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Ethics of identity in the time of big data

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Abstract

Compartmentalizing our distinct personal identities is increasingly difficult in big data reality. Pictures of the person we were on past vacations resurface in employers' Google searches; LinkedIn which exhibits our income level is increasingly used as a dating web site. Whether on vacation, at work, or seeking romance, our digital selves stream together. One result is that a perennial ethical question about personal identity has spilled out of philosophy departments and into the real world. Ought we possess one, unified identity that coherently integrates the various aspects of our lives, or, incarnate deeply distinct selves suited to different occasions and contexts? At bottom, are we one, or many? The question is not only palpable today, but also urgent because if a decision is not made by us, the forces of big data and surveillance capitalism will make it for us by compelling unity. Speaking in favor of the big data tendency, Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg promotes the ethics of an integrated identity, a single version of selfhood maintained across diverse contexts and human relationships. This essay goes in the other direction by sketching two ethical frameworks arranged to defend our compartmentalized identities, which amounts to promoting the dis-integration of our selves. One framework connects with natural law, the other with language, and both aim to create a sense of selfhood that breaks away from its own past, and from the unifying powers of big data technology.

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Multiple identities in daily life

One of the ways I stay out of jail is by changing who I am. A father in the morning, a lecturer in the afternoon, a husband in the evening: it's one face strapped on, then another, and another. Were I to treat my children as colleagues, I'd fail as a father. If I approached the women at work as my wife, I'd end up incarcerated. So, it's an idiosyncratic truth that a normal day features nearly schizophrenic personalities.

Of course it doesn't *need* to be that way. A bland personality suited to nearly any social context could be adopted. Life would be uninteresting, but also uncomplicated. Regardless, the spectrum of possibilities raises familiar questions (Goffman, 1959). Does a unifying self subsist within the variety many of us live? What is its form? How is it discovered or made? Or, are we a bundle of multiple selves, a set of personalities that will always prove irreducible to one sense of identity?

Since Plato, philosophical investigations have been ongoing [1], though no broadly persuasive responses have emerged and, perhaps more significantly, there has been no demand for them because out in the non-academic world where you and I actually live as serial personalities in distinct contexts, little pressure has been applied. Most of us can freelance the question about who we are in distinct contexts, while the prospect of being required to make a final decision about our personal identity is deferred: few of us have been forced to answer the question about whether we are basically one person, or

multiple.

That's changing, though.

Objecting to multiple identities

One of the central effects of contemporary big data technology is that it applies pressure to answer the perennial ethical question about personal identity and multiplicity. Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg captures the reality when insisting:

> You have one identity. The days of you having a different image for your co-workers, and for the other people you know, are coming to an end. Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity. [2]

There are two claims here. Empirically, quotidian multiple identity is diminishing. Ethically, that's good.

The empirical claim gets traction on Facebook where integrity aligns with the concept of *authenticity*, which is key to the platform's content policing. You're allowed to post words and pictures that are humorous or serious, true or false, amiable, romantic, professional. Anything goes, as *long* as it's authentic, which means the poster employs a real name, and has a single account. Selected users are even privileged to receive the blue verification badge, signaling administrative refutation of any duplicity. With or without verification, though, authenticity dovetails with integrity: you're meant to be one person on the site.

In circles of social media criticism, an interesting debate inquires what *should* count as authenticity, and how fine should the filter be. For example, is the Facebook commentator and writer who goes by the pseudonym, R.U. Sirius actually an inauthentic presence on the site? Is someone claiming to not be who they are, not who they are? It's hard to be certain, but ultimately the platform banned him (Au, 2015).

Coming at the authenticity question from another angle, Haimson and Hoffmann (2016) promote the idea of authenticity as connected with identity experimentation. They are especially interested in questions of gender and sexual orientation, and argue that using Facebook under a false identity as a way of introducing oneself into a community (homosexual, transgender, or something similar) is, in fact, an authentic use of the platform, and not an exploitive lie. Within current Facebook policy, however, this kind of experimentation leads to account blocking.

