

Language teacher diffraction and sociomaterial narrative: Teacher-scholar becoming through *Pedagogy of the oppressed*

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Conversations about posthumanism and new materialism in TESOL (e.g. Pennycook, 2018; Porter & Griffo, 2021) can seem abstract and pedagogically inaccessible to language educators. In this article, I explore the theoretical and pedagogical importance of posthumanism by complicating teacher reflection through the practice of diffraction. I illustrate diffractive practice through a narrative of my own affective entanglements with a copy of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, which presents the text as a physical artifact that evokes professional, intellectual, and spiritual transformation. This diffractive telling offers a deeper understanding of my own teacher-scholar becoming that centers difference and tension over reflective response.

To be made happy by this or that is to recognize that happiness starts from somewhere other than the subject who may use the word to describe a situation...[It] functions as a promise that directs us toward certain objects, which then circulate as social goods. (Ahmed, 2010, p. 29)

As a K-12 English language teacher and recent doctoral graduate in Applied Linguistics, my teacher-scholar journey can be described as a balancing act between the philosophies of academia and pedagogies of the language classroom. In my experience, philosophical terms such as structuralism and poststructuralism can often feel inaccessible and pedagogically irrelevant to educators, despite such concepts forming the foundations of language teaching practices commonly used in our classrooms. Consider, for example, research on language teacher identities over the past few decades that has explored intersecting subjectivities such as race (Kubota & Lin, 2009; Motha, 2006), gender (Pavlenko, Blackledge, Piller, & Teutsch-Dwyer, 2001), and social class (Block, 2014; Vandrick, 2014). Informed by poststructural theoretical frameworks that interrogate social discourses of power and dominance (Norton & Toohey, 2011), such studies have been foundational for the development of critical (Crookes, 2013), anti-racist (Motha, 2014), and multicultural (Nieto, 2018) pedagogies found in many classrooms today.

Such connections, however, have developed and been refined over decades of research and practice. As scholars call for new ways forward in studying language teacher identities (Varghese et al., 2016), including alternative theoretical frameworks that move beyond poststructuralism (de Costa & Norton, 2017), conversations about newer philosophies like posthumanism and new materialism (Pennycook, 2018; Porter & Griffo, 2021) may seem too abstract and pedagogically inaccessible for language teachers. In this article, I briefly describe the theories of posthumanism and new materialism in TESOL and Applied Linguistics, and then explore pedagogical implications of such paradigms in language teacher education. I do this by complicating the common practice of teacher reflection using a lens of diffraction, which I illustrate through a narrative of my own teacher-scholar becoming with a copy of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the oppressed*.

Posthumanism and new materialism

There are many forms of posthumanist thought and inquiry across disciplines. I draw from two prominent theorists—Braidotti and Barad—in order to understand the central concerns of posthumanism. Braidotti (2013) describes posthumanism as “a qualitative shift in our thinking about what exactly is the basic unit of common reference for our species, our polity and our relationship to the other inhabitants of this planet” (p. 1–2). In other words, posthumanism

problematizes the centrality of humanism in our understandings of the world. Pennycook (2016), while navigating the “chaotic field” of posthumanism, asks, “How did humans come to be human? What do such definitions exclude? How may the notion of the human be changing?” (p. 1). Though they appear simple, these questions illustrate well the primary inquiry of posthumanist thought.

Alternatively, Barad (2007) describes posthumanism as “eschew[ing] both humanist and structuralist accounts of the subject that position the human as either pure cause or pure effect, and the body as the natural and fixed dividing line between interiority and exteriority” (p. 136). This definition highlights another central tenet of posthumanism: a critique of prominent dualisms (e.g. human/nonhuman, subject/object, body/mind, etc.) and embrace of relational complexity. By de-centering the human and complicating relationships, new epistemologies arise for understanding language and thought across time and space. As Pennycook (2016) says,

No longer, from this point of view, do we need to think in terms of competence as an individual capacity, of identity as personal, of languages as entities we acquire, or of intercultural communication as uniquely human. Posthumanist thought urges us not just to broaden an understanding of communication but to relocate where social semiotics occurs. (p. 2)

One line of posthuman inquiry where this relocation occurs and offers novel insights for language teaching and learning is that of new materialism.

