

# 1932 *Scarface* vs. 2013 *Gangster Squad*: The Major Differences and Minor Similarities in Filmmaking

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Gangster films in the Pre-Code Era were historically produced to address social and economic issues during the Great Depression. A particularly controversial gangster film, *Scarface: The Shame of the Nation* (1932), was produced/directed by Howard Hawks and Howard Hughes. The producers/directors created realistic and raw scenes of violence, smuggling, and explosions that were entertaining to the audience but contained a strong, passionate message. Although *Scarface: The Shame of the Nation* was wildly popular, films such as the 2013 *Gangster Squad*, also about organized crime, contained a somewhat different message due to it having been produced in a different era. *Scarface* conveyed a message addressing the issues of society while *Gangster Squad*'s message was the telling of Italian mobster Mickey Cohen's story for entertainment.

*Keywords:* Gangster films, film history, gender, race

## Introduction

*Scarface: The Shame of the Nation*, produced and directed in 1932 Pre-Code era, is a controversial film of meaning and raw material, whereas in 2013 post-Hays Code *Gangster Squad* is a film made for entertainment with artificial material. *Scarface* is a novel and film based on real-life Italian gangster Al Capone, who ran a multimillion-dollar Chicago operation consisting of prostitution, bootlegging, and gambling. The film shows all acts of violence from hand-to-hand combat to real life gun use and explosives. Producer Howard Hughes directed *Scarface* as originally raw with material of showing sex, drugs, "nudity" showing of arms and legs, real-life explosives, and guns, and with little censorship to address the issues of unemployment and crime caused by the Great Depression and Prohibition. This raw material was unacceptable during and after the making of *Scarface*, as it encouraged the passing of the Hays Code in 1934. *Gangster Squad* was directed by Ruben Fleischer with intent for entertaining the public while bringing Italian mobster Mickey Cohen's story to life. *Scarface* is told from the perspective of Italian gangster Antonio "Tony" Camonte, played by Austro-Hungarian actor Paul Muni. The film's content contained little presence of law enforcement and a subtle incestuous interest between Camonte and his sister. In the 2013 film, the audience experiences the perspective of the 1940s L.A.P.D. secretive police unit as actor Josh Brolin whose character Lieutenant John O'Mara creates a squad to remove Cohen from his criminal empire.

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Actor Paul Muni was an immigrant from Austria-Hungary who became an actor later to film *Scarface* (and various others) as an Italian gangster racially profiling and stereotyping people of Italian origin. *Gangster Squad*, made in 2013, by contrast is told from the perspective of law enforcement officers who planned to take down Italian mobster Mickey Cohen. The 2013 film is not as raw, realistic, and racist as *Scarface*, but provides a unique perspective of how the empire of gangsters fell that changed society, later to implement new laws on sex/drug trafficking. It, too, was based on a novel about the real-life Los Angeles secretive police unit, but solely produced into a film for excitement and entertainment. By comparing and contrasting *Scarface: Shame of the Nation* and *Gangster Squad*, both films' major differences outweigh each other's similarities based on the roles race and gender play, the purpose for filmmaking, and the differences in perspective/period. These factors overrule the similarities in a change overtime.

### **Starring the Italian Gangsters and Gangster Squad**

Both *Scarface* and *Gangster Squad* are based on real-life people from the 1930s and 1940s. *Scarface* was based on Chicago's Italian gangster Al Capone, who was arrested for income-tax evasion in 1931 but never indicted for his racketeering. Like Al Capone, Tony Camonte is a ruthless gangster who impulsively acts to get what he wants without thinking of the consequences. Camonte made his way to the top through violence as the scene of an assassination of seven Irish gangsters replicated the famous 1929 historical event the St. Valentine's Day Massacre when Capone ordered the assassination of seven rivals. Camonte represents Capone historically, but Hughes censored the name *Scarface* to keep the facts from being "too closely" associated with the real-life Italian gangster. *Gangster Squad* is the opposite of *Scarface* and addresses the issues of sex and drug trafficking that still happen in the twenty-first century. The film is based on the real-life Los Angeles secret police unit who sought to bring Italian mobster Mickey Cohen to justice in 1949. The L.A. secretive police unit was originally called the *Gangster Squad*, and like *Scarface*, the book became a live-action film.

