

JOAN MANDELL INTERVIEW

Mandell: (00:03:20:13) Do you want me to look at you or the camera?

Zeldes: (00:03:22:25) Me.

Mandell: (00:03:24:15) (\*Laughter\*) You're much easier to look at.

Zeldes: (00:03:26:20) Thank you...

Mandell: (00:03:57:00) Is that sound going to be too like...should we tell them to move away from that door.

Zeldes: (00:04:17:00) Where did you put that mic? Did you hide it?

Mandell: (00:04:20:12) Yes, I know how to do these things.

Zeldes: (00:04:22:26) Where did you hide it? Where is it?

Mandell: (00:04:25:00) Where do you think it is? Where do you think the mic is? Where would you tell somebody to hide a mic on a woman?

Photographer: (00:04:37:25) Well I don't tell them to hide it. Because I don't mind seeing it in this sort of situation

Mandell: (00:04:42:06) Oh, do you want to see it.

Zeldes: (00:04:43:15) Is it hiding in your bra?

Mandell: (00:04:44:20) Yeah...Is it okay?

Photographer: (00:04:49:17) Yeah, as long as it doesn't rustle.

Mandell: (00:04:51:00) It's a cotton shirt anyway.

Zeldes: (00:04:52:28) Do you want the nametag off?

Mandell: (00:04:56:00) Oh, should I take this off? Okay I'm sorry. I just took the liberty to put it on myself, but if you don't care

Photographer: (00:05:02:15) No, it's good. As long as it sounds fine and we're not hearing the—then we're good.

Mandell: (00:05:08:20) Okay.

Zeldes: (00:05:13:00) All right, tell us about your family background.

Mandell: (00:05:15:22) Umm, where do you want me start?

Zeldes: (00:05:18:21) Oh, in the beginning.

Mandell: (00:05:19:15) Umm...Well...

Zeldes: (00:05:28:08) Where were you born and...?

Mandell: (00:05:31:25) I was born in Boston.

Zeldes: (00:05:33:28) And then how did you come here?

Mandell: (00:05:36:00) Oh, I've lived in many cities and many countries. Umm, do you want me to give you more of a personal background? Is that what you're asking for? Let's

see... Well, I grew up in Boston, I went to college in Montreal. Umm, I worked in Washington D.C., California, Sweden, and the Middle East. I lived for about seven years in the West Bank where I taught English in a Palestinian University and worked as a journalist. And I travel all the time. Umm, because I've lived in so many places, my family and friends are so spread out. It's really hard to stay in one place.

Zeldes: (00:06:18:20) When you worked as a journalist in the West Bank were you in print or were you TV?

Mandell: (00:06:24:15) I was a print journalist. I, umm, helped found, umm, a small weekly English language newspaper that was the first English language newspaper, umm, published out of the occupied territories. It was based in Jerusalem and it was covering the Palestinian, umm, it was a Palestinian newspaper to bring about, umm, sorry. Umm, I just talked for an hour, I'm really sorry. Okay, okay, so let's just start again. Actually, can I have a glass of water please? That would be like so great...(\*Water Break)----- So you were asking me, let's see I can't remember where we were. You were asking me about a newspaper, and that's where I paused. Let's see, so can you ask me the question about newspapers because I don't know where we were?

Zeldes: (00:07:21:15) Oh, umm, gosh, well what did I ask about the newspapers? Oh, I asked you if it was print or it is was TV?

Mandell: (00:07:29:15) Oh yeah, was I in print? Yeah, I've really worked in a variety of mediums, media. Umm, but mainly print. I started out working in a magazine based in Washington D.C., a small press publication that dealt with the Middle East. Umm...sorry....(\*Interruption\*)----- Okay, so I was working in print journalism.

Zeldes: (00:08:14:00) Now you said you got into documentary film making via journalism. How did you make that transition?

Mandell: (00:08:25:00) Uh, I, well when I was working in the newspaper I also did still photography, writing, editing, and the whole thing. Um,, but I helped a lot of documentary filmmakers doing research for them. So when I was based in the West Bank, it would be, say ABC News, CBS News, different European crews would come over, maybe have only a few days and want to get a story immediately. And they would come to our newspaper and they would rely on me as an American who was living there, they thought I would know the kind of stories they were looking for so I would help them do research, I would go out into the field and introduce them to people, kind of networking things. And then after a while I kind of thought, "Well, I'd like to do that myself. I'm the person that lives here. I have stories, you know and, umm, so I really wanted to develop either into a book or into a longer film umm,

Zeldes: (00:09:26:00) Was that *Gaza Ghetto*?

