

# From Patchwork to Pathways: Insights to deepen collaboration amongst Dance Arts Service Organizations

PREPARED BY

Robin Sokoloski & Soni Dasmohapatra

Mass Culture | Mobilisation culturelle

PREPARED FOR

Dance Umbrella of Ontario

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Work in  
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# Land Acknowledgement

We wish to express gratitude to Turtle Island for the resources we have access to, and to honour all the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit who have been living on the land since time immemorial. We are grateful, have much more to learn, and to move on together.

I have been taught that the jingle bell dress dance from Indigenous tradition on Turtle Island is a dance of healing and offering prayers. As a classically trained Kathak dancer, a form from India, I wear bells and offer prayers as part of the expression of dance. The connections of prayer and collective healing in the form of dance is an opportunity to open our hearts, ears, and minds to recognize the power of dance as a transformative method for pathways to reconciliation. I am grateful for the teachings regarding dance that I have learned from Indigenous dancers and elders who have graciously shared this with me.

- Soni Dasmohapatra

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# Research Question

By capturing insights through the assessment of current program offerings and future program aspirations of seventeen organizations that provide services to dance, how can we enhance our understanding, resource allocation, and strategic decision-making to foster more effective collaboration and create a more significant positive impact on the dance community?

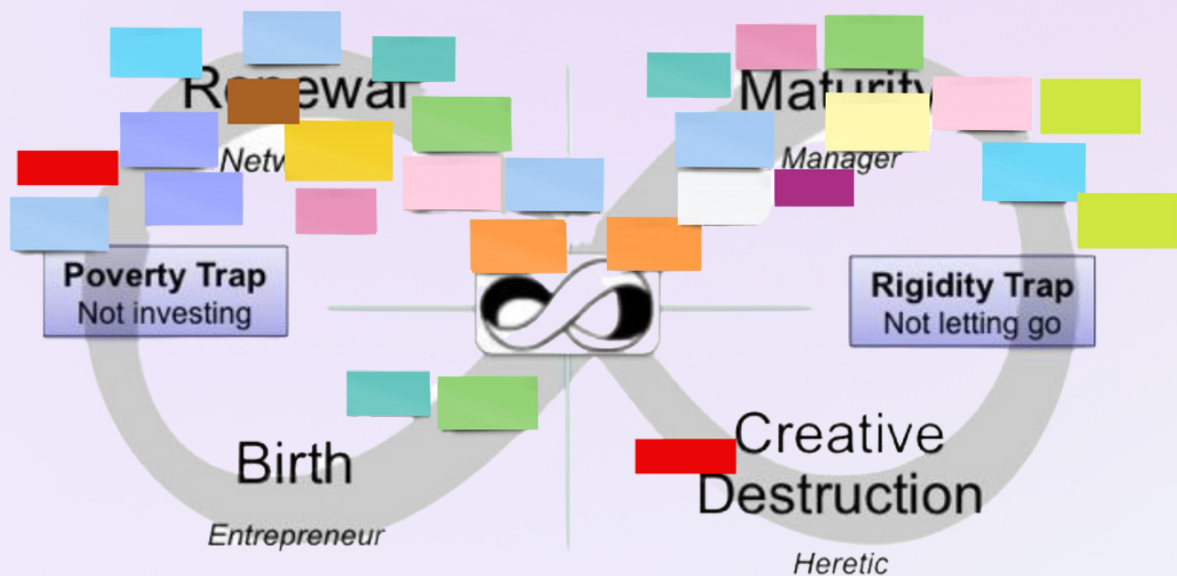
# Methodology

Building off of the Canadian Dance Assembly-commissioned research in 2017, "[Re-Imagining Service Organizations: Decolonizing Dance](#)", Mass Culture conducted a landscape analysis of the eighteen arts organizations that currently provide services to support dancers and dance companies.

In October 2023, Dance Umbrella Ontario commenced a research initiative involving Robin Sokoloski and Soni Dasmohapatra from Mass Culture. Their collaborative efforts culminated in the completion of eighteen interviews and an online gathering with organizations dedicated to serving the Canadian dance community. For a comprehensive list of the interview questions, please refer to the [appendices](#).

The central objective of these interviews was to gain insights into the current and future services provided by these organizations, as well as to discern the unique positions they hold within the intricate patchwork of the dance sector. Through engagement with key representatives from each of these organizations, the interviewers gained valuable insights into the DASO's current positions and collaborative efforts. Ultimately, the goal of this research initiative is to illuminate potential pathways for DASOs to unite and collectively catalyze a positive and transformative impact on the Canadian dance community.

