



INTERSECTIONAL FEMINISM AND THE WOMAN SPECTATOR: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

To what extent does a woman relate to the female on screen when she sits in front of it? Who establishes her image in the public eye and what misogynistic roles suppress her individuality both on and off screen? Many feminist cinema theorists have written extensively about the evolution of the female spectator throughout the years, including Diana Anselmo, Laura Mulvey, and bell hooks. However, a recurring issue in this lengthy discussion is the junction of multiple identities. This investigation is made more complex by intersectional feminism, which acknowledges that racial, class, and gender intersections all influence how women watch. This study uses intersectionality theory to conduct a critical analysis of movies such as *La Souriante Mme Beudet* (1923), *Stella Dallas* (1937), *Imitation of Life* (1959), *La Noire de...* (1966), and *Thelma and Louise* (1991) through the lenses of psychoanalysis, feminist theory, post-colonialist theory, and critical race theory. This theoretical framework challenges and examines the ways in which films uphold or question societal injustices in addition to illuminating the ways in which women from diverse backgrounds interact with the medium.

Keywords

Woman, Spectatorship, Intersectionality, Female, Psychoanalysis

Introduction

Feminist film theory has long been applied to how women are portrayed in cinema and how women experience watching movies. One particularly interesting area of study is the woman spectator. Who is she, and how has her viewing habits evolved over time? Intersectional feminism takes a more nuanced approach to this issue, acknowledging that the female spectator is a complex junction of identities, experiences, and perspectives. Intersectionality theory takes a multidisciplinary approach, drawing on psychoanalysis, feminism, postcolonialism, critical racism, audience response, ethnography, cultivation, queerness, and other ideas. Intersectionality as a theory underpinning this study will be employed in the critical analysis of Manthia Diawara's "Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance" (1975), Diana Anselmo-Sequeira's "Screen-Struck: The Invention of the Movie Girl Fan," (2015), Miriam Hansen's "Pleasure, Ambivalence, Identification: Valentino and Female Spectatorship" (1984), Karen Hollinger's "Feminist Film theory" (2012), Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1967), bell hooks' "Oppositional gaze" (1992), through psychoanalytic, feminist, post-colonialist, and critical race purview. This paper focuses on the intersection of gender, race, and class, in *La Souriante Mme Beudet* (Germaine Dulac, 1923) *Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, 1937), *Imitation of life* (Douglas Sirk, 1959), *La Noire de...* (Sembene Ousmane, 1966), and *Thelma and Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991).

According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, "Intersectionality can be defined as the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups". This theory was first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) in "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" to address the multiple layers of oppression black women face in the society (Ferree, 2018; Phoenix, 2006). This theory however has soon created a buzz in feminist discourse as it has spread broader to encompass sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, disability, etc., (Poletti 2023). All these different forms of social stratification provide a niched scrutiny of discrimination an individual faces.

Intersectional praxis in film studies is essential for creating a more just and equitable world. Intersectional theory helps us to understand how the identities of filmmakers and spectators shape the films that are made and

how they are received. For example, an intersectional feminist analysis of film spectatorship might consider how the experiences of women spectators of various race and class differ from those of male spectators (Diawara, 1975).

Secondly, intersectional theory helps us to identify and critique the ways in which film can perpetuate or challenge oppression (Jacob 2021, Foster, 1930). This analysis helps us to identify films that reinforce harmful stereotypes and biases, as well as films that challenge the status quo and promote social justice. Thirdly, intersectional theory helps us to envision new possibilities for filmmaking and film spectatorship. By challenging traditional paradigms and giving voice to marginalized experiences, intersectional feminist film scholars and filmmakers are working to create a more inclusive and equitable film culture.

Historical Perspective

To understand the invention of the woman spectator, it is important to take a deep dive into historical construction of female imagery. Where did her misrepresented identity stem from? For whom does this imagery appeal to? In the second episode of "Ways of Seeing", John Berger (1927) conducts a profound exploration of the representation of the female nude in art and its intricate relationship with the spectator. His assertion revolves round the idea that traditional Western art, especially oil paintings, has consistently conveyed women as objects designed for visual pleasure. Berger firmly asserts that this portrayal of the female nude is deeply ingrained in a culture that has historically upheld the privilege and dominance of men.

