

*Generation C(ircus)*  
By: Marisa Diamond  
Integrative Project Thesis Paper  
April 19, 2017

## ***I. Introduction***

*Generation C(ircus)* centers on empowerment and education through circus arts. Through circus arts, students learn new approaches and necessity of trust, cooperation, and failure. Many circus schools in the U.S. have youth circus programs, but the majority, if not all, of these youth troupes are led by an adult director; the students are instructed on what acts they will perform and how they will perform them (narratives, themes, choreography) by adults. My project aims to change this structure, and give the youth more control over what they put onstage.

There are three major components to this project: an offsite show, an onsite show, and a written self-guided curriculum. The offsite show included working with a youth circus community in Somerville, MA. I worked with the youth circus troupe remotely to collaboratively create a show. I visited this advanced youth circus performance class in person a number of times throughout the fall semester, and was present to stage manage/direct the final show in December.

The onsite show functioned within the University of Michigan community. I wrote, developed, and produced a solo show exploring themes of female empowerment in relationship to my own identity, with the assistance and collaboration of students from around the University, including from the dance department and the art school. Although the production of the show was collaborative, the actual performance was a solo show entitled, *\*insert sociopolitically-aware title here\**. The show's structure is split into 4 main vignettes, each corresponding to a specific apparatus or act. This show offers a unique opportunity, as the students that I collaborated with (including myself) are transitioning out of "youth-dom" ("youth," as defined by the American Youth Circus Organization is any individual 21 or younger), in an often forgot about youth community with a lot to say.

Because I grew up with circus and performance in my life, it is important that I was able to both coach and teach, as well as perform. Circus is where I found my voice; it became the most effective way for me to express an idea or emotion. I learned many of the aforementioned “life skills” (i.e., cooperation, importance and consequences of failure) through training as a circus artist. One of the concepts I took away from circus is paying it forward, so it made sense to work with other youth to try to give them a positive circus experience.

The third aspect to the project, the self-guided curriculum is meant to continue the work that I do through the off-site show, so that other students are able to recreate a similar training/learning process, with an emphasis on self-reporting and responsibility. This “curriculum” is a set of skill lists, outlining the skills a student should be able to perform in each level of classes within a circus school. Students using this type of tracking tool become responsible for the recording of their own progress.

*Generation C(ircus)* is a contemporary circus approach to a contemporary world. These seemingly separate pieces come together in *Generation C(ircus)* to form a comprehensive social circus company with an emphasis on empowerment.

## ***II. Contextual Discussion***

Circus, like any art form, can be used as a tool for empowerment. The circus world describes this movement as social circus, although that term primarily refers to the circus education realm. A few of the major contributors to the social circus world include Jessica Hentoff, Carrie Heller, and Cirque du Monde.

Jessica Hentoff runs the circus school Circus Harmony in St. Louis, MO. “Circus

Harmony teaches the art of like through circus education” (Circus Harmony n.d.). The school’s “programs teach valuable life skills like perseverance, focus, and teamwork. Learning circus with others teaches trust, responsibility, and cooperation.” Hentoff has a strong sense of social justice, and she brings that to her circus teaching philosophy. Circus Harmony works to bring together children from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds to create art, uniting inner city and suburban St. Louis-ites.

In Atlanta, Carrie Heller founded the Circus Arts Institute. The Circus Arts Institute is the home of Heller’s Circus Arts Therapy. Carrie Heller began as a social worker and play therapist, as well as a circus performer herself, and developed this methodology from “working with both



Circus Harmony’s elite performance troupe, the St. Louis Arches

typical children and those with learning differences, both inside and outside of the therapy room” (Circus Arts Institute n.d.). Circus Arts Therapy uses the art of circus “to address [and benefit] various types of emotional, physical and behavioral challenges.” Carrie works with children, starting at the age of 3, through preteen. Through Circus Arts Therapy, children learn skills such as bilateral coordination skills, brain and body balancing, self-esteem, teamwork, focus, listening, and communication. All of these skills are that these children will be able to use for the rest of their lives.

