

Prototype of Sunken Place: Reading Jordan Peele's *Get Out* through Octavia Butler's *Kindred* as Black Science Fiction and Speculative Fiction Narratives

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Science fiction and speculative fiction have imagined new worlds, species, and technologies that have influenced individuals and societies. These genres have a significant space within American popular culture as “popular culture is woven deeply and intimately into the fabric of our everyday lives. While it may be tempting to imagine such amusements and attachments as apolitical, popular culture reflects and plays a significant role in contouring how we think, feel and act in the world for better and often for worse” (Mueller et al. 70). Science fiction and speculative fiction are not apolitical. These genres within the space of Black culture have illustrated forgotten or distorted historical events within American culture.

America has a history of othering the Black body and the alterity of this body comes in the form of systematic oppression and racism. History has inflicted serious trauma and damage mentally and physically on Black bodies. I use “body” instead of “person” here because of the objectification of the body without regards to personhood which Hortense Spillers refers to as, “a territory of cultural and political maneuver” (67). Furthermore, the flesh and body are conceived as being separate. The body can become an object and dehumanized whereas the flesh takes the impact of the pain being inflicted. Black flesh has been abused, sexually degraded, and scientifically exploited throughout history. Mark Dery furthers this notion stating:

in a very real sense, [Black people] are the descendants of alien abductees; they inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassable force fields of intolerance frustrate their movements; official histories undo what

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has been done; and technology is too often brought to bear on Black bodies (branding, forced sterilization, the Tuskegee experiment, and tasers come readily to mind). (180)

Black life in America started with dislocation and, from there, stripping of identity and ownership of body.

The examples that Dery calls upon are events that happened throughout America's past that could easily find themselves within the creation of a science fiction narrative. With this understanding, "Black existence and science fiction are one and the same" (Eshun 298) because "the sublegitimate status of science fiction as a pulp genre in Western literature mirrors the subaltern position to which Blacks have been relegated throughout American history" (Dery 180). History is the basis from which Black science fiction and speculative fiction is derived, illustrating the ways in which Black existence is equivalent to the genres themselves. Two examples are used to illustrate this relationship. Jordan Peele created a sci-fi nightmare in his award-winning film *Get Out* (2017). While his film was marked as horror in the American market, this film is a Black science fiction and speculative fiction narrative. Peele uses slavery as the monster from which his character must escape, much like Octavia Butler did in her novel, *Kindred*. Slavery is the historical marker from which they make their sci-fi nightmare. Reading *Get Out* alongside *Kindred* illuminates how both Peele and Butler enslave their protagonists to illustrate the trauma of slavery both in the past and the present.

American History, Slavery, and the Sunken Place

Kindred takes the protagonist, Dana Franklin, back to 1800s Maryland to help her distant grandfather, Rufus Weylin, impregnate her distant grandmother, Alice Greenwood, so Dana will be born in the future. The horror in this narrative lies in Dana', a Black woman, transportation to a plantation, and Rufus being the son of a slave owner. Dana has to endure slavery and the violence that ensues to ensure her own future. *Get Out*'s protagonist, Chris, is a Black man who goes away with his white girlfriend, Rose, to meet her family. Chris does not realize he is about to find himself in modern-day enslavement due to the family's operation of taking Black bodies and using them for their own gain by abducting and displacing Black personhood through the means of surgically removing their brain and transplanting a white individual's brain in place thus severing the connection between the Black body and personhood. Peele's film introduces viewers to the sunken place. This is

a space that is both literal and metaphorical. An individual in the sunken place is constantly surrounded by external trauma and violence. This is a space that is overwhelming and weighs down on the individual as they lose their sense of self-expression rendering them completely susceptible to mental and physical violence. The sunken place is only accessed through external forces which create open wounds that are debilitating to the individual who is sunken. If the individual is able to escape, they do not come back whole, whether in the form of damage to their flesh, personhood or both.

