

## HELEIETH SAFFIOTI AND THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE ON GENDER VIOLENCE: AN ANALYSIS OF BRAZILIAN ACADEMIC THESES

*HELEIETH SAFFIOTI E O DEBATE CONTEMPORÂNEO SOBRE VIOLENCIA DE GÊNERO: UMA ANÁLISE DAS TESES ACADÊMICAS BRASILEIRAS*

*HELEIETH SAFFIOTI Y EL DEBATE CONTEMPORÁNEO SOBRE LA VIOLENCIA DE GÊNERO: UN ANÁLISIS DE LAS TESIS ACADÉMICAS BRASILEÑAS*



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**ABSTRACT:** This article examines how Heleieth Saffioti's theory is appropriated in contemporary Brazilian theses on gender-based violence. Twelve theses from the Brazilian Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations were mapped, identifying fields of knowledge, frequency and modes of use of her works, theoretical frameworks employed, and recurring themes. Using a qualitative approach, the study reveals that violence against women is understood, according to Saffioti, as a structural phenomenon shaped by the intersection of gender, race, and class relations. In dialogue with Correia (2023) and Silva (2020), the materialist perspective is highlighted as a tool for understanding patriarchal oppression. However, theoretical shifts are observed in works that align Saffioti with authors such as Pierre Bourdieu, altering her Marxist critique. The study concludes that her theory remains current and relevant, requiring methodological rigor to safeguard its analytical radicalism.

**KEYWORDS:** Heleieth Saffioti. Gender-based violence. Materialist theory. Intersectionality. Academic theses.

**RESUMO:** *Este artigo analisa como a teoria de Heleieth Saffioti é apropriada em teses brasileiras contemporâneas sobre violência de gênero. Foram mapeadas doze teses da Biblioteca Digital Brasileira de Teses e Dissertações, identificando áreas do conhecimento, frequência e formas de uso das obras da autora, referenciais teóricos mobilizados e temas recorrentes. A pesquisa, de abordagem qualitativa, aponta que a violência contra a mulher é concebida, segundo Saffioti, como fenômeno estrutural, atravessado por relações interseccionais de gênero, raça e classe. Em diálogo com Correia (2023) e Silva (2020), destaca-se a perspectiva materialista que fornece instrumentos para compreender a opressão patriarcal. Entretanto, observam-se deslizamentos teóricos em trabalhos que aproximam Saffioti de autores como Pierre Bourdieu, modificando sua crítica marxista. Conclui-se que sua teoria mantém-se atual e relevante, exigindo rigor metodológico para preservar sua radicalidade analítica.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Heleieth Saffioti. Violência de gênero. Teoria materialista. Interseccionalidade. Teses acadêmicas.

**RESUMEN:** *Este artículo analiza cómo la teoría de Heleieth Saffioti es apropiada en tesis brasileñas contemporáneas sobre violencia de género. Se mapearon doce tesis de la Biblioteca Digital Brasileña de Tesis y Disertaciones, identificando áreas de conocimiento, frecuencia y modos de uso de sus obras, marcos teóricos empleados y temas recurrentes. Con un enfoque cualitativo, el estudio revela que la violencia contra la mujer se comprende, según Saffioti, como un fenómeno estructural atravesado por relaciones interseccionales de género, raza y clase. En diálogo con Correia (2023) y Silva (2020), se destaca la perspectiva materialista como herramienta para entender la opresión patriarcal. Sin embargo, se observan desplazamientos teóricos en trabajos que aproximan a Saffioti a autores como Pierre Bourdieu, modificando su crítica marxista. Se concluye que su teoría sigue siendo actual y relevante, requiriendo rigor metodológico para preservar su radicalidad analítica.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Heleieth Saffioti. Violencia de género. Teoría materialista. Interseccionalidad. Tesis académicas.

## Initial Considerations

Brazilian society was structured in a way that benefits certain social groups at the expense of the exclusion or devaluation of others. Therefore, for women's emancipation to take place, it must take into account the material conditions of the capitalist system of production. Such formulations had already been outlined in 1963, when a Marxist professor produced her first writings criticizing this mode of production based on the social markers of class, race, and gender (Pereira, 2021).