Throughout the episode, Berger engages in a meticulous analysis of renowned artworks, including Jean-Auguste Ingres' "La Grande Odalisque" (1814), Sandro Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus" (1485) and Édouard Manet's "Luncheon on the grass" and "Olympia (1863)". These paintings feature women with exaggerated, idealized proportions, crafted to cater for the male gaze and perpetuate the notion that women exist primarily to be gazed upon, admired, and ultimately serve as objects of desire. Berger (1927) also confronts the issue of the commodification of women's bodies, underscoring how the depiction of female nudity in art fosters a prevailing uniformity that signifies the availability of women for sexual gratification.

A pivotal moment in this documentary is the thought-provoking roundtable discussion with five women spectators who provide their unique perspective on these art representations. They assert that the exaggerated portrayal of female bodies in these paintings is incongruous with their self-image, and they do not derive pleasure from scrutinizing such depictions. This segment serves as a powerful commentary on the disparity between the idealized representation of women in art and the multifaceted realities of women's lives. It lays the foundation for a broader exploration of the impact of visual artistic representation on cinema, and the enduring impact of these historical depictions on contemporary perceptions of women's bodies and agency.

The mid 19th century ushered in a new era of female fandom through the intersection of gender and age, particularly among young girls who idolized onscreen divas. This phenomenon echoed the past era of "the stage-struck girl," who avidly attended theatrical plays and yearned for the spotlight. At the time, some of these young girls went to great lengths, even abandoning their homes, schools, and menial jobs, in pursuit of careers in vaudeville shows (Anselmo, 2015). While newspapers, journals, and magazines created advice columns to condemn these seemingly reckless acts, this uprising marked the beginning of a shift towards screen-struck girlhood.

By the 20th century, a transition from stage-struck to screen-struck girlhood occurred, largely due to the industrialization of American cinema. Young girls and adolescent teenagers increasingly self-identified as the most ardent movie fans with obsessive emotional attachment. Additionally, the film industry played a role in demanding a more passionate and engaged audience. Girl fans were given more opportunities to express their affection for their favorite stars, solidifying the association between young women and movie fandom. However, from a critical feminist standpoint, these girl fans used their newfound visibility to challenge stereotypes of femininity and assert their agency, demonstrating that they were not passive consumers but active participants in shaping their own identities (Anselmo, 2015).

Sequel to this new change and the metamorphosis of movie fandom, the 1920s marked a time of shifting gender norms and sexual liberation, which influenced the complexities of female engagement with Valentino's films. A similar example of this female obsessive fanaticism is the relationship between the iconic silent film star, Rudolph Valentino and his female fans, who experience a range of complex emotions, including pleasure, ambivalence, and identification. This ambivalence stemmed from Valentino's ability to embody both traditional masculinity and vulnerability (Hansen, 2012). His sensuality challenged traditional gender roles, creating a space for these women to explore and express their desires and anxieties. Valentino's star image intersected with female spectators' experiences, offering a nuanced perspective on the interplay of celebrity and gender. This intersection provides a more comprehensive understanding of how female spectatorship is shaped by cultural and star-specific influences.

From 1930s-1940s, race, class and queer discourse started to gain momentum. This period of cinema is marked by the production of films that reflected and reinforced societal norms and power dynamics, including issues related to gender, race, class, and sexuality, which focus on the lives of middle-class, white women,

reflecting their struggles and aspirations. There was a significant racial bias. Non-white characters were typically portrayed using racial stereotypes. African American actors were often relegated to supporting roles, playing maids, or other subservient positions. Films like *Imitation of Life* (1959) reflected the deeply embedded racism of the time. Class disparities were a central theme in many films. Movies like *Stella Dallas* (1937) highlighted the struggles of working-class Americans during the Great Depression. Some films of this era, particularly those featuring strong and independent female leads, providing a sense of empowerment and social commentary were often subjected to debate (Hollinger, 2012).

