'Where the cattle went, they went': towards a phenomenological archaeology of mustering in the Kunderang Gorges, northeastern New South Wales

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'Where the cattle went, they went': towards a phenomenological archaeology of cattle mustering in the Kunderang ravines, New South Wales, Australia
Rodney Harrison
Archaeology, University of Western Australia and The Centre for Cross Cultural Research, The Australian National University

Abstract
The paper seeks to understand the relationships that developed between former pastoral workers and the rugged landscape of the Kunderang Ravines through a consideration of the results of a joint program of archaeological and oral history research. Mapping the 'landscape biographies' of former Aboriginal and settler pastoral workers and their descendents, and 'story-trekking' (after Green et al. 2003) along their remembered narrative paths allows a more embodied approach to the archaeology of cattle mustering to emerge. By riding and walking along familiar pathways and mustering routes, pastoral workers and their kin created a familiar sense of being-in-the-landscape (after Bender 2001), while simultaneously creating that landscape. In many ways, the work on Kunderang can be understood as a response to Gaston Bachelard's call for 'each one of us [to] speak of his roads, his crossroads, his roadside benches; each one of us should make a surveyor's map of his lost field and meadows' (1969: 11) and to understand those habits which he describes in the same work as the 'passionate liaison of our bodies' with a space or landscape (in Wise 2000).

INTRODUCTION
This paper describes the results of a project which sought to record and understand the heritage landscapes associated with cattle mustering in the Kunderang Ravines, an area now managed as a National Park and World Heritage Wilderness Area in northeastern New South Wales, Australia. In addition to drawing on established archaeological, historical and architectural heritage recording techniques, the project employed a range of less conventional methods to map the 'landscape biographies' of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous former pastoral workers and their families, in the form of both mapped oral history, and of 'story-trekking' along remembered narrative paths. Such an approach allows a more embodied understanding of the archaeology of cattle mustering to emerge. By riding and walking along familiar pathways and mustering routes, pastoral workers and their kin created a familiar sense of being-in-the-landscape (after Bender 2001), while simultaneously creating that landscape. In many ways, the work at Kunderang can be understood as a response to Gaston Bachelard's call for 'each one of us [to] speak of his roads, his crossroads, his roadside benches; each one of us should make a surveyor's map of his lost field and meadows' (1969: 11) and to understand those habits which he describes in the same work as the 'passionate liaison of our bodies' with a space or landscape (in Wise 2000).

CONTEXT AND DESCRIPTION
East Kunderang pastoral station is located in the upper Macleay River valley, approximately 100 km southeast of Armidale in northeastern NSW in Oxley Wild Rivers National Park, southeastern Australia. It is situated in rugged gorge country, on the site of part of an earlier sheep station established in 1841. East Kunderang was established as an owner-occupied run in 1892, and for the next 100 years its cattle, horses and stockmen established an impressive reputation which was influenced by the rugged grandeur of the country in which it was located. A workshop was run on site to discuss options for the conservation and management of the former pastoral station buildings and associated historic landscape as part of the Conservation Management Plan that was being prepared for the site. Research project aims and methodology were also discussed. Workshop participants focussed on the more ephemeral places in the landscape where workers congregated and lived, such as mustering huts and camps, rather than the prominent built structures associated with the station homestead, which tended to be the focus of conservation and management efforts. The way in which these places could be linked together to evidence a system of mustering in the gorge country was also seen to be important. The archaeological and oral history project thus developed around mapping both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people’s memories of the landscape and places in it, focussing on trails and patterns of movement.

ORAL HISTORIES
The oral histories of former pastoral station workers associated with East Kunderang are rich with details of mustering, riding and walking through the gorge country. A major theme of the oral histories was mapping former
mustered cattle: predominantly on horseback. Sometimes dogs were used to help in mustering wild cattle:

You had to be pretty quiet and let the dogs find them because even if they smelled you when the wind changed, they were gone. It’s just instinct with them. They would plant, they’d lay down once you put the dog round them, tried to work them, they were like little wood ducks, they’d just crawl in under the bushes and lie down and wouldn’t move. You could get right up within a few feet of them they wouldn’t come out, unless the come out to chase you … we’d try and get the dogs round them before they saw us, get the dogs to slow them up or circle them in a little mob before they actually saw us – stay out of sight if you could and just let the dogs do most of the work. And then if they busted or split up, which they did pretty often, you’d just get into them and just get what you could … catch calves or a cow or whatever, tie them up as quick as you could, and go and help the dogs, go and get the next one (Les O’Neill interview, 27 Feb 2001).

