Narrating Lives and Raising Consciousness Through Dance:

The Performance of (Dis)Ability at Dancing Wheels

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This dissertation titled
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The Performance of (Dis)Ability at Dancing Wheels

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ABSTRACT

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Narrating Lives and Raising Consciousness Through Dance:

The Performance of (Dis)Ability at Dancing Wheels (485 pp.)

Directors of Dissertation: Lynn M. Harter and J. W. Smith

This dissertation explores how discourses of difference sustain and disrupt the separation and marginalization of individuals with disabilities from the world of art, specifically dance. I enter the discussion through a case study of The Dancing Wheels Company & School—Art in Motion in Cleveland, Ohio. Dancing Wheels is the first modern dance company in America to integrate professional stand-up and sit-down (wheelchair) dancers. Through its performances, this organization challenges assumptions of difference as members perform a counter-narrative of disability. Mary Verdi-Fletcher, President and Founding Artistic Director of The Dancing Wheels Company & School, a pioneer in the field of integrated dance, started the company in 1980. For more than a quarter of a century, Dancing Wheels has performed, taught, and inspired children and adults of all abilities around the world. Additionally, Dancing Wheels provides innovative employment opportunities by supporting artistic integration between individuals with and without disabilities. In bearing witness to the lived experiences of artists (with and without disabilities) who have traditionally been excluded from public discourse, I provide insight into how members organize resources (material, corporeal, and symbolic) and aesthetic and instrumental rationalities for social change.

Using the frameworks of post-structural feminism and narrative theory, I collected discourse related to Dancing Wheels through participant observation, in-depth
interviews with dancers, staff and board members, and document analysis. The results of
the data collection and analysis are presented in light of three research questions: How is
disability storied and performed at Dancing Wheels?; How do the discourses of Dancing
Wheels reinscribe and/or resist dominant narratives of disability?; How do legal,
economic, and corporeal issues shape how Dancing Wheels enacts disability?

The results covered five themes: Meaning in Motion: (Re)storying Persons,
Organizations, and Publics Through Dance; The Art of Dialogue in Integrated Dance;
Aesthetic Knowledge and Sensemaking in Organizational Life at Dancing Wheels;
Science, Technology, Medicine, and the Dancing (Dis)abled Body; and Moving Through
Realms of Exclusion and Inclusion in Integrated Dance. Ultimately I argue that this
organization (re)inscribes dance and (dis)ability through dialogic, aesthetic, and
narratively based communication, performances, and practices.

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to those who work to make the world more inclusive.

A few who have influenced my life:

Lynn M. Harter, my mentor, expanded my understanding of what it means to live with a disability;

Jack and Marty Quinlan, my parents, were my first disability advocates;

Mrs. Sharon Wickland (1937-2008), my resource room teacher, taught me that having disability does not mean you are any less of a person;

Mrs. Jane Mathias, my high school guidance counselor, taught me to advocate for myself;

Laura Ellingson, my academic auntie, taught me that our bodies have a lot to teach us;

Mary Verdi-Fletcher, President and Founding Artistic Director of the Dancing Wheels Company & School, taught me about what an integrated society can be.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

“No story sits by itself. Sometimes stories meet at corners and sometimes they cover one another completely, likes stones beneath a river” (Albom, 2003, p. 10).

I’m working on a dream
Though sometimes it feels so far away
I’m working on a dream
And I know it will be mine someday

Rain pourin’ down, I swing my hammer
My hands are rough from working on a dream
I’m working on a dream—Bruce Springsteen

My story does not stand alone, I humbly stand with many stories of love and support as I worked on this dissertation, my dream:

To my dearest mentor, Lynn M. Harter, who guided me along every step (bird by bird) even before I arrived at Ohio University. It was an honor to be able to grow with you. With your love and generosity, I have learned so much and have been challenged in ways that I have never imagined possible. I have a richer understanding of the world from my feminist, narrative, dialogic, and aesthetic sensibilities—all inspired by our shared passion of social justice. Every precious minute you put into me as a person and my scholarship has shaped the person I am and continue to be—I look forward to the ways in which our relationship will grow and shift as we continue to co-learn together. I suspect we are both a good tired.

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To my mother and father, Marty and Jack Quinlan, “Can you believe I AM going to be a DOCTOR?” I admire your willingness let me follow my dreams and your help and love along the way.

To Bridget and Michael, I am blessed to have you for siblings. Andrew, welcome to our family!

Aunt Kathy Spicciati, my most meticulous editor, you never miss a “colon” or a “comma.” I have learned so much through your editorial comments.

To the Haff family (Kathy, Bob, Krissy, and Derek), thank you for your love—I am blessed to have Cape Cod as a second home.

Marie Thompson, trusted friend and workout partner, I feel blessed to have done this journey with you—you are an inspiration and I appreciate your loving advice, inspiring stories, and commitment to relationships.

Joe Mazer, my fantastic job coach and friend, thank you for your willingness to work closely with me as I worked through graduate school.

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Finally, I would like to thank The Dancing Wheels Company & School for allowing me to be part of your organization. I admire the work you do and hope my research continues to help you make space for alternative understandings of disability.
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CHAPTER ONE:

Problem Statement

In June 2007, I attended and participated in the 25th annual summer adult dance workshop at The Dancing Wheels Company & School—Art in Motion (Dancing Wheels) in Cleveland, Ohio. Dancing Wheels is a modern dance company and school that fosters collaborations between individuals with and without disabilities. When I arrived, I was not sure if I was actually going to dance with other performers or simply volunteer. However, Jenita McGowen, the educational coordinator, stressed, “The best way to learn what we are all about is to jump on in.” I literally “jumped” in. I remember saying to myself, “whatever you do, try to blend in and at all costs avoid standing out.” I hoped that my thirteen years of Irish step dance training would come back to me and somehow pay off over the next week. Based on my research, I knew that Dancing Wheels considers itself a modern dance company. Still, I entered the field unaware of the differences between modern dance and ballet. The warm-up exercises seemed foreign and yet resembled ballet. Luckily, a professional dancer would demonstrate each move and I was expected to follow. I soon found that my legs were tight in the hamstrings and did not elongate like those of the professional stand-up dancers. I was appalled when I realized that I could no longer touch my toes. Also, when I jumped, I noted that I needed to figure out how to get rid of the thump that my feet were making. When I was about to approach a jump, I kept repeating in my head, “please, this time, do not sound like an Oaf.” About two days into the dance workshop, I became tired of the mirrors at the front of the studio. We practiced from 9 am to 3 pm, and I did not like looking at my body all day. I started
to become fixated on the fat roll that extended over my yoga pants that I had rarely paid attention to. Also, I became discouraged that my hips and butt stood out more than the professional dancers’. Constantly comparing myself to the stand-up dancers, I kindly reminded myself that I am “built different” from these dancers and that I should be grateful for all of the time that I have spent in the gym and on the bike path that has allowed me the stamina to perform in the workshop. Interestingly, I was noticing parts of my body that I did not usually pay attention to. After my experience at the workshop, I became more aware of why it is that dancers have a high rate of eating disorders (see also Hamilton, Brooks-Gunn, & Warren, 2005). It was as if I had a heightened awareness of my body. While we were preparing for our performance at the end of the week, Mark Tomasic, a Dancing Wheels choreographer, asked me to partner with Mark Daurelio, a handsome sit-down dancer who had been paralyzed in a motor cross accident. This was the first time that I had ever partnered with a sit-down dancer and my hands began to shake. I hoped that Mark Daurelio would not notice that my hands were shaking. Mark Tomasic, the choreographer, told me that we would be dancing across the stage and I would pull Mark Daurelio and then fall on my hip behind him. Mark Daurelio would then roll back and grab my hand and then we would continue across the stage and repeat that pattern three times. What Mark Tomasic did not realize was I had never been asked to fall on the ground and had no idea what I was doing. My first practice fall was far from graceful. I was embarrassed and joked with Mark Daurelio that he had the worst partner. He was kind and said I was doing fine, but asked that I when I fall that I keep my legs out of his way because he was fearful that he would run over them when he
wheeled back to grab my hand and continue the routine. After a bit Mary Verdi-Fletcher and Mark Tomasic had to teach me the right way to fall, so that my legs would lie in a straight line with the rest of my body. Of course, by the end of the week, I had a visible bruise on my left hip. However, I left the studio with much more including a heightened awareness about the aesthetic and creative possibilities for organizing around differences including (dis)abilities.

Census 2000 reported that one in five Americans over the age of five lives with one or more medically diagnosed disabilities (Waldrop & Stern, 2003). Disability has been defined by U.S. Public Law 36-101, more commonly known as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), as “(a) a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of such individual; (b) a record of such an impairment; or (c) being regarded as having such an impairment” (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990, para. 1). The majority of the 49.7 million Americans who are considered medically disabled are described as having somewhat to very severe disabilities (National Organization on Disability, 2000). People living with disabilities are more likely to live in poverty and/or be underemployed. Not surprisingly, interdisciplinary literature points to the segregation of people with disabilities from broader public life including educational, economic, and social opportunities (see also, Coopman, 2003; Thompson, 2000; Wilson & Lewiecki-Wilson, 2001). Funk (1987), for example, argued, “People who are disabled have historically been treated as objects of pity and fear—individuals who are incapable and neither expected nor willing to participate in or contribute to organized society” (p. 342).
Over the past thirty years, disability rights movements have evolved in the United States and helped to foster legislative initiatives that seek to ensure access to public domains for people living with disabilities (Fleischer & Zames, 2001; Longmore & Umansky, 2001; Shapiro, 1993). Of particular note are two significant pieces of legislation, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 and the New Freedom Initiative of 2001. Under the ADA, disability was defined, employers were required to provide “reasonable accommodations” for persons with disabilities (PWDs) in the workplace, and discrimination against people with disabilities was prohibited in employment in state and local government, public accommodations, commercial facilities, transportation, and telecommunications. Eleven years later, President George W. Bush took the ADA a step further in the 2001 New Freedom Initiative. This initiative was part of a nationwide effort to remove barriers to community living for PWDs by: (1) increasing access to assistive and universally designed technologies; (2) expanding educational opportunities; (3) promoting homeownership; (4) integrating Americans with disabilities into the workforce; (5) expanding transportation options; and (6) promoting full access to community life.

Numerous disability rights activists applaud the development and implementation of policies to redress historical forms of discrimination adversely impacting people with disabilities (e.g., Colvert & Smith, 2000). Legislative initiatives are necessary to help integrate people with disabilities into mainstream organizational and civic life. Yet, legislative solutions fail to reach their potential if they are not accompanied by organizational and cultural shifts in attitudes and values (e.g., Buzzanell, 1995; Kirby &
Krone, 2002). In their study of the implementation of work-family policies, for example, Kirby and Krone (2002) argued “interpersonal, organizational, and public discourse surrounding the organizational policies impact the structuring of the policies and, ultimately, policy implementation in that written policies may differ from policies ‘in-use’” (p. 51). Buzzanell (1995), too, advanced a discursive perspective for understanding how we communicate in ways that reinscribe or disrupt the “glass ceiling.” Policies that target systemic forms of discrimination like gender inequities in the labor force often address effects but fail to fully acknowledge the discursive processes through which segregation and separation are maintained or disrupted. Communication scholars are uniquely equipped to explore the discursive organizing of differences that are consequential including (dis)abilities (see also Harter et al., 2006).

As a health and organizational communication scholar, I am interested in how subject positions (e.g., citizen, employee, sick role, patient) are made possible (or not) in and through discursive formations. My understanding of discourse is informed by Lupton (1994), who offered the following definition:

Discourse, in this usage, can be described as a pattern of words, figures of speech, concepts, values, and symbols. A discourse is a coherent way of describing and categorizing the social and physical worlds. Discourses gather around an object, person, social group or event of interest, providing a means of “making sense” of that object, person… all discourses are textual, or expressed in texts, inter-textual, drawing upon other texts and their discourse to achieve meaning, and contextual, embedded in historical, political, and cultural settings. (p. 20)
As a feminist, I am interested not only in the constitutive power of discourse in evoking certain subjectivities but also in its likely material consequences (e.g., poverty, unemployment). It is these theoretical and activist commitments that initially drew me to Dancing Wheels Company & School—Art in Motion. By organizing around difference in aesthetic ways, Dancing Wheels is attempting to disrupt historical patterns of economic and social isolation among people with disabilities.

Through my dissertation, I explored how dance (as accomplished at Dancing Wheels) is both vocation and expression. Through this studio, dance offers employment opportunities but also allows individuals to aesthetically and creatively express self and connect with others. A case in point: By volunteering as a dancer with Dancing Wheels, I imaginatively collaborated with individuals whom I otherwise would not have known, such as Mark Daurelio. Coopman (2003) called for research that “examines the ways in which organizations and institutions define or create disability through their common practices” (p. 42). My dissertation answers this call by exploring the ways in which Dancing Wheels offers alternative ways of defining, understanding, performing, and organizing around disability as a form of difference.

In the remainder of this chapter, I provide an overview of the historical context of employment among people with disabilities. I then situate Dancing Wheels amidst a growing number of organizations that are mobilizing around differences like disability in aesthetic ways. Finally, I provide a brief history of Dancing Wheels. In Chapter Two, I articulate my theoretical standpoint as informed by post-structural feminism and narrative theory-praxis and illustrate its usefulness for advancing embodied and aesthetic
approaches to disability studies. I conclude Chapter Two with a section about the ways in which cultural practices have marked the disabled body. In Chapter Three, I outline my methods of data collection: fieldwork that was informed by participant observations of work in the studio and performances, in-depth interviews with studio stakeholders, and documents about the organization.

Historical Overview of Employment Among People With Disabilities

Legislation such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 (IDEA), the Rehabilitation Act and Amendments, and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) shares values of inclusion and integration. Historically the rights of individuals with disabilities were diminished within mainstream discourses. Often individuals with disabilities were excluded and isolated from society, seen as evil or different or abused (Fleischer & Zames, 2001).

According to Mitra (2006), social inequalities experienced by individuals with disabilities include continual high rates of unemployment, poverty, and segregation in school settings, transportation and structural barriers. As recently thirty years ago, individuals with disabilities were not allowed to attend public schools (Eastes, 1994). Although perceptions of individuals with disabilities have improved, there are still blatant forms of discrimination (Eastes, 1994).

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2000), Census 2000 found that 9.3 million individuals live with a sensory disability (i.e., sight or hearing); 21.2 million with a physical condition (limiting walking, climbing, and/or carrying objects; 12.4 million with physical, mental or emotional condition (influencing memory and/or learning); 6.8
million, with physical, mental, or emotional condition (influencing movement at home, dressing, and/or bathing); 18.2 million of those aged 16 and older, with a condition that affects one’s ability to move outside the home; and 21.3 million of those aged 16-64 with a condition that affected their ability to be employed. Today, about 50 million Americans, or one in five people, are living with at least one disability, and most Americans will experience a disability at some time during the course of their lives (Waldrop & Stern, 2003). In 2000, the National Organization on Disability (NOD) found that out of 1,000 individuals with disabilities surveyed, approximately 32% work full or part time. In comparison, out of approximately 1000 individuals without medically diagnosed disabilities who were surveyed, 81% worked full time or part time. Harris Interactive, Inc. (2000) reported that, among the employed, satisfaction with working is somewhat hindered by having a disability. Some forms of discrimination reported included reduced pay compared to those with similar positions, being given less responsibility, and denial of accommodations, interviews and promotions. Given that a person’s career is a source of economic independence, social identification, and relationships, these trends are alarming (Moore et al., 2006).

President George W. Bush in the New Freedom Initiative focused on integrating individuals with disabilities into all phases of community life, including workforce participation (U.S. Department of Labor, 2001). Despite national and state legislation promoting the employment of individuals with disabilities, approximately 76% of adults with developmental disabilities are served by facility-based services such as sheltered workshops (Braddock et al., 2005). Some scholars are concerned that coworkers without
disabilities may have negative attitudes toward their colleagues with disabilities, which could ultimately lead those with disabilities to leave their employment (Conley, 1986; Perrin, 1999). The 2006 American Community Services report stated that employment for individuals with disabilities (ages 21-64) was 37.8 percent, while employment for individuals without disabilities was 80.4 percent in Ohio (Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Disability Demographics and Statistics, 2007).

Disability rights activists have worked to raise consciousness and shift societal practices in order to foster inclusion of diverse individuals in civic life. Yet, even President George W. Bush argued, “Our work is not finished. The millions of Americans with disabilities continue to face physical barriers and false perceptions” (Bush, 2004, n.p.). In A State of the Union Address for Americans with Disabilities 2004, the National Organization on Disability (NOD) called on Americans to prioritize the inclusion of people with disabilities in all facets of community life. The NOD (2004) emphasized that “[e]mployers need to think outside the box; some people who are stuck in the mailroom might be able to contribute in the boardroom” (National Organization on Disability, 2004, n. p.).

In the past few years, several organizations have turned to art as an avenue for expressive and social development for marginalized populations, including people with disabilities. Putnam and Feldstein (2003), for example, described the Shipyard Project in Portsmouth, New Hampshire which relied on dance to bring diverse people together to build on and develop everyone’s capacities for creativity. In similar fashion, Dutton (2001) explored a three-month drama group at a youth center in an urban area of New
England that provided educational, recreational, and leisure activities to at-risk youth. In some cases, arts-based programs extend activities into the vocational realm. Passion Works, a collaborative art studio for individuals with developmental disabilities, is located in a sheltered workshop in Athens, Ohio. The studio has created employment opportunities for individuals with and without disabilities by marketing fine art and products developed through fine art such as jewelry and greeting cards (see also, Harter et al., 2006, 2008; Harter, Norander, & Quinlan, 2007). Artful experiences are by no means a panacea for addressing the harsh inequities sometimes experienced by people marked as disabled (see also, Harter & Thompson, 2008). Yet, as argued by Harter et al. (2006), for the individuals served by Passion Works, artful encounters “do offer nonobvious, collectively created, and edifying means for appraising, grasping, and coping with the world” (p. 28). Like Passion Works, Dancing Wheels offers alternative employment opportunities for individuals too often unemployed or underemployed and segregated away from mainstream sectors. In the next section, I focus attention on organizations whose missions include dance as a form of community building among people with various abilities.

Organizations with Dance and Disability Missions

Although there are many individuals with disabilities who perform, this dissertation focuses on organizations interested in dance and disability. The Dancing Wheels Company & School—Art in Motion is one of numerous organizations that use dance as a vehicle for transforming public understandings of disability. In this section, I describe different organizations with various understandings of dance and disability.
Dance for People with Disabilities

There are several organizations with a dance and disability focus that intend to create space in dance for people with disabilities in the world of dance. Petra Kuppers is a disability culture activist and the founder and Artistic Director of The Olimpias, a collaborative group for individuals with disabilities who express themselves through artistic performances (dance, poetry, and photography). The Olimpias hopes to make space for dancers with disabilities in a collaborative effort (see also, Kuppers, 2008; Kuppers et al., 2008). This group is designed to “raise important questions about contemporary disability culture aesthetics and the connections between culture and labor and aesthetics” (http://www-personal.umich.edu/~petra/tiresias.htm; see also, www.olimpias.org). Another group with a dance and disability focus is Anjali Dance Company, a professional contemporary dance company in London composed only of dancers with learning disabilities. In 1995, the company was started by Nicole Thomson-Stewart as a series of integrated workshops. The goal of this company is to challenge prejudices, generate a new dance aesthetic, and demonstrate the creative potential of people with a learning disability (http://www.anjali.co.uk/).

Victoria Marks, a choreographer and professor at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), choreographs dance for people with disabilities, such as those suffering from post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Marks organizes workshops that allow for improvisations between veterans and artists that led to stage performances for audiences in Los Angeles. Through dance movements, veterans are able to narrate their stories (Joseph, 2008). It is within this growing movement of organizations that rely on
dance for expressive, and sometimes vocational, purposes that Dancing Wheels emerged. Indeed, Dancing Wheels has been a leader of this movement.

Collaborative Dance and Disability Mission

The Dancing Wheels Company & School—Art in Motion is a premier integrated dance company that attempts to make space in the dance world for the collaboration of people with and without disabilities. In this section, I describe dance organizations that collaboratively integrate individuals with and without disabilities in dance in an effort to illustrate how Dancing Wheels is situated within a growing movement of organizations across the United States. AXIS Dance Company, based in San Francisco, California, and founded in 1987 (seven years after Dancing Wheels), seeks to create and perform aesthetically pleasing contemporary dance that is developed through the collaboration of dancers with and without disabilities. I was able to see AXIS perform at a dance and disability conference (Dance Under Construction 2008 Willing and Able: Re-Figuring Dance, Performance, and Disability) in Berkeley, California, in April 2008. AXIS, under the direction of Judith Smith, artistic director, teaches dance and educates about collaboration and disability through community outreach and education programs. AXIS is committed to promoting and sustaining physically integrated dance in local, national, and international contexts (www.axisdance.org).

In 1991, CandoCo was established in an effort to use dance as a truly integrated outlet for dancers with and without disabilities. It is now a well-known and accomplished member of the British contemporary dance scene. Using Martha Graham-based technique and Contact Improvisation, artistic directors Celeste Dandeker and Adam Benjamin have
established a seven-member dance company that has won a number of prominent awards for its performances, videos, and films (www.candoco.co.uk). In 1993, Victoria Marks from UCLA choreographed Outside In, a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) documentary (Marks & Williams, 1993).

Revolutions Dance, founded by Dwayne Scheuneman and co-founded by Amie Fishinger in 2005, is based in Miami, Florida. In 1995, Dwayne was injured, he started to dance in his wheelchair in 2001. Revolutions Dance is a “professional dance company comprised of the area’s most innovative artists both with and without disabilities… Revolutions Dance holds the philosophy that everyone can dance” (http://revdance.org/about.htm).

Common Ground Sign Dance Theatre is a company of deaf and hearing performers creating a performance style that is a fusion of expressive dance, sign-theatre, live original music, and, most recently, Caribbean dance. Deaf artists, along with hearing counterparts, founded the company and are fundamentally influential in how the company’s work is created and how the company is operated (http://www.signdance.com/). Founded in 1980 and based in London, Amici Dance Theatre Company, a large professional company (20-30 members) integrates performers with physical disabilities, learning difficulties, sensory impairments and performers without disabilities. It was founded by Wolfgang Stange, who brings his German Expressionist dance background to evening-length works which often center around dark and serious subjects and are created with an eye to vivid impact (http://www.amicidance.org/).
Another representation of using dance with children with disabilities, especially little girls with cerebral palsy, is Joann Ferrara’s studio in the Bronx, New York (Thompson, 2008). According to Daniels (2006):

… [girls with disabilities] enter Joann Ferrara’s ballet studio, their casts and walkers are left at the door and they become ballerinas. “Miss Joann,” as the girls call her, is their instructor. She’s a physical therapist who realized early on something not explained in any medical textbook. “I was treating some of the children,” she says, “and we would in physical therapy do activities that resemble ballet and I saw how much they loved it.” And not just the ballet moves, but things that really matter to little girls: Fairy tales, glitter, and anything pink. Even more, they like their teacher, who celebrates every step for what it is—an accomplishment. Ferrara pairs each ballerina with a special helper, a teenager who volunteers her time moving little arms and legs that can’t move on their own.

(n. p.)

Danceability, Inc., based in my hometown, Buffalo, New York, also runs a dance program for children and adults with disabilities as well as their families. I have volunteered at this studio. This program was started in 2007 by Robin Bishop and Christine Kwiatkowski. The program provides weekly dance instruction to children and adults with special needs. The family-focused approach seeks to improve quality of life for those challenged with special needs, as well as for their families. The classes focus on individuals’ abilities, motivations, and love for music, and movement, while expanding their potential within a group or individual setting. The program promotes physical,
social, and emotional wellness in an environment that embraces acceptance and tolerance for all, while being an enjoyable form of exercise (http://www.danceabilityinc.com/). In the next section, I narrow my focus to an overview of the development and evolution of Dancing Wheels.

An Overview of Dancing Wheels

The Dancing Wheels Company & School—Art in Motion is the first modern dance company in America to integrate professional stand-up and sit-down (wheelchair) dancers (Grohol, 2005; McMahon, 2000; Ule-Grohol, 1995). They partner with Professional Flair to bring educational outreach to audiences. Mary Verdi-Fletcher, President and Founding Artistic Director, and a pioneer in the field of integrated dance, started the company in 1980. For more than a quarter of a century, Dancing Wheels has performed, taught, and inspired children and adults of all abilities around the world. In the United States, the company presents more than 100 performances reaching a collective audience of 125,000 each year (www.dancingwheels.org). Through the School of Dancing Wheels in their fully accessible studios, the organization provides Community Dance Classes, Summer Dance Workshops, Theatre Arts Camps, Teacher Training Workshops, and specialized classes in Cleveland. Dancing Wheels also produces as well as lecture/performances, workshops, residencies, and main stage performances both at home and nationwide, annually reaching over 120,000 individuals in the greater Cleveland area and throughout the country. Through these innovative programs that integrate arts and recreational activities with career opportunities and
training, Dancing Wheels are committed to changing the apathy, negativity, and fear that surround the education, employment, and inclusion of persons with disabilities in the arts.

Professional Flair/Dancing Wheels has long been recognized as an authority on accessibility to the arts for people of all disabilities (www.dancingwheels.org). Now entering its 28th year, Professional Flair/Dancing Wheels continues in its mission to educate, integrate, and employ people with and without disabilities in the arts through outreach activities, public performances, and advocacy. The organization affords people with disabilities distinctive learning and performing experiences in the arts—experiences that work to ensure equality and integration of individuals with and without disabilities whose experiences and ages are wide and diverse (www.dancingwheels.org).

According to their Web site, Professional Flair Dancing Wheels has four main goals: (1) to develop activities between individuals with and without disabilities that expand opportunities for integration in the arts; (2) to dispel negative myths and stereotypes surrounding the employment of individuals with disabilities in professional careers, primarily in the arts; (3) to offer individuals with disabilities positive role models that are motivated, independent, creative, and successful; and, (4) to instill a greater understanding and level of professionalism in individuals with and without disabilities. In general, Dancing Wheels utilizes the arts as a vehicle through which to broaden thinking and redress issues of inclusion facing people with disabilities.

The mission of Dancing Wheels is not surprising in light of the “mobilizing narrative” (Miller, Geist-Martin, & Beatty, 2005) of its founder. Born with spina bifida and by means of a wheelchair for mobility, Mary Verdi-Fletcher faced vast obstacles in
her pursuit to dance professionally. In 1980, Verdi-Fletcher created Dancing Wheels. The immediate and continuing success of this venture confirmed the need for people with disabilities to have access to the arts as participants and spectators and led to the establishment of Professional Flair, Inc., in 1989. In short, Verdi-Fletcher’s autobiographical story (shaped by broader narrative and material forces in the United States) gave rise to Professional Flair, a 501© 3 nonprofit organization that serves as the parent organization for Dancing Wheels and provides career opportunities and training in the arts for people with disabilities. Dancing Wheels employs approximately eleven dancers (including both stand-up and sit-down) at any given time.

Dancing Wheels represents a valuable context for exploring discourses of disability because of their innovative use of artful activity for both expressive and employment purposes. Since it began in 1980, Dancing Wheels has offered alternative vocational opportunities for individuals with disabilities. At the core of Dancing Wheels appears to be a different understanding of disability. Their philosophy seems to represent a shift away from a narrow biomedical approach that focuses its attention primarily on the corporeal experience of disability, sometimes to the exclusion of other meanings and possibilities (see also, Coopman, 2003). Even so, the corporeal experience of (dis)ability at Dancing Wheels cannot be denied and must be acknowledged and addressed. By engaging in fieldwork including participant observations, interviews, and document analysis, I sought to explore discourses of disability that compete and collide within the context of Dancing Wheels.
Summary

At the heart of this project is a concern with signifying systems, or discourse. Discourse shapes the way we think, speak, and interpret the world. It is a social practice (Fairclough, 1989). Our social reality is constituted through discourse. As such, discourse has the power to shape the subject positions of individuals in society, including those with disabilities (Rioux & Bach, 1994). In order to understand the roots of inequality, marginalization, and disadvantage, as well as the empowerment experienced by people with disabilities, we must explore the meaning and origin of the words and images about disabilities that form part of the cultural codes we all take for granted and in which we are all immersed (Woodhill, 1994).

An increasing interest in the discursive accomplishment of disability is evident in contemporary literature. Our language is unavoidably embodied (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). Indeed, disability scholars often critique how disability devaluation is embedded in language (Galvin, 2003; Quinlan & Bates, 2008). Garland-Thomson (1997), for example, urged scholars to explore the metaphorical systems that mark the body as disabled:

These devices need to be analyzed in an array of cultural products to understand their meanings and functions, and to subvert power… This grammar of embodiment culturally normalizes the American [ideal] and abnormalizes the freak [disabled]. (Linton, 1998, p. 65)

Other disability scholars call for examination of language in assigning meaning to disability. Consider Linton’s (1998) claim:
[O]f interest here are the linguistic conventions that structure the meanings assigned to disability and the patterns of response that emanate from, or are attended upon, those meanings… The disability community has attempted to wrest control of the language from the previous owners, and reassign meaning to the terminology used to describe disability and disabled people. (p. 8)

This discursive turn among disability scholars parallels the work of communication scholars interested in the social construction of organizing, health, and healing. Many organizational communication scholars emphasize that authentic and possible forms of social organization are realized through discourse (e.g., Buzzanell & Liu, 2005; Deetz, Broadfoot, & Anderson, 2004). From this perspective, organizing is defined and contested in discourses and signifying practices. Social meanings can make possible or deter particular forms of organizing. For example, if the metaphor of “disability as medical condition” is the dominant frame for understanding disability, then organizing practices may reflect a deficit-oriented perspective in which the goal of organizing is to address or fix the “problem” of disability (Coopman, 2003). In fact, Coopman (2003) argued that organizing around the difference of disability continues to reflect this dominant metaphor. From this perspective, disability is often envisioned as a medical condition in which individuals’ bodies are regarded as sickly and in need of repair. Individuals with disabilities are frequently described as “suffering from” or “afflicted with” certain conditions. Saying someone is suffering from a condition implies that there is a perpetual state of suffering, uninterrupted by pleasurable moments or satisfactions. Although some people may experience their disability this way, these terms
are not used as descriptors of a verified experience but are projected onto disability (Linton, 2006). As Lupton (2003) pointed out, such discourses of the biomedical model have served as a control function (they enable as they constrain). Lupton (2003) asserted, “Some view medical knowledge as neutral, while others emphasize the social control function of discourses, arguing that such knowledge and its attendant practices reinforce the position of powerful interests to the exclusion of others” (p. 13).

Through my interactions with Dancing Wheels, I witnessed how sit-down dancers try to resist these dominant discourses of disability. Similar to what Ashcraft (2000, 2001) termed an alternative discourse community, Dancing Wheels appears to challenge the ways in which difference and power intersect (see also Harter et al., 2006). Through my dissertation, I sought to explore how this is accomplished. In order to do this, I coupled a post-structural feminist standpoint with narrative theory and praxis. In the next chapter, I highlight key aspects of my post-structural and narrative standpoint—sensibilities that shaped how I framed and encountered the context of Dancing Wheels and its participants. These sensibilities shaped how I ethnographically explored how participants of Dancing Wheels narrated their lives, raised consciousness about disability-related issues, and mobilized resources for social change.
CHAPTER TWO:
A Post-Structural Feminist and Narrative Theoretical Standpoint

Understanding the discursive practices of Dancing Wheels demands an entry point. When thinking about theoretical frameworks to guide my dissertation research, I was most drawn to theories which are “answerable to life” (Weedon, 1987, p. 1). Throughout my work with Dancing Wheels, I wanted to explore the processes through which “practical exigencies give rise to theoretical problems” (Fraser, 1989, p. 6). I found it helpful to bring together post-structural feminism and narrative theory as they are loosely united in their attempts to remain answerable to life by offering accounts for relations between individuals and society, agency and structure, subjectivity and signifying practices, as well as the material consequences of those practices. Post-structural feminist and narrative theory focused my attention on the ways in which organizing and power are realized through discourses at Dancing Wheels. In this chapter, I highlight central concepts that formed my theoretical standpoint and illustrate their value for fostering aesthetic and embodied approaches to disability studies and movements for social change. First, I lay out key tenets of post-structural and feminist theory. I then couple this work with narrative theory-praxis. Finally, I offer understandings of cultural locations of the disabled body.

Post-structural Feminism as a Way of Knowing

*We need a theory that can analyze the workings of patriarchy in all its manifestations—ideological, institutional, organizational, subjective—accounting not only for continuities but also for change over time. We need theory that will*
let us think in terms of pluralities and diversities rather than of unities and universals. We need theory that will break the conceptual hold, at least, of those long traditions of (Western) philosophy that have systematically and repeatedly construed the world hierarchically in terms of masculine universals and feminine specificities. We need theory that will enable us to articulate alternative ways of thinking about (and thus acting upon) gender without either simply reversing the old hierarchies or confirming them. And we need a theory that will be useful and relevant for practical practice. (Scott, 1990, p. 134)

In order to understand post-structural feminism, it is important to lay out key philosophical tenets of post-structuralism. Post-structuralism is often used as a synonym to postmodernism. Both post-structuralism and postmodernism aim to question hegemonic forms of “rationality” found in modernist theory and practice through the process of deconstruction. Flax (1990) stated:

Postmodern discourses are all deconstructive in that they seek to distance us from and make us skeptical about beliefs concerning truth, knowledge, power, the self, and language that are taken for granted within, and serve as legitimation for, contemporary Western culture. (p. 41)

Although the terms post-structuralism and post-structuralist thought are connected with the work of Althusser, Lacan, Derrida, and Barthes among others, in organizational communication theory it is the work of Foucault that has inspired most post-structural and feminist agendas (see an overview by Broadfoot, Deetz, & Anderson, 2004). In articulating my theoretical standpoint, I draw on the original work of Foucault and
contemporary feminist scholars, primarily the work of Weedon (1987), Fraser (1989), and Buzzanell (1995).

My understanding of a post-structural epistemology is informed primarily by the work of Foucault, who was mainly focused on deconstructing linguistic structures that maintained (or disrupted) dominate systems of power (Foucault, 1978, 1980b, 1982). Drawing on Foucault, Tyner (1994) argued:

Poststructuralists asks [sic] fundamental questions about language, meaning, and subjectivity. In particular, poststructural approaches disrupt meaning, labels, and categories; in other words, poststructuralism challenges terms that are assumed to be natural and unchanging. In so doing, poststructuralists propose that the distinctions we make are not necessarily given by the world around us but are instead produced by symbolizing systems we learn. (p. 9)

Organizational communication scholars, for example, have relied on post-structural theory to question the discursive processes (e.g., performance appraisal interviews, interview recruitment practices) through which instrumental rationalities—ways of knowing, that focus on efficiency and productivity—have come to be privileged at the expense of other ways of knowing such as intuition and empathy (e.g., Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Buzzanell, 1995).

Post-structuralists direct attention to how discursive practices give rise to, reinscribe, and/or disrupt social structures and subject positions available to individuals. Weedon (1997) concurred:
For poststructural theory, the common factor in the analysis of social organization, social meanings, power and individual consciousness is language… All forms of poststructuralism assume that meaning is constituted within language and is not guaranteed by the subject which speaks it. (pp. 21-23)

Although I agree that language is a primary discursive form, I join other scholars who adopt a broader perspective to include visual images, photographs, the body, architecture, and even performances like dance as discursive forms (e.g., Finnegan, 2003; Foss, 1988).

Importantly, Fraser and Nicholson (1990) see the concerns of both post-structuralism and feminism as so interconnected that a useful blending of both is worth articulating:

Feminists, like postmodernists, have sought to develop new paradigms of social criticism which do not rely on traditional philosophical underpinnings. They have criticized modern foundationalist epistemologies and moral and political theories, exposing the contingent, partial, and historically situated character of what has passed in the mainstream for necessary, universal, and ahistorical truths. And they have called into question the dominant philosophical project of seeking objectivity in the guise of a “God’s eye view” which transcends any situation or perspective. (p. 26)

Post-structural feminists are skeptical of a truth with a capital T and hope to challenge what has been taken as natural. Additionally, they attempt to problematize Enlightenment beliefs, and the philosophy of an ideal, individualized, rational, and stable self and society. Thus, post-structural developments in understanding discourse, knowledge, and
power can serve feminist interests. As a mode of knowledge construction, post-structural feminism explores connections between signifying practices and subjectivities in order to understand existing power relations (Fraser, 1989; Weedon, 1987).

I organize my discussion of post-structural feminism around several key concepts including (1) discourse and materiality; (2) subjectivities; (3) knowledge, meaning, and power; (4) difference; and (5) social change. Although I address each of these concepts separately, as applied in post-structural feminist work they function interdependently to illustrate how organizations, labor, health, and lived differences are both integral and an outcome of discourses (e.g., Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004).

**Discourse and Materiality**

Post-structural feminists are concerned with the consequentiality of discourse. Relying on the work of Foucault and his understanding of discursive formations, I understand discourse to be social forces in which practices, philosophies, customs, norms, attitudes and strategies become known as well as the social forces which are not easily identified. Weedon (1987) defined discourse as:

… ways of constituting knowledge, together with social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them… Neither the body nor thoughts and feelings have meanings outside their discursive articulation, but the ways in which discourse constitutes the minds and bodies of individuals is always part of a wider network of power relations, often with institutional bases. (p. 108)
More simply, Scott (2003) suggested, “Discourse is not a language or a text but a historically, socially and institutionally specific structure of statements, terms, categories, and beliefs” (p. 379). As suggested in Chapter One, Lupton (1994) directed scholars’ attention to the textual, intertextual, and contextual features of discourse.

Post-structural feminists, through analysis of discourse, are interested in understanding the workings of power in order to question whose interests are served (or not) through dominant structures. Weedon (1987) claimed:

… not all discourses carry equal weight or power. Some will account for and justify the appropriateness of the status quo. Others will give rise to challenge to existing [sic] practices from within or will contest the very basis of current organization and the selective interests which it represents. Such discourses are likely to be marginal to existing practices and dismissed by the hegemonic system of meanings and practices as irrelevant or bad. (pp. 34-35)

Post-structuralists would agree that once discourse becomes normal or natural, it is difficult to imagine and take action outside of it (e.g., St. Pierre, 2000). Even so, organizational and health communication scholars are committed to questioning the sheer tenacity of dominant discourses in order to enlarge possibilities for how we relate and organize.

Post-structural feminists acknowledge the power of language and discourse to shape our thoughts and realities (Lather, 1991; Weedon, 1987). Post-structural feminist scholars pay particular attention to the ways in which signifying practices and language constitute experience. Language is the way we think, speak, and interpret the world. It is
a form of social practice. Language is part of society and, as such, a socially conditioned process (Fairclough, 1989). Post-structural feminists approach discourse as contested terrain—competing ways of giving meaning and of organizing the world (Richardson, 1998). Importantly, most post-structural feminists believe that how we give meaning to our lives depends on the range and social power of existing narratives and metaphors.

“Contextually grounded discourses, vocabularies, and categories are part of local interpretive cultures, resources for defining and classifying aspects of everyday life (Holstein & Miller, 1993, p. 73). As such, one goal of post-structural feminists is to expand the range of possible discourses from which to narrate our lives.

In this study, post-structural feminist theory directs my attention to such questions as How do discourses order the world in particular ways? How do discourses make possible particular forms of organizing? What are the social and material effects of discursive formations? (see also, Bove, 1990, p. 54). These questions allowed me to approach Dancing Wheels as constituted and reproduced through communicative patterns and practices. A post-structural lens also demands that I explore how the textual nature of Dancing Wheels cannot be understood in isolation from its intertextual relations with broader societal forces. Disability at Dancing Wheels, for example, draws its meaning in part from broader societal discourse. Indeed, limitations of dominant ways of performing disability in our society in part gave rise to this alternative discourse community.

Of course, the experience of disability cannot be reduced to the symbolic realm. Cloud (1994) poignantly argued:
We ought not sacrifice the notions of practical truth, bodily reality, and material oppression to the tendency to render all of the experience discursive, as if no one went hungry or died in war. To say that hunger and war are rhetorical is to state the obvious; to suggest that rhetoric is all they are is to leave critique behind. (p. 159).

Cloud challenged scholars to acknowledge interrelationships among material, corporeal, and symbolic experiences. Such moves get us beyond “symbol worship” (see critiques by Cheney, 2000) when we acknowledge and come to terms with the material nature of experience. For example, the label “mental retardation” represents one type of developmental disability. The label engenders eligibility for certain medical benefits—material resources needed by those living with a development disability. Even so, that label lugs with it symbolic baggage from its use beyond medical contexts (e.g., playgrounds) that often leave those living with a developmental disability feeling stigmatized and othered.

Guided by post-structural feminist theory, Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) urged organizational communication scholars to explore the ways in which discourse is both constrained by and generative of material conditions:

First, communication arises in response to (perceived) political and material exigencies. Second, communication takes the material world as its material. Thus discursive formations are inscribed on the body and performed in concrete practices; as such, discourse and communication generate ways of being, seeing,
feeling, and acting in the world. Third, communication can produce material circumstances beyond lived subjectivities. (p. xxvii)

Indeed, many post-structural feminists agree that discourses must situate themselves in material practices and be dispersed across institutions in order to be powerful. Wood (1994) summarized this position when she argued that “structuring institutions and practices are, in turn, embodied in concrete activities that simultaneously express and reinforce the overarching social organization… they sustain and fortify the social order from which they spring” (p. 114).

Subjectivities

For post-structuralists, subjectivities are constructed in and through discourse. The way we talk about the world and the way we experience it are inextricably linked (Higgins, 1992; Woodhill, 1994). Foucault’s (1980b) archeology of knowledge maps out the history of how language specifically and discourse more broadly have been used to construct binaries, hierarchies, and categories that are meant to reflect an order in the world that is then taken to be true. Importantly, subject positions are made available through this discourse (e.g., victim, survivor, activist, mother, employee). Weedon (1987) emphasized, “Language, in the form of a historically specific range of ways of giving meaning to social reality, offers us various discursive positions, including modes of femininity and masculinity, through which we can consciously live our lives” (p. 25). The discourses available to us shape our understanding of self and other. Importantly, our subjectivities are not static accomplishments; they are provisional living truths, ever-
emergent and always unfolding. Our identities are as indeterminate as the symbolic and material exigencies of our lives.

Feminists who draw on post-structural theory also envision subjectivity as a socially constructed sense of self and one’s relation to the world. Intrinsic in the construction of subjectivity is the assumption that the self is socially produced (see also, Quinlan & Bates, 2008). As such, subjectivity is always historically created in specific discourses and never as a single fixed structure (Weedon, 1987). Weedon (1987) argued:

We are neither the authors of the ways in which we understand our lives, nor are we unified rational beings. For feminist poststructuralism, it is language in the form of conflicting discourses which constitutes us as conscious thinking subjects and enables us to give meanings to the world and to act to transform it…The political significance of decentring the subject and abandoning the belief in essential subjectivity is that it opens up subjectivity to change. In making our subjectivity the product of the society and culture within which we live, feminist poststructuralism insists that forms of subjectivity are produced historically and change with shifts in the wide range of discursive fields which constitute them.

(pp. 31-32)

Foucault, and other scholars working from a Foucauldian perspective (e.g., Buzzanell & Liu, 2005; Fraser, 1989), direct our awareness to the discursive processes through which some subject positions are privileged and other subject positions are marginalized. Feminists are committed to valuing diversity in order to have a society that provides opportunities for all people (Fine & Asch, 1988).
A feminist perspective highlights subjective experience and lends ears to the silenced voices (Linton, 1998). It is through tracing multiple and conflicting voices that alternative perspectives gain expression (Browne et al., 1985; Ford & Yep, 2006; Hodder, 1998). Similarly, Foucault (1980a) desired to explore often subjugated voices. He was interested in “the historical contents that have been buried and disguised” (p. 81). Through the discursive practices that structure societal beliefs, some subjectivities are legitimized, while others are denied expression (Fraser, 1989; Weedon, 1987). Fraser (1989) directed our attention to oppositional discourses that “contribute to the crystallization of new social identities on the part of subordinated social groups” (p. 171).

For post-structuralists, subjectivities are constructed in and through language. The way we talk about the world and the way we experience it are inextricably linked (Higgins, 1992; Woodhill, 1994). Subjectivity, power, and social organization are lodged in the linguistic and conventional structures (Lakoff, 1990). Through deconstruction of texts, the framing and defining of experience can be exposed and taken-for-granted assumptions can be unsettled (Harter, Norander, & Quinlan, 2007; Olesen, 1998).

Post-structural feminist theory encourages scholars to ask questions, including How are various subject positions made possible through discourse? How do discourses challenge individuals to intersubjectively construct their identities? How do identities shift in varied and divergent ways, and with what implications for agency? Additionally, inspired by Foucault, post-structuralists seek to uncover subjugated knowledges—those ways of knowing and being in the world often rendered invisible in dominant discourses. Subjugated knowledges and positions are those that have been buried, disguised, or
systematically distorted. Foucault (1980b) urged scholars to “emancipate historical knowledges from that subjection, to render them, that is, capable of opposition and of struggle against the coercion of… discourse” (p. 85). After spending months with Dancing Wheels, I believe its members do just that—through dance, they foster expression and legitimate subject positions that too often have remained on the margins.

Knowledge, Meaning, and Power

Post-structuralists advocate that the ways in which we make sense of the world and produce knowledge is through discourse. Weedon (1987) acknowledged:

… meaning is produced within language rather than reflected by language, and that individual signs do not have intrinsic meaning but acquire meaning through the language chain and their difference within it from other signs. (p. 23)

Because of its discursive nature, meaning and knowledge are always shifting and partial. Meaning shifts depending on the social, historical, and political forces that are, in a specific situation, creating multiple understandings. In sum, knowledge is not a set of monolithic or fixed truths even though its power often comes from its claim to be “natural” (Fraser, 1989).

According to post-structuralists, power relations are enacted in discourse (Fairclough, 1989). Differences in power have the potential to create and uphold structures of inequity. According to Bristor and Fischer (1993), power structures reign only because they are taken up and played out in everyday interactions. Consider Foucault’s (1976/1994) original argument:
There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operates through and on the basis of this association. We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operates through and on the basis of this association. (p. 31)

Thus, power is not something that is gained, held, or shared. From a Foucauldian perspective, “power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations” (Foucault, 1978, p. 94). Power exists at all aspects of a social system, and it is often difficult to separate those with and without power. Foucault (1980b) himself asserted, “There are manifold relations of power which cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse” (p. 93). Power is present in every relationship, unavoidable, and productive as well as repressive. Moreover, power always co-exists alongside resistance (see also, Foucault, 1994).

From this perspective, the study of how disability is organized and the experience of disability in organizations demand an understanding of the extent to which power relations (e.g., the subordination of those with disabilities) are sustained or disrupted through interaction, dialogue, and societal and organizational patterns and practices. In this study, my goal was not to uncover an objective reality. Instead, guided by post-structural feminist theory, I sought to acknowledge multiple, competing, and modifiable realities. Like Fraser and Weedon, I believe that “objective” truths are impossible and possibly dangerous. It is through the deconstruction of language and discourse that it is
possible to question the ways in which meaning is made and power relations structured (see also Scott, 2003). Throughout this study, I examined the ways in which meaning and knowledge were discursively enacted, changed, ascribed, affirmed, and rejected.

**Difference**

*Poststructuralist feminists do not float uncommitted on a sea of postmodernist theoretical indeterminacy. Instead, they ground their epistemology on the foundation of difference. A construct of difference that extends beyond the sociological trinity of class, race, gender (usually in that order) and makes conceptual space for difference in subject location, identity and knowledge, renders such a foundation anti-essentialist and indeterminate... its rejection of certainty promised by modernist discourses, a rejection of a self-certain and singular subject, and a rejection of knowledges that promise answers which lead to closure. A poststructuralist feminist epistemology accepts that knowledge is always provisional, open-ended and relational. (Luke & Gore, 1992, p. 7)*

Post-structural feminists are interested in issues of difference. Interestingly, difference typically is lived within dualistic frames (not uncommon in western and modernistic thinking). From a post-structural perspective, dualisms are realized and reified through discourse and construct and maintain structures of power.

Poststructuralists attempt to deconstruct these dualisms which often become taken for granted (i.e., male/female, science/art, reason/emotion, public/private, normal/disabled). Post-structuralists generally accept the idea that there is no connection between a word and a thing; however, often we categorize and name things based on difference. Weedon
(1987), drawing on the work of Foucault, claimed that “the body as a site of power is central to the constitution of subjectivity, the dispersed, discursive nature of power, and power’s link with knowledge” (p. 116). Furthermore, Weedon acknowledged that the body is foundational to various forms of difference. The body is seen as a material discourse as it is located in institutions and practices that define difference (see also, Butler, 1993, 1999; Grosz, 1993, 1994, 1995; Weedon, 1987, 1999).

Organizational communication scholars whose work is guided by post-structural theory problematize discourses that dualistically frame difference by exploring whose interests are served by such distinctions (e.g., Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Mumby, 1988; Trethewey, 2000). Mumby’s work, for example, explored the gendered nature of the public-private dichotomy that pervades the way we relate, organize, and participate as citizens in democratic societies. Importantly, Mumby argued that “public” and “private” are ongoing discursive accomplishments that shape our self-understandings. The critical question, from a poststructural perspective, is “How does the relationship between public and private spheres get discursively articulated, and how does this articulation process function to produce and reproduce extant power relations and/or create possibilities for resistance and transformation” (p. 6)? Answers to these questions are centrally important to my work, given the historical segregation of people with disabilities in private spheres. Part of what Dancing Wheels attempts to do is integrate people with various (dis)abilities into creative and public positions. I explored how this happens in discursive ways, and with what material, corporeal, and symbolic consequences.
To date, most organizational and health communication scholars have adopted a post-structural feminist standpoint to explore the gendered nature of subordination. For example, Ashcraft’s (2000, 2001) work explored how women organize around feminist principles in an effort to serve survivors of rape. Ashcraft and Kedrowiz (2003) extended this work by unpacking the gendered nature of social support as enacted in organizational contexts. Other scholars have explored the discursive moves through which some stories of sexual and age discrimination are fostered while others are sequestered (e.g., Clair, 1993; Trethewey, 2000). Post-structural feminists, rightly so, have mobilized efforts to redress gendered inequities. Yet, they have been slower to acknowledge multiple forms of difference that intersect and shape experience, including race, class, sexuality, and disability (see critiques by Allen, 1995, 2000). Disability as difference remains on the periphery of post-structural feminists agendas.

The struggles of post-structural feminism and disability studies have much in common (Harris & Wideman, 1988; Thomson 1997; Wendell, 1989, 1996). Post-structural feminism has found the experience of the “other” as helpful in understanding the social positions of people. Thus, personal lived experiences should be central to our political understanding of disability (Harris & Wideman, 1988; Wendell, 1989, 1996). Indeed, Wendell stated we must understand this experience because “When we make people ‘Other,’ we group them together as the objects of experience instead of regarding them as subjects of experience with whom we might identify” (Wendell, 1989, p. 112). Additionally, a post-structural feminist perspective recognizes that human experience must be studied from the multiple points of view of historically and culturally situated
individuals (Weedon, 1980). Post-structural feminists seek to understand different perspectives of lived experience and especially the embodied experience (Richardson, 1998) that is so salient to people with disabilities (Wendell, 1996). Central aspects of post-structural feminist work that has raised consciousness about the gendered nature of (in)subordination can gain similar traction for disability studies and foster social change.

**Social Change**

*Feminism is a politics. It is a politics directed at changing existing power relations between men and women in society. These power relations structure all areas of life, the family, education and welfare, the worlds of work and politics culture and leisure. They determine who does what for whom, what we are and what we might become.* (Weedon, 1987, p. 1)

Many feminists couple an agenda of social change with post-structural concepts of discourse, power, knowledge, and difference. Wood (1994) embodied this perspective when she suggested, “Understanding how discursive practices construct cultural beliefs and inform cultural practices should also illuminate means whereby we can contest the currently prevalent meanings of a social order” (p. 113). Post-structural feminists draw on their discursive resources to redress the material and social inequities that emerge from existing power relations. The robustness of post-structural feminism is its ability to combine the tools of deconstructionism with a commitment to being politically and action-oriented (Ropers-Huilman, 1998). Several post-structural feminists have informed my understanding of post-structural feminist theory in the service of social change (see

A key tenet that feminists bring to post-structuralism is a belief in human agency. Weedon (1987) argued that agency is produced “in the social interactions between culturally produced, contradictory subjects” (p. 107). Subjectivity and agency do not exist prior to language and discursive practices, so while one must be mindful of material relations, this stance was “rather to insist that the meanings of the material world are produced within discourse” (p. 107). Most feminists are committed to identifying sites of possible fractures in discourses. Within these spaces, feminists believe that alternative repertoires of conduct, knowledge, instruments, artifacts and vocabularies exist in any given historical period and provide resources for change.

Like other strands of feminism (e.g., liberal feminism), post-structural feminists make a commitment to consciousness raising about lived differences. Yet, post-structural feminists do so with an explicit focus on discursive formations. Ropers-Huilman (1987) stated, “For feminist poststructuralism, it is language in the form of conflicting discourses which constitutes us as conscious-thinking subjects and enables us to give meaning to the world and transform it” (p. 31). Post-structural feminist initiatives seek to raise consciousness and offer into circulation diverse standpoints. Post-structural feminists pay particular attention to difference and in doing so hope to raise consciousness and make space for alternative discourses and knowledges to arise. Weedon (1987) captured this sentiment when she argued:
How we live our lives as conscious thinking subjects, and how we give meaning to the material social relations under which we live and which structure our everyday lives, depends on the range and social power of existing discourses, our access to them and the political strength of the interests which they represent. (p. 26)

New and different forms of sensemaking about our lives emerge when readily available discourses expand.

Emancipatory potential for social change rests in part on our ability to understand how discourse shapes people’s social identities and secures cultural hegemony. Importantly, though, the very tenets of post-structuralism remind feminists that alternative truths and envisioned possibilities are always contingent. As Harter, Norander, and Quinlan (2007) argued, “Future events may very well render current knowledge claims obsolete. Nonetheless, our imaginative renderings can offer ways of addressing problems now, although one day they may seem archaic or misplaced” (p. 115). The work of post-structural feminists, like that of other scholars, remains subject to ongoing shifts and interpretations. For example, organizing strategies that may have worked for Dancing Wheels during its inception may very well be the source of contemporary tension. Ongoing vigilance is required.

In summary, I position myself as a post-structural feminist researcher in large part because my goal, to echo Ropers-Huilman (1998), “is not ‘finding objective answers,’ but rather in coming to understand differently knowledges and situations that are already assumed to be tentative, partial, and relational” (p. 17). I found a post-structuralist
feminist framework useful as it honors complexities, uncertainties, pluralities, multiplicities, and differences and rejects the notion of an absolute and objective truth. With its focus on discursive deconstruction, a post-structural feminist lens allowed me to explore how Dancing Wheels attempts to offer into circulation alternative subject positions for people of varying abilities.

Interestingly, post-structuralists have focused a great deal of attention on deconstructing master narratives often assumed to be natural or fixed (e.g., Clair, 2001; Lindemann-Nelson, 2001; Trethewey, 2001). This is not surprising, given that narrative remains a primary discursive resource of social life. Because of narratives’ sense-making capacities, activists and scholars alike rely on storytelling to bring (dis)order and meaning to collective life. In framing my work with Dancing Wheels, I combined post-structural feminist approaches with narrative theory in order to emphasize the consciousness-raising potential of narrative activity. In the next section, I explore key tenets of narrative theory and sketch the ways in which they informed this study.

**Narrative Theory and Praxis: Narrative as a Way of Knowing**

From a post-structural feminist standpoint, I paid particular attention to the narratives or stories that circulate in and around Dancing Wheels. Personal narratives have traditionally been key resources in feminist theory and activism because narratives embody and (re)inscribe lived experiences and exist within a web of discursive forces, including broader institutional and cultural scripts (Wood, 1994). The three tenets of narrative theory and praxis that I relied on for this project are (1) narratives as a way of
knowing; (2) formation of identities and groups; and (3) narratives, consciousness raising, and social movements.

Narratives as a Way of Knowing

In this section, I discuss my understanding of narratives as ways of knowing. One’s life is part of past, present, and future stories (Burke, 1954/1984; Fisher, 1987). Fisher (1987) advocated that stories are a form of knowledge and a means of communication. As such, narrative theorizing offers a useful framework from which to address how individuals make sense of other and self in the world (Harter, Japp, & Beck, 2005; Somers, 1994). Garro and Mattingly (2000) claimed, “Narrative is a fundamental human way of giving meaning to experience. In both telling and interpreting experiences, narrative mediates between an inner world of thought-feeling and an outer world of observable actions and states of affairs” (p. 1). Fisher (1984), a communication scholar, advocated that humans are *homo narrans*. In a Burkean (1969) spirit, humans tell stories and are storied. Thus, we live stories and are embodied by stories.

We come to understand the world through stories. Narratives, by virtue of emplotment, represent an organizing and sensemaking resource (Polkinghorne, 1988). It is through narratives that we judge the actions of others and ourselves (Ochs & Capps, 1996; White, 1981). Additionally, narratives help to make our experiences meaningful (Bochner, 2002). Polkinghorne (1988) stated:

Narrative is one of our fundamental structures of comprehension...The paradigmatic mode searches for universal truth conditions, whereas the narrative mode looks for particular connections between events. The narrative
organizational scheme is of particular importance for understanding human activity. (p. 15-18)

Again, the connections/overlaps between stories brings life to an individual story. Carter (1993) concurred:

At one level, story is a mode of knowing that captures in a special fashion the richness and the nuances of meaning in human affairs. We come to understand sorrow or love or joy or indecision in particularly rich ways through the characters and incidents we become familiar with in novels or plays. This richness and nuance cannot be expressed in definitions, statements of fact, or abstract propositions. It can only be evoked through story. (p. 6)

Gergen and Gergen (2006) drew a clear line between two approaches to narrative, “narratives as cognitive structure or schema through which we understand the world” and “narratives as discursive actions” (p. 118). While working with Dancing Wheels, I connected stories that individuals told about themselves and/or the organization even as I attempted to make sense of how narratives guide the way participants organize. In this way, narratives serve a pedagogical function, allowing scholars to collaborate with participants to organize social lives into meaningful episodes (see also, Richardson, 1990, 1995).

At the most fundamental level, narratives allow people to understand human existence (Polkinghorne, 1988). Gudmunsdottir (1996) stated, “Narrative structures are readily available in our culture, and people automatically draw on them in most meaning-making activities” (p. 293). Narratives are a fundamental structure of comprehension,
meaning making, sensemaking and help to bring disparate events together. People share stories about lived experience to make meaning out of them (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000). In doing so, stories have the ability to bring experience to life so that others too may share in these experiences. Of course, the meanings of narratives are never static or fixed (Bakhtin, 1981). Storytelling is how we learn to exercise agency to deal with new challenges, aware of the past, yet mindful of alternative futures (Bruner, 1986, 1990, 1991; Polkinghorne 1988). Living and organizing with others is not just about following a script, but about consciously choosing which scripts to live by and knowing when to deviate from and create different scripts. Thus, storytelling teaches us how to deal with the unexpected futures while maintaining coherence with our past.

Extant literature is filled with discussions about the power of story or narrative to do what other ways of knowing may not be able to (Bruner, 1991). Historically, story and narrative have been accepted ways of knowing, even though they have not received as much attention as the scientific method. Indeed, stories represent one of the most ancient tools used to transmit knowledge (Durrance, 1997). Novak (1975) argued that story, “is an ancient and altogether human method. The human being alone among the creatures on the earth is a storytelling animal; sees the present rising out of the past, heading into a future; perceives reality in narrative form” (p. 258).

What distinguishes narrative as a way of knowing? A main component of narratives that scholars have paid attention to is the experience of time. According to Ricoeur (1984), interactions with the past, present, and future help us make sense of our lives and those of others. One cannot engage in narrative as either a narrator or
reader/listener without the experience of time. Narrative is factually indifferent but temporally sensitive: its power as a story is determined by the sequence of its constituents, rather than the truth or falsity of any of them (Bruner, 1990; Czarniawska, 1998). Temporality, therefore, is a key feature of narrative organization, helping also to preserve particularity. As Hunter (1991) noted when discussing medical narratives:

> By means of the temporal organization of detail, governed by the ‘plots’ of disease, physicians are able to negotiate between theory and practice, sustaining medicine as an inter-level activity that must account for both scientific principle and the specificity of the human beings who are their patients (p. 46).

Our memories (past) and expectations (future) interact to influence our understandings of our lives (Ricoeur, 1984). Attempting to understand how time is experienced by individuals involved in Dancing Wheels was not an easy task. As Brockmeier (2000) noted:

> The study of human concepts and constructions of time faces several difficulties. One is that time is elusive, another that it is ubiquitous, which together make a third difficulty. There is no aspect of human reality that is without temporal dimension (p. 51).

> In telling our lives, we deal not only with the classic modalities of past, present, and future, but also with different orders of natural, cultural, and individual processes.

> Scholars also direct attention to the process of emplotment—the means through which causality is ascertained as well as relations between characters (Riceour, 1984). According to Weick (1988), it is when individuals narrate their experiences that they...
project a story form onto their experience. Somers’ (1994) definition of narrative emphasized these key aspects of narrative activity:

Narratives are constellations of relationships (connected parts) embedded in time and space, constituted by causal emplotment… Indeed, the chief characteristic of narrative is that it renders understanding only by connecting (however unstably) parts to a constructed configuration or a social network of relationships (however incoherent or unrealizable) composed of symbolic, institutional, and material practices. (p. 616)

Narratives, by virtue of emplotment, represent an organizing and sensemaking resource. It is through emplotment that we attempt—often against all odds—to make causal sense of random events that may appear to be unrelated (Charon, 2006). Narratives involve characters involved in lived moments of struggle as they encounter disruptions in the continuity of life. As such, they offer lessons to live by or learn from. Part of the goal of post-structural feminist work is to enlarge the repertoire of stories that we have to choose from and increase individuals’ abilities to decide which stories to enact and tell.

