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Circus, In Crisis:

Examining Care and Community in Circus Training

Five days a week, I was in the air, in a class, collectively devising a production with my team, conditioning, learning, experimenting. Like many recreational circus practitioners, circus is a priority in my life. It is where my expendable income goes. It is where I seek communities, friends, support. It is where I continually develop new levels of trust. As an adult, I learn new physical feats from coaches who seemingly know my body and abilities better than I do. Suddenly, in March 2020 it changed. My support networks abruptly fractured. My networks of care, diminished. My circus body is at a frustrated impasse of crisis, through the grounded impulse to invert, lift, rise, float, muscles flexing, unable to take flight.

This is a paper about care.

Shift.

This was intended to be a paper about circus care culture, consent practices, and economies of performance in recreational circus training. Building on previous research on social circus, academic circus, and disability and circus, I planned to argue that circus culture normalizes consent practices through recreational and professional training, which emphasizes individual bodily autonomy, safety, and constructing and supporting "brave spaces." *Shift.*

This was a paper about a pandemic, about how a pandemic can challenge neoliberal economies that shape recreational circus. Adapting to a new world and an increasing need for pay-what-you-can classes that create a more inclusive circus space; circus schools delaying openings; second homes shutting down. Capitalism is pervasive, we forget to remember that this was not inevitable.

This was a paper about identifying barriers to participation, particularly those related to financial barriers, class, and race. How whiteness overwhelmingly occupies circus spaces and racism is rarely discussed. A revolution and hopeful moment of change. *Shift.*

This was a paper about spaces of circus care: coming together during lockdowns and creating new community environments for care, learning, and creation putting pressure on proximity and divides between public and private space. How care through closures is a discussion of critical human geographies, waves of widening and decreasing opportunities; how a loss of proximity becomes a hyper awareness of proximity, one-on-one classes with masks and increased intention around consent practices. *Shift.*

How much can change as each month passes. Each narrative marking a major *shift* in Canada's circus culture, in my own grieving process, in the normalization of an excessively abnormal moment. We sit with the excess because there is no option to opt out. Our understanding of presence, performance, and coaching is necessarily being remodeled. Consequently, this paper too has changed. *Shifting.*

This paper is about care through kindness. I offer care as a category of relational kindness, where the connectivity of intimacy and trust construct modes of "being held" that do not – particularly in times of the pandemic – necessitate physical presence, but instead emotional support. Kindness and care are in this conceptualization how we relate to and treat ourselves, our environment and others. Kindness and care practices are then not primarily static affective states or emotions nor are they an end goal. Instead these are active and relational operatives, which develop through the personal, environmental, and interpersonal. Alongside Forester (2020), Lampert (2011), and Magnet, Mason, and Trevenen (2014) I note that kindness is not equivalent to attempts to empathize, but instead necessitates sitting with vulnerability – within ourselves and others – and being accountable to our actions and the labour necessary to transform communities and relationships.

This paper considers how modes of kindness and attentive care in circus shifted, mutated, and extended to consent and support in isolation during the Covid-19 pandemic. As a "technology of social transformation' (Sandoval in Magnet, Mason and Trevenen 2014, 1) kindness in this context can demand and enact accountability through relational and self-reflexive acts of attentive support and (sometimes virtual) presence. Importantly, in this conception kindness and caring are practices that can be learnt and incorporate both "cognitive and affective elements" (Philip, Rogers, and Weller 2012, 5). In these circus spaces, radical kindness and care practices emerge as sites of community and collaborative online presence, shaping not only our current moment but also a new model for a future post-pandemic integration. If we choose to learn from these obstacles and barriers, we might even extend the reach of support and care within circus communities, respond to the racial inequities that are too often replicated in circus schools, and attend to current economic models that restrict access to those with less funds in the recreational circus community.[1]

