‘Our Clothes is Not Our Consent’: SlutWalk, Feminism and News

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‘I’m told I’m not supposed to say this, but women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized.’ – Toronto Police Constable Michael Sanguinetti

INTRODUCTION

In January 2011, Toronto Police Constable Michael Sanguinetti addressed a small group of York University students on campus safety. While his intentions might have been to protect women, his comments that ‘slutty’ women attract sexual assault perpetuated the long-standing myth that victims are responsible for the violence perpetrated against them. In response to PC Sanguinetti’s comments, a group of local women translated their concern into political activism. Three months later, the first SlutWalk took place in Toronto, attended by thousands. By the end of the year, SlutWalks were organised in over 100 cities in 40 nations, mobilising tens of thousands of women, men, and children.

Because there has been an erasure of (western) news coverage of feminist activism and protest since the Second Wave (Mendes 2012), with feminism frequently being labelled ‘dead’ or ‘redundant’ (see Gill 2007; McRobbie 2009; Mendes 2011; Smith 2000), SlutWalk’s global reach and its ability to generate international headlines provides an opportunity to assess how women’s collective activism has been represented cross-nationally. Although I would argue SlutWalk is clearly part of the broader feminist (anti-rape) movement, is it fair to assume that all those organising and participating in SlutWalk feel the same? Such questions are particularly pertinent in this ‘postfeminist’ era when feminism is
frequently repudiated, particularly by a younger generation who separate themselves from what they see as the concerns of their mother’s during the second wave (see Jowett 2004; Scharff 2010; Zazlow 2009). Because of its grassroots nature, and the different ways it has been adopted to fit various cultural climates (see for example Gwynne 2013), this chapter does not seek to ‘prove’ SlutWalk is part of a wider feminist movement. Instead, it raises questions about how the relationship between SlutWalk and feminism has been represented, asking to what extent feminism has been erased or made invisible in global mainstream news coverage.

Methodology

This chapter attempts to answer questions around the mediated aspects of SlutWalks by drawing on interviews with SlutWalk organisers, as well as surveys of SlutWalk participants. Crucially, it also utilizes a content and critical discourse analysis of mainstream news from eight nations which have organised SlutWalks (Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, South Africa, Singapore, UK, & USA). I specifically focused on mainstream news media because of its crucial role in maintaining and (re)producing hegemonic ideologies (Dow 1996; Meyers 2006). In total, I collected over 284 news articles. All material was collected between 1 January 2011 and 31 December 2012 using the search terms ‘SlutWalk’ and ‘Slut walk’ as a major mention. While I use a large number of sources, I make no claims that my study provides a definitive picture of how the relationship between SlutWalk and feminism has been represented. Instead, I argue that this study provides a snapshot into results from one global case study.
Is SlutWalk a Feminist Movement?

One of the more interesting debates surrounding SlutWalk, is if it in fact can be constituted as part of a wider ‘feminist’ movement? Although I initially assumed it would be, given feminism’s long-standing involvement in anti-rape activism and consciousness-raising surrounding sexual violence, I was surprised to notice the absence of any discussion of feminism in the mainstream news. This issue was also noted by a range of feminists publishing about SlutWalk in alternative online spaces (for an excellent overview see Sarkeesian 2011). Furthermore, this question was taken up by the broadcast media who organised a number of debates, pitting SlutWalker supporters/organisers against feminists who opposed the movement (see for example BBC 2011; Q 2011; The Agenda 2011). Consequently, because of feminism’s absence in some texts, and feminists’ rejection of SlutWalk in others, I felt it was worth asking: What is SlutWalk’s mediated relationship with feminism? To what extent has SlutWalk been represented as a feminist event? These questions were primarily answered through a content and critical discourse analysis of 284 mainstream news articles, and were contextualised through interviews with SlutWalk organisers.²

Perhaps unsurprisingly, my research presents the relationship between SlutWalk and feminism as ambiguous and complex. For example, when asked about this relationship, SlutWalk Toronto co-founder Heather Jarvis indicated that she has identified as a feminist for ‘many years – at least 10’ (2012, personal interview). She added that when creating their biographies for the SlutWalk Toronto website, her feminist identification was always clearly visible, as it was for many others involved in the movement. Similarly, SlutWalk Perth organiser Beth Castieau has long identified as a feminist, and is someone who is ‘passionate about feminist issues’ (2012, personal interview). Although Castieau says she has ‘always
seen it [SlutWalk] as part of the feminist movement’ she recalled the ‘aha’ moment when one a fellow organiser came to embrace this identity after organising a local event. Jarvis recounted a similar experience with her co-founder Sonya Barnett:

Sonya didn’t have the same experience as I had with women’s studies, and she said she had a lot of misconceptions about feminists – as being angry, or living a life of a certain aesthetic. When we talked about it initially, she said she wasn’t sure about if she identified as a feminist. I remember saying that was ok, and that I’m not going to tell you how to identify. However, in later conversations, she talked about how she did come to identify with feminism. (Jarvis 2012, personal interview)

Both Jarvis and Castieau, as well as other SlutWalk organisers interviewed explained that aside from these few individuals, all of the other organisers for their events, past and present joined the movement with a pre-existing feminist identification (see also Diondra 2013; Haugen & MacDonald 2014; Wraith 2013).

To Embrace Feminism or Not, That Is the Question?

While many SlutWalk organisers were happy to identify as feminists, others such as SlutWalk Singapore organiser Vanessa Ho expressed a different relationship with feminism:
I personally have a very complicated relationship with the label “feminist,” however, many of my team members do identify with the label. That said, we never once labelled the movement a feminist movement, but we always agreed that there are strong feminist aspects to it. We work closely with local feminist groups and NGOs, but we are not part of them. We are made of independent individuals with varying beliefs and ideologies. That said, the feminist “movement” in Singapore is very Second Wave, and has a tendency to be co-opted by the government. This is one of the reasons why we do not always call SlutWalk feminist. (Ho 2012, personal interview)

Ho went on to explain that the term feminism is ‘completely misunderstood’ in Singapore – a nation in which some of its most public feminists are a mixture of ‘right-winged fundamentalists, women who oppress men,’ and others who are anti-gay and anti-human rights. In this context, because of the wide variety of (oppressive) ideological positions associated with feminism, Ho asserts that it is more beneficial that SlutWalk Singapore not be labelled ‘feminist’ (2012, personal interview). Such insight suggests a need for further research into cross-national understandings of the term feminism itself.

SlutWalk Singapore was not the only branch to consciously not embrace the feminist label as part of its marketing strategy. SlutWalk Johannesburg organiser Karmilla Pillay-Siokos argued that a disassociation between SlutWalk and feminism was ‘a good thing for our publicity’ as ‘people tend to have formed a stereotype about feminists and feminism that could alienate people who would otherwise have supported the cause’ (2013, personal interview). Similarly, despite identifying as a feminist, SlutWalk St. Louis organiser David Wraith acknowledged a conscious decision not to brand their walk as ‘feminist’ for risk of alienating it, noting that the word ‘feminist has as much baggage as the word slut’ (2013, personal interview). Wraith went on to state, ‘I know there are a lot of people who won’t
support us because the word slut is in the title and I think a lot of people wouldn’t support us if the word feminist in the title.’ Such sentiments were also expressed by SlutWalk Vancouver organisers Margaret Haugen and Caitlin MacDonald (2014, personal interview). Their responses indicate that although feminist activism is certainly not dead (for a recent example, see McVeigh 2013), there is still a long way to go, particularly amongst the younger generation who attend SlutWalk, before the ‘f-word’ is reclaimed as a positive label.

**SlutWalk, Feminism and the News**

Given that the relationship between SlutWalk and feminism was ambiguous and complex amongst SlutWalk organisers, it is of little surprise that the same was the case in mainstream news. In my quest to explore the relationship between SlutWalk and feminism, I conducted a content and critical discourse analysis of 284 mainstream news articles from eight nations in which SlutWalks took place. One of the questions asked in the content analysis was how many references were made to feminism or the women’s movement. I should point out that these results do not measure how often SlutWalk was labelled a feminist movement, but merely indicate how many times feminism or the women’s movement were discussed. In total, only 88 out of 284 news articles (or 31 percent of total) mentioned feminism or the women’s movement. Such absence raises questions such as, why was feminism so rarely mentioned in news accounts of SlutWalk? Can this be constituted as part of a general erasure of feminism in popular culture? Is there a perception that the two are not connected? Or alternatively, is it assumed SlutWalk is part of feminism, and therefore this connection does not need to be made explicit? Without speaking with each individual author, these questions are difficult to answer. However, I can attempt to provide insights through more qualitative reading of the texts. Broadly speaking, articles can be broken down into
three categories: articles which discuss feminism; articles which make no reference to feminism; and articles in which feminist rhetoric or analysis were used but which fail to make any mention of feminism itself.

