

CIRCUS AND ITS OTHERS: TRANSGRESSIONS AND CHALLENGES

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THIS publication marks the fourth of five peer-reviewed journal issues that are outcomes of the international, cross-disciplinary research project Circus and its Others (CaiO), and ushers in a new era of maturation and expansion of the project's efforts. Launched in 2014, CaiO explores the ways in which contemporary circus artists and companies relate to concepts such as difference and otherness in their practice. CaiO brings together scholars from a wide range of disciplines and backgrounds, artists and arts professionals and the broader community to engage with circus as a vibrant, complex contemporary art form and field of practice.

Following our fourth international conference in Bogotá, Colombia in early 2024, that conference's academic and creative committee (made up of the authors of this introduction and Aastha Gandhi) co-edited a special issue of the Colombia-based journal *Corpo-grafias* and are co-editing this issue and a subsequent special issue (5.1) of *Circus: Arts, Life and Sciences (CALS)*. At the same time, a collective of circus scholars and artists close to the Circus and its Others project, including this editorial team, are coming together to plan CaiO's next steps, which will include an archive project and future conferences. In the introduction

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of *CALS* 5.1, we will write more fulsomely about these upcoming activities. For the present, we offer information on CaiO's origins and past activities, an overview of the Bogotá conference and an introduction to the contents of this first CaiO *CALS* special issue.

Circus and its Others was launched by Charles R. Batson and Karen Fricker under the aegis of the Montreal Working Group on Circus Research. An initial study day in November 2014 involved some two-dozen established and emerging scholars from Canada, the US, France and Australia mapping out key questions and areas of focus. In partnership with L. Patrick Leroux, director of the Montreal Working Group, we hosted an international conference (CaiO I) in 2016 in Montreal that resulted in a dedicated double issue of the peer-reviewed journal *Performance Matters* (4.1–2), which was published in June 2018. CaiO I included five panels, a roundtable, a keynote address and a book launch; featured twenty-four presenters with institutional affiliations from eleven countries; and welcomed over sixty attendees.

The conference and the resulting publication focused around five main areas of inquiry: gender and difference in contemporary circus; semiotic and theatrical readings of circus productions with a focus on bodies and objects; the roles of location, place and movement in circus practices and discourses; the relationship of social circus to professional circus (while problematizing a binary understanding of these two areas of practice); and understandings of freakery and queerness in the context of contemporary circus. It is fundamental to Circus and its Others that our activities are in close touch with circus practices and practitioners and as such all of our conferences have taken place alongside circus festivals: we organized the first conference in partnership with the 2016 Montréal Completèment Cirque festival.

Strong interest in the Montreal conference and the *Performance Matters* issues made clear to us that questions about circus and difference could benefit from further exploration. In partnership with Veronika Štefanová of Cirqueon, an umbrella organization for the support and development of contemporary circus in Czechia (then the Czech Republic), we organized Circus and its Others II in September 2018 in Prague. The academic and creative committee of CaiO II was made up of Batson, Fricker, Leroux and Štefanová joined by Michael Eigtved (University of Copenhagen, Denmark) and Martin Pšenička (Charles University, Czechia). The call for papers for CaiO II received more than twice as many responses as the first conference and over fifty scholars and practitioners presented their research in Prague. In addition to the five areas of inquiry enumerated above, the Prague conference also included panels on circus history, circus pedagogy and training, circus of/as resistance, access and ableism, and circus

and risk. The conference took place alongside the Letní Letná circus festival and featured an opening panel focused on circus in Czechia.

Plans for a third conference in the fall of 2020 at the University of California, Davis, US, organized by Batson, Fricker and Ante Ursić (then a PhD candidate at UC Davis, now a faculty member at East Tennessee State University) were put on hold due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the meantime, the Davis academic and creative committee (Batson, Fricker, Štefanová and Ursić, joined by Olga Lucía Sorzano) organized a series of digital panels throughout 2020 and 2021 on four topics: the intersection of clown and drag practices; new perspectives on Australian circus; circus adaptations and possibilities in the context of the pandemic; and the experience of Black performers in contemporary circus.

The Davis conference (CaiO III) went forward online in the fall of 2021, attracting the largest and broadest attendance of any CaiO gathering to date: 123 registered attendees from twenty-four countries on five continents. A particular focus of CaiO III was the interdisciplinarity of circus research and practice, putting into play questions of openness and inclusion. How could our ongoing inquiry be enriched, the conference asked, by engaging with scholars and practitioners working in a wide range of fields? Forty-five presenters participated in eleven panels on subjects including circus and racialization, circus audiences, practicing disobedience and deviance, and circus bodies in/of pain. In collaboration with the Mondavi Center at UC Davis, Ursić curated a festival of four cutting-edge circus performances, all presented digitally.