Although research on circus for leisure and social circus explores the ability for the arts and physical play to positively impact mental health (see for example: Cohen 2018; Cadwell 2018; McCaffery 2014; Stevens, McGrath, and Ward 2019; Spiegel and Choukroun 2019; Spiegel 2016; Spiegel et al 2015; Seymour, 2012; Sorzano 2018), participation in the activity should not be romanticized or valorized. The layered complexity of the field, both historically and currently is

indicative of its capacity to perpetuate inequities and systems of domination and its capacity to subvert and challenge these systems. As Spiegel notes: "Around the world, social circus is being adopted and adapted in ways that oscillate between the production of neoliberal and post-neoliberal subjectivity" (Spiegel 2019, 9). Limitations and obstacles to participation in terms of race, class, and ability necessitate that we complicate and problematize how circus care implicitly privileges some bodies needs and rights to care over others. Indeed, if we attribute care and kindness to pedagogical and interpersonal circus practices, we must consider, as Sarah Burton does in this issue, how kindness "can be used to oppress, to uphold dominant ideology" and to further marginalize and oppress those who demand change (ref). As Magnet, Mason and Trevenen note "who is allowed to claim kindness, and on behalf of whom, remains tied to existing structures of white supremacist heteropatriarchal ableist domination" (2014 2). Therefore, in this article I also consider the limitations of kindness and how it can be weaponized in my discussion of neoliberalist approaches to art and care.[2]

"Affective Connective Tissue:" The Circus Body's Embodied Care

Prior to the pandemic, our team of five recreational circus artists and our director / coach were fumbling with acro, balancing on chairs, dropping from silks, creating with straps, hoops, trapeze. Together we were building a story through trust, holding each other and spotting for falls, a kind of vulnerability foreign to everyday experience. When doors closed and distanced was demanded, we began meeting twice a week on zoom. We tried to maintain normalcy to promise ourselves the show will go on. We ran conditioning workouts and creative exercises.[3] We experimented with narrative, with character, brick by brick, pixel by pixel, longing to be in the air, but comforted by each other's presence. We tried to push ourselves, but we made space for talking, for connection, for fear, and for personal updates. I have spent 10 hours a week with many of these people for two years. We have gone through pain, illness, births, weddings, and breakups together. We have trusted each other, experimented, created. We were by so many definitions, a family.

Kindness and care in circus is not simply about encouragement or empathy, it is an attention to well-being and (un)productive progress for ourselves and for others. Sometimes our aim might be improvement towards no particular end; to continue and continuing might mean getting better, but it isn't necessarily tied to this. Practiced kindness is not simply an individual behavior or attitude, but as Phillips and Taylor note "the ability to bear the vulnerability of others" (in Lampert 2011, 119). These practices are spatial and relational – between our bodies, other bodies, objects, and surroundings. The interpersonal act of holding and being held is essential to my articulation of circus care and kindness, where vulnerability is often a physical experience as well as an emotional one. Hobart and Kneese explain:

> Broadly speaking, care refers to a relational set of discourses and practices between people, environments, and objects that approximate what philosophers like Adam Smith and David Hume identify as "empathy," "sympathy," or "fellow feeling." Theorized as an affective connective tissue between an inner self and an outer world, care constitutes a feeling with, rather than a feeling for, others. (2020, 2)

This notion of "connective tissue" resonates with the possibilities for embodied creative practice, physical support, emotional encouragement and creativity to produce positive interpersonal and individual outcomes. However, such connectivity necessitated adaptation and change in light of physical distancing and shutdowns that resulted from the Covid-19 pandemic.

Fairly quickly as lockdowns began in Toronto, Canada, and circus studios closed their doors, coaches began offering conditioning classes via zoom. While some online classes mute participants and limit dialogue to focus on fitness and strength development, others opt to leave communication lines open to invite conversation, dialogue, and questions. Some virtual classes ask you to push yourself, to sweat, to test the limitations of your body, but other coaches ask that you tune into your surroundings and corporeal limitations, listen to what your body needs, care for it without judgement. In these environments, the permission for sociality through moments of rest – *just sit and watch if that is what you feel you need today* – creates a community not predicated on conventional understandings of progress, but instead on networks of support and presence. This pedagogical approach to learning environments aligns with Magnet, Mason, and Trevenen's feminist politics of kindness as they note that "kindness is as much about deliberately reaching out to connect to students' lives as it is about teaching them material within the formal confines of the classroom" (2014, 12). Valuing dialogue and presence alongside skill development is essential to constructing a community of care that activates kindness through boundaries and consent, giving students control over how much they are able to push their own limits that day. While our practices of "spotting" a peer or a student in the air are different in virtual settings, the permission to stop and rest extends physical safety practices. Spotting sometimes looks like talking, crying together, being angry, being scared, being hopeful for a studio opening, and then choosing to stay home when it does.