*The collaboration was successful because we both walked away, you know, like, we knew more about each other. [Interview 13]*



Each organization interviewed (represented by a different coloured box), shared where they feel their organization is currently positioned on this Ecocycle Planning Map - <https://www.liberatingstructures.com/31-ecocycle-planning/>

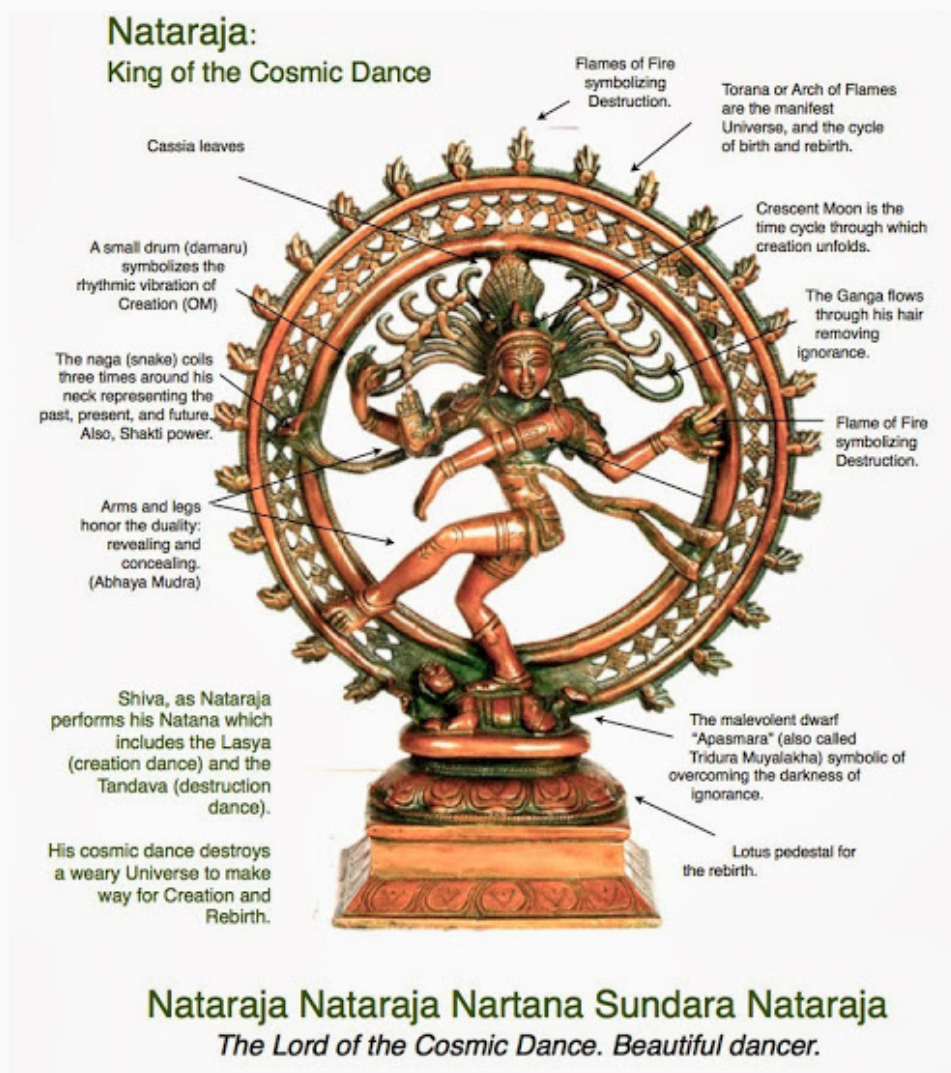
The interviews were conducted by engaging with key representatives from each of the participating organizations to provide a better understanding of:

- Current and Future Services: The interviewers sought to gain insights into the services currently offered by these organizations and their plans for the future. This included exploring the range and scope of services provided to the Canadian dance community.
- Examining Organizational Positions: The research was initiated to discern the unique positions held by each of these organizations within the multifaceted landscape of the dance sector. This involved investigating how they perceived their roles within and contributions to the dance community.

As an additional layer of support for this research study, Mass Culture utilized its [Arts Data Platform](#) to generate a revenue report. This report identifies and compares annual financial trends spanning from 2018 to 2021 across different provinces. It further illustrates how various revenue sources, predominantly government grants, were allocated and invested within the dance sector.

