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## Embodied Knowledge and Accessible Community: An Oral History of 'Four Rehearsals and a Performance'

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# Embodied Knowledge and Accessible Community: An Oral History of “Four Rehearsals and a Performance”

*Liam Lair and Ashley Mog*

**Abstract:** In this article we discuss how an oral history project emerged through our involvement in a collaborative, creative project at the University of Kansas called Four Rehearsals and a Performance (FRAP). FRAP utilized improvisation in dance and music, bringing together community members across ability to explore how knowledge and community are created. Our analysis explores themes of embodiment, community, and how participants experienced the space of FRAP. We first describe how FRAP became a project, and then we discuss how our oral history project emerged as part of FRAP. After providing specific examples of themes and experiences shared by our interviewees, we reflect on the successes and failures of creating a fully accessible performance space. We consider this oral history a “queer oral history” following Horacio Roque Ramírez and Nan Alamilla Boyd’s introduction in *Bodies of Evidence*, as it is a project with an “overtly political function and a liberating quality.” Both FRAP and our oral history project explored the politics of which bodies are valued and which bodies are seen as capable of creative production.

**Keywords:** disability, embodiment, improvisation, queer

“What led to your involvement with Four Rehearsals and a Performance?” With this leading question we began our oral history, seeking to understand what brought people to a space of collaborative improvisation—one intended to create community across ability—and why. Four Rehearsals and a Performance was a unique improvisational and collaborative project, bringing together an interdisciplinary group of scholars, community members, and activists. What were their experiences, and what does an oral history of these experiences tell us about community, embodiment, dis/comfort, connection, and activism? In what follows, we will explore each of these themes through the words of those who participated in this event. We provide an overview of the actual performance, discuss the uniqueness of this particular project, and then share the words, thoughts, and experiences of those who participated. Our analysis is ongoing, and our

hope is that our interviewees will continue to participate in the project by adding their analyses to our interactive website.

## **Improvising across Ability**

In the autumn of 2013, the authors participated in a creative and improvisational process called *Four Rehearsals and a Performance*. The process was exactly as its name suggests: over the course of two months, faculty and students from the University of Kansas (KU) in Lawrence, Kansas, joined by community members from the surrounding areas, met four times to create and rehearse an improvisational piece, ultimately presenting it in a public performance. “Improvising across ability” was a foundational tenet of the project, in part because we employed a musical instrument designed for people with disabilities, which we will describe below. While we were excited to be a part of such a project, it also seemed baffling; with just four rehearsals, what would the final performance look like? Neither of us had much experience with improvisation, and given the few rehearsals allotted, we were not convinced that the final performance would be a success. However, once we started the rehearsals, the rewards soon outweighed any confusion as *Four Rehearsals and a Performance* developed into a project that was as much about building community as it was about expanding and challenging notions of which bodies could participate in a creative performance. People from many backgrounds and positionalities participated in the project, and the final performance was well attended by community members. Below we discuss the beginnings of *Four Rehearsals and a Performance*, how we conducted the oral histories, and what our participants had to say about the experience.

*Four Rehearsals and a Performance* (FRAP) was a collaborative project from beginning to end. Together, four KU professors came up with the broad idea of a mixed arts, mixed media, structured improvisation performance. Within the rehearsals and the performance, participants

moved through the space using dance, the Adaptive Use Musical Instrument (AUMI, described below), contact improvisation, and live musical instruments, which they used in call and response with people playing the AUMI. Current faculty and students from the Departments of Theatre, American Studies, Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Dance, Music, Applied Behavioral Science, and Engineering joined the project, making it a truly interdisciplinary endeavor. KU alumni and community members were another significant group of participants, including people from Independence Inc., Lawrence's independent living center, and Grooveability, a Kansas City-based dance group that brings people together across ability to dance. Every person involved in the project, including ourselves, acted as participants as well as contributors to the final performance, which was called (Un)rolling the Boulder. We all contributed an idea, a movement, a sound, a visual image, or technical help to the event.

We began this oral history project, in part, because of what we saw as a unique opportunity to ask people what brought them to the space of FRAP. As we began speaking with people, themes emerged. Our questions remained the same, but our interests expanded: we wondered about how participants wrestled with discomfort, how they understood and experienced improvisational performance, how they understood community and making change in the world in relation to their participation. We announced our project at the first rehearsal and called for interviewees. From that first day, the project grew into something larger than we had originally imagined as we realized that this oral history had the potential to do something more than record and archive the reflections of participants. We realized that through the Scalar site (the interactive digital archive of our oral history), we could create a space where all of the participants in FRAP, regardless of their participation in the oral history interviews, could

continue the conversations that began in those interviews and evolved over the course of the project.

## Queering Oral History

As queer-identified oral historians, we were also interested in how queerness as a methodological and theoretical framework might help us understand this experience. Our understanding of queerness is multifaceted and extends far beyond sexual practices, desires, or identities. For us, queerness involves an approach to understanding systems of privilege and oppression that accounts for all of the ways in which difference can and does create a more just world.

Queerness is a political approach to struggles for justice that attends to work that positively affects the largest number of people; it eschews shortsighted approaches that might be politically efficacious in the moment. Queer approaches to justice, in the words of legal and trans scholar Dean Spade, seek to “transform current logics of state, civil...and social equality.”<sup>1</sup> Rather than work within an infrastructure that is already broken, queer politics seeks to dismantle that system and create new ones that are not rooted in histories of racism, ableism, colonialism, and classism.<sup>2</sup>

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Acknowledgements: We were so excited to be a part of this project and are thankful that this oral history emerged from it. There are too many people to thank individually, but we want to name some of the key people without whom this project would not have happened. Thank you to Sherrie Tucker, Nicole Hodges Persley, Michelle Heffner-Hayes, Kip Haaheim, and all our co-performers. This collaborative and innovative project was transformative for us intellectually and emotionally. We would also like to thank the many sponsors and organizations that made (Un)rolling the Boulder a possibility: AbleHawks & Allies, Independence, Inc., KU’s Institutional Opportunity and Access, School of the Arts, The Commons, the Hall Center Seed Grant, and AUMI-KU InterArts (member of the AUMI Consortium). Lastly, we would like to thank Ellie Vainker and Catherine Jacquet for their awesome editorial skills and enduring support.

<sup>1</sup> Dean Spade, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law* (Brooklyn, NY: South End Press, 2011), 19.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Spade describes normative approaches to violence against queer people as being such measures as “pass[ing] hate crime legislation to increase prison sentences and strengthen local and federal law enforcement.” His example of a queer political approach to this problem would be to “develop community-based responses to violence that support collective healing and accountability,” and he names the “root causes” of queer violence and death as “police violence, imprisonment, poverty, lack of healthcare and housing.” Increasing criminal legislation further increases the opportunities for those already experiencing higher rates of violence, because the criminal legal system is always already infused with racist, heterosexist, and classist ideology. Spade, 137.

While this conversation about queer politics might seem unrelated, for us it was intricately linked to the heart of FRAP. FRAP sought to create community across difference, to think through and struggle with concepts of comfort, activism, disability, embodiment, and the minutia of everyday struggles for access and justice. For us, queer politics were infused into FRAP, regardless of participant identification with queer identity. By definition then, FRAP was a *queer* project. As we will discuss in more detail below, we understood FRAP to have an “overtly political function and a liberating quality” for those who chose to participate.<sup>3</sup> Participants were changed, and they were challenged to recognize the political implications of pushing back against normative understandings of bodies, communities, and performance.

