



## A Hairdresser in the Family: Mothering as a Kind of Drawing on the Body

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This multidisciplinary fusion of creative writing, drawings, family documents and analysis, explores my 1960s childhood experience of being a sentient canvas for my hairdresser-mother's self-expression. The piece is part of a larger, ongoing research experiment on the terrain of trauma studies, for which I undertake 'freefall escapades' (harnessing iterative, truth-seeking, neurodivergent hypertextuality) into my embodied journey being raised as female in the racialised, post-WW2 British family. This experiment aims to engage with the forces of social production at work and at play, in minds and in bodies, by locating autotheoretical subjectivity not just within a socio-historical context but within a structural Marxist historical materialist analysis.

The imperatives behind my larger experiment are twofold. Firstly, to challenge politically engaged feminist, autoethnographic, family-narrative/photography, new materialist, and trauma theory – where the question of class is habitually reduced to an aspect of intersectional identity expressed through culture, language, materiality, and perceived privilege. Secondly, as a publicly and socially engaged writer, artist, activist and trade unionist, to use creativity to expand Marxist ideas on the family as an adaptive capitalist social institution beyond the critical disciplines of political economy and social history. My aim is to illuminate the class-based nature of changing social relationships in connection with industrial and technological development in the forces of production.

For this specific essay, I offer interpretations of how my mother pulled, twisted, curled, lacquered, permed and pinned my baby-hair as an act of social alienation and performance on a political stage within the inflamed post-WW2 British economy. In doing so, I also navigate the ethical and political hazards of bringing together class-based Marxist analysis with subjective experience and family memory, tending to the manifestation of alienation in those who are not conscious of being alienated, and the imperative to do no harm.

All imagery is by me, unless specified otherwise.

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Studio Portrait of the Author Age Six, 1966 (photographer unknown).

The premises from which we begin are [...]real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live. As soon as this active life process is described, history ceases to be a collection of dead facts as it is with the empiricists, or an imagined activity of imagined subjects, as it is with the idealists.<sup>1</sup>

– Friedrich Engels & Karl Marx, 1846

‘There is nothing more theoretical or analytic than a good story.’<sup>2</sup>

– Carolyn Ellis, 2004

### I. Carol, Ed and Louise Make a Picture

One fine day in 1963, a photograph was taken outside a two-storey house on a brand-new property development in south-east England. When the film came back a week later from processing at the chemists’, the three-and-a-half-inch square print depicted,

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. by C. J. Arthur (Lawrence & Wishart, 1970), p.47.

<sup>2</sup> Carolyn Ellis, *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography*, Ethnographic Alternatives Book Series, v. 13 (AltaMira Press, 2004), p.194.

with precision of focus and perfect, greyscale exposure, from black to white, two Caucasian female figures posed against a sunlit brick wall. A woman in her late twenties – let's call her Carol – is holding up a three-year-old girl who wished her name was Louise. Both have short, dark, carefully curled, teased and lacquered hair. The woman's is swept back from her forehead in circling symmetry. The child's is arranged in rows of plump shells on a swelling wave. The two groomed heads are hairstyles which hide the shape of their skulls.

Carol's dark, pencilled eyebrows, skilfully made-up eyes, and subtly powdered face are in semi-profile as she gazes, smiling, at her little daughter. She is wearing a dark, angular-patterned sleeveless dress, the bodice fitted closely across slim, conical breasts. The gathers of a full skirt can just be seen ruffling out from a piped waistband as her body turns towards the camera. The left arm, further from the camera, supports Louise. The nearer, right arm, holds the child's visible left foot, which is bound tightly in a short white sock and a round-toed shoe with a strap across the top. Louise's arms and legs are baby-fat, her face creamy and clean, and her white, puffball dress fluffs out over her mother's arm. Encased in white lace gloves, her tiny hands clasp a daffodil – and she looks at it amiably. Carol smiles intensely at the child's face by curving up the corners of her closed, darkened, shiny lips.

The person who held the camera, read the light meter, adjusted the aperture and checked the film-speed setting, was Ed, Carol's husband, a keen amateur photographer. However, the daffodil photograph was not a recorded object of his gaze but a collaborative performance – one bursting with effort and pleasure in staging a narrative.

## II. Ethics, Story and History 1: History v. Myth

In the above story, and throughout this essay, I draw on narratives and memories of real-life experiences in my own family. These are my own memories and my own narratives. They differ from the memories and narratives of those with whom I have shared family life, even where – or especially where – those individuals have entrusted me with their own stories and memories through storytelling and circulating photographs and documents. Those people don't – or cannot – exercise a voice. Nor do they write. As such, if they were participants in a sociological study, or if I wished to represent them or write a family social history, they would be the type of subjects that Thomas Couser (2004) – whose major study on ethics in life writing informs my autolocutory reflections – describes as 'especially vulnerable to misrepresentation and exploitation'.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> G. Thomas Couser, *Vulnerable Subjects: Ethics and Life Writing* (Cornell University Press, 2004), p.14.

In building a perspective on how intimate social relationships are assembled, I am thus conscious of my own acute ethical responsibilities in reflecting on my motivations and the benefits to me and others of doing this work. In response, I have invented names, places, events, and dates as filters to distance characters from family members, and the stories below are invented through a process of speculative fictioning defined by David Burrows and Simon O'Sullivan (2019) as 'an open-ended, experimental practice that involves performing, diagramming or assembling to create or anticipate new modes of existence.'<sup>4</sup>

All who want society to change, to become more egalitarian, more inclusive, safer and sustainable – whether in or out of academia – are dreaming of, or working for, new modes of existence. Indeed, in a capitalist society, new modes of existence arise continuously, for better or for worse, benefiting some whilst depriving others. The purpose of my autotheoretical fictioning is both ethical and political: to reframe what has already been lived, normalised and mythologised– the heterosexual white post-WW2 British nuclear family –to show its function in class society. This process of making the 'norm' less normal, denaturalising the institution of the family within capitalism, de-normalising capitalism itself, opens up space for analysis and new possibilities through story.

