

AN ABSTRACT OF THE PROJECT OF

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Tim Jensen

Steps and Stikes is an Environmental Arts and Humanities capstone thesis project taking the shape of an art film. The video layers contemporary dance with natural and industrial imagery on a foundation of personal narrative. It engages with contemporary environmental discourse as a choreographed essay, questioning why the environmental movement has not been more effective over the last several decades. The artwork places an economic worldview, built on unregulated and constant growth, as the root cause of environmental crises. And the piece ends with a call to action for better collaborations between the labor and environmental movements as a path forward. This strategy for change builds in environmental and climate justice while working toward livable futures for all that is alive on the planet.

This written document is meant to amplify the viewer's critical engagement alongside an echo or memory of the analytic and somatic reactions to viewing the film. For those interested, it offers an opportunity for audience members to dive deeper into the thematic elements of the film and serves as a container for citations and further inquiry. It is not intended to replace the choreographed film, more to function as a viewer's companion.

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Steps and Strikes

by
Shane Elliot Scopatz

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APPROVED:

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Dean of the Graduate School

I understand that my project will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Shane Elliot Scopatz, Author

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To begin this capstone thesis project document, I would like to acknowledge that *Steps and Strikes* was produced and created on Native homelands. It was made possible by a Land Grant University—a product of the Morrill Act, a piece of legislation that has obscured the theft of Native peoples' lands and lifeways. Specifically, Oregon State University in Corvallis, Oregon, is located within the traditional homelands of the Marys River or Ampinefu Band of Kalapuya. Following the Willamette Valley Treaty of 1855, Kalapuya people were forcibly removed from reservations in Western Oregon. Today, living descendants of these people are a part of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde Community of Oregon and the Confederated Tribes of the Siletz Indians. The descendants of the Kalapuya continue to resist and stand resilient in the face of past and present oppressive United States policy, including but not limited to forced assimilation, theft of reservation land by the 1887 Dawes Severalty Act, and Termination. I recognize the need to do more than simply acknowledge the unjust actions of our settler colonial nation-state. Action is needed to manifest the just and equitable society I believe is possible. Education and active solidarity are necessary. For readers living in Oregon, I found Kalapuya scholar Dr. David Lewis' [ethnohistory](#) website to be a great resource in my education. If you are not in Oregon, and you are just beginning your journey of learning or relearning the history of colonization in the lands where you live, perhaps start by getting to know who lived on the lands before you arrived at this [website](#).

I would also like to acknowledge my advisor Tim Jensen. With his support and sensitive guidance, this project developed, grew legs, and began to run. I learned a great deal from his openness as an educator and his eagerness to dive into this art project with me. I feel privileged to have had such a person in my corner. I thank Jacob Hamblin and Carly Lettero, the directors of the Environmental Arts and Humanities program. Their leadership and management of this unique program gave me, a dancer and choreographer, a path back into the academy, a path saturated in environmental thinking, a path that has changed the way I step through the world for the better. Thank you to John McQueen. I have learned much from our time working together, and I was able to be able to carve my way through graduate school without extra baggage and student debt because of his generosity. Speaking of work, I have so much admiration for all of my fellow workers organizing in the Coalition of Graduate Employees. I know that the privileges afforded me in my graduate assistantship position are what they are because of a twenty-year

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Steps and Strikes is a project advocating for building community and supporting others as a way of manifesting a planet where we all can live. For me, so much of what I understand about community, stated at home with family. So thank you, Stephen, Jan, Anthony, Julian, and Mary Scopatz; because of all of you, I get to walk through this life as an artist, and I am in your debt. And Ayelet Nadav, my partner in all things, I can comprehend the possible depths of care, love, and solidarity because of you. Thank you for the gift of standing, meandering, and dancing with me.

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Introduction

Steps and Stikes is an Environmental Arts and Humanities capstone thesis project taking the shape of an art film. The video layers contemporary dance with natural and industrial imagery on a foundation of personal narrative. It engages with contemporary environmental discourse as a choreographed essay, questioning why the environmental movement has not been more effective over the last several decades. The artwork places an economic worldview, built on unregulated and constant growth, as the root cause of environmental crises. And the piece ends with a call to action for better collaborations between the labor and environmental movements as a path forward. This strategy for change builds in environmental and climate justice while working toward livable futures for all that is alive on the planet.

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What is Steps and Strikes

Steps and Strikes is a choreographed film and essay that layers contemporary dance with natural and industrial imagery on a foundation of personal narrative. The work traces my early environmental musings and transitions from city life to rural Utah life to graduate school. It then dives deep into the transformation in my thinking around environmentalism and finally articulates my argument for coalition-building between the labor and environmental movements, discussed in detail below. The storytelling is personal with a desire to appeal to viewers. I hope that they identify with my feelings of transitions and awakenings and, in turn, are encouraged to think more critically about the structural obstacles we face in building a livable future. The movement practice embedded in this piece is improvisational and draws on many of my dance lineages, primarily from my experiences as a performer working with Donald McKayle and Ohad Naharin. As a choreographic work, *Steps and Strikes* is rooted in the tradition of post-modern dance, also known as The Judson Church Era.¹ And as a maker, I must pay tribute to Ralph Lemon, an artist, who upon seeing his piece, *How Can You Stay in the House All Day and Not Go Anywhere* over a decade ago, my understanding of what dance can be, was forever changed.

In *Steps and Strikes*, I question why the environmental movement has failed to protect us from ecological crises? The most egregious shortcoming for the environmental movement is the likelihood of mass extinction and mass human suffering during the 21st century from climate catastrophe. I argue that the environmental and climate movements neglect to place capitalism as the root cause of ecological crises. In its five-hundred-year existence, capitalism has fortified a worldview that separates people from the biosphere. As a system, it relies on the cheapening of everything from nature to energy to lives, and it stabilizes hierarchies between people, and between humans and the more-than-human. By neglecting to center the ecological destruction of this global economic system, the environmental movement ineffectively advocates for change when it matters most.

