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## Queering the Ear: Podcast Aesthetics and the Embodied Archive in S-Town

Kira Schukar

Macalester College, [kschukar@macalester.edu](mailto:kschukar@macalester.edu)

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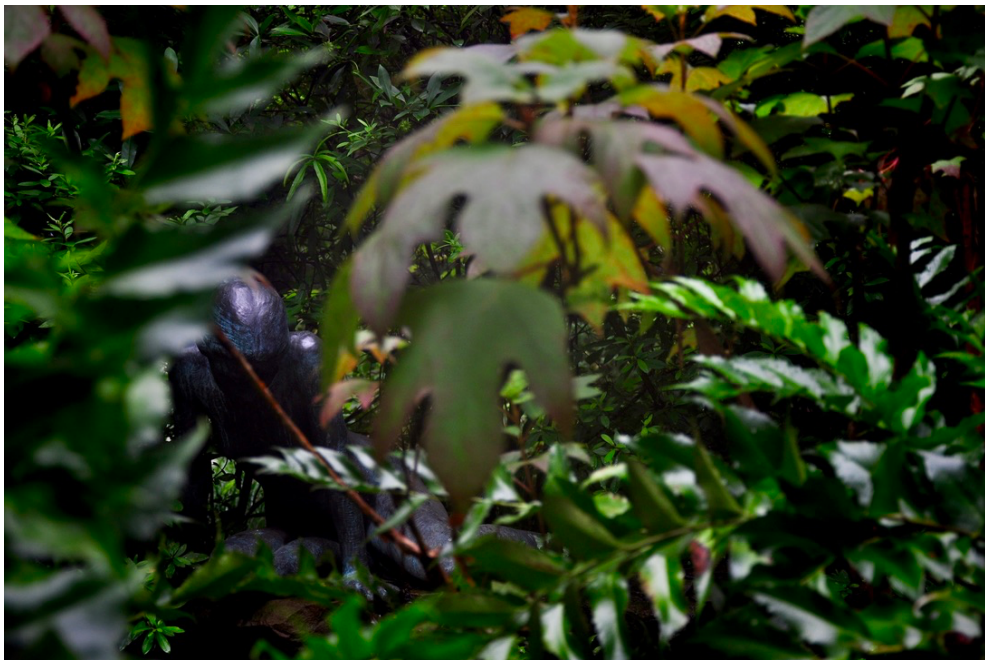
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# Queering the Ear:

## Podcast Aesthetics and the Embodied Archive in *S-Town*



Statue of a young woman gazing into a pond. Birmingham Botanical Gardens, Birmingham, Alabama. Photograph by Kira Schukar.

By Kira Schukar

Honors Thesis  
Faculty Advisor: Professor Amy Elkins  
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## ABSTRACT

Despite podcasts' rising popularity over the last twenty years, literary scholars are only beginning to focus on their affective potential as multimedia texts. In this thesis, I argue that even mainstream podcasts are productively intertwined with queer theories and aesthetics of belonging. Using the 2017 podcast *S-Town* as my case study, I examine the aural aesthetics of queer failure, temporality, archives, embodiment, and desire as key elements in this complex medium. Putting these theories and aesthetics into practice, I describe my process of research-creation and present a podcast I made about my road trip to Woodstock, Alabama, *S-Town*'s place of origin.

*What kind of reward can failure offer us? Perhaps most obviously, failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods. Failure preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children, winners and losers.*

Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*

*To write, after all, is only to hazard the possibility that there will be a future of some sort, a “Queer Time” off the battlefield of everyday existence, in which the act of reading might take place somehow, somewhere. This book is my bet.*

Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds*

## PART I

### *Queering the Podcast*

On a sunny day in July 2021, I sat in the back room of the Woodstock public library next to the refrigerator and a floor-to-ceiling bookshelf. The building once held the town's ambulance fleet—its walls a cold, corrugated metal. In front of me, I spread out a collection of homemade CDs, some of them too chemically corroded to play. “Tracks 11-17 Rated PG13,” one reads in handwritten Sharpie. Another, “John B. presents: ABBA” (see Figure 1). I pick up one titled “Rain” and press it into the CD player. As it spins, the sound of an Alabama thunderstorm hammers out of the player's speakers. I skip to the next track. The rain comes down harder. By the third track, it stops. A few birds chirp. Excess water dribbles off the roof. Footsteps pace in front of the microphone.

These are recordings made by John B. McLemore, the man at the center of the 2017 podcast *S-Town*, though none of them appear in the series' seven chapters. Instead, these recordings have stayed hidden from their streamed counterparts—those hours of John talking, driving, cursing, and sighing that came to be *S-Town*. The CDs act as a mirrored image to the podcast, produced by John instead of about him. Simultaneously, they reflect his ear, what he chose to listen to and to remember in sound. One CD titled “creakiness” is thirty minutes of John opening and closing his back door, adding and removing weights from it to change the pitch of its rusty springs. It's unclear why he decided to make it, other than out of boredom and a sliver of curiosity.



Figure 1. Homemade CDs by John B. McLemore. Held by Cheryl Dodson. The CD that reads “Tracks 11-17 Rated PG13” was treated with John’s homemade cleaning solution, which unintentionally corroded the disc and left it unplayable.

I didn’t know about these recordings until my last day in Woodstock, the town where John grew up, spent most of his adult life, and eventually died. I had been there nearly a week, barely enough time to be a tourist, let alone learn the town’s entire history and John’s relationship to it. Still, I had pointed my microphone at everything that caught

my ear on my journey—a truck stop in Vienna, Illinois; radio static; an interview with a man in a record store; crickets off my Airbnb’s front porch. Until that point, I had tried to keep my distance from John’s memory, even as I listened to his voice in *S-Town*, visited the cemetery where he’s buried, and interviewed one of his close friends. But listening to these recordings, I found it difficult to maintain that separation. Instead, I saw myself reflected in John McLemore—our curiosity with sound, the sheer number of mix CDs he’d made, the natural soundscapes he had captured (many of which sounded eerily similar to my own recordings). Suddenly, a person who had felt so distant from me, separated by years, miles, and sound waves, was standing on the other side of the microphone.

My experience is just one example of how sound creates an alternative space—one where two people can meet, ear to ear, without being physically close. As Stacey Copeland writes in “A Feminist Materialisation of Amplified Voice,” “There is speech because there is a living, breathing, feeling human from which these words extend through sound in a given space. The voice is a powerful tool not only because of its relation to speech but because human voice as sound (online and offline) connects us, like nothing else” (218). The connection mediated through podcasts opens the possibility for not only new forms of communication, but also for queer artistic movements in sound. In this thesis, I argue that even mainstream podcasts provide a rich landscape for queer artists and listeners, as both an archive for memorializing queer lives and a space to foster a relationship between storyteller and audience on a digital platform. Part I orients the reader to podcasts as generative sites for textual and cultural analysis, looking in

particular at the first episode of *This American Life* (then, *Your Radio Playhouse*) as an example of queer sound aesthetics produced from a mainstream platform. Part II dives deeper into queer theories and aural aesthetics by turning to the 2017 podcast *S-Town*. I find that themes of queer futurity, failure (both material and digital), memory, and body flow through the first episode of *This American Life* and all seven chapters of *S-Town*. Finally, I put these theories into practice in an audio essay I made from the sounds I collected during my road trip to Woodstock, Alabama. Through this blend of disciplines, scholarship, and research-creation, I further the discussion of digital media in queer scholarship and introduce new praxis for queer sound artists.

This thesis follows, in part, the “low theory” that Jack Halberstam proposes in *The Queer Art of Failure*. Halberstam defines low theory as “theoretical knowledge that works at many levels at once” and which “revels in the detours, twists, and turns through knowing and confusion, and that seeks not to explain but to involve” (*Failure* 15). Halberstam invites multiple modes of knowledge production, driven by curiosity and confusion, as well as by traditional scholarly inquiry. Likewise, I aim “not to explain but to involve” my primary sources—to invite podcasts into the realm of scholarly research, not only as texts, but also as research-creations. Like Halberstam’s textual subjects in *The Queer Art of Failure*, the textual subjects of my analysis are not inherently queer, nor are their audiences assumed to be queer. Indeed, *S-Town* and *This American Life* are some of the most successful, mainstream programs in the United States today, with *This American Life* garnering more than two million listeners each week (*This American Life*). This thesis aims to identify queerness in everyday, popular media. Although writing about a



visual medium, Halberstam raises questions that we can easily apply to podcasting. Like the animated movies in Halberstam's analysis, podcasts mimic reality, but are far less grounded in true-to-life setting and time than live-action video or live radio broadcasts. Although podcasts like *This American Life* and *S-Town* rely heavily on their stories' settings, they construct those aural landscape from a conglomerate of individual sounds, as opposed to a single landscape photograph or video. As I demonstrate in this thesis, the podcaster de-constructs and re-constructs reality in a way that can be used to reflect queer modes of experiencing time and place.

My thesis is divided into three parts, examining theory, background, and *This American Life* (Part I); *S-Town* as a queer podcast and memorial for John B. McLemore (Part II); and my own aural essay as research-creation (Part III). In Part I, I develop a comprehensive theory of queer podcasting by drawing from queer theory, archival theory, and sound studies. In this section, I argue that podcasts should be treated as cultural and personal texts. By comparing podcasts to literature and film, I argue that the aural medium is especially poised to transmit affect, to bridge the physical or temporal gap between storyteller and listener. In short, listening to a podcast is an intimate experience. I then explore queer aesthetics in "New Beginnings," the first episode of *This American Life*, released in 1995. Read as meditations on time and living without future, the acts in "New Beginnings" queer their subjects' relationship to time, both thematically and structurally. In this sense, the first episode opposes *chrononormativity*, a form of biopower defined by Elizabeth Freeman as "the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity" (Freeman 3). By disrupting the march of a

person's life from birth to adolescence to marriage to death, the stories in "New Beginnings" encourage us to think queerly not only about our own relationship to time, but also our relationship to the podcaster, who speaks to us seemingly privately across time and technology. Finally, I argue that the structure of the podcast as an assemblage of sound creates a cross-temporal conversation between the episode's subjects and its 21<sup>st</sup> century listeners, drawing us back into the podcast's archival potential.

Continuing the themes of failure, time, and archive from Part I, Part II focuses on *S-Town* as a failed, circulatory, and memorialist space for John McLemore. I argue that the show follows a narrative of failure by leading its audience down multiple unfinished trajectories. Much like Freeman's opposition to chrononormativity, queer narrative failure challenges the progressive, forward-oriented model for investigative storytelling. Recording not only Brian's failure to uncover a murder mystery, but also John McLemore's failure to leave his small, Southern town, *S-Town* generates a tale of circularity and returning that finds its roots in Southern and rural queer histories. Circularity, as I define it below, involves a continual movement around or within the same space. Thus, circularity and stasis are intrinsically linked, as a person in circular motion appears to stay in the same place from an outside perspective. By constantly re-visiting and re-membering John for its listeners, *S-Town* engages in a queer mode of memorialization that combines ephemerality with permanence. In this sense, the show extends John's public memory through an endlessly circular, and thus re-listenable space. Within this space, moreover, the podcast conflates the journalistic body of work, the clock body, and the human body, finally birthing a new *podcast body* for John. Combined

with the podcast's re-listenability, this podcast body creates a queer utopian experience for *S-Town*'s listeners, one where we both come to love a constructed John B. McLemore and long to know the real, unreachable version of him. A form of unrequited love and desire, this fleeting utopia is what drives fans to Woodstock.

In Part III, I return us to Woodstock through my own podcast, *Driving to S-Town*. Made from the sounds I collected on my road trip to Alabama in July of 2021, this podcast combines the themes of time, circularity, and archive that I develop in the rest of my thesis and puts them into practice. Part meditation on my own connection to the podcast and part theoretical research project, the podcast combines scenery sound (truck stops, cicada songs, walks through a cemetery), audio diaries, and interviews in a soundscape that I constructed. At its core, it is an assemblage of these elements, an attempt at reconstructing my own memory of the trip, as well as Brian's journey to Woodstock. It is my hope that by listening to this podcast, you will not experience *my* sonic memories, but rather that you will re-create, or co-create, your own.

### ***Background: Defining the Audio Medium***

Podcasts are an audio medium with a wide range of aesthetics—from highly avant-garde, stylized pieces to traditional narratives. The rise of streaming mediums including Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and even SoundCloud means that more people have access to podcasts than ever before; all you need to tune in is a cell phone and an internet connection. Spotify and Apple Podcasts—the largest streaming services—both garner about 28 million monthly listeners on their platforms, according to one analysis by

eMarketer (Perez). Spotify's CEO, Daniel Ek, reported 3.2 million streamable podcasts on his platform alone as of October 2021 (Perez). These include podcasts produced by Spotify, shows recorded in homemade studios, and segments made for national radio broadcasts. In this section, I trace podcasts to their origins, citing their accessibility and structure as the crux of their use for queer scholars and artists.

Although podcasting is experiencing a major boom in media today, we can trace its nexus back to the early 2000s. In a 2004 article published in *The Guardian*, Ben Hammersley writes about a so-called "Audible revolution" in new media (Audible, of course, refers to both the sensory experience and the Amazon child company, the original streaming service for podcasts). Hammersley struggles to name the new media: "All the ingredients are there for a new boom in amateur radio," he writes. "But what to call it? Audioblogging? Podcasting? GuerillaMedia?" (Hammersley). Though the article seems dated to modern ears (the word "audioblogging" recalls the early days of the internet), Hammersley names many of the principles that are true of podcasts today as he reviews Christopher Lyndon's early audio journalism work:

By combining the intimacy of voice, the interactivity of a weblog, and the convenience and portability of an MP3 download, Lydon's work seems to take the best of all worlds, and not just for the listener. The ability to broadcast out, and have the internet talk back to them, Lydon says, is very appealing to journalists: professional hack and weblogger alike. (Hammersley)

What Hammersley highlights is the accessibility of podcasting, not only for the listener, but for the producer as well: All you need is a microphone (today, high-quality desktop

microphones are available at Target for around \$60), a computer, and basic audio-editing software (Audacity is an open-platform editing software designed to run on most laptops and desktop computers). Hammersley points out that this accessibility opens the possibilities for a whole range of audio storytelling. Likewise, its *post*-ability frees podcasting from the time and budgeting constraints on broadcast radio. Like personal and video blogs, podcasting in 2004 promised a new platform for both personal expression and professional storytelling. As I demonstrate in Part III with my own podcast, this accessibility makes podcasting an ideal medium for scholars to expand and broadcast their work, as well as to engage in research-creation practices.

As an example of personal expression through podcasting, Hammersley presents audio postcards—bite-sized, sound-driven pieces that claim to transport the listener to a new location.<sup>1</sup> In particular, he points his reader to Aaron Ximm’s website, QuietAmerican.org, which features audio postcards from Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and the United States. (Writing this section, Ximm’s postcards are still available for download through his website). Hammersley is right to point out that the audio snippets on personal audio blogs like QuietAmerican.org would not fly on public radio: Most of these travelogue clips are under 10 minutes and have little to no dialogue, let alone

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<sup>1</sup> Outside of the podcasting industry, companies that sell products from around the world imply that their customers can traverse the globe without ever leaving their home. Exemplifying this trend with the Far Village project, a small company that marketed handcrafted bathrobes from villages in Guizhou, China to women in Seattle, Washington. Tim Oakes writes that “an apparent condition of advanced or ‘disorganized’ capitalism is a pattern of everyday consumption that renders us more and more like tourists as we purchase not products but representations and experiences. Thus, in Seattle, one can be an ethnic tourist by purchasing a batik bathrobe; one can bathe in the far village without ever leaving the bathroom—and believe that the village is better off for it” (Oakes). While sound reproductions and transportations do not carry the same capital and material consequences as the Far Village project, it is worth noting that soundscapes may replicate these capitalist exploits by packaging distant places into bite-sized postcards.

narration. Listening to just one of these audio postcards reveals how audio manipulation of field recordings—distorting the sound of a train, looping a short clip of laughter, layering radio broadcasts over music—can recreate the experience of walking through a landscape. Said differently, these short clips are *soundscape*s—portraits of a place in sound.