Mandell: (00:09:27:15) Yeah that was *Gaza Ghetto*? I co-directed that. The person who produced it and was the principle director was Swedish, he was a long-term filmmaker and he asked whether I'd like to research and translate for the film and I said, "Well, I will on conditions that I work all the way through the film through the editing." So that's how I kind of learned by apprenticing.

Zeldes: (00:09:54:00) What is it about the documentary medium that makes it powerful—that attracts you?

Mandell: (00:10:04:00) Uhh, well, umm, I guess I got into documentary as an extension of journalism—human interest journalism, in particular. Or to be more specific how—how umm political issue impact people in their daily lives and I was very concerned living in the Middle East, coming back and telling stories of people I knew over there, how the daily impact of war impacts people in their lives. I'd come back to the United States and there would be no grounds for an understanding. So I felt film could bridge this gap by bringing actually some type of likeness of people and their lives into the homes of Americans. Okay, if the Americans couldn't go over seas and witness things maybe they would have some sort of emotional report with the people in the film and then come to some type of greater understanding of the history and politics of the region. So that really drew me into film, plus I'm also a very visual person. I think that film is very rich because you have the whole audio track, you have umm some things can only be told visually, some things can only be told the way we hear things, the way we speak thinks, so it's a really creative form. I love being umm as long as possible the people who's stories I'm involved with. And I feel even when I do third-person filmmaking, which largely is the style that I've done up until now. I haven't—I haven't really distributed any first person works. Where you know, I'm the narrator and the story is about me personally. But even though I say that, I feel I am in all those films. Because I'm in there through the report that I've built with the people in the film, through my choice of topics, uhh, through the fact that I'm telling my stories from the places that I've lived and people with whom I've lived and that I really care about and have captured my imagination. So I don't usually set out—and unfortunately, my films would be more marketable if I did it in another way. But I don't actually go down and think, “Okay what can I get on television now? Or what's the trendy topic?” if something, in particular, seems to be an injustice that's been there for a long time, that's been just hanging all around me that I really want to communicate about to other people and umm you know the people in the film it's kind of like my friends. My friends umm are living through situations or I'm living with my friends through a situation that I want other people that I know and the larger world to know about these stories.

Zeldes: (00:13:10:10) Earlier when we spoke to Will Youmans, The Iron Sheik and raps, was he the person who did the rap in the beginning--?

Mandell: (00:13:20:00) Yeah, actually I covered a live performance of his rap when he was in Dearborn but it didn't--- I-I was going to use that as a scene in the film and I followed him on Father's Day—I have some very nice footage of that, by the way. On Father's Day singing “Happy Birthday” to his father—no to his grandfather. So I was going to put together this umm, you know, you think about rap as this hardcore form of poetry and you know you think of Father's day as this sentimental mushy thing, so I was going to put the two together but the, uhh, that performance was a kind of---the footage didn't turn out really well and it was confusing for people when I showed them a rough cut so I went to his pre-recorded CD. That's more information than you wanted to know but, probably you don't need all that to know about that probably but anyway

Zeldes: (00:14:17:25) You talked about speaking to a younger audience. Who do you speak to?

Mandell: (00:14:24:15) Could I answer your question again, because I realized I didn't really—maybe speak to your question. Is that okay?

Zeldes: (00:14:33:20) Yeah.

Mandell: (00:14:33:23) Yeah, so we used a CD of the Iron Sheik, Will Youmans, umm, I thought it was a really great way—I mean, it was the lyrics, it was the perfect way to introduce the film and also introduce the film to young people. That's why we used it. That's why I used it. I thought it really liked it and I thought it was very inclusive over a lot of different communities and a great way to open the film. A lot of times, umm, the pacing of documentaries could be kind of slow and he's very fast beat.

Zeldes: (00:15:12:15) So, the Iron Sheik, you're saying that his hip-hop music speaks to a younger generation. The documentary medium, specifically your documentaries, who is your audience? Are they younger, middle-aged, and older?

Mandell: (00:15:27:20) Do you mean ordinarily? Or do you mean this one?

