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## **YOU'RE OUT! CALLING FOR DEBATE ON MALE PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHER CANDIDATES**

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Since the 1970s, there has been much research on the plight of females in school and beyond, personified in the celebrated *Reviving Ophelia, Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (Pipher, 1995). Only recently have popular, widely-read, and accessible books been produced that focus on males, among the most famous, *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myth of Boyhood* (Pollack, 1998), followed by *Real Boys' Voices* (Pollack, 2000). The growing interest in researching boys in school has provoked debate and resistance in public and academic circles (Higgins, 2003; Weaver-Hightower, 2003). Similarly, men's studies has become a burgeoning area of research that the international American Men's Studies Association<sup>1</sup> is key in promoting, and that funding agencies such as the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada must begin to acknowledge in revising their selection panels and committees. Faculties of education, as well as other university departments, must also re-examine quota systems, scholarships, and entrance requirements to validate the diverse experiences that males and females bring with them when applying for higher education; this must go beyond the established categorization of gender and include race, class, sexual orientation, disability, geographical location, language and culture in order to fully appreciate the diversity of candidates.

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Gender analysis alone has resulted in a focus on girls and women that occludes numerous challenges facing many boys and men today. Teenage boys across the country fall far behind girls in writing skills (Brown, 2003). About 60% of university students in Canada are female (Becker, 1998), with a growing majority of women not only in education, but other professional schools such as medicine and law too (Wente, 2003). Farrell (2005) claims that more male teachers are needed in education, particularly in the lower grades. He argues that many boys, from the growing number of single-mother homes in poor neighborhoods, risk limited exposure to positive male role models until secondary school, when many have already become disenfranchised.

Indeed, for those of us specializing in men's studies, we grapple with similar issues that the Feminist movement originally experienced—censorship, lack of funding, invisibility, and resistance to our research. Both primary teacher education programs and primary schools continue to be dominated by women, most of whom in all divisions of teacher education programs (Primary/Junior, Junior/Intermediate and Intermediate/Senior) appear to be white, middle-class, ablebodied, heterosexual, and in their twenties in Northern Canada, and the rest of the country and continent (Gosse, 2006b). Many members of this privileged set tend to equate diversity with 'otherness' and see themselves as 'normal' (Parsons & Brown, 2001). Similarly, we postulate that female-dominated teacher education programs and primary schools may be lacking in support for minority male teacher candidates, particularly those who are working class, older, gay, and/or from rural areas.

This article will delve into the experiences of one gay, disabled, older male teacher candidate from Eastern Canada who did not successfully complete his Bachelor

of Education degree while attending a Northern Canadian university. Sexuality is a site, particularly in education, which remains largely invisible, but this narrative analysis will attempt to show how pivotal sexuality and intersectional identity can be in understanding the life of a sexual minority teacher candidate by also focusing on his mental illness / emotional problems, age, and geographical location. This article contains an overview of the literature on male primary teachers, the theoretical framework, an explanation of research methods, and is followed by a narrative in the voice of a former teacher candidate. Finally, in the epilogue we present our main impressions.

### Review of the Literature on Males Primary Teachers

There is a perceived shortage of male teachers in North America, Australia and the United Kingdom. Alleged barriers to males becoming teachers include the impression that teachers are overworked and underpaid (Bittner & Cooney, 2003) and in a profession of lower status than higher paying jobs such as lawyer, pilot, engineer, entrepreneur, or doctor. There is also the perception that men are less nurturing than women and that it is inappropriate for men to be working with young children; male primary teachers are often characterized as "feminine," "homosexual," and "pedophile" (Oyler, Jennings, & Lozada, 2001), both from within the profession and in the public eye. One argument in favor of increasing the number of male teachers in primary school education is to enable them to take increased responsibility for childcare (Farquhar, 1997), suggestive of challenging the historical and persistent take on women as principal child caregivers. Some cite the importance of providing pupils with male role models, particularly in this age of many single-parent mothered homes, and to demonstrate to pupils that it is indeed appropriate for males to choose to enter a caring profession

