

# Meaning in Motion: The Embodied Poetics and Politics of Dancing Wheels

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*This essay examines poetic sense-making and illustrates the significance of numerous story forms, including dance, for organizations that do the work of social movements. We demonstrate how meaning emerges through motion, even as it is expressed and negotiated in language in two vital ways. First, we engage the early work of Kenneth Burke to explore the poetic nature of storied forms and connect it with contemporary studies of dance that emphasize the agency of bodies. Second, we illustrate the efficacy of this position by bringing into focus the efforts of The Dancing Wheels Company & School, a modern dance company integrating professional stand-up and sit-down (wheelchair) dancers in performances that seek to transform public understandings of disability. We construct an account of how the studio and its members rely on movement and other signifying practices to engage, orient, and motivate contemplators, remember history, and enlarge possibilities for individuals marked as disabled.*

*Keywords: The Dancing Wheels Company & School; Embodied Poetics; Aesthetics; Form; Burkean Theory; Narrative*

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

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already on board as passengers. They alerted everyone inside the bus that we would 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 it was 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 paddy wagon 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.

Mary Verdi-Fletcher's voiceover echoed these words across the stage as dancers memorialized the events of that fateful day more than twenty years ago. The intensity and release patterns in the music, coupled with the co-ordinated motion among dancers, symbolized the shocks and instabilities accompanying chaos, and revealed the rhetorical significance of dance. This scene, culled from the *Walking on Clouds* performance choreographed by David Rousseve, is what Burke might call a representative anecdote—a prototypical narrative embodying a culture's value, concerns, interests, and organizing practices (*Grammar* 59). In this essay, we consider this performance and numerous others to illustrate how The Dancing Wheels Company & School—Art in Motion creates meaning, raises consciousness, and poetically disrupts cultural ideologies of difference. In their finest moments, the performers of Dancing Wheels enter into circulation



**Figure 1** Action photo of Verdi-Fletcher, the Founder and Artistic Director of The Dancing Wheels Company & School. Photo credit Dale Dong.

alternative performances of (dis)ability, reinvent identities, and inform and extend notions of inclusion.

Individuals rely on storytelling to make sense of expectations gone awry (Manoogian, Harter, and Denham 2). Stories endow disruptions with meaning and ascertain causality by connecting events. We understand narrativity as a performative process in which meaning is constructed within networks of relationships among characters embedded in time and space and connected by employment processes (see also Langellier and Peterson 147). Humans rely on narratives to make sense of our lives and to relate to and organize with others. Narrative sense-making, though, is not a neutral process. Plots connect events and agents of causation in consequential ways. Mumby emphasized the political function of narrative in the (re)structuring of organizational, relational, and communal life (113). Other feminist scholars have emphasized how narratives remain a central resource in attempts to raise consciousness about lived inequities (e.g., Clair, Chapman, and Kunkel 241). Personal stories can politicize the sociohistorical, institutional, and material nature of (dis)empowerment. Major resistance and social movements—feminist, civil rights, gay and lesbian—emerge as individuals share stories about small and large moments of inequity. “Because narrative is so basic to the formation of identity, it is an essential resource for social movements,” argued Jacobs. “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” (222). When commonalities are experienced amidst differences, stories can set the stage for collective action. In short, narrative activity energizes social movements.

Historians have acknowledged the storied nature of historicizing our lives (e.g., White 5), and communication scholars have explored the performative and political nature of narrative activity (e.g., Langellier, “You’re marked” 145, “Performing” 151; Langellier and Peterson 141; Jacobs 205). We join these ongoing conversations and illustrate the heuristic merit of narrative frameworks that include but reach beyond linguistic signifying practices. Storylines can be advanced, characters’ plights performed, and the particularities of settings conveyed through choreography, movement, music, and artifacts, as well as through words. Indeed, organizations that do the work of social movements can expand their arsenal of rhetorical resources to include numerous narrative forms, including dance, and more to fully realize the rhetorical power of storytelling (see also, Davies 43; Koppers “Dancing Autism” 192; Millett 8; Quinlan and Bates 143; Sandahl 225).

