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Cover Page Footnote

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A Collaborative Autoethnography on Challenging Sociohistorical Constructions of Gender in Teacher Education¹

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Changing one's whole world view is extremely challenging, and university teachers and teacher educators are confronted by students' resistance and opposition, and arguments about a lack of objectivity when the results of gender studies are presented (Lahelma, 2011, p. 270)

On December 6th, 2019, I [Marie-Hélène] facilitated a workshop on sociohistorical gender constructions for social studies teachers in Quebec City. I could not forget that 30 years earlier to the day, in what has been dubbed the *Montreal Massacre*, 14 young women attending class at the École Polytechnique in Montreal were shot and killed for the simple fact of being women. Of course, leading up to the workshop, media relayed that infamous story all day, finally acknowledging the term *femicide*. The conference coordinators of the day organized a moment of silence at lunchtime to commemorate the 14 women, and sensing a somber tone across the silent crowd, I could feel that this harrowing history was going to impact the workshop. When the workshop began, I was upfront and told the participants how profoundly this event affected me. I told them that even as a child in 1989, this tragedy left a vivid mark in my mind, and I am reminded of it every December 6th and, really, any time I feel excluded because of my gender. The workshop, as we will show in this article, had, amongst other themes, a focus on everyday images that shape and perpetuate masculinity, sometimes contributing to felt justifications for acts of femicide. Even more than I expected, the workshop participants were open to discussing the need to go beyond mere denunciation and to show commitment and real action against

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exclusionary constructions of gender. While the open discussion was part of my aim, I began to wonder how my role and own discomfort—the imprint left by the femicide 30 years prior—was determining the forms of connection I shared (or not) with the workshop participants.

I [Mark] recognized the need to more closely examine the place of my own discomfort within the context of the workshop, when I was presenting a guest lecture to a class in a teacher education program. My lecture was not focused on the constructions of gender, and I was discussing the co-constructions of meanings and purposes for material objects and human actions, eventually linking to the enactments of racisms within everyday social spaces. At one point during the lecture, in an unplanned but seemingly appropriate use of an anecdote, I began sharing my experience of dissecting a pig fetus in secondary school biology class. I really do not remember what triggered me to tell the story, but I recall describing how my groupmates and I diverted from the scientific dissection instructions and began examining and discussing the pig's body in terms of preparing barbecue. As I told the story to the workshop participants, I casually recalled: “the guys and I—and of course we were all guys. Girls wouldn't be so unfocused and immature—then talked about our love for barbeque.” Then, quickly recognizing the ways my quip categorized males and females into unfocused and focused, I attempted to backtrack and clarify that girls and women could be unfocused and interested in barbeque just as much as boys and men. I attempted to flag that gender was not as much of the story as I made it. The students did not show any significant response to my gaffe, and I continued the lecture as planned. Yet, I still felt discomfort with the gendered images I inadvertently presented, and I began to wonder what I was unknowingly projecting to participants in the workshop that Marie-Hélène and I designed for the very purpose of engaging discomfort in relation to constructions of gender.

By the time we each experienced our respective moments, we had given our co-designed workshop a few times to teacher candidates, sometimes together and sometimes on our own. We realized that our collaborative work, our exchanges, and the great dynamic and continuous discussion we created, helped to both improve the workshop and make us grow as researchers and educators. We felt there was a need to more systematically *record* our emotions as educators, and that this often meant analyzing our own discomforts. This article is our attempt at unpacking and sharing this process as we argue that if students are to interrogate sociohistorical gender constructions, educators must continuously examine how their own discomforts influence their engagement with students' responses.

To position ourselves here, we are both pre-service teacher educators in a bilingual Canadian university. We generally teach different sections of the same courses in a teacher education program, with Marie-Hélène's classes being taught in French and Mark's classes in English. One of us – Marie-Hélène – became an Assistant Professor in Social Studies education in 2018, but has been teaching in different Canadian universities since 2011. Gender, and more specifically women in history education, has been the focus of most of her research so far. The other – Mark – is a PhD candidate focusing his research on public pedagogies, sociohistorical

geographies, and enacting antiracism. He has also taught at multiple Canadian universities, and his teaching in the teacher education program has been in history education methods and the complexities of the relationships between schooling and society.

The idea of the workshop first grew as an idea for a *Gender and Sexuality* event that was to take place in our Faculty. This activity was mandatory for preservice teachers. At that point, Mark was a research assistant with Marie-Hélène and we were working on improving our understanding of the pedagogy of discomfort (Boler, 1999). Fitting with Lahelma's quotation we used as an epigraph to this article, to different degrees we both experienced resistance and opposition from students when trying to address certain topics in class, even more so when these referred to very current or *difficult* topics (Garrett, 2010; 2020). In her recent studies on discussing gender and sexual violence in teacher education, Engebretson (2016; 2019) exposes well how these very topics are *difficult* since they are linked to personal beliefs and experiences and therefore often taboo. We were therefore trying to find innovative ways to challenge our methods in teaching specifically about *difficult* topics. Upon viewing a then-recent television advertisement by Gillette (2019) and the subsequent public controversy it created (Bogen et al., 2020; Dupuis-Déri, 2019), we saw an opportunity to use that specific controversy to tackle sociohistorical constructions of gender in teacher education. Using a pedagogy of discomfort, we wished to dismantle beliefs based on gender essentialism by challenging the participants to identify and unpack their own representations of gender, some of which they did not initially realize they held.

This aim might seem ambitious for a 75-minute workshop, and indeed it is. Our intention here, however, is not to prove that our workshop fully achieved what it was designed to do, or even to show evidence of the outcomes of a pedagogy of discomfort. Instead, we highlight three 'critical moments' (Zembylas & Papamichael, 2017) that we feel characterize its potential and limits, and, by doing so, we also examine our own choices and positionalities in the process. Before delving into these moment, though, we first describe the workshop and then outline the methodology and conceptual framework we used when conducting our analysis.