Both narratives are portrayals of the sunken place, reinforcing Eshun's belief that the black experience is science fiction. While Peele has given this new language, "the idea of using sci-fi and speculative fiction to spur social change, to re-examine race, and to explore self-expression for people of color, then, is clearly nothing new" (Womak 122). Reading Peele through Butler reiterates that Black authors have been contributing to the genres of science fiction and speculative fiction long before Peele visualized *Get Out* on screen. Butler's resonances are significant to twenty-first century popular culture as she illustrates prototypes of sunken place through her narrative's setting, 1800s Maryland, and Rufus. *Kindred* is a useful rubric by which *Get Out* can be accessed within the space of these genres. The narratives being presented illustrate what is at stake when Black individuals are in the sunken place and the cost of getting out.

Get Out articulates the sunken place as a physical and mental hold, a regressive site. A regressive site is a place that does not comply with the time period in which it is situated. For Chris to sink into a mental sunken place, he is guided to a state of heightened suggestibility by Rose's mother, Missy. To sink Chris to this place, Missy questions him about his mother's death making him dredge up a suppressed memory. Internalized trauma allows Missy to sink Chris, the ultimate act of intimate violence—a kidnapping of the mind. Chris is left with a reopened wound. The pain inflicted in reopening the wounds of his mother's death is evident in Chris's body language. Tears stream down his face and his eyes widen as he tries to fight back the traumatic memory, his fingers scratching at the chair in which he is sitting. Missy's act of violence leaves Chris vulnerable and exposed to the next stages of mental anguish.

Chris not only experiences the sunken place mentally, but also physically. The location of the Armitage family home is isolated and reminiscent of a plantation. When Chris and Rose arrive at the Armitage home, Chris sees Walter, a Black groundskeeper. He is then introduced to Georgina, a Black housekeeper. This

setting Peele gives is a regressive site similar to *Kindred*'s location. Furthermore, Victoria Anderson argues, "the slavery subtext is hinted early on when we find out that Rose's mother goes by the name of 'Missy': a common appellation for the Mistress of the slave-holding" (Anderson). Peele uses Walter, Georgina, and Missy to demonstrate Chris's stepping back in time to a sunken location. Chris mentions this regression to his friend Rod, "Yo, and it's the Black people out here too. It's like all of them missed the movement," to which Rod responds, "cause they probably hypnotized" (Peele 0:51:49-0:51:55). Rod, this narrative's Cassandra, tries to tell Chris the truth he is not seeing. Missy has placed all the Black characters in the sunken place. Her hypnosis is an act of racialized violence. The characters have not missed the movement, they have been displaced by white characters. They may have bodies, but the Black characters have limited consciousness. Missy has hijacked their psyches. Chris is complacent and brushes off Rod's comments, not knowing he is next. Chris is being hunted by this family. The kidnapping of Black people is a game to the Armitage family. Chris will have to run to save himself.

As the film progresses, Chris becomes uneasy about his surroundings but not enough to notice that he is in danger. What he does notice though are the many instances of bodily objectifications before and during the Armitages' party. The night before, Walter frightens Chris by turning towards him, making a sharp turn before crashing into Chris. Walter has been displaced by Roman, Dean's father, Roman was a runner, losing to a Black Olympian. Dean tells Chris "[he] almost got over it" (Peele). Now inhabiting Walter's body, Roman is able to run again and use the "natural gifts" Walter possesses. At the party, Chris is introduced to Gordon who loves golf and says to Chris, "Let's see your form" (Peele). Chris's introduction to Lisa and Nelson is worse: Lisa exclaims, "So, how handsome is he" as she grabs his bicep (Peele). While Chris looks visibly uncomfortable, he makes no attempt to move, perhaps too stunned. Lisa then goes on to ask, "So, is it true... is it better?" alluding to Chris's virility (Peele). Chris is unaware that his body is being auctioned off. Rose continues to show Chris off to potential buyers. Another one of the bidders comments, "Now the pendulum has swung back. Black is in fashion" (Peele). This commentary explains why the Armitage family and their inner circle wants to possess Black bodies; the flesh is a fashion statement and symbol of power and control. The way in which Chris's body is assessed illustrates a modern auction block. The bidders are dehumanizing Chris and he does not realize the red flags. Bidders want to see his form and ask about his sexual performance, turning his body from being to object. The flesh is being appraised

and touched as bidders make their rounds meeting Chris. During their conversation, Rod tells Chris, “White people love making people sex slaves” (Peele). The Armitages are operating a modern form of slavery. Their practice is the ultimate act of regression. The auction is silent and operated with bingo cards reiterating that this is a game to the Armitage family.