Cirque du Monde is Cirque du Soleil and Jeunesse du Monde’s social circus program. The organization now hosts the largest online collection of circus education skill tutorials in North America, which has been a major source for the development for the self-guided

curriculum that I am developing. Cirque du Monde's work targets at-risk youth worldwide, and "combines circus techniques together with educational social intervention to help young people [...] get their self-confidence back, make them realize their strengths, and discover their hidden talents" (Cirque Du Soleil n.d.). Luckily, I was able to gain access to Cirque du Monde's skill tutorials, called "The Box." This collection became the base I worked from in the creation of the self-guided curriculum.

Because not all of my work for this project is education based, I have looked beyond educators in my research, as well. The most influential circus company that I have explored is Les 7 Doigts de la Main. This circus company deals with the human condition in an honest, vulnerable, and moving manner, creating performances "that speak about our world and our time". The performers in their shows use their bodies to express things that words would not do justice. "Ambassadors of diversity, the artists have consistently spread their horizon, mixing genres to better tell their stories" (Les 7 Doigts de la Main n.d.). The company brings humanity to the forefront, with shows that discuss topics such as mental illness, familial histories, and how food affects all of us.

With *Generation C(ircus)* being focused in the circus world, the majority of my research was circus-based. However, I also drew inspiration from the model set up by Rudolf Steiner in Waldorf schools. Steiner famously said, "the need for imagination, a sense of truth and a feeling of responsibility – these are the three forces which are the very nerve of education" (Steiner, 1970). I believe that both the education and performance aspects of my project follow this philosophy. Additionally, movements such as art and dance therapy influenced my work, though the main influence in this field came from Carrie Heller's previously mentioned Circus Therapy work. Especially with the current steadily increasing decline of circuses in the U.S., the historical

precedent that I worked from was of high importance to me.

### *III. Methodology*

Because my project has three distinct components, I will break down my working methodologies down by which part of the project I was addressing in each method, beginning with the offsite show, continuing on to the offsite show, and finishing with the self-guided curriculum.

The offsite show in Massachusetts was a complicated collaboration. I worked remotely for the most part, but circus is a highly physical art form, so I had to come up with creative solutions. One of the biggest factors in this project succeeding was having an onsite coach, who would meet with the youth students at their weekly class sessions. The onsite coach and I communicated multiple times a week about lesson plans, show concepts, and how the previous



*Volare – Offsite Youth Show*

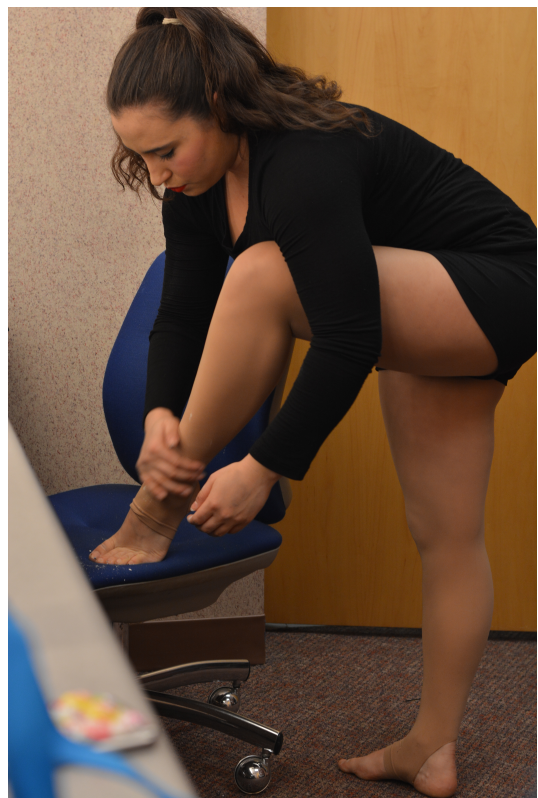
week's class/rehearsal went. There were countless emails, texts, phone calls, and FaceTime calls exchanged over the course of the semester. At the beginning of the semester, we were able to sit down together and lay out our plans the first half of the semester, this included skill and strength