A Relationship Exists

Out of 284 articles, only 88 (31 percent of total) made any reference to feminism or the wider women’s movement. Of these, several explicitly discussed SlutWalk in the context of feminism. This is evident in headlines such as: ‘New feminism or just a parade?’ (Editorial 2011, p. A26), ‘SlutWalk: Is a woman's body the best way to get a feminist point across?’ (Rogers 2011), ‘The new feminists: As slutty as we want to be’ (Valenti 2011), and ‘Toronto SlutWalk sparks blogosphere feminism debate’ (No Byline 2011f, p. IN2). In addition to being linked, it also became clear that some articles constructed SlutWalk and feminism as being mutually beneficial. For example, one article optimistically identified SlutWalk as a potential route into feminism: ‘SlutWalks bring in different people who may not be as exposed to feminist issues’ (Chen 2012). Because it was seen as ‘fun’ and ‘fresh’ (Midgley 2011, p. 33), SlutWalk was also constructed as more accessible to the supposedly disengaged youth (see Barnhurst 2003), being labelled ‘feminism for the Facebook generation’ (Bannerman 2011, pp. 32-33). SlutWalk was also used as evidence of a resurgence of feminism and a model for ‘what the future [of feminism] could look like’ (Valenti 2011, p. B01; see also Barton 2011; Craig 2011; Gold 2011; Laucius 2011; Purves 2011; Watson 2012).

Although a handful of articles clearly connected SlutWalk and feminism, a number of others highlighted ambivalence between the two. Canada’s Globe and Mail described how a ‘trio of 20-something women’ attended the march, despite ‘not considering themselves
political’ (and therefore presumably feminist) and never having attended a demonstration before, none-the-less a ‘quasi-feminist uprising’ (McArthur 2011). Similarly, the BBC quoted a Slutwalk London organiser who acknowledged that: ‘A lot of people are taking part [in SlutWalks] who would not describe themselves as feminists, but they are doing it’ (Bell 2011). This last quote is particularly interesting and can be interpreted in two ways; either that participants are unaware that SlutWalk is part of a larger feminist movement, or that they have decided to participate despite its feminist orientation. Neither option is particularly appealing, as the former highlights young people’s ignorance of feminist history (see Baumgardner & Richards 2000), while the latter indicates their rejection of feminism (see Jowett 2004; Scharff 2012; Zazlow 2009). The latter explanation was unfortunately evident in other articles, including one commenting that SlutWalk was evidence that women were ‘bending over backwards – in high heels – not to look like feminists’ (Petri 2011).

**SlutWalk, Fashion, Feminism, Empowerment and Choice**

Because previous research has highlighted the news media’s tendency to link feminism to such ‘lifestyle’ issues (Genz & Brabon 2009; Mendes 2012), it was of no surprise to find a range of articles focusing on feminism, fashion, empowerment and choice. This was evident in headlines such as: ‘Feminism and Fashion: the (other) two solitudes’ (Onstad 2011, p. L14), ‘Frocks are not a feminist issue: The fight for women's rights is being waylaid by needless talk about what women wear’ (Coren 2011, p. 34), ‘Feminists should promote the right to be openly sexy’ (McCartney 2011), and ‘The new feminists: as slutty as we want to be’ (Valenti 2011, p. B01). Interestingly however, while a handful of the 88 articles mentioning feminism solely constructed SlutWalk as means to demonstrate women’s empowerment – e.g. ‘no one has the right to tell me how to dress’ – most approached this
relationship from a more critical point of view. For example, several articles critiqued neoliberal logic which constructs all free choice as empowering. One Globe and Mail columnist outright rejected the notion that women could be empowered merely through the act of choosing, claiming that such logic was ‘false consciousness gone mad’ (Dhillon 2011, p. A13). Another columnist used fashion as a means to reflect upon the challenge of raising a daughter in a patriarchal society. While rejecting the common myth that ‘slutty’ clothing ‘provokes’ rape, she admitted perpetuating rape culture by advising her daughter to ‘cover up’ and not to ‘leave the house looking like a hooker’ (Timson 2011, p. L3). Such confessions demonstrate the difficulty even feminists have in challenging rape myths in their everyday lives.

