

The Hierarchy of Parampara: Rethinking Relationship to Legacy in Dance

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The idea of hierarchy is unsettling. As a ‘classical’ dancer trained under the hierarchical pedagogy of my guru and as a dance scholar locating my work in the ideals of emancipatory pedagogy, the impetus for this article comes from my conflicted embodied response to the idea of hierarchy. Positioning the idea of hierarchy as both a relational form and a theoretical model, this paper recognizes that the notion of hierarchy is simultaneously problematic and productive. Arguing that hierarchical pedagogical systems in traditional dance forms in India co-exist with an ontological egalitarianism, this paper presents a possible framework to understand the relationship of the contemporary individual with legacies of traditional dance forms. In the discussion that follows, I draw upon my relationship with my guru, Guru Mayadhar Raut, and my training in critical dance studies to unpack the troubled relationship between the hierarchy of parampara (traditional lineages and their transmission through apprentice-learning) and legacy inscribed on the dancers body through training and the political goal of self-expression. In doing so, I do not repudiate the traditional pedagogical systems and neither do I glorify them. Reflecting on the problem of the hierarchy of tradition understood as such, Navtej Johar argues that,

Tradition in terms of dance as we have defined it is like a monolithic score that is not to be tampered with, obediently followed, and diligently replicated. It is controlled through self-policing mechanisms that have become entrenched within its training and practice. It is fixed, linear, and unidirectionally ambitious, and nationalistic (2017, 211).

Johar argues for a schizophrenic relationship with dance; one that is under no pressure to conform to the nationalist ideal of tradition and at the same time is under no pressure to maintain a stance of resistance. He argues that tradition is an archive box whose potency lies in its “un-fixedness and

dual directionality which needs to be rigorously depoliced and divested of any collective ambition.” (Johar 2017, 214). Expanding on this stance, this paper proposes a framework that allows for a retooling, reorientation, and repurposing of parampara to make sense of individual agency and its political manifestation. Drawing upon the work of Victoria Browne (2015) questions like - how can dance in India draw productively on its own history, without passively conforming to expectations of the past, or elevating the past as a nostalgic ideal against which to measure and compare the present? Conversely, how can we, as dancers and dance scholars, usher in new ideas and approaches, without ignoring or returning to a singular past? And how can we speak of legacy, lineage, and parampara in traditional dance forms without instating or reproducing a singular, linear master narrative, underpin this paper.

The Problem with Hierarchy

Hierarchy as a pedagogical model runs counter intuitive to emancipatory sensibilities that most dance scholars share and yet many pedagogical and cultural systems of traditional arts are based on the centrality of hierarchy in the process and production of aesthetic value. In one view of hierarchy, the emancipation of the dancerly self from the hold of hierarchical oppressive social norms requires that liberation be found through a process of “excavating and asserting the inner autonomous agency of the individual” (Haynes and Hickel 2016, 6). Freedom, seen through the narratives of modernity, liberalism and progress, is a project predicated on progressive self-mastery (Keane 2007). The dancerly self, in this worldview, is a disembedded, free-thinking, rights bearing individual. Rolando Vázquez, calling out the hegemony of this worldview argues that as a colonial legacy, modernity and its worldviews have established themselves as a “world-historical reality through a particular politics of time, one that armed the west as the present, and the present as the legitimate site of the real” (2015). Given that

the self is produced by the pedagogical interplay of social norms and relationships some of which are hierarchical, individuality is imbricated within ties of (inter)dependence (Ferguson 2013), and agency and freedom are relational. This relation of the self with the other, with the world and with interiority, produces a relational temporality that troubles the conception of the past as an archive, a representation or an object of study and challenges the idea of the future as a utopia of the never-ending cult of the 'new' (Vázquez 2015). The dancerly self, in this worldview, is emergent, collective, and contextual.

