

Willful Dictionaries and Crip Authorship in CART

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Willfulness involves persistence in the face of having been brought down, where simply to “keep going” or to “keep coming up” is to be stubborn and obstinate. Mere persistence can be an act of disobedience.

—Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* (2014, 2)

In the 1990s, the Museum of Modern Art in New York acquired an artwork by Jackson Pollock known as the *Stenographic Figure* (1942). The painting depicts two abstract figures seated at a table containing a grid-like object representing a stenographic machine. The suggestion of the midcentury writing machine grouped with the two figures elicits an interpretation that queries the boundaries of authorship. Pollock exploits this confusion by connecting the two figures with a backdrop of handwritten shorthand. Without training, the shorthand is unreadable. It is raw data. The museum curator Kirk Varnedoe described the acquisition of the *Stenographic Figure*: “The *willed confusion* of this eccentric, ugly-pretty picture introduces ways of visual thinking that will reappear, in different guises, for years to come.” (Taylor 2003, 53–71) Of those guises, the socio-technological uncertainty that sits at the core of Pollock’s work points to persistent anxiety around the practice of authorship. Historically, such anxieties appeared with the threat of women entering into the workplace and the ambiguity of transcriptions as intellectual property. These uncertainties raise the question is central to this chapter: Is crip authorship a problem of will? Here, I draw on my fieldwork to offer a fictive, speculative account of the precarious demands of coauthorship with speakers, d/Deaf and hard of hearing users, and Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART) captioners.

It is a hybrid conference at a university on the West Coast of the United States. There is a female CART captioner—a real-time writer—seated in front of her personal laptop at the front of the classroom. She sits at the margin of the room. Elsewhere, the same writer simultaneously appears behind a blank square on the familiar telecommunication platform, Zoom. Their hybrid Zoom name (a mix of their proper name and the name of the CART agency) identifies them as outside the rules governing online participation, an implicit gesture to define their neutral roles as observers to the unfolding conversation. Onsite, the stenographic equipment is set out before her on a table. On the table surface, there is

a notepad ready to document the steno briefs (handwritten shorthand) spoken at the forthcoming panel. The room is still empty: this is the stenographer's prep time. Next to the notebook, the stenographer is underlining new vocab from the conference's description of events. She looks up individual speakers from the panel online, including the speakers' research interests and recent publications, mapping out their institutional affiliations and the description of the conference itself. If there is time, the speakers' names are added to the dictionary. The writer searches through her email to find two documents previously shared by two of the four speakers ahead of the conference; she skims through the two documents to find familiar topics while loading each of the documents into the CAT (computer-aided translation) software. A couple of people enter the room to take their spaces among the few chairs in the classroom. She pushes the stenographic keyboard under the desk in front to conceal her presence and her labor. The chair of the panel and two of the speakers enter the room. The writer nods to herself, pairing their presence with their online profiles and research interests listed online. The panel's chair is logging on to their personal computer. Sound check. The computer's camera is not working. Log out. Logging back in. The stenographer returns to her prep work before the panel discussion starts.

The writer searches for a suitable dictionary to work across each presentation and the final discussion in the remaining twenty minutes. Which of her job dictionaries will work for a debate focusing on emerging feminist technologies? The writer considers the dictionary of sociology for her client, who graduated two years ago, while looking for a more recent job dictionary. What categories do feminist technologies fit under? Computer science, visual arts, art practice, media and communication, philosophy, or is it engineering? The Zoom window is now populating with a mixture of blank squares and faces of people seated in their homes. The panelists introduce themselves to the other panelists online, and they enter into an exchange of small talk. The increasing workload of online teaching, travels to the conference, the effects of lockdown, new cats and new jobs and new research. The stenographer looks around the room onsite and at her chatbox for an indication to start writing. When is the right time to begin captioning? Is this a private conversation between the panelists? The writer looks around the room again for the client. Nobody identifies themselves online. Unsure when to start captioning, she places a stream text link into the chat. Nobody takes this as a prompt to introduce themselves. The stenographer is familiar with the practice of nondisclosure (Kafer 2016). In her training, she learns not all clients identify as d/Deaf or hard of hearing and must understand their wishes of privacy in shared spaces. The panel chair begins speaking, and the stenographer loads the sociology dictionary and begins captioning the panel discussion. The chair acknowledges that a CART captioner is providing their services today and refers to the difference between the captions created by a human stenographer and automated captions.

In a Facebook group the previous night, fellow stenographers trained as courtroom reporters noted that another transcription agency had been sold to a larger company. There are rumors of a digital restructure to phase out the use of human captioners altogether—the automation of their labor. It's not the first time. The courtroom is often the testing site of new technologies, which directly affect and devalue the work of stenographers themselves (Downey 2008). Another Facebook group pushed their campaign to sell personalized lanyards with “STENOGRAPHER” inscribed on the ribbon in white letters. Members share images of themselves wearing lanyards in their home offices, courtrooms, and academic classrooms. The disembodied photographs are carefully staged to draw attention to their machine and the location of their jobs. The invisible cottage industry of captioners, often transcribing nightly news and academic discussion from their home offices, is made visible by the array of lanyards. There is talk of making a new lanyard with “Human Stenographer” to capture the not new but intensifying threat of automation on their horizon. Their response to this threat involves the collective practice of sharing stories and images, solidifying their connections to a hidden network of speech-to-text industries.

