In 1909 Sigmund Freud made his only trip to the United States to give a series of lectures at Clark University in Massachusetts. For the wider field of education it would turn out to become one of the more iconoclastic events mined in the psychoanalytic archive. And we, too, will use this visit now to sort through the rooted debates on shaping the imaginary of Bildung or what gives way between psychoanalysis and education. We will attend to the details of Freud’s trip with the question of why the subject of psychoanalysis is deeply affected by the human problem of the upbringing of culture and life. As for the crystal of education, our approach will be through a study of its fault lines. With the currency of debates between psychoanalysis and education, highlighted in Peter Taubman’s *Disavowed Knowledge: Psychoanalysis, Education, and Teaching*, let us try to link the question of theory’s influence in disciplinary knowledge to both the building of a profession and to parenting the cultural binds made from affection and disaffection.

Freud’s manifest purpose involved introducing to the general public a novel education called psychoanalysis—emerging techniques, a style of listening, a treatment of thought, a mode of inquiry, and a theory of psychical life—that, behind the scenes, could test the water. As we shall see, the water was choppy. And some of this seasickness had to do with Freud’s doubts about the
education of a new movement and his prejudice toward America. Clues of these matters come to us in the small details of everyday life housed in Freud’s archive of letters. His communications that rehearse the visit carry the swipe of anxiety: although he wished to see Niagara Falls and porcupines, he had difficulty preparing for this trip. Neither could the American audience prepare for what Freud held in store. Many were quite suspicious toward Freud’s psychoanalysis. To tell this story psychoanalytically involves freely associating to the trail of anxiety and with psychological imagination treat history from the receding vantage of what lags behind yet still manages to propel forward, namely the affects.

With these estranging learning events then, let us ask how, over the last century in the United States, has psychoanalysis and education fared and what involves us in telling this story? One element is that we must trespass national borders without a passport since psychoanalysis is a diasporic and cosmopolitan affair, since its “country of origin” comes with the strange address of the unconscious or what Freud simply called “psychical reality,” and since it is this affected history that surrenders and gives way to education and psychoanalysis. So how may all this transference be narrated when the abiding dilemma (that also belongs to education) is that no one can prepare for psychoanalysis; it can only be undergone. The other dilemma is that while we must come as we are, we also end up talking about more than we know and knowing more than we can say.

A great many of these dilemmas animate the heart of Peter Taubman’s study of psychoanalysis and education in the Twentieth Century. His text is organized mainly through sketches of key thinkers and the problems that preoccupied their theories—rolling tours through the viewpoints of psychoanalysts, psychologists, and educators—and he points out the conflicts of influence that emerge from noisy group psychology that has great difficulty recognizing that they must share the same object, namely the human subject of learning. Some of these figures were suspicious of leaders while others desired to be one. In other words, this contentious history between education and psychoanalysis is made from conflicts in and desire for authority.

What lags behind and is carried forward into group psychology are conflicts among authority, love, and knowledge, aggravated by the many theories of learning that hold onto the trace of the yearnings and rather ridiculous theories of infantile sexuality, a polymorphous perversity whose fate is then given over to the rigidity of the adolescent syndrome of ideality, where spitting is always at stake. Kristeva has given us an image of the question child as researcher and the adolescent as believer in what she or he already knows. And given this other unconscious history, for both fields the problem is whether we can imagine an inventive authority without authoritarianism since we are dealing with the difficult question of what makes up the mind, what sends it away, and what others have to do in all of this.

Taubman begins his story with a close look at Freud’s visit to Clark University and dusts off the erasures. His last chapter engages an existential problem that has to do with the future of education and its choices: “In my attempt to reconstruct the history of the relationship between education and psychoanalysis, “ he writes, “I have sought to find within that history, the outlines of another one, one that is only in the process of emerging and that may point to a future different from the one
promised by today’s educational reformers.” iii Here, I am reminded of a question Melanie Klein asked early on in the history of child analysis: what holds the question child back?iv Or, from where do our inhibitions come?

