

## Questions of Context and Actor Training: Embracing Difference and Inviting Complexity

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The impact of COVID-19 on the arts-education landscape necessitates confronting structures of power and how they operate within the industry as well as in our training programs. What does it mean to train actors during a time when a pandemic frames an unprecedented examination of cultural identity and social justice? In what ways can embracing difference and inviting complexity inform our teaching and learning? How might we challenge and disrupt systems of power and corresponding complacency towards a more diverse, inclusive, and equitable pedagogy? This article engages a range of contextual issues to address these questions. We posit the training environment of an acting program as complex and reliant upon the values and identities of a given institution. We apply this thinking through our respective programs in Singapore and Aotearoa - New Zealand. Thus, we depict LASALLE and Toi Whakaari as forward-facing in responding to the aforementioned questions. We teach among a diverse group of students and colleagues, thereby affording us considerable experience from within Oceania, South- East Asia, and beyond. We argue that actor trainers should meet this moment of threatened sustainability and survival by deeply reconsidering our pedagogies in complex and variant ways. We suggest thinking through the impact of the pandemic and related challenges by robustly responding to questions of context as they relate to teaching and learning through embracing difference and remaining open to equitable and inclusive exchanges of culture.

Keywords: Actor training, COVID-19, Lasalle, Toi Whakaari

### INTRODUCTION

The impact of 2020 on the arts-education landscape necessitates confronting structures of power and how they operate within the industry as well as in our training programs. What

does it mean to train actors during a time of unprecedented examination of cultural identity and social justice? In what ways can embracing difference and inviting complexity inform our teaching and learning? How might we challenge and disrupt systems of power and corresponding complacency towards a more diverse, inclusive, and equitable pedagogy?

Addressing a range of contextual issues frames our responses to these questions. Investigating the training environment of an acting program is a complex process and reliant upon the values and identities of a given institution. In two distinct case studies we apply this thinking to tertiary performing arts schools in Singapore and Aotearoa – New Zealand. Peter Zazzali discusses LASALLE College of the Arts in Singapore and Heather Timms and Mitch Tawhi Thomas discuss Toi Whakaari, New Zealand Drama School in Aotearoa.

## TOWARDS A CROSS-CULTURAL, DIVERSE, AND EQUITABLE PEDAGOGY: ACTOR TRAINING AT LASALLE COLLEGE OF THE ARTS

Founded in 1984 by the late Brother Joseph McNally, LASALLE College of the Arts is Singapore's foremost institution for training in design as well as the contemporary and performing arts. With respect to the latter, its BA (Hons) Acting Programme is a member of the Asia Pacific Bond of Theatre Schools and the main source of talent for Singapore's entertainment industry. Its students come from all over the world to train at one of Asia's most respected acting schools, as indicated by an alumni-employment rate consistently hovering around 80 percent. LASALLE graduates can be seen at professional theatres, on television as actors or hosts, and through their film work. They bear an entrepreneurialism that guides them to create their own opportunities, a point readily apparent during COVID-19, when the class of 2020 banded together to remount their cancelled graduation show as a radio play. Many of these same students have taken the initiative to self-produce and undertake assignments that both engage and transcend the industry. One such example is Chaya Gonzales, whose multifaceted portfolio includes work with a local theatre company, shooting commercials, and as a dramaturge advocating the development and preservation of Singaporean dramas. She credits the programme's entrepreneurialism for providing her the requisite 'self-management skills and self-discipline' to produce her own projects and create enterprising work opportunities. In brief, LASALLE's actors are self-starters whose careers

will take many forms and directions (Chaya Gonzales 2021, personal communication, 27 January).

The entrepreneurship that defines a LASALLE alumna like Gonzales stems from the programme's commitment to a diverse and cross-cultural pedagogy. Steeped in a combination of 'Asian' and Western techniques, students are exposed to a range of forms and traditions tethered through an overarching goal to train their mind and body towards becoming psychophysically present in their craft.<sup>1</sup> The late Phillip B. Zarrilli referred to the actor's body-mind as 'engaging the whole body' towards having 'one's awareness fully open ... and totally focussed within a specific action (Zarrilli 4).' This approach defines LASALLE's curriculum. Classes ranging from Suzuki and Noh to Le Jeu and Rodenburg's vocal techniques develop the actors' corporal and mental presence in work across multiple media. Whether rendering a character in the Stanislavskian tradition for a well-made play or executing a phrase in a Kathakali-inspired narrative, they are facile and nimble artists sensitized to the values associated with a diverse, equitable, and inclusive training environment.