It is difficult to succinctly convey all that this oral history project revealed about the participants in FRAP, their experiences, and how FRAP challenged us to think about community, embodiment, and performance. While various common themes—what we are calling *points of entry*—emerged, everyone was moved by this experience in significant ways. It challenged some to think about community differently. Others realized that discomfort challenged them to relate to their own bodies in new and exciting ways. Every interviewee shared something unique and insightful. What we did see overall, however, was that a project like FRAP can make an enormous and ongoing positive impact; it started conversations, incited people to engage in work and activism, and challenged people to think about their relationships to others in the community.

### **“Dreaming Out Loud”: The Origins of FRAP**

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<sup>3</sup> Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N. Roque Ramírez, “Introduction: Close Encounters,” in *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History*, ed. Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N. Roque Ramírez (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1.

The brainchild of faculty members Sherrie Tucker, Nicole Hodges Persley, Michelle Heffner-Hayes, and Kip Haaheim, FRAP began to take shape early in the fall of 2013, emerging from a common interest in AUMI. The Deep Listening Institute describes AUMI as a

software interface that enables the user to play sounds and musical phrases through movement and gestures. This is an entry to improvisation that enables exploration of sounds ranging from pitches to noises rather than learning set pieces. This open approach to music enables anyone to explore and express a range of affects, both by themselves and in response to, or in conversation with, others.<sup>4</sup>

AUMI is first and foremost an instrument. However, it is unique in that it is an instrument designed with a particular demographic in mind—children with disabilities. Composer, musician, philosopher, and humanitarian Pauline Oliveros designed AUMI in collaboration with occupational therapist Leaf Miller. As a faculty member at Potential Unlimited, Miller wanted all of her students to be able to participate in the drum circle that she was leading. Focusing on children who had disabilities as a starting point was her attempt “to make musical improvisation and collaboration accessible to the widest possible range of individuals.”<sup>5</sup> Miller and Oliveros were also aware of the opportunities this instrument could create “for learning more about the relations between ability, the body, creativity and improvisation, from within a cultural context that does not always acknowledge or accept people with disabilities.”<sup>6</sup> It is these opportunities that the creators of FRAP also wanted to explore.

The seeds of FRAP were planted several years prior to its implementation. The interest in AUMI at KU grew from jazz historian and feminist scholar Sherrie Tucker’s history of

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<sup>4</sup> “Adaptive Use Musical Instrument,” Deep Listening Institute, <http://deeplisting.org/site/adaptiveuse> .

<sup>5</sup> “Adaptive Use Musical Instrument.” Potential Unlimited is a music, dance, and performing arts organization for artists with developmental disabilities.

<sup>6</sup> “Adaptive Use Musical Instrument.”

involvement with music, scholars, and artists. Several years before FRAP, Tucker was invited to participate in Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice, a project created by music and theater scholar Ajay Heble that involved international scholars doing interdisciplinary work. Heble wanted to study improvisation and how it “can be used in social practice and community.”<sup>7</sup> After being introduced to AUMI as a tool for community building, Tucker realized that the possible uses of AUMI as an instrument tapped into her long-standing commitment to improvisation and community. While acknowledging that *community* is a fraught concept—in her words, “It’s so necessary for social justice yet it also so often enacts social *injustice* by deciding who’s in and who is out in ways that are exclusive”—Tucker posited AUMI as “a kind of technology that uses the arts to facilitate a community formation” in new, transformative, and generative ways.<sup>8</sup>

Hoping that many people across communities would be interested in AUMI and her project, Tucker reached out to people in the Lawrence community as well as faculty on campus who were interested in performance, embodiment, and improvisation.<sup>9</sup> Tucker, along with Hodges Persley, Heffner-Hayes and Haaheim, procured a campus grant to fund their interest and

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<sup>7</sup> Liam Lair and Ashley Mog, “‘Dreaming Out Loud’: The Origins of FRAP,” in *Four Rehearsals and a Performance: An Oral History* (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 2013), <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/four-rehearsals-and-a-performance-an-oral-history-of-aumi-participants/the-space-of-frap>.

<sup>8</sup> Lair and Mog, “Sherrie on Practicing Community,” <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/four-rehearsals-and-a-performance-an-oral-history-of-aumi-participants/how-frap-came-into-being>.

<sup>9</sup> Through KU professor Ray Pence, Tucker connected to disability activists on campus, including Dot Nary, an important collaborator and research professor at the Research and Training Center on Independent Living at KU. Nary was instrumental in thinking through how AUMI could be incorporated into classrooms on campus. Pence also introduced Tucker to Ranita Wilkes of Independence Inc., Lawrence’s independent living center for people with disabilities. Wilkes enthusiastically agreed to bring AUMI to the center and shortly thereafter began hosting weekly AUMI jam sessions. Dance professor Michelle Heffner-Hayes was a natural ally, having cotaught the course *Improvisation, Bodies, and Difference* with Tucker. An experienced Flamenco dancer and improviser, Heffner-Hayes had innovative ideas about using dance to create sound using AUMI and began to stretch the ideas of what was possible in regard to the instrument. Music professor Kip Haaheim and theater professor Nicole Hodges Persley, two scholars whose work inspired Tucker, joined the project shortly after Heffner-Hayes. Haaheim’s musical and technical skills expanded the use of AUMI in new and innovative ways. Hodges Persley’s talent as an actor, dancer, director, and artist provided opportunities for the group to rethink AUMI and its uses in new and transformative ways. Bringing their skills and experience with improvisation to AUMI, these four faculty members became a dynamic voice for what this instrument could offer in relation to community development and creativity.

research in AUMI.<sup>10</sup> With this funding, they made several attempts to garner campus-wide interest in AUMI, with only limited success. While classroom demonstrations made other faculty and students aware of AUMI, it did not inspire continued use of the instrument. Regular AUMI jam sessions also proved a disappointment as attendance dwindled and busy schedules kept people from participating regularly. Facing this reality, at an end-of-the-year wrap-up meeting Hodges Persley pitched the idea of a performance in order to generate interest in and commitment to the AUMI project.<sup>11</sup> While the four faculty members were busy and knew from experience that difficulty with scheduling often prevented participation, they decided that a limited and predefined commitment could potentially break these barriers and generate interest and participation from the community, both on and off campus. The group considered a set number of rehearsals with one final performance. As Hodges Persley began creating the skeleton script for the performance, the group realized that four rehearsals were needed to have at least a chance to do a dress rehearsal. Thus, Four Rehearsals and a Performance was born.

### **Disability, Performance, and Queerness**

For this oral history project, we interviewed eleven of the twenty original participants involved in the project. With participant approval, we audio- and video-recorded these interviews.

Although we did not actually interview each other, we included our own experiences as

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<sup>10</sup> Because none of the scholars at KU invented AUMI, the quest for funding for the collaborative KU project had to be based on the difference the instrument makes for individuals and communities. The Hall Center for the Humanities at KU offered a Collaborative Seed Grant for faculty working across disciplines. The group recognized this as an ideal opportunity to bring AUMI to campus, so the group applied twice; the second time they were awarded the grant. Through this grant, they hired Pete Williams, American studies graduate student, to be the project manager. The grant also allowed them to purchase equipment, which provided the foundation for educating others about AUMI and ultimately allowing AUMI to be introduced to the larger KU community.

