

LISTENING IN CRIP TIME: TOWARD A COUNTERTHEORY OF DOCUMENTARY ACCESS

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Jordan Lord's *Shared Resources* (2021) uses access features—namely, open captions and burned-in audio description—as a medium of crip creativity. A meditation on Lord's father's self-reliant attitude toward war debilitation, debt, disability, and bankruptcy, the film asks what it means to listen from the perspective of the out-of-synch and misfitting temporal experiences that Alison Kafer and other disability scholars have called “crip time.”¹ To listen in crip time, Lord shows, is to rethink the temporality of access, turning it from an afterthought into a building block of documentary language. At stake in this intervention is nothing less than a countertheory of documentary.

A number of other crip-identified film and video artists, including Carolyn Lazard, Constantina Zavitsanos, Christine Sun Kim, and Park McArthur, have recently staged critiques of the low institutional bar in place for meeting legal accessibility standards in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Lord brings this critique into the documentary form itself, revealing access to be the fulcrum of what Irina Leimbacher has called the “inquisitive and acquisitive” conventions of documentary listening.² In industry parlance, “access” is often understood in transactional and extractive terms: as the leveraging of money, force, reputation, or trust to acquire entrance to private or inaccessible realms deemed to harbor documentary value. By reframing access as a shared resource and responsibility, Lord's film invites a “sideways listening,” an attention and an appetite for access understood as neither entitlement nor resentful obligation, but rather as a collective practice of care that swells documentary meanings and horizons.

Shared Resources begins where *vérité* films in the Rouchian mold sometimes end. Lord's mother and father,

both principal participants in the film, are shown reacting to an early cut of the film. (Lord has said the film was made “in consultation” with them.) “I didn't just dislike it, I loathed it. Hated it, despised it,” says Albert, Lord's father, objecting to a pivotal scene in which he appears visibly and audibly disoriented after a hospital visit. Later in the film it is revealed that Albert lives with life-threatening chronic illnesses caused by Agent Orange exposure during the Vietnam War, including retinal damage that could culminate in blindness. As also shown, Albert has been debilitated by the stresses of working as a debt collector, losing the family's home to Hurricane Katrina, and subsequently losing his job and his VA disability benefits after filing for Chapter 13 bankruptcy, leading to a three-to five-year debt-repayment plan—notorious for being nearly impossible to complete—during which debtors must live on a fixed income.

The scene to which Albert objects immediately precedes his reaction scene, and actually opens the film. Crimson light fills the screen while Jordan, along with their mother and sister, coax Albert to drink a glass of milk. Lord describes the images and text that appear onscreen in an even-toned voice-over. The descriptions both add to and subtract from what I perceive as a sighted and hearing person. “A reddish pink frame fills the screen, pulsing from dark to bright.” “Throughout the film, yellow text designates someone speaking off camera; white text designates someone speaking on camera.”

In its presentation and what it absents, this scene foregrounds access as a practice of mutual care and dependency. Participants' control over their own image has been a central concern in documentary, but Lord removes access relations from propertied logics and holds them in trust.

Lord hears Albert's objection to his portrayal as weak or vulnerable as a statement of his access needs—that is, as accommodations and adjustments that Albert will require in order to participate fully in the film and the world in which it will circulate. Lord responds to these needs by placing their finger over the lens to occlude Albert's image,

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In *Shared Resources*, director Jordan Lord uses yellow text to indicate someone speaking off camera.

producing an image that looks, to me, like objects passing before my closed eyelids on a sunny day. In verbally describing that occlusion and by captioning the description, Lord anticipates Albert's future access needs were he to lose his vision, as well as those of blind and deaf viewers who might share the political experience of disability. In this way, Lord links Albert's disavowal of his disability experience to the very same ableist forces that justify neglecting or segregating the needs of audiences with sensory differences.

