KEVIN GOTKIN

Interview Date: April 11, 2023
Image Description: Text reads "The Remote Access Archive" atop a screenshot of a Zoom shared screen, which shows a work of art by Yo-Yo Lin. The art is a white and grey blob on a black background. The bottom shows a series of grey buttons, along with an orange chat button that is lit up. A speech bubble above it "From Dominika to everyone" says "yes same issue with audio."

KEYWORDS

access doula, COVID-19 pandemic era, crip space, crip technoscience, crip theory, disability arts, disability knowledge, disability nightlife, DJing, Instagram, media ecologies, music, remote socializing, social media, video chat, Zoom

IDENTITIES GIVEN

white, gender-confused, nonbinary, disabled, Mad, neurodivergent, chronically ill

LOCATION

United States

Introductions

Kevin Gotkin:
My name is Kevin Gotkin. I am 33, and I am currently at home in Lenopehoking, or so-called Brooklyn.

Aimi Hamraie:
And what words do you use to describe your race and gender?

Kevin Gotkin:
I am a white person. And I use gender-confused. A 1,000 genders a minute. I mean, non-binary, generally. Yeah.

Aimi Hamraie:
And do you identify as a disabled person or person with a disability?

Kevin Gotkin:
Yes.

Aimi Hamraie
Do you have a preferred language for that?

Kevin Gotkin:
No, I don't have a preferred language. I, yeah, disabled. I guess identity-first is fine. Some of my disability pronouns are neurodivergent, Mad, chronically ill.

Aimi Hamraie:
And do you consider yourself to be part of disability community and disability culture?

Kevin Gotkin:
Yes.

Aimi Hamraie:
Great. So today, our interview is going to focus on a specific project that you have been spearheading called the Remote Access Party. And so we're gonna go through a couple of things: The history and genesis of that party, and then the party itself, like what happens within it. And then we're

going to get into some of the questions that party, as an activity, has been raising. So let's start with the genesis of the party. What do you remember about how remote access came into being?

How the Remote Access Party Started

Kevin Gotkin:
Yeah, I have been trying to do this genealogy in my head, because it feels like there's so many contributories to this, and some of them are very mysterious. Some of them are very personal. Some of them feel much, much bigger than me, but one of the ways this party started, I think, for me, was feeling like queer nightlife spaces and disability organizing spaces were these two major forces in my life that felt kind of far apart. And then there were moments when I would feel like, "Oh, my gosh! We're not that different at all." And so I think I was reaching for a way of bringing these things together. I had started doing some organizing with a mentor and collaborator, Simi Linton, and we were focused on influencing some cultural policy for New York City that would advance disability, artistry as a kind of a public platform with funding. We were doing some trainings of cohorts of artists and activists, and we influenced this one city document that is called the Cultural Plan, of kind, of interesting policy, genre. And I learned a lot. That was kind of my first big activist project as I started to think about leaving academia, and I learned a lot.

One of the things I learned was that I believed in the work we were doing, and I really liked the organizing, the methods we were using. We would show up at town halls and have people prepped and ready. We choreographed a lot of procedural or administrative actions to have this kind of fire that we felt was missing generally, but the process did leave me feeling a little frustrated. It was difficult to influence something fast and I always felt very outside of these worlds, even though we were having what other people called a "big influence".

I was like, "Damn! That's the big influence?" I wanted to be faster and more immediate, and like a little bit more full of crip culture, you know. So there was just kind of an offhand comment by the then-Commissioner of New York City's Department of Cultural Affairs, where he was like, "You know, it's funny, the two groups that really showed out to help influence the

Cultural Plan were disability arts and DIY nightlife spaces". And that was just a moment where I was like, well, those are the two spaces of my own personal life. Why are those things so far apart? Why is it even said as something like, "Isn't that weird"? It shouldn't be that weird. And also, maybe nightlife organizing is a way of getting toward and touching that more immediate sense of what organizing with access can be. It's immediate. It's right in front of you. You're working with air and getting people water and space, and you're tending to their bodyminds.

You know, cultural policy eventually, I guess, touches our bodyminds, but it's so delayed and so slow. And so, before this, I was really on a spell of what journalist s.e. smith has written about as the "beauty of spaces created for and by disabled people." And there's this quote that I found that really captures like the magic for me. They write, "the first social setting where you come to the giddy understanding that this is a place for disabled people is a momentous one, and one worth lingering over. The experiences blend together, creating a sense of crip space, a communal belonging, a deep rightness that comes from not having to explain or justify your existence. They're resting points, even as they can be energizing and exhilarating." And I just feel like that captures it for me. I would go to academic conferences about disability studies and just feel this amazing giddiness and arrest and it was momentous, like all of the things that s.e. smith writes about, and I saw in nightlife the chance to really take that further and to organize around that.

