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# TOWARDS A METHODOLOGY OF POSTMODERN ASSEMBLAGE: ADOLESCENT IDENTITY IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING

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## INTRODUCTION

Early in the summer of 2008 a concerned mother of a 7<sup>th</sup> grade girl visited my office.<sup>1</sup> Her daughter had been close with a group of four other girls. Together they formed a clique with tremendous social power. Recently, however, Candice had been outcast for wearing uncool clothes. MySpace blogs filled with comments about Candice's lack of fashion sense. Beth, the most popular and manipulative girl in the class, decided to digitally remove Candice from a picture posted on her MySpace page. An emblem of the clique's disposition, the original, unedited, picture once sent a message to the world—*you know you want to be us*. In Beth's alteration of that picture, Candice was cut right out of existence. Gossip about clothing and cutting someone out of a picture can be cruel, but the nasty behavior rises to a new level of spitefulness when the conversation and picture are made public for all to witness. The mother handed me a copy of the MySpace blog:

June 10: *liza\_* “Bahahahahaha YOU CROPPED CANDICE OUT

June 10: *lacey?!?* “LMFAO! She didn't deserve to be in this picture /  
lmfao / I love you guys tons

June 10: *lacey?!?* “wow, I love uss”

June 11: *summer08 baby!!* “ERIN YOU ARE SO FREAKING  
PRETTY”

June 15: *Meg* “This is really cute!”

In this moment, an adolescent's personal torment becomes a public nightmare. As her mother explained, “It feels like Candice has no control of who she is...She has to live with whatever these girls put up about her.”

Theorists from Baudrillard<sup>2</sup> to Haraway<sup>3</sup> have anticipated and narrated our terminal identity: “an unmistakably double articulation in which we find both the end of the subject and a new subjectivity constructed at the computer,”<sup>4</sup> where terminal refers both to an end (the termination of our subjectivity disconnected from the computer) and a beginning (a new self born at the computer terminal). Hyperconnected through technological prosthetics, contemporary adolescents occupy a subject position that extends beyond the body into simulated territories. This passing from spaces once defined by the

real / virtual binary, but conceived more precisely here as movement across the seamless fractal locations of self in late capitalist culture, requires educational researchers and contemporary practitioners to reconceptualize our ways of knowing and representing adolescent identity as it is created concurrently in real and virtual spaces.

Adolescents who occupy virtual spaces construct identities for a dual audience, those intimate friends whose favor they seek and a broader public audience whose purpose for viewing cannot be known.<sup>5</sup> The digital world of MySpace, Facebook, and Instant Messaging has simultaneously complicated and enhanced the process of identity construction. The adolescent obligation to be noticed and coveted, coupled with the power and scope of social networking technology, positions the adolescent self as a product in a frenzied consumer culture. This paper seeks to construct a methodology for articulating the structure and norms of cyber-representations. This methodology of postmodern assemblage has the potential to generate meaningful, useful, and compelling ways of knowing adolescent identity. Insights gained through the assemblage model will lead to curricular advancements that may contribute to the habits of mind and conscience necessary for maintaining personal dignity and avoiding the least desirable trappings of consumer culture.

#### CONTEXT AND IMPLICATIONS

62% of people aged 13 to 24 use social networking technology.<sup>6</sup> For many adolescents the technology provides an efficient and harmless way to keep in touch with friends.<sup>7</sup> For others, the benefits of social networking are complicated by misuses contributing to feelings of depression and loneliness.<sup>8</sup> Some adolescents demonstrate an “ethic of care” in their online behaviors, while others assert themselves and ask direct questions that may cause conflict or show reckless disregard for other people.<sup>9</sup> Still others use the Internet as an electronic confessional, revealing sexual behaviors, preferences, and desires.<sup>10</sup>

