

## From the Appennines to the Bush: «Temporary» Migrants from Tuscany and the Western Australia's «Italophobia», 1921-1939

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*The eyes of others are the mirrors  
In which we learn our identities  
(Hegel)*

### Introduction

The present paper has a few aims. First, it focuses on the experiences and the spatial distribution of migrants from the Apennines mountain communities of northern Tuscany (Italy) to Western Australia during the inter-war period, in order to verify how they either tended to cluster in a few areas or not. Secondly, the study aims to verify whether such migrants followed work patterns related to their original skills or they adjusted to the Western Australian job availability regardless their skills. Thirdly, it will investigate the place of Tuscan migrants within the host community and their relationship with the Anglo-Australian environment, with particular consideration for the Western Australian mining areas of the 1930s and the related local labour force.

Within migration research, many studies focus on mobile groups and individuals and their relationships to the host economy. Research has conceived of the migrant as labourer, as an object of economic modernization (Lowry, 1966; Zelinsky, 1971) or as a victim of transformations in a local economy (Shreshtha, 1988). Labour migrants move in response to economic signals, often disenfranchising as farmers to migrate in search of a livelihood in the urban and/or industrial «cash economy» (Burawoy, 1976; Shreshtha, 1988).

Due to the discovery of gold in the Western Australian goldfields, from the turn of the century, Western Australia became the main destination for the relatively small Italian migration in the country. While in 1891 only 36 Italians were officially listed as living in W.A., in 1921 there were still not more than 2,000 (Borrie, 1954). Such low figures are explainable with the enormous distance between Italy and Australia, which required double the amount of time necessary to reach the United States and the Latin American destinations that were more common for the Italian migratory flow. Hence the pioneering aspect of this early stage of Italian migration in Australia. In 1921, United States immigration policy became stricter, establishing quota systems, which limited the total intake of Italian immigrants. As a consequence, Australia became a more acceptable destination for Italian migrants who were no longer allowed to enter the United States (MacDonald, 1970: 251).

The period covered by the paper is from 1921 to 1939, from the first immigration entry

restrictions in the United States to the outbreak of WWII. It represents the «intermediate» period of the Italian migratory flow to Australia, between the pioneering stage (1860-1921) and the planned mass migration (after WWI to the mid-1960s) of Italians to Australia. Such migration was based on informal networks established by the «pioneers» of the earlier period (Gentili, 1983), and it is fundamental to understand the mass settlement of Italians in Australia after WWII.

The present research has involved the gathering of information from the Australian Archives of WA, which hold a large amount of documents related to migration, such as the files concerning most naturalisations of foreign residents (from 1900 to the mid-1960s). It has been possible to collect information on about 300 people of Tuscan origin who arrived in Western Australia between 1921 and 1939. Records – which provide details such as date and place of birth, occupation in Italy, date of entry in Australia, occupation and place of residence in WA – have been data based in order to elaborate migratory patterns, occupational status and mobility. In addition, a sample of first generation migrants who arrived from the late 1920s to the mid-1930s from the circumscribed area of our study has been selected in order to solicit informal interviews; the consultation with informants as a source of primary data has been in fact considered indispensable in order to confirm and fulfill some of the research aims (Sturino, 1990).

### **From Tuscany to Western Australia**

The geographic setting of the migratory flow of this study originated within the most remote Central Italian Apennines communities of Tuscany at the beginning of the nineteenth century and continued in Western Australia, as a century-long dynamic search for bread. Agricultural resources in the Tuscan communities of origin were never entirely sufficient to support the population; the soil was poor, and agricultural holdings were extremely fragmented (Rombai, 1988). The first type of Italian migration flow developed in the mountain communities, both in the Alps – which form an arc that borders the country – and in the northern Apennines ridges, which cross the whole peninsula as a backbone. Some people migrated in winter – when agricultural work was slow – to France and also England (Briganti, 1993), and returned to village communities in summer to work their own fields. Since the 1860s, such migrants began to cross the Atlantic Ocean to reach South America to work mainly as farmhands. They used to work in a number of countries on several continents with intermittent trips home. Temporary migration was seen as a necessary sacrifice to ensure the survival of the family and the ownership of the small agricultural properties in the country of origin. They never considered emigration as an aspect of separation from the community but as an event improving the survival of the community (Dadà, 1994).

