

# U.S. Public Education: The Ivy Tower of Historical Trauma

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## **Introduction**

The ivy-covered homes in poor black neighborhoods are worn like statues exposed to years of relentless acid rain: their once-hard edges and crisp details softened, obscured, and even disappeared. Such ivy-covered neighborhoods stand as symbols of people whose histories remain fraught with colonialism, enslavement, and resistance and who await seemingly inevitable further decay. Even though worn and in some cases nearly covered by vines, these houses nevertheless stand firm against social and economic gentrification which lurks nearby, an undying colonialism that frames newly built structures which promise only false renewal and which themselves creep toward dismemberment of people of color's living communities. When glimpsed through the eyes not of neoliberal economic progress, but of history, the same poor black neighborhood's ivy covered homes are revealed as dangerous repositories of communities of color's traumatic memories. Trauma challenges the current, colonial progression of the populous, becoming "dangerous" to progress (Zembylas & Bekerman, 2008). This invasive, neoliberal, colonialist enterprise of gentrification, like ivy and acid rain, sets about to mask and attempts to erase traumatic memories, toxicity, and enslavement endured by people of color. In the exalted, profit-hungry, race-blind neoliberal economic enterprise, only ivy-obscurd houses appear to be at stake, but what is actually at stake are the lived experiences of people of color, communities that remain testaments of persistent, proud resistance to oppression. The metaphor of creeping ivy as colonial infiltration and gentrification extends to education because within schools oppression grows unchecked because white educators do not attempt to understand the student of color who bravely stands in resistance even as he or she becomes re-enslaved by the policy and practices of schooling. U.S. educational policymakers and practitioners employ the false promise of educational reform as opportunity to perpetuate harm systematically by limiting the academic success of students of color. The dissonance created between students of color and white educators is then labeled as "achievement gap," blamed upon and

viewed as an indirect consequence of communities of color's actions rather than a consequence of conditions that continue to uphold racist ideologies and actions that harm. We envision this paper as a call to seek and implement critical consciousness and critical empathy in an educational system that continuously fertilizes the colonialist ivy.

Rather than raising consciousness of the harm perpetuated in schools, educators choose to mask the loss of students of color's cultural capital (Yosso, 2005). Cultural capital is the cultural wealth of communities of color so often dismissed in current educational systems (Yosso, 2005). Theory on cultural capital acknowledges community wealth as specific knowledge gained from a community's familial, aspirational, social, linguistic, resistant, and navigational capital (Oliver & Shapiro, 1995; Yosso, 2005). This educator-enforced achievement gap dismisses ghetto colonialism (Paperson, 2010; 2014) and historical trauma (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998), both of which persist and grow. Educators then become complicit, active participants in the cycle of students of color's cultural trauma, often naïvely inheriting the role of arbitrator to assimilation (Suárez-Orozco, Casanova, Martin, Katsiaficas, Cuellar, Smith, & Dias, 2015; Dutro & Bien, 2014; Warren & Hotchkins, 2014). In order to interrupt this trauma cycle, educators must explore the hallways and byways of school systems and take risks in exploring the pathways in which empathy, witnessing, and counter-discourse can create spaces of healing (Dutro & Bien; Schwartz, 2014; Walkley & Cox 2013; Zembylas, 2006). This manuscript's authors and our message expressed herein joins the collective activist voice of critical scholars in unmasking the ivy-covered walls of historical trauma that harm students of color while examining the capacity and need for educators to develop critical consciousness.

### **Historical Trauma**

After years of "toxic rain" in its classrooms and schools, communities of color have yet to recover from traumas experienced by previous generations (Liem, 2007; Mohatt, Thompson, Thai, & Tebes, 2014; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). Generational acts of harm such as slavery, segregation, and racism manifest deep within society. These acts then become policy and law such as voter ID laws, marketed as turning points of change, regarded as preserving public safety and protecting democracy when, in fact, they only persist practices of separateness and experiences of trauma in communities of color (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998; Mohatt et al., 2014). Simultaneously, communities and individuals subjected to generations of oppression form their own collective narrative, acting to preserve counter-experiences that maintain their identity, safety, and history (Mohatt et al., 2014; Yosso, 2005; Zembylas & Bekerman, 2008). However, years of trauma bring loss,