World War II veteran Sergeant John O'Mara played by Josh Brolin was the leader of the secretive police unit before FBI investigators acknowledged the mafia's existences. O'Mara recruited his friend/fellow war veteran Sergeant Jerry Wooters (Ryan Gosling) and a few others that include a black man and another of Mexican descent. The Gangster Squad was created to bring the Brooklyn prize fighter Mickey Cohen (Sean Penn) and others associated with him to justice. It was the war against organized crime, sex, and drug trafficking in 1949. The source material, *Gangster Squad: Covert Cops, the Mob, and the Battle for Los Angeles*, was written by journalist Paul Liberman, who interviewed the people involved in the unit.

### **Uncensored vs. Censored**

*Scarface* is a bold, raw, and violently brutal gangster film that could not compare to 1932's *The Public Enemy*. Hughes continued the admiration for gangster films but went to the next level with raw scenes of the anti-heroes who took matters into their own hands. During the Great Depression, many people were living in poverty and middle-class workers were becoming unemployed. The increase in filmmaking helped the American people escape from the stressful reality of unemployment and everyday life caused by the Great Depression. It is believed that some people may have taken an interest in joining the gangsters out of desperation for survival. Before the Great Depression hit in 1929, Prohibition (1920-1933) was in effect banning all all exportation and

importation of alcohol. The government believed that banning alcohol would “reduce crime and corruption, solve social problems, reduce the tax burden created by prisons and poorhouses, and improve health and hygiene in America” (Thornton 1991, p. 1). However, the passing of the Eighteenth Amendment was a failure as “it led many drinkers to switch to opium, marijuana, patent medicines, cocaine, and other dangerous substances” (Thornton, 1991, p. 1) as shown throughout *Gangster Squad*; in the 1940s, drug-use became a bigger issue post-Prohibition. Prohibition caused an increase of what became organized crime and drug-use and an increase in prisons and jail cells space. Hughes explicitly did not censor the issues of Prohibition as Camonte bullies’ bars in South Chicago to only order liquor from his boss Johnny Lovo’s (Osgood Perkins) alcohol bootlegging business.

The *Gangster Squad* was created post-Prohibition in 1949; mobsters were no longer bootlegging alcohol but found drug-use and prostitution as an illegal economic transaction that increased their power. Unlike Hughes’s production, *Gangster Squad* took a serious and modern approach to censorship, retaining the names of the real-life characters and producing artificial explosions/tommy guns that were unacceptable during the Hays Code Era. Director Ruben Fleischer was interviewed by Kevin McCarthy who asked the question, “What interested you about the gangster Mickey Cohen, and what did you do to stay true to his story?” (Warner Bros. ME, 2013). Fleischer explains that Cohen’s story had never been told and believed his life story was important to put on film with a few alternatives to the end of Cohen. The director and production company placed Cohen’s “reality” into the film, but heightened it with car-chases, explosions, shoot-outs, and romance; “As far as truth versus fiction, we make no bones about the fact that this is entertainment not a documentary. We wanted to make it as exciting and fun as possible” (Warner Bros. ME, 2013). The production of *Gangster Squad* took place in a different atmosphere than that of *Scarface*. In the 1930s, technology was not up to the task of making artificial explosions, thus there were realistic shoot outs and explosions happening on the set of *Scarface* that would not be accepted in today’s filmmaking. *Gangster Squad* was made in 2013 as an entertainment film filled with excitement, whereas *Scarface* was intense and realistic, addressing political and social problems. Thus, both films are similarly made in the entertainment industry as a thriller, and the audience’s excitement for the sex, shoot-outs, and explosions.

Hughes’s production intended for the film to address the social issues of unemployment and crime rising caused by Prohibition and the Great Depression, but instead, led to a censorship battle. Media Historian Chris Yogerst’s article “Hughes, Hawks, and Hays: The Monumental Censorship Battle Over *Scarface* (1932)” argues that headline-driven crime films connect the social problem of demands and qualities in modern life between the audience and gangsters. Hughes believed the audience was no different from gangsters who lived to survive in unfortunate conditions. Unemployment was on the rise—leading to the uprising of crime—and gangsterism happened to be the way to survive through the Great Depression. Yogerst notes, Hughes’s film was based on facts of how American society had rapidly changed and produced a contemporary crime film with sex, nudity, guns, explosives, and addressing the issues of society producing raw material that “revealed” the hard truth during the 1930s. He knew “a film about a living gangster may come with complications” (Yogerst, 2017, p. 135), yet continued to make the film with little censorship of violence and depicting an incestuous relationship.