A third main feature of narrative theory is its attention to the contexts or scenes of activity. Generally, one way to envision context/scene is in terms of the locatedness of actions/texts (see also Charon, 2006). Narratives are embedded in a variety of socio-cultural, economic, and political terrains. For narrative scholars, both the settings of the story itself and the settings of the telling are important. This acknowledges that stories are partial and indeterminant as they change to meet institutional and contextual needs (Barge, 2004; Boje, 2001). The historicizing of texts and ongoing shifts in meaning
making depend on when and where stories are reconstructed. From a related perspective, Burke (1945) discussed context or scene in terms of his pentad: scenes (contexts), acts, agents, agency, and purpose. For him, dramatism, rather than being an “objective science,” seeks to understand why individuals do what they do and why they behave in certain ways from a humanistic perspective. The components of the pentad are: (1) Scene, or the context surrounding the act such as historical and social situation in which the act is situated; (2) Act, or what is done by a person; (3) Agent, or person or people who perform the act; (4) Purpose, or explicit or implicit goal of the act; and (5) Agency, or the method used to perform the act (Burke, 1945, p. xv). The driving force of dramatism is the study of “motives.” Language influences people, and people’s choices reflect the position they take to describe their social worlds and create more or less material realities. However, Burke believed these terms overlap. For Burke, the five elements, or “pentad,” provide a way to examine both an actual event and the way in which individuals communicate about that event. Burke noted that, by emphasizing one or more aspects over another, one is indeed influencing, via language, an individual’s perception of reality, and influence which he labeled terministic screens. Burke (1945/1969) claimed that “act” is always the central term, but explains that an act may be reinterpreted substantially if another part of the pentad becomes controlling. For example, scenes often provide the “grounding” for acts, the “terrain” that determines tactics (Burke, 1945/1969, pp. 11-12).

Burke (1945) referred to the scene as the “container,” while all items that exist in it become the “things contained” (p. 3). The image of the container illustrates the ways
the scene shapes the acts. When arguments are dominated by appeals to the “scene,” Burke suggested they reflect a philosophy of materialism (p. 128).

Many scholars have emphasized Burke’s pentad with a focus on the importance of the scene (Blankenship, Fine, & Davis, 1983; Birdsell, 1987; Tonn, Endress, & Diamond, 1993). In each case, individuals claim they or others would have acted differently had environmental factors not influenced their judgment. David Ling’s (1970) investigation of Senator Edward Kennedy’s Chappaquiddick apologia speech was a first in the communication field. For example, Ling (1970) claimed that Senator Edward Kennedy featured scenic elements in order to excuse his action surrounding the drowning of Mary Jo Kopechne. Also, Birdsell (1987) contended that Ronald Reagan situated the deaths of American marines in Lebanon in a dangerous scene in order to avoid admitting the national conquering of a stronger power. In both Ling and Birdsell’s analyses, the material/symbolic had implications for the rhetor’s or the critic’s privileging of a scene in order to alter the audience’s understanding of the whole drama.

A final feature of narratives that scholars pay attention to is intertextuality—the notion that all stories derive their meaning in part from their relationships to others’ stories. People cannot be understood only as individuals. Instead, we are always in relation to other (Blumer, 1969; Gergen, 1991; Mead, 1934). Often individuals perform their roles according to certain scripts (Goffman, 1967). For Bakhtin (1981), intertextuality is the ways in which narratives draw meaning from other texts. According to Bakhtin, no story stands alone. Just as Bakhtin reminded us that we need to be aware of the intertextuality of narratives, he also wanted us to pay attention the multivocality of
competing and colliding narratives. His concept of heteroglossia pushes us to consider multiple voices and perspectives ever present in discourse. Fisher (1984) agreed and aptly suggested that one’s life is “a story that participates in the stories of those who have lived, who live now, and who will live in the future” (p. 6). Narrative scholars direct attention to the aforementioned issues—temporality, emplotment, context/scene, and intertextuality—to explore the formation of identities and groups and to raise consciousness and mobilize for social change.

The Narrative Formation of Identities and Groups

In this section, I discuss how narratives foster the formation of individual and group identities. Many scholars recognize that the act of storytelling is important primarily for reasons of representation (Fisher, 1987; Somers, 1994). Somers (1994) argued narrative theorizing offers a useful framework from which to address the ways subjectivities are constructed. People make sense of their worlds, recognize their identities, and interact with each other through the stories they tell (Langellier & Peterson, 2004). A narrative perspective focuses post-structural feminists’ attention on narratives as primary resources through which our identities are socially constructed. In the most basic sense, to have a self is to have a story (Bruner, 1986; Kerby, 1991, 1997). Narratives can help to give us a sense, of coherence and continuity across the lifespan, just as they can destabilize and disrupt taken-for-granted truths (Carabas & Harter, 2005).

Storytelling is how we develop identities (individual and collective) that define the ends we seek for and amid whom we seek them (Burner, 1990; Carr, 1986; MacIntyre, 1981; Polkinghorne, 1991; Somers, 1994; Taylor, 1989). Identity is
maintained and created through storytelling (Crites, 1986). We often “become” the stories we tell about our lives (Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001; Bruner, 1990). According to Harter et al. (2006), “through our narrative activity, we embody what we call our self and its actions, reflections, thoughts and place in the world” (p. 10). I do not view narratives as merely reflections on past events. To borrow Allison’s (1994) argument, “humans exist narratively and are better understood as storylivers rather than storytellers” (p. 108, emphasis in original). A story is not simply something to be told after the fact (although sometimes this is the case); storying is an in-the-moment activity that brings meaning to human experience. MacIntyre (1981) concurred:

> It is because we all live out narratives in our lives and because understand our own lives in terms of the narratives that we live out that the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others. Stories are lived before they are told (p. 197).

In short, narratives work as agencies of self-discovery and self-creation in which identities are enacted and performed (Bruner 1990, 2001, 2002; Langellier & Peterson, 1994). Research on narrative identity suggests that a main purpose of narratives is the evaluation or construction of the self (see also Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001; Bruner, 1997, Cohler, 1991; Linde, 1993; Somers, 1994). Numerous individuals with disabilities have written about their experiences in the form of autobiographies (e.g., Bauby, 1998; Bragg, 1989; Clare, 1999; Finger, 1990, 2006; Fries, 1997a, 2007; Grandin, 1996; Grealy, 1995; Handler, 1998; Hathaway, 1942; Hearst, 1982; Hockenberry, 1995; Johnson, 2005; Kaysen, 1993; Kriegel, 1998; Kuusisto, 1998, 2006; Linton, 2005;
Second, stories allow and/or disallow the formation of group and organizational identities (Adelman & Frey, 1996, 2001). Mumby (1987) argued that narratives are a primary discursive form through which organizational structures are reproduced and shifted. Mumby (1987) asserted:

Narratives do not simply inform organization members about the values, practices, and traditions to which their organization is committed. Rather, they help to constitute the organizational consciousness of social actors by articulating and embodying a particular reality, and subordinating or devaluing other modes of “organizational rationality.” (p. 125)

Narratives can allow individuals to feel part of a group as they bind individuals based on common experiences and linked features, even as they silence or marginalize other individuals (Adelman & Frey, 1996, 2001; Sharf, 2005; Sharf & Vanderford, 2003; Van Maanen, 1992). Brockmeier and Carbaugh (2001) claimed that individuals achieve a sense of shared identity through communicating about their experiences. Koenig Kellas (2003) explored how the narratives that families tell are told in joint interaction, and I concur that most stories are not told in isolation. Utilizing a post-structural feminist standpoint and narrative theory to approach discourse in and around Dancing Wheels allowed me to explore the ways in which organizing and power are realized through discourse.
Institutional narratives enable and constrain organizational members. Although organizations may attempt to achieve unified identities among organizational members, multiple narratives exist and sometimes compete for legitimacy and dominance (see also, Bullis & Strout, 2000; Jablin, 2001; Langellier & Peterson, 1993). In organizational communication literature, scholars have explored the ways in which narratives highlight organizational values (Boje, 1991; Brown, 1985; Browning, 1992; Helmer, 1993; Meyer, 1995). Organizations use narratives to create sustained and shared meaning for organizational members (Helmer, 1993; Meyer, 1995). Also, narratives can be used as a means for individuals to make sense of their life’s work (Boyce, 1995; Brown & McMillan, 1991), to foster organizational change (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999), and to integrate new members (Brown, 1985). Furthermore, narratives serve a political function as organizational realities and identities are realized (Clair, 1993; Mumby, 1987, 1988).

Dancing Wheels serves as a rich site in which to explore how identities of individuals and groups are constructed and reconstructed. Analysis of narratives as told and performed by participants provided insight into Dancing Wheels and how members engage in individual and collective sensemaking. As members share and live stories, they embody their understanding of events within the organization. Likewise, I became a co-performer of Dancing Wheels, as I co-constructed meaning with participants.

Narratives, Consciousness Raising, and Social Movements

Most narrative scholars argue that narrative knowing has always been a salient way of sensemaking. Even so, we are just now starting to recognize and articulate its value in raising consciousness about lived inequities and mobilizing resources for social
change (Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001; Campbell, 1973; Fisher, 1987; Frank, 1995, 2005a; Somers, 1994). Numerous narrative scholars are interested in the ways in which narratives (or counter-narratives) have the potential to resist domination (Bruner, 1991; Clair, 2001; Clair, Chapman, & Kunkel, 1996; Linderman-Nelson, 1997, 2001). Scholars have acknowledged the ways in which counter-stories have the potential to shape a new national imagination and create a common ground by rewriting a history of oppression and silence (Andrews, 2002a, 2002b; Linderman-Nelson, 2001; Riessman, 2002; Squire, 2002; Throsby, 2002; Tuffin, 2002). Consider Carabas and Harter’s (2005) argument:

Individual and collective identities are narratively constructed and damaged… and identities can be narratively repaired… The voicing of personal and collective narratives can liberate and heal just as dominant stories often marginalize. (p. 164)

Master narratives need to be questioned and/or challenged and provide an opportunity for learning (see also, Garro & Mattingly 2001). In turn, counter-narratives seek to discursively reconfigure emplotments (Lindemann-Nelson, 2001).

Narrative scholars have acknowledged narrative silences or gaps, the unmentioned or the unmentionable, as well as the absence of certain stories all together (Carabas & Harter, 2005; Harter et al., 2005). Carabas and Harter (2005) explored how the once forbidden stories of oppression felt by Romanian citizens reflect the value of sharing narratives to commence healing. These Romanian narratives were published in a book. According to Carabas and Harter (2005), “as a stigmatizing process, state-inflicted illness defines and labels specific groups as undesirable, unproductive, dysfunctional and
potentially dangerous (Goffman, 1963) and (re)produces the differential acceptability of various groups” (p. 150). Clair (2001), too, asserted that counter-narratives are a performative strategy which can serve those who are marginalized by reconstructing damaged or spoiled identities (see also, Goffman 1963; Linderman-Nelson, 2001). As a feminist interested in voice, emancipation, and equality, I find Clair, Chapman, and Kunkel’s (1996) article on narrative approaches to consciousness-raising particularly useful in that it argues that through stories that people tell we have the potential to enlarge the repertoire of scripts available to us as we organize around difference.

For Bruner (1991), our abilities to tell narratives about self allow us agency to craft possible worlds. In organizational communication literature, Trethawey (2001) and Nadesan and Trethawey (2000) acknowledged the ways in which the master narratives of a culture frame the way we organize even as narratives work to provide alternative narratives. Trethawey discussed the metaphor of the biological clock when talking about the narrative of age as decline regarding women’s reproductive organs. This narrative encourages women to experience and express aging in terms of loss and diminished resources. Similarly, Nadesan and Trethawey illustrated how female bodies are expected to fit male norms, even though the male body does not undergo daily, monthly, or age-related changes, such as hormonal shifts, menstruation, and menopause.

Scholars have acknowledged that narratives can have a therapeutic value (White & Epston, 1990; Frank, 1995, 2000). Drawing on the work of Wittgenstein (1953), Carabas and Harter (2005) argued, “language can blur, alter, or distort experience as well tell our stories; as such, it can condition how we think, feel and act and can be used
purposefully as a therapeutic tool” (p. 153). White and Epston (1990), for example, focused on the therapeutic power of narrative and the ways in which individuals are able to create new narratives for themselves and/or replot their lives which allows them the ability to cope with multiple and competing narratives. Lindemann-Nelson (1997, 2001) articulated that counter-narratives are often woven together to disrupt domination. According to Taylor and Conrad (1992), narratives allow individuals “to reflect, to educate, and to change oppressive cultures” (p. 401).

Some knowledges are subjugated, masked, or otherwise hidden by discursive formations (Foucault, 1995). Naples (2003) brought a Foucauldian understanding of discourse to readings of the framing of public problems and to policy analysis. Her approach helped us theorize the jointly constitutive nature of race, class, gender, and sexuality and to recognize ways in which they are active even when they are not, overtly, what is at issue. She looked at both welfare policy and public debate over community control of schools to give explanation to how this approach can assist us in avoiding appropriation of social movement rhetoric and relations of power. Naples (2003) offered an “everyday life” approach to policy analysis, that is, she used an approach that underpins policy for women’s everyday lives as they narrate them and cultural constructions of the welfare recipient. Her analysis discusses her exchanges with female AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) recipients earning four-year degrees through a training program in Iowa and addresses the ways in which women on welfare are materially constrained by policies. Additionally, Naples called for a reexamination of survivor discourse. According to Naples, the term survivor is “typically reserved for
those who have self-consciously redefined their relationship to the experience from one of victim” (p. 167). As she highlighted, the decision to claim the identity of survivor may be influenced by a number of factors, such as therapeutic interventions, conversations with others who own their own survivor identity, and other forms of contact with survivor narratives, any of which may lead a woman to re-evaluate her experiences. Naples (1998a) discussed “activist mothering,” which is a political strategy that links the private work of mothering with the public work of organizing for social justice and structural, political, and institutional change. Activist mothering acknowledged the ways in which women often organize their activism around everyday practices they face while enacting work-life (see also, Naples, 1998b).

Of course, counter-narratives are not inherently liberatory. Japp and Japp (2005) and Beck (2005) discussed the ways in which counter-narratives remain unacknowledged until a “credible” or “legitimate” (read: famous) spokesperson emerges. The question of legitimacy is also central to sexual abuse survivor discourse. In her evaluation of sexual abuse, Naples (2003) claimed:

Survivor discourse is often posed in contrast to expert discourse, which is legitimated through a distinction between different forms of knowledge production, one that derives from personal experience and emotional pain versus one grounded in more systematic and presumably objective truth claims. (p. 1159)
Naples acknowledged how survivor discourse can be oppositional or even transformed into expert discourse, giving validity and agency to survivor discourse in its different forms.

Importantly, stories are often told through the body (Frank, 1995). The embodied performance of stories is part and parcel of the human problem of authorship and of the desire of individuals to preserve voice and agency (Bochner, 2001; Charmaz, 1995; Ellis, 1995, Ellis & Bochner, 2001; Langellier, 2001; Langellier & Peterson, 2004). A focus on how stories are lived and told in and through the body is particularly important, given the performative nature of how Dancing Wheels resists dominant forces that mark people’s bodies as deficient and defective. In the next section, I coupled post-structural feminist theory with a narrative perspective to explore the discursive processes through which bodies have historically been culturally marked as disabled.

Storied Performances of the Body (Culturally) Marked as Disabled

An Historical Overview

It has been well documented that individuals with disabilities have lived lives marked by exclusion. Cultural practices and organizational strategies (even if unintentional) often accommodate the differences of disabilities in ways that perpetuate rather than alleviate stigma. Garland-Thomson (1997b) asserted that, “The ‘physically disabled’ are produced by way of legal, medical, political, cultural, and literary narratives that comprise an exclusionary discourse” (p. 6). Individuals with disabilities currently “constitute one of the world’s largest minority groups facing poverty and unemployment as well as social and cultural isolation” (Erevelles, 2001, p. 93). Winzer (1997) reported
that individuals with disabilities were been treated poorly long before the 18th century. In the first half of the 1st century, the Romans often prescribed medical treatment or herbs in order to treat insanity. In 16th century Germany, Martin Luther viewed children with mental retardation as monsters who were morally deviant from “normal.” Martin Luther even went so far as advocating for killing individuals with disabilities (Stafford & Stafford, 1996).

Snyder and Mitchell (2006) investigated aspects of the 19th and 20th century history of individuals with disabilities, such as how they have been represented in institutions, literature, art, and film. They claimed that individuals with disabilities have been labeled as deviant and that institutions became sites of oppression:

The absence of disabled people from the streets and public gathering spaces prior to the 19th century turned disability into a rarely encountered phenomenon…. [t]his tradition of treating disability as a private family matter functioned as a form of social invisibility; practices of closeting physical, sensory, and cognitive differences within the practices within the home made the existence of disability appear less persistent in human communities. (pp. 45-46)

Snyder and Mitchell relied on post-structural theorists such as Foucault as they analyzed the ways in which social institutions have characterized human variation as deviant to remove individuals with disabilities from society. The U.S. eugenics movement, for example, worked to acknowledge the ways in which individuals needed to be “fixed” or “repaired” and thus classified “deviant” bodies and “inferior” cultures based on IQ tests, family pedigree trees, and behavioral and physical assessments (Snyder & Mitchell,
Such master narratives of disability as deficiency linger today and it is these narratives that Dancing Wheels seeks to disrupt.

Cultural locations of disability are those places “in which disabled people find themselves deposited, often against their will” (Snyder & Mitchell, 2006, p. 3). Some examples of these locations include sheltered workshops, documentary films, asylums and academic study of disability. In response to social and medical models of disability, Snyder and Mitchell developed a “cultural model” of disability in order to demonstrate how cultural institutions control (and empower) people with disabilities through “manipulation of material, social, and environmental contexts” (p. 9). The cultural model of disability allows scholars and activists to “theorize a political act of renaming that designated disability as a site of resistance and source of cultural agency previously suppressed” (p. 10).

Embarking from a cultural model, Snyder and Mitchell (2006) “reexamine disability experiences in the United States and Europe from an analysis of the history of normalization schemes. This entailed scrutiny of a continuum of bodies and body-based beliefs in the medical, rehabilitation, aesthetic and cultural registers” (p. 17). These “normalization schemes” were easily identified in the 19th century disability; after that time, disability was a tool for categorizing human bodily variation when “individuals came to be increasingly defined by industrial labor practices within a capitalist marketplace” (Snyder & Mitchell, 2006, p. 23). In similar fashion, Tremain (2005) examined disability from a Foucauldian perspective. He relied on Foucault’s understanding of the role of “bio-power” (p.
3) in which the increasing use of statistics, in the late 18th century, of human populations lead to the establishment of statistical norms. These norms became an evaluative force in which it was better to be closer to the norm than farther away.

As a result, categories such as “the disabled,” or “the insane” or “the sexually perverted” emerged, and “experts” were positioned to judge whether a person was a member of such categories. Once these categories were established and individuals were identified as disabled, governmental apparatuses were organized to classify those as disabled. Consider Tremain’s (2005) argument:

The category of impairment emerged and, in many respects, persists in order to legitimate the governmental practices that generated it in the first place; hence contrary to what is claimed in the social model, there is indeed a causal relationship between impairment and disability. (p. 11)

In short, constructions of norms generate categories of people with impairments (i.e., the category of disabled people).

In the 1950s, Barton (2001) argued that the United Way wanted individuals to pity and fear individuals with polio (see also Longmore, 1997; Finger, 2006). Even as recent as the 1980s, electric shock has been used to treat children with autism who engaged in self-injurious behaviors (Iwata et al., 1994). Although there are numerous examples of exclusion of individuals with disabilities, there are also examples in which individuals with disabilities have been integrated successfully into society. In 1620, on Martha’s Vineyard, individuals who were deaf were embraced and included in all life activities (Groce, 1985; McDermott & Varenne, 1995; Peters, 2000). It is through
positive examples such as the Martha’s Vineyard experience that it is possible to think about ways in which dominant understandings of disability can be challenged. Snyder and Mitchell (2006) and Tremain (2005) argued that we need to think differently about disability. Furthermore, Linton (1998) claimed that individuals across disciplines need to study the consequences of excluding individuals with disabilities.

In the remainder of this section, I focus on contemporary cultural understandings of health and healing, disability culture, embodied social movements, as well as the role of dance in challenging cultural norms about the body.

*Contemporary Cultural Understandings of Health and Healing*

> When Lia [Lee] was about three months old, her sister Yer slammed the front door of the Lees’ apartment. A few moments later, Lia’s eyes rolled up, her arms jerked over her head, and she fainted. The Lees had little doubt what had happened. Despite the careful installation of Lia’s soul during the hu plig ceremony, the noise of the door had been so profoundly frightening that her soul had fled her body and became lost. They recognized the resulting symptoms as quab dab peg, which means “the spirit catches you and you fall down.” The spirit referred to in this phrase is the soul stealing dab; peg means to catch or hit; and quab means to fall over with one’s roots still in the ground, as grain might be beaten down by wind or rain. (Fadiman, 1997, p. 20)

Fadiman (1997) narrated the story of the Lee family, a Hmong family, and cultural misunderstandings that occur when cultural systems collide (i.e., the biomedical story of epilepsy colliding with the Hmong story). The Hmong considered *quag da peg* to
be an illness of some distinction. Importantly, the Hmong provide a space where
disability is not something that necessitates alienation for a society.

Many scholars have argued that we need to take into consideration other cultures
when thinking about health (Airhibenbuwa, 1995; Helman, 2001; Spector, 2000). Spector
acknowledged the difficulty when defining the term health. Due to cultural differences,
individuals often have different understandings of health maintenance and restoration.
There are various cultural beliefs and practices related to the concept of health and how
health care practitioners frequently devalue these patients’ beliefs and practices. More
simply, Spector (2000) argued, we need to be sensitive to the needs of another group’s
health, illness, and healing practices. Airhibenbuwa (1995) challenged individuals to
rethink Eurocentric practices, which have dominated our understanding of health. He
argued that these Eurocentric assumptions have been insensitive to the experiences of the
“other.” Airhibenbuwa (1995) questioned traditional health promotion paradigms that
avoid seeking health solutions. Because different cultural groups have different
perceptions of health, he believed that individuals from marginalized groups need to be
considered in discussions about health promotion and programs.

In the biomedical model, there is an underlying assumption that individuals need
to be healed to remain whole. Certainly this is not an assumption embraced by
individuals with disabilities. According to Parsons’ (1951) understanding of the sick role,
individuals with illness are expected to get well. It is the ill person’s responsibility to stay
well and help others learn how to cope with his or her illnesses (Frank, 1995). Frank gave
a poignant critique of the restitution narrative in which individuals are expected to be
healthy again. As for many individuals with disabilities and illnesses, getting well or “overcoming” a disability is not an option or possibility. Frank recognized that in our remission society, individuals who are ill not only want to avoid bad treatment but also want to live a good life while ill. Furthermore, he advocated that the experiences of individuals be shared because the telling of illness stories can lead to new insights, meanings, and purpose for individuals’ lives (i.e., quest narrative). For Frank it is through the telling of stories that individuals who are ill can think differently about the world and create new relationships with it. He said, “Bodies are realized—not just represented but created—in the stories they tell” (p. 52). Narrative resources remain primary sensemaking resources of a culture.

In 2004, Frank adopted a dialogic frame for understanding the storied experiences of patients. He challenged physicians to be generous with their patients and welcome those who suffer by entering into dialogue with patients and family members. He urged health practitioners to enter into dialogue with patients who are “radically different in material, intellectual and spiritual condition of their lives” (p. 82). It is through entering into dialogue with others that we are able to deepen our relationships with others as well as grow as human beings. He claimed that it is through dialogue that we are able to live more generously, more humanly, and more relationally with each other. He conceptualized medical generosity as “the grace to welcome those who suffer” (p. 1).

Narrative and dialogue are central communicative resources for the (re)construction of culture. For example, Do and Geist (2000) argued that communication
can transform interaction in ways that build understanding and compassion; othering or distancing often happens to people who are ill or disabled or disembodied. In this next section, I focus on the symbolic creation and recreation of disability culture.

**Disability Culture and Embodied Social Movements**

*I believe very firmly in disabled culture—and if we don’t have one we should. We need it to survive as an oppressed minority, both physically and emotionally.*—Carol Gill

(Mitchell & Snyder, 1995, *Vital Signs: Crip Culture Talks Back*)

Like all cultures, disability culture is a communicative accomplishment (Braithwaite, 1996). Braithwaite (1996) suggested that individuals with disabilities constitute their own culture because “they hold a set of beliefs about themselves as disabled and as distinct from the larger nondisabled society and they share common communicative codes or sets of communication strategies used to communicate with able-bodied others” (p. 457). In short, individuals with disabilities share certain common experiences and marginalization by living in an able-bodied world. Linton (1998) suggested:

> We are everywhere these days, wheeling and loping down the street, tapping our canes, sucking on our breathing tubes, following our guide dogs, puffing and sipping on mouth sticks that propel our motorized chairs. We may drool, hear voices, speak in staccato syllables, wear catheters to collect our urine, or live with a compromised immune system. We are all bound together, not by this list of our collective symptoms but by the social and political circumstances that have forged us as a group. (p. 4, also cited in Peters, 2000)
A majority of disabled Americans feel a common identity with one another (see also Nagler, 1993). Wade was quoted in Younkin (1989) as suggesting, “Many of us couldn’t fit into the mainstream view of the world if we wanted to—and some of us wouldn’t want to if we could” (p. 31, see also, Peters, 2000).

Activists have been at the forefront of (re)storying disability culture. Social movements around health-related issues have been studied for some time. Brown et al. (2004) discussed the role of embodied health movements that address disease, disability, or illness by challenging scientific understandings on etiology, diagnosis, treatment, and/or prevention. They introduced the biological body to social movements with regard to the embodied experience of people with disabilities and illnesses, and they challenged existing medical/scientific knowledges and practices. Such movements often involve activists working with scientists and health professionals in pursuing treatment, prevention, research, and extended scientific knowledge and practice. Palmeri (2006) argued that technical communication practices both construct and are constructed by normalizing discourses that can marginalize experiences, knowledges, and material needs of individuals with disabilities.

Paterson and Hughes (2000) argued that, until recent times, the dominant approach in society has been characterized by social exclusion and by perception of disability as sickness. Many disability scholars and activists question the limits of the biomedical, and which focuses solely on the rehabilitation of individuals with disabilities to fit into an ablest society (Davis, 2002; Linton, 1998; Longmore, 1985, 2003; Oliver, 1990). Also, we need to redefine health to include people living with chronic exigencies.
for us in order to live well (Lupton, 2003). Paterson and Hughes (1999) argued that we have ignored the attitudes and emotions that individuals with disabilities experience when they are discriminated against (see also, Oliver, 1992).

Wilson and Lewiecki-Wilson (2001) urged individuals to take seriously the medical establishments’ definition and treatment of illness or disability. According to Wilson and Lewiecki-Wilson, we need to pay attention to the ways in which disability functions in society, especially the ways in which disability is constructed in and through discourses. We need to pay attention not only to the representation of disability but also to the material consequences. From their perspective, and I concur, Americans typically “think, talk, and write about disability… as a tragedy, illness or defect that an individual body ‘has’” (p. 2). The tendency is to individualize disability functions to diminish the importance of material circumstances while maximizing personal responsibility for rehabilitation, care, and accommodation to one’s surroundings. Consider this claim:

[D]isability provides one of the best examples of how the language of institutional discourse systems determines material practices in ways that can work to the advantage—and disadvantage—of the disabled person. (Wilson & Lewiecki-Wilson, 2001, p. 11)

The rise of western medicine has too often utilized biological differences in order to justify mistreatment and exclusion of particular populations from the labor force.

Disability activists have gained key advances in public policy on disability rights such as accessibility and job discrimination, while also countering prejudices against people with disabilities (Shapiro, 1993; see also, Fleischer & Zames, 2001; Silvers,
Wasserman, & Mahowald, 1998). Barnes, Mercer, and Shakespeare (1999) claimed that “membership of such groups signifies an imposed second-class, or deviant position, and a denial of minority status rights” (p. 71). Bolt (2004) claimed that we live in a disabling society and it has made a profound impact on the lives of individuals with disabilities. Instead, he believed society can be more disabling than the disability itself. According to Michalko and Titchkosky (2001) “there are multiple ways to read the ways in which the environment inscribed its intentions onto the lives of disabled people” (p. 223). For example, they discussed the ways in which organizational spaces inhibit participation for individuals with physical disabilities.

Although advances have been made that redress the political and social issues that individuals with disabilities face, inequities have yet to be fully addressed (Shapiro, 1993). Similar to any social movement, the struggle for civil rights goes past advocating for legislation. Paterson and Hughes (2000) and Hales (1996) acknowledged the instrumental role of individuals with disabilities play as activists in this movement. Holmes (2001) argued that it is “crucial to recover the subjectivity, voice and agency of people with disabilities who survived discrimination” (p. 42). As stories of lived differences enter public/cultural domains, our collective memory is enlarged and disrupted.

Disability, health communication, and feminist studies have a great deal to offer the disability movement, as disability rights should aim to enlarge what we think disability means. Longmore (1997) asserted:
Every social movement needs sustained critical analysis of the social problems it is addressing. Such movements develop their own cadres of intellectuals and scholars who arise from the community and often connect it with academic institutions. Disability studies have been conceived as a bridge between the academy and the disabled community. (p. 223)

According to Wilson and Lewiecki-Wilson (2001) a disability studies perspective can contribute to the pedagogy and understanding of medical and scientific assumptions by examining conjectures of science and their reinforcing discourses. Michalko and Titchkosky (2001) furthered this claim when they argued:

The central insight of the disability studies research is that disability is not solely a medical condition but a complex social experience, one centered around physical realities of the minority of individuals with disabilities but one constructed as an experience of difference by the majority of individuals without disabilities. (p. 170)

My dissertation challenges cultural understandings of what is normal. Mitchell and Snyder (1998) argued that the bodies of individuals with disabilities are often weighed against normal functioning bodies. Disability is created, manipulated, and performed by a society that presents normal body ideals that can only be met by a few people. In this way, society has constructed the world “from the vantage point of the atypical” (Linton, 1998, p. 5). By extension, for Garland-Thomson (1997b), “disability… is the attribution of corporeal deviance—not so much a property of bodies as a product of cultural rules about what bodies should be or do” (p. 6). Thus, bodies are excluded from a
society based on their ability to comply with rules. Garland-Thomson argued that bodies are not inherently deviant but that they are classified this way. She studied the sociocultural concept of normality in order to reveal both how it is an arbitrary concept whose existence depends on its visual and binary opposite, corporeal abnormality, and how it is specifically linked to bodily ability. Additionally, Garland-Thomson (1996) believed in the signifying power of bodies. She said, “the extraordinary body is fundamental to the narratives by which we make sense of ourselves and the world” (p. 1).

Davis (1995) reminded us that we need to recognize that societal conceptions of health, wellness, disability, and normalcy form the goals of medicine as well as contribute to the stigmatization experienced by individuals with disabilities. The biomedical approach to disability often casts individuals with disabilities in unfortunate circumstance in which they need to be pitied (Cheu, 2005; Davis Basting, 2005; Kuppers, 2006; Nash, 2005). Often the “injured or diseased body is a body out of control” (Manderson & Peake 2005, p. 232). Sandahl and Auslander (2005a), and the many authors in their edited volume, directly criticized the mainstream cultural desire for medical cures for people with disabilities.

Summary and Research Questions

Dancing Wheels represents a shift away from the traditional biomedical approach to disability that continues to pervade society (Coopman, 2003). Dancing Wheels resists the master narrative of disability in which disability is solely a medical condition in which individuals bodies’ are regarded as sickly and in need of repair. In dominant narratives, individuals with disabilities are frequently described as suffering from or
afflicted with certain conditions. From my interactions with Dancing Wheels, I saw ways in which they resist dominant master narratives of disability. Similar to what Ashcraft (2000, 2001) termed an alternative discourse community, Dancing Wheels challenges the ways in which difference and power intersect (see also Harter et al., 2006).

Dancing Wheels represents a unique context for exploring the discourses of disability, especially the disabled body, because of its innovative use of expressive employment opportunities in the arts. This philosophy represents a shift away from a narrow biomedical approach that continues to dominate our understandings of individuals’ bodies. As Lupton (2003) pointed out, discourses of the biomedical model have served as a control function. “Some view medical knowledge as neutral, while others emphasize the social control function of discourses, arguing that such knowledge and its attendant practices reinforce the position of powerful interests to the exclusion of others” (p. 13). We need to pay attention to the ways in which the master narrative of the biomedical model dictates how we should feel about our bodies (Japp & Japp, 2005). I explored disability as “something that one does rather than something one is” (Sandahl & Auslander, 2005b, p. 10).

In an attempt to move away from the biomedical model’s narrow understanding of health, disability scholars have often neglected the knowledge of the material somatic body (Japp & Japp, 2005; Mitchell & Snyder, 2001; Quinlan & Bates, 2008). Current disability studies scholarship does not center attention on the corporeal movements of the disabled body (Cooper Albright, 1998; Mitchell & Snyder, 1998). Importantly, physical movement like dance provides an alternative way to story the disabled experience.
Kuppers (2004) worked to destabilize the notions that situate disability as a category rather than as a lived experience. For Kuppers, performances of individuals with disabilities serve as sites for resistance against normalization.

According to Kuppers (2007b), art about bodies can be used to align medical perspectives and people’s lived experiences. Art can both reflect and challenge realities of human lived experiences (Smith, 2005). Others have acknowledged that dance is a communicative act (Dils & Cooper Albright, 2001), yet little scholarship has been dedicated to dance in communication literature (Rogers, 1998). Dance and alternative performances can be used to resist and challenge representations of what it means to have a normal body (Cooper Albright, 1997; Quinlan & Bates, 2008). Cooper Albright, an individual with a disability and a dancer, argued that the dancing body can challenge “static representations of gender, race, sexuality and physical ability” (p. xii). Kuppers (2000, 2003, 2004, 2006, 2007a, 2007b) asserted that individuals with disabilities have not been placed in a central position in dance performances. Often they have been excluded because they were seen as freaks or outcasts. Furthermore, individuals with disabilities were only included if they were able to perform differently from able-bodied dancers (Cooper Albright, 1998; Mitchell & Snyder, 1998). When individuals with disabilities perform, they are often expected to conform to norms of individuals without disabilities (Paterson & Hughes, 1999; Quinlan & Bates, 2008). Similar to Dancing Wheels, Smith (2005) wrote about CandoCo, a British mixed-ability dance company and their presence in Europe’s exclusive contemporary dance scene. Both Smith (2005) and I argue for an inclusive aesthetics that broadens who has the right to this sphere (see also
Harter, in press). Furthermore, Ferris (2005) argued that there is a mutual responsibility between performers and audience members as performers with disabilities to engage in aesthetic distance to mediate differences and similarities between able-bodied audience members and themselves (Ferris, 2005). As scholars, we need to make space to challenge the understandings of the normal body as well as of who gets to perform.

Guided by a post-structural feminist and narrative standpoint, I explored how, and to what extent, Dancing Wheels offers an alternative cultural location in which (dis)ability is performed. The following research questions allowed me to broadly explore Dancing Wheels’ use of aesthetic activity to restory (dis)location based on the difference of disability.

RQ1: How is disability storied and performed at Dancing Wheels?
RQ2: How do the discourses of Dancing Wheels reinscribe and/or resist dominant narratives of disability?
RQ3: How do legal, economic, and corporeal issues shape how Dancing Wheels enacts disability?
CHAPTER THREE:
Interpretive Methodology

Reflective research has two basic characteristics: careful interpretation and reflection. The first implies that all references—trivial and non-trivial—to empirical data are the results of interpretation. Thus the idea that measurements, observations, the statements of interview subjects, and the study of secondary data such as statistics or archival data have an unequivocal or unproblematic relationship to anything outside the empirical material is rejected on principle. Consideration of the fundamental importance of interpretation means that an assumption of a simple mirroring thesis of the relationship between “reality” or “empirical facts” and research results (text) has to be rejected. Interpretation comes to the forefront of research work. (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000, p. 5)

This study primarily relied on qualitative methods inspired by ethnographic principles in order to understand how Dancing Wheels defines, enacts, and understands disability. Ethnographically inspired studies privilege the contexts in which communication occurs, assuming that a culture cannot be understood absent the social, political, economic, or legal forces that shape how and why people communicate in the ways they do. After obtaining approval from my university’s institutional review board, I collected data/discourses from three sources: (1) participant observations in the studio, rehearsals, and dance performances; (2) in-depth interviews with dancers, audience members, family members, and staff; and (3) documents produced by Dancing Wheels
and about Dancing Wheels. I begin by reviewing ethnographic principles that inspired my research design.

**Ethnographically Inspired Research Design**

In this study, I relied on qualitative research methods in order to understand how Dancing Wheels organizes. These are methods that privilege participants’ perspectives but also acknowledge researcher insights (Bogden & Biklen, 1992). Qualitative research, as a whole, has been broadly defined by Denzin and Lincoln (2000) as interpretive activities involving

… the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials—case study; personal experience; introspection; life story; interview; artifacts; cultural texts and productions; observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts—that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals’ lives.

(p. 3)

Through a qualitative research design, the researcher is able to gain first-hand experience of the situations and/or people studied while privileging their symbolic ways of making-meaning and how they account for their choices and lives. A qualitative approach brought the researcher into close contact with actual performances and practices of the group being studied (Babbie, 1995; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

**Ethnography is one of many genres of interpretive/qualitative research.**

Regrettably, there is not a single definition of ethnography that is fully agreed upon or completely satisfactory to those who practice it. Ayers (1989) did, however, acknowledge “an ethnographic sensibility, a body of work, and a respectable tradition upon which to
draw and with which to interact” (p. 11). Ethnographic sensibilities guide researchers in describing and interpreting cultural patterns, practices, and behaviors (Wolcott, 1985). Streubert and Carpenter (1995) expanded upon this by articulating three necessary characteristics for successful ethnographic work: the importance of the researcher as the instrument, the quality of fieldwork, and the understanding of the revolving nature of the data collection and data analysis.

My work was inspired by ethnographic sensibilities as I sought to understand the complexities of Dancing Wheels as participants relate and organize in their natural environments. Numerous scholars described ethnography as creating portraits of diverse and multivocal experiences and interactions (e.g., Van Maanen, 1988). Because ethnographic fieldwork culminates in representations of people, organizations, and cultures, it “carries quite serious intellectual and moral responsibilities, for the images of other inscribed in writing are most assuredly not neutral” (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 1). As Lindlof (1995) pointed out, “The ethnography of communication lays claim to interests in signifying phenomena of all kinds” (p. 46). In ethnographic studies, discourse is understood to be a pivotal force in the study of social life.

Ethnographic research can employ multiple methods of inquiry; however, there is a distinct commitment to understanding cultural practices and meaning through “close contact with the everyday life of the studied society or group over a fairly long period of time” ( Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000, p. 45; see also, Wolcott, 1995). There is no length of time that marks an appropriate length for an ethnography. Researchers may spend months, and sometimes years, in the field. Given the nature of the dissertation process, I
did not spend years in the field. However, I built sensitivity toward this context over the past eighteen months as a volunteer dancer and audience member. I complemented this with a year in the field doing formal data collection and analysis. I chose the language “ethnographically inspired” to acknowledge that some ethnographers may disagree with my use of the term ethnography if I am not in the field for numerous years.

Importantly, Tedlock (2001) proposed that ethnography is both a process and a product and “involves an ongoing attempt to place specific encounters, events, and understandings into a fuller, more meaningful context” (p. 455). Ethnographic fieldwork involves going out into the field of study and gathering data. If participants are removed from their natural settings, data collection and analysis can lead to disconnected findings. I worked to create thick descriptions derived through ethnographic fieldwork, descriptions that privilege the voices of participants but at the same time acknowledge my power and position in soliciting ideas, framing them, and reporting them. Stewart (1998) suggested that researchers should attempt to get involved at an up-close level with participants. By getting involved in the natural, everyday settings in which people in a given social situation operate, the researcher can learn the intimate details of particular insiders. Due to its concern with process and how people make sense of their lives, my ethnographically inspired fieldwork yielded a detailed and complex portrait of Dancing Wheels. In outlining my research design, I discuss my role as a researcher, offer details about the setting, and describe methods of data collection (interviews, participant observations, document collection) and analysis that I relied on.
Researcher’s Role and Reflexivity

Qualitative researchers can adopt a variety of roles in their research endeavors (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). The first role is that of a researcher. Merriam (1998) noted that the qualitative researcher is “the primary instrument for data collection” (p. 7). All researchers bring theoretical sensibilities, life experiences, and biases into their research. Werner and Schoepfle (1987) described the responsibilities of an ethnographer in this way:

As ethnographers, we try to do more than just describe the cultural knowledge of the native. We try to understand and, if possible, explain. We need to be able to explain how the natives could possibly view the world as they do. The paradox of this situation is that all description, understanding, and explanation of the natives’ cultural knowledge is based fundamentally on two disparate, incompletely transmittable, presumptive systems of knowledge—the knowledge to the native and the knowledge to the ethnographer. (p. 60)

Although I was able to minimize the extent to which my presence unduly shaped or distorted the data collection and analysis, I do not believe it was possible to “objectively” depict and report on the scenes at hand. I am inherently part of the co-constructed process and representations.

Drawing inspiration from post-colonial feminist writers (e.g., Harding, 1998), I adopted a reflexive stance that articulated my standpoint and explored how my standpoint potentially shapes how I am experiencing, interpreting, and framing the discourses.
collected and analyzed. In discussing reflexive methodology, Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000) argued:

It is necessary to widen our rhetorical and textual focus to include the researcher’s recognition of her-or himself as a rhetorician who is part of a social and political context. By writing ourselves into and recognizing that we are engaged in persuasion within a social and consequently a political context, we can avoid narcissistic self-centeredness. (p. 246)

Importantly, adopting a reflexive position does not necessarily mean expanding the scope of inquiry. Instead, “the whole idea of reflexivity, as we see it, is the very ability to break away from a frame of reference and to look what it is not capable of saying. Simply to extend it, runs contrary the whole idea of reflexivity” (p. 246). Throughout the data collection process, I strove to account for how what I saw, thought, experienced, and interpreted was being filtered by my life experiences and sensibilities. I accounted for this in both my fieldnotes and in the final report of findings. Additionally, I questioned how my repertoire of interpretations opens up meaning-making possibilities and shuts off other knowledge claims. In doing this, I hoped to invite other people into the discourses from different standpoints in order to generate alternative understandings.

A key aspect of my standpoint, as illustrated in Chapters One and Two, is my feminist research agenda and concern for voices and experiences often marginalized. Maher (1987) argued, “feminist research methodology thus challenges the ideals of universality and objectivity, not only because they are impossible to achieve, but because they are not useful in capturing the complexity and variety of human experience” (p.
I was particularly interested in the discursive construction of subjectivities and organizing patterns—and the social and material consequences of those discursive formations. I hope my findings opened up possibilities for stakeholders of Dancing Wheels as they continue to evolve as individuals and as an organization. By co-constructing an account of Dancing Wheels, I hope to encourage key stakeholders to think more deeply about their experiences and work with them to build their capacity for ongoing social change.

Additionally, I recognized my position as a white, heterosexual, middle-class woman who is generally considered able-bodied. As someone diagnosed with a learning disability, I recognized the often invisibility of my disability status as compared to some of the individuals at Dancing Wheels. Additionally, I acknowledged that I was never trained as a modern dancer. My dance background is in traditional Irish step dancing, which embraces many different notions about movement. I shared these details out of respect for Naples (2003) who contended, “if we fail to explore our personal, professional, and structural locations as researchers, we inevitably reinscribe race, class, and gender biases into our work. Feminist scholars rely on social research methods that challenge the dualities” (p. 13). I was committed to vigilantly reflecting on my subject positions as the process unfolded. Berger (2004) noted that there are few ethnographies on disability from the able-bodied perspective (e.g., the able-bodied researcher).

Aesthetics and Ethnography

“Aesthetics tracks the emotions that some bodies feel in the presence of other bodies....

The human body is both the subject and the object of aesthetic production: the body
creates other bodies prized for their ability to change the emotions of their maker and endowed with the semblance to vitality usually ascribed only to human beings.”

(Siebers, 2006, p. 63)

Many organizational scholars have focused on instrumental rationalities with a focus on efficiency and effectiveness for the purpose of providing insights into organizational life. In order to highlight other ways of knowing, I have been using aesthetics as a mode of inquiry (Bochner & Ellis, 2003; Clair, 1998; Denzin, 2000). Aesthetics are negotiated in the everyday practices of organizations. Similar to other scholars, I find qualitative methodologies useful to make meaning of organizational events (e.g., Strati, 1999). Aesthetics can be used to direct our attention to sensory day-to-day experience in organizations. Furthermore, the use of aesthetic forms of knowledge offers a medium that can capture and communicate the felt experience, the affect, and the tacit knowledge of the day-to-day moment to moment reality of an organization. Taylor and Hansen (2005) said:

Aesthetic inquiry asks, how can we make organizations more beautiful, more sublime, more comic, or more grotesque—not because we think that might lead to greater efficiency or effectiveness, not because it is the right thing to do, but because we desire to live in a world that is more beautiful, more sublime, more comic or more grotesque. (p. 1216)

As an ethnographer, I found aesthetic inquiry, through participant observation, particularly meaningful to the study of The Dancing Wheels Company & School because
I turned on my senses as a researcher to capture aesthetic knowledges (Strati, 1999). Bateson (1994) claimed participant observation “is more than a research methodology. It is a way of being, especially suited to a world of change” (p. 8). Through aesthetics as a mode of inquiry, as well as my narrative and dialogic conceptions of knowledge construction, I hope to present a unique entry into their organizational life (see also Frank, 2005a, 2005b). I attempted to document alternative ways of expressing and making meaning, which deeply influence organizational interactions, relationships, behaviors, and understandings. For example, I paid attention to knowledges that derive from stories and from emotive and embodied experiences (see also Ellingson, 2005, 2006, 2009). For example, Martin (2002) examined how aesthetics are organized in residential organizations for the elderly in the United Kingdom in order to discuss how involving her aesthetic judgments and bodily sensations enhanced her work as an ethnographer.

Throughout this study, I paid attention to my embodiment in the field. Merleau-Ponty (1962) discussed the ways in which the body is an experiencing agent, itself a subject and therefore a site of meaning and source of knowledge about the world. Like Merleau-Ponty (1962), I strove to remain “conscious of the world through the medium of my body” (pp. 94-95). Communication and dance scholars have yet to fully explore the role of the moving body in our research (see also, Ellingson, 2005, 2006, 2009). Dance scholars often call for scholars to talk about the way the movement feels, yet they have not broken down the movements in writing. As I critiqued the ways in which disability scholars have moved us away from the disabled body, I aimed to acknowledge and
explore the ways in which my body moves and operates (see also, Quinlan & Bates, 2008). Writing “is not only about the body but of and from the body” (Swan, 2002, p. 284, italics in original). I attempted to embody performative voice as I wrote up my results (see also, Pelias, 2004; Phelan, 1997; Pollock, 1998).

Setting and Participants

Since I started volunteering in the studio, I learned about the dancers, their backgrounds and their schedules. Currently, there are eleven dancers, five of whom are sit-down dancers. Most of the dancers without disabilities have either a modern dance and/or ballet background. Two of the stand-up dancers hold a bachelor’s degree in dance. Also, all of the stand-up dancers have trained with other dance companies and/or attended dance workshops at prestigious dance companies. One of the newest members, Carly, a stand-up dancer, did a workshop with AXIS, another integrated dance company before coming to Dancing Wheels. The dancers with disabilities were either born with spina bifida and/or have a spinal cord injury.

While working with Dancing Wheels, I learned that Mary Verdi-Fletcher and Jenny both have spina bifida. The two forms of spina bifida are spina bifida occulta and spina bifida manifesta.

Spina bifida is a birth defect that involves the incomplete development of the spinal cord or its coverings. The term spina bifida comes from Latin and literally means “split” or “open” spine. Spina bifida occurs at the end of the first month of pregnancy when the two sides of the embryo’s spine fail to join together, leaving an open area. In some cases, the spinal cord or other membranes may push
through this opening in the back…The causes of spina bifida are largely unknown. Some evidence suggests that genes may play a role, but in most cases there is no familial connection. A high fever during pregnancy may increase a woman’s chances of having a baby with spina bifida. (KidsHealth for Parents, 2009)

Mark D., Charlotte, and Nicole are the sit-down dancers with spinal cord injuries that happened later in life. Verdi-Fletcher and Jenny were born with spina bifida. Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) is damage to the spinal cord that results in a loss of function, such as mobility or feeling. Frequent causes of damage are trauma (e.g., falls, car accident, gunshot) or disease (e.g., spina bifida, tumor, etc.). The spinal cord does not have to be severed in order for a loss of functioning to occur. In fact, for most people with SCI, the spinal cord is intact, but the damage to it results in loss of functioning. Frequent causes of spinal cord injuries are “motor vehicle accidents (44%), acts of violence (24%), falls (22%), sports (two-thirds of these are from diving accidents) (8%), and other (2%)” (Spinal Cord Injuries, 2009). Furthermore, most people who get spinal cord injuries are male (82%). The average age of SCI is around 31. Every year, approximately 10,000 Americans get spinal cord injuries (Spinal Cord Injury Recovery, 2009; see also, Spinal Cord 101, 2009).

It appeared that the dancers with disabilities also participate in other activities for people with disabilities (e.g., wheelchair sports, dog therapy). It appeared that most of the dancers without disabilities work with other dance companies in the evenings, as either dance instructors or performers. Many of the dancers have other obligations at the
Dancing Wheels studio as part of their contracts (e.g., tour manager, Dancing Wheels School coordinator). For example, one of the dancers helps organize shows and receives a percentage of the profits when she books a show. I looked at the dancers’ obligations as mentioned in their contracts. Posted outside the studio is always a list of what is going to happen during the week (e.g., lists of rehearsal hours and what they are working on, workout times, technique class, lunch break). The dancers’ schedule begins at 9 am and ends at 5 pm Monday through Friday. Often the dancers travel on the weekends. The busiest month is October because of Disability Awareness month. During the 2007 season, the dancers performed more than 20 shows in thirty days. Many of the dancers have employment outside of the studio (e.g., dance in other dance companies, dance instructors, waitress). All of the sit-down dancers have health insurance; however, many of the stand-up dancers do not.

Although the focus of this study was on the company, an integral part of this organization is the Dancing Wheels school. The school which was established in 1990 and is the only multi-arts school in Ohio focused on physically integrated inclusive dance classes. The goal of the school is to provide high quality dance and movement experiences that benefit people traditionally underserved by the arts such as children and adults with disabilities, “youth at risk,” senior citizens, and those who are economically disadvantaged. The school’s programs are accessible and available to “all students of all abilities” by providing scholarships, audio description, sign interpretation, wheelchair adaptation and modification, and assistance with transportation. In the 2007-2008 season, the school directly served 983 students with and without disabilities; 433 were children,
ages 4 through teens; over 55% of all participants had physical and/or developmental disabilities; and, 37% received tuition scholarships. The students’ disabilities include physical disabilities, vision and hearing impairments, mental retardation and developmental disabilities. Students may be wheelchair users or require ambulatory assistance (see also The Dancing Wheels Company & School Annual Report, 2007-2008).

Dancing Wheels also has many individuals who work with the studio. Three to five choreographers work with the studio each year. Currently, they have Lisa Lock, a professional ballerina who works with them two days a week. Also, Keith Phillips, an unofficial physical therapist works with some of the dancers, has been a friend of the company for over 18 years, and Keith invited me to stay with him when I came into town. Also, Dancing Wheels has a sign interpreter, Mark Howdieshell, who has been with the company for 25 years.

The Dancing Wheels studio is located in downtown Cleveland on the eastern side of the city (3615 Euclid Ave., Cleveland, Ohio 44115), which is considered to be mid-town Cleveland. The studio is in the Masonic Temple on the third floor. There is a parking lot outside, and if the dancers arrive early enough, they are able to park on the street. In the lobby of the Temple, there is a guard who has a television screen that views the parking lot. In order to exit the parking lot, one can buy a token for $1.00. In order to arrive on the third floor people use an elevator or use a stairwell. Also, on the third floor is Verdi-Fletcher’s office and there offices for her assistants. Dancers who are employed for administrative purposes have a desk in the larger office. At the time of my research,
Jeanne Oliver was the Developmental Director. She had her own office but left the organization in early January 2009. The studio had wireless capabilities in summer 2008, but not before that, but two of the computers did have internet access. Verdi-Fletcher checks her e-mail in the morning at home before she leaves for the studio.

Most traveling to dance shows is done in vans. Mark D., Jenny, and Mary have adapted vehicles so they can drive to performances. Most of Dancing Wheel’s performances are in Ohio and on the east coast. However, they also travel internationally; however, from what I observed, only a few members of the company travel to these performances. Also, Dancing Wheels has done numerous educational outreach performances in which they perform in schools, universities, and community centers.

For this project, I interviewed current Dancing Wheels company members, former company members, audience members, choreographers, and friends of the company (e.g., the physical therapist and sign interpreter). I gained access to Dancing Wheels when I met some of the company members in January 2007 at a performance in Marietta, Ohio. I kept in touch with the Dancing Wheels educational outreach coordinator and went to see a show in April 2007 in Cleveland (Alice in Wonderland: Like Never Been Seen Before), where I introduced myself to Verdi-Fletcher. At this time, I kept in touch with the educational coordinator and she invited me to the adult summer dance workshop in June 2007. I attended the adult and children’s summer dance workshop in June 2008. At that time, I spent a week at the studio and was able to participate in integrated dance for the first time. Since June 2007, I kept in close contact with Verdi-Fletcher, observing the studio periodically over an eighteen-month period with full-time immersion during the
summer of 2008. For example, on Friday, April 4, 2008 I attended a double feature of Helen Keller in the morning and Alice in Wonderland: Like Never Seen Before in the afternoon. I was able to spend that entire day with the dancers in Mansfield, Ohio. I attend a performance on Sunday, May 4, 2008, in Cleveland, where they released new performances. Additionally, Verdi-Fletcher asked me to represent Dancing Wheels at the Ohio Dance Audition at The Ohio State University on May 31, 2008.

While working with the company, I helped do things for this organization. For example, with Verdi-Fletcher’s permission, I set up a Facebook account to help them network. It has since been shut down because I did not set it up the correct way, but it will be up and running again soon. Also, I volunteered to write an article for Dance Magazine to help talk about Dancing Wheels to the larger dance community. There have been times where Verdi-Fletcher has forwarded e-mail addresses to me and asked me to make a contact for her. For example, Dancing Wheels is currently looking for sit-down and stand-up dancers. I sent numerous e-mails to my connections in the disability community as well as the dance community. As a result, three individuals who use wheelchairs have contacted Verdi-Fletcher to audition. While with Dancing Wheels for six weeks in the summer of 2008, I acted as Verdi-Fletcher’s assistant working on the annual Dancing Wheels campaign brochure.

I maintained a good working with relationship with the dancers and the Founding Director throughout my fieldwork. I felt accepted and included, and I felt that my skills have a lot to contribute in ways that seem valuable to the company.
Consent/Confidentiality

Before beginning my fieldwork, I garnered approval from Mary Verdi-Fletcher to study the Dancing Wheels Company & School for my dissertation (see Appendix A). Also I received approval from Ohio University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). I included both a copy of the IRB application and the approval as appendices in the dissertation (see Appendix B and C). All components of the proposed and approved protocol were followed. Participants signed a voluntary consent form, all participants chose to have their names used in the dissertation and future publications (see Appendix D for interviewee order). Participants had the right to withdraw from the research at anytime.

Discourse Collection Procedures

Participant Observation

I conducted participant observations at Dancing Wheels over an eighteen-month period. Most of the observations focused on integrated dancing between individuals with and without disabilities. I also observed and participated in dance performances and performed in dance practices and workshops. Participant observation exists on a continuum ranging from mostly observation to mostly participation (Glesne, 1999). During Dancing Wheels performances and practices, I took handwritten fieldnotes and documented key phrases of conversation verbatim. During studio observations, I participated by volunteering and helping in whatever ways needed. The volunteer work was conducted in ways that allowed me to observe everyday interactions between the dancers and staff members. My goal was to travel with the dance company as they
performed in various parts of the country. I remained open to other opportunities for participant observation that emerged throughout my fieldwork (e.g., running errands for company, working on the annual benefit brochure).

Dewey (1929) stated that “knowing is not the act of an outside spectator but of a participator inside the natural and social scene” (p. 157). Pelias and VanOosting (1987) viewed the methodology of performance as one that “demands physical, sensuous involvement in a performance event” (pp. 221-222). Performance scholars argued that social interaction gets us only so far and that we need to engage in self-reflexivity. Basically, this project involved perspective-taking in which the body is required to do what another body is doing and which requires training.

This project addressed embodied meanings. For example, Conquergood (1991) claimed:

In the quest for intellectual respectability through disciplinary rigor, some communication and rhetorical scholars have narrowed their focus to language, particularly those aspects of language that can be spatialized on the page, or measured and counted, to the exclusion of embodied meanings…” (p. 188)

Collecting data for an ethnography is much more than just recording notes and findings (Beck, 2000). Researchers often include their own reactions, moods, and thoughts so as to accurately recollect the events that took place during the observation in order to help recall and explain in vivid details.

Throughout observations, I tried to account for how I, the researcher, influenced the scene, including what was observed and how it was interpreted (see also Adelman &
Frey, 2001). After each observation, I typed fieldnotes. In crafting fieldnotes, I drew inspiration from Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995), who argued that “fieldnotes are accounts describing experiences and observations that the researcher has made while participating in an intense and involved manner” (p. 5). My fieldnotes reflected but were not limited to my observations of relational communication patterns, primary scenes of interaction, how scenes of interaction shaped the communication that unfolded, dilemmas or challenges and how those were communicatively managed, if and how notions of disability were discussed, and how collaborative dance unfolded. My fieldnotes contained descriptive details of lived stories as well as theoretical memos that I wrote that reflect my sensemaking about these stories based on my theoretical sensitivities (see also Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). I spent a total of 301 hours in the field (see Appendix E for research log). A total of 100 pages of typed fieldnotes were collected.

The main goal of my fieldwork was to offer a reasonable and viable interpretation of what I observed and experienced in the field (Germain, 1986). My role as researcher was that of participant observer with access to obscure information and key informants (Jorgensen, 1989). As a participant, I engaged in activities and events in order to get to know members and how they organize. As an observer, I watched and recorded the activities and course of the organization. Simultaneously experiencing the role of insider and outsider, I became familiar with formal and informal organizational roles as well as social networks. The data I gathered helped me to learn about the themes and meaning systems embedded within this organization that revealed patterns in lived experiences (Spradley, 1980).
In short, data were primarily collected by using the standard ethnographic techniques of fieldwork, whereby the dynamics of members in a natural setting are observed and interpreted by a researcher who is taking notes (Wolcott, 1996). To complement participant observations, I also conducted in-depth interviews and document analysis.

**In-depth Interviews**

Throughout the duration of my participant observations, I conducted impromptu and informal information-gathering and clarifying interviews. After being in the field for several months, I conducted formal in-depth interviews with the dancers, staff members, and board members in settings of their choice. I conducted 26 interviews lasting approximately 90 minutes each. The interview sessions were semi-structured to allow participants to talk about their experiences. I developed tentative semi-structured interview protocols to guide in-depth interviews (see Appendices F, G, and H). However, I was open to shifting these protocols, based on experiences that emerged in the field that merited in-depth exploration. I hoped the interviews would allow participants to retrospectively account for their experiences. Interviews proved useful as I attempted to construct storied accounts of how participants understand disability, dance, raising consciousness through storied performances, and social change.

Open-ended, in-depth interviews took place alongside participant observations in order to clarify what I observed. I focused my observations on salient issues for participants. I conducted face-to-face interviews in order to encourage rapport with each interviewee rather than using online surveys or telephone interviews. One benefit of face-
to-face interviews was that trust between the researcher and the participants may develop, allowing the researcher to investigate issues that emerge across participants and providing the researcher with an in-depth knowledge of the participants’ views. In this study, I intended each interview to be a “conversation” between me and the interviewee. With the permission of participants, I digitally recorded interviews and transcribed the recordings. These transcriptions provided trace artifacts of the dialogue and allowed me to privilege the words of participants as they narrated their worlds. I collected a total of 162 typed pages of interview transcripts.

It is important to conduct interviews as well as participant observations. Boyle (1994) stated that the researcher should rely on the interview process to produce additional questions and even theories. Best and Kahn (2003) stated that we learn about people’s feelings, actions, and thoughts through interviewing (i.e., listening and observing). Eder and Fingerson (2003) also supported the use of interviews to collect, analyze, and interpret personal feelings and actions. Gay and Airasian (1992) further explained that interviews permit researchers to obtain important data they cannot acquire through basic observations. Kvale (1996) described 12 main aspects in the understanding of a qualitative research interview as (a) being centered on the interviewee’s life-world, (b) seeking to understand the meaning of the phenomena of the interviewee’s life-world, (c) qualitative, (d) descriptive, (e) specific, (f) based on presuppositions, (g) focused on certain themes, (h) open for some ambiguity, (i) able to change, (j) considerate of the sensitivity of the interviewer, (k) taking place on an interpersonal interaction, and (l)
having the potential to be a positive experience (pp. 29-36). The current qualitative study encompasses all of these aspects.

Organizational Documents

I collected 762 newspaper articles on Dancing Wheels ranging from its inception in 1980 through the winter of 2009. By analyzing the newspaper data, I was able to include voices of past organizational members. Also, I collected documents produced by Dancing Wheels, such as the mission statement, promotional flyers, press releases, the Web site, videos of its performances and documentaries. Organizational documents are critical to the functioning of any organization, as they offer an officially articulated set of guiding ideologies. Documents offered valuable perspectives on institutional events and processes. Hodder (1998) articulated:

Such texts are of importance for qualitative research because, in general terms, access can be easy and low cost, because the information provided may differ from and may not be available in spoken form, and because texts endure and thus give historical insight. (p. 111; see also, Hodder, 2000)

Documents provided a “paper trail” of organizational sensemaking related to purposes, events, and experiences. Searches for organizational documents began with discussions with key leaders of the organization. These initial searches led me to other sources of information I was initially unaware of.

Discourse Analysis

Data analysis began at the time I entered the field. As I started to collect data via observations, I paid attention to salient and interesting issues. Likewise, the initial
interviews helped me focus later interviews in ways that built emergent themes. After the
data collection was complete, I pursued more vigorously themes—reoccurring patterns
that seemed to bleed across interviews and observations in the discourse. I also paid
attention to disconfirming evidence that rests in tension with dominant understandings
(Streubert & Carpenter, 1995). In short, I relied on a constant comparative method
(Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to carry out a thematic analysis of the discourses collected
through in-depth interviews, participant observations, and document collection. This
process began with data “reduction” and “interpretation.” I read all transcripts and
fieldnotes in their entirety several times to develop a sense of the discourses as a whole. I
re-read the transcripts while playing the original tapes to ensure the accuracy of
transcriptions and to note special emphases or cues that might affect interpretation but
that did not appear on the transcripts. I listened to each tape several times noting of the
cadence and speed of the language, use of pauses, and other aspects of delivery (see also
Riessman, 1993). Data collection, as well as constant comparison, continued until
“theoretical saturation” was reached (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 110)

A constant comparative method allows themes representing frequent patterns of
behavior and meaning to emerge from the participants’ own words (as understood
through my own senses). The process began by manually coding the data on the actual
transcripts. By engaging in a constant comparative analysis of data, I continually
compared detailed incidents in the data, refined concepts, and identified their properties.