<sup>11</sup> Shortly before this meeting, Tucker presented at a KU conference called “Red Hot Research” in the Commons building on campus and put out a call for a flash mob to occur during her presentation. She was very surprised how many people showed up to participate in the flash mob and saw this as a sign of interest in the AUMI. Emily Ryan, a coordinator at the Commons, was impressed with the flash mob and offered the idea of an AUMI concert at the Commons. After Hodges-Persley pitched the idea of a performance, Tucker connected the pieces, and thus did FRAP begin to take shape.

participants within the project analysis. While most oral histories examine past events, we carried out oral history interviews while the project of FRAP was occurring. This approach to doing oral history is unusual, but it afforded us the ability not only to inquire about what led participants to this project but also to ask about how peoples' histories came to bear on their experience *as it was happening*. Their reflections on both of these aspects were critical for our framing of FRAP and how we interpreted the meaning it carried for each person.

Disability studies served as a guiding framework for our project. Disability studies is the critical academic study of how “ability” and “disability” are both culturally constructed and embodied. As a field of study, it questions the naturalization of able-bodiedness and able-mindedness that structure value and opportunity. Disability studies emerged as an identity-politics field concerned with examining the lives and material realities of people with disabilities. It is both a field of critical study and a mode of activism. As a field of study, it is about questioning the construct of ability by positing able-bodiedness and able-mindedness as experiences that “masquerade as a nonidentity.”<sup>12</sup> Because ability is naturalized in this way, disability is then presented as a foil to “normal” bodies.<sup>13</sup> Disability studies provided us with a lens to critically examine the intersections of disability and performance. Petra Kuppers, who works at the intersection of performance studies and disability studies, argues for a conception of “disability justice” in performance. Kuppers posits that “a call for social justice rather than rights

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<sup>12</sup> Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 1.

<sup>13</sup> The work of Robert McRuer provides an important explanation of this phenomenon. He uses the concept of “compulsory able-bodiedness” to describe the ways in which people with disabilities, according to social convention, must always be striving to be as able-bodied as possible in order to be recognized as normal and valuable. Utilizing the “gender trouble” work of queer theorist Judith Butler, he calls this *ability trouble*: although ability is supposed to be natural and normal, people are always striving for it and often failing to completely embody it. See McRuer, 10.

offers a perspective that does not begin at non-disabled embodiment.”<sup>14</sup> She calls for an approach to social justice that begins from a viewpoint of disability rather than able-bodiedness. We understand FRAP as following this call, centering embodiment and movement both in contrast to and beyond the privileged position of those who are able-bodied and able-minded.

## Theory and Method

Theories and methodologies gleaned from oral historians such as Alessandro Portelli, Horacio Roque Ramírez, and Nan Alamilla Boyd also informed our analysis.<sup>15</sup> Rather than search for a single “truth,” as researchers and participants we hoped to capture both the continuities and discontinuities of participant experience and to explore what these meant for an event intended to create community across difference. As we recorded the oral histories of this project and began to write about what it meant to us, we wanted to continue the collaborative nature of the project. We did not want to be the only producers of knowledge and analysis in relation to a performance where so many were involved.

We frame our project as a “queer oral history” following Roque Ramírez and Boyd, in that “queer oral histories have an overtly political function and a liberating quality.”<sup>16</sup> Our project draws meaning from embodied knowledge—meaning that emerges from the bodily experience of moving through the world. A practice of *queer* oral history, Roque Ramírez and Boyd posit, involves understanding the role of the body in experience and documenting that in oral histories.<sup>17</sup> The process of rehearsing for the final performance required that participants

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<sup>14</sup> Petra Kuppers, *Disability Culture and Community Performance: Find a Strange and Twisted Shape* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 17.

<sup>15</sup> Tami Albin’s project, *Under the Rainbow: Oral Histories of Gay, Lesbian, Transgender, Intersex and Queer People in Kansas*, informed our analysis and approach to this work. Her project served as an example of how to do queer oral history in Kansas. Since beginning her project in 2007, she has interviewed over sixty GLBTIQ people. Twenty-five of her oral histories are available online through KU ScholarWorks, and she continues to transcribe and index her interviews in the hopes of adding more: <https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/handle/1808/5330>.

<sup>16</sup> Boyd and Roque Ramírez, 1.

<sup>17</sup> Boyd and Roque Ramírez, 2.

think about bodies: how our bodies moved and interacted with one another and where they fit in the space. In their oral histories, all of our narrators discussed this bodily understanding and how bodily dis/comfort, connection, and experience created something new or interesting for them. This bodily knowledge, which Jeff Friedman calls “embodied perception of reality,” was different for each participant, and we were able to capture these accounts.<sup>18</sup> FRAP provided space to create communities across difference and relied on participants working together to queer what counts as knowledge and community. Difference in this space was not only focused on disability. It also encompassed sexuality, gender identity and expression, body size, discipline, age, and race. Because of the vastly different experiences of those involved, we refused to create a singular narrative of FRAP. Instead, we found it more interesting to focus on the discontinuities, the points where the narrative and oral histories diverged from one another. For example, we were interested in how different conceptions of community were at play between performers. As we discuss below, there was not a single version of community; in fact, sometimes views clashed. However, it was interesting, productive, and important that participants understood community differently because it created space to question how to build accessible community through discontinuous experience. It is in the variety of experience where we can learn the most about a project like FRAP.

In our analysis of the oral histories about FRAP, we relied on Portelli’s formulation of memory as “an active process of creation of meanings.”<sup>19</sup> We wanted to consider the significance of making meaning with one’s body in community with others, and we wanted to capture these experiences as they were occurring. We also used Portelli’s formulation in

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<sup>18</sup> Jeff Friedman, “Spiraling Desire: Recovering the Lesbian Embodied Self in Oral History Narrative,” in *Bodies of Evidence*, 82.

<sup>19</sup> Alessandro Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different,” in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (New York: Routledge, 2006), 69.

conjunction with a queer oral history lens to think about our interviews and to call attention to the ways in which meaning is cocreated between the interviewers and interviewees. Through the active process of capturing and analyzing these oral histories, we wanted to showcase how FRAP was a collaborative creation of meaning, one that helped us to learn what could be possible in communities working across ability.

Queerness, as a politics and an identity, was present in the FRAP experience, but it was not directly articulated by those who did not identify with it. Queerness was also not a central theme of the project. This posed a challenge for us as queer-identified participants, because we are familiar with the tensions in queer activism and the politics of working across difference and community. While there is amazing potential for disability and queer activists to work together, this work is not always easy.<sup>20</sup> Not everyone we spoke with, either in the space of rehearsal or in our interviews, accepted or celebrated our queerness. We were faced with the complexity of being in community with people in relation to our queer genders and sexualities that did not always create cohesion. Some of this tension arose in a few of our oral history interviews. We tried to be open on our demographic form, asking people to write in their own gender and sexual identities rather than providing check-boxes. What we did not realize at the time is that this is not necessarily a common practice for those who are not actively working within queer politics, and some of the tension of our identities arose in those moments before the interviews started. Other interviews we conducted, however, contained open discussions of queer sexualities and genders, connecting personal experiences outside of the performance to the work we were doing in FRAP.

Race was also something that most people did not engage with in any substantial way.