After the interviews, an interim insights report was crafted and presented to interview participants. This preliminary insights report was shared along with a [List of Services](#) as advanced materials for an online convening in January 2024.

The facilitators guided a ninety-minute online event, involving twelve participants in an interactive discussion. Commencing with a movement exercise centered around an archetype of India's classical dance genre, Nataraja who is King of the cosmic (see image below), this symbol mimics the infinity ecosystem planning map shared above. Showcasing the cycle of creation, maturity and destruction, the session aimed to highlight existing and emerging connections among participating organizations. The conversation initially explored the broader landscape of the dance sector and gradually transitioned into a strength-based discussion focused on current programming. Leveraging insights from this activity, the facilitators generated an "energy map" in real time, illustrating potential collaborative opportunities within the sector.



*Drawing inspiration from the perpetual flow of the Ecocycle of creation, preservation and destruction, the Nataraja archetypes served as a grounding force, fostering a sense of community and connection among the participants.*

# Summary

Research is a living thing, particularly when centered around relationality. In January 2023, Mass Culture organized the event, "ASOs: Positioning a Future Forward." Fast forward a year, and key facilitators from that event, Soni Dasmohapatra and Robin Sokoloski, not only applied insights gained from the January 2023 gathering, but also built upon them through a series of interviews. They subsequently brought together a group of arts service organizations from the dance community to explore new dimensions of collaboration, aiming to amplify their impact on the dance scene in Canada.

Taking a moment to reflect on the essence of the dance sector—its distinctive value proposition, the support it receives, and its intersection with and contribution to equity, diversity, and inclusion—established the foundation for a collective dialogue among Dance Arts Service Organizations (DASOs) in January 2024.

The facilitators strategically crafted this meta-conversation, along with the subsequent activities, to be an ongoing process. Despite the absence of several representatives from dance Arts Service Organizations, the aspiration is that the gathering on January 16, 2024 catalyzes future action-oriented discussions.



*Responses provided by participants during the January 2024 convening on "What is the dance sector?"*

# Who Participated

It is essential to acknowledge that the research encompassed a diverse array of arts organizations, but not all DASOs participated. Some of these organizations readily embraced the categorization of being an arts service organization (ASO), while others expressed uncertainty or reservations about this label. It was clarified that any organization offering services to support dancers and dance companies would be considered an ASO for the purposes of this research.

Nevertheless, as the respondents elaborated on the programs and services they provide, it became evident that they could be categorized into three distinct types of "service providers":

- Workers' Association - Providing a set of standard agreement(s) for better working conditions, fair wages, job security, safe workplaces, and various employment-related benefits for dancers [interviews 1, 11, and 13].
- Dance Development Centres - Providing services to dancers that support the creative and presenting processes [interviews 2, 4, and 12] such as creative exchanges and workshops.
- Support Organizations - Providing services to dancers, dance companies/ organizations, and sometimes other parties, such as academics, by acting as an advocate, amplifier, convenor, funder, educator, archiver, and events planner [Interviews 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 14].

While it may initially appear straightforward to categorize each organization into one of these types, further in-depth discussions reveal that certain smaller and severely underfunded dance arts organizations are grappling with the challenge of addressing multiple types simultaneously.

The factors contributing to this situation are multifaceted. Preliminary findings indicate that it is partly attributable to certain support organizations being tasked with representing entire regions, compelling them to address any and every gap that arises. Additionally, some organizations, despite receiving minimal core funding, have been entrusted with providing stability through said funds. Furthermore, francophone organizations often experience a sense of isolation and limited interaction with their



anglophone counterparts. Although DASOs express a willingness to convene regularly, there remains a prevalent challenge of insufficient awareness regarding the initiatives and endeavours of their fellow dance arts organizations.

# Research Findings

## The Complexity of the Dance Sector

Indigenous peoples are distinct rights holders in Canada. Indigenous dance forms have been practiced on Turtle Island since time immemorial. However, due to colonial practices, it is important to recognize the political, social, economic and cultural harm that has impacted Indigenous dance. In our inquiry and as we seek to address reconciliation, what is needed to understand and repair this harm?

Since colonization, dance infrastructure in Canada has been set up to support European-based disciplines of dance. Many of the interviewees recognized this as the dominant narrative of Canadian dance today. The tension that is arising because of this current reality is to respond to the shifting demographic of Canada's population. Recognizing and making space for dancers and artists that have origins in the Global South and not Eurocentric cultures is a difficult process given the current systems frameworks that hold the Canadian dance ecosystem together.