In this essay, we illustrate how meaning emerges through motion, even as it is expressed and negotiated in language in two vital ways. First, we engage the early work of Kenneth Burke to explore the poetic nature of storied forms and connect it with contemporary studies of dance that emphasize the agency of bodies. Second, we illustrate the efficacy of this position by bringing into focus the efforts of Dancing Wheels. Dancing Wheels demonstrates and embodies poeisis by imagining new movement possibilities and integrating diverse people/bodies in dance contexts once populated by a homogenous and elite group of performers (Lee 111). We offer an

account of how the studio and its members rely on movement and other signifying practices to unsettle dominant notions of disability that too often remain tethered to deficit-driven organizing patterns. Through motion, music, lighting, set design, props, and words, Dancing Wheels challenges hegemonic representations of the “normal” body and the opportunities and privileges afforded to it. In doing so, the studio engages, orients, and motivates contemplators to reconsider notions of normalcy in dance and beyond.

### The Poetics of Dance as Storied Form

“Our lives and our histories are constantly in the making. Though the materials of experience are established, we are poetic in our rearrangement of them.” (Burke, *Permanence* 218)

Burke’s writings continue to influence interdisciplinary conversations about the storied forms used by humans to bring order and meaning to their lives. That said, when Burke’s ideas materialize in contemporary scholarship, they usually appear as elements of his dramatisic pentad (see critiques by Blakesley vi). Often lost in translation is Burke’s initial fascination with poetic processes and the rhetorical qualities of artistic expression (*Counter-Statement* 45). His early articulations positioned *form* as *incipient action* and communication, directing critics’ attention to sociohistorical realms from which forms arise and actions commence. Ultimately, Burke advanced what he termed a “new poetics” that stretched beyond understanding art as the biographical self-expression of an author/creator to acknowledging its communicative potential to arouse contemplators and conjoin individuals. “I was trying to work out of an esthetic theory that viewed art as self-expression, into an emphasis upon the communicative aspect of art,” reflected Burke as he reminisced about his early work, “I was trying to develop a theory of literary form” (“Party Line” 62).

The act of focusing attention on an event and interpreting it culminates in form (e.g., lyrics, choreographic structures). Conferring form is a poetic process by which the creator represents experience. Even so, Burke emphasized that form involves “a communicative relationship between writers and audience, with both parties actively participating” (*Counter-Statement* 329). Artists, then, strive to create conditions under which plots have cultural resonance with contemplators. Poetic impact occurs when artists use form to arouse or provoke audience members toward future action. For Burke, art calls upon past experiences and prepares people for settings and events, or in his words, art functions as *equipment for living*. “Art forms like ‘tragedy’ or ‘comedy’ or ‘satire’ [can] be treated as equipments for living, that size up situations in various ways and in keeping with corresponding various attitudes” (*Philosophy* 304). It is not surprising that the new poetics advanced by Burke assumed a sociopolitical bent. From a Burkean perspective, aesthetic encounters are reflections of and contributors to the cultural idioms shaping citizens’ thoughts and actions. “[A] great work, dealing with some hypothetical event remote in history and ‘immediacy,’ may leave us with a desire for justice,” suggested Burke (*Counter-Statement* 189). “Art negotiates the conditions under which ‘life’ or ‘aesthetic’ value

can be understood within a culture. In other words, art filters life through the pieties of human perspectives" (*Counter-Statement* 314).

Burke's "new poetics" gave rise to his now widely recognized dramatic perspective. We agree with Swartz who argued that Burke's ability to read art and culture ideologically remains one of his greatest legacies (312). By recognizing the rhetorical elements of literary forms, Burke directed scholars to politicize the often taken-for-granted construction of worldviews that lead to partial perspectives and trained incapacities (i.e., one's training results in one's incapacities). Burke foreshadowed how performances emerge as contested terrains characterized by competing discourses, and inspired countless contemporary scholars to explore the storied nature of reality (e.g., Bruner 6) and the emancipatory potential of "counter-narratives"—clusters of histories, anecdotes, and other fragments woven together to disrupt stories of domination (e.g., Lindemann-Nelson, *Damaged* 153, "Sophie" xvii, "How To" xvii) (*Permanence* 154).<sup>1</sup> Narratives constitute complex and sophisticated knowledge of individuals as well as the sociocultural contexts in which characters make sense of lived struggles or unexpected blows of fate.