(DeCorse & Vogtle, 1997). Public opinion often suggests that more men should be teachers to serve as role models, and to enhance the learning of boys who progressively score less well than girls on provincial, national and international achievement tests (Becker, 1998; Bouchard, St-Amant, & Gagnon, 2000; Brown, 2003). However, one study in England using 1997/98 performance indicators and questionnaires in primary schools of 9000 students, found that boys do not do better by having male teachers (Johnston, 2005). These perceptions and contradictions have led various teachers' organizations to enter the debate. For instance, in 2006, the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario launched a symposium entitled, "Is the male teacher becoming extinct?", that included several university researchers and teacher focus groups. Similarly, the Ontario College of Teachers (Bernard, Hill, Falter, & Wilson, 2004), which certifies teachers in the province, published a recent report entitled, *Narrowing the Gender Gap: Attracting Men to Teaching*, which examines the shortage of men in Ontario's teaching profession. They found that men represent only one in ten primary/junior teachers now and fewer than one in three secondary teachers. Some question the necessity for more male primary school teachers (Farquhar, 1997; McIntyre, 2004), claiming that women can do what men do, that gender is not a determinant of a female or male pupil's success, and that males risk more allegations of sexual abuse.

It seems then, that research on male primary school teachers in Australia, the United Kingdom and North America has mainly focused on the fear of males being pedophiles, as well as the possible socio-economic reasons for the dwindling numbers of male teachers. However, there is little mention of studies dealing with self-defined gay teachers in educational circles, and no allusion to male teacher candidates in

primary/junior Bachelor of Education (B. Ed.) programs who do not complete the program, and who self-identify as gay. This is the focus of our article.

### Theoretical Framework: Queering Theory

To situate our theoretical framework, one must first examine *queer* as both a noun and a verb, for our theoretical lens is inspired by both understandings. *Queer*, as a noun or adjective, is often associated with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, Transsexual and Two-Spirited (LGBTTT) individuals and communities, and may lead to political solidarity and power, even if issues such as social class and race may ultimately divide and cause dissent (Stewart, 1995). *Queer* as a verb is at the core of this narrative inquiry and entails interpreting our data with four major tenets derived from queer theory (Gosse, 2006a; Jagose, 1996; Morris, 1998; Namaste, 1996), namely: (a) examining what knowledge is being accepted and endorsed as ‘natural,’ ‘normal,’ or ‘good’; (b) reflective inquiry through the lens of sexuality into social phenomena, interactions, and institutions; (c) an examination of who is excluded/included, privileged or disenfranchised, and possible reasons why; and (d) revisionist readings of texts, institutions, and social phenomena. For instance, not all men are oppressors. Indeed, some women oppress some men, and vice versa.

Furthermore, we reject any notions of absolute and objective truth and make no claims that our interpretations are universal, finite, or conclusive (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Rather, it is our hope to bring the invisibility of our participant to light, particularly regarding the roles of sexual orientation, disability/emotional problems and geographical location, in his life journey and ensuing exodus from a career in education as a B.Ed. graduate.

## Methodology

Our study, “The Professional Journey of Male Primary Teacher Candidates in Northern Canada,”<sup>2</sup> had six participants who were enrolled in a B.Ed. program, and five who had withdrawn since 2000. All attended B.Ed. programs in various universities in Northern Canada. After receiving ethical approval July 4, 2006 from Nipissing University’s Research Ethics Board, during 2006-2007, we interviewed the withdrawn candidates for approximately ninety minutes each, and conducted a series of three interviews with each of the currently enrolled candidates, one in the fall, one in the winter, and one in the spring, as they progressed throughout their B.Ed. programs. We also held focus groups, for all who could attend, in the spring. Only one of our withdrawn teachers, the subject of this narrative inquiry, self-identified as gay. For this article, we focus solely on this participant in order to give a more in-depth “voice” to his unique perspective. This participant, therefore, participated in one two-hour interview and a three-hour focus group, and it is the data from these interviews that we analyzed for our article.