In this context of caring and kindness practices, the recreational circus body is a body oriented within the circus community through leisure or unpaid experiences in studios or performances. During Covid-19 virtual classes, local and international circus Facebook groups, and Instagram feeds have shaped our bodies as well – how they move and how we imagine they might move. The recreational circus body need not be an extraordinary body (in contrast to the Peta Tait's conception of the "circus body" which is ascribed these characteristics, focusing on skill, athleticism, and defying ordinary corporeal feats (2005, 2)). The recreational circus body might not, in pandemic isolation, be doing much that would differentiate it from the otherwise "distanced" traumatized bodies of quarantines and lockdowns. But the recreational circus body is a body that is held and holds circus communities. In a practical sense, acts of kindness in recreational circus might be activated through an invitation to be present, if not with each other then with ourselves; making space and time for others to share their experiences and challenges in a class even when it is not on a 'curriculum' or workout plan; "establish[ing] a non-threatening environment by reinforcing student attempts" (Stewart in Lampert 2011, 119); providing feedback and attending to different physical needs; welcoming participants to enter the space in whatever way they need (as a witness, as a participant; with cameras on or off); expressing gratitude for time spent together; and following up on vulnerable conversations to check in. It also might look like being accountable when we faulter, say the wrong thing, or create an exclusionary environment (intentionally or unintentionally).

In recreational circus, while perfection (pointed feet, straight legs, stronger core, better form) is certainly *an* objective, unlike professional circus, we learn in order to learn, not necessarily to advance to a particular goal or monetary gain. That a plateau or a (safe) failure can be part of progress in recreational circus is clear. This approach towards learning, knowledge, and skill development directly confronts and negates a product-based culture, which normalizes the participation in activities that are profitable or towards a profitable end. Creating social spaces of learning, which do not focus on financial gain, fitness, or career goals, starts to shift a mindset of collectivity and care that enables a "feeling with" (Hobart and Kneese 2020, 2) founded in empathy and presence over productivity.

"Shaped by our Dwellings:" The Spaces of Kindness and Care in Circus

My body is grounded. I explore the contours of my mad white settler Jewish queer circus body, navigating mental health and changing shape in the midst of a pandemic that isolates it from support networks, consensual acts of being held by circus friends, peers, coaches. I remember how apparatuses were once a kind of skin, moving in acts of creation with each of our limbs. I imagine the tensions and calluses I can no longer feel. A layer of skin suddenly absent, as I reorient in new kinds of circus spaces.

Longing to learn new ways to twist and push. My body, that has grown comfortable with discomfort, bruises shared and compared, is missing not only friendships, but teams, chosen families, and mentors. Shows are cancelled. Muscles are changing, healing in ways that we did not know we needed, fracturing collectivities that we didn't acknowledge were exclusionary. Relearning, strengthening, grieving, leaving, returning. A circus body without flight. New modes of care and connectivity across distance. What will my circus body take with it? What can I take and give to a body on a screen?

Caring for ourselves and each other does not occur in isolation, but rather is shaped by relational environments and worlds. In *In Moral Boundaries* Tronto and Fisher define caring as:

> a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our "world" so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web. (Fisher and Tronto 1990, 40)

Circus requires a hyper-awareness of the body, how each muscle moves and twists, the point of a toe, the wrap of a leg, the twisting of an abdomen. A coach avoiding a hit from a moving limb and weaving through space, avoiding the swing of an apparatus, supporting a student physically without putting their own body in danger. We are constantly and vigilantly aware of the spaces we take up and our surroundings. Ahmed explains that "spaces are not exterior to bodies; instead, spaces are like a second skin that unfolds in the folds of the body" (2006a, 9). Our gyms and apparatuses become part of our movements: How far to the floor, how close to a bar, how to push away and how to cling to an apparatus that holds you. Discomfort, fear, excitement mark spaces where we learn to articulate emotion and creativity in new ways, not just *in* but

with the environment and bodies around us. Kindness practices incorporate these relations, moving *with* each other and learning to trust each other. My circus body is not an independent entity, detached from my peers, teachers or spaces it navigates. We grow and move together. Elizabeth Grosz describes the body as:

> a concrete, material, animate organization of flesh, organs, nerves, muscles, and skeletal structure which are given a unity, cohesiveness, and organization only through their psychical and social inscription as the surface and raw materials of an integrated and cohesive totality. (1998, 32)

Exploring circus bodies in the studio is about the (dis)connection I feel, the anxiety, the social awkwardness, the strength, the insecurity, the elation, coming into contact with other bodies, being held by other bodies, burning skin, pulling muscles, bruising deeply.