Very generally, a new materialist approach seeks to re-insert matter into our research and pedagogy. Porter and Griffio (2021: cover) describe it as “an invitation to locate theorizing, researching, and teaching practices within the rhythms and textures of our material, sensory, and perceptual lives”. While poststructuralism emphasizes the discursive construction of reality, and matter as produced by or in service to discourse (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012), the new materialist shift seeks to reconceptualize the matter–discourse binary and complicate the boundaries between them as entangled and mutually constitutive. Matter and discourse are not wholly separate entities, but each produces and is produced by the other. Embracing entangled relationships such as this has the potential to produce novel perspectives on language teacher education and identity, and a much deeper understanding of the dynamic interactions that occur in educational spaces. For

the purpose of this article, I draw from the concept of “diffraction” (Barad, 2014) to complicate the common practice of teacher reflection and a new materialist understanding of objects and affect (Ahmed, 2010) to better understand my teacher-scholar becoming.

The Practice of Diffraction

Barad (2014) defines diffraction as the “cutting together-apart (one move) in the (re)configuring of spacetime-mattering” (p. 168). As I consider my own teacher-scholar becoming, this reconfiguration of “spacetime-mattering” is particularly important as my hopes, goals, and practices fold in on one another, rejecting linearity and chronological understanding. Diffraction complicates traditional notions of reflection in teacher education and offers an alternative perspective (and practice) that embraces complexity and difference. In fact, differentiating between the physical characteristics of reflection and diffraction, Barad (2007) states, “Both are optical phenomena, but whereas the metaphor of reflection reflects the themes of mirroring and sameness, diffraction is marked by patterns of difference” (p. 71–72). Barad’s metaphor uncovers some problematic assumptions present in the practice of teacher reflection.

While teacher reflection has become a ubiquitous and seemingly mandatory concept in teacher education programs, the meaning and methods of the practice are often vague, varied (Beauchamp, 2014; Hatton & Smith, 1995; Otteson, 2007), and undefined (Bozalek & Zembylas, 2017). The emergence of reflection in education has been attributed to Schon’s (1984) *The reflective practitioner*, a psychological study on how various professionals reflect in and after action to problem-solve and improve, often through replication and repetition (Otteson, 2007). In the classroom, this can play out in two ways. In the first, teachers often “reflect” classroom practices as they have been taught in teacher education programs. Such pedagogy is often presented as “best practice,” and thus replication in other learning environments should produce optimal results. Should that not be the case, reflection occurs in a second manner. Pedagogical scenarios are played back, either through memory or physical media, for teachers to interrogate and determine what worked, what failed, and what to adjust when repeating such practices in future instances. In TESOL, the concept of reflective practice has been expanded upon, structured, and measured as a means of

describing novice and expert teaching practices and experiences (Farrell, 2013, 2015, 2016).

These approaches, unintentionally or otherwise, promote teacher reflection as a practice of perpetual auditing in relation to pre-determined standards that include very real consequences in our high-stakes educational system. While self-regulation can lead to empowerment and a sense of personal liberation from control (Siebert & Walsh, 2012), in my experience, teacher education programs and public schools can often constrict reflection to repetition and troubleshooting rather than expand it for holistic development. As a U.S.-based language educator, I prepare annually for observation and evaluation of my teaching skills, among which reflection plays a prominent role. This evaluation is administered by school leadership in accordance with guidelines developed by my state's Department of Education in compliance with federal regulations. The prescriptive trajectory for this action is fairly linear: federal government → state department → school district → school → classroom. The descriptive feedback is just as linear in the opposite direction: written assessment and evaluation of my classroom teaching as part of the school within a school district reporting to the state in compliance with the federal government. This prescription and description form a cycle of accountability that disregards complexity in dynamic classrooms in favor of distinct and easily measurable practices. Teacher reflection often occurs in service to this cycle: replication of measurable standardized practices as means of surveillance and control of educators.

