

Alternate Universes:  
Probability, Marxism, and Feminist Utopias in Joanna Russ's *The Female Man*  
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“Any particular formal system has a provisional and ‘man-made’ quality about it. Such systems indeed have very valuable roles to play in mathematical discussions, but they can supply only a partial (or approximate) guide to truth”

-Roger Penrose, *The Emperor's New Mind*

“But think – only think! – what might have happened if the world had not so luckily slowed down, if there had been a really big war, for big wars are forcing houses of science, economics, politics; think what might have happened, what might not have happened.

-Joanna Russ, *The Female Man*

“Anyone who lives in two worlds . . . is bound to have a complicated life”

- Joanna Russ, *The Female Man*

From the beginning of Joanna Russ's *The Female Man*, the reader is put in a curious position as to how to approach Russ's text. First off, the paradoxical title signals a problem with categories: depending on how we see the meaning of the title, female man can either mean a feminized male, or a masculinized female, or possibly, both at once. The novel gets more complicated when we are confronted with the fact that the narrative takes place in an alternate version of the past, namely, in a history where the Great Depression has never ended, and where four female protagonists, each coming from an alternate universe, all meet through inter-dimensional time-travel. Russ's narrative embodies the characteristics of science fiction as explained by Marxist critic Fredric Jameson, who deems science fiction an ideological mode of awareness that offers us distorted or alternate versions of history *itself*, and thus makes us aware of our own lived historical circumstances and the ideological justifications for that history. Indeed, by its estrangement of familiar narrative *loci* such as stable gender categories (hence, Female

Man), historical time (by way of alternate, and utopian universes that are not concurrent with our experience of history), Russ's *The Female Man* works to suture our lived historical experiences with alternate versions of our universe in the past, present and future, and thus question the divisive ontological and epistemological categories by which we have defined mankind. In doing so, Russ's feminist narrative conjures up alternate histories whose sole purpose is to find new ways of social existence that seek to critique the idea that history is a teleological and rational progression, where the division of gender is an innately *natural* (as opposed to a *social*) consequence.

In *Female Man*, Russ suggests that the divisive and absolute categories upon which we have constructed our experience of the world are questioned by the findings of quantum physics, which posits that on a sub-atomic level our experiences of natural phenomena are influenced by our observations, and thus observer-dependent and relative. If, after Heisenberg and Schrödinger's discoveries in quantum physics, we are made aware that the involvement of our own human physiological response to natural phenomena explains why it is that one can see electrons as alternately, a wave or a particle, we uncover the fallacy underlying the bedrock of modern empirical science – namely, that for us to have stable definitions of our natural phenomena, we need to have absolute definitions first that are independent of the context we have assigned them. In this sense, the Heisenbergian uncertainty principle and Schrödinger's Cat Theorem have demonstrated that science *itself* is susceptible to the limits of human observation, which attempts to pass off scientific findings as truth, yet can make no absolute objective claim to truth if “reality” is contingent upon probabilistic phenomena that indicate “reality” in itself is a continuous probabilistic process.

Furthermore, as Michel Foucault has pointed out in *The Archeology of Knowledge*, science itself is imbued by an epistemic structure, which frames scientific knowledge in inherently ideological terms of facilitating progress, and thus, teleology:

There are the notions of development and evolution: they make it possible to group a succession of dispersed events, to link them to one and the same organizing principle, to subject them to the exemplary power of life (with its adaptations, its capacity for innovation, the incessant correlation of its different elements, its systems of assimilation and change), to discover, already at work in each beginning, *a principle of coherence and the outline of a future unity, to master time through a perpetually reversible relation between an origin and an end that are never given, but are always at work.* (“The Archeology of Knowledge 421-422; emphasis added)

Although science makes pretense to facilitate progress, and thus facilitates strong belief in progress as an empirical goal that justifies the idea that history is working towards an ultimate end, science itself cannot make the pretense of objectivity if it eschews the subjective nature through which knowledge is obtained. Thus, through the findings of probabilistic quantum mechanics, empirical science cannot claim scientific objectivity if its means are gained subjectively. Science thus becomes a procession of ideas that have become *de rigueur*, not more or less adaptable to the present, and cannot function as an absolute Platonic metaphysical basis upon which we can trust to base our systems of qualification and belief. This, in turn, has consequences for our epistemological and ontological beliefs in teleology and progress, revealing an underlying structure for these concepts.