The soundscape is a constructed audio space, similar to yet distinct from the landscape, as it can either represent a physical space or construct an entirely new, nonexistent space in sound. Like the landscape, the soundscape relies on an *assemblage* of different elements to create the overall effect or image. Originally defined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in the 1980s, an assemblage is an important philosophical framework in geography, literature, and art. More recently, Thomas Nail responded to Deleuze and Guattari's definition, arguing that "the condition of an assemblage is abstract because it is not a thing or object that exists in the world, but rather something that lays out a set of relations wherein concrete elements and agencies appear" (Nail 24). That is, the assemblage itself is not an object; instead, its features and political implications define the relationship between a set of concrete elements. In geography, assemblage can combine the "physical and symbolic values in the environment" to create an overall cultural effect (Cresswell 130). David Kaplan similarly contends that "the assemblage of items found within a place is often much greater than the sum of its parts, and we may find that these places do develop potent meanings" (Kaplan 100). The soundscape likewise relies on detail to construct a space's general impression. The soundscape as a field of study finds its origins in the 1970s with R. Murray Schafer, claimed as one of the

founders of sound studies in later decades, who writes that “with a camera it is possible to catch the salient features of a visual panorama to create an impression that is immediately evident. The microphone does not operate this way. It samples details. It gives the close-up but nothing corresponding to aerial photography” (Schafer 7). Think of the soundscape, then, as an assemblage of localized sounds, a layering of voice, wind, insect, traffic, footsteps, all combined to form an at once cohesive and disparate audio image. The constructed nature of soundscapes, moreover, makes them an ideal medium for constructing alternative, queer, and utopian landscapes beyond what is physically possible. In the following sections, I explore how we can read these layered soundscapes as reflections of the storyteller’s perspective, identity, and culture—in short, how we can read sound recordings and podcasts *as texts*.

### ***Aural Theories of Identity***

Reading podcasts as cultural and personal texts requires a grounding in sound theory and literary studies. Most popular podcasts fall into one of a few genres and can be categorized as longform interviews (*Fresh Air* with Terri Gross), conversational talk shows (*Last Podcast on the Left*), essays (*Modern Love*) short-form narratives (*This American Life*), or long-form narratives (*S-Town* or *Serial*). For the purposes of this thesis, I will focus my attention reading the latter three of these categories: essays, long-form, and short-form narratives. These three genres translate well into literary theories, as they are still based in narratives (as opposed to news coverage) and heavily emphasize

literary aesthetics, such as writing style and voice. Even knowing these narrowed genres, we are still left with the question, how can we *read* sound?

Although I am approaching podcasts from a literature perspective and background, scholars have compared the medium to film, as we have already seen in Schafer's contrast between the soundscape and the landscape photograph.<sup>2</sup> In "A Cinema for the Ears: Imagining the Audio-Cinematic Through Podcasting," Dario Llinares compares the audience's experience listening to podcasts to their experience watching a film, emphasizing the *intimacy* and *individualism* in podcast listening. Film creates a "primary experience" for the viewer, as it fixes them in both an audio and visual experience (Llinares 342). By contrast, the mobile technology of podcasts allows the listener to generate their own visual event, one that is decoupled from the audio soundscape. Llinares goes on to discuss assemblage in cinema, whereby the viewer/listener combines their surroundings and relation to the film in order to create a film experience. He argues that podcast listeners enact a similar process, differentiated from film by both the lack of visual stimuli and by the intimacy of the medium. These differences allow podcasts to "[facilitate] connectivity inside and outside of interest and

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<sup>2</sup> Like the camera, the soundscape lends itself to culturally mediated, though individual, experience through this individuality. As Susan Sontag writes, photographs of the war the United States waged on Vietnam "introduced the home front to new tele-intimacy with death and destruction," suggesting that the close-up shot of the civilian, the soldier, the enemy gave rise to a new digitally mediated affect (*Regarding* 21). Likewise, "poster-ready photographs—the mushroom cloud of an A-bomb test, Martin Luther King, Jr., speaking at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C., the astronaut walking on the moon—are the visual equivalent of sound bites" (*Regarding* 86). The sound bites that correspond to these culturally recognizable images—the bass-y rush of an A-bomb explosion, the recorded opening lines of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, "I Have a Dream" speech, Neil Armstrong's staccato proclamation that the first moonwalk was "one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind"—similarly evoke "predictable thoughts, feelings" in their listeners (*Regarding* 86). Like images and film, then, sound can be read as a collection of culturally recognizable bites.



expertise, and across geographical and socio-cultural boundaries” (Llinares 348). Moreover, as Lukasz Swiatek argues, “the podcast can be [received] as an intimate bridging medium: a means of communication that creates a sense of intimacy (even though the podcast's participant(s) and listener are not physically proximate) while enabling [these] two types of boundaries to be crossed” (Swiatek 173). Swiatek claims that podcasts produce the “impression of directness and closeness,” implying that the experience feels individual to the listener, but that it’s actually collective (Swiatek 176). Thus, the podcast—more so than the film—both is and mimics a deeply personal experience, one that allows the listener to create their own narrative from the sounds presented to them,<sup>3</sup> as well as connect to the storyteller across physical, cultural, and temporal boundaries with a collective of other listeners.

For podcasters writing narratives or facilitating a storyteller, sound editing involves getting into their character’s ears, embodying their experience—in other words, hearing and feeling for the audience. In *Out on the Wire*, Jessica Abel cites an interview with Jad Abumrad, one of the hosts of *Radiolab*, to illustrate how he uses sound to recreate scenes from a character’s perspective. Abel describes *Radiolab* as “a radio show about ideas, often scientific ideas, that uses experimental techniques and avant-garde sound to illuminate complex subjects” (Abel 224). By “avant-garde,” Abel means that

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<sup>3</sup> Foley artists capitalize on sound’s ambiguity and our associations between a particular image and its sound. For instance, the sound of frying bacon often stands in for a heavy rainstorm. Though these replacement sounds are often harmless (and actually quite helpful for filmmakers), foley art has also been used to enhance and (in some cases) falsify sound in nature documentaries. On *99% Invisible*, foley artist Richard Hinton reveals that elephants’ footsteps are silent, but that “It’s very uncomfortable to see a foot the size of an elephant fill a screen and hit the floor and not hear a sound for it” (Hinton qtd. in FitzGerald). Instead, artists create heavy footsteps to align with the image of a five-ton animal.

*Radiolab* uses non-traditional sound to place the reader into the main character's ears; we hear what they feel. Often this type of work involves using sound in places that it does not naturally appear or removing sound where we expect it to be. In the interview, Abumrad describes a story he produced about test pilots where his interviewee described the feeling of regaining consciousness: "I wanted to create the sound of a void," Abumrad says. "It's calm and womb-like, and that's the starting point" (qtd. in Abel 155). In Figure 2, Abumrad maps the language of sound. The aural elements in podcasts—narration, effects (like a beeping machine), ambient noise (like the hum of a machine), and music—all come together to create that "womb-like" space—not a physical space, but an aural landscape. In this instance, soundscapes are not so much physical as emotional. When the pilot regains consciousness, "the sound shifts and you then hear this energy rushing in from a distance" (Abumrad qtd. in Abel 157). The sound shifts because the pilot's state of being changes, even though he is still in the same place physically. Sound allows us to hear another person's surroundings, as well as their reaction to them. When reading a podcast, then, it is important to understand whose ears we are inside—are we the radio producer, a bystander, or the story's subject?

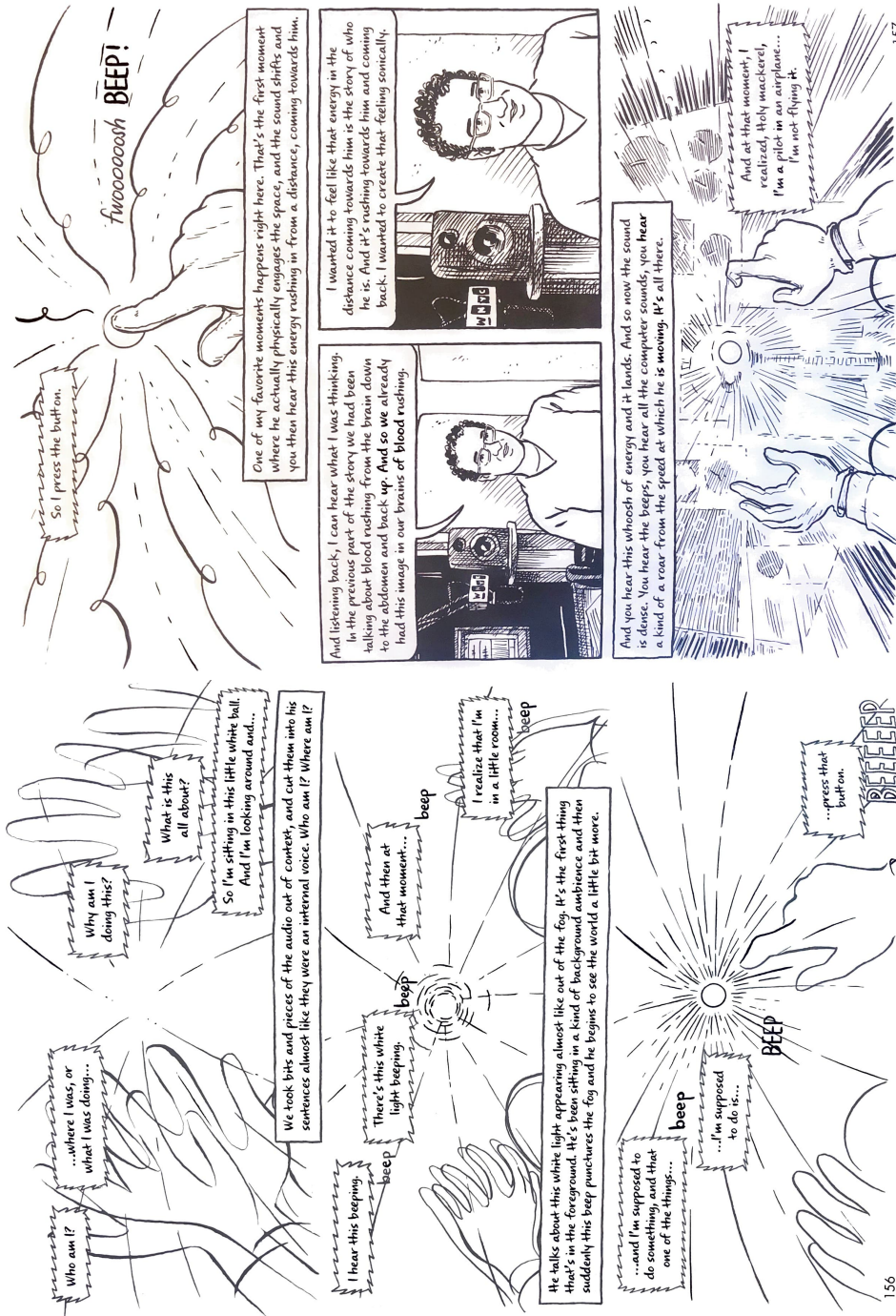


Figure 2. Illustration by Jessica Abel from her interview with Jad Abumrad. Abumrad describes how he constructs his source's personal experience through sound (Abel 156-157).

Sound's embodied quality also means that it can reflect cultural ideas about bodies—sexism, homophobia, and racism all appear in our ideas and values of sound. Anne Carson points out that even in Roman antiquity, philosophers and medical professions hypothesized that a man could “know from the sound of a woman’s voice private data like whether or not she is menstruating, whether or not she has had sexual experience” (Carson 129). This construction of sound as data—a device that could carry meaning beyond what a person expressed with their words—permeates our understanding of voice today. Jennifer Lynn Stoeber explores the construction of race through sound in her book *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Politics of Listening*, which “details the long historical entanglement between white supremacy and listening in the United States” (Stoeber 2). According to Stoeber, the *sonic* color line—paralleling W.E.B. Du Bois’s *visible* color line—“enables listeners to construct and discern racial identities based on voices, sounds, and particular soundscapes—the clang and rumble of urban life versus suburban ‘peace and quiet,’ for instance—and, in turn, to mobilize racially coded batteries of sounds as discrimination by assigning them differential cultural, social, and political value” (Stoeber 11). It follows that, even in nonfiction podcasts, the way that the storyteller constructs a person’s voice within a larger soundscape reflects and composes cultural notions of race, gender, and identity. In this sense, voice and body are innately connected, both in the voice’s production and in how the listener receives a voice as a representative piece of another’s body; the perception of a person’s voice reflects the perception of their body.

At the same time, the body's immediate invisibility in aural storytelling allows individuals to dissuade or avoid some of the cultural biases assigned to their physical appearance. In "Broadcasting Queer Feminisms," Copeland writes that "The desire of mainstream culture to dominate and commodify queer women through sexualization of the human form and the continued production of media for the pleasure of the heterosexual male gaze, can be fought through the empowerment of the queer woman's voice through positive, non-visual, and influential presence on radio and digital mediums" (Broadcasting 218). In the right context, voice offers an escape from the visual gaze, particularly for queer women. The listener "must focus on the voice, ripe with the power and intimacy engrained in human connection" (Broadcasting 219). The difference between a voice eluding or reproducing sexism, racism, or homophobia launched against the body comes down to representation. That is, how the journalist, producer, or artist highlights or engages with a particular voice—by foregrounding or interrupting it—has the potential to either foster or squash the "power and intimacy engrained" within it.

### ***Feeling Sound: From Aural Affect to Ghostly Desire***

The connection between queer theory and sound relies on the voice's ability to produce and transmit *affect*—emotion, desire, and "drive," as Eve Sedgwick defines it (*Touching* 18). In other words, affect is an orientation or disposition toward someone or something. Transmitting affect, then, means communicating our desire and, in some cases, asking for its return. In this section, I ground the connection between voice and affect in queer theories and sound histories, concluding that the affective voice in the

podcast is both reflected in and separate from the body that produces it. In a queer context, this transmission across time and space gives rise to taboo, ephemera, or otherwise non-normative forms of desire, mediated through the recorded voice. In *Touching Feeling*, Sedgwick argues that “the association between touch and affect may seem too obvious: its common sense seems to offer too easy support to modern assumptions about the centrality of sexual desire to all human contact and feeling” (17). I argue that the same common sense can be applied to hearing. In *The Audible Past*,<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Sterne writes that, in the telephone’s early days, “Sound telegraphy was invested with the possibility of a depth of feeling and communication that was hitherto reserved for face-to-face and written interaction” (Sterne 153). Sound’s ability to generate this “depth of feeling” hinges on our ears’ mechanics. When sound waves enter our ear, they vibrate our ear drum, launching a domino effect of feeling: The tiny bones in our ears shiver, amplifying the sound and sending further vibrations to a fluid-filled organ called the cochlea. In the cochlea, 25,000 nerve endings sense the sound waves’ vibratory frequencies, translate them into electrical signals, and transmit those signals to the brain, which interprets our feeling as sound (How the Ear Works, *Johns Hopkins*). In other words, hearing *is* touching, if only a very specific type on a minute scale. If, as Sedgwick argues, all affect comes from touch, then it follows that all hearing also

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<sup>4</sup> Considered one of the foundational texts of sound studies, *The Audible Past* touches on sound technology, history, and theory. For another meditation on sound—or rather, its absence—see Biguenet, John. *Silence*. Bloomsbury, 2015.

produces affect, as sound not only produces feeling but also transmits any number of emotions through the tone and quality of a person's voice.<sup>5</sup>

Beyond conveying affect, the similarities between voice and touch extend to the relationship between two bodies: the speaker and the listener. The voice not only carries affect, but also a piece of the body. In a recent *This American Life* episode titled "The Ghost in the Machine," Ira Glass relates a personal anecdote about the mark a sound engineer leaves in the dial tone of analogue tape recorders. In this anecdote, the tone wavers, "and Keith [Glass's mentor] said to me, 'you see that? That's a person in there. That's the hand of the engineer, whoever recorded this, trying to find the right level. That's the ghost in the machine'" (Ghost in the Machine). In philosophy, "ghost in the machine" comes from Gilbert Ryle's critique of the cartesian dualism between body and mind, and Ryle contends that "it makes no sense to conjoin or disjoin the two" (Ryle 22). In Ryle's argument, the "machine" refers to the body, the "ghost" to the mind, and the two are inseparable. In *This American Life*, however, the "machine" is the tape recorder, the "ghost" the hand of the engineer or, in the rest of the episode, the voice playing through a player's speakers. This allusion suggests that a person recorded becomes

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<sup>5</sup> The biggest difference between the affects that touch produces and the affects that sounds produce is the scale of circulation. That is, podcasts and other transmittable, recorded sound produce similar affect in an audience, as opposed to in an individual body. Circulating affects in podcasts recall Sara Ahmed's claim that "emotions circulate between bodies and signs" and "are not simply 'within' or 'without' but that they create the very effect of the surfaces or boundaries of bodies and worlds" (Affective Economies 117). Ahmed further recommends that, "Rather than seeing emotions as psychological dispositions, we need to consider how they work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective" (Affective Economies 118). Although Ahmed's argument primarily focuses on collective fear and hate directed around and toward asylum-seekers in the United States, we can apply the same analysis to emotions produced through aural affect, ranging from paranoia and disgust to desire and excitement.

something new; they are not entirely conjoined with the recording, nor are they completely separated from it. The recording creates a new body, a “ghost.”

