INTERSECTIONS OF SOCIAL CIRCUS AND SOCIAL WORK: A CRITICAL AND EMBODIED ANALYSIS

by

A. Kitz

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Dalhousie University occupies
the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi’kmaq People.

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DEDICATION

For those who have been engaging in anti-oppressive social circus for decades,

And for those who are working to make social circus a way to challenge the system, rather than join it – thank you.

May this thesis be a footnote in your grant applications to get the funding you deserve to continue your work.

You educated me, and you give me educated hope.

“Educated hope does not look like baseless statements of “it gets better,” or uncritical optimism about the future. Educated hope is about recognizing the intersections of inequities... This means recognizing how circus is infused with class-based discrimination and racism that are only exacerbated by the current pandemic. Educated hope might not look like planning for an impending gym opening, or hoping things go back to “normal.” Educated hope is acknowledging that the inequitable "normal” that many of us found comfort in at the expense of others is not something to return to, but to refuse.” (Zisman, 2021, p. 127)

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the intersection of social work and circus, and the social and political benefit of bringing together anti-oppressive social work practice with a form of circus engagement referred to as social circus for the purposes of self-improvement and community consciousness-raising. While there is no singular definition of social circus, it is generally accepted within the circus community to refer to a form of social intervention using circus arts. The American Circus Educators (Social Circus, n.d.) define social circus as, “the use of circus arts as a medium for social justice and individual wellness that uplifts the role of art and culture as powerful agents for change.”

The primary objective of this thesis is to bring into meaningful conversation anti-oppressive social work and social circus, and to offer insight into a practice that incorporates aspects of each. The project asks how critical, anti-oppressive social work could expand understandings of social circus and how social circus could both empower individuals while simultaneously promoting social change. The thesis deploys critical social work theory—notably queer and disabilities theories—to analyze, critique, and disrupt social circus’s ableist and colonial features, by asking what a critically-oriented social circus as a space for all people to create art, share their stories might look like. This is achieved through two analytic processes: a critical review of the current literature on social circus including an in-depth case study of Circo Social Ecuador, and an embodied and critically self-reflective circus practice that provides an example of how this practice could be reimagined in a decolonized and disabled way.

Findings illustrate a mirroring of tensions between critical and mainstream approaches to both social circus and social work. The project shares potential insights for critical social circus and for critical social work, each influenced by the other, and emphasizes the importance of reframing (e.g.: worldview, life circumstances, choices) as a pathway of resistance against oppressive societies, practices, and systems by recognizing that it is resistance that creates openings for anti-oppressive and decolonial social work to exist.

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I first started working on this thesis under the guidance of Dr. Eli Manning.

It was Eli who didn’t blink when I said I wanted to do a performance piece as part of a social work thesis. It was Eli who set the bar so high, and demanded so much, but in the best way possible.

During the long course of my thesis process, Eli needed to take sick leave and stepped aside as my primary supervisor. She died in the weeks before my defence. Grieving the loss of one of the most brilliant social workers and people I have known, and getting to hold space for her during my defence and with my committee, was an integral part of this project for me.

Eli inspires my practice, every day. I am privileged to have gotten to learn from her.

https://www.dal.ca/news/today/2025/01/22/in_memoriam___eli_joy_manning.html

Thank you, more than I can say, to Dr. Catherine Bryan, for initially agreeing to be my second reader, and for taking over and taking me on when Eli asked. Your insight, knowledge, and humour got me through. Thank you for being willing to continue to reframe this thesis with me.

Thank you to all the queer, disabled, and BIPOC circus artists whose work inspires me, and to the researchers and authors whose writing I get to read and learn from. It is your work that changes how I see the world.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

My thesis examines the intersection of social work and circus, and more precisely, the social and political benefit of bringing together anti-oppressive social work practice with a form of circus engagement referred to as social circus for the purposes of self-improvement and community consciousness-raising.

Circus is often broadly defined as an entertainment showcase of clown-based comedy, acrobatic arts, and acts involving trained animals (Lavers et al., 2019). Traditionally presented in tents that allowed shows to travel to different communities, circus uses artists, music, costumes, and sometimes animals, to provide spectacle to audiences around the world. Circus shows and their acts range from fantastical and ethereal to politically subversive. In my thesis, I focus on the performance arts that are traditionally associated with circus.

Circus, as an art form, is typically defined as the practice of any form of the six commonly recognized circus disciplines: aerial acrobatics (e.g., trapeze, aerial hoop, silks), balancing (e.g., unicycle, tightwire, hand balancing), juggling, clowning, floor acrobatics, and equestrian art (Lavers et al., 2019). Despite the longevity of this definition and approach to understanding what constitutes circus-practice, circus artists are continually exploring possibilities for the practice, and contemporary circus often features newly designed apparatuses, integrating influence from other athletic practices like dancing, ice skating, diving, or rock climbing. At the same time as adding technical proficiencies and styles of movement, the ideology and objectives surrounding circus, as an artist and athletic

practice, have expanded to encompass new politics and approaches. Social circus is one such expansion, and the primary focus of this thesis.

While there is no singular definition of social circus, it is generally accepted within the circus community to refer to a form of social intervention using circus arts. The American Circus Educators (Social Circus, n.d.) define social circus as, "the use of circus arts as a medium for social justice and individual wellness that uplifts the role of art and culture as powerful agents for change." Dominant approaches to social circus, such as the social action project Cirque du Monde, are considered separate from professional and/or performance circus and are targeted towards 'assisting' marginalized populations (Lavers, 2016). They are often based on a charitable model where donated funds are used to provide non-profit services to low-income individuals who might not otherwise be able to engage in circus practice and often prioritize the personal growth of participants over broader community change. In dominant approaches, program funding often originates from individual and corporate donations, as part of the charitable model of social support, described by Smith-Carrier (2020), as one which "involves direct acts to alleviate human suffering; charity tackles the symptoms of social problems, not their root causes. The model, although rooted in compassion and generosity, creates an asymmetrical power differential between the giver and receiver" (p. 157). Despite their, at times, laudable objectives, many dominant approaches to social circus operate from a deficit model where participants are considered 'at-risk' of failing to contribute to society, reflecting of charity-models more broadly, which, in

turn, often obscures or avoids the more historic and structural causes of oppression. In contrast, alternative approaches to social circus, like many based in Latin America, embrace professional and performance circus, and run programs that focus less on individual benefit and more on broader social change (Sorzano, 2018a). In alternative approaches, the social justice mandate identified by the American Circus Educators emerges more specifically in what Smith-Carrier (2020) would likely characterize as a justice model, wherein programs tend to centre "systemic remedies to social problems by focusing on human rights and social change. Emphasis, here, is on reciprocity, mutuality, and human interdependence, premised on respect, dignity, and the belief in the intrinsic worth of all human beings" (p. 157). It is this type of alternative social circus that my thesis seeks to elaborate and more precisely, to connect—in approach and potential—to the practice of critical, anti-oppressive social work.

I came to the world of circus at the recommendation of a friend, who thought it would be a good fit for me due to my love of physical activity and my background in movement-based performing arts. At the time, I was experiencing a mental health crisis and my friend also suspected circus might provide an important opportunity for me to begin working through my trauma and towards mental wellness. For me, circus became a place to grapple with my physical disability, as well as my mental health, while allowing me to reengage in art marking. Through circus, I took classes, and I made friends; I became part of a community. Later, I became involved in the production of local circus shows and served as chair of the board of directors of a

local circus organization that includes a school, a performance troupe, and a social circus program.

I began to practice circus several years before I returned school to begin my social work studies. Guiding this thesis and reflective of my own deepening social work practice is this widely accepted definition of social work offered by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW):

> "The social work profession promotes social change, problem-solving in human relationships, and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance wellbeing. Utilizing theories of human behavior and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work," (Hare, 2004, p. 409).

Specifically, I take up the concept of social justice as a core principle of my practice. Social justice is defined by the Nova Scotia College of Social Workers (NSCSW) as the belief that all people, with special regard for those who are marginalized, vulnerable, disadvantaged, oppressed and exploited, deserve to have fair and equitable access to the resources, services and opportunities they require to meet their basic human needs (NSCSW, n.d.). As I began studying for my Bachelor of Social Work, I puzzled over how my understanding of social work as a practice that can be anti-oppressive and invested in the empowerment, liberation, and wellbeing of people collided with my experience of my local circus community.

Since joining the circus community, I had observed local members working to confront the white supremacy, heteronormativity, and ableism embedded in its structure through reflection, education, and policy development. I wondered how bringing an explicit social work lens to the social justice work my circus community was engaging in could encourage further change. It occurred to me that the circus community has the potential to create safer spaces for everyone and work to mitigate the inherent harms (such as a white supremacy and ableism) that result from the privilege and oppression that under capitalism.

Unless I was actively working to redress these harms by dismantling the aspects of the community that allowed them to exist in the first place, I understood that I was complicit in them. Circus offered me place to be fully myself, and in turn, I hoped might represent a space where a range of people might have a similar, liberatory experience. I considered that my way of contributing could be using my academic skills and privilege to understand how our circus community, like many others, came to enact exclusionary practices, rather than upholding a space for collective community care and acceptance of non-normative identities. I realized that by conducting this research I might be able to provide support for future creation of more socially just circus programming. At the same time, I wondered what circus could bring to social work as a practice, analytical space, and political engagement, such that I also began to think about the potential benefit of circus for the practice of critical, anti-oppressive social work in supporting clients, communities, and broader systems change.

Social circus seemed like the most logical starting place for anti-oppressive work within the community; it also felt most immediately aligned with the principles and objectives of critical, anti-oppressive social work as the very concept is grounded in social outreach and social justice. While relatively infrequent, over the last 25 years, there has been some connection between social work and social circus practitioners. In 2002, circus practitioners from around the world gathered in France for the First International Round Table of Circus and Social Work, where organizations from twelve countries agreed to define social circus as an intervention that combines circus and social work with a goal of, “the use of circus as a tool for social transformation” (PRICTS, 2002, p.8). And yet, despite this initial effort to bring the two disciplines together, few current social circus organizations explicitly refer to or credit social work as part of their intervention and most current programs operate without social workers being involved in the programming or policy development. Notable exceptions in Canada include SoCirC, a social circus organization operating in Toronto/Tkaronto, as well as Cirque Hors Piste, an organization based in Montreal which employs several social workers as part of its program (*SoCirC*, n.d.; *Our Team - Cirque Hors Piste*, n.d.).

This thesis is an effort to bring into closer conversation and alliance social circus and social work. I explore social circus as defined by Sorzano (2018a) as a tool for empowering people who hold marginalized social identities and aim to conceptualize how social work can support individual empowerment and critically, broader social change through social circus. More precisely, and reflecting the

orientation of both my social work and circus practices, I draw on anti-oppressive iterations of queer and disability theories to envision and elaborate critical social work practice that might disrupt colonial and ableist aspects of social circus, and in turn, a social circus that supported through the institutional frameworks. My objective is to reframe social circus as a space for all people to create art and share their stories, and in turn, to communicate the potential of social circus as a modality of social work.

1.1 Objectives and Methodology

The primary objective of this thesis is to bring into meaningful conversation anti-oppressive social work and social circus, and to offer insight into a practice that incorporates aspects of each. To this end, the project asks how critical, anti-oppressive social work could expand understandings of social circus and how social circus could both empower individuals while simultaneously promoting social change. More specifically, the project deploys critical social work theory—notably queer and disabilities theories—to analyze, critique, and disrupt social circus's ableist and colonial features, by asking what a critically-oriented social circus as a space for all people to create art, share their stories, and heal might look like.