Narrative inquiry entails using *narrative analysis* or *narrative reconfiguration* (Kim, 2007) to make sense of a participant’s stories by reorganizing bits of the storied data into a coherent whole. In other words, the participant’s stories are thematically and syntactically analyzed and recreated to produce a plausible, holistic rendering of the participant’s experiences and voice. Narrative inquiry also allows us to make our research more accessible, for we are all storied beings (Gosse, 2005b); we can reach multiple audiences beyond academe, including teachers, teacher candidates, and educational administrators. This affirms our belief in creating bridges between academic

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research and the broader public, and is indicative of our emancipatory and social justice approach.

This paper has also been inspired by the *testimonio* of Latin America (Beverly, 2000), a novel or novella produced in written text, told in the first person by a narrator who is the real protagonist of the events he encountered. It is the narration of a significant life experience. Generally, the production involves the transcription and editing by an interlocutor who is a journalist, ethnographer, or literary author. Drawing from our data collection and narrative analysis, we have created a conceivable narrative from our participant, which embodies overall impressions and dominant themes. This required integration of our tacit knowledge in the creative writing process and final story, and an overt embracing of subjectivity (Higgs, 1996). Also, in acknowledging our participant's experiences with our own tacit knowledge and creativity, the subjectivity of research is not only embraced but viewed as an ethically sound, embodied form of inquiry (de Freitas, 2003).

Our participant goes by the *nom de plume* of Bill Bucket and we are writing a short narrative instead of a novel or novella. He is in his forties, gay, white, and working-class. He comes from a mid-sized city on the East Coast of Canada, but currently resides in Central Canada. He recently withdrew from a primary-junior B.Ed. program in a Northern Canadian university. However, he was the first generation in his family to successfully gain a university education, as B.Ed. programs require a pre-requisite undergraduate degree. Bill is Anglophone and protestant and attended the public school system in his youth. A former alcoholic and drug user with over two decades of sobriety, Bill has mostly worked as a substance abuse counselor.

The *testimonio* is developed in the hope that the participant's life's story will move the reader to action in concert with the group with which the testifier identifies. As Tierney (2000) writes:

Whereas a life history is a written account elicited through interviews by an individual who seeks to understand a life in order to gain a greater understanding of cultural notions, the *testimonio* is developed by the one who testifies in the hope that his or her life's story will move the reader to action in concert with the group with which the testifier identifies. (p. 540)

Therefore, we do hope that not only teacher candidates and policy makers, but also queers, older students, and people with disabilities, or who otherwise deviate from the majority in teacher education, may engage in critical reflection and open dialogue towards more inclusivity upon reading his story.

#### Bill's *Testimonio*

I was born in a mid-sized city on the East Coast of Canada in the 1960s. I'm the oldest of three children. My sister and I are Irish twins as they say - barely over a year apart - and my brother came along a few years later. We're of Irish-English background. Dad's side of the family is all hunters, trappers, and fishermen. Mom's side had some middle-class people a couple of generations ago. We were working class. My mother quit her bank teller job when I was born and stayed at home to look after us from then on. We were very close, and still are, my mom and me. Not so much me and Dad.

Dad was in the military but quit to work closer to home in a local factory. He never went to school - I think he only had his grade ten - but I'm pretty sure he was a genius really. He's really very smart. He became manager of the factory he worked for,

and I worked there too off and on for a few years after high school. After my first attempt at university, actually.

I was always good at school. Probably one of the smartest boy in my class, starting right from grade one. I was one of the best artists in my class, too. That's probably why I was picked on so much by a lot of the kids, girls too, not just the guys. By junior high, even though I know I was still smart, I basically gave up trying to do well. It wasn't worth the fight. Not that that stopped me from getting bullied though. When I had counseling with a psychiatrist as an adult, I realized that academic things were absolutely a TERROR for me because I was afraid I wouldn't get through them.

I don't know why kids picked on me. Maybe they could just tell I was different. I didn't entirely realize how different until towards the end of junior high. That's when I realized I was gay. In high school I started doing drugs too. And then I found I wasn't bullied as much, because I had this tough group of friends. I was accepted because I could party hard. But it wasn't a good crowd. One time we were hanging out in this underpass and someone was feeding whiskey to this kid, like 4 or 5 years old. And a few days later, someone was murdered there. It wasn't a good scene, but I didn't know how else to cope with feeling like an outsider and with my sexuality. I dated girls all through high school, mostly girls from this same crowd. And that's when I bottomed out in alcoholism.