As a dancer in contemporary India, it is difficult to say exactly what dance is (and what it is not). Today, cultural formations like dance and the identities it engenders are in a state of flux- constantly being made, remade and unmade. It is a moment that makes visible the enfolded and entangled constructions of dance that are ontologically complex. The socio-political predictability of pre-liberalization India and the cultural categories that emerged because of its postcolonial politics are a thing of the past (Chakravorty 2017). Traditional dancers and dance scholars, working in various contexts are encountering a world that often challenges the belief systems that these dance categories were built upon. The contemporary moment that we live in has also seen a hardening of borders and boundaries, and globalizing forces of neoliberalism and development have produced a cultural closure, a new longing for forms of social order that pivot around hierarchy as a social form, an ideology or as a nostalgia for an idealized past (Meyer and Geschiere 1999). The instinct for the cultural practitioner is to become to be protective and to fiercely protect what we understand of our past of our cultures and traditions. At the moment of writing this paper the Carnatic classical music world is fractured as a long and painful legacy of the position of caste in music publicly unravels and musicians and art aficionados harden their stance. The battle lines are drawn.

Thinking about the issue of hierarchy in terms of dance in India is a project fraught with anxiety produced by living through the wounds created by the colonial simplification of dance for the extraction of value, for its distribution in hierarchical ways, coupled with massive epistemic genocides – the kinds of massive simplifications and displacements that go along with disappearing (Haraway 2017). The frameworks that this paper discusses is not another simplification¹. Instead, this paper proposes one possible pathway for softening the borders and boundaries drawn around categorization of dance. “so as to open up the contact zones of thinking” (Haraway 2017). Drawing upon diverse fields of philosophy, lived experience, and emancipatory education principles, the frameworks suggested in this article offer a way of opening up zones of thinking and talking about legacy and lineage in classical dance that stay with the inheritance of colonial histories, with the troubles of post-colonial exterminations and extractions, but also the inventions of precious things. The attempt is to find ways of dancing that continue to draw from the vortex of creative energies that have enabled traditional dance forms to endure and to find a way that provides generative possibilities to embrace a pluriverse of dance making and thinking. Acknowledging the epistemic violence of the colonial and post-colonial dance politics on the pedagogical formations of the guru-shishya parampara², this article proposes a renegotiation of the dominant understanding of legacy with a renewed attention to where, how, between whom, and toward what futures hierarchy is engaged in dance. This article is an attempt to “stay with the trouble” (Haraway 2016) produced by the hierarchization of lineage and legacy and the seeming deadweight of legacy under which a dancer in the contemporary moment might struggle, to rethink the ways which agency and freedom of the dancer might be understood from within these pedagogical systems. This article proposes that the hierarchy of traditional methods of training not as something to be overcome but

1 The dominant history of dance in India framed within the state-sponsored nationalist imagination is built upon the erasure of multiple narratives and communities. This erasure, promoting the idea of unity in diversity, is designed to produce a simple and replicable history of dance in India.

2 In her work on the Tawaif and their dance, Pallabi Chakravorty (2006) illustrates how the establishment of the contemporary idea of guru-shishya parampara is built upon the disappearance of female muslim performers and the establishment of a male lineage.

rather as an inheritance that we might (yet) survive (Singh 2018).

Methodology

The ideas presented in this paper are located in my own struggle to come to terms with the pedagogy of dance that I was trained in and the contemporary educational theories of bell hooks and Paulo Freire that I studied. Through unpacking the life and work of Guru Mayadhar Raut³, his pedagogical practices and choreographies and from having documented his life's work of classicization of Odissi (a globally celebrated eastern Indian dance form deemed as 'classical'), I distill seeds and provocations for the future possibilities. His life and his work do not need an introduction, these have been celebrated and talked about for decades now (cite your book, perhaps). My aim here is to examine his artistry, his worldview, and his approach to dancemaking to potentially generate a blueprint for the future. My aim here is also to frame the hierarchy of tradition, its legacies, and histories as a feed-forward mechanism; not something that needs to be preserved, fossilized, and saved but as something that needs to be brought forth and put into action to engage with the world.

The genesis of Odissi as a classical form is in a blood oath that six young men with modest means took in the Chandi temple in Cuttack in 1959⁴. Straddling a time in between times where they were the custodians of the past and the receivers of the future, for these professional dancers survival was at stake. Familiar systems of patronage were gone, the old performers were gone, and dance was competing with the rising popularity of theatre

and film. The world that Mayadhar Raut and his compatriots found themselves in as young men, was entirely different from the one they grew up in. Very similar to the times we live in today, their world was changing fast, through forces beyond their control and traditional dance and its traditions needed to find a place in it. Navigating India's advent into modernity, the actions that they took at that time and the changes that they made to dance that they had inherited from their Gotipua (prepubescent male dancing) and Raas Leela (socially danced celebrations of devotional fervor) traditions, were often considered audacious and risky. Some of the things they did were never done before⁵ and yet these young men, bereft of resources and support persisted. This reorientation, this creative leap of faith, to imagine what Odissi could look like in the future, allowed Odissi to move out of the temple precinct and the Gotipua repertoire and engage with new forms of presentation like group choreographies, ballets, film, and the proscenium. Even in the face of opposition from within their communities, they insisted that they were not throwing out tradition, they were reconfiguring it and reframing it in order for Odissi to survive in the twentieth century and beyond.