To these ends, I engage in two analytic activities. These are: 1) a critical review of the current literature on social circus that while neither a systemic review or discourse analysis in the conventional sense, integrates elements of both and includes an in-depth case study, and 2) an embodied and critically self-reflective

circus practice to provide an example of how this practice could be reimagined in a decolonized and disabled way. Representing this work's novel methodological approach, these ways of engaging and generating new insight and knowledge about social circus are aligned with the political and social justice orientation of both social circus and critical social work practice as I understand them. Expanding the boundaries of more conventional reviews of scholarship, academic literature, and research, my critical literature review focuses not only on *what is said* about social circus, but how social circus is represented and in turn, naturalized in the literature. Importantly, very little of this scholarship takes an explicitly anti-oppressive stance, and even less incorporates the insights of critical social work practice. As a result, in representing social circus, this literature reinforces many of the logics social circus practitioners and scholars ostensibly seek to undermine by failing to problematize their role in the academic industrial complex, by not recognizing how their own social identities will impact their understanding of the world, by unintentionally causing further oppression to participants by failing to prioritize their voices in research and instead, reifying a power differential, and by using research to address symptoms, not causes of inequality.

More specifically, the literature tends to focus on the development of social circus in the global West/North, and more precisely on those dominant forms and organizations that adhere to charity-models of support. As a result, even when values of equity and justice are expressed as core principles of an organization, the approach taken reproduces, rather than redresses, systems of oppression. When

dominant approaches to social circus center individual wellness and growth, rather than broader social change, organizations that label participants “at-risk” imply the risk is one of personal failure to adequately contribute to a productive society. This focus on individual contribution aligns the concept of worth with a capitalistic world view where only certain people are worthy of charity and support, whereas a more critical approach aligns with values of justice and equity as inherent human rights that all people always deserve. By building programs that aim to support social justice through helping individual participants move away from the label of “at-risk”, the programs are addressing the symptoms of inequality, rather than the root issue of systemic societal oppression. And yet, there is a tendency in the academic literature to accept, at face-value, the purported objectives of these organizations, instead of querying the potential limitations and implications of their approaches.

In an effort to think differently about mainstream social circus and to begin building a repertoire of alternatives, I engage in a generative analysis of the literature, paying close attention to the practical and conceptual implications of social circus models that prioritize individual success over systemic and structural change. In turn, and through the lens of anti-oppressive social work and its theories, I consider and detail how social circus can be re-imagined. To accomplish this, I draw on the example of social circus in Latin American, and notably the national Ecuadoran program, Circo Social Ecuador. While the literature typically focuses on mainstream social circus models, a small scholarship has emerged elaborating important alternatives, particularly in Latin America. Relative to its

North American and European counterparts, Latin American social work has often been more explicit in its intended disruption of societally imposed limitations on marginalized individuals – in fact, much of the literature discussing broad, macro-level social change that I encountered during my North American social work training came from scholarship reflecting on writings and ideas which originated in Latin America. One key difference between dominant approaches to social circus and some programs that emerged in Latin America was the centrality of government, rather than charitable, funding. Detailed in this small literature, this follows from the Latin American prioritization of empowerment-based programs, the creation of art and its democratization, and political consciousness-raising. In describing the Latin American model, I also apply a critical lens to the literature detailing the Ecuadorean example, considering if and how the values of anti-oppressive and decolonial work have been co-opted by governmental influence and in turn, naturalized as antithetical to their intended purpose.

For this thesis I engaged in my personal circus practice and used this scholarship, read through my developing critical analysis, as a method for reflecting on my learning, culminating in both an analysis of my embodied circus practice and how this practice relates to anti-oppressive social circus. I position this approach as decolonizing because I am rejecting the Western assumption that written analysis is the only, best, and most appropriate way to engage in academic learning.

Having brought into conversation varied sources on social circus, my next step was to examine my cognitive, emotional, and embodied reactions to these accounts. When I initially designed this thesis project, my intention was to engage in my embodied circus practice while reflecting on my learning from more traditional academic methods. I had planned to use my circus practice to work with the cerceau, also known as an aerial hoop, to create a performance piece that represented my embodied understanding and reaction to the concepts I was engaging with. My body, however, would not allow this, and instead, my embodied work became a way of grappling with the internalized ableism I felt for not being able to pursue this project as I had planned. Rather than moving to music on the cerceau, I engaged in mind-based visualization and somatic imagining of my circus practice. I used learning from the literature and in particular, the case study of Circo Social Ecuador, to apply broader understandings of what anti-oppressive and critical social circus could look like to my own practice. And through this work, I explored the concept that any circus practice can be reframed as social circus, as the practice becomes a vehicle for self- and community-actualization and a way for all people, in their multitudes of intersecting social identities, to share their stories and heal.

My hope is that these two approaches (a literature review and critical case study, coupled with embodied analysis) will work symbiotically to provide a greater and more holistic response to my research question. What I learned from reading and writing about social circus informed my embodied circus practice and enabled

me to engage in the 'social' element of social circus. What I learned from my body allowed me to better understand my cognitive learnings, and this was reified in my personal circus practice. The ontological basis for my research was reinforced by this continually evolving and multiple understanding of reality. Moreover, my hope is that this thesis will provide a rationale for a broader understanding and value of social circus, contribute to the literature, and provide a basis for the expansion of current social circus programming. Finally, through this work I highlight that rather than "simply" referring to society or its organization, the "social" of social circus must encompass both the personal and the communal, by recognizing that only through celebrating and valuing all human life, in its multitude of intersecting identities and experiences, can we truly be in harmony with ourselves and the world. Put differently, the "social" in social circus can do so much more than supporting capitalistic imperatives and social circus organizations can (and should) apply a critical, anti-oppressive lens to their work so that all people can experience the same feelings of acceptance, joy, and hope that I have within my own practice.

This thesis begins with a discussion of the project's approach and theoretical framework. As described, in this work, theory and method are very much mutually constitutive. Having established the methodological approach and adjoining theoretical lens of the project, I turn to my critical literature review. A review of the existing literature on social circus would be foundational to any thesis on this topic, but by applying a critical social work lens to that literature, I am able to gain a greater understanding of how dominant and peripheral approaches to social

circus differ, especially when their stated mandates often frame the programs in a similar way. It is by bringing this critical social work lens that the nuance of unintentional oppression becomes more evident in programs which are meant to encourage anti-oppression.

After reviewing the literature, I focus my analysis on Ecuador's foray into social circus through its national program, Circo Social Ecuador, as an example of a peripheral social circus experience that attempted to centre post-neoliberal and post-colonial values of collective consciousness raising and community wellbeing. Using this example, I chart how a shift towards more progressive national politics provided one possible answer to my research question while simultaneously creating other possible avenues to redress the very oppression the program was seeking to counter. I use this case study to highlight the similarities in the tension between dominant and peripheral approaches to social circus, and with those between mainstream and critical social work. Finally, I draw comparisons between the stated intention behind the program design and the historical and ongoing reality that social workers, especially as government agents, are in fact reinforcing colonialism, despite often the exact opposite intent. I then reflect on these analyses and examine them in relation to my own social identities and turn these reflections towards my own understanding of social circus in an anti-oppressive social work context, the basis of my embodied analysis. Finally, I use this reflection and analysis to endeavour to identify avenues for anti-oppressive social work practice to contribute to social circus work, with the goal of finding ways to to

reframe social circus as a space for all people to create art and share their stories.

This discussion is offered in my concluding chapter.

CHAPTER TWO: METHOD & THEORY/ THEORY & METHOD

I am using this thesis as an opportunity to crip and queer traditional scholarship practices. In this way, the theory and method are very much intertwined and mutually reinforcing. While much of critical social work research and scholarship reflects this union of theory and method, given this work's novel methodological approach, theory emerges as the lens or framework through which the method is constituted. By employing a critical research paradigm, I situate my research in the ontology that realities are multiple socially constructed entities that constantly evolve due to both internal and external/environmental influence (Sharman, 2021). Rejecting positivist and subjectivist approaches, I embrace the epistemology that reality and knowledge is socially constructed and influenced by power relations in society. My epistemological basis allows me to make and hold space for cripped and queered approaches to scholarship that privilege lived experience (Arrighi, 2014; Bessone, 2017). Rooting my work in queer and disability theories, the focus of this chapter, I examine colonial, ableist and peripheral social circus experiences while acknowledging the social impact on people's identities (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). My methodology is also a practice of autoethnography, where I use reflection and description of my personal experiences to contextualize both oppressive and anti-oppressive aspects of social circus with the intent of identifying possible avenues for broader social change (Jones & Adams, 2010; Knowles & Cole, 2008). As a methodology, autoethnography aligns with my ontological and epistemological beliefs by centering empiricism, and

the queer and crip understanding that all realities hold their own truth (Jones & Adams, 2010; Pham & Gothberg, 2020).

Circus has a long history of being a community of refuge for people who struggle to find their place in a society where difference is not valued (Batson et al., 2018; Carter, 2015; Erlich, 2018; Fancy, 2018; Fricker & Malouin, 2018; Funk, 2018; Lavers & Burtt, 2020; Nery, 2018; Tait, 2005), and social circus, when examined through the lenses of queer and disability theories, allows me to rehistoricize the traditional narrative of circus as a community of freaks to one of inclusion and celebration of diverse identity. Critical iterations of queer and disability theories validate this rehistoricized narrative as they are both intersectional theoretical approaches that critical social work practitioners can draw on to analyze and deconstruct their societally imposed assumptions and beliefs about what it means to belong (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018; Sharman, 2021). Queer and disability theories are not just theoretical approaches by, about and for queer and disabled people – they are based in the idea of liberation of all people while celebrating and valuing their intersecting identities (Grzanka, 2019; Marcus, 2005). While social workers who base their work in queer and disability theories might practice using only one of these theories to inform their work, I believe that by drawing the critical and anti-oppressive tenets of each and using these foundations in combination allows for a theoretical basis that includes, rather than excludes, and uplifts, rather than oppresses. To me, queer and disability theories are symbiotic and, much like the warp and weft of a fabric, can reinforce each other and give each other strength.

For instance, I believe that queer theory is supported on the pillars of disability theory's rejection of binaries and ideas of normative social constructs, while disability theory queers the question of what it means to be physically different, mad, or neurodivergent in an ableist world (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018; Sharman, 2021).

Both theories draw heavily from the traditions of critical, anti-oppressive, and structural theory and can be applied to social work theory by recognizing that all people hold multiple, intersecting, and compounding social identities such as race, class, gender, age, size, sexuality, and ability (Bone, 2017; Cohen, 2005; Lorde, 1985). Additionally, both theories recognize that no set of social identities should be valued over another, and that capitalist society is constructed and maintained by privileging some identities and oppressing others (Crenshaw, 1989; Morgensen, 2011). Historically, circus has often been a home to people who capitalist society has not considered 'worthy', and these communities and individuals were often further oppressed as circus companies made money by charging admission to the public so they might be astounded or horrified by what they saw (Bessone, 2018; Tait, 2005). While there are some historical examples of people who gained appreciative fame, rather than notoriety, for their differences, these people are exceptions to the most common experience within circus (Tait, 2005; Toulmin, 2018). Using a critical social work lens for analysis that is informed by queer and disability theories, these examples of oppression and marginalization within the circus world could be reframed as examples of showcasing the incredible

divergence in society by honouring and valuing difference. Queer and disability theories hold space to reimagine the traditionally demeaning sideshow and could provide a basis for celebration of the wonderous and talented people who are drawn to circus communities.

Queer and disability theories speak to the importance of hearing from voices that have traditionally been silenced by society and recognize that all people, in their multitude of identities, are valuable and worthy (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018; Sharman, 2021). By examining social circus from these theoretical perspectives, I will be able to highlight the work and art that can be created when we make space to appreciate all identities. Using queer and disability theories to study social circus allows me to prioritize peripheral societal experiences and identify how social circus programs have been used to oppress the very voices they are designed to elevate. While not all users of queer and disability theories will apply them in this way, and while both theories can, and often have been used as rationale to further oppress people with multiple oppressed identities (Cohen, 2005; Marcus, 2005; Tremain, 2017), I believe that these two theories are the ideal underpinning to my attempt to bring an anti-oppressive lens to my work.