The mid-20th century marked a period of significant social change, including the civil rights movement and first wave feminist activism. Women from diverse backgrounds began to participate in the cinema. White middle-class women might have seen themselves as passive subjects, but women of color were often excluded from mainstream cinema and had to forge their own spaces for cinematic engagement. Feminist black scholars began critiquing filmic misrepresentation/erasure of women of color. Conversations around the "Othered woman" became a central theme and women of color started to take the central stage/lead roles.

The second wave of feminism (1960s-1980s) brought forth the notion of the active female spectator who sought to deconstruct the dominant male gaze. Feminist film theory, led by scholars like Laura Mulvey, examined the ways women were portrayed and how the male gaze objectified them. Mulvey's essay entitled "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1967) delves into the influence of psychoanalytic theory, particularly that of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, to examine the concept of the "male gaze" in cinema. She explores phallogocentric ideas rooted in Freud's analysis of castration anxiety and the lack of the phallus as a symbol of power. In a phallogocentric society, women are relegated to the position of bearers of meaning, not makers of meaning, due to their perceived lack of agency. The second part of her essay focuses on scopophilia, linking it to the act of going to the cinema and the male audience's identification with the idealized male ego on screen. She highlights how women in cinema are often presented as objects of erotic spectacle for both the male lead and the audience. In the third part, Mulvey discusses the role of women in classic Hollywood cinema, where the pleasure of looking is divided between the active/male and passive/female.

Mulvey concludes her essay by suggesting an inquiry into disrupting the male gaze through alternative camera techniques, potentially challenging the illusion of realism in filmmaking. She acknowledges that film directors may not purposefully aim to degrade women but that the unconscious act of the male gaze reflects the patriarchal order in society. Mulvey's essay also prompts an exploration of the possibility of a female gaze to counteract the male gaze, though she notes that such films have faced challenges and often depict women in a utopian or hierarchical society. She highlights the male-dominated nature of the film industry, where men hold key creative roles, influencing the prevalence of the male gaze in cinema. However, these discussions predominantly centered on the experiences of white, heterosexual women, leaving out the voices of women with different sexual orientations and women of color.

From the late 20th century to present, intersectional feminist theory emerged as a response to these exclusions. It emphasizes that a woman's experience of cinema is profoundly influenced by the intersection of her various identities. The "woman spectator" is not a single entity but a diverse collective of individuals with distinct experiences. It acknowledges the unique struggles and perspectives of women who are not only women but also people of color, LGBTQ+, social class, disabled, and other experiences that further alienates the female lead from the society. Scholars like Diawara and hooks respond to Mulvey's essay with a critical scrutiny of the whiteness and masculinity that has long existed in classic Hollywood movies (Diawara 1975, hooks 1992).

Diawara (1975) argues that Mulvey's concept of the male gaze assumes that the spectator is white and male, and that it ignores the fact that black spectators have different viewing experiences. He contends that black spectators are often positioned as "others" or "inferior" to the white male gaze, and that their experiences are shaped by the intersection of race, gender, and class. An important component of Diawara's thesis is his analysis of how Black viewers have traditionally worked around the constraints placed on how Black characters are portrayed in mainstream movies. He draws attention to how racial stereotypes are pervasive and how Black actors have few opportunities, which frequently reinforces unfavorable perceptions. Diawara used movies such as D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *The Soldier Story* to highlight the pervasive racism in early Hollywood and its effects on Black audience. Diawara also touches on the significance of resistance in Black spectatorship. He points out that Black viewers have used film as a tool for resistance, taking ownership of their stories and rejecting or reinterpreting them in order to gain agency, pushing back negative narratives.

In response to Diawara and Mulvey's theories of spectatorship, bell hooks in "Oppositional Gaze" (1992) argues that cinema not only prioritizes the white male gaze but also excludes black women from the equation. She asserts that black female spectators adopt an oppositional gaze that disrupts existing feminist film discourse. For black female spectators, cinema becomes a source of visual pleasure that invites interrogation rather than passive consumption. hooks' argument hinges on the idea that the pervasiveness of racism and sexism in Hollywood cinema denies black women the status of desirable objects, effectively erasing them from the phallogocentric spectacle. Consequently, black female spectators engage with films not through a conventional gaze of admiration but through a lens of inquiry and interrogation.