Drawing from the title of his text, psychoanalysis and education have a share in what Taubman names “disavowed knowledge.” The concept is thorny as it signifies both social amnesia and psychical reality. Taubman’s phrasing relates both sides of repression to the story of his education and, along with a history of his teaching, his study becomes a way into the question Isabelle Stengers asks, “What has happened to us?” When it comes to thinking back over our education however, we may become swamped in what Stengers also calls, “subjective excess” or resistance to changing ideas and “satisfy the demands of thought.” v Taubman presents both the question and the excess of affect as stirring the strange brew of social criticism, or what he calls the emancipatory project, with a psychical orientation or, what he names as a therapeutic project. Notably it is difficult to tell their differences since transformation is the goal for the emancipatory and the therapeutic projects. However if these two modes of address are heard as only cancelling out the other, both are lost and disavowed. The problem then is that education and psychoanalysis as human practices can become inhuman through ideology, social engineering and eugenics, compliance to moral panic, and the fog of stupidity.

But as a piece of mental life, disavowal is at once a phantasy of why knowledge goes missing and doesn’t matter and why, even when repudiated, the knowledge remains but now as oddly unbelievable. It is as if the subject does recognize a fact, for instance, and severs the consequences of its symbolization. The statement might go something like this: I know this is true, but I refuse to believe it. Having it both ways is how Freud described the complex of disavowal and his central example was through the boy’s castration anxiety and its displacement onto the girl. This story can be thought to signify traumatic loss and the anxiety that follows from it. Castration anxiety also gives us a clue as why sexual difference is so difficult to accept. vi

Disavowal, then, is a function of psychical reality, an undoing of what has happened. At its best, it both fuels the imagination and provides language with the flight of metaphor and metonymy. It is most useful for dreaming. In nocturnal romps reality goes missing, or is safely set aside only to return as intricately displaced, disguised, condensed, and reversed. The difficult problem however is when one cannot wake up and tell the difference between wishful mental acts and what reality actually presents. Then disavowal, as an ego defense, indicates a more severe splitting against a traumatic perception, where the ego turns against its own psychical reality, splits itself up in bits and pieces, turns against the reality of others, and refuses the grace of narration. A great deal of mental gymnastics has to be carried out in order to tear apart psychological meaning and destroy difference and absence. The tragedy here is that the ego gives up its mind and cannot make any sense of its perceptions and how they relate to both conscious and unconscious life. Further, the affects and functions of disavowal are unconscious, and this then raises the question that if we do not know we are disavowing a piece of mental life that has to do with loss, how may we even communicate its affairs? How may we know the vicissitudes and transformations of our mental acts at their most destructive? Extending this psychical despair into the field of education would
take us into our phantasies for omnipotence and the attraction of absolute knowledge.

I imagine that when traveling to Clark University Freud knew he was entering the human pathos of education as an unsolvable problem. But if being unprepared for what is unknown incurs anxiety and anticipations over the loss of love, looking more deeply into taciturn education will give us a foothold into our human conundrum. Taubman’s study meditates on the pathos of unsolvable problems that create the affective side of the teaching profession and its education. With imagination he analyzes, as others have, some of the ironic consequences of Freud’s formulation of education as one of the impossible professions. In suggesting that a certain kind of knowledge in human practice is at stake, and in handling teacher education as a funfair of transference, Taubman rightly asserts that a great deal of responsibility belongs to practitioners. Such a burden feels like an impossible demand since everyone wants a guarantee against the chaos of uncertainty. In a nutshell, practitioners have to be able to stand others alongside trying to remember and work through the (forgotten) history of losses that compose their own emotional affairs. They have to be curious about what they do not know, treat this ignorance as affecting, look into phantasies of knowledge that exhale anxiety, and learn to be courageous with their minds. They may have to learn from what Kristeva called, “new maladies of the soul.” If it is the case that a field of practice and so its professionals suffer from their own defenses, and if in essence a field refuses its own psychology by splitting itself into good and bad, success and failure, and even therapeutic or emancipatory projects of education, this also means that the enterprise of education is not immune from anxiety and its neurotic solutions. Indeed, like the psychical apparatus, instituted education can repudiate its losses and compulsively repeat the hatred of learning with phantasies of what Taubman calls, in another of his books, “audit culture.”

If we sort of know that that psychoanalytic negativity is hard to take in, how then would we treat this devastating diagnosis? Kristeva understands that “Each treatment is unique,” and for this particular education, we would have to turn to the reading, writing, and talking cure, we would have to invent education again and we would have to admit that words matter to living life creatively. We would have to learn to tolerate frustration: both sense and nonsense, both reality and phantasy. We would have to learn to narrate with courage our incompleteness and enjoy, through interpretation, the erotic transference.