One of the organizers of FRAP, Hodges Persley, is a mixed-race woman of color whose work is

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<sup>20</sup> Ashley Mog and Amanda Swarr, "Threads of Commonality in Transgender and Disability Studies," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (2008), <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/152/152>.

concerned with critical race studies, and her influences and experiences shaped the start of the project. Tucker and Heffner-Heyes also integrate critical race perspectives into their work, an approach that was reflected in the planning stage of this project. However, most of the people who showed up to participate were white, which in turn implicitly shaped the process and final performance of FRAP. As a group we did not specifically discuss race in the rehearsals or the performance. Several interviewees, however, discussed race and racial politics in their interviews. In her interview, for example, Tucker was concerned about notions of colonization and nationalism as moments when community becomes an untenable and power-laden concept. Similarly, referencing performance studies scholar Meiling Cheng's concept of the "multicentricity of identity," Hodges Persley discussed her own feelings about embodying mixed-race identity in both the space of FRAP and her larger academic work.<sup>21</sup> As we will discuss below, other participants contributed discussions of privilege, including racial privilege, in their conceptions of comfort. A deeper engagement with issues of race and racial justice is missing from the project of FRAP. We acknowledge the ways in which failing to substantially engage race reproduces whiteness as an unmarked identity. While the experiences, overlaps, and intersections of race and disability were not a central discussion in FRAP, however, they were nonetheless always present and are something we hope to promote discussion about within the ongoing analysis on the Scalar site.

### **Continuing the Conversation**

As the interviewers and the creators of the questions, we had some measure of control over the interview process. However, we kept our questions as open as possible, asking a few open-ended

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<sup>21</sup> Meiling Cheng, *In Other Los Angeleses: Multicentric Performance Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

questions and coming up with follow-up questions as we went along. We ended every interview asking participants if they had anything else to talk about beyond what we had asked. When we began our analysis, we wanted the understanding of the experiences and their interpretation to be collaborative. We chose the digital humanities tool Scalar to work with for this project.<sup>22</sup> Scalar provided us with a platform to include various forms of media, to showcase the performance space in a three-dimensional way, and to create an archive of the event (fliers, rehearsal notes, and programs are all available through the Scalar site). More importantly, the multimedia nature of Scalar allows users to choose different paths through the site and access information in many different ways to create their own meaning.<sup>23</sup> Users can also leave comments, adding to the knowledge created about the experiences of FRAP. This last aspect was crucial for us; we recognized the collaborative nature of FRAP from the beginning and wanted to continue that through the oral history project. The Scalar site allowed us to frame the conversation and then invite participants to write, comment, and add their own thoughts and analysis to work that was already available. While we decided on the final organization of the site and cut clips of video interviews so as to organize them by theme, we also put the interviews in their unedited entirety in an easily accessible place on the site. Our hope was that this would invite others to listen to the interviews without our written analysis and to offer their own analysis.

## **The Oral History**

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<sup>22</sup> Scalar is “a free, open source authoring and publishing platform” for creating “long-form, born-digital scholarship online”; see <http://scalar.usc.edu/>.

<sup>23</sup> Some of the analysis here can also be found on our Scalar site: Liam Lair and Ashley Mog, “Four Rehearsals and a Performance: An Oral History,” <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/four-rehearsals-and-a-performance-an-oral-history-of-aumi-participants/the-space-of-frap>.

As mentioned above, we interviewed eleven out of the twenty original participants involved in the project.<sup>24</sup> Our interviewees ranged in age, identifying themselves as between the ages of eighteen and fifty-nine. Seven of our participants identified as women or as females, three identified as men or as male, and one identified neither as male/man or female/woman. One participant identified as “multiracial (African American-Arab American, etc...),” one interviewee identified as “Asian, Chinese,” another identified as “mixed white,” and the remaining eight of our eleven participants identified as “white,” as a “white person,” or as “Caucasian.” Four participants identified as having a disability, and a fifth did not identify as currently living with a disability but identified as having been temporarily disabled prior to our conversation. Six participants identified with heterosexuality or as straight, and five identified as either queer, asexual, bisexual, or with no particular sexual orientation. In the interest of transparency and reflexivity, we feel that it is important to situate ourselves within the demographics of the participants. Author Liam Lair identifies as white and transmasculine and does not identify as someone with a disability. Author Ashley Mog identifies as mixed race, femme, and as a person with multiple invisible disabilities. We mention how we identify because we believe that each aspect of our identities affected the experiences of those we interviewed. Beyond the rehearsals and performance, our identities affected how we conceived of and pursued the oral histories. As queer researchers, we were interested not only in the queer aspects of this performance but also in the racial implications of queerness and disability. The whiteness of the majority of the participants, discussed above, speaks to larger misrepresentations of disability as white.<sup>25</sup> We want to acknowledge that we do not explore this issue in depth, but other scholars

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<sup>24</sup> During our interview process, we asked each participant to let us know which name to use when writing about the interviews, and this is reflected below.

<sup>25</sup> Chris Bell, “Is Disability Studies Actually White Disability Studies?,” *The Disability Studies Reader*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2010).

doing this work inform our overall analysis about the performance and the experience of our participants.

### **(Un)rolling the Boulder**

Familiarity with the space and location of FRAP is central to understanding its larger implications. Our performance space was not a theater but a conference hall which lent itself to collaboration and improvisation. The space provided us with the flexibility to redefine what counted as the “stage” and how we might use every corner of the room, including architectural features such as columns and doorways. While we reference the overall project as FRAP, the performance itself was titled (Un)rolling the Boulder. This name was meant to articulate our intentional move to undo or “unroll” the barriers faced on a daily basis not only by people with disabilities but also by people who face barriers because of any aspect of their identity or embodiment. Too often people form the barriers that other people experience on a daily basis, and the name of this performance was intended to articulate this phenomenon.

Through discussion and process during our four rehearsals, we split the space up into four zones, with a different emphasis in each. What each zone represented was open to interpretation based on one’s experience either performing or watching. During the performance, we moved from zone one to zones three, two, and four. As we moved between the zones we danced from a conga line into a Zumba performance, led and taught by one of our FRAP members. Zone one focused on AUMI. Zone three, along with the columns, focused on playfulness, and as we moved into zone two the focus shifted to isolation, loneliness, and the difficulty of communicating one’s fears, with a focus on invisible disability. Zone four brought everyone together for a music performance and for our human boulder. The boulder was an idea that emerged in the third rehearsal and was the prompt for the name of the performance. The human

boulder was intended to symbolize the fact that many barriers that people face on a day-to-day basis are oftentimes the actions and beliefs of other people who remain unaware of difference or of ways of being in the world that are not considered normative. For the conclusion of our performance we moved out of zone four, performed another Zumba dance in the aisle, and then left the performance space. What each zone represented is open to interpretation based on one's experience either performing or watching.<sup>26</sup> Audience members were invited to join in the performance at the beginning and during each portion of the performance, and many did. After the performance we invited audience members to stay and join us in conversation about the experience. We were moved by how excited they were about the performance and AUMI and how willing they were to engage in conversations about disability. While the conversation was not without diminishing comments about how "inspiring it was" to see people with disabilities dancing, we also understood that the conversation was the first many had had about disability at all.<sup>27</sup>

While this was a collaborative experience and no one person was wholly responsible for the outcome and accessibility of the space, that does not mean making it accessible to everyone was without difficulties. Our use of visuals made it inaccessible for people with visual impairments. The space and performance were not accessible to people with hearing impairments because of limitations on the tools we could acquire. For example, we could not provide a haptic pad for use by performers and audience members.<sup>28</sup> Also, we were only able to have a sign language interpreter at the last of the four rehearsals and at the performance. As

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<sup>26</sup> Visit our scalar site to interactively move through the performance space: <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/four-rehearsals-and-a-performance-an-oral-history-of-aumi-participants/the-space-of-frap>.

<sup>27</sup> For more on the ways in which inspiration is discussed in relation to people with disabilities see: Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1999); Joseph P Shapiro, *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1994).

<sup>28</sup> A haptic pad is a device that uses tactile sensors to communicate sound to the individual using the device.

another example, zone two was related to conveying the feeling and experience of psychiatric disability (invisible disability), but we had a hard time finding a shared language to describe the space that worked for everyone. Our struggles over these issues and making this space as accessible as possible speak to the work that is involved in creating community across ability—work that is well worth the effort, nonetheless.