Geographic disparities are also factors that provide inequitable opportunities for dancers, arts organizations, and other stakeholders involved in the national dance ecosystem. Resources such as government funding are not enough to ensure the dance sector's sustainability. Emerging and established dancers from equity-seeking communities are being encouraged to apply for grants and resources in an already competitive environment that is not able to hold space even for existing established dance artists. Rural communities often do not have the same resources as urban ones. Dance partnerships and artist collaborations need time and space for building relations, and often the administrative burden placed on arts organizations and the artists who need to "live" does not allow for these relations to grow and evolve into new works and touring opportunities.

Dance as a genre is also changing in its disciplinary nature. Global influences, technology, interdisciplinary evolutions in theatre, music and literary arts are all impacting how dance is moving through the arts, cultural and heritage sector as a whole. A question to be explored in the future may be: Is dance losing its artistic centrality due to this fluidity?

The complexity of these current realities cannot be relegated to an Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Accessibility (EDIA) or decolonization strategy that is based on a “one size fits all” mentality. There has to be a contextualization of the current state of dance organizations, dancers, and geographic locations to understand the needs of the dance sector. This needs assessment is vital to building pathways of understanding for accessible and inclusive ways of: creating and implementing dance governance structures, slow touring, recognizing the shifts in dance disciplines, development of dancer contracts and quality of life, reviewing current funding inadequacies, building community partnerships, and considering community care for dance organizations and artists that can respond to the changing needs of the sector.

The dance sector was described by the DASOs involved in this project as multifaceted and intricate, making it challenging to offer a comprehensive definition. The recognition of numerous unseen artistic endeavors and spaces that may not be traditionally acknowledged as dance spaces added to the complexity.

There was a call to examine who holds decision-making power and determines funding within the sector. The focus was on understanding where investments are made and how they contribute to meaningful change.

Despite the complexity of the dance sector, there was a shared belief in the power of togetherness and connectivity as a means to address challenges collaboratively.

## **Leveraging Mutual Internal Renewal as a Position of Strength**

During the interviews, each organizational representative was tasked with placing their organization on an ecocycle map (see image). A common theme that emerged was the placement of organizations in a mature phase, often characterized by them having well-established programming and a decade or more of existence. However, it was a prevailing sentiment that, despite their maturity, most organizations saw themselves as being in a phase of renewal. Regardless of whether this self-assessment accurately

reflects the current status, there was a pervasive desire among the organizations to be actively engaged in a state of renewal. See the [DASO Miro Board](#) for a complete mapping.

*...we're kind of like a 16 legged spider, where we're trying to connect everything and grow a stronger, more vibrant [dance] community, but also to educate the population about how dance is beyond just the performance. [Interview 8]*

## A Call for Data Collection and Research

A participant highlighted the significance of data and research in addressing systemic issues within the dance sector. The idea that data could simplify discussions and pinpoint information for more effective conversations was emphasized.

## Strengthening Shared Resources for Dancers

Dancers, as a group, are not covered by a union, and this particular situation has given rise to tensions within the dance community. It is noteworthy that all interviewees expressed unanimous concern for the fair compensation and safety of dancers. Currently, both CADA West and CADA East have established and uphold sets of standards, which are used as benchmarks when applying for grants and engaging with dancers.

Notably, specific labour agreements with dance companies have been forged by the Canadian Actors' Equity Association (CAEA), offering protection, but they extend only to individuals who are members of CAEA. Although a campaign was initiated in the late 2010s to encourage dancers to become CAEA members, it did not yield the desired results. Some interviewees implied that the reason dancers remain nonunionized is due to the need for a dedicated union exclusively for dancers, which, as of now, does not exist.

To better support a dancer's creative endeavours, the model of Artist-Led Residencies emerged as a notable framework for collaboration. The experience of using resiliency funds to support such initiatives was discussed, emphasizing the need to centre artists' voices and provide resources tailored to their requirements. The conversation

highlighted the absence of funding programs that enable dancers to participate in opportunities like this one, which has created an opening for DASOs to unite and address the issue.

## DASOs as Intermediaries

The dynamic between independent artists and presenters is intricate. Despite facing challenges, there exists a chance for artists to engage in self-presentation, potentially resulting in more sustainable funding and community support. Collaborative efforts between DASOs as intermediaries could delve into innovative structures and models, such as extended timelines and compensation for artists' time, to further enhance collaboration.