Reflecting on these three previous international conferences and the digital panel series, we realized that staying true to the core values of the project meant taking our work to the Global South. With Sorzano and an academic and creative committee including Marco Antonio Coelho Bortoleto, Aastha Gandhi and Julieta Infantino, we set out to create a conference in Latin America that would further the ongoing internationalization of CaiO's research and bring together diverse audiences and scholars to spotlight the rich variety of circus practices and research emerging from the Latin American region.

CaiO IV took place in Bogotá from February 28 to March 2, 2024, and was the first international circus studies conference held in Colombia. It featured sixty panelists from seventeen countries and focused on themes such as social movements, mobility and difference. The conference emphasized solidarity and decolonization, challenging binary categories like Global North/South and human/non-human. It invited critical reflection on how circus arts engage with activism, environmental crises and the reimaging of power structures through creative solidarity.

In parallel, Sorzano curated and produced Achura Karpa, a groundbreaking festival featuring free indoor and outdoor presentations of traditional, Indigenous

and experimental circus practices from around the world. The Quechua-derived name Achura Karpa, meaning “sharing knowledge and playing under the tent,” captured the spirit of this intercultural and interdisciplinary celebration of circus as a transformative and unifying social force.

Throughout this first ten years of activity, Circus and its Others has grown ever stronger in its commitment to fostering a global dialogue around contemporary circus involving scholars, artists and circus professionals. As circus studies is still constituting itself as a scholarly field, the project is by its nature interdisciplinary, bringing together experts from theatre and performance studies, kinesiology, anthropology, area studies, sociology, urban studies, gender and queer studies and more. Many CaiO participants are newcomers to the academic field, a number of them circus artists-turned-scholars. CaiO’s participants share the desire to continue to establish circus studies as an academic field while at the same time resisting its full institutionalization, engaging in an ongoing reflexive inquiry that allows itself to query its own inclusions and exclusions.

Assessing the rich variety and depth of presentations at CaiO IV after the conference, we realized that it was likely to yield more publishable work than could fit in a single journal issue. In the spirit of the conference, we reached out to publications in the Global South and North and committed to work with *Corpo-grafias*, an interdisciplinary journal focusing on critical studies of bodies, sensibilities and performativities based at the Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas in Bogotá, and with *Circus: Arts, Life and Sciences*. *Corpo-grafias* 12.12, published in early 2025, features thirteen articles based on presentations from CaiO IV and is the first circus studies dossier published in Colombia. Our call for papers for CALS yielded such a rich response that we have curated two dedicated CaiO CALS issues, with the second (5.1) to appear in June 2026. The variety of papers published here, along with those that will appear in issue 5.1, reflect some of the multiplicities of style, content and language that have marked Circus and its Others’ inquiries since its beginning.

We curated contributions to this first CaiO CALS issue around the theme “Transgressions and Challenges.” These are concepts that have figured strongly in our project from its outset, as scholars and artists have probed the boundaries, actual and perceived, between circus and other artistic and cultural activities and celebrated circus’s continuing capacity to test norms and open new modes of expression. The five articles in this CALS issue challenge received knowledge about circus on geographical, de/colonial, gendered, environmental and professional terms.

With her “A Gap to be Bridged: Communicating the Value in UK Circus Audience Experience,” Katharine Kavanagh offers a deep dive into the

relationships across messages and meanings vehiculated through professionally crafted materials related to circus performance, from pre-show publicity to journalistic reviews, and audience members' own tellings of their experiences. This audience "reality," for Kavanagh, is rarely recognized to have the same prestige and value as what she suggests is "myth"—that pre-formed and professionally curated idea of what the show is, does and makes us feel. Drawing on a wealth of audience interviews, Kavanagh reveals richness within audience members' experiences, including meaning-enhancing social cues and codes, that cannot be subsumed by language formed in industry-related materials. For her, the audience's own language, with its attendant values, cries for recognition.

