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Cirqiniq: the decolonising of social circus in Nunavik

Katie Lavers , Jon Burt  and Emmanuel Bochud

This writing sets out to explore the Social Circus program in Nunavik in the Arctic in Far North Canada which in various forms has now been running for nearly twenty years. The initial program begun by Cirque du Soleil in 2002 had little uptake by the Inuit. There was a lack of community support and very sporadic attendance by the Inuit young people and after five years it was discontinued. The Social Circus program now known as Cirqiniq developed out of this initial program. Its success can be gauged by the fact that every year young Inuit vote in a poll as to whether it should continue or not. The program now has the support to ensure it continues each year. This article asks questions about what it was that changed in order to cause this turnaround? What was it that changed to cause the involvement of young Inuit and Inuit communities? Did the approaches to training change? Did structural changes occur? The authors, two of whom have worked with Cirqiniq, set out to answer these questions. A series of interviews undertaken with Inuit and Qallunaat (non-Inuit) involved in the program, along with research undertaken in response to these interviews, revealed a process of structural and cultural decolonisation of the Social Circus program which the authors point to as the key component in the program's current success.

Keywords: decolonisation, Inuit, first nations, agency, social circus

Introduction

Social Circus is a form of contemporary circus which has a radical agenda – to use circus as a tool to promote social transformation.

Cirqiniq is a Social Circus set up to work with young Inuit across Nunavik, a vast Arctic territory in far North Quebec, Canada. Nunavik covers over 500 square kilometres and has a total population of only 11,000 of whom 91% are Inuit. There are 14 communities ranging in size

from Kuujuaq, the largest community with around 2,300 people, to Aupaluk, the smallest with less than 200. There are no roads. The communities are not connected to each other or to Southern Quebec by road. The only means of transport is by plane. Non-perishable foodstuffs and supplies are brought in by ship in the summer sealift – otherwise all provisions come in by plane. As a result, store-bought food is expensive. In and around the communities people use snowmobiles, All Terrain Vehicles (ATVs) and motorboats for personal transport, and also for hunting, fishing and trapping trips (KRG website 2021).

Two of the authors, Jon Burt and Emmanuel Bochud, have been actively involved in the Cirqiniq program, with Jon Burt working as an Instructor there over a period of three years, and Emmanuel Bochud, in his capacity as Head of Cirque du Monde, running training sessions for young Inuit Instructors and searching for suitable Qallunaat¹ Instructors for the project. Katie Lavers and Jon Burt have also previously published an interview-style article for the *Journal of Arts and Communities* about Jon Burt's work with Cirqiniq, but aside from that, apart from various interviews on some circus websites, they discovered that very little has been written to date about the Social Circus program in Nunavik even though it has been running for nearly 20 years.²

The authors began their research by setting up a series of interviews with people involved in the Cirqiniq program namely Inuit and Qallunaat Instructors, participants, administrators, and community members as part of a grounded theory process. Grounded theory is a research approach that involves the development of theory that is 'grounded' in data such as interviews with research participants with the analysis and development of theories happening after the data has been collected and analysed.

This grounded research gradually revealed a process of decolonisation of the circus program in Nunavik which the authors have investigated through research conducted in parallel to the interviews. For the purposes of this writing, the authors are using the following definition of decolonisation, that is a process which investigates the effects of colonisation, whether political, social, financial, cultural, or psychological, with the ultimate aim in mind of potential redress.

In line with this investigation into decolonisation, the authors have followed Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith's proposal in her book *Decolonising Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (2012) and prioritised the voices of First Nations and non-white writers, scholars, and Elders wherever possible.

This writing starts with extracts of conversations with some of the young Inuit Instructors in Cirqiniq today, some social context follows, then the writing explores the beginnings of the Social Circus program in 2002 and the process of decolonisation implemented in the training program up to the present day.

Voices

The three authors, Jon Burt, Manu Bouchard and myself, Katie Lavers, were on a Zoom call with some of the Cirqiniq Inuit Instructors who were speaking to us from shared accommodation in Montreal where they had travelled for a performance in Cirkaskina, a festival bringing together Social Circus programs from across Canada. We had sent through a list

¹ Qallunaat is the Inuktitut term used to refer to non-Inuit people.

