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Seeing Red: In A Dark Night of the American Soul

Aaron Kipnis, Ph.D.

Introduction

From 1971 to 2002, the prison population in America grew almost seven hundred percent. With roughly 2 million Americans behind bars, we now have the highest incarceration rate in the world. Four million more are under criminal justice supervision in some form (BJS, DOJ, 1999). A fear of violence, or perhaps even dread of civil disorder, appears to be feeding the rapid-cell-growth of what can accurately be called an American Gulag (Lait, 1998).

This is not a global phenomenon. It is particular to post-modern America and historically unprecedented in a free nation (Walmsley, 1997). This startling trend, begun well before the 9/11 tragedy, has accelerated under homeland security’s increasingly broader suspensions of civil rights. As a nation, we have oft turned our attention to the terrorism other governments inact upon their citizenry. But, little attention is given to the abuses of our own government toward a broad swath of our citizenry.

The fantasy of equality, liberty and justice seems deeply etched into America’s multifaceted psyche. The myth of a free nation, with a passion to build a true democracy, is still resonant in the imagination of many Americans. The brighter a light shines, however, the more distinct a shadow it casts. From the perspective of many living in the eclipse zones, a dark night of the American soul permeates and persists in the borderlands of the American dream. America’s poor, uneducated, mentally ill, substance-addicted, and racial minorities are visibly over represented among the residents in the archipelago of despair now referred to as “the

prison-industrial complex” by many human rights activists today (Zimring & Hawkins, 1991; Torrey, 1995; Currie, 1998).

Little psychological, vocational, or educational assistance is offered most inmates. Widespread neglect and abuse of prisoners has created, by default, a pervasive clinical fallacy about rehabilitation. The nihilistic mantra of those who make the policies fueling the incarceration jihad is: Nothing Works.

The seeming irrationality of a society willing to spend more money to incarcerate than to educate the “criminal class” (Ambrosio & Schiraldi, 1997; Phinney, 1998) serves an unbroken continuum of ruthless labor commodification in America, from Colonial era African enslavement to prison labor contracts now sold on 21st century stock exchanges. Psychologically, when a dominant culture uses its full power to disenfranchise and dehumanize a minority culture, a scapegoat complex is often active in that nation’s psyche. As with wars and other catastrophes, today’s trauma in the heart of American justice may open vents into deeper strata of the cultural unconscious. In my experience, the degree of injustice, oppression and violence tolerated toward specific groups in the United States has some people “seeing red”—a condition of blind instinctual activation in which both extremely heroic and horrific transformative acts are known to occur.

Within psychology, the dialog on violence is quite disparate. Like the blind reporting on elephants, most schools investigate but one small slice of a complex phenomenon. Cognitive psychology reduces the etiology of violence to faulty thinking; developmental and dynamic theory see recapitulations of personal and familial history; sociology examines the impact of hierarchical structures on specific groups, ecological and social psychologies point to environmental stressors; humanism finds negative self regard, neuroscience spotlights organic deficits, behaviorism prescribes retraining, psychiatry cites brain chemistry; theology laments spiritual alienation, religion decries moral decay; and criminal justice blames deviance. This

paper considers a few themes that depth psychology might contribute to the wide-ranging academic and social discourse on violence and intolerance in America.

Perspectives on Violence

Most disciplines concerned with human violence today are roughly situated within one of two large camps. One contemporary stream of thought emerges from the essentialist headwaters of biological predeterminism—Nature. This perspective sees human beings as still dancing an evolutionary two-step to old tunes sung by DNA. The belief that the predominate etiologies of behavior and identity develop out of biological structures is the neo-Darwinian theoretical foundation for the bio-psychiatry movement widely dominating behavioral science today. This research has created powerful techniques and chemicals that change behavior. It has thus seduced many of psychology's wayward children back to the shelter of their more respectable parents in neuroscience.

On the other side of the theoretical spectrum is social constructivism—Nurture. Many of this camp's inhabitants pitch their tents at the confluence of post-modern political, philosophical and social science theory. This field asserts that self and action are largely of Procrustean origin—the product of ubiquitous social norming forces. Constructivist theory has raised important perspectives about how rigidly defined consensus realities imposed on human potential and diversity can induce distortions of self. It has also advanced methods for the situational liberation of psyche, person, and culture embedded in psycho-social structures designed to channel human libido into serving a dominant group's designs.

