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GREY SUIT OR BROWN CARHARTT
Narrative Transition, Relocation, and Reorientation in the Lives of Corporate Refugees

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This article examines relocation stories of people who leave behind corporate work culture, relocate from metropolitan areas to small towns and rural places, and attempt to reorient themselves to work and family obligations. Decisions to start over take place within the context of moral questions about what makes a life worth living and what does not through a process in which geography has a bearing. For these migrants, a choice about where to live is also one about how to live. Choices of how to live one's life are made of more than simple economics, they are also moral. The restructuring and corporate downsizing that defines the contemporary workplace has led some workers and their families to challenge assumptions of the American Dream that promise future reward for loyalty to an employer, hard work, and self-sacrifice. These lifestyle migrants relocate in their attempt to find potential selves and idealized families in new places.

KEY WORDS: Career change; Narrative analysis; Postindustrial economic restructuring; Urban-to-rural migration; Work and family studies

"DO YOU GET TOLD WHAT THE GOOD LIFE IS, OR DO YOU FIGURE IT OUT FOR YOURSELF?" Alan poses the question rhetorically but I can see that he is considering how he might answer it. His query comes in the course of animated conversation as we drink strong coffee at his kitchen table. We sit together in the glow of light reflected off deep drifts of snow blown in off Lake Michigan during one of many sudden squalls that blanket the communities of northern Michigan during the long, cold winters. This weather keeps the area from growing even faster through in-migration. A former Town-Car-driving, suit-wearing corporate manager who underwent a personal transformation through which he became a canvas-Carhartt-jacket-clad, pickup-truck-driving landlord, Alan left behind a self-professed career as "professional people hater" to move here.

After a few moments have passed in thoughtful silence, Alan leans forward over his steaming cup for emphasis and answers his own question. "In corporate America I started getting told." Pausing briefly, he continues: "I look back now and I was told what the good life was. It was a four-bedroom colonial house in the

suburbs and working for a main company, dressing in a suit every day, going to the job, weekends off and getting to go someplace on the weekend. I had that, but I wasn't happy. I just didn't know it at the time."

I first met Alan while looking for a place to live. I was moving here to conduct two years of ethnographic fieldwork. During a planning visit, I called about renting an apartment in the broad glacial plains above the long blue arm of Lake Michigan known as Grand Traverse Bay. A local real estate agent walked me through the building. Answering her questions in polite conversation, I described my reason for moving to the area. As I spoke, a man emerged from behind the kitchen counter where he was quietly making repairs. In paint-splattered coveralls, he gripped a putty knife with an expectant stare that unnerved me. I took a step toward the door. Why would this disheveled handyman show such interest in my research? As it turned out, he and the real estate agent are husband and wife. In what would become a familiar storyline, they described how they had left well-paying jobs in southeast Michigan a few years earlier. Alan and Beth are two of many lifestyle migrants moving to the Grand Traverse region. It was in this move that Alan became a "corporate refugee."

In a popular book aimed at a surging potential audience of downshifting and downsized workers that includes lifestyle migrants like Alan, Ruth Luban (2001) identifies emotional stages of leaving or loosing one's job. A therapist who specializes in behavioral health and issues of personal transition, Luban argues that leaving a work position causes not only a loss of income but also losses of identity and the structure of routine in everyday life—an experience that she metaphorically likens to the refugee experience of being cast out of a homeland (cf. Gini 2000). Primarily a self-help manual, Luban's intent is to provide a useable road map for the disillusioned who need to find a place of refuge for personal renewal and fulfillment (cf. Sheehy 1977). The stages that Luban suggests describe a travel story analogous to the physical and psychological journey that lifestyle migrants make to find a place of personal refuge.

Alan moved away from a self-described destructive past through his decision to relocate from the upscale middle-class neighborhoods of Detroit. Now he calls the rural area where I did my research in the northwestern corner of Michigan's Lower Peninsula home. As with most others whom I call "lifestyle migrants," Alan constructs his narrative of relocation in a manner akin to stories of religious conversion. This story of real and metaphoric travel describes a process of self-transformation that he says enabled him to claim what he called his "second chance" in life. When applied to secular phenomena or experience, "conversion" refers to a far-reaching personal change. This involves adopting a new interpretative framework within which individuals structure their actions and experience them as purposeful. Conversion stories are a special form of autobiographical narrative in which a person distinguishes a "real self" from an inauthentic self (e.g., Schultz 2001). Self-transformation in the process of conversion entails the creation of a new vision of oneself when long-time social roles and self-presentations are challenged by changes in self-interpretation together with changing personal practices (Rambo 1993; see also Bryant and Lamb 1999).[1]

Research presented here attempts to answer several questions. Why are some downsized and downshifting corporate workers relocating to certain, largely rural, places? How do these migrants understand and frame their decision? How does this frame serve to shape the themes that then inform an ongoing process of identity formation in the telling of a narrative of relocation and starting over? Finally, in what ways do the narratives of these lifestyle migrants help us understand public discourse and debate in the United States regarding what constitutes a meaningful, fulfilling, and purposeful life when the meaning of basic categories such as work and family are shifting? My research with these migrants examines the outward and inward travel stories of corporate refugees who seek to start over as they move not only along asphalt roads to new geographic places but also along less-tangible personal paths of introspection and self-discovery blazed by individual negotiations between work, family, and self. I take an approach that combines the study of non-economic migration, work, and family research into the impact of postindustrial economic restructuring with narrative studies of life in transition understood through moral theory. Alan's iconic narrative of relocation is presented with analysis informed by my experience with several close informants and situated against the broad backdrop of a larger population of study participants.

FIELDWORK AND SETTING

Approximately 250 miles northwest of Detroit, the Grand Traverse region is an hour's drive from the nearest highway. Its mostly rolling countryside is defined by a deep, glacially dug bay stretching north-south for more than 20 miles. Endowed with miles of sandy Lake Michigan shoreline and towering 400-foot dunes, the largely rural Grand Traverse region has for nearly a century attracted people seeking recuperative rest through time spent on vacation. In the past twenty years, tourism has played an increasing role in the local economy. Nearly 70% of 128 project participants had vacationed here before making it home (cf. Snepenger et al. 1995). While still seasonally attractive for short-term stays, today the area where I conducted research, like many rural places in the Unites States, finds itself a destination for those seeking permanent, year-round retreat (see, e.g., Bonner 1997; Jobes 2000; Murdoch and Day 1998; Pindell 1995).