As Herbert Marcuse explains in *One-Dimensional Man*, the uncertainty principle of quantum mechanics thus causes a crisis in our systems of knowledge, and, as a result, the belief in teleological progress through reason and rationality. According to Marcuse, in contrast with the earlier Greek epistemological belief in reason, which posits that “if

man has learned to see and know what really *is*, he will act in accordance with truth” which makes epistemology “ethics, and ethics . . . epistemology” (125), industrial civilization has made “logic [become] the logic of domination” (123) where capitalism as a system of belief emphasizes productivity and economical stability, and utilizes technology to structure our ideological systems of belief and our sense of “reality”. In this sense, capitalism appropriates “the [humanist] notion of the free independent individual – a notion ultimately based, of course, on the “free” wage contract between the producers and expropriators of surplus value” (Freedman 86) as a pre-text for introducing an oppressive ideological system that translates the social into economic terms of productivity and (economic) power, and thus manages to penetrate into the very fabric of our personal lives by our need for necessities. History and historical reality, as a result, can no longer be seen as a project that works toward an ultimate teleological end – the end of the humanist struggle for independence and self-realization – but rather as the project of the appropriation and refraction of ideology by the oligarchy: “If truth presupposes freedom from toil, and if this freedom is, in the social reality, the prerogative of a minority, then the reality allows such a truth only in approximation and for a privileged group” (Marcuse 129). History’s purpose is thus distorted in terms of economical progress, where “the societal division of labor obtains the dignity of an ontological condition” and economic means become a matter of social status and power (Marcuse 129). As a result, history and reality cannot be achieved unless science and rationality understand the subjective means by which these are gained. As Marcuse notes, “[Dialectical logic] attains its truth if it has freed itself from the deceptive objectivity which conceals the factors behind the facts – that is, if it understands its world as a

*historical* universe, in which the established facts are the work of the historical practice of man” where “Reason becomes historical Reason” (Marcuse 141). Reason and history thus become a mere justification of the refracted nature of existence within capitalist ideology, which explains ontological vocations in terms of productivity and financial means.

In Russ’s novel, we are therefore offered a parallel universe theory through a probabilistic and quantum mechanical point of view, which from the outset seeks to question the binary relationship that links a natural phenomenon to its intrinsic properties in a one-to-one theory of truth-correspondence:

Every choice begets at least two worlds of possibility, that is, one in which you do and one in which you don’t; *or very likely many more* [ . . . ] To carry this line of argument further, there must be an infinite number of possible universes (such is the fecundity of God) for there is no reason to imagine Nature as prejudiced in favor of human action. Every displacement of every molecule, every change in orbit of every electron, every quantum of light that strikes here and not there – each of these must somewhere have its alternative. It’s possible, too, that there is *no such thing as one clear line or strand of probability, and that we live on a sort of twisted braid, blurring from one to the other without even knowing it, as long as we keep within the limits of a set of variations that really make no difference to us.* (Russ 6-7; emphasis added)

Russ here refers to the “many worlds” theory of quantum mechanics, which holds that Schrödinger’s theorem indicates an observer’s inability to be sure of an outcome on a quantum mechanical level also creates the idea of alternate probable universes where, “the entire universe . . . splits in two (or more) at each “measurement” that [one] makes of the world. Such splitting occurs again and again – not merely because of “measurements” made by observers, but because of the macroscopic magnification of quantum events generally – so that these universe “branches” proliferate wildly” (Penrose 295-296). As a result, there would be no “*single* individual universe history . . . but the

totality of myriads upon myriads of “possible” universe-histories” (Penrose 432). This means that whenever we try and observe the workings of the universe on a quantum mechanical level, and we refer to it in terms of history (as a concrete entity), we are in fact referring to the consequences of our actions and observations *influencing* and *leading* that universe in a certain direction, effects which we then *a posteriori* notice and think of in terms of a grand scheme, or deity. The uncertainty principle, the theory that relativity and probability function on the most fundamental, subatomic level of nature and reality, thus underlines the inaccuracy of our conceptualization of history working towards a kind of Hegelian *Aufhebung* – a historical path in which reason and rationality will lead us to some ultimate end-point for humanity. In turn, this leads to the realization that the universe is open-ended and probabilistic rather than closed-ended and teleological.