So just a few more timeline notes. Working on those things more or less explicitly like, some things, I knew what I was doing, and other times it's like, I'm still figuring out what was driving me. But we had a town hall in April 2019 in New York City. This new city official called the Nightlife Mayor showed up, and we did all kinds of like workshop-style facilitation, where we ask, "What do we want? What do we need? What do we not want?" And we just started dreaming about, what would this be like? You know? And at that point I was like, "there's so many possibilities for this"! I was in a cohort of activists and we were developing all kinds of different projects and arts and culture. And I was like, "we're gonna through our own monthly party. We're gonna work with venues. We're gonna do all this stuff."

And less than a year after that big kind of kick-off moment, we were locked down and sheltered in place, and experiencing this still-unbelievable, and

frustrating thing. Suddenly overnight, everyone understood the power of remote access. And suddenly access was very important for nondisabled people. So everything shifted, and then that's when you and I started dreaming up like, "Okay, why don't we create Zoom space? And why don't we create remote access?" And that's where the collective in the process and the parties really specified and grew around remote access and sharing remote space.

Aimi Hamraie:
Yeah, great. And before we get into the party itself, I want to ask about another thread, which was your research. So, you were doing research, and actually publishing about the history of disability nightlife as well. Is there anything that you wanna include about that?

Kevin Gotkin:
Yeah, I was teaching. It was at NYU at the time I was teaching a course on critical DJ [Disability Justice] theory and practice. So, there's a way that access is super helpful in media studies for thinking about multi- or inter-modality. I understood media production research and teaching as a kind of fundamentally "about access" practice: teaching students how to make an argument or think through evidence in a media format that's different from the conventional academic textualities was really fun for me. It was amazing to see students who maybe felt really like, underneath the text. They always felt like, "I am not good at writing papers", or "I can't do this kind of academic style." Suddenly, they were unlocking all kinds of different ways of thinking in video or in audio.

There was a kind of media pedagogy that was driving my belief in the ecologies of nightlife, and media ecologies that we could build. As an example, something that I am really taken with is that I discovered — I can't remember exactly what who first taught me about this, maybe it was an artist named Alison or Daniel — who represents a scene from 1979 in San Francisco, from what was what became a very famous venue for punk musicians, and it was an old Deaf cultural center, so it was called the Deaf Cultural Center. So, it was called the Deaf Club. I believe it opened in the 1930s.

I think there were a lot of Deaf cultural centers that opened around the US in the 30s. This was a space where there's a whole storied narrative

around… like, one of the managers of the punk bands kind of stumbling into this rundown-looking kind of space that might close any day, and saying, "Hey, could we use this?" And so there are two different communities that centered and thrived in that space. Not for super long, but Allison or Daniel's film, The Tuba Thieves, represents like so much of my fascination with this as a nightlife space. So, in her film, she has a scene where there's a punk concert happening. There's all of the overwhelm and overstimulation of super loud music. People shouting, lots of usual underground concert behavior, and then there's also these elders from the Deaf Club who are playing cards and drinking. One of them is having a conversation in ASL about their granddaughter, who's moving to New York, and they're kind of disagreeing. One is kind of concerned about her. It's a really fascinating scene as a film, because if you're hearing, your gaze, your attention, generally floats to the music. If you're Deaf and you use ASL, you're much more focused on this intergenerational set of concerns that are happening in ASL.

There are the manifold uses of a space when everyone is kind of to use a space in whatever ways, right? Some of the research there, I feel like it's kind of missing…like sometimes people will say that the older Deaf folks really loved the music because it was like, so vibrational and so loud and so haptic. And Allison's film kind of suggests that there's actually an indifference toward the music, like, who cares about that. It just feels nice if there's people here. It was a reactivation of a space that maybe they had remembered as a more active Deaf cultural center before. And that, maybe, is what feels nice.

I am curious about that. Where are all these stories about disability and Deaf culture that we don't even know about, but we know must exist? Like, yeah, there's stories from UC Berkeley of people fixing their own wheelchairs, staying up into the night and hanging out. And I still want to access those stories, because it gets back to that kind of giddiness of understanding and being in a space that's designed by and for disabled people. It's a really magical thing.

Aimi Hamraie:
Yeah, and all the textures of that — there's a really palpable sense of what it means for disabled people to be together in person in that way that you were reading from s.e. smith: "Oh, this is like a place where we can rest

and have been anticipated." And then also, these spaces of cultural overlap that are unexpected and interesting.

I want us to talk about like, the route to getting from that kind of history, but also a place of experimentation for you, since you were planning parties before the pandemic to this remote party. I'm wondering, in that interim or pre-pandemic, if you had experiences with remote access that later you were drawing on, as we were kind of figuring out how we do things remotely at a larger scale?

Remote Access Before COVID-19

Kevin Gotkin:
Yeah, the term that I would have used a lot before COVID-19 was livestreaming. I think I wasn't imagining it as what we now call hybrid, more interactive. I was thinking more like a broadcast into the ether, making sure that if we had an event I was doing right before the pandemic that we could at least have it stream live on YouTube. To be honest, I actually don't know now whether I was also building in a way for us to monitor questions. Coming in from that livestream audience, I think it was more of a documentary function. People could be there with us, but actually, we were also wanting to be able to time shift so people could watch it later, and we could watch it again. I talked about this a lot, especially in New York. It was just so impossible to assume that everyone could be physically co-located in any of the meetings. We were always stressing that, especially wit, non-disabled collaborators: "we just cannot insist on us being in that same room. It's not going to happen, even if we have all these RSVPs. The way that you understand the relationship between RSVP and actual folks in the room is just so much different in disability organizing. We can't rely on the wisdom that other people bring to event organizing like that." So I had been talking about that a lot.

