

BARNARD COLLEGE CLASS OF 1971 ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

The Reminiscences of

Michelle Patrick

2014

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Michelle Patrick conducted by Katherine Brewster and Robert Solomon in May 2011. This interview is part of the Barnard Class of 1971 Oral History Project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Barnard Class of 1971 Oral History Collection Session One

Interviewee: Michelle Patrick

Location: New York, New York

Interviewers: Katherine Brewster and Robert Solomon
Date: May 2011

Patrick: I'm Michelle Patrick, and I graduated from Barnard [College] in American Studies in 1971 and I'm involved in compiling this oral history of our class.

Q: Tell us when you came to Barnard, who were you, and who did you think you were?

Patrick: I thought that I was a very happy girl who would go on to lead a very happy life. In fact, I was a very troubled girl who would go on to have a very complicated life. What had happened was, and it sounds really ridiculous, the difference was a pair of contact lenses. I got a pair of contact lenses and not longer had to wear thick Coke-bottled glasses in my senior year of high school and all of a sudden I started having things grow big, big, big. So, I have to say, when I got to Barnard, I was majoring in dates and having a really wonderful time—really happy to have gotten into Barnard.

My normal track would have been to go to University of Michigan, but I had a best friend at the time who went to my same competitive entrance high school and she said, "Oh no, we're not going to the University of Michigan, because there are these schools called the Seven Sisters and they're all on the East Coast. They're all very prestigious and everyone there is much more

sophisticated than everybody we really know, and more interesting.” So I said, “Oh, okay,” exhibiting my independent spirit. I said, “Okay,” and found that one of these very prestigious Seven Sister schools was in New York, which, you know, that alone—I’d seen *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* and getting in made me very happy. Arriving within three weeks—I kept saying I knew a lot of really nice people in Detroit and smart people, but I had the idea that somewhere there were more interesting people, and within three weeks of being at Barnard I realized I was absolutely right. There were absolutely more interesting people and also there was the dating. And it was fun. It was. And making new friends and all of them fascinating. So I thought well, this is my life now.

I didn’t know at the time that biochemically, in terms of childhood emotional injuries, I would have all sorts of things to deal with. That disappointments would set off and send me into a less than happy direction. At that moment going through those gates with my packages—my bags I thought I was happy, and life was happy and the future was happy, and I was glad.

Q: So, what do you remember about first coming through the gate?

Patrick: Well one of the things I remembered is—

Q: That first day—

Patrick: I had been assigned to a single and against my stepfather's advice, I had written to Barnard asking to be—

[Interruption]

Well, one thing I remember is I had been assigned to a single room and I was really disappointed because I was an only child and for me part of the college experience, as shown on TV, was to have a roommate and do fun things with the roommate. So against my stepfather's better advice, I—well maybe not better—I wrote and said could you give me a roommate.

So I went, it was a beautiful day and they handed us flowers. There were balloons over the gate and they gave us flowers as we walked in. I walked in my room with my mother and there was a [Barry M.] Goldwater poster and I thought, oh dear. My roommate was a very, very, very arch-conservative Republican Boston Brahmin. Not to let things go sour we decided—I don't know whether it was her suggestion or my suggestion, we decided right away no politics to be discussed in the room. She told me—very patiently explained to me where she was from and she told me about her debutante ball. For some reason, and I'm not sure why, I didn't tell her that I had also been a debutante in the black bourgeoisie of Detroit. I don't know whether I didn't want to take the time to explain that there was a longstanding black bourgeoisie or what it consisted of, or whether I was embarrassed at the degree which my people imitated hers. I really don't know why, but I just listened patiently and she was a really sweet girl, and kind as long as we didn't talk about politics, which we didn't do. As a matter of fact, neither of us was particularly

political, we were friends. We didn't stay roommates long, because I was a night person and she was a day person. But I remember walking through, being excited, the Goldwater poster, figuring out a solution to the Goldwater problem right away. Making friends with Ruth [Stuart Bell], hearing about her debutante ball, not telling her about mine, and then I think being asked on a date by a young law student who was at Barnard coasting around for new talent and making friends. Because girls were in the hall and girls were in the dining room, and making a bunch of friends. Feeling just like I was on the top of the world.

Q: You mentioned your mom, and you mentioned your stepfather, and you mentioned Detroit black bourgeoisie. So, fill me in. Tell me about that experience for you growing up in Detroit, the experience of your family.

Patrick: Well, to say Detroit now—if you say you're from Detroit everybody corrects you and says, "You mean the suburbs of Detroit," because nobody remembers, nobody except people who grew up in Detroit realizes that before the riots of '67 and the subsequent downhill thrust of the auto industry, Detroit was a pretty boulevard-lined, tree-lined town. With fountains and parks and peacocks and bridges and one of the best art institutes in the country. It was also headquarters of the black bourgeoisie, of black people whose grandparents, and sometimes great-grandparents, and sometimes great-great-grandparents had been college educated or at least educated to some extent. So you had a leg up in terms of assimilating into the mainstream.

Who had flocked to Detroit when Henry Ford started hiring black workers at five dollars a day, doctors—black doctors—black funeral directors, black lawyers, flocked to Detroit. Particularly doctors because there was a base to support a middle-class, working-class base of black people to support a middle-class and an upper-middle-class. As a matter of fact, someone told me at some point in the '40s there were more black doctors in Detroit than in any other city in the United States. My grandfather had been a doc—was a doctor and I grew up in two contexts.

I grew up in the context of the black bourgeoisie, where our parents had grown up together, our grandparents had grown up together. We were socialized to date, socialize with and marry one another. That was the expectation. Then going to an integrated—and when I say integrated, I mean, I guess there were all white people and two blacks—competitive entrance high school which was very demanding. Because I had those thick glasses and acne, I was a—in high school I would call it an academic anorexic. Instead of focusing on my weight, I focused on my grade point average. I thought, okay I've got a 3.7 and if I get an A in this course it will be a 3.75, and if I get another—that was my obsession because it was something that I could control.