This video is designed to engage audiences, from the dancer who spends little time thinking about climate change to the labor activist new to contemporary dance. The artwork's multimedia and multi-philosophy methodology aids in its approachability. Addressing the

¹ Guadagnino, Kate. "The Pioneers of Postmodern Dance, 60 Years Later" *The New York Times*, March 20, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/20/t-magazine/postmodern-dance.html>.

environmental crises of our time demands the speculative imagination of artists. Ecological catastrophe intersects with environmental, social, racial, economic, disability, LGBTQ+ justice, and other socio-cultural inequities. As culture creators, we have a moral obligation to dream of liberatory and socially just futures.

Steps and Strikes is my first artwork that takes a clear anti-capitalist, leftist stance. In this regard, I take inspiration from the radical leftists, mostly forgotten modern dance matriarchs from New York City in the 1930s and 40s, such as Miriam Bleacher, Edith Segal, and Sophie Maslow. These women, with others, made up the Workers Dance League and rallied behind the statement, "Dance Is a Weapon in the Revolutionary Class Struggle."² My piece is a 21st-century manifestation of this ideology with one small addition. *Dance is a weapon in the revolutionary class struggle for a livable planet for all.*

² Graff, Ellen. *Stepping Left: Dance and Politics in New York City, 1928-1942*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 7-12.

Steps and Strikes: The Argument in Detail

Introduction

We are currently living in a period of overlapping crises upon crises. Unfortunately, the climate emergency and other environmental catastrophes are among the most invisible but are perhaps the most threatening to both human and more-than-human life across the globe. Environmental destruction impacts marginalized and underserved communities disproportionately.³ Climate change and its current effects are already bringing the inequities in our national and global societies into full view. Therefore when we speak about climate catastrophe, it cannot be separated from climate justice, racial justice, immigrant justice, social justice, and worker justice.

In this section, I will display how scholars and thinkers from past and present continue to place the root cause of environmental catastrophe and injustice at capitalism's doorstep. I will argue that the environmental movement, in the broadest sense of the term, has failed to make more significant gains over the last half a century, because it has failed to center this analysis. Leaning into the thinking and writing of labor activist and scholar Jane McAlevey, I will apply her analysis of power as a way to describe why the environmental movement has failed to fundamentally change our relations to the biosphere at a time when it matters most. I will advocate for a more robust collaboration between the environmental and labor movements using examples from the past. Also, I will critique the contemporary iterations of labor environmentalism as not militant enough to save us and future generations from climate fallout. Finally, I will address possible criticisms of the labor environmentalism concept.

Naming the problem

In contemporary struggles for environmental and climate justice, the breadth of issues facing ordinary people are so pervasive they are undoubtedly systemic challenges. That conclusion begs the question, so what system? As I state in *Steps and Strikes*, to create a livable planet for all, it is imperative to name the system, to name the problem. I place the root cause of our ecological crises as capitalism. This is far from a new or original idea. Several scholars, writers, and thinkers such as Murray Bookchin, John Bellamy Foster, Naomi Klein, Kim Stanley

³ Nixon, Rob. "Slow Violence." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Accessed June 12, 2020. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Slow-Violence/127968>.

Robinson, Michael Löwy, Raj Patel and Jason Moore,⁴ have eloquently argued the nuances of this truth more than what is needed here. That said, *Steps and Strikes* is significantly informed by Patel and Moore's book, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things*, and Bookchin's formation of Social Ecology. The following paragraphs will be a quick overview of these scholars' thinking and analysis.

Patel and Moore's history of capitalism is a comprehensive study of capitalism as a global system that, from its very beginnings in the 1400s, has relied both on the domination of people and nature.⁵ Placing capitalism within this historical context is critical because, as John Bellamy Foster explains, many environmentally minded people point to industrialization as the primary factor in environmental degradation. He says,

With respect to 'industrialism,' we need to remember that capitalism was destructive of the environment on a global scale long before the Industrial Revolution—so the problem can't simply be attributed to the presence of industrial production methods.⁶

A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things dives deep into that history and the intersections of nature and human domination. The writers exemplify their argument in a single term, the Capitalocene. Cleverly transforming the term Anthropocene, they center what it is about our human-made geological epoch that has caused so much environmental destruction it will be seen by future scientists in the geological record.⁷ They argue capitalism is part of a World-Ecology, stating, "Capitalism is not just part of an ecology, it *is* an ecology—a set of relationships integrating power, capital, and nature."⁸ They explain this ecology is dependent and made up of a system that cheapens seven things: nature, money, work, care, food, energy, and

⁴ Merchant, "Radical Ecology"; Foster and Soron, "Ecology, Capitalism, and the Socialization of Nature"; Klein, "Capitalism Killed Our Climate Momentum, Not 'Human Nature'"; Robinson "The Ministry for the Future"; Michael. "Ecosocialism"; Patel and Moore, "A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things".

⁵ Patel and Moore, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things: A Guide to Capitalism, Nature, and the Future of the Planet*. (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017).

⁶ Foster, John Bellamy, and Dennis Soron. "Ecology, Capitalism, and the Socialization of Nature: An Interview with John Bellamy Foster." *Monthly Review* (blog), November 1, 2004.
<https://monthlyreview.org/2004/11/01/ecology-capitalism-and-the-socialization-of-nature/>.

⁷ Patel and Moore, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things: A Guide to Capitalism, Nature, and the Future of the Planet*. (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017), 3.

