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WELFARE REFORM AND HOUSEHOLD SURVIVAL IN A  
TRANSNATIONAL COMMUNITY: FINDINGS FROM THE RIO  
GRANDE VALLEY, TEXAS

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## ABSTRACT

During the 1990s the U.S. experienced unprecedented levels of immigration from Latin America accompanied by the “feminization” of migration and significant growth in “transnational” communities. In 1996 the federal government passed welfare “reform,” significantly restricting immigrant access to public assistance. In this paper I present data from interviews with 62 families at the Texas-Mexico border to analyze how this affected household survival strategies. The findings indicate that membership in a transnational community strongly conditions survival strategies and the impacts of reform on them. I argue that when analyzed in its transnational context, immigrant-targeted welfare retrenchment functions to ensure that the costs of reproducing a cheap, docile, and flexible labor force remain borne by sending nations, immigrant families, and transnational communities despite increased settlement in the receiving country.

**KEY WORDS:** welfare reform, household survival strategies, immigration, transnational communities

## INTRODUCTION

During the 1980s and 1990s, the United States experienced unprecedented levels of immigration (Singer 2004). Primarily from Latin America, the “new immigrants” possess relatively low levels of “human capital” (Telles 2006), are comprised of relatively large percentages of women and children (Pessar 1999), and exhibit higher rates of welfare use than earlier cohorts (Borjas 1999). They also moved beyond California and Texas to establish transnational communities throughout the United States (Durand et al. 2005). For these reasons, among others, some scholars see the new immigrants as a drain on the U.S. economy and welfare state (Borjas 1999) as well as a threat to the hegemony of the “WASP” culture they hold to be the fount of the nation’s prosperity (Huntington 2004).

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). The change represented the transition from a “welfarist” to a “workfarist” system of poor support (Peck 2001). The law was also an immigration reform act that placed significant new restrictions on immigrant access to welfare (Hagen and Rodriguez 2002). The melding of welfare and immigration reform in PRWORA was not surprising insofar as the goals of each policy arena overlap in at least three ways. First, both regulate the supply side of the labor market, securing cheap, docile, and flexible “labor without rights” (Krinsky 2007; Chavez 2008). Second, both function to “racialize”

their target populations as different and deviant (Omi and Winant 1994), thereby facilitating hyper-exploitation, political disenfranchisement, and social isolation (Fredrickson 2002). Third, both construct their targets as responsible for the increasing distress felt by workers and taxpayers under Post-Fordist capitalism (Chavez 2008; Kretsedemas and Aparacio 2004).

In this paper I present data from interviews with 62 families in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas (the “Valley”) to examine the impacts of welfare reform on household survival strategies in a transnational community. While transnational communities are not new, the concept of “transnationalism” is insofar as it emphasizes the maintenance of active social, economic, and political ties between immigrant communities and their nations of origin through the day-to-day activities of immigrants (Glick Schiller et al. 1992; Glick Schiller and Fueron 2001). In short, transnationalism conceptualizes migrant communities as operating in two (or more) nations—i.e., in transnational spaces—at the same time. This allows them to combine resources from more than one national space as they struggle to survive and get ahead.

After a brief review of the literature and my method I document the survival strategies of respondent families with attention to how they are constructed in the transnational space of the Valley. I then explain how welfare reform was implemented and how it affected survival strategies. Finally, I discuss how the findings inform future applied research and policy development related to welfare

and immigration, emphasizing the need to move beyond approaches that blame poor mothers and immigrant communities for their condition.

## HOUSEHOLD SURVIVAL STRATEGIES IN A TRANSNATIONAL COMMUNITY

Cash welfare assistance (AFDC) was never more than a minor and temporary source of income for the vast majority of families who ever used it. Rather, mothers always combined paltry welfare payments with formal and informal work, other forms of state assistance (e.g., Food Stamps, WIC), and participation in networks of reciprocal exchange. Importantly, access to each source depended, to some extent, on access to the others. For example, cash welfare supported participation in networks by allowing mothers to reciprocate by occasionally giving a friend who regularly provided transportation money for gas (Edin and Lein 1997).