Similarly, the telephone’s early days saw an anxiety arise around the new medium’s intimate possibilities: “The investment in the sound coming over the wires was presented as a vestige of the body (the voice, the movement of a hand) that had squeezed through the grain of the apparatus itself” (Sterne 153). Likewise, in Roland Barthes’s “The Grain of the Voice,” the voice takes on an erotic quality in a concert hall. As Barthes defines it, “the ‘grain’ is the body in the voice as it sings” (Barthes 188). Although the singer is not recorded, Barthes’ observations echo Sterne’s claim about early telephones being sexualized. Barthes is “determined to listen to [his] relation with the body of the man or woman singing or playing and that relation is erotic” (Barthes 188). Barthes’s critical listening connects him to the singer on a corporeal level: He feels the music reflected in his own body because of his empathetic connection to the performer. For people who communicate from vocal cords to ears, voice represents one of the most fundamental forms of human connection, and to imagine a person’s voice is to imagine their body before us. A person’s essence—what Glass calls the “ghost,” what Barthes calls the “grain,” what Sterne calls a “vestige of the body”—intertwines with the mechanical tape recorder. This person could be the voice recorded or the sound engineer’s hand. As Glass remarks, “putting ghosts into a machine—it just happens when you record anything” (Ghost in the Machine).



### ***Crossing Time: Sound as an Ephemeral (Queer) Archive***

The body's simultaneous presence and absence in recorded voice opens a discussion around sound's archival potential. I suggest in this thesis that recording voice uniquely combines ephemerality and memorialization in one medium, as the listener experiences sound streaming past their ears and yet retains the ability to go back, re-listen, and re-remember. This unstable temporality constitutes *podcast time*, which I define as the oscillation between time progressing forward and looking back. *Podcast time* can be used to record queer joy, but is uniquely formulated for memorializing traumatic moments, which require a degree of forgetfulness in order to not re-invoke past violence on the present community. In the queer community, these archives include memories from the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and '90s and from Matthew Shepard's murder in 1998. Although other mediums also serve these types of archives, I present podcasts as a new accessible medium that queer archivists can use for the same purpose.

From the advent of sound recording, engineers, artists, and historians have tried to capitalize on sound's archival potential for memorializing the dead. As Sterne points out, "If there was a defining figure in early accounts of sound recording, it was the possibility of preserving the voice beyond the death of the speaker." However, "If there was a defining characteristic of those first recording devices and the uses to which they were put, it was the ephemerality of sound recordings" (Sterne 287). Etched into wax cylinders, the first sound recordings deteriorated quickly, playable only a few times before they weathered into sonic mush. Even as technology advanced, the voices

transmitted through telephones and over radio waves—particularly marginalized voices—were rarely preserved. As Copeland points out in “Broadcasting Queer Feminisms,” “A major issue faced in studying the early years of women's history, let alone queer women's history, in broadcast is the ephemeral nature of traditional media as many of the voices are lost to the ether, unrecorded or once deemed inessential to archive” (Broadcasting 213). Thus, ephemerality and ephemera (the physical, yet fleeting, manifestations of ephemerality) are inherent to aural histories.

Audio recordings—already steeped in affect—carry new weight when applied to trauma and other queer archives. The concept of remembering ephemerally—an oxymoron of archiving and destroying—finds its roots in queer theory. Defining ephemera as “traces of lived experiences and performances of lived experience [that maintain] experiential politics and urgencies long after these structures of feeling have been lived,” José Esteban Muñoz explains that the act of recording something—whether photographing it, filming it, painting it, taping it, or writing about it—is itself an ephemeral performance (Ephemera 10-11). Looking at Tony Just’s photography, Muñoz links ephemerality to queer identity by proposing that queerness is a “possibility, a sense of self-knowing, a mode of sociality and relationality,” and that “the fundamental indeterminacy of [Just’s] image made me feel that its ephemerality and its sense of possibility were profoundly queer” (Ephemera 6). Specifically, he argues that ephemera is relevant to queer archives because “queerness has ... existed as innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments, and performances that are meant to be interacted with by those within its epistemological sphere—while evaporating at the touch of those who would eliminate

queer possibility” (Ephemera 6). He suggests, then, that we look for queerness in preserved ephemeral moments. We also find queerness in archives of traumatic memories or events; as Ann Cvetkovich points out in *An Archive of Feelings*, trauma—a dominant experience in queer archives, particularly from the HIV/AIDS epidemic—“demands an unusual archive,” one that “incorporates personal memories, which can be recorded in oral and video testimonies, memoirs, letters, and journals” (Cvetkovich 7). These archives include ephemeral artifacts—testimonies, fleeting memories—all of which can be captured in sound. Likewise, we can view audio recordings as “an archive of feelings,” which Cvetkovich defines as “an exploration of cultural texts as repositories of feeling and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception” (Cvetkovich 7). Podcasts are ideal “repositories of feeling and emotions,” as recording is imbued with affect, including a person’s longing for their lost loved one. In the audiences of some archives, Elizabeth Freeman points out, we find the “simultaneously mourning and lusting spectator, who seems to want to have sex with history” (Freeman 13). By preserving both the erotic and corporeal qualities of ephemerality, Audio recordings preserve our ability to desire the dead, as well as to mourn them.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> As an example of the modern ephemeral archive, I would point to a story from Joe Richman, host of *Radio Diaries*. In his essay “Diaries and Detritus,” Richman describes a cough caught on tape during Nelson Mandela’s trial: “The prosecutor’s words—and the cough—were recorded onto a reel-to-reel tape. At the end of the trial, Mandela and the other defendants were sent to prison on Robben Island. The tape was sent to the basement of a government archives. It remained there, mislabeled and probably unheard, for more than four decades” (Richman 175). The (at the time) physical act of recording a sound is the threshold between the material world (the dimensions and structure of the room, the number of people, the particles of spit from the cough) and the abstract world (the ideas expressed at the trial, the jury’s thoughts). Whereas a “perfect” piece of tape excludes traces of the material and aims to capture only the ideas expressed, the tape makes it impossible to achieve non-material purity because the act of recording *is* material. The cough proves this point because it illuminates the imperfection in our spoken ideas, as well as the material world

Aural archives are ideal for capturing the feelings associated with queer archives—desire, as well as trauma—in addition to the ephemerality of their performance. In a modern audio format, wax cylinders have long since disappeared from use, but audio recordings remain both solid and liquid. According to Sterne, sound “moves between the ephemerality of moments and the possibility of an eternal persistence” (Sterne 311). Inconsistencies in a voice, from a cracked vocal cord to a cough caught on tape, are memorialized in magnetic tape or in ones and zeroes on a phone’s recording app. Since the first audio recordings, we’ve experienced these memorializations on multiple time scales:

In bourgeois modernity sound recording becomes a way to deal with time. Sound recordings came to embody three conflicted senses of time for its early users. ‘Bourgeois modern’ recording is articulated to a *linear-progressive* sense of time, where the present inevitably disappears into the future, modernity being assumed to assure the perpetuity of changes, the constancy of upheaval and transformation. But the sound recording itself also embodies *fragmented* time. It offers a little piece of repeatable time within a carefully bounded frame. A few moments caught on cylinder, disk, or tape that bear some past consistency can be made manifest in the present. (Sterne 310, *my emphasis*)

The oscillation between *linear-progressive* and *fragmented* time speaks to audio recordings’ temporal instability. Like the body that is both present and distant in audio

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from which they are born. The cough—representing the “detritus” in the title of Richman’s essay—also exemplifies how audio recording can capture queer ephemerality in the margins of a recording, or at the tail ends of a forgotten archive.

recordings, time is unknowable. With the advent of audio mixing—splicing pieces of tape or digital recordings together to create one seamless podcast—voices recorded hours or even decades apart may appear in the same hour, minute, or second. Thus, in podcasts, we experience time as both moving past us and encouraging us to hear backward. This crossed time constitutes what I call *podcast time*, a topic that I will revisit in *S-Town* in Part II.

### ***“I’ve Got That Backward”*: Queer Aesthetics in This American Life**

Today, *This American Life* is considered the blueprint for mainstream and public radio podcasts, but traces of podcast time and other queer aesthetics occur, especially in its early episodes. From a studio in Chicago in 1995, Ira Glass aired the first episode of his new radio program, *Your Radio Playhouse*. He takes listeners through a series of interviews—from his mom Shirley Glass to the New York television host Joe Franklin, who advises him to “get the plug fast” when talking to guests (New Beginnings). The show goes off without a hitch, with Glass narrating live transitions between interviews and pre-recorded segments. Then, during the credits, he fumbles. He reads easily at first—he speaks over the sound of jazz trumpeter Ed Ryder, who appeared in the final act of the show. But midway through the production credits, another jazz song fades in under the first one. The music clashes; the rhythm beats out of sync. Glass mis-reads the names of two contributing producers: “I’ve got that backward,” he admits. He reads them again, pausing a little too long to check that he got them correct. “You see,” he says, “you get so

confused when you have two pieces of music running at the same time” (New Beginnings).

This moment would have been lost to radio history, had *Your Radio Playhouse* not become *This American Life*—the now Pulitzer-winning documentary podcast. The name change came just a few episodes later, but it took the show several more years before it gained traction in the radio world. Memorialized in mp3 form on the show’s website, “New Beginnings” contains much of the glitchiness that the show has since left behind. (As *Your Radio Playhouse*, for instance, the company produced an entire episode on poultry, aptly titled “The Poultry Slam.” Though interesting in its subject, the episode feels tonally disjointed, as it pivots from an essay about losing hundreds of turkeys to a thunderstorm on a Missouri farm to a kitschy new episode of the 1960s radio show *Chickenman*.)

In Part I, I’ve suggested that podcasts and radio—like film and literature—act as an archive, as well as a transpiration device for affect and body. In this line of thinking, I ask, “What does queerness *sound* like?” The early episodes of *This American Life*—replete with their fumbles and quirks—give us one answer. In this section, I use the first episode of *This American Life* as a case study for glitches as a queer aesthetic in podcasts. Recent scholarship on glitch aesthetics—from Legacy Russell’s *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* to Andrew Brooks’s “Glitch/Failure: Constructing a Queer Politics of Listening”—highlight glitch’s potential as a resistance to gendered and racialized categories, as well as heteronormative constructs of time and place. “New Beginnings” demonstrates podcasts’ glitchy history, mediated through human error and looser

restrictions to airtime. For a program coined “New Beginnings,” the first episode focuses disproportionately on death, following Kevin Kelly, a man who decided as if he knew he would die in six months, and Lawrence Steger, who had recently been diagnosed with HIV. By combining beginnings and endings, the episode presents a queer mode of time, of birth and death coexisting, of living without a perceived future (calling to mind Jimmy Sommerville’s lyrics in Sally Potter’s 1993 *Orlando*: “I’m being born, and I am dying”). Moreover, the technology, voices, and content of the episode transplant the listener 25 years in the past, encouraging us to continue the conversations it begins, nearly three decades later. If we read “New Beginnings” and *This American Life*’s other early episodes as queer, their digital archive on *This American Life*’s website becomes an important repository for queer ephemerality. Digging through this online archive, the contemporary listener enters an audio space that was not meant to survive the show’s prescribed hour-long slot on Chicago public radio. Known for its human-centered narratives, *This American Life* ultimately blurs the line between audience and storyteller, between time in the podcast and time in the audience.

The first Act of “New Beginnings” follows Kevin Kelly, a current (in 1995) editor for *Wired* magazine. When he was 27 years old, Kelly decided to live as if he were going to die in six months. Part religious experiment, part personal challenge, Kelly’s decision to live as if dying launches him on a cross-country biking trip to visit his four siblings and to, as he puts it, live in the present moment:

KEVIN KELLY: [Before the experiment,] There was a sense in which my entire life was shifted to the future. And the thought of doing something now for the

enjoyment, or the pleasures, or the principle of the function of just right now, without any sense at all that it would ever be used again or that it could ever be brought forward, was extremely difficult and disconcerting. And I fought it day by day and tooth by tooth.

Kelly finds his new relationship with futurity—or lack thereof—uncomfortable, even bordering on unnatural. Although Kelly does not self-identify as queer on the radio, his experiment forces him to embody a queer mode of moving through time: abandoning his view of the future.

Kelly's sense that his whole life was "shifted to the future" before the experiment leads us to a discussion on the politically and socially constructed ways that we view time: often, as a linear progression forward. Though often thought of as distinct from or beyond human experience, the passage of time dictates and is dictated by political and even moral values. In *Time Binds*, Elizabeth Freeman frames time in terms of *chrononormativity*, which she defines as "the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity" (Freeman 3). She goes on to explain that "schedules, calendars, time zones, and even wristwatches inculcate ... 'hidden rhythms,' forms of temporal experience that seem natural to those whom they privilege" (Freeman 3). Like Foucault's biopolitics, chrononormativity and chronobiopolitics describes the state's control over a person's body via time and timed activities. These activities range from the forty-hour work week to a person's expected progression from marriage to reproduction to death: "In the eyes of the state, this sequence of socioeconomically 'productive' moments is what it means to have a life at all" (Freeman 4-5). Although



these normalized schedules affect all marginalized groups, Freeman focuses specifically on queer communities, emphasizing futurity and reproduction. In a chrononormative framework, time is shifted to the future, and “the logic of time-as-productive ... becomes one of serial cause-and-effect: the past seems useless unless it predicts and becomes material for a future” (Freeman 5). Queer epistemologies, on the other hand, oppose chrononormativity by questioning the need for a future, a legacy, or reproduction. In this framework, the past becomes a rich, creative space, and the present is steeped with possibility, as it is not limited to productive activities for the future.