which can include loss of cultural language, values, land, and perceptions of self-worth (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998; Mohatt et al., 2014). This shared experience of trauma becomes a collective memory of pain endured, but also a collective memory of strength drawn from remaining resistant to the dominant narrative of cultural extinction (Paperson, 2010; 2014). According to Dumas (2014), “this process requires that a given group engage in sustained deliberation over the nature of the pain, and importantly, its cause(s)” (p. 6). This discourse of pain includes daily suffering within schools which often moves through generations unacknowledged by educators while communities of color struggle to make their pain heard, felt, and acknowledged (Dumas, 2014, Roppolo & Crow, 2007). Inherent in the journey toward interrupting the historical trauma cycle is the need to address its effects specific to health and educational outcomes among communities of color.

Historical trauma theory explains the intergenerational impact of physically and psychologically traumatic events that affect communities and individuals (Brave Heart, 2003; Brockie, Dana-Sacco, Wallen, Wilcox, & Campbell, 2015; Mohatt et al., 2014; Whitbeck, Adams, Hoyt, & Chen, 2004; Wiechelt, Gryczynski, Johnson, & Caldwell, 2012). Formerly, historical trauma theory has been used to describe experiences of Jews during and after the Holocaust and more recently the intergenerational impact of colonialist events, such as the Indian Boarding School era on Native Americans (Bombay, Matheson, & Anisman, 2014; Brave Heart, 2003; Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998; Brave Heart et al., 2011; Duran, Duran, Brave Heart, & Yellow-Horse Davis, 1998; Elias, Mignone, Hall, Hong, Hart, & Sareen, 2012; Walls & Whitbeck, 2012; Whitbeck, Walls, Johnson, Morrisseau, & McDougall, 2009; Wiechelt et al., 2012). Just as ivy, when left to rampant growth over time erodes long-standing structures while simultaneously masking its destruction, historical trauma dismissed and further supported by reoccurring acts of harm affects negatively students and communities of color (Quijada Cercer, 2013; Roppolo & Crow, 2007). Recent research exploring the impact of historical trauma on Native Americans finds correlations with substance abuse (Wiechelt et al., 2012), depression (Whitbeck et al., 2009), and suicide (Brockie et al., 2015; Elias et al., 2012) among Native-American populations. By exploring and evidencing the mechanisms by which education perpetuates trauma in order to extinguish Blackness, we argue for an expansion of the scope of historical trauma to include current schooling as sites of recurring harm which enact intergenerational traumatic effects on communities of color.

### **Narrative Model**

Similarly to the work of critical scholars who explore the effects of historical trauma on Native Americans’ mental health (Brave Heart,

2003; Whitbeck et al., 2004), the “narrative model of how historical trauma [affects] health” (Mohatt et al., 2014) provides rich insight into the effects of historical trauma on communities of color. According to Mohatt et al. (2014), there are three common elements to historical trauma narratives: (a) contemporary reminders in the form of public and personal (education falls into both); (b) narrative salience; and (c) present-day effects in both community and individual health. Present-day health effects that fall within the narrative model include chronic illness, mental illness, and relational issues that span generations (Brave Heart, 2003; Brockie et al., 2015; Mohatt et al., 2014; Walls & Whitbeck, 2012; Wiechelt et al., 2012). Salience of the trauma to a community or individual is mediated by “contemporary reminders of historical trauma,” which include perceived historical loss, perceived discrimination, microaggressions, and personal trauma (Mohatt et al., 2014). Personal contemporary reminders include experienced microaggressions (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015), limited spaces of safety in which people of color can engage in dialogue about their lived experiences (Leonardo & Porter, 2010), punishment for exhibiting Blackness (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Murphy, Acosta, & Kennedy-Lewis, 2013), and other instances of discrimination as perceived by an individual. These personal and collective trauma narratives can shape memory and behaviors of communities which then deeply affect development of positive self-worth (Mohatt et al., 2014; Seedat, 2015).