⁸ Ibid, 38.

lives. Patel and Moore articulate in detail the intersecting evolution of capitalism and display how it is intertwined with domination and destruction. They convincingly argue the seven cheap things were systematically made so since the emergence of Europe from the Middle Ages and were integrated and perfected in Europe's global colonial projects.⁹

In addition to *Steps and Strikes* being grounded in an understanding of capitalism's history, the artwork also takes shape in the radical imagining of a post-capitalist ecological society. In this way, the film leans into the theorizing by anarchist philosopher Murray Bookchin. Bookchin provides a pointed critique of capitalism through his utopian vision for an ecological society, contained in a philosophy he calls Social Ecology. His writing on the topic and depth of analysis spans almost five decades. At its core, he argues that capitalism is both fundamentally incongruent with ecology and it reinforces dominations of people over people, and people over nature. Social Ecology posits that an ecologically healthy society will manifest with an abolition of hierarchy and celebration of diversity. This concept of social organizing is built from confederated, bioregionally invested directly democratic assemblies or municipalities.¹⁰ These assemblies are egalitarian and based on an expansive conception of freedom. In many ways, Social ecology is about revolutionary vision looking forward. As Bookchin writes,

“In utopia, man no more returns to his ancestral immediacy with nature than anarcho-communism returns to primitive communism. Whether now or in the future, human relationships with nature are always mediated by science, technology and knowledge. But whether or not science technology and knowledge will improve nature to its own benefit will depend upon man's ability to improve his social condition. Either revolution will create an ecological society, with new ecotechnologies and ecocommunities, or humanity and the natural world as we know it today will perish.”¹¹

An Ineffective Movement

As stated in *Steps and Strikes*, our environmental crises have ballooned into an unimaginable existential threat. So how is it that we find ourselves in such a dire situation? It is not because of a lack of understanding, writers and thinkers like Murray Bookchin sounded the

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Merchant, Carolyn. *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable World*. 2nd ed. (Revolutionary Thought/radical Movements. New York: Routledge, 2005), 148-152.

¹¹ Bookchin, Murray. *Post-scarcity Anarchism*. 3rd ed. (Working Classics Series; 3. Edinburgh; Oakland, Ca: AK Press, 2004), xii.

alarm bells on the impacts of greenhouse gases as early as the late 1960s.¹² So why is it that over 50 years later, so little progress has transpired? What are the conditions in our society that have paved our way to relative environmental inaction?

There are good people working day and night, losing sleep for decades over these issues, so this is not to say that some incremental environmental gains have not transpired over the last several decades. But the environmental movement, in the broadest sense of that category, has failed on many fronts. Environmentalists have failed to ensure all people have access to clean drinking water.¹³ Environmentalists continue to fight to protect the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge from fossil fuel development.¹⁴ Environmentalists have not secured a safe and livable planet for all that is alive and will live on this planet, our only home.

The problem is, environmentalists are not fundamentally addressing the root cause of the environmental catastrophe. As expressed in detail above, capitalism and the enthusiasm for its contemporary neoliberal form is this root cause. I argue that environmentalists have not made more significant gains because the environmental movement is not naming the problem and, as a result, is ineffectively advocating for change.

Jane McAlevey, a labor scholar and activist, significantly influences my thinking in this regard. She explains the labor movement and the political left, in general, have not made significant gains over the last half-century because it is too focused on ineffective strategies for change.¹⁵ Primarily those ineffective approaches are advocacy and mobilization.¹⁶ Think Sierra Club and the Climate March, respectively. The Sierra Club fails because it makes boardroom deals behind closed doors that are inevitably detached from many ordinary people's real needs.¹⁷

¹² Ibid, 4.

¹³ "1 in 3 People Globally Do Not Have Access to Safe Drinking Water- UNICEF, WHO." Accessed March 14, 2021. <https://www.who.int/news/item/18-06-2019-1-in-3-people-globally-do-not-have-access-to-safe-drinking-water-unicef-who>.

¹⁴ Plumer, Brad and Fountain, Henry. "Trump Administration Finalizes Plan to Open Arctic Refuge to Drilling." *The New York Times*, August 17, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/17/climate/alaska-oil-drilling-anwr.html>.

¹⁵ McAlevey, Jane. *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹⁶ Ibid, 210.

¹⁷ Merchant, Carolyn. *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable World*. 2nd ed. (Revolutionary Thought/radical Movements. New York: Routledge, 2005), 165-169.

The mobilizing approach fails because the only people the movement activates for a one-off march are sympathizers with the cause. And what is worse, the majority of those who show up then go back home in the evening to continue watching Netflix for the next six months or a year before they are activated again.¹⁸

What McAlevy argues makes a tangible change in ordinary people's lives is organizing. She explains that regular people have power, but to make progress socio-culturally, people have to organize to win. That means having a clear idea of what you want to be changed, who has the power to change that, and how coalitions of ordinary people can flex their collective power to make that change happen. This is a method that requires one-on-one conversations, chats with people, whether they share the organizer's beliefs or not. These conversations require a deep dive into what individuals need as people and workers, what they care about, and showing them that what the organizer cares about is similar and that if they work together, conditions can change.¹⁹

As a labor organizer, McAlevy provides mostly examples of labor unions organizing. Within this context, she discusses the power of the strike. The strike, or the threat of one, is one of the most powerful tools ordinary people have.²⁰ This is the crux of the problem for the environmental movement. We need to remember what our most powerful tools for change are. The strike is a tool to be used whether people are organizing to improve workplace conditions in Amazon warehouses or organizing to maintain the Amazon rainforest as a carbon sink for our planet.

Relying on corporate powers and politicians to make the changes we need to ensure a survivable planet and a just society is not a winning strategy. Solidarity between ordinary people, deep organizing, and the strike power might be our best tools for ensuring a just transition. In my assessment of this approach, I find there two ways to go about enacting this strategy. The first is a general strike. Perhaps environmental organizations should provide more resources to aid in the organizing of all workers across the country. In doing so, there would be an opportunity to call for a powerful general strike until Congress passes climate legislation. My other thought is for environmental NGOs to collaborate with union organizers to unionize and

¹⁸ McAlevy, Jane. *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 9-12.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 12-21.

²⁰ *Ibid*.

build worker power in destructive industries. This Judi Bari-style organizing,²¹ would support workers in fossil fuel development to demand jobs that do less harm to the planet, jobs they and their families could count on for generations to come. Some critics might argue that labor unions should be less interested in social issues and more focused on workplace shop floor issues. I understand that criticism, but environmental health and climate change are working class, workplace issues. Organizing workers in the face of climate catastrophe is an effort to fundamentally shift the conditions of capitalism that is both pro-worker and pro-environment. It is a fight by ordinary people for everything alive on the planet.