As stated earlier, the American entry restrictions began to produce effects in the mid-1920s. Italians found that, until the Australian entry restrictions of 1928, it was not difficult to enter the country: there were no visa requirements and, with a sponsor, one could land free of charge (O'Connor, 1996: 3). Such an easy way that, between August 1926 and June 1927, 2,356 Italians were registered arriving in Western Australia (Bosworth, 1993: 72). Many among them were Tuscans. Due to the distance of Australia from Italy, they had to be

willing to make a break with their relatives and community friends. Although the reasons for Tuscan migrants to move to Western Australia in the inter-war period were various (Price, 1963: 125), nevertheless migrants wanted to raise themselves to the level of welfare which they had perceived possible through the first Italian migrants pioneering to Australia at the turn of the century.

From the results of the data analysis related to the migrants from the Tuscan areas in Western Australia, after 1924 there is a steady increase which reaches its peak in 1927, then a marked decrease during the period 1930-33, due to economic and international factors, and a rise again in the number of migrants between 1937 and 1939. Analysing the figures by gender, it is shown that migrants in the 1920s were mainly men. As a confirmation to the reliability of our records, such figures are reflected also in the total intake of Italian migrants taken by Australian scholars (Price, 1963: 111; Macdonald, 1970). In the latter years of the 1930s, instead, the major component is represented by women and minors (Boncompagni, 1998: 398), due to the tendency of Italian and Tuscan males to bring their wives and partners out several years after their arrival, and in particular after the depression years following 1930 (Borrie, 1954: 53). While settlements and work patterns of Tuscan migrants are variable until the mid-1930s, due to the prevalence of male workers in a continuous search for jobs, with the arrival of women and children, the community took on more permanent characteristics (Price, 1963: 113). As a necessary step, the increase in naturalizations during the late 1930s can be considered as an incentive to become socially and culturally assimilated.

Tuscan migrants performed various jobs according to their areas of destination. They were mainly farmers or labourers, thus following the work pattern of Italians from other areas of origin who were present in Australia (Cresciani, 1983: 312 and O'Connor, 1996: 115). In the late 1920s and 1930s, the foci of Tuscan settlements in Western Australia were the urban areas of Perth, the south-western rural corner of the state and the mining towns of the goldfields.

### **Tuscans in the city of Perth**

Tuscan migrants in Perth metropolitan tended to concentrate in the same northern inner-city suburbs, where Italians of other regions had moved during the same years. In addition, there was a fairly higher concentration of Tuscans in the Perth suburbs of Osborne Park and Wanneroo, as others have confirmed (Pascoe & Bertola, 1985: 31), and on the nearby hills of Karragullen (east of the city of Perth). In the late 1920s and 1930s, these locations represented the suburban areas where most of the market gardening properties for the urban supply of fresh fruit and vegetables were located. If we look at their work patterns, we notice that the highest proportion in the range of activities Tuscans performed is represented, even in the urban/suburban areas, by peasants and farmers, followed by labourers, category that included factory workers and bricklayers (*Table 1*). «When some agricultural blocks, that have been subdivided for the Empire land Settlement Scheme at Balcatta (suburb next to Osborne Park) and Wanneroo, were vacated by their first British migrants occupiers, they were made available to other settlers. This was an exceptional opportunity that several Italian and Yugoslav migrants could not miss.»(Gentilli, 1983: 88).

Table 1. *Professional distribution of Migrants from Tuscany in Western Australia* (Perth, rural W.A. and mining areas), 1921-1939 (original Source calculated by the Author)

	Perth Metro	Rural W A	Mining
Farmers (incl. Woodcutters)	58	29	2
Labourers (incl. Bricklayers)	30	23	1
Craftsmen	4	0	2
Other Services (incl. Cooks, Waiters. Etc.)	6	0	2
Miners	13	8	29
Entrepreneurs	14	2	2
Traders (incl. Restauranters)	10	1	1
Professionals	1	0	0
Housewives	49	8	9
	185	71	48

Beyond the presence of a notable number of housewives, there was also a marked percentage of entrepreneurs and traders. These latter activities were not present at all in the qualifications that Tuscan migrants had brought with them from their communities (Table 2). Many of them relocated in an urban environment and started an independent activity, often linked to services for the local Italian community (fruit and deli shops, restaurants, boarding houses).