The instances that Chris experiences and notices illustrates how explicit Peele is in his depiction of exploiting the Black body—the offenses against the personhood and flesh that are the reality for Black people in and outside the space of this film. The depictions of exploitation signal the audience and Chris that he is in danger as well as the Black characters’ performance within the film. Walter, Georgina, and Andre have all been operated on, having their brains removed and replaced by those of the Armitages’ inner circle of family and friends. Georgina and Walter have been displaced by Rose’s grandparents. Andre has become Logan, one of the Armitage’s friends. When Chris is being prepped for his own operation, Jim Hudson, the blind man who bought Chris’s body, tells Chris:

The piece of your brain connected to your nervous system will still be there. So, you won’t be gone, not completely. A sliver of you will still be there somewhere. Limited consciousness. You’ll be able to see and hear what your body is doing but your existence will be as a passenger, an audience. You’ll live. (Peele 1:24:00-1:24:37)

Chris finishes Jim’s sentence, “in the sunken place” (Peele). Jim becomes a slave master with ownership of Chris’s consciousness as well as his body, specifically his eyes. Roman, Rose’s grandfather, tells Chris “you [African Americans] have been chosen because of the physical advantages you have endured your entire lifetime. With your natural gifts and our determination, we can be a part of something greater” (Peele 1:14:29-1:14:40). “We” is exclusive in Roman’s statement and does not include Black people; it is white determination enslaving Black bodies. This act of violence is a twenty-first-century form of slavery. They are buying Black bodies, furthering the argument that the Armitage home is a regressive site. Their surgical method abuses the flesh and makes it blatantly clear that the Black body is a site of scientific exploitation. The means of creating something greater is akin to Frankenstein and the use of others’ flesh to create a whole being. This practice is alienating Black people and dislocating them from society.

The first Black character the audience sees being dislocated by the Armitage family is Andre Hayworth. He is displaced by Logan. Logan signals to Chris that

something is terribly wrong as he is twirling around in front of a group of white people who clap and say bravo. He is showing off his new “fashionable” body post-operation. The signals become explicitly clear when Chris subtly tries to take a photo of Logan. The camera flash triggers Andre into consciousness. His eyes and facial expression immediately shift into panic and his nose starts to bleed. Chris has reopened a wound. Andre starts to scream and attacks Chris. He repeatedly tells Chris to get out. In this moment, Andre is no longer a passenger in his body. His screams of “get out” are directed at Chris as a warning, but also Logan, his slave owner. Andre’s escape is only partial—he is inarticulate, and his means of communication are through screaming and the utterance of “get out” repetitively, much like the song being played as he is being abducted. The partiality of his being is disabled as he is stuck in the sunken place. Despite the inarticulation, Andre’s partial escape offers Chris the chance to “get out.”

Trauma, Black Science Fiction, and the Sunken Place

Peele may have given us the language of sunken place, but these tropes of trauma also occur in *Kindred*. Butler’s novel illustrated these tropes within the scope of Black science fiction long before Peele visualized them on screen. Near death experiences and severe injuries to Rufus’s body are what brings Dana back to the past. Rufus is sinking Dana and pulling her against her will to 1800s Maryland. Dana tells readers, “so he called me. I was certain now. The boy drew him to me somehow when he got himself into more trouble than he could handle” (Butler 26). The first time Dana is pulled back, she saves Rufus from drowning. Mrs. Weylin, Rufus’s mother, believes Dana is harming her son, as Dana says, “suddenly, the woman began beating me. ‘You killed my baby!’ She screamed” (Butler 14). Mr. Weylin then comes to the scene of the accident with a gun pointed at Dana. The act of saving Rufus is not rewarded. Because she is Black, Dana is beaten and almost shot to death. Butler indicates Dana’s body is expendable and unwelcome. This scene demonstrates that Dana’s journey back in time causes her harm. Fear and injury inflicted on Dana’s flesh send her back to the present. The abuse of her flesh unsettles Dana. Coming from the 1970s, she is unfamiliar with the extent of this physical violence. She is susceptible to perpetual pain because she is connected to a man whose body is deemed more important than her own. Pain sinks her in and brings her back to illustrate that the trauma she sustains in the sunken place, Maryland, does not stay sunken, it comes with her.