Poets conceptualize happenings through a variety of processes, including speaking, signing, writing, singing, photography, and dancing. Scholars interested in the emancipatory potential of storytelling have focused on the centrality of words to thought and action (Ellingson 32). Without discounting the importance of language in our work with Dancing Wheels, we sought to enlarge our ethnographic lens to engage other sensory experiences and the bodies/selves through which stories are lived. In the process, we found contemporary performance and dance studies useful. Over the past two decades, performance studies scholars interested in narrative have focused on the embodied nature of storytelling (e.g., Langellier, "You're Marked" 145, "Performing" 151; Langellier and Peterson 141). Meanwhile, dance scholars have explored the social, cultural, and political aspects of dance (e.g., Browning xxii; Hazzard-Gordon 135; Reed 503). Social identities are articulated, formed, and negotiated through bodily movements. Costumes, props, gestures, and movement signal group affiliation, resistance, and complicity. As such, dance is an important form by which cultural ideologies of difference are reproduced or resisted (Kuppers, *Community Performance* 1, *Scar* 21). Consider Barbara Browning's assertion that dance is a "means of remembering, a mode of 'cultural record keeping' and a form of 'cultural inscription'" (xxii), and "a language in response to cultural repression" (174). Browning acknowledged that bodies inscribe just as they are inscribed upon, and she links agency in the body to notions of resistance. Hazzard-Gordon's study of the rise of social dance formations in African American communities illustrates this assertion (135). In ante-bellum times, dance on slave plantations in the United States was regulated, as it was seen as a likely site for plotting insurrections.

Not surprisingly, a growing number of organizations rely on dance to redress inequities experienced by individuals living with disabilities (e.g., Cooper Albright, "Strategic Abilities" 56; Johnston 206; Joseph; Kuppers, "Tiresian" 174). Dancing Wheels is a modern dance company that integrates professional stand-up and sit-down (wheelchair) dancers in performances that seek to transform public understandings of

disability. Verdi-Fletcher President and Founding Artistic Director, started the company in 1980. In the US, the company annually produces more than 100 main stage performances, reaching a collective audience of 125,000 each year. In their fully accessible studio, Dancing Wheels provides community dance classes, summer dance workshops, theater arts camps, teacher training workshops, and specialized classes. Through these innovative programs integrating arts and recreational activities with career opportunities and training, Dancing Wheels is committed to changing the apathy, negativity, and fear that surround the education, employment, and inclusion of persons with disabilities in the arts and broader communities. Through dance, the studio is challenging cultural norms about the body and the institutional patterns and practices that fail to acknowledge and/or respond to different bodies. At any given time, the studio employs approximately eleven dancers (including both stand-up and sit-down dancers) who work with choreographers to challenge hegemonic representations of a “normal” body and the opportunities and privileges that accompany it.

Dancing Wheels realizes in performance what Burke endorsed: art, if answerable to life, can be harnessed to develop fuller and richer community life (*Counter-Statement* 63). Burke understood the corrective potential of aesthetic processes as articulated in his manifesto, or what he identified as The Program, which “would define the aesthetic as effecting an adjustment to one particular cluster of conditions, at this particular time in history” (*Counter-Statement* 121). From a Burkean perspective, art remains eternal in that it deals with constants of humanity (i.e., recurrent emotions, experiences, attitudes). Even so, art is historically specific, fluctuating with the pressing cluster of conditions experienced by creators and contemplators. To illustrate the poetics and politics of dance as a storytelling form, we turn more fully to a study of the people and performances that populate Dancing Wheels. We draw on our ethnographic experiences with Dancing Wheels<sup>2</sup> to illustrate the communicative potential of dance as a knowledge-producing resource for organizations that do the work of social movements. Burkean theory coupled with contemporary narrative and dance studies directed our attention to the storytelling capacities of dance—its choreographic structures, movement styles, and techniques coupled with musical scores, lyrics, and voiceovers.

### **Dance as a Storytelling Resource for Social Movements**

The choreographers that I have chosen to tell stories are those who have 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. (Interview, Verdi-Fletcher)

Dancing Wheels relies on dance to story history and foster ongoing social protest. The temporal ordering and recounting of key events, turning points, and agents of causation can marshal resources and motivate social change. Drawing on the work of Burke, over two decades ago, White posed the question, “[w]hat would a non-narrative representation of historical reality look like” (9)? We 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 13). Through dance, the studio develops storylines, characters, and settings of memorable moments in disability rights movements. As founder and artistic director of Dancing Wheels, Verdi-Fletcher seeks out and hires choreographers who are storytellers—artists who rely on various forms (e.g., lighting, costumes, and set design as well as movement) to develop sequences of action, characters in particular spaces at particular times engaged in consequential and interrelated actions. Through its performances, Dancing Wheels exposes audiences to events they might not otherwise know, social realities that too often linger in footnotes of textbooks or the shadows of government archives. “I am so afraid this history will be lost,” stressed Verdi-Fletcher during an interview. “Children today do not know that 30 years ago there were not curb cuts.”