In his 1998 article, 'History, Myth and Marxism', Chris Harman, explains why history should occupy the minds of socialist activists like myself who want to change the world. According to Harman, we need to know the difference between history and myth, and how myths serve ruling sections of society. In making this point, he cites a passage from George Orwell's authoritarian dystopia, 1984: 'He who controls the present controls the past. He who controls the past controls the future.'<sup>5</sup> Harman demonstrates – in this and in further examples in ancient and modern history, such as book-burning, record destruction, and intellectual persecution – the repeated pattern of ruling minorities imposing rule by using military or civil powers. A pattern which is always accompanied by a revision of records or history, or the elimination of people who hold knowledge that belies legitimacy of the new regime.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> David Burrows and Simon O'Sullivan, *Fictioning: The Myth-Functions of Contemporary Art and Philosophy* (Edinburgh University Press, 2019), p.7.

<sup>5</sup> Chris Harman, History, Myth and Marxism, John Rees (ed), *Essays on Historical Materialism* (Bookmarks, 1998), p.9.

<sup>6</sup> The quantum physicist and historian Carlo Rovelli, in his scintillating history of natural science *Reality is Not What it Seems* tells of the decline of science in the wake of the collapse of the ancient Hellenistic world, followed by the Christianisation of the empire. The new ruling minority swept away centuries of scientific development and naturalism that did not fit with their adopted monotheism. They closed schools and destroyed the works of Democritus, who held

He goes on to overturn postmodernist claims that all of history is myth, all knowledge discourse or hearsay, and all identity (including one's income and class identity as, for example, a nurse, lecturer, barrista, builder, delivery driver, or hairdresser) simply social 'variables', by pointing to the empirical, documented, historical facts of the Nazi Holocaust, and Western impoverishment of the African continent.<sup>7</sup> I propose adding to this the empirical fact that it is now estimated that one in 13 children and young people in the UK will suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder at some point during childhood.<sup>8</sup>

It is not my aim here to document new materialisms, other than to signal these currents' welcome reaction against postmodernism's anti-structuralism by restoring objectivity and social responsibility to cultural criticism. However, a project of bringing and writing personal story – autofictioning – into materialist history requires rigorous examination and reflection. It needs to be responsible to history, and to the *real individuals* I am filtering. My mother's methods of mothering (*activity*), which arose from her *material conditions* and *social relationships*, are to be brought to light within a social concept of agency and constructed alongside the stories I tell.

And whose story is it? The concept of a person's 'story' is essentially an individualised one, and to take or tell a story could be regarded as 'stealing', or de-realising – reducing the person to a means to an end (Couser, 2004).<sup>9</sup> I am appropriating but not allegorising. Rather, I am materialising and re-materialising. I construct a narrative using an ethical synthesis of evidence, qualitative and quantitative research, fact, representation + analysis, creative response, affective engagement, memory and empathy, with an overarching social-justice/transformation objective. My thematic subject is a small but specific part of *my* embodied relationship *with* my mother – a person who has had a life full of stories, many of which I haven't been told or am not aware of, and many that do not pertain to hairdressing.

Am I entitled to fictionalise and theorise this relationship, the information and sensation transmitted to me, that is now part of me, reproduced in me, and by me?

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the stature of a Darwin, or an Einstein, in the ancient world. Thankfully, they spared the poetry of Lucretius (a near contemporary of Democritus) which resonated with the science knowledge of his time. Perhaps this fact, in itself, is an ethical defence of using creative writing in the rebuttal of censorship and myths that obscure 'real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live'.

Carlo Rovelli, *Reality Is Not What It Seems: The Journey to Quantum Gravity* (Allen Lane, 2016), p.30.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.20.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ptsduk.org/ptsd-stats/>.

<sup>9</sup> G. Thomas Couser, *Vulnerable Subjects: Ethics and Life Writing* (Cornell University Press, 2004), p.19.

Could I be misrepresenting? I am acutely aware of what the shock of self-recognition feels like, and of finding oneself in one's own words, through a circulated narrative made by – or in collaboration with – others, and the wish to change those words. I have disagreed with and disavowed statements I've made, reproduced, recorded, published, and which exist in unrestricted circulation. But I can't take them back, and nor would I wish to. No writer or subject can control how they are read. Their words represent a process, and they can be reviewed in later documentation. In losing capacity, and eventually in dying, my words will still exist. My mother wrote on my body. I retell that writing as I read it then and read it now. She wrote, and I bear her inscriptions as part of 'my own story'.

Couser (2004) also draws attention to the concept of 'autonomy'. In this respect, I acknowledge my mother's intrinsic individual worth and her capacity to determine her own goals. I uphold and honour her intentionality, skills, and creativity. However, at the same time I reject the purely individualistic, 'atomistic and self-originating' concept of autonomy, (Couser 2004).<sup>10</sup> And I want to push that further. Amidst capitalism's structural social inequality, survival struggles, oppressions, and divisions, any abstract concept of individual autonomy as universally available would be mythical, even fraudulent. In her 2021 article, *The Myth of the Neoliberal Self*, Jane Hardy sets out the power of that 'fraudulence' which deprives individuals, communities and workers of real agency and autonomy:

The idea of the atomised, self-seeking human underpins the commodification of individualised labour power – the foundation of capitalist production. In his book *Marx's Theory of Alienation*,<sup>11</sup> philosopher István Mészáros explains the double advantage of this "cult of privacy" and "idealisation of the abstract individual" for the ruling class. He explains how it protects them from being challenged by the rabble at the same time as providing the illusion of escapism to individuals who, mystified by the mechanisms of capitalist society, feel powerless and isolated. The idea of the individual as the basic unit of society, in what is heralded as a meritocracy, also serves to paint the ruling class as deserving of their wealth, power and privilege, while blaming the working class for their lack of success.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Couser, p.17.

<sup>11</sup> István Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation* (Merlin Press, 1970). <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/meszaros/works/alien/index.htm>>.