Food at such mustering camps and huts consisted largely of tinned meat and vegetables, supplemented with the meat of wild ducks and occasional kangaroos:

We would have our vegetables, potatoes and pumpkin and onion was the main thing. Corned meat for the first few days then we would be on to the tinned meat … [if we were out there for a long time] Alex Crawford would come out every four or five days or so with a packhorse and bring some fresh stuff for us (Les O’Neill interview, 27 Feb 2001).

Mustering tracks and landscape biographies

‘Landscape biographies’ map the way people’s lives were lived in and through the landscape of the Kunderang ravines. The regular seasonal pattern of movement involved in the muster became, for the interviewees, a focal point for discussing the nature of work, their perception of the landscape, and changes in the environmental health of the gorges. Those who were interviewed were keen to pass on their recollections of
mustering in the gorge country. Their stories illustrate the processes, as well as the storylines, that mark their own passage through, and hence knowledge of, the rugged landscape.

Interviewees were encouraged to make use of maps and aerial photographs at different scales to mark the locations of events and places to which they referred during oral history interviews. What many of the men and women drew was a series of lines that marked both physical tracks and pathways. These reflect the linearity of their history as it was lived in and through the landscape. The pathways and mustering tracks indicated by the different former pastoral workers represent both different periods in time, as well as the different mustering activities associated with East Kunderang and its neighbours.

Jeff O’Keefe’s recollections revolve around mustering Alan Youdale’s country in the 1960s, and are intermingled with his more recent experiences, with Maurice Goodwin and Ken O’Keefe, mustering cattle out of the park for NPWS in the early 1990s. This pattern of mustering took him from the headwaters of Kunderang Brook all the way north to its junction with the Macleay. Like Les, Ken recalls the locations of yards and overnight camps at Left Hand, Trap Yard, Iron Bark, Cedar Creek, and huts at Bird’s Nest, Sunderland’s (Middle Hut), Youdale’s and Dyson’s. The act of telling these mustering paths and representing them on maps produced recollections and memories that, for him, are intimately tied to his understanding of the landscape.

It was the mouth of Small’s Creek. It was about ’65 and it was very dry. There wasn’t much water in Kunderang Brook but there was a little puddle of water at the mouth of Smalls Creek, about 8 or 10 inches deep and we had a pretty good mob of cattle we were bringing up. We were going to pull the weaners off the land to try and give the cows a better go – it was getting pretty dry and it was sort of getting to the stage that if we didn’t do something we’d start to lose some cows. So we were bringing them up there and Alan was riding along on a horse he used to call ‘the Donk’. He had a big loose rein and he bent down to look up under the tea trees at Smalls Creek to see whether any cattle had gone up the creek or not. We’d had a pretty good mob of cattle and they’d all walked through this puddle of water and when he went to straighten up a tea tree limb poked him in the ribs and half pushed him off the horse. Before he could regain his reins, he only got one rein gathered up, and all that did was circle the Donk round and round and he’d half fallen off, and he nearly got back on the horse, and the Donk was still going round and round in a circle. When he had almost gotten back in the saddle, the limb poked him in the ribs again and pushed him off. He couldn’t hang on any longer and he fell off – flop – fell on his butt in this puddle of water. It was dirty green slimy water that the cattle had all walked through, and I couldn’t help but laugh. And I never forget he got up and he wasn’t real happy about it and I couldn’t help but laugh. There were some pretty funny things that did happen. Little simple things like that, but they were funny at the time (interview, 1 March 2001).

![Figure 2: Mustering and travel routes associated with East Kunderang. Different informants’ records appear here as a single line. Mustering huts, camps and yards are labelled](image-url)
**Women’s landscape biography**

Unlike the men who had worked and mustered on Kunderang and neighbouring properties, Christine Kim, an Aboriginal woman whose father had worked on Kunderang, chose to mark the pathways between Bellbrook Aboriginal mission and Georges Creek, a camp near Kunderang where Aboriginal people would come for holidays, as important linear storylines in her landscape biography. Although Ms Kim and another Aboriginal woman, Irene Lockwood, were the only women who chose to be involved in mapping their oral history, this raises tantalising questions about gender differences in mapping memories of Kunderang. It is likely that this reflects the different working lives of men and women after the 1950s at Kunderang, when the property itself became largely a masculine space. Aboriginal women valued their time at the Georges Creek ‘holiday camp’ where they were beyond the surveillance of Bellbrook mission managers.