### **Uncensored Incest and Misgyony**

In a few scenes, the audience is shown the relationship between Camonte and his sister Cesca, played by Ann Dvorak, and how it evolves throughout the film. For example, Camonte rips Cesca’s strap from her dress

when arguing with her about dancing with another man in the nightclub, this strongly hints at Camonte's incestuous interest in Cesca. In the ending scene, Camonte's desire for Cesca presents itself as he appears at the door of his best friend/hitman Rinaldo (George Raft) and finds Cesca and him together. Without thinking, Camonte immediately pulls out a gun killing Rinaldo in front of Cesca and fleeing from the crime scene. With Camonte's consuming jealousy, this reveals his subtle incestuous interest in his sister. After the killing of Rinaldo, Cesca later finds her brother fighting off the police in his home. She enters pointing a gun at Camonte upset for killing her fiancé but soon realizes how much she is in love with her brother, quickly joining him in his heroic battle against the police. As Cesca joins her brother, she develops an admiration for him as it subtly reveals her incestuous interest in Camonte. The subtle visibility of incest was acceptable to society as it was no concern to the Censors and Howard Hawks. The article, "Mean Streets: Death and Disfiguration in Hawks's *Scarface*," by Asbjorn Gronstad discusses the paradox of *Scarface* as its deep structure of the narrative logically and impulsively forms a hysterical plot of self-effacement and ethics of emasculation. Gronstad is out of two historians who discuss the incestuous interest between Camonte and Cesca's subtle incestual scenes that were purposefully written by screenwriters; "As Hawks himself discloses in an interview with Peter Bogdanovich, the conception of the relationship between Camonte and Cesca in plainly incestuous terms was a conscious decision on part of the scriptwriters" (Gronstad, 2003, p. 400). Gronstad further explains the inspiration for the incestuous relation was "the Borgia family [who] in [the] late 15th century Italy [was] a model for those relations. [Ben] Hecht even refers to Cesca as a 'Borgian wench'..." (Gronstad, 2003, p. 400). This is misogynistic and racially reinforces pre-conceived notions that lead to a later stereotype about Italian families who were bound to become gangsters and incestuous. Film Historian Jonathan Munby states, "*Scarface*, building on its predecessors takes the problem of the gangster's sexuality to a new level of intensity through the suggestion of incest" (Munby, 1999, p. 57). Hawks and Hughes knew the script writers purposely wrote the incestual relationship into the script but had no means to change it. Hughes wanted a production that was "more daring—something with more basis in history" (Smyth, 2004, p. 552), but the relationship between Camonte and Cesca had gone too far. Family was important to Camonte, but it portrays on another level beyond familial relationships, and its issue was overlooked by the Censors making it an exception to society and the Hollywood Industry. As *Gangster Squad*'s production was for entertainment, the scenes in *Scarface* of the incestuous relation were also for entertainment but historically the film was racially profiling and misogynizing Italian immigrants.

In *Gangster Squad*, the audience is introduced to the fiery, red head Grace Faraday, played by Emma Stone, the love interest of Sgt. Jerry Wooters and Cohen's social etiquette teacher/quasi-lover. Cohen and Faraday are not closely related, nor does it indicate an incestuous interest. Faraday's dream was to become an actress but did not work out well for her until Cohen offered to take care of her in exchange to teach him etiquettes. In an interview with Emma Stone, she states that Faraday wanted attention a reason for becoming an actress, to be loved, and someone to take care of her but eventually led her to a dangerous criminal (Tribute Movies, 2013). In *Scarface*, Camonte has a love interest, a prize trophy Poppy played by Karen Morley. Camonte and Poppy's relationship builds throughout the film as they both go behind Lovo's back to see each other. Camonte later kills his boss Lovo taking over his bootlegging company and girl Poppy. The similarities between both films are the taking of the love interest from a/another gangster except Camonte is the gangster and Wooters is the police officer. Wooters and Faraday's relationship builds throughout the film as Faraday continues to see Wooters