Zeldes: (00:15:30:10) Umm, yeah, and ordinarily. Who's your audience?

Mandell: (00:15:33:18) Umm, I think the main audience for my work up until now has been university students because most of my films are used very widely... university campuses and classrooms, however I have in recent years kind of come to this conclusion that we need to be making films that are at the middle school level. Because if we make a film at a middle school level then everybody from middle school to adult hood can watch a film and not feel like it's over their head and not also feel talked down to. Because most people watching your film don't necessarily know anything about the topic, or your trying to perhaps reach a audience that doesn't know about the topic so you're trying to speak simply anyway so then umm its very good if you could to try and involve young people in the film if you make a film uh that has all adults in it its going to be pretty boring. I mean in the film that you saw today it opens with some children and that intentional because children they're also a part of the community but its also inviting children to watch the film. So I can say though that I've done films for all ages. I've done one film for elementary school kids. It was about two sisters who are who are activists. And it looked at how could ordinary kids who want to get involved in changing the world, what could they do? You know kids with no money, no foundation support no backing what could a ten and eleven year old girl do? And that was a ten minute video for elementary school kids. So, you know, each project is different.

Zeldes: (00:17:22:00) Back to the previous comment of yours, you said you were the researcher for these networks coming in. Could that possibly be one of the critiques of national news coverage of the Middle East—that they come in and don't know much about the area and therefore their stories don't provide context to the area?

Mandell: (00:17:46:23) Well I can't really say that for sure because I haven't worked with the crews. You know, I—like everybody else—I'm sitting here and I'm watching television and I can draw conclusions based on watching them but I haven't studied them so I don't really know how to answer your question, honestly. I can talk about my experience with specific crews, I can't...I can say something though. I mean, and also when I was doing that, it was some years ago, and I don't know to what extent things have changed but so should I just make some comments that I think I could make?

Zeldes: (00:18:20:00) Sure.

Mandell: (00:18:20:05) I mean, okay, for one thing in American journalism, people who are foreign correspondents uhh do not need to know the language of the country they are going to, it's not one of the criteria for foreign news coverage. That was very shocking to me when I lived

in the Middle East. Because all the European correspondents who were in the Middle East, umm, if they were covering for example Palestine, they would probably know Hebrew and Arabic. But then a typical American correspondent would typically not know either language. So then they would be hiring translators, the translator might have their own agenda and so there's a lot of mistranslation going on. And the fact that I could speak Arabic, which I learned by living in the Middle East actually gave me a lot of access to people and trust and confidence because I had a very—if you speak the language of the country of which you are living, of course you know everything that's going on and you develop an intimate relationship with people in the country. If you can't speak their language, who are you really, really going to know what's going on. So that's one thing that would really improve, umm, or could possibly improve American journalism is language—language should be, you know, mandatory for the country you're going out covering. Another thing is having correspondents who are, you know, based in countries for longer periods of time and not just coming and going briefly. Umm, I think it's funny—I was just struck...I was remembering something. Umm, I had applied for a grant, umm, to do a film about an Iraqi American family going to go back to Iraq and when I did this application, umm, I sent some footage and, you know, I had my proposal to the granting agency and then they judged it and then I got back the judgments and one of the judges said, "The filmmaker has too much access to the community." Okay, that a documentary filmmaker should be objective and how could I possibly be objective when I knew the people in the film too well? Umm, which I thought was such an odd comment but actually, I mean, that's a comment that somebody made.

Zeldes: (00:20:48:00) Because that's what you think the ideal in some circumstances. I want to talk about *Tales From Arab Detroit*. You did that about a decade ago in 1994. How did that come about?