This track would have also been an important pathway for Thelma McDonell, who often had to make the journey between Georges Creek and Kunderang on horseback.

It is possible to represent all of these mustering tracks and pathways, along with the locations of huts and yards, on a map of the area now covered by Oxley Wild Rivers National Park. This map (Figure 2) illustrates the patterns of pastoral land use in the Kunderang Gorges at a landscape scale. A visual picture is conjured of generations of history lived in and through the landscape of the gorges. This map also demonstrates that the area now managed by the National Parks and Wildlife Service as ‘wilderness’ has had a long history of thorough infiltration by Aboriginal people, cattle and pastoralists that has played a fundamental role in forming the landscape.

**A HERITAGE OF MUSTERING IN THE GORGE COUNTRY**

‘Story trekking’ – visiting and mapping places mentioned in oral histories with those same story tellers (after Green et al. 2003: 378) – formed an important way of both tapping into deep, embodied memories about relationships to place, as well as gaining a more thorough, phenomenological understanding of these places. Many of the features recorded during these site visits were ephemeral traces, unlikely to have been given significance except in dialogue with the lived memories of the former pastoral workers and their families. The fact that these traces are so ephemeral is often the reason for proclaiming the areas as National Parks with relatively unmodified ‘natural’ landscapes; this makes it even more important to record these places and features in conjunction with people who have lived experience of them. While leaving traces may be ‘the primal phenomenon of all the habits that are involved in inhabiting a place’ (Benjamin 1999: 472), the experience of dwelling in space (cf Ingold 2000) creates a link between stories and spatial practices (de Certeau 1984: 121). As the influential spatial thinker Merleau-Ponty argues (1962), the ‘human body provides the fundamental mediation point between thought and the world’ (cf Tilley 1994: 14).

The archaeological traces associated with mustering in the gorge country consist of clearings and huts, and the remains of mustering camps and yards. As indicated above, mustering camps with yards formed an important focus of the work of mustering in the gorges. My objective when recording these sites was to document and record the material evidence associated both with pre-contact Aboriginal uses of the site, as well as any pastoral infrastructure that remained. Informants greatly assisted
in identifying and fleshing out many of the details of the use and function of both places and material objects that remained at them. Most of these site visits were made under time constraints, and visibility at all sites was variable. While this does not constitute a ‘complete’ survey of these sites, this method was considered to be appropriate to this study, which was as interested in the ‘sites’ themselves, as the way in which they were linked by both stories and physical pathways to other places in the Gorge country. I will present two examples from the much more detailed set of places documented in Harrison (2004).

‘Happy Land’: Front Tableland

Front Tableland (or ‘Happy Land’ as it was euphemistically known) is a clearing at the top of one of the spurs that formed one of the main travel routes from the Kunderang ravines up to the tablelands and on to Moona Plains. A hut and yards were built here some time prior to the 1890s. When Les O’Neill first went to Front Tableland in the 1960s, there was a cleared horse paddock and a very dilapidated set of yards, which Alec McDonell and he repaired. The Fitzgeralds’ hut was not extant, but there was a slab-lined well and a bark lean-to that had been built by George Cohen. They would muster McDonell and he repaired. The Fitzgeralds’ hut was not

When the property was under the management of Kellion Estates, a new mustering hut was built at Front Tableland in 1967. This timber-framed corrugated-iron building is located on a small rise above a large fenced paddock and stockyards.

The yards show evidence for several periods of construction. The earliest parts are constructed of split rails and posts, while later round posts and rails either replaced or were wired onto the earlier ones. The final phases of repair, most likely dating to the Kellion period, show the use of star pickets (again often wired against earlier posts) with wire and metal railing. The layout of the yards is now difficult to interpret, but appears to have been three of four holding yards plus a receiving and drafting yard as explained by O’Neill.