behind Cohen's back. Their complicated relationship begins to escalate as Faraday later warns Wooters that he will be killed if Cohen found out about their secret relationship. As for Camonte, he consequently sees Poppy without thinking twice and is almost killed by Lovo who is unsuccessful. However, this does not compare to the incestuous interest that is subtly visible throughout *Scarface*. An incestual relationship would not be accepted in today's entertainment as it is viewed as a prevalence of child sexual abuse between a father and daughter and sometimes between a brother and sister. The scriptwriters, Hawks, and Hughes production's passionate message based on a crime within a crime created a relationship that is now unacceptable as unethical in the twenty-first century culture of filmmaking.

Thus, the similarity between the two films produces a social issue that has not been addressed extensively. In both films, misogyny and sexualization are alive and well as the characters Grace Faraday and Cesca are scripted as helpless women in need of attention and love. Misogyny has become a major theme throughout gangster films, but little sources discuss about *Scarface* or *Gangster Squads* misogynistic characters. Camonte's misogynistic character gets jealous of other men and prevents Cesca from seeing them by bribing and reminding her that no one else can take care of her other than Camonte himself. Sometime in the film, Camonte catches Cesca kissing another guy and becomes upset with her, and tells her, he does not want other men kissing or touching his sister. Cesca laughs, "You are missing out on the fun" (Hawks, 1932). She attempts to make a joke as if it is no big deal until her brother grasps her arm tightly expressing his disappointment. Cesca expresses that he is hurting her arm but does not let go. She also expresses his behavior toward her that sometimes he acts more than just a brother but is immediately cut off by him. In this instant, it is believed that Camonte not only has an incestuous interest toward her but that his misogynistic persona is revealed when she expresses pain. After Camonte has calmed down, he pulls out a wad of cash to woe over Cesca and hands her money, "Listen, you want the real fun huh? Here, how's that?" (Hawks, 1932). She is shocked by the sudden act and questions him about where it came from. He proceeds to tell her that she should pay no mind of where it came from and spend it on herself following, "Remember, you do what I say. No more fellas, understand?" (Hawks, 1932). Cesca is left speechless as she makes no promises to Camonte. Camonte's words alone indicate that the money given was a wager to keep her obedient and loyal to him.

In the 1930s, the masculine ideal was that men were the breadwinners of the family while the women were the domestic, obedient gender to the men who provide for them. Throughout the production of *Scarface*, Hughes was like any other 1930s filmmaker and man who thought subordination of women was normal, but it is not a part of the message he was trying to convey to the audience. The misogyny in the scenes is "popular culture [in] cinema...[that] renders more visible the relation between gender constructions and social misogyny" (Humm, 1997, p. 69). Camonte hopes that Cesca would obey him by giving her money, but in other scenes she disobeys him, and he becomes outraged. Poppy the non-incestuous love interest is considered a sexual prize winner for Camonte. When they first meet, it is in Lovo's home where she resides with him. Camonte does not keep his sexual attraction to Poppy a secret and says, "Hey, that purdy hot" (Hawks, 1932), to Lovo. The word "that" indicates Camonte sees Poppy as an object, a trophy to be won. Lovo pays no mind and introduces Camonte to Poppy as she responds by giving an attitude of uninterest and continues about her business. As Lovo and Camonte continue discussing business, Camonte does not stop looking in Poppy's direction as a sexualized object to add to his collection of women.

