

IN THE SHADOWS: THE STORY OF A FEMALE BOXER

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Received 20 April 2021; Revised 01 May 2021; Accepted 03 May 2021

ABSTRACT

Women have struggled to establish themselves in the sport of boxing. This paper follows Penny Garcia's (pseudonym) journey in the sport. The author concludes that boxing has many positive impacts on Penny's life, despite that she is often marginalized inside and outside the gym.

Keywords: Narrative, Story-Telling, Biography, Sport, Boxing, Female Boxing

INTRODUCTION

Penny Garcia (1) is a nineteen-year-old Latina professional boxer in northern California. I began this study curious about Penny's life as an amateur and professional female boxer. My goal in this work is to capture aspects of the life of a female boxer: I wanted to learn about Penny and interpret the dynamics that support and challenge female boxers on a daily basis. Some of the questions I had going into this project were: What are some of the unique challenges female boxers face? Do female boxers face discrimination in the sport? Are there equal opportunities for female boxers? How many females box locally and how many professional bouts are held?

Like all women boxers, Penny's professional fights are restricted to ten two-minute rounds, for a total fight time of twenty minutes. Men are allowed to fight as many as twelve three-minute rounds. Professional female boxers also say that the boxing association uses their shorter fight times as one of the many justifications for paying them less than men. A few months back, Penny informally surveyed other pro women boxers on the issue of fight length. All the women want longer fights, but the promoters tell women that they will still not pay them as much as their male counterparts. Women are grossly underpaid in the sport; it is not uncommon, for example, for a woman to be offered \$10,000 for a title fight that would typically earn a male boxer six figures.

Female boxing, in many ways, is the last bastion of male dominance. Female boxers are often relegated to the backwaters of boxing gyms, VFW halls, restaurants, hotel lobbies and the like. This, however, does not deter women from entering the ring. Women push past the limitations, garnering the muscle and exquisite health necessary to be elite athletes. When I asked Penny what her life would be like without boxing, she seemed to draw a blank, unable to imagine such a life. Nonetheless, stresses on female boxers are immense. Most work full-time jobs and often seek sponsorship, management, training, promotional opportunities and fight match-ups with little to no assistance. While this is not so different from

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male boxers at the lower end of the chain, the struggles of female boxers are made more difficult because they are effectively closed out of opportunities to appear on television and must overcome negative stereotyping of their efforts.

At the gym there are many professional female boxers who augment their boxing careers with income derived from working as trainers or helping to manage the day-to-day operations at the gym. A couple of the boxers supplant their incomes by modeling, but complain that their boxing identity cannot be revealed on jobs. Female athletes face unrelenting pressure to look a certain way to fit into preconceived notions of beauty and femininity. Often, the pressure does not come from the subconscious signals sent from society as a whole, but from the people running the sport.

Background on Women in Boxing

The first female boxer dates back to 1722, when Elizabeth Wilkinson challenged Hannah Hayfield to a bout through an ad, she placed in the *London Journal*: “I, Elizabeth Wilkinson, of Clerkwell, having had some words with Hannah Hayfield, and requiring satisfaction, do invite her to meet me on the stage and box me” (Malissa, 2014). It was around the same time that men’s boxing was being promoted as a barroom spectacle. For six years, Hayfield fought men and women professionally, wearing “close jackets, short petticoats, coming from below the knee, Holland drawers, white stockings and pumps” (Malissa, 2014). According to the same newspaper announcement. In the late 1800s, Nell Saunders and Rose Harland fought the first women’s boxing match in the United States: the prize was a butter dish (Malissa, 2014).

By the late 1970s and into the early 1980s, women’s boxing was starting to become popular again; some of the women to be licensed at that time were Marian Trimar (known as Lady Tyger) and Cathy Davis (Malissa, 2014). It took decades for other women to push through. Christy Martin, Laila Ali and Ann Wolfe all briefly captured mainstream attention.