Additionally, queer and disability theories require their practitioners to consciously engage in decolonizing and reconciliation work (Rice et al., 2021; Smith, 2010). Indigenous people, whose communities have been tied to the lands of North and South America since time immemorial, have faced hundreds of years of oppression under the capitalist structure of European colonizers (Schwan &

Lightman, 2015). Critical iterations of queer and disability theories value and honour Indigenous lives, ways of being, and ways of knowing (Morgensen, 2011). Ceremonies and performances are integral to an Indigenized understanding of life and have a long history around the world (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). Many circus organizations have attempted to engage with these practices but failed to do so using queer and disability theoretical principles of decolonization and reconciliation (such as making space for Indigenous knowledge holders, publicly giving credit to where this knowledge comes from, and prioritizing the casting of Indigenous artists over non-Indigenous artists fulfilling specific cultural roles), and, as a result, have committed cultural appropriation and reified the oppression inherent in capitalist Western/Northern society (Lavers et al., 2022).[1] To engage in queered or cripped social work practice, settlers like myself must not only learn about and hold space for the atrocities of past colonization, but also engage in ongoing action to dismantle and reconcile the oppression that Indigenous peoples continue to face under capitalist society (Pham & Gothberg, 2020; Sharman, 2021; Smith, 2010). Within the realm of social circus, this includes settlers paying close attention to ways in which they might unintentionally maintain colonial practices

[1] Cirque du Soleil, for example, has often been criticized for cultural appropriation in their shows, as they work to incorporate cultural traditions from around the world. And while their intentions might be honourable, Cirque du Soleil's insistence on only having 'the best' in their shows tells a different story. For instance, their production *Totem* (2010) features significant influence from Native American Indigenous culture, including multiple acts that depict specific, non-Eurocentric cultures (*On (in)Appropriate Cultural Appropriation*, n.d.). Yet, of the ~50 artists who perform in the show, only two are Indigenous artists portraying Indigenous characters (Leroux & Batson, 2016). And while the entire show is premised on an Indigenous worldview, and there are extensive North American Indigenous references in costumes, music, and set design, no Indigenous artists or consultants are acknowledged in the show's credits (Leroux & Batson, 2016; "*Totem* (Cirque Du Soleil)," 2024).

and requires them to engage in the active work of decolonizing their programs and spaces (Lavers at al, 2022; Yassi et al., 2016). To use queer and disability theory is to engage in the active work of decolonization and to support the revitalization of Indigenous people, places, and systems – for failing to do so is to be complicit in the oppression that these theories explicitly oppose (Morgensen, 2011; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). In chapter four, these are illustrated using specific examples and approaches.

Finally, both queer and disability theories recognize the importance of honouring all ways of knowing and understanding the world (Ahmed, 2006; Bone, 2017; Dugan, 2019). They reject the idea that objectivist epistemologies are the only valid ways of knowing and privilege constructionist and subjectivist epistemologies for the insights they offer (Johnson, 2011; Walby, 2021). Research that is based in queer and disability theories seeks to understand, but also change, and deconstruct our view of the world (Perahia, 2021). By valuing autoethnographical and embodied methodologies, queer and disability theories pursue their agenda of liberation of all people while celebrating and valuing people's intersecting identities (Jones & Adams, 2019; Pham & Gothberg, 2020; Toyosaki, 2009). My research seeks to marry my cognitive analysis with my embodied understanding of the topics I am examining. In the traditions of queer and disability theory, I propose that my body and my interaction with the aerial hoop provide the same level of scholarly insight into my research questions as my analytical writing does. I gain this insight by valuing the disabled experience of

making meaning *through* my body, and by rejecting the ideology that cognitive understanding is superior to embodied understanding. Further, by choosing to privilege my embodied lived experience, I am adding to a queer and disabled research canon that encourages alternative approaches and holds space for marginalized experiences of academia that privilege Western epistemologies (Dugan, 2019; Spatz, 2017). Much as social circus aims to provide a way for all people to tell their stories through the circus arts, my research works to crip and queer what is acceptable academic social work research.

It is my belief that by analyzing social circus, and its supporting literatures, using the lenses of critical queer and disability theories it will become apparent how many social circus programs, while designed to be inclusive and empowering, have been complicit in the very societal oppression they seek to counter. Equally so, through these frameworks, I hope to elaborate the immense potential of meaningfully inclusive and empowering social circus, as well as how social work might contribute to this agenda. In what follows, I offer my analysis of the current state of social circus-focused scholarship. This exploration also provides opportunity to provide additional insight into the details and differences of social circus. Given the lack of existing literature about social circus as a social work modality, I have limited the scope of my thesis to existing literature, as I seek to understand the current context of social circus before I could consider conducting new research with sources beyond myself. As such, my work includes

reflection on existing literature, embodied practice of social circus, and reflection that draws from my embodied practice and learning from the literature.

CHAPTER THREE: CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE AND ITS INFLUENCE ON OUR UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIAL CIRCUS' POTENTIAL

3.1 Method

For my written analysis, I immersed myself in the literature about social circus, with a focus on projects and programs that explicitly name and operate counter to its colonial and ableist legacy. While this is not a systematic review (in the conventional sense), it is useful to flag that I searched five prominent social work and social science databases using the key words 'circus', 'social circus', and 'community circus' but found few results. Working with the dedicated social work librarian for Dalhousie University Libraries, I expanded the search to include all of Dalhousie's databases to ensure that I was finding published work in all possible disciplines. In case the results were being biased by Dalhousie's collections, I also searched for the same terms on Google Scholar and included any further results in my literature review. I completed an introductory survey of social circus literature using ProQuest's Social Services Abstracts and EBSCOhost's Social Work Abstracts databases and the keywords "circus" and "social circus". I supplemented findings from these databases with publications about social circus from PubMed – MEDLINE, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar. As there is limited literature on the topic of social circus, especially from peer-reviewed sources, I used the references and citations from the texts I engaged with to find more writing on my topics. Specifically, I searched for sources that engaged with the concepts of 'colonialism', 'ableism', 'queer', 'disability', 'art', and 'social

justice' in relation to social circus. I paid close attention to the biographies of authors of the literature I selected so that I could attempt to understand their writing in the context of their identities and social location. And I specifically sought examples of social circus programs that prioritized social justice, intersectionality, and disability.

3.2 Review of the Literature and Overview of Social Circus

Despite not having a consistent definition, social circus is, at its heart, the intersection of social justice work and circus practice (Sorzano, 2018a), and while rarely explicitly stated, social circus aims to reify the values of social work practice through its pursuit of social justice (Sorzano, 2018b). Usually taking the form of workshops or ongoing programs, social circus engages professional circus practitioners who lead and teach circus classes to people who might not otherwise be able to pursue circus training (Leroux & Batson, 2016; Van ed et al., 2021). The programs are free to participants and will sometimes provide food or transportation funds (i.e., bus fare) to those who attend (Spiegel, 2016). Some social circus programs are designed with an expectation of ongoing participant attendance while others are offered in a drop-in format to make them more accessible (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). The circus instructors are intended to be viewed as mentors, role models, and teachers who care for the participants (Zisman, 2021). Programming encompasses a variety of activities and can include play-based icebreaking games and trust building exercises, introduction to and instruction in circus disciplines, creation and staging of performances, and even touring to share

completed works (Watt, 2020). Social circus programming is usually dependent on the specializations of the instructors and available equipment, but often includes five of the six recognized circus disciplines: aerial acrobatics, balancing, juggling, clowning, and floor acrobatics (Kreusch, 2018). The sixth discipline, equestrian art, is rarely used in social circus programming due to the high level of ability required for introductory training and the complication of using horses in primarily unspecialized urban spaces (community centres, town squares, etc.) (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). Social circus classes often include instruction in one or more circus techniques followed by practice time where participants can benefit from feedback from instructors and other participants (Watt, 2020).

Despite early attempts to bring social work and social circus together, many social circus approaches have been designed absent a critical social work lens to their structure, policies, and programming (Sorzano, 2018a). Many traditional social circus programs take people who experience a variety of marginalized social circumstances and label these people as 'at-risk'. While the term 'at-risk' is rarely defined, and can be the result of larger, systemic issues, many of the applications of the term refer to individuals failing to integrate into society, contribute to their communities, or achieve the Western concept of their 'full potential' (Lafortune & Bouchard, 2010; McCaffery, 2014). This approach of labelling people 'at-risk' often defaults to using a deficit-based lens which blames people experiencing homelessness, those living with addictions or struggling with their mental health, disabled people, trauma survivors, etc., as the reason for their own supposed

suffering. I believe that this framing of people who access social circus programs is actively harmful and fails to consider the ways in which capitalist society is intentionally structured to marginalize and oppress groups of people. I believe that social circus is better understood as a practice which allows all people to examine the ways in which they are both privileged and oppressed within society due to their intersecting social identities and allows them to use this examination to inform their circus practice in the name of both personal and social growth.

Dominant and Peripheral Approaches to Social Circus

The most well-known approach to social circus is the work of Cirque du Monde, an organization created in 1995 when Cirque du Soleil and Jeunesse du Monde came together in a partnership aimed at formalizing social circus and bringing it to communities around the world (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). By partnering with non-governmental and community organizations, within 20 years Cirque du Monde was operating in over 80 communities in 25 countries worldwide (Fournier et al., 2014). Cirque du Monde's programs are aimed at 'youth at-risk', which is defined in their Community Worker's Guide (2010) as:

> A young person under 25, lacking one or more security factors that normally allow people to assume their basic responsibilities and enjoy their basic rights. Young people at-risk live in insecurity and suffer from socio-economic consequences such as poverty, difficulty in developing a social and family life, revolt against society or problems of physical or mental health. Some young people also suffer from drug or alcohol addictions. (p.57)

The program prioritizes the development of participants' self-esteem, social skills, occupational integration, and artistic expression over the final artistic productions (LaFortune and Bouchard, 2010). Cirque du Monde is run as a top-down intervention approach where Cirque du Soleil provides the community partner with financing, circus equipment, and a pre-designed organizational structure (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019; Sorzano, 2018b). Cirque du Monde also provides specific expertise in social circus and can assist in recruiting and training instructors (Cohen, 2018).

The structure of the Cirque du Monde social circus program is generally standardized and universal; however, it does emphasize the importance of situating the work in the context of the local community and attempts to honour local Indigenous traditions and approaches to both circus and art through collaboration with Indigenous artists, and education about local cultural ceremonies and performances (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). Despite its intentions of locally contextualized application, the Cirque du Monde program becomes a colonizing force when, according to Sorzano (2018a), it is "translated into the principles and priorities of funders and stakeholders," (p 231). For example, concerns with capitalist metrics of program success often take precedence over the authenticity of the social justice work being done (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). Ideological disputes between local practitioners and Cirque du Soleil officials are common, and programs have ended due to Cirque du Monde's corporate structure and desire for positive publishable outcomes (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). Despite its good

intentions, the Cirque du Monde program is in many ways a colonial charity based on white saviorism where foreigners dictate how youth 'at-risk' must take their place in society as contributing adults for the program to be deemed successful (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019, Sorzano, 2018a). Cirque du Monde is an example of traditional charitable aid where the goal of social circus becomes an opportunity to join the system, rather than challenge it. It is designed to take an individualized approach to service, focusing less on societal change or community consciousness-raising and more on the impacts to the lives of individual participants (Sorzano, 2018b).

While the social circus model based on the work of Cirque du Monde is hegemonic in the realm of social circus (in no small part because of the funding provided by Cirque du Soleil), there have been many other foundational approaches to social circus, even if they have been relegated to the footnotes of mainstream social circus history (Sorzano, 2018a). While social circus that developed in the global West/North focused on conventional, aid-based social work models with the goal of 'assisting' an individual in improving their self-esteem, in contrast, Latin American social circus programs that focused on emancipation, actualization, and social transformation emerged simultaneously (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). Pioneering social circus organizations such as Circo del Mundo (Chile), Circo Para Todas (Colombia), and Circo Social del Sur (Argentina), emphasized that social circus need not be limited to micro-level social work goals of self-empowerment but could instead be broadened to include all social circus participants in the

making and sharing of art to raise political consciousness and create systemic societal change (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). These organizations, which started formally operating in the mid-1990s, rejected the idea of social circus participants as victims, objects, or problematic entities in need of assistance to be successful in society (Sorzano, 2018a). Instead, they operated from a strengths-based perspective which emphasized the participants' inherent competencies and potential for creating change in the world (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). Taking cues from the Indigenization of social work that started occurring in Latin America in the 1970s, where the American and British concepts of aid-based social work were rejected in favour of social work grounded in local realities (Healey, 2008), Latin American social circus developed using the theoretical underpinnings of Freireism and Boalism (Sorzano, 2018b). Rather than focusing on Western/Northern approaches to social work (casework, groupwork, community work), Latin American social circus embraced the idea that all social action has a political dimension and instead focused the 'social' of social circus on participation, organization, and consciousness-raising (Spiegel et al., 2015b). As defined at the First International Round Table of Circus and Social Work (PRICTS, 2002, p.8), social circus was intended as a locus of broad societal change, and, unlike the approach of Cirque du Monde, these programs were considered gateways for participants to become professional circus artists, rather than simply recipients of psychosocial assistance (Sorzano, 2018b). However, as Latin American social circus programs joined in partnerships with Cirque du Monde to access funding and

support, these underpinnings of social justice were subsumed in the colonial structure of Cirque du Monde (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019).