It was always just an opportunity to also stress like, how inaccessible New York City's public transportation was. I was kind of always saying, "No, we need to have good cameras that were streaming directly to YouTube." And then I think that gave me a sense about how to move into Zoom Land, which I hadn't actually done. I hadn't actually really used Zoom before COVID-19 arrived, and then I think there was a kind of logic to it. It was

really easy for me to work with and think about the creative possibilities beyond what the majority culture that suddenly discovered very quickly about how to use Zoom. There were access complications that excited me.

The Crip Technoscience of Parties

Aimi Hamraie:
Yeah, that's really interesting, the distinction between a broadcast model and a hybrid model. I can also remember instances in which there was more of a livestream kind of thing happening, but there wasn't always functionality built in for interaction, or maybe there would be comments, but definitely not a hybrid sort of thing until the technology caught up with that.

Here's some of the things that I remember from when we were trying to plan the first remote access party: I remembered how you had figured out the DJ tech, and how to stream your DJ set through certain platforms, but not others. I think that there's this question about Instagram, I remember you did a few practice Instagram livestreams, figuring out whether or not we had to move to Zoom to have more of a party atmosphere. Do you want to talk about that stuff, or what was going on as you were going through these different iterations, figuring out what's the best way to broadcast this out, or get people to participate?

Kevin Gotkin:
Yeah, there's a lot of granular crip technoscience in that that I don't often get to share out. I was creating all these schematics. And there's so many things. So, one of the things that's important in that moment was that I was working with the least expensive form of DJ equipment, which is this DJ controller that connects to a computer, a laptop, usually, via a USB cable. I was thinking a lot about that, because I was also like, "could we fundraise to get a whole bunch of disabled artists these controllers?" They are $200, $300, which, in the accessibility of DJ equipment, is the cheapest, because things get really expensive.

So, I was like, "Okay, I know we have to use this controller." It's not the only way. I could say that there are other ways to DJ, like you can just use your computer. But you're a lot more limited, and you can't preview a track, so you can't hear it before you bring it in to know exactly how you're going to mix it. The controllers almost always only have one kind of output, and that

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output is a line output, which is ready to be used on a speaker. But it's not a digital signal, so I was like, "Oh my gosh! I have to get this little like converter," and then I learned all about the differences between line and aux signals, and I'd never occurred to me that you couldn't just kind of plug your DJ controller into your phone. So that took like a week or so to be like, "Oh, right, there's digital, and then there's line signals."

I got that converter, and then I was able to bring the signal into digital devices. Then, I could bring it into my computer. It actually needed to be a second computer, because you couldn't use the same computer that you were manipulating audio files on for DJing to also broadcast. There had to be a two computer thing. And then there was all the IP stuff. Instagram, I discovered, has an automatic takedown. They do automatic algorithmic song identification. If you're planning a clearly pop song, your livestream got shut down immediately. I was shocked that it happened so quickly. I didn't know that Instagram was like doing that kind of, whatever, like Digital Millennium Copyright Act takedown process before so many DJs started trying to do this stuff.

It was interesting, though, that if you use remixes or unknown songs or very new music that probably wasn't in the database for the algorithm, and you didn't get shut down. So in my early Instagram DJ sets, I was very intentional about picking tracks or mixing in a way that would subvert the algorithmic identification of copyrighted material. And it was really fun to play with that. I also saw so many people who were DJing just in their rooms. And it was their phones, microphone, picking up the sound of their room, playing speakers. I mean, people have enormous audiences doing that, and I was always like, you can't — there's no bass. So I was really fixated on getting a direct signal, and once I learned how to do that, and all of the digital devices, I felt like that was a really big breakthrough, because it created the feeling of you logging in to a party. You had the highest quality, and you could connect it to your best speaker, and you had the full spectrum.

And now Zoom has some features that optimize that and make it easier and like, think about your connectivity. I guess that's the other thing: we had to be intentional about our connection to Wi-fi, and then I was really focused on my Ethernet, no wireless at all, we need to have this unbroken. There were so many different technical systems that kind of came together

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in those early days, and I feel proud. I feel like I was early in figuring out a lot of that stuff. We could get people as much of the sound that they can do whatever they want within their own spaces. That felt like one of the earliest moments of real direct, remote access that felt really important for disability community at that time.

Aimi Hamraie:
Yeah, I haven't really thought about sound quality as an access issue. But of course it is, and I'm wondering, too, about some of the other additional considerations that went into choosing Zoom that supported access around sound, or anything about the experience of being in a party space versus streaming a DJ set, which is kind of what the earlier model was.