I conducted fieldwork from early 2000 to early 2002 in the adjoining counties of Grand Traverse, Leelanau, Antrim, and Benzie, which together incorporate an area extending roughly 25 miles from the regional social and economic hub at Traverse City, Michigan. I gathered foundational data for this article through in-depth, open-ended ethnographic interviews with 128 in-migrants to these counties. Interviews emphasized personal background, reasons for leaving a job and relocating, and the process of relocation decision making and identity formation after the move. These conversations allowed individuals to present detailed narratives with minimal interruption. Interviews were followed by more thorough study of particular cases involving casual conversation and participant-observation in the workplaces and homes of a core group of participants. A large study population enabled me to consider a range of personal backgrounds and relocation

experiences while I maintained frequent contact with four individuals and eight families who had relocated within the previous five years.

Reflecting basic demographics of all in-migrants to the area, lifestyle migrants to the study are overwhelmingly white and middle-class. Most had professional backgrounds, including managers, accountants, lawyers, social workers, and others in healthcare-related fields (e.g., Fuguitt et al. 1989; Ghose 1998; Jobes 1992, 2000; Judson et al. 1999; Stinner et al. 1992). After their move, however, almost half were working in a field they themselves considered a *significant* departure from their previous record of employment or field of study. Nearly 60% experience a drop in income from as little as 5% to as much as 40% of pre-relocation levels. Given the shared interest of lifestyle migrants in gaining a greater sense of *control* in their lives. I was not surprised to find that nearly 40% started their own small businesses. These ranged from home-based consultancies to retail shops with several employees. Most migrants, however, found salaried or hourly wage work in the local government, school system, community college, hospital, or a variety of local businesses. Nearly 20% worked two part-time jobs in order to meet income goals. Of a total of 128 participants, roughly even amounts were in their thirties, forties, and fifties, with slightly more than half being female. Nearly 30% were married, with grown children no longer living at home fulltime. Among the remainder, there was a roughly even split between those married with young children, married with school-age children, married with no children, and single. Like Alan and Beth, approximately 60% of participants relocated from Southeastern Michigan; the rest could be evenly split between other parts of Michigan, the Midwest, and the rest of United States.

PLACING LIFE-STYLE MIGRATION IN THE LITERATURE

Life-style Migration as a Quest for Refuge and "The Good" in New Places

I refer to *life-style* migrants in order to emphasize how these urban-to-rural migrants use the act of relocation as a way of redefining their relationship to work and family through changes in *lifestyle*, the personal patterns of everyday life. I intend my choice of the expression "life-style migrant" to draw attention to the growing importance of consumption behavior relative to production activities in American lives. This includes the "place-consumption" behavior exhibited by life-style migrants (cf. Kearns and Philo 1993; Ward 1998). Work by the anthropologist Dean MacCannell (1999:6) suggests that lifestyle should be understood as "combinations of work and leisure . . . replacing 'occupation' as the basis of social relationship formation, social status and social action." Life-style migrants may be a further sign that the "affirmation of basic social values is departing the world of work and *seeking refuge* in the realm of leisure" (1999:6, emphasis added). That is to say, seeking refuge in a lifestyle where the individual is thought to have the greatest degree of discretion (e.g., Putnam 2000; Weiss 1999; Zukin 1991).

Life-style migrants seek geographic places as personal refuges that they believe will resonate with idealized visions of self and family. In her study of how families at a Midwestern company coped with the squeeze of a work-family "time bind,"

Arlie Hochschild (1997) reveals how overworked families may construct idealized or "potential selves" (cf. Markus and Nurius 1986 on "possible selves"). This potential self resides in a future deliberately and carefully set apart from the everyday self living in the often-compromising hustle and bustle of the present. In Hochschild's study, it emerges as a set of imagined, future possibilities that serve as a substitute rather than preparation for action in the lives of families attempting to manage the emotional stress of balancing work and family obligations. Removed from the uncertainties and conflicts of everyday life, the potential self appears as one way of coping with the challenges of increasing costs, declining real income, self-consuming schedules, and emotional downsizing.

The participants in my study made "lifestyle commitments" to reorder work, family, and personal priorities in a manner consistent with their vision of a potential self. This allowed them to seek a kind of moral reorientation to questions of "the good." Accordingly, their stories of relocation and reorientation are told as "moral narratives of self" (Hoey 2005). While my approach to the moral relates to the work of Bellah and colleagues (1996), Wuthnow (1996), and Wolfe (1998)—all of whom contribute to the literature on work and family—my understanding is closest to that of humanist-philosopher Charles Taylor. Taylor's moral understanding and sense of the plurality of possible interpretations of *the good*, or "the good life," that confront the modern person also inspire my term "life-style migration." His interpretation of the moral realm encompasses not only questions about individual obligations and relationships with others but also personal and collective visions of the good. Here the good entails questions of what gives meaning, fulfillment, and a sense of dignity and self-respect to a life. Identity and the moral dimension are deeply entwined in the unfolding account of a person's life as a kind of personal "quest" to find a sense to that life (MacIntyre 1984; cf. Sennett 1998; Taylor 1997). Irving Goffman's (1961) notion of "moral career" resonates with this understanding. Goffman values the career concept's "two-sidedness." While one side concerns publicly accessible social status and lifestyle and is thus more consistent with traditional notions regarding upward mobility within a given profession, the other side entails inner, personal dimensions such as self-image and felt identity. The *moral* aspects of a career are a sequence of inner changes in this image and identity as well as the interpretive framework for judging oneself and others. Social scientists may follow this development through exploring a person's *moral experience*, that is, those "happenings which mark a turning point in the way in which the person views the world" (Goffman 1961:168).

Autobiographical narratives like the relocation stories of life-style migrants allow some insight into moral career and experience. These life stories grow out of the activities of everyday life and one's literal as well as figurative movement through both time and space. As suggested earlier, they are naturally stories of travel (e.g., de Certeau 1984:115). The extent to which there is harmony in a person's life and continuity in one's sense of self "resides in the unity of narrative which links birth to life to death as narrative beginning to middle to end" (MacIntyre 1984:205). Life-style migrants achieve that unity in part through describing their transitions from one life or lifestyle to another, facilitated by the act of relocation,

as a kind of self-transformative conversion experience. Within this transformative process, certain key events may become turning points in the way they see the world. These are the personal watersheds, as I refer to them, that give essential contours to critical narrative transitions in a story told on the "road of life" (cf. Taylor 1997; McAdams et al. 2001).