This trajectory between traditional teacher reflection and evaluation as a means of social control illustrates how artificially simplified linear relationships are a manufactured and skewed version of reality. Reflection can reinforce such skewing by simplifying pedagogy as replicated practice with objective and measurable cause and effect results. The concept of diffraction, however, complicates reflection by emphasizing difference and potentialities in entangled relationships. This complex approach embraces the ambiguity of non-linear relationships and “moves us away from habitual normative readings and accounts grounded in discursive readings that often fail to account for material intra-actions” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 115). For the purposes of this article, then, I offer a diffractive reading of my own teacher-scholar becoming that complicates traditional approaches to reflection. By writing an autobiographical

account of the problems, tensions, and potentialities between myself and a particularly meaningful textbook, I describe my sensory responses towards that curricular object in a way that diffracts processes of professional and identity development.

Curricular objects and affective entanglement

Pre- and in-service teachers prepare to enter classrooms to enact pedagogies grounded in theory and practices they often learned in college courses. In addition to lectures and workshops, such pedagogical theories and practices are primarily disseminated and encountered through texts—articles and books—that the students are assigned to read and engage. The traditional approach to and use of these texts is that of mere containers, depositories of knowledge to be acted upon through literacy practices and applied in future teaching contexts. Less attention is given to *how* students use a text, aside from reading and learning from it. Apart from knowledge-through-language, the texts are inconsequential as objects, sold for pennies on the dollar at the end of the semester. Concepts such as Ahmed's (2010) “happy objects” offer a new materialist perspective for envisioning the complexity involved in our relationships with curricular materials.

Re-inserting matter into language teacher education and identity compels us to consider curricular resources as objects that act and are acted upon in teacher preparation. Teacher reflection from this perspective becomes diffractive: a consideration of the entangled relationships of agents—human and non-human—in educational spaces and how they intra-act (Barad, 2014). Porter and Tanghe (2016) use the concept of emplacement to explore “a seamless blending of the human and nonhuman” in an attempt to understand “relations between material settings, objects, and spaces, with particular respect to the way they contribute to experiences of the self” (p. 773). Complicating traditional relationships between agency and identity, the blackboard in Porter and Tanghe's graduate TESOL course was just as much an agent in the constitution of classroom identities as student or teacher activity. Hickey-Moody, Palmer, and Sayers (2016) develop the idea of diffractive pedagogy “as an example of the type of learning that can take place when materiality and entanglement are considered as vital constituents” (p. 226). By using dance in their “new materialist feminist arts pedagogy,” the authors illustrate that it is “impossible to separate

the dancer from the dance, the teacher from the student, and the bodies from the environments and objects to which they relate” (p. 226–227). These orientations align with Pennycook’s (2016) call for a posthumanist applied linguistics that can “align with current changes to the planet, humanity, theory, and politics” (p. 14). Such examples of alternative teaching practices and approaches incline one to reconsider traditional perspectives of subject, object, and pedagogical linearity in classroom contexts. For this article, specifically, this entails a reframing of curricular material both inside and outside educational spaces. What memories might a book conjure? What feelings might manifest through sensory engagement with the book? How can such experiences—produced intra-actively—reframe the use of curriculum in language teacher education?

Narrative methodology

In this article, I attempt to reconceptualize the role of curricular resources as objects by moving beyond cohesive reflection to embracing complexity through sensation. I consider their materiality as folding into the dynamic and complex process of becoming a teacher-scholar. I draw from Ahmed’s (2010) notion of affect as “sticky,” or that which “sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects” (p. 29). To do this, I autobiographically explore my own “affective entanglement” (Danvers, 2016, p. 282) with a copy of Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the oppressed*.

While autoethnography is a methodological approach well-suited for subjectivity and emotionality in understanding experience (Ellis et al., 2011), the narrative in this article does not incorporate the systematized and in-depth analysis of self and culture required by such methodology. Instead, I engaged in a form of narrative knowledging in which I, as a researcher, produced a short narrative in order to analyze theory and experience (Barkhuizen, 2019). The narrative I produced follows Canagarajah’s (2021) sociomaterial orientation that “consider[s] the engagement of diverse spatial and material resources in the shaping of their stories and their identities” (p. 1). This diffractive retelling complicates traditional narrative reflection in order to consider ways in which my copy of *Pedagogy of the oppressed* folds into my past, present, and future conceptions of place, memory, and practice as an English language educator. This account is my narrative, but it is also the story of a book, not as a container of ideas that have been

disseminated through text, but as a bound object containing a history. It is matter that folds my story into Freire’s, my past hope and anticipation into present conflict and internal struggle.