Blending cultural practices and traditions is a tricky matter. Even with the very best of intentions, one can inadvertently exploit, appropriate, and/or tokenize a given form. The culprits of such homogenizing and reductive work have been well-documented (Knowles 2010:16-30). In exploring and explaining cross-cultural approaches to training, I acknowledge my own identity as a white male whose privilege and unconscious bias are part of my genealogy, thereby directly and indirectly informing my role as the director of LASALLE's Acting Programme. I am humbly committed to remaining aware of my positionality and how it is read and understood by others. My research elides with Rustom Bharucha's intercontextual model arguing for the sustenance of differences along social, national, and political planes. Seeing cultural exchange as an unstable site of tension, he suggests that such a negotiation prompts participants to 'open [themselves]' to the Other

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<sup>1</sup> The authors recognize that 'Asia' and 'Asian' are Western constructions for labeling cultures, countries, and characteristics associated with multiple regions in the Eastern Hemisphere. Such categorizations reduce the cultural distinctions of a given nation and its peoples. Nonetheless, for the sake of clarity as per common parlance in our field and others, we will use the signifiers 'Asia' and 'Asian.' For more on the West's imperialist deployment of these terms, see Akhilesh Pillamarri 2014. 'Kissinger is Right: "Asia" Is a Western Construct.' *The Diplomat*, 23 September 2014. <https://thediplomat.com/2014/09/kissinger-is-right-asia-is-a-western-construct/>. Accessed 23 January, 2021.

towards ‘[respecting] differences that [cut] across the inequities of class, race, and citizenship (Bharucha 2000: 162).’ Bharucha’s paradigm can be put in conversation with Homi Bhabba, whose “theory of hybridity” embraces difference in postcolonial contexts while undoing Eurocentric hierarchies. Speaking on behalf of ‘something *different*,’ Bhabba seeks an ‘ambivalent space’ where essentialist systems of power are upended (Bhabba 1994: 59-60). Erika Fischer-Lichte’s theory of cultural weaving also informs our cross-cultural praxis at LASALLE, insofar as she repositions Bhabba’s hybridity as a ‘coupling’ of traditions to ‘bring forth something new’ without reducing either (Fischer-Lichte 2009: 398). Thus, difference is something to be embraced and celebrated as opposed to being wielded to sow division and inequality.

We aim to create a context for learning that fairly and effectively embraces the cross-cultural sources constituting our classes, our content, and our productions. This objective manifests in a number of ways. First, our audition process is such that we recruit students from various cultural, racial, and national backgrounds. The current student body hails from North America, the United Arab Emirates, Malaysia, Indonesia, Myanmar, and of course Singapore. Our Singaporean students further diversify our makeup as they represent a cross-section of the country’s Chinese, Indian, and Malay populations. Each actor’s identity informs their work. This ethos was evident in our 2020 production of Haresh Sharma’s *Godeatgod*, a Singaporean drama that depends on the cultures and races of the cast to shape a given production. Realizing the piece as a digital broadcast—a necessity given restrictions from COVID-19—fed *Godeatgod*’s intercontextuality in that each performer was assigned a section to speak in their native language, thereby requiring English subtitles, a feat that would not have been possible if it were performed for a live audience. Hearing the actors drop into their so-called “mother tongue sequences” underscored Sharma’s dialectical theme of hope and tragedy across the postmodern world. One of our Burmese students, Su Pang, describes the opportunity to collaborate with Sharma and Tan in creating a character and monologue that captures her native language and culture. She states:

Being able to write and perform in my mother tongue was a huge honour.  
Representation of Burmese language and culture in Singapore is far and wide.  
It was a huge undertaking as I personally feel responsible to represent my

country and culture in its essence while also remaining truthful to my point of view (Su Pang 2021, personal communication, 27 January).