As in actual and metaphorical stories of travel that compose narratives of conversion, Alan's story shows us how finding or believing in a place of personal refuge can be essential to people at crucial points in their moral careers. Although the particular case presented here comes from an informant who voluntarily downshifted from his corporate career, his experience illustrates a commonality between life-style migrants who start over through relocation not only after downshifting but also in the wake of involuntary job loss or downsizing. I found that both groups underwent an experience of loss. This was something akin to what is generally termed "displacement" in the literature on space and place. Displacement is described as a disruption in the emotional attachment of people to specific geographic locations (e.g., see Altman and Low 1992). Although the literature tends to focus on involuntary change, such as forced relocation from a particular place (e.g., see Erikson 1976; Fried 1963, 2000; Malkki 1995), life-style migration presents a case in which relocation, while sometimes involuntarily precipitated by job loss, for example, is a voluntary act. David Hummon's research on the meaning of community in American life (1986, 1992; cf. Brown and Perkins 1992; de Certeau 1984; Stewart 1996) suggests expanding the notion of displacement beyond a focus on involuntary dislocation and loss of place attachment to include the generalized alienation, sense of uprootedness, and dispossession that characterize the stories of people like life-style migrants. With the rapid pace of economic and technological changes and their broad social and cultural impact, the experience of loss may be a fundamental characteristic of our time. The emergence of a postindustrial economy is drastically reducing and at times even eliminating certain economic sectors here in the United States as well as in Europe. Frequently dire consequences to financially dependent communities and the lives of workers in all socioeconomic classes are widely documented (Charlesworth 2000; Doukas 2003; Newman 1993; Read 1996; Zukin 1991).

While the experience of life-style migrants ranges from voluntary downshifting to being involuntarily downsized, following these changes in work life they all attempt to redefine themselves. Through the act of relocating to particular places they believe will support more balanced and integrated lifestyles, they struggle to renegotiate work and family obligations while harmonizing material and practical domains with the moral needs of the person. Their guiding belief is that through the everyday practices of a new life created in their commitment to a particular lifestyle, via relocation to a rural or small town place of personal refuge, and by rethinking their relationship to work they might find greater personal harmony, happiness, and the attainment of potential selves as a kind of "higher calling."

I once asked Alan if he felt that he could have stayed in Detroit and enacted the fundamental personal changes he accomplished by moving to the study area. His answer was that he was not sure, but that he had no regrets about the decision

to start over somewhere else. "When I go back there, people act differently. For me to get my personality to where I liked people, I had to get away from the environment where I didn't trust people." A life-style migrant who moved here as a single, thirty-something woman, Paula invokes a similar sense of distance from former lives: "My lifestyle was too hectic, too much time working and cramming fun in . . . drinking and smoking. I decided to move and start over. [After moving] it became a completely different life, different pace. [At first] I would stand in line at the bank, tap my foot, snap my fingers and say 'Come on, come on, I've got somewhere to go.' Everybody is chatting so that you couldn't do anything fast. I was forced to slow down." The act of relocation and specifically the choice to relocate to a *rural* place, with perceived elements of neighborliness, greater authenticity, and slower pace, is an indispensable part of the story for life-style migrants. Numerous scholars, including Johnson and Beale (1998), Murdoch and Day (1998), Hummon (1990) and Shi (1985, 1986), have commented on the enduring American attachment to a rural ideal and a persistent connection between notions of the good or "simple" life and "The Rural."

Like all life-style migrants, Alan saw his work, family life, and personal identity as bound up with his sense of place—both his sense of the limits of what was possible for him in Detroit and the potential for new beginnings through relocating to the study area. In the Great Lakes states people call the region where the study area is located "Up North" not only as a basic geographic distinction, but more importantly in order to signify a fundamental *state of being*. For many, it is a way of literally locating oneself spatially and orienting oneself ideologically to the ideal of The Rural. In Michigan, the term is used to distinguish the northern part of the state from the condition of being in the heavily urban and suburbanized "downstate" south.

While speaking of journeys to and from the study area, many life-style migrants refer to a defining moment of passage at the point where they feel that they crossed some kind of line. Doing work in the Midwest, the geographers Andrew Clark and Roy Officer (1962) theorized this line as an objectively verifiable boundary. It is in part a kind of ecotone—a transition between distinct ecological systems. Geologic and climatic conditions of these ecosystems have favored different economies. Today, broad fields of modern agriculture spread southward to give way to vast industrial areas reaching out from Detroit along the river valleys. To the north, forests are now recovering from the heyday of logging that helped build Midwestern cities to the south. Although, for a range of ecological and economic reasons, a rough boundary may be said to exist, more important is the fact that passage from one region to another is imbued with personal meaning for those who seek to find refuge in the rural places Up North by crossing that line.

Urban-to-Rural Migration in Postindustrial America

Life-style migration is a recent expression of an approximately three-decade-old phenomenon of urban-to-rural migration in the United States. In some rural counties where agriculture and natural resource extraction have dominated local economies but have typically gone into decline, this migration has reversed a long-

standing history of population loss to urban areas over much of the twentieth century (e.g., see Boyle and Halfacree 1998; Jobes 1992; Pandit and Withers 1999). Demographers Kenneth Johnson and Calvin Beale (1998; cf. Fuguitt and Beale 1978; Williams 1981) have examined three decades of research on urban-to-rural migration and found that unanticipated growth in some of Michigan's rural areas, documented in studies such as that by Borchert and colleagues (1964), was an important harbinger of a rural-urban "turnaround" that later would be documented in many parts of the United States (McCarthy and Morrison 1978).

Research on the emergent urban-to-rural migration phenomenon in the late 1960s to early 70s challenged predominant migration models reliant on economic explanations where relocation behavior was understood as driven by a desire to maximize individual earning potential (cf. Jobes 1992). In work that helped define early understandings of urban-to-rural migration, Calvin Beale (1975) called this emergent trend a rural demographic "revival." The term *non-economic* emerged as a way to describe a migration trend in which a significant number of Americans in their productive working years chose relocation to rural areas well outside centers of business and recognized forms of economic opportunity. *Non-economic migration* was meant to distinguish the behavior of many urban-to-rural migrants from the expected pattern of voluntary population movement where economic opportunity was the primary motivating force for presumed rational actors (e.g., Berry 1976; Williams and Sofranko 1979; see Stack 1996 on non-economic motives for "return migration" to the rural South among black Americans).