<sup>12</sup> Jane Hardy, 'The Myth of the "Neoliberal Self"', *International Socialism Journal*, 171, 2021 <<http://isj.org.uk/neoliberal-self/>>.

### III. Carol Makes a Statement

I want some where we're not looking at the camera, see like the one on this page, where the woman and baby are looking at each other. So we can send copies to all our families. Can we do one like this? Should be able to, if you can get Louise to look at you. I've got the light behind me, you won't see the garden though. Now that's one-two-five and- Come on up Louise. Don't get scientific, you know I'm a dunce. LET ME DOWN Can't you do it with the flowerbeds in the background? Just for a minute, rest against my shoulder, that's it. Be a good girl for Mummy. And Daddy, look. BOSOMS Don't be silly. No, the light would be too bright. The wall isn't bad, you don't want too much to take away from the main subject. The bricks are good actually. A brick wall!? You'll stand out nicely. Louise, are your hands itching? Carol you might want to take those gloves off, they seem to be irritating. TWISTED Keep them on, just for another minute. Come on Ed, be quick, is my hair alright? Solid as a rock. Don't be rude. Stand round a bit Carol, or we won't see your faces. You can still have your head turned- Don't make my arm look fat will you. Hold it slightly away, so it doesn't press Like that? Good. Louise! That's lovely darling. But can you look at Mummy? At Mummy! WHY So we can show everyone what a pretty mummy and daughter you are. Louise, look at me, come on, be a sport. Now smile, come on, like me! Look, mmmmmm! Get on with it Ed or she'll spoil it- I've got one, but hang on What for. Oh what are you going to do with that- Louise would you like to hold a daffodil? Just there, that's it, both hands! THE VIVID YOLK-YELLOW TRUMPET AND TRANSLUCENT LEMONY PETALS GLOW AND BEAM UNDER THE SUN Right, ready! Cheese! Get that outfit off before you go back to playing in the mud.

'The Words at the Wall' typed text graphic.

Born in the mid-1930s, Carol grew up in a large, privately owned house in an affluent London suburb alongside her father, a senior civil servant, her housewife mother, a former civil servant, her shy sister and a series of 15 pet cats. She passed the Eleven Plus examination<sup>13</sup> and went to a selective girls' grammar. Here, she was constantly reprimanded for 'daydreaming'. Physically agile and athletic, she spent her weekends cycling long distances with friends, taking part in competitive gymnastics, and learning how to dance, make clothes, and wear make-up. In 1950, being one of the 30% of 15-year-olds who were still in full-time education in England and Wales<sup>14</sup> but

<sup>13</sup> 'In 1944, secondary education in England was organised into three separate streams. Grammar schools would educate the children who were regarded as the most intelligent and were expected to become the cleverest adults; technical schools would educate children who were less academic but had technical aptitude; 'less intelligent' children would be sent to secondary modern schools. [...] An examination was devised to separate children into those who were designated as 'bright' and those who were regarded as 'less intelligent'. This examination was taken when children reached ten or eleven and was subsequently called the 11+. It was largely based on an IQ test because, at that time, it was believed that a person's intelligence was fixed early in life and that an IQ test taken at 10 or 11 could establish the level of a person's lifetime intelligence.' <https://timesupforthetest.org/history-of-the-11>.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Bolton, 'Education: Historical Statistics', 2012. <<https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN04252/SN04252.pdf>>.





But she maintained her knowledge, skills and bulky, portable set of early 1950s hairdressing equipment: the aluminium clips, steel grips, wire-mesh rollers, elastic fastenings, plastic pins and setting lotions, sticky conditioners and firm-hold lacquers, combs, tail-combs, brushes and – most bulky of all – a fold-up, noisy ‘hood’ hairdryer under which a ‘set’ head could be installed for up to an hour and had to be shouted at. This mass of equipment became a central feature in her relationships. She cut and trimmed, ‘set’, brushed out, backcombed and smoothed, and finished the hair of her neighbours and friends, mother, mother-in-law, sister, sisters-in-law, nieces and – perhaps most intensely and most often – Louise and herself. For Louise, who had naturally straight, thick hair, she created finely wrought hairstyles based on pictures in magazines and television stars. What was it that compelled her to constantly attempt to remake Louise? To ‘finish’ her? To override the child’s protests and screams and agonised pleas for the pain and discomfort to end?

#### IV. Louise’s Straight Hair

Although Ed carefully positioned the figures, placed the daffodil, timed the photograph for light, framed the image, managed speed and aperture, and clicked the shutter – and Carol, for her part, painstakingly styled and dressed herself and her little daughter – Louise will also have exerted significant effort in preparation for the photograph of 1963. Perhaps it was a similar effort to the intense relational and sensory struggle that may have taken place in advance of the studio session that produced the first image at the top of the article:

I have got Dead Straight Hair which is Thick and Coarse. I have to have Estolan Conditioner put on it because it is tangly but it still stays tangly. I have got a low forehead. A high forehead is A Sign of Beauty. Mummy knows about Beauty Culture, she is a hairdresser. She went to London and learnt how to do perms and Marcelle waves, and make wigs.

I watch her doing herself in the mirror. First she brushes out yesterday’s lacquer. She says:

“God almighty I’m bloated, look at the shape of my face.”

She juts her chin at the mirror.

“Round?” I ask.

“An oval face is the best shape face to have,” she says. “Auntie has an oval face. And so does Nanna.”

I think about them and I ask: “What about Gillian?”

She starts backcombing.

“Heart shaped.” She does the top then drops her arms down. “Foof, it makes your arms ache. I’m all behind,” she says. “I’ve got to get on, not keep answering you all the time.”

“What about Dad?”

She breathes louder. “Men don’t have shapes, they just have to shave.” She dips her chin to look at the top of her head.

“What’s yours?”

She saws and tears at her hair with her metal brush, and sprays lacquer.

“Watch out, you’ll get blinded,” she says. “Me? An over-round heart.”

“What shape is mine?”