The Workshop

I [Marie-Hélène] feel ongoing discomfort with the Polytechnique femicide, along with more recent deadly events like the 2018 Toronto van attack when a male driver ran down pedestrians after declaring allegiance to an online *incel* community (Brockbank, 2019). Motivated by my discomfort, I felt compelled to address sociohistorical constructions of gender and help students critique gendered discourses. The *incel* ("involuntarily celibate") community is linked to growing antifeminist culture sometimes referred to as the *manosphere* (Lilly, 2016), reminding us all that misogynist violence and discourses still thrive in North America (Dupuis-Déri, 2018). I wanted to investigate hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005) with my students, but somehow felt like an impostor. The Gillette (2019) commercial controversy (Dupuis-Déri, 2019)—

described below—marked an opening for me, as it easily related to antifeminism (Blais, 2009; Faludi, 1991), a theme I previously addressed with both high school students (Brunet, 2017) and teacher candidates (Brunet & Demers, 2018).

We [Marie-Hélène and Mark] used media representations of gender as a starting point for examining constructions of genders and gender roles, and for considering how to employ a pedagogy of discomfort in deconstructing those thought-to-be-fixed categories. Amongst other institutions, media participates in structuring gender performances (Butler, 1990), and tends to normalize narrow (cis)gender identities (Barker et al., 2018). Berman and White (2013) and Friesem (2017) analyzed the benefits of critical literacy programs that use advertisements to address gender with high school students. Triviño-Cabrera (2017) and Boler (2005) also analyzed some positive outcomes of using popular media (i.e. video clips, advertising, movies) to bring teacher candidates to question their commonplace assumptions on gender.

As we mentioned earlier, we are not pursuing the same objective, but a common thread between those studies is the “need to take into consideration students’ backgrounds and use this knowledge to make [the exercise] relevant” (Friesem, 2017, p. 182). We emphasize the idea that educators’ identities and experiences, as much as students’, must be taken into consideration in a pedagogy of discomfort. To start the workshop, we introduced ourselves, including our gender pronouns and a brief discussion of safe spaces and ethical spaces. We suggest ‘safe space’—where people can express themselves without fear of attack—is a goal to strive for, but often becomes conflated with notions of freedom of speech without consequences. As such, we promote ‘ethical space,’ where participants can express thoughts and feelings, but recognize that they exist relationally (Donald, 2009), and what they say and do can affect other participants, and vice versa. This does not mean people should feel censored, but rather, they must consider others and be prepared for challenging but necessary discussions when negative emotions and tensions arise. Due to time constraints, it is only with small groups (10 or less) where we ask participants to introduce themselves. After addressing the space and our places within it, we presented the media to be examined.

We could have chosen almost any advertisement featuring people and asked workshop participants to assess the ad’s gender representations. However, we specifically chose the Gillette (2019) commercial, “We believe: The best a man can be,” because it was relatively new, was in the news as a source of controversy in public discourse, and it directly engaged with images of masculinity. The ad presents scenarios of men challenging stereotypes of masculinity, such as one man interrupting another man’s attempt at making “cat-calls” to a woman walking on the street and another man breaking up two boys who were fighting at a backyard barbecue, telling them that people should not treat each other with violence. Gillette’s aim, seemingly, was to challenge the “guys just having fun” and “boys will be boys” narratives. Online viewings sparked a contentious debate over whether the ad was helping or hindering the fostering of a productive conversation about toxic masculinity. We guided participants in contemplating their

own responses to the video, but also their responses in relation to the other viewers' online interactions with the video.

When screening the advertisement, we asked participants only to watch the images being shown. Immediately after the ad, we instructed the workshop audience to take 30 seconds and each write down the first five words that came to mind to describe the ad. We used the 30-second time limit believing that selected words would reflect instinctive reactions, and not be over-thought. Following this task, we asked participants to take one minute and, for each of their five words, write down a word they deemed to be the opposite (e.g., progressive-restrictive, funny-sad). Once they had 10 words in total, we instructed them to pair up and discuss what words they used to describe the ad, and what they believed the opposites to be. Our rationale was that the discussion would unveil similarities and differences between people's perceptions, as well as showing similarities and differences between assumptions of what opposing views would be.

After five minutes, we opened the conversation and asked the participants to share with us and the group what words they came up with, and anything they discovered in their partner comparisons about perspectives that they had not previously considered. As the various descriptive words were shared, we wrote them on the chalk board at the front of the room, but did not list them in columns of 'initial thought' and 'opposite'. We recorded the responses as they were spoken to us and created a large cloud of words. We did this to illustrate that all the words represent perspectives that exist and could be encountered in a classroom.

Then, inspired by Dupuis-Déri (2019), we ask the participants to identify the masculine roles they felt were represented in the advertisement (e.g. educator or protector). The 2019 ad is presented as an update to an older Gillette (1989) ad campaign that showed heteronormative traditional gender roles. In order to reflect even more upon the notion of sociohistorical constructions of gender, we then showed the 1989 ad. This part of the workshop is certainly one of the most appreciated (particularly considering our audiences are most often composed of history and social studies teachers and teacher candidates) as the discussion that follows integrates the Historical Thinking concept of continuity and change (Seixas & Morton, 2013).

After examining responses to the Gillette (2019) ad and its ancestor (Gillette, 1989), we presented the Always (2014) ad "#LikeAGirl." This commercial aims to disrupt negative imagery of females in deprecating statements that someone performs an action "like a girl" (e.g. "You throw *like a girl*"), and to reclaim "like a girl" as a positive descriptor. We chose to show this ad so participants could apply ideas from the word comparison exercise to another ad in real time. The hope was that they would view the second ad more critically by considering stated and unstated messages, and different emotional reactions triggered. Additionally, as the online audience approval rating (virtual thumbs-ups) was significantly higher with the Always ad than with the Gillette ad, which was greatly disliked (virtual thumbs-downs) by online audiences, we highlighted the differing approval ratings and posed questions to examine the discrepancy. Seemingly, both ads attempt to disrupt gender stereotypes, so one might expect the 'likes' and

‘dislikes’ to be more balanced. From here, we deliberated possibilities that audiences like the Always ad for attempting to replace negative imagery of females with positive ones and dislike the Gillette ad out of discomfort with perceived suggestions that hegemonic masculinity is *bad* or *wrong*. We expected that using this media and addressing these issues might create discomfort for some workshop participants, and it was because we were the designers and facilitators of the workshop—the bringers of discomfort—that we felt our analytical lens needed to point inward. This paper, then, is a response to our recognition of that need for introspection that considers the complexities of educator-learner relations, and not merely a recalling of our workshop practices.