Taubman suggests that projective identification or looking backward and projecting forward while identifying with new objects involves a second chance to construct the gap between historical reality (what Freud saw as subjective) and material reality (what Freud saw as facticity). And Taubman gives quite a few examples of how our personal meanings change from teaching and life and he asks important questions that unsettle the normative pull of libidinal investments known as impressions. Freud proposed an archeology of the self as part of this work but in his late paper on constructions, thought the rocky road of learning which involves repeating, remembering and working through as only “preliminary labor,” perhaps the new pathway to after-education. But Freud did not consider the work of analysis as prophylactic since the human is driven by the conflict between reality and pleasure. Much later, Anna Freud would put the news this way: “the emergence of neurotic conflicts has to be regarded as the price paid for the complexity of the
human personality.”

So constructions, then, do not change what has already happened but do extract experience from its urgencies in order to affect the ways we may think back upon what, and why at the time of its unfolding, was felt as unaccountable, baffling, fixated, or compulsive. Sigmund Freud gives us the greatest hope as to why psychoanalysis must lean upon constructions: “The work would consist in liberating the fragment of historical truth from its distortions and attachments to the actual present day and in leading it back to the point in the past to which it belongs.” Here, constructions, what we may call today “narratives” are one way to tell time, grapple with truth, enter history to become a subject, and account for the difference between the infantile education and its disillusionment.

It is important to notice that we are treating narratives and despite the familiarity of many of them, to return to Kristeva, “Each treatment is unique.” Taubman’s narrative history of psychoanalysis and education gives readers a sense of his own constellation made from what he reviews in the text: a history of ideas, the historical arguments between theorists in psychology and education, descriptions of their experiments, his own intellectual and parental upbringing and how all of this has affected his pedagogical imagination. In this sense, and all at once a personal account and a wrestling with history’s remainders, Taubman’s discussion is a strong model of the exuberance of curriculum theorizing as put forward in the work of William Pinar, Madeleine Grumet, and Janet Miller.

While a great deal has changed since Freud’s 1909 visit, a return to the fallout of Freud’s trip gives us both a sense of cultural life in university education and the elements of an education yet to come.

At the time of his visit to Clark University, one of Freud’s most difficult claims concerned the sexual life of children and adults, the unconscious wishes that transpired between them, and the social neurosis excited by child rearing, education, and cultural morality. That we want things we consciously hate, that we are utterly susceptible to forbidden erotic ties and their binds, and that consciousness is the exception of mental life, for example, may still come as a narcissistic blow. I imagine this view affected Freud’s audience, particularly given the young agony of the American educational dreamscape and its wish for individualism, will power, self-assurance, and self-invention. But the biggest surprise belonged to the travails and suffering of neurosis and why, in a nutshell, Freudians, at least initially, considered education, along with parenting practices, as both precipitating factors and potential cure. The Freudians stayed close to the phantasies and wishes of the unconscious social body and through the transference of erotic life into its intersubjective symptoms, for instance, gave public voice and a new vocabulary for understanding hysteria, anxiety, paranoia, and deceptive language, lying, and assorted compulsions to repeat, made from disappointment and refusals to distinguish the wish from reality. The Freudians were interested in obstacles to thought such as inhibitions and repression that also included fear of education. In one of his last, unfinished papers, Freud commented on these symptoms from the vantage point of the human’s susceptibility to culture: “We have repeatedly had to insist on the fact that the ego owes its origin as well as the most important of its acquired characteristics to its relation to the real