She puts down one comb and picks up another one. “Oval.” She smooths over the front, puffing her lips and twirling the top. “But an oval on its side HA HAHAHAHA! God Almighty what’s the time we’ve got to get your hair done get out of my way, time’s running out.”

She is not a hairdresser in a shop, she was once one before she got married but now she does people’s hair at home. She is a hairdresser on my hair and Dad’s when it gets down around his ears and Nanna’s and Auntie’s and on Gillian and sometimes on Mrs Willicombe who has rather let herself go, and Nanna’s friend Funny Mary who is gone mad and thinks she’s still got a mother, and sometimes on other people if they find out she is a hairdresser. They all cover their faces with their hands like dead people when they get lacquered.

Most children get their hair washed while they’re in the bath. It’s Unhygienic. We’ve got a Shower Attachment and the way we do it is:

Mum sits on the toilet lid and I kneel down up against the side of the bath, roll up my flannel on the hard edge, bend my face down on it like Anne Boleyn and call:

“READY.”

Then Mum pushes my head down and squirts the shower and the water gushes over like blood.

I scream:

“TOO HOT. TOO HOT. TOO COLD, TOO COLD! FREEZING! TOO HOT! TOO COLD! TOO HOT! TOO COLD!”

She shouts:

“THAT WILL HAVE TO DO.”

My flannel is soaked and water runs over my neck. I cry out:

“I’M DROWNING.”

“SQUEEZE OUT YOUR FLANNEL.”

She slaps shampoo onto my head and rubs it in, digging. My eyes bounce on my knuckles.

“YOU’RE GOUGING MY EYES.”

“KEEP STILL THEN.”

“SOAP IN MY EYES.”

She grabs the flannel and swipes at the froth on my eyebrows. I clamp my eyes tight shut and shout: “YOU’RE MAKING IT WORSE YOU’RE MAKING IT WORSE.” “Turn your face round then.” She points the hose in my face. I can’t breathe. “I CAN’T BREATHE.”

I cry.

“Crying’s going to make you even wetter.” She squeezes Estolan Conditioner out of the tube into her hand, crackles her hands together to get it sticky, then spreads it into my hair, pulling and dragging. It smells of pastry. She pulls and rubs and drags and rubs and pulls so fast I howl, then she squirts the hose again.

“I haven’t got time to cry.” She turns off the taps and reaches over to the radiator. “Here, it’s lovely and warm.” She wraps the towel round my head and over my face and tips me back. “Rubabadubdub!”

“Mind my neck you’re knocking my head off.”

She takes away the towel, like pulling greaseproof paper off a cake. “There’s my little drowned rat! She gets down on her knees to see me. “There you are. Done.” And she smiles. The bathroom light fizzles and sparkles. Her face shines like a wishing-well.

I say: “Do I have to have it set, I don’t do I?”

“Course you do.” She wipes her hand across my head. “We’re doing the pageboy look, for the photos tomorrow, and Nanna’s knitted you that lovely collar with a pearl button.’

I whine: “I don’t want photos. I don’t want that collar, it itches. I don’t want grips and rollers. They’re agony.”

She laughs, folds the towel. “What could you know about agony.”

“I DO KNOW EVERYTHING ABOUT IT.”

She folds and pats.

“MUMMY PLEASE.”

“You’ll be pleased when it’s done and see yourself looking pretty. We can give everyone each a lovely photo.” She leans on me and stands up. Her stockings are stuck in patterns on her knees.

“I WON’T, I’LL BE SAD AND UNHAPPY.” But I do want to be pretty.

“Well, I’ll be more sad and unhappy if it’s flat as a pancake like any common tyke. I want you looking special. These photos are costing money.”

I know it will happen. I know I have to do what she says. I can fight and bite and scream, and roll on the floor. But if I want her to stay close and not walk away from me forever, I must let her do it.

## V. Ethics, Story and History 2: White Heat, Women, Hot Air

The year Carol and Ed made their daffodil photograph against the wall, 1963, was the year the Labour Party leader Harold Wilson made his ‘White Heat of Technology’ speech, arguing for a ‘University of the Air’ (founded as the Open University 1969) which could democratise higher education using the public-service British Broadcasting Corporation’s telecommunications fast-advancing capabilities.<sup>16</sup> It was also the year in which, as John Newsinger (1981) relates, having failed to quell the Mau Mau’s national liberation uprisings against British colonial repression of the Kenyan Kikuyu people (colonisers had seized vast areas of Kenya for agricultural exploitation, and forced indigenous farmers to work on these industrial-scale plantations), the British state finally relinquished governance to the moderate Kenyatta government in an ‘agreement that secured the position of foreign capital, which was the overriding concern of the British Government’.<sup>17</sup> It had been a bloody and brutal colonial repression involving forced enclosure, robbery of land and property, incarceration in concentration camps, torture, rape and the murder of over 100,000 Kenyan people, including the execution of 1000 Mau Mau suspects – a ‘judicial massacre’, as Newsinger (1981) terms it.<sup>18</sup>

In my extended family, and amongst the families of my friends, ‘the news’ was something only fathers needed, and they received it more or less in silence. I do not recall anybody mentioning the Mau Mau. I had compulsory lessons on British history at my academic, selective secondary school, and these resembled King Lists – what Harman describes as the ‘first historic records we have, from Ancient Egypt and Ancient Sumar. The kings made the scribes draw up lists of their predecessors, usually going back to a mythical god, in order to perpetuate the idea that the kings were the embodiment of society.’<sup>19</sup> There were many references in children’s books and by

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<sup>16</sup> ‘Harold Wilson’s ‘White Heat’ speech re-enacted, 50 years on’, *The Guardian* (2013). <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/political-science/2013/oct/01/harold-wilson-white-heat-speech-live>>.

<sup>17</sup> John Newsinger, ‘Revolt and Repression in Kenya: The “Mau Mau” Rebellion, 1952–1960’, *Science & Society*, Pp., 45.2 (Summer, 1981), pp.159–85.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Harman, p.10.

teachers, Brownie Guide leaders, and family adults to ‘hot countries’ where ‘natives’ lived in primitive chaos, and where tumult, drought and starvation were natural and inevitable – and pitiable. Perhaps Kenya was named as a ‘hot country’. It became a word I that I recognised but avoided – often referred to by men with cravats in their distinct, piercing ‘received pronunciation’ (media-trained, upper-class voices) as ‘Keen-ya’.