Methodology

In identifying and reflecting on ‘critical moments’ from our workshops, we conducted a *collaborative autoethnography* (CAE) to examine not only how participants responded to our call for unpacking their representations, but also how participants caused us to challenge our own representations. Beginning with an understanding of *autoethnography* as the examination and “writing about the personal and its relationship to culture” (Ellis, 2004, p. 37), we determined that CAE provided the best way forward for this study, not only because we are two researcher-educators working together, but also because we view ourselves—the personal, as Ellis states—as existing always in fluctuating relational forms. In general terms, CAE is a multivocal approach “in which a team of two or more researchers work together to share personal stories and interpret the pooled autoethnographic data” (Lapadat, 2017, p. 590). Because we each engage with, contemplate, and respond to the workshop activities and interactions primarily through our respective analytical lenses (gender representations for Marie-Hélène and antiracism for Mark), we sought to unpack and understand ourselves by examining how we each shaped and were shaped by each other and our workshop participants.

Much like Hernandez, Chang, and Ngunjiri (2017), we were drawn to CAE by “both our relational connection and the seemingly limitless possibilities of combining our various self-stories to see what they could teach us, and perhaps others, about the complexities of social phenomena” (p. 251). Our sharing of self-stories linked with, but were not limited to, only separate experiences of our individual pasts. Rather, they were focused on the shared experiences of presenting the workshop for which we were both present but sometimes reflected upon differently. Aligning ourselves with the practices modeled by Young and McKibban (2014), “We engage[d] in collaborative autoethnography as a narrative process that involves weaving our voices which simultaneously overlap and diverge” (p. 363), and “We dialogically juxtapose[d] our personal narratives to make sense of our roles as activist-educators” (p. 363).

One might think it a commonplace activity to debrief with a colleague after presenting a co-designed workshop, and indeed, it would be odd for there not to be at least an exchange of “that went well,” or “that was the worst workshop I’ve ever given.” But for this work, our acts of recollection and reflection were more methodical. We began with the usual “how do you think

that went?” but then moved more deliberately into questions of “what audience reactions/responses stood out to you?” and “how did I see/feel myself reacting and responding both in my internal monologue and to the audience?”

Because this process asked us to disclose honest reflections and critical analysis of ourselves and each other, these conversations required an openness and trust between the two of us. This was a project and process of analysis that was founded on a previously established and positive working relationship, but that was and is open to growth through the CAE process. As Lapadat (2017) states, “Doing collaborative autoethnography is a powerful method of team building as it enhances trusting relationships among coresearchers, provides for deep listening or witnessing, promotes creativity, and offers collegial feedback and mentorship” (p. 598). Our post-workshop conversations lent to some self-understanding and growth, but they also helped us better recognize our assumptions and how they impact the content we select, the practices we use, and the positions we hold in relation to each other and the participants in the workshop. By using CAE, our experiences and reflections became our data, and we analyzed interpretations of experiences for commonalities and differences, creating opportunities to deconstruct our relationalities in constructing and historicizing representations (Hernandez et al., 2017). Through our regular debriefing, we realized that we do not merely facilitate, but also actively participate in each workshop: guiding, and also being guided by changing discussions with every iteration. This suggests a need to historicize and critique our own discomforts in relation to participants’ engagements.

Conceptual Framework

Social constructions of gender

Recent Canadian and American studies show that gender stereotyping remains common, although often not seen as such consciously, both within preservice teachers (Brunet & Demers, 2018; Colley, 2017; Engebretson, 2016; 2019; Monaghan, 2014; Richard, in press) and seasoned teachers (Conseil du statut de la femme, 2016; Scheiner-Fisher & Russell, 2015). This research points to the persistence of deeply binary, cisnormative (which assumes one’s gender identity aligns with the gender they were assigned at birth based on their genitalia), and heteronormative (which takes for granted that individuals are heterosexual) gendered practices. Far from being harmless, such practices can lead to the normalization of discriminatory discourses both in teacher education and in schooling at large (Mosconi, 2016).

Historically, beliefs linked to biological differences between men and women have contributed to strengthen representations of psychological and social differences between the sexes. The concept of gender allows us to transcend this traditional biological opposition in order to understand social (non-biological) constructions of the “feminine” and “masculine,” as well as the relationships they generate and the hierarchies they create (Mosconi, 2016). Butler (1990) goes further in this thinking, by arguing that not only is gender constructed, “sex” is too. In other

words, the gender division based on a power differential precedes the sexual differences. Butler explains as well how everyday actions and interactions constitute *performances* reinforcing the gender binary. This gender performativity, as Butler describes it, is both infused by representations of gender in language and institutions and constantly recreated through how individuals present themselves (Baril, 2007; Butler, 1990). This conceptualization is particularly useful to better grasp how constructions of gender are also *sociohistorical* and everchanging, for which contextualization is essential. We also find that Butler's theory is helpful for us as researchers, and even more so in the present exercise of analyzing our own discomforts.

Butler's theory can help educators avoid approaching gender in ways that fall short of a necessary complex understanding. University teacher educators have a role in "doing gender" (Kreitz-Sandberg, 2013, p. 456) in order to help teacher candidates recognize the construction and perpetuation of gender categories through the relationships between their roles as (future) teachers and the education systems in which they work. However, Lahelma (2011) suggests educators in general tend to lean toward one of two approaches: gender essentialism or gender neutrality. Gender essentialism seeks to cater to different needs between boys and girls, but however well-intentioned it may be, it adheres to a gender binary, placing all boys and all girls into gender categories with distinct traits for each, and assuming differing genders to have entirely different needs. The other approach, gender neutrality, most often means simply not talking about gender, as if the solution is to treat all genders the same. The problem with this is that gender neutrality falls short of acknowledging and learning to navigate the (sometimes banal) gendered structures and cultures. Furthermore, it often adheres with the belief that gender equality has been achieved in North America. As we were looking to take up these concepts in ways that helped to move beyond those limitations, we found a path forward with a pedagogy of discomfort.

Pedagogy of Discomfort

As we understand gender to be an identity that is constructed and performed in relational ways, we find it crucial to examine not only *that* gender is constructed and performed, but also *how* and *why*. A classroom space and the subject matter being explored are shaped in part by all the experiences, emotions, and perceptions of those who occupy it. The educator is no exception. With this in mind, it becomes necessary for the workshop participants and leaders (us) to conduct some self-exploration to understand how we position ourselves, how we are positioned by others, and how these notions of set positions come to be. This exploration has potential to be uncomfortable as it requires each person to problematize who they feel themselves to be and their knowledge of structures they thought to be fixed. An endeavor such as this requires that we face ourselves with honesty, and this can be uncomfortable. For this reason, we engaged with and thought through our data for this study—ourselves in relation to each other and our workshop audiences—using a *pedagogy of discomfort*.