My mother had been divorced when I was five years old. In all of America, being a divorcee in 1955 was something quite disgraceful to be, let alone in the black bourgeoisie in Detroit in 1955. So we went through a really bad period where she had, she was propped up by my grandparents on one side, and actually me on the other side. But she was very unhappy. The clubs and the girls she had grown up with all her life sort of fell by the wayside. That was a five year period after which she emerged triumphant by marrying a very successful black attorney who was the first

black councilman in Detroit. And, whereupon all, with a phone that had stopped ringing five years prior began to ring, and ring and ring. She knew that if she remained a divorcee she would not be welcome again. But once again, she was more than welcome and the most popular girl at the party. So we had both had that experience and we knew we were not completely agog at the context in which we had grown up, because we understood that it could be quite cruel, along with all sorts of other clusters or people throughout the country at that time. Am I making sense?

Q: Yes, you are. Tell us about your experience at Barnard. What are some of the things that for you stand out about life, about changes there, about sexual experiences?

Patrick: Well, I'm a big talker, so there was always somebody to talk to. I remember being in my room with maybe five girls at a time just talking and talking and talking. I'm nocturnal, so talking into the night, you know, again needing friends. Dressing. Dressing was very important. Wardrobe was hugely important. I remember the heathery Villager skirts, and cable-knit sweaters. I had also ventured a little bit into the mod, the Mary Quant mod look with the skirts that were really shockingly short, two inches above the knee, right? Going out and classes. I remember a few classes. I did go to class, but I remember just being really happy and being shown during orientation week by upperclassmen, taken to The Village, taken to all sorts of things that I had only read about.

I remember meeting Josie Duke, who was something like out of a Howard Hunt's movie. She was Katherine Hepburn, the heiress with radical ideas. At the time—at seventeen—I didn't care

who anybody's father was, or even think to ask, you know, it wasn't just not on my list of things to wonder about. But, Josie was very radical. She had given me—my birthday was in November, she had given me Mao's Little Red Book [*Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung*], and she was really, really radical. On the other hand, she had put on this Christian Dior gown, and she had gone out to the premier of a Disney movie starring Walter Brennan, called *The Happiest Millionaire*. So, a couple of girls, us said, "Josie, why are you going to the premier of *The Happiest Millionaire*?" She downplayed it to me, "Oh, it's because I have to go to this with my grandfather." And, later that year she was—her family was very angry with her, because she had thrown an orange at the limousine of the Ambassador to Spain, who recognized her, because he was her uncle, and she failed to get the laugh out of that. It wasn't tolerated in the spirit of family fun. So, there was Josie, she was riveting.

But, there were other people who were from other places, and had all sorts of ideas, and just being with them was thrilling. It was just thrilling. I remember—and, now it sounds so primitive, but I remember a night where there was a combination fire drill. I had volunteered to be the fire marshal. I mean, I was that kind of girl, right? "Oh, I'll be the fire marshal—" A fire drill whereas fire marshal you had to put on a fire hat, and you had a clipboard, and a whistle, and you had to go from room to room making sure everybody was there. It was just a sneaky way of making sure that people got into by the curfew. But, if they weren't there I said they were there anyway, because I had figured that out. And, [unclear], where the Columbia marching band played. So we had the marching band in the courtyard, you had the fire bells ringing, you had the fire marshals running from room to room, and then you had the boys climbing up the ivy, right? And, I looked

over and what, a boy was climbing up the ivy, and I looked at him, and he said—and I threw him a half slip, and then I—but, it was, to me it was like being in a Marx Brothers, and I thought my whole life now would be a Marx Brothers movie. It was just so funny.

And, I just remember laughing, and laughing, and having friends laughing and laughing too, because it was just so silly, and funny, and crazy, the way we thought life would be now that we were at Barnard, and had escaped the provinces where people didn't realize how funny these things were. So, there was that.

Q: Tell me about the spring of your freshman year, and what was your response to the strike that was going on, your involvement, how did that affect your life after that?

Patrick: First of all—there was this thing, this gym—I belong to the—let me go back to orientation. People lined up College Walk with card tables for extracurricular activities, and you were supposed to sign-up for the ones that you wanted. I saw the SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] table, and I equated SDS with peaceful protests with the free speech movement in Berkeley. So, I approached the SDS table, when some Black upperclassman tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Oh no, dear, you belong over here," and that was the Student Afro American Society [SAS]. So, I said, "Oh, okay." So I signed there instead. So, through the Student Afro American Society, what I experienced was that were petitioning, and asking for meetings in a very civilized way. Petitioning the university not to build a gym in Morningside Park, in which the faculty and students would be admitted through the front door, and the

members of the community, to whom the park—we thought—actually belonged, would be only welcome in the back door.

This was, it was 1967, 1968, we had just gotten through with this in Selma, and it wasn't even through yet. But, they paid no attention to us whatsoever. Meanwhile, SAS really amounted to an organization that basically had tea, and you'd go to the tea, and you'd meet your date for the next weekend or something. It was all very civilized, and there were teas, and teas everywhere, teas in the deanery, teas in the president's office.

Skirts got a little shorter, and a little shorter, and a little shorter. Curfews, particularly for freshmen, were very—you couldn't go out after 10:00 on a weekday, and I guess 1:00 on a weekend. So, but the boys could—they didn't have those kind of constrictions on them. But, anyway, things went along pretty normally until April. Two things happened. Martin Luther King was assassinated, and that just sent shockwaves everywhere. We—I think—were home for spring vacation, and a couple of days after the assassination we were arriving on campus, and there was sort of the shell-shocked feeling, in the city, at school. And, then things continued normally for me, except one day I went to lunch in one April day I went to lunch in the dining room, and nobody was there. I was, like, wow, nobody's there. It was, like, a Tuesday and, Josie Duke ran in, and she said, "What are you doing here? Everybody's over at Hamilton Hall." And, "There's a demonstration." So, I think, "Oh." I had my Italian book with me, and I said, "Well, do you think I should bring my Italian book, or will we be there that long?" thinking it's a demonstration; we'll be there an hour, we'll be there two hours.

I got there, and there were a lot of people there already, and then there got to be more, and more, and more people, it was really getting massive. All very peaceful, and pretty quiet. Dean Colman, I believe that was his name—whose office was in Hamilton Hall—entered Hamilton Hall, and demanded to be allowed in his office. So, we all peacefully parted ways, and he very huffily went into his office and closed the door. And, then more, and more, and more people came. I remember thinking I wonder how he's going to get out of it. I don't think I was the only person that that occurred to. It was, like, you wanted to get in there, wonder how he's going to get out.