In summation, *Steps and Strikes* points to a broad social issue and offers an acute and unique strategy for addressing environmental crises. I assert that capitalism is the root cause of the ecological catastrophe, including but not limited to climate change. I argue that activists have not secured a healthy biosphere for all because they are pushing for change in ineffective ways. Positioning itself as anti-capitalist, the environmental movement opens up collaborations with and with labor organizers in a way that adds powerful tools to the toolbelt in making change happen. This is hard but necessary work for achieving a just future for all humans and nonhumans. As is evidenced by the Covid -19 pandemic so clearly, crises bring into full view the inequities and imbalances in our society. Climate change will be no different. It is essential to use militant organizing to simultaneously address social inequalities and environmental destruction.

Labor Environmentalism: Then and Now

It is critical to mention, collaborations between the labor and environmental movements have and continue to accomplish good things for the environment and ordinary people. As this strategy depends on a deepening of class consciousness, I would like to highlight a statistic that supports the class analysis central to the argument *Steps and Strikes*. A recently published Oxfam study states that the wealthiest one percent globally accounts for double the emissions of the poorest fifty percent.²² These revelations into the power dynamics, and the structural barriers

²¹ “Wilson, Nicholas. “Judi Bari (1949-1997) | Industrial Workers of the World.” Accessed March 14, 2021. <https://archive.iww.org/history/biography/JudiBari/1/>.

²² Marx, Paris. “Only Class War Can Stop Climate Change.” Accessed March 14, 2021. <https://jacobinmag.com/2020/10/class-war-climate-change-overpopulation-carbon>.

working-class people are up against, are critical to the argument for a robust and militant labor movement that can organize to demand a livable planet.

Historically there are several examples of labor unionists resisting environmental catastrophe. In the late 1960s, in Harlan County, a rank and file caucus formed in the United Mine Workers of America called the Miners for Democracy. Jock Yablonski was an activist member of this caucus. He ran a campaign to oust the corrupt sitting president of the union, Tony Boyle. During his campaign for president, Yablonski articulated clear environmental justice demands from miners, stating,

“Every union should have a vision of the future . . . Unions represent men and women who are part of communities, are citizens of states and a nation. The public environment affects the well-being of miners and their families. What good is a union that reduces coal dust in the mines only to have miners and their families breathe pollutants in the air, drink pollutants in the water, and eat contaminated commodities?”²³

Another example that should not go unmentioned is Judi Bari. Bari, a leader in the *Earth First!* Movement in Northern California in the 1990s was both an environmentalist and a labor organizer. As a member of the Industrial Workers of the World, her anti-capitalist politics were clear. Her class consciousness aided her environmental activism in redirecting environmentalist anger at workers or loggers to corporations. And she successfully organized loggers to see that it is not the environmentalists that were a threat to their livelihood but the scorched earth logging practices of the multinational corporations that would soon result in an evaporation of their good-paying rural jobs.²⁴

This broadening of the camp, the incorporation of environmental demands, and strategic resistance to multinational environmentally destructive corporations proved dangerous for both Yablonski and Bari. In both cases, who definitively brought the violence upon them is unknown. Yablonski and his family were, tragically, murdered in their sleep on the last day of 1969.²⁵ Bari,

²³ Kahle, Trish. “Austerity vs. the Planet: The Future of Labor Environmentalism.” *Dissent Magazine* (blog). Accessed March 14, 2021.
<https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/austerity-vs-planet-future-labor-environmentalism-unions>.

²⁴ Wilson, Nicholas. “Judi Bari (1949-1997) | Industrial Workers of the World.” Accessed March 14, 2021.
<https://archive.iww.org/history/biography/JudiBari/1/>.

²⁵ Kahle, Trish. “Austerity vs. the Planet: The Future of Labor Environmentalism.” *Dissent Magazine* (blog). Accessed March 14, 2021.
<https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/austerity-vs-planet-future-labor-environmentalism-unions>.

and her friend Darryl Cherney, were victims of a car bombing that almost killed her in the spring of 1990.²⁶ The attacks on both of these labor environmentalist leaders are tragic, and they are a testament to the power of a unified environmental labor coalition.

Today, the labor movement and workers generally are a growing part of the national ecological conversation. This is most evident in the discourse around climate change and just transitions. In the United States, the Federal Government, House Resolution 109, popularly known as the Green New Deal, explicitly states;

“Resolved, That it is the sense of the House of Representatives that— it is the duty of the Federal Government to create a Green New Deal— to achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions through a fair and just transition for all communities and workers...”²⁷

In addition to this top-down approach, several non-profits are organizing for workers in the face of climate catastrophe. For example, the Labor Network for Sustainability is a hub for labor environmental collaboration. They work on everything from providing organizing tools and workshops to climate justice communication and policy research. Their mission,

is to engage workers and communities in building a transition to a society that is ecologically sustainable and economically just. We work to foster deep relationships that help the labor movement engage in the climate movement and the climate movement understand the economics of climate change and the importance of organized labor as a key partner in confronting the climate crisis.²⁸

Today’s work at the labor environmental nexus is not as fleshed out as what I advocate for. In my research, I have struggled to find activists that are today’s equivalents, Bari and Yablonski. This is unfortunate but perhaps predictable. Over the last several decades,

²⁶ Thomson, Mary Liz, Cherney, Darryl, Hokey Pokey Productions, Production Company, and Green Planet Films. *Who Bombed Judi Bari?* (Garberville, Ca: Hokey Pokey Productions: Green Planet Films, 2012).

²⁷ Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. “Text - H.Res.109 - 116th Congress (2019-2020): Recognizing the Duty of the Federal Government to Create a Green New Deal.” Webpage, February 12, 2019. <https://www.congress.gov/bills/116th-congress/house-resolution/109/text>.