The founders of depth psychology leaned somewhat toward the essentialist camp of science and many of the last generation's "postians" break post-modern bread with the constructivists. Despite its theorists' proclivities, however, depth psychology does not fully scale either evolutionary or social psychology's epistemological vistas. To do so would be to leave the province of the soul—the first and overriding concern of archetypal psychology.

Just as bio-psychiatry can relegate soul to a ghost in the machine, constructivism often eschews essentialism, reducing soul to a pathological component of social ennui. The notion of an autonomous interior life—particularly as related to any sort of asocial telos—seems to be an anathema to both major behavioral science camps. While not inured to social and developmental theories, archetypal psychology also investigates imaginal structures in which the rough beasts of cultural entropy may slumber or emerge, aroused and ravenous into the world of the living.

Denial of the Imaginal

In his early study of self-inflicted violence—suicide—James Hillman observed: “An objective enquiry in this field somehow betrays the impulse of life itself” (1976, p.17). This being so, however, we can begin by simply acknowledging that violence is a pervasive social phenomenon in America. We are embedded in a cultural matrix, which has a known quantifiable violent proclivity. The incidences of violent human behaviors inhabit actuarial displays with roughly predictable tolls that, in most categories, far exceed the rates of all other industrial democracies (CDC, 1999).

Denial and dread, whether of our counter-transference in the consulting room or revulsion toward the violence outside it, can keep us from investigating less visible recess of the cultural imagination. Jung cautions that not knowing is potentially more dangerous than facing the cultural shadow. Archetypal psychology suggests we may risk literalization of, or possession by, the psychological complexes we fail to work through, as a person or as a nation (Zweig & Wolf, 1998). As we attempt to feel our way past the sharp edged empirical silhouettes cast by behavioral and social science, we proceed unscientifically, with “beginners mind,” toward the faint shape of intolerable images in the gloom. We are not as certain in this place of the imagination. We experience more paradox and less authority here.

From a depth psychological perspective, cultures are embedded with archetypal themes. National and cultural identity can be seen as representing imaginal streams in the collective

psyche. We look to the cultural imagination as a source code for behaviors that condition membership in specific social structures. Cultural identity is as defined by what we unconsciously resist as it is by the ideals we consciously affirm.

From this vantage, archetypal proclivities are at play in both overt and covert forms of violence that dominant groups perpetrate against others. Moreover, individual psychodynamic concepts such as projection, idealization, devaluation, repression, compensation, regression, conversion and sublimation may also describe interpersonal, social, national, and global constructs in cultural psychology. What then do we imagine is feeding our nation's attempt to isolate and contain its shadow? Upon what imaginal foundations does America continue sanctioning expansion of the world's largest penal system?

The global wars and genocides of the last century readily revealed the consequences that collective denial and archetypal possession may hold for any culture. Carl Jung's examination of WW II Germany noted that his patients' prewar dreams reflected their collective humiliation and downward mobility in the years following the Treaty of Versailles. Jung believed that National Socialism exploited the "unexamined" shadow of the collective unconscious through an archetypal personification of order (Nazism) and violent projection of the cultural shame outward onto a scapegoat (the racially impure). He wrote,

We are living in times of great disruption: political passions are aflame, internal upheavals have brought nations to the brink of chaos. [The analyst] feels the violence of its impact even in the quiet of his consulting room [and] cannot avoid coming to grips with contemporary history, even if his very soul shrinks from the political uproar, the lying propaganda, and the jarring speeches of the demagogues. We need not mention his duties as a citizen, which confront him with a similar task. (CW 10, para.11)

Hillman furthered the concern raised in Jung's 1946 *Fight with the Shadow* by charging contemporary psychology with actually drawing libido away from the polis. He believes that an overemphasis on childhood and interiority "deprives the political world" of our legitimate anger about concrete social issues and that therapy by, "ignoring the outer soul, supports the decline of

the actual world” (1992, p.5). At the confluence of Liberation and Depth psychology some

imagine soul work and social work as two wings of the same bird that must beat in synchrony

for sustained or graceful flight to ensue. Helene Shulman Lorenz and Mary Watkins note,

Many schools of psychology, intending to assist individuals in finding new potentials, stop short of critiquing and engaging the social limitations, which make transformation impossible. Thus, it is often the case that the mental health establishment helps to personalize, marginalize, and medicate what is essentially a protest against dehumanizing and repressive social milieus (2001).