He was a dean who was very popular with jocks, and jocks are pretty conservative. So then four big jocks came to guard him from us. They were really guarding him from us, what were we going to do to him? Then at some point in the evening a kind of giddiness came over the crowd, because we realized we were in control. It was all we had asked for, as far as I knew in terms of the park, and Morningside—I mean, the gym and Morningside Park had been you have to listen to us. Well, now you really had to listen to us, because there are more of us than there are of you, and you just can't flick us aside anymore. Look at us, we've occupied a building. We don't have to leave, you're going to have to listen to what we say. Ha, ha! Then things got a little dicey, because the white students were, on one hand, a little frivolous, and on the other hand a little too radical for our sensibility. Things like a Mao poster went up—wonder where that came from, right? And, then there were balloons, right. There were balloons, and a Mao poster, and it had, just started to have kind of a carnival atmosphere, and litter started to accumulate. For the black students this was not an acceptable thing. We had some out of the civil rights tradition even, you

know, a long civil rights tradition, where our grandparents, and our grandparents' grandparents said, "Every time you leave your house you represent the race. When you walk down the street, when you're in a classroom, when you're in public accommodations, you represent the race. You speak the King's English, you dress properly, you use proper table manners. You behave in a dignified fashion at all times." This was getting to be not such a dignified fashion.

Also the goal of SDS, and our goal, we're starting to split because SDS wanted to stay in the building until Columbia University severed its connection with the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency], and with defense research. Well, we would have been in the building two years if—or you know we could still be there today. We had really one principal goal, and that was rethink this gym, it is not fair. So, I was just a freshman, so I was not in on the higher-level negotiations between SDS, and SAS, and whatever other organizations might have been in. But, it was decided, about midnight I think, that the white students would leave, and they would take over their own building. I remember being sad about it, because I was coming at a time when black and white together—We Shall Not Be Moved, that was the motto of the civil rights movement, and what made it so effective. I was sad about it, but I knew that it had to happen, because we couldn't have these candy wrappers, and these balloons, and these Mao posters, because they did not represent us. They did not represent our parents, and our grandparents. We knew what we had to do to represent, and that was, when we realized we're staying here until they make concessions. We realized we had to. Suddenly the frivolous—any remnants of frivolity—left and realized, okay, we have to maintain this building. We had to scrub the floors, we had to make sure that nothing is destroyed. We had to find a shower. We actually did find a shower in the

basement, and keep a schedule where everybody had five minutes to shower a day. Harlem the community—Harlem brought us food, and got it in somehow. But, we had to just have people to serve the food, and then people to clean up after the food.

A lot of it, it was like all of a sudden being in boot camp, you know. We'd gone from being happy college students to being in boot camp. It was really serious. Also we knew, from watching the CBS news during civil rights movement, is that it was quite possible that cops, or people would come in, and beat the shit out of us. And, so we were serious. We became very, very serious. I don't remember much leisure in Hamilton Hall, because were either in a meeting, or we were scrubbing the floors, or making the food, or cleaning up after the food, or being in another meeting. It was that moment of frivolity when we realized, oh god, we've taken over this building. That didn't last very long.

Strangely, we had a press conference every morning. I don't know whether we were there for seven days, or eight days, but every morning we had a press conference, and every morning members of the press, people from *The New York Times*, the [*New York*] *Daily News* would come in to a building smelling like chlorine, because we'd scrubbed it down, and our leadership group, which was called the—I can't remember—steering committee. The steering committee would make a statement, and that press would leave, and the next day, or that afternoon, we would read about riots, and vandalism at Columbia. And, we, we couldn't understand this. Every morning we were impeccable—the place was impeccable. Riots, it was only really forty years later when I, we went to the strike reunion, that I realized that yes, in Lowe, and in other buildings people

were, you know, peeing in wastebaskets, and making litter, and breaking things. It made me so angry. It just, it made me furious, because I realized that it was this behavior, and the behavior later on of the Weathermen [Weather Underground], and some black radical group, that had made our country—turned a period of progress, and made it take a hard right. Because people were scared. People started doing scary stuff. First just silly, and undignified stuff, and then scary stuff. And, it infuriated me, because I still blame those people for what has happened in our country since that time. I think that's more than an answer to that question.

Q: So, what do you remember about the night of the [unclear].

Patrick: Yes, we knew through channels the—because we were middle-class children by and large, and some of our parents were lawyers, and some of our parents were commissioners—we knew somehow that we were going to be arrested. And, we had a discussion, are we going to resist arrest, or are we going to go quietly? We figured pretty much by and large everybody took the position that we had made our statement, we had taken the building, we had said, "We are here, and you must listen to us," so that resisting arrest would have no function except to endanger ourselves, right? So, I remember, I was lining up, and I remember thinking, oh, people thinking we would be maced. We took our Villager sweaters, and cut them into squares, and soaked them in Vaseline water, so—so that if there was mace we could cover our faces as we went out.

There was no—no one was for fighting back or resisting. We lined up. We knew they were coming. We lined up. They put the girls in the middle in a [unclear] blustery showed the men protecting the women. The boys were on the outside, and the girls were in the middle. The police came to get us, and we went quietly, very quietly. I remember there were a couple black police officers, and I remember they were crying. That was like a—it was painful to see them crying, because you knew they felt badly about what they had to do, but this was their job. But, we didn't make it difficult for them, we went quietly.

And, I remember going first to one place, a holding cell, and when there were prostitutes, and the prostitutes were laughing at us, because our hair looked so bad, we really were—after, you know, you try occupying a building for eight, and keeping up your basic beauty regimen. We had been arrested, and we hadn't even gotten any money out of it, and look how bad our hair looked. I also remember they brought the Hamilton Hall people in, and they were bringing people from other buildings. White people, and I remember a policeman said, "This group looks younger than the other group." In fact, we were the same age. Why did the black people to them look older than the White people? I'll never forget that. He was talking on his walkie-talkie, and some white people who are our same age come into the—"This group looks younger." Right? Like, there's something about us that was so tough in our Villager sweaters, you know? I always—I always remembered that.

My father called an attorney to get me out, and he ended up representing, like, everybody.

Charles McKinney. There were a couple of attorneys like that who just basically came in the

morning after the bust, and stayed the whole day as people were arraigned. I was one of the last people to be arraigned at 5:00 in the afternoon. And, by then I was just exhausted. I remember being really cranky, and Josie Duke being brought into my cell, along with many other people. We were crowded in, and Josie saying, "You should have fought back," and my saying, "Shut up, you're an idiot!" And, Linda LeClair was also in my cell, I don't know how I got to be so singularly blessed, and she was leading folk songs, which also made me just want to strangle her.