While research across a host of disciplines reveals a wide range of online behaviors and associated consequences, considerable attention has been given to how technology affects the formation and presentation of personal identity. Often relying on Goffman<sup>11</sup> as a foundational source, this body of research pays critical attention to the presentation of self as a performance within a context of accepted social conventions. The unique nature of the Internet as a virtual place with unclear rules of behavior renders identity formation and presentation in that environment an unstable affair. Walker’s research establishes the simplest version of the argument: “Enthusiasts of the Internet insist that it provides a place where individuals can interact without traditional barriers. Critics believe that the Internet’s version of selfhood and community is a pale ghost of traditional forms of community and identity.”<sup>12</sup>

Although lessons from *The Matrix* suggest that the desert of the real is preferable over even the most seductive simulation, research concerning

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identity development and technology offers no clear directive. Cerulo argues that computer mediated interactions and identities are impersonal, ingenuous, and fleeting,<sup>13</sup> while Walker rejects the notion that virtual identity constructions are “illusory, deceptive, and without a ‘core.’”<sup>14</sup> Far too pragmatic to enter the debate about the value of mediated experience, other groups of researchers are assessing the real world consequence of online behaviors. Harman, et al., discovered that children reporting high faking behaviors online (lying about personal identity) had lower self-esteem, higher social anxiety, poorer social skills, and higher aggression than the group of children reporting minimal faking behaviors.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, Bargh, et al., found that people are more likely to reveal their “true selves” to new acquaintances met over the Internet than to individuals met face-to-face.<sup>16</sup> Research investigating adolescents’ online behaviors and their associated consequences demonstrate paradox at every level. In this *Alice in Wonderland* world, faking is real and may contribute to an actual body in crisis. Interactions may be deeply personal and profoundly illusory simultaneously as people share their “true selves” to virtual strangers.

For more than a decade as an administrator, teacher, and dorm parent at a traditional college preparatory school, I have seen adolescents enraptured by the opportunity brought by technology to be connected with friends, yet to be left alone simultaneously. I have seen adolescents spend countless hours crafting their online identities and developing tech-mediated relationships with friends and strangers. I have seen fundamentally good adolescents damage their reputations by projecting images of themselves online that are distasteful or illegal. I have searched for some theoretical framework and methodology that would allow me to see what’s going on more fully.

To this end I have interviewed nearly a dozen students and parents negatively affected in unanticipated ways by behavior reproduced and made public through technology. I have had discussions covering territory ranging from cyberbullying to cyberstalking. I have seen MySpace pictures depicting model students engaged in various forms of criminality. I have watched parents of young adolescents break down in tears over blog entries filled with the most vile language conceivable. As an emblem of the entire lot, one young woman said of a picture of her involved in some illegal activity—“I wish adults at this school would understand that those pictures are not really us.”

This wish is wrought with complexity and may be at odds with Walker’s belief that the Internet actually deepens and substantiates identity. Walker argues that

The ubiquitous presence of such links brings me to an important point: the technology behind the Internet, through this system of hyperlinks, invites people to represent themselves through relational categories. The creators of

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home pages can place themselves inside a vast web of information in a manner that is not readily available in casual face-to-face interaction. Although the Internet is sometimes characterized as isolating, it offers new methods of creating and displaying networks and communities. This goes against the expectation that the Internet creates an unanchored and shifting sense of self.<sup>17</sup>

The binary logic establishing the real self as authentic and the virtual self as artifice has proven unhelpful and meaningless to the adolescents we are seeking to understand. Modernist assumptions suggesting an obligation to help adolescents repair the fragmentation of their technologically-oriented lives seem equally unproductive. In my role as a dormitory master, teacher, coach, and adviser literally living with students for the past twelve years, I have concluded that useful research in this area must be guided by a realization that our limitation in understanding and representing adolescent identity constructed concurrently in physical space and cyberspace is not a matter of how researchers proceed to *know*, but in the very nature of what mediating technology has allowed adolescents to *become*. This is not to suggest that adolescents have fundamentally changed, or that problems associated with social networking represent an entirely new phenomenon. Rather, I am suggesting that these new tools have given adolescents unprecedented power to assemble, disassemble, and reassemble their identities in ways that require fresh ways of seeing and knowing on the part of researchers and practitioners.