Using aggregate, census-type data and conducted from a wide array of disciplinary approaches—from demography, rural sociology, and geography to economics and planning—studies of internal migration in the United States over the past 30 years have focused on providing macro-level explanations of the causes and consequences of migration patterns (e.g., Frey and Johnson 1998; Jobes 1992; Pandit and Withers 1999). Working primarily, if not exclusively, from secondary data sources, this systems-level research provides an important context within which to embed more detailed, local and individual-level analyses. A limited number of scholars from a number of these disciplines, together with others from fields including anthropology, have taken a micro-level approach to explore processes of migration decision making and examine an array of economic and non-economic issues which weigh on those decisions (e.g., Beyers and Nelson 2000; De Jong and Gardner 1981; Jobes 2000). Rather than provide another model of decision making, this ethnographically informed article offers insight into how non-economic migration decisions are framed and understood by migrants as well as how this frame serves in shaping the narrative themes that inform identity and selfhood through the telling of a life story.

For life-style migrants, these individual themes are shaped by, even as they challenge, the predominant metanarratives that characterize contemporary culture in the United States, such as the notion of an American Dream. Important ethnographic studies on work and family in the United States, including those by Kathryn Dudley (1994), Barbara Ehrenreich (1989), Arlie Hochschild (1997), Katherine Newman (1988, 1993), and June Nash (1989), have helped us understand

the means by which a rift, or "structural lag" (Moen 2001), provides a dynamic tension. The rift has opened between middle-class expectations preserved in the prevailing notion of an American Dream that promises upward mobility in exchange for hard work, on the one hand, and the present economic reality and uncertainties of restructuring and deindustrialization on the other. The resulting tension can lead to a gradual reworking of the meanings and roles of work and family in shaping personal identity. At a time when basic social categories and cultural meanings appear to shift in the wake of global economic restructuring, this article examines middle-class migration to a largely rural area where the act of relocation to a particular place becomes a way of starting over, with emphasis on what makes a life personally worth living. Building on a wide range of macro and micro-level studies, this article addresses the relative lack of ethnographic studies into how non-economic migration relates to postindustrial social and economic change. In particular, the aim is to understand what large-scale transitions mean in the everyday lives of real people like Alan and other life-style migrants.

DISCUSSION

Moral Narratives of Self: Taking Back One's Life, Redefining the Good

Shortly after I met Alan, we got together for a chat on a snowy day in the middle of January. Alan arrived at my apartment in a battered pickup truck. A wide yellow snowplow jutted out into the falling snow. After dusting copious icy flakes from his thick canvas jacket, he strode through the door and delivered a confident handshake. Our conversation began with the weather, a central concern in the area during winter. He hoped to get out and plow before the snow became too deep. I hoped to join him. By this time, I had learned something of Alan's past work as a so-called hired gun brought in by companies to cut costs. Union busting made up a considerable part of the work. He describes what he was called to do:

> The objective was to "keep the unions out," "keep the morale up," and "reduce the workforce." Kind of hard to do all that at once, but that was the deal. The guy who was running the Midwest division [of a large processed-foods company] said, "I want a guy like you, [not] a team player. We don't care if you fire everybody because we're going to close the plant, but we'll keep you if we like you."

Going from that sort of work to a jack-of-all-trades fix-it man and manager tending to two out-of-date rental properties in need of considerable renovation and upkeep is no small shift in routine. In Alan's "former life," his work as a kind of corporate hit man is iconic of the postindustrial economy.

> We had three walkouts, and every time I had the factory running again in 15 minutes because I just went into the offices and said "come on, we're going to run this thing." I would have the [machines] making noise and stuff . . . and it got the union scared that we were going to run the thing without

them. It took them two years to clean up all the arbitrations I started. That's what I was hired to do.

Alan spoke about a life-changing decision to break from his well-established professional career and ready source of social identity by relocating Up North. As I poured coffee, he described what he was learning about himself toward the end of his time living and working downstate. It became a question of personal character. It was about identifying values that he could no longer violate:

> I had a psychologist friend who pointed out that I was taking it all too seriously and that working in corporate America was [only] a game. What [began to bother] me about the game was how people are treated. For example, one day [an upper-level plant manager] told me, "You know you have to fire that guy." I asked why. "His wife has got a serious illness and the insurance is costing us a fortune." Another time, this one guy got prostate cancer and the president of the company said, "We don't have to worry about him anymore." That's corporate America's game . . . but I couldn't play that game anymore.

In a different context, a professional couple in their late thirties told me how they left well-paying jobs and objectively successful days spent in the suburbs of Detroit to move Up North, "take back their lives," and reconnect with "core values." Echoing the theme of displacement common to the stories of life-style migrants, Katherine and John described how they felt increasingly "dispossessed" of the suburban neighborhood where they lived and the nearby office park where they worked. Although their explicit intent was to express a feeling of disconnect, a lack of any meaningful connection, their choice of "dispossession" to describe their feelings suggests something deeper. It suggests losing a sense of security, home, and belonging. They felt no sense of ownership, in the same way that they lacked a sense of control in their lives. Given the desire of life-style migrants to feel a meaningful connection to particular geographic places as a kind of personal refuge, living where this connection seems impossible or impractical leads many to describe their state before relocating as being "disorientated" or "adrift."

Like Alan, life-style migrants feel that the jobs they had before relocation required them to make decisions that over time violated their own inward sense of right and wrong, finally going beyond their ability to cope with a chronic disjuncture. It is at this point, going beyond this breaking point, that everyday life begins "tearing you down" in ways that the occasional vacation simply cannot build back up or put back together. For Alan, the decision to relocate was about being able to define himself according to his own *moral narrative*, the one he now told, enacted in a new place where he actively creates a new relationship to work and family. He explains between swigs of coffee:

> I knew there was something wrong with me. My job was affecting my personality and adversely affecting me as a human being. I saw it manifesting

as behavior that I knew was wrong. I was drinking too much and I was chasing around. I yelled a lot [because] that's what people reacted to. Is this the right way to treat a human being? No. But that's how you got things done. That becomes your whole life. Soon you're screaming at your wife and you're screaming at your kids. Looking back, I was trading away my value system for the job and in support of the company. You find yourself in a system that is not allowing you to live your life properly. This is on your mind whether conscious or [not]. Looking back, it is easy for me to analyze it. I was tearing myself down.