Aboriginal archaeology at Front Tableland

Aboriginal stone artefacts are exposed in two locations at Front Tableland: in the dripline of the hut itself, and in exposures along the creek that runs through the block. These artefacts occur in eroding clay exposures and indicate that there are areas of potential pre-European archaeological deposit at this site. Artefacts noted were predominantly flakes and debitage (flaking debris) on chert and mudstone. Les O’Neill recounts George Cohen constructing a bark shelter at the site, which although no longer extant, relates to a long tradition of Aboriginal people, and then settlers after them, constructing bark shelters in this area:

...every night after you had your tea, old George had his little bark hut that he built there and he’d stroll off with his little bag of flour and away he’d go and cook a damper for the next day, and come back with it the next morning. No camp oven or anything, he’d just cook it in the ashes. You would see him going off with [just] a bag of flour and a billy-can of water (interview, 27 Feb 2001).

The use of bark in the construction of huts and shelters was widespread amongst Aboriginal communities on the north coast. Although they varied in size and sturdiness of construction, they were generally built on a frame of saplings, with cured bark sheets lashed on to the frame (Morris 1989: 77). These shelters were reputedly adopted widely by European cedar getters, and variations on them often formed the first huts in which a pioneering Macleay pastoralist would live, while awaiting construction of a more elaborate dwelling. The use and method of cutting sheets of bark was probably one of the earliest technologies adopted from Aboriginal people by European settlers in this area.
Rusdens Creek campsite
In addition to mustering huts with yards, a number of areas that contained just yards in the gorges formed the basis for makeshift mustering camps, which were used when mustering cattle out of the surrounding creeks for several days at a time. Les O’Neill and Maurice Goodwin took me to one such camp at Rusdens Creek, where the Crawfords (who owned Moona Plains, which abutted the western boundary of Kunderang on the tablelands) built a set of branding yards down at the base of the spur some time prior to the 1950s. This camp replaced an earlier pair of huts and yard at Riverside, which may have been built before the turn of the twentieth century:

There was only one yard there when the Crawfords were there, but there’s two yards there now and the paddock has fallen down. The Crawfords only had the small horse paddock and one yard. The yard was built like a pig sty. It had only little small rails in it and every time a rail would break they’d put another one in and the cattle couldn’t see through it – that’s how they kept them in there. But all they had to do was make a hole and they’d knock the whole yard down … you’ve never seen yards like it … (Les O’Neill interview, 27 Feb 2001).

The site contains a small fenced paddock and set of timber stockyards, and the remains of domestic materials associated with camping activities further up the incline from the yards. The yards had been ingeniously constructed using the trunks of several conveniently placed trees as posts. At least two periods of construction are evident: the first includes the use of round posts and wire; the second the use of star pickets. The yard also possessed a roughly circular branding yard with a crush (constructed more recently than the branding yard itself) and a sorting yard.

During my visit to the Rusdens Creek campsite in 2001, I recorded the yards and the remains of camping equipment stored there. This included billies and kerosene lanterns stored underneath a tree, as well as other domestic items such as a meat safe and the remains of tarpaulin stretched over posts. Also discovered were shovel handles and a sledge-hammer head. Les remembers the hearth being used for cooking, and a ‘fish smoker’ built by Max Duval into the side of the hill – although only a depression remains in the location indicated by O’Neill. The remains of posts, some of which had been used for firewood, and a bed frame and tarpaulin, were scattered across the site.

Aboriginal archaeology at Rusdens Creek
Just above the yard at Rusdens Creek is a natural spring, around which is a low-density scatter (less than 5 per square metre) of flaked stone artefacts. These include several large multi-platform chert cores and flakes. The spring and the flat clearing near a spur would have made this a favourable location for camping by Aboriginal people in the past. The site has been disturbed by cattle trampling and was not recorded in any further detail.

The archaeology of mustering in the Kunderang ravines: a summary
There is a pattern and rhythm to the location of yards and huts in the Kunderang Gorges that can only be read and recognised at a particular spatial scale. This pattern would have been the one most easily recognised by the stockmen and women who worked mustering cattle on Kunderang for over 100 years. Although Kunderang was the head station, yards and huts to house mustering teams were located at strategic points throughout the gorge country, generally on the tablelands near good access spurs. Cleared paddocks would be established around a simple hut and yards. There are three of these huts associated with Kunderang still preserved in Oxley Wild Rivers National Park, although during the Fitzgerald period there were four or five huts.