We have an obligation to look more closely at the near schizophrenic contradiction between the public adolescents we know and their abusive behaviors and occasional criminality posted on the Internet—a seemingly private public space. How do we come to know what’s going on in a world where adolescents look at pictures of themselves and say, “I wish adults would just understand that those pictures are not really us”? Of course, Merleau-Ponty is right—the world is always already there and its objects are our partners in meaning making. Crotty summarizes it this way: “As Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty repeatedly state, the world is ‘always already there.’ The world and objects in the world may be meaningless; yet they are our partners in the generation of meaning and need to be taken seriously.”<sup>18</sup> The world is there—it exists—it holds patterns and possibilities that we may explore. Our interpretive practices become centrally important because they will be the ultimate shapers of the worldstuff we assess. In the process of analyzing adolescent identity construction through technology and social networks, we must acknowledge that our data is slippery, but not entirely ephemeral. Nevertheless, the crisis in representation hinders cleanly linear portrayals of identity construction in the postmodern moment.

But when our partners in meaning making are simultaneously subjects and objects in a consumer culture where identities are discarded and exchanged

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in an endless effort to remain current, attractive, or interesting, the world that is there may defy conventional ways of thinking about adolescent identity formation.

Noting that objectivity is a “mythological creature that never existed”<sup>19</sup> and acknowledging the researcher’s fingerprints smudging the thing represented may not illustrate sufficiently the crises of representation faced when what we seek to know cannot be touched in the first place. We live in a consumer society where even our identities are commodities to be bought and sold. As Zygmunt Bauman explains,

In the liquid modern society of consumers no identities are gifts at birth, none is “given” let alone given once and for all in a secure fashion. Identities are projects: tasks yet to be undertaken, diligently performed and seen through to infinitely remote completion...consumers are driven by the need to “commoditize” themselves.<sup>20</sup>

The adolescents central to this study are sufficiently trained in the art of our confessional society, where going unnoticed may be the greatest offense. Their MySpace pages and YouTube videos may illustrate one of Bauman’s central points about our time. Namely that, “Beneath the dream of fame, another dream, a dream of no longer dissolving and staying dissolved in the grey, faceless and insipid mass of commodities, a dream of turning into a notable, noticed, and coveted commodity, a talked-about commodity...a commodity impossible to overlook.”<sup>21</sup> Those pictures are really not us because in their ceaseless quest to be noticed, their identities must never be permanent. Useful methodologies granting social researchers access to this schizophrenic ontology must somehow account for the unsettled relationship between the adolescent body and its virtual representation.

Derrida’s *Difference* may be particularly useful as researchers theorize and explore adolescent identity assemblage. As Derrida explains, “The signified concept is never present in itself, in an adequate presence that would refer only to itself. Every concept is necessarily and essentially inscribed in a chain or system, within which it refers to another and to other concepts, by the systematic play of differences.”<sup>22</sup> The self constructed via prosthesis (keyboard, mouse) using reproductive technologies (digital camera, voice) is a unique production only loosely associated with something like a “real” referent. Ultimately, it relates within the ontological space of other selves in the same plane—even to the manifestations of the same self under erasure but still existing as a glossy mirage or echo, an earlier self.

#### TOWARDS A METHODOLOGY OF POSTMODERN ASSEMBLAGE

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Inspired by the crisis of representation experienced in her own field work and in her work advising graduate students, Margaret Somerville's "Postmodern Emergence,"<sup>23</sup> is a response to the limitations of empiricist research paradigms that promise precision and control. Her methodology of postmodern emergence seeks to facilitate the emergence of alternative voices and new knowledges. Somerville extends the idea of identity as a process of merely becoming into an ontological experience of emergence as becoming "other."

