



**Steps Toward Systemic Change**  
**Phase I**

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## Steps Toward Systemic Change at TDT

### Introduction

The first and most basic meaning of “decolonization” is when a nation seeks to become free of the oppressor/oppressed regime imposed on them by a colonial power, and to physically and legally undo the colonial state, or Empire, that has dominated their society.

The conscious or unconscious quest for decolonization is present in the art of many independent artists and small arts organizations in the area commonly referred to as Toronto. This art aims to expose and dismantle the effects of colonialism in all its forms, including the more hidden forms that live in older, larger cultural institutions even after more political independence is gained by marginalized peoples. These larger institutions may not realize that they privilege art that places the Eurocentric over the Indigenous, and that their ways of speaking to and working with peoples from Indigenous and non-European heritages perpetuates harmful, disrespectful, marginalizing practices. As a country, Canada’s entire way of being has attempted to erase and write over the languages, dances, music, visual art and scientific contributions of Indigenous peoples first, and then those of immigrant cultures who contribute so much to the fabric of society.

Honouring the spirit of sharing resources peacefully and respectfully in this area as many Indigenous nations did for centuries involves organizations like Toronto Dance Theatre continuing to learn about and apply decolonization and anti-racism practices throughout its work.

Toronto Dance Theatre has already been engaging in a process of sharing its privilege and including a more diverse range of artists and administrators in all levels of the organization. Decolonization of organizations is a complex process and requires the individuals within the organization to learn about and apply new ways of thinking and being. The plan outlined below serves as the company’s first steps toward a thorough examination of its institutional practices and includes deep education, as well as further immediate resource sharing. This initial phase centres Indigenous and Black/African Diasporic peoples in a targeted universalism methodology, which is a recognized equity approach demonstrating that by identifying and removing systemic barriers for a targeted group, other disadvantaged communities benefit from the changes as well.

The first two points of the three-point plan below involve every member of the organization doing the deeper internal work required to lead to lasting institutional changes. The third point involves immediately sharing the company’s privilege and financial, networking and human resources more comprehensively.

## Steps Toward Systemic Change at TDT

### 1. Education on Indigenous Perspectives and Experiences

#### Action:

Engage an Indigenous facilitator to lead the staff and board through a series of decolonization education sessions that will provide:

- A background on what Indigenous Peoples have and continue to face through ongoing colonization practices.
- Context for how Indigenous art forms have been marginalized and erased, and how larger Canadian cultural institutions have participated in and contribute to this erasure and marginalization.
- Tools to internally analyze TDT's way of being in relation to Indigenous Peoples and cultures: Everything from the way a company calls artists, audiences, staff and board members into its space, speaks with, engages, markets to, includes and centres people can contribute to exclusion and marginalization.
- A facilitated discussion forum to brainstorm ways in which the company can begin to dismantle any ways of being that are deemed harmful and exclusionary toward Indigenous Peoples and cultural practices.

#### Purpose:

To continue and expand Toronto Dance Theatre's work on becoming a fully accessible contemporary dance organization that wholly serves, represents, and dialogues with the communities living in this land.

#### Timeline:

Four sessions, each approximately four hours in length, held between September and December 31, 2020. One session per month to allow for reflection and growth.

#### Notes:

While this type of education does not always result in major changes that are visible to the outside world immediately, this type of deeper learning and reflection helps individuals and organizations make meaningful changes to the way we see and understand our environments, which leads to changes in the way we work with others, with whom we work and whose stories we centre in our presentations: Systemic change.

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### 2. Education on Anti-Black Racism

#### Action:

Engage one of the City's Confronting Anti-Black Racism Unit's facilitators to lead the staff and board through a series of education sessions on anti-Black racism and its effects that will provide:

- A background on anti-Black racism's origins, current manifestations, and effects.
- Context for how African Diasporic art forms have been marginalized and erased, and how larger Canadian cultural institutions have participated in and contribute to this erasure and marginalization.
- Tools to internally analyze TDT's way of being in relation to the experiences of African Diasporic peoples and art forms: Everything from the way a company calls artists, audiences, staff and board members into its space, speaks with, engages, markets to, includes and centres people can contribute to exclusion and marginalization.
- A facilitated discussion forum to brainstorm ways in which the company can begin to dismantle any ways of being that are deemed harmful and exclusionary toward African Diasporic peoples and cultural practices.

#### Purpose:

To continue and expand Toronto Dance Theatre's work on becoming a fully accessible contemporary dance organization that wholly serves, represents and dialogues with the communities living in this land.

#### Timeline:

Four sessions, each approximately four hours in length, held between September and December 31, 2020. One session per month to allow for reflection and growth, especially given that the sessions based on Indigenous perspectives and experiences will also be taking place (separately).

#### Notes on the Sessions Outlined in 1 and 2:

These eight sessions combined will total 30-40 hours of learning, which is an extensive first phase education strategy to which the company will devote significant time and financial resources. This plan is not reactionary and concerned with external approval. It involves deep internal work that can lead to more systemic change, if needed. This is the type of examination required to initiate reform at arts institutions. While this initial targeted universalism approach focuses on Indigenous and Black/African Diasporic communities, the education can lead to improved accessibility for all.

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### 3. The House Legacy Fund

#### Action:

As Christopher House embarks on the next phase of his career, he has collaborated with the board to establish the House Legacy Fund to provide an annual opportunity for an artist or artists from either an Indigenous or African Diasporic community to create a work on the company while receiving mentorship in artistic direction. The opportunity will be offered each season and include the artist receiving:

- Space and resources to create a work on the company in the artist's form of dance and way of being/working (e.g. the dance work and way of working can be an expression of Indigeneity that may be outside of western contemporary understanding)
- Guided input on all production elements, e.g. casting, design, costuming, music
- Mentorship meetings with the artistic, rehearsal and managing directors
- Input on how their work is promoted and marketed, and to whom
- A dedicated web page on the company's site that includes a self-authored profile. This can include notes on past or upcoming works, information about their community and/or social causes they would like to draw attention to. An e-blast and social posts to TDT's supporters will call attention to the page.

#### Purpose:

To share the company's financial, human, and networking resources more deeply with artists from Indigenous and African Diasporic communities. To share the company's resources more widely with those who do not have the access and privilege due to systemic racism.

#### Timeline:

Fundraising will begin immediately and will continue annually. The opportunity will be open each season. It is suggested that an informal committee be struck to help the Artistic Director select the artists to ensure an open process.

#### Notes:

This continuation and focusing of Christopher's outreach work moves the support for these artists and their communities beyond the theatre by giving them more mentorship and space to speak to the company's vast network about their work, community and social causes important to them. It is an immediate and responsible sharing of the company's cultural resources. The program is flexible and can be adjusted to better serve evolving community needs into the future.

**Conclusion:** Note that the entire Phase I plan does not only benefit marginalized peoples, it provides an opportunity for revealing, renewal and rediscovery for everyone at TDT.