I have come to think of Lord's ethical and formal commitments to "baked-in" access as constituting a refusal of the austerity thinking that leads too many documentarians to conceive of participants in their films as liabilities that threaten their access to resources that can be mined and refined as documentary content. Liability concerns lurk, unstated, when filmmakers admit backstage negotiations and relational dynamics into the cinematic diegesis after the fact. In *Goodbye CP* (1972), for instance, Hara Kazuo instigates Yokota Hiroshi and other activists with cerebral palsy to "throw away their wheelchairs and take to the streets." Hara then keeps his camera running during a fight in which Yokota's wife angrily objects to his reckless staging of access performances at her disabled husband's expense as well as his shameless efforts to capture their private marital discord. When asked to account for his decision, Hara has stated that Yokota's wife granted him permission to use

this footage in the film despite her disapproval, noting that Yokota has defended the film as a "collaboration."³

Lord's insistence on access as a primary cinematic principle prompts an understanding of such ex post facto efforts as retrospective access accommodations, or retrofits—makeshift structures devised by documentarians to compensate for the harm they have caused and to protect their investment. *Shared Resources* is an exercise in moving away from the adversarial and conservative underpinnings of legal and, by extension, documentary interpretations of access as risk mitigation into a more powerful framework of accountability.

The implications of such a shift for documentary practice become apparent during Lord's interview with Albert about his work as a debt collector and his own subsequent bankruptcy—a procedure that exposed the tenuousness of his middle-class status. Albert responds to Lord's queries in the guise of a spokesperson for the very system that left him with no social safety net when he was fired. Good lenders, Albert reasons, have a responsibility toward their borrowers, and good borrowers owe it to their creditors and to themselves to make good on their debt. Albert claims that he does not regret the massive loans he borrowed for Lord's college tuition, believing this to be his responsibility as Lord's parent, which he has now fulfilled.

Reflecting on Albert's internalization of the neoliberal logic of risk management, Lord muses that in documentary,

too, it has become commonplace for filmmakers to secure access by outsourcing risk to their “interview subjects.” Indeed, this is the logic behind the “release” form that subjects sign to release filmmakers from liability. Lord muses:

The process of interviewing, which is also involved in applying for jobs, schools, and loans, most closely resembles the sense of “applying” that means “to join or adhere,” like one might apply glue. The interview sticks with the person being interviewed. Though it can always be recut and recombined, the filming creates a record. The record produces a kind of evidence that the person may later be held to. This might be called their story, but it might as likely be called their account.

Prior to and during the interview with Albert, Lord “cuts back in” scenes from his daily life that reveal the debilitating and ableist logic of this accounting convention (itself a type of “audit”) and reassert the structural violence that Albert elides in his account. Albert is shown driving to the bank from which he was fired to deposit checks and use the coin machine, no less than four times. He visits an ophthalmologist who tells him the only way to control his retinal damage is to get his diabetes under control. At home, as Jordan’s mother, Deborah, cooks soup with canned vegetables—a survival strategy for living through bankruptcy learned from her working-class childhood—Jordan’s sister Ashley remarks that their father’s health issues would benefit from a fresh-food diet. If Albert’s account suggests that individuals are responsible for their own recovery, both corporeal and financial, then these inserted scenes suggest that recovery is less a return to a prior pristine state than a series of painful detours and backslides through the wormhole of cripp time. They stick with the listener, demanding a different kind of accountability, another type of social glue.

Lord answers that demand by rethinking documentary access beyond artificial scarcity and gatekeeping; instead, they propose a queer and crip practice of sharing resources and building social capacities. Their insistence on burned-in access performs the fundamentally speculative, improvisatory, incomplete, and necessary work of caring and support that has been termed “access intimacy” by disability-justice activist and writer Mia Mingus:

[A]ccess shifts from being an individual responsibility to a collective responsibility ... from being silencing to freeing; from being isolating to connecting; from hidden and invisible to visible; from

burdensome to valuable; from a resentful obligation to an opportunity; from shameful to powerful; from rigid to creative. It’s the “good” kind of access, the moments when we are pleasantly surprised and feel seen. It is a way of doing access that transforms both our “today” and our “tomorrow.”⁴

Lord’s commitment to access intimacy rewires a long cinematic tradition of austerity thinking that has framed linguistic and sensory access features as burdensome additions that distract or subtract from aesthetic experience. The widespread acceptance of subtitles and dubbing in numerous national contexts, as well as data on elective subtitle use for enhanced narrative comprehension and a robust body of scholarly work framing subtitles and dubbing as interpretive arts with untranslatability at their core, have done little to budge the mainstream perception of linguistic access as a degradation of the “original” cinematic text.⁵ The industrial history of sensory access for audiovisual media has likewise been guided since its inception by a mandate of invisibility that reinforces the social erasure of disabled people and the unmarked, unquestioned norm of a sighted and hearing audience.