² See Katie Lavers and Jon Burt 2015, Social Circus in the Arctic: Cultivating Resilience, *Journal of Arts & Communities*, 7(3), 125-139; and Kaitlin Jessica Schwan and Ernie Lightman 2015, Fostering Resistance, Cultivating Decolonization: The Intersection of Canadian Colonial History and Contemporary Arts Programming with Inuit Youth, *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, 15(1), 15-29.

of questions beforehand and they had prepared answers and wanted to speak. The first question we asked was about their first experience with Cirqiniq and how they got into doing circus:

My journey through Cirqiniq started when I was 13 and it was in Kuujuaq. I loved it, and so from then on, I started joining every year. ... So before circus I felt stuck, like everything was it has to be like this, it has to be like that. Everything is so structured in the world and circus set me free. Every time I went to Cirqiniq I would feel fulfilled, and I learned a lot of things and it's never the same thing ... You learn through people and every day you learn something new. (Tukai 2021)³

The first performance I had with Cirqiniq ... was that first summer camp in 2013 and it was crazy ... I performed as a participant in the Cirqiniq program ... that first aerial number kind of struck a chord for sure which is probably why I still do aerials to this day – just cos I love being in the air, but it was also amazing because there was a whole backstage vibe of being with other youth from different communities and having spent the week together working and discovering what we could do ... what kind of show we could create with our minds and bodies. (Kuata 2021)⁴

I started around November of 2011, and I became a Junior [Instructor] after the spring ended in 2012 in Kuujuaq during the summer camp. I became a Junior [and] I became less anxious. I was becoming more of myself when I started circus. (Nappatuk 2021)⁵

My first real experience with Cirqiniq was not what I was expecting, I was expecting people having fun doing circus and teaching kids how to do what we do. But what I went through in those two weeks was making friends everywhere, learning how to further my experiences not only in circus, but with life experience, and being able to help people who needed someone to talk to. That's when I realized that social circus wasn't just about circus, it was a way to bring people together in times that people need to feel together. I was part of something that brought people joy and an opportunity to give them an outlet for whatever they need. I knew I was going to stay in circus, and I knew I wanted to help people, that's when I decided to stay in the Social Circus program. (Angatookalook 2021)⁶

I started in 2012 as a student, and around 2016 is when I started my Junior [Instructor] training and ever since then I've been doing shows with Cirqiniq. (Makiuk 2021)⁷

Some of these Inuit Instructors have now gone on to form their own circus company called Tupiq ACT (Arctic Circus Troupe). Tupiq ACT have recently received a grant from the Canada Council for the Arts to develop and collaboratively devise a new creative work. They recently performed as part of the 2021 Montreal Circus Festival *Complément Cirque* and are now giving workshops and acting as role models teaching and performing within the communities across Nunavik:

Our members are mainly Cirqiniq former Junior Instructors, and we came together to form an Inuit circus troupe from Nunavik. There was a bunch of us from the North who love doing circus with Cirqiniq so we came together and formed Tupiq. (Makiuk 2021)

3 Mina Maina Tukai is a young Inuk woman and Cirqiniq Junior Instructor from Inukjuak, a northern village of 1750 people located on Hudson Bay at the mouth of the Innusuak River. She is a Tupiq ACT member.

4 Saali Kuata is from Kuujuaq the largest northern village in Nunavik and the administrative capital of the Kativik Regional Government. He has performed and toured across Canada with the celebrated circus company 7 Fingers and the Inuit company Artcirq for the work *Unikkaaquat*, and is a Cirqiniq Senior Instructor and Assistant Administrator, and Tupiq ACT (Arctic Circus Troupe) member.

5 Michael Nappatuk is from Puvirnituq, and is a clown and multidisciplinary artist, who has worked with Cirqiniq for nearly a decade and was a Junior Instructor with them. He is a Tupiq ACT member.

6 Christopher Angatookalook, based in Laval, is a Cirqiniq Senior Instructor, acrobat, an Inuit Games specialist, and a Tupiq ACT member and administrator.