assessments, skill building, brainstorming show concepts, and beginning act creation. This structure allowed final some freedom, but also kept us on track. I also planned three site visits, as well as attending the show in person. These visits were used for in depth show planning meetings, special skills coaching, act previewing, and run-throughs and dress rehearsals. I

maintained a thorough notebook of how the students were progressing after each week. I took notes on, not only skill and act progression, but attitudes of the students, as well. Noting attitudes allowed me to track their growth as whole person, not just an athlete/artist. For example, one student began the program as an extremely quiet, shy preteen, but over the course of the semester, I saw her transform into a young woman excited to voice her ideas. This is just one of many examples of growth that I observed throughout the process of the educational element of the project.

Beginning this endeavor, I expected the onsite show to look very different than it turned out to be. Through many different processes after hitting a major roadblock, it became what it now is. At the beginning of the year, I expected to be working with a local youth organization in Ann Arbor to produce a circus showcase, but that is quite different than the actual outcome: a one-woman solo show. Unfortunately, the youth organization was not as receptive as I initially hoped, so I had to decide on another way to produce a show. Through journaling and brainstorming, I came to two choices: I could

work with University of Michigan students who already possessed skills that translate directly to circus arts, or I could produce a solo show. As the year progressed, and the country was thrown into political turmoil, I knew that I needed to make a very specific statement with my onsite show, and the best way to do that was through a solo show. My identity as a young, mixed race,



A performer prepares.

Jewish, working class woman from a single parent home could bring a unique point of view that could only be told by me. I spent a long time journaling about what each of my identities meant to me. Apart from my personal narratives/stories, I knew that music was going to be a very important part of my show; it needed to be all female voices and each piece needed to relate to my overall theme of female empowerment in some way. I also wanted to try to use independent artists as much as possible, which I was able to accomplish with music from the Aquadolls and YaNi.

Conceptually, I used a lot of journaling and brainstorming to create the show. Technically, though, I used a lot of video documenting and experimenting with processes. When you, yourself, are the art, you cannot take a step back to look at your creation, so I relied heavily on videos of my rehearsals to see if my ideas in my head were actually being translated to my body. Additionally, experimenting with different creation processes helped me create multiple acts. Usually, I am not working on more than one act at a time, but for this show, I needed to be working on no less than three at any given moment.

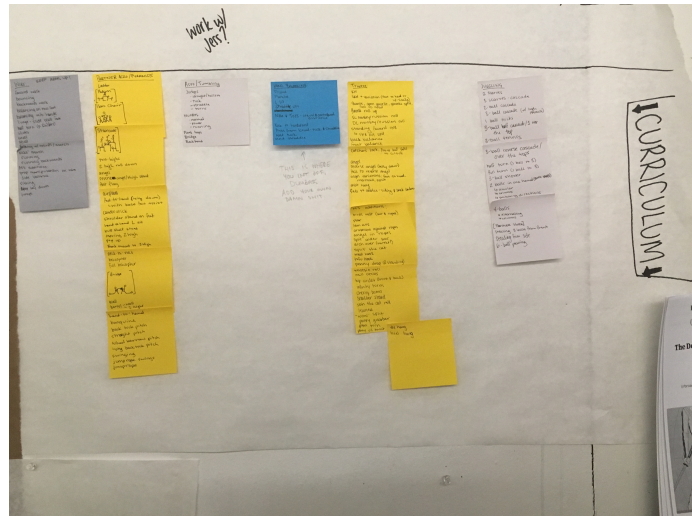
Improvising to my selected act music is usually how I create acts, but I began to burn out when I tried to use this method to develop all of my acts. Instead of improvising, I took a very different approach, where I would list out all of the skills and sequences I can perform, then arrange them into different series, and then try to execute those on the apparatus. Although this is an uncommon practice for me, I would not have completed my acts without it.

The last piece of my project, the self-guided curriculum, followed a much more traditional approach, as it was a written document. I began planning by researching already in use skill progressions and curriculums, and adding to them as I went through each of them. I broke the skill progressions down by discipline, but not by level initially. It helped me to see the



skills visually, so I created a visual chart using sticky notes on one of the walls in my studio. From there, I was able to organize the skills by level on a typed document.