Social circus continues to have a strong presence in Latin America, but as Spiegel and Choukroun (2019) write, its Indigenous influences have become tokenized aspects of programming, rather than core principles of action. The appropriation of Indigenous influences of social circus must be understood and problematized in any examination of the social justice potential of social circus programming.

The approach that a social circus program takes, whether dominant or peripheral, is often indicative of if and how critical analysis of social issues is applied in the program's design. Circus art is often political, particularly through its long history of encouraging social change with an emphasis on expanding social inclusivity and challenging the social systems that maintain social exclusion (Tait, 2005). Social circus programs that reject a colonial approach where the aim is for participants to become contributing members of capitalist society and instead embrace the political dimension of social action by emphasizing larger social change are often most reflective of the peripheral approaches that emerged from Latin America (Spiegel et al., 2015b). I believe that by moving away from the colonial approach to social circus that is upheld in the programming of Cirque du Monde and instead taking cues from the liberatory Latin American examples, social circus could become a space for all people to create art and share their stories.

3.3 Analysis of the Literature

While some formal academic writing on social circus has been published, significant gaps in the literature remain. First, as evidenced by Soranzo (2018a) and Spiegel and Choukroun (2019), most research has been conducted with a focus on either social circus as an example of social outreach or professional circus work as performance, art, and a way of making sense of the world and our experiences within it. Little has been written specifically about the intersection of the two approaches, particularly with the understanding that circus practice could be considered social circus due to the empowering and politicized nature of this embodied work. Secondly, while there is research that analyzes the intersection of circus practice with the social discourses of race, gender, sexuality, disability, age, and other social identities (Bessone, 2017; Erlich, 2018; Gandhi, 2018; Lavers & Burtt, 2017; Seymour, 2018; Tait, 2000; Tait, 2005), few of these analyses focus on the intersection of social identities and how these intersections amplify the level of oppression that individuals experience.

There is a modest body of research that examines, for instance, how disabled people practice circus (Carter, 2015; Lavers & Burtt, 2020), but almost no research that chronicles how a disabled person's experience of circus practice changes if they are also elderly, and/or visibly racialized, and/or economically marginalized. Thirdly, much of the research on social circus and circus practice has been written by people who are not circus practitioners themselves, or by people who do not hold and live with the social identities being examined. Finally, when these issues of intersecting identity are examined within the literature, they are

almost exclusively understood and analyzed from a cognitive perspective and the analysis is almost always communicated solely in writing, rather than through visual art, performance, or other alternative mediums. I believe that by privileging written analysis, the literature both upholds the Western perspective of cognition as a superior form of understanding than embodiment and fails to benefit from alternative epistemological practices.

CHAPTER FOUR: CIRCO SOCIAL ECUADOR

I have chosen to use Circo Social Ecuador as an example of a peripheral social circus program as an illustration of both the radical potential and potential pitfalls of mainstreaming social circus. Its very creation and its program design are reflective of the left-leaning and progressive politics of Latin America in the 2000s. Among the new social policies and programs that the Ecuadorian government introduced during this time was a national social circus program. Circo Social Ecuador was particularly unique, even in a Latin American context, as a program with an explicitly macro level emphasis on social change. And while Circo Social Ecuador did continue to perpetuate colonialism in some ways (as all programs ultimately do when existing within a capitalist society), it also began the work of decolonizing social circus. This was accomplished by using a program design that rejected a deficit approach to service, and by focusing on building collective wellbeing. Further critical approaches were employed by integrating principles from the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and the *Theatre of the Oppressed*, and by prioritizing the creation of art over social assistance. Given the generally anti-oppressive orientation of Circo Social Ecuador's design, it is an ideal case study for applying anti-oppressive social work theory to find some answers to the question of how a critically-oriented social circus program might become a space for all people to create art, share their stories, and heal.

4.1 Historical and Cultural Context

A social movement known as the ‘Pink Tide’ emerged in Latin America in the early 2000s as resistance to the austerity policies of recent democratic neoliberal governments (Friant & Langmore, 2015). While neoliberalism itself had been seen as an answer to the social inequity of the Latin American dictatorships of the 1960s/1970s, the market-driven ideology had only resulted in further disparities between rich and poor in countries like Ecuador (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). Social inequality was rampant in sectors such as housing, education, and health (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). In Ecuador, violence and political unrest resulting from these disparities led to the election of eight presidents in eleven years (Friant & Langmore, 2015). As the pendulum of social ideology swung from center-right to center-left, dreams of more equitable societies became the basis of the Pink Tide movement in Latin America (Walsh, 2010). By aligning his campaign with local Indigenous movements, Ecuadorian president Rafael Correa (2007-2017) and his government were part of this wave of Pink Tide (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). Once elected, they replaced Ecuador’s 1998 neoliberal constitution with one based on the concept of *Buen Vivir*, an Indigenous Andean ideology that translates to ‘living well’, but that rejects the hegemonic, Western vision of ‘wellbeing’ in favour of one that centers harmony between people, society, and nature (Friant & Langmore, 2015). The new constitution established and guaranteed the ‘rights of *Buen Vivir*’ which included, “universal health care and education (including university), food, energy and economic sovereignty, a healthy environment, communication and participation, as well as the right to water and housing,” (Friant & Langmore, 2015,

p.65). With newly elected governments like Correa's focusing on politically-left policies, Latin America became a locus of nationally-funded social programs, and one such social program was Circo Social Ecuador (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019).

In 2011, Ecuadorian Vice-President, Lenin Moreno, travelled to Montreal and learned of Cirque du Soleil's social circus program, Cirque du Monde (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). Using Cirque du Monde's established policy and pedagogical framework, and working in conjunction with multiple municipalities in Ecuador, Moreno created Circo Social Ecuador, a national social circus program (Sorzano, 2018). This was the first instance where Cirque du Monde, which was operating in over 25 countries at the time, had partnered with a national government (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019), and the level of funding provided by the Office of the Vice-President (and later by the Ministry of Culture) far exceeded that of any other program worldwide (Spiegel et al., 2015a). According to the 2012 *Programa Social Circo Ecuador* (Spiegel et al., 2019), the program design aimed to:

> (1) create a cultural alternative for empowering vulnerable communities; (2) support protection of children and adolescents at-risk; (3) bring together young people to promote social movements and strengthen their sense of national cultural identity in a manner appropriate to each locality; (4) facilitate integrative activities with other national social projects as well as public and private initiatives; and (5) develop values of solidarity, participation, discipline, concentration, cooperation, self-esteem, personal and collective development, and a sense of belonging (p. 900).

The creation of a national social circus program initially feels well-aligned with the tenets of both *Buen Vivir* and social justice. National programs are often the most efficient and equitable way to provide services across a broad range of geographies, cultures and economies (Walsh, 2020), so by creating a national program, Ecuador was able to bring resources where they were most needed to ensure programs were available to as many people as possible. In an ideal world, national governments would be able to work with local governments and organizations to deliver programming that best meets specific needs – but we do not live in an ideal world, and there is often a misalignment between local needs and national programs. For Ecuador's social circus program to truly fit its mandate, it would be imperative that the national guidelines did not overshadow local needs, because failing to sufficiently prioritize local contexts would bring an aspect of paternalism to the program, and in turn, reify the oppression that the program was looking to counter. The Pink Tide movement was attempting to embody many principles of critical social work, but without using a critical lens to examine both the proposed programs and their implementation, it would be possible for social inequality and inequity to grow, swinging the pendulum of social ideology further back towards the right. Much as critical social work is difficult to enact in a neoliberal context without being subsumed by the system that employs most social workers, from its very conception, Circo Social Ecuador faced the challenge of simultaneously existing as a government sponsored program while also resisting

the possibility of being co-opted by this government system into causing further oppression through its programming.

4.2 Circo Social Ecuador: Program design

Circo Social Ecuador's program mission and design was a rarity in the world of social circus – even in Latin America during the wave of Pink Tide (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). At the time, social circus programs were also being offered in Peru, Chile, and Argentina, in conjunction with Cirque du Soleil and the International American Development Bank (Spiegel et al., 2019). The stated goals of these programs included, "an alternative to improve the employability… training of entrepreneurship and… a model to help lower the rate of youth unemployment in the region," (MIF, 2013). For all that Circo Social Ecuador might have set an unattainable goal with the desire to bring about wide-spread social transformation, it was one of the only social circus programs at the time with such a macro-level aim.

Circo Social Ecuador's program was made up of four central components: instructor training, *réplicas* (3-4 month-long workshops where participants attended 1-3 sessions a week), 'open circus' sessions (one-time workshops where the public could interact with and learn from social circus groups), and demonstrations/performances. The *réplicas* were, according to Spiegel et. al (2019), the backbone of the social circus program. The intensive workshops allowed the approximately 20 participants to meet regularly and form the close social bonds that encouraged deep commitment to the program and its aims (Spiegel et. al,

2019). The *réplicas* were run in communities around the country and, between 2012 and 2016, over 5,200 people participated (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). 'Open circus' sessions were hosted country-wide, and while many were held in large urban centers, Circo Social Ecuador made a point of bringing this aspect of social circus to remote villages and smaller communities (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). These one-day events were a combination of informal demonstration of circus skills (from both instructors/artists and volunteers from the *réplicas*) and a chance for local community members to see social circus up-close, to lay their hands on equipment, and to try out basic (and safe) circus skills (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). By taking these free, drop-in workshops around the country, Circo Social Ecuador was able to engage over 100,000 participants in 'open circus' events (Spiegel et al., 2019). Finally, more formal, public demonstrations and performances by the participants of the *réplicas* rounded out Social Circo Ecuador's program and provided a chance for participants to showcase their learnings and newly-acquired skills. From March 2012 to March 2013, over 24,500 people across Ecuador participated in some sort of Social Circo Ecuador activity (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019).

Instructors for the social circus programs were generally from two backgrounds: artists/performers who ideally had experience teaching circus, and social service workers who most often had college degrees in social work or psychology (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). The goal was for instructors, both circus artists and social service workers, to be from the local community whenever

possible, to help situate the program within an indigenous, local context of lived reality (Spiegel et al., 2019). Due to a lack of local artists in rural areas, circus instructors often had to be brought in from other regions of the country, particularly in the case of remote communities in the Amazonian jungle (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). And while the goal was to have social workers involved in co-designing and co-facilitating the programs alongside the circus instructors, and taking part in all the activities alongside participants, this was often not possible for a variety of reasons (ranging from a lack of social workers, to a lack of workers interested in/trained in arts-based social work, to a lack of social workers who were willing to join the group as they explored new physical, social, and emotional challenges) (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). Partnership with instructor and social worker considered ideal, but not often present in Ecuador due to lack of social workers with appropriate background, experience, training, or interest. Reportedly, many social workers "didn't want to take off shoes and participate" (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019, p. 218). At the time, the national government was hopeful that social circus would be introduced in university courses and social work training to encourage new social workers to consider it as a specific practice modality they could use with clients. There was also hope that professors of social work programs would expand course content to include an introduction to arts for social change practices such as social circus.

