This was the notice posted by vigilantes in Black Rock, Arkansas, on the night of Friday, January 12, 1894: “All negroes must leave this town inside of ten days or take what follows, and all who have houses rented to them must fire them or we will fire the houses inside of ten days. Negroes, don’t let this slip your mind.” After this initial notice, the vigilantes issued more verbal and written warnings to major area employers, namely local mills and factories, threatening owners with the burning of their property should they fail to dismiss their African American employees. African Americans had reportedly been run off from other towns near Black Rock, and the Arkansas Gazette observed that “if driven from Black Rock [they] will be without friends and money in an inhospitable country.” Governor William Meade Fishback took a personal interest in the situation and stated that he was willing to take action “necessary to the protection of life and property,” as did several local employers. Despite this backing, the largest firm in the town dismissed its entire African American workforce. One-third of the African American population of the town, estimated then at 300, reportedly fled, even though no actual acts of violence had been committed.¹

Vigilantes such as those in Black Rock were commonly known as “whitecappers” or “nightriders.” They were “bands of armed white men . . . engaged in what they viewed as community ‘regulation’ and retaliation, moving against those who violated norms, transgressed boundaries, or threatened livelihoods.” In many areas, as the economy in the late nineteenth century soured, whitecappers targeted and
attacked African Americans, specifically those who “rented farms, owned land, or otherwise worked for merchants or large planters,” as well as those who had found “alternative employment in newly opened railroads, lumber camps, and sawmills,” with the aim of opening those jobs up to unemployed whites.\textsuperscript{2} However, economic competition was not the only motivation behind white attempts to expel local African American populations. Whites also linked expulsive violence against African American communities either to a desire to restore political domination—especially in the post-Reconstruction years, when white Democrats tried to curb the success of the Republican Party, which depended on African American voters—or as collective punishment for a crime allegedly committed by one or more African Americans.

Sometimes, such violence occurred without a stated cause. On December 28, 1906, the \textit{Sharp County Record} of Evening Shade reported that “unknown parties” had posted notices warning African Americans to leave the area and had also attacked one African American resident, Joe Brooks. These actions resulted in the near evacuation of the area by African Americans, most of whom lived in a small colony just outside town. The newspaper identified no misdeed committed by any local African American resident that might have supplied motivation for such an attack.\textsuperscript{3} The following week, the newspaper reported that another notice had been posted. By the time of this report, there were “very few negroes remaining here, a majority of them having left last week and [in] the early part of this week.”\textsuperscript{4}

One might well ask why African Americans fled so often in response to anonymously posted notices. But such notices were not the only tools available to those who desired to expel African Americans from a particular locality. This chapter examines three common tactics used by whites to generate the level of fear and terror among African Americans in Arkansas that made their expulsion feasible. These tactics included personal visitations during which a threat was delivered face to face, the anonymous posting of notices, and the presentation of threats through semi-official means, such as the publication of anti-black editorials in a newspaper or the communication of hostility through the US mail. In some of the cases covered in this chapter, actual violence was combined with these tactics to effect a population transfer—of African Americans, away from whites—while in other cases, a simple notice or visitation proved to be just as effective.

What these various tactics have in common is their shared production of fear and terror among African American populations. As anthropologists Andrew Strathern and Pamela J. Stewart note: “Terror is based on an interlocking feedback between memory and anticipation, the same nexus that makes possible continuity in human action generally. Here, however, the feedback is based on a sense of rupture. Terror consists precisely in intrusions into expectations about security, making moot the mundane processes on which social life otherwise depends. Repeated ruptures shift
people’s perceptions and render them progressively more anxious and vulnerable to disturbance.”5 To employ an analogy illustrating the idea, an abused child or animal may flinch when the abuser’s hand is raised, regardless of whether a slap or punch is forthcoming, precisely because that feedback between memory and anticipation holds that a strike is possible, even if not likely. Or as the philosopher Claudia Card writes, terrorism “creates an atmosphere of grave uncertainty and insecurity in the face of what could be imminent danger. Uncertainty and insecurity can make fears reasonable.”6 In many cases, the threat of violence became the reality of violence as white mobs attacked African Americans, thus creating a new feedback loop between memory and anticipation that made it progressively easier to intimidate African American communities and thus carry out projects of racial cleansing, for a range of motives and occasionally in the face of white elite disapproval.