### **Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome**

While the narrative model of historical trauma provides an objective map of the mechanisms of historical trauma within communities of color its very objectivity renders it generalized and distant (Mohatt et al., 2014) as a means of understanding. Invested with community and personal salience, DeGruy’s (2005) “post-traumatic slave syndrome” challenges patterns of dissonance first by applying historical trauma specifically to Black communities and then by connecting the effects of slavery and oppression to the diagnostic criteria of PTSD. Her theorization directly places historical trauma as a cause of immediate harm within Black communities. Tangled up with effects of historical loss, post-traumatic slave syndrome is theorized as a cause of issues such as depression, alcoholism, and internalized oppression, all of which can become externalized into feelings of anger, invisibility, and low self-worth (DeGruy, 2005). These logical externalizations of trauma are then routinely used by white society to support the continuation of harmful stereotypes lacking in understanding of historical trauma, such as the “angry Black man.” Additionally, DeGruy’s (2005) framing of historical trauma as post-traumatic slave syndrome provides counter-hegemonic

language imbued with personal and collective salience to communities of color and which can provide a foundation for educators to take conscious steps toward interrupting the cycle of trauma incurred by and thrust upon students of color. Overall, post-traumatic slave syndrome plainly, powerfully articulates trauma experiences in the Black community as truths while also attempting to provide opportunity for understanding and healing.

### **Extinguishing Blackness**

Black communities are subjected every day to trauma by being made to bear witness to images, debates, and news headlines which serve as reminders of generations of fighting for liberation with seemingly small progress towards reparation for colonialist injustices. Rather than assume accountability for the institutional and relational acts of harm against people of color, biases broadcast as fact and out-and-out hate speech are protected as free speech and perpetuate messages that Black communities are the cause of their own oppression. What continues to remain absent in the dominant collective narrative is a critical awareness and understanding of counter- language, experience, memory, and Blackness as means to challenge and alter an invented, yet invasive, persistent reality that seeks to preserve whiteness by extinguishing Blackness.

### **False History**

Although U.S. society has made steps towards change, the invasive colonialist ivy spreads its tendrils throughout current history books, media, and overall societal consensus (Brown & Brown, 2010; DeGruy, 2005). Loss of Black cultural capital and history are its successful conquests, executed by means of racist beliefs, values, policies, and systems to silence counter-language, close off safe space, and extinguish self-identity of Black communities. In an educational system where truth only exists within, only has weight in the context of, white culture, language, history, and space, Black communities are left searching for resources to substantiate the subjective essence of their experiences (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013; Paperson, 2010). Communities of color have acted in resistance to the imperialist storm of assimilation in attempts to sustain their history of strength and resilience across generations. However, their history of resilience which places people of color as unified, intelligent, and culturally significant becomes threatening to dominant narratives that place communities of color as less-than, disorganized, and lacking intelligence. As a result, communities of color's memories are twisted into falsity, and result in extinguishing community history and any movement toward liberation (Zembylas & Bekerman, 2008). Examples include media portrayals of police killing unarmed Black men as singular events supposedly spatially and

ideologically contained in one town or community. As a result, the collective memories of generations of police brutality against the Black community are again disappeared, and reinforcing and reifying suffering and recurring harm rather than becoming movement toward liberation.

### **Dehumanization**

In the U.S., public education remains a right for the masses to earn freedoms only truly granted to a few, and a journey of learning what society deems as comprising humanity or humanness: one's essence or cultural identity formed from experience that provides a foundation for evolution and development of consciousness. The colonialist ivy of historical trauma is a product of the absence of humanity of those in power whose actions mutilate and cover the humanness of students of color. Fanon (2008) argues, "man is not only the potential for self-consciousness or negation. If it be true that consciousness is transcendental, we must also realize that this transcendence is obsessed with the issue of love and understanding" (p. xii). It is such love and understanding, through empathy and compassion, which manifests as a fleeting apparition within the educator who lacks critical consciousness, leaving that educator without a means to witness students of color. As such, when leading discussion of students' events and experiences, for the teacher lacking critical consciousness the possibility of a different subjective experience existing during that very same moment is often quickly, safely replaced by dichotomous othering. For instance, a Black student in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade who has not been taught how to sound out words refuses to read aloud in class. His white teacher demands he read because she fails to draw upon critical consciousness, empathy, and compassion in order to seek an understanding as to the reason behind the student's behavior. The student-teacher dialogue escalates, and the student ends up in the school's office. While the student experiences feelings of embarrassment, hurt, and low self-worth, the teacher experiences the student as lazy, confrontational, and disruptive. The student becomes "the problem" in class and is thereafter approached as an object, symbolic of the vast societal and racial divide, a counter-narrative in need of discipline in order to achieve conformity rather than a human child to be understood. As a result, the ivy of whiteness covers the whole child, masks his cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) rather than offering an opportunity to break down the narrative and expose the trauma students of color incur in schools.