An historical approach begins with John Locke's shifting of the source of personal identity. In place of the Augustinian and Cartesian location of personhood in a soul, Locke (1996) proposed that it was psychological continuity that guaranteed continuous individuality. Because we can contemplate our relationships with the past and future in the same conscious way that we consider the present, we can also string ourselves together as one person through those times. If I wake up tomorrow, consequently, with the complete memories of Mark Zuckerberg, I would, in fact, *be* Mark Zuckerberg under this understanding, at least for the moments until the jarring realization that I was in the wrong house, and that the face in the mirror didn't match up with the memories, and so on.

Shifting the historical into the present, Locke's psychological notion directly intersects with Zuckerberg's vision of a unified person as it is very specifically expressed: through the Facebook *interface* [3]. As van Dijck reports, there are two levels on which the interface functions to unify the identity Zuckerberg envisions, and that Locke pioneered. Named the "technologies of the self" [4], they involve the Facebook Timeline as it was introduced in 2011 in the personal Profile section. That modification, according to Mark Zuckerberg, aimed to "tell the whole story of your life on a single page." (Zuckerberg, 2011) The Timeline function gathers everything a user has uploaded and organizes it into two distinct kinds of narratives [5]. Most evidently there is a chronological narrative, the story of the user's life is presented from beginning to the present. Underneath that, there is also a database narrative.

The database aspect will be returned to, but first the experience of the Facebook Timeline is joltingly similar to the process of Lockean identity formation. As van Dijck (2007) writes, "Facebook's encoded activity resembles the analogue real-life shoe box experience: people reassembling pieces from their old photo albums, diaries, scrap book and weblog into one smooth presentation of the past." The Facebook interface in effect *performs* the identity unification that Locke associated with selfhood: it actively connects memories with the present. Further, the process is not just one of rediscovery of our past selves, but also one of *compliance*. Information loaded onto the Facebook site — and consequently onto the Timeline — does not fade. As captured digitally, the moments remain as fresh and compelling in the future as they were on the day of uploading, so it's not just that an

identity is established online by the process of linking memories to the present on the location of a single identity, it is also that the identity becomes unbreachable. Integrity as Zuckerberg understands the term, is assured because the Timeline links guarantee the memory-unification that marks personhood as unaffected by passing time. The result is a sense of a single self, gathered from all its Timeline moments, that is performed on the Facebook site, and that not only digitally recreates, but more importantly psychologically guarantees an integrity of selfhood in the sense that Locke envisioned.

Next, returning to the database aspect of the Timeline narrative, a further measure of integrity is added through the Memories function. Algorithmically selected posts and images from the user's past are regularly written onto the user's wall as a pleasant — though also inescapable — reminder of who that user has been in a different time and context. So here too there is an integrity function, but it is diachronic in that the memory incorporating the selfhood may appear from any moment and place in the user's life. As abstracted from the database and hooked onto the present, it repeats the fundamental rule of Zuckerberg's conception of selfhood on Facebook: an online identity and a psychological notion of self is gathered and reveals *all* the aspects of our identity as lived over different times and diverse contexts. Digital integrity on the social media platform mirrors psychological unity within the user.

Finally, the conclusion is that on Facebook authenticity understood as integrity applies real-world pressure against the idea of identity as multiple. Ironic takes on who we are, along with speculative experimenting with who we might want to be, as well as clean breaks from previous behaviors, aspirations, fears, and desires, all those kinds of identity transformations are relentlessly frustrated.

Big data as forcing integrity

Throughout digital social media, pressure squeezing against the idea of identity as multiple and compartmentalized is tangible. It's not just the name-checking of account holders on Facebook, there's also the visibility: to some extent, the person we are on social platforms is exposed to everyone. So, children and parents feel appalled by each other's Facebook walls. Husbands and wives leer at each other's text messages. Friends and coworkers anxiously scan each other's Instagrams. Viscerally, there's an understanding that it's difficult to divide our lives and compartmentalize our identities when the Web integrates so much of who we are.

All that is only an introduction, however, to the more powerful integrity pressure applied by big data. It begins when third party companies with less-familiar names including Acxiom and LiveRamp, acquire data Facebook, LinkedIn, Tinder and the rest have gathered, and add geographic information accumulated by cell phone providers, as well as recent purchases documented by credit cards, and then scoop up public data sets, like the recent New York City Open Data initiative (https://opendata.cityofnewyork.us), and finally combine it all to form universal profiles assigned to each one of us. This digital bundling churning in the background of all our lives is the *deep* action defining big data integrity, and also the pervasive reason the days of having different images for co-workers, friends, and families are coming to an end. It's not just that a lot of people are on Facebook, it's that electric information gathering unites our work life (LinkedIn), and our romantic life (Tinder), and everything in between (Martin, 2015).