Communities that experienced racial-cleansing violence often became “sundown towns,” defined by sociologist James W. Loewen as “any organized jurisdiction that for decades kept African Americans or other groups from living in it and was thus ‘all-white’ on purpose.”7 This created, through the decades, another level of fear for African Americans, who often avoided moving into or even passing through such communities based merely on their reputations.8 Although this chapter does not examine the long-term maintenance of the all-white status of sundown towns, it does focus on the immediacy of racial-cleansing violence within the time frame in which it was perpetrated. The conclusion examines how these acts of intimidation and violence served a communicative function, inculcating a specific form of terror within African American communities targeted for racial cleansing.

PERSONAL VISITATIONS

Despite the menace presented by a personal visitation from a group of white vigilantes—especially if they arrived armed—warning away African Americans, it appears that this tactic was not a preferred method for most would-be whitecappers. As historian Story Matkin-Rawn has observed, whitecappers—unlike participants in lynch mobs—occasionally faced arrest, had their identities revealed, and were convicted, given that their actions could threaten the profits of white mill or plantation owners.9 This possible result is why many vigilantes worked at night, in disguise, and through the medium of anonymous notices rather than exposing themselves to possible recognition and punishment. However, a few cases of personal visitation do stand out.

In 1880, according to the US Census, only forty-three African Americans were listed as residents of Clay County, which is in the northeastern corner of the state. Certain locals were so determined to keep this population at a minimum that they
even targeted outside workers who were laying railroad tracks through Clay County. Two different versions of the central story exist. According to one account, once the African American railroad workers had crossed the St. Francis River from Missouri into Arkansas, “a group of white men, with lighted lanterns, marched single file past these tents, opened the tent flaps, passed their lanterns inside, just looked around and passed on.”10 As a result, the laborers moved back to the Missouri side of the river and refused to work in Arkansas. Another account holds that Bill Waddle, then overseeing an African American labor crew on the Missouri side of the river, recruited a group of white locals (possibly members of the Ku Klux Klan, as he reportedly was) and “led a shot gun parade” to the Missouri line, where he “told the bosses and Negroes, who were doing the work, that was where the Negroes stopped and the whites would take over.”11

Just south of Clay County, in late October 1892, “twenty-five or thirty men went to the houses and residences of most of the colored population” of the Greene County community of Paragould “and notified them to leave within three days and nights.” According to the Arkansas Gazette, many African Americans had apparently left or were making plans to do so, despite the fact that “leading citizens are opposing this and doing all in their power to quiet the negroes, as there is [sic] a lot of them here who are perfectly harmless, also industrious and attend to their own affairs and are owners of property in their own right.”12 In August 1899, Paragould was also the site of racial violence when vigilantes (described as “the lowest element of the white population”) attacked local African Americans. This attack led to an exodus that the Arkansas Gazette reported under the headline “Negroes Are Leaving Paragould by Hundreds.” According to the news story, a “self-appointed vigilance committee visited the negro citizens of Paragould” on the night of Thursday, August 3, warning them “to leave the city of Paragould, bag and baggage, on or before next Saturday night, and never return again, for any purpose whatsoever, or suffer the consequences of staying.” By the following day, “the trains leaving Paragould were crowded with darkies who were fleeing to other parts of the state. None of them had been killed and none were shot at, but they were alarmed for their safety.” During the weekend following the visitations by the vigilance committee, homes and businesses owned by African Americans were stoned. At the time of the Gazette’s reporting, fewer than twenty-five African Americans remained in town.13

**POSTING OF NOTICES**

A more popular tactic of intimidating African Americans was the posting of anonymous notices. This practice began in the immediate post-Reconstruction years, when African Americans still had a measure of political power as a result
of Reconstruction reforms, and the tactic continued well through the early twentieth century. As a means of intimidation, notices not only allowed perpetrators to remain unknown and thus free from potential prosecution but also prevented recipients from knowing the actual power behind the warnings—whether it was a large, armed group or a single individual. African American populations thus targeted were faced with unknowns rather than a quantifiable force and so perhaps lived in a greater state of anxiety, wondering whether their decisions to stay or to flee were wise or foolish.