FRAP is one performance among others in a lineage of intersectional performances thinking beyond single-issue frameworks for change.<sup>29</sup> FRAP can be understood to be part of a larger trajectory of projects created and performed by disabled performers like Patty Berne, Nomy Lamm, Leroy Moore, and Petra Kuppers.<sup>30</sup> Their project provided stories of queer and nonqueer, disabled and nondisabled people who created a subversive and interesting performance that challenged notions of embodiment and productivity. More oral histories of people with disabilities and queer people are needed; these communities are sorely underrepresented in mainstream narratives. The work of performances like this is about challenging norms and “imagining bodies and desires otherwise.”<sup>31</sup>

## The Common Threads

After conducting our interviews, we found that almost all of our interviewees referenced concepts of community, embodiment, connection, dis/comfort, and activism and advocacy.

These five themes encompass what our interviewees either gestured towards or stated explicitly

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<sup>29</sup> There are many works that highlight ways that including people with disabilities in the creation and performance of dance makes a more subversive and interesting performance; see, for example, Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander, *Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009); Petra Kuppers, *Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on Edge* (London: Routledge, 2003); Simi Linton, *My Body Politic: A Memoir* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007). There are not as many published academic works, however, that bring together a deeply intersectional understanding of performance through the use of oral history.

<sup>30</sup> For some of the work of these performers, see Patricia Berne, *Sins Invalid: An Unshamed Claim to Beauty in the Face of Invisibility* (Harriman, NY: New Day Films, 2013).

<sup>31</sup> McRuer, 32.

during our conversations with them. We used these themes as our points of entry for analyzing Four Rehearsals and a Performance as an oral history project. The coconstitutive nature of these themes provides insight into what happened during the process of FRAP, its affects, its effects, and the ways in which the participants were moved by their participation. While none of these themes are discrete categories, they provided us a way to organize meaning from the narratives we collected.

### *Community*

All of our participants discussed community, albeit in different ways. Some referenced the joy they experienced as we formed a community, and others discussed the discomfort they felt in an unfamiliar community. One of our participants, K, discussed the experience of community during FRAP. K tied community to an understanding of home, where community was less connected to place and more focused on the people in a given space. More importantly for K, community was about just “being yourself.” K specifically discussed the “space” of home and of community as space that provides entry into oneself. K expressed the belief that

through getting to know others I get to know myself better... This is a different sort of community because it's about breaking down those community walls – it's not about who is a part of it and who is not. It's just there to experience, not only to share your own experience, but to have others be a part of it.<sup>32</sup>

K had a very positive experience of community while participating in FRAP and found community there for the first time since starting a graduate program at KU. K felt at home in our project space and with other participants.

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<sup>32</sup> “K on Community as Home,” <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/four-rehearsals-and-a-performance-an-oral-history-of-aumi-participants/kay-on-community-as-home?path=community>.

Other participants experienced concepts of community in contrast to this feeling of home. Sherrie discussed her experience of community as a practice. In her words, “Community is a practice, it isn’t a thing. It’s elusive, because when it feels comfortable, it might not be feeling the same way to other people.”<sup>33</sup> Sherrie defined community as “something that is active, flexible, and changing over time.”<sup>34</sup> She cautioned that “once it’s achieved...there is a danger of community falling so in love with a particular version of itself that it becomes exclusive.”<sup>35</sup> Sherrie hoped the members might be attentive to this, in thinking through and creating community. If we as participants were not aware of this, it could be detrimental because “when community feels like home – it’s a sign of danger” and is dangerous when it is “protected to the expense of other community members or people who are in the proximity of the place that is home.”<sup>36</sup> The two points of view we present here from K and Sherrie help encapsulate the variety and sometimes contradictory experiences of creating community.

Dot defined community as “people who are interested in similar ideas, movements, activities, getting together to do something.”<sup>37</sup> Participation was central to this definition for Dot. Through her disability advocacy work, she formulated a definition of participation over and against the idea of isolation, “the opposite of living in an oasis.” Participation in a community, she argued, involves “some level of interactions with those that reside in your community” and can manifest in formal or informal ways, but there must be “some familiarity in interaction.”<sup>38</sup> FRAP provided an opportunity for people not only to be in community but also to participate in

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<sup>33</sup> “Sherrie on Practicing Community,” <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/four-rehearsals-and-a-performance-an-oral-history-of-aumi-participants/sherrie-on-community?path=community>.

<sup>34</sup> “Sherrie on Practicing Community.”

<sup>35</sup> “Sherrie on Practicing Community.”

<sup>36</sup> “Sherrie on Practicing Community.”

<sup>37</sup> “Dot and Community Participation,” <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/four-rehearsals-and-a-performance-an-oral-history-of-aumi-participants/dot-and-community-participation?path=community>.

<sup>38</sup> “Dot and Community Participation.”

that community. This possibility is what first brought Dot to FRAP, but it is also what stimulated her to continue in her own participation in the project. By creating an event that required each one of us to actively participate, FRAP provided space to reconceptualize community and to step outside of our comfort zones in order to work together.

### *Dis/Comfort*

Feelings of comfort and discomfort during the project were also a uniting theme across our interviews. While many participants discussed the positive effects of FRAP for community building and connection, they also expressed feelings of uneasiness and discomfort. Discomfort took a few different guises for our narrators, from bodily and emotional feelings during the rehearsal and the performance, to structures of privilege, to the created uneasiness in the audience. The line between comfort and discomfort was not always clear-cut and many narrators described their own journey with these affects.

Interviewees repeatedly referenced feelings of discomfort regarding improvising, dancing, and moving in ways that were unfamiliar. Even though participants found improvisation to be uncomfortable at first, they often went on to experience it as a transformative emotion that took them out of their comfort zones. Most of the participants we spoke with both in and out of the interviews mentioned some sort of discomfort or weird feeling associated with improvising. A few of our narrators described the “awkward” feeling of dancing and moving in unusual ways. Narrator Alice, for example, had not danced since her spinal cord injury years before and described her first experiences in the rehearsals as feeling “awkward,” “confused,” and like she had no idea how to follow what was happening.<sup>39</sup> However, as time went on she became more relaxed and less concerned with how she looked. Another participant, K, described “feeling

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<sup>39</sup> “Alice on Finding New Ways to Dance,” <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/four-rehearsals-and-a-performance-an-oral-history-of-aumi-participants/alice-on-finding-new-ways-to-dance-1?path=embodiment>.

scared” in the rehearsals and about the performance, but joined the group because of the possibilities for change and community.<sup>40</sup>

For FRAP participant Trevor, the physical and improvisational aspects of the project were anxiety producing for him, but in a productive way:

I think people... are very invested in feeling always happy and safe and comfortable, but happy and safe and comfortable is usually coming on the backs of people who are not happy and safe and comfortable or just sort of maybe an act of submission... Comfort is nice and it's warm, but so is hypothermia... [but] I think it's worthwhile to inhabit and stick around in bad feelings sometimes.<sup>41</sup>

Trevor saw his own participation and discomfort as a way to think through structures of privilege related to comfort. He conveyed that through participation in the process he found that there is something “worth while” about not always being comfortable when forging community or communal experience.

Similarly, another performer, Pete, described his feelings of discomfort as productive. However, he framed finding ways to move in his discomfort as a way of divesting privilege. He found that the best way to participate in the community of FRAP was to continue engaging through and because of the discomfort he felt. He argued that “what makes me feel comfortable is also what constructs my privilege,” and so his duty as a member of the community was to work on mitigating that in the space of the rehearsals.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> “K’s Interview,” <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/four-rehearsals-and-a-performance-an-oral-history-of-aumi-participants/frac-oh5-ky>.