*Gangster Squad*'s misogyny is subtly geared toward sexual visuals and conversations that exchange innuendos. The director is not interviewed over the social problems but discusses the film's content was for entertainment. Faraday is a feisty woman who is consistently being taken care of by Cohen and Wooters. Faraday is the only female character who is sexualized and misogynized whereas Sgt. O'Mara's wife Connie O'Mara, played by Mireille Enos, is an empowering, intellectual figure who helps her husband find the right people for the unit. Unfortunately, Faraday is not an empowering figure as she dresses as a pristine Roaring Twenties woman who Cohen provides for. She is first introduced as the lover of Cohen as she enters a speakeasy with her arm wrapped around his. Wooters notices Faraday with Cohen as she enters wearing a red dress capturing his eye. Faraday excuses herself to take a smoke at the bar and Wooters follows her. He introduces himself as Jerry Wooters a bible salesperson that piqued her interest. They continue a flirtatious conversation, as Faraday asks, "What's your racket handsome?" (Trung, 2015) curious of his motive for pursuing her. Wooters replies, "Mostly I like to play games" (Trung, 2015). She then becomes suspicious asking what kind of games, Wooter replies with a sexual innuendo then bluntly says, "I was just hoping to take you to bed" (Trung, 2015). Wooters' sexual attraction to Faraday began when he saw her wearing a red dress; in American popular culture, women who wore red are perceived more attractive and open to sexual advances. In another scene, Cohen's misogynistic persona reveals himself as he reminds Faraday of his control and power. Cohen and Faraday are dancing in the speakeasy as he begins the conversation with a story about his life as a longtime gangster who rose to power. Cohen only speaks to Faraday reminding her of his power and control over Los Angeles, but that he too has her in the palm of his hand. It then cuts to a scene of Wooters on his way to kill Cohen and makes eye contact with Faraday as she frantically shakes her head in fear (Zyky33, 2013), but Wooters is immediately stopped. The scene was not just about power and money, it was a misogynistic approach that reminded Faraday she cannot run from Cohen because she is inferior to him. Both films obtain the same representation of women such as visual sex objectifications, visual misogyny, sexual innuendos toward Grace Faraday and Cesca, and "the incorporating masculine violence" (Humm, 1997, p. 30). "This masculinist dynamic and the corresponding subordination...of women had been accepted traits of the genre" (Monk, 1999, p. 173). Gangster films are incredibly known for their misogynistic characters who sexualize and domesticate women; *Scarface* and *Gangster Squad* are no exception.

### **The Change and Treatment in Ethnic Roles in Gangster Films**

In most films, there are inclusions of race as the person of color is given the role to portray a character of their race or ethnicity in the twenty-first century casting. But in the 1930s, some roles of ethnical characters portrayed as monsters or human-like creatures racially profile them as criminals or freaks like in *Island of Lost Souls* as the creatures personify African Americans with features of black face. *Scarface*, and any other gangster films, are notorious for racially profiling people who are of Italian origins casting them as the villains. The idea of using Italian origins for gangster films was inspired by "the novel *Scarface* by Armitage Trail and clearly inspired by the life events of the Brooklyn-born gangster of Italian descent Al Capone [which is] made explicit reference to criminal organisations [*sic*]" (Keating, 2016, p. 108). But filmmakers were not concerned of the women rather "adult men of Italian origins living in the US [*sic*]" (Keating, 2016, p. 108) were targeted. Because Al Capone was an Italian immigrant living in the United States, filmmakers present Italian males as potential criminals. As

misogyny is not conveyed into Hughes's message, neither was racism, as it was normalized in the 1930s and a major difference compared to *Gangster Squad*.

Other ethnicities were also racialized not only on screen but cast as monsters, human-like creatures, or violent gangsters. In film history, "the media can play a role not only in exoticizing other cultures but also in normalizing them" (Shohat, 1995, p. 168). The role of Tony Camonte was given to Paul Muni (born as Frederick Meshilem Meier Weisenfreund) an Austro-Hungarian immigrant who won the Academy Award for Best Actor for his role in 1936 film *The Story of Louis Pasteur* and a Tony Award for Best Actor in a play for his role in 1955 *Inherit the Wind*. Muni may have been successful but does not mean he was racialized. He was not of Italian origin just another ethnical man who was not part of white society. The "dominant cinema is fond of turning 'dark' or Third World peoples into substitutable others, interchangeable units who can 'stand in' for one another" (Shohat, 1995, p. 171). Although Muni did not play a character from a Third World country or African/Native American in *Scarface*, he was an Austro-Hungarian actor substituting a role as an Italian man. This is racist as a "brute material level of literal self-representation" (Shohat, 1995, p. 171) that keep minority actors from receiving roles of their origin. Cultural historian Ella Shohat (1995) states, "The racist idea that a film, to be economically viable, must use a 'universal' (that is, white) star, reveals the imbrication of economics and racism" (p. 171). Muni passes as a white man due to the color of his skin but does not mean his ethnic background was never considered. For example, Muni played a nineteenth century French author Émile Zola from *Life of Émile Zola*, in another, he played a Chinese farmer Wang Lung from *The Good Earth*. Like other film productions, the racist production of *Scarface* exoticize their actors by casting them into roles not of their origin, different from *Gangster Squad*'s representation of the minority.