Dana cannot escape her Maryland or Rufus, the external forces keeping her sunken, because she must ensure Alice is impregnated by Rufus so that her distant grandmother is born. Without the conception of Hagar, Dana would not be born. She is responsible for Rufus despite his disregard for her wellbeing and thus, she cannot prematurely get out of the sunken place. Much like Peele's film, location and people are significant elements to an individual's impact of sunkenness. Alice, Dana, and Rufus are connected to each other for the purpose of creating life despite the objectification and violence against both Black bodies. Even though Alice has now been added to this entanglement, Rufus is still the main source of power and control due to three main factors: gender, race, and setting. Rufus is what sinks both women, the reason being, "racial difference is also spatial difference, the inequitable power relations between various spaces and places are rearticulated as the inequitable power relations between races" (Mohanram 3). This inequitable power relation between races is exemplified through Rufus' characterization. The hold that both the location and Rufus have on Alice and Dana is detrimental to both women's personhood.

Kindred depicts the dangers of being a Black woman in the Antebellum South. Bibi Bakare-Yusuf argues "the black female body is a useful body because it is both a laboring, sexual and reproducing body... the use of violence to break them in, to fragment them and make them cease to be subjects, to transform them into 'docile bodies' that become bodies that labor" (318). The body was objectified, sexually degraded, commodified, and controlled. For white men, Black women's bodies were useful for sex and reproduction. Not only were they forced to sexually satisfy these men, they were also forced to bear children to labor on the plantation or to be sold to other slave owners. These women were no longer subjects but objects for men to do with as they pleased. Butler illustrates Bakre-Yusuf's notion of the Black female body through Alice and Dana. The second time Dana is sunken, she meets a patroller. Butler writes "I guess you'll do as well as your sister," he said. "I came back for her, but you're just like her." That told me who he probably was... he reached out and ripped my blouse open. Buttons flew everywhere, but I didn't move. I understood what the man was going to do" (42). The patroller's words and actions remove subjectivity from Dana's body. She is made an object when the patroller mistakes Dana for Alice's mother and then states, "I guess you'll do." He harmed Dana and Alice's mother as a way of breaking them. Their bodies have been subjected to physical and sexual violence. Her body is useful for sexually

satisfying the patroller. Dana defends herself and comes back to the present before he can rape her enacting more trauma on her body and personhood.

Rufus employs the same acts of violence onto Alice's body. He treats the Black female body as an object of his desire and a being to possess. Alice was a subject to Rufus when they were younger; he had a sense of her personhood and perhaps loved her. Dana states, "he spoke out of love for the girl—destructive love" (Butler 147). Rufus conflates love with possession. He wants Alice even though she does not feel the same for him. His "love" is the external force that sinks Alice into the sunken place. The obsessive desire to have Alice is volatile. He enlists Dana to help him bed Alice, but she resists. This resistance is met with violence. Rufus tells Dana, "How about this: you talk to her—talk some sense into her—or you're going to watch Jake Edwards beat some sense into her" (Butler 163). Rufus is willing to break Alice into submission to sexually satisfy himself. This ultimatum illustrates that Rufus is the product of his environment and what he thinks is love is actually a need to control Alice. It is toxic and inflicts trauma on both women: Dana for having to participate in the coercion of forced sex and Alice for having to submit to this act of intimate violence. Dana tells Alice that Rufus wants to have sex with her, and she questions Dana on what she should do. Dana states, "'I can't advise you. It's your body,' Alice then replies, 'Not mine, his. He paid for it, didn't he?'" (Butler 167). This conversation about ownership is significant. Black women had no rights to their bodies. Rufus paid for Alice, believing he paid too much for what she was worth. Her body is a commodity and it belongs to Rufus to objectify. Female bodies labor for their masters—a sexual labor Alice must participate in despite what she wants. Dana tells us, "She went to him. She adjusted, became a quieter more subdued person. She didn't kill, but she seemed to die a little" (Butler 168). This intimate act of violence against Alice's flesh inflicted mental trauma. The quiet here indicates pain. Alice was not only broken down into submission through rape, but also by the harsh realities she lived. She understood that her body was not her own.