<sup>41</sup> “Trevor on Dis/Comfort,” <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/four-rehearsals-and-a-performance-an-oral-history-of-aumi-participants/trevor-on-comfort>.

<sup>42</sup> “Pete on Divesting Privilege,” <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/four-rehearsals-and-a-performance-an-oral-history-of-aumi-participants/pete-on-divesting-privilege>.

In discussing comfort and discomfort, our narrators also focused on the relationship between the performers and the audience. For Billy, discomfort from the audience was helpful because it enabled learning:

I like that the audience was uncomfortable, I think that's really cool um, because that represents [how] for so many people every day is uncomfortable. You know, me being in a loud space, my buddy going into a place and then realizing he can't get to the counter because there's stairs, um just a lot of different ways. You see, you work with what you got.<sup>43</sup>

Because the performance space was set up to place audience members throughout the room and among the performers, there was not a clear delineation between who was and was not in the performance. This different style of performance and setup, of breaking the fourth wall, caused the audience to feel uncomfortable at times. While the audience was invited at the beginning to join in when they wanted to, most of the audience members did not actively participate during the performance. Despite this lack of active participation, we as performers had to ask people to move as we danced, played music, or improvised throughout the room. In this way, audience members were involved in the performance indirectly as they often were situated in spaces that we needed to utilize throughout the evening. This was a purposeful piece of the production because we hoped that it would create a space to envision how non-normative bodies always shoulder the labor of being uncomfortable and dealing with barriers. K described FRAP as a way for the performers to flip the narrative of discomfort off of the performers and onto the unquestioned privilege felt by many members of the audience.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> "Billy on Discomfort and Learning," <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/four-rehearsals-and-a-performance-an-oral-history-of-aumi-participants/billy-on-discomfort-and-learning> .

<sup>44</sup> "K's Interview."

Feelings of comfort and discomfort were felt by many of the participants, including us as the researchers, both during our research as well as during the rehearsals and performance. These feelings of dis/comfort, though, often moved us to reflect and consider how we might still forge community because of, or in spite of, these feelings. We felt discomfort during the rehearsals and the performance in part because neither of us is a dancer, nor are we used to performing in front of a large audience. We were uncomfortable moving our bodies and dancing in improvisational ways. However, doing this oral history project shifted our perspectives. In the days following the performance, we reflected on our experience and were unsure how to articulate how and what moved us. As we began speaking to other participants about their experiences, they informed how we understood what happened in that space, and they gave us the words to begin to capture what that space meant in all of its contradictions. We were intentional about our position as researchers and in recognizing that we were not the only producers of knowledge in the interviews. Our participants taught us what a space and a performance like this could mean and how vastly different those meanings might be depending on what brought people to that space in the first place.

### *Connection*

Connection between and among participants generated meaning for our interviewees and included individual connections to histories, experiences, and politics. While similar to community, it is different because we found that many narrators were describing connections with other individuals in addition to their own feelings of community. Through points of contact, intimacy, and connection, our interviewees felt that bonds were formed between the people in the space of FRAP. The points of contact were multiple and included literal contact (contact improvisation, playing together during the performance, forming the boulder at the end of the

performance) as well as affective connection (learning to rely on one another, learning to trust each other through the process, engaging in call and response with the various instruments we played.) Each point of contact provided an opportunity to interact with one another, and some of these interactions were more comfortable than others.

Our participants also referenced the *effects* of the connections, both for the performers and for the audience, and how these connections and meanings differed for individuals. The embodied experience of participating as well as creating choreography and meaning through the performance together had a connective effect on the participants. However, our interviewees also pondered the translatability of this process to the audience and wondered if the audience members connected to us through the meanings, the performance, and the politics represented by the performance. Regardless of the desired effects for the audience, or the actual effects for those we interviewed, connection remained an important topic that emerged from the interviews.

Trevor imagined connection as occurring through “points of contact,” which he referenced repeatedly throughout the interview. He believed “points of contact complicate what things can be generated.” For Trevor, FRAP complicated improvisation:

I think it’s just the different ways that information and meaning is being produced beyond just ... acting, or just music, ’cause with the AUMI there are all these different sort of ways a slight movement, connected or not connected to what you are willfully improvising... can do something or create something else... It creates a complex web of interaction – different points people are interfacing with each other, or text or sound... Points of physical and emotional contact are important – it’s not a one way sort of thing.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> “Trevor on Connection and Points of Contact,” <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/four-rehearsals-and-a-performance-an-oral-history-of-aumi-participants/trevor-on-connection-and-points-of-contact>.

Trevor's use of technology also provided him a point of entry to create other forms of meaning. For example, Trevor created the Tumblr site used during the performance. A request was sent out for participants in FRAP to send Trevor links or pictures that illuminated what the performance represented. The anxiety he experienced as he curated the Tumblr site differed from the anxieties that he would have experienced as a dancer or musician. He was required to navigate the language and politics of what was sent for the site, some of which conflicted with his understanding of and connections to FRAP. He ultimately decided to add everything people sent him and to represent voices and thoughts of all participants, regardless of what made him feel comfortable. However, this grappling shifted his experience of connection, his experience of intimacy with participants and with the performance.<sup>46</sup>

One of the aspects of the performance included a contact improvisation duet to make visual the experiences of invisible disability. In our interviews, participants Nicole and Michelle reflected on the connection they felt during their duet. Both talked about their duet as a very moving, powerful, and emotional experience. Michelle reflected on her experience with disability, with privilege, and with how she has experienced both at varying times in her life. She connected this to her "soul searching and hard and vulnerable making" experience while dancing with Nicole.<sup>47</sup> She talked about how she felt the weight of the responsibility for communicating through contact improvisation and movement. She described the "sense of vulnerability in every decision we made."<sup>48</sup> As a junior faculty member at KU, Nicole found her performance in the

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<sup>46</sup> Trevor also discussed intimacy in relation to connection. "Intimacy is about sort of revealing something that is normally inaccessible or private in that sense... [and is] not always good [but]... Each of these points of contact is a point at which a certain form of intimacy is taking place." "Trevor on Connection and Points of Contact," <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/four-rehearsals-and-a-performance-an-oral-history-of-aumi-participants/trevor-on-connection-and-points-of-contact?path=connections>.

<sup>47</sup> "Michelle and Nicole on Their Duet," <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/four-rehearsals-and-a-performance-an-oral-history-of-aumi-participants/michelle-and-nicole-on-their-duet>.

<sup>48</sup> "Michelle and Nicole on Their Duet."

duet very challenging and emotional as well. Not only was she vulnerable in her interactions with a senior faculty member, she felt tremendous pressure in relation to representing and filling a role that she does not necessarily embody. She even experienced a physical block in doing this work. As Nicole reflected on her responsibility, she realized she was not representing something she does not have firsthand experience with. Instead, Nicole realized that

it was my job to perform my own relationship to disability and how it makes me feel, not to try to translate someone's experience through my body... and when I did that, it was really honest because it breaks my heart... it was coming from my own place of truth with it.<sup>49</sup>

Alice, a KU graduate student, was excited by the fact that this experience was an opportunity to work with people with and without disabilities who were from different academic departments and community organizations. Alice's sentiments were echoed by many of the other participants who felt that some of the transformative aspects of this experience occurred because it allowed for connection with a variety of people who do not usually come together. Dot also mentioned this and said that the connections with the other participants was why she continued to participate in FRAP after the first rehearsal. Even though she felt uncomfortable and superfluous at times, the connections she found at FRAP were important to her. She said, "I think there were people there who didn't have much else in common but were committed to that so that formed a bond."<sup>50</sup>

Two faculty members, Michelle and Kip, discussed connection in different ways. In her interview Michelle talked about community, participation, connection, and activism

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<sup>49</sup> "Michelle and Nicole on Their Duet."