Table 2. *Professional distribution of Migrants from Tuscany in Western Australia, 1921-1939* (original source calculated by the Author).

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Traders (incl. Restauranters)	3	11
Clerks	1	1
Professionals	1	2
Housewives	37	54
Minors/Students	24	0
	288	288

The reason for the gravitation of migrants from the Tuscan mountain communities into a restricted range of activities in Australia is linked to the traditional peasant desire – as the professional background of a large majority of them was peasantry – for independence. Many could count on a small amount of capital accumulated with a few years of making long hours in heavy manual labour, such as in the woodcutting and mining industry in remote areas of Western Australia. The preference was therefore given to new activities which could be run in urban and suburban areas (Boncompagni, 1998: 401), partly explaining the slow process of Perth-bound migrants which took place in the mid-1930s. For this sense of security, market gardening and small family-run businesses were ideally suited.

Some reasons lay also in the nature of these urban economic activities, which made unnecessary for the majority of them to ever participate in the Australian environment, for they followed occupations that generally did not bring them into competition with organized labour (Price, 1963), unlike what happened in the mining areas that will be detailed more extensively further in this paper.

For many immigrants, the choice of occupational location was not a matter of great moment: they simply came to join a friend or a relative in Australia and followed the example of who had preceded them in taking a job (Price, 1963: 143). This involved a possible preliminary period as relatively unskilled labourers as farm-hands, fruit-pickers and cleaners. No matter where they settled after their arrival (urban, rural or remote areas of Western Australia), a consistent number remained in the industries where they had initially moved, advancing from unskilled to skilled workers, such as farmers, builders, timber contractors and miners.

### **Tuscans in the rural areas of Western Australia**

Tuscan migrants in rural districts of Western Australia were concentrated where the environment was favourable to the limited range of occupations they tended to follow, such as farming and timber-cutting. The farming belt and the wood-cutting district tend to be concentrated in the south west of the State. Migrants from Tuscany were therefore concentrated in notable numbers in the rural districts of Harvey and Manjimup (farming and wood-cutting). As others have stressed with respect to the settlement of Italians in general in

Western Australia during the inter-war period (Packer, 1947: 72 and Gillgren, 1997: 74), Tuscans also moved into the south-west timber industry, although it seems undoubted that these immigrants played a quite valuable economic role in providing timber and wood for the mines.

Tuscans classified as farmers in the rural districts were prevalent, but such category included also woodcutters (*Table 1*). In addition, there is a consistent number of labourers, category under which there could have been grouped also general workers employed in the wood-lines serving the mining towns. This is to say that the figures of activities performed by Tuscans in the rural areas could be slightly doubtful and possibly hide a relevant number of workers who were employed within the mining industry.

Conversely, the absence of Italian migrants engaged in sheep and beef-cattle grazing requires an explanation. By the time they began to enter Australia in any numbers, most of the good pastoral land was already occupied (Price, 1963: 147) and grazing properties required much capital to buy and maintain. Italians and also Tuscans – who had also been shepherds and grazers in the Apennines communities – realized that they were unlikely to either obtain their own properties or to gain quickly the money that they could instead get through working long hours in heavy manual activities such as woodcutting and mining. In addition, station life, with its long periods of loneliness, was a far cry from the conditions from which most of them derived.

Market gardening, but also any labouring activity in an urban or semi-rural environment, made possible a way of life much akin to the sort of settlement they had grown up. Doubtless, even the spatial concentration of Tuscan farmers shows that they tended to cluster by community of origin. Their concentration in rural towns confirms that they came from a very limited range of mountain communities. Although such communities of origin were about thirty, *Table 3* shows how in just two rural areas (Pickering Brooks, in the outskirts of Perth, and Kulin) only two were the villages of origin (Coreglia and Giuncugnano) of the farmers.