Dana almost suffered the same fate as Alice. Rufus attempts to rape Dana and she says, "Slowly, I realized how easy it would be for me to continue to be still and forgive him, even this" (Butler 259). Alice never forgave Rufus for the trauma inflicted on her body and personhood. She did not willingly submit herself to his desires. Dana's ability to continuously forgive Rufus for the trauma he has inflicted is part of what keeps her sunken. Rufus soon begins conflating the two women, both serving different purposes for Rufus—Dana, his confidante and protector, and

Alice his lover. For Rufus, one woman cannot exist without the other. He states, “Behold the woman, [...] he looks from one to the other of us, ‘You really are one woman. Did you know that’ ... Alice then responds, ‘I guess so. Anyways, all that means we’re two halves of the same woman—at least in his crazy head’” (Butler 228). Rufus has removed individual personhood from each of these women and has made them one. Alice and Dana are laboring and sexual beings for Rufus. He believes he owns these women and this belief is demonstrated when Dana’s husband, Kevin, comes back for her. Rufus responds like a man obsessed, “Damn you, you’re not leaving me!’ He was going to shoot. I had pushed him too far. I was Alice all over again, rejecting him” (Butler 186). Dana sees herself in Alice because she states “I was” instead of I was like.

No comparison exists here: not only is Rufus conflating the two women, Dana is doing so as well. Dana forgets that no matter how strikingly similar they are in appearance, they are not one woman. Dana has a way out; Alice does not. Alice has become hateful and is slowly losing herself the more Rufus tears down her personhood and enacts violence to her flesh. Alice goes back and forth between hating and loving Dana because she does not have to suffer the ways in which Alice does. Regardless, both women are sunken. While their positions differ, they are still affected mentally and physically by Rufus and 1800s Maryland. Dana makes this clear, “We were failures, she and I” (Butler 177). The misery they are both succumbing to sinks them farther into the sunken place.

A wound can heal, scab over, and sometimes leave a faint reminder of the acts of violence endured. Mental trauma leaves wounds that stay open, without scabbing over. The first moment Dana was brought back to the past, her personhood was at risk. When she comes back to the present, she states, “I was shaking with fear, with residual terror that took all the strength out of me” (Butler 15). Every time Dana goes back to the Antebellum South, she leaves a part of her behind, pieces of her sanity being chipped away. The more violence inflicted on her body, the more Dana falls into the sunken place. She contemplates suicide, a clear indication of how much mental trauma she is suffering. She remarks, “I longed for my sleeping pills to give me oblivion, but some small part of me was glad I didn’t have them. I didn’t quite trust myself with them just now. I wasn’t quite sure how many of them I might take” (Butler 178). Dana’s physical pain was starting to cause anguish; she was willing to do anything to get out. Dana is self-aware which is what keeps her from fully succumbing to the sunken place despite the person she is constantly saving continuously sinking her. The moment readers see Dana contemplating taking the

sleeping pills it is a clear indication that she has to pull back and think, is this really what she wants? The moment things get too dangerous for Dana, she has the ability to leave. She also has hope in the form of Kevin. Alice is not granted those luxuries. She is an enslaved woman in the 1800s. Alice can never escape the sunken place in which she resides. Dana reflects on this, stating:

I should have been more like Alice. She forgave him for nothing, forgot nothing, hated him as deeply as she loved Isaac. I didn't blame her. But what good did her hating do? She couldn't bring herself to run away again or to kill him and face her own death. She couldn't do anything at all except make herself more miserable. (Butler 180)

The only thing Alice can do is continue to take the violence enacted on her flesh and personhood. Dana feels as though she should be more like Alice but that would come with many consequences. Alice was letting her mental trauma fester into hatred for herself, Rufus, and Dana. Her suffering was inevitable because this was the reality of being enslaved in the 1800s. Misery was the only option available to Alice because any other option would leave her susceptible to more violence.

The trauma Alice had sustained was too much for her to endure. The constant objectification and degradation of her flesh broke Alice's personhood. She could not find sanctuary within her sunken place. Dana finds Alice and says, "I wanted her down... I broke my fingernails, trying to untie it until I remembered I had my knife. I got it from my bag and cut Alice down" (Butler 248). The sunken place fully devoured Alice. She was Andre Hayworth for Butler's narrative, signaling to Dana that it was time to get out before she too was sunken. Dana has to cut down a version of herself, no longer having to watch Alice suffer in the sunken place. Dana hurts her fingers in the process of cutting "her" own body down. Not only does she have to bear the emotional pain of cutting down Alice's body, but also the physical pain from the process in which she attempts to do so. There is no longer a connection between these two within the sunken place and Dana loses a piece of herself. Cutting down Alice's body is a pivotal moment within the narrative and the turning point at which Dana realizes it is time to get out.