Incidents like the bus protest facilitated by Verdi-Fletcher serve as fodder for choreographers, musicians, and dancers who perform expectations gone awry, pulling audience members into their story world. We began this manuscript with an excerpt from *Walking on Clouds*, a script commissioned in 2005 by Dancing Wheels and the Cleveland Contemporary Dance Theatre and choreographed by David Rousseve. In July, 2005, the two companies initially performed the piece at Cain Park, an outdoor performance venue in Cleveland Heights. As an artist, Rousseve wove between stories of the bus protest specifically (as gathered during interviews and archival research) and parallels in the disability and civil rights movement more generally. By performing the piece in various venues, members of these two companies challenged negative perceptions of people with disabilities and African-Americans and reminded audiences of their shared oppression. “*Walking on Clouds* resists the stereotypic image of disability,” Verdi-Fletcher 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.”<sup>3</sup> *Walking on Clouds* is the most moving piece for Michael Medcalf, a retired Dancing Wheels dancer, because it is “work that tells a story, and work that has many different layers of stuff in it.”

Rousseve artistically employed diverse tactics, forms, and styles to depict human plights surrounding the bus protest specifically and civil rights work more generally. He drew from a range of music including Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, The Kinks, and original hip-hop and rap. Art critic for the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* Wilma Salisbury described the piece as “a skillful blend of text, movement and music” (“Powerful” E4). The following stanza from an interactive rapping/clapping section illustrates blending in action: “I want you to see me. I want you to see me. 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,” chant the dancers in unison phrases that break into syncopated rhythms and vocal counterpoints. As Verdi-Fletcher, a protagonist in the bus protest, describes the

fear she felt when a burly police officer threatened to throw her in a paddy wagon, she spins in space and other dancers tremble. Dancers move forward in space through time (e.g., spinning) and in specific ways (e.g., trembling), and in doing so they embody the vulnerability and courage often accompanying resistance. Choreography, as an itinerary of movement, emphasizes sentiment and desire by organizing dancers' motions and bodies. Ultimately, the dancers re-enact the police officer walking away without arresting Verdi-Fletcher, one of numerous events and forces contributing to Cleveland's five-year effort to make city transportation accessible to those who move through the world in a wheelchair.<sup>4</sup> The companies coming together to perform the bus protest on stage illustrates the capacity to story history by artistically employing diverse signifying systems.

*Walking on Clouds* is one of thirty-five pieces of repertory that Dancing Wheels performs for audiences. The company has several "story ballets" or main stage performances, such as *Alice in Wonderland* (2007), *The Snowman* (2000), and *Sorcerer's Apprentices* (2004). For example, *Helen Keller: Tribute to Her Teacher* (2006), 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 uses story ballets to challenge dominant understandings about disability. When the company brings performances to elementary schools and universities (i.e., lecture performances), performers habituate new generations to alternative understandings about disability. Verdi-Fletcher reflected:

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.

At this studio, dance, as embodied storytelling, entertains, evokes emotive and cognitive responses, teaches others, fosters cultural identification, and rallies people around a cause to foster social change. Dancing Wheels aspires to Burke's vision of art as incipient action (*Counter-Statement* 45).

It was during the late 1980s that Verdi-Fletcher and her dance partners began to use the term *translation* to describe their techniques, the methods at the heart of their success as storytellers. Translation takes on many meanings at the company. To begin, choreographers, musicians, set and costume designers, and performers are united in their goal of poetically rendering events, experiences, and feelings into forms that resonate with and move audience members. In reflecting on the various mediums involved in translation, Verdi-Fletcher noted that:

Lighting is an important element, it sets the mood and creates images that parallel the movements. The costume and lighting decisions were made by David Rousseve [for *Walking on Clouds*]. Typically the choreographer sets the vision on stage and it is up to us and the technical crew to try and keep it true to the choreographer's vision. Costumes were intentionally minimal, more like street wear. This piece was created to reenact people's lives and feelings as it relates to equality so he did not want things like lighting and costumes to be a distraction.