A diffractive narrative of my *Pedagogy of the oppressed* Aesthetic sensations

My 30th anniversary edition of *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (Freire 1970/2006) is published with a bright red cover foregrounding the bold black (partial title, author name, edition, number of copies sold) and contrasting white (“oppressed”) text. As I write this, in addition to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, I have two other books about critical pedagogy resting on my desk—a reader and an edited collection of essays. All three books utilize the same color scheme: red, black, and white. I have associated the color red with critical pedagogy and social justice for over a decade. Envisioning myself as an educator is colored by the aesthetic affects produced by this book. *Pedagogy*’s red cover displays my desire to be a teacher that inspires critical change and action in the lives of students, taking me back to Fall 2006, my junior year of college, to the course “Critical Contexts of Language and Literacy.”

I was introduced to Freire around a cherrywood conference table in a small room with no windows. While it is tempting to remember the room as musty, forgotten, and lacking natural light, my memory sanctifies it as a sacred place of thinking and speaking about critical theory, oppression, and liberation at a conservative evangelical university. Opening *Pedagogy* felt transgressive in such a context.

Of course, it is easy to glamorise an experience so many years ago. Such is the complication of retroactive narrative, especially in relation to entangled agents and their affective productions. Past, present, and future blend together so that what was becomes colored and remembered through what is or what I want to be. Nevertheless, *Pedagogy* stirs up feelings of risk. Then, it was an ideological risk of questioning and doubting dominant narratives of faith and belief; now, it encompasses a pedagogical risk of critiquing and challenging standards-based mandates for teaching within neoliberal education.

The aesthetic effect of *Pedagogy* emboldens me for such risk. Red, black, and white; a struggle for hope; compulsion towards activism. Such is how I envisioned myself in relation to *Pedagogy* as an undergraduate. I not only carried the book to class for reading and discussion, but it also came

with me to organizational meetings for a student-led activist group. I remember curling back the red cover and reading about communal justice and the shared humanity of oppressors and the oppressed. Similarly, I taught from it in my place of worship, the red cover and talk of oppression bleeding into religious practice and a call to action. Red was risk because Freire colored my world, offering a language that challenged my privilege and complacency amidst dominant discourses of personal ambition, career goals, and individual faith.

Pedagogy of the oppressed acted as a catalyst in my conceptualization of English language teaching. Simply touching the book results in a somber remembrance of where I was as an undergraduate, what I anticipated doing with my life, and what I do now as a teacher-scholar. I enrolled in the BA TESOL program at my university with ulterior motives, though I would not have described them as such then. At the time, I wanted to be a Christian missionary in international and “exotic” places. English language teaching was the convenient means by which to achieve those goals. Pennycook and Coutand-Marin (2003) critique this historically common relationship between the Christian religion and TESOL as “teaching English as a missionary language.” Freire’s *Pedagogy* initiated a transformative process of thinking critically on language, power, and colonization. By the time I graduated, I had reconceptualized TESOL and my place in it so as to critique my original goals and the dominance of English as an imperial language (Canagarajah, 1999). I do not reify *Pedagogy* as encapsulating the entirety of my critical transformation during my undergraduate years—there were certainly many factors—but the book, with its red cover, acts as an artifact that manifests such memory.

Marked remembrances

Diffraction writing about this text and object does not only conjure sensations and remembrances; it also has bearing on action—my act of writing and actions upon the book, who and what acts in the classroom, as well as how the book as object acts upon me. My copy of *Pedagogy* is embedded in my own story, and I in it. In this way, matter—the book as object—complicates my narrative. While *Pedagogy* manifests physically at various points in my journey, so too have I acted upon the text in such a way that it now carries part of me within and on its pages. My copy of *Pedagogy* acts as a recording surface, holding, displaying, diffracting an enfolding of time, memory, and identity. Its

curled cover, creased spine, highlights, underlines, margin notes, and a single dog-eared page all tell a story.