Through my long association with guru Mayadhar Raut⁶, in this paper I open the thought processes and ways of being in the world that enabled these gurus to reorient Odissi to the future and become legends. This examination takes a micro-historical method to engage with the reciprocal relationship of individual actions and experiences and cultural formations, institutions, and social process to produce a "culturally shaped context for action and interpretation" that is always "decisively

3 The book *Odissi Yaatra* (2010), is a biography of a kind which documents guruji's life and work. This book is an almost transcription of hours of conversations with him. His life story, as presented in this book, is told in his words.

4 While deliberations were on within Jayatika on how Odissi should be reframed as a classical form, Mayadhar Raut, Kelucharan Mohapatra, Dayanidhi Das, Debaprasad Das, Batta Krushna Sena and Choudhury Balram Mishra went to the Chandi mandir, pricked their finger and mixed their blood on a bel leaf, taking a blood oath to do whatever was needed for the cause of Odissi.

5 At the time of these deliberations, young dancers like Mayadhar clashed with senior people like Surendra Mohanty, Kartik Kumar Ghosh. Mayadhar's guru Pankaj Charan Das refused to continue participating in the discussions of Jayatika Association.

6 My association with guruji spans over three decades.

influenced and molded by materially objective living conditions and changes in those conditions” (Medik in Gregory 1999, 101). In keeping with micro historical research methods (Hargadon and Wadhvani 2023), this paper emerges from the reflexive use of dual temporal frames: a micro temporal frame grounded in the life and work of Guru Mayadhar Raut and a macro temporal frame accounting for processes of continuity and change in Odissi dance over time. The critical reading of the history of classical dance in India throws up a history of exceptional individual actions, unintended consequences, nonlinear and emergent processes, contingent processes, and unobserved or inconceivable processes. By offering three frameworks of *play*, *mimesis*, and *osmosis*, to engage with the legacy of a guru in classical dance and the hierarchical role that this legacy plays in the lives of classical dancers, this paper offers an agential opportunity to situate ourselves within the inherited pedagogical hierarchies of dance.

Frame One: Play

The idea of play provides a framework for experimentation within a formal pedagogical structure, creating space for exploring vulnerability, taking risks, finding pleasure, and also failure. Within educational philosophy, play is understood to be vital to enrich the taught regimes. In this spirit, play is not only a way of expanding the self but is central to self-preservation (Lin and Riefel 1999 in Henricks 2006). It is a laboratory where experimentation with new skills and practice of old ones is done without real-life repercussions. Play is also a social workshop where emotions can be expressed and displayed to stimulate creativity. Play is a province of the student, away from the mastery of the teacher. Here the student learns to develop and exercise their own critical and intellectual faculties (Henricks 2006). Playing in the dance class demands that we engage and invest ourselves completely in what the dance feels like and how it moves the body in the present moment. The focus is not on a pre-imagined final product or outcome, in terms of a learned choreography, and the central aim of the idea of play is to derive pleasure from being in the present.

When children play they are aware that there is a voluntary distance from the real world and at the same time there is a commitment to the value and roles taken

on in the moment of play. This zone of play is mental and emotional, physical, and symbolic (Huizinga in Henricks 2006). While engaging in play, challenges are imagined and then resolved through a process of alternation between tension and completion, between opposition and union and therefore the experience of play is aesthetic, it is an encounter with rhythm and harmony. In the dance class, play emerges as an experimental engagement with the received legacy of the guru. Rather than a replication of the work of the guru, play implies a (re)engagement, a (re)negotiation, and (re)thinking of taught material, distancing the dance from the hierarchical position of the guru with relation to the student. To engage fully in play with dance implies to step sideways into another reality, where the rules of lineage no longer apply. “Like willful children, (students) unscrew reality or rub it onto their bodies or toss it across the room. Things are built anew” (1), and dancers are granted dispensation from mindless replication.