²⁸ Labor Network for Sustainability. “Who We Are.” Accessed March 14, 2021. <https://www.labor4sustainability.org/about/making-a-living-on-a-living-planet/>.

pro-business policies have atrophied the labor movement in the United States.²⁹ Today just 6.3 percent of private-sector workers are unionized.³⁰

I imagine many labor organizers will be critical of this strategy because of the obstacles workers face in forming a union. That stated, I think of labor environmentalism as firmly falling under the umbrella of a tactic called *Bargaining for the Common Good (BCG)*. BCG is an approach to organized labor struggles that include broader social issues. This ranges from grocery workers in a pandemic organizing around medicare for all; to teachers demanding their employer not collaborate with Immigration and Customs Enforcement.³¹

Today there is a simmering resurgence of the labor movement. And as organizing militancy continues to grow, rallying behind the BCG as a tactic grows in popularity. Understandably, several labor organizers believe that putting too much an emphasis on broad social issues does not "get workers the goods." Or in other words, failing to narrow the focus on shop floor issues is detrimental to actualizing improvements for people at the workplace. Marianne Garneau argues:

“My concern about Bargaining for the Common Good is that it implies that unions are normally chauvinistic institutions, and only in special circumstances do they break out of that. But they already take care of the public interest by fighting their own battles at work. More broadly, I want to argue that the workers’ interests — even in the case of the private sector — are the general interest.”³²

This is an important criticism, and to a certain extent, I agree. But the moment we place this in an environmental context, it is easy to see how this argument can fall apart. It is easy to imagine organized workers fracking for oil, primarily concerned with their conditions on the job, even bargaining more time off based on increased efficiency and productivity. Against the backdrop of the climate emergency, it is clear that not all collectivized workers bargaining for better shop floor conditions will be in the public interest.

²⁹McAlevey, Jane. "The Crisis of New Labor and Alinsky's Legacy." *Politics & Society* 43, no. 3 (2015): 415-41.

³⁰ "Union Members Summary." Accessed April 19, 2021. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.nr0.htm>.

³¹ Garneau, Marianne and Burns, Joe. "A Debate on Bargaining for the Common Good." Debate facilitated by Brooks, Chris. *Organizing Work*. Accessed April 19, 2021. <https://organizing.work/2020/10/a-debate-on-bargaining-for-the-common-good/>.

³² Ibid.

Additionally, some might argue that BCG is bad for unions because the promises are too big and broad. When organized labor fails to win on limiting things like rent hikes, workers lose confidence in their union.³³ This is a valid concern, but this real-world problem can be addressed through better organizing and communication. I believe in workers and believe they have the insight to understand that some demands are more difficult to achieve than others, and failing to cross the finish line does not necessarily mean material gains have not been made. Again, against the backdrop of an existential threat of climate change, no matter the industry or sector, working-class people will be affected at work and home. Labor organizing around environmental crises is both a shop floor issue and a BCG issue. It simply needs to be framed that way.

To conclude this *Steps and Strikes: The Argument in Detail* section, I argue that a robust shift in the activist wing of the labor movement will yield the critical environmental changes in public policy and transformations in worldviews that are needed. To resist the status quo of corporate elites and politicians, addressing environmental catastrophe at a fast enough pace will require massive general strikes, strategic organizing, and work stoppages in environmentally destructive industries. This strategy demands rank and file workers invested in building the just society and the livable planet we all deserve with a radical and militant approach to labor organizing.

By diving into this intersectionality, we afford both a utopian vision, something like Bookchin's Social-Ecological revolution, and a roadmap for near future actions. In other words, the radical imaginary can serve as a north star while grounding the desperate work we need to be doing today. We can simultaneously build the politics and directly democratic systems we need for an ecological society while standing in solidarity with fellow workers. Making gains both at work and for healthy livable environments will be how we mitigate ecological catastrophe while building resilience alongside the most marginalized among us.

³³Garneau, Marianne and Burns, Joe. "Is Bargaining for the Common Good Relevant to Private Sector Unions?," Debate facilitated by Brooks, Chris. October 28, 2020.
<https://organizing.work/2020/10/is-bargaining-for-the-common-good-relevant-to-private-sector-unions/>.

Why Art? Why Steps and Strikes?

The environmental crises of our times are complex. They demand systemic change, and that can be hard to wrap one's head around. In this regard, I believe that contemporary art has a critical role to play in pushing and advocating for change. A work like *Steps and Strikes* uses a diverse methodology to level the playing field. Building knowledge in this way will be new for many, but the piece is designed to get people to think about dance, their own stories, and environmental crises together. This repatterning in thinking is one of contemporary art's most influential tools. Art as a discipline is also uniquely suited for expressing the speculative imaginary, and addressing the environmental crises of our time demands this of artists. As T.J. Demos, art historian and critic expresses,

I'm convinced that art, given its long histories of experimentation, imaginative invention, and radical thinking, can play a central transformative role here. In its most ambitious far-ranging sense, art holds the promise of initiating exactly these kinds of creative perceptual and philosophical shifts, offering new ways of comprehending ourselves and our relation to the world differently than the destructive traditions of colonizing nature.³⁴

Ecological catastrophe intersects with environmental, social, racial, economic, LGBTQ+ justice. As someone working in the cultural sphere, I have a moral obligation to make art that dreams of liberatory and socially just futures. The art I find most compelling is artwork that challenges our understandings of life, culture, politics, and art that aims to expand the boundaries of public discourse. In this way, *Steps and Strikes* is inspired by Kim Stanley Robinson's newest Cli-Fi novel, *Ministry for the Future*.³⁵ What this book does to great effect is radically imagine a near future. In doing so, it is as if he lays out a blueprint for how we should be acting on climate change today. Influenced by Robinson's use of this device, the narrative in *Steps and Strikes* finishes with a call to action to radically imagine labor environmentalism in the next twenty days.

As is mentioned above, *Steps and Strikes* is my first artwork that takes a clear anti-capitalist, leftist stance. And the radical leftist dance makers from New York City in the

³⁴ Demos, T. J. *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology*. (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 18- 19.

³⁵ Robinson, Kim Stanley. *The Ministry for the Future*. First ed. (New York, NY: Orbit, 2020).