The creased spine causes my copy of *Pedagogy* to default to a particular page in chapter three when I open the book. The orange highlights originated from my initial reading in 2006, the red underlines, bracket, and star added nine years later as I prepared to present a paper at a conference. The content of chapter three, and these two pages in particular, describe the nature of dialogue as “the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world” (p. 88). Such dialogue occurs between me and this book. I act on it with touch and markings; it acts on me as remembrances of time, place, and practice. These remembrances are not disembodied and recalled on a whim. They arrive with the book, existing in its material, held between the covers alongside Freire’s words. Yet time also brings diffraction, problematizing Freire’s gendered use of language and thus complicating my admiration of his life and work. His revolutionary critique of education through criticality now falls under the scrutiny of current critical theory as male hegemony.

The markings in *Pedagogy* do not only traverse time, taking me back to 2006 or 2015, but they also transport me to different spaces: a small Christian university in West Tennessee, a large and empty conference room in a downtown Chicago hotel, and the corner of a classroom in an under-resourced community where third-grade English learners eagerly awaited a response to their earnestly composed journal entries. And as a result of this diffractive account, I anticipate future interactions with these marks to take me to a small, corner bedroom in an apartment in western Pennsylvania where I spent too much time producing text in an attempt to understand myself.

Page 79 of *Pedagogy* contains the only dog-ear fold in the entire book. Upon opening to it, “praxis” immediately draws the eye to the margin of the page, next to the only highlighted text: “Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it.” This dog-ear is significant as the only mark of its kind in my copy of the book. It situates “praxis” apart from everything else in the text; indeed, praxis became the cornerstone for my conceptualization of critical pedagogy and has characterized my pedagogical imagination as a teacher-scholar. So while the book may open by default to Freire’s discussion of dialogic encounters, the result of a crease in the spine

caused by its use in time, the dog-ear holds within it a disruption that redirects to content set apart by my action upon the text.

Liberatory praxis may not be the most significant concept in Freire's pedagogic opus—hidden curriculum, banking education, conscientização, and dialogue have all become prominent ideas born out of this text—but in my copy of *Pedagogy*, the creased corner on page 79 marks it as such. It encapsulates my goals, hopes, and desires for the type of English language educator I would become. Yet, marks from the past fold into and complicate the present; a dog-ear folded years ago may or may not redirect to some epiphanic moment, but instead simply remain an unretractable crease that manifests my own limitations and shortcomings.

A happy-unhappy praxis

In her essay “Happy objects,” Sara Ahmed (2010) says that “happiness functions as a promise that directs us toward certain objects, which then circulate as social goods. Such objects accumulate positive affective value as they are passed around” (p. 29). Ahmed describes objects as becoming “happiness means” (p. 34), an affective process “directed not only toward an object, but toward ‘whatever’ is around that object, which includes what is behind the object, the conditions of its arrival. What is around an object can become happy” (p. 33). As past, present, and future fold into one another, however, this dynamic meaning-making through time complicates my affective entanglements with *Pedagogy*. Up until this point I have nearly reified the book as enmeshed in my becoming a teacher-scholar. Such is my nostalgia for *Pedagogy* when I touch and open it. *Pedagogy* as requiem is a “happy object,” an artifact that evokes professional, intellectual, and religious transformation—fondness and affinity not only for the book itself, but for the places and experiences around and within the book. In my past, *Pedagogy* also acted as an object of future hope, encapsulating how I envisioned myself in place and practice as an educator.

Such affective responses, however, are absent in my present imagination. When I hold *Pedagogy* in my hands, or merely see its red cover across the room, the past gives way to the present and the book acts as an indictment of the teacher I have become. When I ponder now rather than then, the book acts as a physical reminder of unattained goals and pedagogical shortcomings. It is an unhappy object that causes me to question my skills, my education, and myself. When

considering my identity as an English language educator, I am confronted with tension as past folds into present, as hope and anticipation collide with reality and unmet potential.