Concretely, an embarrassing picture snapped by a jilted lover on a distant vacation gets scraped from the restive online bulletin board 4chan, associated with a face, tagged with a name, bundled with related images and words, sold to a human resources service, and ends up flashing on an employer's screen. A termination notice follows. The identity we live at work, in other words, gets forced together with who we are on vacation (Oppenheim, 2013).

It can only be a matter of time before Tinder finds a way to add credit scores and income numbers to its pictures and profiles, especially given that people have begun using the employment site LinkedIn as a dating platform (Tart, 2017). It has already happened that Target stores announced a young woman's pregnancy to her family before she could. In fact, the store may have known the motherhood identity before the mother did (Hill, 2012).

In the information and marketing trade, the term for all this is *identity resolution* (Bhat, *et al.*, 2018). And, the fact that there is a term, and there *is* a trade, is this essay's first conclusion. It demonstrates how difficult it's getting to *not* be who we are. It used to be that employers didn't know what we did after hours. And it used to be that romantic seduction meant strategically revealing — and concealing — parts of who we were. And it used to be that we were parents for some people, and friends for others, and patients for the doctor, and women and men for each other. Not anymore.

Finally, it used to be that integrity and authenticity were thought experiments lighting up

philosophy classrooms before suffering abandonment for a trip to the bar, or a summer touring Europe, or a normal job in the real world. Now, though, the questions tag behind each one of us, pulling as inescapably as our trails of data.

Part of what makes the incipient big data revolution a watershed human moment is that for the first time in history we cannot leave the question of personal identity for later. Are we going to be one tightly integrated self, or will the disintegration of multiple, serial identities remain a vigorous possibility? As the volume and variety of gathered data rises, and as the velocity of the processing accelerates, and as more of our lives plug into those circuits, it's decreasingly possible to avoid sensing that if a decision is not made *by* us, then the forces of information gathering and surveillance capitalism will make it *for* us.

Ethical frameworks for refusing big data integrity

Do we *want* integrity? Zuckerberg answers yes, and there's solid moral ground beneath him. Being two-faced, or multiple-faced, can be rupturing in the sense that I contradict who I am: my existence conflicts with itself. While it may be true that having one identity for my friends while I'm on vacation, and another, presumably soberer identity for work colleagues is convenient, it is also a form of self-denial, a manipulation, as though my public image were a tool or instrument. There is, consequently, a violation, in the Kantian sense, of human dignity here (Pele, 2016).

We don't need to go that way, though. Against the authenticity of the social media platforms, and against the resolved identities of the big data marketers, ethical arguments can be raised in favor compartmentalized identities and multiplying definitions of myself. This essay is about that particular kind of inauthenticity, the one that is a virtue because it promotes plural, disintegrating selves.

Two directions toward ethical multiplicity in big data reality will be suggested here. First, within the natural law tradition, discontinuity can be conceived as an organic or intrinsic element of human existence, as opposed to an aberration or psychological illness. Gilles Deleuze's example of the rhizome plant stem corresponds well. The botanical idea of an extending stem that intermittently takes deeper root, and then separates from the plant of its origin, translates in human terms as the affirmation that our personal tastes, aspirations, fears, and desires can cut away from information already accumulated to describe who we are. Re-rooting as a different person — at least in terms of the information attributes gathered on databases — is even a natural, healthy aspect of human growth and maturity within this conception. Today's globalized societies, as Kathy-Ann Tan perceives, support the conception, especially to the extent that the discontinuity is nurtured by cultural differences. Identity, as Tan describes, "does not comprise one single root of culture inherited from the individual's past but posits a process of multiplicity informed by multiple nodes and roots of different cultural encounters." [6]. Interacting with cultural differences, she means, fertilizes identity disintegration.