On August 30, 1882, a notice was posted against Burrell Lindsay, an African American who had settled on land in Van Buren County in north-central Arkansas. The warning read: “Notice is her by giving That I sertify you, Mr. Niggro, just as shore as you locate your Self her death is your potion. the Cadron [Creek] is a ded line. your cind cant live on this side a tall and this is all you air going to git And I dont know what cind the next warning will Bee.” Lindsay was unmoved, and on December 13, 1882, he made a homestead entry for his tract of land. However, on the night of January 10, 1883, a group of disguised men (later said to number ten) visited his house “with the intention of making him leave the country.” Lindsay, having anticipated trouble, had gathered a group of neighbors in his house on account of “demonstrations” the previous evening and barricaded the door against attack. Once the masked party began firing at the house, the Lindsay group fled out a back door, whereupon they were pursued by the vigilantes. The group fired on the vigilantes, felling one man, and then “traveled all night through the mud, and landed at Conway worn out and nearly frightened to death.”

The posting of notices usually preceded acts of violence, as in the case just described. Sometimes notices were posted to tap into the local collective memory of earlier outbreaks of mob activity. For instance, on the night of Friday, July 16, 1897, unknown persons posted notices “in a few places about town . . . warning negros [sic] to leave Mena,” which is in Polk County in southwestern Arkansas. The local newspaper reported that “after diligent inquiry no one can be found to father, or even favor, this move.” The paper added, “There are not many colored people here, and those who are here are industrious and law-abiding and have just as good a right to live in Mena as any other ‘citizens,’ and as citizens of Arkansas they must be protected in this right.” However, the following year, notices were once again posted in town, and these were accompanied by “outward demonstrations made by a certain organized gang against the negro population in this city.” These notices and demonstrations must surely have called to mind a widely reported “race war” that had occurred in 1896 during the building of the railroad through the county, which had its genesis in local attempts to keep African Americans from entering the county. According to the Arkansas Gazette, approximately thirty African American
railroad workers who entered Polk County on August 5, 1896, were driven off. Though contractors managed to have the next group of African American workers met by armed guards and escorted by the sheriff of neighboring Sevier County, this maneuver could not prevent the outbreak of violence. According to the New York Times, "Italian, Swedish, and Hungarian laborers, together with a number of natives," teamed up to raid a camp occupied by African American railroad workers, killing three and wounding many more. Numerous other African American workers fled the county in fear.\footnote{17}

Sometimes, it was not simply a small group of vigilantes posting threats against African American populations but a significant portion of the white community doing so in a crypto-official capacity. This scenario is what happened in the coal mining town of Bonanza, in Sebastian County just south of Fort Smith, near the Oklahoma border. There, on the night of Wednesday, April 27, 1904, approximately 200 white citizens met and passed a resolution "demanding that about forty negroes employed by Central Coal and Coke Company leave town." In addition, plans were made to effect the removal by force if the company should resist.\footnote{18} The faction posted the following notice in public:

At a mass meeting of several hundred citizens of Bonanza and surrounding country, held at Bonanza on the night of April 27, 1904, the following resolutions were unanimously passed:

Whereas, There has recently been a large influx of negroes into this coal camp, with a prospect of many more to come, it was

Resolved, That the white citizens of this community are bitterly opposed to the negro living in our midst, and that those now here are requested to leave at their earliest convenience.

Local No. 1199 of the United Mine Workers of America, attempting to combat rumors that it was behind the notice, adopted its own resolution reaffirming "the principles as set forth in our preamble not to discriminate against a fellow union miner on account of creed, color, or nationality."\footnote{19} The community was in a state of high tension for a few days after the posting of the notice. A fight between white and black patrons at a local saloon on the night of Saturday, April 30, escalated into a town-wide exchange of bullets, most of which were fired into the homes of African American workers. More shots were fired the next day, but by Monday morning "it was found that the negroes were quietly leaving town, a few at a time," and was predicted that the town would be emptied of African Americans by the end of the week.\footnote{20}