Such a scenario extends, too, into higher education where the need for critical consciousness becomes a current trend and classroom discourse can become a volley of "us vs. them," "self vs. other," and "truth vs. falsity" instead of engaging difficult discourse enacting empathy and advocacy (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013; Zembylas, 2014).

Placed at the center of this educational trend are people of color who often become unknowingly tasked at educating white peers about their experiences of everyday trauma (Leonardo, 2004). Since the focus of many “cultural awareness” courses is to educate the oppressor rather than liberate the oppressed, the experiences of students of color continue to be silenced and placed as outside of reality through microaggressions such as statements like; “that can’t be true...racism no longer exists,” or “Black people are not victimized by police.” Meanwhile, students of color charged with sharing their experiences act as educators rather than be witnessed themselves, and continue to be subjected to violence through personal reminders of historical trauma. What often occurs when counter-narrative experiences are expressed by students of color is those experiences are labeled as hurtful or acting to their white peers attempting to develop a conscious awareness (Leonardo, 2004; Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013). Furthermore, the distance through such dichotomous dialogues intrudes into other aspects of self where students of color’s cultural identity is manipulated and contained in order to maintain the separateness of trauma histories from the conceived objective truth of dominant society.

### **Personal Identity**

Critical race scholars’ framing of racial identity as whiteness and Blackness expands the depth of understanding of the ways in which society enacts intergenerational trauma onto communities of color through discourse, education, and history of whiteness ideology (Leonardo, 2004; Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013; Paperson, 2010; 2014). Whiteness is a colonial ideology that supports and rewards those who conform to desired behavior, beliefs, values, and experiences and punishes those who exhibit Blackness regardless of phenotype (Paperson, 2010). “Specifically, whiteness emerges as a racial category of entitlements: the right to claim land and sometimes people as property, and conversely, the right not to be bound by borders nor bonded as property” (Paperson, 2014, p. 116). For example, individuals whose language closely aligns with “formal English” are viewed as well-educated, while individuals whose speech mirrors that of their community who have an accent, who use slang, and so forth are viewed as “ghetto.” Whether Ebonics, or Black/home, vernacular/community discourse should be supported or shamed in education continues to be a topic of debate (Perry & Delpit, 1998). Blackness encompasses behaviors, language, beliefs, attitudes, and affect that embody the cultural capital of Black communities (Fanon, 2008; Paperson, 2010; Yosso, 2015). The positioning of whiteness and Blackness as ideologies expands identity to include individuals who may not phenotypically look Black, but who may live by beliefs, behaviors,

and experiences that closely align with the collective identity of the Black community. As such, whiteness ideology acts to keep classroom conversations about diversity focused either on persuading white students towards awareness or on serving the colonialist educational system rather than providing space for healing students of color's traumatic wounds (Dutro & Bien, 2014; Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013). Just as once-flourishing Black neighborhoods are taken over and gentrified, as ivy houses are overshadowed by modern, new housing developments, Blackness becomes ghettoized, subsumed by colonialism but purposefully located outside the protected spaces of whiteness ideology and identity (Paperson 2010; 2014).