Pedagogy unmasks me as someone who easily pays lip-service to justice in order to assuage guilt from failing to make substantive change. Freire's critical pedagogy is only deemed critical with its accompanying action: reading the word and the world in service of transformation. My praxis, however, becomes exposed as lacking its necessary act. Present reflection on *Pedagogy* entails existential dilemma: Can I become the teacher I want to be? Critical pedagogy transformed me as a student, but am I capable of enacting it in transformative ways as a teacher? My pedagogical imagination is suffocated by standards, “best practices,” test scores, and evaluations. My “act” of critical pedagogy—source material for course papers and conference presentations—is perceived as a fortunate accident rather than intentional action towards justice. In the presence of *Pedagogy*, I feel like a fraud. The internal and external tensions conjured by the book inspire this diffractive writing. Past acts in the classroom and sensational acts of remembrance make way for a new act—diffraction—and in turn, new potential for pedagogical practice. This act of diffraction is not an attempt at problem-solving my pedagogy, nor is it reflection to move beyond or improve where I am; instead, it is a purposeful act of accepting complex reality, contradictory stakes, and unresolvable tension. This diffractive writing, to me, is a liberating act of seeing what is and living in, embracing even, its complexity.

Pedagogy of the oppressed has become to me a happy-unhappy object, an entanglement that signifies the enfolding of time and affect. It is Ahmed's (2010) “happy objects” extended and complicated by limitations of time and memory in place. The happy and unhappy are inseparable, hyphenated, so as to maintain the tension between the two. One without the other tempts failed praxis. Ideations of transformation and the despondency of failure can both result in reflection without action, but the two held together in tension symbiotically inform and motivate each other: hope and doubt, imagination and reality, transformation and stasis. This diffractive retelling emphasizes the complexity and muddled boundaries of dichotomy, and this writing—this confrontation—demands a response. As a teacher-scholar, I cannot walk away from this act unchanged or ambivalent. It is

now a marker of my becoming, part of this narrative preceding blank pages yet to be written.

Concluding remarks

I began this article by exploring the balance between theory and practice, and in particular, how philosophies like poststructuralism can often be perceived as inaccessible or irrelevant to educators despite how research using such frameworks has led to critical practices common in language classrooms today. Yet a poststructural understanding of my own language teacher identity continues to confound me. I have attempted critical interrogations of the power and privileges I inhabit as a language educator and how, intentionally or not, I wield such power over and for my students (Glodjo, 2017; Ryan et al., 2016). Yet full understanding of such dynamics has always felt elusive, as if consideration of multiple identity positions is incomplete without some form of embodied response or action, as if the physicality of my being, and that of my students, is subject to discourse rather than matter that matters.

Privileging discourse over matter—bodies, objects, spaces—often left my own critical reflection feeling unsubstantive. Reflection, for me, became a self-centered act of managing identity as means of improving my teaching and assuaging internal guilt. Such a mindset limits sites of knowledge in a classroom space as only existing in and for human interaction. The posthuman and new materialist moves in our field have the potential to expand our understandings of language, teaching, and identity in novel ways, all in an attempt to understand more fully the complexity that exists inside and out of our classrooms. My act of diffractive writing illustrates the potential of an alternative approach to traditional teacher reflection. Embracing such difference and complexity, though, is a daunting task for educators enmeshed in systems of observation and evaluation that function with artificial and simplified views of reality. Yet there are benefits and novel insights to be had from such practice. Diffraction has, for me, reconceptualized agency and knowledge generation as existing between the human and non-human, disrupting binary relationships in favor of complex interactivity in educational spaces.

While the relationship between theory and practice has always been, and will continue to be, complicated and difficult to navigate, posthumanism and new materialism reveal the limitations of the dichotomies we construct

between such concepts. Re-thinking the human and non-human, subject and object, mind and body, and our affective entanglements with each, offers significant potential for better understanding the complexities that exist in language teaching and learning. How might we utilize curricular resources as more than textual containers, but material and affective objects, in language teacher education? *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, for me, became more than a book of radical ideas, but an agent of transformation in my own teacher-scholar becoming.

Posthumanism and new materialism ask us to reconsider relationships like agency and identity and embrace more complex understandings of action and intra-action. By embracing such complexity and entanglement, as well as analyzing the agential reality of objects in educational contexts, we can approach a deeper understanding of the mutually constitutive actions at work in our classrooms and the results at play. For me, diffraction as a methodological practice presents a truer understanding of my own teacher-scholar becoming by centering difference and tension over reflective response. While the discursive still functions to constitute a variety of subjectivities around race, class, gender, and sex, the insertion of matter offers a substantive analysis that invites a more authentic response towards action.

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