The link between discontinuous lives and cultural encounters will be re-engaged below, but going back to the start, the rhizome term originated in Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) *A thousand plateaus*. The supporting theory traces earlier to the metaphysics of difference as developed in a short, less frequently cited essay: "Plato and the simulacrum" (Deleuze, 1983). There are, in Deleuze's language, two foundational ways to read the world, one in terms of Platonism, and the other in terms of Nietzscheanism. When Platonism centers understanding, an original and final unity to everything at the beginning and end of time is assumed, which is optimistic in the sense that it guarantees a single notion of truth and justice that organizes how we live, and that provides certainty that some things are right and others wrong, both empirically and ethically. With respect to personal identity, this view corresponds with traditional notions of authenticity: we fundamentally *are* someone, and the task of life is to discover and be consummate to that self. Finally, the problem with this perspective is that it fails to answer this question: If this metaphysical unity once existed and will again, then why don't we have it now? In religious terms, this point is rendered as the problem of evil: If God is all powerful and perfectly just, then how could the Holocaust have occurred? In terms of personal identity, this problem is rendered in terms of time: if we all *are* someone, then why do we change with the hours, days, or years?

Next, going in the Nietzschean direction, the premise is that metaphysical difference governs reality, which answers the personal identity question immediately: we change, and always will because the nature of reality is such that there is no stability anywhere. Everything appearing to be fixed and solid is just that, an appearance covering over the chaotic reality of the origin of all being. So, the theoretical advantage of starting with the metaphysics of difference is that discontinuity in personal identity — and everywhere else — doesn't need to be explained in our existence because it is a feature of all existence. The problem here, though, is that the stance fails to answer a question: why do I feel like the same person today that I was yesterday? If difference really governs reality, then it seems

like I shouldn't have any lingering sense of myself at all.

Deleuze has an imperfect answer to this question, which involves his unique understanding of repetition. For our purposes, though, what's significant is only that it is possible to create a deep theoretical foundation for the proposal that the nature of existence itself yields disrupted lives. It creates identities as primed to break away from their own past just as rhizome plant stems occasionally and naturally break off from the older root to start a new, independent existence.

What does the theory look like in real human experience? The answers are not at all mysterious or abstract. The philosophy of personal identity as naturally disruptive happens, for example, every summer when people from diverse walks of life depart for backpacking or bicycling travel abroad, and intuitively discover something all travelers have in common: the jarring realization that they can create themselves as whomever they wish for encountered strangers. This is what Tan mean when she wrote about "identity as a process of multiplicity informed by multiple nodes and roots of different cultural encounters." A name, a culinary preference, a professional aspiration or romantic orientation, all those things may be redirected without any social penalty. Of course, the fact that no one is running background checks on their fellow night-train riders doesn't automatically convert everyone into vivid explorers of experiences they wouldn't engage were their friends watching, but, every season there are a few who cut away. Maybe they meet someone who engages with a different language, or an incompatible value hierarchy. Whatever the particulars, if becoming foreign is natural — an organic part of human being — then it may be that we are biologically or neurologically suited to outrun facial recognition technologies and accompanying data streams that constantly remind us of who we're supposed to be. It may be that we resonate with Deleuze's metaphysis of difference and nature of the rhizome. A maximum and well-chronicled example would be the late nineteenth century voyager Isabelle Eberhardt (1988) [7], but if you visit the travel section of the local bookstore, you'll likely find volumes written by people you've never heard of, all telling the same story about converting abroad into someone whose new personal data can't be resolved with the old (Colley, 2000).

Certainly it's true that traveling somewhere else and going native doesn't happen to everyone (Vassilieva, 2016). Still, a simple survey of the newspaper, or a Google search will reveal countless invitations to consider how personal shifts may disrupt the datasets of resolved identities. For example, there's the Wall Street shark who gave up suits and Adderall and started a surf camp (O'Hara, 2013). When that happened, the information previously drawn from his LinkedIn profile — his formal education, his career trajectory, online recommendation letters and similar — all that became misleading. It no longer reveals who the man is and aims to be, and so frustrates the ideal Zuckerberg proposed where accumulated data overlaps to create one integrated and visible self that lingers while contexts change. Along similar lines, there's the criminal who became a police officer (Osher, 2016), and the football player who converted into a priest (O'Neil, 2013). Every time one of these metamorphoses occurs, there's an opportunity to frame it in the terms of Deleuze and Tan's understanding of the rhizome. The collected information — the past — no longer applies, and the reason may be conceived as natural, a part of what it means to be human, just as the rhizome plant stem follows its own logic in breaking away from part of itself to form a new plant.