Through these brief examples, it is fair to say that fashion was not necessarily a frivolous topic, and was often used as an entry point into more serious discussions about feminism, feminist issues, or feminist critiques. For example, in the column ‘Feminism and fashion: the (other) two solitudes,’ author Katrina Onstad (2011) spends nearly 1000 words discussing the historically tense relationship between women’s appearance and women’s liberation. She relays how suffragettes and second wave feminists discouraged women’s interest in fashion as a distraction from their fight for equality. She also explains how a focus on ‘natural beauty’ (e.g. a rejection of makeup and body contorting clothing) has long been a radical way of giving the ‘middle finger to conventional notions of femininity’ (p. L14), and presumably patriarchy. Onstad rounds up the article by asking how clothes might continue to be used as a political tool for protest, or if fashion will always be another means of upholding patriarchy. Cognizant that SlutWalk raised questions about women’s dress, another columnist lamented the fact that ‘feminism is suddenly all about clothing’ and worries that SlutWalk is being co-opted as ‘just another way to chat about fashion’ (Coren 2011, p. 34). Conversely,
others complained that ‘fighting for the right to decide what to wear is not on the feminist agenda’ (No Byline 2011e). Writing about the Indian context, one author recalls a story about a local woman who was branded a ‘witch’ when her husband died because she refused to stop wearing white as is custom. With regards to SlutWalk, the author insists that the focus on fashion is justified because by ‘never questioning that unwritten law of dress codes, we actually endorsed the “I'm asking for it” line of thought’ (No Byline 2011e).

Given the importance of consumption and the reign of neoliberal ideologies in contemporary culture, it is unsurprising that SlutWalk was used as an entry point to discuss fashion, empowerment, and choice. Although most of these articles within the overall sample failed to discuss feminism (many were simply focused on advantages and disadvantages of dressing like a ‘slut’), my analysis reveals that others used SlutWalk as an opportunity to introduce feminist critiques to these issues. While this section focused on articles in which feminism is clearly visible, I will now explore articles in which feminism has been ignored, erased and actively repudiated in regards to news of SlutWalk.

**Erasing Feminism**

Evidence from the content analysis indicates that most articles (196 or 69 percent) in this sample made no reference to feminism or the women’s movement. If drawing only data from the content analysis, the easy conclusion would be to assert that feminism has indeed been erased from representations of SlutWalk. However, a more qualitative analysis of the texts reveal the relationship is far more complex. For example, as the next two sections will show, the absence of the term ‘feminism’ does not necessarily mean feminist critiques or ideologies are absent. Similarly, I argue that erasure does not happen merely by the absences
of the term ‘feminism,’ but occurs when the news media actively attempts to construct it as dead, redundant or frivolous. Because the active un-doing of feminism is particularly problematic (see McRobbie 2009), I will address these articles first.

**Backlash**

Although it is worrying that two-thirds of all articles failed to mention feminism, thus assisting in its general erasure, I was particularly concerned by the presence of backlash discourses throughout the sample. Backlash discourses are a particular type of anti-feminist discourse which suggests that feminism is redundant, unnecessary, and often harmful either because its goals have been achieved, or because it has gone too far (see Faludi 1991; Mendes 2011). In this particular study, SlutWalk was often used as evidence of feminism’s frivolity and redundancy. Although such discourses tended to be found in my more conservative publications, they were scattered throughout the sample. For example the religious and conservative *Washington Times* had one article titled ‘SlutWalking our way to Gomorrah’ (Shaw Crouse 2011, p. B1), making reference to the biblical city which God burnt to the ground because its inhabitants were consumed with vice and sin. This article not only suggests that SlutWalk is headed down a dangerous path, but insists that SlutWalkers are merely ‘publicity starved feminists’ who persistently used ‘in your face’ tactics to harp on and on about ‘women’s rights’ – which, presumably, have already been won. The author also wrote SlutWalk off as evidence of how ‘outrageous and passé the [feminist] movement has become’ (p. B1). In a similar vein, Britain’s conservative *The Daily Mail* had one headline reading: ‘These “SlutWalks” now prove feminism is irrelevant to most women’s lives’ (Phillips 2011), noting that feminism is now well past its ‘sell-by date’ and that ‘The great causes which animated it [feminism] have been won.’ Such discourses are part of the long-
standing backlash to feminism which insists on feminism’s illegitimacy by claiming either
feminisms goals have gone ‘too far’ (and therefore must be rejected), that they are ‘out of
touch’ or that the public was better off before feminism (see Faludi 1991; Mendes 2011). I
argue that such articles are part of a general erasure of feminism, not because they ignore it,
but because they actively contribute to its dismantling. Ironically, previous research has also
indicated that backlash discourses tend to emerge at times of renewed feminist activism (see
Mendes 2011), suggesting that as long as SlutWalks continue, so too will discourses which
attempt to erase their potential.