Liberation psychology suggests that intentional engagement with the world holds opportunities for individuation that may not otherwise emerge from introspection or analysis alone. At the inception of psychology’s second century, many of us feel called beyond the borders of the consulting room, to meet our “duties as citizens,” as part and process of an in the world, soul-making. History begs the question: What socio-political forces exploit the “unexamined” national psyche of America today?

The Deep Psychology of Violence

If we consider human violence as a dis-ease of the imagination—even a virulent, potentially contagious one—then current violence epidemiology seems more rooted in the 19th century than the third millennium. Historically, for example, many perceived alcoholism as a moral defect. Now, most clinicians believe it is a treatable illness. Thanks, in part, to Jung’s contribution to the early formation of A.A., much of the addiction field also understands alcoholism as a spiritual malaise, which can thus be remediated as such. I believe we can appropriately view much criminal behavior in a similar manner.

Violent acts readily confuse inner and outer life. Violence is iconoclastic. It shatters the rigid details of egoic life into disassociated fragments. Violence, like Eros, can draw us out of a diminished self into greater complexity. In nature, an ecology of violence fosters its endless

transformation. The cracked shell surrenders to the chick; seedpods burst and spew new life, a snake grows out through splits of skin and the winter fire's ash feeds the spring's wild flowers.

Violence is rarely "senseless." There is often a *raison d'être* behind violent acts. People employ violence as a tool to produce specific external and internal reactions. It has a function. People may act violently as an attempt to create more homeostasis in an unbalanced system. Violence is readily provoked by the intense emotions generated in people subjected to tyranny and injustice—the American Revolution was one such example.

Not unlike various drugs, violence has quasi-biological and psychological aspects that can catalyze alerted states of awareness. Some sociopaths, for example, actually become calmer when witnessing violent acts. Violence is energetic. It has force, direction, and flow. Violence has numinous, intoxicating, and archetypal dimensions. Perpetrators of violent acts frequently report feeling powerful, even godlike during their commission. Paradoxically, however, violent behavior is most often an expression of weakness and failure. And, as is often, the case with all but the truly psychopathic, tremendous shame and grief arise about the wide range of loss that can follow their violent acts. The unbearable weight of shame, paradoxically, can then provoke more violent behavior in a self-propagating cycle of violence.

Violent acts are often symptomatic of a disintegrative, addictive system. Like most addictions, when left untreated, frequency and intensity of use tend to increase. Many hide violent fantasy just as they closet denigrated drug or sexual appetites, AIDS, poverty, ethnicity or other characteristics that may be deemed indicative of deviance by holders of dominant social norms. We may fear reprisal for openly acknowledging experience with violence or interest in it.

Varied historical events demonstrate that the more inhumane a culture becomes, the more violence it generates, internally or externally. Violent behavior is thus sometimes a completely normal response to an abnormal situation (Kipnis, 1999). Though some may be born that way, many theorists believe sociopathy is predominately learned behavior. With the highest rates of

child poverty, abuse, and neglect in the industrial world, American children also have the highest violence and violent death rates (NCANDS, 1999). Abuse inculcates shame. Shame induces pain. Pain can be masked by: drugs, alcohol, sex, over-work, and other compulsions. Psychic pain can also be ameliorated by the cold, narcissistic deadness of sociopathy. But the psychic numbing of a libido wrapped up in a quasi-biological state of narcissistic stasis can be experienced as more disturbing to the psyche than pain itself.

Some sociopaths become vampiric in a desperate quest to draw red heat to a soul in ice. Violence then becomes the predominate way such an emotionally numbed person knows how to feel fully alive or powerful. Jungian Psychiatrist Adolf Guggenbuhl-Craig cautions that, "If we entirely repress the demonic side we become bloodless, empty, not connected to any sort of Eros" (1996, p. viii). Violence is vivid. It engages intense emotions. Violence, for a moment, can return vitality to an imaginal life desiccated by the vapid badlands of American consumer culture or pummeled into quiescence by brutality and indifference. Behaviorally speaking, violence can produce a range of secondary gains that promote rather than restrain the repetition of such acts.