I graduated high school eventually, but I actually had to switch schools. I was sort of kicked out of my first high school. I finished it and everything, but my marks were really bad and I wanted to upgrade because I decided I wanted to go to university, but I had become a persona non grata there. So I went to one of the other high schools

and graduated with better marks from there. I was still partying, but I'm smart enough that I could do both.

I got into university and moved to Nova Scotia. I wanted to go on to medical school eventually. I was still partying, doing both drugs and drinking. I was doing ok in the classes I went to but there were some classes that I didn't go to, and just never withdrew from either. Then my aunt, who I was visiting a lot because she lived nearby, said I couldn't come around anymore because of the partying, which just made the partying worse. Then I checked into a mental hospital for rehab. I quit drinking, and within a couple years I quit all drugs too.

It wasn't until rehab that I really faced my sexuality. I had almost told my parents a couple years before but I'm glad I didn't. I don't think my dad could've handled it while I was still living at home, and I went back home after rehab. I told them later. Well, more they found out because I was dating this leggy queen in the city when I moved back there, and it became pretty obvious that way. Myself, I'm sort of atypical for a gay man. I like sports and I'm not particularly effeminate and things like that. But the guy I was dating was and I started having more and more friends like that, mostly from Alcoholics Anonymous. There are a lot of gay men in AA!

I went back to university for a few years, working at my dad's factory in the summers. I applied to medical school but I didn't get in. They included my failing marks from the classes I never withdrew from. I don't think that's fair but that's the way they work, so what can you do? After I realized I couldn't follow my dream, I quit school again because I just got so depressed and was medicated even.

My sister got into medical school though. She's a doctor now. I'm sure we have mood disorders in the family on Mom's side, at least for the females. Me, too. Her father was an alcoholic. Mom was manic-depressive and her mother was in and out of mental institutions all her life. My sister and I used to get along when we were really little but at some point, something changed. I don't know what. But we can't even talk to each other now. She's a fucking bitch. My brother and I haven't spoken since I came out but my sister and I stopped before that. Dad was an absent father when I was growing up and he was a drinker, too. He did attend one Christmas Eve party I had a several years ago. He told my brother-in-law it was to atone for turning his back on me when he found out I was gay. I mean, they always sent money if I needed it, but they never visited or things like that after they found out I was gay.

So I moved to Toronto after working a bit longer at my dad's factory. I went back to university in Toronto after many years of just working in odd jobs, some in theatre as an actor and a director. But that didn't really take off so I went back to school and finally got my degree. Since then I've been working in addictions. I really feel comfortable in this city. I've made a lot of friends and had a better time career-wise, although I still would like to do better. That's a large part of why I applied to the Faculty of Education. I thought that might be a good way for me to move into a higher-paying field that I would enjoy. I volunteered in schools in Toronto and always enjoyed it, so I thought maybe I'd be a good teacher. A friend of mine who teaches thought so, too. Also, I had just gotten divorced from a man I was with for a few years. That was part of the reason I wanted to get away.

At first, I really enjoyed the teaching program. The classes weren't too hard and the subject matter was interesting. I thought there'd be a few more guys but there were only four in my section out of forty. I was the only one who wasn't married. One day, I overheard some girls from my class say that I was old. I didn't think of myself as old but I guess to them, all in their twenties, I am. I tried to make friends with people but I didn't seem to have that much in common, especially since I won't go to the bar. Not that anyone ever invited me. So middle class and...I don't know, sometimes petty?

I had a real problem with a guy in my class. He made some homophobic comments and it reminded me of being bullied in school when I was a kid. Well, one day I was making a list of the girls' names in my section to remember them, and this guy said something to me, like, "Ah Bill, you don't want to remember the GIRLS' names, now do you?"

Another time, he yelled out in class, "That means YOU TOO, Bill," and as far as I was concerned, he laughed in my face. I felt physically intimidated by him. He never gave me any credibility in this education assignment we did. I don't know. I've had trouble all my life with co-workers, with taking things too personally. I don't know if it's them or if I'm too vulnerable. Anyway, it really bothered me.

