

Equity, Privilege, and Representation in Dance Facilitated by Raven Davis, Ella Cooper, and Leelee Davis

Session 1: Unpacking Indigeneity, Racism, and Representation in Dance *Tuesday, April 3, 6:30 pm-9:30 pm, at Dancemakers Centre for Creation*

This session began with a land acknowledgement, delivered by Ella. The facilitators discussed what it means for settler-Canadians to participate actively in acknowledging land, as a means of practicing forms of accountability.

The Goals for Session 1 were outlined as follows:

- Unpacking race and privilege.
- Gaining clarity of terms and highlighting differences between cultural, organizational, institutional, and systemic racisms.
- Locating ourselves in the conversation.
- Building connections and broadening our community of support.

We also discussed and expanded a series of space agreements:

- We agreed that we would not have to censor ourselves, while always making sure to take accountability for what we say and the impact it has.
- We agreed that fostering a safer space is everybody's responsibility.
- We agreed to use accessible language.
- We agreed to speak using "I," acknowledging that we speak for ourselves and our experiences.
- We agreed to work at ending white/male complacency.
- We agreed to focus on calling in, rather than calling out – inviting people into the conversation.
- We agreed to lift each other and ourselves up, making the effort to be positive and supportive whenever possible.
- We agreed to check our assumptions about bodies, brains, and abilities.

Indigenous Representation in Dance (Raven Davis)

Raven's presentation connected histories of Indigenous dance, the development of Canadian dance institutions, and settler-Indigenous relationships in Canada.

We surveyed some of the colonial and genocidal policies enacted by the Canadian state on Indigenous populations, including the 1884 amendment to the Indian Act

banning Indigenous celebrations and dances, the residential school system, and the "Sixties Scoop."

Raven also sketched a timeline of Canada's developing national dance infrastructure, including the 1939 founding of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, and the 1951 founding of the National Ballet. What this demonstrates is the simultaneity of state-sanctioned cultural development in Canada's dance field with the continued oppression and marginalization of Indigenous peoples and cultures. The Royal Winnipeg Ballet was founded near the height of the residential school system, and the first year of the National Ballet's existence brought new and discriminatory restrictions to Indigenous status and reservation governance.

Having reflected on some of this important and continuing history, we considered the paucity of Indigenous dance artists holding positions of leadership in our institutions. Where do we go from here? Raven highlighted how Indigenous forms continue to thrive and evolve in the practice of Indigenous dancers today, including celebrated artists like Sandra LaRonde, Santee Smith, and Michael Greyeyes, among many others. We spoke about the countless Indigenous dancers who are not acknowledged within the broader dance culture.

How do we talk about and practice decolonization and reconciliation as a dance community? How can we support Indigenous dance artists?

Some recommendations:

- Hire Indigenous artists to create policies for your organization.
- Invite Indigenous artists to create work, not just to perform a land acknowledgement or an opening dance.
- Consider your values, how can you support dance beyond Euro-American forms?
- Foster inclusive spaces for Indigenous dance.
- Say no to cultural appropriation.
- Gain self-awareness and knowledge, work from your own history.

Tap into Privilege (Ella Cooper)

Ella lead us through an exercise called "Tap into Privilege." This practice was geared toward self-reflection, and asked the group to consider a variety of questions:

- How do we come to accept authority?
- At what point do we question what we are told?
- At what point do we move against a status quo?
- How do we react to positions of power or knowledge?
- What do we feel when we have limited access to the world around us?
- What social dynamics influence how we react to differentials of access and power?
- How do our perceptions of privilege influence our actions, how do these impact the space around us?

What Now? (Leelee Davis)

Leelee asked the group to think of a time when we felt invisible, not heard, or pushed away. They offered this as a channel for reflecting on experiences of marginalization. How might this operate as an incentive to work at addressing the needs those with less privilege and power?

Leelee suggested that an important part of the work we are doing here is trying to align our sphere of concern with our sphere of influence: two concentric circles that are often of unequal size. When our sphere of concern is larger than our sphere of influence, we suffer, seeing a host of injustices we don't have the resources or power to address. When our sphere of influence is larger than our sphere of concern, we might be unaware of many issues as a result of our own privilege. How can we bring our concern and our influence into closer alignment?

Leelee also guided the group to think about the difference between equality (where everyone is given the same thing) and equity (where everyone is given what they need). And, given the state or reality, which is neither equal nor equitable, how can we work together toward co-liberation?

These brief notes summarize a starting point, we hope you will join us for Session 2!