4.3 Reinforcing Colonialism

Circo Social Ecuador, and its conception as part of *Buen Vivir*, was designed and intended to rebut the increasingly guiding principle of social circus coming from the global North by pushing back at capitalistic narratives of worth and value. Unfortunately, despite these intentions, my analysis is that Circo Social Ecuador often fell short of its goal and instead ended up reifying the very colonial ideologies it was trying to disrupt. Officials within Moreno's government attempted to use the Cirque du Monde program design as a starting point for an Ecuadorian version:

> In history we were conquered, we also had bad governments that suppressed communities... By revitalizing the spiritual part of a person, as with social circus, we can start to work to improve self-esteem... And have an Ecuadorian point of view not from a submissive stance but from a position of being able and capable of creating and proposing new ideas and change... Depending on who is in charge of the social circus [program] it can just be a local spectacle and the essence of social change could be completely lost. We [the central government] must look after preventing that. – Official from the Ecuadorian Ministry of Culture and Heritage, November 2014 (Spiegel et al., 2019).

According to government rhetoric, Circo Social Ecuador was to be a way of resisting colonialism and the oppressive forces of previous Ecuadorian regimes (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). However, many critics argued that Circo Social Ecuador, much like its parent-philosophy, *Buen Vivir*, would never be, nor was it

intended to be, a new utopian civilization for Ecuador, but rather a modernized version of capitalism (Alonso González & Vázquez, 2015).

One of the immediate hurdles Circo Social Ecuador had to face was the fact that its primary partner in program design was Cirque du Monde, from the global North, which operates from a model of charitable aid. The Cirque du Monde program centered on the idea that while some people are privileged enough, or perhaps simply 'enough', to grow and develop into productive citizens, others are 'at-risk' of not meeting this metric of capitalistic worthiness (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). As explained by Spiegel (2016), this lens for identifying possible program populations alludes to Eve Tuck's 'damage-centered' theory of change which sets the stage for a hierarchy of power with those who design and implement programs standing over 'damaged' folks who require changing. I believe that by using a deficit model, Cirque du Monde reified the colonial and capitalistic tenet that society must be structured to marginalize and oppress some groups of people while valuing others – simply put, if all people and populations are equally valuable just as they are, no one is 'at-risk' of not being successful in life and this undermines capitalism by rejecting the notion that wealth is the only measure of value. This global-North interpretation of value and power is one of the foundational underpinnings of colonialism (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019), and from Circo Social Ecuador's conception, it was an ideology that I believe would need to confronted in order to create a program in keeping with its own stated values.

Circo Social Ecuador was unique in conception as is one of the only examples of a nationalized social circus program. The national government of Ecuador, first under the auspices of the Office of the Vice President, and later under the Ministry of Culture, contributed substantial funding to Circo Social Ecuador (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). However, the partnership with Cirque du Monde brought more than just social circus expertise to the proverbial table, it also brought funding (Sorzano, 2018b). Cirque du Monde, which was the non-profit and social outreach arm of the Cirque du Soleil corporation at the time, was, according to Leroux and Batson (2016), a program that combined "doing good" with the desire for Cirque du Soleil and its owners to be viewed as 'good' as well. However, it still operated within a global corporate culture (Leroux & Batson, 2016). According to Sorzano (2018a), by adopting categories, such as certain populations who could access services, and terminologies such as 'at-risk', in order to meet the criteria of additional funding bodies whose ethos required bureaucratic language and adherence, Cirque du Monde and its partners were required to re-enact the very colonial divides that they were attempting to reject. This example of the 'NGO industrial complex' (Barry-Shaw & Jay, 2012), where an NGO's need for funding can undermine its ability to sustain itself while trying to create the social transformation that its mandate promotes, was a key problem that Circo Social Ecuador encountered (Sorzano, 2018a). As Spiegel (2016) writes, "indeed, the extent of change that can be meaningfully seeded and brought to fruition without a complete transformation of the hierarchies that continue to characterize systems of support

(and society as a whole) remains in question" (p. 64). With capitalism as a key component of colonialism, I am doubtful that Circo Social Ecuador could ever fully achieve *Buen Vivir's* vision of collective wellbeing while existing within a capitalist state and partnering with the charitable arm of a capitalist organization. However, I believe that a critical analysis of the Circo Social Ecuador program shows numerous examples of ways in which the program pursued the vision of *Buen Vivir*. The following sections of this thesis will detail the ways in which I contend Circo Social Ecuador was able to stand in resistance to the values of a capitalist society and succeed at bringing aspects of *Buen Vivir* to the program design.

4.4 Decolonizing

As Circo Social Ecuador was conceived under the umbrella of *Buen Vivir's* concept of harmonistic 'wellbeing', the design incorporated much of Cirque du Monde's rationale and structure (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). However, Circo Social Ecuador had more of an emphasis on socialist and social justice principles than many other iterations of social circus (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). Within the Ecuadorian program's design, the concept of empowering and supporting vulnerable individuals – or promoting individual wellbeing – was inextricably tied to promoting collective wellbeing through the agency-building within and support of communities (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). By drawing on principles of empowerment, collective cultural development, and community consciousness raising, I believe that the program of Circo Social Ecuador moved from a deficit model of social circus (primarily supporting individuals 'at-risk') towards one that

recognized and tried to offer resistance against the oppressive role of capitalist society. By turning away from Cirque du Monde's traditional focus on social circus as a form a charitable aid for youth 'at-risk', and towards a more holistic understanding of individuals with lived experience in the context of local community and the environment, I contend that Circo Social Ecuador became an example of Ecuador's attempt at reframing dominant discourses in society from deficit-based, capitalistic models, and towards ones of collective empowerment.

4.5 Collective Wellbeing

If Circo Social Ecuador was partnered with a program that was structured as a deficit-model, was sustained through colonial society, and required capitalist funding to operate, how could it ever have any hope of achieving its mandate? Was it destined to fail from its very inception? These are questions that I believe need to be addressed in a critical analysis of the Circo Social Ecuador program.

According to Spiegel (2016b), whose extensive studies on social circus around the world, and on the social circus programs in Montreal and Ecuador in particular, provides unparalleled insight into both dominant and peripheral approaches to social circus, no. Spiegel (2016b) writes that simply by daring to dream of an alternative future, all social circus programs have the potential to be agents of decolonization. And with the federal government's mandate of *Buin Vivir*, Circo Social Ecuador had a better chance than most to meaningfully engage in this process.

> It is important to recognize that process-based theories of change do not require attaining utopian equality as a condition of success. Transformation is a process, not a destination. What is embodied in social circus is a challenge to habitual modes of relating, one that breaks with habits of thought and interaction, to open up new individual and collective horizons for future social and cultural development. (Spiegel, 2016b)

Within Ecuador's program design for Circo Social Ecuador, the intention was to first adopt a critical version of Cirque du Monde's policy and pedagogical framework for social circus, and secondly to reexamine it through the lens of *Buen Vivir*, which would allow for Ecuadorian social circus to implement an anti-oppressive approach within a decolonized design (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). I believe that when Circo Social Ecuador took an international model and, by bringing an aim of collective consciousness raising, created a program situated in the uniquely Ecuadorian context of wellbeing in harmony with people, society, and nature, it allowed space for even small examples of decolonizing the colonial design of Cirque du Monde.

As a settler Canadian, I feel strongly that it is small acts of decolonization that can lead to greater social change. In his 1992 song, *Anthem*, Leonard Cohen sings, "There is a crack, a crack in everything – that's how the light gets in" (Koppensteiner, 2020). I believe that every act of decolonization is another crack in the confines of colonialism, and I think that the ways in which Circo Social Ecuador applied the lens of *Buen Vivir* to their program design focused the light coming through these cracks. From my perspective, even giving voice and intention to

decolonialization in the Circo Social Ecuador program design is one of these cracks. The following two sections of this thesis provide further detail into examples of how Circo Social Ecuador engaged in a critical form of social circus that rejected the dominant approaches that reified colonialism.

4.6 *Theatre/Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

While the program design of Circo Social Ecuador was officially influenced by Cirque du Monde, many of the circus instructors working to train local instructors came from Chile, Italy and France (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). These instructors often had a strong ideological foundation based in Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* and Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). Both methods work symbiotically with the intent and design of social circus and reify the desire for collective wellbeing that underpinned *Buen Vivir*.

Freire's concept of 'conscientization' (critical consciousness) details how learners come to understand that the knowledge they hold that derives from their own experiences and lived reality is equally valuable to the knowledge that instructors bring to the learning relationship (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). Freire's idea was that, by placing the same level of value on the knowledge that both parties bring to the interaction, power differentials that are inherent in learner/instructor relationships can be minimized (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). While I do not agree that valuing the knowledge of both parties necessarily ensures that the power differential is minimized, I believe that even the intention to re-examine this way of

relating contributes to this minimization, and in turn, to the decolonization of the work being done. Many of the initial instructors for Circo Social Ecuador based their work in the relational ideology that social circus program participants would arrive at the program with as much to teach as the instructors themselves – which, per Freire's approach, would give voice and agency to the participants, allowing them to embody a fuller level of humanity than would be possible under a more authoritarian regime (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). The concept that both instructors and participants engage in social circus through the lens of their own lived experiences and that this knowledge is not only worthy of being shared, but also intrinsic to the 'success' of the program, is a tenet of critical social work: critical social workers operate under the understanding that not only are all realities valuable, but that we cannot separate ourselves from them (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). For Circo Social Ecuador participants to be understood not just as knowledge consumers, but also knowledge producers, they were moving closer to fulfilling both Freire's concept of full humanization and *Buen Vivir'*s promise of a better life through collective wellbeing (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). The theoretical underpinnings of my personal practice are strongly rooted in this concept that all realities and lived experiences are both valuable and intrinsic to our conception of self and this is evidenced by my choice of autoethnography as a research method. It is this tenet of critical social work is foundational to my desire to engage with social circus, whether as a participant or a potential facilitator, partly because it removes the need to create distinction between participant and facilitator, and instead

creates a space where everyone can engage in social circus as a practitioner, rather than being only an agent offering aid or a beneficiary receiving it.

Furthering the critical reflection and action that is part of Freire's *Pedagogy*, by referencing Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* in their pedagogical approaches and program design, Circo Social Ecuador instructors were able to work with participants to draw attention to the injustices and oppressions that were entrenched in Ecuadorian society and, through the explorative nature often found in social circus (especially dominant approaches), consider ways to problem-solve these issues (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). Much as I am attempting to do with this thesis, Boal's work asks us to critique society and its systems to ask, "who now is the oppressor?" (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019), and to ask the question of ultimate change, "what if?" (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). According to Speigel and Choukroun (2019, Chapter 4, Train the Trainer Workshops as Models for Learning, para 9), "Boal's work (and social circus) call forth through our bodies in relationship to each other, that which is unsaid, not known, unsayable (Salverson, 2011), along with those situations which we recognize as injustices in our relationships, our political, economic and social contexts." Instructors using these pedagogical approaches emphasized to social circus participants that by examining the unsayable in relationship to injustice in their local worlds, they might be able to first identify and then enact the change necessary for this redistribution of power and reimagination of society.

I assess that is that it was through the intentional identification and implementation of Freire and Boal's theories by experienced social circus instructors that Circo Social Ecuador was able to incorporate these concepts into its overall program design, thereby further aligning the program with the concepts of *Buen Vivir*. In my view, by giving formal weight to the importance of these pedagogical approaches, Circo Social Ecuador was further committing to a decolonized program design and creating more cracks of light in the darkness of colonial oppression.

4.7 Art vs Assistance

When the formal definition of social circus, as an intervention that combines circus and social work with the goal of social transformation, was established in 2002 at the First International Round Table of Circus and Social Work, representatives from the global North, and particularly France, were insistent that within the ideological realm of 'culture', social circus was separate from the art form of professional contemporary circus (Sorzano, 2018). According to Sorzano (2018), the international art world, influenced by the hegemonic Western/Northern definitions of 'art', continues to reject the value and legitimacy of the art produced by social circus programs and participants, even though this resistance is generally ideological, as is evidenced by the many professional circus artists who first came to circus through social circus programming. Sorzano (2018) theorizes that in many social circus programs, the emphasis on creating art is subsumed by the terminology, and subsequently internalized ideology, that programs must adopt to

meet bureaucratic conditions imposed by funding bodies. While Circo Social Ecuador was certainly vulnerable to this potential outcome, under Correa's government, the assurance of substantial government funding tied not just to the concept of charitable aid, but to the constitutionally protected rights of *Buen Vivir* and collective wellbeing, creating space for decolonizing and reimagining how the worlds of art and social circus could intersect.