Heleieth Saffioti (1934–2010) was a sociologist, Marxist, professor, and feminist activist who, in 1964, joined São Paulo State University (Unesp, Araraquara campus) as a professor in the Social Sciences program. Even after the military coup, during a period of political and ideological persecution of political currents considered left-wing, she continued to teach her students about Karl Marx<sup>2</sup> within the university. During the Brazilian military dictatorship, the government established a direct link between education and the capitalist mode of production (Borges, 2014a), grounding educational policy in the political and ideological control of schooling (Germano, 1993). As a result of government actions, the educational reforms of the military period deteriorated teaching work, precarizing teacher education due to the absence of fundamental pedagogical content (Borges, 2014a).

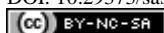
Thus, teaching Marx after the 1964 coup became a space of ideological resistance within the Social Sciences. Even under censorship and repression, the persistence of debates on inequality, exploitation, and class—core elements of Marxist thought (Rios, 2011)—remained present in Heleieth Saffioti's teaching practice. It was also at the Unesp Araraquara campus that the sociologist developed pioneering studies articulating Marxism and feminism, contributing to analyses of gender, race, and class and advocating the examination of women's conditions from a materialist perspective. She also addressed the issue of gender-based violence (Gonçalves, 2011), relating it to the unequal social relations that structure society.

Accordingly, this article seeks to map how Heleieth Saffioti's work has been appropriated in doctoral theses devoted to the study of violence against women. To this end, twelve theses available digitally in the Brazilian Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations<sup>3</sup> were analyzed, identifying areas of knowledge, which and how many of the author's works

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<sup>2</sup>Karl Marx (1818–1883) was a German philosopher, economist, sociologist, and theorist of historical and dialectical materialism. His works, such as *The Communist Manifesto* (with Engels) and *Capital*, profoundly influenced the social sciences. His method is considered analytical and critical of capitalism, with an emphasis on class struggle, becoming a reference in universities (Ferreira Junior, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Available at: <https://bdtd.ibict.br/vufind/>.



were used, authors' institutional affiliations, theoretical frameworks mobilized, citation practices, and the number of theses by subject related to the author. With a qualitative approach, the study aimed to select theses that cited Heleieth Saffioti in research addressing violence against women, whether domestic or otherwise.

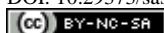
In this regard, it is also important to recall that studies on violence against women became a central focus of Heleieth Saffioti's work from the 1990s onward. During this period, she deepened the notion of the patriarchal gender order which, according to the sociologist, seeks exploitation-domination by unveiling class, gender, and race relations—the knot of relational contradictions (Silveira, 2021). Thus, for Heleieth Saffioti, gender-based violence against women results from social relations rooted in social inequalities, whose common denominator—the patriarchal system—reveals oppression.

Therefore, this article asks how the academic theses analyzed here, which cited and endorsed Heleieth Saffioti's perspective, establish the relationship between her writings and gender-based violence in contemporary societies. To this end, the text is divided into two sections. The first, titled *The Influence of Saffioti's Theory on Contemporary Academic Production*, demonstrates that violence against women is neither isolated nor the result of individual deviance, but rather systemic. It analyzes theses that show how these impacts occur, examining how authors interpret Heleieth's concepts to analyze gender-based violence and how her theoretical framework is incorporated into the theses examined. The second section, titled *The Contemporary Relevance of Saffioti: Theoretical Shifts and the Contemporary Debate*, explains how shifts in Heleieth's theory have occurred in contemporary contexts, that is, how her work has been appropriated when cited alongside other authors in these studies.

### **The Influence of Saffioti's Theory on Contemporary Academic Production**

The present study developed a documentary and bibliographic analysis using the name of the sociologist Heleieth Saffioti as a descriptor, accessing citations of her work available in the National Library of Theses and Dissertations. Twelve doctoral theses were selected, titled:

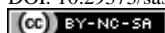
- *Pode a mulher falar? Discursos de mulheres vítimas de abusos sexuais/estupro* (2020), by Joana Rodrigues Moreira Leite;
- *Abordagens da Violência contra a mulher em telenovelas brasileiras: uma análise feminista do discurso* (2023), by Vanessa Correia;