Thus, following Russ’s allusion to this theory, is the introduction of one such possible universe and alternate course of history: *Whileaway*, a matriarchal civilization of the future in which a mysterious virus has erased all men, and where females procreate through ova merging. As becomes obvious, Russ’s usage of alternate histories functions to remind the reader that such histories should not be excluded from our current envisioning of the future, which thus serves to underline the point that history itself is full of liberating probabilistic possibilities which cannot be determined from the outset. As Russ’s novel explains, in *Whileaway*, the advancements of “probability mechanics” have made “looping into another continuum” – essentially time-travel – a possibility (14). Russ’s use of the *novum* of “probability mechanics” creates the possibility of envisioning a utopian universe that exists as an alternate possible strand of existence in our world:

Thus it is probable that Whileaway – a name for the Earth ten centuries from now, but not *our* Earth, if you follow me – will find itself not at all affected by this sortie into somebody else’s past. And vice versa, of course. The two might as well be independent worlds.

Whileaway, you may gather, is in the future.

But not *our* future. (Russ 7)

In fact, although Whileaway is a while away spatiotemporally and ideologically for us, *Female Man* reminds the reader that in a universe that is ruled by indeterminacy and probability, such futures are an inherent possibility, despite our reluctance to accept them. Whileaway, we are reminded, is “not *our* future” seeing as it is removed from any semblance of how our current cultural and ideological systems of belief allow us to imagine the future.

As Carl Freedman notes in “Science Fiction and Utopia: A Historico-Philosophical Overview”, the etymology of utopia has two different meanings: “*eutopia* or good place [and] . . . *outopia*, or no place” (84) and thus reveals how utopia becomes at once the expression of a concrete vision which yearns for something better (the “good place”), as well as the unrealized, ideal nature of this vision which cannot be located in the present or satisfied completely (“no place”). Inherent in a utopian vision is thus a function of social critique: precisely because utopias are removed from us, they manage to evoke how things of the present could be improved (or at least, done differently), and thus utopias inspire an ideological transcendence of our current ideological, socio-economical and political conditions. As a consequence, Freedman notes that utopias are an expression of our innermost collective longings that are not included in the current ideological system, where utopias function in seeing “the future [as] the object of *hope*, [where] our deepest and most radical longings – longings that can never be satisfied by

the fulfillment of any individual wish (for example for personal wealth)” are fulfilled by a radically different social vision that “[demands] a revolutionary configuration of the world as a totality” (Freedman 74). Similarly, in *Female Man* Russ uses the feminist utopian reality of Whileaway and its inhabitant, the time-traveler Janet, as well as the contrast between her and the rest of the female protagonists, to critique the Western, masculinist notions that divide gender in a political and social system of power.

Indeed, Donna Haraway’s quintessential “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” explains how the Cold War arms race (and the subsequent developments in science and technology) has created a Western, masculinist ideology that ties the idea of science, rationality, and progress to that of political power and dominance, which enforces “the tradition of racist, male-dominant capitalism; the tradition of progress; the tradition of the appropriation of nature as resource for the production of culture; the tradition of reproduction of the self from the reflections of the other” (697). In such a tradition, the faith in progress and technology serves to obscure the divisive binaries which perpetuate social inequity, a fact which Haraway is aware of in her essay’s thesis: “American socialists and feminists see deepened dualisms of mind and body, animal and machine, idealism and materialism in the social practices, symbolic formulations, and physical artifacts associated with “high technology” and scientific culture” (700). Specifically singling out Russ and a number of other science fiction authors such as Samuel Delaney and Octavia Butler, Haraway manages to describe a new cyborg myth in which the call for a “unified” self makes way for a liberatory exploration of the body politics of the cyborg, who explicitly resides within the ambiguity of liminal boundaries and thus the space of social politics. Thus,

Female Man, as a book and a concept, is Russ's proposition and exploration of a cyborg identity that does not revolve around the politics of duality, and thus does not perpetuate the Western epistemological and ontological "logic of domination" (Marcuse 123).