There was a professor who got on my case, too, and also made some ghastly comments in front of everyone. One class I came in late. I was REALLY feeling low at the time, and he said out loud to everyone, "Bill is always late is he?" and the class answered, "Yesssss!"

I was so humiliated. I met with him and he said he had asked that to me, not to everyone. Bullshit! He's a fucking jerk and I hope he gets fired. I let the Dean know

about these things but I'm not going to press it any further. I had gotten some help from a campus counselor and she had indicated in my file about my problems and missing time. I think this backfired on me. The Dean was supportive but I think he thought I was manipulating the system which I'd NEVER do! But those two people, the student and the professor, along with just feeling isolated overall, are a big part of why I left. It wasn't the classes or my placement. Those were great. Just that people in the program there weren't welcoming, and then those two were just fucking assholes.

I also went to a club meeting for students who are gay, lesbian, whatever. We did collages about our identities and that made me feel better. It helped me find myself again. I put it up on my wall. It helped me realize that I have lots of talents. I can leave and go back to what is NATURAL. Be a social worker, a community worker.

I don't know if I'm really meant to teach children, anyway. I don't think I could handle the possibility of false accusations. One of my friends is a teacher and this elementary school girl said to her friends that they were dating and had had intercourse. Fortunately, he was VERY gay, and everyone knew he was gay, and he's strong and he was able to manage this. I don't know if I could? And it can happen so easily with men teaching young children. My last placement, I was seated on the floor in the gym. Suddenly all these BOYS started crowding around me. They're very touch feely, whatever, and they were too CLOSE.

My associate teacher got up and told me, "You can NEVER sit down on the floor with them like that again!"

You never know what can happen, I guess... people are so suspicious of you for even wanting to teach kids. Your every move is scrutinized. I don't like that. I was

afraid to be too GRUFF with them. I mean, they're CHILDREN. I don't want to ABUSE them, and I guess classroom management was an issue. I think I wasn't assertive enough. You know, when you work with primary kids, you have to know what to say, to be concise, and as you can tell, I tend to talk a lot!

So now I'm back in Toronto working in addictions. I started part-time at first because I was very depressed after having to leave the Faculty of Education. I was traveling a lot, until my money ran out, which my psychiatrist says is avoidance behavior. I'm considering returning to school again, this time for a Masters of Social Work, so I can go further up the ladder in my field. I'd like to earn more money. I guess addictions is where I'm meant to be since I keep coming back to it. I'd hate to start something and have to quit again though, so I'm still just considering the possibilities.

#### Epilogue: Researchers' Impressions

In examining who and what is included and excluded in teacher education, and who may benefit from this inclusion/exclusion, certain key issues spring forth regarding Bill; not only his male gender, but also that he is working class, gay, older, has emotional problems, and moved from rural to urban areas. Bill deviates from more culturally accepted forms of masculinities, commonly manifested as heterosexual, middle-class, mentally stable, and stalwart in the face of adversity (Connell, 1995; Faludi, 1999). He endured the physical and psychological violence of being bullied as a child and teenager, and once again as a mature teacher candidate, in his view, by a fellow student and a professor. He felt excluded from his mostly young, heterosexual, middle-class, female teacher candidate classmates. Bill has been subordinated throughout his life by heterosexual males and females. Dominant groups frequently affirm their identity by

pointing out what they are not. Whether silencing, excluding, or bullying a subordinated male, *othering* may reaffirm one's sense of heterosexuality, ablebodiness, youth and middle-class status. Bill's life in rural areas as a youth, and then throughout his teacher education program, seemed wrought with more stress than when he lived in larger metropolitan centres. Queers have frequently migrated to urban areas where increased numbers may lead to increased sense of group solidarity, sharing of resources, and political clout (Gosse, Labrie, Grimard, & Roberge, 2000; Labrie & Grimard, 2002). Conversely, queers living in more rural areas may experience amplified feelings of isolation, lack of agency, and failure to identify with the dominant, heterosexualized (and homophobic/heterosexist) culture. Resistance to these norms, as in Bill's case, may also lead to increased disenfranchisement with the (education and teaching) system. Consequently, people who deviate in some way or ways from the norms of the dominant group may spiral into a web of increasing tension. Should I remain hidden and conform? Should I voice my difference(s)? Are not my differences visible anyway, even when not voiced? Do I even have a choice in being closeted? Will I be targeted as 'different' regardless of what I say or do?