7 Charlie Makiuk is from Kuujuaq, specialises in contortion, and is a Cirqiniq Junior Instructor and a Tupiq ACT member.

The summer of 2018 was the start of what became Tupiq ACT, and the beginning was long, tedious, but exciting. We worked long and hard for what we have become today, it's not much to show, but I can say that we are proud of who we are, and we won't stop anytime soon ... It's been tough, it's been a lot to learn, but I'm trying, and I think I'm doing well. (Angatookalook 2021)



Artist - Mina Maina Tukai, Photograph: Radio-Canada:Ivanoh Demers

Social context for Cirqiniq

Life in Nunavik can be stressful for young Inuit. One of the most stressful factors is the speed and intensity of change – social, cultural, and economic. This speed of change has led to a sense of disjuncture and a gap between the experiences of different generations of Inuit. As Saali Kuata said:

I'd like to tell just how severe this [intergenerational] gap is. ... My mother was born in 1964 and she was born in an igloo, and my dad in '53 was born in a tent. For me and all my siblings, we were all born in a hospital. So that just shows how fast things have changed over the last 50 years even. It's crazy. It's insane. Inuit having to go through a modern world today is stressful. (Kuata 2021)

This fast change means that young Inuit are on Facebook and Instagram, and on Zoom calls on their mobile phones to people across the world. Most of their parents speak Inuktitut at home and go out on the land hunting whales and seals, as hunting trips are still a big part of lives in the communities. Life for these young Inuit is precariously poised between different cultures – between the traditional Inuit culture and language and the complexities of global social media and culture. As Laurence J. Kirmayer, Fletcher, and Watt (2009) write:

This generation is the most self-consciously 'global' in that, through mass media, its members have been saturated with the sights and sounds of an international youth culture that celebrates a fast-paced urban life that is hard to realize in their small, remote communities. (291)

8 Settler colonialism is a term made popular in the 1990s by academic Patrick Wolfe, see Patrick Wolfe 2006, *Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native*, *Journal of Genocide Research*, 8(4), 387-409.

They are also still impacted by the relationship with settler colonialism,⁸ and the structural challenges of the education system in which their own family language Inuktitut is still only taught up until Year 4 [9 to 10 years of age], after which they have to deal with learning all their subjects in a second language namely English. The majority of their teachers after Year 4 are young Qallunaat mainly from Newfoundland who come to the Arctic for teaching experience, often with not much in-depth knowledge of Inuit culture (Rasmussen 2011). These conflicting influences place immense pressure on young Inuit in the process of forming their own sense of identity. Saali Kuata speaking about this says:

When I was growing up, I had a problem with my identity as an Inuk. I believed that I wasn't Inuk enough ... That's a thing that I dealt with in my youth a lot ... through that I kind of isolated myself and eventually stopped speaking my own language and focussed on English. (Kuata 2021)

In addition to this, many of the older generation of Inuit are still traumatised by childhood experiences in which they were taken and forcibly separated from their parents and placed in residential schools. Siku Allooloo, an Inuit/Haitian Taino writer, describes her own family's experiences with residential schools, saying:

They knew our entire societies stem from the land, which meant we would never give it up and that we would always protect it. So, for 150 years, Canada stole all of our children – our heart, indeed our future – and sought to break them of our ways and collapse our societies in the process. Many of these children suffered unthinkable atrocities during their time at these schools, and thousands never made it home to our families. (Allooloo 2019, 325-6)

Justice Murray Sinclair, Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, was given the job of studying the legacy of these schools. In a broadcast for CBC, Sinclair said that at least 6,000 Indigenous children [including Inuit] died in the residential school system, but that this figure is an estimate only, record keeping was poor, and the total was likely much higher (Tasker 2015).

It is not widely appreciated that the last residential school only closed in 1996. This practice of taking Inuit children away from their parents and putting them into residential schools where they were often mistreated and subject to all kinds of abuse has led to generations of people who are still traumatised by the experience. Tania Tagaq, the internationally acclaimed Inuit musician and writer, gave an interview in 2016, in which she described her own experiences attending a residential school:

People just don't seem to understand the magnitude of the Canadian residential school system. I went to a residential school for high school, it's not that long ago. It's so presumptuous to think that proper parents could have come out of the residential school system. All that trauma is given forth to the next generation, but the next generation doesn't understand why that happened. It just keeps trickling down and in certain cases, exacerbating itself. (Tagaq cited in Warner 2016, n.p.)