Reddening the Work

Violence "reddens" psyche. Perpetrators of violent acts speak of "seeing red; reaching a breaking, bursting, or flash point; exploding with rage." Criminals get caught red handed (with blood on their hands). Red permeates the lexicon of emotional intensity. Passions are not mauve, fuchsia, taupe or tangerine. They are crimson, scarlet, incarnadine, florid. Desire and hate smolder. Love sparks, becomes inflamed. Anger turns red hot.

Reddening reveals the flush of desire, fever, excitement, estrus, embarrassment, pride, frustration, or rage. Dionysian revelry paints the town red. The mid-life crisis abandons the beige sedan for a red sports car. Women don red "power" suits for executive suites and redden their lips in other pursuits. Sun, irritation and spanking all redden the hide. Simply viewing red can speed a person's pulse, increase respiration rates and raise blood pressure.

Red is primary. It vibrates at the lower end of the visible spectrum. When recovering from temporary color-blindness induced by brain injury, patients begin to see red before any other color returns (Ensenberger, 1997).

Red tape infuriates. Red ink bankrupts. Red lining isolates. Red lights demand we Stop! They also signal ambulance, fire truck, police car coming; sex sold here; heavy equipment on the move, out of gas, oil pressure low, live wire, system failure, melt down, radiation leak, explosion eminent. Red alert! Red flag! Red Zone! Code Red! The president's red phone is a "Hot Line" to a finger poised upon a Red Button. The matador's red cape captivates the bull's red eye. Ole!

America was forged in a red-hot crucible of war. Thomas Jefferson's tree of liberty is steeped in the blood of tyrants and patriots, none less red than the other. America fought the Red Coats, the Redskins, the Red Guard and the Red Brigade. The English projected power toward the colonies under banners of the British Red Ensign (Union Jack). Hitler's Nazi banner was literally dipped in martyr's blood. Japan's flag is still emblazoned with the red solar disk of the Shinto War Goddess, Amataratsu, to whom Japanese emperors have always traced their divine lineage. The blood of slaves, indigenous people, immigrants, prisoners and the poor upon whose backs the few built wealth and power here, permeates the mortar holding together the bricks of our nation. No attempts to whiten history have successfully washed their reddened imprints away.

Reddening confers life and takes it. Violent death is as red as Birth. Seeing red signals that a moment of great transformation is about to occur. Reddening empowers a mother to lift a car off her child, a soldier to rush a machine gun, or a culture to throw off oppression through becoming "mad as Hell" (where a very red Devil lives). In alchemy, reddening (rubedo) denotes the last stage of the "work" before base material turns, at last, into gold. This is a reason why the alchemist's prime object of desire, the Philosopher Stone, was also named "Red Lion" or "Great

Red Water” (Edinger, 1985, pp. 72, 148, 154). The Hebraic God of the Old Testament worked his own divine alchemy to create Adam out of red earth.

The Hawaiian volcano goddess, Peli, embodies the paradox of red’s equally destructive and generative power. An erupting volcano spews red rivers of molten rock. Everything in her path vaporizes into flame. Yet, new soil and fertile ash follow in her wake. Hawaii is the only place in the world where land mass is continually growing. As incandescent lava pours into the sea, one can actually witness the roiling birth of new earth.

Hephestus inhabits the volcanoes of European mythic landscapes. He is a lame but fecund figure who works the blazing heart of magma as a forge to make wondrous objects for the gods. Hephestus is Aphrodite’s lover. She also mates with Aries, War God of the red planet—Mars. These archetypal personifications present two faces of the masculine soul, one reddened by generative power, the other by destruction. Beauty loves them both.

Tempering

Many indigenous cultures understand the reddening of psyche as a post-latency phenomenon that calls for the concerted focus of the entire adult population. In Africa they call this adolescent libido surge Latima. Various tribal traditions hold that if the wild red horse of Latima is not harnessed to the cart of community, the uninitiated young men will run wild and literally set fire to the village (Somej, 1994). With more young men dying from gunshots in American cities than in civil wars around the world, this metaphor of burning down the house does not feel so distant from our contemporary experience in the New West. Robert Bly contends that those who fail to build initiation huts for young men will have to build more prisons (1998).