Play, according to Sutton-Smith (in Henricks 2006, 4), cultivates an individual’s ability to be variable and flexible in a way that existing skill sets can be used to respond to various sets of challenges. But play does not imply a lack of rigor or seriousness. An example is the sanchari bhava that Guru Mayadhar Raut introduced to the Odissi asthapadi (citation). While teaching the sanchari (embodied, experiential, and gestural elaboration on a thought, concept, idea, character, lyrical refrain etc.) section of an ashtapadi, guruji would only teach us the broad outline and it was left to the dancer to fill in the details. That meant that the students needed to play with the story, experiment, listen to their bodies speak, and allow their life experiences to flow through the technique. Sometimes it worked and sometimes it did not; sometimes it worked for the audience and did nothing for the dancer and vice versa. That also meant that the presentation of the sanchari did not look the same every time, it was different in different classes and very different across performances. What he stressed throughout however was the importance of continuous play, to not stop and get fixated on something that works to continue to open the layers of what is possible. The idea of choreography then, according to guruji, is not something that is rigid and fixated. Dancing with play allows the technique to filter through the individual dancers’ bodies and choreography then, instead of

being a fixed set of moves, becomes an idea that is manifested differently across different bodies. None of the great legends danced alike, they were not similar, and their choreographies bore their own individual mark. I believe that play and its varied manifestations are therefore an important element in the making of the legends and legacies we celebrate today.

It's not enough however to just think about something and the merging of action and attention during practice must take place for play to manifest. Play also does not imply that anything goes as attention to detail is critical to play. Play in fact demands complete immersion and dedication; however, there is no clear preset goal. Play therefore demands improvisation. It was perhaps 1945 and Mayadhar Raut had been a part of Kalicharan Pattnaik's theatre group for a little over a year. While playing on the swings, Mayadhar fell and suffered a deep cut over his right eyebrow. His elder brother Harihar was furious! Mayadhar was to play the part of Krishna and he could not possibly go onstage with a bandage. Mayadhar and his friend Gopi Krishna had a way out. Krishna's sakha would ask him Krishna how did you hurt yourself? And Krishna would answer I went to pick flowers for Radha's ornaments and got stung by a bee! So successful was this incidental screenplay that even after the wound healed, the dialogue remained. Guruji delights till date, in the way he was able to find a way around the authority of his guru and elder brother. This subversion, though playful, resulted in an aesthetic experience that became a part of his choreographic oeuvre.

Play demands the possibility of extending a skill to negotiate and contend with the unexpected and therefore demands an engagement with complexity and subtlety. Another small incident from his time in Kalakshetra demonstrates Guruji's capacity to take risks with what he knew in ways that not only challenged the status quo but created moments that make people take notice of him. In 1958, during his time in Kalakshetra, during the fancy dress competition at the Theosophical Society's school, Mayadhar used his makeup and painting skills acquired while working at Annapurna Theatre to transform a boy called Venkatesh into

a leper. The dignitaries who attended, including Rukmini Devi, were taken aback at the choice of fancy dress but eventually were appreciative of the work that Mayadhar did. He was fondly scolded by Rukmini Devi for his naughtiness. This sense of presenting the unexpected has remained a constant in guruji's landmark choreographies. It is in this tension between pleasure and risk, between vulnerability and mastery, between the known and the improvised, between the maneuvered and structured that any dance form remains alive and responsive within hierarchical pedagogical structures.

Frame Two: Mimesis

Play is manifested through the potential of dance to alter perspectives and abstract rasa (the translation from the individual lived experience to a shared aesthetic immersion) from real-life experiences. This idea of abstraction leads me to my second proposition, *Mimesis*. Mimesis is a philosophical idea that describes the process of imitation or mimicry through which artists across genres portray and interpret the world. It is understood as an act of simultaneous imitation and interpretation. Mimesis as a concept has been much debated in western aesthetic philosophy. The understanding of mimesis proposed here draws upon a dynamic, historical, and anthropological notion of mimesis proposed by, among others, Roger Caillois, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno (Paddison 2011).). Mimesis, as understood here implies not only the notion of imitation, where dance is said to imitate something, or stand in as a representation or an expression of something. To clarify, in traditional dancemaking, it is the process of direct representation of the text/ music/ rhythm, for example the dancer interprets a line of a song with hand gestures- *Dheera samire Yamuna teere, vasati vane vanamali* (When the spring breeze blows on the banks of Yamuna, Krishna waits in the forest...). Dance and its technique are used to imitate the meaning of the lyrics and the raaga (melodic mode) they are sung in. However, it is also the process of simultaneous abstraction of the idea by using the moving and shifting body of the text/ music/ rhythm and is most obviously seen in the way in which this line is repeated and represented

