Jorge Luis Borges has claimed that “the milonga is one of the great conversational forms of Buenos Aires,” and in his book of milongas, entitled *Para las seis cuerdas,* his poetry turns to such “talk.” In the prologue, he invites the reader to participate and to collaborate in the dialogue. He writes: “All reading implies a collaboration and almost a complicity” (EE1). Yet since the publication of *Para las seis cuerdas* (For the Six Guitar Strings) in 1965, almost no academic attention has been paid to this collection of poems. Not only have the milongas remained quietly ignored even by scholars who treat traditional Argentine elements in Borges’ work, they are conspicuously absent from the text and indices of books dedicated to the author’s comprehensive works. In contrast to the recognition and critical acclaim received otherwise by this noted Argentine writer, the lack of response to his milongas is particularly dramatic and puzzling. It poses the question: Why is it that readers have failed to respond to Borges’ milonga compositions?

Perhaps a necessary familiarity with the milonga genres or mode is missing, since it is essential for an understanding of milongas to understand the historical and cultural Argentine context for this expressive form, and to develop an awareness of the social and aesthetic character of traditional milonga performances. Yet, in order to comply with the author and to fully participate in and appreciate *Para las seis cuerdas,* actual historical and ethnographic data by itself proves less important than an understanding of the dialogic relationship which exists between Borges’ verses and those of the milonga tradition.

In *Para las seis cuerdas* the author adopts an attitude, a mode, required by the milonga which inform his voice and shape his compositions. He engages in that “great conversational form” styled by *criolllos* before him, both in oral and literary creations. In order to respond to and to collaborate in this work, therefore, the reader must be able to hear in Borges’ understated verses not only the strings of a guitar (as the author prescribes in his prologue), but the voice of the poet alternating and merging with a polyphony of voices from the folk and erudite verbal art of generations.

Let us examine, then, the roots and character of the milonga, and briefly outline the relationship of Borges’ compositions to the art of past milongueros. By thus placing the poems within a milonga tradition, we can begin to uncover a way of reading *Para las seis cuerdas.*

Of African origin, the name “milonga” comes from one of the Bantu languages. It is the plural form of *mulonga,* meaning “word” or “wordiness” and suggesting, by extension, verbal entanglement and intricacy. Such oral manifestations took various forms and tones in the Argentine context. “Milonga” was used, for example, to refer to disputes, confusion, or disorder, but also, for instance, to indicate a mischievous lie or gossip. A “milonguero” utterance might be characterized by a boastful, provocative tone, or by a light and humorous sense of verbal play. In each case, though, verbal display and flaunting highlight the speaker’s mastery of words.

The milonga spirit, however, could also take non-verbal dimensions. The term is used in Argentina, for instance, to name a dance, a musical form, and to characterize rowdy, festive, or permissive behavior. A *milonguero,* furthermore, was one who singled himself out through his dancing and singing, and one who at a gathering took command of the social moment through boastful, defiant, and masterful behavior. In fact, mastery and display for the purposes of artistic and social control, and for personal recognition, mixed with playful *desafío* (challenge), lay at the heart of the milonga.

Milonga, therefore, came to signify more than simply “wordiness,” as its etymology suggests. Its parameters were in no way bound to a single genre. More important to its essence was the style and tone, the stance and attitude with which not only words but dance, or song, or
behavior in general were performed. For a better understanding of Borges, however, let us focus here on the verbal dimensions of the milonga.

Traditional milonga verses varied in their meter, their themes, and their temper. Although classically octosyllabic, they could range to fit the music, and the interests of the moment. Their tone and themes could be patriotic, political, critical, jocular, provocative, philosophical, amorous, and at times even narrative. These songs “could be either the repetitions of previously memorized couplets, or its strophes were the fruits of sudden inspiration.” Given its often improvised lines the milonga “was also used to payar” (to engage in an improvised, contrapuntal, poetic contest common among gauchos). In fact, to say “milonguear” in the Porteño suburb was synonymous to saying payar or cantar.