So, I remember really being very cranky in the cell. I also remember learning what a full body search was, where every cavity in your body is searched. What they thought we had up there, I don't know, but I remember just being really tired, and cranky, and then going back to the campus, and calling my parents—who had been very worried—and falling asleep. Then in a week after going to more meetings, and you know, meetings, and meetings, and marches. My parents had been very supportive—we had to call our parents. The steering committee said that every person had to call their parents when we were in the building. There was a commercial at the time for a deodorant called Right Guard, and the motto, was "Who's Got the Right Guard?"

So, I remember being on the phone with my mother and stepfather, and, you know, this is the beginning of the occupation, and he said, "So, what are you, one hundred twenty people in that building?"

And, I said, "Yes."

He said, "And so you're not leaving?"

I said, "No."

And he said, "Who's Got the Right Guard?" Most parents were pretty supportive of what we were doing, we were just standing in their footsteps as they had done before.

So, that takes us to the Spring, and it's now April—May, and we all felt very connected to one another. Those of us who had been in Hamilton Hall, and a lot of girls went out and got their hair cut really short, and afros. I did not want an afro no matter what I had to do. But then a really, really shocking thing happened. We were at a meeting with community members in Harlem. It seems that all we did was go to meetings. And, a graduate student, a very handsome distinguished-looking graduate student, or I think he was a graduate student—who had been occupying Hamilton Hall with us, got up, and he, I thought very tastelessly, gestured to the Harlem community people, and he said, "Some of us have very little to lose." And, he gestured to the students and he said, "Some of us have a lot to lose." The next time Charles 37 X [Kenyata], who was supposed to be a government plant, tries to disrupt one of our demonstrations, we have to isolate him, and kill him." Did we hear that right? Kill him?

I looked around, I looked at my friend Dona [Summers Carter], I looked at my friend Karla [Spurlock Evans], kill him? And, then all of a sudden it was all over, because I would occupy a building, you know—I would stay in the building for eight days, and I would put myself in

danger, but when you start talking about political assassinations, that's when I went back to dating, right? So, I was a revolutionary for a few months, but after that I was a sophomore, and looking for a boyfriend that was, it was just a whoo—an abrupt turn.

Q: And, if you think back to since then, how does that whole experience, in the building with that [unclear] affected your involvement in political issues, and political activism?

Patrick: I tended not to be very political, I mean, except in the voting booth. I've been with my husband twenty-nine years, and I can't remember anything political we've done, can you? Beyond signing petitions and voting, you know. I'm not an activist. I know people who did go on to become activists, but I did not. I don't know whether I would have had it not been for the—I don't know that that was the path that I was on. Everybody was very moved, and swept up by the civil rights movement. I remember my parents giving cocktail parties to raise money for the civil rights movement, and watching that black-and-white footage of the fire hoses, and the dogs, and being very swept up in that. But, I have gone on to be not a very—politics. I'm a Democrat, well, I was a Democrat until everybody turned into a—until Democrats became Republicans, you know?

Q: Say a little bit about the influence of some of the changes that were happening in the women's movement.

Patrick: Well, the women's movement, when I heard the word "women's movement", I just put the pillow over my head.

[Interruption]

When I heard the expression "women's movement", I just put the pillow over my head, because I had just been through one movement, which had been exhausting, right? And, I thought oh no, I can't do another movement, I just simply cannot do another movement. It took me—and, also what did you have to do to be in the women's movement? Did it mean you couldn't go out on any more dates? It just didn't appeal to me. And, also it was mostly middle-class women, and I thought it was frivolous, you know, these women were not being lynched in the South, or being denied the vote, they were bored in Larchmont, and I thought that it was frivolous.

It was years before I understood that the women's movement did relate to my life, even though I had been taught—my mother had had the period of time of being divorced, and having to find a new husband. So I knew how you were supposed to find a husband. You put on a little black dress, and pearls, and you went out, and you looked, no matter how boring the person—the man you were with was, you looked into his eyes as if he were the most fascinating person in the world. You didn't sleep with him too easily, and you deferred, and demurred. So, I knew how to do that. It was a little harder for me to do than I thought, I should. I'd go out with somebody, and they'd pontificate, and I'd look into their eyes, and envision when he's getting engaged. And the relationship would seem to be going pretty well, but then my personality—my very opinionated

personality would start bubbling up from the—and, I, I'd try to push it down, I'd think to myself, "This will be fine as long as I can keep my personality under control." It would bubble up, and I'd push it down. Finally it would just come out, and the person would look at me, and, like, "Who are you, and what have you done with Shelly?" I was always, like, oh god, if I could just be someone else. There was a point at which if you went out with a guy and he bought you a half a cup of coffee, he expected you to sleep with him. This was really very tedious, and it took all the fun out of going out.

Years after college I had a dinner with a professor, and a bunch of other classmates, and this woman told me this story, but just a huge eye-opener. I guess we were in our mid-20's, and she said some guy, lawyer, had take her out to dinner, a lovely dinner, and then he had taken her home, and he had expected to spend the night, and she just said, no, that wouldn't be happening. He said, "Well, I just spent whaaa on dinner for you," and she said she took her purse, she took her checkbook, she wrote him a check, and said, "Here." And, I thought that was the coolest thing. At that point, only at that very late point, did I realize that the women's movement, and anything that would concern me, did actually have something to do with my life. Until that point I was just like, oh no, I can't take on another movement, and does that mean that when you get married to a lawyer, or doctor, he can't support you, and you have to work, which was not something that I wanted to do. Do you have to, stop wearing these nice dresses. It doesn't seem like much fun to me, I think I'd avoid it. But, when she said about taking that check out, and handing it to that guy, something clicked alright, in me, that I realized oh, this, it does relate to me, it does.

Q: Anything about the changes in dress, changes in kind of sexual relationships with men that was affected during—?