Mandell: (00:21:04:33) Umm, well that I was at—the then director of arts at Access, Sally Howell, umm, was familiar with some of my previous work and asked me to work with Access on creating a film about a visiting Egyptian storyteller who was giving a series of performances at the community centers in the Dearborn area. So, umm, I came ready to do that film. Umm, first the storyteller didn't come from Egypt. He was a month or so late and we had to start rolling. Umm, and second as I was starting to work on it I thought, "That a film about— just about the storyteller, which umm, would have been in Arabic with subtitles and would have been more geared for a smaller audience. Like maybe an audience interested in umm, ethno-musicology for example. What about a wider audience? Since there were at the time—I mean I didn't really know of any films about Arab American communities. Yeah, there were documentaries about individuals. Umm individual filmmakers going back to visit their home countries or umm you have to remember this was before September 11<sup>th</sup>, there really weren't a lot of films. So I thought, you know, for me what was really critical was who was the audience for the storyteller when he came? Umm, and then who would be the audience or the film? So I kind of diverted the original intention of the film and umm, included the visit of the storyteller who came eventually into issues about the audience and umm, looked at oral traditions and how umm the things that the immigrant parents generations care about so much from their homelands some of umm social values, cultural values, how do these get transmitted to the younger generation that's born in the United States? Do they get transmitted? Are they rejected? Are they assimilated? And you know I found I was really interested when I did this because I think umm you know well there's immigrant parents coming to the United States, perhaps they really want to be American, whatever that means, or they want to assimilate, whatever that means. Or

maybe they want to retain all kind of umm whatever cultural values from whatever home country they came from. And then there's going to be these American born children who have some other signals sent to them from school or the other kids around them or something and there's going to be this conflict. This is kind of the story that's usually told. I feel like when

Zeldes: (00:23:59:00) (\*Coughing\*)

Mandell: (00:24:01:22) Need some water? Now the director needs water.

Zeldes: (00:24:07:00) Excuse me. Sorry about that. Oh thank you. (\*Coughing\*) Excuse me. Okay. Sorry. Oh gosh.

Mandell: (00:24:37:00) Do we get her coffee?

Zeldes: (00:24:38:19) (\*Laughing\*) All right. I am so sorry.

Mandell: (00:24:46:15) That's okay. Okay well I'll just cut to that part. Because what I wanted to say was umm, I learned something really interesting working on that film—that sometimes parents are really afraid of what messages they're sending to their children and what messages the children are receiving. Umm, especially immigrant parents it can be very threatening to be raising children in a new country. But I found that the children as they're growing up, they really understood their parents very well. And if anybody was having an identity crisis it wasn't children of mixed backgrounds it wasn't so much children trying to understand. Well, children were understanding their parents and understanding the larger community and putting it all together and redefining themselves. And so they did get something from the parents. And so the parents had been worrying but the children kind of fed back to them. And you can see that in the film. When you see the film, you see how the children incorporated views of their parents as well as other views they got from the larger society

Zeldes: (00:25:56:10) And you're production American Road Movie...I'm sorry

Mandell: (00:26:02:00) Arab American Road Movie.

Zeldes: (00:26:03:25) How much video did you shoot for the fourteen minutes?

Mandell: (00:26:09:00) Umm, probably about 50 hours. I just say that, maybe 20 hours, I can't remember. (\*Laughter\*) You know I really don't remember because I've been away from it for a year. So if you ask me in about two weeks I'd be able to answer but right now I can't remember. I can't remember if it's 20 hours or forty hours. So what should I say?

Zeldes: (00:26:29:25) (\*Laughter\*)

Mandell: (00:26:34:00) I shot—I-I-You know you might say, "What you shot a 14—I don't know how many hours I shot, let's say I shot 20 to 40 hours—you might say why did I shot so many hours for a 14 minute video? Because when I shot it was such a privilege to be with all the people who I filmed. And we went all over the country to do this. So that's a lot of expense, time, umm, you know, once you are in someone's house, putting the lights all over their living room and interrupting them, umm, there's no point in just doing that for a very short film—umm, let's get everything while we're there. So I always thought from the beginning that this would turn into a longer film.

Zeldes: (00:27:15:11) What has the response been from the people in your film?

Mandell: (00:27:20:00) From the people in the film? They really like the film. Yeah they really liked the film.

Zeldes: (00:27:25:00) And what's the process. Do you uhh—and so who do you show rough cuts to?

Mandell: (00:27:30:14) I usually show umm, and this is pretty unusual for a documentary filmmaker, I mean I usually show rough cuts to as many people as possible who were in the film before I release the film. Umm, ordinarily I do that. And umm in this case I wasn't able to show it to every single person because there's about a 100 people in the film and some people only have 10 second parts in there but to as many people as possible I still did show them rough cuts in advance or I communicated with them what parts they had in the film. And umm, eventually I sent them all copies.

Zeldes: (00:28:08:15) And then umm with their feedback do you edit out or put in?