While the payada was the verbal counterpart or duel of the gauchos, however, the milonga belonged to the men of the outskirts. Ethnomusicologist Lauro Ayasterán explains: “. . . next to the traditional payador, acquiring greater stature (around the year 1870) appears the ‘milonguero’ who was to the suburban surrounding what the former had been to the countryside environment . . . .” This milonguero type emerged around the time when the impact of immigration, urbanization, and industrialization pushed the Buenos Aires city limits outward toward the pampa while simultaneously drawing men from the countryside to its outskirts. In the tension of that transition the milonga flourished. “The payador gradually vanished into the milonguero,” Vicente Rossi summarized, adding: “that is why the milonga is the citified payada.”

Borges, of course, knew all this well. He had read Vicente Rossi’s book *Cosas de negros* as a young man and had written in 1928: “This yet unheard of and solitary Vicente Rossi, will be discovered one day with our, his contemporaries’, disrepute and with the scandalous confirmation of our blindness.” He had also come in contact, if only as an onlooker, or guest, with the whereabouts of the milonga. Ulises Petit de Murat, for example, tells of such incidents:

We frequented the neighborhood cafes that were the meeting places for cart drivers, cuartadores (horsemen who made their living by pulling vehicles out of the mud—and who, incidentally, still operate on some Argentine byways), working men who would stay up all night talking, toasting friends, and listening to the music of a sad guitar. Borges still remembers, and admires, a couplet we learned from one of those men. It ends like this: ‘La muerte es vida vivida, la vida es muerte que viene (Death is life that has been lived, life is coming death). Their inventiveness has always fascinated him.”

Similarly, José Gobello notes:

In his youth—it is known—he walked the barrios and befriended some condescending compadres from Palermo, whom he later immortalized in his literature. They were compadres not yet Italianized, introverted and axiomatic; compadres of the guitar and sweet cane, capable of singing things like this: ‘la vida no es otra cosa / que muerte que anda luciendo’ (life is nothing more / than death sporting about). From one of those compadres, Nicanor Paredes, Borges learned the philosophy of the compadre world.

As early as 1928 what Borges had seen, heard, and what he had learned were integrated into an essay about the milonga, included in *El idioma de los argentinos*. In it, he points out not only the milonga’s suburban character, but its gaucho, countryside roots. He writes: “. . . the milonga was of the outskirts. The wooden counter and the compadrito’s guitar generated it and it was perhaps a decantation of the cantar por cifra . . . .” In the same essay, Borges notes the milonga’s defiant, challenging tone, often intended to provoke, in the spirit of a verbal duel. He explains:

That milonga, happy to defy, is the well-known one, it is the one that made itself bold and insolent in bravados about places in Buenos Aires, around the 1880’s. It is the one that got along well with couplets like:

Soy del barrio e Monserrat

where the steel blade shines

lo que digo con el pico

I’m from the barrio of Montserrat

lo sostengo con el cuero.

what I contend with my lip

I back up with my hide.

As in the payada, which Borges called “a kind of duel, but a duel carried out with guitars,” the verbal tension of this “shove” or “thrust” (of this “empuje,” as Borges calls it) is also present in the milonga. “Not only of fights; that frontier was also made of guitars,” he noted, and “milongas express directly what poets have tried to say with words: the conviction that fighting can be a celebration.”

The physical duel, both in the pampa and in the city, was thus elevated by the guitar to poetic and musical metaphor. Milonga verses captured the spirit of a social “enredo” and transformed it into a verbal and literary enredo through a weaving of words. In the course of this process
and as a result of this artistry, an Argentine way of narrating and versifying was fashioned which made for a native, criollo way of speaking. Indeed, it rendered an integrally Porteño “conversational form,” as Borges explains in “La canción del barrio”:

The milonga is truly representative. Its common version is an infinite greeting, a ceremonial gestation of flattering verbiage, corroborated by the ponderous pulsation of the guitar. It sometimes narrates bloody events without hurry, duels which take their time, deaths of valiant spoken provocations; other times it pretends to simulate the themes of destiny. Its airs and arguments will vary; what does not vary is the singer’s enunciation, pulled along, with rushes of weariness, never loud, between conversational and sung... The milonga is one of Buenos Aires’ great conversational forms...22

It is precisely within this conversational, dialogized mode that Borges writes his own milongas. By so doing he actively engages himself in the Argentine, payadoresque tradition—a tradition which speaks to and from a historic, folkloric, musical, and literary, as well as a personal and biographical past. It is a complex, and in some sense, daring undertaking on his part, for he asserts himself as a milonguero, as a wielder of words, and as a descendant of the payadores and creators of cifras.23