differently twenty-three times in guruji's choreography.

Drawing from Walter Benjamin's argument that "mimesis can be seen as an impulse, a mode of 'identifying with' rather than necessarily as 'imitation of' or 'representation of' something external to itself (Padison 2010, 127), makes a case for mimesis as an embodied impulse which functions in relation to its opposite – the technical aspects of dance. Instead of drawing upon simply the imitation of received choreography mimesis in dance oscillates between its own internal rationalized constructional (the lineage of the guru) and unrationalized mimetic moments. "Mimesis in this sense may be regarded as a pre-rational, or not-yet-rationalized, mode of behavior, with an affinity towards the sensuous and embodied, non-conceptual re-enactment of cognitive processes" (Paddison 2010, 136). This process is evident in the different ways in which every piece of the Jayantika repertoire, from the Mangalacharan to the Ashtapadi has been impacted by the specific worldview of every guru and differently imagined, treated, and choreographed across the various styles of Odissi. Each style of Odissi is linked yet distinct emerging from individual mimetic processes.

Mimesis imitates but still creates a work of art removed from reality. That gap is a good thing because the audience responds best to a combination of recognition and distance. It is in this gap, in this shift of perception that *rasa* is generated, and the audience feels empathy and catharsis. I discuss this gap through the idea of music composition through the arguments of Eduard Hanslick.

Two things must be kept distinct. One is the misconception ... that natural sounds can be directly and realistically carried over into the artwork The other is the case where elements present in nature, being to some extent musically effective because of their rhythmic or sonorous character, are taken over by composers, not as something to be 'imitated', but as something that lends itself to their impulse to create musical motifs out of autonomous musical beauty, which with artistic spontaneity they conceive and actualize (in Paddison 132-33).

In the case of traditional dance practices, the

hierarchy and rationality of received knowledge must encounter mimesis within the dance class, both during teaching and individual practice, to be freed from its fixedness. As a sensuous, embodied and expressive phenomenon, mimesis is a process that can enable dancers to intimately adapt dance and dance then becomes "rationally transformed and objectified mimesis" (Wellmer in Padison 2010). This adaptation, however, is not possible without the received repertoire of dance practices from the guru. The oscillation between received practices and mimetic process keeps the dance 'moving', shifting the understanding of parampara from something that is stagnant to something that is constantly evolving, constantly in touch with what came before and what is now. Mimesis is essential to the process of dancemaking because it operates on the principle of shifting perception. In 1961, Guru Mayadhar Raut choreographed a two-hour long dance drama *Tapasvini* based on an eleven canto poem written by Shri Gangadhar Meher. The choreography of this piece was nothing like was ever done before in Odisha. There was a three-tiered stage created in an open ground, with more than a hundred people involved, and people stood on cars and buses to see the show. In many ways guruji drew upon his Kalakshetra training as well as his fascination for Hindi cinema to create a work that shifted the way Odissi was done and Odisha understood the genre of dance-drama. The great choreographic landmark works in the contemporary history of Odissi, that have been made into hierarchical canons today, fossilized to be replicated without thought, all have one thing in common; developed through mimetic impulses, they shift the way the audience perceives reality, they present new ways of knowing and understanding an already known story or text.

When the process of mimesis is simplistically approached, that is when it is understood as simply imitating what is understood as tradition, it creates an understanding of dance technique as something that is rigid, which has no space for personal interpretation and requires the dancers to just copy the teacher or the guru. But we all know as dancers, that is not true. Therefore, I propose that the key aspect of the work of every legendary Odissi guru and every legendary Odissi dancer that we seek to learn from is their mimetic capacity to constantly re-imagine what is already known.