While the above section presents a few examples of how feminism has actively been
erased or discredited, the next section will discuss instances when feminist theory and
rhetoric, if not the label itself have been used, and raise questions about the extent to which
feminist thought has been slowly appropriated into public consciousness.

A More Ambiguous Relationship

Although not quantified in the content analysis, I noticed through qualitative reading
of the texts that, although ignoring the feminist label, a series of articles did indeed employ
feminist language and concepts. For example, a few articles discussed how SlutWalk brought
issues of sexual violence into the public arena or sphere (Chemaly 2011; Hichens 2011).
Since at least the 1960s, feminists have played an influential role in calling for personal,
private issues such as sexual assault, to be renamed as public political questions (see Jaggar
1983; Petchesky 1981). In doing so, feminists have encouraged society to question the
supposedly ‘natural’ and inherently gendered division between these spheres. Although
neither of the news texts above discuss feminism or the women’s movement, both use a range
of other feminist terminology and rhetoric. For example, in the article ‘SlutWalk brings sexual violence squarely in the public arena,’ author Joanne Hichens (2011) draws from feminist theory which dismisses claims that rape is a crime of passion or sex, and instead argues it is about power, domination and control (see Brownmiller 1975; hooks 1982, 2000; Jaggar 1983; Rozee 1999). This re-conceptualisation of the nature of rape has been a key feminist argument since at least the 1960s, and is one of SlutWalk’s key goals (Jarvis 2012). Other familiar feminist arguments were found in Soraya Chemaly’s column titled ‘Why you should bring your teenager on SlutWalk’ (2011):

This [SlutWalk] is not about teaching people about the insidious damage that pervasive gender bias, often internalized, causes every day. It isn’t about the right to wear revealing clothes or have frequent orgiastic sex. SlutWalkers march for safe and equal access to the public sphere even if, god forbid, you're born with a vagina.

Although there is no mention of feminism or the wider women’s movement here, Chemaly’s insistence that women should have safe and equal access to the public sphere has long been a feminist goal, dating back to the first wave (Bryson 2003). Although Chemaly is well known for writing about feminist issues, it is reasonable to assume that such views have largely been appropriated by the general public, at least in the Western world.

Other feminist discourses can also be found throughout the sample. For example, a handful of articles discussed the concept of patriarchy, noting for example how the word ‘slut’ is deeply rooted in a patriarchal ‘madonna/whore view of women’s sexuality’ (Dines & Murphy 2011, p. 25). Others relay how SlutWalk demonstrates women’s collective resistance
to ‘sexual assault, rape and the patriarchal controlling attitudes towards them’ (Schutte 2011, p. 9). Consciousness-raising (CR) and education about rape culture and prevention were also highlighted as key SlutWalk goals (see Clarke 2011). For example, one article constructed SlutWalk as a movement which refocuses the ‘spotlight on a culture that makes acts of sexual violence against women not only commonplace but actually accepted’ (Moodie 2011). Making people aware that supposedly ‘individual’ or ‘personal’ problems such as sexual violence are in fact collective, public issues, and having safe spaces to share personal experiences has long been a first step in paving the way for political activism and women’s potential liberation (Jaggar 1983; Sarachild 1973). Despite the absence of the word ‘feminism’ or references to the women’s movement, articles such as these provide a clear indication that feminist ideology has slowly become appropriated into public consciousness and discourse (see also Durham 2013). Consequently, while the feminist label might be missing, the foundation and message are clearly liberatory, and challenge patriarchal power.