Ed, Carol and Louise’s hard-won photograph expressed aspirations. It united conventional ideals of bourgeois beauty and grooming, class mobility/transformation, home ownership, white superiority, Britishness *and* Englishness, and technological knowledge, in a celebration of their personal, social and financial progress. Unlike working-class people of their parents’ generation, the post-WW2 welfare state (including the National Health Service, founded in 1948) meant they didn’t face significant life-threatening risks of childbirth fatality, infant death, preventable diseases, malnutrition, or medical bills. They could get their children vaccinated against the diseases their recent ancestors had died of. They could send them, in crisp clean uniforms, to well-resourced state schools. Even though, as a married couple, they were entitled to apply for the plentiful public housing that had been built since 1948, earning sufficient to take out a mortgage to buy their *own* home was crucial to them.

Carol and Ed were determined to claim their place in what the political historian Selina Todd (2014) describes, in *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class*, as a new ‘reality’ of social mobility, material security, and leisure:

It was in the 1960s that most working-class people experienced affluence for the first time [...] By the end of the decade overcrowding had fallen, families could expect to begin life in their own home rather than their parents’ household, and the TV was joined by a cooker, a fridge and a twin-tub washing machine. Workers’ earnings were rising: between 1960 and 1970 most manual and white-collar workers saw their pay packet double in size. [...] Unemployment was a dim and distant memory [...] memories of the war were also fading.<sup>20</sup>

This success was a recognisable reflection and derivation of the British state’s contradictory and racialised social and economic policies at home and abroad, in what was a highly militarised post-war political economy.

The independent researcher Jules Birch<sup>21</sup> describes how the 1942 Beveridge Report – which laid the ground for progressive social and health changes described above – was infused with class-biased, genderised, ableist, and racialised proposals

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<sup>20</sup> Selina Todd, *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class, 1910–2010*, 1. (London: Murray, 2014), p.252.

<sup>21</sup> <https://julesbirch.com/2012/11/27/10-things-you-may-not-know-about-the-beveridge-report/>.

for moral and social engineering. The author of that report, William Beveridge, was charged with the task to ‘slay five giants: Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness.’<sup>22</sup> Beveridge was the architect of food rationing and Labour Exchanges (the humiliating ‘dole’ where unemployed men queued in public for a meagre cash benefit). Birch reports that he didn’t want the job; when prime minister Ernest Bevin offered it to him, he burst into tears. He had become the director of the London School of Economics between the wars and had changed his ideas from free-market wage cuts to more socialist-aligned economic planning. However, he hated the term ‘welfare state’ – preferring the idea of civilian service as a duty rather than rights to benefits. He published a plan for training camps for ‘malingerers’ to combat ‘Idleness’. It was a bestseller, with copies circulating in resistance movements across what was then Nazi-occupied Europe. Respectful assessments of its contents were found in Hitler’s bunker. Commercial insurance companies saw their share prices nosedive, due to the proposals for universal National Insurance and a National Health Service.

Beveridge’s plan was fundamentally structured to re-establish social reproduction within heterosexual marriage and counteract the female independence, same-sex social organisation, and racial integration that people had embraced during wartime. This social engineering was bolstered by marriage-based tax reforms and non-means tested family allowances, aimed at fostering ‘national unity’ – a phrase repeated constantly in the report’s headline statements. No attention is given to married women, single parents, or disabled people. In the encroaching wake of the British Empire, ‘greatness’ would require women – specifically white women – to marry and cease economic activity, to become dependent on a husband’s wages and tax allowance, and to channel their life purpose into housework and childcare. As Beveridge stated it, ‘housewives as mothers have vital work to do in ensuring the adequate continuance of the British race and of British ideals in the world’.

In her article ‘Decolonising Britain and Domesticating Women’, Denise Noble exposes this contradictory attitude to the role of women, the function of the family, and the structural needs of British capital in relation to a need for labour to service a burgeoning public sector. Beveridge attempted to balance consolidation of the privatised reproduction of the labour force, with migrant women workers recruited from the Commonwealth, to ensure the availability of essential services. Noble (2015) says:

[P]aradoxes arose from the attempt of the state at this time to use social policy to regulate women’s behaviour and enforce particular normative ideals of femininity, family, and marriage. [...] Beveridge’s concerns for maternalism and family life

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

reveal preoccupations not merely over the need for postwar national recovery; central to these anxieties were state concerns regarding security and the management of British racial rule *both at home and abroad*.<sup>23</sup>

Its own empire had been thoroughly defeated and delegitimised by national liberation struggles, and the British state had no choice but to harness its pursuit of profit and power Clap to the NATO alliance, and on helping to build US imperialism. Although this pursuit went to the heart of manufacturing and research, the arms economy in post-war Britain remained largely hidden within commercial civilian scientific and technological centres of production and development. Thus, it wasn't officially recognised as contributing to the portion of Gross Domestic Product accounted as armament-related, and this hidden arms economy – the major centre of British post-WW2 economic expansion – was where Ed worked. His job at the engineering plant of the international record and communications company was, in fact, in its military missile fuse-testing equipment laboratory. As David Egerton explains:

In the post-war years the military-industrial-complex was at the heart of a powerful British developmental state. [...] The political economic approach is particularly prone to seeing in industry, technology, and science – all viewed as profoundly civilian. [...] Within this framework, only some militarily relevant technologies were called 'armaments' [...] it was not uncommon to exclude aircraft and warships from the definition of armaments.<sup>24</sup>

In material terms, Ed's life fitted Selina Todd's description. Born in 1930, Ed's family lived in a series of cockroach-infested rooms around Clapham Junction and Battersea, until they moved to a new council estate in the suburbs in 1934. Here, Ed and his four siblings were brought up by their parents (a cook and a distillery worker) in a three-bedroom cottage with its own bath (in the kitchen), indoor toilet, allotment-garden, and air raid shelter. After life-threatening bouts of asthma throughout his childhood, Ed left school at 14. National Service in the Royal Air Force gave him his initial experience in military aircraft. Later, 'night school' improved his written English, and helped him to lose his South London accent and syntax to the point where he could move into better paid, white-collar roles with management prospects and enough finance (with Carol's earnings) to consider homebuying. By the mid-1950s he had thereby 'improved' himself

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<sup>23</sup> Denise Noble, 'Decolonizing Britain and Domesticating Women', *Meridians*, 13.1 (2015), pp.53-77. <<https://doi.org/10.2979/meridians.13.1.53>> p.58.