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Freud’s trip to Clark University is well documented, as is the fall out. There are the background details in Freud’s correspondence and as the years passed, the same event took on contradictory meanings. But it was not until the mid-twenties that psychoanalysis became a part of the landscape as Jewish psychoanalysts who had worked with Freud moved to the United States, some with Freud’s blessing and others with Freud’s relief! And more than a few years had to pass before Americans—artists, physicians, and teachers—traveled to Vienna for analysis with Freud. Perhaps the best documented was the poet H.D. Then, between 1933-1939, many Jewish European analysts went into exile in the United States and did become prominent in the arts and crafts of educational theory, social work, and studies of culture life. One thinks of Erik Erikson, Helene Deutsch, Margaret Mahler, Erich Fromm, Frieda Fromm, Hans Kohut, Karen Horney, Bruno Bettelheim, Wilhelm Reich, and Hans Loewald among others. They were a part of what Anna Freud described as “a new kind of diaspora” that continued after World War II and significantly recreated a new psychoanalytic field. And while Anna Freud lived her life in exile in London, she too was active in the educational and social welfare scene in the United States through to the late Eighties. In 1952 Miss Freud gave a series of lectures at Harvard University in Cambridge, invited by Talcott Parsons. Yet many of these thinkers hardly appear as resources for understanding what has happened to us. And, a history is yet to be written as to these thinkers go missing in education or why they appear to us moderns as anachronistic, or why, just as madness disappears from educational discourse, these thinkers have receded from our educational imagination. Surely there is more than one answer but an element we have yet to consider is why the twists and turns of emotional life as matters of subjective erotic excess bring the enterprise of education to its knees.

Freud mentioned the Clark University trip optimistically in his review of the early beginnings of the psychoanalytic movement, though he peppered his remarks with the naysayers who regularly predicted the death of psychoanalysis. This didn’t seem to bother him much. He recalled Mark Twain’s telegraph to a newspaper that printed his obituary: “Report of my death greatly exaggerated.” And then Freud added: “After all, being declared dead was an advance on being buried in silence.” In Peter Gay’s biography the trip appears as well as does commentary on Freud’s love and hate of the United States. Ernest Jones gives his take in his hagiographic biography of Freud. The event is also rhapsodically detailed in Nathan G. Hale’s first of two-volume discussion on Freudian effects in the United States. Eli Zaretsky tips his hat in his social history of psychoanalysis to Freud’s visit, and Peter Taubman now centers this event in our field of thought, namely education. Yet events, such as Freud’s visit, only later become psychoanalytic and the tension is that the registration of experience cannot direct its psychical consequences but rather psychical processes direct what becomes of experience.

Even with all this magnificent reading history, to tell the story of the rise and fall, and so of the crisis, wane, and revival of psychoanalysis means treating temporality as a narrative problem that must from the present jump back and forth in time. But also, due to the nature of its invention, the destiny of psychoanalysis is still in the making, subject to how we feel and think about it today. The challenge for today, as Taubman and many others have made clear, is that the field of education is
more enamored with the brain and its neurons than with the soul and the question of what it means to belong to others. Ironically, psychology and cognition are the dominant discourses in our field, and there sexuality and the unconscious are treated as something to correct and possibly give away.

For psychoanalysis, the dilemma of putting unmeant things to words brings more difficulty and challenges and changes what we can mean by both history and psychoanalysis. Linear chronology may be our greatest retrospective narrative devise to order the chaos and estrangement made from looking back. Conceptually, psychoanalysis involves temporality not as progress but through its deferral, as Nachträglich, or a notion of time that involves “after the factness” of impressions and so new meanings overlay the original event with what we know now. Yet how to tell the story of remainders, deferrals, and revisions? How to create a symptomatic narrative that does more than repeat our educational maladies and defenses against them?

These questions are at the heart of psychoanalytic inquiry and while the documents of history can neither freely associate nor listen to their reception, they do invoke our transference to the here and now and the then and gone. With a psychoanalytic reading one may focus on the traces, deferrals, and repressions. Then, the “after effects” of what it is that we remember are most at stake. Particularly important to a psychoanalytic narrative is the emphasis on giving new words to a private irony of remainders that returns education to its psychical consequences: the small ego’s anxiety that something might change, that something will be lost. As the model for any notion of affect, anxiety tells a peculiar story of timelessness: that something might happen again. Affected history is the only kind we have and if at some point in the life of the subject there dawns the realization that while childhood history seems to take its own time, we may come to see its grammar mistakes and so break those early rules of conjunctions.

