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Frogging It: A Poetic Analysis of Relationship Dissolution

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Frogging It: A poetic Analysis of Relationship Dissolution

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Abstract

Often, themes in work and life intertwine; the author recognized that a cadre of poems she had written during the past several years were about relationship dissolution. The poems concerned romantic and friendship dissolution and the aspects of identity creation and loss this entails. The author presents the poems and makes an explicit connection to interpersonal relationship dissolution literature through the technique of poetic analysis. This analysis serves as an exemplar for how poetry as performative writing offers a valuable addition to interpersonal communication research through the poeticizing of relational dissolution as an everyday relational challenge.

Keywords: poetry, poetic analysis, performative writing, relational dissolution

Encajando las Piezas: Un Análisis Poético de las Rupturas Emocionales

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Resumen

A menudo, la vida laboral y personal se entrelazan; la autora reconoció que una colección de poemas que había escrito durante los últimos años versa sobre rupturas emocionales. Los poemas tratan las desavenencias románticas o de amistad y de la creación y pérdida de identidad que éstas conllevan. La autora presenta los poemas y los vincula de manera explícita con la literatura de rupturas de relaciones a través de la técnica del análisis poético. Este análisis es un ejemplo de cómo la poesía, al ser un texto performativo, contribuye de manera valiosísima a la investigación de la comunicación interpersonal a través de la poetización de desencuentros como reto relacional cotidiano.

Palabras claves: poesía, análisis poético, escritura performativa, disolución relacional

Themes in work and life intertwine, often without conscious processing (Poulus, 2008). I recognized that a cadre of poems I had written and revised over the course of many years were of a relational theme--relationship dissolution, breaking up, calling it quits--only after sorting through them for a poetry editing workshop. These poems showed the breakdown of relationships through the erosion of intimacy in my life, those of my close friends, interview participants, and students. I had used life experiences to craft what some would label autoethnographic poetry because of the focus on the researcher's voice and the systematic study of cultural understanding of the self directly and indirectly connected to others (Chang, 2008; Faulkner, 2009a; Prendergast, 2009). The fact that these poems were about close relationships and their inherent challenges was not surprising to me given that I teach courses on and research about relationship processes. This is my lexicon. The poems I present here concern romantic and friendship dissolution and the aspects of identity creation and loss this entails. I wanted to juxtapose the need for stories about our relational endings with the theoretical literature, so I conducted a poetic analysis of the poems providing another lens with which to view relationship dissolution. I begin this paper with a rationale for poetic analysis and the use of poetry in interpersonal communication research and teaching, and then move on to discuss a model of relationship breakdowns to place the result of the poetic analysis, the poetry performance piece, *Frogging It*, into a theoretical context.

Poetic Inquiry as Interpersonal Research

Qualitative researchers use poetry throughout the research process: as a method of inquiry, as (re)presentation, as qualitative data and as a means of data analysis (e.g., Faulkner, 2009a; Faulkner, Calafell, & Grimes, 2009; Furman, Langer, Davis, Gallardo, & Kulkarni, 2007; Pelias, 2011). Through poetic analysis, a technique of using poems as data for qualitative analysis, I make an explicit connection between poetry and interpersonal relationship dissolution through the creation of a poetry performance of relationship break down. This analysis and subsequent

representation serve as an exemplar of how poetry offers interpersonal communication practitioners an explicit demonstration of individual's needs to poeticize their everyday relational challenges (Pelias, 2011). As Baxter (1982) noted, "the breaking up of a relationship is a phenomenon known to most and dreaded by all. It accounts for some of our most intense and painful social experiences" (p. 223). We need to tell the stories of our relationship breakdowns, and sometimes these stories take the form of poems (Duck, 2011; Kellas & Manusov, 2003).

Because poetry focuses on the minutiae of language use and form to not only present but also create an experience for the reader, it makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of personal relationships. Poetry matters because its powerful, the fact that it "serves up the substance of our lives, and becomes more than a mere articulation of experience-although that articulation alone is part of its usefulness. It allows us to see ourselves freshly and keenly. It makes the invisible world visible" (Parini, 2008, p. 181). The poet's focus on form is important for meaning making in poetry.