The interdependent nature of these activities led some scholars to worry about the effects of welfare retrenchment on family well-being. Insofar as welfare reform shifted responsibility for meeting the costs of reproducing labor from the state to local labor markets and the private networks of families it raised concern that some families—those in the most depressed labor market areas and with the weakest network supports—would experience significant material hardships (Edin and Lein 1997). More specifically, Roschelle (1997) warned that restricting access to welfare in the wake of 20 years of Post-Fordist restructuring was unlikely to result in mothers finding gainful work. At the same time, she argued, restructuring had likely reduced the capacity of kin networks to “take care of their own.”

These concerns were particularly germane in places like the Valley in which the scarcity of work led to the development of survival strategies that are heavily reliant on network support and various forms of public assistance. These institutional factors are, in turn, related to the unusual way in which the Valley is incorporated into the U.S. political economy, i.e., as a transnational enclave to which migrant labor seasonally returns to “reproduce” itself (Burawoy 1976). A hallmark of its institutional structure is the informality that marks the operations of local governments and labor markets, particularly the *clientelism* around which they are largely organized (Montejano 1987; Maril 1989). The lack of good governance amplifies the role of the family and network ties in household reproduction. It also presents unusual sets of problems and opportunities to immigrant households, particularly those whose members include undocumented residents and/or adults with limited education and ability to speak English.

Two major opportunities or “advantages” are access to low-cost housing and work. As regards housing, unregulated developments known as *colonias* allow families ineligible for a mortgage to purchase land for, as one respondent put it, “\$50 down and \$50 a month for life” (see Pickering et al. 2006). Homeownership, in turn, facilitates the maintenance of multi-generational households in which members combine income from welfare for children, the wages of parents, and the retirement/SSI benefits of grandparents (Staudt 1998:62). As regards work, the Valley presents a vast informal economy that offers myriad opportunities for persons lacking legal documents, formal education, and English skills (Bastida 2001). Staudt’s (1998) survey of a low-income area of El Paso found that nearly 40 percent of households had a member who was working “under the table” for a formal company while 42 percent earned income from the “occasional” provision of services (p. 75). Importantly, the international border itself creates opportunities for informal entrepreneurialism. Staudt (1998) found that profits of 50 to 100 percent were garnered by individuals who purchased goods in Mexico and resold them in the U.S., often to neighbors, friends and relatives (see also Harvey 2011; Pickering et al. 2006).

Of course weak labor markets and governance regimes also present disadvantages, particularly to households that are not connected to local powerbrokers (i.e., “*politicos*”) who exercise significant influence over the distribution of jobs and public services (Harvey 2005; Maril 1989). More generally, the weakness of the public sector means that essential work support services of training, child-care, and transportation must be obtained informally from network members (Harvey 2011; Staudt and Capps 2004; Capps et al. 2004).

In sum, the Valley’s “social economy” (Nelson 2005) is distinguished by the extent to which households, from the elite and middle class to the poor, rely on combining access to federal programs (either as administrators, recipients, or both) with participation in highly informalized institutions whose day-to-day operations span the border. As such, it illuminates the ways in which survival strategies are embedded in place.

As noted, the welfare reform act was also an immigration reform act. The bulk of the estimated \$54 billion it promised to save taxpayers was to be derived from disqualifying certain immigrants not only from cash welfare but also from food stamps, SSI, and Medicaid (Tumlin and Zimmerman 2003). Insofar as new immigrants are concentrated in specific communities, the law targeted such communities, threatening to undermine household survival strategies not only by limiting access to welfare but (at the same time) by withdrawing monies from local economies that de-

pend heavily on federal welfare spending (Marchevsky and Theoharis 2006; Kretsedemas and Aparacio 2004). In the Valley, for example, a "huge" (according to one chain store manager) percentage of grocery receipts derive from food stamps. Similarly, medical professionals receive an outsized proportion of their revenues from Medicaid (Gawande 2009). Thus, the law had significant ripple effects in immigrant communities, reducing the capacity of private employers to hire and forcing layoffs in the public and nonprofit sectors at the same time as it forced mothers off welfare. This not only left immigrant households less likely to find work than they were before reform but, also, less likely to be able to obtain assistance from network members (Harvey 2011; 2005).

## DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The impacts of welfare reform are examined here through a case study of the two most isolated, poor, and "Mexican" (according to respondents) rural counties in Texas: Maverick and Starr. The transnational character of these communities is reflected in, among other things, data which show that approximately 37 percent of enumerated residents were "foreign born" and, of those, roughly 64 percent had not naturalized as U.S. citizens (i.e., they had retained their Mexican citizenship). Over 90 percent reported speaking a language "other than English" at home (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000).

The counties are of interest to theorists of "neoliberal globalization" insofar as that term is understood to reflect a process through which costs associated with the reproduction of labor are "off-loaded" or transferred both territorially, from "core" to "peripheral" nations, and institutionally, from the officially regulated spheres of the market and the state to the unregulated or informal spheres of the family and community (Peck 2001; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2006). The Valley has long functioned as both a territorial and institutional space to which the U.S. has transferred some proportion of the costs of reproducing labor, i.e., as a transnational space in which hyper-exploited and politically disenfranchised migrant labor return for refuge and renewal (Burawoy 1976). As neoliberal policies continue to undo formal institutional regulations and disenfranchise new immigrants, the Valley may be a harbinger of the future of the U.S. interior.

Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews that ranged from 45 minutes to over 4 hours and averaged 90 minutes with a nonrandom snowball sample of 62 households who were either enrolled in TANF at the time or had left the program. Respondents were recruited through contacts at nonprofit agencies, by research assistants, and by other respondents. Twenty-six households were single-female headed while 36 were married or co-

habiting. Thirty-seven respondents were born in the U.S. while 25 were born in Mexico. Among the Mexico-born, 8 were undocumented while 17 were legal permanent residents (LPRs) or naturalized citizens. Further, 45 of the respondents had at least one parent who was born in Mexico. Interviews were also conducted with 98 key informants including local political officials, workfare administrators and caseworkers, directors of third-sector organizations, and employers, among others.

## FINDINGS

### A. Welfare and Household Survival in the Valley

The capacity to combine participation in official work, informal work, reciprocal network exchange, and workfare in multi-faceted survival strategies varied enormously between the married/co-habiting households and those single-female headed. The former were organized around the regular migration of men out of the Valley to work in agriculture, construction, and demolition. Upon their return they collected Unemployment Insurance (UI) and food stamps, and performed informal work as mechanics, plumbers, and construction workers. When their UI benefits expired they went on welfare for two or three months before migrating again. Transportation and child care were not problems as they owned vehicles and relied on their wives/partners to care for their children. What is more, when emergencies struck they had broad networks (their own families and the women's social networks) on which to draw for support.

In contrast, single mothers' survival strategies were severely constrained, first by their reproductive labor and second, by the rigid gender segmentation of the labor market. Regarding the latter, although most respondents reported extensive employment histories their work was concentrated in the downgraded sectors of beauty, retail, fast food, home health care, secretarial, and child care (see Harvey 2011). Poor pay, working conditions, and unreliable childcare arrangements caused most to cycle in and out of the market and led some to pursue migrant farm work in a desperate effort to accrue cash. A 21-year-old mother of two described a trip to Colorado with her uncle and cousins to work "in the onions." Her words indicate the strong work ethic expressed by most respondents:

"Well, it would be every day except maybe on Sundays ... and we'd go from like 5a.m. to 6p.m. or 7p.m. ... cutting onions.... It would be probably 80 sacks and we would get 60 cents per sack.... We would split up the money so it would be like \$25 a day ... and then having to go back to the house, wait for everybody to take a shower, and then just rest. Eat, rest and wake-up and go back and do the same thing again."





Migrant work was not a viable option for single mothers to undertake on their own and those who tried returned to the Valley broke. Thus, their work was limited to what was available locally, often through network members. They sought to complement the inadequate income obtained from the jobs noted above with welfare and various forms of informal work, particularly cleaning houses for \$15 or \$20 each and baby-sitting for \$20 a night. In most cases this work was performed for network members and often done to reciprocate for services rendered, such as transportation, or to repay a loan. The most lucrative informal activity was "making plates," that is, cooking food to sell at schools and other centers of employment. Some respondents had regular customers whom they called in advance to "take orders" and a \$50 investment of food stamps in raw materials could reportedly yield \$200 in sorely needed cash.