A recurring motif of these racial-cleansing events was the limited ability of local elites to prevent the violence and bring its perpetrators to justice. This lack of
support was the case in the Lawrence County town of Walnut Ridge, in northeastern Arkansas, in April 1912. A group calling itself “Kit Karson and Band” posted notices demanding that local African Americans leave the area. As in Bonanza, a local committee opposed this threat, even posting its own notices warning vigilantes that they faced prosecution and that whites in town were likely to “arm their servants with instructions to shoot the first intruders who disturb them.” However, on the night of April 19, a crowd of white men succeeded in dynamiting the home of one African American and terrorized “the entire [African American] section of the city for several hours,” finally quitting only “when practically all of the negroes had fled from the district.” Governor George Washington Donaghey called out the local militia to restore order, but by the time the militia arrived, half of an estimated African American population of 400 was reported to have already fled the city.21

ELITE POWER

Although the posting of notices may have had some semi-official backing, as per the example of Bonanza, this tactic was usually the strategy employed by relatively powerless whites. Their posted notices were occasionally ignored or resisted by African Americans who understood—and could occasionally exploit—the class difference between political and business elites and poor white vigilantes. However, when statements regarding the undesirability of African American residents received prominent placement in a local newspaper or when threats against African Americans were delivered through the US mail (which had a respected aura of authority in this era), African Americans tended to see themselves in a much more precarious position. This use of the newspaper and mail, more than anything, had to make fear reasonable, to use the words of Claudia Card, for it drove home the fact that African Americans had no local protectors.

A well-known example of semi-official intimidation of African Americans is the case of the railroad town of Cotter, located in Baxter County in northern Arkansas. Its newspaper, the Cotter Courier, openly expressed antipathy toward the local African American population, a group that had migrated to the area to work on the railroad. According to an August 25, 1905, article: “Nine out of ten inquirers ask as to negroes. Until within the last month there was but one colored family in the county, and a few extra colored men who came here to work on the railroad. There is a strong feeling against the negro in Cotter and the county, and the feeling is growing. It is quite likely there will not be a colored person in Baxter county within a year. They are not wanted.”22 The following year, an April 6, 1906, editorial titled “Too Many Negroes” opined:
Cotter bids fair to be over run with the colored race if the present rate of increase continues. It is far from a pleasant thought and is causing not a little uneasiness. A few months ago there were but three colored people in town, the Mason family, and excellent colored people they have proven themselves to be, but of late the dark-eys are coming in by gangs and are most unwelcome. Cotter is a white town and proposes to remain white and the feeling is daily growing that the negroes should move on. Cotter and North Arkansas can get along without them. There are rumors of resorting to drastic measures to keep the colored men out of town, but it is hoped such steps will not be resorted to.

The editorial ended with this warning: “It would be unfortunate indeed should any colored person at this time commit any offense in Cotter, for it would be taken as an excuse to put the race on the run.” Which was exactly what happened when, on August 24, 1906, a fight between two local African Americans gave the white townspeople the excuse they wanted. Notice was served that all African American residents were to leave town immediately.

The Cotter example serves as a contrast to the riots and other cases of violence discussed in this chapter. What happened in those areas of Arkansas—and of the nation—that “went sundown” was often much more low-key. Intimidation usually consisted of the implied threat behind a quiet “shot gun parade” or the posting of anonymous notices in town or newspaper editorials that purported to represent broad public opinion on the desirability of removing African Americans from town. And because these threats might possibly be backed up with violence (because such violence had happened elsewhere), the threats created precisely that state of anxiety that is the goal of terrorists everywhere. Such fears on the part of the African American community were quite reasonable, for whites had proven themselves capable again and again of immense violence. What happened in the town of Catcher in 1923–1924 stands as a prime example of this capability.

Catcher is in Crawford County in western Arkansas, sited in the rich bottomland of the Arkansas River. Thirty-five to forty families, mostly African American, lived there. On Friday, December 28, 1923, Effie Latimer, a twenty-five-year-old white woman, was found near death at her home by a visiting neighbor. Despite having been shot in the back of the head with a shotgun and clubbed, before she died she was reportedly able to identify her attackers as three African American men, naming one as William “Son” Bettis. Bettis was arrested, as were alleged accomplices Charles Spurgeon Rucks and John Henry Clay, the latter only fourteen years old. These three suspects were taken first to Fort Smith and then spirited away to Little Rock to keep them safe from a growing white mob, which, when denied its charge for revenge, went on a rampage in Catcher, threatening local residents and
desecrating graves in the African American cemetery. This mob’s rampage continued for days, with local law enforcement apparently joining in. A deputy sheriff shot and killed Rucks’s sixty-five-year-old father. Governor Thomas Chipman McRae, instead of using his power to protect the local African American population as previous governors had, ordered the transportation of a machine gun to the Catcher area to be used against a group of eleven African American men locked up inside a cabin. Seeing what they faced, these men promptly surrendered and were, in an example of supreme irony, charged with violating the state’s law against nightriding. Bettis and Rucks stood trial on January 4–5, 1924, and were convicted and sentenced to death, while Clay received a sentence of hard labor after providing a signed confession.25 (Local residents who have delved into the spotty history of the riot have recorded oral histories and uncovered other evidence that suggests Latimer’s husband was having an affair with the neighbor who found his wife on that fateful day, lending credence to stories that perhaps they arranged his wife’s murder. Nothing has yet been proven, though research is ongoing.)26

