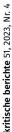
Disown this Heritage

On the night of 20 October 2014, unidentified persons spray-painted in red the slogan «DISOWN THIS HERITAGE» on the plinth of the Ian Hendrik Hofmeyr statue in Cape Town's central Church Square (fig. 1). Immediately, the Tokolos Stencil Collective – being in their own words «an anonymous group of stencil and graffiti artists, activists and other concerned citizens» – claimed full responsibility for this incidence on social media.1 On Tumblr the collective shared photos of the plinth and a short statement, defining the deed in combative tones as an «act of terrorism against the heritage of White Supremacy in South Africa» and demanding whites to renounce «their racist and bigoted heritage». With the «Aluta continua!» salutation the group coined their actions as a struggle for liberation from colonial suppression.²

The intervention on the Hofmeyr statue was a continuation of the collective's series of «creative protest» in public space that aimed to raise awareness for the prevailing (economic) injustices in South Africa's society.3 In hindsight, it appears as a pointer to the developments that unfolded from March 2015 onwards; after the #RhodesMustFall movement had successfully demanded that the statue representing British colonialist and mining magnate Cecil John Rhodes be dismantled from the University of Cape Town's campus, protesters soon addressed more targets across the country.⁴

These events evolving around statues, memorials, and monuments in South Africa during the mid-2010s highlight that such built structures are articulations of ideologies and values originating from a particular socio-political context. In Nicholas Mirzoeff's words they are «the infrastructure of whiteness» that «create[s] a lived reality experienced as segregation and division», working «best when de-noticed».5 Every alteration to them, however drastic they might be, epitomises how the values of those who opted for their erection do not necessarily remain valid for succeeding generations. Being embedded in a specific urbanscape (or landscape) that has developed over time, some public statues coexist in close proximity to memorials, monuments, and historical buildings with different ideological meanings. 6 To describe such multilayered and heterogenous formations of a city like Cape Town, the term «palimpsest», referring to the urban space as «a disparate city-text that is being rewritten while previous text is preserved, proves to be fruitful.8

By targeting the Hofmeyr statue Tokolos directed the attention to Cape Town's Church Square that exemplifies concisely how divergent ideologies as well as different commemoration politics have been at play in the past and now grapple for visibility in public space. Named after the city's foundation church, Groote Kerk (Great Church), the square is located at the intersection of Parliament Street and Spin





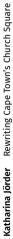
1 Anton van Wouw: Statue of Jan Hendrik Hofmeyr, unveiled in 1920, Church Square, Cape Town.

Street. In addition to the Hofmeyr statue, it is home to the *Memorial to the Enslaved*, the *Old Slave Tree Memorial*, and the Slave Lodge Museum whose back entrance lays diagonally across from the square. Considering the formative processes that shaped South Africa throughout the time, this article illuminates the different historical layers of Church Square as a commemorative ensemble, that has evolved since the 17th century through alterations and contestations, all contributing to rewriting the city-text right up to the present day.

Church Square as Commemorative Ensemble

Towering over Church Square, the Hofmeyr statue looks straight at Groote Kerk's façade that is characterised by neo-gothic windows and crowned by a triangular pediment (fig. 2). Located at the corner to Bureau Street and detached from the square by Parliament Street, the church building in its current form was dedicated in 1841 and is tightly bound to early white settlement at the Cape as well as racial segregation. In 1652, Jan van Riebeeck, commander of the Dutch East India Company, and his entourage landed at the Cape to establish a refreshment station for ships on their sea route to Asia. After the Dutch settlers had held religious services at various provisional locations, the foundations for a first cruciform church were laid in 1678 that where then replaced in 1700.9 Representing the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), which until 1780 remained the only religious body allowed by law in the Cape Colony, the building marked the city's religious centre for more than a hundred years to which People of Colour were not permitted. 10 Thus, being the white settler's foundation church, Groote Kerk was of high symbolic significance to this very community, and in the guise of sacral architecture it cements until today the Cape society's racist and colonial values in public space.

Across Bureau Street, the former Slave Lodge is equally anchored in South Africa's colonial past and, as an architectural marker, refers to the period of slavery





2 The Hofmeyr statue on the right and *Groote Kerk* in the background/Wilma Cruise and Gavin Younge: Memorial to the Enslaved, unveiled in 2009, Church Square, Cape Town.