Herr (1997) claims that homophobia and heterosexism are reinforced in schools through mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. With exclusion, there is a lack of positive images or acknowledgement of queers in schooling, thus rendering queers invisible. With inclusion, when queer issues and discussion do arise, they are often presented in a negative light, pathologized, or made dangerous. This reflects the repeated caution made to male primary school teacher candidates to not hug or hold hands with their young pupils (Hansen & Mulholland, 2005), rather than addressing the dominant,

widespread phobia of male (and especially gay) sexuality that this caution embodies. For centuries, dominant groups have used the ‘they’re after your kids’ myth to marginalize subdominant groups such as Jews and gays (Jennings, 2005). This policing may serve to reinforce the predominance of teacher candidates and primary school teachers who self-identify as female and heterosexual: in no way are they *male* or *gay* and thus clearly not potential sexual abusers of children. When many males are viewed as potential child molesters, early childhood education emerges as a carefully regulated field that only the ‘right’ types of males may enter. For male primary school teachers, this may entail overt displays of hegemonic masculinity<sup>3</sup> and even ‘jock-like’ posturing (Roulston & Mills, 2000), that Bill does not tend to mirror or perform with his assertion, “I think I wasn’t assertive enough.”

We are particularly struck by the pivotal role that not only Bill’s sexuality but also emotional disability has played in his life. In his talks with us, Bill referred not only to his substance abuse problems, but also to the frequent professional counseling he has received since his teenage years, including while enrolled in the Bachelor of Education program. We would like to stress that Bill’s emotional duress throughout his life may well be the result of the alienation imposed by heteronormative society. Fortunately, he was able to convert his struggles with substance abuse into a career as an addictions counselor, although he still struggles to rise in his profession and achieve greater financial stability. Likewise, his successful completion of an undergraduate degree as a mature student, after several failed attempts, and his renewed conviction to pursue another route into higher education through social work and community service demonstrates a commendable perseverance. The hidden curriculum of teacher education

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programs and primary education is a low tolerance for diversity. However, narratives from disenfranchised people who have attempted to navigate throughout the system could serve as a powerful springboard for discussion of inclusion/exclusion and diversity in these spheres rather than common, problematic and largely ineffectual discourses of ‘harmonious pluralism’ (Snider, 1996). Such dialogue may then be transformed from discussion of ‘harmonious pluralism’ to a queerer, more disruptive engagement that challenges status quo assumptions, beliefs, and customs.

In this article, we have generated a narrative analysis around the halted journey of a minoritized male primary school teacher candidate. Although we have presented but a glimpse into what is happening in his life, it is our goal to engage in more debate around who benefits from the exclusion and inclusion of males in early childhood education, and what *types* of males ‘make it,’ for some gay, disabled, and otherwise marginalized individuals do succeed. We hope to generate new questionings in education faculties and early childhood education so that all aspiring educators are given a more equitable and supportive chance at achieving their goals.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Information on the American Men’s Studies Association (AMSA) may be found on their website: <http://mensstudies.org/>

<sup>2</sup> Since the launch of this pilot study, we received a grant from the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (ETFO) to conduct a two-year province-wide study of male primary school teachers. We have already received 223 responses from an online survey and conducted in-class observations and semi-structured interviews in several schools across the province.

<sup>3</sup> Hegemonic masculinity refers to a narrow range of acceptable masculine behaviors considered 'normal' for males (Connell, 1987; Gosse, 2005a; Lingard & Douglas, 1999). Traits may include limited shows of emotion beyond aggression, adopting a 'cool' pose, exaggerated public displays of heterosexuality and homophobia, and repudiation of things considered 'feminine,' such as caring, compassion, and even being studious, which should be seen as human traits and condoned for all. Both men and women implicitly and explicitly encourage hegemonic masculinity in boys and men. More research and theorizing is needed on how both men *and* women benefit from policing of hegemonic masculinity, as well as the steep price boys and men pay.

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