The use of food stamps for plate-making highlights the extent to which TANF in Texas failed to provide families with enough cash to meet basic needs. This was due in large part to its history as a racially segregated agricultural state in which welfare payments were set relative to the earnings of tenant farmers and thus never more than a pittance (the maximum AFDC payment for a family of three was \$188 per month when reform passed in 1996) (Winston 2002). A mother who had received public assistance in Los Angeles recalled her first TANF check in Texas as follows:

"I remember the first check I got ... I got scared because over there I used to get \$500 and something [cash] and like \$400 and something food stamps and when I see here ... it said \$180 AFDC and \$180 of food stamps—Oh my God! I was going, 'What?' And I called and I say, 'What's this? I can't live with this!' They said, 'That's the only thing we can help you with. You're not in L.A. anymore.'"

This is not to say that cash welfare was unimportant. In addition to "paying a bill or two" and allowing the purchase of "things for the baby," prior to reform it was a *reliable* source of cash that facilitated access to other sources of support, particularly network support. As noted, network assistance was crucial to meeting their needs for housing, transportation, childcare, and access to work—indeed, roughly half of the single-female respondents lived in the home of a parent or sibling. It was not, however, free. Rather, mothers were expected to reciprocate for assistance by sharing their benefits and performing in-kind domestic labor. As regards the former, one woman who lived with her parents explained, "I give them my food stamps and [use my TANF to] pay a bill." Regarding the later, the following exchange was typical:

"[Interviewer:] Who provides your child care? [Respondent:] Well, right now my sister in-law. [Interviewer:] And how much do you pay her? [Respondent:] Ah, no, I cannot, I don't have the money<sup>1/4</sup>. When she leaves or has an appointment I take care of her kids or do things in the house. But I don't pay her with money."

## **B. "You're Not in L.A. Anymore:" Workfare in Texas and the Valley**

The impacts of welfare reform on households cannot be understood without examining program implementation in Texas and the Valley. By giving states control over TANF, evaluating their performance mainly in terms of caseload decline, and allowing them to transfer a large percentage of program funds to other areas of their budgets (Winston 2002) the federal government incentivized Texas officials to design a program that would push families off the caseload as quickly as possible at minimal cost (i.e., without providing training or support services). The negative impacts of this anti-investment "workfirst" approach were exacerbated in the Valley which not only lacked jobs but, also, a viable welfare-to-work service infrastructure (Capps et al. 2001).

State officials gave regional administrators responsibility for purging the rolls and used a mixture of fiscal "carrots" and "sticks" to encourage them to do so at the lowest cost (Harvey 2011). In short, deterring clients from accessing services for which they were eligible was the primary "service" delivered in Texas (Winston 2002). Deterrence was achieved through consuming respondents' time and resources in futile and punitive activities. For example, participants were required to spend six weeks performing a "job search" despite the fact that seasonal unemployment rates in the counties approximated 20 percent and employers preferred to hire through personal networks. As one Starr County participant stated: "There's not that many places here so where else do we go? They [caseworkers] would say, go to McAllen and all that." McAllen is located 40 miles outside of the county. What is more, those who lacked transportation or childcare were not exempt. As another respondent put it:

"They didn't care if you didn't have the means to go to their places. If you don't go, well, they take away the benefit. There were some girls that would go walking, or they would ride with another friend or something."

The hardships imposed by the search caused many to simply quit. Those who did not—or could not—quit were mandated to perform at least 30 hours per week of "voluntary community service" to work-off their families' TANF and food stamps grants. According to respondents



community service was more demanding than a “real job.” This was highlighted by “Celia,” who was required to perform 51 hours per week. Although she worked at a public office from 9am to 6pm Monday through Friday (45 hours) she needed to perform another 6 hours a week. She explained, “Well, they told me [to] do something else, like sell tamales or something.” Moreover, the rigidity with which this requirement was enforced resulted in her being sanctioned for factors beyond her control:

“Sometimes when [the office is closed for] a holiday... I have to make it up. For example, work on Saturday or working after 6 pm<sup>1/4</sup>. What is going to happen is that <sup>1/4</sup> they’re going to reduce the grant by \$80 or \$75<sup>1/4</sup>. It’s impossible.”