This marks a change, a leap, in Borges’ writing. In Para las seis cuerdas he no longer writes about the milonga and the payada tradition, as he had done in his earlier days. He actually takes up the challenge here to engage in “milonguicity.” Through his milonga compositions Borges merges his voice with those of other criollos—both erudite singers and popular neighborhood or countryside poets. He puts himself to the test and contest of the milonga. “In my milongas,” Borges tells us, “I have done my respectful best to imitate the joyous courage of Hilario Ascasubi and of the old-time street ballads [coplas] of the different neighborhoods of Buenos Aires.”24 And earlier he had said: “I would like these verses which, granted, need musical backup, to be of the liking of Hilario Ascasubi.”25 Gobello, moreover, observes: “In those lyrics [of Borges’ tangos and milongas] a payador-like tone is displayed. I think that the compadritos would have written them just like Borges, had they not been illiterate.”26 The latter is a compliment indeed, for it suggests that Borges, without turning to Lunfardo (the street language of the hipster-like compadrito) or to a nostalgic tone, could render (as he hoped) a native, genuine milonga. “I have wanted to elude the exagge-rated sentimentality of the inconsiderable “tango canción” (tango song) and the systematic use of Lunfardo, which infuses the simple couplets with an artificial air,” he writes in his Para las seis cuerdas preface (EE1). Earlier, he had commented in “La historia del tango”:

Certain composers of today seek that valiant tone and concoct, sometimes felicitably, milongas of the lower Battery or of the Barrio Alto, but their works, music and lyrics studiously antiquated, are exercises in nostalgia for what was, laments for what is lost, essentially sad though happy in tone. They are to the rough and innocent milongas that Rossi’s book contains what Don Segundo Sombra is to Martin Fierro or to Paulino Lucero.27

Borges’ milonga writings mark an important part in his search for a native, Argentine idiom.28 Like Hernández’ poem, they weave and superimpose a range of Argentine voices and allusions which together render a polyphonic text. As such, Para las seis cuerdas assumes a degree of criollo familiarity, and requires that, like Borges, the reader take a leap and engage in a milonga-like reading/response. This, of course, necessitates that we hear the milonga verses as part of a contrapuntal, dialogic discourse shaped and informed by Argentine folk, literary, social, and historical tradition.

“Dialogic” refers here (and earlier) to the term employed by M. M. Bakhtin, where “dialogism” is defined as “the characteristic epistemological mode of a world dominated by heteroglossia.”29 Such a world, in this case, is the Argentine framework in which the milonga emerges and thrives. Here, “milonga talk” defies the kind of authoritative discourse where, although ambiguity or multiple meaning may be present, the voice is rigid: speaking at instead of with. Quite the contrary, Borges’ milongas and milonga renderings in general are “conversational,” dialogic. They involve a multiplicity of social voices which thrive on irony, on a tongue in cheek delivery, on a suggestive, understated, and allusive kind of speech which recalls (or implies at least) a previous utterance, a simultaneous aside, or a dialogue. In this manner, each milonga shares authority with its very tradition, and with its audience. It is composed by countless and often anonymous authors. In this type of discourse, Bakhtin suggests, “everything means, is understood, as part of a greater whole,” insuring the primacy of context over text.30

The notion of “contextuality” has already been thoughtfully discussed, for example, in articles such as Emir Rodriguez Monegal’s...
"Borges: The Reader as Writer," where he takes up Genette's suggestion of the completion of the text by way of the reader's participation in Borges' work. But what has not been satisfactorily considered are the different conventions which govern our reading, and the different frames which define our "contexts." Borges tells us in the preface to Para las seis cuerdas, for instance, that to read Fausto or Martín Fierro, two gauchesque texts, the reader must make specific admissions (EE1). "In the modest case of my milongas," he says, "the reader must substitute the missing music with the image of a man who hums, on the threshold of his zaguan or almacén, accompanying himself with a guitar. The hand fingers on the strings and the words count less than the chords" (EE1).

The milonga author requires, in other words, that the reader respond not only to the words of a written text but that he recall a specific contextual frame—and that he do this, furthermore, in the criollo spirit in which the work was composed. The milonguero challenges the listener/reader to enter into dialogue not only with him but with the ethics and the aesthetic of the milonga world. He asks, in short, that we not be limited by that which appears linear or literal ("the words count less," Borges tells us), and that we expand our notion of "text" to include the extra-textual, the sociocultural fabric which perpetuates the milonga.