All digitally recorded interviews were stored on my password-locked computer
until transcriptions were made, and then they were destroyed. All interviewees gave me
permission to use their first names. The interviews were manually transcribed for the opportunity to re-think and reflect on the data and to develop an overall sense of what is happening in the Dancing Wheels organization. Transcripts, fieldnotes, and documents were analyzed by coding themes and categories. I used NVivo to help manage the thematic process. NVivo allowed me to keep track of excerpts of discourse by theme. The software did not code for me; rather, it helped me manage the large volume of data I worked with.

Member Checking and Conceptualization of Rigor

Member checking, or member validation (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), is a process through which qualitative researchers share their interpretation of a social setting with members of that setting (see also, Creswell, 1997). In this case, I went back to the field to determine whether the participants recognized my findings as reasonable interpretations. I asked questions such as “Is this what you meant to say?” “What did you mean by this?” “Did I accurately represent your experiences?” Although I am allowed my interpretation, by asking these questions I hoped to make sure that my interpretation was similar to those who actually experienced it. Member checking allowed for ongoing dialogue between myself and participants and allowed participants to offer feedback on the viability and reasonableness of the knowledge claims. Also, through my member checking sessions, I was able to glean new information and insights. In the end, I recognize that this is a partial account of The Dancing Wheels Company & School. However, all knowledge claims are grounded in my fieldwork.
Summary

Now that I have outlined the interpretive methodological approach I used for this study, Chapter Four proceeds with a presentation of the data collected throughout this dissertation. The results of the data collection are organized by theme and accompanied by my interpretation of the data. Chapter Five positions the themes presented in Chapter Four in relation to the three research questions presented at the end of Chapter Two. In Chapter Five, I narrate the implications of my results on theory and practice as well as discuss limitations of this study, practical implications, and future directions.
CHAPTER FOUR:

Analysis

“Who made up the rule that you can only dance on your two feet?” (Dancing Wheels promotional material, 1996)

In 1985 people with disabilities could not ride Cleveland’s buses because the buses were not accessible, so most of us could only dream as far as our own chairs could wheel us. I decided I wanted to do something about it. I traveled to D.C. to train in civil disobedience with a group that had worked with African American, gay, and women’s rights movements. It was a scorching summer day when I captured my first bus, the bus pulled up to the stop where several of us in chairs were waiting. We pulled directly in front of the bus and parked. Our nondisabled friends were already on board as passengers. They alerted everyone inside the bus that we could not move until our demands were met and then they joined us in encircling the bus. I was frightened, I was shaking, but I could not tell if from fear or from rage. But I sat in front of that bus and did not move. The police soon arrived. Car after car arrived. We knew they couldn’t lock us up because the jails were not accessible. But they surprised us with a plan, they would lock us up in the hospital instead. So like a scene in a bad Hollywood movie, a huge siren-blaring paddy wagon pulled up to cart us away. It was ugly, it needed a paint job, it reeked of a violent crime. But there was one problem. The paddiwagon was not accessible. The police had no idea how to load us inside. Of course if the bus had been accessible they could have loaded us in that. But it wasn’t, so they couldn’t. Just then a huge policeman planted his feet in front of my chair, crossed his arms and glared down
in front of me. He looked like Bull Conner confronting the marchers in Alabama except there were no hoses to disperse us. He said, “you need to move away or I’ll pick you up myself and throw you into the paddy wagon.” And I said, “you do what you need to, but I will not move.” We stared at each other for a moment that seemed forever. And then an amazing thing happened, he lowered his arms and walked away. They did not know how to get rid of us, so instead they talked to us. The head of the transportation commission came out, and we talked. On that day we received a promise, and today every bus in Cleveland is accessible.

A voice-over of Mary Verdi-Fletcher speaking these words echoed across the stage as dancers, including Mary, embodied and memorialized the events that happened that fateful day over twenty years ago as part of the Walking on Clouds performance choreographed by David Rousseve. I experienced many moments of inspiration, despair, and hope while in the field at The Dancing Wheels Company & School. Bearing witness to this Walking on Clouds performance will forever remain one of the most memorable for me. This story is what Burke (1969) might call a representative anecdote—a prototypical act that captures a culture’s value, concerns, interests, and organizing practices. Throughout this chapter, I deconstruct this performance and numerous others to illustrate how Dancing Wheels, inspired by the autobiography of Verdi-Fletcher, creates meaning, raises consciousness, and disrupts hegemonic scripts that separate and segregate individuals based on embodied differences.

In this chapter, I move between stories about The Dancing Wheels Company & School—Art in Motion, as shared by stakeholders during interviews or witnessed by me
in the field, and the broader script that guides the organizing practices of its members. I based these knowledge claims on discourse collected through interviews, observations, organizational documents, and public discourse about the organization. Whenever possible, I have used “in-vivo codes” to label and organize themes—language used by participants in the settings in which they live their lives (see also, Creswell, 1997).

As a communication scholar, heavily influenced by narrative and poststructural feminist sensibilities, I am interested in the storied nature of organizational and community life. Drawing inspiration from other scholars, I understand narrativity as a dialogic communication process in which meaning is constructed within networks of relationships among characters embedded in time and space and connected by emplotment processes (see also, Barge, 2004; Charon, 2006; Fisher, 1987). Plots connect events and agents of causation in consequential ways (Polkinghorne, 1988). When analyzing the discourses (i.e., interviews, newspapers, brochures, participatory sketching/photography) collected through this ethnographic study, it struck me that The Dancing Wheels Company & School—Art in Motion is guided by and performs a counter-narrative of disability that disrupts dominant scripts that segregate individuals with disabilities or positions them as objects of pity and fear (Lindemann-Nelson, 2001). Through a layered, post-structural feminist analysis, I develop this argument and construct an intertextual account of the autobiographical story that gave rise to Dancing Wheels and in turn of how the organization relies on movement and rhythm and other
signifying practices to re-story opportunities for individuals with embodied differences (see also Bakhtin, 1981; Brown & McMillan, 1991; Browning, 1992).

Although historians have begun to acknowledge the storied nature of historicizing our lives (e.g., White, 1981) and communication scholars have explored the therapeutic potential of narrative activity (e.g., Sharf & Vanderford, 2003), existing scholarship is limited to the extent to which focuses on the written and spoken word. Riessman (2008) argued, “Words, however, are only one form of communication; other forms (gesture, body movement, sound, images) precede words in human development and continue to communicate meaning through the life course” (p. 141). Storylines can be developed, characters can be performed, and the particularities of settings can be conveyed through choreography, movement, music, artifacts as well as words. I draw on my fieldwork at Dancing Wheels and my narrative sensibilities to illustrate how meaning exists in motion even as it is expressed and negotiated in language. As a result, organizations that do the work of social movements can expand their arsenal of rhetorical resources to include numerous story forms, including dance.

Five themes were found, Meaning in Motion: (Re)storying Persons, Organizations, and Publics Through Dance which narrates the history of The Dancing Wheels Company & School and the mobilizing narrative of the founder Mary Verdi-Fletcher. In the second theme, The Art of Dialogue in Integrated Dance, I discuss the ways in which Dancing Wheels answers difference through dance, the ephemeral nature of dialogic meaning moments, and dialogic performances and social change. The third theme, Aesthetic Knowledge and Sensemaking in Organizational Life at Dancing Wheels,
explores ways in which imagination is used to create and limit new movement possibilities and build community. Additionally, this theme explores the aesthetic of (im)perfection that individuals face as they organize. The fourth theme, *Science, Technology, Medicine, and the Dancing (Dis)abled Body*, explains the ways in which Dancing Wheels resists and embraces biomedicine. The fifth theme, *Moving Through Realms of Exclusion and Inclusion in Integrated Dance*, investigates the inclusion and exclusion of individuals’ experiences at Dancing Wheels, in the dance community, and in society.

**Meaning in Motion: (Re)storying Persons, Organizations, and Publics Through Dance**

We rely on narratives to make sense of our lives. Indeed, storytelling allows individuals to relate to and organize with others (Bruner, 1991; Burke, 1954/1984; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Narrative sensemaking, though, is not a benign process. Mumby (1987) emphasized the political function of narrative in the (re)structuring of organizational, relational, and communal life. Other feminist scholars have emphasized how narratives remain a central resource in feminist attempts to raise consciousness about lived inequities (e.g., Clair, Chapman, & Kunkel, 1996). Personal stories can politicize the socio-historical, institutional, and material nature of (dis)empowerment. As such, storytelling remains a valuable resource for social movements in general, and health activists in particular.

Major resistance and social movements—feminist, civil rights, gay and lesbian—emerge as individuals share stories about small and large moments of inequity. When
commonalities are experienced amidst differences, stories can set the stage for collective action. In short, narrative activity energizes social movements. In this theme, I draw on my experiences in the field and my narrative sensibilities to explore the storytelling activities of Dancing Wheels. I present this theme as a story—my temporal ordering and recounting of key events, turning points, and agents of causation in the history of Dancing Wheels. I begin with the founder’s story, followed by a discussion of how her narrative gave rise to the organization’s mission and mobilized its resources to advance social change.

No Story Stands Alone: Mary Verdi-Fletcher

“No story sits by itself. Sometimes stories meet at corners and sometimes they cover one another completely, like stones beneath a river” (Albom, 2003, p. 10).

Clair (1997), too, argued, “no story stands alone” (p. 323), pointing to the intertextual nature of narrative activity. Individuals organize their lives around specific meanings and events. In this way, stories provide pathways to action. The narrative of The Dancing Wheels Company & School is interconnected with and informed by the story of Mary Verdi-Fletcher. Verdi-Fletcher was born in a suburb outside Cleveland, Ohio, on June 4, 1955. Mary was born with spina bifida, a disability in which a section of the spine fails to develop completely, leaving the spinal cord exposed in that section. Frank (1995, 2004) argued that illness, trauma, tragedy, and in this case disability, represent calls for stories. Being born with a visible disability in a world organized for the able-bodied is a call for stories. From birth on, Verdi-Fletcher was challenged to find
ways to relate and organize with others in a world in which the dominant scripts did not include archetypal characters living with disabilities.

Over the past ten years, numerous scholars have demonstrated how humans use and make stories to make sense of and handle disruptions in their lives (e.g., Bruner, 1991, 1996, 2002). Drawing on my experiences with Dancing Wheels, I extend this argument in two ways. First, I suggest that organizations that do the work of social movements are energized by narrative activity precisely because of the power of stories to allow individuals to make sense of discontinuities in the fabric of communal life—particularly the stories of organizations’ founders. Second, Verdi-Fletcher and Dancing Wheels demonstrate that stories do not need to rely on spoken or written words alone to render experience meaningful or to disrupt the status quo. Music and movement combine with lyrics in the choreography of Dancing Wheels to represent experience and create identification with their cause and mission.

Through the duration of my fieldwork, the stories composing the autobiography of Verdi-Fletcher were ever-present. Indeed, it was a rare occasion when I was in the field that Verdi-Fletcher’s spirit was not evoked. Public discourse about Dancing Wheels also takes its inspiration from the story of her disability. Verdi-Fletcher’s identity is connected to her disability and her identity is connected to the company’s ethos.

“Dancing Wheels is a dance company founded by Mary Verdi-Fletcher,” reported the San Jose Mercury, “who found that, despite a severe physical disability requiring her use of a wheelchair, modes of expressive movement were possible” (1992, p. 3D).
During an interview, Mary shared with me, “I was born with the spirit of a dancer.” In one sense, this is not surprising because she was born into a family that loved the arts. Her mother, Nancy Verdi, was a Vaudeville dancer, and her father, Sylvio Verdi, a musician. In fact, her parents met while performing together. Mary spoke with great pride of her father’s work with Bob Hope: “He played in the Army Orchestra when Bob [Hope] was entertaining and traveled with him to different camps and played for the officers’ events.” Mary brings to life the key characters in her life-story during performances and press interviews. “My mother was a professional dancer and my father was a musician, so performing the arts were inbred in me,” she told an audience between dance numbers at a performance, “But because I was born with spina bifida, I grew up believing the only way I could ever participate in dance was as a spectator” (reported by Morris, 1991, p. 3A). Her early familial exposure to the arts as a child predisposed her to express herself creatively; yet, the stigma and barriers she faced as a person with spina bifida were difficult to redress.

When Verdi-Fletcher was born, her parents were afraid to hold her. “They were afraid I would break,” shared Mary (Grohol, 2005, p. 10). Her mother, Nancy Verdi, remembered being scared by “the sac the size of a grapefruit on her lower back” (Grohol, 2005, p. 10). Soon after Verdi-Fletcher was born, she underwent a surgery to attempt to re-connect nerve endings, which allowed her some mobility in her legs.

During the 1960s, individuals with disabilities were looked upon “as less worthy, less acceptable” (Wright, 1960, p. 118). At the time, sociologist Goffman (1963) wrote about the experience of stigma for those who were marked by society as different and
morally inferior. Individuals such as “the dwarf, the blind man, the disfigured, and the ex-
mental patient” were viewed as not fully human and sequestered away from mainstream
society. However, Verdi-Fletcher’s parents and grandmother, Margharita Baruzzi, raised
her to be independent, taking her where they went. Mary recounted, “My grandmother
knew that I was destined for greatness.” Her grandmother told people that she was born
“with a tear in her eye and a smile on her face.” In 1965, Verdi-Fletcher visited the Pope
in Rome. Whenever anyone would make comments about that “‘poor handicapped child,’
Mary’s mother taught her to say ‘I am not handicapped, I’m Mary!’” (Ule-Grohol, 1995,
p. 5). She wanted people to see her, not her disability. During a press interview, Mary
stressed,

Ever since I was four years old, I have dreamed of becoming a dancer… I was
stimulated by all kinds of music and dancing. As I watched other people dance, I
wondered how I would do that same movement and how I might have done it
derentially (Ule-Grohol, 1995, p. 2).

As a child, Verdi-Fletcher wore leg braces and arm crutches. Verdi-Fletcher and
her cousins would have talent contests judged by family members. Importantly, they
would never go easy on her because of her disability. She had three breaks to her legs so
the decision was made, when Mary was 12 years, that she would need to use a wheelchair
for mobility. To many, a wheelchair represents a universal sign of a disability and of
restriction (Cooper-Albright, 1997). In contrast, Verdi-Fletcher saw the “wheelchair as a
vehicle of freedom rather than confinement” (Smith & Plimpton, 1993, p. 166). Verdi-
Fletcher continues to equate a wheelchair with freedom, and this metaphor serves as an anchor for the counter-narrative of disability performed by Dancing Wheels.

Verdi-Fletcher noted that her parents were protective of her and were hurt when she decided to move out of their house and into an apartment. At the time she was employed at Services for Independent Living. She was even on a radio talk program called *The Year of the Disabled*. Contrary to literature that says individuals with disabilities are childlike and dependent, Verdi-Fletcher was employed and lived on her own (see also, Sprague & Hayes, 2000). During an interview with me, she shared information about her early life:

I lived in an era in which there was this whole transformation that occurred but wanting to be independent was something that I had longed for even from childhood. I lived a very confined life because my parents were very protective. They were very kind and supportive of me in my emotional and educational development, but they really were so afraid for me to branch out into society that I really didn’t have the ability to break loose, if you will, as most teenagers. So even up until I was in my 20s, I was still living at home and didn’t drive a car, and found it very isolating and just confining as a rule.

Verdi-Fletcher remembered dancing at Cleveland, Ohio dance clubs, such as Dan’s Village Inn, at age 23, without her parents’ permission. She would ballroom dance in places like Dan’s Village Inn. Her first dance partner was a friend named Larry. Later she began to dance with David Brewster, the husband of a childhood friend. Mary Verdi and Bob Fletcher, whom she met at Dan’s Village Inn, married in 1984. Journalists often
mention Mary’s first dance experiences when reporting on the events of Dancing Wheels. One reporter provided the following account:

Verdi-Fletcher tried out her talents at local dance clubs. She and her friends—some able-bodied, some disabled—dance together at the disco clubs. It was pure pleasure. “At first people were shocked,” she said. “But then it became an eye-opener for them. And they saw a disability in a new light.” (The Fort Wayne Journal Gazette, 1993, section A)

Mary was not satisfied as a spectator of the arts; she wanted to be an agent of social change. Her own life story evolved into the birth of Dancing Wheels, an organization that would come to provide her and countless other dancers opportunities for expressive movement in the public sphere, opportunities that would otherwise have been unattainable.

Verdi-Fletcher’s Dream Comes Alive: The Birth of Dancing Wheels

In 1980, at age 25, Verdi-Fletcher’s professional dance career began. Verdi-Fletcher and David Brewster entered a dance competition and were given a standing ovation. They began performing in the community; and were eventually sponsored by Invacare, a wheelchair manufacturing company. They then established themselves as Dancing Wheels.

Salisbury (2005b), a renowned Cleveland dance critic, documented Verdi-Fletcher’s entrance into dance:

In the late 1970s, when disco was the craze, a friend asked her to try a few turns to music that was piped out of the Perry Party Center [Perry Heights’s Party}
Center, Canton, OH]. The experiment was fun and the partnering fluid. Soon, Verdi-Fletcher and her partner, gymnast/social dancer David Brewster, became regulars at Cleveland dance clubs. “He would jump on the arms of the chair and spring off. People went wild,” Verdi-Fletcher said last week. On Oct. 1, 1980, the duo competed for a spot on “Dance Fever,” the syndicated television show that gave national exposure to amateur disco dancers. They called their team Dancing Wheels, and they were named first runners-up…Verdi-Fletcher, 50, has overcome enormous obstacles in her relentless battle for civil rights for the disabled and her strong-willed determination to build an integrated dance company. Before the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, she and her partner traveled widely giving lecture-demonstrations at schools, nursing homes, hospitals and conferences. “I saw that it changed everybody’s view of disabilities in an instant,” she said. “I wanted to be an advocate and change people’s lives.” (p. J5)

Although Verdi-Fletcher considered changing the organization’s name over the years, she stayed with Dancing Wheels because, in the early 1980s, there were not any programs that provided professional dance techniques and opportunities for individuals in wheelchairs. As suggested by the excerpt above, dance became an expressive mechanism and a vehicle for activism. Each dance was an artful encounters that sought to disrupt trained incapacities and stretch people’s horizons.

Verdi-Fletcher’s personal life also included other disability activism. One of her now famous activities was spearheading a bus protest in downtown, Cleveland. The goal was to make all buses wheelchair accessible for people moving around the city. After
training by American Disabled for Attendant Programs Today (ADAPT), a transportation
and disability activist group, Verdi-Fletcher and her disabled and nondisabled friends
conducted a successful bus protest. Following the protest, the Cleveland Transportation
Commissioner at the time, J. Barry Barker, promised to make all buses in Cleveland fully
accessible. During one of my interviews with Verdi-Fletcher, she discussed her disability
activist work in the early 1980s regarding transportation.

Mary: From that time on they started to negotiate the deal and we made every
bus in Cleveland accessible. Well, it took years to actually have it—well
what they had to do was they had to go through a plan of whether the
ramps would fit the buses, or adapt them, or to make a plan that every new
bus that got off the line when the old bus got off the line, new buses would
have all the equipment, so they did that. It took years for all the buses to
go off. Now every bus in Cleveland is accessible.

Maggie: How long did it take?

Mary: I’d have to go back and find out but I think a good five years before a
majority of the fleet was accessible and then, after that, then every
replacement bus started to have new kinds of equipment, like the kneeling
buses and things that made it faster for people to get on, rather than the big
ramps that came out. And then we also established sort of a trouble
shooting community so that if people had problems or if drivers had
problems, we could help solve those problems as quickly as possible. And
some of the problems that existed were that they didn’t use them that
much at first. But then when they needed to use them, either the driver
couldn’t remember how the equipment worked or the equipment failed so
the person with the disability that waited out there for the service didn’t
get service. So then they stopped waiting. It was kinda like we had to get
into a cycle to make sure it worked properly.

As Verdi-Fletcher was fighting for transportation accessibility, she and her dance
partners enjoyed performing and competing in the community arts and disability
organizations. However, paying for costumes and travel became costly. Verdi-Fletcher
began to seek funds and soon decided to organize a nonprofit, Professional Flair, with the
mission of providing employment opportunities for people with disabilities. The purpose
of Professional Flair is “to afford people with a disability a unique learning and
performing experience in the arts—an experience that provides equality and integration
of individuals with and without disabilities whose origins and ages are wide and diverse”
(mountaintimes.com/mtweekly/2003/1023/dancingwheels.php3). Verdi-Fletcher applied
for funding from the Ohio Arts Council and later received a small grant ($3,000) but had
trouble showing the Ohio Arts Council that Professional Flair was an art form rather than
a therapeutic outlet. Dancers have long acknowledged and applauded the therapeutic
potential of dance (Chaiklin, 1985; Halprin, 2000). However, artists with disabilities
often have trouble moving outside the therapeutic frame to one of acceptance in the arts
(Nash, 2008). The slogan for Dancing Wheels became “Whoever made up the rule that
you can only dance on your two feet?”
Through Verdi-Fletcher’s work and performances in the Cleveland community, she continued to make many professional contacts. It was during the late 1980s that Verdi-Fletcher and her dance partners started to use the term translation to describe their technique. Translation involves interpreting movements from a stand-up dancer (one using his or her legs for support) to a sit-down dancer (one using a wheelchair for support). Mark Tomasic, whom I met at a summer dance workshop that I attended, described a reverse translation as translating movement from a sit-down dancer to a stand-up dance (fieldnotes, summer 2007). During an interview, Verdi-Fletcher reflected,

I am not sure if I coined the phrase but certainly the technique as the only way to dance was to learn from the stand-ups at the time. I learned to move in unison with them by watching their movements and adapting them to me.

Sara, a current company member, explained translation in the following way:

Well, we use translation in our lecture performances. And how we describe it is… how you translate one language into the other. Like, for instance, Hola is hello. So that’s… a language translation. And then we do demonstrate, like I was saying, about the body… Dancer A does their right leg, to their knee, out to the side, back into their knee and back down to the ground. Dancer B is in a wheelchair. How would you do that? Translate it. They could translate it usually by using their arms. If they can’t use their arms, use your ears, right tilt, go the side, tilt and back to center.

Translation is a primary organizing practice of Dancing Wheels. Interestingly, Sara adopts a linguistic metaphor to illustrate what happens through movement—a signifying
practice that often goes unrecognized as meaning-making. Language alone could not accomplish what happens in the translation process; translation is truly an embodied process that demands an attunement between another’s body and one’s own.

By the time the Americans with Disabilities Act (of 1990) was passed, Dancing Wheels had been making available artistic and expressive opportunities for people with disabilities for ten years. That said, Verdi-Fletcher acknowledged the importance of legislation that mandated that people with disabilities be afforded the same rights and opportunities as other citizens:

Well, I was born with my disability, so obviously I had encountered all of the problems associated with society’s views of disability. And back then, since I’m 52, people with disabilities didn’t really have certain rights. In fact, it wasn’t until 1990s that people were considered first class citizens through the ADA.

In 1990, Dancing Wheels was invited by Dennis Nahat, Artistic Director of The Cleveland Ballet, a contemporary ballet company in existence from 1972 to 1999, to serve as its educational outreach component. Verdi-Fletcher had dreamed of such an alliance and of establishing a company in her hometown of Cleveland.

Dennis Nahat saw Dancing Wheels perform at a nursing home and was inspired by possibilities. In response to seeing Verdi-Fletcher perform, he told a reporter:

That is a dancer… There is no mistake about it. She had the sparkle, the spirit that makes a dancer. You can’t take your eyes off her—whether she is sitting still, or on the floor, or has her head in profile. Rarely do you see an artist that can be standing still and yet still hold your attention. (Ule-Grohol, 1995, p. 1)
Dancing Wheels joining the Cleveland Ballet in 1999 led to the creation of Cleveland Ballet Dancing Wheels (CBDW).

Verdi-Fletcher undertook both the artistic and the business aspects of the organization. During an interview, I asked Kerry Agins, the current Chairman of the Board and a disability lawyer, what Dancing Wheels would look like without Verdi-Fletcher:

I don’t think there would be a Dancing Wheels without Mary. I don’t think it ever would’ve come to fruition; it never would’ve come to existence. I don’t think it would’ve grown the way it has in the last 20 years. One of our Board’s primary obligations, I think, in the next three to five years is to have a succession plan in place for Mary, which is going to be extraordinarly difficult. As the founding dancer, the founding president, I mean, not only is she the focus of the arts, but she's also the business focus. And really what is identifiable with Dancing Wheels, when people think of Dancing Wheels, they think of Mary. And so I hope that we can be successful as a Board so that in another 20 years when Mary’s ready to retire, we have a message that’s a little bit broader than that… we’re all thinking about that.

As suggested by Kerry, the stories composing Verdi-Fletcher’s life intertwined with the scripts that would guide the development and evolution of Dancing Wheels.

Verdi-Fletcher became responsible for obtaining grants, establishing partnerships, and recruiting choreographers, board members, and company and staff members. In 1990, Verdi-Fletcher received the Outstanding Young Clevelanders Award. In 1991, she
received the ORACLE Merit Award for Outstanding Educational and Outreach Programming. In 1992, Verdi-Fletcher was awarded the Lakeland Community College Women of Achievement Award. It was also in the early 1990s that CBDW joined with the G.G. Greg Agency, which is responsible for Dancing Wheels’ artistic representation. Also, in the early 1990s, Verdi-Fletcher was influential in starting Dancing Wheels Georgia, which later became DanceAbility. In regard to her work with other organizations that wanted to start an organization similar to Dancing Wheels, Verdi Fletcher commented, “I went in and I consulted with them and I helped develop the program. I helped build their classes. I helped them on a foundation side. So they were well established as a result of the work we did.”

Verdi-Fletcher met Sabatino Verlezza and his wife, Barbara, in 1992 at a dance conference and the Verlezzas felt an immediate connection to the mission and ethos of Dancing Wheels. Verdi-Fletcher was determined to convince the Verlezzas to move from New York City to Cleveland to work with her. In 1994, Verdi-Fletcher invited the Verlezzas to become Co-Artistic Directors of CBDW. Sabatino Verlezza was born in Italy in 1952 and had been a soloist for twelve years in New York City with the May O’Donnell Concert Dance Company. Additionally, Verlezza had his own company and had achieved national recognition as a choreographer. In 1994, Dancing Wheels took its first trip abroad. They participated in the International Very Special Arts Festival held in Brussels, Belgium. In that same year, Verdi-Fletcher was awarded the Invacare Artistic Achievement Award.
The Verlezza and his wife had previous dance training in the May O’Donnell modern technique, which provided CBDW with a movement vocabulary through which they could talk about their choreographic aesthetic and dance technique for people with and without disabilities. May O’Donnell (1906-2004) was a member of Martha Graham’s company from 1932 to 1938. From 1944 to 1952 May managed her own company, called the May O’Donnell Dance Company (Horosko, 2005). The translation (or the adaption) of the May O’Donnell technique for individuals with and without disabilities was critical to the success of Dancing Wheels, as it provided a basis on which to translate movement. Her technique was particularly easy to adapt to bodies of individuals of all abilities in integrated dance because its principles emphasized “upper body suspension, torso expressivity, spatial patterning, individuality, interaction, and innovation” (Williams, 1999, p. xii). Additionally, Williams (1999) noted that the May O’Donnell technique was easily translatable for integrated dance because it placed “an emphasis on the expressivity of the torso, a sense of upper body suspension, a focus on movement and spatial patterning, a valuing of individual difference, a focus on interaction and discovery, and a balance between process and form” (p. 111). Most of May O’Donnell’s choreography had a storyline that opened space for Dancing Wheels to pass on their mission about inclusivity for individuals of all abilities.

As CBDW was gaining momentum, Verdi-Fletcher suffered numerous infections. She had to have her kidneys removed. She received a kidney from her husband, Bob. Verdi-Fletcher humorously shared, “Bob gave me his kidney for our 10th wedding anniversary.” Verdi-Fletcher’s transplant was documented in public discourse, once again
illustrating how her life story is intertwined with that of Dancing Wheels. Salisbury (2005b) reported:

In 1994, Verdi-Fletcher suffered her darkest days. Her kidney failed, and she feared she would lose her life and the company. Her life was saved by her husband, businessman Bob Fletcher [a management consultant], who donated a kidney. The company was kept afloat by Sabatino Verlezza, the New York dancer-choreographer who had just been named Dancing Wheels’ co-artistic director. He represented the company at an international festival in Brussels, Belgium, and he recruited New York wheelchair dancer Kitty Lunn to take Verdi-Fletcher’s role in a touching duet, “May Ring” [repertory choreographed by Sabatino Verlezza]. (p. J5)

Even when Verdi-Fletcher was in the hospital or on dialysis, she continued making phone calls from her hospital bed. Within one month after her major surgery, she was back in the studio, dancing and fundraising.

Verdi-Fletcher’s health was documented as part of the organization’s history. On the one hand, this is not surprising, given that chaos gives rise to storytelling. The tension of disruption and continuity is a key problematic of narrative theorizing. Harter, Japp, and Beck (2005) argued:

Narrativity involves characters embedded in the complexities of lived moments of struggle, heroes or victims who resist or accept the intrusions of disruption and chaos, preserve or restore continuity, and re-story meaning in their lives in the face of unexpected blows of fate. (Harter, Japp, & Beck, 2005, p. 14)
Although numerous scholars have acknowledged that “Trouble with a capital T” rests at the heart of narrative activity (Burke, 1954/1984), what Dancing Wheels demonstrates is that the storytelling impulse is also lived by institutions whose existence is tightly coupled with the life story of its founder.

Ule-Grohol (1999) captured the connections between the emergent story of Dancing Wheels and the health crises of Verdi-Fletcher:

Mary Verdi-Fletcher had to change her lifestyle following a kidney transplant to lose weight, get back in shape, and lower her cholesterol level. The principal dancer for the Cleveland Ballet Dancing Wheels says all the hard work was worth it, though, when she was able to come back and dance again. (n.p.)

In this case, Verdi-Fletcher’s “blow of fate” was her kidney transplant. This crisis was a call for stories for both Verdi-Fletcher and the organization she founded.

In the midst of recovering from the transplant, Mary remained the public face and image of Dancing Wheels. In 1994, Jerry Springer flew Verdi-Fletcher and her nurse out to be on his television show:

It was the same year I had the kidney transplant because he flew me and my nurse out while I was still on dialysis. It must have been in the Spring or late winter of 1994. I was also on Good Morning America that year because I remember just coming home from dialysis and being interviewed on the back porch of my house. The nurses had infiltrated my vein and my whole arm turned black and blue and swelled up under my suit jacket!
In 1995, for Dancing Wheels’ 15th anniversary, Melinda Ule-Grohol, a Cleveland native and dance historian, wrote a book on CBDW entitled *Dance Movements in Time: Tempus Fugit: A History of Dancing Wheels*. The focus of this book was “how the dream of dance for one woman has become the reality of inclusiveness for numerous others—as spectators, participants, dreamers, artists, and dancers in the world of arts” (Ule-Grohol, 1995, back cover). CBDW was awarded the 1996 Ohio Theatre Alliance Encore Award. In 1998, they received the Cuyahoga Special Education Service Center Award for Outstanding Community Services. Following the 1996 summer Olympics, Dancing Wheels performed at the Cultural Paralymiad in Atlanta, Georgia. In 1998, Verdi-Fletcher was awarded the Governor’s Award for Outstanding Outreach Programs. Also, they performed with the National Easter Seals Conference. On September 18, 1998, Mary Verdi-Fletcher and CBDW were awarded a grant in Washington, D.C., from the National Rehabilitation Awareness Foundation for their contributions on behalf of persons with disabilities. During March, 1998, CBDW performed a trio [showcasing talents of three dancers] on the televised “Christopher Reeve: A Celebration of Hope” production presented by the Christopher Reeve Foundation (www.dancingwheels.org; Verdi-Fletcher’s personal CV). In a company and school brochure, Christopher Reeve is quoted as saying, “Dancing Wheels is proof that possibilities are endless.” In 1999, Verdi-Fletcher received the YWCA Greater Cleveland Women of Achievement Award. In 2000, she was inducted into the National Hall of Fame for Persons with Disabilities. Patricia McMahon and illustrator John Godt (Eds.) collaborated on a children’s book entitled *Dancing Wheels* (2000). In a review, Ellen Mandel (2000) remarked:
An extraordinary company, Dancing Wheels is the realization of Mary Verdi-Fletcher’s dream. Though born with spina bifida and confined to a wheelchair, Mary wanted to be a dancer. She has not only achieved her goal, but through Dancing Wheels, enabled others with physical restrictions to dance as well. Color photographs document a Dancing Wheels summer workshop where “stand-up” dancers partner with “sit-down” dancers in wheelchairs. The rigorous practice routines, spontaneous moments of interaction among the dancers, and dramatic views of a Dancing Wheels production are captioned and attractively displayed while the text acquaints readers with individual dancers and their “can do” attitude. Just as Dancing Wheels fosters trust and understanding between disabled and nondisabled participants, so McMahon’s book opens readers’ eyes to another dimension of dance and encourages the appreciation of desires and talents different from their own. (Mandel, amazon.com)

Narratives are often translated into diverse forms accessible to multiple audiences (see also, Hunt, 1984; Nodelman, 1990). In the case of Dancing Wheels, the history of Dancing Wheels was turned into a picture book—a visual narrative of the company and school targeted toward children.

In 2001, The Ford Foundation named Verdi-Fletcher one of 20 semifinalists from over 3,000 international nominees for the Leadership for a Changing World Award. In that same year, Dancing Wheels faced some difficult times. Consider Grohol’s (2005) account:
Nationally, there was September 11th in 2001 after Dancing Wheels lost two-thirds of its national touring engagements and thousands of dollars in operating income. People not only became afraid to travel, but also to have “unknown” people come to their town. Locally, there was the demise of the Cleveland Ballet in the year of 1999 that left Dancing Wheels on its own financially and artistically in the middle of their performance season. Last but not least, there is the internal financial struggle, as a result of the aforementioned events, that was also affected by the overall reduction in grants and funding for arts organizations occurring throughout the United States. As a result, in 2003, Dancing Wheels was forced to drastically reduce their staffing and decrease their operating budget. Also, in 2003, there was no longer a resident choreographer/Artistic Director or an Education Director. Company members wondered about the creative direction of the organization. And ultimately there was the overriding concern about expenses and staying within budget in order to regain financially stability. The picture has changed significantly and once again Dancing Wheels became an entity onto itself. (p. 8)

Salisbury, (2005b), *The Cleveland Plain Dealer* dance critic, storied the impact of the terrorist attacks on Dancing Wheels when she wrote:

After the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, however, Dancing Wheels lost $100,000 in bookings, and part of the concert season was postponed. By the spring of 2003, the company’s financial situation had become so dire that the board made the
painful decision to terminate the contracts of Verlezza and his wife, associate
artistic director and education director Barbara Allegra Verlezza. (p. J5)

Like other artistic organizations, Dancing Wheels was impacted by forces in the broader
environment.

Due to the timing of my fieldwork, I was not able to interview key participants in
the evolution of Dancing Wheels, including the Verlazzas. The analysis of the newspaper
discourse allowed for the inclusion of their voices, filling in what would otherwise have
been narrative silences. Clair (1997) focused on “organizing silence… how interests,
issues and identities of marginalized people are silenced and how those silenced voices
can be organized in ways to be heard” (p. 323). In this case, looking to public discourse
provided an opportunity to juxtapose multiple voices. Salisbury (2003b), in her article,
“Rough road lies ahead: Loss of artistic team is a huge blow for Dancing Wheels” wrote:

The couple’s full-time contract ends with the performance of “The Icarus Project”
on May 30 at the Allen Theatre in Playhouse Square. Although they have sent
their resumes to various college and university dance departments, they applied
too late to be considered for job openings in the fall. “Barb and I feel thrown out,
as the dancers do,” Sabatino said. “We invested in the whole thing for nine years,
and it didn’t matter.” Despite their questioning of the board’s ethics and
judgment, the Verlezzas are not going away angry. “Cleveland has been a very
good town to us,” Barbara said. “It’s important to me not to be a bridge-burner.
We are a little sad that the board did not contract us. But that is water under the
bridge. The bridge is still there, and I hope to keep it that way.” (p. J4)
Starting in 2004, after much financial and organizational restructuring, Dancing Wheels started to use a series of guest choreographers and became a repertory company. It commissioned works by various choreographers, including Young Park, Hernando Cortez, Homer Avila, Rosalind Newman, David Rousseve, and Mark Tomasic. Salisbury (2005b) noted:

Since then, Dancing Wheels has struggled to restructure, and Verdi-Fletcher has asked local and national choreographers to create new works. The latest commission, an innovative piece by Pilobolus, will premiere at an Integrated Dance Festival Saturday, May 13, at the Allen Theatre in Playhouse Square. The touring program also will feature Full Radius from Atlanta and Axis Dance Company from Oakland, California. (p. J5)

As part of Dancing Wheels’ 25th anniversary, Verdi-Fletcher and Cleveland Contemporary Dance Theatre commissioned David Rousseve, a dance choreographer from UCLA, to create a piece for both companies. In 2005, Dancing Wheels and Cleveland Contemporary Dance Theater presented work at Cain Park, Cleveland Heights, OH. This was their world premiere of new work by nationally acclaimed choreographer David Rousseve of UCLA University. Also, commemorating their 25th anniversary, Melinda Grohol published another book on Dancing Wheels called Dancing the Dream: The Story of Dancing Wheels Pioneer of Integrated Dance in America in honor of Dancing Wheels’ 25th anniversary. The purpose of the book is to celebrate Dancing Wheels’ 25th anniversary and “how the dream of dance for one woman has
become the reality of inclusiveness for numerous others—as spectators, participants, dreamers, artists, and dancers in the world of arts. (Grohol, 2005, back cover)

In the Akron Beacon Journal, Guregian (2006), a dance critic, also documented the momentus significance of Dancing Wheels’ 25th anniversary signified for Dancing Wheels when she wrote:

When I looked at celebrating this [25th anniversary] milestone for us, I also looked at trying to foster more understanding among the general public,” Verdi-Fletcher said. “People stereotypically think in terms of disability as inability. They conjure up an image of sickness and frailty. In reality, something that happens in your life—or, like for me, onset at birth—doesn’t make me any less able. Artistry really comes from within. Oftentimes it’s not developed or uncovered in people with or without disabilities. (Guregian, 2006, p. E1)

In 2006, continuing the celebration of 25 years of integrated dance, AXIS (Oakland, California), Full Radius (Atlanta, Georgia) and Dancing Wheels (Cleveland, Ohio) performed in the first-ever integrated dance tour (http://amputeehee.blogspot.com, 2006). During an interview, Verdi-Fletcher shared:

Three companies performed at the Allen Theater at Playhouse Square [in Cleveland, Ohio], it was Dancing Wheels, AXIS and Full Radius. We then all toured to California and then to Georgia (the final performance was on June 4th. The entire tour was produced by Dancing Wheels but each site paid for their own theater and production expenses. It was a wonderful, but expensive tour! The first
physically integrated national tour to be produced. It was highly supported by the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts].

Dancing Wheels received the 2006 Northern Ohio Live Special Achievement Award in recognition of its 25th Anniversary.

In 2007, Dancing Wheels changed its name to The Dancing Wheels Company & School—Art in Motion. Verdi-Fletcher described this decision for me,

I decided to broaden the image of the Company because a lot of people didn’t seem to know about the school and some folks when they heard Dancing Wheels, they did not know it was a dance company, it sounded too vague.

She also indicated that she often uses the company name, Dancing Wheels, to refer to the whole organization.

Recently, Verdi-Fletcher was the recipient of the E.P. Maxwell Schliefer Distinguished Service Award for 2007 and a 2007 Emmy Award for hosting WNEO/WEAO PBS Television’s “Shortcuts to Happiness,” a 12-series show created and produced by Steve Mitchell (www.dancingwheels.org; Verdi-Fletcher’s personal CV).

Dancing Wheels’ 2007-2008 Annual Review stated:

A highlight in this current season was The Dancing Wheels Company performance at City Center as part of the 22nd Annual Gala to benefit Career Transitions for Dancers in New York City. The Company was in the midst of incredible dance companies from across the country and was honored to receive a standing ovation for their performance led by Tommy Tune, Ben Vereen and Bebe Neuwirth. The Company performed *Fly*, a piece choreographed for the
Company by Keith Young, a notable choreographer whose work spans television, films and national tours with such luminaries as Bette Midler and Madonna. Mr. Young originally choreographed the piece performed on the ABC television special, *Christopher Reeve: A Celebration of Hope*. It was an unbelievable moment that we’ll always remember!

Other memorable moments this season were performances at Wright State University in Dayton [Ohio] for an national conference on disability and technology, St. Joseph College (NY), Midwest Disability Conference (OH), Maryville University (MO), Ohio State University, Inclusion Network Gala (OH) and the Spring to Dance Festival in St. Louis, Missouri, a prestigious dance festival that adjudicates to present the finest dance companies in the nation. Other tours included Chicago, New York, Wisconsin and Connecticut (two tours) (2007-2008 Annual Report).

During an interview, Verdi-Fletcher commented on how Dancing Wheels has changed in regard to technique since the restructuring of the company. Reflecting on the current state of The Dancing Wheels Company & School in regard to its new identity as a repertory company, Verdi-Fletcher said:

During the Sabatino era, it [May O’Donnell technique] was our core basis of training. It is where the Verlezzas came from and it had a good relationship to the idea of translation since the center work started in a seated position. Also, for the stand-up dancers “everyone started in a seated position.” Over the years it appeared that this technique (although a favorite of mine) became antiquated
among the stand-up dancers. Stand-up dancers seem to be more interested in ballet and various kinds of modern [dance], such as Horton, Graham vary often combining techniques in a single class. Not many people have heard of May O’Donnell in the dance world especially, our young dancers. However, I have a great deal of respect for her.

Today the Dancing Wheels’ classes work to appeal to what is of interest to our dancers and particular techniques that relate to the choreographers that we are working with. When I moved away from working with the Verlezzas, we once again became a touring repertory company. That was what we were to begin with prior to them coming on board. There is good and bad in it (most people are attracted to an artistic director that is a choreographer, however except for the greats like Martha Graham, Alvin Ailey, Alonso King Lines, etc., it seems like people get tired of seeing the same style or technique over and over). We live in a different era, it is hard to know what is best, but from my perspective, it is not easy to have the same choreographer creating work year after year—it gets old.

In January 2008, The Dancing Wheels Company & School performed in New York City at the Association of Performing Arts Conference. Also, they choreographed a video and entered it into a contest to be on the Ellen DeGeneres Show if she chose Cleveland as her featured city; however, DeGeneres did not pick Cleveland, and The Dancing Wheels Company & School has not been invited to perform on her show. In 2009, Verdi-Fletcher and Mark Tomasic are working on a DVD to help standardize the Dancing Wheels technique. Since 2005, Verdi-Fletcher has been able to commission
three or four choreographers each year. Some of the recent choreographers since 2005 were Nai Ni Chen, Hernando Cortez, Hoang (Mac) Dang, Rebecca Darling from Pilobolus Dance Theater [renowned imaginative and athletic exploration of creative collaboration], Christopher Flemming, Stuart Pimsler, Mark Tomasic, and Robert Wesner. During an interview, Verdi-Fletcher mentioned that she would like to see Dancing Wheels continue to expand its mission, with the hopes of having a “Dancing Wheels in every state.” Verdi-Fletcher also envisions an integrated dance program at one of the universities around the Cleveland, Ohio, area.

At the same time that Verdi-Fletcher seeks to expand the organization, the Board is actively trying to help the organization prepare for its continuation if Verdi-Fletcher decides she would like to move on from the organization or can no longer run it. The organization is actively working on helping to free her time from the business aspects so that she can spend more time in the studio, doing what she loves—dancing. Steve, the Treasurer of the Board, discussed the role that the Board has taken to help Verdi-Fletcher balance the artistic and business aspects of the organization:

We’ve worked to try to get an administrator, a manager for the organization. But Mary fills that role. She fills the artistic and creative role. And she loves to dance. But she is so good at the other things as well. And just in running the organization. And we have felt that if we could get somebody to take care of the administrative side of things it would free up Mary to do more on the artistic, creative side. And we’ve had just a couple of false starts. We’ve had some people we've hired that just haven't worked out. So that’s one of the things we continue
to struggle with. We’d like to find somebody that could run this organization administratively… take care of the finances. And not have Mary have to worry about the budget and all those kinds of things… free her to work on the creative and artistic side. And also on the development side. Mary is a very good fundraiser… she knows so many people. And she’s out talking to people… as far as I’m concerned, her time would be much better spent out trying to raise money than worrying about who’s pulling in the office [taking care of business side of organization]… and all those kinds of administrative issues that she deals with. So we really need to find a way to free her up. And then… if we [the board] could get the administrative side working, keeping that going in the future would not be, that wouldn’t be a difficult thing to do. There are business people that could run the organization. Then you could find somebody to follow along with Mary on the creative side. Somebody that didn’t have to combine all the talents that Mary’s got, to run the organization and provide the creative side. We’re probably looking for a couple of people. On the administrative side, you’d think, would be the easier side to find somebody to carry that on.

The Board would like to help the organization balance its earned and contributed revenues, which will be difficult in the current economy. Steve, the Treasurer of the Board, indicated:

We would like to achieve a 50/50 balance. But we have never quite made it. We got up to about, I think, 42 percent one year, which was very good. But too often it fell off to like 25 percent. And that really—we need to work more on keeping
the earned revenue up so that we’re doing our share of earning revenue as opposed to just counting solely on gifts. But that is a—one of the challenges we face. But all non—well, many nonprofits are really struggling, especially in this economy. And in the Cleveland area where we once had lots of businesses that contributed to the arts, generally and to non-profits… that diminished greatly over the years.

Quoted in Grohol’s (2005) book, Verdi-Fletcher said:

Dancing Wheels itself, as the premier integrated dance company in America, continues to learn and evolve utilizing both individual and corporate strengths. Within the past three years, Dancing Wheels has undergone a major reorganization rebuilding itself artistically, financially, and in terms of confidence. Thinking about those efforts, Mary said, ‘I want us to have the internal strength that will maintain our status as the leading integrated dance company. With this internal strength we can expand our performances and garner greater audiences. I’d also like to see us do more international work. (p. 69, italics in original)

Verdi-Fletcher would like to continue to have the organization recognized in the dance world:

I am sad sometimes that Dancing Wheels (not me) hasn’t been recognized in the dance world as it should be. It seems as though it is taken for granted and that somehow has not [achieved] the level that I had hoped for all these years. I don’t know exactly what to do about it because I don’t want it perceived that I
personally want anything. It is for the Company and the status I wish to have it rise to.

\textit{Mobilizing Narrative(s) of The Dancing Wheels Company & School}

In (re)storying the history of The Dancing Wheels Company & Schools’, I felt called as a post-structural feminist and narrative scholar to chart its evolution since the birth of Verdi-Fletcher, using multiple forms of discourse. Fairhurst and Putnam (2004) stressed that organizations are both the medium and outcome of discourses, always in a state of becoming, grounded in symbolic action and anchored in social practices. I acknowledge that the story told is partial and indeterminate (Browning, 1992). The choices I made in terms of characters, turning points, and plots around which I organized the history of Dancing Wheels may be different from the ways in which another ethnographer would craft the story or describe Verdi-Fletcher herself. Importantly, as Clair (1993) pointed out, not all individuals are able to tell their stories. Therefore, I acknowledge that the above narrative contains silences or voices that remain unheard and perhaps even prohibited by gatekeepers of the discourses collected (see also Carabas & Harter, 2005). I also acknowledge the potential consequences that come along with (re)storying history.

While plotting the history of The Dancing Wheels Company & School, I hoped to document organizational, personal, political, and cultural shifts in meaning across time and various spaces. It is through stories that those involved with Dancing Wheels explained and recounted decisions they made such as changes in organizational structure with the board’s decision to not re-contract the Verlezzas (see also, Fisher, 1984, 1987).
Through narratives, the significant members of The Dancing Wheels Company & School negotiated events or disruptions in their personal lives and identities as well as in the ways in which they impacted the overall structure of the organization (see also, Hanne, 1994). For instance, Verdi-Fletcher’s kidney transplant was storied as a chaotic time in the organization; however, it became part of the storied history of the organization. In many ways, the integration of Verdi-Fletcher’s personal life history into the story of the organization helps give individuals who encounter Dancing Wheels insight into values of the organization. Verdi-Fletcher became part of a restitution narrative (Frank, 1995) in which one is able to overcome obstacles (i.e., disability and illness). The weaving of Verdi-Fletcher’s narrative into the story of Dancing Wheels, narrated from Verdi-Fletcher’s perspective, gave her personal control and individual recognition (see also, Sharf & Vanderford, 2003). When Verdi-Fletcher narrated her story, she revealed the therapeutic power of narrative in that she was able to cope with competing identities and (re)plot her life in a way that mobilized resources to foster the mission of Dancing Wheels (see also, Epston & White, 1990). In making sense of her disability (spina bifida) and illness (kidney transplant), Mary Verdi-Fletcher drew on scripts available in her surround (i.e., restitution and question narratives) to restore continuity in her life (see also Lindemann-Nelson, 1997, 2001; Miller, Geist-Martin, & Beatty, 2005). These same scripts provided stability to Dancing Wheels in chaotic moments.

In making sense of the interrelatedness between Verdi-Fletcher’s life story and the evolution of Dancing Wheels, I draw on the concept of “mobilizing narratives.” Hart
(1992) used the term mobilizing narrative to highlight the fundamental role of narrative in creating collective identity for social movement organizations. Jacobs (2002) argued:

Because narrative is so basic to the formation of identity, it is an essential resource for social movements. In order to mobilize actual and potential members into a committed and coherent movement, cultural entrepreneurs generate a set of collective narratives that situate the group in time and place. These collective narratives tend to be most effective when they are flexible enough to integrate a diverse set of life histories, when they tell a story of agency and ultimate success, and when they are able to effectively block or demobilize other competing (and potentially antagonistic) group identities. (p. 222, also cited in Miller, Geist-Martin, & Beatty, 2005, p. 299)

Drawing inspiration from Miller et al. (2005), exploration of how the Tariq Khamisa Foundation (TKF) offered alternative ways of understanding and coping with gang-related activities. The mission of TKF is to challenge dominant narratives of teenage violence and aggression and promote nonviolent behaviors through pedagogies of peace. The story of the founders of TKF became the organization’s mobilizing narrative. The authors illustrated how structural properties of narratives (such as emplotments and characters) can become powerful sources of protest used to teach morals and behaviors.

The Dancing Wheels Company & School is organized around and offers a counter-narrative of disability, as members attempt to disrupt the dominant script of disability in which individuals with disabilities are sickly and in need of repair, are believed to be unworthy to participate in art and dance, and are unemployed and
dependent members of society (see Coopman, 2003, for a discussion of dominant interpretations of disability). Guided largely by the quest narrative (Frank, 1995) lived by Verdi-Fletcher, Dancing Wheels created space for individuals whose opportunities had previously been limited and their experiences subjugated. Drawing inspiration from Verdi-Fletcher’s life story, Dancing Wheels continues to (re)story disability narratives to “transform and reshape identity,” “reveal values or reasons for taking action” and “build community” by allowing individuals to support one another, raise public awareness, and advocate change” (Miller, Geist-Martin, & Beatty, 2005, p. 298, italics in original). In doing so, Dancing Wheels has politicized the experiences of people living with disabilities.

The stories individuals live and tell can become strategies for change and embody a pedagogy for overcoming obstacles. In the case of Dancing Wheels, Verdi-Fletcher’s story gave rise to an organization that embraces inclusiveness, acceptance, and arts to all. In the remainder of this theme, I focus attention on the ways in which organizational members at Dancing Wheels as well as reporters in the media narrate the organization’s core values and mission. Scholars have looked at mission statements and their value in promoting organizational effectiveness and productivity (Bart & Baetz, 1998; Cochran & David, 1986; Meyer, 1995). However, I position mission statements as stories that summon individuals to action (see also Cheney, 1991). Throughout my time in the field, individuals commented on the importance of the ways in which Cleveland’s newspaper dance critic, at the time, discussed the company and promoted its mission and identity. Wilma Salisbury was the The Cleveland Plain Dealer dance critic from for over twenty
years. Don Rosenberg is the current dance critic. Throughout my time in the field, I became aware of the role of the dance critic in circulating either positive or negative organizational narratives.

Tensions arise, of course, when an organization loses control of its story in the public sphere. Dancing Wheels presents its current mission this way:

The Dancing Wheels Company & School is a unique organization that has pioneered the inclusion of people with and without disabilities through the arts. Our mission is two-fold: to create and present passionate and compelling integrated dance works from nationally esteemed choreographers and to utilize this new art form to integrate, educate, advocate and entertain audiences throughout the world.

The purpose of the organization is to afford all people of all abilities a unique learning and performing experience in the arts—an experience that provides equality and integration of individuals with and without disabilities whose origins and ages are wide and diverse. (Dancing Wheels’ Annual Report, 2007-2008, italics in original)

A 2008 promotional package described the Dancing Wheels mission and purpose: was described as “… an organization of artists with and without disabilities that educates, entertains and advocates through inclusive dance worldwide. The purpose of the organization is to provide artistic opportunities inclusively” (italics in original).

During an interview, Verdi-Fletcher emphasized, “We shortened it [mission statement] a bit… [But the] overall intention has remained the same over the years.” In a
promotional brochure from 1996, the mission of the Cleveland Ballet Dancing Wheels was as follows: “Dance is an expression of the human spirit… it is the movement of the soul… it is the language of all peoples, of all ages and times… It is for all people of all abilities.” Fairhurst and Sarr (2004) discussed the skill of framing in organizational leadership. They argued that framing, when used by leaders effectively, causes individuals to accept one meaning over another. When frames are in place, the sanctioned behavior typically follows. Additionally, those who aspire to lead must master the art of framing (Clair, 1993). Dancing Wheels, through the leadership of Verdi-Fletcher, framed its organizational mission statement in a way that continues to encourage individuals to enact it.

Through the word choices of the company members and staff as well as of reporters in newspapers, we are able to get an idea of the collective sensemaking that occurs within and around the organization (see also, Brown, 1987; Currie & Brown, 2003). The stories that individuals tell reflect an understanding of the beliefs and values within the organization. Stories often help organizational members feel that they are a part of the group if they are able to buy into the organizational mission. The continual (re)articulation of the mobilizing narrative of Verdi-Fletcher, for example, functions as a thread that ties people together; it is a sustainable storyline that fosters identification with the values and goals of Dancing Wheels.

During interviews, when I asked individuals (inside and outside the organization) about the core values of Dancing Wheels, they used language directly from the mission statement, such as overcoming obstacles, integration, acceptance and arts to all. First,
individuals discussed ways in which their understanding of the core values of the organization reflected the story of the founder, Verdi-Fletcher, who encouraged individuals to follow their dreams and overcome obstacles (i.e., the adoption of quest and restitution scripts). Carly, a stand-up dancer, shared:

We kind of give the message of the director [Verdi-Fletcher], which is that… in the end… your dreams can come true and that if you are—if a problem is put in your way or even if someone else tells you you can’t do something or go out of your way to make something happen, even if it’s not alone, if it’s gonna help with your friend, but to keep going and to just keep pushing through and… things will happen in the end. So I guess that’s one of the messages from the company, more of a message than a value.

Second, individuals discussed integration of people with and without disabilities as central to the core story they wished to diffuse. For example, Frank, a stand-up dancer, focused on the integration aspect of the organization as being its core value:

I guess the only thing that I can think of that they would value more anywhere else and value in general would be the integration of the wheelers. That’s pretty much the only thing that I kind of see because like in almost every single piece the thing that we work on the most is getting the wheelers into a piece or the stand-up with the wheelers so that they can do things together and not like kind of like the wheelers over here and the stand-ups over here. They have them in the same place doing like partnership or partnering, which is the thing I think we spend the most time on.
Interestingly, Frank was the newest member of the Dancing Wheels Company that I interviewed. At the time of the interview, he had been a member of the organization for a few months.

Similar to Frank, Kerry, Chairman of the Board, narrated her understanding of the core value of integration:

I think our main core value with Dancing Wheels is integration. I mean, I think that that’s prevalent in every aspect of our company from the performance aspect to the actual dance company, to the school, to who’s working in the office. It’s integration and it’s really bringing individuals with and without disabilities together on the same playing field and making sure that the opportunities are endless for anyone. I think that’s our core value, and I think that that’s the one that we’re best at promoting and communicating and upholding. I don’t know that I would say that we have any other that reach that level.

Participants also emphasized that acceptance of diversity was a key storyline guiding the actions of organizational members. Mark H., the company American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter, said:

I think the core value, from what I’ve seen over the years, is acceptance. No matter who you are as far as culturally, intellectually, disabled, nondisabled, I think the core value is acceptance that… that we’re all different yet we’re all the same and that we can celebrate our diversity and still be one, still be one together. Charlotte, a sit-down dancer, emphasized that acceptance of all abilities was the way in which she understood the core values of Dancing Wheels, “Just that if you have a
disability, it doesn’t really make any difference. You’re still the same person you are, you’re just doing it in a different way.”

Fourth, individuals discussed the ways in which bringing “arts to all” is a key component of Dancing Wheels. Salisbury (2000) wrote:

“Our touring is so heavy,” said Verdi-Fletcher. “We are in so many theaters that are noncompliant with the ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act]. We want to be an advocate and open the door a little. We always have to prove ourselves.”

Besides proving itself to presenters, Dancing Wheels has to convince contributors that its mission of “dance for all people” is worthy of support. The company currently operates on an annual budget of $695,000. It has raised $150,000 of the $750,000 needed to convert space in the Masonic Temple into accessible studios for the company school. (p. 1E)

“Arts to all” not only means including people with disabilities in dance, but also bringing dance to diverse audiences. Salisbury (2003b) wrote:

Dancing Wheels was placed on the distinguished roster because of its mission to make dance accessible to wide and diverse audiences on national tours. MetLife will give the company $40,000 each year. (p. J4)

When Sara, a stand-up dancer, was asked about how Dancing Wheels defines and enacts diversity, she responded:

Dancing Wheels defines diversity by all inclusiveness, whether it’s race or abilities. We haven’t really gone into religious belief or anything. But I think those are the two main things. Making art available to all people.
In its early years, Dancing Wheels was framed in terms of its ability to create opportunities for individuals with disabilities rather than *arts to all*. For example, a reporter in *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*, focused solely on individuals with disabilities:

“Its [Dancing Wheels] mission is to provide outreach and education about the diversity of dance and the artistic capabilities of people with disabilities” (no author, 1996, p. 12E).

However, as seen through my fieldwork, the company has a broader mission. Individuals throughout my fieldwork emphasized that the integrated dance genre that Dancing Wheels participates in is not “wheelchair dance” or “disability dance.” Instead, it focuses on the value of each individual as part of the whole (see also Benjamin, 2002). Verdi-Fletcher, when asked in an interview about negative or inaccurate perceptions of the company, asserted:

Oh my God. Well, calling it a “wheelchair company” is really bad, instead of it being physically integrated or just integrated company because it’s not a wheelchair company. Its core stems from me being in a wheelchair and wanting to dance with nondisabled dancers, but it’s certainly not a “wheelchair” company. We’re developing a brochure and I just looked at it and somebody had put in [wheelchair company]—and I didn’t write it but somebody had put in my bio information “the first wheelchair dance company,” and so now I have to go back and find that and edit it and get it out of there because it’s not what I wrote.

Even in 2009, Verdi-Fletcher continues to correct differing impressions of her company and school.
Additionally, Verdi-Fletcher reminds viewers that her company and school is professional even though it includes individuals with disabilities.

I think the second perception is that it isn’t as professional because it includes people with disabilities. And these are people who haven’t seen it. I’m just saying, mentally if they see the name, if they haven’t seen it this is what they think. Those are the two biggest ones, the nonprofessional aspect and the wheelchair aspect. Overall, I think that they can’t perceive that it would be so broad in scope in terms of its artistic repertory, the quality of the dancers, the ability to transform ourselves from piece to piece. I think they think if they see one, they’ve seen it.

I’ve even noted that amongst people who’ve brought people, like trying to get return people to come. “Oh yeah, I saw Dancing Wheels,” almost as if you would have seen—I don’t know, something that never changes. “Oh, I saw it. It’s great. But I’ve already seen it.” Which is such a weird perception.

In summary, Beth Jokinen, a reporter, wrote,

Verdi-Fletcher kept expanding Dancing Wheels, believing that more and more people needed to see and learn from the group. “It delivers a message more than just about dance,” she said. “It delivers a message of equality, acceptance and achieving your dreams” (Lima News, 2006, p. B1).

Jokinen summarized Dancing Wheels’ preferred storyline of its existence—diverse individuals can overcome obstacles, be integrated with one another and work together in public and organizational contexts, and experience artful encounters.
Why is it important for a communication scholar to pay attention to the stories that individuals tell as well as to tell stories? In the above narrative, I have grappled with questions of epistemology and ontology. As a result, by narrating the inception and evolution of The Dancing Wheels Company & School, I sought to demonstrate the ways in which activists such as Verdi-Fletcher tell stories in order resist dominant narratives of injustice. By the telling of the history of this organization, I am telling the story of its becoming, as an organization, as it established its identity as well as the values it stands for.

Verdi-Fletcher did more than simply tell stories; her mobilizing narrative, as the founder and artistic director, motivated collective action. Verdi-Fletcher was able to use the persuasive nature of storytelling to highlight shared experiences (i.e., injustice) of a larger group and create a collective voice (Polletta, 1998). It appeared that the organization, in its early years, focused its mission on the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in order to foster an awareness of injustice, identity, and collective worth in order to invite people to participate and deconstruct pre-existing stereotypes. Once their mission of inclusion of people with disabilities gained strength, they were able to broaden their organizational narrative to be more inclusive of individuals of all abilities (see also, Klandermans, 1997). Numerous narrative scholars discuss the use of frames or persuasive devices used by movement leaders to connect to the beliefs and broad cultural understandings, foster a sense of severity, recruit participants, maintain solidarity, and organize support (Benford 1993; Gamson, 1988; Klandermas, 1997; McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996; Snow & Benford, 1988).
Verdi-Fletcher’s personal story as an individual with disabilities who is able to spearhead an organization despite prejudice is persuasive in that it uses emotional appeals. The narrative is also compelling because Verdi-Fletcher established credibility within the dance and disability communities despite numerous disruptions (e.g., illness, financial difficulties, and organizational restructuring) and kept a consistent narrative throughout the years (i.e., long-term endurance of the organization). Additionally, during periods of disruption, stories were used to maintain stability of the self (Verdi-Fletcher) and group (organization). Through the writing of the history of The Dancing Wheels Company & School, I located events or moments of ambiguity that called for more stories in order to make sense of the past, present, and to further this organization.