While a methodology of postmodern emergence offers a useful starting point for theorizing adolescent identity today, the notion of emergence may not be precise enough to account for the complexities involved in a study where both the subject *and* object of research are in a state of perpetual change and a cultural moment that defies standard modes of representation. In this moment, the better question may not be "Who is this 'other' you are naturally becoming?" (emergence), but "How are you artificially constructing a self at this moment?" (assemblage). This second question extends Somerville's methodology of postmodern emergence to a *methodology of postmodern assemblage*. Emergence may never have existed, and it may be possible to apply the notion of assemblage to all forms of identity development across previous cultural moments. My use of the concept in this context is necessitated by the circumstance it seeks to describe. Social networking technologies, including MySpace and Facebook, have laid bare the *process* of identity formation in dramatic ways. In a cultural moment when the machinery of identity building is both ubiquitous and alluring, and when the compulsion and obligation to be noticed is more public than ever, a methodology of assemblage may be the only suitable analytical tool for making sense of identity formations.

Data collected from students demonstrates the value in seeing their identity formation as assemblage.<sup>24</sup> Their own assessment of their current lived experience reveals a unique type of artificiality, or performance, where identities are always in flux, always assembled.

*CB:* I guess some of the parents who would do that [snoop on their kids MySpace pages] don't want their kids to feel pressured to do those things. You girls are well liked [...]. People look up to you [...] Do you think that people feel differently about posting pictures of themselves involved in illegal activities—like drinking underage—in light of all this trouble?

*The Girls:* I know that because of all that we have been through we are. We are. But I don't think like we think differently because like the way when we were punished the school like wanted us to realize it was wrong. I think the only way that like we think differently is that we don't want the school to address it or whatever. We don't think it's bad.

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*CB:* So it's not that you have changed your mind about whether it's right or wrong, but that you don't want to get in trouble.

*The Girls:* I know that if we are out anywhere before we take a picture I make sure that nobody has anything in their hand. I'll do stuff like that. But I know like, a lot of kids who are younger don't care as much. They say, "Oh I'm cool, I'm drinking let's put it on there." The younger it is. I don't know. That's just what I've seen.

*CB:* So when a younger student, say a 9<sup>th</sup> grader, is out at a party drinking and someone stops to take a picture. Do you think that's a moment that at some level they think, "This is good."

*The Girls:* I think everyone even if they didn't have a drink in their hand they would grab one and hold it up and be like, "Yeahhh."

*CB:* Why?

*The Girls:* I don't know. I guess they think that's cool. I remember seeing a girl's picture on MySpace. She is a younger student. It was a picture of just her and she had alcohol in her hand. I don't know what it was. But that was her main picture and she was young. Also there are older people who do that. I don't know.

*CB:* Who does she want to be noticed by?

*The Girls:* Maybe older people—like guys. Or just to fit in to a group of girls in her grade.

The artificiality of self-depiction cuts at every narrative level. The older girls remove alcohol from the picture, while the younger girls position it prominently. Moreover, the girls' attitude about others in our community interested in their development, a perceived intrusion into their personal freedom, seems predictable. It is a natural adolescent response (stay out of my business) made complicated by technology. In other words, the insulating aspects of technology appear to facilitate greater distance between us rather than increased connections among us.<sup>25</sup>

A methodology of postmodern assemblage begins by foregrounding the process by which identities are constructed. They are not their pictures. They are an assemblage far more complex than that. Nearly nine months after the first round of interviews in which one young woman said, "I wish adults would understand those pictures are not really us," I re-interviewed the original girls.

*CB:* Some say that part of being a person is that we all have different sides of ourselves. What do you think of that? I remember one of you saying, "I wish adults would understand that those pictures are not really us."