My process was not a neat, consistent one due to the variation of work included in *Generation C(ircus)*.



Example of process of curriculum development in the

Because of this, I improved my multitasking skills and my ability to switch from one mode of thinking to a completely different thought process.

#### **IV. Creative Work**

*Generation C(ircus)* aims to present a new avenue for empowerment through circus arts. The project uses circus performance as a means to express one's voice. It is important to understand that the use of "performance" does not pertain solely to professional performance, in this case. Student and amateur performance can be just as empowering as professional performances, and this was a major consideration in the development of *Generation C(ircus)*.

I chose for this project to have three components, so I could understand what it would be like to set up a business model for a comprehensive circus company, with an educational aspect, as well as a performance aspect. Although the project could have been considered complete with either an educational focus *or* a performance focus, *I* would not be able to consider it complete. Both sides of the project, the educational and performance, are part of who I am, and it was important that I was able to express that through my IP.

Throughout my circus experience, I had the unique opportunity to work with both Carrie

Heller and Jessica Hentoff at their respective circus schools, Circus Harmony and The Circus Arts Institute. Though each educator takes very different approaches to their work, they are both working and succeeding in the realm of social circus. Hentoff's more strict, yet always supportive, training methods provide a needed structure for young people. Meanwhile, Heller takes a more relaxed, yet extremely organized, approach to her circus school. Both approaches have been successful, and *Generation C(ircus)* aims to find a balance somewhere between the two in its teaching model.

I would not hesitate to say that I have borrowed ideas and training methods from both Heller and Hentoff in the development of *Generation C(ircus)*. In fact, Hentoff's Circus Harmony also utilizes self-guided circus binders. I based my self-guided curriculum circus binders on the model that the students at Circus Harmony use. However, because our facilities



Close friend and fellow circus performer, Elliiana Grace. Her solo show is about 27 minutes.

greatly differ, I changed many of the skills included and what level includes what skills. My curriculum is based directly on the students I worked with in the offsite show. The circus binder I created is a reflection of my youth students, with an emphasis on responsibility and encouraging a sort of daily practice.

From Heller, I have borrowed her strong sense of fun, as well as learning. Although not reflected in the self-guided curriculum, when I, as a coach, am responsible for warming up a group of students, I often do so through games. I also encourage independent student

exploration; a student does not have to have a high skill level to begin creating acts. Exploring movement choices and acting is just as important in act building, and I have found that “games” or improvisation exercises is one of the most effective ways to teach these skills. Using the precedence of these two mighty forces in the circus education world, I have been able to begin to develop a new circus education model through *Generation C(ircus)*.

The choice to have a solo show as part of my project was not a simple one. As I have previously discussed, a solo show was not originally in my proposal for *Generation C(ircus)*. Once I decided that the best way to express what I wanted to express was through a solo show, my creation process shifted greatly. I went from writing plans out for others, to spending all of my spare time working out and getting back into performing shape. To me, a solo show should

last at least 25 minutes. This meant that I would need to have multiple acts in the show. My years of circus training have been filled with many disciplines, but I have chosen to focus mostly in trapeze and acrobatics, which meant I, essentially, already had my act choices picked out for me. In 2015, at “circus bootcamp,” I majored in acrobatic chair hand balancing;



Me with my acrobatic chair at Bootcamp, Summer 2015

until bootcamp, I trained and taught trapeze as my main focus; my gymnastics background provided an additional outlet for the show; lastly, my short experience in acrobatic cube from circus summer camp resurfaced as I was brainstorming for the show, and I remembered my fondness of it and that it could have a strong

visual impact. With these four elements, I was able to develop an 18 minute-long show. From there, the theme and act development occurred. Each act was its own vignette, some more literal than others, representing themes of activism relating to social identities, including femininity, gender and race.