Table 3. *Spatial concentration of Farmers (>2 per Town per single Community of origin) in rural Western Australia*

	Karragullen	Osborne Park/N. Perth	Upper Swan	Wanneroo	Balcatta	Tot.
Bagni Lucca	5					5
Capannori	5	11		2	2	20
Casola Lunigiana			5			5

If it can be inferred that Tuscan and Italian migrants in general liked a more active community and social life, as that in the area of origin, as a consequence it could be assumed that they did not like any activity in the mining towns of the remote inland Western Australia. On the contrary, figures show that the presence of Italian, and in particular Tuscan migrants, was notable in the goldfields in the 1920s and 1930s, especially in proportion to the limited extension of the mining towns and the fact that more than 60 per cent of them were directly

involved in mining activity (*Table 1*).

As stressed above, this explains the search of migrants for immediate economic reward. It was not the quality (or, in many cases, the safety) of the activity to be taken into consideration, but rather the potential to make money quicker than in any other activity available in Australia during the inter-war period. It is vital to understand this concept in order to frame the attitude of «temporary» migration of Tuscan workers (although prolonged for an average of five-eight years !), and outline their search for bread abroad as a resource to accumulate, in the shortest possible time, enough money to return home and settle there with more financial comfort than before departure.

This explains the relatively young age of migrants, the huge majority of non-married males, their clustering among friends belonging to the same community of origin, as well as their adaptability to accept any jobs offered regardless to their skills.

As from the data analysis, the average age of Tuscan migrants at their arrival in Australia and employed as miners was 24 (against 26 for those employed as farmers and as labourers). Such figures contrast with the information gathered through a few selected interviews (7) to first-generation Tuscan migrants who arrived in Western Australia between 1927 and 1938, where their striking average age of arrival of only 17, with no regard to their profession, being as various as farming, labouring or mining. The relatively younger age was certainly in relation to the type of occupation involved in the mines, which required stronger and more resistant persons than in farming or factory activity.

### Tuscans in the mining areas of Western Australia

It is recorded a marked concentration of Tuscan migrants in Cue, Leonora, Kalgoorlie and Wiluna, which all had a large percentage of foreign workers who were either singles or whose wives and children lived back elsewhere (Longton, 1997: 128). In fact, if we look at the sex ratio amongst Tuscans in mining areas and we compare it to that of Italian migrants in general in the same areas (as from Pascoe & Bertola, 1985: 30), we can observe a similar ratio for the four towns (*Table 4*).

Table 4. *Sex Ratio amongst Tuscan (calculation by the Author) and Italian Migrants in some mining areas of Western Australia, 1921-1939*

	Tuscan Men	Tuscan Women	Italian Men	Italian Women
Cue	2	1	22	8
Leonora(incl.Gwalia)	6	3	169	24
Kalgoorlie	3	1	61	14
Wiluna	15	3	220	29

Source: Pascoe & Bertola, 1985.

Hence, the reliability of the records collected on Tuscan migrants and the confirmation of a population of the goldfields with a large majority of male workers. Their presence, although prolonged for several years, was always temporary and aimed to accumulate quick earnings to

re-invest in either the community of origin or in other geographical and often urban areas of Australia. As suggested by Gentili, they undertook the long journey from the mountain communities of Central Italy to the harsher outback of the mining towns because they did not want to expose the wife (if married) and any children to the hardship and uncertainties they expected to meet (Gentili, 1983: 77).

In addition, *Table 5* shows how the mining activity performed by Tuscans in the goldfields did not have any similar precedent in Italy. All the migrants employed as miners were mainly farmers and labourers. Unlike what happened with those who worked in farming in Western Australia, whose professional background was for the large majority farming, Tuscan miners had a totally different professional background.

Table 5. *Italian Previous Profession of Migrants from Tuscany in Western Australia, 1921-1939* (original source calculated by the Author)

Activity in Italy	Activities in Western Australia							
	Farmers	Labourers	Craftsmen	Miners	Traders.	Housewives	OtherAct.	Tot.
Farmers	75	33	3	38	13	5	6	173
Labourers	7	8		5	3	1	3	27
Craftsmen	4	2	3	4	1	2	1	17
Miners	1	2			2			5
Traders/Entrepr.					2		1	3
Housewives	1				3	33		37
Students/Minors	2	3	1	1	5	13	1	26
Other Activities		1					1	2
	90	49	7	48	29	54	13	290

Such figures confirm both that they chose woodcutting or mining as a way to facilitate fast accumulation of money and also as a «temporary» working situation in view of future investment of small capital in professional areas which were undoubtedly more congenial to them. A choice which was also compatible to that of the state government, willing to locate southern Europeans in areas other than urban in order to both better control them socially and enhance the economy in areas where the Anglo-Australian community was not extremely keen to go. «The mines or the Bush» became the catch-cry of immigrant Italians in the inter-war period (Pascoe & Bertola, 1985: 13).