Although this is not a close analysis of Para las seis cuerdas, certain aspects of these poems may be examined and read in the spirit of the reflections expressed in this discussion.

Reminiscent of Martín Fierro, who calls for divine inspiration and the aid of his muse, Borges turns to the guitar to recall past histories and to bring memory to life. He writes in "Milonga de dos hermanos" (Milonga of Two Brothers):

| Traiga cuentos la guitarra           | Let the guitar bring us tales
| De cuando el fierro brillaba,        | Of when the knives used to flash,
| Cuentos de truco y de taba,          | Tales of gambling and of dice,
| De cuadreras y de copas,             | Horse races and hard drinking,
| Cuentos de la Costa Brava            | Tales of the Costa Brava
| Y el Camino de las Tropas.           | And of the old Drovers' Trail.
| Venga una historia de ayer           | A story of yesterday
| Que apreciarán los más lerdos;        | Of appeal to all comers;
| El destino no hace acuerdos          | No deals can be made with fate,
| Y nadie se lo reproche—               | So no one should reproach it—

Ya estoy viendo que esta noche
Vienen del Sur los recuerdos.
I'm aware now that tonight
Memories come from the South.

The story which follows in this milonga is one that Borges has already written in prose. It is the story of the eternal duel, always present in Argentine history and folklore. In this instance it occurs between Juan Iberra and his brother, and more generally represents the contest between North and South, the counterpoint between payadores, the rivaling versions of the same story. Implicit, one could even argue, is the poem's allusion to the duel between Fierro and el Negro, and to the consequent dialogic relationship between Hernández and Borges.

But Borges' milongas do not echo only Hernández' poetry or the literary gauchesque tradition. The author of Para las seis cuerdas also engages in dialogue with common, though heroic, compadres. He relates:

I was once at a meal, and the payador, a good man, dedicated verses to all those present, and I liked the strophe he addressed to me, because it began 'Y a usted, compañero Borges / lo saludo enteramente.' That idea of a kind of a 'social greeting' seemed very nice to me and I asked him to write it down later.

Not only did the payador write it down, but Borges responded to this "social greeting" years later when he composed "Milonga de Nicanor Paredes," which opens:

Venga un rasgueo y ahora, Give us a strum and now,
Con el permiso de ustedes, With the permission of those
Le estoy cantando, señores, present,
A don Nicanor Paredes. (EE20) Gentlemen, I'm going to sing

To Don Nicanor Paredes.

This kind of greeting—this dedication or celebration—however, is also a "fórmula" which adheres to the traditional milonguero's repertoire, and which in these poems render a milonga-like discourse. Borges himself noted that his milongas were largely composed from verses sung by his predecessors, by other criollos. These depended on formulas and turns of phrases such as "con el permiso de ustedes" or "aquí me pongo a cantar." Similarly, for example, Borges calls on traditional proverbs "En casa del jabonero / el que no cae se rafa" (EE22), or on popular sayings "Más bravo que gallo inglés" (EE36). He turns to folk humor "Un balazo lo tumbó/En Thames y Triunvirato; / Se mudó a un barrio ve-
cino, / El de la Quinta del Nato” (EE32). And he includes the mordant, ironic kind of understatement common among pui sanos and compadres “Un acero entró en el pecho, / Ni se le movió la cara; / Alejo Albornoz murió / Como si no le importara” (EE46).

Yet the “social greeting” mentioned earlier serves not only to recall “milonga talk” but also to address or to identify an audience, and to establish thereby a familiar and conversational tone. Borges begins, for example:

A un compadrito le canto
Que era el patrón y el ornato
De las casas menos santas
Del barrio de Triunvirato. (EE30)

and

Alta la voz y animosa
Como si cantara flor,
Hoy, caballeros, le canto
A la gente de color. (EE34)

and

Milonga que este porteño
Dedica a los orientales,
Agradeciendo memorias
De tardes y de ceibales. (EE38)

Often Borges’ “responses” to other milongueros are not as explicitly stated as the one to Nicanor Paredes, yet we hear echoes of past popular milonga verses woven into Borges’ poems. Such is the case with the words of the milonguero Arnold. Borges tells us:

I have heard in a suburb of Buenos Aires a milonga, a milonga composed by a jail-bird in Tierra del Fuego, a convict who, curiously had the same name as Matthew Arnold: Arnold’s milonga. And in that long milonga, almost metaphysical like the end of Martín Fierro, I have found extraordinary verses like the following:

La muerte es vida vivida,
la vida es muerte que viene,
y la vida no es otra cosa
que muerte que anda luciendo.