Boler (1999) describes how a pedagogy of discomfort begins by “inviting educators and students to engage in critical inquiry regarding values and cherished beliefs, and to examine constructed self-images in relation to how one has learned to perceive others” (p. 176). While we recognize and give attention to the intersectionality of identities that continuously (re)construct a person’s being (Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1994), we chose to centre gender construction in this study, because very few studies in education have looked at the use of a pedagogy of discomfort to specifically tackle gender-related issues (Boler, 2005; Harrison & Ollis, 2015; Reygan & Francis, 2015; Richard, in press).

With that in mind, we considered Boler’s (1999) continued description of a pedagogy of discomfort, which suggests that “Within this culture of inquiry and flexibility, a central focus is to recognize how emotions define how and what one chooses to see, and conversely, not to see” (p. 176). Acknowledging how the emotions we experience are indicators and influencers of how we see and engage the world is a challenge, sometimes enhanced by emotional pain, and it is for that reason that a pedagogy of discomfort is sometimes avoided and even discouraged for being unethical (Zembylas, 2015).

Issues such as racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, and other forms of discrimination are often dealt with in indirect ways, being declared as “bad,” but not distinctly addressed in educational settings. Those hesitant to engage with them more fully by examining the violent realities and students’ roles in perpetuating white, heterosexual, cis male dominance claim it is harmful and unethical to ask students to consider themselves in relation to these forms of exclusion. Indeed, considering oneself in relation to such discriminations can provoke negative emotions, but passive engagement, denouncing discriminations without understanding them, allows educators to claim anti-oppressive practices while discriminations continue to be repeated, sometimes unknowingly. Kumashiro (2002) argues that the repetition solidifies discriminatory perspectives and does not call on students to recognize their engrained attitudes, causing marginalized students “to experience, again and again, the privileging of only certain ways of identifying, thinking, or relating to others” (p. 68). In response to notions that approaches such as a pedagogy of discomfort are unethical, Kumashiro (2002) writes, “What is unethical [...] is leaving students in such harmful repetition.” He continues by emphasizing that “entering crisis, then, is a required and desired part of learning in anti-oppressive ways” (p.74).

Echoing Kumashiro’s argument about the need for “entering crisis” in anti-oppressive education, Zembylas (2015) states that “Individual and social transformation may be impossible without enduring some sort of ethical violence, and thus causing students discomfort and pain in social justice education may be unavoidable” (p. 172-173). Through our own study, the intention was not to actively *bruise* anyone’s identity, but rather, if this type of bruising was felt by workshop participants, we sought to guide them in purposefully taking the time to understand how and why it might be felt, and to use it to understand different internally engrained categories of identity.

More pertinent to the aspect of the study we discuss here is how we witnessed, responded to, and at times experienced discomfort ourselves when addressing the relational construction of genders. Critics might suggest that our consideration of our own experiences through a pedagogy of discomfort does not constitute recognizable research evidence. To this, we say that the promotion of an evidence-based pedagogical practice is indeed necessary, as this builds bridges between research and practice, and helps to develop the relationship between theory and practice to create praxis. One common connotation with terms such as *research* and *evidence*, however, is that one must fully remove the *personal* to be objective. A pedagogy of discomfort seeks to engage the personal not to suggest research and evidence are unnecessary, but rather to acknowledge that the personal is evidence and that reflecting on it is research (Boler, 1999; Mozziconacci, 2019).

A pedagogy of discomfort did, as the name suggests and as we witnessed, bring workshop participants discomfort, because they were being asked to be critical of what they think they know and who they think themselves to be. As we discuss here, we also experienced our own discomfort in working with this pedagogy. The potential positive outcomes occur because it requires more than passive empathy and demands an active engagement from both teachers and students, which means a personal investment and recognition of the fluctuation of the self in different contexts. Ultimately, a pedagogy of discomfort helps students and teachers to see the oppressive power differentials that they experience and sometimes perpetuate, and to then use that understanding to see the potential for them to contribute to changes in their school experiences and beyond. To aid us in recognizing and unpacking power differentials and the potential for enacting change, we next turn to some of our experiences from the workshop.

Critical Reflections

In the spirit of collaborative autoethnography, we recall three critical moments from facilitating the workshop. For each moment, we proceed in analyzing our experiences in a structured and repeated fashion. First, we present a snapshot of a critical moment that serves to summarize and frame our combined reflection. It acts as a representation of our methodology in practice. Each snapshot includes three elements: 1) a description of the critical moment; 2) a list of emotions and perceptions as experienced by the educators; and finally, 3) a broad insight of how the moment contributed to developing understandings of the relationships between educators, learners, and the workshop content. Following each snapshot, we each proceed to separately historicize and critique our respective experience, each explaining how we have reacted in the situation and how we interpret our reactions and emotions.

While we offer certain details for contextualizing our reflections, for the purposes of confidentiality and anonymity of our participants, we do not specify the location or iteration of the workshop in which those moments took place. We also disclose information on gender identity or sexual orientation only when these inform the understanding of the moment. To

complete the discussion of the critical moments, we marry our reflections together by drawing on academic literature to help consider the ways our individual responses represent those that are characteristic of our endeavors, thereby being prone to happen again, as well as something that is and should be shared. Finally, we draw on our experience with CAE to describe how this methodology can become a tool for joint-teacher reflection in pondering the reactions and emotions linked to the teaching and learning of not only gender but many other current issues in social studies (Garrett, 2020). Through these practical implications, we argue that this exercise is imperative for whoever claims to teach towards social justice.

Critical Moment 1: Isolated dialogue ***Snapshot 1***

General description of the first critical moment

During a group-wide conversation, a participant expressed their initial discomfort with the masculine representation in the 2019 Gillette ad. The facilitators engaged in a dialogue with the objective of helping the participant reflect on their cherished beliefs (Boler, 1999). The dialogue quickly became exclusive and the rest of the group stopped being involved.