Kevin Gotkin:
Yeah, well, I think we talked about this. We texted back and forth about really wanting to create the feeling for people to come together and be in the same space, that magic of sharing and creating crip space. Now that we were using Zoom for our classes and for all of our meetings, and for family time, everything was on Zoom, we wanted to create those spaces for our disabled like networks and friends and kin. There's one thing that I remember you and I talking about, which seemed like a big record scratch. Like, can our administrators of our institutional licenses like see everything that we're doing? Are we about to get scolded? Am I allowed, as a faculty member, to organize things?

This is a good example of, and fully part of, my research practice as a scholar. But also, I was kind of freaked out and worried about other people feeling freaked out about the possibility that the administrator could go in and watch the recording we just made to the Cloud, because it's going to be on servers that we don't maintain directly. So there's all these ways that someone could kind of get in. And so there was a survey. There was a concern about surveillance, people were sharing stories. This was such a moment in the pandemic. People are sharing stories of the host of a Zoom Meeting, downloading the chat and being able to see all the direct messages between people.

There was that feeling that this is a proprietary thing, and of course, the background chatter was like, "Wow, Zoom as a company is just going to be doing great, they are making money off of us." There was a real palpable

feeling of like, "this is a corporation that has produced this thing that now the entire world seems to use," and I think we were kind of concerned about that, and also weighing that against the hurdles of trying to use…I can't even remember what they were called now, but some of the other alternatives that were more decentralized, less corporatized, were not very accessible. They didn't have all of the things, and that's a sad realization that we come to over and over again.

Like, going to Walmart to get your groceries is going to be a lot more of an accessible experience than going to your local food co-op, even though their governance models center access in this way. Walmart's been sued a a million times, so they got their access shit together. And it was kind of a sad realization that, a lot of times, we did have to have to hew to Zoom as the default space, because it was legible, because it was familiar, because it had access features built in that other places didn't. And now it's interesting that every time Zoom has an update, it's like our parties are absorbing a lot of the shocks of that, because every time the familiar interface changes even a little bit, it feels like everyone needs to kind of get together. I enjoy the updates because they make certain things better, they definitely afford us more. And they are also a reminder of just how precious and fragile access is.

Aimi Hamraie:
Yeah, I remember those conversations, too. And one of the concerns that we had also was, how many people can be in the space. We didn't know how many people are going to show up to the first party, was it going to be 10 or 900? I think we got almost 300 for that first one. But we were trying to figure out, "Okay, we were going to DIY this with as much free stuff as possible, but do we need to pay for a pro account on Zoom?" and I think that was also part of the consideration of using Google Meet versus Zoom: Google Meet, even though it had some access features that were a little bit better, like the AI captioning was better, it wouldn't have supported something so multisensory, with so many people on the screen, as Zoom would.

Participation Guide and Access Doulas

Aimi Hamraie:

It's also interesting to me that a lot of these technologies are probably made for bankers to talk to each other across time zones and we're over here trying to have a party. Another technology of this party that is really important, and I think people have grown accustomed to interacting with, but is one of those infrastructural things, that is just part of it, so we don't talk about it that much is the protocol or the Participation Guide. So you always have those, and I think Louise Hickman also worked on the first one, and maybe some of the other ones, and I just edited a few things. But do you want to talk about the process of creating a guide like that? Is that something that exists at other parties? Is this something brand new, that was created for this?

Kevin Gotkin:
Yeah, it's such a good question. Honestly, I don't feel like we were the first. I don't think we were discovering or inaugurating a form, but I also feel like we put it into form and maybe helped popularize something that was happening. It was definitely informed by my own collation of a lot of access information for every event that I did. I was always like, "I have to explain exactly what the bathrooms look and feel like."

There was a moment in some of my in-person organizing in New York City before the pandemic where I realized that I'm giving way too much detail for most people to use. But I love that it was just like ridiculously long, you know, describing the hue of the overhead lights: Are they warm? Are they cold? Do they have bulb steadiness, or are they like, a little bit flickery? Those kinds of sensory things. I think I imported a sensibility about the power of description into accessibility planning and organizing. You know, just give the most and give it in a creative, almost poetic sense. So I think, for every event I was organizing before our remote access parties, I was doing that already, just gathering as much as possible.

It was always a wonderful organizing practice, because if I hadn't been to a venue, if I was new to the venue, I was suddenly asking all these questions that allowed me to really understand the venue. Like, where exactly is the emergency pathway for wheelchair users? That got me close to the people that were helping us share space with others. So then, the participation guides for our parties were really an extension of that practice which has long been a disability organizing sensibility. And we still add to them. The length of it is a point of pride for me. You know, we could keep going, and

every time there's a new set of features on Zoom, it's a great new paragraph in the Participation Guide. I've seen more and more folks do that. The people who don't need it, or don't have time to review it, don't. It doesn't really bother them, they're just like, cool, here's the link right here at the top.