Similarly, Kelly’s story on *This American Life* questions what it means to live outside of “ordinariness,” to live against productive time. Lee Edelman challenges what he calls the “fetishistic fixation of heteronormativity” on “reproductive futurism” (Edelman 21). In *No Future*, he places the Child at the center of this fixation, with queerness poised as the Child’s antithesis. Edelman proposes that queer people embrace the antisocial position, abandon the fight for assimilation, and instead “insist that the future stop here” (Edelman 31). In Halberstam’s book, *In a Queer Time and Place*, queer temporality offers possibility, as

The constantly diminishing future creates a new emphasis on the here, the present, the now, and while the threat of no future hovers overhead like a storm cloud, the urgency of being also expands the potential of the moment and ... squeezes new possibilities out of the time at hand. (*Time & Place 2*)

Like Kelly, Halberstam views the diminishing future as a threat to human existence—the “storm cloud” hovering overhead; at the same time, a traumatic loss of future stretches and “squeezes new possibilities” from the present.

Whereas Edelman proposes a collective movement toward *No Future*, Kelly’s brief detour into the antisocial aligns with Halberstam’s mixed view of lost future. Kelly’s experiment forces him into “new possibilities”—spending more time with his family, biking more than 5,000 miles, giving away all of his money to friends and family—but he ultimately chooses to return to his old life. On November 1, six months to the day after his experiment began, he wakes up and reflects:

KEVIN KELLY: I had my entire life again. I had my future again. There was nothing special about the day. It was another ordinary day. I was reborn into ordinariness. But what more could one ask for? (New Beginnings)

Kelly’s rebirth into “ordinariness”—living with future—suggests that living entirely in the present is deeply unsettling and, ultimately, not feasible for every individual. Indeed, living without a future seems to be an incredibly isolating experience. Kelly’s remark, “what more could one ask for?” suggests that future offers relief under chrononormativity, a resettling into society, a refusal of Edelman’s antisocial position. Kelly’s choice doesn’t make his story any less queer; indeed, the relief he feels when he returns to “ordinariness” highlights the discomfort imbued in queer or antisocial ways of experiencing time.

“New Beginnings” sits with this discomfort in Act Three, which is framed as a creative response to Kelly’s story from a performance artist named Lawrence Steger.

Like us, Steger heard the recording of Kelly's story from the producers of *Your Radio Playhouse*. His response to it, then, both reflects and diversifies our responses to the episode thus far, with one (potential) caveat: When the story was aired, Steger had recently found out that he was HIV-positive. Whereas Kelly's queer experience of time arises voluntarily, Steger's is entirely without choice: With his HIV diagnosis before the wide use of antiretroviral therapy, he is faced with his mortality. Indeed, what the episode cannot reveal is that Steger would die of complications from AIDS only four years after "New Beginnings" aired (Obejas). In this sense, the piece is caught in time—a recorded memory of Steger's voice, writing, and reaction to his diagnosis. Steger's response to Kelly's story takes the form of a rough screenplay-turned-radio-script, a piece that exists between and around multiple genres. The story follows Luke—"gay, white, Midwestern, late twenties," who parallels Steger—and his friend Bill as they embark on a cross-country road trip hours after Luke learns that he is HIV-positive. Thematically, the story is an understandably bitter view of "living in the present." In the process of retelling this story, Steger unveils the technological boundary between podcaster and audience. Ultimately, the diagnosis that shortens his future allows him to take his audience on a rougher and more realistic journey in sound.

Formally, Steger's story forces *us* to live uncomfortably in the present with Luke—we wait for the nurse, "a Black drag queen named Stephanie"; sit in heavy silence with Bill; and listen to Steger direct and re-direct Ira Glass as he brings in various sound cues behind Steger. As Halberstam suggests, working with limited, queer time forces Steger to use sound creatively. Out of all the Acts in "New Beginnings," the third is

perhaps the most aesthetically queer. Although the entire episode deals in queer time, Steger's story deals in queer *glitches*. Within the first minute of the segment, he interrupts his own story to fix the recording equipment:

LAWRENCE STEGER: Title. *Road*. Treatment. It's shot entirely on video, mostly handheld. Shaky, out of focus, bad color. Overblown color actually. Sort of the way colors are separated on an old television console, yet still has all the outlines of the images repeated. The outlines of the images, the silhouettes, repeated over and over, ad nauseam, and fading into each other. [aside to Glass] Can I get this microphone adjusted a little, so I don't have to lean over so much?

IRA GLASS: Yeah, sure. Just pull that.

LAWRENCE STEGER: [aside to Glass] Check one, two, three. Sound better? Yeah. Sorry. Thanks. (New Beginnings)

This stop-and-go, jilted style persists for the entire act: At one point, Steger asks Glass to bring in a recording of Harrison Ford from *Blade Runner*, then quickly tells him, "This isn't the right section of *Blade Runner*. Can you just kill the *Blade Runner*?" (New Beginnings). *Blade Runner* ends, just as quickly as it began. The sound fades from memory. This form not only exposes Steger's creative process to the audience—his changed mind, his collaboration with Glass—but it also reveals the technology behind the sound—the sound board, the dials and knobs that bring a sound in or out of our field of hearing. Listening to the description in this scene, we also find visual glitches, not just glitches in the creative process. The scene "has all the outlines of the images repeated,"

and the camera work is shaky (*New Beginnings*). The mix of technological and vocalized “glitches” keep us entirely in the present moment; they are disruptive, uncomfortable, and suggest that this is Steger’s first time reading the story aloud to Glass. Where we might have expected a polished story about an AIDS diagnosis, Steger instead presents us with a rough and bumpy meditation on the moment when a person’s future disappears, when there is no more time to go back and edit.

In addition to disorienting the listener, Steger’s glitches resist airtime—the literal time it takes to play his segment over the radio. As Freeman proposes, chrononormativity dictates that actions, stories, or moments in the present must produce for the future. On the radio, likewise, time is strictly regulated; when airtime is limited and commodified, meditation and mistakes become expensive and wasteful. Although earlier radio programs allowed longer-form storytelling, producer Sandy Tolan writes, “it’s hard to get a piece longer than six minutes on *ATC* or *Morning Edition*, and the consequences for long-form storytelling are real” because “shorter formats mean fewer scenes, less use of telling or ‘metaphorical’ sound, not as much character development, and therefore less nuance and complexity” (Tolan 202). By this standard, Steger wastes valuable airtime cuing and un-cuing sound bites, all of which add minutes, but not traditional aesthetic value, to the story. In this sense, Steger engages in a kind of glitchy resistance—a pushing back against restraints that chrononormative standards level on the body. Andie Shabbar likewise argues that “as a form of protest ... glitch witnesses and testifies to the slippages, cracks, and fissures of control, surveillance, and technology to reformat error as an act of resistance” (Shabbar 197). This protest disrupts gender binaries, as well

“biometric recognition technologies”—TSA X-ray scanners, for example—which “aim to fix the body within rigid identity categories” (Shabbar 198).<sup>7</sup> Likewise, in *Glitch Feminism*, Legacy Russell defines glitch as “an error, a mistake, a failure to function ... an indicator of something having gone wrong” (Russell 7). A body that reaches beyond gendered confines—“a body that pushes back at the application of pronouns, or remains indecipherable within binary assignment”—is a glitched body, and “this glitch is a form of refusal” (Russell 8). Technical glitches such as CD scratches, audio pops, and image pixilation expose the technologies that constrict our bodies and movement by capitalizing on their faults. Andrew Brooks argues that the electronic “detritus” that emerges from failed technology exposes and parallels queer failure of social expectation (Brooks 38). Far from separating the artist from the audience, glitch aesthetics uncover the technological medium and reveal the human behind it. When viewed in a queer context, glitches break down the material, gendered barriers between people. Although Steger’s glitches don’t arise from technological failings, his refusal to stick within a tidy time frame adds the “nuance and complexity” that Tolan misses from longer radio segments; his discomfort becomes our discomfort. Thus, Steger’s work opposes not only restrictive airtime, but also restrictive chronobiopolitics.

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<sup>7</sup> Shabbar’s article discusses her recent artwork *Queer-Alt-Delete*. For the project, she deleted lines of code from portrait image files, replaced those lines with the word “Queer,” and converted the code back into an image. The result is a glitched and unrecognizable image. As Shabbar argues, “the project performs protest of surveillance by glitching images of the self in order to question one’s attachment to identity. In doing so, it asks the artist or creator to both acknowledge and illustrate their socially situated, embedded, and embodied context in relation to sexual surveillance” (Shabbar 202-203).

Glitches play a similar role to camp aesthetics—the unnatural or artificial—in that they bind the listener to the artist.<sup>8</sup> Steger’s miscues emphasize the lack of editing, or his failure to utilize recording technology to produce an aesthetically “perfect” radio segment. Here, unnatural could also mean unedited, as a “natural”-sounding radio segment is in fact highly produced, whereas an “unnatural” segment like Steger’s requires very little post-production. I have already discussed how recorded voice transmits not only affect, but also body through sound. Here, I add that glitches bridge the gap between the podcaster and the listener by exposing the technological medium and the artist’s process. In Sontag’s “Notes on Camp,” she explains that camp denotes queer community: “Camp is esoteric—something of a private code, a badge of identity even, among small urban cliques” (Notes on Camp). Camp identifies a person as one of a protected or limited group. As a “private code,” it has the potential to lift the veil of anonymity between people who can decode camp’s messages. Drawing further on the “badge of identity” in campy objects, Madalyn Detloff writes that camp is “a queer form of dramatic irony that creates an insider group which is *in the know* (and thus is in a position to appreciate the sublime, bitchy critique leveled by camp) and an outsider group which is *not in the know* and often the target of camp’s barbed wit” (Detloff 18, *her emphasis*). Considering both these positions, we can read glitch aesthetics as creating an irony between the listener and the sound artist: Steger incorporates his creative process—

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<sup>8</sup> The lapse between mechanical and human bodies in podcasts—our “getting to know” a character in a technologically mediated space through their voice—recalls Donna Haraway’s work on cyborgs; she writes that “cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves” (Haraway 116). Like Russell, Haraway suggests that cyborgs (“glitches” in the man/machine binary) may lead us to a utopic, genderless future.

his edits and re-takes—into the final artwork instead of hiding it from the listener’s ears. The unedited version *is* the final product, not simply a step toward it. As for creating the insider/outsider groups that Detloff identifies in camp aesthetics, Steger’s glitches speak to those people who feel constrained by chrononormativity, for whom time moves too quickly, for whom editing isn’t feasible. Thus, community between the listener and artist is not only created *through* technology-mediated experience but also created *despite* technology—through the irony that the glitch is the part of the medium that makes connection possible.

The final glitch in Steger’s story is a leap back to Act 1. In the last scene of Act 3, Ira Glass steps in to re-remind us of Kevin Kelly’s story, the source material for Steger’s. Steger narrates the beginning of Luke’s road trip with his friend Bill, hours after Luke receives his diagnosis. As they drive onto the highway, a “voice comes up on a car radio” (New Beginnings). At this point, we hear a segment from Kelly’s act, and we can imagine Luke and Bill are listening to his segment over the radio: “It’s not actually a very good thing to live entirely in the present,” Kelly says. “One needs to have a past” (New Beginnings). Kelly’s tape ends, and “Luke sees a hitchhiker with a sign that he stands [sic.] for any remote meaning of the narrative. Luke sees himself outside of his own story. He can’t read the hitchhiker’s sign” (New Beginnings). Again, we can imagine that Kelly is the hitchhiker, making his way across the United States in what he assumes are his last six months alive. The stories bleed together: Kelly is both the hitchhiker and the voice on the radio; Steger is both the narrator and Luke. The radio allows their voices and, by extension, their bodies to comingle in one seamless act: Time “glitches,” and the



past leaks into the present. This moment recalls Russell's claim that the digital "encourages us to challenge the world around us, and, through this constant redressing and challenging, change the world as we know it, prompting the creation of entirely new worlds altogether" (Russell 69). In the case of *This American Life*, creating these "new worlds" involves layering multiple temporalities across one another, placing them in conversation with each other as well as with a contemporary audience who discovers the radio's online archive. This form gets at the essence of these early episodes, which were written as collages of interviews with little narration to interrupt them.

*This American Life*'s structure necessarily places the stories, interviews, and artistic pieces in conversation with each other, creating a call-and-response between acts, pulling the extraordinary from the quotidian, and ultimately reaching for utopia—a place that can't exist anywhere else. The call-backs between Kelly and Steger's acts in "New Beginnings" weave the stories together, creating a holistic, time-crossed episode. Glass introduces the concept for the show as not only cross-temporal, but also as presenting the extraordinary in the everyday:

IRA GLASS: OK, the idea of this show, this new little show, is stories, some by journalists and documentary producers, like myself, some just regular people telling their own little stories, some by artists, and writers, and performers of all different kinds. And the idea is we're going to bring you stuff you're not going to find anywhere else. And there is also going to be music. (New Beginnings)

Glass's description begins humbly: *This American life* is a "new little show," caught up in the quotidian—"just regular people telling their own little stories." However, in the same breath, Glass introduces the extraordinary: "Stuff you're not going to find anywhere else."

This turn from the mundane to the exceptional recalls Muñoz's claim that "utopia exists in the quotidian" and that utopic projects "detect an opening and indeterminacy in what for many people is a locked-down commodity" (*Cruising* 9). In other words, from its conception, *This American Life* has strived for "the utopian function" or "a certain surplus in the work that promises a futurity, something that is not quite here" (*Cruising* 7).<sup>9</sup> Even the episode's title and theme, "New Beginnings," suggests future while also referencing the past: *New* implies that there has been an *old*, a place to leave and build from; *beginnings*, on the other hand, suggests that the single episode contains multitudes, "a certain surplus." Part of the show's utopic project comes from the close yet impossible relationship between Glass and his listener: From the beginning of "New Beginnings," Glass creates a personal connection to his audience, calling us "you," referring to "myself," encouraging audience response to the stories in the program. Today, listeners who venture into these archival episodes also join the "regular people" featured on *This American Life*; we are them, while also learning about them. Thus, Glass fosters a conversation that started more than 25 years ago. We answer, desiring a response that we

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<sup>9</sup> Muñoz also cites Frank O'Hara's "Having a Coke with You" as a poem of quotidian surplus, one that "signifies a vast lifeworld of queer relationality, an encrypted sociality, and a utopian potentiality. . . . Though the poem is clearly about the present, it is a present that is now squarely the past and in its queer relationality promises a future" (*Cruising* 6).

know we'll never hear. "We're going on a journey in sound," Glass implies. "Come join us."

In Part I, I launched us on a journey in queer sound and presented the basis for my analysis of *S-Town*. Namely, we've discovered that podcasts transmit both affect and body, that they create at once ephemeral and permanent archives. By using "New Beginnings" as a case study for glitch aesthetics, I've also presented a short model for reading podcasts as texts. Although Part II moves away from the glitchy '90s episodes of *This American Life* and into the highly polished, more contemporary world of *S-Town*, we will continue to extend these queer aesthetics and more rigorously inspect failure, ephemerality, archive, and desire in sound.

## PART II

### ***“This is going to sound like a ridiculous question, but is there a gay scene down here?”: S-Town and the Queer Aesthetics of Podcasting***

When I arrive in Woodstock in July 2021, I join a legion of people who have already made their “pilgrimage”—the locals’ word for the journey to the town from places as far away as Australia (O’Neill). Some come out of curiosity, some (like me) for research, others because they identify with John B. McLemore—they knew someone like John or *they* are like John, an outsider. Some have lost a loved one to suicide. All of us come expecting Shittown (John’s colorful name for his hometown). What we find instead is Woodstock, a small town 45 minutes southwest from Birmingham. One phrase I hear from one of John’s friends, Cheryl Dodson, is that people feel like they’re walking into a story. I hear myself saying this too, into my microphone, as I walk around John’s grave. As I drive through Woodstock and the towns surrounding it, I’m not surprised by what I see, but the scenery surprises me. Some places feel familiar, like déjà vu—John’s grave, for example, or the sign for K3 Lumber, which Brian points out in Chapter I of *S-Town*. Other places seem to appear unexpectedly, disconnected from the image of Shittown that I’ve created—the invasive species of vine that coats almost every tree in the area, or the roads that weave between Woodstock’s neighboring towns. I don’t expect these parts of Woodstock, but they don’t feel out of place, either. In the week that I spend here, my

image of the town doesn't radically shift, nor does my image of John change all that much. Instead, I make the turn toward knowing them better.

