CHAPTER TWELVE

comics as everyday theory: the counterpublic world of Taiwanese women fans of Japanese homoerotic manga.

INTRODUCTION

In Taiwan today, as in many other parts of east Asia from mainland China to South Korea to Japan, tens of thousands of young women are passionately engaged in consuming, producing, trading, talking about and even re-enacting comic-book narratives of love and sex between boys and young men. These homoerotic manga comics are known among their Taiwanese fans as 'BL,' for 'boys' love' (Figures 11.1–11.4). This chapter proposes that interaction with BL texts enables women fans to engage actively with questions of gender and sexuality which are central to their own everyday experience as young female-bodied social subjects, and which can be negotiated 'at one remove' through the BL stories of male homoerotic romance.
figures 12.1 and 12.2: cover and excerpt from the Taiwan edition of Hiromi Sakuta's BL manga 1,2,3


figures 12.3 and 12.4: cover and artwork from a Taiwanese fan-produced (tongrenzhi) BL manga series by dokoshu, based on narratives of male same-sex love among members of Johnny's Jimusho, a talent agency in Japan famous for producing male idols and boy-bands.

Taipei, 2004 and 2005, self-published. (Reproduced with kind permission by dokoshu.)
The BL subculture is based originally on Taiwanese women readers' fandom of Japanese homoerotic manga, known in Japanese as *shonen-ai*, *bishonen* or *YAOI* manga, which first appeared in Japan from the pens of a pioneering generation of women manga artists in the 1970s (Fujimoto 1991; McLelland 2000; Orbaugh 2003; Welker 2006, 2008a,b). Today in Taiwan, BL manga form a major niche market within the broader category of girls' manga (*si1aonu manhua*), and are generally displayed openly in a dedicated section of the girls' manga area in manga rental libraries, rather than being aimed—as one might initially assume—at a gay male niche readership. There are hundreds if not thousands of titles available, covering a spectrum from the 'pure love' (*chun qing*) subgenre, with its emphasis on chaste, child-like romance, right through to the 'H' (hard/hentai) subgenre with its combination of romantic plots and pornographic-style explicit sex scenes. More than two decades after the initial appearance of the Japanese works in pirated editions in Taiwan in the late 1970s, today Taiwan's BL culture encompasses a wide range of texts, practices and sites far exceeding its original instance in the Japanese comics (Lent 1999; Zhong 1999). The BL scene includes not just fandom of commercially produced Japanese *shonenai* manga (in Chinese translation or in the original Japanese), but also Taiwanese fans' do-it-yourself production of amateur spin-offs, in both comic and popular novel form. It includes a flourishing fan culture known as *tongrenzi1i* (from the Japanese *dojinshi*) that holds regular conventions and swap-meets for the fan-produced products, and intersects with the broader COPlay (costume-play) youth culture, in which fans dress up *en masse* in elaborate home-made costumes representing favourite manga characters. Taiwan's BL scene also extends into an additional transnational dimension in a lively internet culture where fans chat and swap artwork and stories with their counterparts in Japan, Hong Kong, South Korea, mainland China, and beyond.