Patrick: I was pretty conserve—my idea of sexual relationships with men, the Pill—we had the Pill, and that was great—was that you start dating somebody, you'd fall in love with them—sleep with them, then get engaged, then get married, that was how it would work. But, I was finding it really wasn't working that way. I was very—I loved necking, and petting and stuff, but I was like an "everything but" person. I did have a boyfriend from summers in Martha's Vineyard that I thought I would marry. So I attempted to have sex with him, and I, I thought, boy, this is pretty underwhelming. It didn't, I mean, [unclear] until two years later that we had actually never managed to have sex, which is why it was so underwhelming.

I then had a boyfriend in my junior year, and who was a lot of fun, and who was of a more youthful sensibility—was not a young lawyer. So I remember he was having a discussion with people at dinner, and I was being very quiet, as I had been taught to be, and I remember him saying, "Well, what do you think, Shelly? You're a smart girl. You must have an opinion." And, I was, like, oh, somebody's asking me for an opinion. So I had a very happy dating experience in my junior year. Unfortunately, I discovered that my very happy dating experience was with a man who actually was gay, but who hadn't mentioned anything along those lines until very late into the—I was very disappointed. He was a twenty-year old boy, and I guess twenty-year old boys can sleep with men, women, dogs, chickens, fire hydrants, so—and, when he told me he

was gay it was, like, okay, so that's your sexual preference, but isn't your actual preference the preference of the heart? Right? It was like saying, "I want pheasant, but you're just serving chicken, so I'll just make do with the chicken." But, he just couldn't make do with the chicken. I didn't, I didn't understand the sense in which sexual preference was a really compelling thing, I thought it was flexible. Yes, this is preference, but then there are all sorts of things working around preference, and other factors that might apply.

Q: Prior to that what was your exposure to—he was gay, and then how did that affect your whole understanding of both Barnard students?

Patrick: Everybody that I knew was gay in Detroit—

[Interruption]

First of all, my mother had come to New York one summer when she was divorced, I stayed with my grandmother, and had taken some drama courses. And, she came back with this story. She had a date, and the date and she were invited to a party. She was trying to get the date to go to the party, and she said, "Oh, really, it's going to be very gay," she was using gay in the sense that it had always been used up until—I guess I don't know. He said, "Well, I don't like those kind of parties," and she said, "You don't like gay parties? What kind of parties do you like, somber parties? Wakes?" And anyway, she had learned this new word "gay", gay men, homosexuals. We didn't know that.

But, people I knew who were gay where we had a guy who used to clean our house, and he was gay. He was openly gay. When I was a senior in high school I worked in a jewelry shop, and what did they call it, female impersonators would come in, and buy jewelry, and show pictures of themselves in their female impersonator. So, anybody that I knew who was gay said they were gay. But, the concept of people being gay secretly, it didn't occur to me. It really, really did color my future in, because I was attracted to very nurturing mild-mannered men. I didn't like men like my stepfather, who was kind of a bully, and you had to watch what you said. I was attracted to the other kind of men, man, you know, gay. But I didn't know that gay men would actually take you out, and say they were in love with you, and wanted to marry you, when they were actually homosexuals. I didn't understand that concept. So, I ended up with a couple of gay boyfriends, being really, really in love with them, and heartbroken when I found out. A brick had to fall on my head, honestly, for me to figure out they were gay. I remember thinking, "I wonder why it is that really smart black men have to get up in the middle of the night in the winter, and go for a walk by the Charles River, or in Central Park? Isn't that a coincidence that they have to do that?" Just, you know, criminally stupid, you know? If I wrote a memoir about my young life it would have to be "Too Dumb to Live."

So, I had a couple of those relationships, because I liked gentle, nurturing, quiet men who enjoyed my incessant talking, and who didn't need demure. As a matter of fact when my mother married my stepfather, she became—they were very social, because he was political, and she started, she had never known Jewish women before. She came home, and she said, "You know,

these Jewish women, it's really quite amazing, they sit at the dinner, and they say whatever they want, and express their opinions. They don't have to defer, or demure to anyone, and there are no repercussions." She had noticed that with black men, and also WASPy [White Anglo-Saxon Protestant] men, required a certain demure stance on the part of the wife. Ironically, then, I grew up to marry a Jewish man, and talked my head off with no repercussions.

I remember Karla and I—Karla was my good friend. Karla and I would, after we couldn't be political anymore, because we weren't going to kill anybody, we doubled our efforts at finding boyfriends, and we used to get, really, it was like people with jobs, every weekend we'd get dressed up—it could be four degrees below zero—we'd get dressed up and we'd go to parties looking for boyfriends. We never found any boyfriends at these parties, we never did. But, sometimes we had fun and danced. I don't know if it was worth going out in the cold, but we did. It was like, alright, suiting up, you know, it was like we were in ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps] or something. That dating ROTC, we're going to get one, we're going to get one this weekend.

Q: So, tell me about your experience—when was the first time you remember in your life that you were aware of race, and any racial discrimination. What was your experience at Barnard, and what has it been, the thing that's in your life that you can speak to about the consciousness—

Patrick: It took me a long time to get race. I think it takes children a long time to get race. I remember when I was five, my first little cousin was born, and they brought her home from the

hospital, and she had curly black hair, and she had blue eyes, and I remember looking at her and saying, to the family I think, "I think she's going to be a little white girl." Right? So, I thought race was something that you accidentally got, like you were tall, you happened to be tall, or you happened to have blue eyes, and it just arbitrarily came.

Then I remember being in the hospital, having had my appendix taken out, and being in the children's ward, and one girl there had figured out race, and she told everybody what they were. She told me that I was white, and so I told my mother that I was white, and my mother said, "No, honey, you're not white, you're colored," because that was the expression. I remember saying, "Well, well what color am I?" I was very slow to learn about race.

I do remember a point where race became complicated, socially complicated. I remember my friend Jennifer, who decided that we were going to go to Eastern Ivy league schools, she was turning sixteen. We were both at the competitive entrance high school, which was something like Stuyvesant [High School]. She was turning sixteen, and I thought is she going to—she's a little older than I was, and I said, "Are you going to have a party?"

She said, "I don't know, it would just be too exhausting, because I have to have two parties."

I said, "What do you mean?"

She said, "I'd have to have—" there weren't that many black people on our track in

school, "I'd have to have a party on Friday night for my white friends, then I'd have to have a party on Saturday night for my black friends," by those she meant the girls and boys that we'd grown up with in the black bourgeoisie.

And, of course, I could see her point. Not only did these people not know one another, but we thought we were afraid of social awkwardness. You know, as a teenager there's nothing worse than social awkwardness.