Frame Three: Osmosis

This capacity for re-imagination is fueled by the last element that I would like to put forth today, *Osmosis*. Osmosis is a scientific term that implies a spontaneous transfer of elements from one fluid to another through a membrane. When I examine the work of Guru Mayadhar Raut through this lens, I realize that his approach to dancemaking operated on this very principle. Nothing was off-limits. Every experience, every life circumstance fed into their work. Dance does not operate in a bubble with technique becoming a barrier that keeps the world out. In an osmotic worldview dance technique becomes the membrane, the filter through which varied experiences and learnings from all aspects of life come into dance. The legends and legacies we celebrate understood dance technique as something that was available to them in their bodies. This meant that the technique adapted to changing bodily and life circumstances evolving in the role that technique played, the way technique was deployed. When we see later videos of elderly gurus performing, it is apparent that they have made technique their own rather than be subservient to its diktat.

Examining Guru Mayadhar Raut's work for examples of osmosis, I am overwhelmed by the examples that come up; he learnt multiple dance styles, from Kathakali at Kalakshetra to Uday Shankar's style under Kumar Dayal Sharan. Before that he learnt Gotipua and Mahari (temple-dancing traditions) dance sequences, dance sequences inspired by the work of Mumtaz Ali (father of well-known comedian Mahmood), he learnt Oriya folk dances like the sword dance, Bhil dance. He wrote two novels and several poems which were never published. Guruji learnt to play the Mridangam, the Pakhawaj, the tabla, and the Manipuri Khol. In his lifetime guruji has worked as a Gotipua artist, a mechanic, a printing press assistant, and an assistant to a set designer. He ran away to Bombay to be a film star, enthusiastically participated in the first election in independent India and he was even a social activist for a time. During his time at Annapurna theatre, he learnt how to do make-up and dress arrangement. He composed solo pieces, directed severely plays, composed the

first ever dance dramas in Odisha, choreographed for films, choreographed on a range of texts from Oriya songs to Tagore's compositions; the list is inexhaustible. The range of training that he received and the life circumstances that engendered a diverse set of experiences seeped into his choreography and pedagogy. Osmosis suggests an ontological orientation that happens in the space between the non-linearization and non-hierarchicalization of experience to create a dance freed of the imperative to conform to its genealogical origins.

Osmosis as a process, I suggest, reconfigures the unity of the self towards a multiplicity of selves. Phillipa Rothfield, thinking through the work of Deborah Hay argues that thinking of the body as a cellular body undermines the choreographed body, its habits, body schematic dispositions and tendencies (2020, 236). Osmosis is an imaginary practice that invokes the whole body reminding us that "movements of all kinds can be abstracted from the projects to which they contingently belong; accordingly, they can be studied both as discreet units of meaning and distinct instances of kinesis" (Noland 2009, 6). Drawing upon the work of Merleau-Ponty, I suggest that dance, which is acontextual, impartial, and effectively disembodied, presenting a universal perspective unaffected by the corporeality of the individual is an impossibility. Pedagogically imposed hierarchy of replication of legacy forecloses the possibility that the taught technique fuses with the bodily schema of individual dancers. By shifting the idea that the received canon is to be replicated as is, an osmotic process enables the deliberate noticing of the way in which lived experience permeates into the dance and dance becomes a corporeally situated experience.

Moving Forward and Sideways

Renegotiating the hierarchy of parampara or dance legacies revived through the guru implies that dance is seen not just as a representation but is rather a view from the body. This view from the body allows the dancer to move forward and sideways though the legacy of their guru, bridging the gap between thinking, doing, writing, and making dance. Dancing

then becomes a perspective mediated by the critical practice of thinking about questions of difference, privilege, power politics, and marginalization which in turn become the ground for a corporeal formation embedded within dynamic encounters of the political self. The force of such a pedagogy will be felt at every level of viewing, critiquing, evaluating, and transmitting dance; in the dance class, in institutions, performance spaces, and scholarship.

If traditional forms are to survive the fossilization of the nationalist movement and continue to be a relevant art form in the twenty-first century and beyond, it is imperative that we learn from the legends to embrace the vulnerability of *Play* to create space for the *Mimetic* process and fuel it with being in an *Osmotic* relationship with the world. The aim here is not to imitate the past but to stand on the shoulders of giants and take a leap of faith into the future.

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