroyed, which is conveniently expressed after the realization of the colonizing process (Rosaldo 1989).

6. For example, a nostalgic engagement may even encourage a committed ethnographic pursuit of continuities with the past that will inevitably lead to the realization that such continuities may very well be artificially construed.
7. And in this respect, counter-exoticization positions itself ambivalently in between the two most common distortions of resistance: the pathologization and exoticization of the resisting subject (Theodossopoulos 2014).

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