As Circo Social Ecuador's presence grew, some of its instructors took the work of decolonizing social circus further by establishing Tejido de Circo Social, a social circus program that did not rely on any funding from Cirque du Monde (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). Created in 2015, Tejido de Circo Social aimed to develop social circus in Ecuador to "improve society and lead to construction of a just and creative world through horizontal work with individuals and the community" (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019, Chapter 3, National Social Circus as a Catalyst for Social Transformation? Para 3). Tejido de Circo Social, like many of the decolonized iterations of social circus across Latin America at the time, emphasized not just participation, but recognized social circus as a potential locus of true artistic expression – for in the words of the director of Circo Social del Sur (a social circus program in Argentina), "we do not appeal to youth as beneficiaries of social assistance, but rather as producers and actors in artistic events, as creative subjects" (Infantino, 2011, p. 57). And it is by viewing the labour of engagement with the process of social circus, in addition to the more polished outcomes and performance pieces, as true 'art', that social circus work moves beyond the

concept of charitable aid and towards a development of community consciousness-raising that privileges all art as culture. I also contest that it is through this very rejection of the hegemonic definition of art and broadening of understanding of what art can be that Circo Social Ecuador, along with other peripheral examples of social circus, further engaged in decolonization. By rejecting traditionally Western/Northern (and colonial) concepts of what art can be, Circo Social Ecuador once again broadened the confining restraints of what is 'valuable' to include all aspects of social circus practice. Regarding all social circus practitioners as circus artists resisted the colonial concept that only polished and refined performances by professionals could be considered art and embraced the Indigenous concept that making art is a core characteristic of humanity, and therefore, that all people are artists engaged in art-making (Sorzano, 2018).

In conclusion, Circo Social Ecuador provides an alternative example to mainstream social circus programs. It illustrates the possibility for progressive, left-leaning national governments to implement diverse social programs with a macro level goal of bringing about wider social change. While Circo Social Ecuador did continue to perpetuate colonialism in the ways that it adhered to capitalistic metrics of program 'success' and maintained a partnership Cirque du Monde, it also began the work of decolonizing social circus by rejecting a deficit approach to service and focusing instead on building collective wellbeing. While not part of the original program design, local Latin American circus instructors brought the principles of the *Pedagogy/Theatre of the Oppressed* to the program's

implementation which furthered the program's anti-oppressive and decolonial approach, and with an intended focus on creating art over providing social assistance, Circo Social Ecuador further distanced itself from a deficit-based, charitable-model. As more research is published[2] on the maturation of Circo Social Ecuador, we will be able to see further how the program both met and failed to meet its goals. And for now, the current research available on Circo Social Ecuador gives one possible iteration of how a critically oriented social circus program might become a space for all people to create art, share their stories, and create social change.

[2] In English

CHAPTER FIVE: EMBODIED ANALYSIS

5.1 Method

To determine the methodological approach for my embodied analysis, I read a variety of circus-based theses, dissertations, and research articles. While my methods draw aspects from multiple approaches, one thesis framed embodied analysis in a way that truly resonated with me. In her master's thesis, *Art of (dis)obedience: A study of critical embodiment through a circus body*, Dugan (2019) writes:

> Scholarly circus research can be *for*, *through*, and *about* circus. Up to now, much circus discourse is historical (*about* circus), mostly conducted by researchers outside of the circus community. More than a research object, circus is also a medium of investigation for theoretical development – *through* and *for*, which is what my research focuses on. I research *through* my circus body *for* circus scholarship. My research is practice-based and therefore embodies theoretical and practical explorations. I phenomenologically interrogated my body through practice and theory. Bringing these two together, I tried to bridge the traditional gap between artistic and scholarly practices, which are mutually dependent. I used the knowledge of my practice to stimulate theoretical explorations that, in turn, provide a critical lens for my practical experience. The goal was that the artwork be scholarly and the scholarly creative. (p. 18)

Much like Dugan, I used my personal embodied circus practice as a method of furthering my critical analysis of social circus. I engaged in my embodied practice while working to understand how my queer and disabled body holds a place in the colonial legacy of social circus. Hoak et al. (2020) argue that by combining academic learning with embodied circus practice, scholars can further their access to creative solutions and expand their knowledge horizons. My initial plan for this thesis was to reflect on my cognitive analysis and endeavour to translate this understanding to my body while working to build a performance piece on the aerial hoop that reflected this learning – as time passed and I came to accept that this would not be a physical possibility for me while working on this project. Regardless, I found a way to engage with my body so that *through* this circus work I could use my artistic practice to share those aspects of embodied understanding that are inherent to queer and disability theories, but which cannot be adequately communicated through writing. Gallagher (2006) and Steinman's (1995) work on embodiment shows that the body and mind mutually inform and affect each other. Thus, by using both written analysis and embodied movement, I hoped to allow for each process to inform the other and lead to a more holistic understanding of the topics I am exploring. For this project, I am my own case study; I conducted my analysis from the autoethnographical vantage of my own social identities, allowing my theoretical framework to be explored through the medium of my body. This artistic practice was then used to inform my scholarly understanding of the topics I examined. As Gallagher (2006) proposes, my personal experience of circus work

became a problem-solving strategy and a reference point as I worked to understand my research question. It is my hope that by combining my cognitive work with the emotions I feel while engaging in this work, and with the experience of how this work feels within my body, that I have achieved a holistic understanding of the research at hand. My intent is to use the understanding gained *through* social circus practice *for* the advancement of anti-colonial and anti-ableist social circus practices.

My embodied circus practice research centres on the issue of how social circus can be a space for all people to create art and share their stories. I reflected on my learnings about how queer and disability theories can reframe social circus and applied these learnings to my own body and my own circus practice. Using this lens, I hoped to engage in circus practice that was not only artistic but also 'social'. While social circus generally involves group programming and learning from instructors, I challenge this notion by valuing my personal social circus practice, where I learn from my own body and its relationship to social discourse. With this project, I sought to gain a better understanding of my place within the circus community and society at large by honouring the knowledge generated by my queer and disabled body through circus practice. By bringing an autoethnographical approach and consciously engaging in the therapeutic aspects of social circus, my hope was to work *through* my body *for* the benefit to myself, my community, and my research.

While completing my thesis, I had to set aside the planned creation of an aerial hoop performance piece because of the fluctuating nature of my disability,

but I choose to honour the planning aspect of the social circus I hoped to engage in by sharing it here. While I did not end up being able to create the intended performance piece, my social circus research has shown me that by applying a decolonized lens to the valuation of art, I can recognize that a polished performance piece is no more worthy as an example of art than the intention I initially had for my practice. And it is with this understanding in mind that I share the plans I had once intended for my research.

When initially planning this project, I had hoped to start by brainstorming my thoughts, my emotions, and my embodied feelings in relation to my research areas. I hoped to record not only words and phrases expressing what I think about the topic areas, but also words and phrases representing my emotions in relation to the topics. I then intended to spend time noticing and recording how this understanding is manifested in my body by focusing on the embodied sensations I would have in reaction to my thoughts and feelings. By focusing on the overlap of my cognition and emotions, which have traditionally been conceived as adversaries within Western thought (Cognition and Emotion, 2021) and amalgamating this understanding with my embodied sensations, I hoped to engage in holistic brainstorming. The product of this brainstorm would have been reflective of queer and disabled theoretical underpinnings as it values embodiment, lived experience, and the inclusion of non-empirical information.

From the product of my brainstorm, I intended to group similar words and phrases to create several overarching themes to be used in my embodied social

circus practice. For each theme, I planned to identify key terms would act as guides for me to focus on during practice sessions.

At this point, I had hoped to begin the creation of an aerial hoop performance piece. I planned to keep my identified themes and key terms in mind while practicing on the aerial hoop. I hoped to work to find positions, movements, and postures that reflected my understanding of my research. Working both on the ground and with the hoop, I would explore and investigate ways to communicate with myself and with others. I would build sequences of moves that felt aligned with my experiences and knowledge, and I would play with the order, cadence, and speed of the sequences. I planned to consider music choices for the final performance piece and reflect on how and why they would further my message. Finally, I would drill the piece and excepts from it, learning as I did so about how the repetition and practice of the piece shaped my understanding of it.

Following each practice session, I planned to complete a self-questionnaire that I designed to elicit reflection on the work I engaged in and help me organize those reflections. The questionnaire would allow me to reflect on factors like my mood and my body pre- and post-practice, the day and time of my practice, what themes and key concepts I entered practice focusing on, how the practice went, and what barriers I encountered. I also included sections of the questionnaire that would allow me to record what elements I worked on that session and make note of new topics or concepts that emerged. I hoped to catalogue my answers in a spreadsheet which would enable me to capture key

and recurring concepts in my answers and compare how my initial, deductive thematic analysis compared to the concepts and themes bodily experienced within my work. I then planned to reflect on those concepts and themes as I engaged in future practice sessions and my written analysis.

I intended that the finished performance piece would be recorded on video and in photographs. I planned to use those as aids in my final reflection on the work, which would be a section of my written analysis. Finally, I hoped to present my performance piece as part of my thesis defence in recognition that the understanding I gained through my embodied circus practice could only truly be communicated through the movement itself.

5.2 Reflective Analysis

I have been engaged in this thesis project for several years – all while working full-time as a medical social worker within local hospitals. This project started as a dream during my MSW degree, when I was feeling disenfranchised by the lack of critical social work in my degree program and the strain of attempting to bring an anti-oppressive practice to a neoliberal healthcare setting during a global pandemic. I practiced self-care by reading above and beyond my course requirements – from Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (2018), to Zena Sharman's *The Care We Dream Of* (2021), to Robyn Maynard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's *Rehearsals for Living* (2022), as a way of keeping myself anchored to my practice ideology. As I started to dream my way through possible topics for my thesis, I realized how important it was to me that

my work focus on community since my professional social work life was predominantly filled with clinical, rather than community, perspectives. As a disabled person during a pandemic, my experience was often one of being dismissed and unseen – as my school, local healthcare system and local government all chose to ignore or selectively consider the research that was coming out about Covid-19. I found support and visibility online, among other disabled people and allies, who prioritized accessibility, safety, and equity for all people by using solid scientific research as the basis of their approach to life during this unprecedented time. But so many of the people I was surrounded by and working with daily were unaware of the danger, or simply didn't seem to care about possible futures, as a result of repeated Covid-19 infections. My experience was not an uncommon one within the queer and disabled community, but as much as I had hoped that my local queer and disabled communities would prioritize collective care and safety, many of them did not. What I needed was a space where I could feel seen, supported, and safe, and where I could work through a research plan that would help me find hope and light in the midst of a dark reality.

At the time, I was taking circus classes with a group of friends at a local circus school. The school, Halifax Circus, had thorough Covid-19 protocols and was engaged in providing safe and supportive services to the community (for example, by requiring all students wear masks to class, thereby creating a safe space for disabled and non-disabled students alike), at a time when many organizations were choosing profit over collective care (as, for example, many students would choose

to enroll at another school, rather than wear a mask to class). A friend organized a group of us to attend classes together so that we could all feel safe around each other – certainly we were aware of Covid-19 and taking a harm reduction approach to our circus training, but we were also a generally like-minded group of people who varyingly identified as queer, Black, and/or disabled. We were able to create a class with a teacher who prioritized our wellbeing, and we were able to learn, practice and laugh together. Some of the participants were local academics, researchers, or authors, which meant that the discussions we had as we struggled to haul our bodies through space were incredibly varied and often focused on issues of social justice, and how we could work towards implementing them in our local community. For instance, we often spoke of struggles we were facing with friends and family who did not prioritize Covid-19 harm reduction like we did and how we coped with this difference in political ideology, or about local companies who were changing practices to make their business more accessible to all and how we might encourage others to follow this example. The group chat we used to organize ourselves often included links to peer-reviewed articles, examples of disability-friendly art, or content from the university courses that people were teaching. In fact, it was a member of this group who first sent me the link to the circus-specific issue of *Performance Matters* (Circus and Its Others, Vol. 4 No. 1-2, 2018) as a possible resource for this project[3].