Crip authorship is not always visible. The first speaker begins their presentation, and the CART captioner realizes she has loaded the wrong job dictionary onto her software. The job dictionary designated for sociology classes would not match the speaker's background in engineering. Their technical jargon does not correspond with the sociology dictionary prepared and coded two years earlier. If we consider the coding of spoken speech as a type of data, we can then appreciate that the nonexistence of these data can cause real-time issues for the writers. In tech-driven spaces, the strategic move to conceal human labor backstage further contributes to the ongoing narrative of the magic of AI.¹ In other words, the training of data somehow occurs elsewhere. Demystifying the labor of dictionary work for the purpose of this chapter allows us to understand that the potential of *crip authorship is always happening elsewhere*. I repeat: crip authorship is not always visible. The coding of job dictionaries occurs in relation to other speeches, other disciplinary discourses, times, and places. It is a community of speakers that comes to populate a stenographer's dictionaries. On these terms, the crip authorship of access draws on the politics of crip futurity imagined by Alison Kafer to contend with the labor practices of captioning itself. (2013) It is the traces of previous speech captured by a community of speakers, readers, *and writers* that enable the coding of future meetings.

The stenographer waits for another lull in speech to load another job dictionary, but the break never arrives. The captions begin to lag in respect to the spoken content, parts of the sentence are dropped from real-time transcription, word conflicts appear on-screen for the readers. The pressure of real-time writing grows; more shortcuts are being made as more panelists engage with the discussion

(further expanding the disciplinary backgrounds). The real-time writer moves between the speakers to capture their conversations in readable texts.

Crip authorship, as I use it here, is to be understood as a practical, ongoing assemblage always moving toward materializing the ephemeral, recapturing what tends to be lost at the margins. Enfolded into this practice is attention to precarity as it appears locally. I opened this chapter with the novel premise that crip authorship is a problem of will, which builds on Sara Ahmed's work *Willful Subjects*. Ahmed further writes, "To be identified as willful is to become a problem. If being willful is to become a problem, then willfulness can be understood as a problem of will" (2014, 3). Crip authorship is a necessarily incomplete project that focuses on the ephemerality of speech. Crip authorship appears in the discrete moments when a captioner catches the fleeting small talk between panel presentations and allows this to shape their growing dictionary. The willingness to capture these unremarkable moments is a willful turn away from treating captioning as a neutral process; rather, it gives authority to the speakers, readers, and writers to shape the outcome of the dictionaries they rely on. Working at this scale, the labor captioners do for their readers is localized and embedded in particular communities that give meaning to that work. If a mistake is made by a stenographer—most often speakers' names, places, local knowledge—they can and often do work in real time to repair this mistake. For automated captions, the system is not designed to recognize and understand a person's changing social context. Cloud captionings are trained to find patterns of speech, but have limited ability to grapple with or respond to local knowledge on the ground. Stenographers with local knowledge are more likely to recognize and *have already coded* distinctive landmarks in the area—for example, names of Indigenous lands occupied or nearby. The practice of captioning, as a form of documentation, can affirm the power of crip authorship as a situated ethics in particular times and places. Likewise, the will of captioners to build multiple job dictionaries that can reflect a range of speakers and experiences, rather than foreclose these through automation, is a reflection of the values embedded in particular communities. Crip authorship is an archive of values that are meaningful for speakers, readers, and writers.

Real-time captioning often gets enfolded into discussions of access and accessibility, rather than being understood as a potent cultural entity in its own right. With the automation of captioning ever present on the horizon, real-time writing is often scrutinized for human errors, which automated systems are built to improve on. By being more attentive to the assemblages of real-time captioning as a practice of crip authorship, the seeming binary of error versus verisimilitude is revealed as a practice that hides the diversity of those assembled in its standardization. Captioners are constantly working to mediate the potential harms of real-time writing. Is it possible to cultivate a feminist practice that allows for

and forgives human-made mistakes in captioning, that privileges the will and persistence to improve dictionaries over the mandate to standardize? Perhaps this is an idealistic proposition when the stakes of access are necessary for d/Deaf readers. But yet, here is an opportunity to recognize that crip authorship is always in progress, focused on the ever-shifting margins, and assembling around the responsive dictionaries that mark the promiscuity of past interactions and the responsive diversity of crip futurities.

NOTE

- 1 Also see: Lilly, Irani, and Six, Silberman. 2013. "Turkopticon: Interrupting Worker Invisibility in Amazon Mechanical Turk." In *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, pp. 611–620. Mary, Grey and Suri, Siddharth. 2019. *Ghost Work: How to Stop Silicon Valley from Building a New Global Underclass*. Eamon Dolan Books.

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