Through studies in nuclear physics, Western science learned how to contain, transform and intentionally release elemental energy. But America has largely lost the sacred technologies which sustained social homeostasis for thousands of years in other cultures. Instead of hosting the alchemical process by which adolescent soulfire is directed into the engine of culture,

advocates for social order increasingly embrace methods that attempt instead to turn down the heat of youth, contain their passions, and even extinguish their sacred fire altogether.

The U.S. now consumes over 90 percent of the world's Ritalin, up over 700 percent from a decade ago (Breggin, 1998). As diagnostic criteria for conduct and attention "disorders" increasingly pathologize the reddening of adolescence, roughly one in ten American schoolboys is being prescribed Latima-quieting chemicals. From a depth perspective, this practice is dangerous. Archetypal forces do not simply submit to egoic will or neurological flattening; Latima will seek expression.

A person without fire has no will. They do not possess the power to actualize their dreams, protect the boundaries of others, or even defend their own. Passion, creativity and fire are intimately linked. When our talents are engaged we get "fired up." When suppressed, Latima smolders, like a coal fire that secretly burns underground for decades, until it finds a new vent to the surface and erupts. Poet Langston Hughes asks,

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—and then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags like a heavy load.
Or does it explode? (1951)

The Criminalization of Despair

Facing violence can be a step toward self-knowledge. But the province of Violence is not hospitable to tourists, nor does it readily issue exit visas. Like a rapacious Hades reaching for his lush Persephone, Violence is more likely to abduct than invite. Those previously held for ransom in its underworld enter our offices as trauma survivors and lost souls. For psychologists, the threat of violence can present the most difficult challenge of their professional life. One reason for this is the degree of liability and personal risk that accompanies such patients. His or her

violent act can readily appear to nullify our therapeutic value. Moreover, society increasingly holds us accountable for our clients' behavior.

In our professional capacities, we are often on the front lines of domestic, work place, school and institutional violence. Violence is also the portal through which the state penetrates psychology's domain and stakes increasingly larger claims within it. Ever widening mandates require clinicians to report any "reasonable suspicion" of potential assault, homicide or suicide, child, elder, or dependent adult abuse, neglect or fraud, and even threats against property. As psychology is conscripted by the state to aid its containment efforts, legislative directives to forcibly medicate psychotic patients and calls for increased involuntary hospitalization powers are also on the rise (AB 1800, 2000).

In eras past, lepers were confined to colonies set apart from the rest of society. There was no cure for their disturbing illness. In a similar manner today, we shun and confine troubled minds in penal colonies. The most shameful chapter in the annals of psychiatric history is that of clinicians' willing presence on the leading edge of the Holocaust. It began with their rounding up of mental patients for the good of the community, then sterilization and eventually . . . extermination. And, as we know, one scapegoat then led to another. This is one reason that our drift toward law enforcement as the primary solution for our social ills is one that bears closer examination. I believe every clinician must ask himself or herself at some time: To whom do I owe my first allegiance—the state or the soul?

While the American Gulag impacts the lives of many citizens, its primary targets today are boys and young men of color at the lowest levels of the socioeconomic hierarchy (Breggin & Breggin, 1998). A significant contingent of lawmakers today appear to perceive this group as representing the greatest threat to their vision of social order. The incarceration frenzy that now has one in three young African American men in its thrall defies rational explanation. The disproportionality of racial criminalization (black men are 6 percent of the general population

and 48 percent of inmates) shares more features with patterns of genocide than with social justice (Staub, 1989; Miller, 1996; Mauer & Huling, 1997). I believe we are compelled by our knowledge of history to wrestle with the discomfort this eugenics—laced shadow may bring.

The severity of punishment and scale of imprisonment in the United States calls into question our continuing status as a civilized nation. We live in the only Western democracy ever censured by Amnesty International, the UN and other human rights organizations for failures to enforce minimal international standards for the humane treatment of prisoners (UN, 1998; AI, 1998). Evidence of beatings, torture, medical neglect and rape of prisoners is widespread and well documented (Hornblum, 1998; Krupers, 1999). In various upwellings of dissent across the nation I hear reddened voices loudly chanting: “No Justice, No Peace, No Justice, No Peace...”