Emotions and perceptions of the educators

- Discomfort in engaging with straightforward expressions of resistance
- Impression of “losing” the rest of the group
- Fear of losing control or making the space “unsafe”
- Sense that the position of *professor* and *feminist professor* can either hinder true expressions of feelings or, at the contrary, provoke harmful responses

Insight

We need to ensure we do not turn classes/sessions into a series of one-on-one dialogues focused on our perspectives versus a participant’s perspective. We must strive to create and maintain a workshop environment for learning about and from unpacking discomforts in relational ways.

Marie-Hélène

Before the workshop, I often feel a tension, a stress I can feel deep in my stomach, which is similar to every time I am about to introduce issues of race or other difficult knowledge (Garrett, 2010) in a social studies classroom. Many things can explain that initial anguish, including insecurities linked to a feeling of being an impostor (e.g. as a cisgender woman, who am I to talk about masculinities?); a simplistic and mostly false idea I need to have an incontestable expertise

on everything in order to teach it; an anxiety related to my position as pre-tenured professor (Boler, 2005); and a fear that my feminist-activist hat might be badly received by the workshop participants (Richard, in press).

Reflecting on this prior discomfort, it is no wonder I felt angst when having to deal directly with a student expressing that the Gillette ad was upsetting to them. It is, however, contradictory when we take into consideration the fact that this is what we wanted and should have expected, as we are working with a pedagogy of discomfort. Still, at the very moment it happened, my head was spinning as I was trying to evaluate the best way to respond. I decided to engage with the student, and it was a respectful and enlightening dialogue, but it was certainly not a group conversation. The participant was able to explain their position and was actively able to put words on their emotions. At one point, though, considering the silence (or indifference?) of the rest of the group and the body language of the participant, I thought that the participant who brought this issue up may have felt targeted and regretful of their intervention. Thus, we left it there, somehow unfinished, and the workshop continued. I felt a sense that I failed at engaging the group to collectively unpack the expressed ideas, and had instead isolated an individual who expressed a view – and did it in an unfrontational way – I considered oppressive, but that was symptomatic of relatively common views on masculinities (Lilly, 2016).

As some scholars suggest, resistance is a sign of engagement, and often a first step to working through what lies beneath preconceptions of gender (Boler, 2005; Friesem, 2018). Therefore, decentering myself by encouraging other participants to join the conversation is likely a more effective way to create a safe learning environment than a confrontation or a bidirectional dialogue. A study on Women Studies' courses and female professors in positions of authority shows that male students' stances about feminism and male privilege are reinforced and reproduced by a lack of subjective and active teaching strategies (Pleasant, 2011).

Mark

As an educator who underpins his pedagogy with positions of anti-oppression, I sometimes feel it a challenge to find a balance between my role in guiding participants and students to critique their own positions, thereby allowing them to find their own understandings of anti-oppression, and my desire to problematize their positions in an effort to name and disrupt oppressive stances. When the participant expressed discomfort with the Gillette (2019) ad, feeling that the ad suggests there is something wrong with men as a gender, I had to resist the urge to bluntly say, “So you’d be more comfortable if Gillette promoted forms of masculinity that perpetuate the objectification and dehumanization of women?” This response, however, might not have been greatly productive for the purposes of our workshop.

While I did not voice this response, and instead chose to pose questions to help the participant unpack why they felt uncomfortable, I pondered my instinctive reaction and found that it comes from two places. First, it came from my discomfort with oppression; this is not a

bad thing, and in fact where my training comes from. However, it also came from my discomfort with, and perhaps fear of, the uncertainty of people to recognize their position(s) as problematic. Through my ongoing self-reflection, I noted that my internal response of confrontation was indicative of my feelings that my position of anti-oppression is the *correct* position, and that my goal was for students and workshop participants to join my side. I imagine, but will not generalize, that these discomforts are conceptually common, as educators at any level wish to see the “ah-ha” moment when students *get it*, whatever ‘it’ is.

Just as I came to acknowledge that my efforts in developing antiracist analysis in and through education do not come with guarantees (Stanley, 2014), so, too, must I remember that my contributions to designing and facilitating this workshop are done with hopes but not inevitabilities that participants will unsettle themselves from views perpetuating harmful constructions of gender. Additionally, while I can remain confident in the knowledge I create, I must remember that my ways of knowing are not the only ways. This does not mean that I should accept misogyny or racism or any discrimination as just a difference of opinion. I do, however, need to recall that a student or participant expressing their discomfort is step one in the process of deconstructing that discomfort, and it offers little benefit to that process if, out of my own discomfort, I create confrontation that could potentially lead to violent discourse or a shutting down of dialogue. As an educator, I made the choice to work with students and participants who could have beliefs and values that oppose my own, but I would shirk my accepted responsibility to facilitate learning if I did not deconstruct my own discomforts and allowed them to derail challenging but necessary interactions that can lead to personal, anti-oppressive growth.

Critical Moment 2: Boys will be boys?

Snapshot 2

General description of the second critical moment

A participant described with great emotion how the Gillette (2019) ad was emancipating for him, a cisgender heterosexual male educator, and how much he had desired that kind of representation.

Emotions and perceptions of the educators

- Worry that the intervention might hinder some other responses or the objectives of the workshop
- Fear that the participant’s response is not truthful, but said to please the facilitator
- Need for the educator to reevaluate their own assumptions on the advertisement

- Realization that the educator might also have assumed the homogeneity of the experience of cisgender heterosexual males

Insight

We need, as educators, to rethink how and why we seek to “control” how a workshop is progressing. This also includes examining our own assumptions and expectations of participants’ gendered responses.

Marie-Hélène

More than ever, I sense that one major barrier to gender equality is that many men do not see what they have to gain by adopting more egalitarian behaviors, especially in a society that values salaried work, but does not value unpaid feminized labour such as domestic duties and child rearing; a society which celebrates individual and financial successes, but has much less concern for *care*, or jobs, like teaching or nursing, that involve to some degree, selflessness (Delvaux, 2019). In that state of mind, invited to rethink their assumptions of what “makes a man,” I thought Gillette’s advertising line might feel to most men like a “loss” or a “put down.”

Throughout the many times I facilitated the workshop, discussions generally seemed to go the way I expected them to go: whether participants say they are comfortable with the advertising or not, they evoke that the 2019 advertising can be perceived as depreciative to men by asking them to change their behavior. They do not directly use the terms loss of power, but this is, in my sense, what is implied. The presentation of the 1989 ad, can also, in many ways, reinforce this, as it clearly associates manhood with positions of power or individual success (Wall Street worker, astronaut, professional athlete, father and husband, etc.).