But for the people who need it? People who want a flow, want to know what to expect? We know when they can take a break, when different shifts in the vibe are gonna happen at a party? They have consistently expressed a lot of gratitude for that. It shows me that we're working against a background of access information insufficiency, we just don't have enough. I thought it was great that we all kind of came together to also think about the citational practice of that. We specifically were imagining, which I think has come to pass, some large institutions suddenly doing this form. We wanted to make sure that we were intentional about naming the disability expertise that informed that. I wish for me or someone to do a whole project on this, to really look at some of the genealogies of the Participation Guide. I hadn't really given this a ton of thought before this moment. But I feel very proud of what we produced there, and what we continue to work with.

Aimi Hamraie:
Yeah, totally. I've seen things like this for queer parties of different kinds that are more along the lines of, like, "this is the social contract for this space, these are the rules, here's what you need to do to prepare, here's what you're agreeing to if you come to this." Something that I think sets these participation guides apart as a different kind of crip cultural protocol is that they really are based in that neurodivergent technology of knowing what to expect, and being able to rehearse participation ahead of time, or get an overview, so that if you're having anxiety about being in a social space, it's all really clearly laid out. If you're having anxiety about technology, or you need to make an access request that's not covered, it's all laid out.

Something that is striking to me as this practice has evolved, as the party has evolved, is that the Participation Guide, you use as a planning tool. You'll send it out, and it has a sort of run of show, and people plug themselves in to do different roles because they have editing access and it's a shared document. The tool isn't just a broadcast of information, it's an invitation for people to come and like, show and change it. I know that

there's also there's contestation that happens. There's a whole section on safety, and I think that there's been a lot of discussion about how do we conceptualize that? And what does it look like in different kinds of spaces?

I think that's just really interesting. And it's also part of a genealogy of disability cultural protocols and disability design protocols. One part of the participation guide that is really interesting, and I wonder if we could talk more about because it's become a sort of relational technology of these parties is the access doula component. So do you want to talk about what that is, and how it came to be?

Kevin Gotkin:
Yeah. Totally. That's another, with the Participation Guide category, I think, that the party has helped popularize, and I've even seen and had to intervene on people citing us as coining that term. I'm like, "Oh, no, not really." I think there's been, since the late 2000s, a real expansion of the term "doula." We're not just talking about birthing doulas, we can talk about death doulas, illness doulas, HIV doulas, and COVID-19 doulas. With an access doula, there's a kind of satisfaction that I still experience from using that term. I think the satisfaction is coming from an insistence and shared legibility around the relational aspects of access design, as opposed to the predominant mode of access design as opposed to the predominant mode of thinking of access in compliance, regulatory and legal terms. You know, checklist-oriented and getting things to be not a liability.

We just dispense with that, when we think of doulaing as a support role for people experiencing transition of many sorts. How amazing that there's someone there specifically to help you arrive at your own screen. It's amazing, and that just obliquely, naturally gets people out of the mindset of access as a set of things that you kind of need to be worried about whether you're doing or not doing. The access tool is like,"Hey, we recognize that this is just one big process that we are in the middle of. We are writing it together. It's not finished, and we need to respond in real time to what's coming up for people."

Also, in our parties, it kind of resonates with another way that the doula has been used in disability culture, and that's to quote Stacy Park Milburn, who has said "The work of supporting people rebirthing themselves as disabled or more disabled has a name. We are doulas." The crip doula is the name

that is specifically thinking about love and mentorship of people reckoning with their disability or changing disabilities. It kind of gets back to that feeling s.e. smith names of being in a space that you know is for you. You can release this little reserve of energy that we are taught to constantly protect, to always have a little bit of energy set aside, so that if something goes horribly wrong, you can advocate for yourself, and when you are in a space where doulaing is happening really well, you can release the actual energy. Or, if not the actual energy, release the concern and stress that often circles around protecting that energy, and you can relax.

Doulaing, I think, in our parties, is probably more often something that allows people to feel good that it's happening, less that the doula is performing particular tasks. Sometimes there's like a moment when someone will say, "I'm not getting any audio," and everyone else is, and then the doula is, like, "I got this." It's a one-on-one thing. We don't have to pause the whole party, why don't you and I kind of figure this out, and I'll help you troubleshoot. Troubleshooting is also a category that's also undefined. But it's roving, sensing for what we can make better. Sometimes it's emotional and affective support - someone just needs to be able to tell someone, "something is coming up for me right now, and it's taking me by surprise". And the doula is there. I've done that in our parties, and it's been very moving. People will suddenly say, "I don't know why I'm crying right now in this party space, because I'm having a great time, and suddenly this is reminding me of all these things that are lost in my life." The doulas are there to help people process.

A little concern of mine is that the access doula, because of its rather undefined and expansive role, can be used as a way of offloading a sense of obligation and responsibility to really good access planning. Sometimes it's like, "Okay, well, we can't get it all done, but we'll have an access doula there." The access doula is a compliment to really good planning, and, like the doulaing, gets better. It's easier for the doulas to work when there's really clear, excellent access planning. I worry sometimes when I see, especially in institutional spaces, big foundations that are like we're gonna have this event, and we'll have access doulas. It's not a catch-all category for all that messy stuff that we're now actually going to kind of shield from, it's a way of actually bringing that complexity into a larger space and letting people show it.