Language of personal identity as an ethics that refuses big data integrity

Another ethics suited to confront the unification of our various selves as enforced by big data reverses the conventional primacy of nouns over verbs in the conception of identity.

Starting with the convention, nouns as primary means there is someone who I am, and that determines what I do. So, since I am a person who once lived in Mexico, I may want to travel back and visit the country. Not only does that make sense, it also aligns with the standard big data business model: users are resolved as *who* they are, which allows algorithmic predictions about consumption behaviors, and subsequently financial profit. This is precisely why algorithms constantly serve banner ads for Mexico City flights onto the Web pages I browse.

But, identity can also go the other way. I *do*, and the person I am comes after, as an effect of what has been done. Following this logic, I'm the *kind* of person who lived in Mexico *because* I went there (Deleuze, 1990).

So, why did I go if I wasn't already predisposed, if Mexican traveler wasn't already in me as a substantive part of my being? It could be something exterior to how I defined myself, meaning the cause was only tangentially related to the destination. It may have been a bitterly cold day in a northern American city when a good deal on a one-way air ticket appeared in a travel agency window. Regardless, if that's the order — if it's the verb of what is done before the noun of who I am — then what it means to be me or you always comes after what we do. In the end, after the doing, we may embrace the trip as who we

are and be that person on the level of nouns. Or, the doing may be rejected, separated from who we are. Whether it's a place or a romance or some other isolated experience, it is segregated from how we identify ourselves in the future. The strategies of segregation are known well and practiced widely. Perhaps we gather everything associated with the episode and throw it in the trash; maybe we drink until we forget the whole thing.

The larger point is that whether we embrace the doing or reject it, the noun — our identity — is always just over the horizon: we're all interminably waiting to see who we're going to be. In a sense, we find out about ourselves just as others do, by watching and listening.

Examples of verb-privileging are common. No one drinks to excess because they're an alcoholic; they become an alcoholic because they've been drinking, excessively. Or, two people are not lovers in the noun sense, until after the verb sense. It's also apparent that some young adults have little sense of the career they'd like for themselves, and happen into a profession where they acquire the taste. Maybe a woman studies theoretical mathematics in college, but finds the work too abstract until stumbling into a job at Tableau where number avalanches get applied visually: by doing it, she learns that she's a mathematical engineer.

There's also an overlap here with the theory of decadence in the history of philosophy which reverses the conventional noun and verb privileging in terms of the relation between truth and thought (Brusseau, 2005). Conventionally, the reason we engage in philosophical thinking is to reach truth in some form. The verb *serves* the noun just as thought serves truth in the sense that the purpose of philosophical reasoning is the achievement of stable understandings. Verb privileging goes the other way: the reason we value a philosophical understanding is to incite more thought. The best truths, consequently, are not those describing the world accurately or enlighteningly, they're the ones most energetically fueling the next round of philosophizing. Conclusions are no longer terminations, they are stations. The reason we have them is to serve the drive onward toward others. Philosophy, in a sentence, is about *doing* thought, not *having* truth.

Polemically, we could assert that academic philosophers already subscribe to this view implicitly; the best books and journal articles are identified in the profession as those stimulating the most *subsequent* writing, the most energetic support and criticism. As for whether the original work is in fact right or wrong, that's a secondary consideration. They serve their purpose best when the pages of criticism, support, elaboration, and extension keep coming.

Moving the logic of decadence onto the ethical level of identity, the analogous claim is that the best conception of the self today is *not* the one capturing all the data points and then resolving who I am most accurately across the different aspects (professional, familial, romantic) of my life. Instead, it's the one most energetically sparking *new* data points, on the way to becoming someone else. Just as the reason philosophers have truths is to stimulate more thought, so too the reason we craft understandings of who we are is *so that* we may disintegrate. When personal ethics in the age of big data is underwritten by the privileging of verbs over nouns, then the virtuous person is the one most primed to become another.