Pang's experience has been echoed by students across the programme, with Singaporeans in particular expressing the significance of being able to work on texts that reflect their own cultural identity. In lieu of producing an English classic in the so-called "Shakespearean slot," for example, we chose Alfian Sáat's *Homesick* for our second-year actors. A decidedly political play that focuses on Singaporean culture and society, it portrays a Peranakan family that is quarantined at home during the SARS pandemic of 2003. *Homesick's* contents effectively aligned the programme's identity as a Singaporean institution with the contemporaneous moment, given that it was produced in the middle of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Our staff is also diverse and dedicated to a pluralistic learning environment. Instructors representing cultural and national backgrounds that include Mexico, Brazil, America, Australia, Singapore, and the United Kingdom deliver a variegated yet systemic curriculum. Our guest artists likewise support our inter-contextual model as noted by recent appointments coming from Ireland, Germany, Switzerland, and India. The curriculum reflects their different influences. In Year One, for instance, our Asian Theatre Project module consists of guests leading intensive multi week sessions in Xiju and Kathakali. In describing his experience enrolled in the Asian Theatre Project, Hirah Tejas explains:

At first I was a little confused. I said to myself, 'this is interesting, but why am I doing this?' And then I realized that in these forms—Chinese Opera and Kathakali—we are creating a world that is larger than life. These classical forms allow to create fantastical and magical roles all with our bodies. And this is something that I can apply to our Western approaches like Stanislavski. Both traditions really open our bodies and voices and imaginations. I was able to link what I was learning in Western training methods to Chinese Opera and Kathakali. For example, I relied on Stanislavski to ground myself in the reality of the characters I played, including a princess from Indian mythology.

The first two years of training especially correlates Western systems like Stanislavski and Decroux, both of which present psychophysical approaches to the actor's craft, with Asian forms such as those represented in the Asian Theatre Project. Additionally, technique courses from kalaripayattu to Le Jeu and neutral mask further develop the actor's body-mind through an intersectional curriculum. This embodied praxis of Asian and Western forms yields learning outcomes that include physical flexibility, clear and sonorous speaking, a supple imagination, a keen sense of rhythm, remaining emotionally available, accessing a creative state of play, and being fully present throughout one's performance irrespective of the medium.

In addition to the course's entrepreneurial and inclusive pedagogy, we are also wary of how structures of power consciously and unconsciously influence our work. Singapore's authoritarian governance and the ways it becomes manifest throughout the educational sector makes for a challenging environment in which to learn a craft contingent on self-expression and creative risk-taking. Our team of instructors ongoingly attempts to empower students to embrace their positionality with confidence and to question authority while exploring their artistic voice. Our Creative Practice module offered during the second year especially addresses this important learning outcome. The student experience is centred as each participant is encouraged to identify their artistic voice through a combination of play, ensemble building, and solo work. Multiple full and part-time instructors mentor students throughout the process, which culminates with sharing work at the end of the semester. Creative Practice is a forerunner to the dissertation project that each actor will write in their third year of training, insofar as the thesis is a scholarly expression of their role as an artist. Topics have ranged from performance and disability/accessibility to gender identity in Singaporean drama and what is affectionately termed 'nerd theatre.' A research project in the richest sense, the dissertation is yet another example of the Acting Programme's goal to invite students to discover and develop who they want to be as an artist and a citizen.

Embracing diversity and inclusion lends to a cross-cultural curriculum such as ours. Both in the programme's contents and delivery, we hold these criteria as values to be nourished and integrated in everything we do. From the texts selected for productions to the techniques deployed throughout the training, LASALLE's multinational group of faculty and students

share in a unique learning environment that prepares artistic entrepreneurs to engage the industry and shape its future. Admittedly, this journey has been fraught with anxiety and setbacks that offset occasional—if meaningful—moments of progress. Grappling with the challenges of blended learning in response to COVID-19 was one such example. Throughout it all, however, LASALLE’s Acting Program has continued to remain steadfast in its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion across the curriculum and within its learning community.

## BUILDING REFLEXIVITY - ACTOR TRAINING AT TE KURA TOI WHAKAARI Ō AOTEAROA – NEW ZEALAND DRAMA SCHOOL

*Te Kura Toi Whakaari ō Aotearoa* is the national drama school of New Zealand, based in Pōneke – Wellington. We are a bespoke tertiary arts training organisation, training five disciplines in live and screen performing arts; Acting, Performance Design, Arts Management, Costume Construction and Set & Props.