In 2009, the International Olympic Committee announced women’s boxing would be part of the 2012 Summer Games in London. While the Olympics have historically been one of the biggest and most rewarding stages for female athletes, they have never been about equity. Female boxers were not allowed to compete or even be spectators at the first modern Olympics in 1896. In 1900, twenty-two women were allowed to compete in two sports: tennis and golf. At the following Olympics in 1904, the number of female participants *decreased* to six. And despite the rapidly expanding popularity and size of the Olympics over the next few decades, women did not account for more than fifteen percent of the athletes in games until the 1976 games in Montreal. In 1984, women were permitted to shoot, cycle, and run the marathon. American female boxers did quite well in their Olympic debut: Claressa Shields won a gold in the middleweight division, while Marlen Esparza won bronze in flyweight (Malissa, 2014).

Medical Concerns

The history of female boxing is littered with attempts to eliminate women from the sport. Initially, concerns were focused around the impact boxing might have on women’s reproductive health. In the 1930s, the boxing commentator Nat Fleischer argued that female fighters would have problems bearing children and breastfeeding (Malissa, 2014). In the 1970s, the Amateur Athletic Union barred women from competing in boxing tournaments because, according to the organization, taking hits to the chest would lead to the development of breast cancer (Anasi, 2002). Some groups, like the Pennsylvania State Athletic Commission, allowed women boxers to fight, but only if they wore aluminum bras

to protect against cancer risks (Anasi, 2002). Around the same time, the California State Athletic Commission gave its first boxing licenses to female fighters (Malissa, 2014). But certification came only if a woman could certify she did not have her period.

Female boxers are skeptical of the World Boxing Commission's regulations; some view them as trumped-up concerns that are meant to keep women from ascending in the sport. Women boxers view the age-old menstrual argument as a way for male boxing authorities to remind them of their proper place.

Another possible area of gender difference that emerged in research is the rate of concussions in professional boxers (Kelly, James, Rosenberg, Jay, 1997). Some have argued that women are more prone to concussions than men, although the literature on this issue is rather confusing. When a team of doctors with the American Academy of Neurology undertook a five-year review of thousands of journal articles in an attempt to come to an evidence-based understanding of concussion management, most of what they found was inconclusive (Giza, Kutcher, Ashwal, Barth, Getchius, et. al, 2013). However, in clinical practice, many doctors report seeing women get more concussions than men (Dotinga, 2017). There are a number of variables that could explain this. It could have to do with physique—for example, men's neck muscles tend to be stronger than women's, which may protect against concussion.

Theoretical Background

Serving as a backdrop to this study is the longstanding sociological perspective that emphasizes the role of sport in the social construction of maleness, one which maintains—rather than destabilizes - the marginalization of athletic women, reinforcing notions of a masculine sporting status quo (Michael, Messner, 1990). This derives from early ethnographic work that portrayed sport as the domain of males (Roberts, Arth, Bush, 1959).

However, the world of the pugilist went through some major changes in the early 1990s (Heiskanen, 2012). It was at this time that middle-class women, white-collar employees and educated professionals began to appear on a regular basis in boxing gyms alongside working-class Latino or African American youth. The relationships between male and female fighters largely boil down to their everyday interactions in the gym (Woodward, 2006). That said, the entrance of female boxers into the sport is not without controversy. Some boxing administrators, managers, promoters and trainers hold strong biases about women transforming the all-male domain into a mixed-gendered space. Male and female boxers began interacting in gyms out of necessity as they encountered each other daily. These encounters enabled them to give meaning to and negotiate their athleticism within the social context of the sport. The development of symbiotic relationships helps athletes get through their daily workout routines: males and females rely on each other to tie gloves, give water between sparring rounds, hold the heavy bag or just offer words of support.

Gender relations in boxing gyms can allow for crossing boundaries, individual acts of transgression, and multiple identity positions (Heiskanen, 2012). Many male boxers have been perfecting their technique since adolescence, with substantive amateur careers, while women boxers are still learning the fundamentals of the sport, sometimes with little or no guidance. However, the pugilistic women's entrance into boxing has de-gendered the everyday spaces in boxing gyms, and has shifted the sport's seemingly fixed social organization.

METHODOLOGY

The life writing method used in this study focused on working against forms of division and compartmentalization while creating a portrait of a life that is meaningful. I did five two-hour interviews with my participant. Each interview was recorded and focused on a different period of time in the participant's life. After the interviews were completed, I transcribed them. As I studied the interviews, I made a visual map of my participant's life.