- *Corpo- escrita das mulheres: violência memória e trauma em Conceição Evaristo e Marcela Serrano* (2020), by Bruna Stéphane Oliveira Mendes da Silva;
- *Políticas públicas e preventivas à violência doméstica contra as mulheres implementadas em Uberlândia — MG* (2017), by Danúbia Santos;
- *Violência doméstica contra mulheres: centro de referência da mulher – Araraquara* (2008), by Gisele Rocha Côrtes;
- *Pode ser comum, mas não é normal: o ensino de História como ferramenta pedagógica na discussão da violência de gênero* (2022), by Aline Cecília Jones de Lima;
- *Produção do conhecimento do serviço social brasileiro no campo da violência de gênero contra a(s) mulher(es): uma abordagem feminista de(s)colonial* (2020), by Catarina Nascimento de Oliveira;
- *Amor, poder e violência em contos de Nélida Pinôn* (2015), by Joyce Glenda Barros Amorim;
- *O estudo como violência de gênero* (2018), by Catarina Lopes Placca;
- *Sob o muro das convenções e as muitas faces da violência de gênero: Ribeirão Preto/SP* (2014), by Michelle da Silva Borges;
- *A violência de gênero contra a mulher sob a perspectiva étnico racial: a relevância do papel do Ministério Público* (2017), by Jaceguara Dantas da Silva;
- *Mulher–produto: a violência simbólica de gênero na publicidade julgada pelo Conar* (2019), by Beatriz Molari.

These theses were selected with the aim of investigating how Helelith Saffioti's work has been appropriated in Brazilian academic theses addressing gender-based violence, seeking to understand the depth of engagement with the author's theoretical framework in contemporary studies and to examine the intersectionality between class, race, and gender.

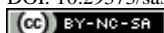
Analysis of the selected theses in the National Library of Theses and Dissertations shows that women's struggles are shaped within constraining structures. It is within these constraints that power relations are established. Based on these theses, rape emerges as one expression of this violence, as it occurs with the purpose of establishing power between men and women (Leite, 2020). According to Saffioti, rape is an instrument of power in male–female relations, serving to affirm dominant ideology (Saffioti, 2001). This occurs because society grants power to men, and a genitalized culture leads men to concentrate their sexuality in the genital organs (Saffioti, 2001).



In a country as vast as Brazil, it is necessary to understand regional developments and specificities, as well as local particularities, viewing violence against women as a social phenomenon (Cerqueira; Bueno, 2024). According to data from the 2024 *Atlas of Violence*, produced by the Institute for Applied Economic Research, 34.5% of female homicides occurred in households, totaling 1,313 victims in 2022, with a prevalence of Black women, who accounted for 58.2% of victims. White girls and women represented 39.8% of the records; Asian women approximately 1%; and Indigenous women 1%. This is because Brazilian society was built upon an ethnocentric, colonizing ideology that unfolds through inequalities and patriarchal ideologies (Correia, 2023).

The article entitled *Abordagens de violência contra a mulher em telenovelas brasileiras: uma análise feminista de discurso*, by Correia (2023), was selected to compose the analysis of the present study because it evidences an appropriation of Saffiotti's concepts from a contemporary perspective. This allows for a focus aligned with the objectives of this research, identifying how Saffiotti's theoretical framework is mobilized to understand contemporary mechanisms of exploitation and domination. According to Correia (2023), technologies and television programs, such as soap operas, operate as mechanisms that reinforce unequal and colonizing ideologies. As a result, different forms of violence become intertwined, overlapping and merging. If Saffiotti's theoretical elaborations (2015) are applied to the understanding of this object, violence is defined as the rupture of the other's integrity—whether physical, psychological, sexual, or moral. Thus, such forms of violence are not isolated events; rather, they constitute the knot of contradictions proposed by the author, acquiring a specific dynamic inherent to this knot (Saffiotti, 2015). The critique developed here revolves around understanding gender-based violence as an instrument of male control and domination. Accordingly, this study supports the argument that violence against women is neither isolated nor the result of individual deviance, but rather systemic and structured within power relations. These strategies are reinforced by their naturalization in women's everyday lives and are accompanied by fear, shame, and guilt. Such destabilizing mechanisms lead women to feel guilty and responsible for the violence they experience, with the objective of exerting control over the victim and maintaining her in a state of submission (Correia, 2023).