Taubman reconstructs the Clark University lectures as education’s “primal scene” but also as something akin to Woodstock. The two are related in terms of memory: revolts against the parents, an outbreak of Eros, and an utter preoccupation with becoming a player. In his discussion of the lectures and more generally, throughout his study, Taubman then can picture education atmospherically, as environment and zeitgeist, and as manifesting institutional life from the side of the discourses found and dismissed, the techniques that invent and agonize the subject, the image of human learning fought over, and the return of history’s revenants in the form of the compulsion to repeat. This demanding notion of education crystallizes in primal scenes, by which Taubman means both the beginnings of a child’s phantasy of the parents’ sexual relations and then the patchwork of knowledge made from hearsay, desire, and wish. All this psychical work the child must do to create a story of origin and defenses against it. And from phantasy the child may begin the interminable work of distinguishing the power of psychical reality as the subjective excess of her or his historical record.

So what is this other history? Here is where psychoanalysis asks us to freely associate to revise our imagination. André Greene gives one of the most significant formulations when he asks, “What is history for the psyche?” Green turns to that other archive, the one we know nothing about or the archive that tolerates contradiction, knows no time, knows no negation and so cares nothing for
reality. What then is history for the unconscious? The short answer is a history of forgotten desire. Green tells us why it is disavowed:

As far as psychoanalysis is concerned, the historical is a very difficult notion to handle. . . Because, for the psyche, the historical could be defined as a combination of:
--what has happened,
--what has not happened,
--what could have happened,
--what has happened to someone else but not to me,
--what could not have happened,
--and finally—to summarize all these alternatives about what has happened—a statement that one would not have even dreamed of as a representation of what really happened.xxv

I believe that the complex of education, for the psyche, is also difficult to handle and shares a similar fate. Looking into this archive, we would have to admit our subjective excesses and resistance to change. We would have to interpret our narratives of what makes education such a contentious exercise. And we would have to include emotional experiences of jealousy, envy, masochism, sadism, and the hatred of development.

Imagining the Clark lectures as a primal scene gives Taubman the permit of free association, needed to construct from the day’s residues of history new ideas but also to point to the dispersals of Eros. One of the great pleasures of reading Taubman is his style of thinking out loud as he is handling historical material and gain admission to how he has been affected in bringing constructions of psychoanalysis and education together as parental figures. He asks, “I wonder if part of my reason for referring to the Clark Conference as a primal scene had to do with the fact that my own identifications were ambiguous?” xxvi The lectures have become a “conference” but also a scene of identification, always ambulant, partial, and unconscious. We are always, Taubman suggests, telling more than one story. No matter how many there are, our storied lives involve not only what we thought happened to others and to ourselves but also what has happened without us.

Let’s go back again to that event as it unfolded behind the scenes—in the letters—and that occupy what Derrida called, in his study of Freud’s reception, “archive fever” or, “what calls into question the coming of the future.” xxvii

Freud was invited by G. Stanley Hall to Clark University to receive an honorary doctorate in psychology and lecture on his new approach to psychological life. He gave his lectures in German. Sándor Ferenczi, a young Hungarian psychoanalyst accompanied Freud, as did the better-known Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung, chosen at the time by Freud to take on the leadership of the young psychoanalytic movement. Jung as well was an invited guest to Clark. He lectured in English and also received an honorary doctorate in education and social hygiene. That education and social hygiene were of a pair may now give us pause, though its continued ties to social engineering, betterment and progress are now so much a part of the imaginary of education that we are apt to forget its violent origins. Five years after their trip, Freud and Jung would be finished with
Eventually, Ferenczi would turn to the wilder analyst Georg Groddock and create the active technique called “mutual analysis.” But as with the dream, the destiny and fall out of this American visit remains unsettled. Yes, there are the day’s residues but they now return in congealed, forgotten wishes. What remains is the question of education, caught somewhere between articulating the force of experience and handling the echoes of its estrangements, the unmeant things, or what Groddock simple called “the it.”

By 1909 Freud’s Interpretation of Dreams went into a second edition (Freud would take it through to eight editions) and had published books on hysteria, jokes, and mistakes and forgetting in everyday life, his three essays on sexuality, and the “Little Hans case” that brought the talking cure to the analysis of child neurosis. Still, it is hard to remember that in 1909 psychoanalysis as a young theory and movement was barely nine years old and the discipline of psychology at the University was hardly dawning. Stanley Hall was the first PhD in psychology in the United States, supervised by William James at Harvard. James had given his talks to teachers on psychology between 1892 and they were published in 1899. So psychology as a philosophy of life and as life’s articulating desire was already seen as relevant to the new teacher education, though in James’s hands, the question that most concerns psychology is what makes life significant and insignificant. James and Freud met during the latter’s visit and James is said to have told Freud that psychoanalysis is the future.