She also indicated that “props and fabrics can be used to embellish a choreographic idea.” Costumes and props are often used to create moods, but their meaning as signifying systems emerges in relationship to other aspects of form, including the speed and timing of movement.

In *Walking on Clouds*, props such as chairs were used to simulate the shape of a bus. Verdi-Fletcher explained,

[t]he bus was simulated using folding chairs; dancers exchanged seats and reenacted the emotions that were talked about in the voice-over. It starts with Rosa Parks and ends with my story of the disability rights movement. The two stories ironically paralleled one another. I guess the saying that history repeats itself is true! The piece in general raises the emotions and awareness of a cross section of minority groups. Those of us who lived in a time in which we made change happen are certainly moved by the memories of this radical time. Those who are too young to remember understand better how they came to live lives of equality. It is so amazing to me when you lay out the paths of the gay and lesbian movement, woman’s rights, civil rights and disability rights. That we all took a stand and it really was only a handful of people that led the masses into major stands of civil disobedience to get their rights to freedom of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness recognized.

Additionally, in *Snowman*, for example, exercise balls are integrated as props in a scene because they facilitate certain movement but also, according to Verdi-Fletcher, “reflect the light and offer a buoyancy not found generally.”

Importantly, translation also 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). During an interview, Verdi-Fletcher indicated that initially such translations were necessary because individuals in wheelchairs had been all but absent in modern dance, “[t]he technique of translation, 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.” The company now plays with what Mark Tomasic described as reverse translation, “translating movement from a



**Figure 2** Image of a *Snowman* performance, another example of translation. Photo credit Dancing Wheels archives.

sit-down dancer to a stand-up dance.” Sara Lawrence, a current company member, explained translation in the following way:

we use the term 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, Lawrence adopts a linguistic metaphor to illustrate what happens through movement. Language alone could not accomplish what happens in the translation process; translation is an embodied process that demands an attunement between another’s body and one’s own, between music and movement, lyrics and rhythm and voiceovers.

In summary, Dancing Wheels, by storying history, invites audience members to consider moments fostering societal progress and the numerous ways in which people marked as disabled still have limited access to social spaces. The mission of the company is not surprising in light of the “mobilizing narrative” (Miller, Geist-Martin, and Beatty 295) of its founder. Born with spina bifida, which would necessitate a reliance on wheelchairs for mobility, Verdi-Fletcher faced profound obstacles in her pursuit to dance professionally. At Dancing Wheels, meaning is created through motion—and music, set designs, props, and scripts. Importantly, Dancing Wheels reminds us that *narratives about resistance can be as powerful as the original acts themselves* insofar as performances imagine new movement possibilities, enlarge the population of people participating in dance scenes, and answer embodied differences in ways that enrich community life.



**Figure 3** Dancers from the Dancing Wheels Company & School working through translations. Photo credit Dancing Wheels archives.

### Imagining Bodies and New Movement Possibilities

Storytelling, as an aesthetic process, draws on individuals' creative capabilities. In the case of Dancing Wheels, performances encourage audience members with and without disabilities to imagine different lived experiences. As individuals bear witness to the stories of others, they affirm their capacity to move beyond the boundaries of their own bodies and truths to appreciate the bodies and possibilities of others. From this perspective, Dancing Wheels engages and develops *imaginative rationalities* to redress salient and pressing inequities and marginalization. We understand rationalities as *modes of reasoning*, knowledge-producing resources that guide individuals' choices and actions, the processes they engage in the production of knowledge, and the value judgments they make about knowledge claims (see also Davies 43; Harter et al. 423). In turn, we position aesthetic rationalities as logics of possibility that cultivate individuals' capacities to reconsider and challenge dominant categories and classifications (see also John 329; Taylor and Hansen 0022). Nearly eighty years ago, Burke, too, argued that social change depends on citizens' creative capacities (*Counter-Statement* ix). Creativity at Dancing Wheels allows individuals to imagine otherwise, thus opening up new movement possibilities.

Mark Daurelio, a sit-down dancer, suggested that Dancing Wheels' performances enlarge audience members' understanding of 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.

DAURELIO I don't think they [health care providers] 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. 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, "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 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?