Borges’ reference here is to Enrique Vicente Arnold whose composition “De profundis” includes other such metaphysical concerns, which defy popular expression. Arnold’s milonga, for example, says:

En la humana comprensión,
con majestad grave y muda,
germina en todo la duda,
según mi interpretación.

Las cosas son y no son,
por ley de su propio ser,
nada es eterno a mi ver,
pero sin tampoco tiene:
del hoy el mañana viene
y el hoy viene del ayer.

We see this philosophy echoed in Borges’ “Milonga de Manuel Flores” where a similar understated, deceptively simple, and apparently logical reasoning about life and death occurs:

Manuel Flores va a morir.
Eso es moneda corriente;
Morir es una costumbre
Que sabe tener la gente.

Mañana vendrá la bala
Y con la bala el olvido;
Lo dijo el sabio Merlín:
Morrí es haber nacido. (EE48)

Again in “Milonga de Calandria,” the reader/listener is drawn back to voices and personages from the past. One recognizes in Calandria, for example, that “last Argentine outlaw” carefully sketched for us and immortalized by Paul Groussac. Groussac’s narrative, in turn, perpetuates the story told to him by an estanciero from Entre Ríos of the courageous, defiant, and playful gaucho/péon, Calandria, famous for his duels.44 Similarly, we are reminded by this milonga of an early tango written by Villoldo, a milonguero and author of those festive tangos which Borges likes and which scholars argue are derived from the milonga.45 Villoldo’s version, also entitled “Calandria,” sings the following boasts which, though defiant, are most endearing. It opens:

Aquí tienen a Calandria
que es un mozo de renombre,

and continues:

el que cantando milongas
siempre se hace respetar.
No hay compadre que me asuste,

In our human comprehension, with grave and silent majesty, doubt germinates in everything given my interpretation. Things are and they are not, by law of their own being, nothing is eternal to my seeing nor does it have an end: from today tomorrow comes and from yesterday comes today.46
not even the bravest knife fighter,
because I know, when pressed,
how to handle a steel blade.
I've never known fear
and I never get scared,
and if anyone wants to top me
they've got a lot to sweat."

Borges' version, in turn, sounds like this:

Servando Cardoso el nombre
Y No Calandria el apodo;
No lo sabrán olvidar
Los años, que olvidan todo.
No era un científico de éstos
Que usan arma de gatillo;
Era su gusto jugarse
En el baile del cuchillo.
Fija la vista en los ojos,
Era capaz de parar
El hachazo más artero.
¡Feliz quien lo vio pelear! (EE5)

The name is Servando Cardoso
And the nick-name No Calandria;
Not even oblivious time
Will be able to forget it.
He wasn't one of those scientists
Who used weapons with a trigger;
He was pleased to stake his life
In a dance with his knife.
With his eyes and sights fixed,
He was capable of stopping
The most dexterous "axe" blow.
Happy those who saw him
fighting!"  

A song about Calandria is particularly interesting here, furthermore, since the apodo (nickname) of the character is also the name of a native Argentine bird. Not just any bird, the calandria represents a symbol of freedom to the country people, and is known for its ability to sing in any voice. The bird is a perfect mimic, known by the folk as the poet of the countryside. Its name thus inspires popular sayings which celebrate, as does Borges, the gaucho singer's values and his verbal art. "Libre o muerto, como la calandria" or "Calandria y gauchito, dejarlos libre" are examples which underline the gaucho's resistance to authority. And "Tiene pico e calandria" or "Calandria pa el amor" indicate the seduction, cleverness, and sweetness of a "calandria's" song or words."