3 Slave Lodge Museum, originally established in 1679, seen from Church Square, Cape Town.

(fig. 3). Different to other histories of slavery on the African continent, the white settlers, instead of selling enslaved people across the Atlantic, imported them from South-East Asia, Angola, Mozambique, and Madagascar and auctioned them at the Cape. 11 The Slave Lodge was established in 1679 to house the enslaved who were impelled to work for the Dutch East India Company. By 1770, the building that is said to have also served as a brothel and asylum accommodated around 1,000 people. 12 The British took control of the Cape from the Dutch in 1795 and again in 1806, before it eventually became a British colony in 1814. More than 60,000 persons of different ages and genders were brought to the Cape to be sold into chattel slavery until 1807, when the British banned the import of more enslaved people. 13 After the lodge dwellers were displaced in 1811, the building was transformed to house the Cape Supreme Court from 1815 to 1914 and the Legislative Council between 1827 and 1844.14 From a present perspective, the building's functional re-use as a site of law is a blatant mockery towards those people the white Cape society deprived of their human rights and speaks of this society's distorted and self-righteousness sense of justice.15

The prohibition of slavery at the Cape and its later abolishment in all British colonies from 1834, is often mentioned as one reason for the Boers' emigration from the Cape Colony to the South African hinterland during the 1830s. In the mythology of Afrikaner nationalism, the episodes of migration later became idealised as the Great Trek and a liberation from the yoke of British rule. Triggered by colonial conflicts between the British, who now controlled the Cape Colony and Natal, and the Boers, who led the independent republics Orange Free State and Transvaal, the South African War (1899–1902) deepened the rift between these two parties. The declaration of the Union of South Africa in 1910 marked a pivotal point in the conciliation between English- and Afrikaans-speaking whites. Yet, the matter of language became crucial in the process of balancing powers and the following decades saw the rise of Afrikaner nationalism that countered and contested the Union's predominant Anglophile character.

In this political atmosphere, the statue of Jan Hendrik Hofmeyr, a former Afrikaner Bond leader and parliamentarian, was unveiled on Church Square on 5 July 1920 (fig. 1). Erected by private subscription for Hofmeyr's efforts to give Dutch equal importance to English in the 1910 constitution, the sculpture was made by Anton van Wouw (1862–1945), whose works often served Afrikaners to express their nationalist sentiments. Larger than life, the bronze figure – wearing a tailcoat and holding a tophat behind his back – stands upright on a high vertical plinth where a plaque reads in Dutch: «JAN HENDRIK HOFMEYR [ONZE JAN] 4 JULIE 1845–16 OKTOBER 1909 IS HET ONS ERNST» (Jan Hendrik Hofmeyr [Our Jan] 4 July 1845–16 October 1909 we are serious about it). Programment of the status of

The Afrikanerisation that successively replaced English-speaking whites in key positions with Afrikaners reached the highest political ranks when the *Nasionale Party* (National Party) under Daniel François Malan, a former DRC minister, came into power in 1948.²⁰ Aiming to build a white nation state for the *volk* (people), the government from then on rapidly implemented apartheid legislation that would economically and spatially exclude people whom the regime did not categorise as white. Afrikaner nationalism reached its zenith during the first half of the 1960s when the country left the Commonwealth to become a fully independent republic, dissolving all ties with the British Empire.



4 Old Slave Tree Memorial, installed in 1953, Spin Street, Cape Town.

At Church Square, the commemoration of the white settler nation's history was dominating and co-opting the ensemble for the apartheid regime's agenda. In 1961, the country's Historical Monuments Commission declared the Hofmeyr statue a National Monument before Groote Kerk gained equal status in 1962.²¹ Considering the importance of language to Afrikaner nationalism and that the DRC served as the regime's official church, only distancing itself from apartheid in 1986, this is rather unsurprising. The values and ideologies attached to both the statue and the sacral edifice were now officially recognised to be of national significance, fostering the consolidation of white settler hegemony, while the contribution of the enslaved to building Cape Town, that after all was promoted as the nation's mother city, were silenced. When the former Slave Lodge was restored and established as the South African Cultural History Museum in 1966, it solely focused on white history, excluding the history of slavery.22