Form is the visible side of content. The way in which the content becomes manifest. Form: time turning into space and space turning into time simultaneously...We name one thing and then another. That's how time enters poetry. Space, on the other hand, comes into being through the attention we pay to each word. The more intense our attention, the more space, and there's a lot of space inside words. (Simic, 1990, p. 85)

Form and language are also intimately connected. Pelias (2011) eloquently stated that "Constituted in interaction, I am formed by the language that passes between me and others. And I make sense of my relationships by finding a language that provides some account of my personal observations and feelings" (p. 17). The language of poetry demonstrates how communication is relational, how we create identities, and how we feel our way through our relationships.

The use of poetry to examine relational loss can be categorized as performative writing because the personal experiences of the researcher are connected to the ethnographic project (Denzin, 1997), the writing takes shape through observation and field experience to bring the

audience the most interesting and complex moments of our lived experience (Pelias, 2005). Pollock (1998) described performative writing as evocative because it brings the reader in contact with other worlds. Using writing that is both performative and poetic allows me to represent the experience of relational loss in a “messy” format that speaks to representational issues of empowerment and disempowerment (Alcoff, 2003), the perspectives of all those effected by dissolving relationships. Denzin (1997) described narratives of the self as messy texts because they are multi-voiced and no one interpretation is privileged. “The poetic self is simply willing to put itself on the line and to take risks...predicated on a simple proposition: This writer’s personal experiences are worth sharing with others. Messy texts make the writer a part of the writing project” (p. 225). The writing vacillates between description and interpretation using voice as a means to write *for* those studied rather than *about* them. Poetry as an experience can create empathy in an audience by allowing them to see and feel what the writer does (Pelias, 2005).

Leslie Baxter and Dawn Braithwaite (2008) contend that interpersonal research and theory is biased toward post-positivist methods. They content analyzed published studies in two popular relational journals from 1990-2005 and discovered that 83.3% took a post-positivist stance, with 13.9% adopting an interpretive stance and 2.9% a critical perspective. This suggests to me that there exists room for poetry as/in relational research. Prendergast (2009) argued that the best poetic inquiry is that which concerns itself with affect as well as intellect and deals with topics grounded in the “affective experiential domain.” The use of relationship dissolution as a basis for autoethnographic poetry represents human thought in an affective context (McAdams, 1993). We create stories or narratives about our break-ups to provide the closure we, and those in our social networks, need (Kellas & Manusov, 2003). Therefore, the impulse to create poetry is the impulse toward narrative. McAdams (1993) believes that our narratives provide, at least in part, a window into our thoughts, behavior, and experiences. Narratives allow a way to examine identities, the communicative behavior that externalizes our thoughts about identity (Faulkner & Hecht, 2011), how we make sense of our cultural

and social worlds, and how we try and create coherence (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). In many instances, we narrate particular life experiences where there is a rift between a real and ideal self, between the self and society (Riessman, 1993). The end of a relationship, and the shifting of it into another form, entails a threat to your social and personal order (Duck, 2011). Our personal order contains our preferences, experiences, and identities (e.g., being part of a couple, being nice, discovering a partner's affair), and the social order references cultural context (e.g., being in a romantic relationship is often viewed as better than not being in a romantic relationship).

The goal of the poetic analysis that led to the creation of the performance piece here is "freedom for personal resonance," for audiences to experience the poetry as "evocative mediators" of painful relational experiences (Todres & Galvin, 2008, p. 571). Using performative writing, specifically poetry, to examine relational dissolution provides insight into underlying values of how to do relationships, and in this case, how communication plays a role before, during, and after they end (Pelias, 2011). If we think of the bevy of songs and poems that concern breaking up, we can see how this experience of ending relationships occupies our expressive imagination. Many poets assert that all good poetry addresses large issues- death, silence, absence, and loss- all reasons for why relationships end (see Faulkner, 2009b). The power of poetry to reconnect our selves to loss, conscious and unconscious hurts that manifest in our relational interactions, offers interpersonal scholars, educators, and those in relationships other ways of understanding. Pelias (2011) noted that he used poetry in a collection of essays about personal relations because, "I want the poetic to discover how meaning feels and how feeling means" (p. 12).