In Catcher, the demands that African Americans leave the area did not precede the violence but rather came afterward and consisted of a combination of posted notices and warnings communicated in a more official capacity. On the evening of Saturday, January 13, 1924, unsigned notices were posted throughout Catcher “warning the negroes to get out of the county within five days.”27 Similar warnings were reportedly sent through the US mail to those African American defendants accused of nightriding. According to the motion for a change of venue filed by the accused nightriders in March 1924, one of the defendants, Gus Richardson, received a letter that read: “It becomes necessary for the safety of the community to ask you to leave it. You will be given a few days to straighten out your affairs. If you are out of Crawford County in five days you will not be bothered; otherwise, you will have to suffer the consequences.” According to this same document, anonymous notices were also posted in the nearby town of Shibley “advising that no negroes would be tolerated in that community, and that all negroes there should not be found around that place, or to that effect.”28 As a result, by the morning of January 15, there were only three African American families left in the Catcher settlement, and all were reportedly making plans to depart. The January 18, 1924, issue of the Van Buren Press-Argus reported that the black out-migration “continued until that settlement was strictly a white settlement.”29

CONCLUSION

German literary scholar Jan Philip Reemtsma argues that violence assumes social significance when it carries out a communicative function in which the perpetrator’s act upon a victim conveys a special message to a third party. “In all forms of
war,” writes Reemtsma, “the bullet is meant for two soldiers: the one it strikes and the one it does not. With the first soldier, the intention is to kill. With the second, the intention is to communicate that he’s next.”

If we can assume a similar communicative significance in the violence of racial cleansing, then what might it be? The answer is this—nothing less than the placement of its victims outside what Helen Fein has called “the universe of obligation.” This phrase refers to “the range of people to whom the common conscience extends: the people toward whom rules and obligations are binding, who must be taken into account, and by whom we can be held responsible for our actions.” Of course, one may assume that the praxis of white supremacy at this time placed all African Americans outside the universe of obligation, but this assumption was not the case, for the rhetoric of the “white man’s burden” contained a measured obligation toward supposedly inferior non-whites. Even the practice of lynching could imply some level of obligation by providing examples of punishment and thus a helpful warning to African Americans not to transgress certain boundaries. As Amy Louise Wood points out, large-scale “spectacle” lynchings often entailed the victim-to-be giving “an execution speech, which often read as a lengthy religious confessional, in which he testified to his own sin and accepted the suffering he must endure as a means to his salvation.” Thus even the victim of a lynching is arguably included in the universe of obligation, at least insofar as his execution is done for the good of his soul.

Unlike lynching, however, the violence of racial cleansing did not have an immediately perceptible horizon beyond which normality, such as it was, might return. Being an African American in Arkansas—in America—during these times often meant surviving through the regular practice of deference toward one’s “racial betters,” especially in the immediate aftermath of massive white-on-black violence such as lynchings. Those were the rules, but racial cleansing threw out the rules, depriving African Americans of their regular strategies for surviving in a white supremacist society—for these communities made it clear that there was no place at all for African Americans, not even at the bottom of the social scale. As the notice delivered to Burrell Lindsay testifies: “Notice is her by giving That I sertify you, Mr. Niggro, just as shore as you locate your Self her death is your potion. the Cadron is a ded line. your cind cant live on this side a tall and this is all you air going to git.” African Americans were accustomed to the many behavioral lines they could not cross, but these new “dead lines” were physical and geographical. Beyond these many “dead lines” that ran across this country, African Americans could not live with the assurance that a properly subservient attitude would protect them. Their behavior was not the issue; rather, their very existence was the issue. By understanding that fear, we can begin to comprehend the level of existential terror this sort of violence produced, to comprehend why so many people fled their homes and their jobs at the
first hint of danger, even if it was simply a sign posted anonymously during the night. Such acts signified their removal from the universe of obligation, and outside that universe anything could happen—and often did.