DAURELIO 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 skateboard, and 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.

Daurelio specifically referenced *A Wing/A Prayer*, an "all-wheeler" piece, choreographed by Tomasic, as a powerful illustration of people in wheelchairs making meaning through motion.

- MAGGIE What do you think makes *A Wing/A Prayer* such a good piece?
- DAURELIO 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. It is a fast piece, with difficult balance challenges.

Verdi-Fletcher suggested that “it is the rhythm of the dance and speed of the music that helps convey the message in *A Wing/A Prayer*. Its last section is precision based and quite technical with wheelie work. And the exactness of timing and speed for wheelchair dancers demonstrates their abilities like no other.”

At the same time, *Dancing Wheels* is re-imagining movement possibilities as they integrate diverse people/bodies in dance circles once populated only by the very elite (Lee 111). Scholars have acknowledged that we have not yet explored all of the movement possibilities available to humans (Hanna 178). Consider Verdi-Fletcher’s belief that *Dancing Wheels* has expanded the dance world’s *movement syllabus*:

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. People with disabilities did this. 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.

Tomasic, a retired stand-up dancer for the company and choreographer, emphasized in an interview with a reporter that inspired movement emerges when choreographers engage wheelchairs and the dancers who use them:

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 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 28–29)

According to Daurelio, choreographers who tap into the embodied experiences of sit-down dancers are poised to invent creative motions.

I think the best stuff that I’ve seen has come from in-house choreographers, like Mark [Tomasic] and Bobby. 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.

Charlotte Heppner, a sit-down dancer, stressed that inventive movement depends in large part on the choreographers’ ability to understand the bodies of those living with disabilities and the technologies they use to move.

. . . some people, they don’t know what the hell to do with us [sit-down dancers]. They just don’t realize, “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.

But 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 she too. She, I know, was pretty frustrated initially and thought "because you're in a wheelchair, you should both be able to do the same things." But you can't. . . . 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 T., 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 is not surprising that integrating sit-down dancers with stand-up dancers is difficult. The world of modern dance, until recently, has been an exclusive one. "When I was little, I did not know what was possible. So I just kept telling people I wanted to be a dancer," Verdi-Fletcher shared. "Everyone would say, 'Oh that is cute, you cannot walk, how can you dance?'" The contours of sit-down dancers' bodies demand that choreographers understand how wheelchairs work, as well as the specificities of people's disabilities, in order to craft inventive movement.

Kristen Stilwell, a stand-up dancer, reflected that Diane McIntyre, choreographer for *Sweet Radio Radicals*, worked "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 to participate more fully in the invention process.

MAGGIE Can you think of a time when integrated dance worked really well? Why did it work so well? Who was involved? To what can you attribute the success?

STILWELL When Diane McIntyre was here—she decided to choreograph with the wheelers. So when "Kristen is kicking her heels in the air on count 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. It was outside the box.

In response to a similar question, Carly Dorman, a stand-up dancer, talked about how beautiful moments are created by working through emergent movements rather than simply resorting to set choreography used in the past.

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 see what works best, what feels best, what looks best, and then some beautiful moments are created.

In reflecting on his impending departure from Dancing Wheels, Medcalf, a retiring stand-up dancer and choreographer, stressed that he would really miss the creativity that goes into *working through* integrated dance:

As an instructor or a facilitator, I would miss the analyzing of translating the movement. I think I would miss the—the analyzation [sic] 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, Medcalf talked about how he enjoys helping dancers find their own artistry/creativity. During the 2008 adult summer dance workshop that Maggie participated in, Medcalf had dancers engage in *inscription* or the creation/generation of new movement vocabulary. For example, he asked dancers to inscribe their names through bodily movement. He then linked everyone's movements together in a choreographed dance. For Medcalf, the invention and interpretation of movement is key to storytelling:

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. I really, really enjoy facilitating movement. 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.