Siku Allooloo also describes another life changing event for Inuit families:

My Inuit grandparents went from freely traveling the land as our ancestors had always done to living in a permanent community. The RCMP [the Canadian National Police] forced Inuit into settlements in the 1950s to bring us under government control. They slaughtered our sled dogs so we were immobile and also split entire family groups apart, scattering us across different communities. (Allooloo 2019, 325)⁹

9 This is a contested event. Along with other Inuit leaders, Pita Aatami, president of the Makivik Corporation (the Inuit holding company for the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement), has commented on the RCMP investigation of the issue frequently. See CBC News 2010, Inuit leader wants apology for dog deaths, CBC News. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/inuit-leader-wants-apology-for-dog-deaths-1.912026>.

Many young Inuit in Nunavik are still dealing with the PTSD in their family as a direct result of this tumultuous recent history. At the same time as the sense of continuity and continuance of the traditional culture is being eroded, the sense of possibility for the future is vanishing. This sense of the traditional Inuit way of life as a vanishing one, and of the Inuit race itself as being under threat of extinction is a real existential threat that looms large. Tommy Akulukjuk, Inuk hunter and journalist, describes how he finds it something that is almost impossible to talk about:

Today, as I occasionally do, I was reading John Amagoalik's essay 'Will the Inuit Disappear From the Face of This Earth?' This is a very serious question for any Inuk. ... To realize that our people can be classified as an endangered species is very disturbing. Is our culture like a wounded polar bear that has gone out to sea to die alone? What can be done? (Amagoalik 1977). These words were written in 1977 by a very intellectual Inuk, called, by some, the 'Father of Nunavut.' ... I think many of us do not realize that adjusting to a dominant society has its limits. At what point do we know that we have lost most of what is precious to a strong culture? An Inuit identity is on the line: a way of life and a language so unique that it is in its own league. (Akulukjuk in Rasmussen and Akulukjuk 2009, 288)

Inuit are also subject to the effects of climate change. In 2006 the Inuk writer and activist Sheila Watt-Cloutier in her speech as Chair of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference spoke about the Inuit 'right to be cold'. She described how Inuit hunters and Elders have been reporting climate changes and a range of change to the natural environment for over 20 years:

The range of these changes is well-known: melting permafrost, thinning of sea ice, receding glaciers, 'invasion' of species of animals not previously seen in the Arctic, increased coastal erosion, longer and warmer summers and shorter winters. The magnitude of these changes varies from place to place, but the trend is consistent across the Arctic. (Watt-Cloutier 2006, n.p.)

She stressed that climate change is not an abstract matter but something that directly effects the health, livelihoods, and wellbeing of Inuit families.

In addition, the 14 communities spread across Nunavik still consist mainly of Nissan huts which are very overcrowded. In 2013, the Popular Travelling Commission on the Right to Housing Report states that some Inuit families:

have to adopt 'sleeping shifts,' that is to say, establish a schedule so that everyone can sleep in a bed [...] The consequences of overcrowded

houses in numerous communities are well documented, and overcrowding (in some cases, as many as four families in a few rooms) does not create an environment conducive to educational success. The Québec Ombudsman feels that this situation prevents Inuit from receiving the educational services to which they are entitled. (Corneau 2018, 12)

High levels of unemployment and low incomes can also lead to tensions in families. Food is expensive in Nunavik, as, except for the meat and fish from traditional hunting and wild berries and plants in the summer, all food has to be flown in or be brought in by boat when the ice permits and is expensive. There is often a high level of food insecurity with young Inuit often having to skip meals. No school meals are provided (Corneau 2018, 12). All these tensions combine to make life very stressful for some of the young Inuit in the remote communities.



Artists- Micheal Nappatuq and Christopher Angatookalook, Photograph: Marc-André Rocheleau

Background to Cirqiniq

The Social Circus program in Nunavik was originally set up by Cirque du Monde, the Social Circus wing of Cirque du Soleil, in 2002. After some initial research, seven communities were identified as being suitable for the program. Instructors, all Qallunaat, flew up from the South, from Montreal or Toronto, and out into the seven selected communities. The program aimed to connect with young Inuit in Nunavik, an area with one of the highest rates of youth suicides in the world. This was a challenging task for the Instructors many of whom had only just recently received training and

had little practical experience of either Social Circus instruction, or of living in the Arctic (Leonard 2020). This early Social Circus program which ran from 2002-2007 did not gain real traction with young Inuit. Cirque du Monde recognised that the young Inuit only came to the program sporadically, and in order to make real connection the program needed to change and evolve. After five years it was decided that the model of drop-in workshops with different Instructors coming up to the communities from the South of Canada to run the program was not working (Leonard 2020). At this point in 2007 the program was wound down.