This chapter presents some of the results of an interview-based study I conducted of female fans of homoerotic manga in Taiwan in 2005. I spoke with thirty women between the ages of 19 and 34, including some who produced their own fan editions and were otherwise active in the *tongrenzi1i* subculture, plus one professional male manga editor. Participants were interviewed both singly and in friendship groups, with each semi-structured interview lasting between one and two hours. What follows is a condensed account of some of the extremely rich and complex range of responses that were given in interview discussions about the possible motivation of readers of homoerotic manga. Like most researchers of BL, *YAOI* and slash cultures, one of my own motivating questions when I commenced the study was precisely the question of reader motivation: why should young women flock in such numbers to texts about love and sex between men? What did they get out of their BL fandom? How did it impact on their understanding of real-life gay cultures? How did it contribute to their understanding of their own genders and sexualities? In short, what could it reveal about the cultural constitution of the readers themselves, as young, female subjects in Taiwan? But as our conversations progressed, through the sophistication and complexity of their...
own thinking on precisely these issues, the readers began to teach me that my own
desire, as researcher, to uncover concrete and accurate answers to these questions
might be obscuring a more interesting point about the readers' own proficiency
and pleasure in asking and debating exactly these questions. I began to think that
one of the main things that readers get out of reading BL and participating in BL
subcultures might be precisely the chance to be part of this collective, ongoing
process of thinking about, discussing and hypothesising on—in an informal sense,
theorising—important elements of their own social experience as young, femininsty-
gendered social and sexual subjects, via the mediation of their BL consumption.
The importance of the indirect and collective elements of this everyday
theorising was brought home to me by the extremely different kinds of response
I tended to receive to two of my standard questions. The question 'what is it
that you like about BL manga?'—addressed directly to the respondent as an
individual—in many (not all) cases tended to elicit one-dimensional, dead-end
responses such as 'I enjoy their artistic style,' or 'I find the stories interesting'.
In contrast, the question 'Why do you think that so many young women
enjoy BL?'—addressing the readers indirectly and as members of a community
of readers—was far more productive. The second question plainly solicits what
might be called a theoretical response: it asks for the respondent's hypothesis on
an abstracted social phenomenon, while the first question aims at uncovering
an individualised, 'authentic' motivation on the part of the respondent herself.
While the respondents' preference for the second kind of question might simply
be seen as evidence of some women's shyness in directly confessing individual
preferences and desires to a relatively unknown researcher, I think that the verve
with which they leapt at the second question also indicates a real pleasure in this
kind of folk-theorisin, with the level of abstraction it entails, and respondents' preference for seeing themselves in relation to a community.

Given this, I would frame the accounts that follow as reflexive discourses—
thoughts of self routed through and made possible by BL readership—rather than as
authentic reflections of reader motivation and practices. That is, I am not proposing
that the content of these accounts be taken at face value as an accurate explanation
of why and how Taiwanese women read BL manga; rather, I want to foreground
the immense complexity and richness of the process of producing these discourses
or 'folk-theories' about young women's gender, sexuality and cultural agency.
Such theories are continually arising and being contested, defended and refined
as a direct result of the women's participation in the richly productive world of
BL and its Taiwanese fandom, suggesting that BL manga could productively be
understood as goods to think with for this group of readers.
Crucially for understanding the specificities of feminine-directed BL
(ming xiang BL), these manga were considered by the vast majority of interviewees
to be clearly and obviously distinct from gay (tongxi) narratives. Giselle, a
24-year-old university student, encapsulated the distinction succinctly when I
asked her whether she'd classify BL as "gay":

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asked her whether she'd classify BL as "gay":
They're totally different. I've got a gay friend who says BL is totally not the same thing as gay. He says BL is really just a bunch of boy-girl love stories. It's a bunch of stories that wouldn't really happen in real life. To put it bluntly, BL is a kind of fantasy. It's different from [what] those gay guys [do]. BL is mostly written and drawn by girls.

The distinction from gay identity politics occurs at a textual level as well: a virtual set piece in many BL manga is the speech—in a way, the opposite of the gay coming-out speech—in which one or both of the members of the central male couple vociferously declare himself/themselves not to be homosexual (making the current same-sex entanglement the exception rather than the rule for him/them). Although there clearly exists a very general, conceptual link between BL manga and the homosexual topic, it is equally clear that BL was not generally understood by this group of respondents as offering social-realist accounts of actual gay lives. If not primarily this, then what are these young women looking for in BL narratives?

The question of reader motivation is evidently much discussed within the fandom itself, as the theories offered, while multiple and varied, nevertheless began to show a certain consistency over time, with a handful emerging as the strongest, repeatedly cited hypotheses. The idea that interaction with BL texts enabled young women to engage actively with questions of gender and sexuality was among the most frequently expressed, and it is on this aspect that I will concentrate here. Specifically, clusters of theories emerged on BL fandom as a form of proto-feminist cultural critique, on the one hand, and as a means of readers symbolically negotiating their own gendered and sexual self-understandings, on the other.