[Interruption]

Q: You were talking about the party—

Patrick: So, the fear was that the white people that we went to school with, and the black bourgeoisie people whom we socialized with, with our parents, would somehow not be able to mix and mingle, and that it would be strange. Nothing violent, or loud, but that just it would be strange, and there's nothing worse in a teenager's mind than having a strained situation. So, she decided that she wouldn't have either party, because it was just going to be too exhausting to have one on Friday, and one on Saturday. I completely understood, and tossed out the idea of having one of my own, because how were these people going to mix? Well, maybe they'd mix well, but maybe they wouldn't. And, then there was a class a part of it, because the people from the black bourgeoisie we knew were upper middle-class, and some of the white children, not

children, but kids that we went to school with, were working class. So how was that going to work?

And, then there was the thing that my grandfather said that was repeated to me endlessly. He said —my grandmother was very fair, and could have passed for white, but did not. People would tease my grandfather, he'd say, they'd say, "You married a white woman," and he'd get, he wouldn't laugh, he didn't think it was funny, and he would get very serious, and he'd say, "I would never marry a white woman. I am a physician, and I would marry a Polish waitress, and her family would consider that they had elevated me." This is something that I carried around for a very long time, and still do to this day. I mean, I tell this to my son. So, that was one way in which I experienced race.

At school I had close friends, good friends that I liked very much, that I saw every day, and socialized with, but then, and the black bourgeoisie kids that I didn't see as much, we were not as friendly, unless the group happened to mesh. But, the sense was that they were more important, because they were the people that counted, that you were going to go on and marry into, and carry on the system.

Q: What were some of your experiences at Barnard?

Patrick: Everything seemed perfectly happy until after the strike. And, after the strike there was —we, the Hamilton Hall people, did have a sense of being disappointed with the white people

who had not behaved well. And, there was polarization. So at a certain point—I mean there was a certain point at which, it didn't last forever, but a few weeks or months, I felt as if I had to sneak around and visit my white friends, like you would go see an illicit lover. That I couldn't—it was harder to blend the groups. That in my room no more did you have a bunch of black girls, and a bunch of white girls. If you had a bunch of black girls a white person would come, and people would stiffen, and they'd feel uncomfortable. I don't remember all the specifics, but I remember that feeling that oh, social awkwardness, again, the worst thing, social awkwardness.

Then I moved into Plimpton [Hall], and you stopped socializing with the greater group of people, and got very close to four other people. And, I had a mixed group sophomore year, and junior year—gosh, junior year was an all black group that somebody put together, and senior year apartment was two other black students. So, although I did maintain friendships with white girls, it made my closest circle became more and more black. I remember being really sorry about that, it wasn't as much fun as having everybody together. Having everybody together was the most fun to me, and still is.

Q: Say a little bit about your experience since graduating from Barnard with racism, and race in your life.

Patrick: Well, years ago I read a book called *I've Known Rivers*, it was by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot. It was about successful black professionals from all sorts of backgrounds, tenant farms, upper middle-class, telling their story. She didn't say this in the book, but I believe I

observed in the book that every one of those people had dealt with race by sheer denial. I remember Karla—my really close black friend in college—said that of all the black people she knew, I was the least racially aware. She wondered how I had become so not aware. In fact, I wondered myself, but I wondered how she could be so aware all the time. I mean she said to me, "You know, when I go out, and I get on the bus, I'm aware of myself as a black person getting on a bus. When I go to a movie, I'm aware of myself as a black person entering a movie with mostly white people." Well, I used to tease her. I'd say, "Okay, Karla as a black person, would you like a hamburger? As a black person, do you want to go to the movies? As a black person, can I borrow your sweater?" Because to me this was, I just—I didn't—I think in addition to the fact that my, neither of my parents—with the exception of my grandmother—nor my grandparents, went to black colleges, which most people did, they went to mainstream colleges. I think there was something about my family that was particularly assimilated, and I was just the result of a very assimilated group of people. Then lately I've started to think that a lot of it was just denial. The power of denial is amazing.

I remember when I was trying to get into soap operas, I wanted to write soap operas, and there were no black soap opera writers. I kept writing sample scripts, and handing them in. People would like the script, and want to meet with me, but after they met with me they wouldn't like the script so much. I remember my parents saying, "It's race. It's race," and my saying, "It's not race, that's over, it's not." But, when I finally did get a job, the sample script that I wrote, the office of the show that I wanted to write for was three doors down from my apartment, but I hired a messenger to deliver it, so they wouldn't see me. I got that job and, I was the first black

person to get a long-term contract in soaps. So, the other came a few months later, but it was on the West Coast. Okay, was that an accident, or not an accident? Well, I don't know, with race you can never know, unless it's just out there you can never know.

Q: What were the names of the shows that you wrote for?

Patrick: Oh, I wrote for *All My Children*, and I wrote for *General Hospital*, and a little bit of, like, six week's worth of *One Life to Live*. But, they were the ABC shows that are now being cancelled. I feel like a person who used to make whalebone corsets, or cotton gins—the genre that's fast disappearing.

Q: What was your experience of drugs? If you don't want to talk about—

Patrick: No, it's fine. My experience with drugs, I had very little experience with drugs at Barnard. My experience of drugs at Barnard were the boys always had the drugs, and it was usually marijuana. So, the boyfriend who turned out to be gay, and was lots of fun, he always had a lot of marijuana around. We'd sit around and giggle, and pretty benign. My friend, Allison, used to make a marinara sauce where she used pot instead of oregano, and this is a memory, the more you ate, the more delicious it became. I was reluctant to take hallucinogens, because I had the strong feeling that if I took a trip, that there would be no return ticket. So, I refrained from that. When I went to Harvard and it was such a miserable situation, my roommate and I used to smoke pot almost every day. But Harvard was a nightmare for me.

Q: Tell me how you got to Harvard, what was that sequence?

Patrick: I was in American Studies, and I was accepted with a fellowship to the Ph.D. in History of American Civilization. I had worked with Barbara Novack at Barnard, and I had a theory—I still don't know whether this theory is correct—I had a theory that there was a relationship between luminism in American landscape paintings, and pentatonicism in American folk music. I went to study with this person, Benjamin Roland, but two things—he died before I got there, and they didn't replace him. When I found out that, well they didn't replace him, and the American Studies Department at Harvard had always been very small, ten—twelve people.