Now, however, in 2021 the Social Circus program (which is now named Cirqiniq) has strong support from within the communities. The continuance of this program is based on polls run by the Kativik Regional Government (KRG). In these polls, young Inuit have consistently voted for the program to continue.

The authors wanted to find out how it was that the Social Circus program, that was wound down in 2007, had been turned around and how its current success had been achieved. As they started digging into this question, the answer gradually became clear. The success lay in the decolonisation of the program. In 2009 when the Social Circus program started up again the process of decolonisation started immediately with a new partnership.

Decolonising Cirqiniq

In 2009, the Kativik Regional Government, which is over 65% Inuit, initiated a new partnership with Cirque du Soleil. The KRG took the lead, raised the necessary funds, and controlled the structure of the program, selecting and employing a Program Coordinator. Karin Kettler, the Cirqiniq Coordinator from 2011-2014, in an email to the authors, broke down how the partnership between Cirqiniq and Cirque du Soleil worked in practice:

We do not receive financial support from Cirque du Soleil. KRG does their own fundraising for the program. Every year we seek funding from regional programs like Ungaluk Program, Brighter Futures and Sustainable Employment. KRG has a dedicated position to coordinate the program. Cirque du Soleil has a contact person for us to connect with and share information. We will contact them for Instructor suggestions, names of places to get equipment and, in the past, they provided used costumes to be recycled from their big shows. (Kettler 2014)

The KRG had taken ownership of the Social Circus program and their directives were clear. The focus should be on developing young Inuit in leadership roles with the eventual aim of the program becoming self-sustaining, and the new program must include aspects of traditional Inuit culture in the training program and in the shows and performances.

The Sri Lankan/American scholar Chandra Talpade Mohanty, writing about the process of decolonisation involved in decolonising her own approach to teaching, emphasizes the need to start taking seriously the 'different logics of cultures as they are located within asymmetrical power relations' (Mohanty 1989, 196). These directives from KRG created a

new culture within the Social Circus program – one that addressed the asymmetrical power structures by taking financial control and by determining that young Inuit participants should eventually run and direct the Social Circus program. The question of taking ‘the logic of different cultures seriously’ was also addressed by putting in place an Inuk Program Co-ordinator to guide the Qallanut Instructors coming from down South and determining that Inuit culture be included as part of the workshop and performance program.

A survey of the communities was conducted in 2009, and, in 2010, a call was put out for circus Instructors. Rachel David was one of the first new Senior Instructors to join the program in 2010. In a Zoom call with the authors, she described a preliminary training session for all new Instructors hosted at the Cirque du Soleil Headquarters in Montréal. The KRG had appointed the Inuit drummer and throat singer Sylvia Cloutier as Recreation Advisor for Arts and Culture to manage the Social Circus program in Nunavik.¹⁰ Rachel David described this first training session saying:

¹⁰ Sylvia Cloutier was born in Kuujuaq, where her mother's side of family live. She has lived in Montreal and also in Iqaluit working as an artist and with Inuit youth.

[Sylvia] is both Quebecoise and Inuk ... She has family from Kuujuaq and roots there, so she'd been there a lot growing up, and I think she'd also been in the South quite a bit. She really had a lot of respect for both the cultures that she's a part of, and also respect for the artists that she was hiring to go up North. She was really trying to create mentorship and empower young people in her culture to eventually take the reins of the program. (David 2021)

The five Instructors who were being sent up into the identified communities had a lot of specific questions they wanted to ask as none of them had ever been up North before. However, as Rachel David said, ‘Sylvia left a lot of the answers very open and in retrospect I really appreciate that because she allowed us to have our experience and not put cultural questions or anything in a box, because there is no one answer and putting things in a box creates stereotypes’ (David 2021). One of the main points that Sylvia Cloutier made was the importance of building trust with the young Inuit, ‘Sylvia made the point that the way everything's structured up there, there's teachers and nurses and staff from the South that are in and out all the time. They [the young Inuit] get attached to their teacher, build attachments and then it's constant change. This can make it challenging to build trust’ (David 2021).