Following an all-too-brief broadcast experiment with open captions, audio descriptions and captions have largely been segregated on an optional track, placating able-bodied investments in cinema that would be “spoiled” by translation.⁶ To this day, industry norms for captioning and audio description preach the values of inconspicuousness, discretion, and seamless integration. Style guides consist largely of design and pacing recommendations for retrofitting captions and verbal description to the film or television program in the available space-time between scene changes and dialogue in order to minimize asynchrony and maximize narrative comprehension. Best practices advise audio describers and captioners to be neutral, accurate, and objective, and to avoid interpretation, commentary, or graphic or technical vocabulary that calls attention to itself.⁷

Users of these services have lamented the mystification, misdirection, and shrinking of cinematic experience under the neutrality imperative. Blind disability scholar Georgina Kleege has noted, for instance, how the withholding of information about nudity can, in addition to infantilizing blind audiences, consign them to imagining narrative information made explicit to the sighted viewer.⁸

Lord has stated that their intention in *Shared Resources* was to work with access as the “material and form” of their creative practice. Lord shares this investment with a number of other artists who have used access features to

experiment with crip aesthetics of complaint, displacement, substitution, overlay, and ventriloquy. In the short film *Artist Christine Sun Kim Rewrites Closed Captions* (2020), Deaf artist Christine Sun Kim explains how the translation of music as a single word or symbol depicting a musical note impoverishes d/Deaf spectators, and suggests synesthetic alternatives: a tiled floor is captioned as “the sound of shampoo scent floating among the fog.” In her *Spoken on My Behalf* (2020), Kim is shown signing while sarcastic captions ventriloquize interpreters and hearing people who have voluntarily or involuntarily “voiced” the artist. In *Captioned-Channel Surfing* (2017), Liza Sylvestre captions TV programs captured while channel surfing without captions, conjuring a parallel but overlooked spectatorial experience reliant on visual observations, lip-reading, body language, and prosthetics like hearing aids and cochlear implants.⁹

Other artists employ an aesthetic of displacement and substitution to emphasize the positive benefits of exclusion from ableist cultural spaces, widely referred to in disability communities as “JOMO” (the joy of missing out). McArthur’s audio piece *PARA-SITES* (2018) visually describes the gallery and artworks in their MoMA exhibition, in addition to off-site and imaginary spaces.¹⁰ Amalle Dublon and Zavitsanos likewise omit an image needing description in their minimalist video *April 4, 1980* (2018), in which open-captioned text is audio-described by Zavitsanos’s voice, slowed down to fit the speed of caption reading rather than matching the speed of captions to the soundtrack.

Lord’s *Shared Resources* contributes an aesthetic of redundancy to this emergent lexicon of access intimacy. What appears onscreen is told, and what is spoken or sounded is shown. The look, sound, duration, and feel of the film are rejoinders to the documentary dictum “Show don’t tell.” As a theory of narrative economy, “Show don’t tell” celebrates inaccessibility. The viewer (presumed to be seeing and hearing) is independently responsible for finding their way into the narrative through elegantly disguised and sutured points of entry. If telling reveals and doubles these openings, then Lord doubles down on redundancy as the lowest and most obvious denominator of access.

Audio description, even more than captioning, is often resented and avoided by most filmmakers. It is expensive and requires advance consideration and creative compromise in the form of a well-ventilated soundtrack; too much sound, music, and speech makes it difficult to accommodate verbal description, resulting in acoustic congestion. Lord turns this constraint into an opportunity to explore how

access features can guide not only the aesthetic of the film, but also its narratological movement. The basic principle of audio description is “Say what you see.” Where best practices and style guides see a covenant of fidelity to an original text (premised on able-bodied assumptions), Lord employs a crip philosophy of ekphrasis, a fount of narratorial invention and means of channeling sensory attention that activates what is not shown.¹¹