This is probably the optimism of beginnings. But close to his departure from Vienna to Massachusetts, Freud seemed exhausted by trying to prepare. In a letter to Ferenczi, on August 9th 1909, he admitted as much: “I declare myself definitely unsuited for preparation for America. I don’t have any illusions at all about America.” Having no illusions and being unable to prepare are of the same piece of psychical life: one morphs into the other, or they go hand in hand. About thirty letters and telegrams, scattered throughout Freud’s correspondence were exchanged with his then colleagues Carl Jung and the young Hungarian psychoanalyst, Sándor Ferenczi. Ernst Jones was already in New York and he too corresponded with Freud about the trip. Jones tried to warn Freud what he would be up against and advised him to simplify the theory by staying close to a description rather than focus on the consequences of mental functioning. Jones did admit that much of what Freud would say, specifically on the topic of sexuality and the unconscious, would be heard with tin ears and received through the fog of moral accusations. It is the details of trying to prepare without illusions that bring us squarely into the dilemmas of education.

Freud understood all of this since he was already arguing with the European psychiatrists under the sway of biology and heredity theories, and he knew well its particular force through the cold anti-Semitism in Austrian life. But there was also the issue with America: by 1909 his work was just beginning to be published in English. Nathan Hale mentions a letter to Jones where Freud wrote: “America is a mistake, a gigantic mistake, it is true, but none the less a mistake.” A slight variation of the mistake quote is also found in Peter Gay’s biography. Ernst Jones’s biography of Freud would simply allude to this comment. Practically speaking there was Freud’s suspicion that “American know how,” along with the mythology of self invention, will power, and its ethos of ready-made solutions meant that the American public would have no patience for psychoanalysis.
It was as if time really was money, though in the psychoanalytic vocabulary, money is shit. Psychically speaking, however, we need mistakes. They are the royal road to unconscious desire and remind us that something more than consciousness motivates our forgetting, our bungled actions, our jokes, and our sexuality. The human comedy of errors is our lot. But given the sexual etiology of the neurosis in Freud’s early work, he would not be too far off the mark to think the public would find psychoanalysis as either an anathema or an entirely laughable matter. His often quoted quip said to Jung on the ship from Europe to the new continent was recently retrieved in David Cronenberg’s 2011 film, A Dangerous Method: “Don’t they know we are bringing the plague?”

Whether this education too would be a laughable matter or a better means to accept the human comedy of the split subject is part of the argument. But don’t we know that education too brings the plague, in the form of suffering from our understandings and in our efforts, in whatever ways we can, to communicate why we believe learning is so difficult. The education Freud had to event becomes stranger. He had to invent the plague, but now in the form of an “artificial illness” called the transference that paradoxically gives psychoanalysis and education the freedom to linger between ordinary life and its extraordinary emotions of love and hate, provided that the transference can be used to understand difference. The scene on the ship in Cronenberg’s film gives us a sense of this erotic neurosis and the fragile, incomplete attempts to disillusion the hysterical ideality of authority and the wish to be loved, surely a pedagogical problem that defies instructions. Freud’s gift to us was to write the unrolling story of founding psychoanalysis psychoanalytically.

What gives way between psychoanalysis and education is still in the making, though much of what has already occurred carries the flavor of resistance to emotional life and its passions. By the time Taubman comments on our present, its time has already past. Yet the past, at least for both fields of thought, still manages to speak to the future, not as prediction but as a question of transference. Both social critique and therapeutic projects turn out to be two sides of the same coin. We should stop playing the neurotic spinning game of heads I win, or tails you lose and wonder if resistance can give way between psychoanalysis and education.

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i One of Freud’s earliest discussions of psychical reality is found in his second part of The Interpretation of Dreams (1900): “If we look at unconscious wishes reduced to their most fundamental and truest shape, we shall have to conclude, no doubt, that psychical reality is a particular form of existence not to be confused with material reality” (SE V, p. 260).


Kristeva, 1995, p. 35.


Ibid., p. 268.


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