Dana was unable to remain unimpaired by her travels because that was unrealistic for Black existence during this era. The sunken place does not leave people whole—parts of their being would be missing through acts of violence against their flesh and the disregarding of their personhood. Throughout history and at present, Black bodies are othered and objectified as if they are inhuman. For Dana to experience the horror of Antebellum slavery, she would have to bear the

markings of this system that broke people and left them without the ability to be whole. Dana's escape from the sunken place leaves her without an arm. She kills Rufus and escapes the sunken place. Despite Dana's freedom from Rufus, she is not free from the trauma inflicted. Part of her remains in the past, "Something harder and stronger than Rufus's hand clamped down on my arm, squeezing it, stiffening it, pressing into it—painlessly, at first—melting into it, meshing with it as though somehow my arm here being absorbed into something. Something cold and unliving" (Butler 260-1). This is the aftermath of slavery, the "memory unforgotten" (Hogan 196). Butler writes that Dana's arm was absorbed into something cold and unliving—it was the wall between the past and the present, but also Rufus's dead hand pulling Dana back one last time. This gripping hold of Rufus dismembered a piece of her. He is the embodiment of oppression and slavery much like the Armitage family. Dana now has the physical reminder of escaping the sunken place.

Chris does not have a physical reminder of escaping the sunken place, but just like Dana, he is mentally scarred. Chris and Dana had to kill to save themselves. The sunken place ends with death to either the external force or the individual being sunken. Both narratives illustrate loss through the sunken place, each character escaping as a partial being. This loss they experience is phantom pain. Linda Hogan describes phantom pain as a phenomenon that is "unlike other types of pain, no body part need be present for it to occur... it is an apparition, a ghost thought to exist only in the mind, as a memory unforgotten." The problem with this pain is "its invisibility." It does not always rely on visible evidence but belongs to "secret histories of inner worlds" (196). Racial trauma is phantom pain, felt mentally by the individual. This pain may not be seen but one can feel it, "a form of wounding, hurting, or defeating... the phenomenon of trauma presupposes the reality of being exposed, open" (Yancy 142). By this definition, the phantom pain felt from racial trauma is the pain that is felt when one is in the sunken place. The sunken place leaves individuals exposed with wounds that will fester even after one is able to get out. This is the pain that Black people feel in what Saidiya V. Hartman refers to as the "aftermath" of slavery—it is a ghost sitting within the mind. Phantom pain and racial trauma is effectively articulated through Butler and Peele, illustrating each character's response to both concepts.

Conclusion

Kindred proves useful as a rubric to access *Get Out*. Butler is significant to the space of Black science fiction and speculative fiction. Peele's language and explicit use of the genre's conventions as laid out by Eshun and Dery solidifies his place within Black science fiction and speculative fiction. Butler and Peele created protagonists who lived through constant violence and damage to their flesh and personhood, demonstrating what it means to be Black in America. Having their protagonists live at the end articulates what it means to survive trauma, but also the costs of having to live with mental and physical damage—a reality that most Black Americans face.

Both narratives illustrate that the aftermath of slavery has a strong grip on America without any plans of letting go. Black Americans are still trying to escape the sunken place that is systematic oppression, police brutality, and racism. Getting out is not yet a reality within America and, if one is able to survive the trauma, they will be not the same individual; there will always be the possibility of triggering what Toni Morrison refers to as (re)memory, "recollecting and remembering as in reassembling the members of the body, the family, the population of the past...the pitched battle between remembering and forgetting" (Morrison). Popular media will circulate comic strips, pictures, and videos, of Black Americans who have been abused or killed because of the color of their skin. The trauma of being Black in America is an ever present wound, festering when exposed to new violence to either the flesh or personhood. Peele's contribution to Black science fiction and speculative fiction makes it blatantly clear that twenty-first century America is not yet woke. We still have work to do.

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