Further down the hierarchy of places there were numerous, less frequently used yards and paddocks where the mustering team would occasionally camp as they worked their way down the rivers and creeks to find and muster wild cattle. There were no structures built at these locations, although canvas tents were sometimes erected. Often stores of cooking equipment and canvas for shelter were left at these mustering camps. These sites were
ephemeral and would be difficult to locate if they were not pin-pointed by someone who has knowledge of working at them, but they demonstrate clearly the system of pastoral land use in the gorge country. As archaeological sites, these places preserve information about the ways of life of former pastoral workers, but taken together with the oral history they build a powerful picture of the pastoral industry as a land-use strategy that was highly adaptable to the varied landscapes of New South Wales.

The scatters of stone artefacts recorded at every one of the mustering hut, camp and yard sites most likely represent the remains of successive camping episodes, carried out by small groups of Aboriginal people who moved into the gorge country in the warmer months. Following the results of Godwin’s research on the Macleay (1983, 1985, 1990, 1997, 1999), these sites probably date to within the last 2000 years. All sites occur within the contexts suggested by Godwin’s model – close to watercourses on flat ground or near semi-permanent water sources and good access spurs to the tablelands. Flaked glass pieces and scarred trees with evidence of steel axe marks provide tantalising hints of post-contact use of the sites by Aboriginal people, or the transferral of Aboriginal techniques of hut construction to settler pastoralists. The co-occurrence of Aboriginal and pastoral sites is significant as it suggests that settlers ‘learned’ to use the landscape in similar ways to Aboriginal people in the deep past, and that there was a transference of environmental knowledge from the Aboriginal people who worked in the industry in the recent past to European settlers.

KNOWING THE COUNTRY

Human pathways often make use of trails formed by animals, such as kangaroos and wild horses and cattle, which travel the easiest routes between tableland and river valley floor. Early pastoralists in search of a route between the valley and tableland discovered Aboriginal footpaths, and cleared tracks that they came to use as stockroutes and roads. There is certainly very good evidence for the continuous re-use of several of these much older Aboriginal pathways over 160 years of European settlement.

The interviews collected for the project are rich with places that constitute landscapes of dwelling, working, walking and riding. These landscapes have a personal character, but also reflect wider shared notions of cultural and natural landscapes in the pastoral industry. For the former pastoral workers and their descendents, the landscape of the Kunderang ravines is understood in profoundly different ways to the way it is now understood by the Department of Environment and Conservation who now manage the national park. Recollections of the country emphasise particular kinds of places, such as clearings on the tablelands and river flats, on the river itself, and the ever-important spurs – those escalators of the gorge-lands. The linearity and seasonality of movement between tableland and gorges forms a moving landscape, a construction within which people’s memories can be articulated and made to speak in profoundly personal ways.

Making places at East Kunderang

The relationship between work and people’s understanding and appreciation of the landscape of the gorges is of critical importance. Jeff O’Keefe noted when describing a particular creek while he was mapping his landscape biography:

Steep hard creek but amazingly enough we used to have very good luck because the sides were so steep, the cattle wouldn’t climb out of them easily. They always used to sidle around the sides and then they’d come down again. Over the time we had a lot of success in it. Early in the piece we got every beast out of Blanks Camp. Some of the creeks – even Left Hand and Thread Needle – still have got a handful of cattle in them, but Blanks Camp – quite early in the piece we had every beast out of it (interview, 2 March 2001).

Jeff’s knowledge of Black’s Camp Creek is profoundly phenomenological – his understanding of the creek is as part of a wider, lived and working mustering landscape. There is a relationship here between the movement of people and cattle which is important in understanding the way in which stockmen came to know and appreciate this landscape:

We used to say ‘If the cattle can get there, follow that track because you’ll get there’. The cattle were wise enough to know that if they couldn’t get round the side or over a steep bank or something they wouldn’t go, so if the cattle went around a steep incline or something we’d follow their tracks because they knew where they were going. And that proved pretty well all the time. If the cattle didn’t want to go there you had to be careful because it was probably too steep, or too shaley or the water was too deep. But a lot of it is probably common sense – if it gets too steep you get off and lead your horse. You don’t go scrambling around where you’re going to get it busted (Maurice Goodwin interview, 1 March 2001).