Rachel David remembers Sylvia Cloutier emphasising that the program was intended to be long term and she advised building real relationships in order to build this essential trust, so it was decided to try to keep the same Instructors for all the workshops. Rebecca Devi Leonard says, ‘I think what really helped break down disconnection was being able to continue going back year after year after year and building relationships ... on both sides, like I was able to get to know people and they were able to get to know me’ (Leonard 2020). This sense of trust as it developed gave a strong base to the Social Circus program.

When we asked about her first experience up in Nunavik, Rachel David mentions some other advice that Sylvia Cloutier gave to the new Instructors:

Sylvia's training encouraged us to meet the youth where they were at. Not to necessarily stick to our own schedule but to learn as much from the youth and the program as the participants learn from us ... this is a Nunavik program – and belongs to the youth of Nunavik. We can create and plan workshops, but if the timing is good to go hunting and we are invited, no need to stick to our own plans, go! Learn on the land. (David 2021)

When asked about her first trip to Nunavik, Rachel David says:

Training was left loose and open, which was a beautiful thing long term and allowed the program to evolve and shape naturally. When I arrived for the first time, in June 2010, all the youth in the Cirqiniq age demographic [secondary students] were going island hopping and fishing right during my first days of arrival. Instead of pushing an agenda to start circus workshops, a program totally new to the community, I joined them – I was lucky enough to get an invite! I was able to build relationships with the youth in their own environment, meet some community members, learn more about the community culture and the land, and play ... all part of early stages in circus workshops anyway, but we were outdoors enjoying Inuit culture. (David 2021)



Artist - Mariam Imak, Photograph: Radio-Canada:Ivanoh Demers

This new Social Circus program originally had the name Kacisomavik but after about twelve months took the name Cirqiniq. Willis Tagoona, Inuit administrator with KRG of Cirqiniq from 2014-2019, says, 'The word Cirqiniq is an invented term combining the first parts of the words circus and cirque in English and French respectively, with the Inuktitut word *siqiniq* which means sun' (Tagoona 2014). Karin Kettler in an email to the authors wrote, 'For me [the name Cirqiniq] means a bright light, something to focus on, a place to feel warmth and safety; and life grows from the sun' (Kettler 2014).

11 Métis (people in Canada and parts of the United States of mixed Indigenous and European ancestry).

A grounded theory research project conducted at the Okanagan campus of the University of British Columbia was developed with First Nations students there. It was conducted by two researchers – Karen Ragoonaden, a bi-racial Mauritian/Irish scholar, and Lyle Mueller, a Métis¹¹ scholar. The research explored how to retain Indigenous students in Higher Education. Through interviews with the participants, three major themes emerged, namely the importance of 1) circles of learning, 2) peer mentoring, and 3) the relationship with the Instructor (Ragoonaden and Mueller 2017, 22–46).

These three elements are present in the Cirque du Monde Training Model but have evolved in response to the situation in Nunavik:

1. Circles of learning have become particularly important in Cirqiniq. When seated in the circle, participants can discuss anything that anybody in the circle wants to talk about including technical problems that may have come up in training, or other more personal things. These circles create an important place for communication. In an article in the journal *Transcultural Psychiatry*, which was written by five authors, three of whom are Inuit, the writers state that talking about problems is important for Inuit of all ages, 'Talking remains the most important activity for coping with problems. Resilience is thus important at the relational level. This is a way that resilience operates among Indigenous peoples, in relationships and in the community' (Kral et al. 2014, 686). Rebecca Devi Leonard stresses the importance of holding a space of trust and connection:

You can talk about anything – there's no judgment and it's an opportunity to talk about things maybe that are happening when there is no other person to talk to. I mean there's something about holding that trust as well for these young people. It's a complex role because it does blur the lines a little bit of just being an Instructor. (Leonard 2020)

Sitting in a circle of learning also decreases the hierarchy between teachers and learners. Verna Illasiak, in her Ted Talk in TedxAklavik, emphasises the importance of shared authority and non-hierarchical relationships as an important part of Inuit culture (Illasiak 2015):