<sup>50</sup> "Dot and the Importance of Connection," <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/four-rehearsals-and-a-performance-an-oral-history-of-aumi-participants/dot-and-the-importance-of-connection>.

simultaneously. She understood connection, specifically *touch*, as a form of support, as a point of entry into making a difference in people's lives and as a way of creating community. Again and again she focused on improvisation as a way to do the work of making connections through movement. While larger social issues are incredibly important to Michelle, she sees the work that she does in her students' lives and in the lives of those around her as making a difference in smaller and sustainable ways.<sup>51</sup> In his interview, Kip focused on purposefulness rather than touch. He believes that purposefulness leads to meaningful engagement and connection in improvisation. For Kip, there is a responsibility that comes with engaging in improvisation, a responsibility not just for what is being created but also a responsibility to the others you are connected to through the performance.<sup>52</sup> While he did not explicitly talk about connection in his reflection, we understood him to be gesturing towards a way of connecting with others through improvisation and through the ways we create meaning together.

### *Embodiment*

Different threads concerning embodiment emerged as we moved through the interviews. By *embodiment* we mean how people described their own bodily feelings and how their bodies moved through the space and interacted with others. Gestures towards and reflections on embodiment were often discussed in conjunction with the other themes. However, issues of embodiment occurred frequently enough to pull our attention towards the ways in which participants were discussing their own bodies in relation to FRAP. Several interviewees discussed their embodied experiences of dancing across ability—people with disabilities dancing with non-disabled people and vice versa. They also reflected on the individual feeling of one's

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<sup>51</sup> "Michelle on Movement," <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/four-rehearsals-and-a-performance-an-oral-history-of-aumi-participants/michelle-on-movement?path=activism-advocacy>.

<sup>52</sup> "Kip on Improvisation and Responsibility," <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/four-rehearsals-and-a-performance-an-oral-history-of-aumi-participants/kip-on-improv-and-responsibility?path=connections>.

own body moving, or being in the space, or working on a computer, or playing an instrument during the course of the project. Embodied experience was not always comfortable and at times it was very discomfoting and stressful, but most found value in these moments of discomfort because of the opportunities for community building, for going outside of one's comfort zone, and for points of contact with other participants, technology, politics, and oneself.

Some participants discussed embodiment in relation to their disability. When asked about how she became involved with disability activism, Dot spoke about her discomfort with identifying as a person with a disability, despite the fact that this refusal was limiting for her in relation to her embodiment. Her disability was not what was limiting for her but rather her refusal to identify with her embodied reality:

I was afraid of identifying as a person with a disability – that was very limiting for me...

I realized that although I had been involved in political issues I hadn't been involved in the disability rights movement and that was probably the most important thing in my life right then.<sup>53</sup>

FRAP provided Dot with an opportunity to move her body and to have fun in an embodied way. "Moving was nice – there are not many situations where I just dance. It reminded me how good it feels to be rhythmic and move in different ways."<sup>54</sup>

Pete was interested in how our conceptions of movement and the body might be subverted through the experiences participants had during FRAP. He specifically pointed to how the AUMI changed the ways in which bodily movements were conceived of. He reflected on this, saying, "I appreciate what the AUMI says about what kind of movements are important or

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<sup>53</sup> "Dot on Embodied Disability," <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/four-rehearsals-and-a-performance-an-oral-history-of-aumi-participants/dot-on-embodied-disability>.

<sup>54</sup> "Dot on Embodied Disability."

matter.”<sup>55</sup> He also talked about how for trained actors and dancers, big movements are the most important and signal intelligibility. In contrast, the AUMI helps reformulate intelligibility because large movements are not easily registered while using AUMI. It is by smaller movements, which might otherwise seem insignificant, that one creates music. Pete argues that it shows us how “small movements can be important.”<sup>56</sup>

Trevor referenced the creation of new meaning through what he called “embodied interfaces” as he explored what types of relationship to embodiment occurred during FRAP. When Michelle and Nicole danced together using contact improvisation in an effort to visualize and embody an invisible disability, Trevor saw that duet as productive of new meaning for both dancers, as well as for those watching and interfacing with that performance. He recalled:

Thinking about the performance that way I think it’s... I was expecting more going into it of sort of what Michelle and Nicole were doing of the contact with each other, but that’s a very intimate, touching in general is a very intimate act because you are feeling what someone else feels like... it’s this interfacing... its pressure, energy... literally... it’s being transmitted in this certain way. But I don’t think that intimacy has to be physical. Differently embodied people interacting with other people - we don’t normally see that.<sup>57</sup>

Another interviewee, Alice, talked about how she “never imagined” she could be in a performance after her spinal cord injury years before. She connected her experience of AUMI as a tool that helped her and others find or return to a passion for making music and dancing. One of the things Alice learned from her experience of FRAP was that “the most important thing,

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<sup>55</sup> “Pete on Movement,” <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/four-rehearsals-and-a-performance-an-oral-history-of-aumi-participants/pete-on-movement> .

<sup>56</sup> “Pete on Movement.”

<sup>57</sup> “Trevor on Embodiment, Erotics, & Intimacy,” <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/four-rehearsals-and-a-performance-an-oral-history-of-aumi-participants/trevor-on-embodiment-erotics-intimacy>.

whether you have a disability or you don't have a disability, if you have an interest in something, whether it is dancing or music, you can just do it and enjoy it.”<sup>58</sup>

### *Activism and Advocacy*

Another theme that emerged in our interviews was participants' desire to make a difference through community building, connection, and embodiment. The participants discussed the possibilities for FRAP and the AUMI interface to alter conceptions of disability, using things such as education, love, and movement to enact social change. A wide variety of people attended the performance, many of whom had not been exposed to thinking about identities like disability in a critical way. This was reflected in some of the comments by audience members during a question-and-answer session following the performance. During this session, many audience members recounted that they “felt inspired” by the performance. In his interview, Trevor questioned the politics of being “inspired” by the performance or by people with disabilities more generally. He struggled with the implications of FRAP at the intersection of several varying experiences, both for individuals acknowledging their encounters with disability for the first time and working through their responses to these encounters out loud, and for people with disabilities who too often bear the burden of educating others about disability. He also discussed the difficulty of our attempt at representing and performing particular disabilities, such as schizophrenia or other invisible disabilities, within the final performance. He said, “I don't know if the performance talked to the politics necessarily that we were wanting it to talk to... but I think it spoke to something for people... it's an incitement to discourse.”<sup>59</sup> He recognized that

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<sup>58</sup> “Alice on Finding New Ways to Dance.”

<sup>59</sup> “Trevor on Incitement to Discourse,” <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/four-rehearsals-and-a-performance-an-oral-history-of-aumi-participants/trevor-on-incitement-to-discourse-1>.

FRAP might be a starting point for many individuals who otherwise may never directly discuss and engage with disability politics.