As we talked and finished the coffee pot, Alan glanced out the window from time to time. Cold Arctic air continued to stir the relatively warm waters of Lake Michigan, gradually becoming thick with moisture. Snow piled up as this air came ashore and unburdened itself. Alan suggested we go for a ride. Maybe plow a bit. Bracing against the bitter blast, I followed him to his truck between drifts in the parking lot. I climbed in among scattered tools in the passenger seat and on the floor, clearing myself a place. After waiting for some heat and relative visibility, we set off into white.

The cab of his truck was a considerable change from the cozy livingroom of my apartment and no doubt a reminder to him, as it was metaphoric for me, of how far he had come from the company-provided Lincoln Town Car. As we wound our way through mostly deserted streets, I asked Alan about what it meant for him to have started over, to have taken his self-proclaimed "second chance" at life. What did it mean for him to "break" from a life that he felt had been slowly tearing him down? Alan kept his focus on the road ahead with a serious expression. He slowly navigated forward through the storm. A grin spread slowly over his face and he began to speak. Alan described how he could now act in ways incompatible with what his employers (and friends) would have expected from him in his former life. As in his previous work in the personnel department, he still in some respect "manages" people in his new job as a landlord. Now, however, he can make decisions based on what feels right and does not seem to violate his sense of an authentic self.

> I can make decisions based on income or I can make decisions based on people. There is this handicapped guy living in one of my units. He's got this little thirteen-inch TV. He doesn't have much life outside that TV. The other day I picked up a big 25 inch for 100 bucks. I gave it to him and told him that somebody left it in one of the units. That's a decision based on what's the right thing to do. In the corporate world, it is [only] black and white—it's numbers.

A Postindustrial Economy

The dimensions of Alan's story provide an intimate view into contours of a postindustrial economy and its impact on the everyday life of working families. Alan himself played a part in the painful process of corporate downsizing and the

shift from paternalistic companies, who reward worker loyalty, to employers who appear to attend first to shareholder interest. A telling fact of our time is that one of the country's largest private employers is not a giant of industry past or present, either the old order based on resource extraction and materials refinement or the new order of high technology and information systems. Rather, it is in the business of selling specified, limited packets of human labor for companies increasingly interested in pursuing the "on demand" or "just in time" model of business. With a half-million workers by the early 1990s, Manpower had become one of the country's largest corporations and the world's largest temporary employment agency. A recent study by Jackie Rogers (2000; cf. Gonos 1997; Parker 1994) not only provides a valuable ethnographic account of the everyday experience of temp workers, she also establishes the role that the temporary help industry plays in creating a demand for its services despite claiming merely to fulfill a marketplace need. Companies like Manpower flourish with swelling personnel at the same time that America's traditional business heavyweights cut people from their own workforce. Workers are brought in inexpensively to complete discrete tasks or projects defined by a limited time period and objective.

Once used to describe a management technique of employing temporary workers only when there was an immediate and direct need for specific work to be done, the term *contingent work* is now applied to a range of employment practices, including part-time work, the use of contracted or outsourced workers, home-based work, and even self-employment.[2] According to arguably conservative figures released in 2005 by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the number of contingent workers is now nearly 6 million. This figure does not include workers engaged in so-called alternative work arrangements such as 10.3 million independent contractors, 2.5 million on-call workers, and 2 million contract-firm workers.

One of the reasons Alan felt insecure in his former life before relocation and starting over was because he himself was the hired gun. Not only did he see the brutality of downsizing firsthand as one who was called to do its dirty work, he knew that his own job was only a temporary assignment. It was not a "real job" in the usual (if outdated) sense of an enduring position within an organizational chart. Rather, he had become a kind of contractor with skills that applied to certain, transient situations. Alan had become the ideal worker of the postindustrial economy—a sort of "migrant worker." Is this a comfortable position for someone who wants something more than this forced flexibility?

> I was always brought in for an assignment. And when [it's] over, what do you do? I guess that's why I was getting more and more frustrated. There was just nothing there anymore. I've been gone five years now [from my last position] and during that time they've been through three or four guys. They just keep burning through them. That's the way a lot of corporate America is these days; they just hire you for an assignment. There's no pension. You just keep job-hopping . . . like the migrant workers who come here to pick fruit.

A former GM executive turned consultant appears to agree with Alan's sober assessment. He asserts that today's workers are going "to be moving from job to job in the same way that migrant workers used to move from crop to crop" (quoted in Castro 1993:44). Life-style migrants recognize the impermanence of this world of work. In *Rethinking the Corporation*, Robert Tomasko (1993) defines a new way of corporate thinking: in order to overcome what are now perceived as the limitations and unneeded baggage inherent in conventional strategic planning, today's leading companies are organizing development around "core competencies." In this perspective, the company sees itself not as being "in the business of," but rather as a fully flexible portfolio of potentially reinforcing capabilities. This is part of a trend toward greater "unbundling," wherein businesses undergo a deliberate disintegration into separate, presumably more efficient, enterprises. In a parallel way, workers are also encouraged to take themselves apart and define themselves not by a career but by their range of abilities and to establish skills that can be rapidly deployed in different configurations for different tasks. In extensive ethnographic work in Silicon Valley, the anthropologist Charles Darrah (1994, 2003) has observed how knowledge workers, in particular, are encouraged to see themselves as a "bundle of skills." In this emerging landscape of work, it is no longer as much about who you are, where you have been, or what you have accomplished as it is about what you can do right now. According to journalist Alan Murray, author of *The Wealth of Choices*, the secret to success in the New Economy is to "think of yourself as an entrepreneur, regardless of what you do. Think of yourself as a product that is being offered in the marketplace" (2000:155–56).

Murray calls on business consultant Tom Peters to help make his point. Peters argues that we need to "take a lesson from the big brands. . . . We are CEO's of our own companies, Me, Inc. To be in business today, our most important job is to be head marketer for the brand called 'you.'" Further, Peters explains that in today's "flattened" corporation, a career can no longer be thought of as a ladder on which the earnest worker climbs upward while achieving greater status and reward. He insists that career should be viewed as a "portfolio of projects that teach you new skills, gain you new expertise, develop new capabilities, grow you a colleague set, and constantly reinvent you as a brand" (quoted in Murray 2000:156).