In 2012, John B. McLemore emailed *This American Life* and told them about a murder in his hometown. "I would hope you have the facilities to investigate," he writes (Chapter I). The email makes its way to Brian Reed, one of the producers on *This American Life*. Brian starts emailing John regularly, and eventually he decides to visit him in Woodstock. What starts as a murder investigation soon turns into a story about John B. McLemore after Brian uncovers that the murder John described never happened. *S-Town*'s creators condense the story and hint at its detour:

John despises his Alabama town and decides to do something about it. He asks a reporter to investigate the son of a wealthy family who's allegedly been bragging that he got away with murder. But then someone else ends up dead, sparking a nasty feud, a hunt for hidden treasure, and an unearthing of the mysteries of one man's life. (*S-Town*)

This description packages up the seven-part story in a digestible, elevator pitch style, one that makes a story full of narrative detours and failures into something the general public would want to listen to. In fact, we did want to listen to it—in the first week of its release, fans downloaded *S-Town* sixteen million times, making it the most popular podcasts ever produced (Hess). This description leaves out a few key details—namely, that John died by suicide in 2015 after he drank cyanide, which Brian reveals at the end of Chapter II. But even in this short description, we find the narrative failures that, I argue, make *S-Town* queer—it begins with a murder investigation (per *Serial*), but quickly detours into

“the mysteries of one man’s life” (per *This American Life*). These detours mean that *S-Town* leaves gaps in the story. There are many reasons that people make the pilgrimage to Woodstock, but one of them is that its fans want more—to fill in the spaces that Brian leaves out, to walk into the story and let it become real.<sup>10</sup> Further, the shift from investigating “the son of a wealthy family” to “the mysteries of one man’s life” is a turn toward John. Although Brian already knew the podcast would focus on John before he died, his suicide sends Brian on a deep exploration of his finances, sexuality, and friendships—all “mysteries” now that John can’t answer Brian’s questions directly. As I suggest in this section, the podcast extends John’s voice beyond his life, allowing him to persist (to a degree) in the podcast.

One of the questions I want to raise in this section (indeed, the question that led me to this thesis) is how *S-Town* engages with queer aesthetics, despite being one of the most popular podcasts ever produced. We might expect a podcast geared at mainstream audiences to shy away from sex, sexuality, and queerness, but the podcast devotes ample time not only to John’s sex life, but also to his tattoos and nipple rings, all of which gestures toward John’s possible involvement in kink culture and sadomasochist rituals. The sixth episode, which focuses almost exclusively on John’s love life and sexuality, is subtitled, “Since everyone around here thinks I’m a queer anyway” (John qtd. in Chapter

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<sup>10</sup> Although *S-Town* is based in real life, I want to be clear that I am writing about the podcast as a piece of artistic literature, rather than a piece journalistic writing. As such, my thesis analyzes the people and hosts of podcasts as constructed characters who are related, but not identical, to the real people they represent. This framework is especially important when considering Brian Reed, the host of *S-Town*. Although we only hear Brian’s voice as the storyteller in *S-Town*, there is an entire team of writers, editors, and journalists put the show together. Much like the relationship between the poet and the poetic speaker, the relationship between Reed, the journalist, and Brian, the host, is not one-to-one. For this reason, I refer to Brian by his first name in the context of the podcast.

VI). John says this quote offhandedly, and it underscores his difference from the rest of Woodstock—the degree to which his neighbors perceive him as “queer.” Considering queer’s original meaning as “strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric,” or even “of questionable character; suspicious, dubious,” John McLemore seems to embody *queerness*, from his obsession with antique clocks, to his tirades launched against neighbors, governments, and friends (“queer,” *OED*).

Still, it is possible to view *S-Town* as a spectacle, with John’s suicide, paranoia, and failures paraded before us. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag grapples with the audience’s role in consuming another person’s suffering: “There is the satisfaction of being able to look at the image without flinching” she writes. “There is the pleasure of flinching” (41). This claim echoes in Michael Booth’s criticism of *S-Town*, that the series “offers up the voice and life experiences of a queer man [John McLemore] as an object to be consumed, digested, and appropriated” (Booth 283). Historically, Sontag points out, images of “grievously injured bodies” broadcast over the TV or printed in newspapers come from “exotic” places (*Regarding* 72). Moreover, “this journalistic custom inherits the centuries-old practice of exhibiting exotic—that is, colonized—human beings” in “ethnological exhibitions” from the 16<sup>th</sup> through the 20<sup>th</sup> century (*Regarding* 72). Although *S-Town* does not present the South as a *colonized* landscape, Michael Bibler proposes that the narrative laid out for us is one of an outsider entering and interpreting a foreign—one might say exotic—community. After talking to John for months over the phone and via email, Brian says,

BRIAN REED: It felt as if, by sheer force of will, John was opening this portal between us and calling out through it, calling from his world, a world of—

JOHN MCLEMORE: Proleptic decay and decrepitude.

BRIAN REED: So eventually, I decide I'll come check it out. (Chapter I)

Brian assigns himself the role of demystifying Woodstock and, by extension, the South. By comparing Woodstock to a portal, he suggests that a fundamental breakdown of physics—mediated by John—is necessary for him to understand a place that is only a short plane ride away. Here, the South is not only a different geographic space, but also a sort of alien landscape.<sup>11</sup>

While *S-Town* certainly has its drawbacks, I suggest that it does more to connect us to John than to alienate us from him. As Lauren Berlant argues in “Compassion and Withholding,” at best, “to feel compassion for people who struggle or fail is ... to take the first step toward forging a personal relation to a politics of the practice of equality” (Berlant 9). If *S-Town* were only meant to illicit compassion from its audience, it might bring out the desire in the spectator to “turn away quickly and harshly” (Berlant 9). However, *S-Town*’s goals go beyond compassion, reaching for understanding of and, ultimately, identification with John. The show embraces John’s outsider status, or deviance; when Brian talks to John’s clockmaking friends over the phone in Chapter IV, he says, “one friend told me how his coworkers would tell him not to talk to John so much because he was a weirdo. And another told me, people think I'm weird, like John

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<sup>11</sup> For popular sources concerning *S-Town*’s ethics, see Alcorn (“*S-Town* never justifies its voyeurism, and that makes it morally indefensible”), Goudeau (“Was the art of *S-Town* worth the pain?”), and Stevens (“*S-Town*’s’ treatment of its main character was riveting. But was it unlawful?”).



B,” recalling other pilgrims’ identification with John, as well as the show’s commitment to narrative queerness (Chapter IV). Heather Love connects deviance to queerness, as “deviance studies persists within queer studies as its all but avowed precursor, the repository of both its most stubborn faults and its utopian potential” (*Underdogs* 17). According to Love, queer theory and, by extension, queer art often deals in the negative, backward, and “immoral.” Along these lines, in this project, I embrace *S-Town*’s ethical messiness, its narrative failures, and its pessimistic turns.

*S-Town* is driven by “the queer art of failure,” a phrase Jack Halberstam coined to refer to queer people’s dis-junction from social and capitalist expectations (*Failure* 87). In this section, I argue that the show adopts the *aesthetics* of failure on a narrative level: The original task that John gives Brian—to expose a murder in the town over from Woodstock—not only crumbles with the discovery that there never was a murder in the first place, but also launches us on an entirely different quest for gold (one that, I may point out, the series also never answers concretely). The show presents John’s pessimism as the reason for its narrative failures—namely, through his tirades, his profanity, and, ultimately, his failure to leave Shittown, all of which oppose the podcast’s forward progression. Moving beyond the scope of the podcast, I discuss the real queer circulations in the rural South and Midwest, whereby queer people build *virtual*, as opposed to physically proximate, communities; to maintain these communities, rural queer people either stay put or continually leave and return to their homes. Constituting another type of failure, these circulations oppose the dominant narrative that queer people want to leave their small, “backward” towns and move to urban centers. By focusing on a “semi-

homosexual” man who chooses to stay in his small Alabama town, *S-Town* resists this narrative and adds nuance to representations of queer southerners (Chapter III).

For the second half of Part II, I read *S-Town* as continually circling back to John B. McLemore. The podcast builds a memorial for John, one that resists heteronormative mourning practices and creates a living archive for him. Likewise, *S-Town* adheres to the queer memorial practice of emphasizing John’s body by conflating the journalistic body of work, the clock body, and the human body. The show presents all of these subjects as measuring multiple timeframes: Narrative clues impress history onto the journalistic body of work, witness marks impress onto the clock body, and tattoos and sadomasochist practices impress onto the human body. Through this conflation, *S-Town* constructs a digital podcast body for John McLemore, one that is reflected in yet separate from his physical body. Along these lines, I return to *podcast time*, a theory I introduced in Part I, and argue that the *S-Town* creates an ephemeral yet endlessly re-listenable space in which we love the constructed version John and want to know him better. As desire is “directed to the attainment or possession” of something, the podcast becomes a queer utopia in which we desire the John who has passed away (“desire,” *OED*). This desire is not sexual, but rather driven by love for a person who we can never meet.

### ***From Failed Aesthetics to Aesthetics of Failure***

Halberstam identifies the “queer art of failure” in opposition to capitalist and heteronormative models of success—modes that include maturity, wealth accumulation, legacy, and inheritance (*Failure* 87). Failure embraces “the wonderful anarchy of

childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children, winners and losers” (*Failure* 3). Like queer time, queer failure encourages its practitioners to question the expected timeline from childhood to adulthood, marriage, and death. *Queer* and *failure* go hand-in-hand<sup>12</sup> because, as Halberstam points, out,

Heteronormative common sense leads to the equation of success with advancement, capital accumulation, family, ethical conduct, and hope. Other subordinate, queer, or counter-hegemonic modes of common sense lead to the association of failure with nonconformity, anticapitalist practices, nonreproductive life styles, negativity, and critique. (*Failure* 89)

Halberstam identifies queer failure not only in queer art, but also in mainstream media—from pre-stonewall photographs and butch lesbians to children’s films like *Babe* and *Finding Nemo*. Like the glitches we discovered in Part I, queer failure “recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed, failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its undeterminate [sic.] qualities” (*Failure* 88). Failure need not tackle hegemonic structures from the outside, but rather exploit the kinks in the wires. When we download a computer virus, it “transforms [the machine] into one that cannot perform, that quite literally *cannot work, forgets how to work, works against its function*. It challenges the endemic

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<sup>12</sup> *Queer* and *failure* need not always go together. James Morrison draws on queer aesthetics of failure to evaluate James Franco’s career: “Though publicly identifying as straight, he declared in one widely circulated interview, ‘I’m gay in my work.’ The distinctly contemporary aesthetic that Franco’s career articulates is characterized in its refusals of stable definition and its challenges to traditional notions of artistic quality, expressing a fascination with ‘failure’ that takes on explicitly queer ramifications” (Morrison 575). While refusing a queer personal identity, Franco adopts queer aesthetics for his public and fictional personas, namely through unstable identities.

correlation between value and labor, dangerous in its uselessness” (Russell 111, *her emphasis*). Thus, recalling Freeman’s evaluation of productive chrononormativity, the failure that generates uselessness or misuse—the time waster—threatens history’s forward march. Aesthetics of failure, like glitches, slow time in the body of work, preferring instead to ruminate, re-do, and skip.

It’s important to note that Halberstam also identifies an *unqueer* failure. In the Scottish punk novel *Trainspotting*, he says, the white male lead rages against heteronormative and capitalist ideals—namely, the pressure to marry, reproduce, and amass capital. The rage he cultivates “finds its echo in recent queer theory that associates negativity with queerness itself”—in Lee Edelman’s *No Future*, for example (*Failure* 91). Nevertheless,

Without an elaborate vision of alternate modes, the novel collapses into the angry and seething language of the male punk from whom a legacy of patriarchal and racial privilege has been withheld. In this example of unqueer failure, failure is the rage of the excluded white male, a rage that promises and delivers punishments for women and people of color. (*Failure* 92)

In this sense, *queer* failure must keep a utopian future in sight—a future built off of undoing the institutions that oppress and exclude queer people, people of color, women, indigenous peoples, disabled folks, and other marginalized groups. While queer failure need not produce this utopia on its own, the practice must work to uplift rather than oppress.

John's pessimism points to systemic failures and embraces failed emotions (e.g., negativity, resentment, denial), at once uplifting his community and resisting the linear progress narrative. It seems obvious to say that John's pessimism and failure is unproductive—that his tirades and rants serve no purpose other than to annoy, and often offend, his neighbors and the occasional national radio producer. Like the main character in *Trainspotting*, John often targets women and poor folks, especially the people who live in the South 40 trailer park near his property. Yet, we also find John directing his blame at the “proleptic decay and decrepitude” in his town, county, state, and country—a rant against the system that built the South 40 trailer park, rather than the people who live there (Chapter I). In one tirade, he aims his volleys at no one in particular, but rather on the United States as a culture:

JOHN MCLEMORE: We ain't nothing but a nation of goddamn, chicken-shit, horse-shit, tattletale, pissy-ass, whiny, fat, flabby, out of shape Facebook looking damn twerp-fest, peaking out the windows and slipping around, listening in on the cell phones and spying in the peephole and peeping in the crack of the goddamned door, and listening in the fucking sheet rock. You know, Mr. Putin, please, show some fucking mercy. I mean, come on, drop a fucking bomb, won't you?

[SIGH] I gotta have some tea. (Chapter V)

This rant targets the culture that built “resignation, the numb acceptance that we can't change things” (Chapter II). John's anger fuels multiple projects in the form of mentorship—from helping his young neighbor Michael Fuller land back on his feet, to

paying Tyler Goodson to tattoo his entire chest and back in a veiled move to cover Tyler's rent at the tattoo shop. While John's pessimistic outlook alone does not constitute queer failure, his tirades are not entirely unqueer failure, either.

John's pessimism constitutes a failed affect, a negativity so intense that it paralyzes the progress narrative. In *Feeling Backward*, Heather Love frames negativity as a core queer affect, a "backward turn" (5). This category also includes "nostalgia, regret, shame, despair, *ressentiment*, passivity, escapism, self-hatred, withdrawal, bitterness, defeatism, and loneliness. These feelings are tied to the experience of social exclusion and to the historical 'impossibility' of same-sex desire" (*Feeling Backward* 4, *her emphasis*). John's resentment for Woodstock extends to his experiences as a "semi-homosexual, semi-practicing homosexual, or celibate homosexual" (Chapter III). In one of his emails to Brian, John writes that being queer "could get you killed around here [in Woodstock]" (Chapter III). By emphasizing not only his suffering, but also general queer suffering in his area, John resists "the temptation to forget—to forget the outrages and humiliations of gay and lesbian history and to ignore the ongoing suffering of those not borne up by the rising tide of gay normalization" fueled in part by the U.S. Supreme Court's decision to uphold same-sex marriage in 2015 (*Feeling Backward* 10). Instead, Love insists that we remember "ruined identities and histories of injury," or queer histories that resist the progress narrative (*Feeling Backward* 30). By focusing on John, *S-Town* remembers one of these histories.