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*The Girls:* It's not the big picture. Everyone just sees the bad and sticks to it. They don't say, "Oh this person also did this and all this other stuff." [...] It's not really us being us. It's us being funny, goofy, or whatever. [...] The thing that really bothered us: we've gone to this school for so long and you know, that's not really who we are. Everyone who saw those pictures said, "I can't believe you are like this. They didn't take time to look back and see everything else."

A methodology of postmodern assemblage has the potential to account for heteroglossic identities emerging from a single individual passing from virtual to real worlds. To account for this complexity, research in the form of postmodern assemblage should operate with an obligation to the difficult whole of adolescent identity as artifice. An ontology of postmodern assemblage methodology then focuses on the discarding of used (boring) incarnations of the self; the frenzy of choosing the alternatives that will be desirable by the market (MySpace); the spaces of creation, commoditization, and marketing; the alterations, additions, deletions of materials; the schizophrenic gaps between older versions of the self, the embodied self as exhausted signified, the virtual self as invented fiction, the process of each bleeding into the other; the rejection of the new forms and the procession of simulations through ever new and imaginative recombinations of found materials.

*The Girls:* People say in high school you are figuring out who you are and stuff like that but I don't think it's right. I think you are creating, I don't think you figure out who you are. I guess I don't want to go unnoticed. Like my parents and stuff are just in Wheeling and I don't know... I don't want to be like that. I never really thought about it.

*CB:* What do you mean by creating identity?

*The Girls:* You learn from certain things. You create yourself. You are not a certain person looking for who you are deep down. I mean I think that we all create our personalities and everyone changes.

*CB:* Is that an active process?

*The Girls:* It's always changing with everything you learn.

*CB:* Is it like building? Constructing? Assembling?

*The Girls:* I never really thought about it. Different experiences change you. Building upon your personality. You hear all the different stories that happen good and bad and you make decisions about what to do... There are so many different things that make you who you are. Your personality isn't uniform. There are many things that describe you and go outside the lines.

*CB:* How does technology fit into that?

*The Girls:* It just shows you more. Pictures in a photo album give you a chance to put pictures online to see your personality, to see who you are.

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CB: Is that assembling?

*The Girls:* When you think about building and going outside the lines. It is like the campus. It's not just one building. We would be the art building and technology would be Kuchinka (a building on campus). You can go outside the lines.

A methodology of postmodern assemblage relies upon a variety of analytical techniques useful in constructing meaning in postmodernist aesthetic productions ranging from long poems to installation art. These strategies have the potential to generate meaningful, useful, and compelling ways of knowing adolescent identity. Insights gained from these exercises will lead to curricular advancements that may contribute to the habits of mind and conscience necessary for maintaining personal dignity and avoiding the least desirable trappings of consumer culture. The time to begin is now. The technology driving late capitalist culture has borne upon our children some baleful side effects. Shockingly, the dizzying consequences of fast communication technology create nostalgia for the good old days of industrialization where by today's standards those old factories seem to be a model of solidarity. While conditions of the old steel towns were harsh, people were also united. They walked the same streets, shared the same water, entered the same factory gates, and stood shoulder to shoulder against shared injustices. Moreover, cultural institutions, notably schools, could plainly see their obligations to help the children they were established to serve. The need for social reform is self evident when a child physically broken by industrial machinery enters your classroom. Yet, what are the signs that the infrastructure of multinational capitalism has harmful effects on our students today? Unlike children from the turn of the last century, young people today are not forced to operate the machinery driving this phase of capitalism. Yet, that machinery drives their social lives just as it drives global commerce. The effects are not self evident. Their fingers are not cut. Their bodies are not battered. Their clothes and faces are not stained with coal dust. Be certain, however, our attention is needed all the same. Listen carefully and you will hear them calling: "those pictures are not really me." Look closely and you will see their terminal identity.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> At the time of their visit I was the Director of Admissions at a college preparatory school serving 440 day and boarding students in grades 5-12.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985). The slippery seduction of this new age of tech driven identity construction lies in the procession of identity constructs allowing an individual to never settle on a state of being. The prospect of the illusion (or disembodied virtual avatar) effacing the slant referent—the body—proves

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troublesome and alluring on a host of levels. Baudrillard's procession of simulacra where the referent effaces the original offers a useful theoretical lens for understanding identity constructions in virtual space.