Instead, in *Female Man* Russ subverts the idea that technology will support the continuation of masculinist, "Western" civilization (i.e. the utilization of technology by the military-industrial complex to enforce the economical and political means of late-capitalism) by purposefully replacing such a vision with the pastoral and matriarchal reality of Whileaway, where technology plays only subservient role and in fact creates a social order that does not involve the construction of the politics of domination through technology. Thus, whereas technology is imagined to play a large part in our future, Russ contradicts this idea by setting Whileaway in an explicitly de-centered pastoral setting with hardly any mention of technology: "Whileaway doesn't have true cities . . .

Whileaway is so *pastoral* that at times one wonders whether the *ultimate sophistication may not take us all back to a kind of pre-Paleolithic dawn age*, a garden without any artifacts excepts for what we would call miracles" (Russ 14). In place of the Western *telos* of a largely technologized world, Russ locates Whileaway in a pastoral, decentered utopian world where technology plays an unobtrusive social role, and thus unsettles the ideological and political Western capitalist vision of an "always-already" determined future that we cannot escape. Thus, Russ uses the utopia of Whileaway to critique the ways in which technology is utilized by capitalism in terms of the subjugation of those existing with the nation-state, which manages to penetrate itself into the most private spheres of our personal life.

Using Andrew Feenberg's distinction in *Critical Theory of Technology* between "instrumental" technology – technologies that serve to enhance our abilities but manage to remain subservient in an instrumental sense – and "substantive" technology – technologies (such as the nuclear bomb) that affect our social and historical dialectics by profoundly altering the way we think and experience the world, Russ's narrative makes the point that in a probabilistic universe, such determined and teleological "Westernized" visions of the future (and hence, history as a concretized set of events leading up to that future) are ideological blockages that serve to reify our existence in the current political system. In *Whileaway*, substantive technology that could be effected in terms of political domination is therefore integrated as an instrument (the "induction helmet") that aids to create the de-centered social structure of *Whileawayan* civilization.

As we learn, in *Whileaway* technology cannot be seen in terms of the masculinist politics of domination by the nation-state, nor is it removed from nature, but rather it should be seen as an instrument subservient to ensure the organic nature of the familial unit: "farming on *Whileaway* is mainly caretaking and machine-tending; it is the emotional security of family life that provides the glamour" (89). Furthermore, in terms of family, it is no coincidence that Russ's vision of *Whileaway* includes no mention of men (having been wiped away by a mysterious virus) or the "nuclear" family, women having mastered the technology of in vitro fertilization by ova merging, and having eluded the divisive politics of gender and technology.

The consequences of Russ's use of a feminist utopia where substantive technology (such as the induction helmet, and ova merging) is not utilized in terms of power, thus serves to highlight our current socio-economic dependence upon masculinist

ideology which creates technologies for destructive and dominative purposes. The social consequences of technology are that in Whileaway “there’s no being *out too late . . . or up too early, or in the wrong part of town, or unescorted*. You cannot fall out of the kinship web and become sexual prey for strangers, for there is no prey and there are no strangers – the web is world-wide” (81). Russ’s matriarchal utopia thus explicitly negates the traditional divisive usage of gender in terms of sexual and sociopolitical domination, where ideological and physical boundaries demarcate the social property relations of a masculinist nation-state. Instead, Whileaway is a “web” in which no such social/economical or geopolitical boundaries exist that manage to create social inequity. Thus, when a Whileawayan woman decides to flee Whileaway, declaring her independence from Whileawayan civilization by leaving a note that states: “You [ . . . ] Do not exist” (55), she is allowed to do so. Thus, the narrator informs us Whileawayan police decide to follow her, but “not to return her for rehabilitation, imprisonment, or study” (55). To which the narrator ironically adds: “What is there to rehabilitate or study? We’d all do it if we could”(55). The narrator’s understanding of the woman’s desire to leave civilization, and the fact that this is a natural feeling of alienation from civilization, thus reminds us that we *do* live in such a civilization, where punitive measures are enforced in order to make sure that everyone functions “correctly” within its socio-ideological and geopolitical structures.