One suggestion offered by a participant was the inclusion of future discussions on fostering a safe workplace, particularly addressing harassment concerns for dancers dealing with abusive companies. This might be an opportunity for DASOs to explore relevant resources and initiate a collaborative dialogue with organizations such as CADA and CanDance to collectively address and combat these issues.

*I want to make sure that we don't go and just keep spinning the wheel and not really making changes. I do think art has the ability to make change... we need to find a way to bring in underserved artists and really nurture and support them. [participant, January 2024]*

# Next Steps and Pathways Forward

Despite resources stretched thin across small, overworked DASOs, it became evident to the researchers that a dance continuum does indeed exist. Within this continuum lies a series of pathways that, if collaboratively designed by the DASOs, can serve as invaluable guides in pinpointing areas where each organization can contribute and further strengthen the foundation of the dance community.

Based on the information gathered throughout the interviews and convening, the following thematic pathways will be presented and discussed further by the group:

**Professional Development and Artistic Growth:** Enhancing the skills, knowledge, and artistic development of dancers through residencies, training, mentorship, and career advancement opportunities.

**Administrative Synergy:** Sharing administrative processes, fostering knowledge exchange, and providing shared support services for more efficient operations.

**Dance for Wellbeing and Social Impact:** Exploring the positive societal effects of dance, emphasizing its role in mental health, community building, and broader social contexts.

**Dancers' Health and Quality of Life:** Focusing on physical and mental health initiatives to ensure the wellbeing of dancers, including injury prevention, mental health support, pay equity and overall wellness.

**Identity, Diversity, and Inclusivity in Dance:** Addressing the diverse aspects of identity within dance, including gender, ethnicity, race, and promoting inclusivity and representation.

**Strengthening Dance as a Disciplinary Pillar:** Advocating for dance's importance as an art form, sustaining its vitality within the cultural landscape, and securing its recognition and support.

Several sub-topics will intersect across all of these themes, including advocacy, collaborative event production, relationship building, and resource sharing.

These categories can provide a structural framework for organizing and discussing the multifaceted components that contribute to the Canadian dance ecosystem, facilitating a holistic comprehension of the various elements within the dance world.

# Appendix A

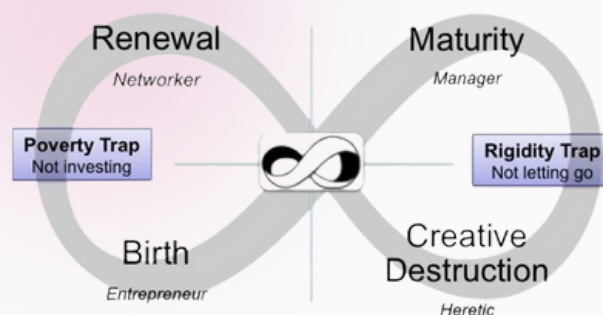
## Interview Questions

Focus on Program and Service for Dance

1. From your perspective, what makes your organization unique?
2. Talk about the services you provide. If you have a compiled list of programs/ projects upload them [here](#)
3. Talk about the services you would like to provide. Maybe things you have plans for or wish you could do, but don't have the resources to?
4. Are there any gaps you've noticed in programming for the dance community?
5. What information or support, etc. they need from other regions in Canada
6. What's the last successful collaboration your organization took part in? What made it feel successful? What did you learn from the process?
7. Take a look at this image (see below). Where would you place your organization right now on the cycle?

Tips:

- Go with your gut, you don't need to be an expert on ecocycle planning to take part.
- Aspects of your organization may sit in different areas of the cycle.



# More on this initiative

The goal of this landscape review of Dance Arts Service Organizations was to assess opportunities for enhanced collaboration within the dance community, and was initiated in 2023 by Dance Umbrella of Ontario in partnership with Mass Culture and Work In Culture upon the receipt of a grant from the Canada Council for the Arts.

## Thank you to the following organizations for participating in this research

Canadian Actors Equity Association | Dance Immersion | Circuit-Est Centre Choregraphique | Kinetic | Regroupement québécois de la danse | Canadian Alliance of Dance Artists/West Chapter | Canadian Alliance of Dance Artists/East Chapter | Healthy Dancer Canada | Alberta Dance Alliance | CanDance Network | Dance Studio West | Dance Ontario | Dancer Transition Resource Centre | Canadian Dance Assembly | Dance NL

[robin@massculture.ca](mailto:robin@massculture.ca) | [www.massculture.ca](http://www.massculture.ca)  
[www.danceumbrella.net](http://www.danceumbrella.net)