Despite this deliberate obscuring of the past, the city authorities installed the Old Slave Tree Memorial in 1953. The unimposing stone octagon is inscribed bilingually with the words: «ON THIS SPOT STOOD THE OLD SLAVE TREE | OP HIERDIE PLEK HET DIE OU SLAWEBOOM GESTAAN» (fig. 4). The sentence refers to an old fir tree that had been cut down to a stump by the Cape Town City Council in 1916. Soon after that, by private initiative of a shop owner who ran his business next to the tree's location at the corner to Church Square, a first plague was added to the site, declaring that enslaved people had been sold under this tree.²³ In 1951, this plaque and the remaining tree stump were removed due to the widening of Spin Street, entailing the demolishing of a number of buildings. This also explains the memorial's current remote location on a traffic island.²⁴ Today a blue panel added on to the octagon contextualises the memorial, admitting however, that it is uncertain if sales took place at this very location.25

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After the country's first democratic elections in 1994, that to many signalled the official end of apartheid, the emerging nation eagerly tried to detach itself from the colonial structures on which previous white nation-building projects had been based. To come to terms with the past, the country under the new African National Congress (ANC) leadership opted for reconciliation among South Africa's communities. While some voices in the ANC saw the history of slavery as part of Coloured history and therefore as a separatist issue in the project of promoting national unity, the new government could not fully ignore it since it was symptomatic of the racial subordination the ANC had fought. When the National Heritage Resources Act of 1999 explicitly attested exceptional importance to sites relating to the history of slavery, it integrated this chapter of history in the overall South African heritage.²⁶

In 1998, the South African Cultural History Museum was renamed the Slave Lodge Museum, but only in 2006, it opened the first permanent exhibition *Remembering Slavery* to the public, representing as Nicola Cloete criticises, slavery in the cocooned «narrative paradigm of a nation saved by human rights».²⁷ Yet, the museum's exterior is met with a prevailing «symbol blindness», leaving it untouched instead of pointing out the building as a central place of slavery.²⁸

The *Memorial to the Enslaved* that was unveiled on 24 September 2009 as the most recent addition to the commemorative ensemble of Church Square is the city's first official site to remember the enslaved and their descendants (fig. 2).²⁹ The request for competition submissions issued in 2008 had sought for a memorial «that would symbolize the indomitable spirit of the enslaved and the contributions that they made to the economic and cultural development of the city».³⁰ The winning design by artists Wilma Cruise (b. 1945) and Gavin Younge (b. 1947) consists of eleven blocks formed from dark granite of 80 square centimetres each, differing in height. Two blocks, which are placed on a plinth on Church Square's southwest corner closest to the former Slave Lodge, are engraved with the names of enslaved persons to remember their suffering (fig. 5). The nine other blocks are arranged in



5 Wilma Cruise and Gavin Younge: Memorial to the Enslaved, unveiled in 2009, Church Square, Cape Town.

a grid close to the Old Slave Tree Memorial. Their thematic inscriptions gathered from words of the slavery period form concentric circles around the tree memorial as the centre.31 Yet, none of the words engraved on the memorial plinths directly references the slavery period's violence and brutality.³² Moreover, the memorial has been disapproved for being impenetrable, not providing contextual information, and lacking an atmosphere that encourages contemplative engagement.³³ Such criticism, as Nigel Worden notes, «may reflect a desire for a more triumphalist memorialization of slavery» and is «indicative of increasing opposition to (official) state control over slave heritage in a city of deep racial and political division».³⁴

The memorial clearly emerged from the post-apartheid moment, when the history of slavery at the Cape was incorporated into the national narrative of reconciliation. Its abstract form stands in stark contrast to the figurative Hofmeyr statue which, as Younge notes, had to be left in place according to the competition's requirements.35 Thus, in close spatial proximity the memorialisation of a single white male Afrikaner personality clashes with the commemoration of thousands of enslaved people. This juxtaposition, as Cloete notes, epitomises the complicated relationships in heritage politics during the post-apartheid era when Afrikaner history could still dominate over the history of slavery in the public space, not lending appropriate expression to the latter's scale and impact.36