In other words, black female spectatorship is not about identifying with or desiring the objects of the screen, but rather about challenging the power structures and representations that perpetuate marginalization and exclusion. By actively questioning and deconstructing the visual narratives presented in cinema, black female spectators reclaim their own agency and assert their presence within the cinematic landscape.

This reframing of black female spectatorship highlights the importance of considering the intersection of race, gender, and viewing experiences. It also underscores the need for a more inclusive and nuanced approach to feminist film discourse, one that acknowledges the diverse perspectives and experiences of all spectators.

Post-feminist theorists have argued for a possibility of a female gaze, but Mulvey responds by asserting that it is almost impossible to have a female gaze since it uses the same language, technique as the male gaze which is constructed by patriarchy. For Mulvey, focus should be drawn to the plot, editing and identity structure.

Intersectionality in the Selected Filmic Narratives

This category critically examines the theory of intersectionality in *La Souriante Mme Beudet* (Germaine Dulac, 1923), *Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, 1937), *Imitation of life* (Douglas Sirk, 1959), *La Noire de...* (Sembene Ousmane, 1966), and *Thelma and Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991). These movies were carefully selected from different spatial and temporal settings to investigate the historical progression of woman representation in cinema from different cultural backgrounds. Using the intersectional feminist lens, this paper focuses on the intersection of gender, race, and class in the selected visual narratives.

The silent film *La Souriante Mme Beudet* (Germaine Dulac, 1923), offers a unique perspective on intersectionality, particularly through the lens of gender and class. While the concept of intersectionality, as coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, wasn't a known term during the film's creation, the film does touch upon several interlocking forms of oppression. The film primarily revolves around the life of the titular character, Madame Beudet, a middle-class woman stuck in an unhappy marriage with her oppressive and insensitive husband. Her experiences highlight the intersection of gender, class and psychological struggles. She's trapped not only by her husband but also by societal expectations of women in her social class.

We are first introduced to the character's revolt to the societal norm through her husband's point of view of her. As the movie progresses, we see how her rebellious act is depicted through the framing and sequence. Dulac uses chiaroscuro lighting to create a sense of mystery and unease, distorted images to represent Mme Beudet's inner turmoil and her fantasy. The filmmaker also employs extreme close-ups to focus on Mme Beudet's facial expressions, as a way of inviting the audience to identify with her fantasy and silence is used to create a sense of isolation and despair. These techniques complicate the struggles of Mme Beudet and reminds the female spectator that the quest to challenging the social norm is a daunting task that affects the physical, emotional, and mental state of an individual.

Addressing the issues of mental health, an aspect of intersectionality that is often overlooked in classic cinema, Madame Beudet's psychological distress and her responses to her oppressive environment reflect how her gender, class, and emotional well-being intersect to create a complex portrayal of her character. The film effectively uses the domestic space as a backdrop to illustrate Madame Beudet's entrapment. For example, the oscillating movement of the flower positioned on the table between her husband and herself shows the conflicting power dynamics. In scenes where Mme Beudet wasn't present, objects like her favorite piano and the baby doll like serve as her representation. The confinement she feels in her home serves as a metaphor for her intersectional oppression, where her class, gender, and mental well-being intersect to keep her in a stifling environment.

Madame Beudet's husband's oppressive behavior, including playing a practical joke on her with a loaded gun, highlights the power dynamics in their marriage. The film explores how women, particularly those in higher social classes, could be trapped in oppressive relationships, subtly challenging societal gender norms and expectations of the time. The ambiguity of the last scene, where her husband mistakenly fired the gun without knowing it was loaded reminds the female spectator that the only way of escapism is death. Madame Beudet's desire for more out of life and her emotional depth contrast with the limited roles typically assigned to women in early 20th-century society. It is also important to note that if the male gaze were to be reversed in terms of Mme Beudet's Point of View, it can be said to be categorized under the female gaze since it potentially explores the unconscious mind of Mme Beudet in opposition to the patriarchy.