As Dupuis-Déri (2019) states, the portrayals in the 2019 ad are not less positive—and certainly not negative—but they are differently positive: men are shown much more as *protectors* or *educators*. Most participants do not see these roles as powerful or emancipating. Further, they sometimes associate these roles to weaknesses or emotions. In short, the viewing of the Always (2014) ad serves, among other things, to have them reflect on how these qualificative of weak and emotional are also associated as “feminine” and bear an unfavorable connotation, which as Delvaux (2019) points out, can also be found in homophobic speech. This is the way it generally works in the workshop to the conclusion where we question the association of *feminine* with weak and *masculine* with powerful; the danger of this narrative and how the Gillette (2019) ad might help disrupt this. So, when a participant brought, very early on in the discussion, the fact that the Gillette ad was empowering for him, I was astonished, in a very positive way, but

also skeptical and destabilized in my preconceived structure for the discussion and in my own assumptions about participants, particularly male participants.

I will start with my first insecurity, that I thought the participant might not be being completely truthful. I thought: how much of this response is my doing? Like in the first critical moment, how much does my position as a *professor* and as a *feminist professor* influence the reactions of the participants? Are they simply saying what I want them to say, simply seeing what I want them to see? My questioning here speaks to the ways my understanding of educator-learner power dynamics might be shaping my practice. Why would I even question the veracity of a reaction I was hoping to get, that is a participant underlining how much men had to "gain" by getting rid of the dictates of hegemonic masculinity? Is it not also because I assumed that participants, and even more male participants, would react in a certain way? Even if my background as a feminist scholar should alert me to the dangers of homogenizing a group, particularly in terms of gender, in this case I did make presuppositions about male students.

Considering a second aspect, I was taken by surprise and accepting his testimony as sincere meant I needed to let the discussion take its own trajectory. It meant letting go of a certain control I thought I had. I did let go and the discussion continued, but I worried some other participants might have decided to hold back their participation because they felt *everything had already been said*. Then again, maybe that's how it was supposed to go in the specific context of this iteration of the workshop. In the end, my realization has been that in a pedagogy of discomfort, not completely unlike in other forms of teaching and learning, educators cannot and should not anticipate every reaction. If some anticipation is normal and desirable, too much anticipation risks hindering what should be a more organic conversation.

Mark

My response to the participant's sense of emancipation—feeling supported in his disconnection from rigid constraints of dominant visions of male-ness—was of pleasure, but also surprise. The participant's sense of emancipation was because he was uncomfortable with the perpetuation of narrowly defined masculinity, and worked to present the males around him (i.e. colleagues, students, his own children) with versions of masculinity as being in flux, which departs from the dominant fixed category and grapples with essentialized perceptions of male and female educators (Cushman, 2012). My pleasure, of course, was with the participant's general understanding of, and appreciation for, the disruption of stereotypical constructions of masculinity. He was not about to push back, and fully embraced the shifts in the categorization of men. Whether he intended to be or not, I saw the participant in a position of allyship with feminists, as he declared that he had been waiting for this type of disruption of dominant and toxic masculinities with which he did not feel comfortable aligning himself.

My feeling of surprise was for the unexpected nuance of the participant's reaction, as well as being surprised at myself for not anticipating the reaction as a possibility. I realized that I

presumed all male viewers would in some way respond to the ad in terms of how it connected with them (or not) as an individual, but not beyond that. Indeed, I still expect the self-focused responses to occur; however, despite my continual promotion of relationality (Donald, 2009), I did not have the forethought or foresight to expect participant responses to be that of themselves in relation to their colleagues, students, or even their own children. The participant saw the ad and our engagement with it as validation of the ontology that informs his own practices. As such, his interaction with the ad was not merely “how do these messages connect (or not) with me?” and extended to “how do these messages connect (or not) with me in relation to others?” This relational line of thinking was very much what we wanted to develop as a take-away from the workshop, so I enjoyed seeing the participant grasp it so easily, but it bothered me that I had anticipated only self-centred responses from participants, thereby imposing some sort of cultural deficit (Gay, 2000) on men when discussing feminism. I took the experience as a learning moment for myself, and I now enter workshops without assumptions of the depths to which participants will take their thinking on their own, without my guidance. I caught myself essentializing male participants through my assumptions that although they will not all feel the same way, they will all approach the ad in the same way, only analyzing it for commentary on their male character. This was something that I needed to deconstruct within myself.

Critical Moment 3: “That’s kinda bullshit”

Snapshot 3

General description of the third critical moment

After viewing the Always (2014) ad, and after listening to other participant responses discussing the positivity of the ad, a female participant declared that the ad was “bullshit.” The comment was not suggesting that girls and women should not be shown in positive ways, but that the ad was oversimplifying girls’ and women’s experiences and ultimately working to sell a product, not problematize patriarchal constructions of femininity.

Emotions and perceptions of the educators

- Fear that such a reaction interferes with our objectives
- Concern that our intentions with the ad are shortsighted
- Worry that we offended the very audience the ad is said to empower
- Surprise that a female participant would use a feminist lens to criticize messages of female positivity

Insight

By remaining open to participants taking a range of critical lenses to analyze the advertisements, and not only the lens we anticipated, we create a space

that allows for the organic evolution of richer discussions of the media portrayals.

Marie-Hélène

Let us first identify something: the reaction to the Always (2014) commercial, when presented in the workshop, is almost always unanimously positive. Students tend to praise its aspirational message, and sometimes share their own lived experience related to the content of the ad (e.g., casual sexism). This plays well in the design of the workshop as it allows us to compare this positioning to the backlash to the Gillette ad (Bogen et al., 2020) and their generally more ambiguous reactions to it.

I must say that I expected that some participants would underscore the marketing techniques of Gillette or Always and the hypocrisy of not even showing the product they were selling – be it razors or menstrual products (Gill, 2017). I personally did not buy into the narrative proposed by Always (2014) in its *Like a Girl* campaign. From the start, I thought it was simply a form of what some call *femvertising*, also known as feminism-washing – the use of a gender equality or female empowerment narrative to sell products (Iqbal, 2015; Pruegl, 2019) – and that it could also be interpreted as patronizing (Gill, 2017). But I could understand its appeal and how it worked well and reached its objectives to emotionally touch viewers, and that is why we decided to use it in our workshop.