I kept a sketchbook during the study and made notes about photographs that were shared, videos, diaries, mementos and other artifacts that were pulled into the interviews by my participant. I made short notes about these items and included some of these elements in my visual representation of my participant's life. I was able to watch many old home movies of Penny when she first started boxing as a little girl. I often watched these movies with Penny and her father. After watching the home movies, I made notes that I turned into analytic memos.

I interpreted my findings through a synthesis of the account to allow a comparison across and within such accounts. Translation becomes a form of interpretivism for the researcher working to unfold a life. I utilized translation as I worked through the data collected.

I divided the visual representation of Penny's story into four parts. I began writing Penny's life in sections, starting from her early childhood and moving forward. I wrote each section separately and only combined all the sections at the end of the writing project.

When I had a draft, I again shared my writing with Penny for comments and feedback. I made changes as requested. I continued to edit the document, working on flow and readability. All names of people and places used in this paper are fictionalized to protect Penny's identity.

FINDINGS

Penny approached me at the One Step Gym on a sunny afternoon. The One Step Gym is located in Parkerville, a suburban city outside a large urban city in northern California. The One Step Gym is located in a garage type warehouse in an industrial park. During the day, the big rolling garage doors are up, to provide air and an open feeling as the athlete's workout. Penny was eager to meet, and she greets me with a big smile. Penny is small, standing five feet and weighing a mere ninety-five pounds. At first glance, few would imagine she is a boxer. She seems a little too thin to be a fierce competitor. After we shake hands, she ushers me to a corner of the gym where we can talk. The hustle and bustle of the gym is always in the background along with the sparring clock. The gym is full; professional athletes go through their daily routine while exercise classes are being taught to everyday people who just got off work.

"My dad loves boxing, you see," she begins, "so when I was two or three years old, he started taking me to the boxing gym when he would work out. It didn't take long for people to get to know me and I guess you can say, I pretty much grew up in the boxing gym," she says with a captivating giggle.

Penny's parents, Carlos and Argelia Garcia, live in Parkerville. Carlos works in construction and Argelia is a stay-at-home mom. Penny describes her family as "fantastic." She has a younger brother, Roberto, who does not box. Roberto is a talented baseball player - his high school team made it to the All-Star game for his league last year. Their home is modest, yet Penny describes her life as having everything she wants and needs. Although Roberto and Penny are both star

athletes, they have carved out their own territory and do not compete openly with one another while they are at home. Roberto has baseball and Penny has boxing, and that works for their family.

“When I got to be seven or eight years old, I begged my dad to start training me and everyone said I had talent as a boxer,” she shares. “At first my mom thought it was bad for me to box and she was mad at my dad, but I loved it so much that she got over it pretty fast. Now she is really proud of me for doing what I love and being independent about things”.

Penny’s father tells the story differently. “I didn’t want Penny to box. When she was seven, I set up a sparring bout with an eight-year-old boy. I was sure she would get beat up and then she would give up boxing.” At this point Carlos laughs uncontrollably. “She beat that kid up instead and then on the way home she thanked me for setting up the sparring bout - she said it was fun!” He would later show me an old Super 8 film of that fight where Penny’s big, red, boxing gloves look the size of her whole body.

When Penny was a little girl, it was very hard to find her amateur fights. Penny weighed forty-nine pounds for her first amateur fight. She had to fight a girl who weighted ninety pounds. That happened a lot since it was so difficult to find opponents in her weight class.

“My dad would drive me to other states so I could get a fight during the first few years. Once we drove to Kansas City. That fight was scary. I weighed fifty-eight pounds and my opponent weighed one hundred pounds, but I took her,” Penny reminisces with delight. Penny fought over one hundred amateur fights before turning professional at age nineteen. She won the Golden Gloves Championship three times in her weight class and went to the Junior Olympics and won a medal.

Boxing stories often focus on a child and a father – male or female. Penny’s story is no different.

“Boxing has been good for us. My dad was in prison and doing heroin when I was really little,” Penny shares. “When I got into boxing things changed for him and for me. Maybe boxing saved us,” she says and then she quickly corrects herself, “It isn’t about boxing. It is really about us and our relationship and what my dad means to me and what I mean to my dad.” Unlike many boxing fathers, Carlos seems to have Penny’s best interests at heart. He never encourages her to take a fight for the money. He has taken a slow and calculating approach to selecting her fights in order to help her move up in the sport. And unlike many boxing fathers, Carlos is not counting on his daughter to pay all the family bills.