Rather than shying away from John's pessimism, *S-Town* gives his voice ample airtime to rant, blame, and reject. John's pessimism slows the show's forward progress,

its march toward a clean story; in short, *S-Town* tells us that John is the reason for its narrative failures. John insists that Brian's work on the murder case is "definitely not saving the world" (Chapter II). Indeed, while Brian swears that his investigation spells "progress, right?" John redirects the show's tone toward persistent failure (Chapter II). When Brian discovers that there never was a murder, he calls John to tell him what he views as good news:

BRIAN REED [*narrating*]: I'm excited to tell John what I figured out, finally, after all this time. I now narrate the story of the real crime back to him, almost a year and a half after he first told me about it, with details colored in and facts illuminated, including the rather germane one that Kabrahm did not kill anybody. After I'm done, John summarizes my findings.

JOHN MCLEMORE: A bunch of fussing and fighting, snaggletooth, stolen trucks, meth labs, stabbing, hooping, hollering, and going to jail? I can't believe how much you've worked on this son of a bitch, and at the same time—

[SIGH]

My God.

BRIAN REED: [*in conversation*] What? Why the sigh?

JOHN MCLEMORE: I'm sitting here looking out the window at the clouds going by, just in loathing disgust at the town that I live in and the fact that I didn't pack my bags and get the hell out of here decades ago. (Chapter II)

John's insistence that his town hasn't changed—his persistent “loathing disgust”—reverses narrative expectations, aligning with Elizabeth Freeman's anti-progress temporalities that I discussed in Part I. John is the computer virus in *S-Town*, the line of code that undoes Brian's progress, the endless loop in the machine. Similarly, scholar Monique Rooney writes that John's insistence “challenges the idea that telling about ‘what happened’ somehow moves us forward” (Rooney 162). Rooney's analysis comments on the stagnancy that underscores all of *S-Town*. Instead of moving us forward—as chrononormative narrative and social structures would have us believe—the process of retelling John's story or of uncovering a murder mystery keeps us in the same place. That is, while we might expect the year-long investigation and its findings to close the narrative, we instead find John right where he began: standing in his kitchen, complaining to Brian about Shittown. Like the broken record, John's insistence that Brian's work is useless keeps us rooted in place.

### ***Circularity, or the Queer Art of Returning***

Our return to John's resentment for Shittown not only reflects *S-Town*'s narrative failures, but also John's continued return to his childhood home—a return in time and place. This “failure” recalls the history of queer folks who chose to stay in (or were unable to leave) the rural South and Midwest during what Kath Weston coins the “great Gay Migration of the 1970s and early 1980s,” which “witnessed an influx of tens of thousands of lesbians and gay men (as well as individuals bent upon ‘exploring’ their sexuality) into major urban areas across the United States” (Weston 32). Those who left



their rural hometowns “launched themselves upon a quest for [imagined] community,” implying that those left behind felt overwhelmingly isolated (Weston 34). While Weston acknowledges that “membership in the imagined community is interpretively constructed” and therefore not limited to urban areas, she also cites the benefits to becoming urban: “More than an illusion, the imagined community threads its way through social structures and everyday experience, even as it depends upon conditions ‘on the ground’ for its social purpose” (Weston 35). Thus, Weston opens the possibility for rural queer communities while also emphasizing queer people’s need for exodus from rural areas.

Mainstream, heteronormative narratives view the remaining population as a group of failed “returners,” people who rejected or were not able to access the idealized urban queerness. One example of this idealization comes from Michael Warner’s brief aside in *The Trouble with Normal*, which negates queerness outside of urban centers: “The sexual culture of New York City serves people around the world, even if only as the distant reference point of queer kids growing up in North Carolina or Idaho, who know that *somewhere* things are different” (Warner 190, *his emphasis*). Warner’s examples of these “distant” places—North Carolina and Idaho—invoke the Southern, rural, and midland geography that supposedly constructs anti-queer space. Moreover, Warner contrasts New York’s “somewhere” with these states’ assumed “nowhere,” suggesting that rural queerness doesn’t or shouldn’t exist in the first place. In this example, this type of rural queerness embodies the undesirable, the place queer people wish to leave. A person who

chooses to stay in Idaho or North Carolina, or who leaves only to return later, has failed—failed to escape the “backward” small town, failed to be queer.

Although Weston leaves open the space for rural queerness in her “Great Gay migration,” her focus on the unidirectional and linear movement from rural to urban constricts our understanding of queer migration and movement. More abstractly, Sara Ahmed points out the link between heterosexuality and “the requirement to follow a straight line;” same-sex desire, on the other hand, “reaches objects that are not continuous with the line of normal sexual subjectivity” (*Phenomenology* 70, 71). Queerness bends, returns, and moves between; it reaches for objects and places that we don’t expect. Even if the Great Gay Migration is a statistical fact, its stress on linear movement in both queer and non-queer discourse glosses over the experiences of people who chose to stay, return, or go elsewhere. Halberstam calls this emphasis “metronormativity,” which “reveals the conflation of ‘urban’ and ‘visible’ in many normalizing narratives of gay/lesbian subjectivities. Such narratives tell of closeted subjects who ‘come out’ into an urban setting, which in turn, supposedly allows for the full expression of the sexual self in relation to a community of other gays/lesbians/queers” (*Time & Place* 36). In short, “the metronormative narrative maps a story of migration onto the coming-out narrative” (*Time & Place* 36). This narrative necessarily limits our understanding of rural queer movements and communities.

On a more concrete level, rural queer scholars point to pervasive and harmful beliefs that coincide with metronormativity. In his book *Just Queer Folks*, Colin Johnson contradicts Weston’s claims, identifying the urban “escape” as a myth

perpetuated in both heterosexual and queer circles: “I am aware of no discernible evidence,” he writes, “to suggest that people who identified as lesbian or gay, or people who eventually went on to identify as lesbian or gay, migrated from the country to the city any more frequently over the course of the twentieth century than people who did not” (Johnson 110).<sup>13</sup> True or not, the Great Gay Migration certainly affects notions of success and failure both within and outside the queer community, to the point where “is virtually impossible to imagine what life might have been like for those who stayed behind, either because they had to or because they *wanted* to. We can imagine that it was horribly oppressive; that much is easy. But beyond that, we find ourselves at a loss” (Johnson 110). Johnson’s point is not to erase the history of persecution against LGBTQ people in rural areas, but rather to advocate for further rural queer studies and to question the belief that “urban equals safe” and “rural equals unsafe.” Without this nuance, the queer people who choose rural life and “appear to find value in ways of being or forms of life that strike us as isolating, hopeless, or sad—we tend to characterize these people as ignorant or irrational, tragic or stuck” (Johnson 111). Scott Herring takes this critique of queer theory a step further, declaring that, in historical and contemporary examples of queer urbanism, “the rural becomes a slur, one that has proliferated into an admittedly

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<sup>13</sup> Johnson further argues against the association between heterosexuality and rural spaces in the United States. Instead, he presents a queering of rural areas through the study of early twentieth-century rural genders and sexualities, concluding that, “heteronormativity is no more indigenous to rural areas and small towns than it is to American culture as whole. Instead, [he argues] that heterosexuality had to be constructed in nonmetropolitan America in much the same way that it has to be constructed everywhere else” (Johnson 18). That is to say, queerness has existed—and continues to exist—in the rural South, though it may look and feel different than the queerness we imagine in New York or San Francisco. Although this statement seems obvious, the scholars I engage with in this section have sometimes struggled to make sure that this assertion is not only known but believed.

rich idiom. Suffice it to say that if recent strains of queer theory and recent forms of lgbtq politics (latent and manifest) share common ground, it's usually a dismissal of rurality as such, a dismissal not only commonplace but, let's bet the farm on it, chronic" (Herring 5). Herring and Johnson's frustration with the escape myth extends not only to other scholars' work, but to the larger negative implications of being a rural queer person. These "failed" queer people represent a population continually pitied, forgotten, or erased.

John B. McLemore—who is rural, queer, and poor—embodies the "ignorant or irrational, tragic or stuck" figure, a person typically forgotten, yet memorialized through *S-Town*. Brian relays that John briefly left Woodstock to attend college at Birmingham Southern College in the 1980s, all while continuing to live in his parents' house for financial reasons. His daily movement between Birmingham and Woodstock epitomizes circularity, defined as stasis through continual movement, or movement without perceived progress forward. At Birmingham Southern, "the student body was made up largely of children of professionals, doctors and lawyers. They were preppy. John was not" (Chapter IV). John's friend and former professor, Tom Moore, points to John's physical characteristics that marked him as an outsider, namely his "bushy red hair, unkempt, clothing from a different socio-economic background. He was clearly different" and barely made friends with his peers (Chapter IV). When describing John's time at Birmingham Southern, Brian dwells on John's daily drive home—his circularity from Woodstock to Birmingham and back again—as not only a return to his hometown, but also to adolescence: "Every night he drove back to his parents' house, back to his

childhood bedroom, back to Bibb County” (Chapter IV). John’s return to his childhood bedroom represents not only his failure to “escape” Woodstock, but his failure to step “in time” with his peers, as he embodies someone either much older (e.g., by befriending his professor) or much young than himself (e.g., by living in his childhood bedroom). Brian describes John’s property as a place that “feels like it’s of another time”—something from the Civil War (Chapter I). Literally, too, “John doesn’t follow daylight savings, so his property is on a different time zone separate from the world around it” (Chapter I). This emphasis on John’s disjunction from standard time brings up another aspect of John’s “failure” by heteronormative standards: As Love argues, “homosexuality is often seen as a result of a failure of maturation or a failure to overcome primary cathexes, and it has been associated with narcissism and infantilism as well as with incomplete or failed gendering” (*Feeling Backward* 21-22). In all, *S-Town*’s description of John’s time at Birmingham Southern implies that he lived “out of time” from the rest of the world, including other queer Southerners who chose to leave Bibb County.

Still, the spaces that John moves through during his college years (his childhood home, the open road, his college) are also spaces of queer possibility in the rural south. In *Men Like That*,<sup>14</sup> John Howard identifies the childhood home, school, church, and college as queer spaces, and roads as sites of queer movement, all ripe with sexual exploits and exploration, all “constantly in flux” (Howard 101). Open roads “both served as avenues and venues, as arenas of circulation and congregation. Moreover, cars and roads

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<sup>14</sup> For more work on queer identities in the South, see Sears, James. *Growing up Gay in the South: Race, Gender, and Journeys of the Spirit*. The Haworth Press, 1991.

participated in synergistic processes of social, cultural, political, and economic development, crucial in the formation and reformation of desire and difference” (Howard 101). Likewise, queer people do not discover queer spaces, so much as they create and re-create them over generations: “Homosex altered sites. ... [Men’s] imprints and gestures, their movements and actions, modified particular places, contributed to the ongoing evolution of the built environment” (Howard 35). Creating a queer space or community requires returning to a previously constructed place—to reify, to reshape over time, to circulate. Moreover, circularity generates these queer safe spaces (read: utopias) through movement, as “utopia and dystopia are not mere physical spaces but fleeting moments—stopovers or way stations amid the seemingly contradictory ideas of movement and nonmovement” (Manalansan et. al. 5). Creating these fleeting utopias requires stasis and movement—a moving away and moving back, of moving into the future and back to the past at one time, of moving queerly within the same town, county, state, or time period—of finding queer space, letting it go, and digging it up again.

More concretely, queer people in the rural Midwest and South—particularly white gay men—have historically built queer networks for themselves through virtual communication and circular movement. Nicholas Syrett discusses the queer, white, upper-class networks between Midwestern men in the Midcentury, focusing on how these men “lived queerly” through circular (as opposed to linear) travel between rural and urban areas. Namely, these men traveled to nearby cities, towns, or villages on business trips, met with other queer men, and then returned to their rural homes. “Unlike the standard model of community formation,” Syrett writes, “they usually did so in the

absence of shared space or proximity sustained over the long haul. Indeed, it was precisely because many of them did *not* live near each other that this web of correspondents existed; it is, after all, usually unnecessary to write letters to those whom one sees regularly, those who live nearby” (Syrett 77-78). Thus, we find that circularity is a particularly rural phenomenon; it was these men’s decision to stay close to home that meant such a virtual network was necessary at all.

Likewise, we find queer spaces as virtual networks created between John and other clockmakers, as well as between the show and its listeners. In Chapter IV, Brian begins calling a list of close friends and contacts that John gave to Faye Gable, Woodstock’s town clerk at the time, just before he died. Most of the men on this list are antique clock enthusiasts (also called antiquarian horologists), like John, and are scattered across the United States, with a few living as far away as England. Although John’s network is not explicitly queer—none of the men Brian interviews self-identifies as queer on the show—their connection to John through hours-long conversations and their resulting intimacy parallel the connection found in Syrett’s queer virtual networks.<sup>15</sup> The calls between John and these other men follow a pattern of close homosocial relationships—both virtual and physical—in the podcast. These relationships include John’s friendship with Tyler Goodson and Michael Fuller—two men he mentored—as well as his budding friendship with Brian. In *Between Men*, Eve Sedgwick blurs the boundary between homosocial and homosexual desire, citing “the potential unbrokenness

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<sup>15</sup> Virtual queer networks also exist between gamers. See Taylor, Nicholas, and Shira Chess. “Not So Straight Shooters: Queering the Cyborg Body in Masculinized Gaming.” *Masculinities in Play*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 233–79.

of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual—a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted” (*Between Men 2*).<sup>16</sup> Even though none of John’s relationships are explicitly homosexual, we can read desire into them because of their intimacy.

Brian’s interviews with this network also recreate the late-night phone calls between John and his friends, implicating us in this renewed homosocial network:

BRIAN REED: The men talked to me for hours, without batting an eye, even if I'd just called them cold and informed them that their friend had committed suicide. Which at first I thought was pretty remarkable, but then it occurred to me that they were all friends of John B. McLemore's, which means you are predisposed to having long, rambling conversations on the phone. (Chapter IV)

John becomes a queer site—the person around whom we gather, who makes these “long, rambling” conversations feel natural. The podcast itself is a kind of long, rambling conversation—between John and Brian, between Brian and the listener. While most podcasts are released weekly, one episode at a time, *S-Town* was released as a form of audio literature, in chapters. This structure, more than seasonal or even episodic podcasts, encourages “re-reading”—or a continual return to the beginning of the story, a return to

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<sup>16</sup> In other virtual homosocial networks, “homophobic taunts and teasing serve to distinguish between the homosocial intimacy that operates within the fraternity from other, more sexual, forms of desire” (Williams et. al.). John’s insistence that “just because I say I love you don’t mean I’m trying to get up your butt or anything” serves the purpose of separating the homosocial from the homosexual desire in John and Tyler’s friendship (Tyler qtd. in Chapter III). As I’ll discuss in later sections, however, John and Tyler’s sadomasochist rituals *do* introduce homosexual desire to their otherwise platonic relationship.



John's voice. Thus, Brian not only engages with a queer network—he also invites us to join it.