In Acting, we have a team of five full-time staff and run a three-year training program for a Bachelor of Performing Arts (Acting) and 2020 marks fifty years for our actor training. Currently, Toi Whakaari Acting graduates have 100 percent picked up by the top agents and are the actors of choice in Aotearoa - New Zealand.

The *kura*-school has a long history of interrogating its relationship to the context of Aotearoa - New Zealand. In 2012, we began to ask some new questions in response to changing currents in the national and arts landscape. Three questions have focused our work in Acting over the last eight years:

- 1) How could actor training respond to diminished traditional employment opportunities for our actors?
- 2) What if we reject this notion of 10-15 percent of actors ‘making it’ and design a training model for 100 percent to make it? What could this look like?
- 3) Does our model of training reflect our specific national context?; A small nation in the Pacific, with an ever-present colonial past and a rapidly diversifying population. And

if it doesn't, as the 'national' drama school, why not? And what could it look like, if it did?

What was clear, if the school remained within a European conservatoire training model, diversity, regardless of the level of good intention, commitment or effort, would remain systemically 'othered', operating in peripheral spaces. We required what Homi Bhabha calls, a 'third space (1994).' He describes this space as engendering new possibility; an 'interruptive, interrogative, and enunciative' (Bhabha 1994) space of potential new forms of cultural meaning and production. A space that has the potential to provide a spatial politics of inclusion rather than exclusion that 'initiates new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation.' (Meredith 1998).

In our context, these three questions and our ambition to reach for a possible new and 'ambivalent' space (Bhabha 1994), has required us to create a new model for our actor training, with new structures, new curriculum and new forms. These new structural and practice based innovations have grown out of a school-wide investigation of values, frameworks and processes within Tikanga Marae (principles underpinning the roles, purpose and function of Māori ceremonial buildings, spaces and practices) and the model of the *whare* (Māori ceremonial house).

The central purpose of this work was to develop a context specific model and curricula that would drive artistic innovation and develop stronger artists fit for the challenges and opportunities of our time and for Aotearoa – New Zealand. The school-wide model, *Kōiwiwanga*, develops a practice of collaboration and leadership that focuses on live questions of context, purpose, role and function.

We focus on the function of role, relationship and purpose that exists inside Māori frames of engagement and on how the values that underpin these frames might be experienced and then translated into the lives of our students. We propose these roles and relationships as living entities that need to constantly be investigated within the institutional context not simply translated or used as 'titles' that can be settled on...



The orientation is not ‘why Māori do it’ but ‘why we do it here, right now’. Māori and non-Māori address this together. (Eriksen, Moetara & Timms, 2013)

While it is embedded in traditional forms, it is necessary to keep upholding the practice of *Koīwitanga*, as a live, learning space. Ideas or practices that permit ‘fixity’ or ‘fetishism’ (Meredith 1998) lean towards an appropriated, white-washed, cultural space. Our work is to keep signposting the complexity of this learning with up-front transparency, in the hope to orient students towards their own liberated context and purpose, while keeping the *mana* – integrity of Māori knowledge intact.

This work has, and continues to, affect the school in profound ways. Curriculum structures across many of the disciplines have evolved to prioritise independence and innovation inside respective craft delivery. An interdisciplinary course has emerged, Independent Practice (IP), where students pursue their own artistic questions to create original live and screen work. We have a bi-weekly and inter-disciplinary working space – *Hui ā Kura* – where the whole school meets to practice *Koīwitanga* through arts-based inquiry. The major literacy we focus on in our *hui*-meeting is the ability to read what exists between us when we work in the live moment, and how to respond. Student and staff make-up is diversifying, and so is our story telling. And importantly, we are attracting new recognition for artistic work being created at the *kura*-school. Our Toi Film Project (final year actors and costumers, with other disciplines interning to Design, Management and Set & Props roles), which has been running for four years, is a good example. Toi Film produces a trio of short films a year and since its conception, has consistently had a number of films in international competition; Clermont-Ferrand (2021), Venice (2020), The Berlinale (2019) and New Zealand (2018, 2019) and Melbourne (2019) international film festivals.