On the question of why straight girls should prefer stories about love between two boys over stories about love between a boy and a girl, several interviewees offered critiques of the representation of girl characters in mainstream girls' manga. Musing on the relative popularity of boy-boy manga romance, Zirong, a 25-year-old project manager, connects the general lameness of girl characters in boy-girl romance manga specifically to the generic conventions of mainstream romance:
Petit, a 29-year-old worker in a games company who was very critical of what she saw as the extreme sexism of mainstream boys' manga, went further to frame the collective girls' culture of BL as a slap in the face for the masculinism of older genres of manga:

Nowadays at a lot of anime conventions, men tend to feel sort of as if they've been marginalised by the women—because everyone's reading BL manga now, and it's as if their regular comics have been pushed aside. It's really interesting—at that sort of gathering, BL comics are totally the mainstream, and BL are even quite prominent among the comics you can find at regular outlets, as well. Whereas before [the culture was] very much dominated by masculinist manga.

As these comments indicate, the implied gender critique that many readers find in BL frequently relates to genre critique: BL is interpreted as a rectification of, or a critical commentary on, the limitations of conventional genres of girl-directed popular culture. Several respondents cited the deadening predictability of representations of heterosexual relations in standard BG (boy-girl) romance as a possible motivating factor for their own or other young women's enthusiasm for BL. Vicky, a 24-year-old university student, was especially taken with the gender and sexual ambiguity represented in BL, in contrast to the rigidity of sexual and gender roles in straight romance:

[I like the] ambiguity [of BL], I think it leaves more space for the imagination. As soon as the relation [between characters] becomes too defined, it gets just like ordinary heterosexual culture; it gets limited down to an ordinary love story. But if they don't define the genders too clearly, it's really fun.

[Later] If both characters are very clearly defined as homosexuals, in my opinion that makes the whole thing more or less the same as a heterosexual relation; I mean it right from the start they're defined as lovers, and there's no real space for ambiguity, then their relation is no different from a standard heterosexual one... But if there is some space for ambiguity, then that comes closer to my own sense of what same-sex relations should feel like.

While Vicky values the ambiguity (aimei) in both gender roles and sexual identity for which pure-love BL is well known, Petit enjoys the assertiveness that is often permitted to feminised bottom/insertee characters, which she contrasts critically with the passivity of girl characters in standard straight romance:

I think most of those heterosexual mangas are pretty stupid... The girl characters in them have no brains at all. I guess this might actually be a problem with Japanese manga in general. When the male characters do things to them, hold them down or whatever, they never put up any resistance—that's really weird, to me [laughs]. For some reason they seem to have absolutely zero brains and zero physical strength. But when you read BL manga, if [the top/insertee character] tries anything, [the bottom] gets to resist, he gets to fight back. That seems more like it, to me— in that regard, [BL] seems closer to reality... It's because I don't like that kind of powerless girl character that I don't read those 'normal boy-girl' mangas.
Giselle, meanwhile, cites the greater level of social realism available in BL narratives, as compared with the hidebound clichés of straight romance, as a key reason for her enjoyment of them:

The reason I started reading BL is because I'd gotten a bit sick of ordinary manga. It was right around that time that [BL] books began to appear in Taiwan, and so I started to read them. Then once I'd read some, they brought me some different sort of feelings. Aside from their novelty value, their plots were more attractive, too. BL novels add a bit of social context, or discussion of social morality—things like that. It was quite different from the sort of romances I'd read before, where the boy and girl always just fall in love at first sight and walk off into the sunset to live happily ever after. By contrast, [BL] feels a bit more real.

In addition to the various forms of implicit gender and genre critique that these readers interpreted in the popularity of the BL phenomenon, other responses suggested that BL could be useful to young women readers for the ways in which it facilitates negotiations with readers' own gendered and sexual identities. Readers discussed how they felt that reading 'transvestite', BL, GL (girls' love), and related forms of 'gender-bending' manga when young had helped them formulate both counter-hegemonic forms of femininity and proto-queer gendered and sexual identities. Linking both of these themes, Malfoy, a 19-year-old university student, related:

When I was young I just loved [Chumu Tezuka]'s Princess Knight, because actually that was a dream of mine—to grow up from a little girl into a king. I was very excited by the idea at the time, I was all like—oh wow! Can that really happen? Because I didn't like wearing puffy skirts, or acting all sweet and gentle—and your Mum and Dad would always be on your back, if you played outside: 'hey—remember you're a girl!' What they meant was that you should act dignified and not make too much noise, just sit there like a goody-goody, with a little bow on your head, or whatever. I just hated all that. Where the hell did they get off, saying you're a girl, so you can't run around like the boys? And when I was a bit older, Oscar [the 'transvestite' protagonist of Riyoko Ikeda's The Rose of Versailles] came into my life. Back then I was like: Wow! She's so handsome! She's so cool! In my opinion, girls had the same level of ability as boys. But later when I heard that [Oscar] fell in love with Andre, I was just heartbroken, I felt: you've betrayed me! You don't love Marie Antoinette!
Lesbian or 'T' (butch) identifying respondents also quite frequently cited BL, GL, and other gender-bending manga as a source of alternative gender representations that they felt had related to their own formulation of a gendered and sexual identity. July Monster, a 23-year-old nursing student who self-identified as a 'T,' described her reactions to non-conventionally gendered characters in manga:

Well, it's a boy (character), but yet he's drawn very feminized, or a girl character who's very masculinised, then what I feel is—that I'd like to meet people like that in real life... Basically, myself am a girl whose behaviour is quite masculine, so mostly when I come across characters like that, I classify them in the same category as myself... When I was little I certainly [used to identify with manga characters]. For example I was a fan of [Rumiko Takahashi]'s Ranma—Ranma could turn herself into a boy just by wishing for it, or turn himself into a girl! It reminds me of myself today. If I want to seem feminine for some reason then I dress more girly, or if I want to be more casual then I can do that too. [What I really identified with as a child was] the ability to change genders at will—don't you think that would come in pretty handy?

Simao, another T-identifying interviewee, had the following exchange with Lucifer, an assistant at some of the interviews and herself a prominent personality in Taiwan's queer manga cyber-fandom:

S: I identify most strongly with Seiya, from [Masumi Kurumada]'s Saint Seiya [a.k.a. Knights of the Zodiac]. I actually have a dream someday to transform from Seiya into Dragon Shiryu.

L: Well you've no hope of that in this life as far as I can see [laughs]. So I guess right now we're really talking about 'T' [butch]-style characters. Maybe Seiya represents what we might call a 'hot-blooded young T,' while Dragon Shiryu is more like a 'beautiful youth T?'

S: Exactly. Among the five main characters, Seiya is the one who's always fighting, always struggling, and who has greater strength than all the others. Also he tends to explode without warning. But Dragon Shiryu is more the silent type, more like a 'master of martial virtue,' in the Chinese tradition.

L: More like the young Kuan Yin... [Kuan Yin, a Buddhist deity].

S: No, that's got nothing to do with it. I think that the characters in Saint Seiya are undergoing a Chinese-style development—the process of becoming a 'man of culture' (wenren)... Dragon Shiryu is more like the man-of-culture type, whereas... Seiya is more like a kid from the sticks who's come for the fighting—he'll never grow up.

Simao and Lucifer's translation of the personality and gender traits of the various male mythical characters in the Saint Seiya manga into the 'nonce taxonomy' of Taiwanese lesbian secondary gender (hot-blooded young T; beautiful-youth T; cultured T; martial T, etc.) provides an exemplary illustration of BL's utility as
The fictional characters function as quasi-totemic figures enabling a symbolic processing of Simao's relationship with available identity categories within a local sex-gender subsystem.

Another folk-theory about BL's popularity among young, straight women, which was so common as to approach a kind of common sense among this group of readers, proposes that BL can be seen as the expression of a common feminine sexual fantasy: the visual possession of two beautiful male bodies at once. This 'two-for-one' theory is neatly encapsulated by Malfoy:

Mostly, danwei ['aesthetic'] works require both of the lead characters to be aesthetically beautiful. Their primary purpose is to fulfill straight girls' fantasy: if I can look at two cute guys at once, why would I waste my time with [works that] include a female character? ... [Danwei works] are purely the product of the imaginations of straight girls lying locked away in their bedrooms.

Malfoy's characterization is slightly condescending in tone: at other points in the interview she made clear that she herself was impatient with what she perceived as the unrealistic qualities of these feminine sexual fantasies, especially their strict demarcation of active and passive sexual roles. But other respondents who cited a specifically sexual motive for their own consumption of BL were quite upfront about the genre's fantasy status, and clear about the distinct pleasures this enabled.