In the latter years of the 1930s, the major component of arrivals in Australia from the studied area is represented by women and children (Price, 1963). The change in the migratory pattern was probably due to external factors, such as the growing political instability of Fascism in Italy and the stricter entry conditions adopted by the Australian immigration authorities (Macdonald, 1970: 272). This deteriorating situation pushed many Tuscan migrants to decide to sponsor their families in order to be reached in Australia and, if possible, to obtain naturalization. In any case, males would tend to defer naturalization until they had finally



established their homes in Australia (Borrie, 1954: 123). With the coming of the families, the group took on more permanent characteristics as the Italian one in general, becoming the stepping stone of Italian post-war mass migration.

These latter changes took place only in the late 1930s, whereas the paper aims to focus also on the place of Tuscan miners within the hosting mining community and their relationship with the Anglo-Australian environment.

Italians had begun to arrive in number in the Western Australian goldfields at the turn of the century, when the gold mining industry was passing into a period of consolidation and rationalisation. In order to make new large capital investments, gold companies sought to cut labour costs and to increase productivity. Italian migrants, in desperate search for highly paid labour within their pattern of «temporary» employment, were perfectly suitable for such new gold-mines» labour trend. The main assets that this class of immigrants brought to Western Australia were all labour related: more than specific skills, they had the willingness to work harder and for lower wages than the local working class, and the flexibility to accommodate fluctuations in employers» needs (Portes & Boeroecz, 1996: 166).

Italian workers in the mines not only obtained employment at the expense of local labour, but were also used in the process of cutting costs and employed to break strikes over conditions and piece rates (Bertola, 1993: 7). An attitude that the Western Australian Labour Party pointed out in a few occasions, lodging a petition – which was rejected – to the Federal government in 1906 to extend the Immigration Restriction Act, then applicable to coloured workers, also to Italians (Cresciani, 1983: 320-321).

The number of Italians and other southern Europeans in the mines increased all through the 1910s, such to represent in 1913 up 22.65 per cent of the underground workforce (Bertola, 1993: 8). Although the recession hit the mining industry in the 1920s and the numbers employed in gold mines in Western Australia fell from a pre-war figure of 13,020 in 1913 to a low of 3,766 in 1928, by January 1934, on the eve of the riots in Kalgoorlie and Boulder, Italians and Yugoslavs still made up 18.37 per cent of the underground workforce in Kalgoorlie and 41.33 per cent in the associated mines (figures from Bertola, 1998: 14-15). As a consequence, rising unemployment among Anglo-Australians in the late 1920s drew more attention to the presence of southern Europeans, calling to restrict their immigration in the local press, as happened also in the woodcutting industry (Gillgren, 1997: 75 and 76).

Italians, as well as Tuscans, had arrived in Kalgoorlie and Boulder during the early 1920s in increased numbers, such to have their own neighbourhood and local stores, hotels and boarding houses (Pascoe & Bertola, 1985: 22). In 1933, Italians were 133 in Boulder and 132 in Kalgoorlie (Packer, 1947: 40-41), whereas in Wiluna there were about 250 of them (Longton, 1997: 127).

It is understandable that the general aim of Italian miners in the goldfields was, again, to make money as quick as possible. The relatively small size of their settlements worked against the creation of solid political organisations with a large following. Many migrants had a «temporary» aptitude to the local working environment and were used to never stop for long at any one place, thus making it difficult for them to take part in social, political or union activities. The economic conditions of sheer poverty of most Italians must also be borne in mind; they did not allow for much time to engage in activities other than working long hours.

The effort of keeping themselves just above the «bread line» (Cresciani, 1980: 3), deterred many of them from any organised attempt to keep abreast with politics and unions.