The *Gangster Squad* is made up of mostly white men, however, black actor Anthony Mackie plays the role of Coleman Harris, a black cop, and Latino actor Michael Peña plays the role of Navidad Ramirez, a Latino sidekick to Max Kennard. Navidad is the only Latino who is seen in the entire film of *Gangster Squad* who works alongside Max Kennard played by Robert Patrick. Actor Peña discusses in an interview with The Youth Folks about how exciting it was that his character was the only Latino in the entire film. Peña is then asked which his favorite scene was to shoot, he explains that a lot of scenes were his favorite and describes the relationship between the white actors and minority actors when they were together; "Us together like joking and joking. But it got to be distracting sometimes, but it was awesome. I really enjoyed shooting this movie" (The Youth Folk, 2013). Although Peña's character was at first not allowed to participate in the *Gangster Squad* due to the lack of experience with guns and Kennard believing Ramirez was not ready for such action. This part of the film is the least bit racist as Kennard explains that Navidad could barely shoot his target when they first met but is still learning. In a sense, it can be argued that Ramirez is being racialized as an incapable Mexican man who cannot shoot a gun to save a life but that is untrue. The audience sees Ramirez grow into a strong character throughout the film, and at the end, Ramirez becomes a police officer.

Anthony Mackie's experience filming *Gangster Squad* was enjoyable to him as he explains their friendship on set. In a group interview with other cast members, Mackie answers the question of how their friendship developed on set, he says, "It started on a mutual level of respect. I mean everyone knew everybody's work, everyone knew who the other person was, and this was a movie truly built on a solid cast" (ScreenSlam, 2013). Mackie continues to explain that everyone respected each other and mutually knew that everyone knew how to

act that forged their relationship. Everyone respected each other as actors, co-stars, and humans despite skin color. Mackie's character Coleman Harris is introduced as an iconic black police officer who was skillful in the art of throwing knives. This was not to make Harris seem like a monster rather a skillful police officer in the 1940s Los Angeles who was recruited in the Gangster Squad for his talent. A scene of Sgt. O'Mara walking into an all-black speakeasy looks specifically for Harris to recruit him into the unit, but witnesses Harris catching drug dealers. As O'Mara enters the speakeasy, the audience feels the racial tension between O'Mara, a white police officer, and the black people in the speakeasy. In the 1940s, segregation was still in effect and seeing a white man enter an all-black speakeasy was no comfort to the people. Racial tension is also felt when O'Mara speaks with Harris, but without hesitation Harris agrees to be part of a secret operative. This did not mean there were racist intentions thus it was seeking a skillful police officer for a dangerous job despite their skin color. Both Harris and Ramirez were introduced in an iconic way that is unforgettable in gangster film history. In today's filmmaking, roles are now given to those who come from a certain origin to play the role of their ethnicity. The racial substitution for ethnic roles has been fought for many years and now in many modern-day films a Latino character is played by a Latino actor, etc. The production of *Gangster Squad* includes the right minority actors to play characters of their ethnical origins whereas *Scarface* exploited both the actor and character.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the differences between *Scarface* and *Gangster Squad* are greater than the similarities. The raw material in the production of *Scarface* was not dramatic as it seemed in the 1930s compared to what is filmed today. It is based on the perspective of Italian gangster Tony Camonte who was ruthless, creepy, and incestual. *Scarface* was made in the 1930s during the causation from Prohibition to the Great Depression. These two historical events are what inspired Hughes to produce a film that addresses the issues of increased crime and unemployment. However, gangster filmmaking in the twenty-first century is now produced as entertainment rather than conveying a message as the director of the 2013 *Gangster Squad* explains the inspiration for the film. The drastic film was never to convey a message only to entertain the audience of a true story based on the perspective of the Los Angeles secretive police unit and gangster Mickey Cohen. The burning social theme such as racism in both films create a major difference of how minority actors are treated and presented. The similarities of both films are scripted about a gangster, both sexualize and misogynize women, both based on novels written by journalists, and the audience's purpose for watching the films as entertainment; but these similarities are not greater than the differences.

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