Dance as Storytelling for Social Movements

In this section, I come full circle to focus attention on the ways in which The Dancing Wheels Company & School relies on dance as a form of storytelling for the purposes of remembering historical events and social protest. Over two decades ago, White (1981) posed the question, “What would a non-narrative representation of historical reality look like” (p. 9)? I concur with White’s argument that where there is no story, there is no history. Yet, what White did not explore were the various forms by which the collective imagination is storied (see critiques by Riessman, 2008). Similar to the ways in which Flannery (2001) discussed quilting as a feminist mobilizing resource, I argue that the Dancing Wheels Company & School utilizes dance as a mobilizing resource to future its feminist pedagogy of bringing the arts to all.
Dewey (1934/1980) viewed art as means of communication as well as a resource for building community by fostering a full and free interplay of ideas in the public sphere. He argued, “art is the most effective mode of communication that exists” (p. 286). From Dewey’s perspective, aesthetic experiences can enlarge people’s sense of the possible, which I argue is a key aspect of social protest. Numerous scholars have discussed the role of art in communicating (Dewey, 1934/1980), connecting with diverse others (Dewey, 1934; Grey, 1998; Tolstoy, 1989), eliciting emotions (Dewey, 1934/1980), educating and learning (Eisner, 1992; Singhal & Rogers, 1999), entertaining (Singhal & Rogers, 1999), inquiring (Grey, 1998), representing (Dewey, 1934/1980), challenging/disrupting social norms (Becker, 1994), inspiring hope and possibility (Daloz et al., 1996), determining morals (Daloz et al., 1996), dealing with ambiguity (Eisner, 1992), enhancing imagination and cognition (Eisner, 1992; Hanna, 1992), promoting citizenship (Kaelin, 1991), fostering therapy (Feder & Feder, 1981; Ritter & Low, 1996), engaging in social protest (Boal, 1985; Kershaw, 1992; van Erven, 1988), promoting dialogue (Kester 1996), and fostering social change (Harter et al., 2006; Jensen, 2002).

Numerous scholars also have written about the connections between art, performance, aesthetics, and political protest (Cohen-Cruz, 2005; Franko, 2002; Gere, 2004; Jones & Dawson, 2002; Kershaw, 1992; Kuppers, 2007a, 2007b; Leonard & Kilkelly, 2006; Martin, 1990, 1998). Martin (1990) argued that any act of performance is political in nature. Cleve Jones, founder the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, recounted the role that the quilt played in his life:
The Quilt required me to change. Whether it is the pope or the woman from Kentucky, the Quilt touches something intensely private and personal in everyone who sees it. I learn to listen to those feelings, those fears and hopes—not just of my sorrowing brothers, but of everyone who even for a moment had opened up and recognized a common humanity, a link between us all. (Jones & Dawson, 2000, p. 141-142)

In a sense, the Quilt, a piece of art, provided Jones and countless others the opportunity to be more reflective, promote dialogue, and connect with others. Likewise, Demo (2000) recounted by the Guerrilla Girls, feminist art activists in New York City, established in 1985, use of art (i.e., posters) and strategic playfulness to promote the inclusion of women and people of color in the arts.

Lull (1987) discussed music’s role in social protest. It has been well documented that Black Africans “sang and danced” their way to freedom in order to dismantle Apartheid (Monson, 2007; Stewart, Smith, & Denton, 1989). Furthermore, scholars have begun to recognize that the body, through dance, is a site of resistance for forms of social control (e.g., Martin, 1990). Franko (2002), from a Marxist perspective, discussed the role of dance as resistance during the 1930s labor movement. Furthermore, Gere (2004) analyzed the relationship between AIDS and choreography in the U.S. He claimed that choreography includes both movement and the organization of bodies in order to produce a political effect, especially during the AIDS crisis.

It is through dance, at The Dancing Wheels Company & School, that individuals are able to communicate their mission and story the injustices that individuals with
disabilities face in community life. According to Dewey (1934/1980) art is able to “break through barriers that divide human beings” (p. 244). He argued that art as a medium of communication is able to create an experience for an individual or group that is not solely reliant on instrumental reasoning. While in the field at Dancing Wheels, I witnessed what Dewey theorized at a conceptual level. At Dancing Wheels, dance is a powerful tool used to address social issues. Steinman (1995) discussed artists as storytellers. Indeed, choreographers create narratives when they choreograph repertory (Foster, 1986, 1996; Nye, 2008). As such, choreographers have the potential to express the opinions of the organization when creating repertory.

Verdi-Fletcher, recognizing the role that storytelling plays as a mobilizing resource for social change, said,

The choreographers that I have chosen to tell stories are those who have historically captured real life stories throughout history and could reenact through dance and dialogue those significant times in our history that made an impact on a certain population. I like to tie in the way history repeats itself, in other words the journey that African Americans, women rights, disability rights movements were all very similar where a person or people took a stand for equality and then the rest of the nation listened. The battles that people fought for equality, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Billy Jean King, those in the disability rights movement who chained themselves to buses or were carted off to jail. The risk takers. We all had the moral obligation to fight for what we believed in despite what others thought. I believe that history must be told because our young people forget how they
came to their freedoms. Whether they be of color or disabled, they very often do
not know the story of how their equality came about.

Michael Medcalf, choreographer and founder of Cleveland Contemporary Dance
Theater and a retired Dancing Wheels dancer, also emphasized the role of storytelling in
creating provocative dance:

The more moving pieces for me that was—that’s a part of Walking on Clouds
because I’m a big fan of David Rousseve’s choreography. But also how it
integrated a company of stand-up and a company with mixed abilities, one
company primarily African-American and the other company of dancers with and
without disabilities, coming together, exploring different issues, but where the
commonalities of the issues lie—the more poignant works in the company’s rep
[repertory] for me. And I’m a big fan of work that tells a story, and work that has
many different layers of stuff in it.

David Rousseve, a well-respected choreographer from UCLA, was commissioned in
2005 to choreograph a piece for The Dancing Wheels Company & School and Cleveland
Contemporary Dance Theatre. In July 2005, the two companies performed the piece at
Cain Park, an outdoor performance venue in Cleveland Heights. In order to collect stories
to create the piece, he interviewed dancers about their life experiences. In a sense,
Rousseve, an African American, created an opportunity for dialogue between the
disability and African American communities to discuss their shared experiences. By
interviewing dancers, Rousseve attempted to avoid imposing unexamined agendas of his
own on the choreography he created. From my perspective, Rousseve attempted to co-
construct a narrative with those he was interviewing (see also, Kester, 1998). Bolton (1993) applauded such artists who create a way for individuals to deeply think about issues.

From a narrative perspective, this choreographer/artist is a storyteller. *Walking on Clouds*, is a 40-45 minute piece described on The Dancing Wheels Company & School’s Web site:

Mixing words and movement into a powerful cauldron, this new work celebrates a common humanity that survives the boundaries between differences with equal parts humor and grit. The work blends fact, fiction and possibility to find the connections, both emotional and historical, between people with disabilities and African-Americans. Commissioned by both Dancing Wheels and Cleveland Contemporary Dance Theatre, this work represents the first time the two companies have culled forces to share, create and comment. This powerful new work is perfect for junior high and high school students. This dance chronicles the African-American and the disabled communities’ fight for equality. Excerpts from this work offer a mix of music spanning the decades and freely blending Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, and the Kinks with original hip-hop and rap music. An interactive section, “I want you to see me,” involves students in a rapping/clapping combination that involves intricate gestures that repeat in rounds. Students experience liberating moments in history that enabled those communities to rise to a level of equality. This is a perfect program to integrate
Salisbury (2005a), in The Cleveland Plain Dealer, narrated her dance critique of Walking on Clouds:

Dancing Wheels launched its 25th-anniversary season Wednesday night at Cain Park in Cleveland Heights by premiering a powerful dance theater piece by David Rousseve of Los Angeles. The renowned choreographer-storyteller was commissioned to create “Walking on Clouds” for the company of dancers with and without disabilities in partnership with Cleveland Contemporary Dance Theatre. A skillful blend of text, movement and music, the 30-minute piece focuses on issues of identity that are shared by people with disabilities and people of color… “I want you to see me—not the chair, not my arms, not my skin. I need you to see me as I really am,” the dancers chant in unison phrases that break into syncopated rhythms and vocal counterpoint…Verdi-Fletcher plays the trump card, however, when she reminisces about joining other people with disabilities to surround and stop a Cleveland city bus that was not accessible in 1985. As she describes the fear she felt when a burly police officer threatened to throw her in a paddy wagon, she spins in space, and the other dancers tremble. At the end of the encounter, the cop recognizes her as a courageous person rather than an immovable object, and he walks away without arresting her.

The confrontation, which led to today’s full fleet of accessible buses, was a
triumph for Verdi-Fletcher, and *Walking on Clouds* is a triumph for her
pathbreaking company. (p. E4)

As an artist, Rousseve was able to weave individual stories together to tell a larger
story about the parallels in the disability and civil rights movement. Both companies
came together to perform the bus protest on stage shows, demonstrating the ways in
which they are artistically employing tactics (i.e., dance movements, lyrics to songs, and
voiceovers) in order to resist negative perceptions of people with disabilities and African
Americans in our society and to remind us of their shared oppression.

Verdi-Fletcher saw the artistic expression of bus protest that she participated in as
an opportunity to change the “stereotypic image of disability.” She stressed, “nobody
ever expected somebody in a wheelchair to go out and do something like wheel in front
of a bus and not move. It was just totally out of any person’s mindset.” However, she
perceived that some people were resistant to what the individuals were protesting about
because of the perception that individuals with disabilities wanted “special treatment
versus equal treatment.” Verdi-Fletcher claimed that some people without disabilities
perceived access for people with disabilities would be inconvenient and they would have
to wait for “the buses to stop and put the ramp down.” She concluded that “it took
approximately five years until a majority of the fleet of buses was accessible” in
Cleveland, and Verdi-Fletcher took an active part in making sure that the buses became
accessible.

As a post-structural feminist, I hope to illuminate experiences that have been left
and social movement scholar, advocated that we need to give voice to those who are not included in the dominant discourse. In this case, I wove together multiple discourses of the bus performance in 1985 and its restaging with The Dancing Wheels Company & School and Cleveland Contemporary Dance Theatre in 2005. In this analysis, I made connections between texts and constructed the story of Verdi-Fletcher, the founder, who was heavily involved in the 1985 bus protest in Cleveland. Verdi-Fletcher, through the work of her integrated dance company, made space on stages to represent the original bus protest over 20 years later. In 2009, Dancing Wheels continues to use this piece on national and international stages. In the stage performance of the bus protest, key turning points in Verdi-Fletcher’s autobiography are dramatized as part of Dancing Wheels’ mission of raising consciousness about disability-related inequities.

*Walking on Clouds* is only one of the thirty-five pieces of repertory that The Dancing Wheels Company & School performs for audiences. Dancing Wheels have several “Story Ballets” or main stage performances such as *Helen Keller: Tribute to Her Teacher* (premiered 2006), *Alice in Wonderland* (2007), *The Snowman* (2000), and *Sorcerer’s Apprentices* (2004). For example, *Helen Keller: Tribute to Her Teacher* (2007), choreographed by Christopher Flemming, is a “story ballet about the adult life of Helen Keller and her accomplishments as a pioneering force for women, people with disabilities and the civil rights movement” (www.dancingwheels.com). Dancing Wheels illustrates how art is a viable mechanism for social change by (re)storying history, making visible injustice, promoting dialogue among marginalized communities, and encouraging empathy between the groups (see also Stout, 1999). At The Dancing Wheels
Company & School, dance is a storytelling resource used to create awareness about overcoming obstacles and embracing inclusion, acceptance, and “arts to all.”

Sellnow and Sellnow (2001) discussed the rhetorical power of music. I argue that we need to pay attention to the storytelling power of dance. In order to understand its rhetorical potential, we must explore the interplay between discursive (linguistic, lyrics, virtual experience) and nondiscursive aesthetic symbols (gestures, movements). Dance, as embodied storytelling, can function to entertain, evoke emotive and cognitive responses, teach others, foster cultural identification, rally people around a cause/foster social change, and give voice to marginalized groups. Verdi-Fletcher uses art/dance to challenge dominant understandings about disability. For example, when Dancing Wheels brings this performance to elementary schools and universities (i.e., lecture performances), this is an opportunity for Verdi-Fletcher to habituate new generations to alternative understandings about disability:

Well, I always feel that it’s my duty to educate people about disability. I think the views of disability haven’t changed that much over the years. I think that a person, a novice person, I will say, that hasn’t had a direct encounter with a person with a disability generally still has the same stereotypic attitude, which is fear.

In Rousseve’s piece, the dancers from both companies chanted, “I want you to see me, I want you to see me.” To Verdi-Fletcher, this means,

I do not want you to judge me as a big wheelchair... just see me as me. It is a great opportunity to educate kids, whether it is for Martin Luther King Day or disability
rights. We didn’t have an opportunity to bring it up because it’s a 40-to-45 minute piece. But it’s certainly a fabulous piece for our repertory that is more than just dance. It has that educational component to it.

Dewey (1934) argued that art has the ability to elicit emotions. When I asked Verdi-Fletcher about what it felt like to perform the 1985 bus protest, she recalled,

Well when I first did the piece, actually I cried. I’m always crying. But it conjured up all those feelings again that it made me feel proud, but it also made me realize how intense that time frame was. And I hadn’t thought about it for—I mean, I hadn’t really thought about it in years… so to hear myself recalling it and then actually reenacting it, simulating it. It was extremely powerful for me to do. Now I’m used to it. I try to have the same intensity regarding it onstage every time I do it of course. Just the emotions of the moment, it’s fine now, I’m not crying across the stage or anything. But, you can feel—I see it every time I do it. I see that moment every time I do it.

In a personal conversation with Verdi-Fletcher, she shared, “Maggie, I am so afraid this history will be lost. Children today do not know that 30 years ago there were not curb cuts.” Again, for Verdi-Fletcher, a key part of the mission of Dancing Wheels is about narrating, through dance, the history of disability oppression—choreographers and dancers educate and remind audiences of the oppression individuals with disabilities have faced, while envisioning hopeful possibilities for the future.
The Art of Dialogue in Integrated Dance

I think we [Dancing Wheels] define diversity by hiring people like me who don’t really have a background in certain types of dance and helping them to learn things to help their company be more diverse. Because there are things that I do that they don’t do so just me being here [at Dancing Wheels] makes it more diverse. The fact that there are people from all different races and religious beliefs here; that makes it very diverse. Wheelers [sit-down dancers] etc. Different dance styles which I think is going to make this group stand out more than a lot of companies are simply ballet companies and all the folks do ballet and maybe they don’t do anything else or get a chance to show anything else that they do if they do more than that because it’s a ballet group. At Dancing Wheels I’ve had a chance to show off my break dancing and my caporiera which are things that I love to do more than anything else. So to be able to show that off in a modern dance piece or in the ballet piece [other dance training]—that is incredible. I’m sure it’s something that no other company is doing. So I think that makes it more diverse than any other company. (Frank, stand-up dancer, interview excerpt)

Throughout my time at Dancing Wheels, Frank, and numerous other interviewees, emphasized the importance of difference as central to Dancing Wheels’ organizing practices. Numerous organizational communication scholars have positioned difference and diversity at the forefront of their scholarly agendas (e.g., Allen, 1995, 1996, 2000). Yet, Dancing Wheels offers an alternative way of organizing around difference through dance. While at Dancing Wheels, I paid specific attention to the dialogic potential of
integrated dance. Drawing on my fieldwork, in this theme I develop an understanding of embodied and dialogic organizing strategies for acknowledging and answering difference. Additionally, I explore the ephemeral nature of dialogic meeting moments.

Answering Difference through Dance

Dance scholars have acknowledged the communicative nature of dance (Hanna, 1979; Sweet, 1985). Some examples include the dancer’s ability to (re)create/interpret (Kaeppler, 1972; Sachs, 1933/1937), express (Boas, 1972/1944), raise awareness of (Kurath, 1960), reflect (Kealiinohomoku, 1974), and symbolize (Snyder, 1974) values of the culture in which the dancer is embedded. Barge (2004) argued that narrativity is a highly dialogic communication process. On the same note, I argue that integrated dance, in its finest moments, represents a dialogic communicative process and illustrates an embodied approach to understanding and responding to difference. Dance, like art, is an expressive form with the potential to be dialogic. Ellis (1923), an early dance theorist, positioned dancing as life. Likewise, Hanna (1987) suggested that dance is “a whole complex of communication symbols” (p. 26). Hanna continued that dance is a testament of values, beliefs, and emotions of a culture in an embodied performance. The very essence of dance is meaning-making through a symbolic performance.

I was intrigued by the ways in which members of The Dancing Wheels Company & School affirm and recognize difference. By celebrating difference, Dancing Wheels acknowledges the dialogic and liberating potential of art. In communication studies, the work of Buber, (1965, 1970/1996), Bakhtin (1981), and Gadamer (1982) have been fundamental to our comprehension of dialogue. Buber (1965, 1970/1996) claimed that
humanity is realized in relation with others. Authentic dialogue is the sharing between two or more humans (Buber, 1970/1996). For Buber (1970/1996), living relationally is key to human existence, as all living is meeting. Individuals come into dialogue from either an “I-It” or “I-Thou” perspective. Dialogue brings us into an I-Thou relationship rather than an I-It relationship. In authentic dialogue, there is a sharing between two or more individuals in which selves turn toward each other in full recognition of difference.

By fostering integrated dance among people with and without disabilities, Dancing Wheels makes space for self-expression and affirmation of diverse human beings as dancers. At the very heart of integrated dance is the valuing of diversity with a dedication to building on individuals’ abilities. Verdi-Fletcher discussed the ways in which Dancing Wheels values difference and how they go about creating dance pieces:

I think that the main theme is melding differences. One of the major things that we try to do is find the essence of strength in each dancer. That is very often how they are selected to play certain roles. Casting is made on people’s physical characteristics, their strengths and of course their willingness to mold themselves into characters.

Mark Tomasic, a retired stand-up dancer and choreographer for the company, narrated what integration meant to him. He said, “Integration is the combining of different types of people or parts in harmony. Integrated dance then is the rhythmic movement to music of different types of people resulting in a whole.”
Kerry, the Chairmen of the Board of The Dancing Wheels Company & School and a disability lawyer, discussed the ways in which Dancing Wheels is an excellent example of what integration in our society could be:

My definition of integration has always been the cooperation of or the participation of individuals with and without disabilities… the same or similar activity. Because of my work, I’ve always had a pretty strong definition of integration, and I don’t think that’s changed since I’ve been involved in Dancing Wheels. I think I had a strong example of it in Dancing Wheels.

When discussing the inclusive nature of the company, Verdi-Fletcher declared,

Well I think the inclusive nature of the company and school demonstrates that all those who wish to dance (whether for pleasure or career) can. Many of our students never dreamed that they could dance and of course when I started, there were no wheelchair dancers period.

Kristen, a stand-up dancer, suggested that integration is about working together and fitting together all abilities.

*Kristen:* Working together. I mean, whenever we talk about integration, it’s about… to be dancing with stand-ups and wheelchair dancers. But I think it—the theme runs in our company, too, like we have to work together as a group.

*Maggie:* When you explain dancing wheels to somebody who doesn’t know what it is, what are some things that you think you would say?
Kristen: I always use the term for school and for the company we’re a company or school for all abilities because I really think that is what we are. And then we have different races, abilities, people, and personalities. We have all levels of abilities, like we have beginners in the school and we have advanced students in the school. We have different levels in the company, and I think all the abilities fit together and it [Dancing Wheels company] is not so that we have Hispanic dancers. We have white dancers. We have black dancers. It is not so cut and [dried]. It is like a family.

Gadamer (1982), through philosophical hermeneutics, emphasized that dialogue is the basic mode of human understanding. For Mead (1934), understanding of the self is key to understanding others. Meaning, thus, lies in the interface between individuals as we enlarge and hopefully transform our sense of self. The selves expressed at Dancing Wheels are enlarged senses of self (see also Rawlins, 2009). Dancing Wheels realizes in embodied practices what others have conceptually suggested; dialogue can provide space for personal growth and enlarging one’s worldview (e.g., Wheatley, 2002).

Dialogic dance at the studio leads to authentic engagement between dancers and allows for new understanding about being in the world and exploring meaningful interactions with self and others. Pearce and Pearce (2004) stated, “The defining characteristic of dialogic communication is that all of these speech acts are in ways that hold one’s own position but allow others space to hold theirs, and are profoundly open to hearing others’ positions without needing to oppose or assimilate them” (p. 45). Kristen, a stand-up dancer, discussed her enlarged sense of self after being part of the company.
For her, being part of the company is about its commitment to individuals with disabilities rather than just being “showy on stage.” She conveyed, “one of the biggest values is it is not about yourself.” Dancers’ expressions of individuality become sources of connection with others (see also Ashcraft, 2001; Cheney, 2000; Harter et al., 2009; Rawlins, 2009). Carly, a stand-up dancer, recognized the importance of connection between dancers:

So when I see a battle going on or hear attitudes from other people, like, we should all be working together… this is an art form, there are emotions involved in this. And we wanna be able to connect with each other and just be professional, so it just kind of—sometimes that upsets me when it’s not that way.

For Polkinghorne (1988), meaning is about the social nature of communicating and narrative knowledge. In dialogue individuals are able to access a large pool of common meaning. As individuals share on various topics through dialogue, their sharing inherently contains stories. Individuals become storytellers who develop deeper understandings of themselves within the sharing of their lived experiences, reflections, and understandings (Remen, 2000). Furthermore, as individuals share stories, they become co-narrators (Bavelas, Coates, & Johnson, 2000).

Van Berkel (2007), a reporter for The Herald in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, remarked on Dancing Wheels’ ability to utilize dialogue:

Dancing Wheels provides an experience that raises cultural awareness as well as a stunning performance. The performance at the Heyde Center for the Arts will feature a mixed repertory of pieces, including dialogue and very unusual ways of
partnering both sitting-down and standing-up dancers. Mary [Verdi-Fletcher] says that each performance is catered toward the audience and the audience’s interest. (n. p.)

Through dialogue, individuals can explore their commonalities and differences about worldviews and cultures. Dialogue is profoundly influenced by such aspects of culture as meanings and stories. According to Harter (2004), difference provides a dialogic opportunity for growth. In dialogue there is an affirmation of the tension that comes along with difference (Smith-Sanders & Harter, 2007). Dialogue suggests that the world is co-experienced by two more people. Each one’s perspective is necessarily partial, and each needs to gain a more adequate sense of the world by sharing perspectives (Frank, 2004). Frank, a stand-up dancer, discussed the ways in which integrated dance has taught him to share in another person’s experience (co-experienced nature of integrated dance).

Maggie: What feelings do you experience when you’re in the chair?

Frank: Comforting because I can sit down. I’m sitting down. I think that’s kind of like a time where I can work on the upper part of my body and seeing how that works more. It creates understanding of things. I think it is probably the most—like the biggest part of it. The understanding of how the wheelers feel… it gives me a sense of determination and hope that they can do things that I’m doing [that] I’m pretty sure they can do.
But they’re [sit-down dancers] sometimes scared to try it because of the situation that they’re in.

According to Bakhtin (1984c), “to be means to communicate” (p. 287). Bakhtin (1981) viewed dialogue as a process that is woven into the language. Language is essentially dialogic; each word echoes with the multiple histories and human experiences that depend on otherness and difference. Bakhtin (1981, 1984b) posited that dialogue includes a heteroglossia of different voices (various voicedness), an ongoing resistance within and among discourses representing opposing ideological belief systems. Zoller (2004) stated,

Dialogue… involves heteroglossia, a plurality not just of voices but of relationships that acknowledge difference… Dialogue requires collaboration that does not rule out disagreement and debate but presumes a focus on joint sense making and a willingness to be vulnerable to being changed through the interaction. (p. 214)

Daly (2002) theorized that dance is dialogic in that it inherently is a “nexus of conversations” defined by its dynamic and political space and by constantly changing relationships. When asked about a time when integrated dance worked beautifully, Dezare, a stand-up dancer, poignantly discussed the dialogic nature of integrated dance in that it was a “conversation” between a stand-up and a sit-down dancer in which the strengths of both were acknowledged.
Maggie: Can you think of a time when integrated dance worked beautifully? Can you describe the situation? Who was involved? What do you attribute to the success?

Dezare: Yeah—this year, I definitely loved Diane McIntyre’s piece *Sweet Radio Radicals*, not simply because the choreography was amazing, but because she took Mary and myself, and we were in a duet with one another, and she took part—it was like she took both of, she took Mary’s ability and placed it on me and together—it’s a profound piece. It was just complimented many times to me where people were just like, “It was incredible.” “Between the two of you, the lines were so similar and just together they’re beautiful.” And that piece alone, I feel like it touched many people.

Maggie: How did you feel that you performed it?

Dezare: It’s an amazing piece. It’s a piece of strength and release, but it feels as if we were supposed to be in a battle because of the way it played out. But it doesn’t feel like a battle at all but more so like talking to one another. So that’s what that felt like, yeah, like a conversation between Mary and myself.

As Frank (2004) stated, in order for true dialogue to take place, there needs to be respect and responsiveness to the other. Also, one must acknowledge the “self is unfinalizable” in that he or she must have a willingness to change (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 45). Indeed, authentic dialogue may ultimately foster a radical change in human
consciousness (de Quincey, 2005). Similarly, Dezare, a stand-up dancer, talked about the ways in which integrated dance is dialogic. She talked about “being with” another dancer.

Maggie: Can you talk to me a little bit about—I watched you and Mary work with Lisa Lock [ballet instructor] this morning on like a new combination. Can you tell me a little bit about how that felt, what you were trying to accomplish?

Dezare: Okay, so when it comes to working with any sit-down dancer, I believe that we should do what we can for each other. So when she [Lisa Lock] was saying to me to do this part in the movement sequence, and then Mary, when she told her what to do with her sequence, the best thing to do is mold between the two. So to be able to do it together but also be able to do it without conflict in running into each other. So like… being bumped into—part of being a dancer is being able to find a way around other dancers or finding a way to move through other dancers. So even with the sit-downs, it’s the same thing, and also that their movement is different than other dancers. Their movement is circular or it can be straight, so it depends, you have to really watch your partner. So when we were doing the sequence, my thought was to watch Mary… pay attention and be with her. And so that was what that was about; that’s what it felt like to me was to be with Mary.
Maggie: Is that a common occurrence? Is that something that you have to do on a daily basis or like every time you learn a piece, do you kinda go through that sort of motion with each other?

Dezare: Definitely, definitely. Any piece that we do, I feel that that’s one of the first things is being able to get the path of things and then work through the choreography (Chuckle).

As is evidenced by participants’ testimony, Dancing Wheels responds to embodied differences of sit-down and stand-up dancers. At the same time, though, company members try to acknowledge the diverse strengths and talents of dancers. Dancers come to the studio with various dance backgrounds (e.g., modern, ballet, hip-hop, jazz, caporiera, break-dance). Dancing Wheels attempts to acknowledge and make space for these diverse styles to showcase and develop their strengths and training.

The Ephemeral Nature of Dialogic Meeting Moments

In their best moments, participants at Dancing Wheels provide us with an embodied vision of how to organize around difference by drawing on aesthetic sensibilities. That said, numerous scholars have noted that moments of true dialogue and collaboration are rare (Buber, 1970/1996; Turner, 1980). While at Dancing Wheels, I witnessed that dialogic communication is a difficult and often fleeting or ephemeral accomplishment. Mark D., a sit-down dancer, reflected on times when integration (i.e., partnering) between stand-ups and sit-downs did not go well because he felt like a “prop” and “overpowered”:
A couple times with, I think with Mac and myself. Like, it was during rehearsals, but it was just things that I don’t think I was really comfortable doing. Not for so much of the part of a male/male part but just as for—it was kinda like overpowering—I was just like a rolling prop.

Mark D. articulated how responsiveness is not easy to achieve and does not always happen. On a similar note, Salisbury (2001), a dance critic for *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*, attested to the difficulty of partnering in integrated dance:

David Nau, one of the sit-down dancers, said the collaboration with student dancers had been a revelation. A former construction worker who became a quadriplegic after a car accident eight years ago, he had never danced until he took a Dancing Wheels community class. “It’s a huge learning curve for me to see the difference between the students and the professional dancers,” he said. “The students are learning every day. They’re not familiar with so many different levels of disability. The partnering is difficult.” (p. 4)

Dezare, a stand-up dancer, articulated some of the difficulties in partnering between stand-up and sit-down dancers in integrated dance. She finds height changes and handholds difficult.

*Maggie:* Do you remember the first time engaging in integrated dance?

*Dezare:* The first time I danced with sit-down dancers was when Diane [McIntyre, a choreographer] came in on Monday, she was there for the whole week, and the first day that we—didn’t really do much together until we got to a certain part in the piece. And she was like, “Okay, now do the hoedown
with Mary.” And I was like, “How do I do it?” Like, it’s just, it’s so
different... No. 1, they [sit-down dancers] are shorter. It’s a different level
and so… you have to get down… it was a different feeling. And it wasn’t
negative at all, but it was just different. So that was actually my first
experience of dancing with an integrated sit-down dancer…

Later in the interview, Dezare reiterated some of the difficulties she encountered in
integrated dance:

**Dezare:** For example, if there’s some kind of arabesque where your leg is coming
off the ground in any way, it’s frightening if you’re in the air or close to a
stand [stand-up] or a sit-down because it’s possible to kick anyone. But
they would be the first thing you would kick, depending on how high your
leg is, so that’s a problem, depending on where your leg is supposed to be
and where the sit-down dancer is. Handholds, again, are a big thing. If you
don’t hold the hand correctly in a certain way and the turn would be either
crossed, your arms would become crossed, or you could pull their
shoulders back too far and you could injure them.

Dialogue between two bodies takes time and an awareness of space. Learning how to
neither deny interdependence nor repress difference is an ongoing challenge (Phillips,
1993).

Kristen, a stand-up dancer, noted that translation of movement actually allows for
more options in dance. However, she wishes that the dancers would attempt to translate
movement from sit-down dancers to stand-up dancers (reverse translation), instead of
always relying on translating movement to sit-down dancers. Perhaps if the company utilized reverse translation to its full capacity, they could foster more dialogic potentialities and moments. Consider Kristen’s comments:

Translation to me just means a different form of choreography. If you talk to Mary, there are movements that she likes to translate a certain way. A translation can be different. You can do, just like for stand-up, that movement in different ways. You may want to use the arms, stand-up dancer’s arms or maybe you want to use the arms and the standup dancer’s legs or maybe you want to mix the two. The turn that they can do that we cannot do because we are not on wheels. Translation is the definition to me is like a different term of choreography because it is all dependent on the music, how comfortable the wheeler is how comfortable the stand up is translating for them. If the wheeler wants to translate, the feelings behind the movement, it really can change. There are certain things that you can do that are more codified but I think it actually gives you more options in dance because even if there is something that Mary or Jenny [sit-down dancers] is going to do maybe I will look at it and go how will I translate that to me and that would be a different choreographic idea for our pieces. And it has actually happened in my classes. I wanted the wheelers to share something and like hey that was really cool can you do that again. Now what are the ways that I can translate it?

For the most part unfortunately we use class in a wheel chair but I would love for a class where one of the wheelers try and we would have to translate it because I think it would make us stronger choreographers and I think we would be make
into stronger teachers to see the different between translation between stand up
and sit down but between the different teachers and different people.

During my fieldwork, I paid attention to which dancers initiated connections with another
dancer. In most cases, the stand-up dancer was the first to initiate movement. Thus, my
observations are consistent with Kristen’s sentiments.

In an interview, Frank, a stand-up dancer, noted that sometimes his dance
training is not recognized as dance at Dancing Wheels. If Dancing Wheels operated in a
truly dialogic fashion at all times, regardless of his dance training, Frank would have
been considered a dancer from the moment he entered the company by all company
members. It appears that modern dance training is what is most valued in the company (a
hierarchical system of what counts as dance at Dancing Wheels).

Frank: Put down as not being a “dancer” because I did hip-hop and break dancing
and caporiera which are all dance styles. But they would be like you’re
starting to look like a “dancer.” They say that a lot to me. And I’m like
hmmm. Just because I don’t dance the way you dance doesn’t make me
any more or less of a dancer than you.

Maggie: How does that make you feel?

Frank: It hurts. That’s where I kind of think that’s where you have to have thick
skin because that could have easily made me walk out and be like okay,
see you later. But I mean I didn’t because I figure I can take as much as I
can from this group before I leave next year which I plan on doing.
In another interview, Frank discussed how individuals are taken out of pieces without any explanation. When choreographers set pieces for the bodies and strengths of certain dancers and the original dancer leaves the company, instead of shifting the dance to meet the strengths of the current dancers (i.e., shift a choreography for a ballet dancer to a modern dancer), they search for and fill the spot with a dancer who is most closely aligned with the dancer the piece was originally choreographed for. Again, working from a dialogic perspective, a more flexible choreography would make space for showcasing the strengths of the dancers. I argue that at times the preferred aesthetic of the company places limits on how dialogic the company can be.

Frank: I think Kristen gets brushed to the side a lot. I think that’s just from coming in and seeing it for myself. I’ve seen her in things and then pulled out of things and someone else got put in her place and I don’t understand that. Because I think she does just as good as the person taking her place. I think especially in this group everybody with the exception of me is kind of like in the same place. I don’t ever really think for someone to get like—to get a role that someone else has… They’re pulled out of their position so someone else can have it. I don’t really think there’s a reason for [this]. Which I think is a really good part of this group is that there’s nobody that really stands out as like this person is great and the rest of them are just kind of there. So you’re gonna put this person in front. They all have their strength. Juliana is really good with ballet, Kristin is really good at modern dance and Robby’s really good with
contemporary. Sara is just good. She is well-rounded I think which is good because she can do whatever role and she really gets into the roles. They all have their strengths so there really isn’t any reason. So if a choreographer comes in from somewhere and he sets it to be this person, this person, and this person and then you pull out one of the folks that the choreographer set it on and put somebody else in there when the choreographer specifically asked this person in this dance. I don’t like that.

**Maggie:** Who makes those decisions?

**Frank:** I think Mac does. I think it’s a collective of Mac and Mary; I don’t really think it’s the dancers. I think the dancers all want to be in the pieces. I think they get hurt when they get pulled out of them. I think that really hurts their feelings. But I’ve seen that happen to Kristen, I’ve seen that happen to Sara, I haven’t really seen it happen to other people. Like the other people are always in the pieces. They’re always there. Which I think gets annoying to the people who watch the pieces. It gets annoying to me and I don’t really watch the pieces. So I know for someone to go and watch a show and to see—and Dezare would get pulled out of stuff too or somebody else would get in. I think Dezare would take a choreography faster than anything else. I think that was her strength. She would pick up the choreography really fast and she would know everybody’s part. Everybody’s part. If you asked her do… this part that Mac does, yes. She does know it. She would get pulled out of stuff and she knows the
choreography down to a T. It was like whoa, why did you just pull her out of there. She knows it almost better than you do. Maybe way better than this person does. She’s got to teach the person…

One possible way to address the dialogic issues would be the use of personal storytelling. Storytelling during group deliberation can help members to shape their identities and take on another’s perspective (Black, 2008). Charlotte, a sit-down dancer, mentioned that she and Mark dance well when the dances are fast. Again, Dancing Wheels has a difficult time meeting the strengths of all dancers of all abilities. Charlotte showed frustration with Dancing Wheels for not meeting her strengths. In a truly dialogic world, all the dancers’ strengths would be met:

_Maggie:_ Why do you continue to stay here?

_Charlotte:_ She keeps bugging me—(Chuckle) because I do like it. I like it. The only thing I want to do is I want to do some more fast dances and I just can’t talk them into it. You know? I mean I like the slower dances, they’re beautiful, but I just don’t feel that I fit into them… if they brought me in there for the strength and the speed, then use me for that and that’s the same thing with Mark D. Now that was promised to him and I’m sorry, it’s not been given to either one of us. You know, and that’s the one reason that I get frustrated I guess with Dancing Wheels because—and I think that’s what the people like. I’m sorry, but that’s what the people want to see. After we get done with dances, they’re, “Wow, that’s… they
had 1420 Mega Hertz [choreographed by Sabatino Verlezza] or… Mark’s [Tomasic] gymnastic piece—

Maggie: A Wing/A Prayer.

Charlotte: Yeah, A Wing/A Prayer, people love that piece. I mean—I love doing it because of the speed and people say they can see that I love doing it in my face. Or the beginning of Young Park’s piece, Walking on Clouds, where we’re doing that fast snaky thing where it’s all of the people… I love that kind of stuff. But I’m sorry, there’s just not enough of it now.

Mark D., a sit-down dancer, echoed Charlotte’s position that he would like to see more fast pieces which would allow for his strength as a dancer to be accommodated.

Additionally, both Mark D. and Charlotte believe that capitalizing on their strengths allows them to dialogue with audience members (audiences like to see fast pieces).

Maggie: What would be like some reactions you’ve had from audience members or people who come to watch any of those events? Like, are there any moments that stand out?

Mark D.: Oh, yeah. People would come up and say that was like—I mean, my favorite piece, of course, is A Wing/A Prayer… they say, “When you guys go out there and you guys are goin’ around so fast and doin’ the wheelies and… you’re staying and doin’ all that stuff,” they just like, “that is incredible, that is really cool.” And especially when people come up in wheelchairs and say, “I didn’t even know that was possible.” And it’s like,
“It is, that’s what you can do, just you gotta believe you could do it.” So that was always good.

One time it was real inspirational is when there was a little girl, I can’t remember her name, but it was one of the performances, and she was just a real little girl. She must’ve been 4 or 5 years old, and she was in a wheelchair, and she was like, “I wanna do that. I wanna do what you did.” And I was like, “Wow,”… that was my moment right there.

Frank, a stand-up dancer, discussed the importance of being responsible for others when lifting dancers. In order to do so, he discussed a moment where a sit-down dancer almost let someone who she was partnering with fall:

I’ve seen a few times where she wheeled way too fast, he almost falls off the chair and she’s like you need to hold on. It’s like you’re in control of him, you have to take care of him the same way if I was doing a part in a dance with a stand-up and I’d have to take care of them because I’m lifting them. It would be my fault if they fell. It’s not their fault if they fell. I can’t let them fall; that’s my job. 50/50...

At the same time, if I’m lifting I am responsible. She doesn’t like to take responsibility for a lot of stuff she does. Those are the times where it doesn’t work well. And I think that happens a lot. It’s not necessarily the wheelers, because a lot of times it is the stand-ups. Those are the main times that happen a lot where I’m just like whoa she’s doing this and Mary and Mac aren’t stopping it at all because it happens a lot.
Finally, the corporeal nature of health and illness among dancers also poses a challenge to dialogically connecting with others. Sara, a stand-up dancer discussed the relational nature of colds. Because of the embodied nature of dance, dancers have to interact with each other and when one person is ill, the illnesses are easily passed. Indeed, dancers connect through their illnesses. Stewart and Zediker (2000) reminded us that no one person is responsible for dialogue. Dialogue must involve voice “multivocality in relation to univocality” (p. 237). In the dance studio, it is virtually impossible to resist the nature of connection in sickness and in health, as no one’s voice/body is covered up and they exist together:

Maggie: How often, if at all, do disruptions occur that you would attribute to a person’s health?

Sara: Health then in sickness wise or whatnot happens once a month or so. When one person out of all 10 of us or so. I mean, that’s scary because we’re in this hot environment that is very conducive to growing bacteria. And I see like the dance floor and the bars and everything that we touch is probably filthy all the time. So it can definitely get us all sick. If one person gets sick it just starts to snowball in that manner.

Coming full circle, I want to emphasize that the dialogic potential of integrated dance is realized in moments that ebb and flow. Anderson, Cissna and Clune (2003) discussed this ebb and flow as consisting of “meaning moments” (Cissna & Anderson 1998, 2002). Both Gadamer (1982) and Buber (1970/1996) discussed the notion of embodiment in the between. Mark D., a sit-down dancer, discussed the ways in which
these “meeting moments” are difficult to achieve because you have to really get to know your partner and these moments are fleeting:

And I think because she and I, we worked, we partnered the most, so we really, like… we got to know each other in that way. We got to partner a lot, so we, I just—one specific moment I can’t really think of, but, I mean, maybe during Pilobolus [professional dance company choreographed a piece for Dancing Wheels], I can’t remember the exact name of it. It was a duet in Pilobolus, that was like… that was a good one for us. And also, I think the I Want You to See Me, when we partnered in that because, I mean, that was a faster piece and so it was like we had to be—we had to know what each other were gonna do.

A “meeting moment” that Mark D., a sit-down dancer, reminisced on was the first time he saw his daughter, Jena, a stand-up dancer, perform on stage with a sit-down dancer. Jena was a member of the Dancing Wheels school.

Mark D.: And then she did The Snowman, and that was the first performance I had gone to.

Maggie: How did you feel when you watched?

Mark D.: It was like—I kind saw a lot of the rehearsals, so I knew a little bit what to expect. But it was more high stage and everything, the night when she was—it was a lot bigger. I would say, it was bigger. And it was really weird because that was my daughter up there… like such a young age, and she was interacting with a bunch of different people who have different abilities. And I think it like, for her, it showed her at such a young age
somethin’ I never realize… I never interacted with people with disabilities growing up.

Maggie: Do you think in any way, like, what were some things maybe she took away from when she was with them?

Mark D.: Oh, yeah. I mean, the last workshop she was in, she worked with another little girl who was in a power chair, and they did Chicken Lips together and I—just the way they… she helped her out and just the way they moved together, it was incredible. I couldn’t believe it. And her mother was sittin’ next to me and I’m over there cryin’ and her mother was just like bawlin’, and she was like, “I can’t believe it.” And I’m like, “I told you.” So it was really cool. It was really, really great.

Maggie: Did you get to see like a side of her that you hadn’t seen before?

Mark D.: She’s always been real compassionate. She’s always had like a… she cares about people. I kind of… I didn’t expect that, but…it was nice to see.

Mark D. enjoyed viewing the ways in which his daughter and a child with disabilities moved together in the “meeting moment.” Mark continued to explain his embodied experience with responsiveness (to otherness) and connection, which takes time to achieve:

You’re relying on somebody else, and you’re relying on… it’s like you work with different people, so it’s everybody’s different. And say the way that the May Ring duet, the way Rachel and I did it, Sara and I did it differently, and sometimes… it
comes out better with different people. Like Sara and I, I think her and I did it, like, we were more fluent and we made it look nicer than Rachel and I. But when it comes to like Pilabolous… and other partnering, Rachel and I made things look nicer than say with either Sara or… Kristin, but Kristin taught me most of these dances. And it’s kinda weird… it’s like, I guess whoever you work with the longest that’s who is gonna work best with you…

Sara, a stand-up dancer, articulated about how she learned to partner with sit-down dancers. In order for Sara to be responsive to the other (her partner), she watched others partner while acknowledging her own bodily strength before she could be supportive of another person’s body:

I guess I got to observe as I learned. So I would see how other dancers interacted with them first. But most of the time, when I had to try some things integrated with Mary or Jenny, at the time, I was cautious to know beforehand that if I put their arms behind their head, they will fall backwards. I tried to avoid that. Or Mary likes to hold her hand one way and if you offer your hands, let’s say, the wrong way, palm up versus palm down or something, palm down versus palm up; whatever she wants at that time, she’ll make a fuss and she’ll correct your hand. I learned that way, too. How else did I feel? You know, cautious. And I feel like I’m strong. I’m not going to do anything overboard because I’ll be a base first. You know, let’s figure out this move and if anything goes wrong for either one of us, I know how to save it before I go further.
Sara, a stand-up dancer, acknowledged the ways in which bodies embody dialogic communication. She recalled the ways in which she knows she is connecting with other dancers, through body heat, sweat, and touch:

*Sara:* We I think having class every morning helps each dancer (myself included) prepare the body to dance your best by training. And then even just taking class with each other. We warm up together so the room heats up and we know that we’re together. And then we have to turn the air conditioner on to cool back down. But unless you’re by yourself, you don’t focus in on everybody else. We take turns ‘turning’ in class and watch and stand off to the side. Then you go and dance and everybody else is watching you. So then we take lunch and come back after lunch. And we’re all together for rehearsal and go from there.

*Maggie:* Can you talk a little bit about how the heat in the room lets you know that you’re together?

*Sara:* Yeah, well you feel heat rise from the body as soon as you start to move or exercise. It just gets multiplied when there are multiple bodies in the room. And then also how close you are to other bodies. And when you start to do partnering and touching you can feel other people’s sweat and skin. And that gets physical. It’s hard and it gets a lot of heat going.

*Maggie:* What are some similarities or differences between dancing with a company compared to solo dancing?
Sara: Solo, you could make up your movements as you go because you’re dancing by yourself, so nobody would know. If you were dancing with another group and you’re supposed to be together, if you do one thing differently, you see it. The audience sees it. And sometimes that can be acceptable and other time[s] everybody has to look the same. So when you’re together, sometimes there’s one person that’s out in front and doing something different. And it’s on purpose. But the rest of the people have to be together.

The integrative nature of this company challenges societal conceptions of artists/dancers of independent work (see also Harter et al., 2006). Additionally, Sara directed attention to sensational knowledge (e.g., sight, smell, touch, taste, sound, motor, and kinesthetic), which helps her be fully present with the “other” (Hahn, 2007). Dezare, a stand-up dancer, discussed difficulties she encountered when performing in a wheelchair. For her, it is difficult to communicate (or express) while in a chair.

Dezare: It felt like I couldn’t express, honestly. It’s harder for me to express in a chair because—I wasn’t used to it. I wasn’t used to it. But technically wise, it was—it wasn’t that it was easy, but it wasn’t a big challenge. The biggest challenge was emotionally, like, “What am I supposed to do in this chair?” is what it felt like.

Maggie: As a stand-up dancer, how do you express yourself emotionally?

Dezare: It’s movement through my entire body. And not being able to use my entire body is hard, not just my arms, not just my legs, but also my torso
and… hips and everything, shoulders, head, all that. It could’ve been the
choreography too, but all of it together, choreography and being just
like—I felt like I was detained between two wheels.

Verdi-Fletcher, Sarah, Mark D., Mark Tomasic, Dezare, and Frank all demonstrate the
ways in which integrated dance requires bodies to be responsive to otherness (i.e.,
difference) as they are conscious of dialogue between bodies. Even so, they admit that on
a regular basis, pragmatic exigencies limit participants’ abilities to truly respond and
connect with others.

*Dialogic Performance and Social Change*

In teasing out the dialogic potential of collaborative art at Passion Works, Harter
and Rawlins (in press) drew on “dialogic theory to develop a communicative
understanding of aesthetic rationalities as knowledge producing resources for
organizations that do the work of social movements” (n. p.). Consider this in light of
Putnam’s work on social capital (2000). In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam used a bowling
metaphor to argue that Americans were reducing relational and organizational ties
outside the home and workplace, which is a threat to democratic dialogue. As an antidote
to these trends, I argue that dance and art as lived at Dancing Wheels continue to engage
publics and promote democratic involvement (see also, Harrison, 1994).

At the heart of democracy, dialogue, and integrated dance is difference.
Throughout this study, I explored the role of dance in promoting civic dialogue at
performances sponsored by The Dancing Wheels Company & School. Because of the
performative nature of dance, I paid attention to the ability of performance to resist
Oppressive practices and foster social change (see also Bakhtin, 1984b; Conquergood, 1985; Dutta-Bergman, 2004a, 2004b; Singhal et al., 2004). Performance scholars have advocated the use of theater to direct community attention towards change. According to Bakhtin (1984b), performances resist oppression through entertainment. Performance is a communication strategy for understanding the established and oppressive practices through social dialogue. Public dialogue is important for the creation of a caring and empathetic society (Friedman, 1993). Public dialogue can bring people together both emotionally and intellectually through a shared sense of the world.

Verdi-Fletcher conveyed the ways in which Dancing Wheels, through its embodied integrated dance, strives to create a public dialogue focused on individual abilities rather than the disability:

Audiences of course are very often seeing a performance for the very first time, therefore their dialogue is not only about the choreography but about individual dancers. It seems that the idea of disability equates into ability as they see dancers transformed into beautiful images of strength, grace, speed, agility... all the things that speak to ability rather than disability.

Kerry, Chairman of the Board of Dancing Wheels and a disability lawyer, explained the ways in which Verdi-Fletcher builds a community for these public dialogues to thrive.

Maggie: What do you think drives people back to another show?
Kerry: I think there are several things. I think the fact that we try to combine the show with an event, with some kind of fundraising event or socialization
opportunity… where we’re before or after a show having hors d’oeuvres, conversation… I think that that helps a lot because not just going to see a show, it’s a sense of community as well. I think people feel good. I think they feel like they’ve supported an organization that’s worthwhile… you feel like you’re doing more than just watching a performance, you feel like you’re contributing in some way to the disability community as well, which is rewarding. I think it’s a good show… it’s a good show, you wanna see another good show. But I think, at least for me, I come back because I feel like I’m not only enjoying myself but doing something good for the community.

Conquergood (2002) argued that performance is a strategy for social change that lies in contrast to textocentism or the privilege that is given to written forms of knowledge. Similar the analysis by Harter et al.’s (2007) of radio listeners in Bihar, India, and to Conquergood’s (1988) study of Hmong refugees, I view Dancing Wheels as a type of dialogic performance that gives voice to marginalized voices without a sole reliance on text for persuasion.

Verdi-Fletcher specified the ways in which they aim to integrate dance and text to raise consciousness and advance ongoing conversations:

We have often included text in our performances, especially most recently. I am a big believer however in the fact that the dance speaks for itself. The whole idea of dance and the artistry of it is to evoke emotion, to tell a story without words and to convey a thought that doesn’t need words.
Utilizing Freire’s (1970, 1973) work, participatory communication opens up possibilities for dialogue by enabling critical thinking as a means to empower individuals who are marginalized in society.

Dancing Wheels engages audiences in critical thinking, as a means of empowerment, by providing opportunities for people to ask deep questions. In Walking on Clouds (2005), choreographed by David Rousseve, there is a scene in which a woman (originally performed by Jenita McGowan, a retired stand-up dancer) described herself as a spy because her light skin conceals her race. Kristen, a stand-up dancer, mentioned that the repertory at Dancing Wheels invites the audience in to wrestle with difficult questions:

… in my mind it is not about being mixed? It is about the question that it poses. Is she white? Is she black? Or, is she really mixed? You don’t know. And that is the whole point of this company. We are supposed to love each other for who we are not for who we are not.

In many ways, the work of Dancing Wheels is similar to that of the Animating Democracy Initiative (ADI) sponsored by the Americans for the Arts (see also, Anderson, Cissna, & Clune, 2003). Anderson and colleagues described ADI and the ways it seeks to foster “artistic activity that encourages civic dialogue” (www.americansforthearts.org). In the case of Dancing Wheels, the dialogic meeting moments of integrated dance open up possibilities for ongoing dialogue with audience members who bear witness to the performances.
The choreographer calls out: Mark Daurelio and Maggie are the next set of partners.

My stomach and shoulders tighten.

I hesitantly stagger over to Mark, my partner, on the right side of the stage. My feet drag as if there are weights on my ankles. My heart and soul are resisting. I am afraid of being exposed, made to feel more vulnerable. I stand next to Mark. We are both facing the mirrors, not looking at each other. Mark is closer to the mirrors and I am about a foot away, behind his chair. I realize that my body positioning might be giving him the impression that I do not want to dance with him. I am allowing my insecurities to get the best of me. I am allowing my body/mind to get in my way instead of thinking about the vulnerabilities that Mark and I share.

I am so focused on my thoughts and what my body is about to do that I do not listen to the directions that the choreographer is giving the other dancers. “Blah Blah Blah” is all I hear. If I listened, I might confuse myself. I am over stimulated with so many unknown directions. My head is down and I decide to fix my bra strap so that I look like I am busy and not avoiding Mark. I think, “Well, he is not talking to me either.” We say nothing to each other. My shoulders slump, and I take my right hand up to my hair and start to pick at it to relax. I fill the silence between Mark and me with self-absorbent, nervous movements like fixing my hair and clothing.

The choreographer says, “Okay, Mark and Maggie.” A surge of adrenaline takes over my body again. I look to Mark, and my voice nervously vibrates with shame as I say “just
I hope this negative self-talk will cover me for all of the mistakes I am about to make.

“Okay, Mark and Maggie,” says the choreographer. “What I want you to do is hold hands.” Without looking at Mark, I turn my body to the right so I am facing the mirror.

Mark faces stage right. I unclasp my hands in front of me I reach for Mark’s left arm with my right hand. I am opening up my body to his, allowing myself to make the first move.

With one easy glide Mark comes closer to me. His body feels very foreign. So different from mine. A stranger. I try not to look at his legs. Today is the first day he has worn shorts. I had never seen atrophied muscles before. His legs look so skinny, a contrast from his strong arms. I admire that he is able to live in his body. I have much to learn from him.

Our hands clasp. My arm extends away from my torso at about a thirty-five degree angle. My whole arm is stiff from the shoulder down. No part of my arm is touching my torso. I reach low to meet the height of his chair.

I am facing the mirror behind Mark’s chair. Our hands are still clasped. My hands are sweaty. Perhaps Mark will not notice or at least think that it is his sweat, not mine. I reject my body, my own secretions: women are not supposed to sweat.

“Okay, now I would like Maggie to pull Mark forward and let him go after you take three steps—right left right. Then I would like you to pull Mark in front of you and let him go.”

“Let’s try,” said Mark.

One. Two. Three. I stiffly extend my right arm in an arc from my body. I’m trying to drag Mark’s body past my body and propel him across the stage while our hands remain
clasped. I pull Mark ahead of me with our hands still clasped. On my second step, Mark’s body passes mine. With force and momentum, I give Mark a push with my right hand. He glides with ease across the stage.

“No no no. Woah. Way too much force, Maggie.” said the choreographer. “Mark is going to need to wheel backwards to come and pick you up and, if you push him that far, he will not be able to wheel back and stay with the music.”

I had no sense of his body, his chair. Or my body, my strength. It is uncomfortable pushing his body. I feel awkward. What gives me the right to throw his body around?

“Try again,” said the choreographer. Yup, the inevitable. My imperfections are becoming even more apparent. I need to get this right next time.

“Sorry Mark,” I mumble. “As you can tell I’m new at this.”

Mark wheels backwards to attempt this combination again. I tip toe backwards to where we started. Toe to heel. Toe to heel. Left, right, left, right, left. I stagger off the stage to avoid being in the spotlight.

One, two, three. We begin again. Our hands unite. I push Mark ahead of me with our hands still clasped. Mark’s body goes in front of mine. With force I give Mark a push with my right hand. His body slides past mine.

Mark and I look at each other. I look away. As I look away, he smiles and says, “Never danced with a sit-down dancer before, eh?” Geez, he understands. There was tenderness in his voice that I had not heard before as he is trying to comfort me. Since Mark’s accident this is probably not the first time he has had to do this.
“No,” I giggle. I begin to relax. The tension in my body seems to be released as my muscles relax.

The choreographer continues, “Okay, Maggie, after you let go of Mark, I am going to need you to cross your right foot over your left. While bending your right leg, I am going to need you to slide your left leg to the floor.”

Ouch. He wants me to fall on the floor. I have worked hard to keep my balance and now falling is part of my routine. This will take some letting go on my part. There is something about falling on the ground that does not really appeal at this moment. I am tired, sore, embarrassed, and afraid of falling.

With my body facing the mirrors, I place my right foot in front of my left. My left leg slides to the floor as my right leg and foot are facing stage left.

My left leg hits the floor, and my right leg is crossed over my left and is bent at forty-five degrees. I am in this really awkward, yoga-like position, in which my body is going in two different directions. I am annoyed at my inflexibility. Again, my body betrays me. I plead with my body to do as I command.

In order to break the position and take the uncomfortable stretch out of my groin being stretched in two different directions, I place my left hand on the ground to try to take the pressure off the stretch as I plop all of my body weight on my left hip. Ouch. I hit my hip bone and get the sensation that a bruise is about to begin to form under the layers of skin. My right leg is still at a forty-five degree angle in front of my body. I am not really sure what to do with this leg, so I swing it around and lay it on top of my left leg, which is pointing toward stage right. My hip flexors are tight. As I swing my right leg around, I
hear and feel my right hip crack. I slide my left hand onto the ground, so it is facing the left side of the stage. My head falls onto my arm so that I am lying in a straight line. I look up to Mark to see if he approves. My mouth is dry and my whole body is moving with my heavy breath. The pins and needles sensation begins as my left leg falls asleep.

“Good good, Maggie,” said the choreographer. “Just work on getting your right leg around faster so that Mark does not run it over with his chair when he wheels backward to pick you up. Also, you may want to practice falling with a little but more grace. Don’t look so scared,” said the choreographer.

“Oh okay are you two ready to try this to music?”

I let out a loud, and on the verge of obnoxious, sigh!
Merleau-Ponty (1962) eloquently stated, “Our bodies have their own knowledge which are able to communicate to us” (p. 231). While Mark and I danced together, I began to think about my/our bodies, their connections, their limits, and their boundaries. As an ethnographer, interested in what aesthetic sensibilities have to communicate to us through bodily sensations, being aware of my body in the field allowed me to more deeply understand the personal, social, and political conditions that affected communication in the field. Similar to Sklar (1991), a dance ethnographer, I remained aware of the ways in which the body holds cultural knowledge that cannot be articulated or learned through observation. The very fact that I had opportunities to engage in
integrated dance allowed for an understanding of the complexities of this art form (as well as the organization) that could not have been experienced by sitting at the edge of the studio. At Dancing Wheels, (dis)ability has a very live presence.

Throughout this study, I paid attention to the ways in which The Dancing Wheels Company & School is guided by aesthetic values and relies on the imagination to coordinate activities so that its members can more fully acknowledge, answer, and develop difference in the form of (dis)ability. Drawing on Dewey’s work (1934/1980), Harter et al. (2009) recounted, “The term aesthetic derives from the Greek aisthanomai—to perceive and feel with the sense” (p. 35, italics in original). Aesthetic sensibilities constitute a form of human knowledge, a form of sensemaking yielded by the perceptive faculties of hearing, sight, touch, smell, taste, and the capability for aesthetic judgment (Gagliadi, 2006; Strati, 1999). Dewey (1934/1980) positioned aesthetics as a way of knowing. Building on this argument, Strati (1999) suggested that aesthetics in organizational life “concerns a form of human knowledge; and specifically the knowledge yielded by the perceptive faculties of hearing, sight, touch, smell, and taste, and by the capacity for aesthetic judgment” (p. 2). Because of the embodied nature of dance, I have attempted to recognize the ways in which aesthetic knowledge is embodied (Ewenstein & Whyte, 2007). Aesthetics is often equated with beauty. A case in point: the feeling of beauty is one of the factors that structure organizational life. Indeed, individuals are attracted to things they consider to be beautiful and repulsed by the ugly. Strati put forward categories of aesthetics such as the sacred, picturesque, tragic, ugly, sublime, comic, and graceful as ways for understanding organizational life and for making sense of different types of aesthetic experiences. In this theme, I explore how
aesthetics and other nonhuman artifacts are central to organizational communication processes.

Strati (1995) argued that paying attention to aesthetics is a new way of defining the nature of our conceptions of organizing. On that note, The Dancing Wheels Company & School can be usefully understood through an aesthetic approach, rather than by being examined solely as a structural entity guided by logico-rational analysis (see critiques of dominant literature by Mumby and Stohl (1996). Harter et al. (2008) concurred and suggested, “Instrumental and objectivist logics maintain a hegemonic place in Western scholarship, reasoning skills powerfully equipped to address certain dilemmas even as they may obscure other ways of knowing” (p. 33). In this project, I acknowledged that aesthetic sensibilities are knowledge-producing resources used by organizational members to navigate through their worlds and at the same time I drew on my own aesthetic sensibilities to make sense of what I was seeing, observing, smelling, touching, hearing, and feeling in the field (see also Ramirez, 1991).

In this theme, I discuss wheelchairs as aesthetic artifacts and elements of choreography, aesthetics and the imagination, the arts and community building, and an aesthetics of (im)perfection lived by Dancing Wheels.

Wheelchairs: Aesthetic Artifacts and Choreographic Elements

Dancing Wheels uses a wheelchair in the studio and on stage as an aid to glide, jump, turn, and propel themselves through space to music or silence as a way to express themselves and choreography. Their wheelchairs are used just as we use
our feet... to dance... the wheelchair symbolizes speed, versatility, agility, expression and movement. (Kristen, stand-up dancer, interview)

While in the field, I remained mindful of the ways in which organizational members at Dancing Wheels discussed aesthetic artifacts. Strati (2000) summarized organizational aesthetics as focusing on organizational identity images, physical space of the organization, physical artifacts, notions of the manager as artist and the beauty of social organization, and how management can learn from artistic form and content. Dancing Wheels is characterized by artifacts that can be perceived by the senses—forms of aesthetic and/or sensory knowledge (see also Gagliardi, 1990, 1996). Strati (2000) focused on images relating to organizational identity, physical space of the organization, physical artifacts, ideas such as the manager as artist and the beauty of social organizing in order to explore how individuals can learn from artistic form and content. In this study, aesthetics and symbols came to be interrelated as I studied this organization’s culture through its symbols and aesthetics. Other scholars have paid attention to organizational artifacts such as conference rooms (Witkin, 1990), chairs (Strati, 1992), and offices (Strati, 1992). Strati (1996) suggested that artifacts can give one insight to the pathos of an organization. A chair, for example, acquires multiple forms of meaning in an organization. A chair may be a powerful symbol or an artifact on which to sit, a decorative item, an improvised table, a stepping-stool or a jacket hanger. Gagliardi (1996) concluded that artifacts share the ability to influence our perception of reality, to the point of shaping beliefs, norms, and cultural values. Hancock (2005) noted the ways in which artifacts become vehicles of expression for organizational control.
At Dancing Wheels, the wheelchair becomes an important organizational artifact. Hershenson (2003), quoting Sabatino Verlezza in the *New York Times*, noted that the wheelchair is part of the organization’s aesthetic.

“We create something that’s never been done,” he said of the pieces that the dancers perform together. “We call it integrated, though I don’t like the word.” Wheelchairs have become part of his aesthetic, whether they are gliding or motionless. “It’s like discovering a new color,” Mr. Verlezza said. (p. 7)

Dancers, staff members, and board members talked about the ways in which the use of wheelchairs distinguishes them from other dance companies. Others view the wheelchair as a prop that allows them to create innovative choreography.