### Segregation

In addition, as it is shown by the professional background composition of *Table 6*, Tuscans were often peasants and labourers: there was no articulate middle class, no intellectual elite which could express the variety of ideas for a positive political and or union action. On the whole, Italian workers preferred to congregate with people of the same community of origin, with whom they had in common the same heritage and culture. This tendency to form group settlements, also within the unionised Anglo-Australian environment of the mining town of Boulder-Kalgoorlie, milited against rapid assimilation, usually very negligible anyway amongst the first generation of migrants (Borrie, 1954: 63). Such devotion of first-generation Italians and Tuscans to the narrow circle of the home and community of origin explains their limited interest in social activities and the apathy to political affairs. As stated earlier and confirmed by the authoritative work by Borrie (Borrie, 1954), migration chains which operated after 1921 suggest a movement of groups and relatives and friends guided by economic and not political reasons. Although there are a few records of Fascist (Fabiano, 1983: 234) and anti-fascist sympathies (Cresciani, 1979: 151 and Missori, 1982: 319) amongst Italian and also Tuscan migrants (O'Connor, 1996: 147 and 153), the large majority of them was driven by economic needs and displayed little interest towards politics (Pecout, 1990: 727, 738), or the local Anglo-Australian society and labour organizations. As from the records collected, *Table 6* shows the presence of Tuscan migrants in the mining areas and their composition as referred to some five local Apennines communities, even if their area of origin in Tuscany covers about thirty different administrative centres. Hence, the evident segregation of Tuscan migrants within the host mining community, with particular regard to Wiluna, where the presence of Tuscans was higher than average.

Table 6. *Spatial concentration of Migrants from Tuscany in mining areas of Western Australia per single Community of origin (>2), 1921-1939* (original data calculated by the Author)

	Wiluna	Gwalia	Other mining areas	Tot.
Piazza Serchio	5		1	6
Giuncugnano	4			10
S.Romano Garfagnana	3		2	5
Villa Comandina	5		1	6
Capannori	3	4		7
Other Communities	8	2	4	14
Tot.	28	6	8	48

The spatial segregation of first-generation Tuscans was not the result of any conscious

withdrawal from the Australian environment, but due rather to the nature of their economic activity. Tuscans and Italians in general, already culturally distinct and isolated, as well as relatively powerless and dependent upon the work, became the object of growing ill-will. It is within this environment that in January 1934 the Kalgoorlie riots occurred. An Italian bartender accidentally killed a local Anglo-Australian sports hero. This accident sparked the resentment of many Anglo-Australian miners against the Italians residing in Kalgoorlie, which culminated in two days of riots. A raging crowd of miners devastated and burnt many shops and private adobes of Italians and other southern Europeans in Boulder and Kalgoorlie and pushed hundreds of Italian migrants to shelter in the surrounding countryside (Cresciani, 1983: 339). Notwithstanding the condemnation of the fact on media, the riots did not modify the attitude of public opinion toward Italians in general. In the 1930s, the Anglo-Australian community kept a perception of cultural inferiority of Italians that owed much to longer term racial conceptions and which were confirmed by the lifestyle of the migrants, «by their apparent willingness to be used in efforts to drive down wages and conditions, and by their inability to transcend the boundaries that separated them from the host culture» (Bertola, 1993: 8-9). In addition, the social stereotype of the young Italian man in Western Australia during the inter-war era was not pleasant, suspected of «preying upon destitute women», while magistrates fulminated against them for carrying knives (Pascoe & Bertola, 1985: 32).

### **Conclusions**

Anti-Italian feelings were not merely an aspect of the Western Australian mining environment, as this image of the Italian – as different from the reliable Anglo-Australian labourer – comes from a century-long «Italophobia» (Harney, 1985: 9) that encouraged stereotypes about race, culture and level of trustworthiness that may have begun in England in the Middle Ages. Hence, a general antipathy towards Italians which was partly based on racial and cultural comparisons that inferred inferiority and was inextricably bound up with questions of Anglo-centrism and with the decade-long relations between capital and labour in the mining community. As some have clearly stressed out, racism enmeshed with what are termed the social relations of productions (Bertola, 1998: 21).

As the paper outlines, Tuscan migrants in Western Australia tended to concentrate within a few urban and mining areas, employing within a restricted number of activities and with the specific aim of a quick accumulation of capital to bring back to the community of origin. Such trend certainly influenced their social and working role within the host community and explains the limited interaction between them and the Anglo-Celtic community, such to spark and exasperate forms of social rejection by the host society, especially when such frictions involved the relations of production.

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