In summary, by exercising their imaginations and tapping into their embodied differences, participants of Dancing Wheels are envisioning new movement possibilities and thus perform pieces that invite audiences with and without disabilities to exercise their imaginations. In turn, as noted below by the renowned Cleveland dance critic, Salisbury, Verdi-Fletcher and Dancing Wheels are challenging dominant stereotypes of people living with disabilities and their exclusion from many facets of community life, including the arts:

In the late 1970s, when disco was the craze, a friend asked her [Verdi-Fletcher] to try a few turns to music that was piped out of the Perry Party Center. 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." (Salisbury, "Dancing Wheels" J5)

Guided by Verdi-Fletcher, performers of Dancing Wheels seek to challenge cultural codes too often taken for granted, deficit-oriented discourses that approach the disabled body as in need of a fix. Instead, Dancing Wheels, in its finest moments, is responsive to the differences of dancers' bodies and capitalizes on how they can move. In doing so, they

offer an inclusive aesthetics that broadens contemporary dance scenes and community life (see also Cooper Albright, *Choreographing* 56; Quinlan and Bates 64).

### **Building Inclusive Communities through Dance**

Dancing Wheels relies on aesthetic forms to foster more inclusive and diverse communities, including dance arenas. Individuals' experience of communal life remains a sensory one. Barber argued that the imagination is the link that art and democracy share. It is the sense by which we stretch ourselves to include diverse others, expand our interests, and overcome the limits of our parochial selves. At Dancing Wheels, connection is created and expressed through dance. Numerous interviewees emphasized the importance of *integration* and *difference* as central to Dancing Wheels' organizing practices and its ability to build a community inclusive of individuals who too often remain on the margins of civic life. "Too often," Robert Funk 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" (342). Dancing Wheels organizes around difference through dance, as explained by a stand-up dancer:

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 . . . 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)

By celebrating difference, Dancing Wheels acknowledges the dialogic and liberating potential of art. 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:

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.

Tomasic 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." In *Walking on Clouds*, according to Verdi-Fletcher, rhythms are

created by using our voices and clapping. The rhythm is syncopated and is very difficult to keep constant. It requires a great deal of rehearsal and concentration. It is powerful in that it is right in your face and it is telling the audience, "I want you to see me," and goes on from there. When you have a line of people of a variety of ethnicity, ability and gender sitting in a row chanting it makes quite an impact!

Kerry Agins, Chairman 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.

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

STILWELL Working together...whenever we talk about integration, it's about . . . to be dancing with stand-ups and wheelchair dancers 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?

STILWELL I always say 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.

The selves expressed at Dancing Wheels are enlarged senses of self, enriched by communion with others. Dancing Wheels realizes in embodied practices what Burke argued: art can provide space for personal growth and enlarging one's worldview (*Counter-Statement* 63).

Stilwell 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 79; Cheney 131). When asked about a time when integrated dance worked beautifully, Dezare Foster, a stand-up dancer, poignantly described integrated dance as a "conversation between a stand-up and a sit-down dancer in which the strengths of both are acknowledged." Through integrated dance,



individuals create new orientations and foster alternative realities. For Maxine Greene, 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” (143). *Dancing Wheels* realizes this through its performances.

### Concluding Reflections

Burke’s “new poetics,” coupled with contemporary narrative and dance studies, proved illuminating in our engagement with *Dancing Wheels*. Narratives provide codes of conduct for coping with expectations gone awry, or in Burke’s words, they function as “incipient forms of action” (*Counter-Statement* 185). Narratives, thus, represent a performative strategy with particular significance for marginalized individuals (Clair 73). Through our storied portrayal, we illustrate how *Dancing Wheels* opens up new possibilities for disability narratives as subtle, surreptitious, and multidimensional forms of protest surface that bespeak the power of artful beliefs and practices. Through dance, the studio is remembering history, as well as proposing and shaping the worlds people inhabit together. How do societal values find embodiment through dance? How are social identities negotiated through dance? How is history storied and remembered through dance? Our portrayal of *Dancing Wheels* positions these questions center stage for disability rights activists and the public at large.<sup>5</sup>

Numerous narrative scholars have explored how individuals’ identities and communities’ collective imaginations are rendered meaningful through language (e.g., Holstein and Gubrium 230). Yet our work stretches this interdisciplinary conversation by emphasizing the range of signifying practices drawn on by individuals in the service of social justice. Props, movements, voiceovers, and choreographed repertory represent forms to be engaged narratively. The world as lived by members of *Dancing Wheels* is “seeable,” just as it is “sayable.” 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. Even so, dominant narrative scholarship focuses on the linguistic construction (and disruption) of social life and social change. *Dancing Wheels* opens up new possibilities for disability activists even as it demands that we theoretically stretch how we make sense of the organization of social change from a communicative perspective.