Fiona, a 25-year-old worker in a design firm, made the following straightforward statement:

Actually, [sexual] objectification is not necessarily a bad thing, because it reflects reality quite directly: people's psychology really does include an element [that desires] it. Take me, for example: when I rent manga, I'll choose ones that are H ['hard'; perverse; sexually explicit] through and through, because I'm very clear about my own desire to read material that is thoroughly H. Of course if I were reading for the plot then I'd rent manga with more plot development. It just depends what you feel like reading that day—each to her own!

Reflecting a similarly liberal, utilitarian view of H-style BL manga as enablers of sexual pleasure rather than aspirants towards social realism, Shaomo, a 21-year-old university student, spoke even more frankly about the kind of sexual fantasy she prefers her manga to deliver:
What I like is flat chests. That’s right! The ones with flat chests. And I prefer it if they have hermaphrodite genitals, too. BL doesn’t have that, but at least they get the flat chest part right! I have no interest in breasts. ... The whole point is the flat chest. The genitals on the lower part of the body are also extremely important. Because I don’t have that much interest in girls’ genitals, I think it’s best if [the characters] can have both kinds of genitals at the same time. Like there’s this Japanese daimon novelist ... that’s right. Yamaai Shikiko. I don’t like her plots, I can’t accept them at all. But in her stories the bottom/inserter character mostly has hermaphrodite genitals. That’s the one thing I like about her stories.

Such frank accounts bespeak a shared theory that BL readership facilitates a mediated sexual agency in its female fans: not simply the power to consume and enjoy explicit sexual fantasies—a power not readily granted to young feminine subjects in the wider culture—but also the power to become a connoisseur of such fantasies and to share them among a community of similarly minded friends.

counterpublics and parallel worlds.

Writing on the phenomenon of women’s and girls’ fandom of Japanese YAOI comics in Japan and beyond, Mark McLelland and Seunghyun Yoo aptly draw on Michael Warner’s concept of the counterpublic to theorise the community of readers enabled by YAOI readership (McLelland 2005; McLelland & Yoo 2007). Critically modifying Jurgen Habermas’ influential theory of the public sphere as a feature of emerging modern Western democracies, Warner writes:

[Some publics are defined by their tension with a larger public. Their participants are marked off from persons or citizens in general. Discussions within such a public is understood to contravene the rules obtaining in the world at large, being structured by alternative positions or protocols, making different assumptions about what can be said and what goes without saying. This kind of public is, in effect, a counterpublic; it maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status. (Warner 2002: 56)]

As McLelland and Yoo (2007) astutely observe, female YAOI fans can be seen as a counterpublic not only by virtue of their feminine gender—in itself a guarantee of subordinate status in patriarchal societies—but more specifically, in that the collective discourses on gender, sexuality and women’s agency they elaborate through their interaction with YAOI texts critically interrogate “hegemonic (that is, patriarchal, masculinist, heteronorm) codes governing the public expression of gender and sexuality” (2007: 100) in the societies in which they live. The Taiwanese study discussed in this chapter certainly supports this contention. We have seen how these women’s interactions with BL cultures enable them to voice
criticism of the representation of girls and women in mainstream, heterosexual
romance novels and manga narratives; to argue with the ways in which female
subjects are socialised into hegemonic forms of ‘proper’ femininity; and to imagine
and sometimes enact alternatives to this in creative formations of androgynous,
fluid or transgender sexuality; and to think through and assertively express their
own explicit sexual desires in a culture that tends to position feminine subjects as
the objects, rather than the subjects, of sexual desire and self-expression.

As a way of concluding this discussion, I would like to extend the notion
of the counterculture by proposing the notion of ‘worlding’ as a name for the
cumulative effect of the specific kinds of imaginative and material practices that
these women are engaged in. As I intend it, ‘worlding’ refers to the creation
of parallel worlds, both in imagination—as in the texts themselves, with their
invention of a parallel universe of male homoerotic love—and in subcultural
practice. On a textual level, BL manga present their readers with a world of
sex-gender ambiguity, fluidity and sometimes resistance, where beautiful boys
enact fantasy romance narratives and enjoy passionate sex with each other. In
subcultural practice, alternative worlds of feminine sociality are created through
worlding: BL fan culture in a whole range of activities, from reading, Cosplay,
amateur manga and novel production, and internet communities to swap-meets,
conventions and the specialised Japanese-Chinese-English hybrid subcultural
argot that creates an effective exclusionary cordon around ‘BL girls’ interacting
with each other in mainstream public space. In all of the imaginative and
material uses to which Taiwanese women fans put these narratives, we have
seen how BL manga function for these women as ‘goods to think with’: material
commodities that enable creative, pleasurable and self-reflexive practices of
everyday theorisation.