The Relationship Break Down Process

Steve Duck (2011) offered a pedagogical theoretical model of relationship breakdown that I prefer over other explanations, such as Knapp and Vangelisti's (2005) model of relational dissolution, because of the focus on communication in and as relational processes. This

model consists of five stages that focus on the relationship between cognition and communication during the dissolution process and includes the dyad's social networks and their communication. This focus on communication between the dyad and social network is a major strength of the model given the importance of the break-up story (Kellas & Manusov, 2003) and the idea that communication is relational; action is the basis of our relationships (Duck, 2011). Breaking up is not just the ending of a relationship, and the use of the term ending or dissolution may be a misnomer; relationships alter forms as partners disengage from the idea of being a couple (Baxter, 2010; Duck, 2011). Ex-partners still exist as a presence in future relationships because of material things such as children and mortgages to immaterial ideas of stories and preferences and assumptions about relationships. The knitting term frogging references a process of unraveling or ripping back knitting to fix a mistake or recycle a project; a frog says "rip it, rip it." This seems an apt metaphor for the breakdown of personal relationships and one that I employ to contextualize the dissolution process.

The dissolution process begins when there is communication breakdown and dissatisfaction with the relationship (Duck, 2011). The *intrapsychic processes* occur when individuals ruminate about the cost of the relationship and a partner's faults; feelings of resentment may be present. A person often considers alternatives to the current relationship (e.g., being with other people, not being in a relationship). *Dyadic processes* begin when individuals decide they would be justified in withdrawing from the relationship. Partners may discuss their unhappiness with one another, and those in one's social network may express disapproval (e.g., a belief that divorce is bad). Individuals may withdraw from social contact or decide starting a new relationship is best. Engaging with others in the social world may cause stress, which is part of the pain of breaking up. The next stage entails *social processes* of going public by seeking advice or support. Accounts of the relationship are subject to social scrutiny at this point. An individual attempts to have his or her personal order validated with public critique of the partner and by building alliances. *Grave dressing processes* occur when individuals transform the relationship history into a story that is plausible to others. An individual needs to present themselves to others

as a good person for new relationships. Finally, during the *resurrection processes* an individual recreates a sense of social value through the presentation of the self as a desirable relational partner with the story of “what I learned and how things will be different” (Duck, 2011, p. 190).

Method: Poetic Analysis

I used a four-step analytic process with autoethnographic poetry and interpersonal communication research literature about relational dissolution as data to create a poetry performance piece. First, I used 9 poems about relational dissolution I had written during the past ten years for a thematic analysis. Some of the poems were constructed using email exchanges, personal conversations, and journal entries constituting what I would label a found poem. Found poetry consists of words, phrases and whole passages from other sources and reframes them as poetry to create new meaning. All of the poems have been work shopped in various venues as a way to obtain feedback and pay close attention to issues of craft and aesthetics (Faulkner, 2007). I read and reread the poems, noting my impressions of the original poem and any characteristic words or phrases, to identify themes. Second, I then connected the themes to literature on relational dissolution. Third, I juxtaposed the poems and thematic analysis with Duck’s (2011) Breakdown Process Model. This is similar to a chapter in Ron Pelias’s (2011) book, *Leaning: A Poetics of Personal Relations*, in which he uses Knapp and Vangelisti’s phases of relational dissolution as scaffolding for a series of poems on breaking up. Fourth, I integrated the themes and poems into a performance poem titled “Frogging It.” The goal of the poem is to show how the individual in relationship is not a set of attributes, but rather is situated within relational structures as an activator. I present the performance poem with the embedded themes and literature now.

FROGGING IT

Frogging: to “rip it, rip it;” the unraveling of knitting mistakes.

In this breaking up dream

your right foot sticks in a flaming
suitcase, orange and red sparks
burn the base of our bed, rented
in some Victorian on University Hill.
I fall off a decrepit chair
mid-lecture, clutch your spitting
pet parrot who has always hated me,
notice charred clothes and consonants
transform into constant aches when magic
markers refuse to write on your skin
or dry erase boards made of hamster pelts.
You can't help me get unstuck,
even the coffee steamed in my cup
as I start the week can't take
the black soot smell away
make me grateful for your love notes
tucked away in my computer annex.