However, when in a crisis that distinctly necessitates isolation and distance, our modes of care necessarily shift and with it our relationship to space and surroundings. Richard Schechner writes: "The human tissue does not abruptly stop at the skin. Exercises with space are built on the assumption that human beings and space are both alive" (1994, 12). The recreational circus body is now explicitly shaped by circus spaces' absence. If bodies are, as Sara Ahmed aptly writes "shaped by their dwellings and take shape by dwelling" (2006a, 9), then in the transition to 'circus' in their home spaces then recreational circus bodies are shaped by their individual experience, by the sensation of seeing the bodies no longer able to be touched. In times of the pandemic we become distinctly aware of the contours of the body and the proximity of other bodies in new ways. We are more intentional with distance, more careful with what we touch, and often more alone. There is an overwhelming recognition of the solitude of a body. It is how our bodies respond to a lack of steel and ropes on our skin, how the absence of commutes to and from a studio, the cessation of hands to grip in the air, the withdrawal from spaces and communities necessitate new forms of support and care. What does it mean to no longer slip on your partners sweat, clinging to the hands that hold us up?

With these changes, virtual circus helps to construct spatial imaginaries through presence and communication, creating an environment where a coach can witness a student's body doing conditioning exercises and make corrections to form, engagement, and execution. Yet, where groups used to gather in a shared studio space, where bodies were proximate, physically touching, sharing apparatuses, circus in Covid creates a new community structure. Seeing the internal home or personal space of a peer and training together in our homes affords a new opportunity for intimate proximity without touch, but also gives rise to a deep kind of loss. Vulnerability on the other side of screen must be met and held without the sensations of physical touch. Play, presence, music, encouragement and feedback stand in for the kindness practices we had previously grown accustomed to.

Discussing the relationship between spaces and bodies is not to suggest a universal spatial experience online or in real life; between coaches and students, or between apparatus and performer. Indeed, as I will note in the next section, how the spaces we move through accommodate our genders, our abilities, our size, and/or our race, and how we are read in those

spaces, will mark our interactions and experiences in differing ways. Whereas Husserl's phenomenology asserts that the starting point for perception is based in the body and where it is situated (Ahmed 2006, 545), Ahmed asks us to avoid the assumption that perception is derived only from a perceiving subject. Our perceptions and experiences are shaped by how our identities, privileges, and oppressions make space for our bodies, and by how easily we can traverse and be oriented within space.

"Present an Otherwise:" Combating Neoliberalism and White Supremacy in Art and Care

It isn't until after I make the switch to online classes, that I start to realize how much of my income has been devoted to circus practice. Spending all of my expendable income (and more) on training and rehearsing has been a significant commitment – one I warned my wife of when we first started dating. Now, during the pandemic low cost and PWYC classes allow for more frequent participation, more learning opportunities, and more support. I envision a new world where this might be possible on a larger scale, where in-person circus classes are accessible, physically and financially. While at first, I am certain that PWYC models will provide a route towards inclusive change in the industry, my assumptions belie the financial barriers resulting from studio rental costs, insurance, and fare wages for coaches. The realities of art and creative activities in a capitalist system, particularly during a pandemic, devalue both the arts' role in stabilizing mental health and the arts workers who are developing and maintaining the industry.