key readings
McLeod, Mark 2000. ‘The Love Between “Beautiful Boys” in Japanese Women’s
Penley, Constance 1991. ‘Brownian Motion: Women, Tactics and Technology.’ In C.
Penley and A. Ross (eds), Technoculture. Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota
Press.
The bipartite classification is something of a simplification: further distinctions can be made between ‘hard/hentai’ (H) BL works and the commercial genre of male homosexual pornography. In addition to—and somewhat distinct from—all of these categories there also exist gay (long) manga that aim to offer realistic depictions of gay male life and target male readerships as well as female ‘BL girls.’

BL culture is perhaps broadly comparable to, albeit also distinct from, ‘slash’ cultures in the USA and elsewhere. Slash is the subject of an extensive field of critical commentary. Some key texts include Russ 1985; Penley 1991a,b, 1997; Bacon-Smith 1992; Green, Jenkins & Jenkins 1998; Cicioni 1998; Brooker 2003. A comparative study of English-language slash and Japanese and Chinese-language BL is outside the scope of this chapter; one clear difference, however, is the relatively high degree of commercialisation of Japanese-originating BL publications as distinct from the still almost purely amateur status of Euro-American slash publications.

The study also targeted fans of the much smaller, less codified group of texts classifiable as ‘GL’ (girls’ love/ female homoerotic manga), but discussion of this aspect falls beyond the scope of this chapter.

The discussion covered both BL and GL, but most discussions concerned the larger cultural phenomenon of BL.

All original responses were in Chinese; these translations are the authors’. Pseudonyms have been used for all interviewees.

This is in distinction to the nantongxie (gay male) subgenre, which unlike nansingshang (female-directed) BL, is concerned with more or less social-realist depictions of gay life.

Some interviewees were looking specifically for social-realist accounts of gay lives; these respondents noted critically that nansingshang BL is not the right place to seek such accounts—as a group, they preferred the relative realism of nantongxie manga.

Other theories linked BL consumption with specific aesthetic and generic pleasures, with negotiations around ethnicity and nationality, and with a generalised social rebellion or anti-conformism. A full exploration of all of these elements is material for a more extensive paper.

The fans in fact produced a far wider and more complex array of ‘folk-theories’ on these subjects than can be done justice in a paper of this length; for this reason, I concentrate here on three common sets of theories as outlined above, that is: BL as gender/gender critique; BL as enabling readers symbolically to ‘process’ or negotiate with their own gendered identities; and BL as enabling women readers to enact particular forms of sexual agency.

See: Motoko Hagio’s comments on BL as an antidote to the predictability of straight romance; cited in Fujimoto, 1991.
Vicky said the phrase ‘love story’ in English.

A key deity in East Asian Buddhism: the Goddess of Compassion, who underwent a process of transgendering from her origins as the male Sanskrit deity Avalokiteshvara. As such, Kuan Yin sometimes functions as a symbol for Taiwanese queer youth.

On ‘nonce taxonomy’ as a creative queer world-making practice, see Sedgwick 1991. She defines nonce taxonomy as ‘the making and unmaking and remaking and redissolution of hundreds of old and new categorical imaginings concerning all the kinds it may take to make up a world’ (23).

These terms include BL (boys’ love), GL (girls’ love), BG (boy-girl romance), shoujo (lesbians), seishun (lesbians), samurai or hanami (serious female BL fans); damaci (aesthetic-style; referring to sensuous, but not pornographic, BL texts with drawings of delicate, feminine young men); haku (a code word for GL manga); qingweis (a code word for BL manga); Zhengzhai/Zhengtai/Zhangtai (Shota/Shoda/Shotaek in Japanese: refers to erotic interest in younger men or boys, and manga that represent this); Lolita/Lolikur (Lolicon in Japanese: refers to the ‘Lolita complex’, i.e. erotic interest in younger women or girls, and manga that represent this), and so on. Many of these terms are based on Japanese kanji but in Taiwan are pronounced in Mandarin pronunciation.
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