In King Vidor's *Stella Dallas* (1937), a classic example of the maternal melodrama genre, tells the story of Stella Martin, a lower-class woman who marries Stephen Dallas, a man from a wealthy family. Stella's inability to conform to the expectations of the upper class is evident in her clothing, her mannerisms, and her speech. She is often criticized for her behavior, which is seen as being too coarse and unsophisticated.

Despite the challenges she faces, Stella is determined to provide a better life for her daughter, Laurel. She believes that the only way to do this is to climb the social ladder. She sacrifices her own happiness and social standing in order to give Laurel a chance at a better life.

Stella's actions, although driven by love, also reflect her ambition to climb the social ladder through her daughter. She wants Laurel to have the things that she never had, and she believes that the only way to achieve this is for Laurel to marry into a wealthy family.

The film (*Stella Dallas*) explores the intersection of class and gender in a number of ways. One way is through the character of Stella herself. Stella is portrayed as a naïve young woman who is trying to fit into a world of wealth and privilege. She is constantly struggling to conform to the expectations of the upper class, and she is often criticized for her behavior or completely ostracized from the social gathering.

Another way that the film explores the intersection of class and gender is through the relationship between Stella and her daughter, Laurel. Laurel is a young woman who is torn between her loyalty to her mother and her desire to fit in with her wealthy peers. She is ultimately forced to choose between her mother and her new life, and this decision has a devastating impact on both of them. Foster in her article entitled "Performing Modernity and gender in the 1930s" (Lune, 2004) asserts that the best way to class-pass effectively is through marriage or reproduction. Maternal melodrama tales like *Stella Dallas* permit the noble passing and erasure of the female self. Hence, marriage is necessary for Laurel to solidify her place in the upper class.

Stella's ostracization is seen through these filmic elements: medium shot of extravagant clothing and her obsession with social status, interaction with other upper-class women in the sequence, her decision to give up custody of Laurel, and the final scene of the film, in which Stella is seen watching Laurel get married from a distance. The last scene shot through the window from Stella's Point of View also gave the spectator a sense of ostracization as the frame tends to elicit the same feeling in the mind of the viewers.

Imitation of life (Douglas Sirk, 1959) is a quintessential melodrama that explores the intersection of race, female agency, and class simultaneously. This movie is a progressive feminist film that focuses on just female characters, while the men take the back seat as opposed to previous storytelling. The lead characters each have a particular struggle that made their experiences and identities unique and marginalized. The film tells the parallel stories of three women, Lora Meredith (a white aspiring actress), Annie Johnson (a black domestic worker), and Sarah Jane (Annie's racial passing daughter). Despite their different backgrounds, Lora and Annie form a close bond as they navigate the challenges of motherhood and career aspirations.

The film also explores the intersection of class and gender through the contrasting experiences of Lora and Annie. Lora, despite her success as an actress, struggles to balance her career and personal life, ultimately sacrificing her own happiness for the sake of her daughter. In her journey to becoming a Broadway queen, she exerts her colonial power over Annie. Often denied major roles in vaudeville shows, her only way of escapism is to pass as an upper-class. A good example is the scene where she went to meet a director at his office, and in passing as a wealthy woman, she told the director to call her house, insinuating she has a maid. Annie is confined to a life of domestic servitude, limited by her race and social status. Her character seems to be complacent with the societal constraint. She proposes to be a maid, take care of Lora's child as long as she has a roof over her head. This action parallels the narrative that blacks were forced to accept for their survival at the time. Sarah Jane, on the other hand, decides to pass as white in order to escape the limitations imposed on her by her race. Sarah Jane's decision has devastating consequences for both her and her mother, as she struggles to maintain her secret and live a life that denies her identity. She also was a victim of the patriarchal construct. For example, we see her get slapped by her white boyfriend when he finds out her mother is black.

The intersectionality of these three women identities contribute to the ongoing discourse in race, feminism, class and film discourse. While Lora passed as influential to become a star without little to no consequence, Sarah Jane suffers for her actions by losing her mother. This classism and divide were the central issues ravaging the mid 20th century.