In this context, sociologist Phyllis Moen (2001:6) finds that "workers increasingly feel like free agents, having to chart their own career paths." Asserting a position already acknowledged by life-style migrants, Robert Schaen, a business owner and former comptroller of Chicago-based Ameritech (later SBC and now part of AT&T), states that "People are going to have to create their own lives, their own careers, and their own successes. Some people may go kicking and screaming into the new world, but there is only one message there: You are now in business for yourself" (quoted in Castro 1993:47).

Confidently defining oneself for the long-term by way of a job might have been realistic in the generation of many life-style migrants who came of age in the 1950s. Now, however, there is no guarantee and no expectation for the durability

of such a definition because the world of work upon which it had been based appears ever more unstable and unpredictable, more fluid and boundless (Sennett 1998). The geographer David Harvey (1989) points to the early 1970s as a collective watershed when shifts in the organization of capitalism together with new forms of time-space experience opened a postmodern age. As with other discussions of the structural and cultural shifts during this period and their deep impact on the conduct of everyday lives and construction of selves (Bell 1976; Jameson 1991; Skolnick 1991), Harvey points to how "The relatively stable aesthetic of Fordist modernism [gave way] to all the ferment, instability, and fleeting qualities of a postmodernist aesthetic that celebrates difference, ephemerality, spectacle, fashion and the commodifications of cultural forms" (1989:156).

Cultural historian John Gillis suggests that we are now in an era where *everyone* is encouraged to think of themselves as being in a "perpetual state of becoming" and where people are asked to continuously "retrain, reeducate and recycle" (1996:232; cf. Bridges 1994; Martin 1994, 1999; Sennett 1998; Smith 2001). In the context of emergent economic and political epistemologies and new forms of cultural practice that characterize this transition to a postmodern and postindustrial era, today's worker must be multitasking and forever learning, in a sharp departure from the ideal desired in the more standardized and regular industrial world of the previous century (Gini 2000; Murray 2000; Tomasko 1993). Today's ideal worker is the ever-adapting "person as portfolio" defined as a living bundle of skills. A new culture of work has emerged which emphasizes flexibility over predictability and opportunity over job security.

So Long, "Organization Man"

In the world of sports, a *free agent* is a player whose contract with a particular team has come to an end and who is now free to move about in a larger field of possibilities—specifically, they are free to sign with a team of their own choosing. As with many such terms and ideas, "free agent" has jumped the fence of its original usage, taking up new meaning in another sphere of social and cultural life. In the world of work, the term is now increasingly used to characterize the growing ranks of some 20 million Americans who are in various manners self-employed.[3] In contrast to William Whyte's (1956; cf. Mills 1951) "organization man" of two generations ago, the free agent is largely an independent worker, whether small-business owner, temporary or contract worker. Many are born of sweeping changes taking place in everyday life as the U.S. economy moves from the industrial/corporate job system that defined the working world for more than a century to a postindustrial order. Whether by default (downsizing being a regular part of the postindustrial economy) or design (voluntarily opting-out of unsatisfactory corporate career paths), increasing numbers of U.S. workers are becoming free-agents.

Speaking of the "organization man," Whyte explained that these devoted postwar workers not only worked for their companies, they "belonged" to them as well. For Whyte, they were "the ones of our middle class who have left home, spiritually as well as physically, to take the vows of organization life, and it is they

who are the mind and soul of our great self-perpetuating institutions. . . . [T]hey are the dominant members of our society . . . and it is their values which will set the American temper" (1956:1). Whyte's "organization man" was white, middle-class, and suburban, with values, aspirations, and lifestyles that defined the second half of the twentieth century and gave us a stubbornly persistent vision of the American Dream. This vision was portrayed in TV shows such as the 1950s series *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, with an upwardly mobile breadwinner father, a supportive homemaker mother, and two kids in school. Even if this image was never in reality the extreme suggested by Whyte and others of the time, in contrast to the organization man's predictability and sameness, we now have what might be a dramatic shift in American temper toward unpredictability and diversity in work, family, and community arrangements among growing numbers of free-agent workers.

Evidence of this shift can be found in recent studies of high-tech workers. Daniel Marschall's (2001) study of "internet technologists," for example, explores the emergence of new models for work, family, and identity as well as changing expectations for one's relationship with work. Research in Silicon Valley by Darrah and others reveals how workers there manage the ambiguity and uncertainty of high-tech work through emergent identity strategies which connect to the innovative nature of new technology itself (Darrah et al. 1998, 2001; English-Lueck and Saveri 2001). In addition to these kinds of changes, the influence of broader social forces such as the feminist movement and increasing numbers of women in the workforce over the past thirty years encourages all workers to actively define their identity and lifestyle. With the experience of women entering a male-dominated workplace, today's free-agent has many inventive and recent models (both successful and not) of how one can self-consciously negotiate obligations of work, family, and self.

While free-agents take manifold paths, their journeys begin at a common point of experience and understanding. As the structurally short-lived but culturally important social contract between employer and employee comes to an end, many of today's contingent workers understand the need to become more pragmatic and more proactive. The old contract was an implicit understanding between the two parties, consisting of an often informal trade-off wherein the employer awards security to workers with seniority in return for their commitment (Moen 2001). Today the trust or faith workers might have had in finding and keeping a meaningful job is eroding. Instead of rewarding loyalty, companies shed "excess" long-time employees from their payrolls while hiring younger, often part-time and thus less-expensive staff. These younger workers enter the field at an already insecure state with virtually no guarantee and little expectation of stability in their career. Some free agents may have no choice but to accept the uncertainty of what is quickly becoming the status quo and adhere to a pattern of temporary, dependent, or contingent work. Life-style migrants have both the will and the means to reject this relative passivity and to employ de facto free-agency in a deliberately self-fulfilling and creative way by relocating and starting over.

Active Free-Agency

Alan continues to drive through the nearly blinding snow. We are now on a mission. He wants to show me the place where he was driving a few years earlier when he decided to quit the work that seemed to be killing him and relocate in order to start a new life. Thinking about how much the working world had changed during his lifetime, Alan tells me in a manner a man might speak to his son, reaching out to touch my shoulder, "Brian, nowadays you got to put together your own life." This would become a common refrain in our conversations. Alan's exhortation suggests that we need to figure out as individuals what the good life is. His realization is that popular culture might be telling us through ubiquitous messages what the good life is, but that does not mean we should embrace these interpretations as our own.