While circus offers ample opportunity for embodied kindness and connectivity, such visions of kindness can be deployed to "maintain existing structures of power, and are, therefore, non-transformational" (Magnet, Mason and Trevenen 2014, 2). There are multiple elements we might unpack in this regard, but here I focus specifically on class privilege – and relatedly the privileging of "self-care" – as well as racism and white supremacy. It is essential that we avoid isolating contemporary circus from its origins and critically engage how exploitation of marginalized peoples in the circus industry shifted to economically privileged participation. As Spiegel notes:

> Since the nineteenth century in the Americas, circus has been embroiled in a colonial politic as employer and exploiter of Indigenous and African-American performers, as well as of non-normative bodies and gender presentations […]. At the same time, circus creates a nomadic family and way of life for those with no place in society. (Stoddart 2000; Sussman 2013 quoted in Spiegel 2019, 9-10)

As recreational practitioners, artists, researchers, and audiences we must refuse the romanticization and valorization of contemporary recreational circus as a "home" for everyone and assess how both race and class (among other experiences and positionalities) animate and shape the space. Rather than creating an equitable and inclusive environment where practitioners attend to historical and current trauma and oppression, contemporary circus at times creates further limitations delineated through both the economic privilege for participation and often the overwhelming whiteness in the space of the North American circus industry. As Spiegel argues, "the field remains haunted by legacies of cultural power and

privilege that pervade the very ways we think of both art and of transformation"(2019, 23). Today, in the context of Toronto, Canada (and many other urban centres), circus for leisure and recreational circus has significant barriers and is predominately (though not entirely) able-bodied, white, and class privileged. Increased fees for insurance, for rent in Toronto, for equipment, means that coaches are paid relatively little for their skills and for the risk of safety to their bodies, as they assist, hold, catch, and physically and emotionally support their students. Although circus may complicate gendered expectations and make space for social transformation, it cannot be detached from the systems in which it is organized and implemented.

When we enlist the rhetoric of self-care and empowerment in recreational art activities we also valorize and elevate those who "take care of themselves" and "prioritize themselves," and erase the privilege necessary to do so. It is not simply the circus is costly, and participation is limited to those with expendable income, but also that circus – like many other leisure activities - necessitates expendable time. Ahmed argues that privilege is an "energy saving device" that allows certain bodies to pass through space with less effort. She writes that "if less effort is required to unlock the door for the key that fits the lock, so too less effort is required to pass through an institution for bodies that fit" (2013). Privilege allows us to take our time for self-care and caring for peers because of the ease and confidence with which we pass through space: the relative steady and stable ability to devote time to leisure and costly recreational activities. We do not worry too much about running low on energy, running low on time, we take up space. We take our time.

In a neo-liberal state of production, extending to neo-liberal states of our current emergency, self-care is a measure of productivity in the face of a threat to survival. How can *you* be accountable to the world that is crumbling around you? How can *you* make *you* feel better? Certain bodies and activities are seen as more valuable, more worthy of rest than others:

> […] because care can be mobilized as a way to privilege some groups at the expense of others, the "radical" aspect of care can bleed into right-wing and white supremacist politics as much as it upholds leftist utopian visions […] The problem with care attached to fellow feeling or sympathy is that all too often it means that care is reserved for those deemed worthy. (Hobart and Kneese 2020, 8)

Even as we untangle necessary steps towards transformation, we must acknowledge that neo-liberal subjectivity is pervasive and uneven. As Spiegel notes, "The exploration of collectivity and transformation of subjectivities that occurs through creative practices necessarily engages with legacies of colonialism, imperialism, and postcolonial struggle" (Spiegel 2019, 6). Despite efforts to the contrary, privilege enables some bodies access to circus communities –even in online environments – and not to others. While PWYC virtual classes might make space for those with more precarious income or caring responsibilities, such a payment system is not easily translated into live circus schools, particularly when risk requires supervision and small class sizes. This predicament is a result of pervasive capitalist structures, which require circus coaches and business owners to navigate the need to earn an income, pay rent, and support themselves

financially alongside a desire to ensure more equitable access. While radical care is exciting and calming, it is also easily romanticized and its reach over extended.

In addition to the impacts of classism and wealth privilege, the erasure or minimalization of racism and settler colonialism in the America's works to privilege whiteness as an unremarkable presence – one that 'just so happens' to be present, as opposed to a consequence of racism and exclusion. Abbott and Seroff argue that "The majority of published histories politely ignore patterns of racial discrimination that are a skeleton in the closet of the American circus" (Abbott and Seroff 2009, 158) and Spiegel further explains: "Since the nineteenth century in the Americas, circus has been embroiled in a colonial politic as employer and exploiter of Indigenous and African-American performers, as well as of non-normative bodies and gender presentations." (2019, 9-10). With its shameful and violent history, circus industries have significant reparations necessary in order to demonstrate a commitment to care and inclusivity. It is only by complicating and emphasizing these roots that recreational practitioners, as well as professionals in the field, can thoroughly understand how whiteness can be "an orientation device" – a familiarizing attribute that might make some bodies occupy space more easily (Ahmed 2007, 150). Whiteness breeds whiteness as a naturalized expectation that shapes our experiences of space.