Thus it is that Russ offers us the characters of Jeannine, a librarian living in a patriarchal society in which the Great Depression has never ended, Janet, who lives in the (post-apocalyptic) pastoral, matriarchal civilization of Whileaway, Joanna, (presumably) the alter ego of the writer who lives in the seventies as a feminist, and Jael, living in a

world where the war of the sexes has created separate male and female civilizations. The contrast between these characters serves to underline the point that history is incongruous and contingent upon probability, where ideology merely serves to obscure the process of ideological socialization. That is, in *the Female Man* we are made to see the difference between Jeannine's need for a man to validate her in terms of a Freudian lack, the myth of heterosexual unity which hides the suppressed social and sexual position of women (women being "separate but equal" while "men make the decisions and women make the dinners" (67)) and the alternate ideological presuppositions that Janet's feminist utopia has produced in her.

As a result, in contrast to Jeannine, Janet has no such psychosexual ontological structuring, as Whileawayan life is structured around denying such myths of sexual and organic wholeness:

Whileawayan psychology locates the basis of Whileawayan character in the early indulgence, pleasure, and flowering which is drastically curtailed by the separation from the mothers. This (it says) gives Whileawayan life its characteristic independence, its dissatisfaction, its suspicion, and its tendency toward a rather irritable solipsism. (Russ 52)

Eschewing wholeness for dissatisfaction and disunity, Whileawayan civilization is thus not structured upon overcoming the lack that is felt and the ensuing dualisms of nature/reality, reason/nature, male/female; instead, Whileaway revels in the productive value inherent in the ontological disconnectedness that humans feel from the world:

"Whileawayan psychology again refers to the distrust of the mother and the reluctance to form a tie that will engage every level of emotion, all the person, all the time. And the necessity for artificial dissatisfactions" (53). Thus it is that an influential Whileawayan philosopher notes that "humanity is unnatural" (12) and is forever bound to universal

solipsism, a productive disconnectedness “without which . . . we would all become contented slobs, *nicht wahr?*” (Russ 52). Similarly, when Janet falls in love with Laura, she denies any Freudian explanation for this emotion: “there used to be an explanation by way of our defects, but common human defects can be used to explain anything, so what’s the use?” (Russ 75). Instances such as this make the reader aware of the psychosexual Freudian ontological structuring of the “myth of wholeness” which perpetuates socialized gender division, and makes it that Jeannine can only realize her social potential by waiting “For a man [and thus] *For a plan*” (114). Similarly, Joanna realizes the limited role that she is allotted in such a patriarchal civilization, in which a female is seen in refracted and complementary terms of the male ego: “We fight through the constant male refractoriness of our surroundings . . . Remember: I didn’t and don’t want to be a “feminine” version or a diluted version or a special version or a subsidiary version or an ancillary version . . . I want to be the heroes themselves” (206). In demonstrating how ideology refracts females’ social purpose and action in terms of a complementary sexual identity that denies any ultimate social and political agency, Russ thus makes the reader aware of such ideological and mythic structures that serve to debunk women’s social potential.

Moreover, the ideological division of gender for productive purposes is made obvious when Jeannine, who exists in an alternate universe around 1969, where government stores ration food and the Great Depression has never ended, has a conversation with Janet while they are on *Whileaway*. Confronted with a feminist pastoral utopia that promises to relieve her of her alienation from patriarchal civilization, Jeannine’s response reflects the ideological system of women’s suppression that she

exists in. Jeannine's anxiety of Whileaway's decentered structure indicates a strong awareness of how war technology is utilized to enforce centralized political and social power: "But suppose we brought a – a cannon or a bomb or something – suppose we fooled you and then seized the Government and threatened to blow everything up!" (91). In contrast, Janet's response is telling that no such ideology is applicable to Whileaway: "First of all, there is no government here in the sense that you mean. Second, there is no one place from which to control the entire activity of Whileaway, that is, the *economy*. . . . Introducing an entire army or an entire arsenal through the one point would take either a very advanced technology – which you have not got – or vast amounts of time" (Russ 91). Moreover, Janet underlines the fact that Jeannine's response is steeped in the ideology of post-World War I United States, where ideology penetrates the sphere of the personal: "You see, conflicts between states are not identical with conflicts between persons" (91). In passages like this, Russ demonstrates how deeply ideology manages to infuse us with the politics of differentiation for political and economical purposes.