Further, inadequate treatment by some caseworkers also functioned to push families off the program. In Maverick County, respondents reported being misinformed about the effect of their receipt of TANF on their children. As one stated:

Others reported being “yelled at,” “humiliated,” and “disciplined” by some, although not all, caseworkers.

### C. Exacerbating Inequality: The Differential Impacts of Reform on Households

While the major note in Texas’ workfare program was rapid caseload reduction at minimal cost, local administrators had a very limited amount of funds for education, training, transportation, and childcare. According to a former regional workfare administrator, however, the metrics by which they were evaluated (and fiscally rewarded or punished) encouraged the targeting of services to families with the most personal and private resources. Thus services tended to be directed away from clients perceived to be the “hardest to serve” and towards those most likely to deliver administrators a “performance” (see Harvey 2011; Harvey and Pickering 2010).

For example, the most successful respondent was a married man who had graduated from high school, had a solid work history and an extremely strong private network. He was chosen to receive a six-month on-the-job training placement at a nonprofit agency where he earned \$6.00 per hour—in addition to TANF and Food Stamps—while he learned new skills. He was eventually hired by the nonprofit as a regular employee, given more training, and two raises. He described his caseworker as “excellent” and praised the supervisor at his placement, noting: “He gave me the confidence and I went up there and I passed [an exam] so I got a different position and a better pay. Right now<sup>1/4</sup>I’m earning \$7.52/hr.... I think it’s great.”

The overwhelming majority of TANF recipients however, were placed in community service, which was highly effective at performing its deterrence function. In the words

of many, it was a “hassle” and “waste of time.” As one married man who quit put it:

“It was too much<sup>1/4</sup> And then they want you to work for eight hours every day for free?... And if you don’t do it they ... will sanction you?<sup>1/4</sup> They gave me and my family \$250 a month. It’s not worth it.”

Like almost all married couple families who quit, the loss of \$250 had little impact on his families’ survival strategy and no effect on their well-being.

Those harmed by reform were single mothers, many of whom never graduated from high school and lacked work experience and strong networks. They lacked the resources necessary to allow them to quit TANF as well as to complete its requirements (see Harvey 2011). Their experiences were captured in the case of a young mother of three whose own mother had died and who relied on her elderly grandmother for housing and childcare. Mandated to work from 3pm to 10pm five nights a week, she arrived home one night to find that her youngest child had not been bathed and the older ones had not done their homework. Concluding that the arrangement was untenable, she informed her caseworker that she would no longer comply with her work requirement. Rather than helping her obtain a “hardship” exemption, the caseworker threatened her with a heavy sanction:

“[He said,] ‘Well, if you’re not gonna do the hours then we’re gonna cut your food stamps.’ I said, ‘What does food stamps have to do with [it]? That’s for TANF.’ And he said, ‘Well, that’s a new law right now over there in the food stamp office, if you don’t do the hours they’re gonna cut your food stamps and cut your TANF.’ I said, ‘Well how do you expect my kids to eat if we don’t have food stamps?’ And he said he didn’t care, that we just had to do everything they asked [us] to do.”

The 2002 Farm Bill allowed states to sanction the food stamps of mothers who failed to complete work requirements. In contrast to TANF, food stamps were a pillar of household survival no family could do without for long. Indeed, those who reported being denied food stamps were able to prevent children from going hungry only by skipping meals themselves and relying heavily on their networks until their benefits were restored (see Harvey 2005). One mother stated that her children had gone hungry, breaking down in tears as she explained: “What happened was, I really don’t have some money and I really.... It was embarrassing to go to a neighbor’s house [again].”

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

A regional workfare administrator interviewed for this study stated she had a message for TANF participants who could not find work in the Valley: “Just move!” While this often makes sense for householders with high levels of edu-

# The Applied Anthropologist



MARK HARVEY



Welfare Reform...

education and access to well-paying careers, the findings indicate this was not feasible for the many families whose survival strategies were embedded in the social economy of the Valley.

By consuming time and resources that could otherwise be dedicated to performing “real” work and in-kind network exchange, welfare reform reduced the ability of Valley families to sustain multifaceted survival strategies. And while many were able to quit the program without experiencing significant disruptions to their survival strategies this was not the case for the most isolated single mothers who, unable to meet program requirements due to the lack of state investment in support services, were often sanctioned and suffered material hardships as a direct result.