Ahmed explains that spaces are marked by the bodies that move in them and through them, "it becomes possible to talk about the whiteness of space given the very accumulation of such 'points' of extension. Spaces acquire the 'skin' of the bodies that inhabit them" (2007, 157). Circus spaces do not need to be explicitly racist in order to privilege whiteness and make white bodies feel belonging and security. Indeed, white supremacy in art spaces often functions through the *erasure* of whiteness. Ahmed continues, "Spaces are orientated 'around' whiteness, insofar as whiteness is not seen. We do not face whiteness; it 'trails behind' bodies, as what is assumed to be given. The effect of this 'around whiteness' is the institutionalization of a certain 'likeness', which makes non-white bodies feel uncomfortable, exposed, visible, different, when they take up this space" (2007, 157). Care, both during and after the pandemic is tied to accountability and unlearning invisiblized privileges and norms. For white practitioners, it is not about "making space," but attending to and understanding the history of the space that you take up. While such work is beginning to happen through ongoing efforts to critically consider how racism shapes circus, in order for care and kindness to have meaningful impacts, they must continue to incorporate accountability and self-reflexivity.

In order to develop meaningful and inclusive environments, circus industries, both professional and recreational, have significant work to do to account for – rather than ignore – histories of violent oppression and exploitation. Recreational and professional circus artists must critically examine –and white / cis-het / settler / able-bodied practitioners must be accountable to – not only how kindness might breed support and care, but how it can be weaponized against other bodies. Put another way, we might consider who is most often charged with being *un*kind – whose bodies, movements, presence is targeted as too angry, too unwelcoming, too threatening? In our efforts to establish kindness as a process of relational care and support, it must ultimately be "built upon a commitment to social justice" … that 'embraces critique'" (Rowland in Magnet, Mason, and Trevenen 2014, 3) and connected to histories and present

experiences of inequality, to prevent "this pedagogical strategy from replaying systemic forms of violence" (in Magnet, Mason, and Trevenen 2014, 6). Thinking critically about whose bodies most easily "practice kindness" means that we must recognize how kindness becomes a normalizing tool of white supremacy, class, and gender and how it can be weaponized to maintain and perpetuate the status quo.

In recognizing the layered complexity of race and class privilege, I speak to the efficacy of collective kindness with a caveat that it might not create a revolution, but instead offers an avenue towards sustainable change. Collectivity in kindness and care might mean that students with more means commit to paying higher rates not as a means of subsidizing others – which would create an unbalanced power dynamic – but instead as a more accurate invocation of "pay what you can" models. Professional training should also prioritize the voices, experiences, and participation of those from marginalized and oppressed groups, ensuring that leadership is not only assigned to white practitioners. Collectivity in care can also come in the form of consensual (and perhaps mundane acts of) allyship: asking what others need in order to participate, creating a flexible schedule for training, offering to clean, to do domestic labour, or care work when one has expendable time. These are acts that seem unremarkable, but give community members time for rest, creation, and collectivity.

Such collectivity works to construct or at the very least imagine, a counter-hegemonic methodology for existing in the world. We can be accountable to complicity in this system and the inequities marked by it, while still being open to "[…] what Elizabeth Povinelli describes as an *otherwise*. […] Radical care can present an otherwise, even if it cannot completely disengage from structural inequalities and normative assumptions regarding social reproduction, gender, race, class, sexuality, and citizenship" (Hobart and Kneese 2020, 3). We can also respond to neo-liberal optimization of 'self-care' by creating artistic environments of learning and collaboration that employ a non-outcome focused framework and that refuses a "silver lining" approach to challenges. In her manifesto on love as political resistance, adrienne maree brown writes that we must "shift from individual transactions for self-care to collective transformation" (2019, 63). She tells us to "be in family with each other" to find new ways to construct networks of support.