2. Peer Mentoring – The setting up of circus stations which participants rotate through is an important part of the Cirque du Monde model. This allows for participants, especially those training to be Instructors, to start to work as peer mentors through the stations. This peer connection and peer teaching plays an important role in Inuit learning. The circus stations also offer a cyclical approach to learning which Verna Illasiak emphasizes is a vital element in traditional Inuit culture rather than the linear approach to learning which characterizes Qallunaat education (Illasiak 2015).
3. The importance of a developed and extended relationship with the Instructor had already been addressed by Sylvia Cloutier in the first training workshop for the Instructors with the directive to develop a real relationship with the students. This was also addressed through retaining a core group of the same Qallunaat Instructors who return to teach in the program year after year.

Another element of the Cirque du Monde Model is the 'entry ritual' that sets in place the idea of creating and holding a particular safe space for people which they can enter without prejudgement. Saali Kuata commented on this, saying:

It's a very welcoming space for us and we don't get to have that a lot ... Immediately for me, I was able to see it and fall into it, just like falling backwards with your eyes closed and trusting that you're going to be caught, something like that. It just creates this aura of welcomeness and as the relationship progresses and prolongs, it becomes a lot more engaging. (Kuata 2021)

Holding this non-judgemental safe space for participants can create tension with schools. The Cirqiniq program is run in partnership with schools as workshops are often held in school gymnasiums. Sometimes there have been requests from schools for Cirqiniq Instructors to use the workshops as something that can be withheld or offered as a reward to encourage better behaviour. Rachel David says that in these situations she would say, 'I understand your desire to do that, but the whole point of this program is to be here for everyone regardless of their problems in other situations. So ... I want to be here to provide a space that's accepting and different' (David 2021).

Another important aspect of the Cirqiniq program is the performances at the end of the workshops. The content of the performance comes out of discussions amongst the participants and may include Inuit traditional stories, personal experiences, or sometimes political or historical events such as the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement.



Artist - Micheal Nappatuq, Photograph: Marc-André Rocheleau

The summer camp usually involves around 60 participants who fly in from different remote villages to Kuujuaq, the largest Northern village in Nunavik, for a one-week workshop which culminates in a performance. The theme and content of the summer camp performance are decided by a Facebook poll amongst participants. The performances are given to the communities. Not that everyone will take part in them, some may prefer to make costumes or work with props, but for those that do choose to take part it can offer a different way to present themselves. As Michael Nappatuk says:

I was a shy kid back in the day and at the same time, I started being more active when I started circus. When I started performing and people started to notice that I was performing in front of the audience everybody was surprised ... [they were] calling my grandparents ... They were proud of me. (Nappatuk 2021)

Cirqiniq has now become an important cultural landmark for young Inuit. In addition, the new circus company Tupiq ACT, set up by the young Inuit Cirqiniq Instructors, is now touring, performing, and delivering workshops to other young Inuit across Nunavik.

Rachel David says that the achievements of Tupiq ACT are extraordinary but there are other forms of impact that the Social Circus program has:

There's all these success stories happening in the tiny communities, and some of them don't even necessarily want to leave, and some don't have the chance to leave. These success stories look different than Tupiq ACT, but they're equally as beautiful. (David 2021)

Chris Angatookalook, who is a Cirqiniq Instructor and a founder member of Tupiq ACT, writes:

I would have become a completely different person without circus, and I love who I've become, ... I know I have support from everyone around me and I'm feeling the love that I became familiar with from Social Circus ... Everything that was written down was from the heart and there's nothing I would change about it. I believe that everything that has happened was from the jubilation that radiates from circus, and if anyone is willing to listen then I would love to tell my story. I hope you found this useful, and maybe even a good read ... I would love to share my love for circus with everyone. (Angatookalook 2021)

Conclusion

This research set out to explore what changes had happened in the social circus program now known as Cirqiniq and what led to the program now having the ongoing support of the Nunavik Inuit communities especially young Inuit. The research uncovered an ongoing process of

decolonisation in every aspect of the program, structural, financial and administrative as well as in the pedagogical and cultural approach.

This research sets out connections to wider research themes including decolonisation, trust and circus; and identity and generational trauma which it is hoped will prompt a wide range of future research in the field.

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