NOTES

1. “Whitecaps,” Arkansas Gazette, January 17, 1894, 2; “Negroes Ordered out of the County,” New York Times, January 17, 1894, 8. According to the New York Times, two days later Black Rock had settled into an armed quiet, and “no overt acts have been committed by the persons who have attempted to drive the negroes from town,” though whitecappers had by then published three notices. “Armed Quiet in Black Rock,” New York Times, January 19, 1894, 6. See also “Indignant Citizens,” Arkansas Gazette, January 20, 1894, 2; “The Facts in the Case,” Arkansas Gazette, January 21, 1894, 4; Perkins, “Race Relations.” Whitecappers are mentioned as having been operating in the same county four years later. See “Negro’s Bloody Deed,” Arkansas Gazette, November 23, 1898, 1; “White Caps Shot in Arkansas,” New York Times, November 24, 1898, 1.


3. The newspaper—which editorialized that “We have little use for the negro as a citizen and on general principles”—insisted that local black residents deserved to live in peace “unless the negro commits some crime, or interferes in some way with white people or with white people’s business.” “Negroes Leaving,” Sharp County Record, December 28, 1906, 1.

4. “Negro Trouble,” Sharp County Record, January 4, 1907, 1; Jaspin, Buried in the Bitter Waters, 219–223. The local newspaper followed up on the case in 1907, reporting that J. D. May was arrested on a charge of slander for having accused local resident Caleb Evans of having masterminded the expulsion of black residents. See “Slander Is Charged,” Sharp County Record, April 12, 1907, 2; “Local News,” Sharp County Record, June 7, 1907, 2.


6. Card, Confronting Evils, 166; original emphasis.

7. Loewen, Sundown Towns, 2. In Arkansas, these sundown towns were found mostly in the upland regions of the state, the Ozark and Ouachita Mountains, and communities in northeastern Arkansas that emerged with post–Civil War railroad and industrial development.

8. Loewen, Sundown Towns, 345–349.


12. “Ordered to Leave the County,” Arkansas Gazette, November 1, 1892, 3. This attempt at racial cleansing reportedly occurred as a response to the murder of one Monroe Pulley. The Gazette, however, gave no details about this murder, and no record of it has been found.


14. “Trouble at Faulkner,” Arkansas Gazette, January 14, 1883, 4; “Conway Condensations,” Arkansas Gazette, January 18, 1883, 1; “Land Troubles,” Arkansas Gazette, January 16, 1883, 5; “Brought to Justice,” Arkansas Gazette, January 25, 1883, 4. The title of the first report betrays an early misrepresentation of events as occurring in Faulkner County near Pinnacle Springs rather than farther north in Van Buren County. Lindsay’s name is variously represented throughout the newspaper reports as C. G. Lindsey, Burrill Lindsey, Burnet Lindsey, and Burrill Lindsay. This instance of nightriding eventually led to the US Supreme Court case United States v. Waddell et al.; see “United States v. Waddell and Others,” 221.


16. On August 16, 1898, a dozen “men and boys” were arrested in connection with this campaign but were let off after receiving a friendly warning from the mayor. “The Mayor Gives Good Advice,” Mena Weekly Star, August 17, 1898, 4.


21. “Citizens Join to Protect Negroes,” Jonesboro Evening Sun, April 18, 1912, 1; “Citizens Join to Protect Negroes,” Arkansas Gazette, April 19, 1912, 2; “Whites Dynamite Home of Negro,” Arkansas Gazette, April 21, 1912, 1, 3; “Walnut Ridge Negroes Ordered to Leave by Whites, Militia Called,” Jonesboro Evening Sun, April 22, 1912, 1; “Militia in Camp at Walnut Ridge,” Arkansas Gazette, April 22, 1912, 2.


29. “‘Colony’ Negroes Flee from Wrath of Whites,” *Van Buren Press-Argus*, January 18, 1924, 1. For more on the Catcher riot, see Gray, “Catcher Race Riot.”


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