<sup>3</sup> Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Scott Bukatman, *Terminal identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 9. Following Bukatman, others have made effective use of this metaphor. In "Disembodiment and Cyberspace: A Phenomenological Approach," Btihaj Ajana writes, "In such a framework, a phenomenological shift occurs: the subject behind the computer screen is reincarnated – or rather disincarnated into a *hypercogitatio* that progressively abandons the body to freely float between the inner world and the outer world, and in doing so, reaches a status of 'terminal identity' where any 'felt' sense of selfhood is entirely eliminated from the picture." *Electronic Journal of Sociology* (2005): [www.sociology.org+ajana.html](http://www.sociology.org+ajana.html).

<sup>5</sup> Denise Bortree, "Presentation of Self on the Web: An Ethnographic Study of Teenage Girls' Weblogs," *Education, Communication & Information*, 5 (2005): 25-39.

<sup>6</sup> On August 20, 2007 MTV and The Associated Press began releasing the findings of an in-depth, seven-month study into happiness and young people. Data on social networking habits among adolescents has proven valuable in my own research. The study can be accessed at [mtv.com/thinkmtv/research/](http://mtv.com/thinkmtv/research/)

<sup>7</sup> Katherine Walker, "'It's Difficult to Hide It': The Presentation of Self on Internet Home Pages," *Qualitative Sociology*, 23 (2000): 99-120.

<sup>8</sup> Scott Caplan, "Preference for Online Social Interaction: A Theory of Problematic Internet Use and Psychosocial Well-Being," *Communication Research*, 30(2003): 625-648.

<sup>9</sup> Shayla Stern, *Instant identity: Adolescent Girls and the World of Instant Messaging* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Ashley Grisso and David Weiss, "What are gURLs Talking about?: Adolescent Girls' Construction of Sexual Identity on GURL.com," in *girl wide web: Girls, the Internet, and the Negotiation of Identity*, ed. Sharon R. Mazzarella (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 31-50.

<sup>11</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>13</sup> Karen Cerulo, "Reframing Sociological Concepts for a Brave New (Virtual) World," *Sociological Inquiry*, 67 (1997), 48-58.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>15</sup> Jeffrey Harman, Catherine Hansen, et al., "Liar, Liar: Internet Faking but Not Frequency of Use Affects Social Skills, Self-Esteem, Social Anxiety, and Aggression," *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 8 (2005): 1-6.

<sup>16</sup> John Bargh, Katelyn McKenna, and Grainne Fitzsimons, "Can You See the Real Me? Activation and Expression of the 'True Self' on the Internet," *Journal of Social Issues*, 58 (2002), 33.

<sup>17</sup> Walker, "'It's Difficult to Hide It,'" 104.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Crotty, *The Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process* (London: Sage Publications, 1998), 44.

<sup>19</sup> Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln, "Paradigmatic Controversies, Contradictions, and Emerging Confluences," in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, eds. Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Press, 2005), 191-215.

<sup>20</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Consuming Life* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 111.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>22</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Differance," in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 392.

<sup>23</sup> Margaret Somerville, "Postmodern Emergence," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 20 (2007): 225-243.

<sup>24</sup> This conversation comes from meetings I had with girls who were first counseled, then disciplined by my school for repeatedly posting pictures on MySpace depicting themselves involved in underage drinking. Five girls each met with me for one hour. The interviews were not disciplinary in nature. Students were invited to answer or skip any questions asked. I suggested at various points in the interview that the school was interested in better understanding them and the choices they made.

<sup>25</sup> See Maxine Greene, *The Dialectic of Freedom* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

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