I asked Penny if her father’s past history with drugs and prison bothered her. “When I was young, I used to worry he would be gone again. When you are little, you don’t know what is going on. I am glad that part of his life is in the past and that our family stayed together.” Carlos is more circumspect when he says, “I guess I fit in here at the gym. Most of the guys here [in the gym] have been in prison or caught a case. I carry my mistakes, but I have worked to move beyond them. Argelia and the kids are my everything”.

“My favorite fighter is Sugar Ray Leonard,” Penny shares smiling.

“How about a female boxer? Do you have a favorite?” I inquire.

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With a sigh Penny admits there are so few women and there is no one whose boxing style or stature motivates her to try to emulate them. “Sugar Ray was really fast,” she says, sharing a color photograph of herself with Sugar Ray while she tells me the story of how they met. In the photograph Sugar Ray is leaning down to Penny’s size with his arm around her and they both have their fists clenched with big smiles on their faces. “Sugar Ray watched me and was very encouraging. He liked my technical style,” she shares proudly. In the gym, the admiration of a notable professional elevates a boxer to celebrity status.

Being in the gym can suck sometimes,” she begins, “some guys are cool, but a lot of them put up with me and have an attitude. I’d like to kick their ass, but the truth is, many are too big for me to take on, so I quietly stick to my routine.” This subtle and not-so-subtle reality shapes Penny’s interactions in the gym in ways she does not always acknowledge, or, perhaps, understand.

The barriers manifest often in the form of men and women thinking she does not belong in the sport. These judgements sometimes have been vocalized directly to her, but often they are directed at her father. When I asked her if her race was ever a barrier in the sport she laughed and replied, “In this sport everyone is either Black or brown. I get hassled about my gender, but I think things are changing. In our gym, people are learning more these days about gender stuff and maybe people won’t be so narrow minded after people like me make it,” she stated. Then, she shared pensively, “Last week a dude I don’t know called me ‘Brown Sugar Coco.’ I can see it bothered her, but she hides her feelings as best she can, continuing, “You see, the same guy wouldn’t say that to a heavy weight training because he’d get nailed. He was just picking on me and I know it. It is best to ignore them.” I ask her, “Do you think that comment was about your race?” Penny pauses and shrugs and says, “That guy thinks my brown skin is nice, but he is a jerk”.

During my time in the gym, I observed remarks about her body more than Penny would openly admit. Many guys called her “Sexy.” They would jokingly say, “Hi Sexy.” She often shrugged off bad encounters by calling the guy’s “Idiots” or “Morons,” but it is quite real and if not a daily challenge, most certainly a weekly challenge. When I asked her if she told her dad about these encounters she says, “I carry a bat in my pick-up. If I need to get it, it is just a short walk. I don’t have to cry like a baby”.

“Asking for a little help isn’t crying like a baby,” I remark.

“There is no room for a tattle tale in this gym,” she curtly replies.

“As I got older and started qualifying to go to my first Junior Olympics some trainers in the gym told my dad that he should work on raising a lady instead of a butch dyke like me,” she shared.

“What did your dad do?” I asked.

Penny began laughing so hard she could barely talk and she said, “He punched those guys so hard in the stomach they doubled over. We laughed all the way home - I mean my dad and me laughed.” Penny is often called “Butch” or a “Dyke” because she fights, although she does not present as masculine and identifies as a straight woman. She says, “People just want to find something they think is wrong with a woman who wants to fight. I’ve learned to live with that, but it will change - I think - I hope”.

Penny’s story is peppered with incidents of her father and sometimes her brother standing up for her, facing a gym culture that was sometimes narrow-

mindful and judgmental. However, as Penny developed into a champion at the Junior Olympics and at the Golden Gloves, her amateur status began to provide her with a level of celebrity which resulted in power, agency, and access that she did not have in the beginning of her career. "Now I say, bring it on, to the guys who hassle me. Most of them haven't accomplished what I have," she shares proudly, but I know she does not actually say that to them.

"Are you going to ask me why I fight?" she asks teasingly.