Discussion and conclusion

No doubt it will be dreadful when children begin finding ways to access their parents' old Tinder pages, and it's petrifying to imagine how stilted life will become as we learn that every one of our distinct selves may be revealed to the wrong person at an inopportune moment. The problem today, however, is that these realities are no longer speculative, they're upon us. Many reading this article grew up in a time where they could re-start their careers and their lives more or less from zero, simply by moving to the next state or province. We are now on the cusp of nearly everyone we meet having access to nearly uninterrupted trails detailing what we've done and where we've been, no matter where we go. From that technological reality, the ethical dilemma is unavoidable. Embrace the vision of ourselves as integrated, as one person visible and identically known by everyone, or, investigate the potential for disintegration, for ways of living that refuse the unities of resolved identities.

This essay has opened space for the latter by sketching two views of identity ethics that could be developed to foment and support multiplicity. The view that identity is organically severable from the past is a naturalist approach. The view that we can understand ourselves as verbs yielding nouns instead of nouns determining verbs results from a linguistic approach. At bottom, both affirm that the big data drive to personal unity may be met by the imperative to understand disintegration as a virtue.

Future research

This essay's purpose was first to define an ethical dilemma about personal identity that is rising along with the pervasiveness of big data applications and, second, to indicate directions for ethically justifying compartmentalized, dis-integrated selves. Future research could develop these justifications by further exploring the naturalistic and linguistic ethics of multiple identity in big data reality.

Starting with the naturalistic approach, one direction for development joins the idea of a minor identity, which is a strategy for organic self-creation resembling Gilles Deleuze's notion of a minor literature (Brusseau, 2005). The key to Deleuze's idea is that self-creation is not radical in the sense of producing something completely unfamiliar and unknown that results from an exterior intervention. Instead, the process works naturally by recombining elements of customary experiences [8]. Already the strategies of the minor have been mapped in language (Kafka's writing in the German of Prague, the jargon of marginalized communities in the United States), and also in political theaters (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986), so the groundwork has been laid for a similar approach to identity in the time of big data.

A second direction for future research aligns with the linguistic turn in identity ethics by exploiting ironies within big data technology. The goal here is to locate aspects of digital reality that initially confine the self, but that may be converted into opportunities to become another. The guiding question is: Could the digital forces unifying our identities also carry within themselves opportunities for disintegration? Possibly. One example starts with the standard practice on media and social platforms of intentionally introducing anomalies to test how users respond to possibilities they wouldn't have otherwise been served (Netflix Technology Blog, 2016). So, Tinder may present a man who loves jazz to the woman whose ears still ring from last night's metal concert. It may be that this feature encourages identity disintegration by introducing unfamiliar interests and possibilities — new elements of identity — to users. On the other hand, it is inescapably true that the *reason* big data romantic matchmakers (one person matched to another by Tinder) and big data entertainment matchmakers (a person matched with a movie or music playlist by Netflix or Spotify) provide incongruent experiences is to *fortify congruency*. That is, the unexpected suggestions are not meant to provide opportunities for the users to escape their profile, so much as refine the platforms' ability to define the users still further, to hold them still tighter, and to predict matches still more accurately. Inexorably, the big data business model twists irregular experiences into identity resolution channels. Nevertheless, research could be undertaken to investigate the possibilities for users to exploit these opportunity windows in the name of escaping their own defining personal information.

Another irony of big data technology is that on some levels it has never been easier to get out of who we are, to disrupt our existences from the bottom up by connecting with unfamiliar tastes, urges, and directions. Take LinkedIn: only a generation ago the job search was limited to the advertisements found in local newspapers, trade publications, and the doors that could be physically knocked-on. Now, accessible openings feed to our screens at blinding speeds, from the furthest geographical reaches, and from cultures that may deeply redirect who we are. And for those who make a resonant appeal to the recruiter who's willing to take a chance, they can be gone the next day. For anyone who goes, the verb rules the noun in forming a professional identity because the lived experience becomes the person who lives. The research path may continue by asking how these extreme career shifts can be experienced without being co-opted by the identity resolution machines.

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Notes

1. Plato, *Parmenides*, 126a–128e.

2. Kirkpatrick, 2010, p. 199.

3. Van Dijck, 2013, pp. 199–215.

4. Van Dijck, 2013, p. 201.

5. Van Dijck, 2013, p. 204.

6. Schultermandl and Toplu, 2010, p. 113, ellipses suppressed.

7. Brusseau, 1998, pp. 181–195.

8. Renza, 1984, pp. 120–126.

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