Well, my year they accepted two people, me, and a thirty year old architect named Peter [Fabre]. And, Peter [Fabre] had a nervous breakdown before midterms the first year. So I was the class of '76. And, I would go—I had no mentoring. For years I thought that I had failed Harvard, and only recently occurred to me that Harvard failed me. I had no mentoring. I would go to my advisor and say, "What am I supposed to be doing?" and they'd say, "Well, anything you like." Well, for a forty-year old, that's really great, but for a twenty-year old living alone, going everywhere alone, picking your classes alone, it was just—I almost died of loneliness. I guess in the third year a friend from Barnard moved up, and we shared an apartment. We were both really depressed, and we both got stoned every day.

I remember walking across Harvard Yard with her and saying, "Leslie, has it occurred to you that we get stoned every day?"

Leslie said, "Yes."

And, I said, "Don't you think this might be a problem?"

She said, "Yes." She said, "Let's go home, get stoned, and talk about it."

So, not so much drugs—marijuana in college, and a lot of marijuana in graduate school, which I'm sure didn't help the depression, but—

Q: I'd love to hear the story again about how you and [Robert] Bob [Solomon] met, and then also to talk about your experience with an inter-racial marriage, and then having a child inter-racially.

Patrick: Bob and I met at a Halloween party, where you were supposed to come as a saint or a sinner, and I really went out. I wore my prom dress, and I had a wreath of baby roses made for my hair. I think I probably looked better than I ever looked in my life before or since. Bob wore jeans, and a tee shirt, that was his effort. We talked, and talked into the night, and then we made a date to, to have dinner the following Friday night. He came over, he was five minutes early, and I went into the kitchen to pour two glasses of wine, and I saw that my, my hands were shaking, I was so nervous. So I came out and said, "I know I'm supposed to be really relaxed, and poised,

and everything, but I'm really not. I haven't had a date in six months. I don't even know who's supposed to pay for the date, and I have no intention of sleeping with you." Bob said, "Oh, I'm so glad you said that." And, then we sat down, and we talked all night. We talked until all the restaurants closed, and we had to eat for dinner dry Cream of Wheat, because that's all I had in my house. No milk, just Cream of Wheat.

We just, we made a date for the following Friday, and between the first Friday and the last Friday my mother abruptly died. In-between I had gone to her house for dinner, and I was telling her about Bob, and I was trying to explain how I felt when I woke up the next morning after he had, had gone, and the date.

I said, "I woke up this morning, and I felt—and, I felt like—"

And she said, "You felt, like, a wonderful person."

And, I said, "Yes, that's exactly what I felt like, I felt like a wonderful person."

We had one of our long talks, I was very close, very close to my mother. I was reminding her of all the night her appendix burst, and the night that she had had an asthma attack, and almost died.

I said, "You know, you have to tried to bail on me very many, many times." She said—my mother was not quite of this world, and she said, "Well, you know, I've never felt really comfortable on this earthly plane, but all my life I've known I had to stay on this earth long

enough to get you to where you are today." That was on a Sunday, and she died Wednesday, before the second date. So, I stayed at my stepfather's house for a while, and I came back into the city on my birthday, because Bob had made a date to take me to dinner and a movie on my birthday.

I had a friend there, and she said, "Oh, I'll be back at midnight."

Bob said, "Why will you be back at midnight?"

She said, "Well, you, you don't understand. Shelly shouldn't be alone."

He said, "She won't be alone."

And, she said, "Oh, you don't understand, I mean ever."

And, he said, "No, I mean ever," and I never was.

It sounds very bizarre or strange, but I never was. I mean, we didn't plan to live together, it's just that we just did. We just fell into being together every day, and every night. I tried, and I knew, I thought oh, this doesn't seem healthy. So I was supposed to take a trip to San Francisco to see a friend, and Bob kept saying, "Well, do you want me to go with you. Don't you want me to go with you?" and I'd say, "No, I, no, because I—." I thought I was falling into this too easily. This

is not healthy. This is before cell phones. He drove me to the airport, and I got on the plane to San Francisco, and I got off the plane, and I found the nearest phone booth, and I called him and I said, "I've changed my mind," and the next day he came. So, healthy or not healthy we've been together for twenty-nine years.

The race problem we had was with his mother, who did not want him to marry a black woman. It was my grandfather's saying all over again, because he came from a working-class background. His mother was an immigrant, she was not well-spoken, or cultivated in any way, but she felt that I was the inferior being, and of course it played to all my worst tendencies. I have to say I hated her when she was alive, and I still hate her, and I'll hate her when she's been dead for thirty years and I'll hate her even after I've been dead. So, so much for that.

But, other than that, we lived in New York. We did raise our child in New York. I cannot remember any other problems, or incidents, can you? Patrick is racially indistinct looking. So I've done a lot to reinforce the black part of his heritage. Also that it happens to be a very distinguished part of his heritage. He knows the grandfather story. I did put a little pressure on him—I don't know how he dealt with this, or whether he dealt with it at all, but I said when he was in grade school, "I don't know how you're going to do this, but I don't ever want to come to a play date, or a party, or a classroom, and have peoples' jaws drop to the floor. So, however you have to arrange it so that they know that you're not white, you'll just have to do that." In only one incident did I have a jaw drop to the floor, and that wasn't a teacher, that was a reading specialist, or something. So I didn't have jaws dropping to the floor. I don't know how he dealt with—I

don't know if he dealt with it at all, or we were just in a, in a social milieu where jaws wouldn't be dropping to the floor.

I remember when Patrick went to college, he went to [University of] Maryland for his first two years.

I said, "Well, do you have any black friends?"

He said, "Sure, I have a lot of black friends."

I said, "Well, do they know that you're black?"

He said, "I don't know, what am I supposed to do say, 'Hi, I'm Patrick, I'm black?'"

In my day there were little things you could slip in like clubs that you belonged to that would transmit the information, but not in Patrick's day. But, I must say, and I think because I live in Manhattan—oh, there was a—I was pregnant, and looking for apartments, and Bob was working in the day, and I would go looking for apartments. I realized that apartment managers responded very, very differently to me alone than they did to me if I'd come with Bob. I realized there was no point in going if Bob couldn't come with me. That was a real shock for New York. Like oh, they really do discriminate. So, that was the one big thing in New York. I can't think of another one, can you?