"Do you want me to ask you that?" I said, smiling.

"I get irritated because I don't think anyone asks the men why they fight. They assume the men have hearts of gladiators, but everyone asks the women why we fight. Sometimes I want to tell them I fight so when I meet a guy like you, I can kick his ass," she said laughing again.

Penny is fun to be around - light-hearted and thoughtful, she floats through the gym, talking to everyone. I see her friends light up as Penny approaches. She is kind to them, stopping to help kids, and taking tips from other pros. Penny has a Chihuahua named Poppy who is often with her. Poppy roams freely in the gym, nipping at ankles and befriending even the toughest athletes. Heavyweights will pause and gently pick up Poppy talking to her in the softest voice. They often inquire about Poppy's health and well-being even suggesting trips to the veterinarian or special food she should eat. Poppy is part of the gym landscape and everyone loves her.

Penny has built her life around her training schedule. She lives at home which helps out with the cost of training, since she does not have to pay rent. Since her father is her trainer, she also saves on that expense. After all, trainers can take as much as forty per cent of a purse when a fight comes along. Penny attends community college classes because her mother insists, she continue her education. She makes some money teaching kids' classes at the gym, but her parents are supporting her in her quest for a professional championship. She is a kind and thoughtful trainer and spends many hours artfully coaching the skinny kids with two left feet.

"It takes patience sometimes for the kids to understand what to do next, but I find if I go slow and take it at their pace, things go well, and they come back to me," she offers.

"Right now, I am working on not over-training," she told me.

"What does it mean to over-train?" I ask.

"I have this problem where I can't stop training. It is a little manic, I suppose. I worry about my weight. I eat and then I train. Or I worry I'm not strong enough and I train some more, or I just train for something to do. The outcome is I can be too tired when the time comes to fight. It hasn't worked against me yet, but my dad is trying to help me with my ability to take time off right now," she tells me reluctantly. "I'm not sure I can relax," she shares quietly. Observing Penny, this seems true. She is constantly on the go, never taking a time out. She even eats while moving.

Watching Penny in the gym is like tracking a force of nature. She hits the heavy bag, then she starts sparring, then she helps a young boxer, and on and on. She moves from one activity to the next with an ease of purpose and a casual joy that is infectious. She seems to make everyone happy.

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“What are your goals as a boxer?” I ask.

“I want to be a champion flyweight, of course,” she answers and continues, “If I can get the fights to get me there is another story.” Discipline is the name of the game in boxing. Penny keeps to a strict diet and limits her social life in order to place focus on the sport she loves.

“What is it like training around men? I notice you are the only female professional in your gym” I ask.

“Most of the men I train with accept women. Some of the guys come to my fights and cheer me on. We are friends in the gym. I even spar guys from time to time. The big problem is the promoters,” she said, reinforcing what I already knew. It is no secret that many trainers and promoters think women do not belong in the sport. Penny shares, “Some of these trainers are caught up in the whole delicate flower thing. I’m not trying to be a delicate flower. I am my own person. Those trainers encourage their fighters to have attitudes towards women. Besides, I could take most of those pencil-necked trainers down,” she says smiling.

“How do you view competition?” I ask.

“I am a fierce competitor, and I think most women are. I think women are fiercer than men. The thing is, that most women have been taught to suppress stuff because it isn’t lady-like, so all that fierceness is hidden from view,” she explained matter-of-factly. “Sometimes people ask me how I can seem so relaxed in the ring when I am under attack. Because of my sports background, I don’t look at it like being under attack; it is a sport. When I get a match, it is also kind of a performance.” She pauses and thinks for a moment and then continues, “When I am taking punches and receiving them, it is showing me my strong side, my fearless side. There is nothing soft when I’m in the ring. I can be in the ring and be aggressive and fight and when I get out, I can be sweet,” she explained smiling (Routledge, 2007).

I asked Penny about her prize winnings and she said the most she has made for a fight is \$5,000. She estimated that the winnings for equivalent male fighters start off between \$20,000 and \$30,000. Then she added, “Maybe I have to fight them to make that kind of money”.