Exile to the American Gulag is tantamount to a death sentence for many low-level, nonviolent offenders. One tool in the slow motion extermination of addicts, the underclass and the mentally ill is the administratively sanctioned rape of thousands of incarcerated young men. Many are forced to serve as wives, slaves and the prostitutes who are an integral part of the sexual culture and underground economy of some prisons. This unprotected, often violent sex contributes to AIDS and Hepatitis C transmission rates soaring far beyond those of even the greatest at-risk, populations who are free to choose their lifestyle (Hanlon, 1993; Rachel, 1998). Conservative estimates indicate that rates of male prisoner rape parallel those for nonincarcerated females (Dumond, 1992; Donaldson, 1995).

Dehumanization of any group can result when authorities regard certain cultural or behavioral markers as indicative of their moral inferiority. For example, crime classification manuals do not even regard the sexual assault of prisoners as rape (Douglas et al., 1992). To reduce a young man to “dope-dealer,” “gang-banger,” “felon,” or “super predator” is to define the sum of his entire worth by his most intolerable acts. Such judgments of “less than fully human” can then be used to justify the abrogation of their human rights. Through their silence

our policy makers passively sanction medical neglect, brutality, chemical immobilization, torture and even the murder of the American Gulag's inhabitants. This year, half a million inmates will be ejected from the bitter heart of this burgeoning prison industrial complex and shipped straight back into our communities. What then?

Conclusion

If we believe it possible that 1) reciprocal links exist between interior and exterior life; 2) archetypal themes are expressed in cultural psychology; and 3) that it is as possible that we exist in an inter-related, subjective web of psyche as it is that we possess autonomous egos, then we might wonder at the effect repression of collective rage on such a megalithic scale is having on the ecology of our cultural soul. One need not believe the premises of depth psychology, however, to ask: Does out of sight really assure out of mind?

Prisons contain dense psychological material—anger, despair, grief, revenge, and apocalyptic fantasy. The more a dream is deferred, the stronger the container required to keep it suppressed must become. This alchemical metaphor of psychological containment reflects a belief in the value of holding potentially volatile transformations well enough to allow base material to experience a range of transformative processes. The alchemist's goal is for the material to become ennobled without exploding or converting into poison in the process. Some view depth-oriented psychotherapy as such a possible method for the transformation of psychological contents.

As a psychological axiom, this alchemical principle might help explain one aspect of why our prison system keeps growing unabated. Modern penology builds excellent crucibles but seldom turns leaden lives golden. I believe that is a compelling reason for psychology to take up the issue of torture and repression in the American Gulag, to help actualize its innate potential as a soul-making realm. This was, in fact, the original intention of the Quakers who introduced the idea of prisons into American society.

Prison was first imagined as a quiet place for solitude, deep thought and penance—a penitentiary—in which broken spirits could mend and impoverished imaginations could be refreshed through contemplation instead of violent action. From this sort of temenos they would then return to community life renewed. Today, they return more humiliated than humbled and more broken than healed. Understandably, many emerge enraged and vengeful. Psychologists glimpse firsthand the powerful dynamics with which the return of the repressed can become imbued. From this point of view, just as the energy potential of uranium is enriched and converted to plutonium in nuclear reactors, violence may become more virulent in the very crucibles designed to contain it.

Resistance can make violence more fascinating, just as sexual repression drives some into deeper obsessions. The suppression of naturally occurring forest fires ultimately causes more danger when the repressed contents (underbrush) reach critical “fire storm” mass. From my tiny, fogged peephole into the cultural psyche, it appears we may be approaching that condition. Will the reddening of the American soul create new gold or will it just explode?

The question is too large for any single perspective to address. Its very complexity calls for a diverse, creative community’s full consideration. Meanwhile, some of us blindly feel around in the dark, vainly trying to describe this irritable, hungry, red-eyed, bull elephant fitfully sleeping in the middle of America’s living room. Shhhh.

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BJS: Bureau of Justice Statistics/ Sourcebook.

CDC: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

DoJ: Department of justice

NCANDS: National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System
315

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