Initially, I was hesitant to create and perform a solo show as part of this project; I thought it might detract from the overall goal of *Generation C(ircus)*. However, throughout the development of the show, the importance of my own performance became clearer. As the coach/director of the offsite youth show and the author of the self-guided curriculum, my presence was mostly hidden because I wanted the youth show and the curriculum to speak for themselves. I grew up in youth circus, though, and education systems, like the one I have created, shaped me into the performer I am now, as well as the activist influence from my family. Showcasing who I am and how I perform felt like the natural extension of the education aspect of this project.

## **V. Conclusion**

Through my experience of developing *Generation C(ircus)*, in its completeness, it is increasingly clear that circus is a tool not only for education, but also empowerment. The current state of education is flawed, and, though I do not believe that circus can fix it, I do believe that circus education could be used to improve it. Personally, I have learned science and math skills from learning to rig equipment and balancing budgets/managing class registrations; I have learned about world history through the lens of circus history; in planning a show, which is akin to writing a script, I built my language arts knowledge; and, most importantly, I have grown into the responsible, competent person I am today. Circus has given me as much of a global education

as any course taught in an academic setting, while also teaching me to have a voice and make a difference in the world. My hope for *Generation C(ircus)* is to bring that kind of wholesome education to children who need it most, whether it be through direct teaching, seen in the education model of the project, or simply, through experiencing a show that proves to marginalized populations that they are powerful and can make change, modeled in *\*insert sociopolitically-aware title here\**.



*\*insert sociopolitically-aware title here\**

Although my plans post-grad do not necessarily include continuing in circus education or performance, I still wholeheartedly believe that I will be “doing the work.” The onsite coach I worked with in the first semester of the project will now base the youth program at Aircraft Aerial Arts on the model I have constructed, which includes the idea of student self-reporting and a structure on how to build a show collaboratively with youth students. Additionally, the biennial American Youth Circus Festival is happening at the end of the summer this year; I will be coaching workshops there, with the possibility of leading a workshop outlining the work of my thesis.

Whether I continue to pursue circus education and performance or not, I can confidently say that I will take with me the skills that circus, and the creation of *Generation C(ircus)*, has taught me through the rest of my life.

## Bibliography

"Circus Harmony » About." Circus Harmony. Accessed April 19, 2017.

<http://circusharmony.org/about/>.

"Circus Arts Therapy ®." CIRCUS ARTS THERAPY. Accessed April 19, 2017.

<http://circusartsinstitute.com/circus-arts-therapy>.

"The 7 Fingers." 7 doigts. April 18, 2017. Accessed April 19, 2017.

<http://7fingers.com/the7fingers>.

"Cirque du Monde | Global Citizenship." Cirque du Soleil. Accessed April 19, 2017.

<https://www.cirquedusoleil.com/en/about/global-citizenship/social-circus/cirque-du-monde.aspx>.

Davis, Jacqueline. *Toward best practices in youth worker training for developmental circus arts programs*. Proceedings of AYCO Educators Conference, New England Center for Circus Arts, Brattleboro, VT, USA. Accessed April 19, 2017. <http://www.americancircuseducators.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Core-Competencies-and-Best-Practices.pdf>.

Miel, Justin. *Volare*. Somerville.

Circus Flora. St. Louis Arches. Digital Image. St. Louis Public Radio. Published July 29, 2014.

[http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/kwmu/files/styles/x\\_large/public/201407/2-best-flora-6-4-10-0492\\_5642.original.jpg](http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/kwmu/files/styles/x_large/public/201407/2-best-flora-6-4-10-0492_5642.original.jpg).

"Study of Man: Lecture XIV." Rudolf Steiner Archive & e.Lib - About Rudolf Steiner. January 01, 1970. Accessed April 20, 2017.

<http://wn.rsarchive.org/Lectures/GA293/English/RSP1966/19190905a01.html>.

Brown, Stephanie. Marisa Diamond. Ann Arbor.

"Elliana Grace." Digital Image. Everyday Circus. Accessed April 19, 2017.

[www.everydaycircus.net](http://www.everydaycircus.net).

Simonici, Melissa. Marisa Diamond. Somerville