While at Dancing Wheels, I questioned with my own (mis)conceptions of wheelchairs. I started out believing that wheelchairs were something that I was not allowed to touch, which I documented in my fieldnotes:

*Dancing Wheels has extra wheelchairs all over the studio. People without disabilities are always sitting in them. Yesterday, I watched Mac’s oldest boy race Jena in a wheelchair. I just stared at them and was afraid that someone was going to get hurt. They kept hitting each other in the chairs as if they were bumper cars. I found that pretty disrespectful to individuals who use them to traverse through the world. Also, the wheelchairs that are donated to the company are really expensive. Part of me thinks my understanding of disability would be different if wheelchairs were always around. I sat down in a wheelchair for the first time. My stomach dropped as I sat—felt like I was falling backwards. It didn’t help that*
Mac came from behind and gave me a shove from the back; I felt like I was about to wet my pants, my notebook falling to the floor as I grasped the wheels to figure out how to get them to stop before I hit the mirror. “Maaaaaaaccccccc, that was scary.” He responded, “That is the fastest way to learn.” I wheeled backwards and tried to turn around and then attempted to steady the wheelchair so I could get out unharmed.

Later in my fieldwork, I spent many hours sitting in a wheelchair taking fieldnotes, and I began to feel a kinesthetic connection with the machinery. As time passed, I became very comfortable sitting in wheelchairs. Often, I sat in wheelchairs to avoid sitting on the cold studio floors. I would wheel around the studio with dancers or watch them perform from the chair.

Sara, a stand-up dancer, explained to me what the wheelchair symbolizes to her. “The dance aspect aside, a wheelchair symbolizes mobility” (personal interview). Sara discussed the ways in which Dancing Wheels uses the wheelchair in its repertory. She discussed the ways in which wheelchairs are part of the body and locomotion of the sit-down dancers, as well a way to connect with the body of a sit-down dancer.

Maggie: How does Dancing Wheels use the wheelchair? In the studio? In pieces of rep?

Sara: Dancing Wheels uses the wheelchair often as a means of locomotion, as able-bodied dancers are able to use their legs to travel. The wheelchair is used as a prop, not necessarily needed by any of the dancers with or without a physical disability, but as an
additional tool to make the dance material interesting. That’s why sometimes stand-up dancers perform in wheelchairs, too.

I view the wheelchair as another element of the physical body when partnering with sit-down dancers. Picture the difference between a male dancer turning a ballerina on one leg in pointe shoes [ballet] versus a stand-up dancer doing an under arm turn with a sit-down dancer that has four points of contact with the floor that must turn with the body. In physics, the turn radius must be taken into consideration. Another example is lifts and weight distribution. We have to find ways for stand-up dancers to lift sit-down dancers and sit-down dancers to lift stand-up dancers. It’s about balance and what works.

Similar to Sara, who talks about the wheelchair as a “tool,” Dezare, a stand-up dancer, discussed the chair as a “prop.”

**Maggie:** How, if at all, do you think Dancing Wheels differs from other dance companies?

**Dezare:** Hmm, differently, sit-down dancers, that’s very different. You can use props… people use props all the time… they use… wheels mainly or tools or chair, things like that. But definitely a wheelchair is completely different. Even if a stand-up is in a wheelchair, it’s different from actually a sit-down dancer or wheelchair person.
Later in an interview, Sara, a stand-up, discussed wheelchairs as a prop (as compared to a tool) that makes Dancing Wheels distinct from most other dance companies.

*Maggie:* How do dancers with Dancing Wheels perform dance? Differently or similar to mainstream artists?

*Sara:* I think Dancing Wheels is different from mainstream artists because of the integrated dance. There’s only three major companies in the United States that have [have] an integrated component, versus there are so many levels of companies… So we’re unlike other companies because integrated dance makes us something else to watch. I guess, I kind of refer to the chair to like a prop. It’s a prop that is used for those dancers that no other companies can use. We’re like other companies [in] that we produce work that we consider dance. And we try to get audiences to come see us, and view it as dance or theater, as we would like it to [be].

The *Toledo Ohio Blade* music critic, Cornelius (2001), using the words of Verdi-Fletcher, commented on the ways in which the wheelchair is a vehicle of aesthetic expression.

The wheelchair can be a vehicle for artistic expression.

“Integration of movement is the goal,” she [Verdi-Fletcher] said. “Our dance is very athletic. I think that people often associate disabilities with weakness, but that is not the case. We have the same physical and artistic concerns as any dancer.” (p. D1)
Bob, a Board member, discussed the wheelchair as becoming invisible as an organizational artifact.

*Maggie*: Can you think of an example, a piece [repertory] that the arts community would appreciate?

*Bob*: The one that is Radio.

*Maggie*: *Sweet Radio Radicals.*

*Bob*: That was one that was just tremendous. There was a local choreographer in the audience that said that he felt that the wheelchairs became invisible and that is the way I felt too. It was very, very, well done.

*Maggie*: What are some of the advantages of the wheelchairs becoming invisible? Why would that appeal to an audiences?

*Bob*: Say that art is that when the wheelchairs become invisible—the performance comes through so clearly that you don’t even realize that there are wheelchairs on stage.

Russell (1985) argued that objects of everyday life such as chairs and bicycles could be combined and slightly modified to produce a work of art. At Dancing Wheels, the organizational artifact of the wheelchair becomes part of a work of art. It is through aesthetic performance that wheelchairs are normalized to the extent of being taken-for-granted. Scholars have noted that wheelchairs are an almost universal symbol of disability as deviance or tragedy (Coopman, 2003; Kuppers, 2000). At Dancing Wheels, wheelchairs are technologies that allow sit-down dancers to engage in creative expression.
(just as they allow individuals in the best of circumstances to move through the world).

Yet, through performative dance, dominant meanings associated with wheelchairs are resisted and shifted. In short, wheelchairs allow some individuals to mobilize movement even as they can be used aesthetically to mobilize social change.

**Aesthetics and Imagination**

“This is a totally different way of thinking,” he said during a rehearsal break at Cleveland Ballet’s studios. “I am experimenting to know what is possible. There is the obvious challenge of the wheelchair. It moves differently from legs. This is a learning process for me. The more the challenge, the more interesting my work will become.” (Walker, choreographer, quoted in Salisbury, 1995, p. 6J)

Aesthetic rationalities are forms of knowledge in organizations that rely on individuals’ perceptions, creativity, and imagination. According to Ford and Gioia (1995), “Creativity is now a core necessity for success in a profoundly changing organizational world” (p. 4). They added that creativity in organizations is essential because organizations and their environments are constantly changing. Aesthetic encounters allow individuals to imagine the life experiences of others, because “to exercise our imagination is to affirm our capacity to move beyond the boundaries of our own bodies and truths, appreciate others’ experiences, and interrupt automatic patterns reinforced through communal living” (Harter et al., 2009, p. 26). Indeed, Dancing Wheels is an arts-related organization that relies on creativity to inspire participants and consumers alike.
I argue that Dancing Wheels utilizes imaginative rationalities to engage salient and pressing lived experiences, inequities, and marginalization. While in the field at Dancing Wheels, I found that paying attention to aesthetics remained essential to understanding personal and organizational growth. Aesthetic forms of expression allow us to reconsider and challenge dominant categories and classifications (see also, John, 2001; Taylor & Hansen, 2005).

According to Harter et al. (2009), “Organizations and relationships selectively develop our senses, enhancing some of our perceptive and creative capacities at the expense of others” (p. 35). Extant research in organizational communication is replete with examples of how instrumental logics have been overdeveloped, sometimes at the expense of cultivating other ways of knowing (e.g., Ashcraft & Kedrowicz, 2002). When we restrict the development of diverse rationalities, we also then inhibit a full and free interplay of ideas that Dewey (1934/1980) and other pragmatists viewed as essential to community life. Dewey (1934/1980) believed that “art’s purpose was to achieve a more satisfying experience, one that invigorates us and aids our achievement in whatever ends we pursue” (Taylor & Hansen, 2005, p. 1224). Furthermore, art and life should respond to each other (Haynes, 2003).

For Greene (1995), to imagine is to envision otherwise. Greene (1995) viewed arts as having the ability to release imagination, create new possibilities/perspectives and allow alternative realities. She held that the arts are “opportunities for perspective, for perceiving alternative ways of transcending and of being in the world, for refusing the automatism that overwhelms choice” (p. 143). It is through imagination that social
change is possible. In developing this sub-theme—aesthetics and imagination—I first explore how creativity at Dancing Wheels allows individuals to imagine otherwise and then how creativity opens up new movement possibilities.

*To imagine otherwise.* During an interview with Verdi-Fletcher, she stressed, “When I was little, I did not know what is possible. So I just kept telling people I wanted to be a dancer. Everyone would say, ‘Oh that is cute, you cannot walk, how can you dance?’”

Mark D., a sit-down dancer, mentioned how performing with Dancing Wheels makes space for opening up people’s imaginations to what is possible for someone who lives with a spinal cord injury. He discussed a *Snowman* performance in which one of his nurses saw him perform and could not believe that he was able to dance. Sadly, in Mark’s case, the medical professionals could not envision that dancing and wheelchair basketball would be something he is capable of accomplishing.

*Mark D.*: Not at all. I don’t think they really thought that I was… gonna be involved in wheelchair basketball or even riding dirt bikes or Dancing Wheels or any of that. I mean, it’s like one of the nurses there, she’s a wheelchair specialist, and she had her son in *The Snowman*, and she didn’t realize that I was part of Dancing Wheels and I was for years… a couple years. And until we did a little show for the hospital for the spinal cord forum, she was like, “I didn’t know you were a part of that.” And I was like, “Well, yeah, I have been for a couple years now.” And she was like, “Wow, that is so great to see you out there and doing that.” She was like, “I never
thought you’d be able to do that.” So it’s kinda weird. You know, it’s people who are in the medical field and saying… say all this is possible and then hearing somebody in the medical field saying, “I didn’t think you’d be able to do that.”

_Maggie:_ How does that make you feel?

_Mark D.:_ It feels good… It feels real good. It feels like it is possible… just to show people that you can go out there and do the things you love to do, that’s the biggest thing. If you love to go out and dance and you get hurt, there are things out there for you. You love to skateboard, still there’s, you’re in a wheelchair, there’s four wheels, go for it, do something… It’s like all you have to do is just have some sort of imagination and you’ll find a way to do things.

Mark D. discussed the ways in which performing _A Wing/A Prayer_, an “all-wheeler” piece choreographed by Mark Tomasic, is one way Dancing Wheels is able to open people’s imagination to what is possible for disabled people to do in wheelchairs (e.g., fast pieces and difficult balance).

_Maggie:_ What do you think makes _A Wing/A Prayer_ such a good piece?

_Mark D.:_ It shows what people can do in a wheelchair, not what a person, like an able-bodied person can do in a wheelchair. It shows what disabled people can do in a wheelchair.

And I think just—I like this piece, of course, the fast pieces. Also, I like _Icarus_ [repertory choreographed by Sabatino Verlezza] a lot and, I mean,
that wasn’t really fast, but it had parts that were fast and stuff with a rope, and it’s a lotta balance. And when somethin’ challenges you like that, those are the things that I like. And those are the things that I would like to see more of in the company.

At Dancing Wheels, participants draw on creative capacities to envision otherwise. They envision creative and expressive opportunities for dancers and alternative understandings of disability and embodied differences among audience members.

*New movement possibilities.* Scholars have acknowledged that we have not yet explored all of the movement possibilities available to humans (Hanna, 1987). I was reminded of this when in the field at Dancing Wheels. Consider Carly’s testimony shared during an interview:

I think it’s amazing how your body… whether you’re in a chair or not, like, even dancers in a chair, they can learn, experience a whole new range of motion, like they maybe never thought they could have. I actually worked with a dancer who could barely do anything after his accident. And what he was able to do once he started moving and dancing was just incredible. So whether your body is injured or whether you were born with a disability… it’s amazing what your body is capable of doing.

Based on my fieldwork, I argue that the creativity used in integrated dance may allow us to access some of these movement possibilities—to communicate in new ways. A key aesthetic to Dancing Wheels is their use of creativity to foster movement in integrated dance. Verdi-Fletcher mentioned that she wished she was able “to train
choreographers in wheelchair technique, but also does not want to limit their creativity.”

In a later interview, she said:

Choreographers have commented time and time again that physically integrated dance has taken them out of the “box” in terms of movement choices. Just when they thought that there were no more movement possibilities, we came along and opened and expanded their minds and movement syllabus.

The other answer to your question is experimentation, we experiment with choreographers to uncover new and exciting possibilities, even for us. What I find is, the eclectic group of dancers bring new options.

Mark Tomasic, a retired stand-up dancer for the company and choreographer, shared,

Until you actually sit in a wheelchair and try it, you have no idea what is possible. For a recent piece I choreographed, I did the whole thing sitting in the wheelchair so that I could be find the abilities of the sit-down dancer and see how they worked in relation to the stand-up dancer. When you’re in a wheelchair, you have no lower body opposition, whereas a stand-up dancer would move forward with their right foot and [their] left arm comes forward. The very fact that sit-down dancers have to use their arms to push their chairs makes all their movement twice as fast. Dancing in a wheelchair is not as easy as it looks. (Grohol, 2005, pp. 28-29)
Mark D., a sit-down dancer, recognized that choreographers, such as Mark Tomasic, who actually get in the wheelchairs understand how the wheelchair moves while they create new movements.

Maggie: What do you think are some major reasons why somebody would no longer continue dancing with Dancing Wheels?

Mark D.: Hmm, I think maybe working with like a lot of the choreographers, I think they really don’t get a really good idea of… what we can do in wheelchairs or… of how to like really mix it together. I think the best stuff that I’ve seen, which I haven’t seen a lot of the new stuff since I’ve been out, but the older stuff that I’ve seen has come from in-house choreographers, like Mark Tomasic and Bobby [Wesner] and… they’re the ones who actually—they get into the wheelchair and they’ll try something. And then they’ll say, “Can you do this?” or,… you show them something you can do and they’ll work it in with their choreography. So that’s really cool and that’s what I like to see… a choreographer [earn] his money… get into the wheelchair, get into the choreography itself.

Similar to Mark D., Charlotte, a sit-down dancer, believes that choreographers who do not understand the movement of the wheelchair miss out on some of the imagination that comes along with creating innovative integrated dance choreography. She discussed when choreography does not work because the choreographers expect all sit-down dancers to be able to have the same abilities and be able to move their bodies the same way.
… I think a lot of it is it that people don’t—they’re here. They don’t know what the hell to do with us. They don’t realize… “Well what do you mean you can’t do it? What do you mean you can’t go sideways?” And then they get frustrated and they just don’t use us in the pieces.

Bur David’s Walking on Clouds I think was the best piece we ever did. That and also Young Park. She [Young Park] really used us in the wheelchairs and she had some cool moves we learned and stuff and she too. She, I know, was pretty frustrated, I think they said, when she first started working with us because she couldn’t believe that… she thought she was coming in just working with dancers and then found out, “Well because you’re in a wheelchair and you’re in a wheelchair, you should both be able to do the same things.” But you can’t. You have a completely different disability than you have [someone else].

And I think that frustrated her, but she worked with it and she worked it out and I think she did another—those are my two favorite pieces. Now Mark Tomasic of course, worked with us for years so when he put together his piece… he’d been in wheelchairs and… he figured out the piece with us. So, I think people that really are… really looking at what they’re doing and see it, they’re the ones that do the best pieces.

It appears that, for Charlotte, choreographers need to have an understanding of how the wheelchair works, as well as the specificities of the disability, in order to create inventive choreography.
Kristen, a stand-up dancer, mentioned that aesthetic moments are created when dancers (not just the choreographers) are willing to try new movement possibilities. Kristen did not place all the blame on the choreographers for not being able to invent new possible ways of moving. Instead, she acknowledged that dancers need to be part of these dialogic creative moments by not being “resistant to change.” Indeed, there is a risk that artists face when creating art. Kristen positioned that Diane McIntyre, choreographer for *Sweet Radio Radicals*, an all women’s piece, was creative in that she was able to think “outside the box.” McIntyre did not choreograph for stand-up dancers and then place the sit-down dancers in as an afterthought. Instead, she choreographed “with the wheelers,” which allowed the wheelers (sit-down dancers) to *really dance*. It appears that choreography that integrates sit-down dancers as an after-thought might not allow sit-down dancers to dance to the best of their abilities. In turn, dialogic aesthetic moments often arise when the choreography integrates both stand-up and sit-down dancers.

*Maggie:* Can you think of a time when integrated dance worked really well? Can you talk about why it worked so well? Who was involved? To what can you attribute the success?

*Kristen:* I think probably the best time we had working with integrated dance is when we do have choreographers come in here, and we either have a choreographer or a choreographer’s assistant that’s that head person that gets everything done and keeps everybody interested or—because, again, I think that… when it comes down to it… some wheelers want to do something one way. They don’t want to change their minds and do it a

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different way. They don’t want to try new things. And not just wheelers, but mostly.

They think it’s too this, they think it’s too that. But usually, if you have a choreographer in here, they’re a little bit more… here’s the best example. This is when Diane McIntyre was here because she choreographed not to—she decided not to translate it but choreograph with the wheelers. So when Kristin is kicking her curls in the air on three and then turning around, four, five, and you’re going to put your arm up on three, and turn, four, five. She choreographed to the wheeler. Because, to her, it was important. It wasn’t any different from choreographing you, me, Sara, or whoever. And I think that was the best thing, because that piece is an amazing piece choreographically. The wheelers danced in that piece. And I think more of the time when the choreographers come in, or even, like… when we’re rehearsing, like, with old teachers and stuff, I think it gets so stuck in the times or so “this is how it has to be.” Like, I was talking about some movement and… transitions. But it’s not thought outside the box.

Carly, a stand-up dancer, talked about how beautiful moments are created by really working through choreography and not depending on set choreography or movements that they have used in the past.
Maggie: Can you think of a time when you were engaging in integrated dance where you felt that it went really well, that there was, like, is there one piece that you think worked really well for you and for the other dancers?

Carly: I think what works best is instead of just saying, “Okay, this is how it goes,” and I think most choreographers that work with the company know that you can’t just set choreography and say, “This is what I want. This is what you’ll do.” I think that what works best and what comes out most beautiful is when you really workshop through things and see what works and try different things, and how can we train you but do it or try it different ways and see what works best, what feels best, what looks best, and then some beautiful moments are created.

Michael Medcalf, a retired stand-up dancer and choreographer, commented on how he would really miss the creativity that goes into working through integrated dance. 

Maggie: What would be one thing, if you never worked with Dancing Wheels again, what would be something you would miss?

Michael: As an instructor or a facilitator, I would miss the analyzing of translating the movement. I think I would miss the— the analyzation of working through the movement with a new member—be it stand-up and/or sit-down dancer, the working through the translation.

Later in the interview, Michael Medcalf talked about how he enjoys facilitating movements or helping dancers find their own artistry/creativity. During the 2008 adult summer dance workshop that I participated in, Michael had us engage in inscription or
the creation/generation of new movement vocabulary. For example, he asked us to
inscribe our names through bodily movement and then found a way to link all our
movements together. When I danced M-A-G-G-I-E, the hardest part was finding a way to
link the two Gs together through bodily movements. Later in the week, Michael used
some of the movements we created from our name inscriptions in a dance. I wrote in my
fieldnotes, “My body was doing movements, I never envisioned possible.”

Maggie: I just want to ask you some questions about yourself as a dancer,
choreographer. What are some of your strengths as a
dancer/choreographer?

Michael: I think some of my strengths as a dancer would be interpretation. Being
able to move or help to transport an audience. I think that I’m technically
proficient. As a choreographer, I’m still growing, I’m still experiencing
and playing, but I do like story-telling, story-telling. And I think, I
remember, I really, really enjoyed facilitating movement, as opposed to
choreographing movement.

Maggie: How do you facilitate?

Michael: Giving the dancers, the students, different tasks, different tools to use to
generate movement. It helped me find the different vocabulary in which
it’s going to be most appropriate to say what this work is. And I think I
really enjoyed being able to assist people, particularly dancers who are
interested in choreographing, with setting up different tools for
themselves. And, some people, after we worked together, go, “Oh my
God, I had no idea! Didn’t even think about using inscription to generate movement!” And what it does is create interesting looking movement… And it’s also—inscription might not be the right tools to use for what this work is trying to say.

So I’m—I liked finding different tools to help assist with what the work is trying to say.

In the summer 2007 dance workshop I participated in, we used poetry as inspiration to create new movements. Additionally, Mark H., the company’s American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter, discussed the ways in which sign language has been incorporated into their performances as inspiration for new ways to move the body. Also, Dancing Wheels has found ways to integrate Mark H. into their choreography. The incorporation of sign language into their performances allows them to be more inclusive to audiences who rely on sign language as a way to communicate.

Mark H.: Yeah, I—not only as an interpreter for performances, interpreter in the classroom, a student taking dance as well as interpreting in the classroom.

I’ve also—I guess I gave the name “sign choreographer,” back when the company was made up of different personnel because they were looking to incorporate sign into the dance.

So what we did is, we took the lyrics and the music of the—that were going to be utilized in the dance and that’s what the dance was going to be choreographed and based on was the lyrics and that and so what we did is we filmed the interpreting of it into ASL, from English to American Sign
Language, and then we filmed it in what would be more of a—considered a straight English sign translation just to compare signs and how they look.

From that then, we looked at incorporating those signs and expanding and making them larger to make them movements and incorporating them into the dance and that’s how it got incorporated.

I think looking back that one of the first things I did when I was interpreting in the classroom and also taking dance is I performed in an early show years ago and so that’s how I originally got started. But that’s pretty much the other… capacity that I really worked in is… and just always being just a staunch supporter of the company. I think that’s about it.

Maggie: Can you tell me what it feels like to interpret and dance at the same time?

Mark H.: Well, really I have interpreted and danced at the same time.

We incorporate, what I just discussed, is we incorporated sign into the dance where they became larger movements in the choreography and they weren’t really signed and danced simultaneously. However, when I interpret music, especially, I try to embody the feel of the music and the emotion behind it. So I tend to, as an interpreter, move—physically move and so I, where traditional interpreting for, like, a lecture you stand in one place and you sign and you stay in a certain area where, even though when
I’m interpreting for Dancing Wheels I stay in a certain area, there’s still movement involved.

With the most recent Helen Keller piece there was movement and sign incorporated not like we did for the piece that was called May Ring where the sign language was incorporated into larger movements, but where I would move and then sign, move and then sign with the Helen Keller piece and be a part of on stage [of the performance] instead of being in one location.

In summary, by exercising their imaginations and tapping into their embodied differences, participants of Dancing Wheels are envisioning new movement possibilities.

_Aesthetics, Arts, and Community Building_

Arts and imaginative rationalities have the ability to build compassionate communities. Greene (1995) stated that “lack of imagination results in an incapacity to create or even participate in what might be called a community” (p. 37). Democratic communities are a struggle to attain the life of “free and enriching communion” (Dewey, 1927/1954, p. 189). Individuals’ experience of communal life remains a sensory one. Barber (1998) argued that the imagination is the link that art and democracy share. It is the sense by which we stretch ourselves to include others, expand our interests, and overcome the limits of our parochial selves. Bateson (1972, 1979) discussed aesthetics’ role as connection (e.g., patterns that connect mind and nature). Ramirez (1991) argued that belonging is a key part of aesthetics (e.g., belonging to a system). Sandelands (1998) argued that humans are fundamentally both part of a group and that artistic forms
represent how humans express the feelings of being part of a social group (see also, Taylor & Hansen, 2005). If our feeling of what it is to be part of a group is expressed through aesthetic forms, then aesthetics must be the foundational form of inquiry into social action (Sandelands, 1998; Taylor & Hansen, 2005).

Connection: “Home of the lost souls.” Sara, a stand-up dancer, discussed the ways in which the Dancing Wheels lecture performances, in which company members go into schools, community groups and/or universities, to give a performance and have a dialogue with the audience about what it means to create integrated dance and educate the audience about the disabilities the dancers have. For Sara these performances are important because they help build a connection with audience members so that individuals may feel more comfortable in the future building a relationship with a person with disabilities. Sara said:

As a personal example, I had not really met a person with a disability until coming to Dancing Wheels. I went to school with several people with disabilities, but was never able to really talk to them, connect with them, and get to know them. This is why our lecture/performances in schools are so important because those students at a young age are able to meet, hear from, and become friends with (if not just for that one hour) a person with a disability.

Dancing Wheels tries to create a sense of connection between dancers, staff, and board members. Many individuals talked about Dancing Wheels as a family. Kristen, a stand-up dancer, when talking about the company and school said, “It is like a family.” Dezare, a
stand-up dancer, discussed the company as being another family. Therefore, when it comes to leaving the company, it would be difficult for her. She said:

And just the whole time, like, because we’ve all grown really close and like another family kind of thing. So it’s just becoming harder, especially cuz I’m leaving sooner now.

Continuing the family metaphor, Jeanne, the developmental director, discussed Dancing Wheels as the “home of the lost souls,” or a place where people feel accepted, safe, respected, and affirmed without judgment.

**Maggie:** How does Dancing Wheels define diversity? How is it enacted?

**Jeanne:** I’ve always said that we’re the home of lost souls. We’re very welcoming and we seem to have a lot of lost souls and I don’t mean that in a bad way. I don’t even mean lost like we’re desperate or anything like that. I just mean that we always seem to provide a welcoming place for people that might not fit in so well anywhere else. Or they don’t feel comfortable anywhere else, or they do feel—I mean they’re involved other places, but this is like home, they like it here.

**Maggie:** What do you think it is about here that draws people in?

**Jeanne:** Well I think—we accept everything. And we try very hard to accept all people. It’s not always possible, but we do try very hard and I think that—I think it’s just a warm welcoming environment and there are all kinds of people and over the years… that’s how I’ve always looked at it and it seems that people seem to come here and. And they feel really—and the
weird—we’ve heard from parents—we hear from people, Maria, that she was the ugliest person on earth and she never felt—she felt that everybody thought that she wasn’t attractive for her that she wasn’t attractive so for her to feel—and that she was dumb… so to come to somewhere where people respected her and liked her. She was funny, they laughed and she’s very sociable. So to come to a place—and she wrote a lot about that, it’s really touching. I mean this is Maria, there’s a million people like that. There’s a lot of people, not a million. So it has its good points and its bad points. We’ve both had people that have been very challenging because of that, some were real trusting and that’s not always the case so—but I’d say 99% of the time it’s been really good.

Carly, a stand-up dancer, drew connections between emotions involved in being part of a family (i.e. belonging) as well as emotions necessary to create art. She said,

    But it is a business, so there’s a thin line because you are like a little family… you’re a dance company and… you’re dancing and it’s emotional and there’s a sensitive aspect to it. And you are a little family because you’re seeing each other every day, and it’s an emotional thing, it’s an art form.

At Dancing Wheels, connection is created and expressed through dance. Harter et al. (2009) suggested, “Dance as aesthetic form invites participants to inhabit another’s world long enough to achieve familiarity and imagine vectors of life from someone whose body and experiences may be quite different from one’s own” (p. 38). Society’s over-reliance on linguistic forms of knowledge creates a need for aesthetic knowledge to
bring forth insight and awareness that might not be possible to put into words. In turn aesthetic knowledge enables us to see in a new way. Frank, a stand-up dancer, noted that sitting and dancing in a wheelchair give him an aesthetic opportunity to connect with sit-down dancers that recognizes differences in how individuals are able to move in their chair.

**Maggie:** What feelings do you experience when you’re in the chair?

**Frank:** Comforting because I can sit down. I’m sitting down. I think that’s kind of like a time where I can work on the upper part of my body and seeing how that works more. It creates understanding of things. I think it is probably the most—like the biggest part of it. The understanding of how the wheelers feel I think. And it gives me a sense of determination and hope that they can do things that I’m doing [and that] I’m pretty sure they can do. But they’re sometimes scared to try it because of the situation that they’re in.

Carly, a stand-up dancer, recalled that connection, or the “space between” (see also Bradbury & Lichtenstein, 2000) dancers, is created through eye contact and inside jokes, which helps you connect with your partner and the audience.

**Carly:** I think the other thing is when you are really together on the same page, whether it’s… just feeling the other dancer with you or if you make eye contact with them and you’re out there performing… that’s a really beautiful moment. And if you guys share it then hopefully the audience can feel it too.
Maggie: When you make eye contact with another dancer, what does it feel like to you?

Carly: I guess you just feel like you’re connecting with that person and you’re trying to, I mean, if you’re gonna be serious about it, like you’re connecting to the piece and… you know what you’re there for, you’re there for the same reason, you’re performing, I mean, I’m just talking about if I’m out performing somewhere while it’s happening… sometimes something goes wrong and the audience probably doesn’t know, but maybe you made eye contact and it’s kinda like a giggle or a laugh or something because only you guys know and whoever’s on stage knows. And, I mean, you try not to laugh cuz you wanna be professional about it, but if it keeps things live and it keeps things real and… it’s just, whatever it is. Whether it’s like knowing that a mistake was made or whether you’re really connecting to the person and the piece and feeling the piece, it’s just that it’s connecting with that person.

*Emotions as connectors. Throughout the discourse, participants positioned emotions as connectors providing ways for individuals to connect with others and build a connection with the audience. Kristen, a stand-up dancer, mentioned that emotions played a critical role in keeping her in the company:*

It’s a huge role [referring to emotions]. To work with this company you should love what you do and the population that you work with. If you do not have that emotion your drive is definitely not in the same direction as Dancing Wheels
I asked Verdi-Fletcher how she felt when she performed the 1985 bus protest on stage in 2005 (choreographed by David Rousseve) for the first time:

Well when I first did the piece, actually I cried. I’m always crying. But it conjured up all those feelings again that it made me feel proud, but it also made me realize how intense that time frame was. And I hadn’t thought about it for—I mean, I hadn’t really thought about it in years… so to hear myself recalling it and then actually reenacting it, simulating it was extremely powerful for me to do. Now I’m used to it. I try to have the same intensity regarding it onstage every time I do it of course. Just the emotions of the moment, it’s fine now, I’m not crying across the stage or anything. But, you can feel—I see it every time I do it. I see that moment every time I do it.

Verdi-Fletcher also discussed how music is chosen. It appears that music is chosen by choreographers for the ways in which the song can raise individuals’ emotional awareness. For example, Verdi-Fletcher and Diane McIntyre, a choreographer, chose Dolly Parton’s *I Will Always Love You* because of the song’s ability to elicit emotions. Also Verdi-Fletcher is looking for music that is catchy and people will remember:

A lot of times choreographers just have something in their brain that they want to infuse. I really haven’t influenced the music so much unless it’s like—they’ll ask me do you have this piece in your repertory or have you ever used this music or what do you think of this? Like just recently, the one that Stuart [Pimsler, a choreographer] did, he has a song in there—“Love you from a wheelchair, baby.” Or something like that. It’s got a real country twang to it and he was afraid it
would be offensive to the audience if someone was in a wheelchair that they
would be offended by the lyrics. So he let me listen to them. I was like, “No, I
think it’s great. It’s kinda funny in a way, but it also has this really great beat to it
and it’s gonna be catchy. People are gonna be singing that.” And so we used it.
So I get asked and generally the choreographers will let me know the direction
that they’re thinking of taking or in some instances, I have an idea so I will
present it to a choreographer and ask them to do it. Like the piece that Diane
McIntyre just did with all women, and that was my idea. I had gotten this CD set
from the museum company and I was like, “Oh, it’s fabulous,” there’s all these
women artists, singers, songwriters, down from 1920 to the 1980s. Wouldn’t it be
great to have a female choreographer, have all women dancers and do these
pieces? So I approached Diane, because I had been wanting to work with Diane
anyway, and she loved the idea. And then we listened to music and she had
probably 15 selections that she thought were the strongest that she would like to
work with, and she sat with the dancers and said, “What do you think about this?
What do you think about that?” And of course, the Dolly Parton one always
makes me cry. I was like, “We have to use that, I love that.” Of course if I end up
crying (Laughter).

Sara, a stand-up dancer, discussed the role emotions play (as expressed through
dance) in communicating a message to audience members with the hope of raising
consciousness about disability inequalities in our society. She hopes that audiences will
see disability in a way that they have never seen before, a new understanding of what it means to have a disability.

**Maggie:** How do emotions help audiences become aware of issues individuals with disabilities face in our society?

**Sara:** As far as audience members that see Dancing Wheels perform, but without any of the members speaking, they are most likely being exposed to disability in a way that they have never seen before and that will build in them a different emotion for individuals with disabilities. We can only hope that the emotion that they come up with when they see Dancing Wheels perform is a positive one and full of appreciation, like “Wow, I didn’t know they could do that!”

Verdi-Fletcher mentioned how a standing ovation is a sign of connection with the audience that they have been moved by the dance. She said:

> A standing ovation is a rise in emotion, when people rise to their feet in applause; it means to me that they have felt a surge of emotion that they felt compelled to show in a more enthusiastic way—beyond the norm of polite applause. I really feel that it is not about the applause at all, but more about moving people through the art.

Kristeva (1982) contributed to the analysis of the body with her concept of abjection where we are simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by exotic bodily difference which led to the setting up of nursing home, sheltered workshops, and lunatic asylums (see also, Dorn & Laws, 1994; Millett, 2008).
Aesthetic of (Im)perfection: Disability and Dance

“There is no exquisite beauty, without some strangeness in the proportion.” (Edgar Allan Poe as cited in Siebers, 2006, p. 65)

Andy Hamilton discussed the aesthetics of imperfection in music and music recordings (Hamilton, 2000, 2003; see also, Suhor, 1986), while Gioia (1988) acknowledged imperfections in art. Likewise, Weick (1995) argued that an aesthetic of imperfection “creates a different mind-set toward error. Errors now become viewed as experiments from which people can learn, as oddities to be incorporated or made normal” (p. 197). Drawing on Burkean theory, communication scholars Hyde and McSpiritt (2007) also problematized societal obsessions with perfections:

Perfection is a ‘god term,’ an ultimate standard meant to define states of ‘completeness’ that can be used to direct us, Burke reminds us, perfection can also drive us crazy and lead to troublesome (if not disastrous) consequences in our lives (p. 153; see also Burke, 1966).

At Dancing Wheels, disability and difference as well as the wheelchair are “imperfections” that are used to create art. Bodies with disabilities as well as wheelchairs become choreographic elements.

Mark D., a sit-down dancer, noted a performance in which he fell out of his chair. Because the bottom half of his body is motionless and his feet are strapped into his chair, it took him a bit (compared to a stand-up dancer) to get back with the music.

Maggie: What would be, you would say, like your most embarrassing moment at Dancing Wheels?
Mark D.: Oh, jeez. I would say the *Alice and Wonderland*, the first *Alice and Wonderland* performance when I fell over backwards. But the good thing was that people thought I was supposed to do that because I fell over backwards close enough to a wing to where they didn’t see Mac help me back into my wheelchair because my feet were still tied in. And that was the same performance where the table kept collapsing. So it was a really— it was somethin’ that would’ve been great on tape, I mean, cuz everybody—the whole Mad Hatter scene, the table was collapsing, I fell over backwards, Mary almost fell off the table cuz it collapsed. As soon as she got into my lap, the table collapsed. I think—and Sara, Sara was on top of the table when it collapsed and she slid off the table. Kristin had to come out. She actually came out, saves the day by holding onto the leg of the table… and she just like normal, it was like choreographed—She made it look—

Maggie: That that’s the way it was supposed to be.

Mark D.: Yeah. But that was probably my most embarrassing, but it was like we just rolled with it, we just did it, and it was probably the most fun onstage I ever had with Dancing Wheels.

Maggie: Why do you think so, it was so much fun?

Mark D.: It just broke—it broke the ice. You know, there’s all the tension, all the buildup of all the… having to perform in front of people and I always,
always got really, really nervous, but that just, I mean, after that happened, we’re like, “What else could happen?” … and then people came up to us afterwards and said, “The Mad Hatter scene was great.” They were like, “You did that roll, like, how did you do that roll?” I’m like, “Well, we practiced a lot.” … so it was cool. It was really cool.

As revealed in the above scenario, Mark’s “error” of falling out of his chair and the table collapsing actually turned into a beautiful moment—an aesthetic of (im)perfection.

Body and art. Thomas (2003) acknowledged, “The study of the body in society has been a major focus of social and cultural analysis since the late 1980s. The body is generally the primary means of expression and representation in western social and theatrical dance” (p. 1). The body is a site on which culture has been written. Siebers (2000), an aesthetic theorist, acknowledged the importance of the body in aesthetics, “We all have bodies… Everything we do, we do as or by means of our body. We cannot get beyond the fact that we are bodies” (p. 3). Additionally, he claimed that bodies have been repressed:

Alexander Baumgarten named aesthetics after the Greek work for perception. There is no perception in the absence of the body. Nevertheless, any number of modern commentators have claimed that the rise of aesthetics in the eighteenth depends on the repression of the body. (p.1, italics in original)

Bordo (1993) deemed that the body is a site for political struggle (key to second wave feminism) that has presented “an important starting point for examining and
undercutting dominant unquestioned attitudes towards the enslavement of women to their bodies and the beauty ideal” (Thomas, 2003, p. 37). Siebers (2000) acknowledged the ways in which individuals have seen their bodies as works of art in which they attempt to create the ideal body (see also, Schneider, 1997; Vergine, 2000). He continued:

In most avant-garde circles, artists have affirmed this trend by making art out of their own bodies, but the trend is not confined to the artworld, since people on the streets are more concerned about their bodies than ever before… This overall change in aesthetics is most noticeable in the meaning of the beautiful… Popular culture has become a culture of the beautiful body: dieting, exercise clubs, visits to [a] liposuctionist, tattooing, and piercing are not only methods for perfecting ourselves; they are entertainments that determine social identity on the basis of the body. (pp. 5-6)

At Dancing Wheels, Sara, a stand-up dancer, acknowledged the ways in which her self is a work of art. She said: “My body is a mass that can be manipulated in space and to which other thinking forms of life can react.” Foucault (1983/1997) said “the self is not given to us, I think there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art” (Foucault, 1983, p. 262). In Sara’s care, the self is constituted by creativity; she is making herself through self-realization. Kuppers et al. (2008) wove together poetry and photography of individuals with disabilities to discuss ways in which multiple forms of text can create an alternative aesthetic of disability (see also Kuppers, in progress). Kristen, a stand-up dancer, posited that her body is a work of art. She stated, “I view myself as a visual description of a choreographer’s movement, intent and
expression.” Verdi-Fletcher discussed her body as a work of art which gives her an “artistic advantage”:

Well from the biblical sense, we are all God’s works of art! We are uniquely different but I would tend to think that my body is much more unique than most. I use that to my artistic advantage, for example, I am very lightweight, but extremely strong which offers many opportunities for lifts and floor work (which are my first love). I also can stand on one leg which helps me in and out of the chair or to stand for a bit of time. With my curvature and kidney transplant I must be careful however, but I tend to think that it gives me much more body awareness.

**Feminist and disability aesthetics.** Because of my commitment to feminist sensibilities, I look to feminists who create new ways of thinking, as well as new ways of thinking and new categories of critical reflection. I, like Hein (1990), view feminist art as a means to raise consciousness. I also am aware of the ways in which men have dominated the art world (see also, Battersby, 1989; Demo, 2000) and in which gender influences the formation of ideas about artists, art and aesthetic values (Hein, 1990). Lippard (1995) wrote “feminism questions all the percepts of art as we know it” (p. 172). I view the Dancing Wheels Company & School as attempting to challenge ideals of female beauty.

At the same time, disability scholars have asked the question: Can disability be beautiful? (Hahn, 1999; Thomas, 2001). Thomas (2001) claimed that the disabled body is regarded as being noneligible for portrayal. Siebers (2006) recognized that disability has
always been a part of our understanding of aesthetics and art. He posed the question:

“Would the *Venus de Milo* still be considered one of the great examples of both aesthetic and human beauty if she still had both her arms?” (p. 65, italics in original). He does not believe that the role of disability in art has been excluded; however, disability is rarely recognized as aesthetic. Siebers (2006) recognized that disability is indeed an aesthetic:

What I am calling disability aesthetics names a critical concept that seeks to emphasize the presence of disability in the tradition of aesthetic representation. Disability aesthetics refuses to recognize the representation of the healthy body—and its definition of harmony, integrity, and beauty—as the sole determination of the aesthetic. It is not a matter of representing the exclusion of disability from aesthetic history, since such an exclusion has not taken place, but of making the influence of disability obvious. This goal may take two forms: 1) to establish disability as a critical framework that questions the presuppositions underlying definitions of aesthetic production and appreciation; 2) to establish disability as a significant value in itself future development. My claim is that acceptance of enriches and complicates materialist notions of aesthetic, while the rejection of disability limits definitions of artistic ideas… I am making a stronger claim: that disability is integral to aesthetic conceptions of beautiful and that the influence of disability on art has grown, no dwindled, over the course of time… we need to consider, then, how art is changed when we conceive of disability as an aesthetic value in itself. In particular it is worth asking how the presence of disability
requires us to revise traditional conceptions of aesthetic production and appreciation. (pp. 64-67)

At Dancing Wheels, the integration of dancers with and without disabilities is an aesthetic of this organization that distinguishes this organization from other professional dance companies.

*Disability and Dance Aesthetics*

Cooper Albright (1997), a performer, choreographer, and feminist scholar, wrote about the ways in which dance has traditionally privileged the abled-body (see also Freire, 2001; Kuppers, 2000; Quinlan & Bates, 2008; Whately, 2007). When most people think of professional dance, they think of the body of the ballerina. Cooper Albright believed that:

[the] intersection of dance and disability is an extraordinarily rich site at which to explore overlapping constructions of the body’s physical subjectivity and cultural visibility… The disabled body is supposed to be covered up or hidden from view, to be compensated for or overcome (either literally or metaphorically from view) in an attempt to live as “normal” a life as possible. When a disabled dancer enters the stage, he or she stakes claim to a radical space, an unruly location where disparate assumptions collide. (p. 58)

Cooper Albright (1997) discussed the privileging of the ideal body in dance. She stated, Generally, dancers are treated with certain paradoxical awe that is an odd mixture of respect for the physical discipline of daily technique classes, fascination with
what is often supposed to be a “natural” gracefulness (but is, of course, a result of intensive physical training and plain old objectification. (p. 56)

She called for us to radically revise movements that can be considered dance. She posed these questions:

Given that disability signifies the cultural antithesis of the fit, healthy body, what happens when visibly disabled people move into the role of dancer, the very same role that has been historically reserved for the glorification of an ideal body? Does the integration of disabled bodies into contemporary dance result in a disruption of ablest preconceptions about professional dance? Or does the disabled body “transcend” its disability to become a dancer? (Cooper Albright, 1997, p. 57)

In contrast to Cooper Albright (1997), Verdi-Fletcher argued that Dancing Wheels has attempted to revise movement that can be considered dance:

We sometimes translate from the legs to the arms which is probably the most radical for example a plie would be bending at the elbow either inward or raising the elbows toward the ceiling. The idea is to work the large muscles as you would the legs.

Barnes (1996) noted “importance and desirability of bodily perfection is endemic to western culture” (p. 56). In recent years, attempts have been made to develop alternative approaches to the definition of the “disabled body” in Western society. The dominant definition of disability includes the medical model. This model views disability as a sign of sickness (Woodhill, 1994). Cooper Albright (1997) said, “The insertion of bodies with real physical challenges can be extremely disconcerting to critics and
audience members who are committed to an aesthetic of ideal beauty” (p. 63). I asked Sara, a stand-up dancer, how she thought beauty was defined at Dancing Wheels, she replied,

I’ve always been intrigued by the beauty of unevenness. I have scoliosis, and although you wouldn’t be able to tell just by looking at me, you’d see in my x-rays a simple S-curve that makes my spine uneven. Although the body appears to be symmetrical from the outside, it is not. So, it is my opinion that Dancing Wheels is beautiful for its diversity—unevenness—in age, ethnicity, and ability.

For Sara, Dancing Wheels embraces an aesthetic of (im)perfection—in her words, the “beauty of unevenness” that is ever-present if not always visible.

Kuppers (2000), a dance and disability scholar, challenges us to rethink the ballet body as being perfectly abled and normal because balletic movement that relies on weightlessness in the lifting of limbs and in jumps and extensions rather than in speed or force reveals western culture’s fascination with hiding women’s masculinity and physical strength. In agreement, Verdi-Fletcher posited,

I believe the notion of the “ballet body” is passé in today’s dance world. As I am sure you recognize, the world of dance has expanded and the expectations and demands on the body vary greatly. There are those that are suited for ballet and then those who are suited for modern, hip-hop, etc., so many styles and techniques to choose from.
Sara, a stand-up dancer, articulated that her body does not fit the classical body (i.e., George Balanchine)\(^1\) would be better suited for a romantic style of ballet in which a curvier body is accepted.

**Maggie:** What are some things that you’ve learned about your body in the process, while you were here?

**Sara:** I wish that I’d be perfect by now, but I’m not. So I’m always learning, I guess, is the bottom line to that. What I’ve learned is my structure. Like for ballet, this is how my bones stack up. And this is the amount of turn out that I have right now to work with. You always want to work to be better but… in modern this is how high I jump. That’s what I’ve learned. Or I’m very good at being slow versus quick. I’ve learned that… movement wise.

**Maggie:** What do you mean by that?

**Sara:** Like slower music rather than fast, sharp rhythm.

**Maggie:** Is there a style of dance that you think your body is best suited for?

**Sara:** Well, I like to think that I would be a romantic style ballerina. And this is like before ballet got so athletic and competitive. Like before it moved to America. Before George Balanchine said, only if you’re the size of your pinky finger can you be a ballet dancer. And anybody else is not. So the romantic style, they didn’t have straight legs. Everything was very soft. And really they were quite chubby girls. I’m like, yeah, that’s a nice size.

\(^1\) a choreographer in the 20\(^{th}\) c. for the New York City Ballet. He was of Russian descent, and his work created modern ballet and was deeply entrenched in knowledge about classical forms of technique.
Otherwise, I think I do very well at combining ballet and modern. You know, the held-up moments combined with the release; putting them both together is one of my best things.

Walker, a choreographer, came to Dancing Wheels in 1995 to choreograph a piece called *Picture Imperfect*. *The Cleveland Plain Dealer* noted cultural stereotypes that our culture has for the “perfect body.” Salisbury (1995) wrote,

Before Walker saw Dancing Wheels perform, he was not sure how he would react to the sight of dancers in wheelchairs. “Some people think the only body that should dance is the perfect body,” he said. “That is not true in modern dance, and I was brought up as a modern dancer. When I started performing with May O’Donnell [in 1952], there were 15 different bodies [body types] in the company. There was not a stereotypical look.

I believe anyone who is moving to express something is a dancer. The wheelchair dancer is saying, “Look, I can move. I can glide. I can turn. I can be musical.” What they are doing is very direct, very honest.” (p. 6J)

For Charlotte, a sit-down dancer, disability and diversity are aesthetics of the company because they are able to show how they are all people just moving in different ways.Interestingly, Charlotte believes that the company shows that disability is her normal way of being, dancing, and moving.

*Maggie:* How, just from your perspective, do you think that Dancing Wheels defines diversity?
Charlotte: Well, I guess just showing that people with and without disabilities or whatever, whether it be a small disability or a big disability, it doesn’t really matter. You know, we’re all here, we’re all people and we’re just all moving a different way.

Maggie: How do you think that the term disability is defined by the company?

Charlotte: I think we define disability—I define it as being normal. To me, it’s my normal self and I think to the whole company it’s really—it’s just the way we’re normal. It’s just normality to us and that’s what we want you guys to see. That’s what we want the audience to see that… you’re not really seeing the wheelchairs. You’re seeing people dancing.

Kuppers (2000), using the work of Aalten (1997), noted that an aspect of ballet technique is the negation of the body’s weight. Aalten said,

Dancers are seen as artists who successfully challenge the law of gravity. This is not only a consequence of the taste and fashion at the time of its origin, but also of the specific characteristics of ballet technique. In ballet the centre of the movement is the spine. A dancer always keeps his or her body up, letting the arms and legs do most the work. The basic movement in ballet is upwards. (p. 47)

When I first arrived at the studio in June 2007, I was surprised to see a few of the stand-up dancers leave the studio to smoke during their breaks. Also, several of the dancers mentioned that they restrict calories to lose weight (i.e., not eating after 8 pm) as well as do 500 sit-ups a night to keep a flat stomach. Kristen, a stand-up dancer, spoke frankly about her efforts to fit the ideal body weight:
Yeah. And it’s hard, because I am a muscular girl because I don’t have a skinny body like that. I am 5’2” and 105 pounds and solid muscle, as you can probably tell and that is horrible but it’s hard. Like, when [choreographer] came in here, he was just like, “Oh, you guys are too fat. You need to get into shape.” But this is a pretty modern company, and in modern, it’s not supposed to be that way. So I don’t know where that aspect came from, since it has always been a modern company. But, I mean, [company member’s name] doesn’t eat. You know what I mean?

Kristen struggles with trying to maintain a classical body in a modern company that supposedly is accepting of different body types. Modern dance, emerging in the 20th century, focused on dancers’ own style and interpretation rather than structured steps (of classical ballet) with an emphasis on individual expression of emotion. Kristen recalled how she had been told to lose weight, and acknowledged that in the dance world individuals are judged on how they look. However, she noted that it is difficult for sit-down dancers to lose weight:

*Maggie:* What would an individual look like who did not fit the body image at Dancing Wheels? What would somebody look like who would never make it into the company?

*Kristen:* They’re very particular on how you look outside of Dancing Wheels. Not that you shouldn’t be, but not looking sloppy. Weight is a big one. Like, I’d been told that I needed to lose weight.

*Maggie:* When you came here?
Kristen: When I came here. Now, and I had agreed with that because I had been off dancing for a year and I wasn’t in shape. I’ve lost probably 15 to 20 pounds since I started here, and then I talked about it again that I need to lose six pounds.

Maggie: Are there methods that are given differently or similar to standards, or are the standards pretty much the same?

Kristen: They are pretty much the same when [a sit-down] is overweight and it was said to [her or him], “you’re too fat, overweight,” not that it should be. It is harder to sit down and to lose weight and I encourage people to do that.

You know that is a big deal. For people on how you look?

Sara, a stand-up dancer, concedes that dancers need to be fit, but that “fit” can be different for everyone.

Maggie: Can you tell me about your, any messages that you’ve been given about how you should look? What kind of messages about body image do you think Dancing Wheels supports?

Sara: I think I’ve heard messages that vary from positive to the middle of the road to the very negative. Positive [messages] being, to be a dancer you should be fit. That’s just kind of middle of the road. And everybody’s got their different levels of fitness and [of] what that actually looks like when you are fit. And then the negative route that I’ve heard here and other places is lose weight and be strong. But not be able to see any muscle build up. It just has to be lean muscle that they still want to see...
Maggie: So has anybody said anything to you personally?

Sara: Not personally. I mean, Mary has told me and other girls that we need to work more on pulling stomachs in when we dance. But otherwise, nobody said, hey you need to do this.

Dancers without disabilities mentioned ways in which their bodies were not “perfect either” (like dancers with disabilities). Carly, a stand-up dancer, said:

Maggie: How do you define disability?

Carly: I guess that maybe it’s just—I don’t know (Chuckle). I guess it could be a little bit like, I mean I could say, “Well, I’m not disabled. I’m not in a chair. I can walk. I have full function.” But I might—but I’m not perfect either. So maybe I would change the meaning a little bit—I mean I don’t know the dictionary definition—and just say maybe like a weakness or… not something that’s a strength… that could be something that’s not necessarily a disability for me but maybe like a weakness or something that I can work on. But I guess, naturally, you would just say, well, someone in a chair has a disability, or they [wouldn’t] have to be in a chair. I mean, you have some students who are deaf. I don’t know at this time cuz I don’t really teach within this school, but from what I’ve heard… we’re open to all abilities and that’s how we put it.

In this case, Carly is discussing the very nature of having a disability as being an imperfection. Similarly, Cooper Albright (1997) used Bakhtin’s (1984a) term “grotesque” to discuss classical (individualistic) and “grotesque” bodies (e.g., secreting,
protruding, open) not to associate the disabled body with the grotesque. Instead she
sought to acknowledge the ways in which cultural constructions deeply influence our
attitudes towards our bodies (see also Russo, 1986). Carly is able to articulate Bakhtin’s
notions of the grotesque with bodily imperfections:

But I guess there are some things that—just the way my body is, like, I might not
be able to change. Like just the way my back is—I have a pretty arched back, so
some things that—coming up from the floor might be harder for me to do or
sometimes we’ll do things and that will go into my back [strain], I’ll be like take
all the pressure in my back. So some of the things I might not be able to choose, I
might have to find other ways to move about, but I could try to make my muscles
stronger. So I guess some of those things might be weaknesses or just different
styles or ways to execute movement. I think sometimes, like, slower things are
easier for me. I prefer to move more slow than really fast…

For Carly, her arched back is imperfect in that it makes some movements difficult. For
Sara, a stand-up dancer, her favorite body parts are her waist and stomach. However, she
talked about how it is important for her to keep other body parts “in check” or in control.
Specifically, she wanted to avoid from being “blobby.” Again, grotesque bodies are out
of control.

Maggie: What do you think is your favorite body part or favorite dance movement?
Sara: My favorite body part is my waist (Laugh).

Because I think it’s like the tiniest part of me and it’s effective because
your torso and your core movements [must be] strong. So I feel like my
center is very strong. And everything else for my body just kind of balloons out from there. We have to keep that in check.

*Maggie:* How do you do that?

*Sara:* I don’t really do much. I wish that I could exercise more. But that would be more for like endurance. You can feel when you’re not in shape because you get out of breath. So I feel that sometimes. I mean, otherwise, my body really doesn’t fluctuate much. But I just feel like I’m kind of big in other areas. Like my butt sticks out. I have boobs. My arms are kind of blobby. And it’s not fat.

Both Carly and Sara were able to fragment parts of their bodies that did not fit bodily perfection as seen in classical ballet dancers.

Cooper Albright (1997) was critical of Dancing Wheels and similar dance companies, such as AXIS in Oakland, California. She said,

I feel that much of their work is still informed by an ethos that reinstates the classical body within the disabled one. Although embodied differently, cultural conceptions of grace, speed, strength, agility, and control nonetheless structure these companies’ aesthetics. Thus, while all groups that integrate disabled and nondisabled dancers have surely broadened the cultural imagination about who can become a dancer, they have not, to my mind, fully deconstructed the privileging of ability within dance. (pp. 83-84)

Verdi-Fletcher noted that it is important to her that “grace, speed, strength, agility, and control” are part of the aesthetic of Dancing Wheels:
I feel that these are the elements of dance (which should be portrayed by all
dancers, disabled or nondisabled). I mention them as adjectives however so that
the imagery stays in the minds of the reader because these are things that are not
necessarily associated with disability.

With regards to deconstructing “ability” within dance, Verdi-Fletcher said:

I look for the ability to achieve the choreographic works in the repertory and to
have a distinct presence on stage. I look for dancers who can perform at every
level. I look for an inward dedication and love not only for dance but for people.
The ability to convey in words and well as with the body. It is the ability of not
only the body, but the spirit and the soul.

I argue that Dancing Wheels changes perceptions of ability (see also, Davis, 2008, for her
analysis of the choreography of AXIS, an integrated dance company in Oakland,
California).

Basically, Cooper Albright (1997) believed that Dancing Wheels’ reliance on the
use of ballet aesthetics does put forth the most empowering image of disability. Instead,
Kuppers (2000) would prefer that Dancing Wheels question ballet stereotypes in their
work. However, Frank, a stand-up dancer, argued that Dancing Wheels is an empowering
image of disability. For Frank, disability is an aesthetic at Dancing Wheels because of the
opportunities that it provides for people with disabilities that are shown through their
choreography. When asked how dancing wheels defines disability. He said:

I think disability is defined… not necessarily as a lack of ability but it’s just like a
different ability that somebody else has. So like maybe a wheeler can’t walk so I
don’t think they want to call that a disability but I think they want to call that an opportunity to have another ability. So where they can’t walk they can use their wheels or their arms to show the same thing. So it’s not putting them at a disadvantage but putting them in another place or another advantage. So that’s what I think. It kind of worked. My little smart thing kind of worked.

I think they show it or act it by the choreography or by what they present on stage because a lot of the works or pieces that they have are very integrated. And they have a saying before it’s really a partnership and not just like well the wheelers are going to do their thing and then they go off stage and the stand ups are going to come in and do their thing. It’s more like we’re all on the stage doing the same thing at the same time and it shows you that they can do this the way that we’re doing it. So it’s not like they’re at a disadvantage at all. They’re doing the same things that we’re doing. Not exactly the same, but they’re doing the same thing.

Similar to Frank, Sara, a stand-up dancer, understand disability to be something different or having different ability.

*Maggie:* Can you define or describe disability in your own words? And based on your own experiences, how has your understanding of people with disabilities changed since starting to work at Dancing Wheels?

*Sara:* I think before I considered disability like different ability, being able to do something, just in a different way; I’d think of disability… as somebody can’t do something. So I’ve learned to think of it differently since coming here.
Maggie: And how do you think of it now?

Sara: I think of it as a different ability. Somebody who is considered disabled means, I would make a personal judgment only after seeing, talking, hearing, from this person. But I would think... how are they considered disabled? Like are they mentally disabled? Are they physically disabled? And then physically disabled could be anything. It could [be] not use of legs. It could be you don’t have a finger on one hand. I could be your face being crooked: who knows. But until I make that judgment for myself... what is the disability? I wouldn’t know. I would just consider it as something different.

Aesthetic of Virtuosity

Seeing Mary, somebody in a wheelchair that can be just as beautiful as any other dancer is striking. You think, like how did they get to do this? When I saw somebody in a wheelchair for the first time dancing, like I’ve been training all my life. Like how did they get to do this? I wouldn’t think that they would ever train to do that. I’m sure that that struck other people like that Sara, stand-up dancer, reflecting on the first time she watched Dancing Wheels. (Sara, stand-up dancer, interview)

The Dancing Wheels Company & School has been critiqued for adopting an aesthetic of virtuosity (skill and technique) rather than more postmodern types of dance that embrace antivirtuosity, or everyday movements (e.g., walking, running, washing hair) (Cooper Albright, 1997). Postmodern dance is antivirtuistic because everyday
movements are seen as a valid performance art and training is not seen as necessary to create composition. I argue that Dancing Wheels’ attempts to train the bodies of individuals with and without disabilities contribute to their aesthetic of (im)perfection.

The question this poses for me is, what is at stake for Dancing Wheels in relation to the dance/art world? What is at stake for the organization in terms of its choice institutionally, artistically and personally? “‘Virtuosity’ is what results when people follow their passions to know something well and to perform skillfully. Although it is typically associated with the performing arts, there are virtuosos in every form of human endeavor” (Pearce & Pearce, 2000, p. 161; see also Palmer, 1998). Basically “virtuoso” refers to someone who excels in a technique such as singing, music, or dance (see also Royce, 2004).

As of January 2009, Dancing Wheels is working on a DVD and manual that will standardize the Dancing Wheels technique (fieldnotes). Basically Dancing Wheels wants to “brand” its technique to distinguish it (wheelchair technique) from other integrated dance companies. José Limon in New York City has marketed and standardized their technique (see also, Lewis, 1984). Jeanne, the Developmental Director, discussed how Dancing Wheels is attempting to standardize their technique:

Whether it be a DVD they get and a manual or we actually go and show them and use that there with them and we have a very much a standardized, consistent program that is happening the same way, pretty much the same way throughout the country where it’s core customized to their situation, but that it is. This is us—this is the Dancing Wheels technique or whatever you want to call it, the
Dancing Wheel method—and that’s all happening slowly, but surely. Oh by the
tway I have to talk to you about that very thing.

The Dancing Wheels company, like other professional dance companies,
subscribes to a certain body aesthetic. For example, Martha Graham, a renowned dancer
and choreographer (1894-1991), invented a new dance expression that contrasted with
that of classical ballet dancers who worked to appear graceful, fluid, and weightless.
Graham dancers are highly skilled (virtuosic) and hold their bodies at sharp angles and
move in abrupt irregular phrases. Her dancers are often seen in bare feet and welcome the
force of gravity rather than work against it (marthagrahamdance.org/company; Graham,
1993). The Alvin Ailey American Dance Company has a particular aesthetic calling for
young black dancers (http://www.alvinailey.org/).

The Dancing Wheels Company has been critiqued for a limited definition of
disability because the company’s dancers with disabilities all are in wheelchairs and have
strong upper bodies, flexible torsos, and arms and legs that do not spasm. Additionally,
all of the dancers with disabilities in the company are able to move themselves in their
chairs (i.e., no motorized chairs). From within the company, Verdi-Fletcher has been
critiqued for the aesthetic the company. Charlotte, a sit-down dancers said:

Charlotte: Well, I thought this was an integrated company and this was for
everybody and it’s not. We have nobody in a power chair. We don’t have
anybody on crutches. We don’t have anybody that’s blind. We don’t have
anybody that’s spastic, that’s real spastic. We need all those kind of people
in our company and we don’t have them and that’s another one of my
big… And I’ve talked to Mary about this and I don’t know, maybe she just
doesn’t want to hear it or… she just wants her company the way she wants
it. It’s her company, she can do what she wants, but… I don’t say all of
this stuff to be mean. I say it to help. You know?

Maggie: What would be some advantages of integrating more disabilities?

Charlotte: Oh my God you get more people to dance with us. You’d get—do you
know the base of people we would get if she would get people from CP
[cerebral palsy] community. “Wow, they’ve got a person with CP in there,
let’s go see this company.” You know? Or… somebody that’s blind,
they’d get the blind community to come.

You could get so much more if she would just get some more
people in, but she doesn’t go out and—I shouldn’t be dancing—I mean I
like it, but I shouldn’t be dancing at 57. She should have younger people
in there dancing… And she [Verdi-Fletcher] doesn’t do it.

In March of 2008, I e-mailed Simi Linton, a disability activist,
(http://www.similinton.com/) to spread an audition call for sit-down dancers Dancing
Wheels was having. Her e-mail response was: “I wonder why they specify ‘sit-down’
dancers—as opposed to thinking more broadly about disabled dancers? Best, Simi.” In
response to critiques that Dancing Wheels has not included multiple disabilities, Verdi-
Fletcher emphasized,

I have actually not denied entree to anyone who would like to train with our
Company. All are welcome. However to be in the Company, it is mandatory that
the members achieve the choreography in the repertory (not to say that anyone who is blind or deaf cannot). Quite frankly, I have not had anyone come to me interested in pursuing employment as a dancers. Our students of course have a myriad of disabilities. I also believe that you must have a niche and since I use a wheelchair that was my particular interest. Dance has been made available to people with sensory disabilities for years even prior to the creation of Dancing Wheels, therefore I did not feel a huge desire to focus on that population.