The variation in outcomes suggests that the impacts of reform on households are determined by the *interaction* of factors constituted at three institutional levels: 1) state workfare policy; 2) local labor market and administrative conditions; and 3) households and their networks. Texas officials used their control over TANF to fund politically popular property-tax cuts for middle class homeowners (Winston 2002). Similarly, regional administrators extracted fiscal benefits from the program by strategically distributing resources to select families—thus denying them to others—on the basis of household characteristics. Thus, the variation in outcomes among more and less “well-off” households is explained by the interaction of household characteristics with the organizational interests of bureaucratic actors at the regional and state levels. This is cause for concern. As indicated, the positive outcomes of reform were quite limited while the negative could hardly have been more grave. Whereas the AFDC program may have left the worst-off families stuck in a so-called “welfare trap,” TANF leaves them dangling from a “workfare trapeze” under which there is no net.

Returning to the link between workfare and immigration, the past 30 years have witnessed the increased settlement of labor migrants from Latin America. Prior to reform these “new immigrants” exhibited higher levels of welfare use than earlier cohorts (Borjas 1999). These factors fostered a convergence in discourses about immigration and welfare in the racialized concept of the “underclass.” California’s Proposition 187 (1994) marked the enactment of this convergence in public policy. While struck down in federal court, the proposition was a harbinger of immigrant-targeted welfare reform and its construction of the new immigrants as “welfare migrants” with little interest in “assimilating” to American values (Chavez 2008; Murray 1984). In light of historical explanations of poverty in immigrant communities as resulting from the inability of persons of inferior “racial stock” to “assimilate” (O’Connor 2001),

the convergence of immigration and welfare reform around the specter of a new Latino underclass was not surprising (Chavez 2008). Led by Huntington (2004), this view holds that the failure of the new immigrants to become “self-sufficient” is rooted in Latino culture. Insofar as the distinctions between “cultural” and “racial” traits, as well as those among different “races,” are social constructions, an important question for future research will be to identify to what extent neoliberal policies such as welfare reform function to reinforce (versus deconstruct) notions of essential difference and the hierarchical social relations they support. To the extent that welfare reform has left members of Latino transnational communities worse-off relative to the “mainstream” than they were under AFDC it represents what Omi and Winant (1994) call a “racist state project,” i.e., one that reinforces racialized hierarchy, albeit on the basis of cultural, rather than biological, differences (Fredrickson 2002; Harvey and Pickering 2010).

Contra the underclass thesis, the findings indicate that the new immigrants may be more accurately conceptualized as strivers and survivors and the communities to which they belong less as “welfare colonies” than as sites of entrepreneurialism and thick “social capital.” That said, it is important not to valorize these households and communities as sites of “solidarity” or “resistance” to neoliberal globalization (Smith 2005). The communities examined here are fraught with internecine conflicts, including the exploitation of women by men and of new immigrants by those who barely preceded them. Reliance upon private networks often comes at high price as some of my respondents, all women, were effectively domestic servants in the homes of their husbands and relatives. At the community level, exploitation and abuse were evident in the attitudes and behaviors of some caseworkers, all of whom were Mexican-American, who viewed their clients through the prism of the underclass and appeared to identify-up with the neoliberal policy elites for whom they worked (Harvey and Pickering 2010).

Finally, this study indicates the need to analyze neoliberal policies and their impacts with reference to their global-historical determinants. The plight of households in transnational communities under welfare reform can only be explained with reference to broad institutional conditions which must also be explained through applied research. In the Valley those conditions are derived from its role in the long-standing international migrant-labor regime that exists between the U.S. and Mexico, and through which the U.S. effectively “off-shores” reproductive labor costs. In the face of the feminization of immigration and increased settlement, immigrant-targeted welfare reform functions to keep those costs off-shored. When viewed in this light, the impacts of





welfare reform in the Rio Grande Valley ultimately must be explained with reference to the Valley's status as a transnational space constructed through historically specific, spacialized, racialized, and gendered processes of capital accumulation, state formation, and racial formation.

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