Mandell: (00:28:16:00) Actually, umm, let's see. It's.. I mean the only way to really answer your question is to look at specific films I've worked on because every film is so different. So I don't really know how to answer the question without...Umm, typically when I've shown rough cuts to people they'll say things like, "Why isn't this film five hours long?" Or "I didn't look good that day." Or umm, but you know I had very—for the *Arab American Road Movie* I had very, very positive response when people saw themselves on screen . umm, I think they really enjoyed it. One of the families that I was working with. We filmed them for I don't know about two days in a row and umm when we were leaving and packing up all the gear, the mother turned to me and said, "Oh, you're leaving? We felt like we had our own reality TV show." And I think that's another thing I've really noticed when I worked on this film. Things have really changed due to reality television people are used to seeing people do very embarrassing things on national television. So the idea of being on television—some people really want to be on television who before would have been more shy. So I don't know if that's necessarily a good thing it's just something I've observed. I feel like something has changed. People feel more comfortable with cameras then they used to. I feel like as a documentary filmmaker, umm, let me just start again. Umm...As a film maker and a documentary filmmaker I realize I have a lot of power. And that's where a lot of the ethical issues come in for me and those are a very important part of the process. No matter how many times you have a person sign a release form. Say they want to be in the film. See the rough cut. Ultimately they may never see quite understand what they've agreed to. They've agreed to let you represent them in anyway you see fit. So that with it carries a lot of responsibility. You are going to expose their features to an audience who you don't even know who the audience is. Someone's going to make a DVD copy. It's going to run away and people are going to look at and scrutinizing people as if their fictional characters but they're actually real people and real lives can be jeopardized. Umm, so I really take those issues very seriously and I really have to think about how I portray people on camera. Umm, sometimes when you come into a persons home with a camera it becomes a very confessional moment and people will say things to you—they don't think really think very deeply about whether they should expose something or whether they're going to get in trouble for saying something. So again you have to really think about what you're going to do with that footage and what's your purpose in making the film. What's the most important thing. Is the most important thing to make the best film that's going to win you some big award because people will say "Wow! Look at that footage!?" Is the most important thing to do some kind of education, umm. You know, what's your relationship with these real people who are in your

film. So those are—those are questions that I think every filmmaker needs to be asking themselves.

Zeldes: (00:32:02:15) When you were working on your film downstairs did you feel extra pressure because it was for the Arab American National Museum or because of the content of it, you were trying to represent your community?

Mandell: (00:32:19:20) I felt...Let's see, did I feel extra pressure? Not anymore than I always feel. Umm...Umm...Let's see, give me just one second. Can we just pause for a second? (\*Break\*) I don't remember what the question is so that makes it easier to answer. I'll just answer the question that I think it is. Okay, umm, I actually felt a great sense of responsibility, umm, not pressure but responsibility working on the *Arab American Road Movie* because I really—I was given—I was commissioned and asked to make a film that would represent people from 22 countries, from all regions of the United States. Umm, you know, from different religions, social classes, and ages and to make it something meaningful and cohesive. That's a very tall order. Umm, I wanted to make something that would—there's no way you can represent all of that in a short film. You just can't. So you know I had—I wanted to make a film that would represent a feeling and energy, a community, communities. I think important things are, umm, how people in answering my questions. You know, when I went—I'm sorry, I'm interrupting myself here. Umm, when I went to interview people for the *Arab American Road Movie* I didn't in most cases ask: "How do you feel as an Arab American? What is it like for you as an Arab American? How do you define yourself as an Arab America?" In most cases, I ask people just to talk about their identity because perhaps they didn't consider themselves Arab American. Even though I know that their country of origin was somewhere in the Arab world. So umm, I think that all the people in the film answered all the questions in the film in the way that they wanted to answer them and then I looked at what they had answered. Umm, consistently, people talked about family. Family is how they define themselves. They are somebody because their grandmother was somebody. They are somebody because they eat dinner with somebody. And the woman who sums it all up at the end of the film. She talks about heritage as being something as both blood and lived experience. And I think that's really—that's very true for me and I think that's very true for many people in the film. Umm, so I found what helped me answer some of the questions in craft the film.. Umm, but in the beginning it seemed like a really tall order to represent people from so many different communities, umm, from so many different lengths of immigration and it was a very large responsibility but I had to say I had a lot of fun doing it because of all the people that I found along the way. Umm, also, I don't know if I'm putting enough pauses between my thoughts for you to cut them, I'm running on sentences here. But you know, umm...While politics are a part of all of our lives and as I mentioned before, you know, I started my documentary career essentially as a political issue filmmaker or human issues related to political issues. So I really do care very much about political issues and that really drives my work. But every human being, it's not politics every morning noon and night. so just because people are Arab American and just because they may have loved members in a war zone, doesn't mean that every moment of their life is a political issue. Umm, it's to go to someone's house and not to constantly be asking them, "How do you feel about a war? You know, how did this happen?" To treat all the whole human aspects of a person's life that's something very important and I think that people embrace that and people welcome that and people want to talk about a lot of things about themselves. Umm, so I feel it's very—it was in that way very easy for me to make this film because I didn't have that specific agenda. I didn't come with questions, umm, from the, you know, mainstream