Although it is rarely explicitly talked about in the dancer community, choreographers often choose dancers based on bodies that match the aesthetic of the company. For example, Martha Graham, in her early years, often chose Asian dancers because they matched her body, which had a long torso and relatively shorter legs. The Graham technique is not well suited for dancers who are long and lean (Paskevska, 2005). Why is it that Verdi-Fletcher is critiqued for choosing a bodily aesthetic for her dance company that matches her body, when we do not critique other choreographers for the same practice? Novack (1990) discussed the influence of cultural trends in dance aesthetics. In the early years of Dancing Wheels, the organization was very much connected to the virtuosic work of May O’Donnell. However, I argue that now that Dancing Wheels is a repertory company and brings in various choreographers, it has expanded the aesthetics of movements that are included in its repertory. Although, May O’Donnell technique is part of the company’s history, Dancing Wheels has opened up to fresh and new movements that individual choreographers bring into the company (i.e.,
alternative ways of looking at movement). When I asked Verdi-Fletcher about her current connection to May O’Donnell’s technique, she recalled:

During the Sabatino era, it was our core basis of training. It is where the Verlezzas came from and it had a good relationship to the idea of translation since the center work started in a seated position for the stand-up dancers “everyone started in a seated position.” Over the years it appeared that this technique (although a favorite of mine) became antiquated among the stand-up dancers. Stand-up dancers seem to be more interested in ballet and various kinds of modern dance, such as Horton, Graham… Not many people [have] heard of May O’Donnell in the dance world, especially our young dancers. However I have a great deal of respect for her.

Today the Dancing Wheels classes work to appeal to what is of interest to our dancers and particular techniques that relate to the choreographers that we are working with.

When I moved away from working with the Verlezzas, we once again became a touring repertory company. That was what we were to begin with prior to their coming on board. There is good and bad in it (most people are attracted to an artistic director that is a choreographer, however except for the greats like Martha Graham, Alvin Ailey, Alonso King Lines, etc., it seems like people get tired of seeing the same style or technique over and over). We live in a different era; it is hard to know what is best, but from my perspective, it is not easy to have the same choreographer creating work year after year—it gets old.
Cooper Albright (1997) made the argument that Dancing Wheels (and other integrated dance companies) attend to virtuosic sensibilities; however, if they adhered to a more postmodern dance or dance everyday movements (e.g., contact improvisation, a dance technique in which points of physical contact provides the basis for movement and exploration), they would make more space for who can be included in dance.

Improvisation is a chance for dancers to “contest and overthrow prevailing expectations about dance’s movement” (Foster, 2002, p. 43). Verdi-Fletcher noted The Dancing Wheels Company & School’s relationship with contact improvisation:

I view contact improvisation as a tool to explore movement. It is a great class exercise or a beginning process for a choreographer to see the abilities of the dancers. I do not find it appealing in performance. I think it is again more for self exploration than an external performance tool.

Sara, a stand-up dancer, noted that Dancing Wheels rejects a post-modern/raw humanistic aesthetic in their attempt to be “pretty.”

Maggie: What are similarities or differences between Dancing Wheels and some of the other integrated dance companies you see?

Sara: I haven’t seen much. But I think Dancing Wheels strives to be prettier in the dances that they come up with. Versus like raw humanistic post modern type dance, which is more like human. I think Dancing Wheels goes to the above human level in that we strive to make our bodies look pretty. The lines, the turns, the matching each other, telling a story rather than glooming over something.
Cooper Albright (1997) would like to see dancers with disabilities participate in dance that does not “emphasize classical dimensions of disabled body movement,” which tends to recreate the aesthetic of classical ballet (p. 89). I agree with Cooper Albright (1997) that Dancing Wheels does not radically revise movement that can be considered dance; however, I argue that there is a space for training dancers with and without disabilities to be included in modern dance. Instead of saying that dancers with disabilities are more empowered if they adhere to postmodern dance, we need to extend our understandings of modern dance to include individuals with disabilities as recognized dancers. For instance, saying that postmodern dance, which embraces an antivirtuosic aesthetic, is the most empowering place for dancers with disabilities excludes them from being accepted as modern and/or classical dancers. Indeed there is a place for dancers with disabilities in modern dance. Does all dance that incorporates individuals with disabilities need to be postmodern? Can an individual with disabilities who wishes to be recognized a ballerina be one?

At Dancing Wheels, company members work to improve their technique, a virtuosic aesthetic, for sit-down and stand-up dancers. Carly, a stand-up dancer, mentioned that they are looking for male and female stand-up dancers to have strong technique. However, for sit-down dancers, she recognizes that many have not had any previous dance training, so Dancing Wheels is looking for dancers who are strong and who can move in the chair.

Maggie: What is Dancing Wheels looking for in a dancer?
Carly: I think for a sit-down dancer, they want someone who is athletic, so they might not necessarily need to have any dance training, but someone that is strong and that can move well and is comfortable with their chair. And for a standup dancer, this is the male versus female thing….

For females, I mean, I think that they want someone who has strong technique and who has experience. And everyone’s techniques, everyone’s strengths and weaknesses are gonna be different and that’s okay because in different dances, you might wanna showcase one dancer over another. And for males, I think that ultimately they want someone who’s strong in their techniques, but at the same time, like, everyone’s always in a need for male dancers, but sometimes it’s more about athleticism and just being open to learning and stuff like that.

Dezare, a stand-up dancer, discussed the importance of “wheeler technique” as being a value of Dancing Wheels in order to make for “fluid” choreography:

Maggie: Most organizations have core values that guide the work with their members. What are some of the core values of Dancing Wheels? Can you identify practices that reflect those values?

Dezare: I think they value—they’re really into technique. It’s technique. Not so much dancer technique but being able to work with wheeler technique. So for example, when you’re training them or even just simply running with them and you’re holding hands, there is much technique just to that and that’s very valued… you have to learn it in order to be able to truly be
fluid in your movement with them. Cuz if you don’t understand the technique and the handholds and the different things that you do with the wheelers, then it’s, yeah, it’s just not as fluid.

Sara, a stand-up dancer, when discussing a performance she saw orchestrated by another integrated dance company, discussed that she found that the technique was not “clean” and “challenging” and that the dancers did not seem to work together. On the contrary, at Dancing Wheels, they strive for clean and challenging choreography.

*Maggie:* Can you talk a little bit about that? Why?

*Sara:* It think ‘cause it was not enough technique. It was more like… there were not lines. There were not high jumps. It was just kind of bodies moving on stage that had wigs on, goofy music. And it just didn’t seem challenging watching from a dancer’s perspective. What they were doing was not challenging.

*Maggie:* Are there things that you pay attention to now that you wouldn’t have before coming here?

*Sara:* I think I pay attention to, when I view a dance, how the dancers work together. I can kind of tell when I view dance, who looks rehearsed, who had been doing this for a long time together as a whole company and who looks like they just put that dance together last night and didn’t get a chance to rehearse it. And I kind of compare that to our dance, days in and days out. You know, what are we getting done here. Do we look good when we go on stage? And that’s kind of what I compare.
Maggie: When you say, like what looks good on stage to you, like what looks good on stage? When dancers are at their best, what do they look like?

Sara: I suppose, first, clean techniques. And if dancing together is a necessity at that point, then they’re all together. Strong personalities. You know, some dancers will draw your attention if they have their chest lifted and a presence on their face rather than a dancer that’s standing right next to them who might have their shoulders slumped and [an] expressionless face. So, see, Dancing Wheels with everybody’s faces putting forth some kind of emotion or personality is good to me.

Interestingly, later in an interview, when I asked Sara what Dancing Wheels was looking for in a dancer, she mentioned that the dancer needed to have the ability to “blend in” into what had already been done.

Maggie: What do you think that Dancing Wheels is looking for in a dancer?

Sara: Definitely, dancers that can multitask and not only dance. And they have to have the compassion and the want to make a difference. Because Dancing Wheels is integrated dance, we can make a difference because that’s our performance venues that we’re trying to portray.

Maggie: What physically, do you think they’re looking for in a dancer?

Sara: Physically? Has the knowledge of basic technique in dance. And the physical ability and both mental ability to try things. Try mostly things that have already been done for all 25 years, 27 now that they’ve been
doing things. Do you, as a new coming dancer, look like what we’ve done here? Would you blend in? Would you match?

Michael Medcalf, a retired stand-up dancer and choreographer for the company, reiterated that dancers with and without disabilities need to be properly trained in order for integrated dance to work. Like Sara, Michael believes that the choreography needs to challenge all dancers. Michael emphasized that aesthetic choreography needs to be able to find commonalities between the dancers to bring the piece together.

Maggie: From your perspective as a choreographer, can you think of a time when integrated dance failed? Can you describe the situation, people involved? What can you attribute to it failing?

Michael: Um, yeah, if you—I think it fails when the dancers aren’t trained properly in the technique. I think in being able to translate movements, I think that’s when it fails. When the choreography is weak, I think that’s when it fails. When the choreography is weak, it—meaning when the choreography doesn’t challenge the stand-up and the sit-down dancer.

Maggie: Can you think of a piece that you would think doesn’t challenge?

Michael: Nothing right off the top of my head… Nothing just sticks right out. Because nine times out of ten, the dancers are trained—sit-down and stand-up dancers are trained well enough to be able to move a work beyond to a perfect state.
Maggie: What obstacles, if any, exist in creating integrated dance at Dancing Wheels? In other words, are there issues, attitudes, physical issues that prevent integrated dance from taking place?

Michael: Times that I’ve created work here, our challenges are the different physical abilities of the dancers. Some can move their spines really well. Some cannot. Some are comfortable with getting out of the chair, and some are not. Some can still move their legs. Some cannot... Some—their range of motion is a challenge. So what you have to do is find the happy medium, where they all—some of the things that they all can do, and exploit that is what—is how I think about it—in creating for the company.

Maggie: So you would want everybody to dance the same?

Michael: No, not the same. But there has to be, in creating what is a group work, he couldn’t give—if all of them can’t tilt—tilt their chair… if that’s the—the movement that you want, you can’t do it.

They can’t do it. So what is the happy medium? Um, can they all tilt?

Because aesthetically, there has to be some—there has to be some aesthetic things that are the same… So yeah, those are—those are some of the challenges. Their different abilities...

Unlike postmodern dance in which any person can be considered a dancer (with or without training), Dancing Wheels embraces an aesthetic of training the body. Many of the dancers have been cross-trained. For example, Frank, a stand-up dancer, was trained in hip-hop, Capoeira (Brazilian martial arts), and break-dance. Kristen, a stand-up
dancer, was trained in jazz, ballet, and modern dance. Nicole, a sit-down, was trained in competitive dance. I argue that the various forms of dance training that individuals have had allow for dancers to call on certain techniques of the body. However, their previous dance training and the training they received at Dancing Wheels provide what Burke termed “trained incapacities” (i.e., one’s training results in one’s incapacities) (Burke 1954/1984; see also Harter et al., 2006). Indeed the training of the individual dancers and choreographers as well as the company’s historical lineage with May O’Donnell technique provides opportunities for them to create movement but may inhibit them from thinking of ways in which the body can express itself.

Science, Technology, Medicine, and the Dancing (Dis)abled Body

On a chilly spring afternoon in April 2008, I watched artists of Dancing Wheels perform at a medical conference in downtown Cleveland. At the end of the performance of *Fire and Ice*, Verdi-Fletcher came onto the stage and spoke with the doctors, thanking them for making her dreams a reality. She acknowledged that, too often, health care providers are not present to witness the unfolding stories of patients’ lives—the chapters written after biomedical interventions.

On behalf of the Dancing Wheels company, I would like to thank PDM [an association for medical doctors] for having the foresight to bring together the worlds of art, science, technology and medicine. What a perfect blend of those who think beyond the norm everyday.

In our performance, I spoke of how one can be transported through dreams where nothing is impossible. That is how I have always lived my life. I was born with
spina bifida and have [had] over 20 surgeries in my life; the most significant one
was a kidney transplant nearly 14 years ago. Even in my weakest moments (both
physically and emotionally), the single most thing that drew me back in was the
dance. But it was my faith, my doctor, and my ignorance that helped me come
back!
I always say that ignorance is bliss. I did not know that most people do not work
when on dialysis; I did not know that most people did not drive anymore when on
dialysis and, as a child, I also did not know people in wheelchairs could not
dance! I did it all, I worked, I rehearsed, and even performed without kidneys.
One month after my transplant, I was dancing again and have not stopped since.
I wanted to take this moment to share that with you because I feel that you are to
be commended for the work that you do and very often do not always see the
fruits of your work. But know that life is full of possibilities and you have the
power to make dreams a reality. Thank you.

Verdi-Fletcher remains grateful for the ways in which science, technology, and
medicine have allowed her to live a longer, more comfortable, and enjoyable life. The
coupling of the scientific rationalities of biomedicine and the aesthetic sensibilities and
irreverence of an artist—Verdi-Fletcher—have allowed sit-down and stand-up dancers to
embody imaginative expressions and audience members to enter into those creative
junctures.

Although Verdi-Fletcher acknowledges the possibilities opened up by the
practices and rationalities of medicine, Dancing Wheels was envisioned in response to
the exclusion of individuals marked by health care institutions and society at large as disabled and to the stigma that they bear because of the “deficit” model that undergirds much of the practice of medicine and organizing of social services for individuals with disabilities.

In this theme, I explore the medicalization of (dis)abled bodies and how Dancing Wheels organizes in the midst of these competing ideological and material practices as well as the corporeal experiences of both sit-down and stand-up dancers. I begin by talking about the social structuring of normalcy, what that means for individuals marked as disabled, and how Dancing Wheels both benefits from and resists these structuring processes.

The Social Structuring of Normalcy

In their discussion of cultural locations of disability, Snyder and Mitchell (2006) examined societal spaces and institutions across time and space in which disability has taken on meanings. They concluded these meanings in some cases have “proven detrimental to their meaningful participation in the invention of culture itself” (p. 3). The biomedical model, the organizing of health care resources, and the practice of health care remain key cultural locations in which “normalcy” and “deviance” are defined.

Numerous scholars and activists have acknowledged the continuing influence of dominant practices of health care on societal understandings of abilities and disabilities (e.g., Brisenden, 1986; Shapiro, 1993; Wilson & Lewiecki-Wilson, 2001). Consider Trieschmann’s (1999) argument:
In health care, the dominant paradigm, the medical model, states, essentially, that the body is a physical mechanism which is capable of study and understanding using methods of the physical sciences. The implicit assumption is made that quantitative measurement of physiological function to diagnose the cause of sickness and that treatment, as well, can be accomplished at a strictly physical level. (p. 33)

From this perspective, physical and cognitive disabilities are exigencies to “overcome.” Disability is marked as frailty of health, beauty, and autonomy as well as loss of control of bodily functions.

Goffman (1961), while not specifically referencing individuals with disabilities, argued that the stigmatized person is typically perceived as less than whole and not quite human in the minds of others. “Society establishes the means of categorizing persons and the complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members of these categories” (Goffman, 1961, p. 2). Drawing inspiration in part from Goffman, Dorn and Laws (1994) stressed:

Deviant bodies, social institutions, and practices are inseparable from one another. Deviancy as a cultural system for representing the impaired or abnormal body, is constantly up for grabs, always being renegotiated through the exercise of political power.” (p. 108)

Although most participants I interacted with at Dancing Wheels acknowledged the benefits they have derived from the dominant practices of health care, they also resist the
stigma and social separation that too often accompanies a disability diagnosis and are
drawn to Dancing Wheels for its focus on “abilities."

Mark H., the American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter, reiterates the medical
model’s understanding of disability as an “inability”; however, Dancing Wheels
challenges that understanding because individuals have the ability to dance:

Maggie: How do you think disability is defined by the company?
Mark H.: That’s a tough question. Because by definition itself it means not having
the ability and I don’t necessarily think the company defines it that way
simply because we dance. We dance whether we’re stand-ups, we dance
whether we’re sit-downs. It’s not… having the ability to be a stand-up but
the level playing field is we have the ability to be dancers.

Again, the label thing’s tough. That’s probably one of the toughest
questions but I don’t see the company or the philosophy of Dancing
Wheels as defining it as that particular word as not having an ability, but
we tend to have to utilize the words that are available to us to define
certain things and people always are looking for how to define something
when maybe the best thing is not to define it but just to let it be what it is.

As suggested by Mark H., disability is often positioned as a medical condition in which
physical or mental impairment is the defining characteristic (Asch & Fine, 1988; Frank,
1988; Thomas, 2001).

Numerous disability scholars and activists have started to contest the heretofore
unproblematic usage and interchangability of terms including “disability,” “impairment,”
and “handicap” (e.g., Matthews & Harrington, 2000). Garland-Thomson (2002) differentiated between disability and illness/impairment. She positioned impairments as abnormalities in system functioning (e.g., Verdi-Fletcher’s kidney failure), and disabilities and handicaps as the disadvantages experienced by individuals because of impairments (e.g., the inability to attend a musical because of lack of adequate access). Disabilities and handicaps emerge from the organizing of communal life around assumptions of able-bodiness and normalcy. In short, impairment and illness are about bodily differences, whereas disability and handicaps are about the social and political contexts in which our bodies operate (Sandahl, 1999).

Today, disability activists attempt to transcend the potential limiting aspects of medical diagnoses (Crutchfield & Epstein, 2000). Bridsenden (1986) noted that the medical model’s understanding of disability is “partial and inhibiting” (p. 173). Many believe that disabilities result from the medical model in which disabilities are seen as medically diagnosable and ultimately “curable or fixable,” if not completely eliminable/eradicable with the help of modern medicine or technology (Goble, 2004; Neufeldt, 1999; Switzer, 2003). Often, individuals with disabilities are seen as dysfunctional bodies in need of care or “healing” (Hahn, 1991; Oliver, 1990, 1993; Parsons, 1951; Pfeiffer, 2003; Stone, 1985). Disability is often associated with sickness (see Parson’s “sick role” theory, 1951; Zola, 1994). The individual with a disability is identified primarily by his or her diagnosis, and prognosis and treatment are designed to bring the individual back to “normal” (Parsons, 1978), which is the responsibility of the expert physician (Barnartt, Schriner, & Scotch, 2001; Newell, 2006), who is the one who
decides who is worthy of services (Basnett, 2001). Through the lens of the medical model, disease and illness are seen as the malfunction of a machine, and the physician is to repair the broken body part (Basnett, 2001; Mishler, 1984). Basically, the medical field attempts to provide a solution to disability (Jordan, 2004). “Indeed, without the belief that medicine can transform bodies, medicine would seem to have little to offer” (Jordan, 2004, p. 329). In Verdi-Fletcher’s speech to physicians, shared at the beginning of this theme, she acknowledges how she has benefited from providers’ efforts. Yet, her performance for them also represented her desire for providers to see what people with impairments can do.

When Sara, a stand-up dancer, was asked about how normalcy is understood at Dancing Wheels, she showed frustration that able-bodiness is associated with normalcy. Dancing Wheels demonstrates that different people have to work together. We all learn and communicate in different ways, but essentially we are equal. There are many levels of disability, but for the most part the dancers at Dancing Wheels with physical disabilities are able to do many things on their own. They may, however, do it in a different way than an able-bodied dancer does. They may need the assistance of an able-bodied person, but that does not mean that they have to be totally dependent on others to take care of them.

There are individuals with so profound a disability that they need assisted care. Dancing Wheels provides classes to students with MR/DD which gives the opportunity for people to work together to create movement and dance.
Why can’t our “normal” come to them? We must continue to find ways to live together with people of different abilities. The change and the journey to make society’s view of people with disabilities equal require movement from all sides of the spectrum.

When Sara asks, “Why can’t our ‘normal’ come to them?” she questions assumptions and desires an epistemological shift in what society views as normal. At Dancing Wheels, staff, company, and Board members want audiences to see the ability in disability rather than operate from a deficit model.

Stroman (2003) pointed out that agencies serving individuals with disabilities have adopted a medical model that involves “assessing and devising intervention plans on how individuals can compensate for individual deficiencies” (p. 15). The ways in which individuals are treated within the system allow for the continued segregation and stigmatization of disability. Oliver (1990) pointed out that the aspiration to control the bodies of individuals with disabilities calls forth a desire to control the disabled body. Garland-Thomson (1997b) reminded us that current medical practices such as abortion of “defective” fetuses and plastic surgery continue to reinforce the stigma associated with disability (p. 79). Recently, Cohen and Cosgrove (2009) wrote about how the medical community and parents have subjected children to controversial treatments (e.g., extreme doses of estrogen and testosterone) for children who fall outside “normal” height range by being “too short” or “too tall.”

Numerous dancers I spoke with acknowledged that deficit understandings of disability dominate our collective imagination. They expressed frustration with such
meanings. Kristen, a stand-up dancer, talked about “disability” as something that everyone experiences. She claimed, sometimes it is visible and life-changing, and in other cases it might go unrecognized by society at large.

Maggie: How do you define disability and how does the company define disability?

Kristen: I define disability as something pretty much negative [for which] you’re looked down upon. It could be your attitude. It could be that you can’t hear. It could be that you can’t see. It could be that you are too short, that you are too tall, too fat or you are too skinny… to me disability is more about that. We tell these kids, if you are in a wheelchair and you are blind, you can still dance but to me it is more of saying no matter who tells you no, go for it because… if you believe in yourself. Everybody has a disability to me whether it is a personal disability, whether they feel they are too tall, too short or whatnot or if it is something that they have been told. Or, it is something like when they were a kid, they [their parents] went through a divorce and they don’t feel comfortable with relationships, perhaps that is their disability. To me, everybody in the world has a disability. As a far as the company goes, I think it is more about the physical aspect [than] the disability.

Frank, a stand-up dancer, mentioned that disability is defined at Dancing Wheels as an opportunity to have “another ability.”

Maggie: How is disability defined by the company?
Frank: I think disability is defined as not necessarily as a lack of ability but it’s just like a different ability that somebody else has. So like maybe a wheeler can’t walk so I don’t think they want to call that a disability but I think they want to call that an opportunity to have another ability. So where they can’t walk they can use their wheels or their arms to show the same thing. So it’s not putting them at a disadvantage but putting them in another place or another advantage. So that’s what I think. It kind of worked. My little smart thing kind of worked.

Sara also emphasized that, at Dancing Wheels, disability means difference.

Maggie: How is disability defined by the company?

Sara: Disability is defined by the company as a different ability. So not necessarily that a person with a disability, as it is named, can’t do something. But it’s not that they’re just not able, it’s just that they do something another way in order to get it accomplished. Just literal like, I kick my leg. If you can’t move your leg then you would translate it and use your arm. Or you would turn your chair, like the same direction as the way that I kick.

Thinking of disability as an opportunity to have “another ability” stretches the deficit-oriented perspective that continues to guide social service organizations that work on behalf of individuals with disabilities. Similarly, Mark D., a sit-down dancer, discussed the ways in which his disability has provided opportunities for him that he may
not have had otherwise, such as playing basketball at a Cleveland Cavaliers basketball game.

I mean, traveling to different cities and like going, playing at the Schiller Arena during halftime of a Cavaliers basketball game, it sounds like… 20,000 people, but it’s like it’s something… normal people don’t get to do.

Mark indicated that because of his height, he would have never been able to play professional basketball and hear his name over the intercom.

Maggie: Since your injury, have you had any opportunities that you might not have before?

Mark D.: Playing basketball. Just playing basketball. I was never a basketball person. I’m 5’5”, so I’m not tall, and then playing for the Wheelchair Cavaliers, which is… it’s a D3, Division 3, it’s the lowest division. D3 is more of a, I don’t wanna say recreation-type basketball, but it’s not like college or [professional]—And so we get to go out, we get to represent the Cavaliers, we get to represent the Cleveland Clinic, and we get to go different places. We went to Miami; they went to Las Vegas also this past year, New Orleans, Chicago, I mean, a lotta different places. And it’s like I never thought I would do that, never thought I would do that. And then being able to play during halftime for a Cavaliers and Knicks game, I mean, that was really, really cool. And that was the first time I scored, like, during this exhibition game and they said my name over the
intercom, and that was just like, wow, that was really, really cool and that was somethin’ I never thought I’d do, ever.

For Mark, racing in adapted dirt bikes allows him an opportunity to literally “look down” at people who literally and metaphorically stand above him on a regular basis.

With raw honesty, he talks about being tired of always having to look up at people from his chair.

Mark D.: And then in September when we raced, there was three of us in wheelchairs racing our dirt bikes, and when we’re on our dirt bikes, we don’t think of the other person in a wheelchair (Chuckle)… we’re cuttin’ each other off, we’re bumpin’… we’re rubbin’ elbows and we’re doin’ all that. And it’s like these people couldn’t believe it. I went over this jump, the actual jump I got hurt on, the actual jump I got paralyzed on and… when I went over it, I was like—that was the greatest feeling. I was like, “This jump didn’t beat me,”… “I beat this jump.” And then going around the track and you’re doin’ jumps and… you look over, as you get to look down at somebody… not like they’re actually looking… better than someone, but to actually get to look down at ‘em because you’re sittin’ all the time, so you’re always lookin’ up at people. So it’s so nice just to like look down at somebody and [have] somebody lookin’ up at you for a change, so that was a good feeling too. That was a really good feeling.
Figure 2: In this image, Mark D. is looking down at a friend who helped him adapt his bike.

His disability and Dancing Wheels also afford Mark the opportunity that he may not have had before to inspire children:

Maggie: Anything that Dancing Wheels has provided that you think you might not have been able to experience before?

Mark D.: Inspiring kids and, trying to… getting kids—it’s really good talking to kids because the kids, they see you and, okay, they’re like, “Wow, we’re gonna have an assembly, we get to get out of class,” … that’s what they’re excited about. But then they see you come in and they’re like, “Wow, this guy’s in a wheelchair.” And then I would go and I would go interact with the kids. And I would be like, “Hey, let’s play some basketball,” … and
we’d play basketball. We’d pick out teams real quick and play a little bit of basketball and stuff like that and then do the show. And they would come to ya afterwards and, “Wow, those are cools wheelies! Can you do more wheelies?” You know, “Can you do this?” “Can you do that?” And it’s like, “Can you show me how to do wheelies?” You know, they wanna hop in your wheelchair and they wanna play… they wanna get in there and they wanna try some of this stuff. And it’s like the kids are becoming more knowledgeable about people in wheelchairs just by wanting to be in a wheelchair, not wanting to be in a wheel but playing around in a wheelchair… just doin’ stuff like that. And that was really good for me because… I like interacting with the kids and having them ask me questions and educating them on stuff that people in wheelchairs can do, so that was good for me. That helped me out a lot; that was my therapy…

*Maggie:* Can you think of any of the questions kids would ask, like, besides wheelies?

*Mark D.:* There’s a couple. Like, a lotta kids would ask…“Well, how do you get into bed?” And it’s like, “Well, you have to transfer. You have to use your upper body to move your lower body.” And it was kinda funny because one of the kids, we did a little question and answer, and one of the kids asked me if I fall on the floor, how do I get up, how do I get back in my wheelchair, and it was funny because [in] the performance right before that I fell. I was doing a side show and I fell over and the kids were just
like, “Uhh,” … they couldn’t, they were like, “Oh my gosh, he fell! What is he gonna do?” And then I just got right back up, got back into the chair, and we pretty much finished the performance.

When Mark talks to students at Dancing Wheels performances about how he gets into bed, he is narrating life after Trouble with a capital T and how he makes sense of his life and his injury (see also Babrow, Kline, & Rawlins, 2005). In so doing, he focuses on abilities and opportunities he would not have developed or experienced had it not been for his injuries.

Disability advocates are embracing the notion that individuals with disabilities need to become empowered in their own health and healthcare (Hayes & Hannold, 2007; West, Bopp, & Brown, 1995). More simply, traditional notions of disability locate disability in the body rather than external factors. In the cultural model, individuals have the right to accept their disabled body and embrace their abilities. The study of Dancing Wheels is inherently a study of the disabled body. Differences and disability constructed through communication call upon tensions between the materiality of the disabled body and the discourse that surrounds their bodies.

Similar to Jordan (2004), I regard the disabled body as a discursive site through which to look at the processes of medicalization. Bodies can be seen as surfaces for inscription (Grosz, 1993, p. 198; Foucault, 1982). Disabled bodies are sites of struggle (Hevey, 1992; Nordon, 1994; Oliver, 1990). Indeed, as Illich (1975) pointed out, the “unhealthy” body is a social construction. The move toward understanding bodies as social constructions allows us to understand, then, how the body is marked as deviant
through social forces. Subsequently, as argued by Manderson and Peake (2005), “Recent
disability theory—and increasingly, biomedicine—acknowledges that people with a
disability are impaired by society and not by their bodies” (p. 233).

Participants at Dancing Wheels conceptualize disability as socially constructed in
an effort to avoid the essentializing features of the medical model’s understanding of
disability (see similar moves by Brittain, 2004). As Kuppers (2003, 2007b) noted,
discourses of medicine make disabled bodies marginal and invisible, yet disability makes
one hypervisible. Indeed, medical discourse inscribes meaning on the body. Individuals
who are defined by their bodies can be trapped by such definitions. Davis’s (2002)
concept of “dismodernism” challenges the medical model of disability’s
conceptualization of a “normative” body. Dismodernism was Davis’s (2002) attempt to
transcend distinctions between “healthy/sick” and non/disabled bodies by way of locating
all people on a fluid continuum of wellness. Coopman (2003) believed that disability as a
culture is empowering, which often legitimizes positive aspects of identity but can lead to
discrimination within the culture. As Cooper Albright (1997) said, disability and the
disabled body cannot be “neatly packaged as a metaphor” (p. 60) that we need to take
into consideration the material and corporeal aspects of the disabled body.

Disability has been conceptualized as a culture in a theatrical context (Kuppers,
2003; Sandahl & Auslander, 2005c). Performance studies have generally focused on
“normal” bodies. Sandahl and Auslander (2005b) suggested,

Disability, unlike race, class, and gender, escaped recognition as an important
identity rubric for performance scholars. Whereas those involved in using the arts
therapeutically have formulated a concept of disability, albeit a contested one, performance studies—out of negligence rather than overt hostility toward disabled people or disability studies—has no such concept. (p. 7)

When individuals with disabilities are performing, they are generally regarded as a “freak show” and expected to perform on separate stages from abled-bodied performers (Bogdan, 1988; Chemers, 2008; Marks, 1999, 2001). Kuppers (2003) reminded us that “performance is a medium of the body” (p. 88) and individuals with disabilities are defined by their bodies. Cheu (2005) stated,

to perform a disabled body, thereby positioning disability as cultural construction and as “a way of being in the world.” The disability performance artist, then, must refute the need for medical cure and assert the right of the disabled body to exist.
The vanishing point becomes (able-bodied) spectatorial position against which the disabled performance artist produces his or her own bodily performance and thus, an insistence on the permanence of the disabled body. By seeing the impairment, the spectator necessarily sees the cultural responses to that impairment. (pp. 139-140)

While in the field at Dancing Wheels, I heard people wrestle with the structuring processes of normality and their efforts to live well and dance and create in the midst of impairments. Ironically, many of the sit-down dancers rely on the very scientific and technological advances of biomedicine to emphasize their abilities and disrupt the stigma and “disabilities” that can too often accompany physical impairments. I address this in the next sub-theme.
Cyborg Bodies

Numerous participants acknowledged scientific advances and technologies as central to allowing them to participate in activities that have not always been accessible to people with disabilities. Mark D., a sit-down dancer, acknowledged the social construction of disability and reflected on his efforts to maintain “normalcy” in the midst of impairments that accompanied his life-changing injury.

Maggie: Can you talk a little bit about how you’ve been able to form your identity as somebody who’s in a wheelchair?

Mark D.: Well, I never, like I’ve always pretty much dressed the same and I’ve always pretty much had the same attitude when it comes to just who I am and… I’m not gonna let something that alters my life change my whole, I don’t know, my whole being, I guess. If anything, it’s gonna change me better, for the better and it’s like—I’ve always wanted to be a little different… not be that same person… on all my cars, I always had a nice set of rims on there, so it’s like on my van, I have a nice set of rims. And it’s like the same thing on my wheelchair—actually, now they’re ruined, but I have a nice set of rims for my wheelchair, and I actually use them for onstage. They’ve worked onstage a couple times really well, so it’s just stuff like that. It’s a mindset that you’re not gonna let somethin’ like this change who you are and change your whole outlook on life and… everything.
Interestingly, Mark D.’s wheelchair becomes an extension of his body, a mechanism through which he can communicate his identity.

Haraway (1991) conceptualized a cyborg as a hybrid human and machine unit that transgresses the boundaries between human and machine. The cyborg defies binaries of gender, race, and normality. Cyborg theory offers an image of persons with disabilities as bodies enhanced by prosthetics, wheelchairs, or other technologies (Quinlan & Bates, 2009). Time and again, I heard participants vividly illustrate what theorists have articulated in the journals of the academy. Kristen, a stand-up dancer, said,

The wheelchair symbolizes speed, versatility, agility, expression, and movement. Dancing Wheels uses a wheelchair in the studio and on stage as an aide to glide, jump, turn, and propel themselves through space to music or silence as a way to express themselves and choreography. Their wheelchairs are used just as we use our feet... to dance.

Constructed from mechanisms somewhere between man and machine, Mark D. represents a cyborg figure. Also, Mark has two chairs, one for Dancing Wheels and one for wheelchair basketball. Advances in technology have allowed for different movement possibility (Sonntag, 2000).

Mark D. mentioned that dance has not always been his life passion. Before he became disabled, Mark participated in high adrenaline, hyper-masculine sports like motocross and continues to do so with the help of technologies like wheelchairs. In the hyper-masculine sport of motocross, Mark D. discussed how fear of becoming disabled
was such a part of his life and how his body is now a reminder to his motocross friends about the sport’s dangers.

Before I was [paralyzed] more or less didn’t wanna have anything to do with… that type of lifestyle because I was riding dirt bikes, I was riding motocross, that’s dangerous, and who wants to even be close to somethin’ like that. I mean, I was superstitious about… —it was kinda weird… like you had certain things you just don’t say. And the one thing you just don’t say when you’re riding dirt bikes is, “Oh, I’m gonna take this one last lap.” You don’t say that cuz if you get hurt you don’t take that one last lap. So that’s one of the things you would say to each other… “I’m not sayin’ it.” Though I’m gonna go out again but I’m not sayin’ it… I mean, it was real superstitious. So it was like you met somebody in a wheelchair, “Oh, how you doin’,” and that was it… you kinda keep your distance just because you’re so superstitious. But now, it’s like I wanted to be out there and I wanted to get out there on my dirt bike, and I wanted to show that even though I crashed and I’m in a wheelchair, I’m still out here ridin.’ And I think that right there showed more people out on the track, whether they were passing me or I was passing them, that it’s not a superstitious thing… that I was out there to have fun and I’m goin’ out there and I’m still gonna have fun. It still freaks out some people and namely a couple of my friends, it really does. It’s like the guy who actually made the bars for my bike, he was really freaked out when he saw me ride, and he was really like, “Oh my gosh, I can’t believe he jumped that. Oh my gosh, he’s so crazy, somebody needs to stop him,”… that type of thing. And it’s like I was out
having fun and I was like, “I wanna ride more.” And he was really freaked out about it, but he was the one who helped me... he was the one who helped me get back out there. So I think he’s got some regrets—

Not only does Mark use a wheelchair, but during the summer of 2008, Mark had two major surgeries. In the second surgery, he had a metal cage built around his spine (see Figure 3 and 4).

_Maggie:_ So as soon as your back started to hurt, how did that influence the way you were dancing or the way you were playing basketball or other things?

_Mark:_ What it was, my L2 and my L4 started to curve. And they were rubbing on my L3, and it was wearing my L3 away. So every time I moved and I was turning either way, that’s when I would feel a pop. And so it got to the point where every time I actually twisted, it popped. Every time I moved, I popped.

It was my lower—my lower lumbar. And it just got so bad that there were little bone fragments that were starting to form, so that’s when they had to do—they found out what it was and they had to do the surgery and everything. But it’s been going on for years, for—ever since I got hurt. Because of the pressure, I was just sitting up all the time and not being able to relieve that pressure by standing like an able-bodied person could do.
Figure 3. This was taken after Mark D.’s first surgery—metal almost came through his back.

Figure 4. In this image you can see where Mark D. broke his pelvis (in 1997) as well as the cage that was built around his spine (summer 2008).

During the summer of 2008, Mark D. was healing at home and he had to keep his body at 90 degrees and could not bend for an extended period of time. As a result, Mark will not be able to dance or play basketball for over a year and will most likely never ride his adapted motocross bike again. In short, Mark’s reliance on technology goes
beyond his wheelchair to include objects not visible to the public like metal rods and braces.

Similarly, Charlotte is reliant on a morphine pump to manage her pain from a tumor that grew on her spine and caused her to lose control of her bowels, bladder, and legs. Charlotte hopes that the next surgery she has will allow her to race in her wheelchair again.

**Charlotte:** I’ve had like 14 [surgeries] to take off scar tissue. But what happened is every time he takes off more [scar tissue], I get more. But I was on so much pain meds and they weren’t helping, so finally he said, “This is stupid, Charlotte.” He said, “I keep going in there,” and he says, “You know, you’re okay for two months and then you’re right back in the hospital. The pain’s worse and you’re on so much medicine.” So they decided to put the morphine pump in and they put it in and I’ve been fine ever since. Yeah. I’ll have it forever. Well, I mean it’s an addiction now. I mean, ‘cause my body—it doesn’t go into my head. It just—it’s right here and it—the tubes or the catheters go around and they drip this morphine right onto the nerves that are causing the pain. So of course you don’t feel it in your head. You’re not all… whacked out because… you’re taking medicine by mouth. And it gets refilled every three months and I’m fine. I have to have it replaced ‘cause the battery’s gonna run down and it’s just like your computer, but it’s not gonna be as big a surgery this time ‘cause
they’ll just take this out. This one is this big. The new ones are a lot smaller and I might be able to race again after that with the new one in.

My analysis reveals how participants’ identities are shaped through dance, science, technology, and medicine. DePauw (1997) noted that our current understandings of sport with its emphasis on ability (understood in a traditional sense) leaves little room for re-imagining. However, drawing on my fieldwork, I argue that Dancing Wheels provides space for us to re-examine traditional assumptions about ability, humanity, and functionality in part because of technological interventions.

Although I am critical of the medicalization of the disabled body, I acknowledge the ways in which it has been able to provide opportunities for individuals to live longer and more comfortable lives. For example, assistive technology like wheelchairs have allowed the sit-down dancers locomotion possibilities and independence. Additionally, the combination of bodies and technology has allowed us to revise the definition of the human body and our notion of independence. From a feminist perspective, I argue that Dancing Wheels embraces an aesthetic of in(ter)dependence that incorporates technology. Their dancing in the wheelchairs enables us to redefine our understanding of the bodies of dancers as being fully independent of technology. The wheelchair is seen either as part of the dancer’s body or as an extension of it. In fact, we begin to see technology as contributing to the art, which forces audience members to re-define the role of the wheelchair as well as what the body is capable of doing in the chair.

The chant “I want you to see me, I want you to see me, Not my chair,” in the piece David Rouseve choreographed for Dancing Wheels in 2005, means to Verdi-
Flethcer, “I don’t want you to see me as a big wheelchair.” Indeed, Verdi-Fletcher wants us to see past the medicalization of her disabled body. Additionally, Bob, a Dancing Wheels Board member, discussed performances in which he thought that went beautifully. He discussed the ways in which the wheelchairs become invisible. Although I share this excerpt in another theme, I share it here as well to emphasize the cyborg concept of relationships between humanity and machines.

Maggie: Can you think of an example, a piece that the arts community would appreciate?

Bob: *Sweet Radio Radicals.* That was one that was just tremendous. There was a local choreographer in the audience that said that he felt that the wheelchairs became invisible and that is the way I felt too. It was very well done.

Maggie: What are some of the advantages of the wheelchairs becoming invisible? Why would that appeal to an audience?

Bob: Say that art is that when the wheelchairs become invisible—the performance comes through so clearly that you don’t even realize that there are wheelchairs on stage.

Interestingly, both Bob and Dezare mentioned that they felt uncomfortable when dancers with disabilities were out of the chairs.

Maggie: Can you think of a time when a performance did not go well? Can you describe why? That you don’t think the arts community would like or that you did not like for a particular reason?
Bob: There is no particular performance. You know one thing that I guess says something about me. It make me really uncomfortable when… the wheelchair people are out of their wheelchairs and it says something more about me than the dance company. I guess I am afraid that they might get hurt or whatever. It does bother me.

Maggie: How do you feel when you see that?

Bob: I guess I would say that I feel sorta scared. (Laughter). It makes me uncomfortable… the vulnerability. The vulnerability, yeah (Laughter). I mean you go to another dance company and these people are like super athletes and you figure they can take care of themselves but somebody who gets out of their wheelchair I think they would feel vulnerable. I am not sure if I answered that adequately. I hate to say this but sometimes the wheelchair dancers cannot sometimes physically perform like the able-bodied dancers. Some of the things you see in that kind of dance is amazing because the whole body is involved in jumps and stuff and that just does not happen in wheelchairs it is a physical impossibility and… that is why it is more of a challenge for our company to put on something that is really artistically beautiful.

Similar to Bob, Dezare mentioned the vulnerability of sit-down dancers when they are out of chair or their chair malfunctions:

Maggie: What are some negative perceptions of Dancing Wheels that audiences have? What does the company do to change negative perception?
Dezare: I think a negative perception would be making them seem vulnerable because vulnerability, like, they’re already vulnerable being disabled, so when you expose the vulnerability, it can be like insulting to some people or offensive.

Maggie: Can you talk a little bit about like what—you mean by vulnerability? How do you see that?

Dezare: Hmm. Okay, for example—just like a tragic thing… Let’s say a wheel has popped [come off alignment]. That would be an extremely vulnerable state because, like, their wheelchair is their accessibility… cuz they don’t walk and crawling is also very vulnerable in that case, just as an example, would be a case of vulnerability. Taking them out of the chair is taking them away from their accessibility space.

Both Bob and Dezare narrate an understanding that audiences (perhaps even they) feel uncomfortable seeing dancers with disabilities in a vulnerable state. King (1993) claimed that the disabled body confronts our conceptions of illness, health, brokenness, and wholeseness. Individuals with disabilities are perceived as not being whole because of their reliance on assistive technology (again, the dialectical tension between in(ter)dependence). Sandahl (1999) said the “most successful kind of disability performance offering alternative views of disabled bodies may be found in dance performances” (p. 27). Through Dancing Wheels performances, even if they make the viewer uncomfortable, artists challenge our own understandings of ability and wholeseness. Additionally, viewing the dancers out of their chairs on stage challenges audience
members to rethink the space (whether on stage or not) that individuals with disabilities are able to occupy.

Mark D., a sit-down dancer, believes that medical professionals need to open up their imaginations to what is possible for someone with a spinal cord injury. He discussed a *Snowman* performance in which one of his nurses saw him perform and could not believe that he was able to dance. Sadly, in Mark’s case, the medical professionals cannot even envision that dancing and wheelchair basketball would be something he is capable of accomplishing.

*Mark D.*: I don’t think they [medical community] really thought that I was… gonna be involved in wheelchair basketball or even riding dirt bikes or Dancing Wheels or any of that. I mean, it’s like one of the nurses there, she’s a wheelchair specialist, and she had her son in *The Snowman*, and she didn’t realize that I was part of Dancing Wheels and I was for years… a couple years. And until we did a little show for the hospital for the spinal cord forum, she was like, “I didn’t know you were a part of that.” And I was like, “Well, yeah, I have been for a couple years now.” And she was like, “Wow, that is so great to see you out there and doing that.” She was like, “I never thought you’d be able to do that.” So it’s kinda weird… it’s people who are in the medical field and saying… say all this is possible and then hearing somebody in the medical field saying, “I didn’t think you’d be able to do that.”

*Maggie:* How does that make you feel?
Mark D.: It feels good… It feels real good. It feels like it is possible… And to show that… just to show people that you can go out there and do the things you love to do, that’s the biggest thing. If you love to go out and dance and you get hurt, there are things out there for you. You love to skateboard, still there’s, you’re in a wheelchair, there’s four wheels, go for it, do something… It’s like all you have to do is just have some sort of imagination and you’ll find a way to do things.

Earlier in the interview, Mark mentioned that he gets frustrated with some of his therapists because they don’t understand that when he gets home, he is going to have to face obstacles that they cannot envision. He gets annoyed with therapists who just rely on textbook therapies:

Mark: I had great therapists. I mean, my therapist, my physical therapists, one of ‘em was Darcy and she was awesome. I mean, she would push me and push me and just, she’d push me. She was really great. Jim is another therapist, and he was a motivator himself. He was a triathlete and so… he really knows how to push somebody. My occupational therapist, Mary, she was great just by being open-minded… she’s not in a wheelchair, so she’s not gonna have every answer for me… when I get home, there are gonna be… there’s gonna be things that she can’t even think of. And she was really open about that. But it just seems like now, at Metro, it just seems like it’s just a textbook therapy… there’s only a couple therapists there who are really open minded and really wanna improve in that area. It
just seems like everybody else is like, “Well, this is how I was taught, so this is how it is.”

Now there is this new group of therapists—the occupational therapist I had, her name was Mary, and she was just great. She was really, really great. And she let me try everything first, the way—I was like, “Well, can I try it this way?” And she was like, “Sure, go ahead.” Some things worked out, some things didn’t, and she was willing to work with me. And… she had that type of patience… it’s totally different now. It’s more by the book, it’s by a text, it’s just textbook-type therapy. And it just doesn’t work for everyday life. I mean, everybody’s different…

Like Verdi-Fletcher, Mark D. remains grateful for the ways in which the medical model has allowed him to live a longer life; however, he reminds us that medical professionals need to keep an open mind about what is made possible in part through the very technologies they introduce into his life. Cyborg identities, then, can open up possibilities that disrupt the stigma typically accompanying biomedical interventions for bodies marked as “disabled.”

That said, health concerns among those (such as dancers) who labor in professions that rely heavily on the body are not easily anticipated. Health can ebb and flow with forces such as flu seasons and remain an ever present for sit-down and stand-up dancers alike. I turn to this issue next.
Health Maintenance in Embodied Professions

When entering the field, I was interested in how organizing rhythms and patterns might be affected by, disrupted, or shifted in light of corporeal exigencies associated with disabilities. Interestingly, many interviewees indicated that injuries and typical health concerns (e.g., colds) occur irrespective of whether a dancer deals with a medically diagnosed disability. I organize this sub-theme around the corporeal nature of dance and the strains that it places on bodies and the financial resources available (or not) to deal with these strains.

Corporeal strains on the dancing body. Time and again, participants talked about, and I witnessed, the corporeal strains that accompany a career in dance. Kerry, Chairman of the Board of Dancing Wheels, and I had the following conversation:

Maggie: How often, if at all, do disruptions occur that you would attribute to a person’s health, condition or disability problems? How do you handle such occurrences? Do any situations come to mind?

Kerry: You know, it’s funny, as a result of disability, I have not seen in the year and-a-half that I’ve been here that that’s really been an issue that’s disrupted the company. Injury is more likely to disrupt the company… like the morning of our Stewart Pimsler event, one of our dancers was injured and couldn’t dance; that’s the nature of dance. But… that wasn’t caused by disability, it was more of an injury. I can see where… if we had a medical condition that involved one of our more central dancers… Mac, Mary, that it could really impact what we were able to put on stage… what
we’re able to do as a business. So I think it’s possible, but I don’t think that it’s exclusive of just our individuals with disabilities. I think it’s more of an injury-related aspect that any dance company would have to deal with.

Sara, a stand-up dancer, mentioned how colds are disruptions that affect the company:

Maggie: How often, if at all, do disruptions occur that you would attribute to a person’s health?

Sara: Disruptions on any level such as attention… If somebody can’t concentrate, that’s disrupts everybody. If they can’t concentrate because they’re not getting along, they’re not remembering steps, they don’t remember what comes next or how to put your hands somewhere when you’re partnering or something. People get sick about once a month. When one person is out of all 10 of us are affected. I mean, that’s scary because we’re in this hot environment that is very conducive to growing bacteria. And I see like the dance floor and the bars and everything that we touch is probably filthy all the time. So it can definitely get us all sick. If one person gets sick it just starts to snowball in that manner. As in physical health, everybody’s got issues with their body, such as injury. And injury can cause disruptions if they can’t dance their full.
Maggie: How often do you talk to other dancers about their health? What would spur a conversation about someone’s health?

Sara: I’d say rarely. Only if I can tell that there’s something going on health wise in somebody else. I’ll say, “hey are you okay?” Or have you heard anything if I know somebody had an injury. I mean, I guess that would probably come up. I think rarely because I don’t talk to everybody. But then again, if we—if I know if somebody has an injury or health issue, if I know about and I think they would be appreciative of me asking about their concerns; then yes, I’ll say something.

Mark H., the ASL interpreter, noted the corporeal nature of dance and the strain it places on the body:

Anytime you participate in a physical activity of any kind… especially dancing, you put a strain, at times, on your instrument, your body and so here they have to work at maintaining… your physical level. But yeah, we’re only human… there’s gonna be a time someone may be injured or ill and so, just like in theater… you quickly have an understudy and have someone else to communicate that role.

Dancers frequently mentioned the pain they experience while dancing.

Maggie: How do you feel when [choreographer] says things to you like smile through the pain?

Frank: It’s frustrating. It definitely is because we had a talk about this during class last week, yeah, last week, she was like you don’t think it hurts them or me and I’m like I don’t think it hurts you that’s why you put your leg on
top of your head. Your leg is way up here and my leg is down here because it hurts me. It doesn’t hurt you. It does hurt. I’m like okay; I don’t think I believe you. Because when something hurts you don’t brush it off. I can always see when it hurts one of the dancers because they complain about it. Or they’re like this is blah, blah, blah or they don’t go full out. Or sometimes, I’m like very like in your face when things hurt me because that’s the way I was taught to be. When I was doing things with Young she would have us doing some of the craziest stuff that I’ve ever done, lifts and things like that, she liked partnering and lifting and stuff like that. And she would always be like if you’re hurt you need to tell me because I’m gonna expect you to do 100% of whatever it is you can do if you’re not hurt. If you are hurt and you let me know you’re hurt you don’t have to do it... in ballet class things hurt and I like to tell folks that they hurt because they’re not supposed to hurt or maybe they are supposed to hurt. I think she doesn’t like to tell people that stuff. I don’t think it’s a good idea. I don’t think it’s ever a good idea to dance in pain and not say anything about it. Not wanting to dance in pain comes from my background in massage therapy.

When I asked Carly, a stand-up dancer, about the pain she experiences, she responded:

Nothing that I go to the doctor for. I mean I have certain pains in my hips and in my back that I’ve had for a few years now. Sometimes when they
get really bad for a particular reason, whether it’s the dance that I’m doing or a movement that I’ve made that sparks up the pain… just usually medicine wise, Tylenol or Advil or ibuprofen and then going home, maybe taking a bath, a hot bath or putting a hot pack or a heating pad or asking for a massage… I wish that I could go to a spa place more often. It’d be wonderful to be able to go like… at least once a month or whatever. My boyfriend gets to be the lucky one [to give her massages]. He gets the prize.

Although I do not believe I ever witnessed bladder control issues in the studio or at performances, individuals I interviewed mentioned that bladder control was a corporeal issue that individuals with disabilities encounter. For many, disability may include incontinence, placing disabled men even closer to the feminine, leaking body with its undefined border (Lindemann, 2008; Manderson & Peake, 2005). Jeanne, the Developmental Director, noted health disruptions because of bladder control:

It happens sometimes. Sometimes people have problems with their bladder control… I’ve been with people that have had an accident happen, it’s not been a big deal. I think sometimes—some type of a bathroom accident and it’s happened with different people over the years. I try to act—be okay, like I would with my kids—I don’t want them to feel bad like I’m embarrassed, because I’m not. It happens, so I think sometimes we have those issues. We’ve had people go through a transition that have had some disability related issues that have been more challenging so accommodating them has been certainly more challenging, but not
for the company... Yeah we’ve had people that have had visual—legally blind and
had people with all kinds of mental problems that you’re not sure what the
background—as far as the company goes people get injured but with a disability
so—sometimes people have had to go home because something’s happened… like
they don’t want to go back to dance at that moment. Maybe they have to go home
and regroup.

Kristen, a stand-up dancer, mentioned that pressure sores are something that
happens to people with disabilities that can cause a disruption but understands that this
condition is something that they need to deal with and rest.

_Kristen:_ It’s hard with wheelers because of pressure sores. Jenny does not get as
many. Mark [Daurelio] gets [pressure sores] all the time… Sometimes
there will be days when Jenny cannot get out of bed because of pressure
sores. So I think probably more so the wheelers…

_Maggie:_ When you know that somebody has one, what—how do you react or
what—what are some things you would say?

_Kristen:_ I mean, you’d just have to understand—You know, understand, and the
same thing, encourage… And they’re not making it up. And that if I was
on my butt every day, like, in a wheelchair all day, that it would happen to
me, and that you can’t push that situation. You can’t get mad at a wheeler
for not being able to come in for a few days. They have to stay off their
butts and lay on their stomach because if it was vice versa, I would like to
think they would [be understanding, too].

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Maggie: How often do you talk to sit down dancers about their health conditions, and what would spur these conversations?

Kristen: With Mark, I talk about his health conditions a lot. We have a special relationship outside of work, but we’ve hung out, so I think that was just being comfortable with me. I have these pressures on my butt and, like, “Can you help me pad it?” or… whatever he needs. Because when you have to help them… with bandages and whatnot. I think it just depends on how comfortable they are about talking about it. It doesn’t bug me to talk to them about that. Same with my students, I do the same thing. Like, I’ve never asked any of my students, “What’s your disability?” I’ve never asked them to explain what happened to them. If they’re having issues, I don’t ask them what the issues are unless they feel comfortable telling me, because that’s their business and… I know that there’s things that go on when you’re a wheeler versus when you’re stand-up. And if they’re comfortable talking to me about it, then I let them talk, but I don’t address the situation, per se.

Interestingly, I learned that health issues are not something that stand-up and sit-down dancers talk about much in the studio. Similar to Fox et al. (1999), individuals talk about the nature of the disability in the beginning of the relationship to reduce uncertainty; however, disability is not something that is necessarily mentioned often and usually only with someone one feels close to. Similarly individuals do not talk about
health very often, unless someone is injured or you know that person has a doctor’s appointment.

*Maggie:* How often do you talk to other dancers about their health? What would spur a conversation about someone’s health?

*Sara:* I’d say rarely. Only if I can tell that there’s something going on health-wise in somebody else. I’ll say, hey are you okay? Or have you heard anything, if I know somebody had an injury. I mean, I guess that would probably come up. I think rarely because I don’t talk to everybody. But then again… if I know if somebody has an injury or health issue, if I know about and I think they would be appreciative of me asking about their concerns; then yes, I’ll say something.

Frank, a stand-up dancer, noted that, usually, the sit-down dancer will initiate health and/or disability-related conversations.

*Maggie:* Do you talk to sit-down dancers about their health? What would start a conversation with a sit-down dancer about his or her health?

*Frank:* Usually they would start the conversation. I think that that’s something that they want us to know, especially somebody like Charlotte, who comes in now and then and works on stuff [Charlotte dances half time with the company and has another job]. She has to remind us of what she can and can’t do because of the condition she’s in. I think Mary kind of likes to forget the things that are wrong with her. She doesn’t always tell us until
it’s time for her to do a move or something like that. She’s like oh I can’t do that or this or that, which is not very smart I don’t think…

Carly, a stand-up dancer, wanted to be careful not to offend sit-down dancers:

I don’t think I really do and I’m not sure, like, if I just don’t want to like offend them or… say the wrong thing. If I know that they had gone to the doctor or I know that they’ve shared that there’s a problem or they’re going to the doctor then, of course, I would ask, like I would ask anybody that I worked with or cared about… But I’m not overly protective about it or… And as far as stand-up dancers, if there is an injury or something like that that I’m aware of, I’ll ask them because you all are working together and you wanna help to… want to keep up if they’re well…

Mark D., coming from a motocross background, finds it humorous to talk about injuries in dance because stubbing or breaking a toe is difficult to compare to becoming paralyzed.

Kristen would always tell me about her stuff just, I mean, some of the times… one time she was having that breathing problem because of the carpet [in the studio], the new carpet that was going down. Health problems where, I mean, you’re in a company where you have people in wheelchairs who are going to the doctor all the time and… And then you have the dancers who are constantly stubbin’ their feet and toes… Actually, I guess Juliana broke her foot or broke her toe or something… I don’t know how the conversations would like start or come about, but it’s always interesting cuz you’re relating dance to injuries. For me,
that’s kinda foreign because… comin’ from a motocross background, it’s like…

that’s injuries… those are injuries you’re talkin’… being paralyzed, even

sometimes some people dying. So… “Oh, you stubbed your toe, oh big deal. I
can’t move my legs.” You know, it’s somethin’ like that. It’s more like a comical
type thing… I try to at least have some comedy behind it.

While it does not appear that there is a lot of communication between stand-up and

sit-down dancers about health issues unless they feel comfortable with the other person,

Charlotte mentioned that the dancers with disabilities do talk about health between sit-
down dancers:

It’s funny, we talk a lot and it’s the silliest things to talk about. What kind of
catheters they’re using, well Wilkes [brand of catheters]. Oh, I found this really
good way to do this or that. I think it’s really good because I think we all learn a
lot from each other. So yeah, I think every time we see each other, we probably
have something to… to tell each other about something that we found or
something that we found to make something better or to make it easier. So I think
to the sit-down dancers, I think we talk a lot to each other.

In summary, the embodied experience of dancing includes disruptions associated

with injuries and common health issues like colds. Some, but certainly not all, of the
corporeal conditions are linked with disabilities (e.g., incontinence), and those conditions
are more likely to be talked about between sit-down dancers. In terms of health
maintenance in a physically demanding profession, differences do exist between sit-down
and stand-up dancers in terms of access to health care resources.
Insuring the dancing and disabled body. Early in my fieldwork, it became apparent that many of the stand-up dancers did not have health insurance; at the same time, sit-down dancers had health insurance but felt constrained by it. Frank, a stand-up dancer, often stated, “If I break my leg, just shoot me. I’m like a horse.” Sara, a stand-up dancer, was on health insurance for individuals with low income until she made $120 more than she could have to qualify. For Sara, she feels constricted by having to try to not work to qualify:

Maggie: Do you personally have injuries? What kind of health insurance are you on? Have you run into any problems with your health insurance?

Sara: I have no health insurance right now. Darn. I don’t like it. But since I’ve been here—actually, I was on my parent’s health insurance until I graduated. And they even found out I was out of school and a couple months after, my parents had already paid for that year. They’re like, did she graduate? Yeah. And then they cut it off right then.

Well, I went about six months after that with no health insurance. And then working here, I found out about Metro Health Hospital. And they have a program that’s like low income, if you make under a certain amount of money, you get free healthcare. So I took advantage of that for about six months until I made too much money. I think it’s like $20,000 a year. I think that’s the amount. And it was after I started teaching that I had too much money. Yeah, I mean students. And if I didn’t have my other job then I would qualify here. I mean, I’m kind of pissed about it
because you have to go in for like an interview every three months so they can check your income and provide paycheck stubs and what not. And I was only like $120 over the last time they checked. And they’re like, sorry. And it’s not even like a graded scale. It’s not like you can pay half or something. Pay half of your healthcare when you come here. So now I’m back to nothing. And it’s like I can’t afford health insurance even though I make $120 over $20,000. Like I still can’t pay $200 a month for health insurance.

**Maggie:** Do you have any plans to get back on health insurance? Like it would be worth it not to make that $120?

**Sara:** I thought about that but I shouldn’t have to struggle to not make enough money. So I guess, I’m just watching my income and seeing if I can make it work to buy health insurance or just keep looking for different plans. And also, I’m about to get married. So that might help. In a year or so I might be under Steve’s [her fiancé] health insurance, if it goes that way. So I’m just kind of dangling with no health insurance right now. It just sucks. Steve just found another dance company here at Groundworks Dance Theater [in Cleveland, Ohio] has a plan called Cofe, C-O-F-E. Steve forwarded it to me. And he’s like, tell Mary about this. This is what Groundworks does. And even if only like one or two people need it, it’ll work for you guys as a company or whatnot. Or if it doesn’t work, then I think there’s individual benefits too that might be reasonable. I didn’t send
it to her yet. I want to wait until she gets back in town. I mean, I’ve asked about health insurance here and it feels like I’m the only one that needs it when I asked the last time. Because of various things like people being on insurance with their spouses or still with their parents or too broke to even get it even if they tried. So there’s three instances. But it seemed like me and Jeanne are like the only people that needs continued health insurance. So I don’t know what she’s doing now.

Carly, a stand-up dancer, thought she would still be covered by her parent’s health insurance until she turned 25; however, since she was no longer in school, she no longer qualified.

With mine, well, that’d be kinda funny because when I moved here, I was still covered also, with my age, under my parents. But then soon found out that even though I was supposed to be covered until I was 25, because I was out of the house, because I was no longer a student, I would no longer be covered under my parents. And this is something that I have—I have discussed it a little bit with Mary, but of course, when I renew my contract, I want to further discuss with her. Some of the things in the contract that I was sort of given needs to be updated. I’m not really sure how old these contracts are, but my contract did say that health insurance could be bought through the company. And when I found out I would no longer have health insurance and I asked her about it, she said that because nobody was interested, the company no longer does provide health insurance. So now, I’m on my own to try to find something. So I just had to start… searching for things,
and my parents were willing to help me with that since they did think they were going to be covering me anyways for about two more years. And I did find something. It’s Anthem, which is part of Blue Cross Blue Shield, which is what I had back in Florida. And what’s good about them was they are nationwide, so wherever I would move to, if I stuck with it, I would be covered. And although it is a little bit of an expense, like I said, at this time, my parents, they are helping me with that. So as a dancer and being on my own, it is very helpful that they are there to do that. But the other things is, financially, if I’m looking for other ways to save money, I know that there were other options that I heard from other dancers about things here, because we are dancers and artists for a lower income, like health coverage. But what I found is that you can run into several problems with that. And in the end, I think it’s worth it to put some extra money in to make sure that you’re covered for whatever it is, for regular doctor’s visits, which I’m… I like to make once a year and… for any other problems that might come along the way.

Ironically, many of the dancers without disabilities do not have health insurance. Because of the corporeal nature of dance, if a dancer becomes injured, he or she is out of work. Additionally, it is difficult for the dancers to live on what they earn, and because of their rigorous training and touring schedule, it is difficult for them to have other jobs. Many find themselves in double-binds and uninsured.

Kristen, a stand-up dancer who has health insurance, talked about how her limited and expensive coverage constricts her from being able to have a baby:
I have health insurance, group health insurance, dental and vision. I haven’t really run into any issues. Just the price is hard, having health insurance, and then some of us have it here and some of us don’t. I think it’s just hard financially not to have it?