There are also discourses produced by men that delegitimize laws aimed at combating violence against women. This type of narrative suggests that such laws do not produce significant results in reducing violence, thereby reinforcing a culture of silence (Correia, 2023). On this matter, Saffiotti (2015, p. 99, our translation) states that "the law is no longer adequate



to address domestic violence, but even worse is its implementation.” She also argues that patriarchal order permeates institutions. As a result, the reinforcement of women’s inferiority within these spaces occurs through the repeated message that they are inferior to white people and to men, leading them to internalize this perceived inferiority.

The discussion then turns to the second thesis analyzed in this section, *Corpo-escrita de mulheres: violência, memória e trauma em Conceição Evaristo e Marcela Serrano* (2020) by Bruna Stéphane Oliveira Mendes da Silva. This study aims to analyze marks of violence in the narratives of female characters in short stories by Conceição Evaristo and Marcela Serrano. In this research, the author appropriates Saffiotti’s framework by emphasizing gender relations as one of the factors leading to women’s subordination. These factors are explained by Saffiotti (2015) with support from Jung (1992)<sup>4</sup>, who introduces the concepts of *animus* and *anima*. Both concepts are incorporated into the thesis, with *animus* referring to the masculine principle and *anima* to the feminine principle.

Silva (2020) employs these concepts to analyze the works *Insubmissas Lágrimas de Mulheres*, by Conceição Evaristo, and *Diez Mujeres*, by Marcela Serrano. These works are marked by power relations in which male characters dehumanize women and act as though female bodies were territories over which they hold rights. In this regard, Saffiotti (2015) highlights that society commonly encourages men to develop their *animus* while preventing or discouraging women from developing their *anima*, resulting in an asymmetric process between genders. Consequently, men often transform aggressiveness into aggression, while women remain positioned in fragility (Silva, 2020).

Regarding men’s claimed rights over women’s bodies, as discussed in Silva’s (2020) thesis, Saffiotti (2015) argues that the concept of patriarchy structures male–female relations. Within this framework, men are granted absolute rights over women’s bodies, as this represents a hierarchical modality of power relations that facilitates forms of oppression—that is, the ideology of violence. Accordingly, Silva (2020) emphasizes that gender-based violence constitutes the core of her research and cites Saffiotti to remind us that gender-based violence transcends social class boundaries, levels, and institutions.

In conclusion, it is evident that gender-based violence is a structural and systemic phenomenon deeply rooted in power relations. Drawing on Saffiotti’s theoretical contributions and the reflections proposed by Correia (2023) and Silva (2020), gender-based violence is

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<sup>4</sup> Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961), born in Switzerland, was a psychiatrist and scholar who created a psychological approach known as analytical psychology (Araújo, 2023).

understood not as a deviation or exception, but as a set of practices sustained by social, cultural, and media discourses that reinforce inequality. Thus, forms of violence such as rape, femicide, and representations of women exemplify how these practices are embedded in an ideology that naturalizes male control over female bodies. This dynamic is compounded by victim-blaming and political delegitimization that deny the existence of violence.

Furthermore, the works analyzed and data from the *Atlas of Violence* (Cerqueira; Bueno, 2024) demonstrate that this context disproportionately affects Black and peripheral women, confirming the knot between gender, race, and class and reinforcing the need to understand violence against women not as an isolated phenomenon, but as part of the knot of contradictions proposed by Saffiotti. Therefore, based on these reflections, it is possible to conclude that the boundaries of gender-based violence are collective, historical, and structural. Considering Heleieth Saffiotti's theoretical contributions, this article thus advances to question how the theoretical shifts within her framework tension or update critiques of gendered power relations in contemporary academic production. This is the focus of the following section.

### **The Contemporary Relevance of Saffiotti: Theoretical Shifts and the Contemporary Debate on Gender-Based Violence**

From a quantitative analysis of the theses, it is evident that Heleieth Saffiotti's work has undergone theoretical shifts as it has been cited in the studies examined here. In several instances, her work has been associated with that of Pierre Bourdieu. From this standpoint, this section analyzes theses that cite both authors jointly in order to propose a contemporary understanding of gender-based violence.