1930s and 40s instilled in me a confidence about making dance in the political sphere.³⁶ Additionally, as an artmaker, I am deeply rooted in this history, physically, creatively, and intellectually. A past mentor of mine, Donald McKayle, spent much of his early artistic days working with and creating alongside these leftist dance artists in the New Dance League.³⁷ Because of this embodied dance DNA, I feel a sense of duty and honor in carrying on a tradition of leftist dancemaking.

And finally, it must be stated, critically socially engaged contemporary art and dance are essential. The creative practice, the making of, participating, and observing of art builds knowledge in diverse ways. I have no text or study to cite in this regard, only an insider's perspective. As someone who has danced for close to thirty years, I know that the way my brain and body move through the world is unique because I am an artist.

³⁶ Graff, Ellen. *Stepping Left: Dance and Politics in New York City, 1928-1942*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).

³⁷ Ibid, 165-166.

Conclusion

Steps and Strikes is a snapshot of me thinking out loud for a year, and not just any year, 2020. Underneath the piece's central theme is a messy mix of the personal, an internalization of pandemic stresses, and a reaction to a range of events—from a slog through the United States immigration system to the worldwide uprisings for social justice. In that way, art is unique. It can offer both an argument for labor environmentalism but also serve as an invitation to reflect on the messy glory of what it means to be alive and human.

I fundamentally believe the issues we face in the first half of the 21st century, most urgently climate change, require (to borrow a term from Kim Stanley Robinson) an all-hands-on-deck approach.³⁸ We as a global society can meet these existential threats and build liberatory futures for humans and the more-than-human alike. Art, undoubtedly, will be a centerpiece in accomplishing these goals. The breadth of issues upon us and the overlapping of crises demand a vibrant art and humanities sphere. These disciplines are where new ways of knowing are built and experimented with. *Steps and Stikes* is my humble manifestation of that goal.

³⁸ Robinson, Kim Stanley, “Imagining the End of Capitalism With Kim Stanley Robinson.” Interview by O’Keefe, Derrick. Accessed April 19, 2021.
<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/10/kim-stanley-robinson-ministry-future-science-fiction>.

Appendix

Steps and Strikes



Monologue from Steps and Strikes

I am a person who can fall deeply for a place. I have a poem I wrote to prove it, it goes something like this....

During pandemic times
 Visions of crows echoing in Windgate
 sandstone cottonwood filled canyons
 The daily forlornness is a torness
 Akin to the ache of a partner
 Separated by land, sea, plague and US immigration

Sound absurd?
 Empathy for landscapes
 Is what moved me
 from canyon country
 To the woods and water country of Cascadia.

Before moving to Oregon for graduate school, I was living in the ancestral land and historical territory of the Hopi, Zuni, Dine/Navajo, San Juan Southern Paiute, Kaibab Paiute, Ute, Ute Mountain Ute, and Acoma nations also known as southern Utah.³⁹ I didn't grow up there, I spent most of my childhood in California. In Utah, I worked as a morning shift barista and spent most afternoons exploring the labyrinths of canyon country. When I finally moved to that part of the world, it was like moving to Narnia or Hogwarts. You see, I fell for the desert Southwest landscape while living abroad, reading books about it.

I lived in Tel Aviv for roughly 6 years, and strange as it is, when I remember my time there, some of my fondest memories are drinking coffee at my neighborhood coffee place devouring the books of Edward Abbey, and others. I was homesick, and city exhausted and just as fantasy facilitates teleportation to a mythical place, nature writing allowed me to inhabit a space without concrete, without buses and without the condensation of air conditioner water falling like recycled rain on my face from three floors up.

³⁹ Grand Staircase Escalante Partners. "Justice, Equity, Diversity, & Inclusion." Accessed April 19, 2021. <https://gsenm.org/jedi/>.

The more I read, the more being thousands of miles away from a Joshua tree, saguaro or pinyon-juniper forest became unsustainable...

The majority of my life I poured all my being into a passion, an obsession with movement. Initially I moved to Tel Aviv for work, work for what at the time, was the dream job, But additively, I walked onto the stage a few times with hundreds of audience members watching me dance while I simultaneously daydreamed or stagedreamed of one day living amongst rocks, snakes and desert streams.

So in one of the bravest things I have ever done, I left my friends and an art community that supported and admired my work to move to a place I spent hundreds of hours reading about.

Escalante has a population of around 800 people. It was settled by Mormons in 1875 in search of an easier place to live on the Colorado Plateau. Like many rural towns across the Western US today, you'll find a mix of people. Mainly white settlers who have been there for generations and white newcomers. The town hugs a recovering river by the same name, it runs so brown and silty, it looks like chocolate milk after a few good monsoon summer rains....

The land management of the area is complicated and is currently in a hotly contested conservation battle involving some very old US legislation called the Antiquities Act.⁴⁰ To be perfectly honest, that's one of the reasons I moved there. Back in that Tel Aviv coffee shop, I wasn't just reading about the love people had for the desert, I was reading stories of radically minded people who fought to protect landscapes. I wanted to see if I could bear witness to any of that kind of activism and maybe even participate...

In the end, my year in Escalante was not spent protesting or devising direct action campaigns. I saw none of that. A few of my friends testified in front of the House Natural Resources

⁴⁰ Nordhaus, Hannah. "What Trump's Shrinking of National Monuments Actually Means." National Geographic, February 2, 2018.
<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/trump-shrinks-bears-ears-grand-staircase-escalante-national-monuments>.

Committee, which I watched, but that was about the extent of it. Instead, I served coffee and quiche to many types of travelers and walked, drove, and floated as many canyons as I could. Escalante is not the easiest place to live, it is remote and prickly cowboys abound. But there is community there, many of the vegetables I ate were grown in the sandy soil of my neighbors. It is an easy lifestyle to romanticize.

Before I moved to Escalante, I not only worked as a dancer but I made environmentally themed multimedia performance pieces. I often thought, if I lived in a place where I could foster a deep connection to land, my artwork would be more poignant, more detailed, more acute. So in many ways I felt like my move to Escalante was for my art. But a strange thing happened...