<sup>24</sup> David Egerton, 'The British Military-Industrial Complex in History: The Importance of Political Economy', *The Economics of Peace and Security Journal* , January 2008, 2008. <<https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/The-British-military-industrial-complex-in-history%3A-Egerton/19e043e61337e7f825b74aaf528e2ebdaa1d9877>>.

enough to ask to marry the lively, beautiful, fun-loving, similarly ambitious Carol. Real individuals they were, with specific activities shaped by their material conditions. Carol, the giddy, extrovert, fashion-conscious dancing queen, had no wish or intention to give up work or become a mother. Little did she know that she was on the brink of conformity to the imperative of national unity.

The question of *privilege* observed in mothering as a job, a career, a place of self-expression would be crudely materialist. In historical materialism, privilege is associated with benefit appropriated from others. A housewife is dependent both socially and financially. It may be that the household's financial controller restricts and shapes how and when money is spent. Today, writing in 2024, I know of one father who does all the household food shopping himself, thus determining what everyone eats, and he challenges any food brought into the household that he has not authorised. I also know of one husband who holds a joint bank account with his wife, but cut up her debit card so that she has to 'borrow' his card for each shopping trip.



The Unbelieving Family Christening, 1964, photographer unknown.

The photograph above, of the 'christening' of Ed and Carol's second child, is one of many Ed and Carol took during the course of their marriage until it ended in 1968 (scandalising their families and communities, to whom divorce was a prerogative only of film stars). The shapes they made and recorded together were diagrams, likenesses, of their shared and separate identities and lives. With, and on, their bodies and their children's bodies, they drew the shapes of their wishes and dreams. They drew themselves as they wished to be seen. It was up to others to draw conclusions. Their babies drew these shapes like laden vessels forward through time-tides to the present: retelling and redrawing; drawing out meanings and casting away meanings.



Later images, as bodies and fashions changed, caused mothers to criticise, to draw one another aside to confide their fears and their hopes for themselves and their children. So much was *drawn* in these photographs, in light and line, in ideology and in the practice and performance of gender, race, sexuality and class.

## VI. Ethics, Story and History 3:Transmission



'Being the Moon' mixed media, 2018.

During the 1950s, my father bought every edition of the legendary *Picture Post* photojournalism magazine (until it folded in 1957). When I was in my 20s, he told me that his collection of *Picture Post* had been stored in the understairs cupboard of his parents' house until one day his mother, without consulting him, put them out for the refuse collectors. I saw on his face the same grief, urgency, and self-checking I saw each time he tried to speak about his terror of the air raids and sirens during the war, and the sight of his father returning from rescue work each day, covered in dust, silent.

This is why I contend that Selina Todd (2014) in the book extract above<sup>25</sup> illustrates why a mechanical and purely empirical approach to history cannot give a full account. Todd wrote: 'Unemployment was a dim and distant memory [...] memories of the war were also fading.'<sup>26</sup> Unemployment and war for British workers in the 1960s were not a widely experienced part of everyday life (although they were a reality for some). However, for people like Carol and Ed, the remembered poverty and horrors of what had been witnessed and experienced – despite having been crowded to the edges of their lives by the concerns and pursuits of homemaking and having children, new jobs, new

<sup>25</sup> Todd.

<sup>26</sup> Todd, p.252.

social connections, new fashions and new recipes – remained palpable elements inside them, and all the more powerful for not being acknowledged in their contemporary world. They were supposed to forget, and so they acted as though they had. But when they spoke of childhood, even when they didn't tell the visceral scenes they witnessed or saw in the faces and bodies of others, the episodes of terror, the familial separations, these stories held the rough and uncanny textures and emptinesses of the air-raid shelters, powdered egg, the relentless deprivation of food and clothing rations, hunger, the shattering explosions at night, the terrifying absences of fathers, uncles, brothers. And the shame of still remembering these things, of even having known them.

## VII. My Intravenous Art Practice



'Drawing Not Writing' ink and felt tip on lined paper, 2018.

Coming to ideas through imagining and thinking has always been an intravenous process for me. As trauma clinicians Bessel van der Kolk (2015)<sup>27</sup> and Gabor Maté (2019)<sup>28</sup> assert, the body keeps a chronic score of an individual's life; the mind and

<sup>27</sup> Bessel A. Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma* (Penguin Books, 2015).

<sup>28</sup> Gabor Maté, *When the Body Says No: The Cost of Hidden Stress*/Gabor Maté. (London: Ebury Digital, 2019).

brain are fully embodied. Internal organs, hormonal systems, digestive processes, muscles, bones, neural pathways, and so on, can protest and disrupt with illness, disorder and pain when a child or adult's adverse experiences are denied, minimised or ignored.

Taking this a step further, pioneering affect theorist Anna Gibbs describes the visceral process by which feelings jump from one human body to another through this embodied unity, mirroring, inciting, and materially transitioning – much as water can transition to ice, or to vapour. Her description captures startlingly the impact of affective transmission through transgenerational relationships:

Bodies can catch feelings as easily as catch fire: affect leaps from one body to another, evoking tenderness, inciting shame, igniting rage, exciting fear – in short, communicable affect can inflame nerves and muscles in a conflagration of every conceivable kind of passion.<sup>29</sup>

Childhood trauma that is neither acknowledged nor processed sets off a habitual pattern of dissociation – of leaving one's own body and mind, because whatever our organs and thoughts and brain are expressing cannot be heard, and perhaps cannot be voiced or articulated. We may have been silenced, shut down, told we are too sensitive or making too much of things. We are then left alone and isolated with the consequences of social relationships.