From Reconciliation to Revolution

Contesting the prevailing prominence of certain narratives, the Tokolos Stencil Collective's nightly deed of October 2014 highlights how the Church Square ensemble is anchored in different commemoration politics that are subject to re-evaluations. The Hofmeyr figure, similar to Mirzoeff's observation on US-American Confederate statues, «placed those designated (not white) on notice that white supremacy was always watching. For white-identified people, this infrastructural function remained invisible until it was directly challenged.»37 The Tokolos activists denounced the ideological values from which the Hofmeyr statue originated and disputed its right to exist in public space. Their plakking (Afrikaans for placing, writing and tagging, but in local vernacular also for «occupying space» or «scripting the city») on statues is based on the idea of a «legible city» that, according to Nomusa Makhubu, «make the invisible assertions of power readable» and «unearth a substratum of meaning and functions of places, objects and edifices in the geography of the city». 38

The notion of palimpsest not only applies to broader urbanscapes but also to single monuments once their official inscription is erased while their «originally intended meaning of such markers may still linger on».³⁹ Tokolos Stencil Collective did not erase the inscription on the Hofmeyr statue but their plakking literally overwrote the statue's plaque. When the tag on the plinth was removed, stains of red paint remained and the collective dryly commented «You can't clean away the revolution». 40

«DISOWN THIS HERITAGE» and other interventions on public statues and monuments during the mid-2010s demonstrated vociferously to the public that the post-apartheid moment with its narrative of unity and reconciliation has passed and that Cape Town's city-text urgently needs a revolutionary rewriting in order to achieve liberation from colonial structures. As such, the Hofmeyr statue became a palimpsest in the palimpsest of Church Square that itself is a palimpsest in the city of Cape Town to which further layers may be added - whether ephemeral or more permanent.

- 2 Tokolos Stencil Collective: Tokolos-stencils, Tumblr, 21.10.2014, https://tokolosstencils.tumblr.com/post/100582903604/tokolos-stencils-claims-full-responsibility-for, last accessed on 09.06.2023. The statement's closing salutation refers to FRELIMO's (Frente de Libertação de Moçambique, engl. Liberation Front of Mozambique) fight for freedom from Portuguese colonial rule during the Independence War (1964–1974).
- **3** For the labelling of the collective's practice as «creative protest» and more of their interventions see Nomusa Makhubu: Changing the City after Our Heart's Desire. Creative Protest in Cape Town, in: Journal of Postcolonial Writing, 53, 2017, No. 6, p. 686–699.
- Tokolos targeted the Rhodes statue already in May 2014, Ibid., p. 689. Going viral on social media the #RhodesMustFall demonstrations quickly developed into country-wide protests that soon broadened to include the #FeesMustFall demand, denouncing the prevailing structural racism, white privilege, and inequality in South Africa's educational system and in the general society. For a chronology of previous interventions and the events that unfolded around this specific statue in 2015/2016 see e.g. Brenda Schmahmann: The Fall of Rhodes. The Removal of a Sculpture from the University of Cape Town, in: Public Art Dialogue, 6, 2016, No. 1, p. 90–115. For an enumeration of defacements and vandalising acts since 1994 see e.g. Alude Mahali: In Whose Name? On Statues, Place and Pain in South Africa, in: Anitra Nettleton/Mathias Alubafi Fubah (eds.): Exchanging Symbols. Monuments and Memorials in Post-apartheid South Africa, 2020, p. 57-82, here p. 61-62. For a more international perspective see Nicholas Mirzoeff: White Sight. Visual Politics and Practices of Whiteness, Cambridge 2023.
- 5 Mirzoeff 2023 (as Note 4), p. 10–11.
- The distinction between memorial and monument is fluid and the terms are often used interchangeably. Both belong to the field of commemoration, with monuments often characterised by a certain size, longevity, and visibility. According to Nettleton, all monuments can function as memorials, but not all memorials are monuments. Anitra Nettleton: By Design, Survival and Recognition, in: Anitra Nettleton/Mathias Alubafi Fubah (eds.): Exchanging Symbols. Monuments and Memorials in Post-apartheid South Africa, 2020, p. 31-55, here p. 34-36; see also Sabine Marschall: Landscape of Memory. Commemorative Monuments, Memorials and Public Statuary in Post-apartheid South-Africa, Leiden 2010, p. 11-12. Throughout this text I will use the terms according to the official names.
- 7 Andreas Huyssen: Present Pasts. Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory, Stanford 2003, p. 81.