Sedgwick's continuum between homosocial and heterosexual desire, as well as her theory on "reparative reading," further allows us to view the horologists' craft as queer.<sup>17</sup> To repair a centuries-old clock, an antiquarian horologist must piece together what is missing from the time piece, as well as uncover what every horologist has done before them; these practices align with the return to queer sites that we've already seen in Southern queer communities, as well as queer epistemologies. In academia, for example, Sedgwick defines this return as "reparative reading" (*Novel Gazing* 1). To Sedgwick, reparative reading "is the position from which it is possible ... to use one's own resources to assemble or 'repair' the murderous part-objects into something like a whole—though not, and may I emphasize this, *not necessarily like any preexisting whole*" (*Novel Gazing* 8, *her emphasis*). Reparative reading re-makes one's resources, knowledge, and history into something new. The new work "is available both to be identified with and to offer one nourishment and comfort in turn," recalling again those "imprints and gestures" that Howard argues "contributed to the ongoing evolution" of queer spaces; as Sedgwick points out, another name for the reparative process is "love" (*Novel Gazing* 8). In

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<sup>17</sup> By viewing John's network of horologists as a queer one, we can expand our view into John's queer life in Woodstock beyond Brian's pessimistic characterization that John's life was loveless:

BRIAN REED: Olin says at least he had places to go on a date, places where he could sit with another man in public and get a coffee or a drink. But John had nothing like that. There's not a single bar in all of Bibb County. And even if there was, it's hard to imagine two men feeling comfortable or safe going on a date there. (Chapter VI)

I don't want to brush over the isolation that McLemore probably felt living in his childhood home— isolation that he alludes to repeatedly in *S-Town*. However, to characterize his life as loveless, as Brian seems to at the end of Chapter VI, supports the heteronormative idea that the only *real* love—the love that counts after someone has died—involves monogamy, sex, and marriage.

antiquarian horology circles, knowledge comes from gazing inwards and backward, as “a knowledgeable collector can tell much about the history of an antique clock by observing the details on its face” (Converse).<sup>18</sup> These details include “the presence of a maker’s signature and town,” as well as the methods used to paint, carve, or guild the clock’s features (Converse). Once the horologist identifies the clock, their reparative process resembles unrequited love, an unwanted yet irresistible desire: “It is to the repairer that falls the ungrateful task of trying to put into working order these mechanisms which are often so badly designed, and it is work to which he sometimes has to devote much time without obtaining satisfactory results” (Hillmann 5). This “ungrateful task” evokes Love’s claim that “queers have embraced backwardness in many forms: in celebrations of perversion, in defiant refusals to grow up, in explorations of haunting and memory, and in stubborn attachments to lost objects” (*Feeling Backward* 7). The clockmaker’s preoccupation with uncovering the past conjures this “haunting,” as well as images of “lost objects” in history; the horologist desires the undesirable, the unknowable. It is in these “stubborn attachments to the past” that we find John’s queer network, and it is our desire for such memory that draws us into *S-Town*.

### ***Remembering a Queer Horologist: Memorial Practices in the Aural Archive***

*S-Town* both feeds and entices this desire, creating a memorial for John with references to geographic sites where listeners can visit and contribute to the archive. On

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<sup>18</sup> Note here that the clock’s face recalls a human visage, hinting at the conflation between the human and clock body, a topic I’ll explore later in Part II.

my last day in Alabama, one of John's close friends took me to a spot along the Little Cahaba River, not far from Woodstock. We pulled over to the side of the road at the entrance to a bridge and picked our way down a muddy slope to the riverbank. It had rained earlier in the week, and the downpour had carved up the mud, ferrying it into the river below and forming trenches that snaked across the path. As we approached the river, we came across one of the bridge's concrete support beams, easily thirty feet tall and ten feet wide. Graffiti coated an entire side of the pillar. As I walked around to the side facing the river, I saw spray painted in large red and black letters, "JTG, est. 1994" and "JBM, est. 19—" (see Figure 3). The first set of initials belong to Tyler Goodson, born in 1994, the second to John B. McLemore, born in 1966. John and Tyler wrote these dates the day John died, a day highly documented in *S-Town*: John and Tyler waded through the river and celebrate "their Father's Day;" they drank Wild Turkey bourbon. Talking to Tyler about this day, Brian asks,

BRIAN REED: Did it seem like he was saying goodbye?

TYLER GOODSON: I don't know. Hell, we spray painted our damn names up there on the damn bridge. (Chapter III).

In the series' final chapter, Brian visits the bridge for himself. "And there," he says, "past all that, on the other side of the giant support of the bridge in a serene spot looking out over the bend in the river, there they were. Tyler's initials on one side, with an 'Established 1991.' John's on the other, 'Established 1966'" (Chapter VII). This bridge serves as a stable marker in the series, an endpoint for John and Tyler, a final look back for Brian. At the same time, it fades, pointing to time's passage since the podcast's

release. In either case, *S-Town* frames the bridge, the pillar, and the graffiti as a memorial and an archive—a physical place where fans of the show, friends of John, or any passerby can witness what remains of his presence.



Figure 3. Graffiti next to the Little Cahaba River near Woodstock, Alabama.

When I visited the bridge, John’s birth year—1966—was partially crossed out and obscured by paint; over it, someone wrote, “The best time’s in my was spent [sic.] here with the love of my life. He will always have my ♥” (see Figure 3). It’s not clear who wrote these lines, or if they are related to Tyler or John. Either way, they demonstrate how weathering affects physical memorials—graffiti, statues, portraits, gravestones; though seemingly permanent, the graffiti mark from John and Tyler’s last day will disappear under layers of paint or be etched away by windblown sand. The podcast, on

the other hand, may experience a digital kind of weathering, not marked by changes to its sound, but rather cultural changes around it, its becoming obsolete, or its fading into history.

At this point, we have read *S-Town* as several types of media: as a text, a podcast, and an investigation. In this section, I investigate the podcast as a public memorial for John. The choice to memorialize John in sound arises at his funeral, which we can view as a turning point in the podcast, when “understanding” John becomes its primary focus (Chapter III). Brian attends the funeral with the Goodson family. He describes the service as unremarkable, even uncomfortable: Prayer at the funeral “disorients” Brian, since John was “as fervent a critic of religion as the most zealous evangelists for it” (Chapter III). His comment that “In his 20-minute service, Brother Ben [the pastor who leads the funeral] only talks briefly about John himself” also implies that something is missing from John’s funeral, the way he is remembered immediately after he died (Chapter III). Although the funeral “serves its purpose,” for John’s mother, Mary Grace, Brian’s observation that “it was sad to see the life of someone with such personality [read: queerness] remembered with so little, to see John honored with a service so utterly devoid of him” opens a conversation about the role of queerness in memory (Chapter III). Indeed, Chapter III is the first to acknowledge John’s sexuality outside of his occasional references to being “a queer” (always John’s phrasing). Brian withholds John’s sexuality until this point; although Brian reads part of the email John first sent to him at the beginning of Chapter I, he waits until Chapter III to read us the rest of what John wrote to introduce himself:

BRIAN REED: He began, quote, “Me, I am 47, unmarried, sort of, ahem, like ahem—let's just say I might be a fan of David Sedaris, or in other words, I might know who Audre Lorde and Ann Bannon is, if you get the idea. Of course, that could get you killed around here.” I took that to mean John was gay, though when we talked about it after, he told me that he'd gone both ways in his life. And whenever it came up, he never called himself just gay. It was always semi-homosexual or a semi-practicing homosexual, or celibate homosexual. (Chapter III)

John resists labels and tidy categories—he is not “just gay,” but “semi-homosexual.” Brian’s disclosure marks the point when the podcast turns toward John, though not with the goal of defining his sexuality. Likewise, Brian suggests that remembering John means remembering him as a queer man—not by distilling his personality to his sexuality alone, but rather by allowing his queerness to underscore his memorialization, just as heterosexuality underscores standard memorial practices.

Just as John led Brian to Woodstock to understand his town, Brian leads us (digitally) to Shittown to better understand John. Both John and Brian act as a guide, presenting their followers with stories (“A Rose for Emily” by William Faulkner and “The Necklace” by Guy de Maupassant in John’s case; the murder investigation and the hunt for gold in Brian’s). In Chapter III, for instance, Brian describes the whole aftermath of John’s death—John’s cousins, the drama with Tyler, Tyler’s arrest and his unresolved treasure hunt—as a vessel for understating John; not only that, it’s a vessel for understanding Shittown:

BRIAN REED: But in the aftermath of his death, a whole other story unfurled in front of me piece by piece. A story I could picture John laying out for me with outrage and humor and sadness, maybe even written by one of his favorite short story writers. I could see John handing it to the next visitor he coaxed down to Bibb County as their bedtime reading, saying, read this, it'll help you understand this place I've lived nearly every one of my days. It'll help you understand me. (Chapter III)

The two stories—John's death and the short stories John shared with Brian during his first visit—blur together under the podcast's narrative structure. In this sense, Brian becomes John—he passes on this story to us, a story meant to help us understand his friend John. Understanding, I'll point out in this section, also recalls the clock restorer's obsession with the past, their goal of knowing the clock's history and repairing it through historically accurate methods. From Chapter III on, this goal underscores the entire podcast, shaping how the *S-Town* memorializes John (not as a "tidied up" version of himself, but as a queered and messy memory) and how we interact with the John it presents. Without directly saying it, *S-Town* queers John's death; instead of leaving John's memory at the cemetery, Brian hits on the point made over and over again by queer memorialist scholars: that remembering a queer person means remembering them queerly.

The way we remember—from the materials associated with memory—constitutes a political statement through memory. The places we choose to preserve and the material aesthetics we ascribe to them play an enormous role in social or public memory, as "the

very materiality of a place means that memory is not abandoned to the vagaries of mental process and is instead inscribed in the landscape—as public memory” (Cresswell 119-120). Thomas Dunn discusses the need for queer memorialization (as opposed to queer ephemerality); in *Queerly Remembered*, he proposes a mode of queer memorialization that both defies heteronormative oppression and generates a permanent, queer history. By “reading” gravescapes, Dunn reveals the heteronormative practices embedded in death and dying rituals and laws, particularly in the United States:

The often unacknowledged privileges that death and dying rituals provide to heterosexuals—presence at the deathbed, legal decision making, participation in funeral arrangements, decisions concerning religious services and the place where the deceased is buried, and even the right to be buried with one's partner—have often been unavailable to GLBTQ persons. Rather, death magnifies the pain and violence GLBTQ people (particularly those suffering from HIV/AIDS) commonly experience in life. (Dunn 130)

He cites practical concerns, such as Veterans Affairs historically rejecting “GLBTQ-affirmative words such as *gay*, *lesbian*, or *queer* from appearing on gravestones,” or funeral planning privileges going to the deceased’s family, instead of to their same-sex partner (Dunn 137, *his emphasis*). Although John McLemore didn’t have a lifelong partner, Brian realizes that his funeral is not only devoid of John’s personality, but also his close friends. After the funeral, as Brian digs through John’s contact list that he gave to Faye Gamble, he finds that “there's this whole group of names at the top [of the list] who are all from out of town, and in a number of cases out of state or country. And each



of those names is a mystery to me” (Chapter IV). As Brian begins calling John’s friends, he discovers that very few of them knew about John’s death, meaning that only a handful knew to come to his funeral. Thus, Brian’s decision to start calling John’s friends—though journalistic—also means honoring John’s wishes.

On an aesthetic level, heteronormative gravescapes’ “styles also embed within their visual frames the view that life and death should be understood from a heterosexual perspective” (Dunn 136). One of the most apparent instances of this view emerges as what Dunn calls “the denial of the body,” particularly in memento mori gravescapes. In these graveyards, such as the Congressional Cemetery, “the bodies of the deceased disappear into the headstones. We witness the stones but do not linger upon what they mark” (Dunn 154). Graves are plain, marked with unmemorable symbols such as skulls and crosses. By highlighting the presence of the body under the mourner’s feet, Dunn writes, queer memorial graves disrupt this common aesthetic, marking not only the queer grave, but also the queer body. This type of memorialization is especially important for the queer community, in which “specific forms of knowing, being, belonging, and embodying are prevented from emerging in the first place, often by techniques that intimately involve the body” (Freeman 11). Ignoring the body reasserts this heteronormative limitation onto the deceased person after death. Thus, by simply acknowledging the body (one of the graves Dunn describes has an elegant granite slab over the buried body, in addition to the headstone), the grave disrupts the otherwise heterosexual landscape.

While Dunn makes a compelling argument for queer memorialization, other queer theorists add nuance to the emphasis on preservation and memory in queer memorials. Namely, Halberstam proposes that we “suspect memorialization” and points to texts that “advocate for certain forms of erasure over memory precisely because memorialization has a tendency to tidy up disorderly histories (of slavery, the Holocaust, wars, etc.)” (*Failure* 15). Both Muñoz and Halberstam agree that “memory is most certainly constructed and, more important, always political” (*Cruising* 35); that “it reads a continuous narrative into one full of ruptures and contradictions, and it sets precedents for other ‘memorializations’” (*Failure* 15). This argument doesn’t contradict Dunn’s, but rather adds the caveat that queer memorialization requires degree of forgetfulness, “a gate-keeping mechanism, a way of protecting the self from unbearable memories ... a cocooning of the self in order to allow the self to grow separate from the knowledge that might destroy it” (*Failure* 84). Forgetfulness, Halberstam argues, protects the community from re-living past harms.

On the contrary, Heather Love discourages forgetfulness, as “we cannot afford to turn away from the past; instead, we have to risk the turn backward, even if it means opening ourselves to social and psychic realities we would rather forget” (*Feeling Backward* 29). Likewise, queer graves engage with melancholia, as opposed to mourning, which “Freud describes ... as an enduring devotion on the part of the ego to the lost object,” a devotion to those “psychic realities we would rather forget” (Eng and Kazanjian 3). Far from allowing the deceased to fade into memory, these graves insist that we maintain “an ongoing and open relationship with the past—bringing its ghosts

and specters, its flaring and fleeting images, into the present” (Eng and Kazanjian 3-4). As I argue in this section, *S-Town* similarly memorializes John, both as someone lost and someone continually brought to mind.<sup>19</sup> While *S-Town* deals in trauma—namely, John’s suicide and his tattooing, which Brian calls “essentially an elaborate form of cutting”—the audio medium allows these moments to arise and fade as many times as we choose to listen to them, rather than solidifying them in marble (Chapter VII). I contend that *S-Town* begins a nuanced, queer memorial for John B. McLemore, one that incorporates forgetfulness and permanence into his failures, queerness, tattoos, and piercings (an element of kink culture as well as an archive of skin). We can therefore read *S-Town* as extending John’s public memorial; *S-Town* begins a trend of melancholia for John, a continual longing for him. As David L. Eng and David Kazanjian argue in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, “melancholia’s continued and open relation to the past finally allows us to gain new perspectives on and new understandings of lost objects” (4). This melancholia translates to fans making the pilgrimage to Woodstock and leaving objects for John: A bottle of Wild Turkey whiskey, rusty keys, a shark keychain, and an Altoids

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<sup>19</sup> In recent queer history, the memorial that grew in the wake of Matthew Shepard’s murder has “(re)produce[d] disciplinary and normative expectations” for queer communities” (Cockayne 472). I present Shepard’s case because of several similarities to John’s—namely, that Shepard lived and died in a rural area (Laramie, Wyoming), which, in his archive, “represented America’s revered but disavowed past,” a view we have already seen in representations of the South (Cockayne 473). Daniel Cockayne discusses *Considering Matthew Shepard*, a choral piece he performed that, he argues, “both repeats and challenges the normative popular and academic framings of Shepard’s murder” (Cockayne 471). Though other representations of Shepard reflect metronormative views of rural Wyoming, *Considering Matthew Shepard* takes a more neutral approach to its rural setting: “Though Wyoming is then the passive stage upon which social events unfold, it is not framed as *responsible* for those social events, nor is it compared with urban America as a necessarily more cosmopolitan space of supposed urban safety and liberal tolerance” (Cockayne 477-478). Cockayne likewise emphasizes the need for a more complete view of Shepard, one that does not gloss over his “drug use, his depression, his serostatus, even in some cases his (homo)sexuality,” as some memorializations have done in the past (Cockayne 474).

container all decorate the grave, referencing obscure and (sometimes unknowable) moments in John's life (see Figure 4). After all, without the podcast, few people outside of Woodstock would know to leave Wild Turkey at John's grave. These new objects and the people who bring them offer "new perspectives and new understandings" of John—as a source of comfort, inspiration, hope, or sense of belonging.



Figure 4. Footstone by Tyler Goodson for John B. McMere in Woodstock, Alabama.