As Barker, Gill and Harvey (2018) point out, critics addressing *femvertising* “illustrate something of the complexity of thinking about gendered power relations in visual culture” (p. 55-56). As mentioned in the snapshot, when the participant dismissed not the message of the ad, but its commercial framing, I saw an opening to go deeper in the critical analysis of the media representations of gender. However, I saw time flying and worried it could make us drift from our central objectives to have participants reflect on their own beliefs on sociohistorical constructions of gender. I acknowledged the reaction and pointed to *femvertising* with other examples like cigarette ads from the 1970s (Amos & Haglund, 2000), but I do not feel I fully made use of the moment. I tried too quickly to bring the conversation back to the comparison between the Gillette (2019) and Always (2014) ads and what it says about sociohistorical constructions of gender. I now realize her comment was in no way a threat to the structure of the workshop. In the next iterations of the workshop, not only did I welcome this type of intervention and followed it by bringing the whole group in the conversation, I initiated it if it didn’t turn up. I also turned to *satire* by showing a fake advertisement for *manpons* as an example of satire of toxic masculinity. By broadening the conversation, it allows us (educators

and participants) to co-construct interpretations and to dig deeper in the analysis. It can also lead to important conversations on capitalism and systems of oppression interlocking with gender (hooks, 1994).

Mark

The participant's response took the group discussion in directions that, like the male response analyzed above, I understood but did not anticipate. However, unlike the unexpected but appreciated male response, I was at first unsure if this woman's response should be seen as a pleasant surprise or if it indicated a harmful oversight on the part of the workshop designers – Marie-Hélène and me. Thinking the worst, worrisome questions ran through my head: Had I underexamined the effects of the ad and allowed a male-centric perspective of female positivity to seep through? Would my unreadiness for this woman's response discredit the position of workshop leadership and logics that I leaned on for disrupting toxic masculinity? On the inside, these sorts of questions circled my mind, made me question my grasp on analyzing identity constructions, and made me concerned that the participants viewed me as no more than a man trying to play feminist. On the outside, as educators do, we ran with it and, like the moment in snapshot 1, we acknowledged the participant's position by posing questions to dig deeper into the participant's expressed discomfort, but this time involving the full group in the conversation.

The discomfort I felt in this moment was, put simply, that I might be a fraud but convinced myself I knew what I was doing. More than that, though, I worried that my part in leading the workshop was ineffective, if not harmful, in helping participants to deconstruct dominant understandings of masculinity and femininity. These fears, I now see, sprouted from leftover perceptions from my student years that the educator had considered everything, had the answers, and was the expert. Certainly, as a workshop designer and facilitator, I need to have a strong understanding of the topic at hand and be able to field participant questions with some confidence, but I also have to remind myself that knowledge is socially constructed and continuously (re)created (Munro Hendry, 2011; Peters & Burbules, 2004). This means that while I spend ample time and focus considering constructions of identities such as gender, thereby creating my knowledge of the complexity of construction, there is by no means a finish line, and students and participants of any level of education have experiences that shape their thinking in ways that I would not know to consider until I encounter their ideas.

Collaborative Take-Aways

Our separated reflections above allowed us to think through our respective responses to a shared incident, and additionally created points for comparison and collaborative contemplation. We recognized all reflections as valuable and considered what we could we learn together and from each other. As we showed in the snapshots prefacing our sections of reflection, our individual and collaborative debriefing of each critical moment led us to insights that we now expand upon, presenting three general and collaboratively developed take-aways that we now carry with us in

our educational environments. We anticipate that even if readers here have not experienced the same or similar incidents, our take-aways will still contribute to educators' considerations for acknowledging and unpacking their own discomforts in relation to students and other educators.

First, we cannot deny and must be aware of the presence of our own experiences, values, and beliefs that inform our positions and approaches as professors and activist-educators. We enter classrooms as people who perform through gendered identities we claim, but those identities are always in flux. Indeed, we commenced each workshop with declarations of our gendered pronouns, making known that we align ourselves with understandings of masculinity and femininity, but we did not and cannot include with that declaration a set list of traits outlining what makes a man or a woman. Those lists grow, shrink, intertwine, and diverge depending on context. As such, when interacting with participants, we must be cautious to not take on stances that suggests we completed the dissections of ourselves and now it is the participants' turns. We must model embracing the ongoing changes of who we are, accepting that we are always in a state of *becoming* the labels we give ourselves and are ascribed by others (Ibrahim, 2014). That *becoming* is not a choice, because it occurs whether we are aware of it or not. We exist in relation to more than just the person who first asked a question or made a statement. That initial engagement by one person triggers discussion, yes, but the whole group is participating, whether they verbally respond or not, because their gendered identities are (re)created (validated, negated, adjusted) in relation to interactions around them. The purpose of our workshop is for participants to problematize their constructions of gender, and to do so together, not just because it is practical or convenient to do as a group, but because genders, as well as other identities, become (re)created between and through spaces we occupy and share with others. Knowing this, we recognize how imperative it is that we present ourselves as active participants—not disconnected discussion moderators—and ensure acknowledgement and involvement of the wider group—not just one or two participants—because everyone in the room is continuously shaping and being shaped by our collaborative examination of gender constructions.

Subsequently, reflecting on our representations of gender leads to recognizing how we sometimes might be complicit in reproducing cisnormativity and heteronormativity. This is in no way self-flagellation, but rather an important step to constantly being alert to how systems reproduce gender in subtle but insidious ways. Like Straton explains while considering his own path to awareness in the reproduction of white privilege: “Instead of feeling shame for having internalized [those] thoughts, I recommend getting angry at a system that teaches us lies and then teaches us to lie to ourselves about what we are taught” (Paz Ortiz et al., 2018, p. 115).