Our ongoing commitment to the investigation of *Koīwitanga* has invited us, as a *kura*-school, to develop a reflexive approach, to change and evolution; a process of becoming self-aware through a circular relationship between cause and effect (Sliep & Norton 2018) with an ever present awareness of *whakapapa* – all that has come before.

## DIVERSITY

We recognise it is no longer acceptable to expect generations of applicants, students and graduates, who inhabit a spectrum of multi-ethnicity, sexual orientation and non-binary gender to only uphold a previous essentialist model and to ‘pass’ for what constitutes as an acceptable euro-centric and hetero-normative graduate actor.

Our bachelor degree contains a structure that is a metaphorical riff of a well-known Māori concept - *Tūrangawaewae* - that is often translated as *a place to stand*. This is spread across the 3 year training and used as a model to expand student acting skill and artistry:

*Tū*, Year 1, their individual stance, for foundational actor craft and their emerging artistic voice. *Raranga*, Year 2, weaving, applying and deepening their craft and artistry through increasingly complex performance opportunities. *Waewae*, Year 3, practicing as an independent actor and artist as we dissolve the membrane between the *kura*, industry and wider community (Teina Moetara & Heather Timms, December 2013, extract from a personal notebook)

To not be open to the nuance of the diverse creativity that lies within each individual student voice seems tone deaf to the stories that are demanding to be heard within the current global climate of crisis and protest.

Staffing and the audition process are two key areas where we have evolved structures to invite greater diversity. They are at once rigorous, rewarding and difficult to inhabit.

It cannot be understated how resonant the significance is that our current Toi Whakaari *Tumuaki* - Director is a Wāhine Māori. Tanea Heke herself is a graduate, with a long-ranging career both as actor and arts administrator; ‘I never want our people to think they can’t and if you see it, you know you can do it (The Big Idea. Matthew 2020).’ Our acting department staff has an ethnic breakdown of two *Pākehā* (New Zealander of European descent), one Māori, one Samoan, and is led by an Australian female of European ancestry. Our newest appointment is movement tutor, Fafine Samoan Tupe Lualua. She has opened up a unique possibility of exploration for our program. Exposure to a rich base of Pasifika dance and

movement traditions, with a clear invitation to integrate these ancient skills of physical articulation, alongside acting craft classes, has had a profoundly liberating effect for many of our students.

We often espouse the importance of ‘being liberated’ but, under what conditions? This moves us closer towards our vision of holding our own indigenous methodologies. It did not, however, come without pause and again echoes a tense liminal space of hybridity that ‘is positioned as antidote to essentialism (Meredith 1998:2).’ The question was raised, ‘What do we lose by not upholding a European actor-movement methodology?’ It provided us with a moment to reflect. The answer was – ‘If not now? When?’

For the past six years we have evolved an initial open audition process that repudiates a long standing tradition of the well- rehearsed monologue in front of a panel of expert judges, with the agility to respond to some slight direction thrown from the onlooker. While this form has proved effective for some, who are equipped to handle the pressurised memory recall, they more often than not also bring with them the educational privilege of a supportive high school or theatrical background. This form has consistently failed a marginalised pool of talent that continues to be systemically disallowed to pursue their artistic possibilities.

By upending an old narrative of a Toi Whakaari student being the ‘cream of the crop’, a mysterious elite, we have invited an inclusive audition culture. By highlighting reflexivity, live impulse, investigation and risk-taking, we have attracted a wider range of diverse applicants and increased our audition numbers and national status. Currently, Heather Timms and Mitch Tawhi Thomas travel the length of the islands. This first audition is an opportunity for applicants to play with text focussing on the inhabitation of worlds and discovery of an embodied imagination within the ‘live.’ This is the antithesis of the nervous repetition of an over-practiced idea. What is evident, and of utmost importance, is how each applicant is really ‘seen’ during this experience.

Representation can become problematic if it simply exists within its own importance. Targeting a diverse range of either staff or students, without addressing the forms and models to which you are teaching, can lead to a toothless sort of tokenism, no matter what the good

intention. The evolution of forms and processes has been the most effective way to diversify, rather than some kind of ethnic or social ‘shoulder tapping’ approach.

## INDEPENDANCE

With the pedagogical aim of our training, to grow *each* actor’s right to stand, confidently, as an autonomous actor and artist - *Tūrangawaewae* – this challenged us to develop structures and curriculum that would interrogate and develop independence; for the craftsperson of the actor and for the vision, innovation and practice of the artist.