Duck's¹ Break-Down Process

“When your relationships turn bad,
they disturb your epistemic and personal order.”²

ravel—1580s, ‘to untangle, unwind,’ also ‘to become tangled or
confused,’ from Du[tch]. *ravelen* ‘to tangle, fray, unweave,’ from *rafel*
‘frayed thread.’

Ravel the relationship
between thought and talk
talk/thought/talk-
all that space filled with stories
knit together from your memories
of thought/talk/thought about fault
unravel your honesty into a new skein

rival the paparazzi of relational failure
start here
unhappy:
I can't stand it



I. Intrapsychic Phase

Subject: Resend

“The art of poetry is the abolition of doubt...We must somehow learn to be careless.” (Revell, 2007, p. 14)

What do you want? I don't do that. Do you see? You love me? How did we get on this train? How dare you make me feel. Am I being too clinical? Hot? Need I tell you about marriage and what doesn't work? He couldn't get into your pants with a pry bar. I get scared of waking up, realizing I hate this person in my house. What went wrong? I don't dwell on it. The problem is my own problem. How come she can't love me anymore? You can't take it back. It is too late. Why did you say that? Did god tell you to say that? J, K, V and I are part of you. You will go to his wedding. He will come to yours.

How can you be free to love if you are oppressed? He was always trying to change me into something. More palatable. But isn't connection where it is at? Can you ever relax? You need to hear how smart you are. Often. How do you take from someone else and not be a dope? How pretty you are. How can you integrate a life with someone and still be yourself? My old girlfriend used to take her diaphragm home on the weekend. Can you do this and still be strong? Am I being wrong when I say you can only rely on yourself? Who said you are inauthentic? Sometimes I am able to compensate. But this morning it stung. Should I fight for her? Does that sound like a hallmark card? It is my duty (per your instructions and phd) to tell you what I need. Am I bad? How do you take from someone else and not be a dope? What attracted me to you was getting nailed for saying something stupid in poetry class. A peanut butter cookie in my mouth.

Already I am sitting here shaking. Hold on it's you. Take a deep breath. Put your face right in it. What I wanted to say but couldn't. If you want me to go away you better stop. I wonder if you understand what I am saying? If you understand what you make me feel like? This is what is Real to me. I am spinning in a circle with my head bent over backwards. Why is she burning for me? The fan fails. Forget fears. I want to sink into you like the wake of a boat:

tough ashes shaking
juices sweat drown
tough
protect sentiment

Themes: needs, wants, assumptions about relationships, found poem

The decline of a relationship often begins with the realization that you are working more, putting more into it than a partner.³ Differing investments in terms of material and nonmaterial resources mean one person may be over-benefited and another may be under-benefited. Recognition of this often begins with intrapersonal dialogue. You feel angry. You deserve to feel this way. Another way to think of this is through the dialectic of autonomy and connection,⁴ the fact that partners may experience different needs for closeness and independence, thus they struggle to figure out what to do.

I'd be justified in withdrawing



II. Dyadic Phase

Subject: date/ Should I bring a 6 pack of bud?

From: pdruby

To: SF

8/16/01

09:07 AM

i have a cooler. don't dare
ask for tofu, my heart or hummus
at the snack stand.

watch me. feel that I want you.
want you like you are. what
does this have to do with sandra?

From: SFaulkner
To: pdruby
Subject: Re: bud?

The vile watered down
horse piss enigma
most people like, my
your tongue becomes numb
when you drink. I am bad.
I shamed my roommate out
of drinking BUD light,
so Don't call me girl.

From: pdruby
To: SF
Re: ooo

you are a dream girl, the phd lady?
the one that tells lesbian jokes-
firegirl - whiskey straight from the bottle.
yes i remember. tsk tsk tsk

bud isn't a beer like ferrari isn't a car,
it is a personal thing
with all the grease monkeys and votech fans.
it takes me to automotive places of comfort.

i like spam and pouilly-fuisse
buying into annhauser busch
chivas and key memories:
bring a 6 pack

To: pdruby
From: Dr. Faulkner
11:36 AM

I know symbols,
dislike bud as a reminder
that my latte will implode.

I work with clean hands,
hands that move
when my mind commands,
no automotive places of comfort.

My assignments: interview people about love,
not roses like impressionistic paintings
what reminds me to throw up.