The analysis focuses on the thesis by Jaceguara Dantas da Silva (2017), *A violência de gênero contra a mulher sob a perspectiva étnico-racial: a relevância do papel do Ministério Público*, whose objective is to problematize the reasons for the increasing incidence of gender-based violence against Black women. To this end, the author draws on official data and analyzes<sup>5</sup> them through the theoretical perspectives of Bourdieu, Scott, and Butler. Silva (2017) discusses gender-based violence against women as a phenomenon present in contemporary society, highlighting the unequal power relations established between men and women, which, as cited by Saffiotti (2015):

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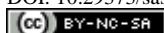
<sup>5</sup> Statistical data from the Institute of Applied Economic Research (IPEA) show that more than 60% of women murdered in Brazil between 2001 and 2011 were black (Silva, 2017).



Inequality, far from being natural, is produced by cultural tradition, power structures, and the agents involved in the web of social relations. In relations between men and between women, gender inequality is not given; it can be constructed, and it often is (Saffioti, 2015, p. 75, our translation).

Saffioti is mobilized throughout the entire thesis, contextualizing women's trajectories over time and examining how tradition has been used to justify inequality between men and women, as well as between white and Black populations, in order to understand female subalternity. Silva (2017) draws on Heleith Saffioti's writings to analyze the sexual and racial components of violence which, due to patriarchal and slaveholding elements, condition and determine gender relations across racial lines. In this sense, the author also cites Pierre Bourdieu to address inequality, particularly through the concept of symbolic violence. Symbolic violence operates in a subtle and invisible manner and is often internalized by the victims themselves as something natural. Its perception as part of the social order legitimizes and sustains its continuity, making it difficult to recognize it as a form of domination (Silva, 2017). For Saffioti (2015), employing Bourdieu's concept of male domination allows for an understanding of the patriarchal institution while minimizing the existence of matriarchal societies. Thus, gender-based violence against women is understood as part of social relations derived from social inequalities, with patriarchy as their common denominator. Moreover, according to Silva (2017), drawing on Saffioti, Black women are discriminated against for being women, Black, and poor, which intensifies gender-based violence.

To further understand the contemporary theoretical shifts in Saffioti's work, another thesis that also combines readings of Heleith Saffioti and Pierre Bourdieu is analyzed. The thesis by Gisele Rocha Côrtes (2008), *Violência doméstica contra mulheres: Centro de Referência da Mulher de Araraquara*, aims to outline the socioeconomic profile of women assisted by the institution, seeking to identify and understand the structural mechanisms of social organization. For Côrtes (2008), violence is difficult to report, as the preservation of the family institution often takes precedence over physical integrity. The author draws on Saffioti (2004) to argue that violence has a chronic and stabilized character, while also citing Bourdieu (1999) to understand violence as something perceived as normal, part of the established order. Côrtes (2008) employs Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, understood as the product of past learning and lived experiences—that is, of socialization institutions—functioning as a matrix of perceptions and choices across different domains of practice. In addition, the author mobilizes Saffioti (2004) to point out classifications of male domination, a phenomenon that



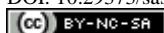
operates beyond consciousness and reflects the notion that women are complicit in or connive with violence.

Drawing on Bourdieu (1999), Côrtes (2008) explains that hierarchical gender codes are not limited to mere mental representations; rather, they are incorporated into the *habitus*, becoming schemas that underpin dominant relations. From this perspective, a correspondence is established between objective structures and mental representations (Côrtes, 2008). Based on this reasoning, the author uses Saffioti (2004) to argue for the impossibility of women's complicity in their own oppression, since "[...] for them to be complicit, to consent to male aggression, they would need to enjoy equal power with men" (Saffioti, 2015, p. 85, our translation).

Therefore, when citing Bourdieu (1999), Côrtes (2008) clarifies that the author understands structures of domination from a macro-social perspective (state, family, school), using mental representations to conceptualize social practices. By incorporating Saffioti's perspective (2004), it becomes evident that the way these discourses are constructed and reproduced is directly linked to the logic and maintenance of the patriarchal order.