For us, the CAE method highlighted and extended our understanding that our life experiences shape our pedagogical approaches. In many ways, we comprehend that our respective ways of understanding the critical moments, of responding to the participants, and of writing about it, are connected to how we each perform our gender and our social and

professional positions. Going back to our second critical moment, by expecting a certain response from our male participants, we might have unintentionally emphasized a discourse that many male teachers in Cushman's study (2012) feel modulates them to act in certain ways. As Cushman explains, teaching, more so at the elementary level, is associated to a "feminine" profession. Men who become teachers oftentimes feel that they are brought in to create a balance by performing in hegemonic masculine ways (a teacher who connects with "the boys"). Even when they do not identify with that form of masculinity, they feel they must reflect it in order to be valued as male teachers. Obviously, our objectives with the workshop were to deconstruct this kind of notions, but the way we initially structured the discussions reveal we also had gendered assumptions.

Finally, we learned that we need to be more open to the different directions our workshop may take. The second and third critical moments have shown that participants can (and will) contribute meaningfully to the conversation. Of course, we knew they would, but we did not take real measure of how this would also be a deeply formative experience for us as educators and as researchers, and how the relation that is built through the workshop would make us grow pedagogically. It helped us embrace a pedagogy of discomfort, while being more conscious of the challenges it poses, particularly with regard to our positionalities.

Implications for practice

As much as we focused here on post-secondary teacher education, our study is relevant for social studies educators at any level. Of course, we encourage teachers, more particularly at the intermediate and senior levels (grades 7 to 12), to make use of the workshop and maneuver around the proposed activities. Even more, we feel that the specific contribution of the present study is to serve as a model that can be replicated or adapted to different contexts when teaching and learning about/through many current or *difficult* issues, thus not being limited to gender (Garrett, 2010; 2020). Like Engebretson (2019) reminds us:

Dialogue is of particular importance to the social studies classroom where the emphasis of the discipline is on educating an informed citizenry that must learn to operate in a pluralistic democracy. [...] Understanding that this is a goal of social studies teachers begs the question of how they dialogue with each other as colleagues. (p. 4)

As such, we suggest here a series of steps that can be undertaken by teachers wishing to embark on the Collaborative Autoethnography journey as a means to improving the way they handle the teaching of *difficult* topics. This is an iterative process, meaning it should not be a one-time act, but a repeated exercise, whether it be focused on teaching the same topic (or workshop, as we did here) or on comparing and analyzing discomfort between different topics (Engebretson, 2018).

The first step is to find *time* and *space* for the dialogue to happen. Dedicate time to put critical moments in writing, and, as much as possible, do this quickly after the event. Regularly making connections between the most recent critical moment and your “older” critical moments can help to see how retrospection can refine your comprehension of what happened most recently. A logbook is useful to keep track of these personal reflections, detail your emotions, etc. The interrelational space can take multiple forms. In our case, we felt that collaborative contemplation could happen between us drawing from our common work experiences, the trust and profound consideration we share for each other. We believe our dialogue also allowed for rich and substantial connections. It is important to find a colleague ready to work in ways that allow for constructive confrontation, but through respect. This is not to say a larger group is not desirable in CAE. In fact, some schools already have social studies professional learning communities that can be catalysts for these discussions. Still, working through complex emotions sometimes feels more serene in one-on-one conversation.

The second step is making the conversation happen, which might look easy to do, but is not. It puts the educator in a space where they need to look beyond themselves in the critical moments. It means not only being able to reflect in terms that go beyond a deficit-based approach, but also being open to learning from and with students, sometimes through critiques from them and from colleagues. It also means, as per the first step, dedicating time to the conversation, and doing so at regular intervals through meetings and sharing of your logbook. Reflecting on our choices, emotions and reactions should not lead to a “self-righteous attitude” (Cutrara, 2020, p. 124) in trying to justify our choices. In other words, it does not mean thinking in terms of “success” or “failures”; critical moments are not necessarily “incidents” or to be analyzed as *negative*. As our second critical moment showed, even when things seem to be going in a *good* way, we might feel insecurities, and those also deserve to be deconstructed and worked through.

The final step is the *take-aways*. We recommend that these be, as much as possible, informed by research in social studies education and/or in anti-oppressive pedagogies. This, we feel, helps the educator build on the collaborative reflection towards action and helps to work through the emotions (“you are not alone”) in a constructive way. This can be done in a more concrete way by pointing out to intentions, goals, or objectives for future iterations. These will, of course, then be analyzed (repeating the steps) until the teachers feel they have reached saturation.

Through these practices, we have shown that CAE can be an asset in social studies education. The kind of collaborative unpacking demonstrated through this article goes hand in hand with the aim of transformative teaching and learning. By connecting us, it helps complexify our understandings and truly work towards social justice.

Conclusion

Some of the discomforts that we shared above might strike some readers as familiar, and we hope that this is the case, so we can all see that we are not alone in these feelings. We recognize that our reflections are merely a starting point. Firstly, we did not collect participants' reactions other than some fresh impressions right after the workshop, which were mainly positive. We cannot conclude what participants took away from it or how they felt about it. Secondly, we would need to further unpack and examine the myriad ways we perform our genders (Butler, 1990). These are avenues for future research.

Recognizing and unpacking discomforts as an educator includes but requires much more than acknowledging engrained values and/or beliefs about a particular topic. Educators must also take the time to contemplate their (dis)comforts with their practices, and the challenges to those practices that learners can pose when they understand issues differently than the educator. After all, if we are to ask participants “[...] to be honest about their relationship to power, privilege, and oppression, [...] we have a responsibility to first demonstrate the vulnerability in the mapping of ourselves” (Paz Ortiz et al., 2018, p. 111).

I [Marie-Hélène] started this article by highlighting the very emotional nature of certain historical events (in my case, the Polytechnique femicide) and how this affects how I teach gender-related content. However, I think CAE has helped me to further consider why and how to teach and learn about sociohistorical constructions of gender. Learning through and from students, and through and from my colleague Mark, reminds me that teaching and learning social studies begins with *connection* (Cutrara, 2020). With this connection in mind, through the CAE process with Marie-Hélène, I [Mark] learned to see my teaching practices not as acts to be perfected, for there is no final pinnacle to be achieved, but as acts to be developed and employed with awareness of myself and with others, both educators and learners. The collaborative reflections on our practices and discomforts must be ongoing because people are dynamic and relational, so while there may be similarities from one lived experience to the next, no two are fully the same.

We embody a variety of identities, with gender being a core tenet of the *who* or *what* we believe ourselves to be, but from the changing social spaces that we occupy and navigate down to the shedding and reproduction of our cellular makeup, who and what we are is never final. The need to (re)consider our being, then, is never done, especially when we are asking others to contemplate their own constructions.

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