Millicent's Opera Glasses

“We can’t lie and say we have somewhere to go tomorrow, so we’ll be here all night... We’re not leaving here until I finish this bottle of wine.”
–Eddie Vedder, Pearl Jam Concert, State College, PA, May, 3, 2003

I. Act One

I focus in on my altar, collect stares
from the college males as I use
the mother of pearl and brass
scroll-work opera glasses.
You complain about the seats
too far away from the stage
while they pretend not to watch me

watch them spit liquor off
our choir seats, wipe the wetness off
chins with torn cuffs like small kids.
Great grandmother Millie must
have used these glasses cum binoculars
between her own classical piano tours.
I dream she snuck in sherry or vermouth,
calculated modified stage dives off
upper box seats into a writhing unctuous crowd.

II. Act Two

I smile at the not so secret smoke
handed around. Security stops and scolds
the ones who just now found the art
of being bad. We exchange high fives
that just miss, hit me in the gut.
Millie's glasses passed hand to hand
like a flask, I wonder if she craved
the crowds and claps she surrendered
for the Scottish salesman and the wife-
tour through blue collar Philly,
gas refineries and electric poll climbing.
You play the petulant partner now
as I surrender our apartment
for my new job somewhere else,
without you.

III. Act Three

I lost my best friend last tour, wet
on a split garbage bag, cheap grass seats
suspended in some half-way zone,
Trenton or Philly? We sipped free beer
tabled for a good tip. "Your white friends
treat me like a fresh-air fund kid."
Ed flaunts green jeans, worked-out biceps,
all we feel is sex, and hear is sex,
when he rolls up his sleeves.

Sing with me he purrs; *teachers leave those kids alone,*
but kids, don't leave those politicians alone.
I'm the teacher who needs to lick the sweat
that pools like the Susquehanna in the hollow
of his throat; I grip the binoculars, drown
like a randy pirate who worships lust.

Themes: attraction, loss, difference, privilege, found email poem

Of course, people also end relationships suddenly because of a critical incident or traumatic event according to catastrophe theory. Say a partner cheats or you discover that you have different values or fundamental beliefs.⁵ Maybe you can't deal with cultural differences or perhaps even, someone dies.⁶ Catastrophe accounts for about 25% of our relational endings.⁷

A relationship may not gradually go through stages of decline or follow an ordered cultural script of progression from lack of communication, avoidance, assessing the situation, arguments, trying to work things out, to dating other people and breaking up.⁸ Though, many relational endings do follow ordered scripts. Sometimes, however, we are clueless and dense about signs of trouble until things are too late.⁹

I mean it



III. The Social Phase

Relational Therapy

My friend makes me imagine dating myself
so I know what my exes know:

I could fuck and not make
a relational statement. My network

of one would never require a plan,
no dates to mark on the calendar,

no need for talk
about talk or apologies.

The day we ended it I lit up
the secret pack of smokes

to feel young and angry. If I were my own
lover, I could remain silent about feelings

because I would know what I intended to say
would be. If I were my own lover, I could

ignore the sighs and gripes about young girls
whose tastes shift like smoke rings in the wind.

At the end, she took her bed from the basement
but not me, orange rust framed my hands,

but if I were my own lover, I would
breathe words in without tasting blood

I would make all the rules. I would
make all of the rules.

Themes: social networks, maturity and growth, misunderstanding

Duck's model of relationship dissolution focuses on the importance of social networks. We tell our break-up stories in these networks. Support from family, friends and peers influences relationship longevity.¹⁰ This seems to matter even more than larger cultural scripts. Some factors that contribute to breaking up include the amount of time spent with a partner, social network support, and whether the relationship was marginalized because of being interracial, same-sex, or partners having a large age gap.

It's now inevitable



IV. Grave-Dressing Phase

How to Write a Break-Up (#2)

Pretend you don't notice
the ink of her new tattoo or
the thud of his terry cloth shorts

as he drops them in front of you
on the floor of the new studio
you visit because you're friends now,

and friends undress in front of friends.

Take note of the names hurled
at you because you quit it, the jilter-
fake-lesbian-couscous-eater

little girl, ruined by feminism, fallen.
Spill your red wine on their white carpet
while making large gestures.

Always be the one to break it off:
leave him for her and then her for him,
be a non-discriminate leaver.