In this sense, a traumatised body is a lantern, shedding light on human life in an inhumane world *from the inside out*. Gabor Maté (2019) puts a useful focus on the reality of the relationship between emotional stress and physiology, and allopathic medicine's separation between the mind and the body:

Interactions with other human beings—in particular, emotional interactions— affect our biological functioning in myriad and subtle ways almost every moment of our lives [...] The medical approach to health and illness continues to suppose that body and mind are separable from each other and *from the milieu in which they exist*. Compounding that mistake is a definition of stress that is narrow and simplistic. Medical thinking usually sees stress as highly disturbing but isolated events [...] but there are chronic daily stresses in people's lives that are more insidious and more harmful in their long-term biological consequences.<sup>30</sup> [my italics]

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<sup>29</sup> Anna Gibbs, 'Contagious Feelings: Pauline Hanson and the Epidemiology of Affect', *Australian Humanities Review*, 2001.

<sup>30</sup> Gabor Maté, p.45.

I have italicised ‘from the milieu in which they exist’ because the political denial by our rulers (of, for example, climate change, menopause symptoms, or the transgenerational transmission of trauma from racism or war) can create severe mental distress and physical manifestations, compound the suffering precipitated by the original cause, and instil beliefs that being affected by what is happening around us is an indication of our lack of resilience/maturity/ability to ‘switch off’ or ‘detach’. What if being dysregulated by material reality is a state of insightfulness, vision, or unconscious knowledge of the underlying dynamics of the ‘milieu in which’ we attempt to function? What if that knowledge can only be discovered or accessed via the disordered discourse of a dysregulated, even dysfunctional, researcher or artistic practitioner? I can only research and produce multi-modally. I write, and my writing collapses into drawing. Drawings suddenly stop in mid-line and words start appearing around the edges of the paper. Bessel van der Kolk (2015) suggests that image-making is a human and natural response to psychological trauma, and acts as a precursor to narrative:

Traumatic events are almost impossible to put into words. This is true for all of us, not just for people who suffer from PTSD.<sup>31</sup> The initial imprints of the events of September 11 were not stories but images: frantic people running down the street, their faces covered with ash; an airplane smashing into Tower One of the World Trade Center; the distant specks that were people jumping hand in hand.<sup>32</sup>

Thankfully, research within and beyond academic institutions is expanding through the incorporation of methodologies and practices that can counter the structuring of knowledge within the measured and separated disciplines which evolved to serve the needs of early capitalist/imperialist development in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Helen Johnson (2021), in her book chapter ‘Ten Incitements to Rebellion’ asserts:

For many, the arts and sciences stand at opposite ends of an unbridgeable divide: the sciences, rigid, objective, systematic and authoritative; the arts, fluid, dynamic, subjective and capricious. Yet there are multiple points of interconnection between these fields. Arts research presents a particularly fertile form of art-science interaction [...] creating new forms of knowledge.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

<sup>32</sup> Van der Kolk, p.232.

<sup>33</sup> Helen Johnson, ‘Ten Incitements to Rebellion: Spoken Word as a Social Scientific Research Tool of, and for, Rebellious Research’ in *Doing Rebellious Research: In and beyond the Academy*, ed. by Pamela Burnard and others, Critical Issues in the Future of Learning and Teaching, Volume 23 (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2022), pp.34–5.

Like me, she mixes theoretical discussion with creative writing. She proposes that this interweaving approach can offer new forms of collaboration in arts research which she terms 'Collaborative Poetics'. Her poem includes the following lines:

... we write ourselves;  
story the silence...  
our lives viewed  
like sand through a microscope.  
Each lived experience a sliver of cerith,  
a paring of periwinkle.  
No longer lost in tawny drifts,  
We hold piece by piece up to the light;  
Sift rainbows through our fingers.  
We are conchologists,  
Collecting cantles of discrimination;  
A poetic enquiry  
To splinter  
The softness of sands.<sup>34</sup>



'Asleep and Sleeping' ink on paper 2020.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid p35.

When I was 40, I began to have a recurring dream. It was connected to the sensation of Carol making a parting in my hair by digging the pointed end of a tail comb into the front of my scalp and dragging it across to my crown. The sensation of that painful operation was still in and on my head and had attached itself to something deeper: a feeling or perception of not being cared for, of being an object of anger, resentment, or revenge for some other force in Carol's life – a fear of being in mortal danger. I wrote this dream.

### **VIII. Breadknife Dream**

In the kitchen, Mum hunches with elbows out, a preying mantis, sawing bread.

Her second husband, at the sink, dips infinitesimally at the knees with every rinse under the steel tap, every plunge back into hot water, his hands blistering in the soap.

They are devoted to their tasks.

I stand on the hard, linoleum tiles and feel the coldness in the floor swim up to my bare knees.

Now I see myself, a soft animal figure, waiting. My face is set, dead wood: now I am in it.

Mum turns to me with the bread knife. With the fingers of one of her hand, she grips my scalp; with the other hand, she starts to pull the blade across the top of my head, painfully and slowly, from front to back, repeatedly, sawing.

I keep standing. This is to be expected, it's something she has to do, it's what needs to be done, right now. It's what she can do, because I am her daughter, my head is her head, and the knife is her knife. The knife is for cutting bread and frozen pies, and cakes with stiff icing. I can feel the teeth biting lightly over my crown, mincing hair and skin. It hurts, but not unbearably because she is not pressing as hard as she did when she was sawing the bread.

This happens. It's a gesture and won't leave a mark. I am not afraid. I am not angry. I am nothing.

This experience will end as it started. No explanation is required.