Self Directed Craft Training (SDCT) supports the independence of the actor’s development of craft. It’s a course that runs across the three years and focuses on growing each actor’s independent ability to integrate, own and progress their actor craft through self-directed enquiry. Across the three years, the tutor’s role moves from direct teaching in Year 1 to largely mentorship, coaching and facilitation, by Year 3.

There are three key principles underpinning SDCT. There needs to be a space where actors *independently* select, apply, integrate and develop the acting craft, live and screen, they learn across studio classes. Secondly, an actor’s craft questions and focus of enquiries, will, and should look different for each individual. Thirdly, self-driven, practice-based enquiry is an essential skill set for independence, innovation and reflexivity.

This program is one of the newer evolutions in our actor training and 2020 graduate, Tioreore Ngatai-Melbourne (Ngāi Tuhoe, Ngāti Porou), is an example of its effectiveness at work. Tioreore’s first language is Te Reo Māori and she comes from a remote town, Ruatoki. Across lock-down Tioreore returned home. Her SDCT focussed on strengthening her ownership of text craft to feed her screen acting, short film writing and ability to coach two young non-actors from her community, cast as leads in her film. This self-directed space allowed her to integrate sophisticated actor craft with her Māori world view. The outcome was a strengthening in her own work as an actor, in the last six months she has been shooting as a lead in one feature and played a featured role in another. It also opened gateways for deeper levels of performance within her community and she won funds from the Māoriland Film Festival for the development of her film.

Independent Practice (IP) develops the unique artistry and creative practice of each actor and similarly, is a training line that runs across the three years. IP works to develop the artist who, after graduating, can create opportunities for themselves and others within the performing arts in Aotearoa and beyond.

Benjamin Ashby (*Pākehā*), 2020 graduate from Ōtautahi - Christchurch, used his IP to lead and develop an intercultural theatre work, collaborating with training actors Ngamako Rota and Albert Latailakepa and training designer, Hollie Cohen. Due to lock-down the development of the work occurred largely over ZOOM and was fairly embryonic in its first showing at our *Festival Of Work In Development*. The company continued to independently develop the piece and it will have its first professional outing at the 2021 Putahi Festival. Ben has also secured the position as new Director for innovative and celebrated Long Cloud Youth Theatre here in Poneke – Wellington. He also went straight from graduating into a featured role in a high profile feature.

As these two lines of independence training strengthen, we are making some interesting discoveries.

SDCT and IP have a dynamic symbiotic relationship. Strengthening the actor's ownership of their craft feeds the rigour, discipline and critical thinking of the artist. And, developing the actor's anarchic artistic voice fuels the artistry and originality of their craft choices. Tioreore and Benjamin's breadth of work channels and artistic practice exemplify the picture of 'making it' we are fostering at Toi Whakaari, and these types of stories are reflected across our graduating classes.

Secondly, sustainable 'independence' is a set of hard skills, and is hard teaching, that requires dedicated resources and time in the curriculum to teach, scaffold and integrate across the arc of three years. It is important to consider that this level of student independence and artistic efficacy is not the result of some kind of mysterious playtime that is slotted into our timetable but is a highly structured teaching strand.

Lastly, developing the independence of our actors is asking us, as teachers, directors and mentors, to constantly investigate the power dynamics at play. This tension is growing our reflexive capacity as tutors and curriculum developers.

## CONCLUSION

2020 has created challenges for drama schools throughout the world. The industry is reeling from what has become an existential crisis. Theatres remain shuttered in many parts of the world, film and television projects have been delayed, and conventional sectors of the profession are moribund. Nonetheless, our students at LASALLE and Toi Whakaari continue to look for ways to exercise their creative freedom and ingenuity.

In our current moment, we cannot consider the pressures of 2020 without also understanding structures of power in the training space and the potential barriers and gateways to opening up artistry, innovation and diversity. How does shared power actually work without being some kind of opaque space where everyone is power-less? And what could negotiation look like between institution, teacher, and student if we work to all be power-full? LASALLE and Toi Whakaari are addressing these questions in variant ways and we acknowledge how dynamics of positionality condition the training space. These working questions must remain open and active as we respond to an uncertain future.

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