Sing the break-up story
with the malice of righteousness,
no more limping and wilted words-

you ended the tired thing
with your own words
because they wouldn't.

Forget the scars from sledding
accidents, the curve of ass
the taste of sweat like half-sour pickles

parts you traced with intimate fingers.

Rip up the fed-exed note
delivered to work in front of friends
declaring you better than a Pearl Jam song.

How to Write a Break-Up (#3)

She writes what she remembers.

Your like a tiny tumor, spontaneous growth
that inveigles her academic persona

makes her skip the prescreening of poor personality,
the cataloged essay of relational observations.

Instead she rides wedged into your crevice
without a helmet, eats fries sans ketchup,

you both smashed together
on the same side of the booth.

She writes of you, forgets the others-
a series of bad choices listed on paper.

She pretends the play worked, love
hung, rose uncontained by labels.

She misses still what she can't write;

how the fun became like the longest
and most boring February.

Themes: unilateral breakups, friendship, surprising revelations

Most decisions to breakup are unilateral, bilateral dissolution is rare, which explains some of the pain of breakups.¹¹ One partner may experience guilt for breaking up while the other partner wishes the relationship would continue. Everyone wants to smell good in the formulation of an account, though. Relational processes are similar for heterosexual couples and homosexual and lesbian couples; the biggest differences occur because of lack of social network support.¹² Transforming a romantic relationship into a friendship depends on how we broke up, whether we get something out of being friends, how we handle the transition, and again, whether our social network supports us.¹³

Time to get a new life



V. Resurrection Processes

How to Date Catholic Boys

Talk about premarital sex
like a summer baseball game
to attract the devout.
Paste lipstick kisses on
his stomach instead of Hail Marys.
Use confession to exorcise your
body out of his holy virgin thoughts.
Genuflect over cheap beer in bars
where men wear ties to play pool
and seduce women with alcohol and arguments,
rituals polished like communion cups.
Use left-over cell minutes to break it
off because you want to be the whore.
Memorize these rituals with practice.
Repeat. Order another beer
and touch his knee. Repeat.

RearViewMirror

-After RVM by Pearl Jam and with a line from Kim Addonizio

Once you airmailed me a jar of jam from the yard
where we had lived together when I believed

in the lilies blooming in the black vase,
once I saw those Pennsylvania blackberries, jarred

in a Madrid café when I was months married
to the man you anticipated I would screw

and who would not suffer for desperate love like us,
I imagined we had lasted, our faces flushed,

sweat like fear, sticking us to the seats in your blue van.
I saw things, saw things clearer when eating

dry toast, starved after sex in some other rented room.
How could you know I saw you in the rear view mirror?

Themes: guilt versus pleasure, differing values, patterned interaction,
intimacy fear

Having different values, attitudes, and beliefs than one's partner is one of the reasons that individuals report ending a relationship.¹⁴ Sexual incompatibility, including values, can cause relational partners to recognize they have incompatible love styles and conceptions of romantic relationships. When the relationship has been transformed into something other than a romantic one, we must provide an account about the relationship. We need to justify the self to others. A complete and sequential narrative of terminated relationships aids adjustment as does writing about it.¹⁵ A good reason to write some poetry.

Notes

- ¹ Duck, S. (2011). *Rethinking relationships*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- ² Duck, 2011, p. 187.
- ³ Goodfriend & Agnew, 2008.
- ⁴ Sahlstein & Dun, 2008.
- ⁵ Felmlee, Sprecher, & Bassin, 1990.
- ⁶ Baxter, 1984.
- ⁷ Rawlins, 2009.
- ⁸ Battaglia, Richard, Datteri & Lord, 1998.
- ⁹ Vaughn, 1986.
- ¹⁰ Lehmiller, & Agnew, 2007; Sprecher, & Felmlee, 1992.
- ¹¹ Tashiro, & Frazier, 2003.
- ¹² Gottman et al., 2003; Kurdek, 1991.
- ¹³ Busboom, Collins, Givertz, & Levin, 2002; Kellas, Bean, Cunningham, & Chen, 2008.
- ¹⁴ Baxter, 1986.
- ¹⁵ Kellas & Manusov, 2003; Lewandowski, 2009.

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