- **8** Samuel North: Remembering Slavery in Urban Cape Town. Emancipation or Continuity?, in: International Review of Social History, 65, 2020, No. S28, p. 197–223, here p. 197.
- **9** Désirée Picton-Seymour: Historical Buildings in South Africa, Cape Town 1989, p. 22.
- **10** David Chidester: Mapping the Sacred in the Mother City. Religion and Urban Space in Cape Town, South Africa, in: Journal for the Study of Religion, 13, 2000, No. 1/2, Sacred Space in Southern Africa, p. 5–41, here p. 24.
- 11 Gavin Younge: The Mirror and the Square Old Ideological Conflicts in Motion. Church Square Slavery Memorial, in: Kim Miller/Brenda Schmahmann (eds.): Public Art in South Africa. Bronze Warriors and Plastic Presidents, Bloomington 2017, p. 53–70, here p. 57; North 2020 (as Note 8), p. 198–200.
- **12** Younge 2017 (as Note 11), p. 59; North 2020 (as Note 8), p. 199; Nicholas Coetzer: Building Apartheid. On Architecture and Order in Imperial Cape Town, Farnham 2013, p. 90.
- 13 On 1 December 1834, the British implemented the act of abolishing slavery in their colonies. Yet, enslaved people in the Cape Colony had to serve another four years in a so-called (apprenticeship) period to compensate their owners for the costs of purchase and food they had spent on them. Nicola Cloete: Digestible Memories in South Africa's Recent Past. Processing the Slave Lodge Museum and the Memorial to the Enslaved, in: International Journal of Heritage Studies, 21, 2021, No. 12, p. 1230–1244, here p. 1230; North 2020 (as Note 8), p. 199; Younge 2017 (as Note 11), p. 53, 57.
- Seymour 1998 (as Note 9), p. 19; Younge 2017 (as Note 11), p. 59–60. Debates in the 1920s whether the Slave Lodge should be demolished to allow a better flow of traffic on Adderley Street were met by destroying the elliptical vestibule with double stairways leading to the upper floors.
- **15** See also Younge 2017 (as Note 11), p. 59–60.
- 16 With the term Boer (pl. Boers) I refer to farming descendants of Dutch settlers, who were later called *Voortrekkers* (pioneers). The former term is often used synonymously with the designation Afrikaners that refers to white people who self-identify as such and whose mother tongue is Afrikaans. Giliomee summarises the reasons for the Great Trek as «a lack of land, labor and security, coupled with a pervasisve sense of being marginalized» and explains the role the question of slavery played in this, Hermann Giliomee: The Afrikaners. Biography of a People. London 2011, p. 144–149.
- 17 Jacques Lange/Jeanne Van Eeden: Designing the South African Nation. From Nature to Culture, in: Kjetil Fallan/Grace Lees-Maffei (eds.): Designing Worlds. National Design in the Age of Globalization, Oxford 2016, p. 60–75, here p. 62, 64. Afrikaans is a creole language that has developed

in southern Africa since the 17th century. The Dutch spoken by the European settlers fused with the indigenous population's language as well as with the Malay and Portuguese the enslaved at the Cape spoke. The early years of the 20th century were a decisive period in the negotiation of the role of Afrikaans, Author Gustav Preller reflected on these developments in his series of articles Laat 'T Oons Toch Ernst Wezen (Let's take this matter seriously) published in 1905, arguing for the language's professionalisation by developing it from a predominantly spoken language into a language that was also used in books, newspapers, and education. In 1925, Afrikaans became recognised as an official language in the Union of South Africa. See e.g. Giliomee 2011 (as Note 16), p. 52-53; Isabel Hofmeyr: Building a Nation from Words. Afrikaans Language, Literature and Ethnic Identity, 1902-1924, in: Shula Marks/Stanley Trapido (eds.): The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism in Twentieth-Century South Africa, London 1992. p. 95-123, here p. 103-104.