[3] This double issue of Performance Matters is an ideal jumping off point for anyone looking to read and learn about critical approaches to circus. Twenty papers are presented in sections entitled:

As I started narrowing down my potential thesis topics, it occurred to me that this group was essentially an informal social circus class. While not a formalized program, it met many of the criteria as described above by various sources. The circus aspects of the class were run by our instructor (themselves a social circus and accessible circus facilitator), but always in collaboration with the participants, recognizing that we were the experts in our own bodies. Given the topics we would discuss in class (from body issues like the fight against internalized sizeism, to local social justice concerns such as how our universities were or were not supporting marginalized students and staff during the pandemic, to more global politics such as how the fall out from George Floyd's murder was bringing to light entrenched racism in performing arts), and the way we would share recommendations for further learning, the traditional top-down power differential was disrupted in favour of a more Freirean approach of collective consciousness raising, all experienced through the framework of embodied circus practice. I started engaging in reading about social circus and learning about the distinct disjunction between mainstream social circus practices and more peripheral ones. It immediately became clear to me that many formal social circus programs were not well aligned with a critical or anti-oppressive social work practice, particularly one based in critical queer and disability theories. As I mused aloud about my findings to my circus classmates, I realized that I could use autoethnography to understand my own experience of

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Gender and Difference in Contemporary Circus; Reading Circus Bodies and Signs; Location, Locatedness, and Mobility; Is Social Circus the Other of Professional Circus?; Freak and Queer.

social circus to perhaps gain greater insight into how a social work lens might further the goals of anti-oppressive social circus. Finally, I decided that it was important to include a movement-based aspect to my work, as I find I can't easily tease apart my embodied experience of the world from my cognitive one. And as a social worker who attempts to practice from an anti-oppressive lens, I wanted to push back at exclusionary academic practices that gatekeep post-secondary research from the embodied and lived experiences of the researchers in the name of an impartiality that critical queer and disability theories tell us is not possible to achieve (Dugan, 2019).

I have been privileged to work with two primary thesis supervisors in the last several years as I have struggled to frame, refine and outline the details of my thesis. With their support, I was able to design and propose a thesis project that would incorporate much of what I wanted to explore, from both cognitive and embodied perspectives. This work, and the refining of it, took quite some time, given the somewhat atypical nature of my proposed project – at least for a conventional social work thesis! Even when I had a clear idea of the plan in my mind, it was difficult to translate this to text in a way that was not only understandable, but also met academic expectations. But eventually I managed it.

5.3 Grappling with Embodiment

As I finally set to work on the thesis itself, I found I had to focus almost exclusively on the cognitive and written portions of my project. Time had passed since I had dreamed up this plan in my informal social circus class, and with this

passing time, my body had changed. Critical disability theory tells us that disability/ability is never static, but rather always evolving (Carter et. al, 2018; Devlin & Pothier, 2006). One of the critical perspectives on disability as a social identity is that at some point in life, everyone will be "disabled", as, similar to other shifting identifies like socioeconomic status but dissimilar more fixed identities like race, disability fluctuates over a person's life (Carter et. al, 2018). Some people will be disabled their entire lives, whereas some people will never accept the identity for themselves (although sometimes society will apply this identity for them, regardless of their self-conception) (Gillies, 2014). As for me, I was in a new healthcare social work position which required much more from my body than my previous position had. At the same time, my health was changing, and I was facing increased fatigue and pain at baseline. Despite my best intentions and the support from my specialist health team, I could not keep up with attending my circus classes.

When I finally stopped attending circus completely, I struggled significantly with how I would continue with my thesis. The weight of my own expectations were heavy as I worked to process the grief that comes from not being able to do what you have in the past. In my social work practice, I spend significant time supporting clients to envision new realities for themselves in the face of new medical diagnoses or altered functional ability, as I believe that having reasonable and realistic expectations for the future helps provide a sense of safety and increases wellness. But I struggled through this process with my own health as I had no idea what to expect – would my body adjust to the demands I was placing on it? Would

taking time off circus or work help me get back to my former baseline? Would I continue to decline and be able to do even less than I was now?

I spent months agonizing through the experience of sitting with my body and honouring its needs, while trying to figure out what to do about my project. I didn't want to give up on my thesis. I cared too much about the embodied portion of the work to drop that aspect if I didn't have to. And while I waited, I engaged in a technique I have used since I was a teenager, when my fatigue would prevent me from physically enacting something at a specific time. My best attempt to describe this practice is as a combination of meditation, visualization, and somatic imagining. I would listen to the music I had hoped to choreograph my routine to, and I would daydream of what I might do in the future, or what I might have done.

I pictured myself arriving at the cerceau, the feeling of the mats under my feet and the stickiness of the tape wrapped around the metal hoop under my hands. I imagined myself sitting in the hoop and felt the line of pressure the hoop made under my legs, imagined what it would feel like to engage my core muscles to sit upright and to point my feet. I saw myself from the outside, as a watcher might see me, as I imagined spinning in the cerceau, and I imagined what my view would look like as the world flew past – a swirl of the bright, primary colours in the Halifax Circus gym, a feeling of dizziness from lack of practice, and that feeling of teetering on the edge of safe control as I perhaps spun a bit too fast or too long. After almost a decade of practicing circus, I can feel the pressure points and pain that working on the hoop bring – behind my knees, along the sides of my thighs, down the knobs

of my spine. My body remembers the feeling of letting go of the cerceau after hanging on too long when I am out of practice – my hands feeling stuck in a gripped position, and like I need to use one hand to peel my fingers back and open on the other, fighting the resistance of muscle and skin.

And through this visualization and somatic imagining, I can reach a sort of meditative frame of mind, similar to a flow state. In my mind it feels almost as if I am physically in the gym, grappling with my body and its limitations, except that the limitations aren't quite so limiting when I engage in this work. Certainly, the pain from too much pressure to certain body parts doesn't force me to stop, my injuries don't hold me back quite as much, and I feel less fear about pushing too far and tipping past that point of safety. For all that I feel grief as I am forced by my own body to participate in this practice only within my mind, there is also a sort of freedom that comes from it. There are shapes and movements I have learned when I have been at my strongest that I usually can't do, but these positions and tricks are no longer inaccessible to me because of my body. I still know how they feel, and I remember what I saw as I moved upside down, or around, or through the air. I can still feel them in my body and when I imagine myself engaging in them from the viewpoint of a watcher, it is a joyful surprise that my form is always as I intend it – no wonky toes or leg that I failed to straighten, or pained expression on my face. In some ways, this method of practice is preferable to physically working on the cerceau at the gym, as I can repeat a sequence as many times as I want, and spend as much time as I want delving into the slightest somatic details, like my leggings

getting caught on the tape of the hoop, or how to perfectly place my hands each time, without needing to adjust them. In a way, this type of practice gives me a level of freedom and ability that I simply can't obtain in the physical world and having that level of embodied control is an incredible high – one that feels, perhaps, like self-actualization.

When I engage in this work - this mind-based social circus - I feel intensely connected to the artistic aspect of the practice. I am not simply a participant, or a learner in a class, but I am an artist, weaving together motion and shape and colour and time. This echoes the tenet found in peripheral approaches to social circus, particularly those in Latin America, where applying a critical social work lens to the practice allows me to queer what it means to engage in traditional social circus work and find new ways to create and exist within art using my disabled body as a medium. I am not lesser for not being in the gym, and the art I create is just as valuable, even though I can't show it to a viewer. The worth of my social circus experience is not conditional upon being in the gym, but in engaging in the practice of recognizing who I am, how I relate to the society I am part of and the land I stand (or lie!) upon, and how I can use this understanding to pursue greater change beyond myself. Much as Circo Social Ecuador and other peripheral approaches to social circus push back against a capitalist social system that focuses on a deficit approach, my approach to the embodied portion of my thesis queers the structure that I had designed for myself by redefining my "practice" of social circus from a critical disability lens. Whether it is society or my body that is limiting my

participation in my planned work, a critical social work approach supports my endeavour to find and pursue alternate ways of moving forward with my project.

Critical disability theory affirms the value and inherent worth of reimagined and queered approaches to both art and academics (Devlin & Pothier, 2016). As Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018) writes, “Me writing from my sickbed wasn’t me being weak or uncool or not a real writer but a time honoured crip creative practice,” (p. 15). As I reflect on these words, I realize that I have completed most of the work for my three (and a bit) post-secondary degrees from bed – or at the very least from the couch. Sitting up to type was often hard enough, let alone asking myself to leave the house (and all the labour that required) to go to the library or attend a study group. But because I was usually able to hide the necessity of these adaptations to completing my degrees, or because it is socially acceptable for my generation to work from home and from bed, or because of the pandemic and its subsequent online and work-from-home format, I was able to pass as abled, to complete my work as expected, on-time, and per requirements. As such, I did not usually feel shame for the care I needed to show my body (even at a time when I didn’t realize this was care my body was demanding, not just desiring, to experience), so why should I feel differently when I was not able to complete a circus performance piece as I had planned? Kafer (2013), writes that crip theory is "a way of acknowledging that we all have bodies and minds with shifting abilities, and [a way of] wrestling with the political meanings and histories of such shifts,” (p. 13) and that the concept of crip time normalizes societal expectations of pace and schedule by

prioritizing the disabled experience, for, “rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds" (Kafer, 2013, p. 27). If I can accept these arguments within the scope of a critical social work practice, then can I apply them to myself? Thinking on this question, I realize it is critical that I reflect on and process the political meaning of this shift within my own ability and reaffirm my choice to live my politics loudly and proudly.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while the embodied aspect of my thesis ended up substantially diverging from what I had planned it to be, this divergence itself became a further way for me to process what social circus might look like when applying anti-oppressive and critical social work lenses, particularly ones founded in critical queer and disability theories. My body forced me to take the learnings I had gained by researching general peripheral social circus examples, and Circo Social Ecuador in particular, and apply them to my own embodied experience. In my practice I have found that we are always better at supporting others to do work that we struggle to undertake for ourselves, and this was no exception. By coming to a place of acceptance where I was not internally devaluing the embodied work I was able to undertake, I was required to personally enact the principles of critical queer and disability theories in relation to my own social circus practice. And so perhaps I ended up learning more from the embodied portion of my research than I might have if I had proceeded with my thesis as originally planned. Certainly, I found the

work to be much harder than I expected, and the process of coming to acceptance took much longer than I had anticipated. But in the end, I feel like this experience was exactly what I needed, as it truly required me to attempt to find answers for what a critically-oriented social circus space for all people to create art, share their stories, and heal might look like.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION: CRITICAL SOCIAL WORK FOR A CRITICAL SOCIAL CIRCUS PROGRAM

Social workers have a long history of using art as a medium for conducting therapy, processing trauma, and supporting social change (Huss & Bos, 2018; Mreiwed et al., 2020; Newcomb & Centeno, 2020). Art-based social work is a well-established field that acknowledges the mental, emotional, and physical benefits to engaging in both artmaking and sharing, and uses these benefits in support of education, personal development, and wider social change (Chambon, 2009; Huss & Bos, 2018; Konrad, 2019). Art-based social work rejects the Western notion that analytic processing is the ultimate way of learning and understanding the world and instead privileges alternative approaches to the practice of social work that can range from dance and physical movement, to painting and drawing, to music and singing (Heller & Taglialatela, 2018; Moffatt, 2019; Sorzano, 2018a). Art-based social work is incorporated in programs as wide-ranging as addictions treatment, research and policy development, community outreach, and even social work education (Kuri, 2020; Newcomb & Centeno, 2020; Reamer, 2006). As a branch of performing art historically practiced around the globe, it makes sense that circus arts would be used by social workers as a way to support and diversify their practices. While there are some social workers who explicitly engage in circus arts as part of their practice, I believe that the potential social justice work that can be undertaken by social circus programs is an informal form of art-based social work. For this reason,

I argue that social circus could exist at the intersection of circus arts and social work practice.