### **Ghetto Colonialism**

When Blackness enters the classroom it is often viewed as an imperfection, something to be extinguished through punishment (Dumas, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2003; Murphy et al., 2013). Viewing Black children's humanness and culture as behavior to be extinguished instead of an essence in need of understanding, educators position students of color as objects, experimented on by using different forms of punishment to discipline and extinguish Blackness. As a result, students who exhibit Blackness in schools become marked for reform. Educators armed with colonialist knowledge become inspectors with model blueprints of assimilation charged with ensuring a student who exemplifies whiteness ideology is supported and promoted, while students who exhibit attributes outside the whiteness ideology are stripped and refurbished to white educational code. Ghetto colonialism is one of the manifestations of such a system used to further imperialist schooling and colonial education (Paperson 2010; 2014). This "new learning" is repackaged propaganda that dislocates students' Blackness as inhuman and classrooms as spaces for cultural extinguishment (Dumas, 2014; Paperson 2010; 2014). Accordingly, the degree to which a student of color can "succeed" is often determined by the capacity of that student to endure classroom violence, assimilate, or mask his or her Blackness. Paperson (2010) argues,

This asymmetry between the pull of empire and the push of dislocation gives rise to imperial education on the one hand and colonial schooling on the other. Imperial education is training for inclusion into the metropole, which stands in contrast to colonial schooling, a form of management of populations in the ghetto. (p. 24)

It is just such an "imperial education" that normalizes students' suffering of historical trauma and which inhibits educators from exposure to a discourse that provides spaces for healing instead of imposing harm.



### **School-Based Suffering**

The trend in U.S. public education to focus on positivist student achievement prizes objectivity and enacts punishment with little reward. Of the ways in which students of color experience trauma within schools Dumas (2014) opines:

Marginalized groups suffer doubly in relation to schooling: First, the drudgery and futility of the school experience itself, and second, through the loss of hope for oneself individually, and for the group, collectively, in terms of improved social recognition and economic stability. Neither stage of suffering is deemed legitimate. In the first case, students are told, despite evidence to the contrary, that participating in schooling is not suffering, but an opportunity to improve one's life chances. (p. 8)

Scholars critically examine education—its goals, actions, and outcomes—through the lens of critical race theory (Duncan, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Critical race theory (CRT) is a means through which to examine the power dynamics within schools that perpetuate messages such as, “to exhibit Blackness is to be less than human” and “learning is measured by one's ability to exhibit whiteness” (Duncan, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011). When cultural capital earned within Black communities is confronted by toxic microaggressions in the classroom, students are left hurt and vulnerable, providing an opportunity for historical loss to sink in its destructive ivy roots (Dutro & Bien, 2014; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). Eventually students experience the loss of cultural foundations meant to help foster positive growth, self-efficacy, and empathetic relationships (Mohatt et al., 2014; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). This places both students who conform and those who resist such “cultural learning” in spaces where they are subjected to continuous exposure to trauma narratives, dehumanization, and invisibility.

### **The Achievement Gap**

Through ghetto-colonialism the consciousness gap of empathy and liberation is projected onto students of color and reframed as inherent “smartness” disability (Leonardo & Broderick, 2011). Rather than being held accountable for students of color's lack of achievement, educational systems instead reify colonialist achievement by privileging language that continues to place students of color as the cause of and responsible for their own trauma. Rhetoric such as the “achievement gap” and the “school-to-prison pipeline” contribute to the intergenerational trauma cycle through educational initiatives that temporally muffle the voices of advocates while allowing schools to hide from accountability. Paperson

(2010) argues, “the most recent push for accountability in education is yet another modernist project to create utopic schooling systems, where deviant schools must be closed and impure bodies and minds must be reformed” (p. 8). This push to create “utopic schooling systems” disregards the voices of students who seek understanding and spaces for healing within their community’s classrooms. Coinciding with the call for increased student academic achievement there exists stark need to address the gap in white educators’ empathy (Warren & Hotchkins, 2014).

### **Accountability: An Interruption in the Trauma Cycle**

What is there to gain by lifting the white veil? Of primary importance and potential benefit, educators must act to accept accountability for participation in microaggressive acts and other forms of oppression which can liberate students of color from contemporary reminders and effects of decades of historical trauma. Like many calls for raising critical consciousness, white educators need to exercise caution against placing liberatory actions within a strict modality when in fact consciousness-raising remains a developmental journey of constant risk-taking, self-work, and relational challenges. By way of recommending implementation of such a strategy, we now turn to describe different pathways along which educators can walk toward developing their capacity for critical consciousness, eventually acting to interrupt cycles of historical trauma within their classrooms. Too, white educators will need to develop a keen awareness of the fears that come with the unfamiliar, ambiguous nature of liberation, which can foster a need for the familiar structure of whiteness ideology and lead to disconnection among students of color (Fanon, 2008; Freire, 1989).