Solomon: The whole thing of people would refer to you as Patrick's nanny.

Patrick: Oh, yeah, there were. I'd take Patrick to the park, and people would think, oh, who do you work for? And, I'd say, "Well, *All My Children*," and that was, you know, they would assume I was the nanny. But, other than that, no, no real hard [shit]. But then we hadn't traveled in the South, we've really been pretty much Manhattanites, so I can't say that necessarily our experience would have been the same in another place.

Q: Before I ask the last question, is there anything else that you can think of that you'd like to really talk about that we missed?

Patrick: Nothing is coming to mind. Getting me to talk is really not a—

Solomon: How would you summarize, or articulate your sense of that time period that we're exploring with this? How would you sum up the 60's?

Patrick: Like, the late 60's? Like stepping into a time machine, when everything changed.

Q: Say it from the beginning.

Patrick: Okay. We went into Barnard in our skirts that were daringly two inches above the knee, and within months they were up to our butt. The teas were being replaced by marches, and we were being led off to jail after having occupied a hall. Dating and courtship rituals changed to the point where anybody that you knew casually just thought that you would sleep with them, which was really not fun. The date became, you better not go out with anybody that you weren't wildly attracted to, because you were going to have the struggle over were you going to sleep with him. If you weren't going to sleep with him you were either hung up, or a lesbian, and if these enticements failed, there would be more reaping of criticism.

We had come out of the movement black and white together. We shall not be moved. There was great polarization SDS went, as far as I'm concerned. Berserk. Elements in the black movement went berserk. So that wonderful time of '65, '66, '67—of feeling that we together, were making social progress, that fell away, and that was a great sadness for me. People started taking drugs. Could you really have an ongoing relationship with a guy who was tripping every time you went out with him? The boys were a lot more adventurous drug-wise than the girls. The girls would sit around and smoke marijuana, the boys would trip. So you never knew whether what somebody said was just some ridiculous thing, or they were tripping. So, everything, the clothes changed, hair changed, politics changed. The interracial nature of progressives in this country changed. I think I've pretty much covered—

Q: The last question is, if you could go back to September 1967, and tell the young girl you used to be, give her some advice, what would that be?

Patrick: Try to figure out who you are, and don't worry about who you're supposed to be. That would be the advice. Try to figure out who you are, and not care at all about who you're supposed to be. That would be it.

Solomon: There's one other thing, describe your life now.

Patrick: Well, my life is pretty scary now, because for a long time I had this very secure career writing soap operas, and it's over. Soap operas are dying, and it's over. I was forced into early retirement, and neither psychologically nor financially am I prepared for retirement. So I've got to find some kind of mini career, or be very disappointed. So, it's a scary time for me. You know, I never thought age sixty-one would be a scary time. I thought I'd be completely secure, and having a wonderful time, and that's really not the case at all. It is with many of the people that I've interviewed, and I'm happy for them, but unfortunately my career dried up a few years too early for me to be comfortable in my present situation.

Q: What are you afraid of?

Patrick: Poverty. I'm afraid of poverty. I'm afraid of growing to look like a wizened old crone. I'm afraid of losing people I love. I'm afraid of serious illness. I'm afraid of just about everything.

Q: You talk about serious illness, and one of the things we haven't talked about is your experience with cancer. Do you want to say anything about that?

Patrick: You know, I had breast cancer. I didn't really have time to think about it that much, because I was working. I had to write a show a week, and in television you don't take a—you don't hand in a script you don't get paid. So, I had to write a show a week through all the surgery, and the chemotherapy, and the radiation. I think I got really burnt-out from it, that I didn't have much time to think about it. The really serious illness I had was Guillain-Baree [syndrome], when I—1974 I was paralyzed from the neck down, and attached to a respirator, which is really scary. In those days—I think the respirators have changed—but in those days a respirator, it could pop out of your neck, and you couldn't breath. Well, if you're attached to a respirator you can't speak. Paralyzed. You can't move, so the thing could pop out, and that you'd just die there. So, that was the really scary, scary illness that I had. But, I recovered from it. The breast cancer I didn't have time to think about, but I think I really did get worn down, and burnt-out from having to do those things at the same time. Yeah.

Q: So, what is it now that sustains you in this time period of uncertainty, and feeling scared? What are some of the things that you're finding that are sustaining or supporting you in this time?

Patrick: Well, my friends. My husband. My son. I think of projects to do. I wrote a screenplay, you know. This oral history is, is really time-consuming, so as long as I have something to throw myself into I'm pretty good. After this is over I'll have to throw myself over, into something else.

Q: What's the value of the oral history project?

Patrick: Oh, it combines both of my interests. And, you know, I'm a storyteller, and at the same time I'm interested in social history. I'm very interested in social history. Oral history is become something that's emerged. I read the book *The Warmth of Other Suns*, which is a story of the migration of blacks from the rural South to the urban North, and was just swept away by it. So, it really combines both of my interests, and talents, the storytelling, and the social history. It's just, it's perfect. And, that's how I've been getting through the last few months.

Q: Why should the general public be interested?

Patrick: It's a way of telling history that gives—that's a close-up. It's not one historian taking facts, and quotes, and giving one point-of-view, but it's a chorus of voices telling the story. You get much more nuance, much more range.

Q: Can you say that again?

Patrick: An oral history is a history that's told by many people, it's like a chorus of voices talking about the same things, different things, a period of time. So that you get that richness that you get from a chorus, but that you don't get from a solo. That's why oral history is so moving to me.

Q: Your relationship with your mom was very important to you, do you have the energy to tell us about that relationship for you?

Patrick: Well, my mother was my best friend, and I adored her. I think it was really, really very, very close. I didn't say—when she died, and very suddenly, it was if somebody had said that the sun had gone down, and was never going to come up again. The only reason I survived it was because of Bob. Because Bob was in so many ways so much like my mother, so fluky, and not mainstream, and funny, and devoted. It's really—I think it was just a serendipity that Bob came along, or, as my mother said all through her life she knew she had to get this far to get me where I was today. That makes it sound providential, but I, I miss my mother every day, and I hear her talking to me every day. Bob can tell you, I'll wake up some mornings, and in that period, that little period between waking and sleeping I yell, "Mom!" I'm sixty years old. My mother has been dead since 1982, and I'll wake up and say, "Mom!" So, a pretty profound relationship.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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