“Boxing is my job. When I box, I feel equal to the guys and although I am a small person, I never feel small in the ring - I am a giant in the ring,” she comments. There is a lot of chatter about Penny being a woman who will move up the ranks and land a big fight. For now, boxing is Penny’s passion. When I ask about what might come next, she is uncertain. “My mom wants me to be a model because small girls can model now and I’m...well...pretty,” she shares.

“Is that what you want?” I ask.

“No. Not unless I can own the runway and the designers and the show,” she answers laughing.

On a Friday night toward the end of this study, Miguel set up a screen in the center of the ring and projected all of his old home movies of Penny fighting. Some were in black and white, but most were in color. Penny, Carlos and I sit and watch along with some of Penny’s friends from the gym and community college. The ray from the projector cuts through the dark room as dust dances in the light. Many of the films were originally taken with a Super 8 camera and the films are jumpy and grainy. Penny often looks straight into the camera, smiling at her father. She wears pink silk shorts as her arms fling the boxing gloves toward her opponent. When she wins large medals are placed around her neck time and time again. Watching her as a small child fighting created a kind of dissonance. She was so

small. I kept thinking of a fierce mouse or a superhero. Miguel's meticulous documentation of his daughter's career allowed me to watch her grow up before my eyes. It took an hour to watch all the films and then we all sat back and drank sodas and talked about what we saw.

"I love those films because I see where I started and where I am now," she says.

"I love those films because it marks my life," Carlos says, "These films mean I was born. I was here, and I have a fierce, beautiful daughter. Penny is a great boxer, but she can be or do what she wants. It is up to her. She has my support".

DISCUSSION

Learning about Penny's story impressed upon me that it is not the brute strength associated with throwing punches that attracts Penny to the sport. Rather, for Penny, boxing is a quiet awakening. It is inner empowerment. It allows her to stand toe-to-toe with her own insecurities and tear them down punch by punch. Despite the oppression that the sport and other athletes impose on her, time and again she rises up in new and different ways to reveal parts of herself.

The nature of the sport of boxing has allowed Penny to develop a pronounced independence. It provides her with the ability to rely on herself in any situation and the confidence to know that she can handle whatever comes her way: both in the ring and out.

Penny's story reveals many of the challenges facing female boxers today. Both the amateur and professional fighters have a hard time finding fights in order to gain the experience needed to establish a solid career. Penny, like many female boxers, encounters people in her life who think that boxing is inappropriate for women. Reinforcing stereotypes about what is and is not womanly came up quite often, and Penny actively challenged master narratives about what it means to be a woman, and feminine, by her persistence in the sport.

Women have endured being barely tolerated in the sport of boxing. In spite of divisions and lack of support, more women are taking up boxing. Women who box love the sport for the same reasons men do. Boxing requires intense physical and psychological discipline and the ability to overcome anger and fear. While some consider boxing a "shadow sport," boxers like Penny are working to bring it into the light.

These days, professional female boxers like Penny are lucky if they can convince a promoter to put them on a card, let alone earn decent prize money or find a sponsor. The business of boxing involves a supply chain that is relatively unique in the world of sport. Promoters gauge audience and premium cable demand, and then arrange the fights according to what they believe will generate the most interest (and, in turn, money).

In Penny's experience, the women's fights usually turn out to be the favorites of live-event crowds - contrary to what most promoters expect. She speculates that is because women are much less selective about opponents, which makes for a better fight. Males who are represented by good gyms have the luxury of declining to fight anyone who might conceivably have the talent to beat them - and they often do, in an effort to preserve their records and their images as champions. The women are often willing to fight anyone because making a match is so much harder.

CONCLUSION

Boxing is, in principle, a remarkably egalitarian sport. Unlike, for example, basketball or football, boxing does not necessitate a particular body type. If anything, the range of body types enables a variety of stylistic approaches to the combat. Willpower is tested in various forms of self-restraint both inside and outside the gym--which requires that boxers balance their personal relationships and engage in social seclusion. Body type and the development of restraint are gender-neutral requirements of the sport.

Women's entrance into the sport of boxing attempts to de-gender the everyday spaces of male boxing athletes. Through such everyday considerations, it is possible to penetrate the seemingly fixed gender divisions within the sport and begin to take notice of the cracks within continually-evolving power relations. For years women in the sport have boxed in the shadows, but Penny Garcia teaches us the light can shift and moving forward women may well hold center stage on equal terms with men.

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