So I worry about that kind of concealment mechanism, sometimes, of the popularization of that role. You know, also, the word doula etymologically referred to female slaves in ancient Greece. And so there's a lot to reckon with in the history of that term, like, where has it actually traveled? How did we decide to pick it up? And what does it encode about servitude and relationships and power between people? I feel there's a lot of unfinished work there, and sometimes I feel like what we're doing with the term and how it's circulating now represents its own etymology, that doesn't necessarily always need to be beholden to literally ancient traditions of using that word. But it's something that brings up, and I think puts on our radar, a really important set of questions about relations and being together.

Aimi Hamraie:
Yeah, that's really good to know. I didn't know that about the etymology of the word doula, and it makes me curious about power relationships around service and work and labor. I think that also gets one of the sticky points or frictions that are inherently part of this project and this party, which is this question of free DIY access work versus professionalized access work. When we first got started, we're sort of like, "What do we do? How can we do this on a very small budget?" I think we hired CART and ASL, but for things like image descriptions, audio descriptions, we were sort of relying on the participants to know how to do that and to do it in the comments and the chat, and had to have a kind of rotating group of people who volunteered to do that stuff. Of course, it's controversial, like, why is one of those things a paid professional, trained position, and one of them is more DIY. Does that sacrifice the quality of it? And what does it say about these dynamics of expectation or servitude, or whose labor is valid, and who says it?

Access Labour

Aimi Hamraie:
As of 2023, I would say the majority of the parties have shifted to a model where someone is paying for all of that access labor, and then the funds are kind of divvied up between the people who were participating in an organizing capacity and an access capacity for the party, doing different kinds of access work. I wonder if you want to just talk more about this

theme of labor, and what it's bringing up. Because labor is a kind of technology, right? Labor is one of the central questions for philosophies of technology and theories of technology.

Kevin Gotkin:
Totally. I'm so glad that you're raising all that, because I think about it all the time. I feel like it's one of the more unfinished and difficult parts of the collective work that we're doing. We were actually just talking about this a few weeks ago, how we noticed that we, as you said, tend to split the remaining pot. In our budgeting with our parties, there's a certain flexibility that really helps in making sure that whatever actually happens that day, like someone can't come, someone else is jumping at the last minute, we can remain flexible on how the budget gets used. To me, it feels very in line with a queer nightlife. Like, at the end of the night, here's the cash that we made. I love handing people cash and not having to report that it's income. In a lot of cases, it's getting people coin, you know, and doing it quickly, right then, is a sensibility that I try to push forward in our work. What we know is that, pretty much always, the compensation for people who have been planning the party is always so much lower than the folks who are sharing artworks, or creating something for the party, and the more professionalized access workers, specifically ASL and CART providers. I have a big, major love for the organizing that has professionalized those categories, like that's great, you know, and people insisting that these are interfaces with an audist and ableist world like, we need to have categories of people. But it's interesting that a lot of times we're paying non-disabled access workers who don't really bring their own political analysis to our work, they're just there.

Sometimes you can see it, because we'll invite them to do more emergent forms of access work, like song signing. We're inviting people to try out an interpretive flow that maybe they haven't been trained on. Maybe that's not something that happens in their formal ASL pedagogy. And there are some access workers that we've worked with more and more, because you can tell that they have an excitement around diverging from that. And then there's other folks who kind of don't, I guess, really bring much political analysis to their work, who are thinking like, "I'm just going to get the lyrics, I'll just kind of pare this down". It's an interesting way of knowing who's with us on experimentation.

But then, of course, how do you reduce that down to a necessary function of using payment as a way of relating to each other. I wish that we didn't, and I know how important it is for people to have a number that they are being paid in order to show up at that party and take it seriously. It's tricky. I think the breakthrough that we've had recently is to stop splitting the pot of money afterwards, and say, "let's foreground our role. Our role is as access magicians, people doing the less professionalized, sometimes entirely anti-professionalized kinds of work, like doulaing." Let's foreground what we want and what we need for compensation to feel good, because the feeling of being in a space made for and by disabled people is magic, it's also pretty magical to immediately get a Venmo you know, payment like after the party. I want that feeling of people getting to solidify the kind of affect around a party. It's also completely devoid of a political economic analysis right now, like we haven't really done a study of where the dollars come from in the budgets that have supported our projects. Like, a lot of academic dollars, can we understand that based on which professional and networks we are in as individuals? Is there a more equitable way that we can fund these parties?

It brings us to some really big overarching questions about how disability culture can be lifted up by capital. And of course, we proliferate all the ways that is besides the real pleasures and importance of being together. So, yeah, labor is this axis of analysis that scares me like a little bit, because this is real shit. We're talking about getting people money. We should formalize that. And then I always run into ways that compensation and labor is overly determined by the intransigence of ableism. It's fucked up to think of any kind of work that we do in terms of hourly productivity. I don't even like trying to reduce those things, yet it remains so important. And so I get stuck in there a lot. And you know, I try to tell myself it's okay. It's generative.