Another device used in Borges' milongas to create a dialogic tone is a series of questions which are posed to the audience. His readers are challenged to reconsider the past and to redefine the future by looking back on Argentine history and tradition. Such is the case, for example, in "¿Dónde se habrán ido?" where Borges responds to the interrogation at the end of this milonga with an insistent refrain: "No se aflija. En la memoria." (Don't worry. In memory.) Earlier in the poem, perhaps echoing the verses of Pierro and Hernández ("Me tendrán en su memoria/ para siempre mis paísanos"), Borges declares:

—No se aflija. En la memoria
De los tiempos venideros
También nosotros seremos
Los tauras y los primeros.

To similar questions posed previously in the poem "El tango," Borges had responded:

—Don't worry. In the memory
Of coming days
We also will be
The foremost and the brave.

Both answers, in essence, bring us back to the milonga, and to the six (guitar) strings. There, in the music of the lyrics/poems, memory (history, folklore, popular voices, etc.) is recalled by the milonguero/poet, and celebrated by the collaborative reader willing to draw up "the image of a man who hums... accompanied by the guitar" (EE1).

When questioned why he had "condescended to the milongas," Borges replied "I have not condescended. I have elevated myself to them! But it is not I who have written them." He added, "It is all the criollos I carry in my blood." Similarly, we too must read these compositions against a backdrop of their full criollo tradition—a challenge to which this essay has only begun to respond. Indeed, much more unravelling of Borges' milongas remains to be done. The following are defiant, traditional milonga lines:

Caballeros milongueros
la milonga está formada.
El que sea más milonguero
que se atreva y la deshaga.

Milonguero gentlemen
The milonga is formed and there
Let the one most milonguero
Try to undo it if he dare.

Perhaps they will invite readers to "elevate" themselves (like Borges) to the challenge posed by Para las seis cuerdas.
NOTES

1. Some revisions have been made in the text as it was delivered at the Symposium on the Poetry of Jorge Luis Borges, Dickinson College, April 6–8, 1985. I wish to thank Linda Taranik Grimm, Günel Gün, and Diana Grossman Kahn for their critical comments and editorial suggestions after reading a draft of this paper.


4. In spite of the limited treatment of Para las seis cuerdas by scholars, it is interesting to note that Borges’ milongas have been acknowledged and recorded by popular singers. These include tango interpreters as well as singers of more traditional and rural folk music (e.g., Edmundo Rivero, Josefiná, Susana Rinaldi, the Cuarteto Zupay).

5. By “dialogic” I refer here to the term as it has been employed by M. M. Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).


9. Rossi, Cosas de negros, 120.


11. Rossi, Cosas de negros, 115.

12. Rossi, Cosas de negros, 24.


15. Jorge Luis Borges, El idioma de los argentinos (Buenos Aires: M. Gleizer, 1928): 135. The cifra, briefly, was a contrapuntal way of verbal dueling used to payar, in which the sides “challenge” each other with highly defined verse. For a definition see Félix Coluccio, Diccionario folklorico argentino, vol. I (Buenos Aires: Luis Lasserre y Cía. S.A., 1964): 78. Roberto Selles, furthermore, writes about the milonga: “It was, and still is common, in this type of music, to apply the same melody for different lyrics. This is called ‘cantar por milonga.’ The same had occurred with the cifra, the estilo and, even, with other genres, like the vals;” 2099.


22. See footnote 16.


27. Dobello, Conversando tangos, 15.


35. At the end of this milonga, in the lines, “Asi de manera fiel / Conté la historia, hasta el fin,” the last verse of Borges’ need to give us “the end” of Martin Fierro’s and the Negro’s duel in the story “El fin.” By so doing, Borges enters into contest / dialogue with José Hernández.
42. See Rossi, Cose de negros, 147, for example, or José Gobello, “Tango, vocabulo controvertido,” La historia del tango, No. 1 (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Corregidor, 1976): 143. Examples of sheet music also attest to this, where compositions are labeled “milonga-tango” or “tango milonguesado.”
44. The last word in this stanza could be “it” or “him” since the last line can refer both to the person or to his name. See also the translation by Norman Thomas di Giovanni in Borges, In Praise of Darkness, 8.
47. Carlos Cortínez, “Con Borges,” Anales de la Universidad de Chile, (enero-diciembre 1967): 142–143. It is also worth noting here that the poem Borges considers to be among his most accomplished in this interview is, “y por qué no, algunas de las milongas . . .”

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