Social circus becomes the ‘social’ of its name, rather than simply the practice of circus, when understood as a form of social intervention. While not often formally recognized as such, I believe social circus could be considered a social work practice modality; this thesis concludes with a discussion of insights concerning the mutual benefit for bringing social circus and social work together. Many programs are designed to provide support to specific populations of people such as marginalized youth, economically disadvantaged folks, people with mental health challenges and other disabilities, refugees, survivors of war or trauma, children in care of the state or other groups of people who face systemic challenges in society (Bassel, 2005; Beuler, 2020; Carter et. al, 2018; Hentoff, 2018; Lavers & Burtt, 2015; Leslie et al., 2020; Löf, 2021; Loiselle et al., 2019; Rivard et al., 2010; Seymour & Wise, 2017; Spiegel et al., 2015a; Watt, 2019; Watt, 2022). Social circus can be both micro social work practice focused on supporting individuals and mezzo social work practice that is aimed at community-level political consciousness-raising and social transformation, as seen in the example of Circo Social Ecuador (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019; Spiegel & Parent, 2018). Arrighi (2014) writes that social circus work is “the co-oping of circus skills to an agenda of social change” (p.206). On an individual level social circus traditionally aims to “foster the personal and social development of at-risk individuals” (Lafortune et al., 2010). It is conceived as a practice modality that empowers participants, helps them to build trust and self-

esteem, and ultimately, perhaps, pursue self-actualization (Schorr, 2021; Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). By focusing on possibility, in addition to their current or historical social situations, participants can be encouraged to dream new realities for themselves through building new social and circus skills, while simultaneously challenging dominant capitalist narratives of worthiness (Cadwell, 2018; Spiegel, 2016). While some participants go on to further training and become professional circus practitioners or social circus instructors themselves, others take the skills they have developed and apply them to other aspects of their lives, including employment and artistic pursuits (Sorzano, 2018b).

The Code of Ethics for the Canadian Association of Social Workers (2005) outlines expectations for all interventions undertaken by registered social workers in Canada – but more than that it provides guidance for any form of social intervention. Per the Code of Ethics (2005),

> Social workers uphold seven core values which are:
>
> 1. Respecting the Dignity and Worth of All People
> 2. Promoting Social Justice
> 3. Pursuing Truth and Reconciliation
> 4. Valuing Human Relationships
> 5. Preserving Integrity in Professional Practice
> 6. Maintaining Privacy and Confidentiality
> 7. Providing Competent Professional Services

By using these seven core values as a guide and considering specifically the case study of Circo Social Ecuador and my own ethnographic work, we can see how the first three in particular must be foundational elements to a critical social circus program.

To respect the inherent dignity and worth of all people, programs must strive to ensure access to as all (given the program's particular mandate. In the case of Circo Social Ecuador, this can be seen by the specific and intentional inclusion of the most rural populations in Ecuador, instead of limiting access to people who live in urban centres (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019). In my autoethnographic work, I struggled to a place of acceptance where I could uphold this value by placing the same level of worth on a mind-based practice as I did on a physically embodied one. Despite being unable to physically go to the gym, I was no less worthy of participating in social circus, and despite not being able to share my work with others (in a traditional, visual sense), my art still held the same value.

The value of promoting social justice is foundational to critical social work practice, and we can see this value being undertaken in a macro-level practice by Circo Social Ecuador, where, according to the 2012 *Programa Social Circo Ecuador* (Spiegel, 2019, p. 900), the first aim of the official program design was to, "create a cultural alternative for empowering vulnerable communities." The influence of the work of Paulo Freire (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*) and Augusto Boal (*Theatre of the Oppressed*) furthered the macro-level work to promote social justice through the Circo Social Ecuador program. In my autoethnographic work, I took these principles

of social change and attempted to apply them to my own, micro-level practice, in what can only be described as an incredibly intimate experience where I questioned my very conception of self and self-worth. But by engaging in this practice and using the broader concept of social justice as a guide, my personal learnings circled all the way around to become examples of theoretical application and guidance for further and future community work.

Given its long history of conquest and colonial rule, from the Inca to the Spaniards (Spiegel & Choukroun, 2019), the work of pursuing truth and reconciliation in Ecuador in an ongoing process. By bringing this social work value to the design of social circus programming, Circo Social Ecuador centered the importance of Indigenous participation and grounding social circus work in local realities. And by attempting to resist the colonial program design typically implemented by Cirque du Monde, Circo Social Ecuador pushed further into the sphere of creating art and social circus in an Indigenous Latin American context. As for myself, I recognize that who I am is profoundly shaped by being a settler who lives on and benefits from unceded Mi'kmaq lands. The privileges and benefits I experience in my life as a result of Eurocentrism and white supremacy stand in stark contrast to the work of reconciliation. So my research and social circus practice can only be undertaken in the name of social work when I am explicit and intentional about my privileges and how benefitting from these privileges oppresses others. All work I do to push back at white supremacy and its assumption that only productive people are valuable, and that productive people are compulsorily able-

bodied, is a form of reconciliation work. And by taking this work from my personal practice and applying it to a wider context of social justice and community consciousness-raising practice, I am continuing the work of reconciliation by queering the expectation that settlers blindly accept and maintain their privilege.

Critical social work practice and the CASW Code of Ethics (2005) provide guidance to critical social work programs in a myriad of ways. From encouraging programs be explicit about positionality, and how they enact and work to counter oppression, privilege and power differentials, to advocating that all elements of anti-oppressive practice are represented, and not just ones that are predominant in a certain area (disability, gender, race, socioeconomic status, etc.), critical social work has the ability to make social circus programs safer places for all people to engage in making art. By advocating for oversight into where funding comes from and how it is awarded and used, and by centering the formalization of anti-oppressive structures and policies, critical social work allows for social circus programming to be developed in a holistic way that prioritizes bringing a critical approach to all aspects of a program, from the onset, and not to specific parts as an afterthought. There is a reason why social circus is often defined as the intersection of social work and circus practice – for by using critical social work as a foundation to development, we can expand understandings of social circus and how social circus could both empower individuals while simultaneously promoting social change.

Critical Social Circus for Critical Social Work Practice: Some insights

So, what can critical social circus teach us about critical social work practice? Critical social circus brings to the forefront of critical social work practice many of the tenets of anti-oppressive and decolonial work that social workers strive to implement but are often unable to enact in the ways we intend. From recognizing the resilience and power that all clients hold, to devaluing 'expertise' by prioritizing co-learning as instructors and participants work together, to re-examining a traditional framing of worth – who is an artist, what stories should be told – in favour of upholding all experiences as worthy and valid, critical social circus tells us that critical social work principles need not exist only in theory. If we are willing to bring truly anti-oppressive and decolonial lenses to our practice, much as I did to my own embodied work, we should be able to find alternative ways to practice and resist, even within constraining situations.

Critical social circus reminds us that we must continuously revisit the importance of the land, embodiment, and cultural heritage as intrinsic to life experiences and that perhaps it can be by prioritizing these values that we can find a way to provide care to our clients as we re-imagine ways of existing in the world. Maybe we are working with a client who must decide between two seemingly untenable choices – but perhaps this decision might be easier to be at peace with if we expand the outcome beyond the personal and analytical. When thinking about each option, does one feel slightly easier, or more 'right' in the client's body? Does one option perhaps draw from a cultural history or tradition that modern capitalism has told us to ignore (for instance, setting aside independence as an ultimate goal,

and recognizing a tradition of receiving community caregiving as being just as honourable)? Does one option maybe leave an example for future caretakers of the lands we live with and upon, or minimize personal impact in favour of the possibility of greater collective good? The ways that social workers find to bring alternative perspectives and approaches to their work might be small – and perhaps so small that it doesn't seem they could possibly make a difference. But as critical social circus shows us, it is even by attempting to reframe a situation that we make openings for anti-oppressive and decolonial work to exist. Remember, that according to Leslie et. al (2020), all social circus programs have the potential to be agents of decolonization by simply daring to dream of an alternative future. And as the more critical examples of social circus in Latin America show, by valuing the writings of Freire and Boal, we are reminded that none of our work is politically neutral. We are either upholding systemic inequalities or working to dismantle them, in ways that are big or small.

By looking to the example of Circo Social Ecuador, we can see a mirroring of the tensions between mainstream social work and critical social work, where despite the best efforts of practitioners, oftentimes, social work ultimately further oppresses those we work with by reinforcing a traditional capitalistic society. Circo Social Ecuador is an excellent example of how critical social work is often realistically employed within societal systems – underlying theories and principles come from a sound anti-oppressive and decolonial basis but, when forced to meet the confines of the system, are often unable to be faithfully enacted. Much as Circo

Social Ecuador's program was designed to emphasize local realities, collective wellbeing, and the creation of art over the administration of aid, critical social work aims to bring anti-oppressive and decolonial approaches to both the clients we work with and the systems we practice within. But, as we see with both Circo Social Ecuador and oftentimes with critical social work, intention does not always match action. Circo Social Ecuador needed to import circus instructors and failed to find many social workers willing to participate in the program. A usually un-voiced but still implied outcome of collective wellbeing would be an increase in productive workers who can happily contribute to a capitalist economy. And the importance of creating art over providing aid becomes questionable when the government pushes public performances by social circus participants. With (critical) social work, I can easily draw comparisons to my own practice, where I face daily constraints and impediments to providing anti-oppressive and decolonial support when I am practicing within a government-funded healthcare institution. Despite my best intentions, my work is constrained by needing to facilitate hospital discharges to free up beds for new admissions, even when I believe that discharging someone might not be safe. I am oppressing the people I work with when I am complicit within a system that limits client self-determination due to a lack of finances for medical services or treatment. And I am complicit in ongoing colonialism when I am unable to support folks in meeting some of their most basic religious, spiritual or cultural needs, e.g., by reinforcing institutional policies that forbid smudging, by not being able to access an interpreter who speaks their language, or by telling them

that the hospital is unable to cater to their dietary requirements. For all that I try my hardest to bring anti-oppressive and decolonial approaches to my daily work, I am often unsuccessful because I need to keep my job. And this requires that I live in an uncomfortable space – much like the one I was in when trying to reconcile my body's ability with my thesis design – where I know what I believe to be right and what I want to do, but I am constrained by the capitalist society we live in.

Finally, turning to my autoethnographic work, I believe that an anti-oppressive and decolonized approach to social circus would certainly include the mind-based work I am able to engage in, and inherent in the social aspect of that circus work would be striving towards the radical acceptance required to value and love the contribution I am able to make. By viewing my practice as empowering rather than limiting and by being vulnerable enough to share this experience with others, I am engaging in the Freirean practice of living my political values. And like Freire, I believe that it is by living our politics that we create social change. I may not be showing up in-person to a protest or attending a conference, but putting this writing out into the world is certainly a way for me to create art, share my story, and heal. My embodied reaction to this knowledge is a powerful fear, deep in the centre of my chest, a sort of hollowness that tells me that I'm scared that my rehistoricized narrative of what social circus could be is pushing too much against the boundaries of what dominant approaches tell us it is. But it is precisely by marrying this knowledge generated by embodied practice to my cognitive analysis of social circus that I am researching *through* social circus practice *for* the advancement of

peripheral social circus approaches, as I initially hoped to when I first proposed this thesis. As Dugan (2019) posited, I find my artistic and scholarly practices to be mutually dependent, and ultimately it is this holistic analysis that moves me towards my goal of imagining anti-colonial and anti-ableist social circus practices. So perhaps, if I allow myself the grace to be authentically myself as I find creative ways to exist within the worlds of art and academics, I have indeed met the goals of my thesis, albeit by a circuitous and unexpected route. But perhaps that is what I should have expected all along – for what is anti-oppressive social work, in theory, in academia, and in practice, if not about finding the alternative and celebrating every possible way of human existence?

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