> The old American Dream was to buy a house . . . or is it a dream of having a job, a career, and all of the things you receive because of that? You start on a path and then you realize maybe this is a good path, maybe this is the dream . . . a good job, a house in the suburbs and all those trappings. Then that became the dream. This was all coming from outside of me. Because of the circumstances I fell into, it became "This is the direction you should go." It was the logic of where I was.

Alan came to see that he was paying a very high price to maintain that peculiar vision of self, one particular to what were then dominant and convincing interpretations of the American Dream. By not being true to an emerging sense of an authentic or inner self, Alan felt that he was losing this self to a dream that was, in fact, never really his. He explained to me how even the dream itself was something that he found himself claiming over time as he stumbled through different career decisions and related life choices. Given that Alan ultimately came to see what he was doing as trading away his value system, violating a sense of a "true self" for the job, how important did Alan feel that this job had been to his identity at that time in his life? What does having left this job and the life it supported, both financially and habitually, mean now? As noted earlier, as with other life-style migrants, for Alan it is about being able to define himself according to his own moral narrative.

> I would say that working in corporate America was extremely important to my identity at that time. It really defined me for my daughter, for my family. A job title is a definition of a person. Now I can accept the title "Dad." I can accept the title that "I am a husband." Those are important parts of me. Before, those were all pushed to the side. I was Director of Operations. I was *also* a dad or *also* a husband. Now I am a dad, a husband, *and* a property owner. Now those other things are elevated in importance. I can go be Dad for a while and this can wait. Before, I had put in my calendar to be Dad. It's a lot different now. What is the definition of success? Living life the way *you* want to.

When Alan and I thought through it, making rough calculations on the back of a newspaper, we figured that Alan put in much more time doing things related to his present work than he generally accounted. In particular, he spends a lot of time doing what Alan is fond of calling "running around talking to people" and fulfilling other, more informal responsibilities. He doesn't feel any need to account for this time as work. This unconcern is common among the life-style migrants who are small-business owners. Activities like "running around" felt more like engaging in everyday social interaction, especially when one of the things that most characterizes life in the study area for Alan and other life-style migrants is that people here know each other and take the time to stop, chat, and show that they care about one another. As Alan explains, making time for that is important because it supports and defines the choice life-style migrants made to relocate:

> That's one of my *commitments to my lifestyle*. Growing up, my daughter watched me wearing suits and driving a company car and my [much younger] son is now growing up watching me driving an old pickup truck and plowing snow, wearing Carhartts. . . . [laughs] Man, those kids are going to have stories to share. "No, dad was *this* . . .!" and "No, dad was *this* . . . !"

Like other life-style migrants who left behind well-established careers, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, Alan often uses the term "retired" to describe his current social status. But this did not mean that he no longer worked. When he uses it, he is trying to make a statement about having left behind a part of his life defined by not only a particular career but also the lifestyle to which that work contributed. Wearing heavy canvas-and-flannel Carhartt work jackets such as those often used by the blue-collar laborers he once managed, and common among many long-time residents of the still heavily agricultural study area, helped Alan inwardly mark and outwardly display his intended transition. Alan has chosen to define himself in opposition to a career and lifestyle past. But like the ambiguity his younger and older child might one day have about what kind of person Dad actually was while they were growing up (was Dad a suit or a Carhartt man?), Alan is not always sure himself where he's at when it comes down to typical categories. "To this day I don't know how to define myself. [My wife] Beth has finally acquiesced to my preferred definition [or] my preferred word, 'retired.' I prefer to say that, [*laughs*] I guess I'm not retired, but I find it easier to define myself that way."[4]

Defining Personal Watersheds

Many people can point to one or more turning points in their lives in which the impact of a certain event, or possibly a series of critical events, may act as a catalyst for decisions that change the apparent course of their life (McAdams et al. 2001). These events include readily recognizable negative life episodes such as a death in the family, personal near-death experience, serious injury, divorce, or being laid off from work. They may also come in the form of such seemingly positive experiences as birth of a child or a promotion at work. Typically, though, they come in the form of more negative episodes. For example, one 43-year-old

life-style migrant tells a story of a profound and deliberate lifestyle shift in the aftermath of personal tragedy. Describing the work she did before her injury, she explains that her job selling electronic components to the U.S. military was very demanding and stressful. Her husband had long wanted to move some place with a slower pace that he believed would allow them to focus on family. She remained reluctant to take the economic risk of relocation, so they stayed put.

Then she had an accident. She describes how she was run over by a pickup truck while walking at lunchtime. She could no longer work. "I told my husband that now was the time to move. We bought property [in northern Michigan], sight unseen, sold or gave away most of our belongings, and relocated." Within months, they were living in a remote cabin without electricity or many modern conveniences. As with any such incident, her injury exists within the broader context provided by the moral experience of personal and historical events. As a child, she had moved first from Detroit to Los Angeles in the wake of the Detroit race riots of the early 70s. Now as an adult, her decision to move from Los Angeles to rural Michigan coincided with the very year racial violence struck that city hard and left many stunned and reeling with shock. In the case of this seriously injured woman, her injury was the turning point, a catalyst.

Still traveling in Alan's truck, we inch carefully around a corner and head east down a tree-lined road, following a ridge above the bay. Alan looks wistfully at the countryside now visible through a brief break in the storm. After a few moments in quiet reflection, he returns to an earlier description of how he felt stuck in his former corporate life. Using language common to the stories of life-style migrants, he explains that after a number of years of self-doubt about the direction his life appeared to be heading, he was ready for something to challenge the social position in which he felt he had become "entrenched" by virtue of routine and the fear of uncertainty that comes with the thought of making a change. In Alan's case, the challenge to his own status quo came as a threat from his wife that she would move Up North without him.