- **18** The *Afrikaner Bond* was the first Afrikaner political organisation that came into being at the end of the 19th century. During the early 1880s JH Hofmeyr was the Bond's leader. The Afrikaner Bond is not to be mistaken for the Afrikaner Broederbond that was founded in 1918. Giliomee 2011 (as Note 16), p. 128, 400–401. On the sculpture see e.g. Alan Crump/Raymond van Niekerk: Public Sculptures and Reliefs. Cape Town, Cape Town 1988, p. 32; Younge 2017 (as Note 11), p. 62.
- 19 The addition «Is het ons ernst» assumedly refers to the speech Is 't ons ernst? (Are we serious about it?) that Hofmeyr gave in 1905, asking Hollands Afrikaners in the Cape how important it was to them that Dutch would be maintained as a language next to English. On the speech see Giliomee 2011 (as Note 16), p. 365.
- **20** Lange/van Eeden 2016 (as Note 17), p. 64–65.
- 21 Crump/van Niekerk 1988 (as Note 18), p. 32; South African History Online: Groote Kerk, Adderley Street, Cape Town, 14.07.2011, https:// www.sahistory.org.za/place/groote-kerk-adderleystreet-cape-town, last accessed on 09.06.2023.
- 22 North 2020 (as Note 8), p. 203, 209-210.
- **23** The memorialisation of the tree had started with the testimony of Joemat (also known as John), who claimed to have been sold under the tree. Jacqueline Lalou Meltzer: Slave Sales and Cape Town's Slave Tree Memorial, in: Bulletin of the National Library of South Africa, 73, 2019, No. 1, p. 17-36, here p. 28-29, 31.
- 24 Ibid., p. 18, 32-33. Why the city authorities agreed under apartheid to install the stone memorial in 1953 remains unclear at this point.
- 25 On sales of enslaved people in Church Square and on the question whether they took place

under a tree see Ibid., p. 21, 27. The memorial's unobtrusive and austere design, which does not reflect the cruelty and inhumanity of slavery, has provoked artistic interventions. In 2014, Nadya Glawe installed a temporary tree sculpture at the octagon to encourage people to engage with the history of slavery, Nadya Glawe: Email to the author, 07.02.2023.

- 26 Nigel Worden: The Changing Politics of Slave Heritage in the Western Cape, South Africa, in: Journal of African History, 50, 2009, p. 23-40, here p. 28-29; North 2020 (as Note 8), p. 207, 223. It is important to note that the term Coloured (pl. Coloureds) has been in use in South Africa since the 19th century to name a very diverse group of persons of mixed heritage who were neither designated White nor Black.
- Cloete 2021 (as Note 13), p. 1234. The second exhibition at the Slave Lodge is titled Slave Origins - Cultural Echoes. For a detailed description of the exhibitions and their development see Ibid.. p. 1235-1239. Since the year 2000, the Slave Lodge Museum forms part of the Iziko Museums of Cape
- 28 Younge 2017 (as Note 11), p. 59; see also Cloete 2021 (as Note 13), p. 1234.
- 29 South African Heritage Resources Agency: Annual Report for the Year Ended 31 March 2009, Pretoria 2009, p. 108.
- **30** Younge 2017 (as Note 11), p. 53–54.
- For this description of the Memorial to the Enslaved I rely on Ibid., p. 53-54, 62-66.
- 32 Cloete 2021 (as Note 13), p. 1240. By using «opaque» words, the artists hoped to elicit further research, Younge 2017 (as Note 11), p. 64.
- 33 Cloete 2021 (as Note 13), p. 1240; Worden 2009 (as Note 26), p. 39; City of Cape Town: Cape Town Public Art Catalogue, 2019, p. 127. The City of Cape Town had planned to add an interpretation panel to the memorial but it has not been installed yet, Gavin Younge: Email to the author, 08.06.2023.
- Worden 2009 (as Note 26), p. 39.
- The design by Younge and Cruise recalls Peter Eisenman's Berlin Holocaust Memorial, a reference Younge himself points out, Younge 2017 (as Note 11), p. 61-62.
- Cloete 2021 (as Note 13), p. 1239.
- 37 Mirzoeff 2023 (as Note 4), p. 221.
- Makhubu 2017 (as Note 3), p. 686-688, 693.
- Marschall 2010 (as Note 6), p. 3.
- Tokolos Stencil Collective: Tokolos-stencils, Tumblr, 23.10.2014, https://tokolosstencils. tumblr.com/post/100698515574/before-and-afterphotographs-of-our-campaign-to, last accessed on 09.06.2023; Makhubu 2017 (as Note 3), p. 690.

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