Thus, when analyzing both theses—those of Jaceguara Dantas da Silva (2017) and Gisele Rocha Côrtes (2008)—it is possible to observe that Bourdieu's concepts, in conjunction with those of Saffioti, reveal points of theoretical convergence. In both studies, these authors are mobilized to understand the persistence and naturalization of gender-based violence within contemporary social structures. From Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence, it is possible to understand how male domination infiltrates social structures in an invisible manner, being reproduced by the very subjects involved. Expanding this understanding through Saffioti, by introducing intersectionality as an analytical axis, highlights oppression not only by gender, but intensified by factors such as race, resulting from overlapping historical and structural inequalities. Côrtes (2008) introduces the notion of *habitus*, which is articulated with the idea of women's complicity in violence—a notion deconstructed by Saffioti, who argues that complicity would require equality of power, something nonexistent in patriarchal societies.

In this way, the contemporary readings of gender-based violence proposed in these theses indicate theoretical shifts in Heleieth Saffioti's work, not diminishing its relevance, but rather underscoring the importance of reinterpreting and re-signifying her contributions. Therefore, the intersection between Bourdieu and Saffioti, albeit with different emphases, contributes to a broader and more critical understanding of gender-based violence as a structural, historical, and multifaceted phenomenon.



## Final Considerations

The information was organized by identifying citation patterns, thematic recurrences, and theoretical trends, serving as a basis for understanding the orientation of Heleith Saffiotti's work in contemporary academic production. This analysis reveals the frequency with which her work is cited and referenced, while also indicating the limited depth of its theoretical mobilization. This reinforces the argument that her intellectual contributions, when more substantively engaged, enrich analytical depth, particularly when observing the theoretical shifts within her body of work.

The analysis of the theses undertaken here demonstrates that they incorporate Heleith Saffiotti's thought in discussions of gender-based violence, evidencing that her theory remains current and productive for understanding the structures that sustain social inequalities. Based on contemporary authors' appropriations of her concepts, the persistence of a patriarchal system operating intersectionally through markers such as race, class, and territory becomes evident, reaffirming the centrality of the knot of contradictions proposed by Saffiotti. The analyses show that violence against women is neither isolated nor accidental, but rather the result of discursive and institutional practices that sustain male dominance over women's bodies. Elements such as rape, femicide, and victim-blaming expose the brutality of these mechanisms, revealing the cultural and historical entrenchment of oppression. In addition, data from the *Atlas of Violence* (Cerqueira; Bueno, 2024) point to the heightened vulnerability of Black women, reinforcing the importance of understanding violence from an intersectional perspective, as articulated in the concept of the knot of contradictions.

The appropriation of Saffiotti's theory in the theses engages with a range of authors, revealing theoretical shifts that, on the one hand, signal updates to Marxist feminist thought and, on the other, require methodological caution to avoid diluting the materialist critiques central to Saffiotti's framework. When such theoretical displacements are not critically examined, they risk undermining the analytical radicality necessary to interrogate power relations. The analyses indicate that Saffiotti's intersectional perspective—articulating gender, race, and class as structuring elements of social relations—remains essential for understanding the multiple layers of violence against women. Authors such as Jaceguara Dantas da Silva (2017) and Gisele Rocha Côrtes (2008) reaffirm the contemporary relevance of her analytical categories, while also bringing them into dialogue with Bourdieusian contributions, particularly regarding the concept of symbolic violence and the notion of *habitus*.



Heleieth Saffioti thus remains a key reference in studies on gender-based violence. However, her theoretical contribution, centered on the structural analysis of women's oppression, is often cited without being fully mobilized in its complexity. This indicates that, although widely recognized, her work is frequently treated as ancillary, often alongside authors whose theoretical orientations diverge from hers, resulting in theoretical dilutions that compromise the critical force of her thought.

Therefore, the importance of reclaiming Saffioti as a fundamental critical reference is reaffirmed, especially for understanding gender-based violence. Her work contributes not only as a theoretical framework but also as an analytical tool for unveiling patriarchal domination. The theses analyzed point toward productive paths for this dialogue while simultaneously highlighting the need for ongoing critical vigilance to avoid reductionism.

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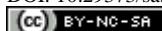
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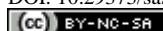
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