While a number of articles used explicitly feminist language or concepts (even if there was no mention of feminism itself), the link between feminism and SlutWalk was more ambiguous in a number of other articles. For example, some headlines constructed SlutWalk as part of a ‘fight for women’s rights,’ but made no further connection to the women’s movement or other feminist ideology. Surprisingly, only a handful of articles made any direct connection between SlutWalk and the larger anti-rape movement or demonstrations (such as Reclaim the Night/Take Back the Night), which have existed since the 1960s and 70s in places such as the US, Canada, Australia, India, Belgium, Italy, Germany and the UK (see Cuervo 2011; Hope 2011; Horin 2011; Szego 2011; Tanenbaum 2011). As scholars have argued, having a historic understanding of women’s quest for equal rights and liberation is important and might prevent feminists from having to ‘reinvent the wheel every fifty years or
so’ (Baumgardner & Richards 2000, p. 68). It would also help situate movements such as SlutWalk into a broader feminist context and build upon the successes feminists have already made in challenging rape culture.

Although SlutWalk was not recognized as part of a long-standing anti-rape movement, it was regularly constructed as a contemporary global movement. Such articles therefore do help create a sense of collective activism – and represents a shift away from the (neo)liberal feminist rhetoric of individual freedom and choices which have dominated much of the (Western) news media of feminism in recent years (see Gill & Scharff 2011; Mendes 2012; Thornham & Weissmann 2013). Typical examples include: ‘SLUTWALK, an international movement rapidly gaining momentum worldwide after being started earlier this year to object to a suggestion that women could avoid sexual assault by not “dressing like a slut,” is coming to South Africa’ (Mposo 2011, p. 5), and ‘WOMEN protesting for the right to wear what they like and behave how they choose without facing sexual harassment are set to hold “SlutWalks” across Australia as the movement goes global’ (No Byline 2011b). The global nature of the march was also evident in headlines such as: ‘SlutWalk goes global’ (No Byline 2011c, p. A2), ‘SlutWalk sparks worldwide movement’ (Church 2011, p. A6), and ‘New Delhi “SlutWalk” brings global sexual violence protest phenomenon to India’ (No Byline 2011d). That SlutWalk was seen as a global phenomenon once again provided it with credibility and a certain amount of newsworthiness, important for bourgeoning social movements, but historically rare for feminist activism. And while I argue that this global frame was useful in providing the movement with credibility, and challenging the idea that women cannot get along (Douglas 1994), it is necessary to ask why it is not contextualised as part of a global or historic feminist movement. Has feminism simply been forgotten, or worse yet, does this suggest it has deliberately been ignored?
CONCLUSION

It is clear from this analysis that SlutWalk’s relationship – and its mediated associations with feminism is complex – particularly in regards to its (in)visibility in the mainstream news. Although most of the [Western] SlutWalk organisers interviewed identified as a feminist, and acknowledged the movement’s feminist roots, feminism or the wider women’s movement was only mentioned in one-third of all mainstream news articles in this sample. As a result, I argue that there indeed has been a general erasure of feminism from the mainstream news media both in terms of its sheer absence and lack of feminist critiques, but also through the ways many articles actively erased feminism’s utility through the continual insistence that it is dead, redundant and passé. These articles contribute to an overall backlash towards feminism which has been on-going for decades (see Faludi 1991; Mendes 2011). At the same time however, there is evidence that feminist rhetoric has at times seeped into public consciousness, even if not identified as such. Several articles used explicitly feminist analysis of patriarchy, the public sphere, and the nature of rape without being linked to a wider feminist movement. Whether the omission of feminism was deliberate or not is hard to tell without interviewing each journalist, however, such articles indicate that while feminism may perhaps be ‘invisible,’ its aims and theoretical understanding of women’s oppression is certainly not irrelevant.

Endnotes

1 Newspapers include: Calgary Herald (Canada); Canberra Times (Australia); Cape Times (South Africa); Daily Dispatch (South Africa); Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday and Mail
To date, I have conducted interviews with organisers from SlutWalk Toronto, Vancouver, Singapore, St. Louis, Perth, Victoria (Canada), New York City, LA, Johannesburg and Winnipeg.

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