Audio description may appear to emanate as though from an objective, authorless source, but, as Kleege has noted, it is often multiply authored. Lord’s process honors its collaborative and subjective character. For every scene that appears in the film, Lord asks Deborah, and occasionally Ashley, to watch the footage with and without sound and to record descriptions incorporating three different registers: (1) how they reacted to seeing the footage; (2) how they would describe it to someone who could not see; and (3) what was left out of the frame but important to know.¹²

Lord then edits these three types of responses into one unified voice-over track, supplementing it with their own descriptions and commentary. Deborah’s is the voice that the audience hears most frequently, along with Lord’s. Lord’s commentary and descriptions (neutrally intoned in the simple present tense) have the effect of moving out beyond the frame to include analyses of abstract and invisible structures and infrastructures (the credit economy, internalized ableism). As a combined effect of her willingness (and perhaps, need) to open up, her intimate and emotional delivery, and use of the present continuous tense, Deborah’s descriptions sound like an internal monologue that takes the audience inside the film and illustrates how the structures illuminated by Lord are felt and lived.

As a sighted and hearing listener, I experienced this collective description-as-narration as what Zavitsanos might call a “backstage pass” to a different dimension of the film than the one unfolding in the foreground. McArthur writes: “Figuring out together with a person or people who are providing access often means running temporary interference to rules of security, business, and customer service that mediate kitchens, break rooms, and storage areas as work sites. Tina [Zavitsanos]’s called this the backstage pass.”¹³ Creating access, as Zavitsanos and McArthur note, entails developing relationships with those who work backstage. Access work—that invisible and inaudible “relay between people” that literally and metaphorically props up Albert and (the story of) his recovery—takes place behind the scenes.

Shared Resources transpires in these waiting rooms of life, folding the tedium and repetition of access work into its narrative rhythms. In the foreground, the story of Albert’s



Lord describes the images and text that appear onscreen in voice-over narration.

recovery marches along, unsteadily but surely. Meanwhile, Deborah, Lord, and Ashley place telephone calls to medical-insurance agents, wait in the bank parking lot as Albert deposits checks, and wait on Albert as he convalesces at home. When responding to their own images, they transport the listener to off-site and imaginary spaces of access work. To me, it is incredibly moving to hear Deborah's own perception of her access fatigue grow and evolve through the act of description. This is how she describes a different view of the occluded scene that opens the film, and recurs throughout like a fever dream: "My face is telling the story of the stress I feel, there is fear all over my face, because of my husband who I depend on so much. I felt it but you see it." Her words swell the scene in a chorus of concern, worry, and love that tells us what it feels like to provide care and support—that is, to provide access.

Kathryn Bond Stockton has described "growing sideways" as a queer orientation with regard to temporal and relational destinations normalized by the compulsory heterosexuality of "growing up." Sideways growth, she writes, is "a motion, an emotion, and a growth, even though, from certain conventional angles, it may look like a way of going nowhere."¹⁴ *Shared Resources* grows sideways by cultivating a crip kind of love for access intimacy.

If I were to describe my own auditory activity during Lord's film, I might say: I am listening sideways, to the

workaround, to what must happen despite and because of all that ableism makes unthinkable and nonsensical. Listening sideways is the opposite of listening for the gist. It means listening for the props and supports that have been cut out or kicked away. It means falling in love with the thickness and slowdown that comes, in Dublon's words, from "becom[ing] involved with the means of getting around, or communicating, and the poetry or choreography of that means."¹⁵ It means developing an ear for the unaudited and unaccounted love work of collective care that props up documentary stories.

Access has multiple meanings and legacies. The modern, legalistic meaning of access, understood as permission or ability to enter, has superseded an older, medieval definition in which access refers to a fever or altered state.¹⁶ I learned this from *After ... After ... (Access)*, the film that Lord made in 2018, which documents the filmmaker's preparation for open-heart surgery and concludes with cell-phone footage shot inside the hospital, obtained surreptitiously after Lord's months-long petition to film their care networks during their stay was denied. *Shared Resources* invokes this older concept of access, understood in the crip sense of an attack or breach. Inequities of access, Lord shows, cannot be solved by retrofits that seamlessly integrate people with disabilities without displacing majoritarian bodies or substantially changing the social structure.