Indeed, one of the fiercest characters in *The Female Man*, Jael, who exists in a war-torn civilization in which men and women battle for supremacy, remarks that Jeannine, Joanna and Janet are all a version of one and the same genetic woman:

Genetic patterns sometimes repeat themselves from possible present universe to possible present universe; this is also one of the elements that can vary between universes. There is repetition of genotypes in the far future too, sometimes. Here is Janet from the far future, but not my future or yours; here are the two of you from almost the same moment of time (but not as you see it!), both of those moments only a little behind mine; yet I won't happen in the world of either of you. We are less alike than identical twins, to be sure, but much more alike than strangers have any right to be. (161)

Thus it is that Joanna and Jeannine are already in the midst of the process of a gender war in which Jael functions on the frontlines, where Janet resides as its end product, in a

civilization ignorant of the foundations on which it was built, the total destruction of patriarchy and men in general that is effected by Jael. Jael also remarks that it is ideological circumstances that have shaped each and everyone into a separate and different version of the same woman:

If you discount the wombs that bore us, our pre-natal nourishment, and our deliveries (none of which differ essentially) we ought to have started out with the same autonomic nervous system, the same adrenals, the same hair and teeth and eyes, the same circulatory system, and the same innocence. We ought to think alike and feel alike and act alike, but of course we don't. So plastic is humankind! Do you remember the old story of the *Doppelgänger*? This is the double you recognize instantly, with whom you feel a mysterious kinship. An instant sympathy, that informs you at once that the other is really your very own self. The truth is that people don't recognize themselves except in mirrors, and sometimes not even then. Between our dress, and our opinions, and our habits, and our beliefs, and our values, and our mannerisms, and our manners, and our expressions, and our ages, and our experience, even I can hardly believe that I am looking at three other *myselfes*. (162; emphasis added)

Jael's expression of alienation from Jeannine, Joanna and Janet thus makes the point that each version of the same woman is largely dependent upon the ideological structuring of gender, where in the case of Jael, Jeannine and Joanna, the gendering of society exists for the purpose of social and economic subjugation of women by way of an ideology that provides women with only an outsider's view of reality by its denial of natural identity. The clashing identities of these widely differing women – Jeannine the traditional woman, Joanna the struggling feminist, Jael the radical soldier on the literal ideological battlegrounds of gender, and Janet the strange future ideal of a naturalized womanhood bereft of masculine domination – thus all serve their ideological purposes of demonstrating the different versions of the same woman that the alternate histories and resulting ideologies in which Russ's tale spins off into.

As a result, Russ's *The Female Man* critiques the ways in which Western epistemology has always emphasized the prelapsarian myth of organic unity, and utilized reason, technology and ideology in masculinist ways as a means for achieving this unity. In these alternate universes, the *Female Man* thus exists as a conflated example of women's forced integration in such patriarchal political and ideological systems (The *Female Man*), and also exists as a paradoxical claim that though females are included, the positions accorded to them are entirely within the sphere as defined by masculinist ideology: "Women only have feelings; men have *egos*" (Russ 66). Thus, in her essay "Femaleman©\_Meets\_Oncomouse™", Donna Haraway makes the point that Russ's novel works explicitly to deconstruct such masculinist versions of identity, nature, and reality: "The four Js are an oxymoron, an impossible chimera, a partially marked universal, a generic scandal. Profane at every level, they are a scandal to the Sacred Image of the Same" (76). Through the possibility of time-travel, and quantum mechanic's thesis of the "many worlds" theory – that of observer dependent, alternate, probabilistic universes - Russ's protagonists experience a reclaiming of their own version of reality, a reality untainted by oppressive patriarchal ideologies, where they, and the reader, experience the liberatory potential in the ideological "crime of creating one's own Reality, of "preferring oneself"" (208). Thus in the end, it is Jeannine's joyful exclamation of "goodbye to Normality, goodbye to Getting Married, goodbye to The Supernaturally Blessed Event, goodbye to being Some Body, goodbye to waiting for Him" (209) that inaugurates a declaration of independence by Russ's *Female man*, the rejection of the divisive epistemological and ontological binaries which prevented her in making "Real what was Unreal" and existing as a complete independent subject capable

of agency: “Goodbye Jeannine, goodbye, poor soul, poor girl, poor as-I-once-was. Goodbye. Goodbye. Remember: we will all be changed. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, we will all be free. I swear it on my own head. I swear it on my ten fingers. We will be *ourselves*” (208).

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