We urge scholars, especially those in communication, to continue to explore embodied differences that matter—differences that take on meaning and differential value—and the organized efforts of individuals trying to redress the resulting lived inequities, divisions, and marginalization (see also Ferris 219; Bauman, Nelson, and Rose xvi). The most habitually held belief about disability is that it involves a defect, a deficiency, dysfunction, an abnormality, a failing, or a medical problem that is located in the individual (Bickenbach 83). The social meaning given to impairment and disability gives rise to public and institutional responses to these conditions (Bickenbach 35). 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, and Hocevar 360). Dancing Wheels, with its focus on inclusion and ability, attempts to create a space to disrupt institutional and public responses to disability through aesthetic forms. Their approach to dance is aligned with the cultural model in which an individual has the right to accept his or her (dis)abled body. 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 and the movements that constitute dance itself.

It is through thirty years of alternative expressions of the body, coupled with aesthetic creativity, that Dancing Wheels has worked 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 its vision of art, beauty, and activism. Dancing Wheels realizes Paul Crowther’s conceptual argument about art: “[b]y virtue of its creative difference from other representations, [the work of art] opens up new possibilities of aesthetic experience” (372). Matos, when discussing disability and dance, said,

[w]hat 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. (73)

The combination of flesh and technology as utilized by dancers with and without disabilities re-imagines how bodies perform.

We find Dancing Wheels instructive in its aesthetic celebration of embodied differences as performers re-envision movement possibilities. Through dance, these artists link imaginative capacities to a sense of possibility and ability to respond to other human beings. The studio offers a set of relational and organizing rhythms worthy of modeling in which those often categorized as other for whatever reason (e.g., age, race, ability, gender) share in humanly fabricated worlds. Rather than disregarding or rendering invisible embodied differences that remain consequential (e.g., inability to stand), choreographers and countless others are imaginative enough to be present in and contribute to what Burke would consider a full and enriching communion between people (*Counter-Statement* 215).

We conclude with two cautions. First, it would be a grave mistake to assume that one performance or even a set of performances can redress the many inequities experienced by those living in bodies biomedically marked as disabled. Dancing Wheels’ performances unfold amidst severe economic impoverishment and limited opportunities for those who bear the stigma associated with physical disabilities. Performances are by no means a panacea for troubling times, but they can offer diverse entry points for refiguring the experience of living, signal problems in societal practices and patterns, and contribute to idioms shaping people’s thoughts and actions. Second, we position our construction of Dancing Wheels as pregnant with

possibilities for alternative interpretations. We agree with Alvesson and Sköldbberg, who argued:

[a]uthorship is about increasing the opportunities for different readings. The reader becomes significant, not as a consumer of correct results—the right intended meaning from the text and its (author)ity—but in a more active and less predictable positioning, in which interesting readings may be divorced from the possible intentions of the author. (171)

We offer our arguments as plausible, viable, and open to revision by others operating from different standpoints or with different theoretical underpinnings. We invite others into our textual reproduction in hopes of generating fruitful dialogue.

## Notes

- [1] See Hawhee for related discussion of Burke's interconnectedness theorizing of poetics, rhetoric, and the body.
- [2] Over a period of eighteen months, the first author collected data from three sources: (1) participant observations in the studio (workshops and rehearsals) and of performances; (2) in-depth interviews with nine dancers, three choreographers, and five board and staff members; and (3) documents produced by and about Dancing Wheels, including but not limited to newspaper articles, promotional materials, videos, and the website. The first and second author met weekly for eighteen months to discuss the fieldwork and to analyze the data.
- [3] The 1985 bus protest in Cleveland was part of a growing wave of activism for disability rights in the United States. ADAPT (American Disabled for Accessible Public Transit) had begun orchestrating similar bus protests in Denver in the early 1980s. For a broad overview of the disability rights movement in the United States, see Shapiro, and Fleischer and Zames.
- [4] For more information about RTA history in Greater Cleveland see <[http://www.riderta.com/ar\\_RTAhistory.asp](http://www.riderta.com/ar_RTAhistory.asp)>
- [5] This essay is the first in a series of articles about Dancing Wheels. The second article is a critical interrogation of paradoxes and tensions experienced by the organization and its members as they organize around difference through dance. We realize that Dancing Wheels does not always live up to its mission; yet, this is a first step in what will be several attempts at problematizing this discourse.

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