Bruce Lockwood echoed this sentiment when he remarked, on the courage of Aboriginal people mustering in the Kunderang Gorges, ‘where the cattle went, they went’. Indeed, cattle provide a wide range of metaphors for understanding human experience, particularly travel, in the Kunderang ravines. Such observations have been made of pastoralists in other parts of the world (eg Tilley 1999: 51). The use of human/cattle metaphors is shared between both Aboriginal and settler pastoralists. This is part of the shared working language which developed through living and working together in the gorges over 150 years.

The way in which people move about in this highly dissected environment is not only reflected in people’s
language, but is inscribed on the very landscape itself. The named features in the gorges all focus on spurs and creeks, reflecting the broader pattern of movement both to muster cattle and to move across the land from the tableland to the valley. The landscape is described and named as a working, moving landscape. This in turn represents a profoundly landscape-oriented body of lore, which documents the long history of people and cattle in the gorges.

The ‘short cut’
For landscape philosopher Michel de Certeau, it is people’s interlinked paths and pedestrian movements that form ‘real systems whose existence in fact makes up a city’ (1984: 97). The history of the city begins at ground level, with people’s footsteps. In the Kunderang Gorges, it is not pedestrian movement but the movement of horses and riders along pathways, and cattle across their daily and seasonal ‘beat’, that constitutes the social face of the country. We can inscribe these movements and pathways as lines on maps, but to do so would miss the practices of starting and stopping, walking, crossing rivers, roping and throwing wild cattle, and incidents that occurred along the way (see Pearson and Shanks 2001: 148). De Certeau distinguishes tricks in the ‘ways of doing’ (1984: xviii), the ways in which people continually subvert the constraints of landscapes.

One such trick is the ‘short cut’, a frequent inclusion in people’s oral histories which stress moving through space, constituting a focal point for the intersection between history, event, people and landscape:

Yes it’s not very far from the mouth of Thread Needle [Creek]. Well, actually you don’t come out the mouth of Thread Needle with cattle, you short cut over a bank and cross to Middle Yard. And it’s a steep little climb up and a steep little climb down and, in the dark, at night coming back with tired cattle, it was a great place where years ago they used to lose a lot of them. So we decided we’d take the portable yards, to a place where there was a bit of a track where they used to cut posts years ago. We would just put them in to the portable yards without the hassle of losing them or widening the yard and we’d go back next morning, either take the ‘Blitz’ [truck] over and put them on, or drive them across next morning when we had plenty of time (Maurice Goodwin interview, 1 March 2001).

Like the short cut, the detail of embodied landscape biographies can be lost in the broad stroke of the line on the page. The Kunderang narratives seem to support Gibson’s ‘theory of reversible occlusion’, which describes the way in which the environment is known by humans along a path of observation of surfaces which move in and out of view in a particular order along a pathway or route of travel (1979: 198; see discussion in Ingold 2000: 238). These stories relive and recreate the landscape by recalling the routes along which it was experienced and known. The ‘ways-of-doing’ associated with mustering in the Kunderang ravines form part of the collective experience from which former pastoral workers constitute their sense of collective identity, and sense of place (eg papers in Feld and Basso 1996). ‘Places not only are; they happen’ (Casey 1996: 13).

CONCLUSION
A focus on the material remains of mustering may have revealed details of the ‘system’, but the accounts of former pastoral workers has allowed a more profound understanding of both the relationship between people and landscape in the gorges, as well as the experience of walking and riding what we recorded as narrative paths during oral history recordings. The stories, a series of named places linked by narratives, pay testament to an involvement with the landscape (Tilley 1994: 27; Pearson and Shanks 2001: 135). The constraints formed by this rugged, dissected landscape, the river itself, and the shared experiences of huts and mustering camps form the basis for the active creation of the cultural landscape of the Kunderang ravines. Riding and walking constitute a kind of spatial acting-out, choreographed by pathways of movement, and the constraints formed by the landscape. Living and working in the Kunderang ravines meant an active and constant engagement with the landscape. For the former Kunderang pastoral workers, to travel the landscape is to ‘remember it into being’ (Pearson and Shanks 2001: 138).
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