I mean, everybody gets things taken out of their paycheck, but my health insurance, I have mild asthma that I may have once a year. Exercise induced. I have to be in the right humidity and temperature. There are stuff that I can do like make sure I have the right temperature, or whatever. And I pay $200 a month for basic health insurance. And that’s just, like, the deductible. When I had the allergic reaction here, there was workers’ comp, and I had co-pay that I had to pay. It makes it hard. It covered part of it, but when I had the pulmonary embolism, they were checking my heart and checking my brain, and checking. They’re doing CAT scans and EKGs and it adds up. It was $12,000. And then, they wonder why I won’t have a baby.

I read Frank’s body language as he made a joke about not being on health insurance: “just shoot me.” He really was embarrassed and understood the consequences of an injury. For Sara, although she did not like not having health insurance, she was not proud. It was as if she wanted to talk to Verdi-Fletcher about the possibility of receiving health insurance through the company, yet felt anxious asking her about it. Also, I realized that the dancers did not talk to each other about what kind of health insurance they were on. I am compelled to believe that the individualistic nature of our society and the company have led the dancers away from asking for help.
For individuals with and without disabilities, work gives individuals a sense of identity (Sprague & Hayes, 2000). However, in order for an individual with disabilities to be able to receive disability benefits, it is more advantageous to not work. Charlotte, a sit-down dancer, discussed her disability benefits, the government and the ways in which she is only allowed to make a certain amount of money a month. In this discussion, she acknowledged she will never be able to own a house and always have to “prove” to her insurance that her disability still exists.

It’s the stupid government. The government wants people that get hurt or whatever to go back to work. Okay? They want you to get back in the mainstream, but if you go back to work, then they’ll take all your benefits away. I can make $500 a month. If I make one penny over the $500 they can take my benefits away from me. So—even if I didn’t work, I could get a whole bunch more stuff than I’m getting now. I could get food brought to my house, I could get food stamps, I could get all kinds of stuff, but I want to work. I want to go. And even the doctor said one time, I’ll never forget this, my spinal cord doctor said to the—there was a new doctor, a doctor becoming a doctor in there said, “Charlotte would be better off not working ‘cause she could get a lot more benefits.” They want you to go back to work, but you can’t—it’s stupid. You know what I do twice a year? I tell my company not to pay me so that it looks like I’m not working so the Social Security doesn’t come jumping on my ass saying, “Oh well you’re working so you can go back to work full time.” I can’t. I can’t go back to work. I have to go back in for another surgery pretty soon. Once
you lose your disability benefits, it’s hard to get them back again. It’s real hard to get them back again. Oh, going through all the crap I went through before and—

To prove it, yeah to prove it. Like I said, when they told me, after I lost bowels, bladder [control], right side and then left side [legs], they said, “You’re not disabled enough.” I said, “What else do I have to do to be disabled enough for you people?” It’s ridiculous. It’s absolutely ridiculous. And now the way they’re throwing people out of the hospital with insurances, I stayed in for six months. I mean you’ve got to learn how to do your bowel routine, your bladder routine, all—there’s a whole bunch of new stuff.

People now are being thrown out of the hospital three weeks after they’re hurt. They have nothing even set up at their house for them. There’s nothing… It’s horrible. It’s really—and it’s getting worse. We’re supposed to get—we get a one percent cost of living raise every year. Well, you know what? My disability check went down this year ‘cause they took more money out for medical. So I didn’t get any more money. I lost money.

So… how do you live on that? I get $800 a month in Social Security. John gets $1,000. So we have $1,800 a month to live on, that’s to pay our rent, to pay all of our utilities, to eat and everything. And we each get $500 more from our work and that’s it. And that’s supposed to be okay for the government.

I wish I could buy a house, but I can’t because I can’t make enough money ‘cause of the government. I wish I could wheelchair race again. No, there’s really
nothing that I—no, ‘cause I did everything. I mean I did. I walked for 32 years regular, so I don’t think it’s so horrible and I think people that are born with their disability, why should they be mad? They don’t know any different either.

Likewise, Mark D., a sit-down dancer, mentioned his frustrations with his disability services and the ways in which they need to negotiate the advantages and disadvantages of being unemployed.

Yeah, it’s kind of like a, kinda like somethin’ we don’t like to… talk about too much. But the reason for that is because, like, these past few surgeries, the first surgery I had which didn’t work was $25,005.60 and it didn’t work… The second surgery was over $28,000, and there hasn’t been a time that I’ve worked, where I was working 40 hours a week that I had this kind of coverage on insurance… I’ve never had this good of insurance.

I have Medicare/Medicaid. And I virtually pay nothing for the surgeries. And when I broke my pelvis back in ‘97, I was working for Johnson Controls, and I had really good insurance, but I was left paying 20% of the bill and that 20% of the bill ended up being, with everything that I had to pay for, ended up being $8,000, and that was nothing compared to these surgeries… And it’s like if you go ahead and you get a job, you have to get insurance, okay, your medical insurance, you also have to get a job that’s going to give you the benefits of…that the state gives you. And finding a job like that, I mean, you’d have to at least, at least make $70-80,000 a year. And, I mean, even that, I mean, like one surgery
can set you back… 50 grand easy… It’s sad to say, but 60% of people in wheelchairs, even after 8 years, are still not employed, still don’t have a full-time job and that’s a statistic. It’s like 60% and that’s high, I mean, that’s really high if you think about it cuz, I mean, we can get out there and get a job, but who’s gonna pay 4 or $5,000 for a new wheelchair every 5 years… 6 years or whatever. I mean… who’s gonna pay for the doctor visits? Like me, we have to—well, I do. I have to go to the doctors… you have to get checked. You have doctor visits at least once every couple months and that’s being healthy. So it’s just… who can afford that? It’s like I can’t afford that, I never could.

The actual insurance benefits are the most, I mean, the highest, that’s by far the biggest advantage. There’s also the… once you’re—I worked for 13 years before I got hurt, and I qualified for the highest amount of disability insurance being paid out. Because I put in so much towards my Social Security. So it’s like that right there and having Jena, that also helps me out with my Social Security Disability because she receives money also. She receives half of what I get, so I get a certain amount and she gets… half of what I get. And it really helps out with places to live, qualifies… I qualify for Section 8, Waiver Program, just a buncha different things that I wouldn’t qualify for. I mean, this apartment alone is—it’s $800 a month. I pay $500 a month out of my pocket, but Section 8 pays the other $300. And it’s like I wouldn’t be able to do that with… going to the doctors, being in a wheelchair and trying to work 40 hours. Just the insurance alone, it would just be bills, just too many bills, way too many bills.
You know, it’s not gonna—it would never be beneficial to give up my benefits from the state to do anything, I guess, I could qualify for because, I mean, I don’t have a college degree, so the most I think I would be making right now if I was still at the job I was at would be, like, $33,000 a year. I think that was my last since 1040 [tax forms]… I mean, that was pretty good for then that was pretty good.

Dealing with the government. I mean, dealing with the people who are in control of whether or not I qualify for Medicaid. One person, in particular, who happens to be my caseworker at the Job and Family Services over at the Virgil E. Brown building, her name is [insert name], and every year it’s the same thing. There is one month that goes by that I don’t get Medicaid, and I end up getting bills from either Metro or some medical bills, and that’s all because she didn’t do her work. And anytime I try to call her, her mailbox is full or somehow it just loops you around… you’re on the phone for 20 minutes and you’re not getting anywhere and it’s so frustrating. And every time that this happens, I have to call my caseworker who is the best, the greatest person. I swear she saved my life, oh, countless times. She called up their supervisor and then gets rerouted to another supervisor, and she’s gotta go through all this. And it’s like she works it out for me—she does that. I’m so happy I have a caseworker like her to deal with these other people who are just like—they have so much power cuz they’re controlling my life… whether or not I’m qualified for these programs that I really need. I mean, like, the nurse who came in for—cuz I still have the pressure sore—so the
nurse that comes in, that changes the dressing, she’s here 15 minutes. Well, that would cost you and I… an easy $110—.

Scholars have acknowledged the discrimination that individuals with disabilities face in the American health care system (Brock, 2000; Orentlicher, 2000). I saw first-hand how these are lived during my time at Dancing Wheels.

Moving Through Realms of Exclusion and Inclusion in Integrated Dance

My colleague and friend, Marie, saw a poster for an upcoming Dancing Wheels performance in Marietta, Ohio. As we sipped tea at the Donkey, we talked about the need to make a roadtrip to Marietta to experience this. As I finish writing this dissertation two years later, the poster that we were given after the performance is on my wall near my desk. I traveled forty-five minutes to watch Dancing Wheels perform that spring. Marie and I entered the performance just as it was about to begin. I couldn’t help but notice that there was a row of individuals with developmental disabilities near the stage. Throughout the hour-long performance, individuals from the front row let out undecipherable noises. After the show, I asked Marie if she had heard the voices and she had. There was something that I really liked about hearing the individuals with developmental disabilities during the performance. They were enjoying themselves, too, and did not hold back their enthusiasm when the dancers moved in a way that moved them. Marie and I talked about how it made us rethink what it means to be an audience member, how we
have been scripted about what it means to be “well-behaved” as well as WHO has been traditionally thought of as “acceptable” to be in a theater. (Fieldnotes)

Dancing Wheels is one of many activist organizations working to redress the exclusion of people marked as different from all aspects of social life. It simultaneously demands, through its performances, that society at large question the spatial segregation of marginalized individuals. Each of the themes in this chapter contributes to this culminating discussion of Dancing Wheels’ mission of inclusion and exclusion.

Throughout history, individuals with disabilities have been marginalized and stigmatized socially, politically, and economically (Corker, 2000; Young 1990). People with disabilities continue to experience inequalities in social, cultural, political, and economic status (Charlton, 1998; Young, 1990), experiencing high rates of poverty and unemployment (Shapiro, 1993). Scholars have written about the social exclusion of people with disabilities (Candlin, 2003; Crutchfield & Epstein, 2000; Harter et al., 2006; Kuppers, 2003; McGrew, Thurlow, & Spiegel, 1993; O’Grady et al., 2004). The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 is considered to be the most inclusive federal legislation making exclusion of disabled people from all aspects of public life a violation of their civil rights. The ADA is consistent with “the sociopolitical model employed in disability studies” (Linton, 1998, p. 32). Although compliance with the ADA has not happened overnight, disability activists are in the public sphere demanding full legal citizenship. The ADA shifted our understanding of disability as one of justice rather than charity or personal tragedy (Barton, 2003; Oliver, 1996).
The Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), and its political implications, has facilitated self-awareness and self-expression by people with disabilities, especially in the arts (Shakespeare, 2006). Labeling certain bodies “deviant” or “defective” enforces a form of normalcy and superiority that excludes certain bodies (see also Davis, 2002; Garland-Thomson, 1997a, 1997b). Similarly, Crowther (2003) argued:

Cultural exclusion (hereafter referred to as “exclusionism”) has two familiar basic forms. Its explicit mode involves practices that affirm the superiority of one cultural group over others and either excludes those others from full and equal participation in society or allows inclusion only to the degree that participants give up the practices that are basic to their identity in favor of those of the ruling culture. (p. 122, italics in original)

Disability scholars Mitchell and Snyder (2000) claimed, “Cultural groupings always occur in reaction to prior exclusionary definitions” (p. 43). When discussing the cultural model of disability, Snyder and Mitchell argued that individuals marked by medical discourse as disabled “often find themselves resisting the effort to identify their diagnoses, in order to complicate medical definitions with the more nuanced stories of their own experience” (p. 11).

For the purposes of this study, I paid attention to the ways in which bodies become excluded or included at the Dancing Wheels studio, in the dance community, and in society. Silvers (2002) claimed “the idea of the normal holds so much less sway in art than in ordinary life,” which allows for “an aesthetic that makes disability powerful” (p. 230). Individuals with disabilities have begun to celebrate disability and honor its beauty
The Dancing Wheels Company & School reclaims the disabled body’s right to be included in the public sphere while raising questions about inclusion in performance, dance, and society. I argue that the members of Dancing Wheels view their performances as agents of change and as a form of entertainment that opens people’s minds to new possibilities (see also Guinier & Smith, 2001). In this theme, I discuss the ways Dancing Wheels grapples with issues of exclusion and inclusion at the studio, in the dance community, and in society. While at Dancing Wheels, I questioned the taking for granted of privileged positions (i.e., by able-bodied individuals). At the heart of Dancing Wheels is a focus on inclusion through integrated dance. At the heart of integrated dance is the inclusion of each dancer (with or without disabilities) in an effort to capitalize on unique strengths while allowing for transforming through relational interactions.

Inclusion at Dancing Wheels: “A Home of Lost Souls?”

I invited my mom and sister to come to Cleveland, Ohio, for a girls’ weekend and to see a mainstage performance of “Dancing Wheels’ Alice In Wonderland: Like Never Seen Before.” We met half way between Athens, Ohio, and Buffalo, New York, in Cleveland. When we entered the theater, we sat around little girls dressed as Alice who later were invited on to the stage to show off their costumes. At the end of the main stage performance, children (with and without disabilities) from the Dancing Wheels School came out and performed. My eyes filled up with tears, and I took a few gasps of air as I watched the children dance. They looked so happy and seemed to love the bright lights on the stage. Some of the children had less control over their bodies and their heads bobbed to the music. After the
show, my mom, sister, and I talked about how it would be really hard for my dad to witness a performance with children with disabilities because he would cry the whole time. He is a pretty sensitive viewer and has a difficult time watching children who live in a body different from what he has experienced. (Fieldnotes)

For many individuals like my father, viewing disability on stage through Dancing Wheels is a reminder of their own fear of disability. “Those of us who live with disabilities are too often treated as unwelcome reminders of the mortality, that is the fate of all of us” (Fries, 1997b, p. 8). After having spent two years around Dancing Wheels, I pose the question: Can audiences see the body on the stage and transcend their prejudices? Kuppers claimed the “body comes to be seen as an arrangement of meanings that is produced by social knowledges…” (p. 5). As someone who has teared up during several Dancing Wheels performances, I acknowledge that performances can evoke emotions for spectators and performers alike (see also, Schechner, 2002). Through Dancing Wheels, bodies with disabilities become more visible on stage and more knowable to the audience. Such visibility has the potential to allow people opportunities to transcend their fears and prejudices. Society at large minimizes opportunities to integrate individuals with disabilities in community life when they are denied access to performative venues (see also, Sandahl, 2008). As suggested by Kantor (1993), “By implication or desire, performance is constantly oriented towards the impossible desire to stop disappearance” (p. 19, also cited in Grace, 2009, p. 15).
Bob, a Dancing Wheels Board member, mentioned that the inclusion of children (with and without disabilities) on the stage with a professional company is what drew him into the company.

**Maggie:** Do you remember the first time you saw Dancing Wheels? Do you remember how you felt? What emotions you experienced?

**Bob:** Yes, the thing that really drew me to them was the kids. They had a section with kids—I think they called it kids of the world. It was all these children with disabilities that are participating with a professional dance company. I just thought it was tremendous for all these kids to be on stage with a professional dance company. It really brought tears to my eyes, actually. That was the thing that really did it for me.

Steve, another board member, emphasized that Dancing Wheels includes all different types of disabilities:

**Maggie:** What do you think is the best thing about Dancing Wheels?

**Steve:** The best thing? Well, I think that they are providing inspiration to probably some people with disabilities. To show them that they are capable of participating in the arts. And just opening up their thinking into what might be possible for them to do. And not having any disabilities personally… I can’t always relate to or figure out what they might all be thinking.

But you’d have to guess that a student in a wheelchair, sitting in a classroom with a bunch of kids around them that are all able-bodied would
feel deprived. And would be, perhaps, unable to participate or have
opportunities to do things. And this would open up their eyes to the
possibilities for what potentially they can do. I think that’s just a great
thing that they do.

Maggie: How is disability defined as a company?

Steve: That’s a good question… it certainly is not just physical disability that it
talks about. It’s a wide ranging with varying degrees. Kids in wheelchairs
that can barely move and barely turn their head or shoulders. And yet they
are there somehow participating. And then you see kids that are able to
stand but with difficult and walk with some difficulty.

Or to dance but not needing to be in a wheelchair. So just a wide range of
the disability. And then they work with the board of, County Board of
Mental Retardation. And so they have classes for those kids that might be
physically able but some mental disabilities. So it’s just across the board, I
think, which is great. Mary [Verdi-Fletcher] has her own disability but
that’s not how she sees Dancing Wheels. It’s not just people in
wheelchairs but any kind of disabilities.

Both Bob and Steve, speaking from an able-bodied perspective, are in a privileged
position to resist pity towards and instead make space for people with disabilities. They
recognize that there are not many opportunities for children with disabilities in dance. As
an individual without visible disabilities, I need to continue to question my position of
privilege and think about what Dancing Wheels has to offer me, as it has shifted the ways in which I think about disability. Consider this excerpt from my fieldnotes:

This is my second Dancing Wheels performance, I mustered the courage to introduce myself to Mary Verdi-Fletcher and propose to her my idea for writing my dissertation about Dancing Wheels. What if she does not want me to work with the company? What if she has no use for me? I stood in line to go up and introduce myself. There were several children that waited in line to hug Mary. I was moved by the ways in which children no older than eight years old went up to her and hugged her, as they were practically laying on her lap. She is at the same height as the children and her wheelchair seemed to hug the children. Thankfully, Mary said she would love to have my help. “Other people have researched us. But you are welcome to come.” I have so much to learn from them. With one interaction, I felt I belonged.

Jeanne, the Developmental Director at Dancing Wheels, refers to Dancing Wheels as the “home of lost souls” where people come who do not feel that they belong anywhere else. An example is Maria, a woman with disabilities, who volunteers for the organization:

Maggie: How does Dancing Wheels define diversity? How is it enacted?

Jeanne: Well I think we’re—I’ve always said that we’re the home of lost souls. We’re very welcoming and we seem to have a lot of lost souls and I don’t mean that in a bad way. I don’t even mean lost like we’re desperate or anything like that. I just mean that we always seem to provide a
welcoming place for people that might not fit in so well anywhere else. Or
they don’t feel comfortable anywhere else… I mean they’re involved other
places, but this is like home, they like it here.

Maggie: What do you think it is about here that draws people in?

Jeanne: Well, I think—we accept everything. And we try very hard to accept all
people. It’s not always possible, but we do try very hard and I think… it’s
just a warm welcoming environment and there are all kinds of people and
over the years there have been all kinds of people here of all sorts… Maria
[a volunteer with disabilities], thought she was the ugliest person on earth
and she felt… that she wasn’t attractive… and that she was dumb… so to
come to somewhere where people respected her and liked her. She was
funny, they laughed and she’s very sociable. So to come to a place—and
she wrote a lot about that, it’s really touching. I mean this is Maria, there’s
a million people like that… So it has its good points and its bad points.
We’ve both had people that have been very challenging because of that,
some were real trusting and that’s not always the case so—but I’d say 99%
of the time it’s been really good.

…we have dancers that have to dance with physical disabilities that feel
very comfortable here—and Mary’s so bent on you’re going to be your
best. So it’s a very encouraging environment to make you be your best and
because you’re so welcomed and accepted it’s like being in a loving
family. You know you’re gonna do okay.
At Dancing Wheels individuals generally feel accepted and respected, including those who previously felt quite lost.

Even so, Verdi-Fletcher recognizes the limits of the notion that Dancing Wheels is a “home for lost souls:”

… although it might seem like a nice sentiment, it is not my intention to have it as a haven for those who are lost or have no direction. I truly believe that Dancing Wheels is a unique art form that inspires through its artistry. I believe it gives vision and teaches good lessons, but certainly it is not on the same plane as a homeless shelter or a home for the wayward…

In contrast to the “tragic, poor, helpless, heroic…” (Kuppers, 2003, p. 3) view of people with disabilities, Verdi-Fletcher vigilantly positions Dancing Wheels as first and foremost an organization guided by aesthetic goals. Of course, people may be rescued or saved in the process but that is not how she positions the mission.

Verdi-Fletcher assigned dancers responsibilities, outside their rehearsal duties, to help in the management of the company (tour manager, rehearsal director, head of the school) as well as cleaning the studio (e.g., painting, vacuuming, and dusting). Verdi-Fletcher talked to me about how she wants dancers to leave Dancing Wheels with skills outside of dance and to reach their full potential. Indeed, Verdi-Fletcher believes in her dancers and wants to help find ways for them to fully participate in society. Verdi-Fletcher respects her dancers enough to not pity them and find ways to help them self-actualize.
I view our company as uniquely diverse. I am so serious about that viewpoint. I want everyone to hold their heads up high and say this is who I am and this is the gift I have. The lessons that I hope for the dancers to acquire are first and foremost “be a good person” through honesty, integrity and hard work. The rest will come. Dancers or anyone for that matter who puts their heart and soul into whatever they commit to do will be successful.

Jeanne, the Developmental Director, mentioned that Dancing Wheels allows individuals in the company to feel included, through various rituals.

Maggie: Does the company have any rituals? If they do, how would you describe them?

Jeanne: I think they’re real tight. I think when they go out they try to do everything as a group. They do everything together—we always do birthdays and farewells and whatever we try to make—I think everybody tries to make everybody feel good, but I think it depends on the mix of—this probably isn’t our most social group—little more introverted maybe, so it depends on the group of dancers you have, but rituals—I don’t know if they do something, they probably do. It used to be that different groups of dancers you heard all the stories, I’m sure, doing different things to make each other laugh while they’re onstage and you know getting back at them. I mean they’ve done all kinds of things, fun kind of things, but I don’t know if this group does that.
I think we just very much try to make sure that people feel special with special events. Mary has a lot of social events of her own and Mac… I think there’s that kind of thing that goes on and that works well with this group. I don’t think this is the group that’s going to all go out together and go hit the flats [bar district in Cleveland].

Although Dancing Wheels makes an effort to create an inclusive environment, I thought about the ways in which the Dancing Wheels studio is an accessible environment for people with disabilities to get in and out of. That said, it may be difficult for individuals with and without disabilities to interact when they are outside the studio. For example, the “flats” in Cleveland, the bar area, may not be accessible. Perhaps after a long workday, it is easier for individuals (stand-up and sit-downs) to go back to their homes where they do not have to worry about other people’s needs. Kristen, a stand-up dancer, and Mark D., a sit-down dancer, have talked about times when they have gone to the bars together and Mark will wheel Kristen home on his lap after they both have been drinking. It was beautiful to hear Mark and Kristen talk about those times and the ways in which they share moments together.

Dezare, a stand-up dancer, mentioned that having life events (e.g., birthdays and graduation) remembered makes her feel included.

_Maggie:_ Does Dancing Wheels have any company rituals? Can you describe them?

_Dezare:_ Definitely. Every birthday someone gets a card, present, cake, something, it’s always noticed, your birthday is always noticed. Or a special moment, for example, graduation and then Mac leaving to be with his family. Those
focal things in there—they stay on top of the special moments during the year.

Maggie: What kind of impact do you think that has on the company?

Dezare: It makes you wanna *(Chuckle)*—I stay because you’re just like, “Well, these people care,” *(Chuckle)* it definitely brings the family equation closer… rather than some other companies who you would probably celebrate your birthday with some of the dancers in that company rather than the entire company.

Kerry, Chairman of the Dancing Wheels Board, posited that Dancing Wheels is not only inclusive to individuals with disabilities, but also other marginalized populations:

Maggie: Who do you think Dancing Wheels attracts?

Kerry: I think because when people hear Dancing Wheels is an organization that assists people with disabilities, there is a tie to minority populations that’s an automatic…, if they’re sensitive to people with disabilities then they’re gonna be sensitive to people of color, they’re gonna be sensitive to people from other ethnicities, they’re gonna be sensitive to people with different sexual orientations, they’re gonna be sensitive to all of those kinds of issues. And so I think people feel comfortable with that identification.

At Dancing Wheels, there are people from different ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, sexual orientations, and religious backgrounds. As Kerry pointed out, individuals from minority groups feel accepted. Perhaps Verdi-Fletcher (and likely others
in the company) draws on her own experiences of feeling on the margins of society and wants people to feel included in her organization.

I truly teach people to have dignity, I have never viewed myself as an outcast truly. I look at what I have to offer as a unique gift. I told you that my grandmother said that I was born with a tear in my eye and a smile on my face and she knew without a doubt that I had something to offer the world. (Verdi-Fletcher, personal interview)

I argue that Dancing Wheels makes a political statement not only as it relates to disability, but also as it relates to other marginal identities. Dancing Wheels helps to speak to broader issues of inclusion and enter into dialogue with those about who is marginalized. Dancing Wheels helps us see what society has often placed in the periphery, not in privileged positions of power. Through their dancers’ bodies, Dancing Wheels is setting an example of what an inclusive society could look like by offering up a possible alternative way of viewing the world.

Mark H., Dancing Wheels’ American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter, noted the ways in which he attempts to be integrated/included in the performance rather than being a separate entity. When Dancing Wheels includes a sign language interpreter, they are also able to be inclusive to another population, those who use a sign language interpreter.

The one thing I don’t want to do is take away from their performance. I want to be a part of it and enhance it rather than be a separate entity where people say, “Oh… it was such a pleasure watching you.” I’m here to be—I’m a part of the package. I don’t want to be viewed as a separate act where the audience has to
make a choice of watching them or watching me. I don’t want to take away from—and I think that’s where it goes back to like with the—“I want you to see me.” Instead of standing, which would draw more focus, I sit just like the dancers. I try to mimic some of the same movements within the interpretation so you can see that there’s a meshing of… so it’s a whole piece rather than two separate pieces.

Like Mark H., I view sign language as aesthetic movements. By incorporating sign into repertory, communicatively Dancing Wheels is making a statement that ASL is part of our society and should not be relegated to the side of the stage.

While at the studio, I noticed that not all of Dancing Wheels pieces are fully integrated. For example, A Wing/A Prayer, is an all-wheeler piece. When I asked Verdi-Fletcher about whether or not all pieces need to be fully integrated, she responded,

I do not think that every dance needs to be integrated, but I do think every concert should include integrated material. We have several all stand-up and all sit-down pieces which are wonderful, but I try never to have them stand alone [without integrated pieces too] because people often get the wrong impression. Like those who refer to Dancing Wheels as the wheelchair dance company. We are not a wheelchair dance company, because we do not exclude the stand-up dancers.

When Verdi-Fletcher said, “We do not exclude stand-up dancers,” she is flipping the script about who is privileged in our society. Verdi-Fletcher is making a political statement that she is not excluding able-bodied dancers. Dancing Wheels does not give performances about disability; rather people with disabilities are part of the creation of
the dance performance (see Hevey, 1992). Indeed, the artistic vision of Dancing Wheels is shaped by disability (see also Fassett & Morella, 2008). Singh (1995) claimed that disability arts seek to strategically employ difference in order to make a political difference. Deleuze (1994) noted that difference needs to be looked at as an element that disrupts pre-established order.

Allan (2005) examined disability arts and their role in identifying exclusion and barriers to participation within society and found that arts have potential where other forms of ideological critique fail because of the ways in which difference is deployed, playfully and pragmatically, in order to make a political difference. Arts have been regarded for promoting inclusion and enhancing levels and quality of participation of vulnerable groups, including disabled people (Goodlad, Hamilton, & Taylor, 2002; Goodley & Moore, 2002). In evaluating their performances, though,

The difficulty has been to avoid imposing a non-disabled view of quality: it is vital to recognise the process in which people are engaged, the struggle against barriers involved in getting there, and the context in which the work is presented.

(Barnes, Mercer, & Shakespeare, 1999, p. 207)

Living the Limits of Inclusion

“Because this is an integrated company, everyone should fit.”—Carly, stand-up dancer

In this next section, I describe the limits of inclusion, and the exclusion sometimes experienced by individuals with disabilities at Dancing Wheels. While I was at the Dancing Wheels studio, I talked with dancers about whether they felt as if they
belonged. Kristen, a stand-up dancer, explained how she does not always feel that she belongs:

*Kristen:* Yeah. And it’s hard, because I am a muscular girl because I don’t have a skinny body like that. I am 5’2” and 105 lbs. and solid muscle as you can probably tell and that is horrible but it’s hard. Like, when [choreographer] came in here, he was just like “Oh, you guys are too fat. You need to get into shape.” But this is a pretty modern company, and in modern, it’s not supposed to be that way. So I don’t know where that aspect came from, since it has always been a modern company. But, I mean, [name of dancer] doesn’t eat.

*Maggie:* What would an individual look like who did not fit the body image at Dancing Wheels? What would somebody look like who would never make it into the company?

*Kristen:* They’re very particular on how you look outside of Dancing Wheels… not looking sloppy. Weight is a big one. Like, I’d been told that I needed to lose weight. Now, and I had agreed with that because I had been off dancing for a year and I wasn’t in shape. I’ve lost probably 15 to 20 pounds since I started here, and then I talked about it again that I need to lose six pounds.

They are pretty much the same when [name of dancer] is overweight and it was said to her, “you’re too fat/overweight,” not that it should be. It is harder to sit down and to lose weight…
Mark D., a sit-down dancer, said he did not feel that he belonged because of his appearance:

Me. Oh, I felt like I was not—Well, the tattoo and plus, I didn’t grow up with it [dance]. I wasn’t used to it. I wasn’t used to a certain look. I just felt out of place a lot. A lotta times I felt outta place and it was like I would have to put on a different face to get through the night or get through the performance.

Both Mark D. and Kristen mentioned that they did not think they belonged because of their appearance. Charlotte, a sit-down dancer, argued that Dancing Wheels excludes certain bodies from their aesthetic and if they were more inclusive, they could bring in more audiences:

Maggie: What would an individual look like that did not fit the image of a dancer at Dancing Wheels?

Charlotte: Somebody whose body was contorted. That’s—I mean to me, it would be fine, but somebody that… is in an electric chair who might be a little askew. I don’t think they would hire them.

Maggie: What do you think this tells audiences about Dancing Wheels?

Charlotte: It tells audiences that the important people they have are in there… I don’t know how many people come back to see us ‘cause we don’t have big audiences anymore. I don’t know what it tells people. I don’t know if the people notice that there aren’t any blind people and there aren’t any people in electric chairs… I don’t know what they’re seeing…

Maggie: What kind of body image messages does Dancing Wheels support?
Charlotte: Well, again, I think we should have a lot of different bodies in there. I don’t think we should just have us people that were paralyzed later on in life that have long legs and… the [bodies] that look normal.

I think—what I used to like about Michael Metcalf's company was they had all different body sizes, bigger women, and I think it’s beautiful… I think it’s beautiful to have all the different—if you can dance and you’re a little bit bigger, then dance… But with the sit-down dancers, I think she has a standard that she wants.

Mark D., Kristen, and Charlotte all illustrated the limits of the company whose mission is inclusion. Even in Dancing Wheels’ efforts to be fully inclusive, there are still individuals who remain at the margins or feel excluded. Even so, I argue that Dancing Wheels has started the conversation and mobilized resources around the possibilities of integration. Additionally, Dancing Wheels can inspire individuals to find other ways to think about inclusion (i.e., create their own companies).

At Dancing Wheels, the performing body attempts to actively challenge the constraints of hegemonic discourse, and opens up alternative meaning; however, Dancing Wheels is not able to include all bodies. Mark D., a sit-down dancer, explained how he did not always feel incorporated in the choreography and, therefore, felt excluded:

Maggie: Can you think of a time when integrated dance didn’t go well? Can you talk about why and who was involved?

Mark D.: A couple times with, I think with Mac and myself. Like, it was during rehearsals, but it was just things that I don’t think I was really comfortable
doing. Not for so much of the part of a male/male part but just as for—it was like overpowering—I was just kinda like a rolling prop (Chuckle) is just what I kinda felt like. And there was a couple times like in that and, I mean, there was another time also with the… Helen Keller thing that I have opinions about. He was the first choreographer I think I worked with that wasn’t part of the company—it just seemed like I was a rolling prop and it was like there was nothing in there I liked—it didn’t need me. It didn’t need me at all. That’s how I felt. Nothing worked well for me in that.

Through the difficulties in creating integrated dance, Mark brought to my attention the difficulties of creating an inclusive society. There are going to be times when people feel used and not needed, which is something we need to pay attention to and strive to avoid.

Kerry, Chairman of the Board, noted that Dancing Wheels attempts to be inclusive at the company and school; however, in the company, certain individuals would have trouble keeping up with the choreography:

Maggie: What barriers, if any, exist in creating integrated dance at Dancing Wheels? In other words, are there issues such as attitude, physical issues, or economic issues that prevent dancers from integrating?

Kerry: I think that there is a certain skill level in dance that you have to have to participate, at least in the company… I’m not disabled, but I certainly couldn’t be a dancer. (Laughing)… —I don’t think that there are any
attitude limitations. I think it would be difficult for someone with a severe cognitive impairment to follow the choreography. I think we have developed opportunities in our school for anybody to participate… we have people with cognitive, physical, emotional disabilities with… great financial need. We have people who are perfectly healthy, and we have a wide variety of opportunities to participate in Dancing Wheels that way. But it would be pretty [difficult] in the company if you couldn’t dance.

Dancing Wheels makes space for those who wish to participate in a particular type of modern dance in which being able to memorize choreography is key. Kerry did not indicate that she hoped to be a dancer, but she remains involved in the integrated dance because it touches another part of her self (i.e., disability advocacy).

Verdi-Fletcher claims she has never denied anyone entrance into the company: I have actually not denied entree to anyone who would like to train with our company. All are welcome. However to be in the company, it is mandatory that the members achieve the choreography in the repertory (not to say that anyone who is blind or deaf cannot). Quite frankly, I have not had anyone come to me interested in pursuing employment as a dancer. Our students of course have a myriad of disabilities. I also believe that you must have a niche and since I use a wheelchair that was my particular interest. Dance has been made available to people with sensory disabilities for years even prior to the creation of Dancing Wheels; therefore, I did not feel a huge desire to focus on that population.
Scholars have noted the ways in which women are expected to be inclusive and engage in emotional labor (Buzzanell & Turner, 2003; Fletcher, 2001; Hochschild, 1979, 1983/2003; Lopata, 1993; Shuler & Sypher, 2000; Tracy, 2005; Wood, 1994). In Verdi-Fletcher’s case, I have seen the ways in which she compromises her own health and other life activities for the company and school, often leaving her on the verge of burnout (Kruml & Geedes, 2000). Yet, there is still this expectation that she needs to give more and to be more inclusive (i.e., of all disabilities).

Mark D., a sit-down dancer, also mentioned that sometimes he feels excluded because he is a slow learner and has difficulty picking up choreography when it is not fast, athletic choreography. He noted that he receives special treatment (i.e., is “babied”) because there is a lack of male dancers (especially those with disabilities):

Maggie: What are some of your strengths as a dancer? What are some of your weaknesses? And have you improved? How could you improve?

Mark D.: Strengths, I don’t know if I have any strengths as a dancer. Weaknesses, I don’t know if you have a lot of time left. *(Both laugh)*

But my weaknesses—I’m a slow learner, that’s a big thing, slow learner and forgetful and I think it frustrates people. And sometimes I get babied.

Maggie: Well, it’s hard to remember everything and they change it all the time? What are some of your strengths, tell me something that you do well as a dancer.

Mark D.: I’m fast and athletic. So I think I’m, I think it’s… faster athletic pieces, I’ll do a lot better.
Maggie: What are some ways you’ve improved since you started?

Mark D.: I would catch on to things quicker… like it doesn’t take me as long to pick up things.

And then like over, like, over the course of, like, working—even Mark Tomasic [a choreographer and retired Dancing Wheels stand-up dancer] is like, “You’re catching on to things better, quicker.” “You’re showing better lines in your form,” and stuff. And that was a good compliment coming from Mark Tomasic—I think of him like a great guy and a great choreographer and a really, really great dancer, so anything he says, it means a lot.

I felt more than one time that… the focus was, “Oh, Mark doesn’t know that much, so we’re gonna take it easy on him.”… and everybody else is getting yelled at for like little things and I’m messin’ up like—I’m messin’ up everything. And it’s like I’m not gettin’ in trouble at all or anything, and I felt like, it just felt weird because I was like, “Man, I’m getting babied… I just couldn’t get in trouble.

Maggie: Do you think Dancing Wheels has different expectations for stand-up and sit-down dancers in general?

Mark D.: Yes. Availability… there’s so little [few]… guy sit-down dancers. So few male dancers, period. And it’s hard to find, it really is. It really, really is… I really think that if they found somebody who has a dance background… a male [sit-down dancer] who has a dance background in a wheelchair
that things would run a lot smoother and it would really help out the
company a lot. But, it’s been years.

Mark D. noted the sexism that takes place in the dance community. Since male
dancers are more difficult to come by in dance arenas, sometimes they receive special
treatment. Furthermore, at Dancing Wheels, male dancers with disabilities are even more
difficult to hire. As a result, males are excused for being late, which is not tolerated with
female dancers. Consequently, I found that some of the women felt “disposable” in the
company due to practices they viewed as unfair.

Charlotte, a sit-down dancer, also articulated the ways in which female sit-down
dancers receive special treatment and are able to get away with unacceptable behavior
(i.e., slapping another dancer):

_Maggie:_ How, if at all, has your understanding of people with disabilities changed
since coming to work at Dancing Wheels?

_Charlotte:_ Well, some of them are bitchy just ‘cause they’re in a chair. I’m sorry.
You’re no better than I and you have no reason to be like that to me just
because you’re in a wheelchair… [name of sit-down dancer] slapped
[name of stand-up dancer] in the face one time. I said to Mary, “Why do
you keep her?” “I have no one else dancing.” I said, “You wouldn’t keep
any stand-up that slapped somebody in the face. She shouldn’t have any.”
She [sit-down dancer] has no more special rights than anybody else, but
she shouldn’t be there… I get mad at people with disabilities that.. “Oh,
poor me, poor me.” No, not poor you. Get yourself together. You can do a lot of stuff… it’s not poor me.

Frank, a stand-up dancer, mentioned that sometimes he felt excluded because his dance training (hip-hop and break-dance) was not seen as being as valued as others (e.g., classical ballet and modern):

Maggie: Has Dancing Wheels affected the way you view yourself or the way others view you?

Frank: I think Dancing Wheels hasn’t affected the way I see myself but I think that people see me in a different way especially people that I worked with before Dancing Wheels. They look at me as a better dancer because I’m picking up the ballet stuff kind of fast... especially now that I’m doing it every week.

Maggie: People in the company?

Frank: No, outside the company. In the company every now and then. There was… that I know of in the company the only people that have ever given me any kind of actual verbal saying I see you in a different way has been Dezare and Kristen.

Maggie: What have they said?

Frank: Well Dezare mostly because I talk to her more. Just saying how good I got in such a short period of time. I think that also comes from them not really knowing that I actually had a dance background before Dancing Wheels. I
was never really open to doing what I already kind of knew I could do because I kind of felt that I was put down a lot too.

*Maggie:* By people here?

*Frank:* Yeah.

*Maggie:* For what kind of things?

*Frank:* Put down as not being a “dancer” because I did hip-hop and break dancing and caporiera which are all dance styles. But they would be like you’re starting to look like a “dancer.” They say that a lot to me. And I’m like hmmm. Just because I don’t dance the way you dance doesn’t make me any more or less of a dancer than you.

*Maggie:* How does that make you feel?

*Frank:* It hurts. It’s not—that’s where I kind of think that’s where you have to have that thick skin because that could have easily made me walk out and be like “okay, see you later.” But I mean I didn’t because I figure I can take as much as I can from this group before I leave [Dancing Wheels] next year, which I plan on doing.

*Maggie:* What do you think is the most challenging?

*Frank:* Learning choreography with more of a ballet background in it because I’ve done modern dance since 1999 or so and I think that was kind of like a little known factor was brushed off to the side [modern dance background]. So I know how to dance but there were some things that
were never drilled in me that like pointing my feet wasn’t so like drilled. I mean it was like but at the same time it wasn’t. Point with your feet and that was it… Which I think a really good part of this group is that there’s nobody that really stands out as like this person is great and the rest of them are just kind of there. So you’re gonna put this person in front. I think—they all have their strength. Like Juliana is really good with ballet, Kristin is really good at modern dance, and Robby’s really good with contemporary. Sara is just good. She is well-rounded, I think, which is good because she can do whatever role and she really gets into the roles. They all have their strengths so there really isn’t any reason. So if a choreographer comes in from somewhere and he sets it to be this person, this person, and this person and then you pull out one of the folks that the choreographer set it on [choreograph to certain styles] and put somebody else in there when the choreographer specifically asked this person in this dance. I don’t like that.

Frank articulated the ways in which Dancing Wheels has difficulty capitalizing on everyone’s abilities, illustrating the limits of inclusion. In a later interview, Frank, a stand-up dancer, revealed that he wished dancers at Dancing Wheels would bond outside the studio.

Maggie: Like how do you communicate with company members? What are things you talk to them about? Do you communicate with them when you’re not around the studio?
Frank: No. I think—no. And I think that’s a big problem with this group is that we never bond. We never take time to go to someone else’s thing or something like that. Or if we do it’s like once in a year. Like Mac had a party when Stewart’s group [another dance company] was here and that was for Stewart’s group. We never just do that for us. It’s seems like it’s more to impress them it is to learn or relax... When the times we have opportunities to—like I was saying when about like I asked [his fellow company members] to tell me about the history of ballet they said, “why don’t you just look it up?” And I’m like this is a good time for us to talk. That’s why I don’t want to look it up and I said that and they were like, “Oh well.” It was kind of like why we don’t get along that well at times or sometimes it’s kind of like—It’s very weird.

I don’t think it should be like that; I think we should definitely talk more. I often invite the group to come out to things that I’m doing or things that I like to do. I like to go salsa dancing on Fridays and numerous times I invited [company members]—

Maggie: Do they come?

Frank: No. Of course not. Of course they don’t come. But when Stewart’s group was here I invited the whole group out again and Stewart’s whole entire group came and then three people from Dancing Wheels came. I thought that was funny because I invited them out every week since I started here. No one would come. “I’m so busy; I can’t find time to come or blah, blah,
“I’m like really? What are you doing on a Friday night at 9:00?
You’re still at work? I don’t really believe that. And then when [Stewart’s] group comes, all of a sudden the group is free to come out. I thought that was weird.

I just don’t think that people try to do things too much outside of the group
I think that maybe they get tired of things at some point. It’s just kind of like work for them. I see them when I go to work; I’m tired of seeing them. Or maybe they are busy. I don’t know. I think it sucks because you never really get to know the people you work with. Especially when you have the opportunity to get to know them.

Interestingly, I had never heard Frank be reflexive about his privileged position as an individual without physical disabilities who does not negotiate the world in a wheelchair. There is this under riding assumption that dancers with disabilities have access to salsa dancing. However, there may be other issues that prevent all of the other dancers from wanting to interact with company members outside the studio.

Inclusion and Exclusion in Broader Dance Communities

“We’re like other companies in that we produce work that we consider dance. And we try to get audiences to come see us. And view it as dance or theater, as we would like it to.”—Sara, stand-up dancer

Along with the exclusion that individuals sometimes experience within the organization, individuals mentioned the exclusion they have experienced in broader dance communities. The experience of exclusion in dance communities is not new, and in
fact dates back to the Renaissance and its exclusive corporeal aesthetic (Lee, 2002).

When discussing inclusion in dance and recreation activities, “[t]he concept of full inclusion is the new social mandate. Full inclusion occurs when people with disabilities participate directly with, not beside, able-bodied peers” (Schilling & Coles, 1997, p. 22). Matos (2008), when discussing dance and disability exclusion in the dance community, said,

Despite a current trend in contemporary dance toward deconstruction of an idealized nondisabled dancer’s body—a trend that often leads to constructing movements that resemble those of nondancers or of bodies outside the world of theatrical dance—paradoxically there remains a certain rejection of dance groups that include dancers with disabilities, along with a questioning of the artistic merits of their work. In addition, some choreographic works that utilize dancers with disabilities still sustain hegemonic visions of what it means to be a dancer.

(p. 73)

Verdi-Fletcher recalled times where she received a standing ovation. After a show in St. Louis, Missouri, “It was like ending with a prayer.” I asked her what a standing ovation meant to her, as I interpreted it as symbolizing inclusion in the dance community. However, I found that it means much more:

A standing ovation is a rise in emotion, when people rise to their feet in applause.

It means to me that they have felt a surge of emotion that they felt compelled to show in a more enthusiastic way—beyond the norm of polite applause. I really
feel that it is not about the applause at all, but more about moving people through the art.

In the *Fort Wayne Journal Gazette*, Verdi-Fletcher claimed, “‘The point is, it’s art,’ she said of her dancing. ‘It should be appreciated by everyone. We are just bringing equality into the arts’” (1993, A section). In essence, by recognizing that the mission of Dancing Wheels is not simply about dancing, but by acknowledging that disability is an integral part of their performances, Dancing Wheels is making a political statement about disability and individuals’ right to perform in the public sphere. Interestingly, Verdi-Fletcher wants to promote the notion that Dancing Wheels is an art; however, not all arts are appreciated by everyone. Art can be defined as an expression of creativity and imagination that has had a long history of being controversial. Not everyone is going to appreciate all forms of art, and agency should be given to the audience to make that choice.

The Dancing Wheels Company & School has had a history of being excluded from the dance community. Verdi-Fletcher was outraged when Dancing Wheels and other integrated dance companies were left out of an eighty-year review of modern dance in *Dance Magazine*, a premiere dance outlet:

I was outraged to learn that integrated dance was left out of *Dance Magazine* when they did their issue on 80 years of modern dance. My god, they even included John Travolta and his contribution to the disco era. That clearly said to me that they did not consider integrated dance as “legitimate dance!” I started a letter writing campaign and of course wrote [it] myself. My letter was quite strong so of course
they chose to publicize Judy’s [Judith Smith, founder of AXIS, an integrated
dance company in California] letter (she said that they edited it and so it came
across much softer). I had the NEA [National Endowment of the Arts] call them
too. They never responded appropriately, but I would assume that I will never
have another feature in the magazine.

During spring 2008, I sent an inquiry to a Dance Magazine editor about writing an
article for Dancing Wheels. One of the editors responded:

Thank you for your interest. We ask that new writers send us a pitch letter that
tells why our readers would be interested in your topic and why this is a prime
time to cover it. We also ask that you send three clips of published writing on
dance that is NOT academic writing. Our features are, at the most, 1,500 words,
and written with journalistic directness and flow in mind.

In a later e-mail exchange, an editor said that I would need to have already published
three nonacademic articles about dance. When I received these e-mails, I was irritated
thinking about my perceptions of perceived barriers being placed in the dance community
to exclude integrated dance as part of modern dance movements.

Jeanne, the Developmental Director at Dancing Wheels, mentioned that she does
not feel that the stand-up dancers receive enough credit for their talent in the media and
dance community. Instead, the sit-down dancers tend to be the focus of media attention.

Maggie: What do the dancers at the Dancing Wheels do differently than other
mainstream artists?
Jeanne: Well there’s a couple things—I think the professionalism of the dancers here. People who have never seen the company think that our dancers don’t dance as well—like they’re maybe students or aren’t quality dancers—for some reason they couldn’t dance anywhere else or they might not have the training, so they don’t expect to come and see a performance and I’ve been listening to people for 10 years—they don’t expect to come see the performance and see the quality of dance that they see. It’s always, always, always amazing. If they’ve never seen them, not familiar with them and they’re just blown away—I think sometimes the dancers without disabilities feel like they’re not showcased as much as they should be and I think Mary’s [Verdi-Fletcher] trying very hard to have that not be the case so that [stand-ups] didn’t feel special or highlighted or maybe they didn’t get as much coverage—they never get mentioned in the press. This last time they did in the Stewart Pimsler piece. If there is a comment about a specific dancer nine times out of ten it’s about a [sit-down] dancer, that’s hard to take because [stand-ups] are working very hard too. I think that’s one thing. I think that is something that once they [reporters] see the company and I also think our level of repertory and choreography I think that’s changed so it highlights the stand-up dancers in an integrative fashion… I had heard some comments that people were tired of seeing, the same thing and seeing the same movements that they had seen at other times and that’s exactly what they
were seeing so it was a real complaint. So with all these different points—
everybody that comes in sees and I think again they see the stand-up
dancers in relation to the sit-down dancers in a way—and I think they’re
all great. I also think again that if they didn’t get the mission they wouldn’t
be here. If it didn’t make sense—because we have a lot of dancers that
come and don’t stay very long and I think it’s because it doesn’t make
sense to them for whatever reason, not a bad reason, it doesn’t click.

Jeanne noted that individuals who “click” with the mission most likely feel
included in it and are the ones who stay (see also Cochran & David, 1986). Verdi-
Fletcher and I talked about how she wants to have dancers who are easy to work with.

I always look for talent first, however if it comes down to someone who is
argumentative, arrogant and unsettled, I would take someone who I can train with
a bit less talent.

Verdi-Fletcher discussed ways in which Dancing Wheels has felt excluded from
the dance community when they are simply referred to as “a wheelchair company.” For
Mary, this moniker limits the positioning of Dancing Wheels as a professional
organization focused on art first; instead, the label directs attention to people’s
disabilities. One unintended consequence is that publics tend to think that once you have
seen the company perform, you have seen everything Dancing Wheels has to artistically
offer.

_Maggie:_ What would be some misconceptions about your work?
Mary: Oh my god. Well, calling it a “wheelchair company” is really bad, instead of it being physically integrated or just integrated company because it’s not a “wheelchair company.” Its core stems from me being in a wheelchair and wanting to dance with nondisabled dancers, but certainly not a “wheelchair company.” And I just was looking at—we’re developing a brochure and I just looked at what somebody had put in—and I didn’t write it but somebody had put in my bio the first wheelchair dance company, and so now I have to go back and find that and edit it and get it out of there because it’s not what I wrote.

Well that’s the one. I think the second perception is that it isn’t as professional because it includes people with disabilities. And these are people who haven’t seen it. I’m just saying, mentally if they see the name, if they haven’t seen it this is what they think. So those are the two biggest ones, the nonprofessional aspect and the wheelchair aspect. Overall, I think that they can’t perceive that it would be so broad in scope in terms of its artistic repertory, the quality of the dancers, the ability to transform ourselves from piece to piece. I think they think if they see one, they’ve seen it. I’ve even noted that amongst people who’ve brought people, like trying to get return people to come. “Oh yeah, I saw Dancing Wheels,” almost as if you would have seen—something that never changes. “Oh, I saw it. It’s great. But I’ve already seen it.” Which is such a weird perception.
Well I remember when I first applied to the Ohio Arts Council… I mean we didn’t even have a full big company or anything and their comment was, “Well I cannot imagine how they could create a repertory or a concert that would be diverse enough to keep people’s attention for an entire hour.” No problem, but it’s amazing, isn’t it? I mean we have over 35 pieces in our repertory now. They’re all different.

Dancing Wheels strives to have professional, high-quality, and diverse dance products. Steve, a Dancing Wheels Board member, echoed Verdi-Fletcher’s comments that it is difficult to get repeat audience members because people simply understand the “inclusion” part of Dancing Wheels mission to the “exclusion” of its performative nature:

**Maggie:** What are some negative perceptions of Dancing Wheels? What does the company do to combat them as an organization?

**Steve:** I don’t know if it’s a negative perception. I think one of the problems that we have is that people think that once you’ve seen a performance at Dancing Wheels, you’ve seen that. It’s like when you see a movie. I’ve already saw that. I don’t need to see that again. And many people look at it that—unlike… a dance, like the Cleveland Ballet that was here that would perform once a month with some different performance every time. You never say, “Oh, I’ve seen the ballet. I don’t need to see that again.” You’re always looking for what’s new. Somehow—there’s this feeling about Dancing Wheels that once you’ve seen this integrated dance then it’s as if they only have one thing that they
did. And that’s a problem. Because we don’t get the repeat audience coming back. There are certain, obviously, people who do come back time after time. But it’s a small amount.

And it’s a shame because there’s such a wide diversity in the performances that they do and the things that they do. And you look at the *Alice in Wonderland* thing they did and compare that with *Snowman*. I mean, they were two very different kinds of things. Each could be enjoyed. So that’s a problem. And I don’t know what—and we aren’t doing anything about it or nothing successful, anyway. Somehow we need some sort of marketing that addresses that issue.

Jeanne, the Developmental Director, mentioned that Dancing Wheels is often perceived as the “little sister,” an outsider, in the mainstream dance community:

*Maggie:* How do you think the mainstream art world perceives Dancing Wheels?

*Jeanne:* They don’t feel we’re a quality dance company, that’s what I hear. Its kinda like oh and then there is this company and this company and this company [Dancing Wheels] kind of like my little sister is coming.

*Maggie:* How does Dancing Wheels contribute to the dance community?

*Jeanne:* Because of that it’s difficult to be taken seriously so if you do get involved in it there’s that whole dance organization out of New England, Dance of America—Dance USA—well they organize a big dance collaborative down here. We were involved in it, but again I think there was that feeling that we were the little sister—you have to bring your little sister to the—
not taken seriously. You know, bring your sister because you cannot find a babysitter. It takes a tremendous amount of effort…

Verdi-Fletcher mentioned that locating The Dancing Wheels Company & School in downtown Cleveland allows them to have more legitimacy (and be included) in broader dance communities. This is not surprising given that most professional dance companies are located in the city. Also Dancing Wheels is located in the city because children from various economic backgrounds will be able to have access to it:

*Maggie:* I’m also interested in Dancing Wheels’ position in the city [downtown Cleveland]. Does it make a difference that the company is located in the city as opposed to another kind of environment [such as a suburb of Cleveland]?  

*Mary:* If it was in a suburb, it would be Dolly Duke’s School of Dance. Meaning that it would be like any other corner little dance school that you see. Maybe have more students because it’s in an environment where there’s more families. That’s a possibility; however, in these communities, the people with disabilities are far fewer per household. Your average nondisabled kid is not gonna go to a dancing wheels school, per se, because they can go down to J’Te’s down the street [any random dance school] to take a dance class.

It’s positioned in Cleveland because of its funding ability. It has a more centralized location. It can appeal to a broader range of people, those with economic problems, issues, challenges, as well as those with physical. So
it allows us to serve a bigger population in that area. Those people don’t have a dance school to go to and if they did, they probably couldn’t afford to go to that school. So we try to serve people who wouldn’t otherwise have an opportunity to dance or have a program of some sort. That’s the whole reason for why we have this school. And as far as the company goes, I have always been from the philosophy that if you move into the suburbs, you just lose your strong status as being Cleveland based. So that’s why I wanted to keep us there. Cleveland Foundation originally, now I don’t know they may have changed their rulings but typically they give to Cleveland. If you’re in Cleveland, you receive funding from the Cleveland Foundation. If you’re in whatever suburb, not so much… And more research could be done on that, but that’s my feeling. If you see most of the major dance companies in Cleveland, they’re in Cleveland. Yeah, [even] if they have an office somewhere else, they pretty much perform in Cleveland. Cleveland proper. I was thinking Verb Ballet has an office in the Shaker area. That’s still considered Cleveland, but they never have their presence over there. They rehearse in our studios, or at Playhouse Square [in downtown Cleveland].

In short, the staff and directors of Dancing Wheels are aware of socio-spatial dynamics and have sought to position Dancing Wheels in spaces that are highly valued. Such moves have fostered, to some extent, the inclusion of Dancing Wheels in the broader dance communities.
Dancing Wheels opens up new possibilities for disability narratives that function as protests against who can be included in dance. Verdi-Fletcher brought to my attention the ways in which individuals with disabilities have been marginalized from the dance world in academia:

In academia, reasons why wheelchair dancers can’t get a dance degree. Historically dance has been defined for the elite, the “able,” those with legs, the young. However not only Dancing Wheels, but others who demand to participant have changed the face of dance. The evolution has taken many turns, as you well know. Modern dance and modern female choreographers specifically were not taken seriously. Now, older dancers have professional companies, the genre of acceptable dance has expanded significantly (I don’t know if you have been watching the new international dance competition [“Superstars of Dance” International Dance Competition, NBC], but hip-hop is competing with ballet! How can they make the comparison? Obviously they are going beyond a specific technique. They are evaluating performance ability!)

Having said all that, dancers with disabilities are still contending with the stereotypic view of disability. It doesn’t matter what technique [you use] or your stage presence or strength as a performer. Often times even the word disabled conjures up so many negative images that you can’t even get people to come and see it. Now after they do see it, images are transformed. So my theory is that you must see it to believe it.
Inclusion and Exclusion in Broader Society

“I imagine a fully accessible society, the most fundamental characteristic of which is universal recognition that all structures have to be built and all activities have to be organized for the widest practical range of human abilities... I do not mean that everyone would be able to do everything, but rather that, with respect to the major aspects of life in the society, the differences in ability between someone who can walk, or see, or hear, and someone who cannot, would be no more significant than the differences in ability among people who can walk, see, or hear.” (Wendell, 1996, pp. 55-56)

At Dancing Wheels, because of the inclusion of individuals with disabilities on stages, there is an increased visibility of people with disabilities in the arts and in the public sphere. Marks (2001) argued that individuals with disabilities deserve inclusive citizenship as well as visible recognition in the nation state. Performance allows the body to be masked, manipulated to express a multiplicity of movements and identities. Dancing Wheels offers a vehicle for individuals with disabilities to be included and paid in the arts. Barnes and Mercer (2003) noted that, for individuals with disabilities, being paid symbolizes status, freedom, social validation, and independence. By equating paid work with status, we unintentionally marginalize those who are denied employment opportunities (Barnes & Mercer, 2003). Mark D., a sit-down dancer, discussed how Dancing Wheels is “work.”

Maggie: You talked a little bit about how when you first got involved it was work for you. Can you talk a little bit why you consider it work?
It’s a challenge—the one thing I learned is that once you worked somewhere for a long time, you have to learn to leave work at work… that’s way I work with Dancing Wheels, I would leave all the stress and all the frustration at work… It’s like cuz then you’re there every day with the same people and you’re workin’ and pretty much—I don’t wanna say it’s the same pieces, but when you’re there working with the choreographer and you’re working on the same piece for a week, and you’re expected to pick it up as the choreographers are showing you, “Okay, this is what we’re doin’,” and then you have to memorize it, it becomes frustrating. Sometimes with me, I’m like, “Yeah, right.” I just couldn’t do it. I couldn’t just get it all, so when I got home, I was like, “Man, I’m just like leavin’ it all at work,” just go do somethin’ else… go to the gym or somethin’ else when I probably should’ve been practicing… goin’ over the choreography or somethin’, but it’s just easier for me just… so I can relax and go back the next day.

Later, Mark D. articulated how in order to dance in the company, it has to be more than a job because none of the dancers get paid enough:

Mary knows that and that’s basically one of the things—if somebody doesn’t do the dancing as a hobby then they’re probably not gonna do it because they’re not gonna get paid enough.

Mark D. suggested that dance was not his passion as compared to motocross and basketball. However, dance does provide financial resources that he does not receive in
other activities he participates in. Also, he had limited employment opportunities because companies do not want to cover the health insurance.

And it’s like if you go ahead and you get a job, you have to get insurance, okay, your medical insurance, you also have to get a job that’s going to give you the benefits of… that the state gives you. And finding a job like that, I mean, you’d have to at least, at least make $70-80,000 a year. And, I mean, even that, I mean, like one surgery can set you back… 50 grand easy… It’s sad to say, but 60% of people in wheelchairs, even after 8 years, are still not employed, still don’t have a full-time job and that’s a statistic. It’s like 60% and that’s high, I mean, that’s really high if you think about it cuz, I mean, we can get out there and get a job, but who’s gonna pay 4 or $5,000 for a new wheelchair every 5 years… 6 years or whatever?… who’s gonna pay for the doctor visits?

I argue that Dancing Wheels dancers, such as Sara and Kristen, stand-up dancers, often feel excluded from society because they do not qualify for healthcare or have poor healthcare:

**Maggie:** What kind of health insurance are you on? Have you run into any problems with your health insurance?

**Sara:** I have no health insurance right now. Darn. I don’t like it. But since I’ve been here—actually, I was on my parent’s health insurance until I graduated. And they even found out I was out of school and a couple months after, my parents had already paid for that year. They’re like, did she graduate? Yeah. And then they cut it off right then.
Well, I went about six months after that with no health insurance. And then working here, I found out about Metro Health Hospital. And they have a program that’s like low income, if you make under a certain amount of money, you get free healthcare. So I took advantage of that for about six months until I made too much money. I think it’s like $20,000 a year. I think that’s the amount. And it was after I started teaching that I had too much money. Yeah, I mean students. And I didn’t have my other job then I would qualify here. I’m kind of pissed about it because you have to go in for like an interview every three months so they can check your income and provide paycheck stubs and what not. And I was only like $120 over the last time they checked. And they’re like, sorry. And it’s not even like a graded scale. It’s not like you can pay half or something. Pay half of your healthcare when you come here. So now I’m back to nothing. And it’s like I can’t afford health insurance even though I make $120 over $20,000. Like I still can’t pay $200 a month for health insurance.

Sara, in a spirit of individualism and meritocracy, is buying into the ways in which Americans are expected to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps” rather than participate in medical assistance. Kristen, a stand-up dancer who has health insurance, talked about how her limited and expensive coverage constricts her from being able to participate in other aspects of life (e.g., have a baby).

I have health insurance, group health insurance, dental and vision. I haven’t really run into any issues. Just the price is hard, having health insurance, and then
some of us have it here and some of us don’t. I think it’s just hard financially not to have it.

I mean, everybody gets things taken out of their paycheck, but my health insurance, I have mild asthma that I may have once a year. Exercise induced. I have to be in the right humidity and temperature. There is stuff that I can do like make sure I have the right temperature, or whatever. And I pay $200 a month for basic health insurance. And that’s the deductible. When I had the allergic reaction here, there was workers’ comp, and I had co-pay that I had to pay. It makes it hard. It covered part of it, but when I had the pulmonary embolism, they were checking my heart and checking my brain, and checking—they’re doing CAT scans and EKGs and it adds up. It was $12,000. And then, they wonder why I won’t have a baby.

Scholars have written about the stereotype of the “starving artists” who forgo material wealth in order to focus on their artwork (Baumol & Bowen, 1965; Filer, 1986; Nicholson, 2003). The American healthcare system has had a long history of discriminating against artists (Perlstein, 1998) and individuals with disabilities (Brock, 2000; Orentlicher, 2000).

At Dancing Wheels, I witnessed other ways in which society can be potentially inaccessible for people with disabilities. Verdi-Fletcher told me that one of the first questions Dancing Wheels asks when someone wants to book them for a show is: “Is your stage accessible? What about your bathrooms?” Consider the following excerpts from my fieldnotes.
While at a show in Mansfield, Ohio, I was running around the beautiful, historic Renaissance Theater bringing costumes to different dancers. It took me a while to realize why I was doing so much running up and down stairs. The female dancers could not all be in the same dressing room because the dressing rooms were not accessible to the wheelers because a staircase, without a lift, separated them.