### **Empathy**

When asked to define empathy the common response is often “to walk in another’s shoes,” an accepted adage adopted by society and integrated in schools within relational education contexts. For people of color, empathy’s particular discourse is one rooted in dislocation, displacing one outside his or her community in order to allow another to “act as if” and granting white onlookers a license to explore without need to understand the person of color’s true experience. This discourse of empathy creates racialized avoidance by bracketing empathy as an objective ability to understand another without having truly to feel, hear, believe, or even acknowledge the sacrifice of people of color who have given up part of themselves in the hope someone will witness their counter-experience. As a result, what remains invisible, missing within this dominant discourse. are subjectivity, humanness, wisdom, and affect (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013; Warren & Hotchkins, 2014). In a

classroom the drawbacks to the discourse of empathy and its roots in dislocation appear when students of color's emotions are dislocated from their humanity and recast as behavioral issues, their experiences rendered false in such a way that the salience of students' experienced trauma is reaffirmed.

In addition to developing critical empathy, educators committed to building critical consciousness will participate in *engaged witnessing* (Gubkin, 2015), which requires an educator's critical empathy along with four actions: (a) studying the historical context; (b) exploring multiple subject positions (including the student); (c) testing the possibilities and limits of representation; and (d) utilizing emotion as a source for knowledge (p. 109). On the surface, an educator's achievement of this framework's components could easily be characterized as objective and ticked off as completed tasks, completely losing the essence and intentionality of critical empathy and increasing subjective, emotional, historical disconnects between white educators and students of color. Used as intended, engaged witnessing challenges educators critically to examine the historical counter-narrative of their students' communities, histories easily avoided if educators are not required to live in the same town as their district of employment. Furthermore, emotion can become a source of knowledge for white educators, providing space for intersections between historical trauma and classroom discourse, and ultimately leading to opportunities for healing.

### **Witnessing the Speaking Wound**

Witnessing the "speaking wounds" of trauma (Dutro & Bien, 2014) is a process that asks educators to abandon the deficit perspective in which they view students of color as inheritors of hopelessness. The very act of believing students when they voice their pain instead of silencing them can in itself begin radically to shift relationships from disconnected, vague links to relationships rooted in critical empathy, from classrooms imbued with toxicity to classrooms within which students of color find safety and experience the potential to have their voices heard and their cultural identities celebrated (Dutro & Bien, 2014; Schwartz, 2014; Wissman, 2014). However, to create spatial opportunities where the "difficult knowledge" (Zembylas, 2014) of trauma experiences can be heard, teachers must be willing to risk movement beyond what whiteness deems "safety," or that knowledge typically couched within "diversity" boundaries manufactured by white culture such as calendared "cultural" months or events that serve only imperialist ego. Persistent white fear of the ambiguousness of a developed critical consciousness results in the desire to preserve ideals of whiteness' innocence and alibies instead of moving boldly to adopt antiracism (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013). Students of color, too, can

experience anxiety when engaging in relations of empathy and witnessing in classrooms. However, their anxiety originates uniquely from their perceived and historically learned need to remain vigilant against harmful actions occurring in classrooms, which can become even more traumatizing when students voice their speaking wounds.

Finally, when racist actions and events, like those in Ferguson, Missouri, occur and schools put a policy of silence in place, educators must ask themselves who benefits from these actions and what difficult knowledge is being avoided? These are not new difficult knowledges for students of color: they are familiar narratives. Historical trauma accountability, like empathy, is a continuum without a formula. Removing the white veil and peeling away colonialist ivy exposes wounds, and these wounds take time to heal: healing that begins with the recognition of white educators' roles in perpetuating harm and in adopting the fortitude and diligence to engage in the never-ending work interrupting colonialist cycles of historical trauma.

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