Leticia Fonseca Braga Machado's article "Strength Artists and Female Porters: Versions, Inversions and Transversions of the Feminine in Circus," translated by Marta Cotrim, engages with debates about gender in the performing arts, looking specifically at performances by female porters and strong women in the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Machado reads performances by female porters as multivalent exercises in risk—not just the sorts of physical risks often associated with circus, but also social risks that result from challenging normative expectations of gender. This article forms part of Machado's broader exploration of the concept of excess, which "mobilizes limits [and] expands boundaries," creating the potential for "new and more authentic ways of expression and living." Working within Deleuze's tradition of pop philosophy and Charles Feitosa's concept of transversions, Machado explores the practices of female porters including (historically) Sandwina and the Braselly Duo, and the contemporary Alexis Sisters, Kolev Sisters and Raphaela Olivo, amongst others, arguing that collectively their work allows for both a "recognition of the limits" of the gender binary and the potential to think about the body and performance in multiple other ways.

Sarah Norden's "Searching for an Escape: An Autoethnographic Study of Aesthetic Innovation in Professional Circus School" offers a critical gaze upon a constellation of practices and discourses frequently labeled, often in celebratory terms, as "innovation." Drawing on her own experiences at a renowned circus school, Norden points to certain "material constraints, ideological structures, and market incentives," formed across time, that lead to pedagogies and practices that, in her terms, encourage "hyper-individual competition" in the name of innovation. As she works with terms and scholarship that necessarily involve post-Fordism(s) in this context, Norden calls our (critical) attention to the notion that the language we use to talk about our practices is rarely neutral.

In "Circus as a Pedagogy of Fabulation: Reflections Based on the Work of the A Penca Collective," Maria Carolina Vasconcelos Oliveira (translated by Rafael Esteque) discusses how circus arts encourage audiences to broaden their perceptions and "imagine what lies outside the spectrum of the ordinary and

the normative.” Vasconcelos Oliviera explores existing conceptions of risk—in contemporary society and in circus performance—and pushes these further by bringing them into dialogue with contemporary climate emergency and with Indigenous ways of knowing and engaging with the more-than-human world. Along with robust theoretical engagement with thinkers including Ulrich Beck, Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour, the author discusses the work of the Brazilian circus collective A Penca, of which she is a member, which engages with the changing landscape of contemporary São Paulo by incorporating remnants of pruned urban trees in their circus compositions, challenging preconceptions about agency and the animate.

Kristy Seymour’s “Women in Australian Contemporary Circus” offers an important look at work arising in the Australian contemporary circus ecosystem with a focus on the presence—and, at key moments, absence—of women artists and their contributions. Grounding her work within the context of an emergence of third-wave feminism in Australia, Seymour reveals a rich and complex picture of mutually informing feminist aesthetics within local community and contemporary theatre spaces, which in turn helped shape choices by circus troupes with regional, national and international influences, including such “New Circus” companies with global reach as Women’s Circus and Circus Oz. Along the way, Seymour implores us all to continue to ask about “the girl in the red dress,” that figure—not limited to Australian contemporary circus—of a retro-styled woman, outnumbered and tossed about on stage by male artists. Seymour’s presentation here points beyond this figure to real possibilities of multiplicities and equalities of gender(ed) stage presence, suggesting we still have much to learn from understanding the “resistance and persistence of the innovators and trailblazers across the artform’s history.”

It is a thrill for us guest editors to see reviews in this issue of two publications whose inquiries could easily fall into the fold of Circus and its Others research. Katharine Kavanagh (whose own scholarly article appears elsewhere in this issue) offers a review of the latest publication from long-time Circus and its Others contributor Franziska Trapp, *Readings of Contemporary Circus, a Dramaturgy*. Trapp’s work here is both “exciting and ambitious,” in Kavanagh’s reading, as it lays out explorations and definitions for what we have come to know as traditional, new and contemporary circus, offering practical and theoretical analytical tools for helping us all sense the relationships across such terms and specific dramaturgical and creative choices.

Matthew Solomon, in turn, reviews Andrea Ringer’s *Circus World: Roustabouts, Animals, and the Work of Putting on the Big Show*, in which Ringer brings her expertise as a labor historian to bear on circus’s Golden Age in the US, arguing that the uniqueness of this field lay in “its undeniably cosmopolitan workforce of people and animals from around the world.” Ringer’s work resonates with

that of Circus and its Others in its particular focus on laborers whose contributions have been historically undervalued: animals, racialized circus workers and women. Further, Ringer highlights the ways in which many aspects of circus life blurred the lines between public and private, work and leisure, pointing to, for example, the arrival of a circus in town as an occasion for spectatorship and the fact that living spaces for circus families were publicly viewable.

We welcome readers to this first Circus and its Others *CALS* special issue and hope that it both satisfies in its own right and whets readerly appetites for what comes next in *CALS* 5.1.