media that would have oriented me to ask people, “What do you think about terrorism?” Or “What is your position on this, that or the other thing?” Or “Have you been discriminated against in this way?” And assume just because a person’s of a certain ethnic background that that’s been there experience. I kind of went and asked people, “What do they want to talk about?” And people have many, many things to talk about and very few people who are going to listened to those stories. So...it’s why I paused when you first asked me about the pressure. I didn’t really feel a pressure, I felt more a privilege. I felt an extreme privilege and honor to do this work.

Zeldes: (00:37:45:05) (\*Break\*) Bob says “That’s a terrific sentiment...”

Mandell: (00:38:01:00) I’m sorry I just remembered a part I forgot. But I just remembered it now.

Zeldes: (00:38:03:00) That’s fine. Your brain’s working over time

Mandell: (00:38:07:00) Well, if I—I always think about things the next day. That’s the other reason I’m a documentary filmmaker and not a stand-up comedian. Nothing comes to me fast. Okay, I don’t know ---He’s also a journalist. Okay, is the audio okay? Okay you sure? Okay let me just see if I can remember what this was. Okay on the first anniversary of September 11<sup>th</sup> a local news show was looking for some local angle on things and someone said that I was doing updates to *Tales From Arab Detroit*. And knew—I was interviewing local Arab Americans. No that wasn’t what I was doing. Hold on a second. Was that what I was doing okay? Okay, yeah I have to start over again, I was confused. So a year after September 11<sup>th</sup> a local news station wanted to do a follow up on how local Arab Americans were impacted by ongoing events after September 11<sup>th</sup> and the Patriot Act and somehow word got to this news station that I was editing an update to *Tales From Arab Detroit*. So they asked if I could umm give them some of my contacts and some of the people in the film and if they could come and film me in the editing room editing this footage. So I said okay and they came and they filmed me. Okay how was this used? How did it appear on the air? That day, you know those promos before the news where they say what’s going to happen on the news, umm—“We’ve discovered some video tapes, uhh, Osama Bin Laden video tapes, live on the news later tonight. Video tapes, Osama Bin Laden video tapes.” And—and then somehow they bridged over to a local woman having video tape. So the Osama Bin Laden story disappeared when you actually got to the news. The Osama Bin Laden story became my videotape story and I have this footage if you want it. Umm, and umm, then you didn’t really see my face. Well, I was interviewed briefly. But mostly I was a backdrop, the back of my head. I was editing, you see the back of my head editing and then the on air newscaster talking about me editing while I’m behind her. But anyways, I just wanted to mention that.

Zeldes: (00:40:41:00) So it was just inaccurate?

Mandell: (00:40:43:29) It was, the way news is promoted, sometimes you have to—news is promoted as if there is a scandalous exciting thing to watch later so the scandalous exciting thing was Osama Bin Laden video tape that was the hook—what do you call it?

Zeldes: (00:41:02:00) The tease.

Mandell: (00:41:03:00) The tease to get people to the news. And then on the news what they actually saw was this local thing about Arab Americans. There might have been something about Osama Bin Laden but definitely the next thing and all through the hour before this little

news clip appeared was repeated the Osama Bin Laden, the Osama Bin Laden. And then on the news program was a clip about local Arab Americans. So you could kind of make a linkage. I mean, you would have made a linkage in your mind. I remember seeing that and being really surprised.

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