Aimi Hamraie:
Yeah, totally. It's like, we're very aware of the types of precarity that people are vulnerable to. And so trying to figure out, given the limited resources that are available, how do we at least reduce that for charity, or don't contribute to it? And being in disability cultural spaces, many people have income restrictions and things like that, so it does require extra care beyond the disbursement of funds and stuff.

Access Artistry

Aimi Hamraie:
Another part of this that I'm curious to hear you talk more about is the access artistry part of it, which is related to labor. You were just pointing out that within ASL, for example, there are emergent practices of song signing, or emergent forms of artistry that happen similarly in captioning. How are we seeing some of that within the party space? How has it evolved? And thinking about documenting this also in terms of the history of disability, technology, and crip technoscience. What is happening in these parties that's also innovating these access practices through an artistic framework?

Kevin Gotkin:
Yeah, totally. When I think about access in terms of magic, it's really access artistry, access as artistry, that captures that and drives what I mean by the "magical possibilities" of all of this. On a basic level, I think we can identify that our party series and the works that we show and the artists that we invite, we are involved in a pretty amazing moment in, like, the grand art history time, where access features are primary compositional materials, more relational than relational aesthetics. It is an incredible moment to realize that these things that we have pretty much always thought of as after the fact, are actually the primary materials for artistic invention and creation.

I kind of tasked myself in one of our parties with creating a magic trick, because I was like, "Oh, you know, how can I show people the brilliance of this thing? How do we actually do a magic trick and show people?" There's some folks who have really been taken with the way we talk about magic. There's one artist named Lisa Prentiss, who wrote in a piece about our parties in a publication called Black Flash Magazine. She wrote, "I was so excited by one of our parties because of the way the word magic immediately suggests the emotional and joyful dimensions of access practice. Building capacity and collective responsibility for creating and engaging space with care and attention feels aligned, too, with an idea of magic. I also love that magic suggests the possibility of transformation of material conditions in an instant."

So, when you are encountering an abundance of access, features, a too-manyness, a lot of non-disabled folks would describe as an overwhelm,

because they're like, "Wait, I can't focus on all these different things," and it's like, well, each of them was designed to operate within a disability cultural center around an impairment category of, like, audio description, not just as a general thing, but specifically for blind and low vision folks. Or, ASL song-signing specifically for Deaf ASL users in the space. Of course, there's this sense of, "Oh, my gosh!" There's no one position from which to get it all, and even that kind of acquisitive, "I need to be positioned to be able to take it all in," is very much a feeling informed by ableism and a charmed non-disabled subject who can take in all these features. We kind of explode that by separating out the focus on all these different ways.

I experience a kind of calm in that. It makes a party feel infinite, because you can kind of focus on any one thing and find something really, really rich and beautiful there when it's working well. It has all these implications for artistic methods, like thinking of DJing, for example, not as manipulation of sound but as description of sound. Why don't more DJs just identify as DJs because they accompany the people who manipulate the audio files in order to describe it, which is something DJs actually do all the time. Everyone's inventing some random arcane genre. It's like, "what do you mean by synthwave"? And it's like, "Well, describe it." That should be a core practice to DJ culture that would then invite better citational practices, and better media forensic possibilities.

I get really like excited about this, I feel like this is really the core process that we are involved in. Access artistry. It drives kind of everything, and we often specifically invite folks who are working on something innovative in access artistic practice, they're working on a new kind of thing, or focusing on a particular combination of intermodalities or something. And then, of course, the party space is a way for people to get feedback and talk about how it lands from them, from a specific situated, disabled, viewer experience. This seems to be the core of our technoscientific and artistic practice.

Aimi Hamraie:
Are there any examples that you want to highlight?

Kevin Gotkin:
That is a good question. I guess one of our landmark parties happened in a virtual world that was built by Yo-Yo Lin, with a little support from me. And it

was pretty amazing to be a little avatar inside this little, beautiful and technically endless virtual space, where there was this dance floor that was a 3D model of an art object by Yo-Yo Lin. We were literally dancing on this visual system for describing one's experience with pain, or resilience, journal data visualization, as our floor. We looked up at this enormous screen where artists were sharing work, and they were accompanied by ASL interpretation. We were feeling connected to each other, captions were embedded, and you could get out of that if you needed to.

There was someone who did something pretty interesting with their name, because everyone's avatars had a name that was a 3D element. Someone made their name extremely long with all of these, hilarious emojis that didn't render correctly, so it looked like a glitch, and every time they moved anywhere, everyone kind of had this beam of text kind of cut across them. And so I thought, I thought that was amazing, and if you were over stimulated, there's a low stim room with these pillows and an installation that was like, specifically designed to feel calming.

There was something about our move — and of course we never give up on the familiarity of the Zoom interface, if you were making dinner, if you didn't weren't really at your screen, you could always join the party through Zoom — but there was something in our jump into a more spatialized virtual world that made these access features feel more interactive, more haptic, being with people where you could get really close to them and feel a little uncomfortable, and move far away, and just choose your practice to people. That somehow gave the access features a certain texture that I was like, "Wow, each of these features now being placed spatially, makes me feel like I am surrounded by them even more." There's an ecological dimension to it. And that's something that I'm thinking about very much - how to continue to work into virtual spaces for our parties, so that we can continue that feeling of being literally surrounded by access.