Similarly, Billy articulated the politicizing and educational potentials of FRAP. Billy reflected on the ways in which FRAP might have created a new way to think about disability:

It was rewarding for me to hear a lot of the different ways that people who don't necessarily identify as belonging to [a] disability community were now thinking about disability as a result of seeing you know, you have somebody with a physical disability teaching everybody to do that body roll. Which I still don't got down, but um, it was just cool to see those switched roles...<sup>60</sup>

Billy's account resonates with Trevor's in that Billy was unsure, but hopeful, about the audience's reaction to the performance. While some of the questions during the question-and-answer session felt jarring to some of the participants, Billy echoed Trevor's sentiments of how the performance might be an incitement to discourse:

I really like the questions, because it's good that they had questions and it's good that they didn't know what to do with their Braille paper, it's good that they didn't know whether or not to get up and dance because it means that they are asking questions and that's the whole reason we're here, right?<sup>61</sup>

Nicole, one of the original organizers, also recognized the possibilities FRAP offered for both participants and performers. Nicole understood FRAP as a transformational experience in part because of love. In our interview with her, she discussed love as a methodological approach to scholarship and community building. Following Leo Buscaglia, bell hooks, Paulo Freire, and

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<sup>60</sup> "Billy on the Possibilities of Education," <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/four-rehearsals-and-a-performance-an-oral-history-of-aumi-participants/billy-on-the-possibilities-of-education> .

<sup>61</sup> "Billy on the Possibilities of Education."

others, she believes that love is largely missing from the academy.<sup>62</sup> She talked about FRAP as an instance of love because “we made meaning ... that room was filled with love, it was filled with joy, you could feel it.”<sup>63</sup> Nicole’s comments resonate with our experience. Most of us entered that space skeptical about what this process would look like and left as community, as collaborators, and many of us as friends. Through creating trust, we experienced a transformation, in part because of the love present in that space. Despite our different politics and different life experiences, we created something that left an impression on all of us.

When we as participants showed up on the first day of the first rehearsal, none of us knew quite what we were getting into (including the four faculty). We walked in hoping that we could trust each other and that it would be a space of creativity, kindness, and forgiveness for any skills we lacked. Our oral history allowed all of us to pause and reflect on our feelings, thoughts, and experiences as participants in this project. Many of us found that what we had hoped for became manifest in that space. Creating performances like this can, and did, change perceptions, enhance understanding, and break down barriers between people, between people and their environment, and between exclusion and inclusion.

## **Conclusions, Limitations, and Further Research**

In the space of FRAP, participants came in with different histories and different concepts of movement and embodiment. We all had conflicting ideas about the role of agency in the context of improvisation. Yet in that space, we had to agree upon acceptable collective movement, what was safe or comfortable for us a group and as a collective (even if we did not understand this

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<sup>62</sup> Leo F Buscaglia, *Living, Loving, & Learning* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1982); bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: William Morrow, 2000); Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2000).

<sup>63</sup> “Nicole on Love,” <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/four-rehearsals-and-a-performance-an-oral-history-of-aumi-participants/nicole-on-love>.

collective as a community). Susan Leigh Foster argues that “the experience of improvising... establishes the possibility of an alternative theory of bodily agency; improvisation provides an experience of body in which it initiates, creates, and probes playfully its own physical and semantic potential.”<sup>64</sup> Foster’s assertions about agency reflected many participants’ experience in the space of FRAP. Many interviewees discussed how they exceeded their own expectations about their participations, and how this experience, which ended up being unexpectedly fun, taught them about their own limits and the potential to push past them. Pushing past these limits also sparked some participants’ interest in the political possibilities of projects like FRAP. Robyn Wiegman argues that collectivity is “that absolutely vital, potent synonym for the wish at the heart of identity knowledges, which underscores and enlivens the political commitments that have shaped and transformed them all.”<sup>65</sup> The collectivity we all experienced demonstrates an aspect of this project that forced us all to consider our political objectives, pursuits, and desires as we struggled through the creation of the performance and how our different histories informed the investments each of us had in the decisions that were ultimately made.

We all came together into these rehearsals with our own ideas about the project and how the end result would be produced. Many of us felt confused about how we might participate or what the final product might require us to do. However, in the end, through the use of collaboration and improvisation, we worked together to construct something and translate our ideas about barriers into an artistic performance. Nevertheless, it still left out some ways of knowing. For example, FRAP was a very visual performance and thus was not accessible to people who are visually impaired or blind.

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<sup>64</sup> Susan Foster, “Taken by Surprise: Improvisation in Dance and Mind,” in *Taken by Surprise: A Dance Improvisation Reader*, ed. Ann Cooper Albright and David Gere (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 8.

<sup>65</sup> Robyn Wiegman, *Object Lessons* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 328.

While conducting the oral history, we began to think more deeply about the limitations of our project based on the limitations of the rehearsal and the performance. If we wanted to do the work of embodied translation in our oral history, how could we account for bodies not able to be included? How could we account for the ways in which bodies know things in different ways as we discussed our participants' responses? One way we approached these questions was through Mel Chen's formulation of "the ethics of care and sensitivity," which requires "fierce sensitivity to...differences."<sup>66</sup> Chen's ethics emerged from an experience in "queer of color and disability/crip circles, neither of which has enjoyed much immunity from the destructive consequences" of contemporary ways bodies are politicized through science in the interest of the public health and hierarchies.<sup>67</sup> These differences include the ways in which bodies and people are placed within a hierarchy of movement, agency, and animacy, hierarchies that are found "peppered across discourses of not only mainstream thinking but also science itself."<sup>68</sup> This ethics of care also provides "an alternative means... to identify cross-affiliations – affinities – among groups" as different and diverse as the one participating in FRAP.<sup>69</sup> If we conducted our work keeping in mind those who did not or could not participate and creating space to discuss these limitations, we felt that we could begin to engage in Chen's ethics. It was our hope that in utilizing an ethics of care and sensitivity, we would be able to talk more openly about problems in bodily translation through our findings. This ethics, and our understanding of the effects of FRAP, help us to "challenge the order of things,"<sup>70</sup> an order that too often fails to consider the benefits of affiliations and affinities among queer, disabled, and non-normative bodies.

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<sup>66</sup> Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2012), 237.

<sup>67</sup> Chen, 237.

<sup>68</sup> Chen, 136.

<sup>69</sup> Chen, 236.

<sup>70</sup> Chen, 137.

Our work in this project relied on unstable realities and interrogated what counts as knowledge, knowing, and embodiment. Our oral history gave the participants, including ourselves as participant-researchers, an opportunity to pause and reflect on this experience and the possibilities it offered each one of us. We believe FRAP facilitated new kinds of community formations with an interest in improvising across ability and difference. Using FRAP as a starting point, this project and the histories we captured allowed us to interrogate how spaces and performances allowed participants to access different kinds of movements and community, expanding the possible futures they could imagine for themselves.<sup>71</sup> Improvising across difference gave us a space to imagine queer and disability prospects in a cultural context where bodies that are queer or disabled are written out of desirable futures in mainstream contexts.<sup>72</sup> We hope to continue this work through performances like FRAP and through conducting oral histories. We want to record these important moments to capture the effects and affects of these performances. We are also motivated to record these experiences about and for individuals and communities who are too often made invisible in historical narratives and whose membership in these collaborative spaces is forgotten.

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<sup>71</sup> One participant who had never participated in any kind of performance, in part because of her disability, is now an active performer, partially as a result of her experience in FRAP.

<sup>72</sup> In *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, feminist disability studies scholar Alison Kafer discusses the phenomenon that the only "desirable futures" are those that involve able-bodied and heterosexual ones because those futures ideally involve reproduction both in terms of normative family structures and in terms of what is considered "productive" within a capitalist system; Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013). Creative performances such as FRAP allow for imagining outside of those norms.

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