What Mia Mingus calls a “‘good’ kind of access” (one that transforms both present and future) is necessarily an act of creative destruction that entails rebuilding new forms, relationships, and systems of accountability in the social wreckage of the old. Lord requires audiences to experience sensory access not as a supplement but as an occlusion—a crip curb cut that bends listening toward an apprehension of disability as the ground state of life, a social world braced by the values of interdependence and shared responsibility. This is why it is so important to build the political capacity and muscle memory for the type of listening that *Shared Resources* models and practices: a listening whose difficulty is in direct proportion to its collective gains. This is the paradigm shift at stake in listening in crip time.

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Notes

1. Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 27; also see Ellen Samuels, “Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (2017), <https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/5824/4684/>. Kafer and Samuels describe crip time as a departure not only from normative life stages and linear progressive time, but also from the ableist values of productivity, self-sufficiency, independence, and achievement.
2. Irina Leimbacher, “Hearing Voice(s): Experiments with Documentary Listening,” *Discourse* 39, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 293.
3. Hara Kazuo, *Camera Otrusa: The Action Documentaries of Hara Kazuo*, trans. Pat Noonan and Takuo Yasuda (New York: Kaya Press, 2009), 91–92.
4. Mia Mingus, “Access Intimacy, Interdependence and Disability Justice,” *Leaving Evidence* (blog), April 12, 2017, <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2017/04/12/access-intimacy-interdependence-and-disability-justice/>.
5. On subtitles, see Abé Markus Nornes, “For an Abusive Subtitling,” *Film Quarterly* 52, no. 3 (Spring 1999): 17–34; and Atom Egoyan and Ian Balfour, eds., *Subtitles: On the Foreignness of Film* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004); and on dubbing, see

Tom Whittaker and Sarah Wright, eds., *Locating the Voice in Film: Critical Approaches and Global Practices* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

6. Today, closed captions (which exist on a separate file and are usually identified by a [CC] symbol in the corner of the screen that allows the viewer to switch them on or off) are the most common type of captions used by major broadcasters and video streaming services. See Emily Watlington, “The Radical Accessibility of Video Art (For Hearing People),” *Future Anterior* 16, no. 1 (Summer 2019): 117. Also see the essay by Neta Alexander and Mara Mills in this dossier.
7. See Sean Zdenek, “Which Sounds Are Significant? Towards a Rhetoric of Closed Captioning,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (2011): <https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/1667/1604/>; and Georgina Kleege, “Audio Description Described: Current Standards, Future Innovations, Larger Implications,” in “Description across Disciplines,” special issue, *Representations*, no. 135 (Summer 2016): 92–95.
8. Kleege, “Audio Description Described,” 96–97.
9. See Emily Watlington, “Critical Creative Corrective Cacophonous Comical: Closed Captions,” *Mousse*, no. 68 (2019), <http://moussemagazine.it/product/mousse-68/>.
10. Amalle Dublon and Constantina Zavitsanos, “Dependency and Improvisation: A Conversation with Park McArthur,” in special issue “Disability + Visibility,” ed. Emily Watlington, *Art Papers* 42, no. 4 (Winter 2018/2019): 52.
11. The ancient art of verbally describing visual material, ekphrasis includes such varied and mixed verbal-visual forms as poems about paintings, film analysis, slide lectures, and videographic criticism. See Mara Mills, “Listening to Images: Audio Description, the Translation Overlay, and Image Retrieval,” *The Cine-Files* 8 (2015): <https://www.thecine-files.com/listening-to-images-audio-description-the-translation-overlay-and-image-retrieval/>. Mills proposes that audio description be viewed alongside captioning, fansubbing, voice-over, and “twin-vision” braille/print books as a “translation overlay” practice that adds alternative content to source material by integrating a new track without creating a new work.
12. Jordan Lord, “Shared Resources (Contractual Obligations),” *City University of New York School of Arts & Sciences Theses* (December 18, 2019), 5.
13. See Dublon and Zavitsanos, “Dependency and Improvisation,” 52.
14. Kathryn Bond Stockton, “Growing Sideways, or Versions of the Queer Child,” in *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*, ed. Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 311.
15. Dublon and Zavitsanos, “Dependency and Improvisation,” 53.
16. *Oxford English Dictionary*, www.oed.com, s.v. “access.”