"For the First Time I Had Hope:" Revolutionary Feelings for Circus Futures

I'm tired. I miss my ability to show up. I am grieving the loss of energy and hopefully counting down to an end of the pandemic (but I am no longer sure what that means). Each week's new discovery is met with cruel realities of the unknown. Helplessness is a constant. Next week the new circus school will open. Next week I will be on a trapeze. Next week, I will imagine the smile I think lurks beneath a mask, imagine the absence of a fear that has become a norm in our bodies. Next week, we are in lockdown again. Next week. Next week. Next year. I remember going to circus and growing community. I choose to sit with sadness for the moment, knowing how quickly corona time changes. Our clocks are sped up and days lose meaning. I cannot pretend to imagine what comes next, so I imagine myself in the air.

The absence of live classes is a loss we grieved. We saw each other multiple times a week, ups and downs of emotions making presence ebb and flow, energies shift and change, focus lost,

mourning and laughing. Virtual presence could not - cannot - be a replacement, but perhaps if we could not be together, we could grieve together. Perhaps the "revolutionary feeling" we seek is not one grounded in optimism, but in mourning, in refusing stasis, and seeking change.

On October 29th, 2020 Noeli Acoba, a Corde Lisse circus artist and filmmaker posted a video of a Corde Lisse performance she had performed in Montreal, Canada, a year prior. Before the pandemic, I had seen her perform this routine as well in Toronto. Her determination, skills, drive, athleticism, and creativity were astonishing. When Covid-19 was first spreading in North America, alongside protests resisting police brutality and calling for justice for the murder of George Floyd, and in Canada for Regis Korchinski-Paquet, Chantel Moore, and D'Andre Campbell among others, discussions of race, racism, and settler colonialism became increasingly present in the arts. There was an imperative demand for change in our industries with call-outs and call-ins happening across companies and organizations. Acoba took initiative in the Canadian circus industry to elevate the voices of other BIPOC artists' and highlight their experiences of discrimination in the circus industry. She posted videos discussing her own experience, followed by panels and a docuseries with other circus artists of colour. And amidst these revolutionary, resistant, and undeniably important discussions, she posted this performance.

The Corde Lisse performance begins as the lights come up on Acoba's barely moving body, wrapped in the rope, hanging high above the audience. A voice over is cast through the space on speakers, a static voiceless body, an internal reflection made external. We are bystanders and witnesses to her experience: "For the first time I had hope. […] Everywhere I turned someone was giving me a reason not to pursue my dream. They said my thighs are big, my skin colour is dark. I started doubting myself: Can I actually do this?" She drops from the rope, her body unraveling in flight, jerking to stop as she hangs from one foot, upside down, suspended above the audience. She pulls up into a seated position, staring out at us. The routine is a feat of determination, knocking down and reclaiming space as she rises back up. Concentrated slow movements and rapid descents: arms reaching. I think of Sara Ahmed's willful child's arm – a wayward limb that keeps coming up, despite being stricken and pushed down. Ahmed notes how an arm can

> [inherit] the willfulness of the child insofar as it will not be kept down, insofar as it keeps coming up, acquiring a life of its own […] persistence in the face of having been brought down. We have to reach the arm to carry that spark, to feel the pulse of its fragile life. We catch the arm in that moment of suspension […] The arm gives flesh to this persistence. (2016)

I think of how artists and coaches like Acoba teach not only physical skills, but tireless insistence and a willful refusal to be kept down. Kindness practices look like sharing, listening to and witnessing an archive of inspiration from those who have been told they are not enough.

In this performance, Acoba does not minimize or ignore the voices that challenge her inclusion in the industry: she does not induce a false optimism of forced resilience. Her work is a resistant force against the systemic inequities that persistently tell her she is not enough. Alongside Lisa Duggan and José Esteban Muñoz' call for educated hope, Acoba's performance simultaneously

engages hope and hopelessness, as modalities of existence that enrage, sadden, grieve, inspire, and make possible new forms of existing in the world. As Muñoz explains, such educated hope is founded in a revolutionary feeling:

> Feeling Revolutionary is feeling that our current situation is not enough, that something is indeed missing, and we cannot live without it. Feeling revolutionary opens up the space to imagine a collective escape, an exodus, a ‘‘going-off script’’ together. Practicing educated hope, participating in a mode of revolutionary consciousness, is not simply conforming to one group’s doxa at the expense of another’s. Practicing educated hope is the enactment of a critique function. It is not about announcing the way things ought to be, but, instead, imagining what things could be. (2009, 278)

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. In this context 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. Such hope aligns with in Magnet, Mason, and Trevenen’s refusal of “magical kindness” (2014, 18) – the kind of kindness that makes a false promise that everything will be ok. They favour instead kindness as labour and a “robust form of pedagogical kindness” (2014, 18). Our care networks take work – they must out of necessity be intersectional, accountable, and reflexive.

Educated hope means taking the time to not only evaluate safety measures in the air, but inclusion practices and implicit white privilege in a circus studio. What happens when we recognize how these two emergencies – a pandemic and white supremacy - inform and shape each other? Isolation and distancing won’t bring about positive change, but they might afford us the time to acknowledge change’s urgency. What lessons and shifts we take with us into an unknown future will be mitigated and shaped by inequities and systems that already exist.

Circus culture is infused with care, consent practices, and support. We are used to holding each other up. Now without touch, without apparatuses, without our shared space, our understanding of presence, performance, and play is necessarily being remodeled. Live circus performance has shifted and with it elements of care and consent in our performance and training practices have consequently transformed. Our presence is marked by the absence of the familiar aches and pains of a bar callousing tightly gripped palms, silks wrapping tightly around thighs, the height of a body driving muscles to push their limits. We are marked by what we long for.

A new world of distance and barriers has led to new narrative forms and content. They pulse with possibilities, grounded in grief and loss. We smile and zoom and meet and talk. But we mourn what’s out of grasp. Cancelled shows and cancelled income. Cancelled classes, practices, training sessions. In these new online spaces, our training environments change, adapt, and

extend commitments to consent and support in isolation. Circus care expands as we perform virtual spotting: online training, and verbal modifications, check ins, and daily messages, open spaces for crying, for trembling, for helpless laughter and excitable fear. We reach across borders. We refuse an impulse to put on-hold and opt instead to hold each other from afar, shifting our definitions of productivity and product, alongside precarious timelines and futures not yet knowable, unnameable sensations of a virtual present, our bodies together but not quite here.

A Not-Quite-Post-Note:
We are now in a not-quite-post-pandemic world, where waves shift our experience of beginnings, endings, and cycles of change. Circus schools are reopening, masked bodies beginning to fly again, coaches attending to our soft bodies, relearning and reorienting as we grip our longed-for apparatuses. Perhaps some of what we have learnt over the last year will shift these circus spaces. As the Toyoko 2020 Olympics are aired, I can't help but notice how new forms of care are already holding athletic bodies: Simone Biles choosing not to risk her safety for a gold medal; women's teams showcasing new costumes for covered bodies, prioritizing their needs over outdated norms; and teams holding each other through hardships as they navigate performance without catharsis in the absence of their audiences. We learn to prioritize care through collectivity when we recalibrate our understanding of winning and productivity. As I re-enter a world that feels both familiar and foreign, I remind myself of the new ways I have learnt to hold others and to be held.

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Notes

[1] While this article focuses on recreational circus practitioners rather than on professional circus, there have been notable Zoom discussions, virtual panels, and events during the course of the pandemic presented by professional organizations and artists, for example: En Piste in Quebec (Montreal), Circus Talk (International), Circus and Its Others (International research project), and Ontario Circus Community Facebook Group (Ontario), and the newly formed Ontario Circus Association (Ontario), among many others. Additionally, artists and organizations have developed invaluable projects during the pandemic to address wider circus concerns in the industry related to racial inequities and white privilege.
[2] While I discuss many of the barriers in circus throughout this text, it is also important to recognize the work being done by circus artists to further expand the industry. For example, Erin Ball and Lauren Watson are two artists who create more accessible circus, for both professional and recreational artists. The growing work of adaptative aerialist artists is testament to artists and coaches prioritizing inclusivity and change.
[3] I include here a recording of one of the creative exercises created during the pandemic, as part of our circus team's devising project. The cancelled devising project was to be directed by Emily Hughes.

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