Do dreams know when it's time to end the dream? Does my body know when the dream is ended and it's time to wake up? Is the end of the dream timed and planned? Is dreaming a planned economy?

## IX. Quiz



'Profit and Ache' from *How To Be Strong* 2010.

My mother told me that the NHS paid a small grant of about £3 to the 33% of women who chose to give birth at home in the 1960s<sup>35</sup> I could not locate a reference for this grant. The first reader who sends a citation or reference to me at [nicola.field@kingston.ac.uk](mailto:nicola.field@kingston.ac.uk) will get a signed print of any art image they choose from this essay.

## X. Shared Life

The psychiatrist and writer Judith Lewis Herman originated the term 'Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder' (CPTSD) to denote a kind of PTSD that arises not from one catastrophic event, but from multiple, persistent and repeated adverse experiences. Like van der Kolk and Maté, Herman also insists on a counternarrative of a unified mind/body. She further observes how a failure of care in childhood, whether known or unknown, visible or hidden:

forces the development of extraordinary capacities, both creative and destructive. It fosters the development of abnormal states of consciousness in which the ordinary relations of body and mind, reality and imagination, knowledge and memory, no

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<sup>35</sup> 'Births in England and Wales by Characteristics of Birth 2: 2013' *Office for National Statistics* (2014). <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/livebirths/bulletins/characteristicsofbirth2/2014-11-17#:~:text=In%201960%2C%20the%20percentage%20of,women%20gave%20birth%20at%20home>>.

longer hold. These altered states of consciousness [...] speak in disguised language of secrets too terrible for words.<sup>36</sup>

This subject position described by Herman is the place from which I choose to make practical artist-research experiments in thinking about the socio-political category of ‘mother’ as it is manifested in my memory, imagination, and embodied experiential/expressive artistic representations.

I am struck by Mark P. Freeman’s (2012) concept of the ‘narrative unconscious’ as ‘those culturally rooted aspects of one’s history that have yet to become an explicit part of one’s story [...thus] discerning the workings of the narrative unconscious entails moving beyond the particulars of personal life into the shared life of culture.’<sup>37</sup> My approach is to contribute to a growing but continually struggling body of counternarrative scholarship and research which breaks from objectivity, insular disciplinarity and (sometimes) coherence, in order to continue to carve out, and re-claim – however often it is necessary (as the objections can come from within the body/mind as often as from without) – a place where integrated identity can exist.

I argue that this counternarrativity *must* include structural socio-political analysis and historical materialist critical and methodological elements because, as Chris Harman states: ‘to reject Marx’s model is to reject any sense of unity in human history. It alone provides a picture of how human society develops, of why different societies develop in different circumstances’.<sup>38</sup> My patched-together elements may always be experimental, and sometimes disordered, but as Freeman insists: ‘without them, there would only be a superficial and incomplete rendition of the past, one that mistook the manifest order of things for the whole story.’<sup>39</sup>

## XI. Concluding Reflection

Narrative pleasure, a class-based conception of life-writing ethics and some sense of what it may feel like to be a small, well dressed, well fed, undiagnosed-autistic English girl having her hair washed and set in the 1960s, are what I hope will be gained by readers of this article. It’s not easy being a bearer of the Marxist metanarrative in any discipline, even in these times of intersectionality and new forms of materialism.

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<sup>36</sup> Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror; with a New Afterword by the Author*, (Pandora, 2010), p.96.

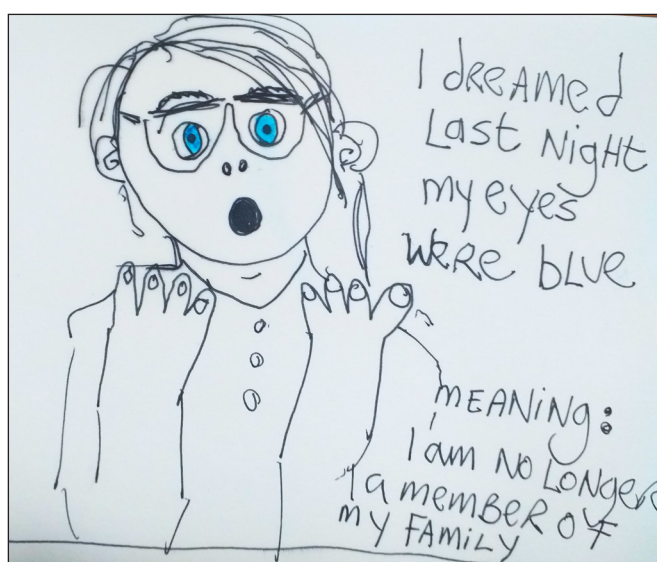
<sup>37</sup> Mark P. Freeman, ‘The Narrative Unconscious’, *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, 48.3 (2012), 344–66. <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00107530.2012.10746508>>.

<sup>38</sup> Rees.

<sup>39</sup> Freeman.



I have attempted an even more lonely task: to bring together two different genres of knowledge production, which some, especially Marxists like myself, may consider ultimately incompatible. (These genres can be broadly understood as what the socialist-feminist theorist Kathi Weeks (2023) identifies as: ‘systems thinking with a focus on social structures’ and ‘theoretical production associated with the subjective and ethical turns and the premium they place on [...] biographically centred and finely textured studies of the meaningfulness of subjective and intersubjective experience.’<sup>40</sup>). It causes me to wonder, with compassion and sadness, if this is the kind of impossible quest for meaning and integration my mother may have been on her whole life. Such affective, spiritual benefit would be a welcome by-product of this theoretical encounter on the sparsely inhabited but fertile land between autoethnography, autotheory and historical materialism. Whether or not this affect is effected, fellow travellers will be so very welcome. However, be warned, there is very little money in it.



'I Dreamed Last Night My Eyes Were Blue' mixed media 2020.

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<sup>40</sup> Kathi Weeks, 'Abolition of the Family: The Most Infamous Feminist Proposal', *Feminist Theory*, 24.3 (2023), pp.433–53. <<https://doi.org/10.1177/14647001211015841>> p.434.

### **Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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