Aimi Hamraie:
I love that description of that party, too, and also a really interesting example of how disabled artists have used the party as a container, a space to further iterate, "What are remote parties now, in a digital world?" We're in Zoom, but also in this other place, and that's happened a few times where I think also that platform area was formerly used for online gallery kinds of things, like a 3D gallery. To make it this enormous

playspace is definitely a different approach that maybe wouldn't have happened in a different cultural location and time history.

These are the questions that we've talked about so far. I wonder if we want to end on the question of how crip technoscience might inform parties going forward, and that could be in all remote spaces. It could be in hybrid spaces. What are some of the features you're working towards, imagining, after having organized this party for three years now?

Future Remote Access

Kevin Gotkin:
Yeah, so I do want to mention a kind of heartbreaking moment for me that happened recently. Two incredible artists and organizers, Tina Zavitzanos and Leah Laskhmi Piepzna-Samarasinha wrote a really amazing guide to sharing space in the winter outside. The reason I say it was heartbreaking was because they have a paragraph where they name the limit of remote access. I totally understand it, and they beautifully describe our collective indignation about the digital, the impossibility of really feeling safe when there's shadowbanning and unbelievable data harvesting. Our social media spaces have always been used by disabled people in innovative ways forever, that's just been how it is. And now, they just feel icky. They just feel like, not places that we want to gather. And it's just heartbreaking because it's true. It's kind of what we were talking about earlier, very early on being on Zoom: "wait, is this…how corporate is the space? Actually, even though this is a meeting where we got to decide some of the settings, fundamentally, how free are we here?" And I don't know.

So they kind of said that, like, "Here's why we're giving so much detail about how to be outside. It's because a lot of people are just like, are not finding it…they use the word, increasingly, chokehold. And I was just like, "Damn, that is the feeling that I want to push against, and people feel like you can transcend and actually experience this thing in your room, this space of isolation." So many people are experiencing the planned abandonment of the end of the public health emergency, and just such a profound retreat and withdrawal from public life. I think, though, actually, in this amazing set of resources about how to share space outside in the winter, we see crip technoscience. It's a very similar set of concerns like

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you have to get really granular about energy sources. Power. Safety. A lot of the things that we do in our party are just a difference and degree, but not in kind, necessarily.

I felt affirmed, and reading their approach to thinking about, for example, being in a public park and having to worry about like, "what if any of us feel unsafe, or we're actually attacked," or "how do we, how do we share space?" It's a sense that transfers across these different ecologies. And so I think that's where we keep going, it is a certain pride and love for the real detailed ways of being together and continuing on as a kind of devotional practice. We do this not because we're claiming that this is the amazing thing that's ever happened. We know that there is this residual feeling of another Zoom meeting. We get that. I think what draws people to it is that we are doing this devotionally, because we are like insisting on this, and we are not willing to give it up.

There's a kind of resistance aesthetic to saying, yes, we will be there, because, yeah, we're as the invisibilization of the planned abandonment of so many disabled people continues, his is the one way that we that we can say "fuck no" to that. I think it's combining that kind of sensibility about granularity, of technical problems that we're going to fix together, with a kind of devotional practice of remote access.

Aimi Hamraie:
Yeah, beautiful. And you know, it's worth noting that this is really different from the idea of going 'back to normal', that it's really getting at some of the core concerns of remote access, and the sense of isolation of disabled people who aren't able to access community because of accessibility barriers and things like that. And, as you point out, like some of those same barriers happen in the remote space. It's about being strategic using the resources that are available to us, working collectively, trying to find alternatives.

Is there anything else you want to talk about before we end?

Kevin Gotkin:
Yeah, I just kind of want to have on the record, my profound and deep appreciation for you in this. You have been such a champion and supporter of me and my work, and this party really help me transcend outside of

academia. You know, the history of this party, is also personally encoded on my own life. So much of my life has changed since we've developed this party series, and your belief in the innovative possibilities, your support, and your friendship has been so key. It's such an important and often not-so-obvious reason for why this is continuing on.

When I hear people talk back to us about their emotional experiences or the palpable love in a party, I think of how that is only possible by the friendships and the support and the generosity that you have shown to me, and to this party, and to so many of our collaborators. So I just want to say that to you. Thank you. And how deeply grateful and appreciative I am for everything that you've done.

Aimi Hamraie:
Okay, thanks, Kevin. And likewise, it's been such a joy to get to watch you put all of these different pieces and make new things that literally no one has ever done before, or thought about before. It's really nice to reflect, three years after it all started, how much has changed, how much has become possible. I really do think that like disabled friendships are a technology. We've known each other for such a long time now, since we were graduate students, probably at least a decade, if not more. It's really great to see the kinds of worlds that we can create together and I'm looking forward to doing more of that, and seeing everything else you do, too.