After the show, Marie, a colleague, and I walked out to the lobby and were greeted by the Dancing Wheels dancers. There was this power of seeing the dancers with and without disabilities standing together. They looked strong and beautiful. Going over and talking to them was like going to talk to celebrities. When I used to go to Broadway shows in NYC, my friends and I would wait for the actors/actresses to leave the theater and ask for their autographs. I had that same nervous and exhilarating feeling tonight. I had never seen so many people in wheelchairs together in one location. I wonder, if when they go to other cities, if other people have the same reaction.

As I reflect on my fieldnotes, I am reminded of the ways in which we often think of individuals with disabilities as dependent or alone. When I walked into the lobby, I noticed their strength and connection to the other dancers in the group. I often wonder if, when they travel to other cities, others have the same star-struck reaction.

Mark D., a sit-down dancer, revealed that because of the amount of travel they experience, he is able to see places (e.g., cites and towns) that are otherwise not accessible for him. Even so, not all spaces are accessible:
Mark D.: … I mean, being in a wheelchair not everything is accessible. I mean, this building [his apartment complex], for example, when you came in, that door up there, that’s a real heavy door and it also has a step. So getting out of that door, you have to push open the door and then you have to pull yourself up as you’re doing a wheelie to get over that step, but it has a wheelchair ramp. Once you get outside, it’s got a ramp, so it’s like… it’s accessible but then again it’s not. So it was just stuff like that.

Maggie: Has your understanding of integration changed since you started working at Dancing Wheels?

Mark D.: I think it opens up your eyes more and you get to see a lot more when you’re with a company that travels… and does lots of performances… with kids in schools and dealing just in different states and cities where… it’s not so accessible… you get to see all that stuff. It opens up your eyes a lot, like, “Wow,”… it seems like… some places it seems like just by looking at the town and how it’s not set up for anybody in a wheelchair, it’s like it seems like these people are being alienated against just because they’re in a wheelchair. It’s like nobody makes any voiced forum and saying, “Hey, you need to make this more accessible for,” or if it’s a small town of like 5,000… and there’s like 3 people in wheelchairs, there’s 3 people in wheelchairs, they have a voice and somebody needs to speak up for ‘em. And I don’t know, that’s… you see stuff like that and it’s like just… you wanna do somethin’, you wanna say something.’
Dezare, a stand-up dancer, mentioned that the physical disabilities of the dancers become visible when she realizes the exclusionary structural barriers faced by sit-down dancers.

**Maggie:** How is disability defined by the company?

**Dezare:** Disability. They’re very independent, so you don’t focus on the disabled ability of them. The only time that I’ve ever experienced disability is when we find parking spots. So, like, we were over on, I think it’s 36th and Prospect, St. Clair, it’s over in that area. I went to a Chinese restaurant and we had to park on the street because we didn’t realize that they had a parking lot. So I realized that Jenny [sit-down dancer], that she needed a ramp, and so they pay attention to those things, but we [stand-up dancers] don’t because, like, we can walk anywhere and get over any curbs. So that would definitely be like something that defines their disability. It’s parking—it’s such a simple thing for us, but to them [sit-down dancers] it’s a big thing.

The ways in which institutional spaces are designed reflect historical patterns of organizing around and for able-bodied individuals. These same spaces reveal patterns of inclusion and exclusion, connection and segregation.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I have explored how Dancing Wheels (re)stories persons, organizations, and publics through embodied and dialogic movement. In doing so, it promotes the inclusion of individuals in aesthetic and vocational aspects of community
life who too often remained excluded. By developing and drawing on aesthetic sensibilities, members answer and include difference through dance and create new movement possibilities that foster social change and disrupt patterns of exclusion. The studio at once benefits from and resists science and technology—rationalities and tools that include cyborg bodies in public spheres. Like other activist movements and organizations, Dancing Wheels also confronts the limits of living its mission of inclusion, and must remain vigilant regarding whose experiences are included and whose are marginalized in the organizing patterns of the studio.
CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion

Works of art that offer new ways of seeing the human body propose new ways to be human. (Bateson, 1994, p. 224)

Language is critically linked to issues of knowledge, and ultimately power...for new disability discourse to produce the kind of socio-cultural change which is its task, it must significantly increase both its prestige and its status by directly engaging with hegemonic structures and practices. (Corker, 1999, p. 193)

This dissertation brings together in scholarly conversation the work of Mairian Corker, Mary Catherine Bateson, and numerous others through my exploration of embodied and dialogic storytelling, disability/difference, subjectivities and bodies, feminisms, knowledge, power, and institutional and medical barriers that foster inequities and societal segregation. As a health and organizational communication scholar, I believe that humans make sense of chronic and episodic health concerns through symbolic resources that derive their meaning, in part, from their relationship to other texts (e.g., intertextuality) and from their social, political, and economic contexts. I agree with Corker (1999) that individuals’ identities and communities’ collective imaginations are rendered meaningful through language. Yet, my work stretches this inter-disciplinary conversation by emphasizing the range of signifying practices drawn on by individuals in the name of social justice. Props (e.g., wheelchairs), movements, voice-overs, and
choreographed repertory represent texts to be engaged narratively. As my results chapter demonstrates, the world as lived by members of Dancing Wheels is “seeable” just as it is “sayable.” Even so, dominant narrative scholarship focuses on the linguistic construction (and disruption) of social life and social change (see critique by Riessman, 2008). Meanwhile, post-structural feminists interested in the organized nature of (dis)empowerment have focused much of their attention on discourses of gender and race to the exclusion of other markers of marginality, including disability and class (see critiques by Allen, 2000). Dancing Wheels opens up new possibilities for disability activists and feminists even as it demands that we theoretically stretch how we make sense of the organization of social change from a communicative perspective.

My approach in this case study of The Dancing Wheels Company & School wove together features of narrative inquiry, discourse analysis, participant observation and one-on-one interviews (see also Riessman, 1993). Narrative remains central to the ways in which individuals make sense of their lives and experiences. Similar to Fairclough (1989), I acknowledge the role of language in the construction of narratives and the interdependent relationships between discourse and institutional forces. I believe that language shapes and is shaped by ideologies manifested in social institutions and structures. Yet, an emphasis on language alone would fail to capture the nuanced efforts of Dancing Wheels to aesthetically and communicatively call into question dominant scripts and offer alternative visions for both those marked as disabled and those who are temporarily able-bodied. Through this dissertation, I urge scholars, especially those in communication, to continue to explore embodied differences that matter—differences
which take on meaning and differential value—and the organized efforts of individuals trying to redress the resulting lived inequities, divisions, and marginalization.

I began this dissertation by pondering the ways in which The Dancing Wheels Company & School questions and fosters dialogue about (ab)normal bodies and their legitimate right to exist, relate, organize, and become in public domains. I developed five themes in Chapter Four: *Meaning in Motion: (Re)storying Persons, Organizations, and Publics through Dance; The Art of Dialogue in Integrated Dance, Aesthetic Knowledge and Sensemaking in Organizational Life at Dancing Wheels; Science, Technology, Medicine and the Dancing (Dis)abled Body, and Moving through Realms of Exclusion, and Inclusion in Integrated Dance*. Collectively, these themes narrate a story (but not the story) of this organization, and the possibilities and tensions members experience as they organize around difference and with a mission of inclusion. This dissertation came out of an aspiration to advance scholarly discussion about the ways in which communication interweaves corporeal, material, discursive, social and institutional forces, which in turn shape how individuals experience disability and difference. Dancing Wheels mobilizes various resources for dancers with and without disabilities in order to engage individuals in socially charged performances with the hope of enhancing community dialogue about disability and other marginalized populations.

Narrative and post-structural feminist theories offered useful lenses through which to explore Dancing Wheels and the experiences of its stakeholders. Narrative theory offered a way to focus attention on the ways in which organizing is realized through the process of emplotment that connects characters in webs of relationships...
embedded in time and space. Post-structural feminism demanded that I remember how storytelling and other embodied discourses establish and maintain power relations, and sometimes reclaim voices and experiences often subjugated. I hope insights gained from participant observations, in-depth interviews, and discourses from and about Dancing Wheels, as read and interpreted using my narrative and feminist sensibilities, inspire scholars and practitioners to focus ongoing efforts on aesthetic rationalities and embodied communication in the service of raising consciousness and constructing more empowering and inclusive community life.

In the remainder of this chapter, I discuss the theoretical implications and contributions of this study as I answer my three research questions:

RQ1: How is disability storied and performed at Dancing Wheels?

RQ2: How do the discourses of Dancing Wheels reinscribe and/or resist dominant narratives of disability?

RQ3: How do legal, economic, and corporeal issues shape how Dancing Wheels enacts disability?

Next, I articulate limitations of this study as well as practical applications and directions for future research. Finally, I conclude with reflections of my journey with Dancing Wheels and some final last reflections.

Theoretical Implications

In order to explain the significance of my interpretation of the data collected, I first advance a discussion of the theoretical implications of my findings. Reflecting on each research question individually, I highlight themes, issues, and key concepts that
seem central to each question. Certainly, the boundaries between each theme blurred as I thought about and wrote them. Likewise, answers to these questions, however partial they may be, also speak to multiple curiosities simultaneously.

*Research Question One*

Research question one asked: How is disability storied and performed at Dancing Wheels? Insights from two themes: *Meaning in Motion: (Re)storying Persons, Organizations, and Publics through Dance* and *The Art of Dialogue in Integrated Dance* speak directly to this question. Dancing Wheels is a salient context in which to understand disability and difference in organizational life. Disability is enacted and limited in multiple ways at and around Dancing Wheels. Siebers (2008) argued that “human beings make lives together by sharing their stories with each other. There is no other way of being together for our kind” (p. 48). Mary Verdi-Fletcher is aware of this and mobilizes her own ever-emergent life story in an effort to include experiences and individuals too often excluded from aesthetic and vocational realms and from the collective imagination of a society. Likewise, through my narration of the history of The Dancing Wheels Company & School, I hoped to shape the collective memory of a community (see also Dewey, 1927/1954).

After having been in the field for several months, I became aware of how individual stories such as the mobilizing narrative of the founder were integral to the evolution of the organization as well as the ways in which members story the organization so that it can be accepted in society. Avery (1999) argued, “Communities have the potential to re-story and restore self within the larger society” (p. 118). The
studio relies on the intricacies of dance to story its activist pedagogy and agenda of making the arts accessible to diverse peoples. As I pen these words, I am reminded of Barrett and Thomas’ (1995) poetic argument:

Communication, then, is not just a conduit of transferring information from one person to another, rather it is the very process by which organizing comes to acquire consensual meaning. Organizing, therefore, is continuously created and recreated in actions of communication among an organization’s members. (p. 353)

The studio exercises members’ imaginations to organize in ways that enlarge rather than restrict individual capacity.

Popular Memory Group (1982) argued “the principle value of a narrative is that its information comes complete with evaluations, explanation and theories and with selectivities, silences, slippages that are intrinsic to its representation of reality” (p. 228). Throughout my fieldwork, I witnessed the power of narrative to change the lives of storytellers. Many of the participants noted that, if I had never asked the question, they never would have thought about it. Throughout the interview process and participant observations, I beared witness to the power of narrative to change the lives of storytellers. Also, from a feminist perspective, I noted the ways in which individuals created new signifying practices (including new movements) that reconstituted meanings of disability. I saw the ways in which narrators “use the power to name their experiences, and rename it if necessary” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 22). Additionally, individuals created a new emancipatory language with the hopes to reconstitute disability. For example, company
terms of stand-up and sit-down dancers as well as the term “translation” enlarge rhetorical resources and movement possibilities for participants. More generally, “this is to say that language for the postmodernist is not a reflection of a world but is world constituting. Language does not describe action but is itself a form of action” (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 2004, p. 237). As Dancing Wheels moves into the future, they will need to think about the ways in which their organizing scripts will need to shift, change, or stay consistent with the stories that have given shape to their rituals and practices.

Additionally, because of the dialogic nature of integrated dance, stories or conversations are shared between individuals and audiences to raise consciousness about difference. My analysis answers McKerrow’s (1998) and Selzer and Crowley’s (1999) calls for communicative considerations of the body. Through trust, responsiveness, difference, and reciprocity, bodies are able to connect with other bodies in integrated dance. The aesthetic values and sensibilities practiced in integrated dance at Dancing Wheels encourage members to more fully acknowledge and respond to embodied difference. By exercising their imaginations, members of Dancing Wheels are tapping into, rather than merely accommodating, embodied difference.

Research Question Two

The second research question asked: How do the discourses of Dancing Wheels reinscribe and/or resist dominant narratives of disability? Three themes spoke to this research question: Aesthetic Knowledge and Sensemaking in Organizational Life at Dancing Wheels; Science, Technology, Medicine and the Dancing (Dis)abled Body; and Moving through Realms of Exclusion and Inclusion in Integrated Dance. Scholars have
long discussed dance as communication (Hanna, 1987), language (Baxmann, 1989), and form of thought (Jaeger, 2005). Also, dance, through the medium of the body in artistic expression, has been noted to encompass personal, relational, and historical aspects of a society. Because individuals with disabilities typically have been excluded from opportunities to participate in the arts, they have been excluded from creative opportunities to communicate. At Dancing Wheels individuals perform narratives and alternative narratives as they resist dominant understandings of disability and ability. Also, they resist dominant scripts of what counts as dance and disability as they have made space for those who may not have had an opportunity to participate. For example, individuals with disabilities are included in the dance aesthetic of a professional company. Also, children with disabilities are able to participate in the school and perform in mainstage performances with a professional company. As a result, Dancing Wheels creates space for certain subjectivities in the arts to emerge that otherwise would not have been possible. The embodied storytelling that unfolds on stage or in the studio legitimizes subject positions and unearths subjugated knowledges.

It is through 28 years of alternative expressions of the body coupled with aesthetic creativity that Dancing Wheels has begun to revolutionize movements that can be considered or included in dance. Again, it is through their performances that Dancing Wheels has been able to expand our vision of art, beauty, and activism. Dancing Wheels realizes Crowther’s (2004) conceptual argument about art: “By virtue of its creative difference from other representations, [the work of art] opens up new possibilities of aesthetic experience” (p. 372). Matos (2008), when discussing disability and dance, said,
What was previously hidden, because it was considered an imperfection or a lack, may then be revealed and transformed into an element that generates other possibilities of movement and this yields new approaches in both the creation and perception of dance. The artists and audience members are newly related to their own incompleteness by looking and contacting the other’s body, forming a direct relationship among imperfection, perfection, and ambivalence. (p. 73)

It is important to note that the inclusion of individuals with disabilities and other differences in dance may be “disconcerting to critics and audience members who are committed to an aesthetic of ideal beauty” (Cooper Albright, 1997, p. 63), and this was revealed in resistance on the part of some dance outlets to cover the work of Dancing Wheels.

The combination of flesh and technology as utilized by dancers with and without disabilities changes our cultural perceptions of how the body is capable of performing. Also, when dancers have no movement in the lower half of their bodies, the organizational artifact of the wheelchair reminds audiences that disability in dance offers new elements through which choreographers can revise audiences’ perceptions of ability, completeness, and functionality. As an example, when integrated dance is performed well, audiences are able to see past the medicalization of the disabled body (e.g., wheelchairs as tragedy) to a new understanding of ability, inclusion, (im)perfection, and humanity (see Goodwin, Krohn, & Kuhnle, 2004; Kuppers, 2000).

Post-structural feminists recognize that hegemonic signifying practices construct subjects “by a discourse that weaves knowledge and power” (Alcoff, 1997, p. 336).
Bodies are materialized through discourse (Price & Shildrick 2002, p. 62), and it is through discursive formations that organizations make possible roles and routines. At Dancing Wheels, the biomedical model has influenced individuals’ perspectives of normality. Both past and contemporary medical discourses give rise to the representation of “the body as a model of industrial society” and machine (Martin, 1992, p. 37). Tremain (2002), using the work of Foucault, claimed “impairment and its materiality are naturalized effects of disciplinary knowledge/power” (p. 34). Existing understandings of normality serve as a means “through which to identify subjects and make them identify themselves in ways that make them governable” (Tremain, 2002, p. 37).

By drawing on my own aesthetic sensibilities as a method of analyzing this organization, I sought to capture the lived experiences of organizational actors in the settings in which they live their lives. I paid attention to the ways in which my body and perceptions impacted my interpretation of the data. Moya and Hames-García (2000) claimed “knowledge is not disembodied… comes into being in and through the embodied selves” (p. 81). Throughout the process, I remained attentive to how my fieldwork was itself embodied.

Research Question Three

The third research question asked: How do legal, economic, and corporeal issues shape how Dancing Wheels enacts disability? Three themes address this theme: Science, Technology, Medicine, and the Dancing (Dis)abled Body; Moving through Realms of Exclusion and Inclusion in Integrated Dance; and The Art of Dialogue in Integrated Dance. One of the first times I was in the field, Mac, a stand-up dancer from Vietnam
who has been with the company since the early 1990s and who serves as the current rehearsal director said, “Don’t marry a dancer, marry someone rich so you can donate to us.” I paused because I never had any intention to marry a dancer and did not know what inspired the comment. However, through later conversations, I learned that his comments had more to do with the low socioeconomic status that many of the dancers live in as well as their limited access to healthcare.

The most habitually held belief about disability is that it involves a defect, deficiency, dysfunction, abnormality, failing, or a medical problem that is located in the individual (Bickenbach, 1993, p. 61). The social meaning given to impairment and disability gives rise to public and institutional responses to these conditions (Bickenbach, 1993). Discourse functions to “create, maintain, and transform the background of agreements and set of interlocking assumptions that reinforce one another and delimit what is knowable within organizational communities” (Barrett & Thomas, 1995, p. 360). Dancing Wheels, with its focus on inclusion and ability, attempts to create a space to disrupt institutional and public responses to disability through art. Their approach to dance is aligned with the cultural model in which an individual has the right to accept his or her disabled body.

Although there has been legislation to promote the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in societal life, the biomedical model continues to shape legislative and institutional practices (Gleeson, 1999; Kaye & Longmore, 1997). Consider, too, Newell’s (1999) argument:
The state can be seen as particularly important in constructing and replicating disability… Predominately, in the major spheres of life such as medicine, law, theology, economics, and all other disciplines, the approach has been on managing and dealing with ‘the problem of the disabled’ as deviant individuals, as opposed to recognizing that narrow norms have oppressed people with disabilities via systems and attitudes. (p. 49)

Along with its communicative practices, technological advances, science and medicine, Dancing Wheels’ performances disrupt medical models for disability by including bodies with and without disabilities in aesthetic experiences. Indeed, Dancing Wheels performances attempt to diffuse a political message (or act of protest) and expand our understandings of art, beauty, and activism as they reshape, redefine, and re-articulate our understandings of who is able to participate in dance. Although the mission of The Dancing Wheels Company & School places an emphasis on activism (although perhaps not everyone in the company and school embraces that mission), throughout this dissertation, I acknowledged that not every person with a disability needs to bear the responsibility of activism.

Practical Implications

Along with the theoretical implications, which remain essential to the dissertation process, in order to fulfill the feminist/narrative ethos of this project, I also offer practical implications. Specifically I offer ten areas in which Dancing Wheels can revise daily practices in ways I believe will be beneficial to organizational members. First, I suggest that Dancing Wheels assimilate organization members into the organizational culture and
mission so that dancers, staff, and board members understand the history and the purpose of the organization. Second, I recommend that Verdi-Fletcher have conversations with dancers about their contracts. Many seemed to have difficulty articulating what their contracts stated, especially in terms of health care benefits. Third, I suggest that Verdi-Fletcher and the rehearsal director, Mac, a stand-up dancer, have conversations with dancers about why they are taken out of dances or not invited to do performances. Several of the dancers mentioned frustrations when individuals are taken out of dances without explanation. Fourth, I propose that Board of Dancing Wheels continue to work on taking some of the financial and artistic responsibilities off of Verdi-Fletcher. During my fieldwork, I learned that many individuals were concerned that Dancing Wheels may not go on without Verdi-Fletcher. Fifth, I suggest Dancing Wheels bring in an outside rehearsal director who is not a company member so that a company member is not also responsible for making decisions about who is in performances. Also, many of the company members had other administrative responsibilities. I witnessed times where dancers felt their roles conflicted. Sixth, I advise that Dancing Wheels continue to work on their social networking (e.g., Facebook and Myspace) in order to bring in more audiences. As of March 1, 2009, the Dancing Wheels Facebook page that I created is up and running and they have been advertising for their April 2009 event. Seventh, I would like to see Dancing Wheels post video clips of their repertory so that more and more individuals have access to their work. Eighth, I encourage Dancing Wheels to continue to work on creating new and innovative choreography and bringing in choreographers who are able to push the boundaries of movements available to individuals with and without
disabilities. For example, on February 16, 2009, I e-mailed Verdi-Fletcher a CNN link for “Dancing chair; for the disabled” in which a hands-free motorized chair allows the dancer to express with arms instead of having to power with arms (Cohen, 2009). Verdi-Fletcher responded:

Hi Maggie, we need to contact them. I am not sure, but I may have met the male wheelchair dancer somewhere. I am not fond of the chair concept because it seems to take away the propulsion action which feels like more energy of movement (this has the feel of a power drive chair). But it is very interesting and could certainly be an added element to dance.

Since that video came out, I have contacted the creator of the chair, Merry Lynn Morris from the University of South Florida, and put Morris in touch with Verdi-Fletcher about the possibility of Dancing Wheels purchasing the chair. Indeed, it appears that Verdi-Fletcher is willing to continue to shift her company’s aesthetic with the possibility of including motorized wheelchairs.

My ninth suggestion is that, as Dancing Wheels moves into the future, they take into consideration the ways in which they hope the story of Dancing Wheels continues on. For example, the mobilizing narrative of the Founder/President/Artistic Director, Verdi-Fletcher, is so central to the organizational identity. What will happen when she is no longer is able to run the organization? Who will take over? Will they be ready to shift the aesthetic of the organization to match future artistic directors and choreographers? Without Verdi-Fletcher running the artistic and business aspects of the organization will Dancing Wheels continue to be a financially viable organization? I would like Dancing
Wheels to consider all of the previously mentioned questions as they talk about the future.

Lastly, I believe this study makes a contribution as Dancing Wheels is an excellent example of what integration can look like. Of course, an integrated society is not going to look as we have known it to be. I hope this study will carry on conversations in academia and beyond about the disenfranchisement that many artists with and without disabilities face (e.g., harsh economic, political, and cultural realities). For example, the bona fide occupational qualifications for professional dance have traditionally been reserved for individuals who are able-bodied. However, we need to continue to look at other physically demanding trades/occupations in which the qualifications are generally thought to include being able-bodied (e.g., waiting tables) to think of ways to integrate people of all abilities. As seen through the communicative practices employed at Dancing Wheels, individuals with disabilities do not need to be excluded from the participating in physically demanding occupations, but those occupations might need to be re-envisioned to include otherwise excluded individuals.

Limitations

Taken as a whole, I am proud of my dissertation fieldwork and write-up. I found the experience rewarding. In this section, I put forward four limitations of this study. First, when I interviewed many of the dancers, they mentioned that it was difficult for them to express their thoughts and feelings in words. Company members mentioned that they usually rely on dance to express and communicate. I would have liked to have video-taped one-on-one interviews since many of the dancers moved their bodies to
emphasize points. Additionally, I wish I had conducted participatory sketching and photography to allow the dancers another way to communicate that is not as reliant on linguistic conventions. Second, I would have liked to have asked the dancers to narrate the movements their bodies go through as they engage in integrated dance. For example, when I described my first integrated dance experience with Mark D., I would be interested to have had him describe what it felt like to dance from the sit-down perspective. Third, absent from this dissertation are the voices of audience members, children with and without disabilities who work with the school, and parents of company and school members. Fourth, I would have liked to interview individuals from other integrated dance companies about their perceptions of Dancing Wheels. Since I traveled to watch Dancing Wheels perform at various locations in the Midwest, I was able to witness multiple audiences’ responses to their performances and talk with audience members around me about their perceptions. Therefore, I was able to witness their interactions in the public (e.g., organization-society relationship). These limitations can hopefully inspire ongoing research.

Directions for Future Research

This study concludes with some guiding questions and suggestions for further study, which may help future arts and communication scholars. Indeed, performances need to be critically and interpretively examined. As I worked on this project, I left my fieldwork with more questions than answers. This project stimulated questions as I spent time in the field and as I analyzed and gathered data. Indeed, contemporary performance
(with and without individuals with disabilities) is always political and personal and I hope to show the ways in which the personal is political and vice versa.

This dissertation confirmed my desire to continue to work with organizations that combine aesthetic and instrumental rationalities in order to work for social change. Because of their interest, like mine, in applied communication issues, communication scholars need to stay involved with contemporary social problems in order to foster and nurture the discipline through connections between research and praxis. In the future I hope communication scholars, including myself, continue to ask and answer questions about the discursive understandings of various aspects of disability and difference and work with other organizations that seek to redress social problems. I feel that communication studies, because of its attention to symbols, is uniquely positioned for discursive approaches to understanding social problems or organizations working to solve problems. I strongly believe that the area of integrated dance needs input from many scholars both inside and outside the field of communication (see also, Westhaver, 2000). For example, bringing together narrative theory and post-structural feminism is one entry point into studying integrated dance at organizations like Dancing Wheels.

Due to my experiences as someone who lives with disabilities, mostly invisible, I entered this project sensitized to some of the systematic, material, aesthetic, corporeal, dialogic, and symbolic aspects of disability that individuals with invisible disabilities face. However, this project sensitized me to some of experiences that individuals with visible disabilities experience that have some similarities but also differences. Other
approaches will help us make sense of ways in which we can strive for a more integrated society.

From a discursive perspective, scholars need to continue to interrogate the body, with and without corporeal limitations, as a medium and outcome of social and personal realities in order to understand issues such as the production and creation of bodies and their meanings in our society. For example, how and why certain bodies become privileged and marginalized in our society remained central to this dissertation. Additionally, I view performance as way in which to educate individuals about lived differences. There needs to be continued rhetorical and ethnographic exploration of Dancing Wheels and organizations that strive to be more inclusive (i.e., collaborative art studios, integrated theater groups). I believe that much research remains to be done in the area of integration. Future research needs to more fully explore the embodied nature of work/labor. Also, I would like to see scholars write about the history of integrated dance in order to make sure that these histories “will not be lost” (Verdi-Fletcher, personal interview) and that they become part of our mainstream understanding of dance. I hope that future research will document the content of these performances. For example, many of the Dancing Wheels performances tell powerful stories about issues of difference, and I would like to see Dancing Wheels continue to document and archive their performances so that individuals can analyze their performances. I believe that this dissertation can serve as a model for how to engage aesthetic professions and performance companies who do not have an easily identifiable product. Lastly, I would like to raise the potential
for re-envisioning higher education curriculum in fine arts (dance and otherwise) to include integrated experiences and opportunities.

My Journey with Dancing Wheels

I am grateful for the eighteen months that I spent in the field with The Dancing Wheels Company & School. I plan to continue to have a relationship with organizational members. I am humbled by how welcomed I felt, and as Jeanne expressed, “I felt I belonged.” I feel honored that Dancing Wheels trusted me enough to offer basically unlimited access to their organization as they let me get involved in artistic and business aspects of the organization. As a result, I hope to be able to write about Dancing Wheels in academia and popular press outlets in ways that represent their organization well.

As Mary Catherine Bateson (1994) stated, “Works of art that offer new ways of seeing the human body propose new ways to be human” (p. 224), and Dancing Wheels has taught me more about what it means to be human. I grew in ways that I could have never envisioned at the beginning of this project. I was able to see the ways in which narrative, feminism, aesthetics, and dialogue work to give rise to organizational life. For example, I started out this dissertation discussing a “fat roll” that I fixated on during the beginning of my fieldwork. A year later, I have a deeper appreciation for aesthetics and have shifted what I see as beautiful, including how I view my body. I have shifted the ways in which I view my own disability and other “imperfections” society has created. Similar to Cooper Albright (1998), who wrote about her refusal to have surgery for a spinal injury and instead chose to choreograph a dance. Indeed, disability has something
to offer art beyond a medical stare as it shifts an aesthetic of imperfection that dominates our culture.

I have stated several times as I worked on this project that this is more than a dissertation; I hope to be part of the dance and disability movement. The stories told to me have shaped who I am; I will be a better teacher as I will be able to talk about my experiences with this organization to individuals in academia and have a deeper appreciation for those who have different lived experiences. I hope to engage stakeholders (e.g., medical doctors, architects, therapists, and insurance companies) with the stories that shaped this dissertation for ways in which we can work together to build a more integrated society.

Often, the stories I heard saddened and angered me. I felt the frustration that many of the dancers experienced in the one-on-one interviews, as many had difficulty articulating the very essence of their being in coherent sentences. Throughout the one-on-one interviews, many of the dancers were brought to tears reflecting on injustices that occur. I too was brought to tears during several of the interviews and during the transcription process and write-up. Furthermore, I was present when company members went to inaccessible cities and stages. Also, I felt the rejection that Dancing Wheels faces as I attempted (and ultimately failed) to submit an article to *Dance Magazine*. At times I was overcome with guilt that I have health insurance and do not face some of the discrimination many of the dancers face. Also, I have chosen a career that is not as demanding on the body and, therefore, most injuries and sicknesses would not disqualify me from my chosen occupation in the academy. As a result of some of the negative
emotions I experienced, I will continue to bear witness to their stories and engage in writing up manuscripts that narrate their lives.

Final Reflections

In 2000, bell hooks wrote *Feminism is for Everyone: Passionate Politics*. In that project, hooks emphasized differences that matter, including gender, race, and socioeconomic status. However, disability was excluded. I, along with numerous disability and feminist scholars, hope to make sure that feminism is for everyone. “Doing empirical research offers a powerful opportunity for praxis to the extent that the research process enables people to change by encouraging self-reflection and deeper understanding of their particular situations” (Lather, 1986, p. 263). I hope that this study provided an opportunity for individuals to reflect on their situations and circumstances. I remain hopeful that by revising our communicative practices there will one day be a more inclusive society. And, I am forever grateful to those who dedicate their lives to creating space for those who have traditionally been excluded.
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424


438


February 5, 2008

Margaret M. Quinnan
39 Elliott Street, Apt. 103
Athens, OH 45701

Dear Margaret:

We are pleased to invite you to visit our facility to study The Dancing Wheels Company & School for your dissertation research.

We welcome you to interact, interview and study the Company members, the School teachers, the administrative staff and our organization. This includes seeing all performances during your research period, studio observations of classes and rehearsals for performances/lectures/demonstrations/workshops and conducting interviews with all company personnel and audience members.

We are looking forward to your study and are eager to review your research findings.

Warm regards,

Mary Verdi-Bettger
President/Founding Artistic Director
APPENDIX B. DANCING WHEELS IRB APPROVAL

The following research study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Ohio University for the period listed below. This review was conducted through an expedited review procedure as defined in the federal regulations as Category(ies):

Project Title: Narrating Lives and Raising Consciousness through Dance: The Performance of (Dis)ability at Dancing Wheels

Researcher(s): Margaret Quinlan

Faculty Advisor (if applicable): Lynn Harter

Department: School of Communication Studies

Rebecca Cale  
Institutional Review Board  
6/19/09  
Approval Date  
6/19/09  
Expiration Date

This approval is valid until expiration date listed above. If you wish to continue beyond expiration date, you must submit a periodic review application and obtain approval prior to continuation.

Adverse events must be reported to the IRB promptly, within 5 working days of the occurrence.

The approval remains in effect provided the study is conducted exactly as described in your application for review. Any additions or modifications to the project must be approved by the IRB (as an amendment) prior to implementation.
Title of Research Proposal: Narrating Lives and Raising Consciousness through Dance: The Performance of (Dis)ability at Dancing Wheels

Investigator Information

Primary Investigator
Name Margaret M. Quinlan Department: COMS
Address Lasher 35
Email mq316105
Training Module Completed? X Yes □ No

Training Module Completed? □ Yes □ No
Name: Lynn M. Harter Department COMS
Address Lasher 12
Email harter@ohio.edu

Funding Status
Is the researcher receiving or applying for external funding? □ Yes X No

Review Level
Based on the definition in the guidelines, do you believe your research qualifies for:
□□□ Exempt Review Category
X Exempt Review Category
Expedited Review Category
Full Committee Review

Final determination of review level will be determined by Office of Research Compliance in accordance with the categories defined in the Code of Federal Regulations

Recruitment/Selection of Subjects
Estimated Number of Human Participants: 100

Characteristics of subjects (check as many boxes as appropriate).
___Minors  X Physically or Mentally Disabled  ___Elementary School Students
___Adults  ___Legal Incompetency  ___Secondary School
          Students
___Prisoners  ___Pregnant Females  ___University Students
___Others (Specify)______________________

Briefly describe the criteria for selection of subjects (inclusion/exclusion). Include such information as age range, health status, etc. Attach additional pages if necessary.

There will be no recruitment materials. Potential participants will be asked in person by the researcher Maggie Quinlan. All individuals who are involved with Dancing Wheels will be invited to participate in this project. How will you identify and recruit prospective participants? If subjects are chosen from records, indicate who gave approval for the use of the records. If records are "private" medical or student records, provide the protocol, consent forms, letters, etc., for securing consent of the subjects for the records. Written documentation for cooperation/permission from the holder or custodian of the records should be attached. (Initial contact of subjects identified through a records search must be made by the official holder of the record, i.e. primary physician, therapist, public school official.)

Participants in the study will consist of dancers, and staff at Dancing Wheels. Members of Dancing Wheels will be observed and interviewed. Individuals with physical disabilities (sit-down dancers) will be interviewed and observed practicing and performing as part of the Dancing Wheels dance company.

Please describe your relationship to the potential participants, i.e. instructor of class, co-worker, etc. If no relationship, state no relationship.

The researcher will be a volunteer at Dancing Wheels.

Attach copies of all recruitment tools (advertisements, posters, etc.)
NA- The researcher will ask potential interviewees to participate while volunteering at the studio.

Performance Site

List all collaborating and performance sites, and provide copy of IRB approval from that site and/or letters of cooperation or support.

The performance site for the research will be at the Dancing Wheels studio in Cleveland, Ohio.

Project Description
Dancing Wheels is the first modern dance company to integrate professional stand-up and sit-down (wheelchair) dancers. Dancing Wheels is a mixed ability dance company that challenges mind/body assumptions as members perform a counter-narrative of disability. Dancing Wheels has performed, taught and inspired children and adults of all abilities around the world. Additionally, Dancing Wheels provides innovative employment opportunities by supporting artistic collaborations between individuals with and without disabilities.

Please describe the specific scientific objectives (aims) of this research and any previous relevant research.

This project explores how discourses of difference sustain the separation of people with disabilities from community life, and highlights the efforts of one organization, Dancing Wheels, as members perform a counter-narrative of disability. Dancing Wheels is the first modern dance company to integrate professional stand-up and sit-down (wheelchair) dancers. Mary Verdi-Fletcher, President and Founding Artistic Director, a pioneer in the field of integrated dance, started the company in 1980, and for more than a quarter of a century, Dancing Wheels has performed, taught and inspired children and adults of all abilities around the world. In the United States, the company presents more than 100 performances reaching audiences of 125,000 each year. My ethnographic portrayal will be based on my experiences as a participant observer; narratives collected through in-depth interviews with dancers, and staff, participatory sketching/photography, and document analysis.

Methodology: please describe the procedures (sequentially) that will be performed/followed with human participants.

After obtaining approval from our university’s institutional review board, I will collect data from three sources: (1) participant observations in the studio (2) in-depth interviews with dancers; (3) participatory sketching/photography, and (4) documents produced by Dancing Wheels and about Dancing Wheels.

Participant Observation

Participant observation—a qualitative research technique in which the investigator participates substantially in the activities of a group; used to develop an in-depth understanding of the behavior of the group and to see things as members of the group do. Participant observation exists on a continuum ranging from mostly observation to mostly participation (Glesne, 1999). I will conduct participant observations at Dancing Wheels over the period of one year. Most of the observations will focus on collaborative dancing between individuals with and without disabilities. Also, I will observe dance
performances and perform in dance workshops. During Dancing Wheels practices, I will take handwritten field notes and document conversation within the company. During studio observations, I will participate by volunteering and helping in studio activities. The volunteer work will be conducted in ways that allow me to observe everyday interactions between the dancers and staff members. Throughout observations, I will try to account for how I, the researcher, affect the scene including what is observed and how it is interpreted (see also Adelman & Frey, 2001). After each observation period notes will be transcribed.

In-depth Interviews

After being on-site for approximately 6 months, I will conduct in-depth interviews with the dancers and staff members. The interviews will last approximately 90 minutes each. Interview sessions will be semi-structured to allow participants to talk about their individual experiences and insights within and outside the dance company. In appendices, I offer the semi-structured interview protocol to guide in-depth interviews (Kvale, 1996). I anticipate that the interviews will allow participants to retrospectively account for their experiences and provide narrative accounts of how participants understand disability. Interviews will be digitally recorded then transcribed to written form and checked for accuracy.

Participatory Sketching/Photography

Although language remains a primary form of discourse, an overemphasis on linguistic forms can obscure the rich knowledge deriving from other aesthetic performances of experience (i.e., dance). I join other scholars who adopt a broader perspective of discourse to include visual images, the body, and even architecture as discursive forms (e.g., Finnegan, 2003). During the in-depth interviews, I will utilize participatory sketching in order to allow participants to draw their understanding of Dancing Wheels. I believe this will provide a way for them to get started talking about their experiences. Participants will be given access to paper and colored pencils/markers and asked to answer a broad research question through sketching rather than with their words. Then, participants will narrate what they have drawn, explaining how their sketch answers the research question. Also, in the case of photographic activities, each participant will be given one disposable camera to use during the course of the project. They will be trained how to use the equipment by the researcher and asked to narrate their photos. After being given up to a week to take photographs, the participants will return their cameras to me at the studio. I will then develop the film, and return the pictures during the scheduled follow-up session. During these sessions, participants can choose two to three pictures to narrate for me, explaining how they answered the research question.

Document Analysis

Document analysis is another method, like interviews, that is strongly connected to participant observation. Documents are artifacts that are critical to the functioning of organizations, groups and individuals and can provide historical context, corroborate observations and interview data, evoke new questions or ideas and provide data that is not available in any other format (Glesne, 1999; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Documents by themselves can have limited significance (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). However, when
related to other types of evidence, document analysis can prove to be an enlightening method of data collection. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) argued that this connection between document analysis and other forms of data collection is fostered in three main ways. Document analysis can be linked to, and thus confirm, “the talk and social action contexts that the researcher is studying” (Lindlof & Taylor, p. 117). Documents that will be considered artifacts for analysis for this study will include, but are not limited to newspaper articles, promotional materials, and website. I will be analyzing documented such as any newspaper article which has been printed about dancing wheels since its inception. Also, I will be analyzing the Dancing Wheels website. Finally, I will be analyzing posters and/or promotional materials handed out by Dancing Wheels.

Describe any potential risks or discomforts of participation and the steps that will be taken to minimize them.

There are no known risks based on participation in this research project.

Describe the anticipated benefits to the individual participants. If none, state that. (Note that compensation is not a benefit, but should be listed in the compensation section on the next page.)

There are no anticipated benefits to the individual participants in this research project.

Describe the anticipated benefits to society and/or the scientific community. There must be some benefit to justify the use of human subjects.

This project hopes to provide a new perspective on the communicative construction of disability. Disability has been a largely understudied experience in the discipline of communication. This project will highlight an organization that offers alternative vocational and expressive opportunities about disability-related issues. Through my dissertation I also hope to bring what we do in the communication discipline to help their organization function better, or make sense out of what they do, in a valuable way.

Describe procedures in place to protect confidentiality. Who will have access to raw data? Will raw data be made available to anyone other than the Principal Investigator and immediate study personnel (e.g., school officials, medical personnel)? If yes, who, how, and why? Describe the procedure for sharing data. Describe how the subject will be informed that the data may be shared.

Only the primary investigator and the dissertation director will have access to the raw data. Interviews will be digitally recorded and transcribed. Once transcriptions are completed, the digital files will be destroyed. Once transcriptions are created, there will be no identifying characteristic on the transcripts. The raw data and transcripts will not be provided to any party who might be able to connect a person with their specific answers. If requests for data are made, only the anonymous transcripts will be provided. Additionally, all interviewees will be made aware of the confidential nature of the interviews and the anonymous nature of the interview transcripts. Confidentiality: the
assurance given a respondent that even though the investigator can identify the respondent his or her responses, the investigator will protect the respondent's identity. The participants in the study will be allowed to pick a pseudonym or use their real names if they so choose.

Will participants be: Audiotaped? X Yes □ No

If so, describe how/where the tapes will be stored (i.e. locked file cabinet in investigator office), who will have access to them, and at what point they will be destroyed.

Audio files will be transferred directly from digital audio recorder to the primary researcher’s laptop computer that will be with her at all times or stored in a locked office. The laptop computer is password-protected, meaning only the primary researcher can use the computer containing the audio files. Once all audio files have been transcribed, the original files that identify the participants by name will be deleted and only the anonymous transcriptions will remain.

Provide details of any compensation (money, course credit, gifts) being offered to participants, including how the compensation will be prorated for participants who discontinue participation prior to completion.

There will be no compensation for participants in this study.

Instruments

List all questionnaires, instruments, standardized tests below, with a brief description, and provide copies of each

How will the data be analyzed? State the hypothesis and describe how the analysis of the data will test that hypothesis.

There are no hypotheses as this is a qualitatively oriented study. The research questions for this project were listed previously in this IRB proposal. Below, I provide the methods that will use to analyze the data that will be collected.

I will rely on a constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to conduct a thematic analysis of the discourses collected through in-depth interviews, participant observations, and document collection. This process begins with data “reduction” and “interpretation.” I will read all transcripts and field notes in their entirety to develop a sense of the discourses as a whole. I will re-read the transcripts while playing the original tapes to ensure accuracy of transcriptions and to note special emphases or cues that might affect interpretation but did not appear on the transcripts. After gaining a holistic sense of the discourses, before I will start the actual analysis. A constant comparative method allows themes representing recurring patterns of behavior and meaning to emerge from
the participants’ own words. The process will begin by manually coding the data on the actual transcripts. By engaging in a constant comparative analysis of data, I will continually compare specific incidents in the data, refined concepts, and identified their properties.

Member checking or member validation (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) is a process in which qualitative field researchers verify their interpretation of a social setting with selected members of that setting. The underlying belief of member checking is that social actors are capable of making sense out of their own world. Lindlof and Taylor stated that member checking “means taking findings back to the field and determining whether the participants recognized them as true or accurate” (p. 242). Member checks generally involve asking participants questions such as: “What did I get wrong?” “Have I been fair?” “Do you recognize anyone?” By asking these types of questions, researchers are able to gauge to what extent the scholarly interpretation of the setting rings true with those who actually experience it. Member checks do not solely function to make sure that the researcher’s interpretation falls in line with that of the participants. The researcher is still entitled to their particular interpretation of a given setting. But the member check process exists to make sure that the researcher’s interpretation overlaps to some extent with how social actors view their world. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) also noted that the member check sessions often can result in additional information that can help the researcher continue to analyze a setting or pick up on something that might have been missed initially.

**Informed Consent Process**

Attach copies of all consent documents or text. Informed consent is a process, not just a form. Potential participants/representatives must be given the information they need to make an informed decision to participate in this research. How will you provide information/obtain permission?

I will be completely clear with any potential interviewees as to the purposes of the project. I will show participants the interview protocol before the interview begins or I will read them all potential questions. If the participants have any questions regarding the nature of the research they can contact Maggie Quinlan and/or Dr. Lynn Harter who will have the ability to answer questions regarding the research.

How and where will the consent process occur? How will it be structured to enhance independent and thoughtful decision-making? What steps will be taken to avoid coercion or undue influence?

The informed consent process will take place both when the interview is scheduled with each individual staff member as well as prior to the interview starting. In order to enhance the potential participants’ thoughtful decision, I will first explain to them the overall goals of the project, their contribution to that project should they choose to participate, and I will make them aware of their ability to choose to not participate in the study.
Title of Research: Narrating Lives and Raising Consciousness through Dance: The Performance of (Dis)ability at Dancing Wheels
Principal Investigator: Margaret M. Quinlan
Co-Investigator: NA
Department: School of Communication Studies

Federal and university regulations require signed consent for participation in research involving human subjects. After reading the statements below, please indicate your consent by signing this form.

Explanation of Study

Purpose of the research—To understand how Dancing Wheels operates

Procedures to be followed—This project has three phases. You may participate in all or only one:

1-Participant observation is a qualitative research technique in which the investigator (me) participates substantially in the activities of a group; used to develop an in-depth understanding of the behavior of the group and to see things as members of the group do. I will be observing you in the studio and at performances and taking notes about my observations and conversations I hear. I will conduct participant observations at Dancing Wheels over the period of one year. Most of the observations will focus on collaborative dancing between individuals with and without disabilities. Also, I will observe dance performances and perform in dance workshops. During Dancing Wheels practices, I will take handwritten field notes and document conversation within the company. During studio observations, I will participate by volunteering and helping in studio activities. The volunteer work will be conducted in ways that allow me to observe everyday interactions between the dancers and staff members. Throughout observations, I will try to account for how I, the researcher, affect the scene including what is observed and how it is interpreted. After each observation period notes will be transcribed.

Do you agree to participate: ___ Yes. ___ No.

2-Sketches/photography—Although language remains a primary form of discourse, an overemphasis on linguistic forms can obscure the rich knowledge deriving from other aesthetic performances of experience (i.e., dance). During the in-depth interviews, I will utilize participatory sketching in order to allow participants to draw their understanding of Dancing Wheels. I believe this will provide a way for them to get started talking about their experiences. If you choose to participate, you will be given access to paper and colored pencils/markers and asked to answer a broad research question through sketching rather than with words. Then, I will ask you to narrate what they have drawn, explaining how their sketch answers the research question. Also, in the case of photographic
activities, you will be given one disposable camera to use during the course of the project. You will be trained how to use the equipment by the researcher (me) and asked to narrate your photos. After being given up to a week to take photographs, you will return their cameras to me at the studio. I will then develop the film, and return the pictures during the scheduled follow-up session. During these sessions, you can choose two to three pictures to narrate for me, explaining how they answered the research question. The relevance of the participatory sketching and/photography is that it will allow you an opportunity to draw to capture about the organization that you may not be able to capture in words. Also, it is an opportunity to help me understand you make sense of Dancing Wheels. Basically, I will give cameras you and the following week, I would like you to address this question: How does Dancing Wheels organize around disability. Then I will develop the pictures and ask individuals to narrate three of them. Explain the picture, what does it mean to you, why did you pick it. For the sketching, I will follow a similar protocol. In a one-on-one interview, I will give participants color pencils and paper. Give you a similar question: What does Dancing Wheels mean to you? Give you about 10 minutes to draw a picture and then ask you to narrate your image.

Do you agree to participate: ___ Yes.   ___ No.

3-One-on-One Interviews- After being on-site for approximately 6 months, I will conduct in-depth interviews with the dancers and staff members. The interviews will last approximately 90 minutes each. Interview sessions will be semi-structured to allow you to talk about your experiences and insights within and outside the dance company. I anticipate that the interviews will allow you to retrospectively account for your experiences and provide narrative accounts of how you understand disability. Interviews will be digitally recorded then transcribed to written form and checked for accuracy.

Do you agree to participate: ___ Yes.   ___ No.

You are invited to participate in all parts of the study; however, there is no obligation to participate in any of these activities.

Duration of your participation—Until August 2009—approximately one year

Confidentiality and Records
All interviews, field notes, and participatory sketching/photography will be confidential (your identity will be known only to the researcher) and all interview transcriptions will be anonymous (no one will be able to connect you to your answers). **Only if you give permission to the researcher to use your name will your real name be placed in the actual report.

Would you like the researcher to use your actual name in the research report? If yes check:

___ Yes.
If you would like a pseudonym (or fake name) used, what would you like it to be?

Pseudonym ______________________________________

** You are welcome to participate in a participatory photography and/or sketching activity to help you narrate your experiences with Dancing Wheels. If you are interested in participating, please check yes

__ Yes.

If you are not interested in participating, please check no

--- No.

** Risks and Discomforts
There are no known risks involved with your participation in this study.

** Benefits
There are no direct benefits to you, the individual, based on your participation in this study. However, this research project will help Dancing Wheels become make sense out of their artistic collaborations. In addition, this research project will prove useful to the academic community by creating knowledge about collaborations between people with and without disabilities.

** Compensation
There will be no compensation for your participation in this project.

** Contact Information
If have you have any questions regarding this study, please contact the researcher, Margaret Quinlan at 716-830-2671, mq316105@ohio.edu or the researcher's faculty advisor, Dr. Lynn Harter, at harter@ohio.edu, 740-593-4830.

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Jo Ellen Sherow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740)593-0664.

I certify that I have read and understand this consent form and agree to participate as a subject in the research described. I agree that known risks to me have been explained to my satisfaction and I understand that no compensation is available from Ohio University and its employees for any injury resulting from my participation in this research. I certify
that I am 18 years of age or older. My participation in this research is given voluntarily. I understand that I may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of any benefits to which I may otherwise be entitled. I certify that I have been given a copy of this consent form to take with me.

Signature of Participant ________________________________ Date ______

Printed Name________________________

Date:
Printed Name:........................................................................................................
# APPENDIX D. LIST OF PEOPLE INTERVIEWED FROM DANCING WHEELS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Job</th>
<th># of Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mary Verdi-Fletcher</td>
<td>Founder/President Artistic Director</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bob</td>
<td>Board Member</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>Sit-down Dancer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeanne</td>
<td>Developmental Director</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>Board Member, Treasurer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michal Medcalf</td>
<td>Choreographer, Retired Dancer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark Tomasic</td>
<td>Choreographer, Retired Dancer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carly</td>
<td>Stand-up Dancer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristen</td>
<td>Stand-up Dancer</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carly</td>
<td>Stand-up Dancer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>Stand-up Dancer</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dezare</td>
<td>Stand-up Dancer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark D.</td>
<td>Sit-down Dancer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>Stand-up Dancer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole</td>
<td>Sit-down Dancer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerry</td>
<td>Chairman of Board</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark H.</td>
<td>ASL Interpreter</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## APPENDIX E. RESEARCH LOG

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Times</th>
<th>Total hours</th>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Fieldnotes</th>
<th>Documents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8:00 to 9:30</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>Performance at Washington State Community College, Marietta OH</td>
<td>Talked with Mark D. They told me to contact educational coordinator</td>
<td>Poster and program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 to 4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Alice in Wonderland, Cleveland OH</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Program and 2 Dancing Wheels books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-3 for 5 days</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Adult Summer Dance workshop and performance Party at Macs Stayed with Keith</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance on Saturday Mac’s party</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Dayton show at Disability Conference</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Hung around with them all day, helped with music and lighting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 to 4 for 5 days</td>
<td>35 (87.5)</td>
<td>Dancing Wheels Studio</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Performance at John Carroll University to a freshman class of 500</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 to 6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Snowman Performance</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Watched performance, met with dancers and visited with audience members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All day</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Started Facebook page</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All day</td>
<td></td>
<td>Facebook shut down page—had 200 friends and they must have realized it is not a person. I will make the group</td>
<td></td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 am till 10 pm</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Mansfield, OH Saw children’s performance of Helen Keller; hung out the company while they set the stage for Alice at night</td>
<td></td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>Dance</td>
<td>Dance and Disability Conference, presentation of DW, coffee with Petra Kuppers</td>
<td></td>
<td>Laura Ellingson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dance and</td>
<td>disability</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conference</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:30-10</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>Help with child care for Mac’s family—</td>
<td></td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12-10</td>
<td>10 (126)</td>
<td>Fire and Ice show at Renaissance Hotel in Cleveland—watched rehearsal and helped with stage managing</td>
<td></td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:30-2:00</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>Ohio Dance Auditions in Columbus—represent</td>
<td></td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Code</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Notes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:30-3:30</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Adult Summer Dance Workshop</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:30-4:00</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>Adult Summer Dance Workshop</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:20-4:30</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Adult Summer Dance Workshop</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:30-4:30</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Adult Summer Dance Workshop</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(155) Adult Summer Dance Workshop-Interviewed Michael Medcalf</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:20-3:30</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Adult Summer Dance Workshop</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:30-3:30</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Adult Summer Dance Workshop</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Performance—clean up</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:30-5:00</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>Children’s Workshop and Event meeting at Bravo</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6:00-8:00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:30-4:45</td>
<td>7.25</td>
<td>Children’s Workshop—worked on Annual Benefit packages,</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>contacted Halle Berry, contacted Bob</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:30-4:45</td>
<td>8.25</td>
<td>Children’s workshop, celebrity letters, and annual benefit</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6:00-7:00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Hours</td>
<td>Activity Description</td>
<td>Completed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:15-1:00</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>Send out letters annual benefit</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00-4:30</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>Interview with Jeanne and Charlotte</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:30-4:30</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Interview with Steve and went to Mary’s house to work on annual report stuff.</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:30-5:00</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>Meet with Bob at Bob Evans.</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00-3:30</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>No one in studio—answer phones and interview Frank</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00-8:00</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Drive in from Canada, print Corp packages, Interview Carly, meeting at Farideh</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:30-2:30</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Interview with Mark, Interview with Kerry</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00-5:00</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Send out and make copies of benefit package</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00-3:30</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>Send out and make copies of benefit package</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00-3:30</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>Stay at Mary’s—work on looking up grants for</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Hours</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Follow up</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00-5:00</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Talked with Mark on the phone for a bit. Interview Sara at 3:00</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-5:30</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>Took dance class from 10-11:30—taught by Mac—I Interview Kristen at 3; helping to find computers-TechSoup</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-7:30</td>
<td>9.5 (268)</td>
<td>Last day at DW for the summer, interview with Mark</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Follow up interviews</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Follow up interviews</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Follow up interviews</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Follow up interviews</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total observation hours through February 25, 2009 = 268 hours  
Total interview hours through February 25, 2009 = 18 hours  
Total other hours spent on project through February 25, 2009 = 15 hours  

Total hours dedicated to Dancing Wheels project = 301 hours
APPENDIX F. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL: DANCERS

Interviewee (pseudonym): ___________________  Time of interview: _______
Place: _________________________________  Date: ___________________
Gender: ________________________________  Age: ___________________

Introduction: (briefly highlight goals of project and informed consent)

General Questions
Tell me how you became involved with Dancing Wheels (DW). Why do you continue to work at DW?

What were your first impressions of the company? What is the best thing about it? What is the most challenging?

Most organizations have core values that guide the work of their members. What are the core values of DW? Can you identify practices that reflect those values?

What attracted you to the company?

Non-disabled—have you had experiences with people with disabilities before coming to DW?

What do you plan to do once you leave DW? College?

What is your background in dance? What style were you trained in?

How does DW define diversity? How is it enacted?

How is disability defined by the company?

What are some negative perceptions of Dancing Wheels? What does the company do to combat them?

Integration

How do dancers at DW do dance differently than “mainstream artists”? Similarities?

Define/describe integration in your own words and based on your own experience?

How, if at all, has your understanding of integration changed since you started working at DW?
Can you think of a time when integrations worked beautifully? Describe the situation, other people involved, what you attribute to success of collaboration. (These are example critical incident questions)

Can you think of a time when integrative dance failed? Described the situation, other people involved, what you attribute to causing failed effort.

What barriers, if any, exist in creating integrated dance at DW? In other words, are there issues (e.g., attitudes, physical issues, economic issues) that prevent dancers from integrating?

What is the hardest part of doing integrated dance?

What advice would you give to newcomers in integrated dance?

Do you remember your first time engaging in integrated dance? How did you feel?

How do your experiences as a solo/individual dancer compare to your experiences doing integrated dance at DW?

What is one thing you would really miss about the company? One thing you would change?

Tell me about your proudest moment with Dancing Wheels?

Does DW have different expectations for standup and sit-down dancers?

What makes DW different from other integrated dance companies?

For individuals with disabilities only:

How long have you had your disability?
What is its nature?
If you were injured how?
How does your disability impact your daily activities?
How would you describe the experience of being disabled to someone not disabled?
How have you been treated by the able bodied community?
Are there things that you cannot do because of your disability that you wish you could do?

Disability-Related Issues
Define/describe “disability” in your own words and based on your experiences? How has your understanding of people with disabilities changed since coming to DW? How does your understanding influence your interactions with dancers with disabilities?

How, if at all, do you think DW differs from other dance companies?

How often, if at all, do disruptions occur that you would attribute to a person’s health condition or disability? How do you handle such occurrences? Do any particular situations come to mind?

Have any inequalities (economic, social) emerged among dancers with and without disabilities? To what would you attribute the inequalities?

How often do you talk to sit-down dancers talk about their health conditions? What spurs such conversations?

What kind of health insurance are you on? Have you run into any problems with your insurance coverage?

Are there different expectations for stand-up and sit-down dancers?

Art and the Broader Communities

How do you think the “mainstream” art world perceives DW?

How does DW contribute to the dance community?

In what ways does DW engage in “civil rights work”? What does that mean?

Artistic versus Business Ideologies

What do you define as the artistic interests of the company? What do you define as the business interests of the company?

Do you think there is a struggle to balance financial and artistic interests? If so, please describe.

Have there been times when you felt your artistic impulse was stifled due to financial concerns or constraints?

Organizational culture

Do you have any company rituals? Please describe them.

Describe your communication with your fellow company members?
What is your schedule like while at Dancing Wheels? What do you do when you leave the studio?

Questions about body Image:

What kind of messages do they support?

What messages have you been told about how you should look?

What is your favorite body part? Or favorite dance movement?

What do you think DW is looking for in dancer?

What would a individual look like that did not fit the image of a dancer at Dancing Wheels? How would you describe him or her? What do you think it tells audiences about the company?

How has DW affected the way you view yourself and others view you?

Audition

What was your audition experience like? How did you feel? What were you asked to do?

Strengths/Weaknesses

What are some of your strengths as a dancer?

Weaknesses?

Have you improved?

How could you improve?

What do you bring to the company?

What is your favorite piece of repertory at Dancing Wheels? Why?

How have your experiences been working with choreographers? What have you learned?

What have they brought to the company? Or taken away?
Do you have any injuries? How you dealt with them? Physical therapy?

Concluding Question

If you could change one thing about DW, what would it be and why?
Hello, Mary. Thank you so much for allowing me to ask you questions about your experiences. I would like to document your history as a social activist in disability issues. In order to learn more about your experiences, I have outlined a few questions.

Please tell me about how you became interested in disability rights? When did you start? Who influenced you?

How do you define your work? What is your goal?

What do you see as your role in the disability movement? What are some misconceptions people have about your work?

What do you hope to be your legacy?

How did the bus protest come about? How did you feel before? What were you thinking during the protest? What was your goal? What was the result?

How did your loved ones respond?

How did the media respond?

What do you remember most about the protest?

Would you have done anything different?

Now, I have seen the piece where you perform the bus protest. How did this piece come about? What were some of the decisions you made? What do you hope people take away? What was the response when people saw the piece?
APPENDIX H. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL: BOARD MEMBERS

Interviewee (pseudonym): __________________________  Time of interview: ________
Place: __________________________________________  Date: __________________
Gender: __________________________________________  Age: __________________

Introduction: (briefly highlight goals of project and informed consent)

General Questions
Tell me how you became involved with Dancing Wheels (DW). Why do you continue to work on the board at DW?

What is your role as a board member? How often do you meet? How are the meetings run?

What were your first impressions of the company? What is the best thing about it? What is the most challenging?

Most organizations have core values that guide the work of their members. What are the core values of DW? Can you identify practices that reflect those values?

What attracted you to the company?

Non-disabled—have you had experiences with people with disabilities before coming to DW?

What is your background in dance? Or the arts?

How does DW define diversity? How is it enacted?

How is disability defined by the company?

What are some negative perceptions of Dancing Wheels? What does the company do to combat them?

If you could change one thing about the way Dancing Wheels is discussed in the media, what would it be?

What are some advantages for Dancing Wheels to be a non-profit? What are some of its challenges?

Artistic versus Business Ideologies
What do you define as the artistic interests of the company? What do you define as the business interests of the company?

Do you think there is a struggle to balance financial and artistic interests? If so, please describe.

Have there been times when you felt stifled due to financial concerns or constraints?

What advice would you give new comers?

Organizational culture

Do you have any board rituals? Please describe them.

Describe your communication with your fellow board members?

What do you see as the future of Dancing Wheels? What obstacles does it face?

Integration

How do dancers at DW do dance differently than “mainstream artists”? Similarities?

Define/describe integration in your own words and based on your own experience?

    How, if at all, has your understanding of integration changed since you started working with DW?

Can you think of a time when integrations worked beautifully? Describe the situation, other people involved, what you attribute to success of collaboration. (These are example critical incident questions)

Can you think of a time when integrative dance failed? Describe the situation, other people involved, what you attribute to causing failed effort.

What barriers, if any, exist in creating integrated dance at DW? In other words, are there issues (e.g., attitudes, physical issues, economic issues) that prevent dancers from integrating?

What advice would you give to newcomers in integrated dance?

What is one thing you would really miss about the company? One thing you would change?
Tell me about your proudest moment with Dancing Wheels?

Does DW have different expectations for stand-up and sit-down dancers?

What makes DW different from other integrated dance companies?

For individuals with disabilities only:

How long have you had your disability?
What is its nature?
If you were injured how?
How does your disability impact your daily activities?
How would you describe the experience of being disabled to someone not disabled?
How have you been treated by the able bodied community?
Are there things that you cannot do because of your disability that you wish you could do?

Disability-Related Issues

Define/describe “disability” in your own words and based on your experiences? How has your understanding of people with disabilities changed since coming to DW? How does your understanding influence your interactions with dancers with disabilities?

How, if at all, do you think DW differs from other dance companies?

How often, if at all, do disruptions occur that you would attribute to a person’s health condition or disability? How do you handle such occurrences? Do any particular situations come to mind?

Have any inequalities (economic, social) emerged among dancers with and without disabilities? To what would you attribute the inequalities?

How often do you talk to sit-down dancers talk about their health conditions? What spurs such conversations?

Are there different expectations for stand-up and sit-down dancers?

Art and the Broader Communities

How do you think the “mainstream” art world perceives DW?

How does DW contribute to the dance community?

In what ways does DW engage in “civil rights work”? What does that mean?
Questions about body Image:

What kind of messages do they support?

What do you think DW is looking for in dancer?

What would a individual look like that did not fit the image of a dancer at Dancing Wheels? How would you describe him or her? What do you think it tells audiences about the company?

How has DW affected the way you view yourself and others view you?

Strengths/Weaknesses

What are some of your strengths as a board member?

Weaknesses?

Have you improved?

How could you improve?

What do you bring to the company?

What is your favorite piece of repertory at Dancing Wheels? Why?

Do you remember the first time you saw integrated dance? How did you feel? What emotions did you experience?

Concluding Question

If you could change one thing about DW, what would it be and why?