While living out in canyon country, I seldom felt inspired to make something. After all that dreaming back in Tel Aviv, most of the time having sand shift under my Chaco sandaled feet as I walked through a chilled canyon on a fall morning, was enough. Long before the move I had vowed to never choreograph the dance equivalent of a pastoral landscape painting. And yet while I was living there, my brain was too satisfied, relishing in the beauty of the high desert to even conjure up an idea that did not default to a statement about how pretty and strange this landscape is. So I made very little art that year. Sometimes, my partner, also a dancer, and I just felt like dancing, so we did. Sometimes we recorded it. But it was not a creative process....

Just as the dark streaks of desert varnish high up on red canyon walls only shine when the light hits it right, some of the appeal of the Escalante life began to wear off. I often thought to myself, on the one hand, I could build a house somewhere next to the Strait Cliffs, work in the tourist industry, maybe start my own coffee business or something, grow my own food and be there, be happy. On the other hand a lot of that fantasy didn't sit right with me.

Today I can think of many reasons why I felt that way, but at the time it was just a general sense that the life I was living in Escalante didn't feel like the expression of my environmentalist identity in the way I always thought living out in the middle of nowhere in the desert would. So again, I questioned who I was and where I was... I knew wanted to make better art about the environment and that was not looking like it was going to happen anytime soon in Escalante. So

going to grad school seemed like a good place to at least try to sort out why I paused my dance career, left friends, colleagues and a city I liked to live in the desert, and then when I finally got there was unsatisfied...

In 2019 I found an environmental graduate program that suited me and I suited it. I moved from the arid high desert on the Colorado Plateau to the temperate rainforest lands of Western Oregon. Not only was the amount of water and green overwhelming, so were the first days of my first graduate seminar.

Before graduate school, I called myself an environmentalist because I loved being in wild places and thought they should be protected. I thought I understood the environmental movement pretty well for being self taught. I'd read foundational environmental literature like Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* and Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* long before enrolling in grad school. I listened to podcasts about conservation and the West, and I regularly read High Country News. I perceived myself to be well versed on contemporary environmental issues. But then there I was, in a seminar with about 15 other students and I was critically thinking about environmental justice for the first time.

I remember reading this article about black women organizing in the 80's in Los Angeles. They were trying to stop a toxic waste incinerator from being placed in their neighborhood, and when they reached out to the Sierra Club for help, the Sierra Club, refused because they said it was not "environmental" enough.⁴¹ Being exposed to these new narratives, it took only a couple of weeks for me to understand that in all my passion and in all my drive to make environmental art I had defaulted to a social movement that has been historically white and historically closed minded in integrating social justice as part of its agenda.

⁴¹ Di Chiro, Giovanna. "Nature as Community: The Convergence of Environment and Social Justice," Cronon, William. *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*. 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton &, 1995), 289 -320.

In the United States, like so many of its institutions and philosophies, the environmental movement is rife with moments and ideologies that are grounded in systemic racism and white supremacy.

It became clear to me that the way I was experiencing environmentalism had everything to do with the privilege that comes with my skin tone, gender and class. My thinking about the environment was coming from an ethic that placed such a high moral value on nonhuman life that it erased the lived experiences of the environment being weaponized against peoples' health livelihoods *AND* it reinforced a fallacy that untouched wilderness exists.⁴² The environmentalism I claimed was archaic. It was like I was running on a DOS operating system and everyone in the academy had the smartphones with the most updated android. The more I learned in these beginning weeks of my graduate education, the more I began to realize that somehow my move to Esclante was a white person fleeing to white space so I could make art in a white way about issues that were dominated by white voices.

So that was lesson one. A humbling lesson. A needed and disorienting lesson.

Lesson number two came out of that confusion, and the shedding of an old skin. Spending day after day thinking and reading about how a person's access to non toxic water, food, and work depends on their nationality, ethnicity, race and class, was admittedly getting me down. In many ways I feel like as an environmentalist I had gotten used to a certain kind of masochism that comes with an often perceived lost causeness of the movement. I had experienced both sides of the hope and despair coin in relation to the environment, but with my expanded and more inclusive understanding of the movement, I felt lost. I was lost on what to do with my privilege and not fall into a white saviorism trap. I was unsure about the role of art in all this. And most of the time I felt powerless to manifest being a force for good.

⁴² Cronon, William. "The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." *Environmental History* 1, no. 1 (1996): 7-28.

What is it about Western society and its imperialistic reach to every corner of the planet that makes our micro and macro environmental realities so? Of course there is no singular root cause and the cause is an intersection of many facets in the construction of culture and society... But, but in order to act, in order to escape a cycle of passively observing systemic environmental injustices, I needed to name the problem, name the system.

Capitalism, Neoliberalism , a constant unregulated growth dogma of the economy is the name of that problem, it is the name of that system.

I am far from the first environmentally minded person to make this claim. And you might be tempted to write off this anticapitalist thinking as a millennial phase, some wokeness trend of the early 21st century. But honestly you don't need to dig into the scholarship to believe in its truth....

A capitalist economy fails if it fails to grow and if it fails to accelerate that growth. The health and livelihoods of both humans and nonhuman nature then gets pitted against this system. Disruptions to ecology from things like dams, fossil fuels, or fertilizers either require a different cadence than the market allows for recovery or they require a care from the outset that is incongruent with increasing profits.

So there you have it, a global system, that for the last 500 years has facilitated an environmental catastrophe. A crisis that has ballooned into a once unimaginable existential threat for all life on earth...⁴³

I saw the best damn minds of my generation hypnotized by the doomsday clock, tick tocking 10 years to keep the planet from warming past the point of no return. I saw other great minds believe and proselytize individual actions like riding your bike to work or purchasing electric cars, truly believing that if enough people did their part, they'd save humanity from climate

⁴³ Patel and Moore, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things: A Guide to Capitalism, Nature, and the Future of the Planet*. (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017).

catastrophe. And I saw other great minds lost in an acidifying sea, dreaming up far off speculative futures, Utopias, and never stepping back on shore.⁴⁴

Many have said, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.⁴⁵ I get why people say that... But to be perfectly honest it's not *that* hard to imagine what an eco-interested post capitalist society might look like. The ecosocialist dream is for a society built on an abolition of hierarchy replaced by directly democratic systems. It is a dream full of people using free carbon negative modes of transportation, cities sustaining themselves with regenerative agriculture and people finding the joys in participating more fully in their society because they have time to do so. In this dream art flourishes because opportunities abound in making it and taking it in.⁴⁶ The ability to conjure a utopia in opposition to catastrophe is not that hard. Our real problem is, it's easier to live the status quo of capitalism than it is to live a life of incremental action in constant motion stepping toward an ecosocialist future.