Although his final decision to relocate was the result of long process of accumulated experience and choices, as with so many life-style migrants, it came down to a single moment that he recalls with great lucidity. In this moment, everything shifted on the very stretch of road we now traveled. He had brought me here, to what was now an essentially sacred personal place, to share his story. In his account, I can feel how the weight of meaningful possibilities tipped an inner scale that pushed him to embrace a change, take a risk, change his life through his lifestyle commitment. His crisis reached a breaking point. Work continued to grate on him, "tearing him down" and violating his sense of right and wrong. At the same time, a personal history of a failed first marriage weighed on his second, now apparently at risk from the same patterns of behavior. Driving down the road, thinking about the direction his life was heading, Alan experienced a self-described ephiphanic moment of personal clarity that lead to his self-transformative conversion experience.

I was coming up [to Traverse City] on weekends. I'd come up here and wouldn't have anything to do. I said, "Gee, this is different up here. There's something different that I can't quite put my fingers on." I was not able to identify it, but you can look back, reflect, and figure it out. I remember driving down this very road one day. I started looking around, looking at the trees. They were starting to change colors in September. I thought to myself, "Why would I leave all this for what I got down there? Maybe I should leave all that for what's up here." I remember that day as clear as a bell. I was driving down the road looking out the window and I realize that I'm fucked up. So you finally say, "I'm forty-five, am I gonna make it to sixty-five? Am I gonna make it to fifty-five? Am I gonna die from an ulcer or a heart attack?"

CONCLUSION: MORAL GEOGRAPHIES

Research findings presented here suggest that anthropologists engaged in research on migration in the United States might consider the narratives of those relocating for non-economic or lifestyle reasons as not only entailing stories of geographic relocation but also personal conversion and moral reorientation. This article proposes that those downsized and downshifting from corporate work who engage in life-style migration understand their relocation experience and frame a broader understanding of their lives in terms of a narrative of conversion and a quest for refuge in particular geographic places where they might fulfill lifestyle commitments and realize potential selves. Recognizing the profound changes taking place in the world of work and their potential consequences for individual, family, and community life in America, this article explores what some who have left corporate work have done in order to claim or reclaim a greater sense of control and purpose in their lives.

Given a rising sense of displacement among the downsized as well as those downshifting, a growing contingent workforce, and mounting disillusionment with the promise of an American Dream as a culturally defined *good* among many members of the middle-class, I have looked at how some corporate workers recognize and act on their de facto status as free agents. My research has identified how, as life-style migrants, some of these workers utilize idealized visions of self, *potential selves*, as personalized roadmaps for starting over through commitment to a self-conscious lifestyle enacted in a geographic place rich with personal meaning. Through Alan's story, we see how corporate refugees may actively embrace their status as a way to pursue personal quests to take control and redefine the good by choosing a place in the world seen as both inspiring and supporting their decision to enact a more "balanced" and "integrated" lifestyle.

In stories such as Alan's, crossing a personal watershed separates one life from another in an autobiographical narrative that helps give coherence to a sense of self. What is now seen as an inauthentic or "violated" self is left behind in a quest to realize that which life-style migrants understand as a more authentic self, what heretofore may have been held as a distant ideal or potential self. For cases

like Alan, this transformation is literally the claiming of a kind of personally redemptive, second chance at life to overcome personal liabilities through identifying fundamental values that can no longer be violated. Life-style migrants attempt to redefine their own personal relation to the good by finding ways to harmonize the material domain, in the form of pursuing a livelihood, with the moral sphere, in the form of family and social relations. It is about getting *reoriented*. As refugees from a way of life characterized by popular conceptions of the corporate "rat race," life-style migrants describe how they "got control" and "took back their lives," rejecting feelings of disorientation, dispossession, and being adrift. Taking back their lives entails being able to define personal identity and orient self to the world according to their own moral narrative.

Charles Taylor (1989:22) says that identity is defined "by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which [a person] can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what [they] endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which [they are] capable of taking a stand." To lack a coherent, compelling, and personally meaningful moral narrative of self is to be without a frame or horizon through which things can take on stable significance and with which a person is able to weigh possibilities as good or bad, important or superfluous. An essential part of selfhood is that a person is positioned—situated in physical and moral spaces within which they can know who they are. This orientation is not only within a culturally informed space of questions about what is and what is not worth doing, it is also a part of how people find their bearings and locate themselves in a particular social and physical landscape. To speak of orientation is thus more than mere metaphor. Relocation to new places is essential for these corporate refugees. In these places, they feel a meaningful connection that they imagine will sustain their commitment to a new lifestyle. The choice of where to live is also one about how to live.

NOTES

1. Lewis Rambo's (1993) approach to conversion characterizes it not strictly as an inner event or singular moment in a person's life but as a complex process involving varied dimensions from the social to the psychological and spiritual. While Rambo's heuristic was primarily intended as a model of religious conversion, it provides a framework for considering the process in which nearly all of the seven stages (context; crisis; quest; encounter; interaction; commitment; consequences) have clear parallels in the experiences of individuals in the realm of secular experience, including the case of life-style migrants undergoing personal changes through relocation and starting over in their work and family lives. Noting how the language of conversion informs popular discourse on personal transformation and growth in a variety of contexts, including, for example, the experience of "coming out" among gays and lesbians, Daroll Bryant and Christopher Lamb (1999) suggest that the

conversion experience can be understood as a secular phenomenon. It also resonates with models provided by popular self-help literature for starting over in the wake of crisis (e.g., Luban 2001; Sheehy 1977), literature frequently consulted by life-style migrants in their deliberations regarding relocation.

2. The term "contingent work" is attributed to Audrey Freedman's usage at the Employment and Housing Subcommittee of the Committee on Government Operations for the U.S. House of Representatives on May 19, 1988. For some the term applies to nearly any arrangement that deviates from the standard model of a full-time wage or salaried job. In 1989 the Bureau of Labor Statistics developed the following conceptual definition: "Contingent work is any job in which an individual does not have an explicit or implicit contract for long-term employment" (in Polivka and Nardone 1989).

3. According to estimates by the U.S. Census Bureau (2005), the number of businesses with no paid employees, including such enterprises as home-based businesses, small retail shops, and construction contractors, was 18.6 million in 2003.

4. For a detailed examination of the meanings of retirement in America today, see Joel Savishinsky (2000), *Breaking the Watch: the Meanings of Retirement in America*. In the book, Savishinsky looks at rural men and women as they approach and experience retirement, and their efforts to make sense of this often-confusing stage of life. He finds that they are deeply committed to defining their own retirement and looks at how these people, as retired, renegotiate their relationships to family, friends, and community.

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