In Sembene Ousmane's *La Noire de...* (1966), Diouana experiences is shaped by her race and her status as a colonial subject, her class as an impoverished young woman who is willing to take up menial jobs to survive, her gender as a symbol of objectification by both the colonial and patriarchal hierarchy. The film uses a variety of filmic techniques to convey its themes of intersectionality. For example, the use of black and white cinematography, highlight the racial divide between Diouana and her French employers. The film's use of this monochrome contrast is evident in the way that Diouana's experiences in France are contrasted with her experiences in Senegal. In Senegal, Diouana is treated with respect and dignity. She is a member of a close-knit community, and she has a sense of belonging. In France, Diouana is isolated and marginalized. She is treated as an outsider, and she is constantly reminded of her inferior social status.

The film's use of symbolism is also evident in the way that Diouana's suitcase is used to represent her identity and her experiences in France. The suitcase is initially a symbol of hope and opportunity. However, as Diouana's experiences in France become more difficult, the suitcase becomes a symbol of her alienation and marginalization. The film's use of close-ups and extreme close-ups whenever she is alone and lost in thought, can be seen to convey Diouana's isolation and alienation. Likewise, the film's use of non-diegetic music can be seen as a way to evoke sympathy for Diouana and her plight.

With the increasing number of feminist scholars critiquing phallogentric and patriarchal construct in cinema, the third wave of feminism clamored for more female strong lead roles that subvert the male gaze. It is in

this light that Ridley's Scott's *Thelma and Louise* (1991), a powerful and thought-provoking exploration of intersectional feminism, made a groundbreaking entry giving women their agency. Through the intertwined narratives of Thelma Dickinson (Geena Davis) and Louise Sawyer (Susan Sarandon), the film delves into the complex interplay of gender, class, and patriarchy, highlighting the challenges and injustices faced by women in a society that often marginalizes and oppresses them.

At the heart of the film lies the exploration of gender intersectionality, examining how the experiences of women are shaped by the overlapping of their gender with other social identities, such as class and sexuality. The film portrays Thelma's transformation from a submissive and dependent housewife to an empowered and independent woman. Louise, on the other hand, embodies a more assertive and independent persona from the outset, taking the masculine form to assert power and control. Their journey together represents a shift from societal norms as they break free from stereotypical gender roles and societal expectations.

Thelma and Louise are subjected to harassment, assault, and threats from men throughout their journey. These violent encounters illustrate the dangers that women face, especially when they challenge patriarchal norms. The film can be seen as an intersection of their gender and class struggles. They seek justice, freedom, and autonomy, refusing to be silenced by a society that marginalizes and oppresses them. These two women having mistakenly killed an aggressor who tries to rape Thelma, are wanted for murder by the police and having no means of escape, decide to jump off the cliff. The film's conclusion, though tragic, is also liberating, as the two women choose to maintain their freedom even in the face of an oppressive legal system. This act represents their final rebellion against the intersectional forces of gender-based oppression.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the exploration of the woman spectator within feminist film theory has evolved into a rich and nuanced field, particularly when viewed through the lens of intersectionality. Acknowledging that the female viewer is not a singular entity, but a convergence of various identities and experiences is crucial to understanding the complexities of her engagement with cinema. This paper focuses on the intersection of gender, race, and class in the selected visual narratives. By employing intersectionality, this study unravels the intricate connections between gender, race, and class in cinematic narratives. Manthia Diawara's exploration of Black spectatorship, Diana Anselmo-Sequeira's analysis of *Screen-Struck*, Miriam Hansen's insights into *Valentino* and female spectatorship, Karen Hollinger's comprehensive feminist film theory, Laura Mulvey's seminal work on visual pleasure, and bell hooks' concept of the oppositional gaze collectively contribute to a multifaceted understanding of how women interact with and are represented in film. The films, through the female characters reveals their resistance, strengths and resilience. It sends a poignant message to the female spectator to reject the phallogocentric order and occupy her proper space in the society irrespective of their diverse identities, perspectives and experiences. It calls for collective efforts from both feminist, gender experts, psychologist and a host of others to denounce any form of subjugation permeating human society. Thus, intersectionality emerges as a powerful tool, facilitating a more holistic and inclusive examination of the diverse experiences of women spectators throughout the history of cinema.

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