Admittedly, I am a 32 year old newborn in all of this leftist politicking and posturing. I doubt myself often. I doubt the utility of the rhetoric. I'm skeptical of the dream. I feel insecure about what people would think of me if they knew this is the stuff I now wake up at night worried about. I get that for many of you these ideas might sound extreme, scary and can be easy to brush aside. I know because I now resist those feelings and impulses often. But as I stitch this new thinking together, I find this process of becoming more cognizant of my privilege and recognizing the suffering of others, this process of naming the problem, this process of radically imagining how the world could be better, healthier, and safer; all that is the easy part...

Recently, I have found myself on the phone a lot, perhaps more than ever. And this is partly because of the coronavirus pandemic and social distancing guidelines, but mostly because I have been making calls to my coworkers. I've been reaching out to people I have never met and asking them to join our union.

⁴⁴ A creative riff on Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*.

⁴⁵ Patel and Moore, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things: A Guide to Capitalism, Nature, and the Future of the Planet*. (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017), 2.

⁴⁶ Moritz and Vulliez, "Social Ecology and the End of Capitalism, pt 1 and pt 2". SRSly Wrong. Podcast audio, December 14, 2020. <https://srslywrong.com/podcast/223-social-ecology-and-the-end-of-capitalism-pt-1/>.

You see, this is my first time in a union. I don't come from a union family. I don't remember anybody talking about unions or the labor movement over the dinner table. So even though I opted in to paying dues from my very first paycheck, it took me about a year before I was actively helping build power in the union.

I could have bushwhacked countless other trails in my adventure through graduate school, so how is that I found myself doing this labor organizing work? As is clear by now, my studies and my empathy for people, ecology and nonhumans developed in me an anti capitalist sentimentality. When that transition was at its peak flurry in my brain, I was simultaneously bearing witness to my colleagues volunteering thousands of hours to bargain for and secure things like the best healthcare I have received as an employee. It was impossible to ignore the intersectionality of all this. As a grad student studying the environmental arts and humanities I felt a gravitational pull of the labor movement like it was some kind of dark matter that for way too long I never knew it existed. But now that I had some kind of kinesthetic sense that it was there, I needed to know more. So in true humanities grad student style, I stumbled into a book that would help me sort through some of this.

I wound up reading labor activist and scholar, Jane McAlevey's book called *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*.

I can't stop thinking about it. I think what hooked me was one of her central arguments, that I will do my best to sum up. She explains that the labor movement and the political left generally in the United States has not made significant gains because it is too focused on ineffective strategies for change. Primarily those ineffective approaches are advocacy and a mobilization. Think Sierra Club and the Climate March respectively. The Sierra Club fails because it makes boardroom deals behind closed doors that are inevitably detached from many ordinary people's real needs. The mobilizing approach fails because the only people you are activating for a one off march like that are sympathizers with the cause. And what's worse the majority of those who show up, then go back home in the evening to continue watching Netflix for the next six months or a year before they are activated again.

What McAlevy argues actually makes tangible change in ordinary people's lives is organizing. She explains that regular people have power, but in order to make gains, people have to organize to win. That means having a clear idea of what you want changed, who has the power to change that and how coalitions of ordinary people can flex their collective power to make that change happen. This is a method that requires one on one conversations, chats with people, whether they think like you or not. These conversations require a deep dive into what individuals need as people and workers, what they care about, and showing them that what you care about is similar and that if you work together conditions can change.

Reading this book got me so riled up. In an unexpected way, I got angry, angry at the environmental movement. The movement of course has made some gains over the last 50 years, but we have failed to make sure *all* people in the US have access to clean drinking water, we have failed to protect ourselves and future generations from the fallout of catastrophic climate change and conservationists in 2021 continue to fight against fossil fuel development in places like the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. After reading this book, I just kept thinking to myself, *will the children I'd like to have someday become adults in a world where millions are displaced and millions are killed as a result of climate change because environmentalists today are too focused on advocacy and mobilizing actions when we need to be organizing.*

As a labor organizer McAlevy provides mostly examples of labor unions organizing and discusses the power of the strike. The strike or the threat of one, is one of the most powerful tools ordinary people have. And the way I see it, whether people are organizing to improve workplace conditions in Amazon warehouses or organizing to maintain the amazon rainforest as a carbon sink for our planet, we need to remember what our most powerful tools for change are.⁴⁷

Simply put we cannot rely on corporate powers and politicians to make the changes we need in time to ensure a survivable planet and a just society. The more I think about it, the more I realize

⁴⁷ McAlevy, Jane. *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

that solidarity between ordinary people, deep organizing and the strike power might be our only chance. In the face of climate catastrophe, this work to fundamentally shift the conditions of capitalism is actually a fight by us for everything alive on the planet.

I don't know if this means organizing efforts should prioritize growing the numbers of workers who are unionized and pushing the labor movement toward a massive general strike until climate legislation is passed, or if organizing efforts should focus attention on strategically organizing workers in environmentally destructive industries. But I do know this strategy will be built out of creative and innovative organizing techniques and will be filled with opportunities to practice being the best coworkers, neighbors and citizens we can be. There is joy and power in that work.

So I challenge you, especially if it's easy for you to get overwhelmed by environmental despair and grief. I also challenge you speculative imagining dreamers out there, let's spend less time thinking about the coming dystopia and ecosocialist utopia that will magically rise out of the ashes of climate disaster. I challenge you. I challenge you to radically imagine your next 20 days. I challenge you to radically imagine your next 20 hours. I challenge you to do that everyday after day after day after day after day....

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