*S-Town* acknowledges this physical archive as a source of memorialization for John's idiosyncrasies, for his queerness. In the third chapter, Brian describes the headstone that Tyler made for John, which now serves as his footstone. Much like Dunn's examples, this footstone emphasizes, rather than conceals, John's body—namely, it displays his tattoos:

BRIAN REED: On top of the [tombstone], Tyler will inlay a pretty piece of stained wood into which he's burned John B. McLemore, 1966 to 2015, with his favorite photo of John sealed into it with polyurethane. A picture of John leaning back in a chair, outside, feet up on a table, shirt off, his chest of tattoos and nipple piercings in its full glory. It's a version of John that was hidden from the everyday world, a version that most of the people at his funeral surely did not know. But Tyler did. (Chapter III)

Although the picture of John has since worn away from the footstone (see Figure 4), the stone and the trinkets people have left around it stand out against the rest of the graveyard, even against John's current headstone (see Figure 5): The stone is "shorter and squatter than most tombstones, and will look like nothing else in the whole cemetery" (Chapter III). Brian comments that the footstone and the picture of John on it show "a version [of him] that most of the people at his funeral surely did not know," implying that the footstone reveals something unexpected, odd, or queer about John to the rest of the world. Namely, his tattoos and nipple rings, though these are thinly veiled metaphors for his queerness, as "gay, lesbian, transgendered, and SM [sodomasochist] body modifiers

have used body marking as a form of ‘queering’ the body” (Pitts 15).<sup>20</sup> As Brian points out, the footstone reflects the intimacy between Tyler and John: “It’ll start nagging at Tyler that John’s in the ground, decomposing into worm dirt, without so much as a marker,” and Tyler will make him a tombstone from the concrete leg of his grandmother’s table (Chapter III). The gravestone not only acknowledges John’s body, but also his deep friendship with Tyler, disrupting heteronormative gravescapes on multiple fronts.



Figure 5. John B. McLemore’s headstone, Green Pond Presbyterian Church Cemetery.

Likewise, Brian relies on these queer memorial practices to build John’s memory in *S-Town*: He acknowledges John’s body—his tattoos, his sex life, his voice—and

<sup>20</sup> Tattoos and piercings have long been associated with queer subcultures, especially leather and kink communities. See Steward, Samuel M. *Bad Boys and Tough Tattoos: A Social History of the Tattoo with Gangs, Sailors, and Street-Corner Punks, 1950-1965*. Harrington Park Press, 1990. For recent scholarship on gender embodiment and body modification, see Del Mar Miller, Kathleen. “Working Clinically with the Skin’s Surface: Tattoos, Scars, and Gendered Embodiment.” *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2020, pp. 143–154.

assigns the podcast a sense of interlaced permanence and ephemerality, ultimately creating what Muñoz calls a queer “utopia in the present” (*Cruising* 37).<sup>21</sup> The show operates under *podcast time*—a layering of both permanent and ephemeral temporalities. The podcast’s online, streamable format invites us to consider it as part of an ongoing digital archive, whose practices “turn archiving into an activity that is part of everyday online experience, engaged with affectively, and implicated in the production and maintenance of minority and diverse sexual and gender identities” (Cover 127). Because listeners experience the podcast individually, yet respond to it collectively, *S-Town* is uniquely public, as well as commemorative; it catches up with the present while allowing us to experience the past. This queer experience of past in the present echoes one of Muñoz’s observations of queer utopias. Namely, that a queer utopia “understands its time as reaching beyond some nostalgic past that perhaps never was or some future whose arrival is continually belated” (*Cruising* 37). These utopias stretch time in the present, recalling Halberstam’s queer temporality. Likewise, in *A Critical Inquiry into Queer Utopias*, scholars “focus on the everyday acts of resistance and affective forces that create the potentiality for pockets or cleavages of queer utopian spaces” (Jones 2). The utopia need not last beyond the podcast; rather, “pockets or cleavages of queer utopian

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<sup>21</sup> Co-created digital archives are just one example of both ephemeral and permanent queer archives. As Rob Cover argues, “The preservation of an archive in a digital context is that which is anti-loss—the repetition of the data across the cloud preserves an archive in a way that not only sees it protected against the kinds of threats that might be expected of a Medieval manuscript repository in a monetary (e.g. fire or flood), but also begins to operate as mobile and as if separated from both tangible form and presence. At the same time, however, as a digital and co-creative site, it is interactive, meaning it is changeable, transformable and unfixed, always open to the loss of the archive as it stood at one moment in favour of an adjustment, a comment, new imagery, new interpretations—the form of co-creativity sponsored explicitly by digital interactivity” (Cover 133).



space” emerge from the act of listening to it. Thus, Brian creates this queer utopia in *S-Town* by memorializing John McLemore and encouraging us to re-experience his voice.

### ***The Ghost in the Machine, or the Body in the Podcast***

Drawing on memorial practices that engage with a person’s “embodied” life, Brian re-members (reconstructs, remakes) John’s physical presence in the podcast, conflating the clock body, the human body, and the journalistic body of work. The series ends with John’s birth, implying that the seven hours that led to it were this *podcast body’s* development. Establishing the overlap between the clock and the podcast, each episode begins with the show’s theme song and ends with “A Rose for Emily” by the Zombies, mimicking a clock’s hourly chime. Brian also bookends *S-Town* with reflections on time and clock restoration. In the first episode, the metaphor of the clock restorer foreshadows Brian’s own journey into John’s life:

BRIAN REED: I'm told fixing an old clock can be maddening. You're constantly wondering if you've just spent hours going down a path that will likely take you nowhere, and all you've got are these vague witness marks, which might not even mean what you think they mean. So at every moment along the way, you have to decide if you're wasting your time or not. (Chapter I)

Like the antiquarian horologist, Brian wastes hours diving into obscure pieces of John’s life that have nothing to do with the podcast’s original goal, which, we might remember, was “to investigate the son of a wealthy family who’s allegedly been bragging that he got away with murder” (*S-Town*). This method again recalls Sedgwick’s reparative reading



process, which encourages the researcher to encounter surprise: “To read from a reparative position is to surrender the knowing, anxious paranoid determination that no horror, however apparently unthinkable, shall ever come to the reader *as new*: to a reparatively positioned reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise” (*Novel Gazing* 24, *her emphasis*). The researcher expects the unexpected, following a wandering line of research as opposed to a linear one. Among these surprises are the list of contacts that John left for Faye Gamble; his friendship with Olin Long, a man John met on a gay singles line in the early 2000s who reached out to Brian after John died; and John’s friendship with Michael Fuller, who Brian views as the earlier version of Tyler Goodson. The journalistic obsession with unearthing and understanding these elements also recalls the clock restorer’s practice, whose connections to reparative reading we have already uncovered.

The crux of the clock as a metaphor for both the podcast and the body lies in witness marks, which “could be a small dent, a hole that once held a screw [in the clock]. These are actual impressions, and outlines, and discolorations left inside the clock of pieces that might have once been there” (Chapter I). Witness marks and the goose chases they launch are also metaphorically linked to narrative clues left after John’s death—those “surprises” that Brian follows through *S-Town*. In this sense, the act of making the podcast—reflected in its circular structure and narrative failures—parallels the act of restoring an antique clock. Likewise, John’s tattoos constitute witness marks on the human body. In what some scholars call the “body project,” heavily inked people use their tattoos’ symbolism, aesthetics, and meaning to construct an “auto-bio-graphic

device” on their skin (Ferreira 326). Like the witnessed-marked clock body, “the fleshy canvas illustrates a map of the routes taken by its bearer, by option or accident, but always self-perceived as framers of the personal identity” (Ferreira 325-326). This system is both personal and culturally inscribed, as only the tattooed person may understand each tattoo’s biographical significance, yet the overall effect also evokes culturally relevant images and symbols.<sup>22</sup> As the clock, body, and body of work decay, however, these witness marks begin to disappear, along with the histories they inscribe.

Unlike the human body, however, the clock and podcast operate on timescales beyond human life. The clock, like the memorial podcast, persists and changes beyond its craftsman while also recording the clockmaker’s hand. Within *S-Town*, a human life is quantifiably measured: In John’s essay “Worthwhile Life Defined,” he writes that

The average industrialized man with 25,000 days on this planet may easily secure only about 4,500 waking hour days of beneficial life. That's a quarter of your life, if you're lucky ... A quarter of your life during which the average person can pursue matters that are meaningful to them. (McLemore qtd. in Chapter VII)

The clock and the human body both adhere to this notion of limited time—the body decays and, without human hands to repair it, a clock stops ticking. Still, a well-crafted clock can survive hundreds of years, so long as there is a craftsman to repair it.

Likewise, the clock acts an archive for the clockmaker, recording their choices and hands in its witness marks; just as the human body is recorded in the podcast, it is

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<sup>22</sup> For an aesthetic meditation on tattoos, see Loos, Adolph. “Ornament and Crime: Tattoos.” *Aesthetics: A Reader in Philosophy of the Arts*, by David Goldblatt et al., 4th ed., Taylor and Francis, 2017, pp. 149–52.

also recorded into the body of the clock. In the final episode of *S-Town*, Tom Moore—another one of John’s close friends—shows Brian a sundial that John made for him, customized to tell time at the latitude and longitude of Tom’s house. This object confirms that time is personal, that the way we experience it depends on where and how we choose to live. As Tom reflects, it is also emotional:

TOM MOORE: It's unbelievable to me what it took in knowledge and skill to be able to make this. Off the charts! [VOICE CRACKING] What's more valuable to me than this? I think you get that. (Chapter VII)

Moore’s clock holds significance because it persists beyond John yet retains the mark of his craftsmanship. The timepiece has witnessed the clockmaker, and Moore knows that it will last beyond his life as well. Likewise, Moore’s question, “what’s more valuable to me than this?” recalls Cvetkovich’s observation that “the memory of trauma is embedded not just in narrative but in material artifacts, which can range from photographs to objects whose relation to trauma might seem arbitrary but for the fact that they are invested with emotional, and even sentimental, value” (Cvetkovich 7-8). The sundial—representative not only of John’s skill, but also the trauma after his death—gains value from its archival use, the “emotional, and even sentimental, value” invisibly etched into its metal. The clock’s imagined past—what we construct based on its witness marks—constitutes Muñoz’s “nostalgic past that perhaps never was.” Still, Moore and John’s other friends understand their time pieces as existing beyond their own lives—the “future whose arrival is continuously belated.” This feeling of nostalgia for time gone by merges with the desire to capture it in timepieces, which themselves hold the mark of human touch.

Thus, the clock—or any material measure of time—places us in this perpetual present of both watching time pass and waiting for it to arrive.

Likewise, the podcast measures time—in its seven recorded hours and in the multiple media associated with *S-Town*. These “intermedial timepieces” grant us the ability to not only revisit the podcast, but to record ourselves into the material objects associated with it (Rooney 156). The material objects—from John’s gravesite and the graffiti tags he and Tyler left under the bridge next to the Cahaba River, to the short stories he gives Brian and the elaborate hedge maze he built in his back yard—allow the podcast to persist into the future, re-member the past, and remain ephemeral, or exist exclusively in our present experience listening to it. Monique Rooney identifies these objects as part of *S-Town*’s *intermedia*, which she defines as “an artform that combines or incorporates other artforms or media” (Rooney 157). The materials that Rooney claims are part of *S-Town*’s intermedia—clocks, sundials, graffiti, tattoos—all adhere to different timescales. While Rooney argues that the podcast’s temporality “streams on” in a “downloadable/streamable mode of binge-listening,” she also recognizes the permanent media present in the podcast: “Existing amidst the incessant streaming of time,” she writes, “are the relatively contained temporalities afforded by graffiti as well as performance, tattooing and other discrete rituals that are mediated by the podcast” (Rooney 169). Thus, *S-Town* (or any podcast which interacts with multiple media) is a liquid narrative from which solid temporal fixtures rise.

The graffiti in particular stands out as a permanent fixture within the podcast, likely because it is highly visible and visitable for the podcast’s fans. The graffiti is also

one of *S-Town*'s intermedia that we view as unchanging, though (as figure 3 shows), it *has* changed since the podcast was released.<sup>23</sup> We hear Brian interact with the graffiti and bridge during his last visit to Woodstock, solidifying a particular image of the graffiti in the listener's mind; Brian climbs under the bridge next to a bend in the Cahaba River and sees "Tyler's initials on one side, with an 'Established 1991.' John's on the other, 'Established 1966'" (Chapter VII). As I pointed to earlier, the graffiti under the bridge has already changed: People have painted over it, John's birth year is obscured, and someone inscribed their initials between John and Tyler's, writing, "J.J.A. 2019" two years after the podcast was released (see Figure 3). The graffiti, too, is ephemeral. Unlike the podcast, however, the graffitied pillar "is a space only able to be felt, rather than seen" or heard (Isaac 380). While the spray-painted image "disappears" as "something that exists until it ceases to be," the pillar and the site it represents remains relatively permanent (Isaac 379). Unlike the streamed podcast (or, indeed, the streaming river nearby), the bridge, graffiti, and even the act of visiting them act as pillars in time—markers of relative permanence in an otherwise ephemeral podcast space. Whether or not John and Tyler's tags are visible, we know they once were, that the tags covering them are a record, rather than an erasure, of time passed. This relationship between the

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<sup>23</sup> In recent decades, a move to preserve graffiti and street art—especially where it relates to cultural or political revolutions—has arisen, both in official and sub-cultural archives. For a brief history of 1970s graffiti in New York, see Isaac, Joseph. "Pics or It Didn't Happen: The Artwork Formerly Known as Heritage in Google Street Art." *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2019, pp. 374–92. For an analysis of New York's graffiti archives from the 1970s and 1980s, see Masilamani, Rachel. "Documenting Illegal Art: Collaborative Software, Online Environments and New York City's 1970s and 1980s Graffiti Art Movement." *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America*, vol. 27, no. 2, Fall 2008, p. 4014. JSTOR.

streamed podcast and the solid bridge reproduces the relationship between the tattoo and the body, as a solid and timed fixture within a liquid narrative.

In this sense, the podcast combines ephemerality and permanence in what I have coined podcast time. Even though the podcast streams past listeners' ears, John's recorded voice memorializes him in the present, linking multiple time periods in one set of mp3 files. Writing about another moment in the show's final chapter when Brian visits Bill, one of John's horological friends, Rooney comments on Bill's sense of time as "going by, and never coming back," claiming that this moment opposes the podcast's circular use of multiple time periods (Chapter VII). "Against Bill's expressly unidirectional concept of time," she writes, "the not there/there of John's voice communicates, on the one hand, his irretrievable pastness and, on the other hand, the immediate presence generated by the podcast that, beyond the moment of his death, places John's voice within earshot" (Rooney 158). In other words, Rooney argues that the podcast returns us to a time when John was alive through his voice, allowing us to relive time in a circular pattern, as opposed to the linear march of time that Bill describes. Much like the physical circularity of queer lives that I discussed earlier in this section, the circularity of time in podcasts generates a unique and, ultimately, queer experience of time for the listener, enticing them to re-listen to the podcast and re-experience John's voice.

Turning now toward the body, we can read John's voice and presence in the podcast as a constructed body—a *podcast body*. As we've already seen in Glass's "ghost in the machine," Barthes's "grain," and Sterne's "vestige," the body traverses the audio

apparatus, touching the listener on the other side. In this transmission, however, the body becomes something entirely new—a cyborg.<sup>24</sup> In “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Haraway describes this construction as “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (Haraway 104). *S-Town* likewise becomes a new body for John, a factitive version of his physical form that reflects—yet remains separate from—his original form. The podcast reconstructs and reconfigures John by assembling his voice through narrative witness marks. The witness marks *S-Town* ascribes to John—his tattoos, his contact list, his friendships with Michael Fuller and Tyler Goodson—frame the new body’s identity and history. This construction is possible in part because we know that John is dead; we understand his presence in *S-Town* as a constructed memory, rather than a reflection of someone who is still living. When Brian first hears that John died, he imagines John’s body, his “standing at the computer in his bedroom, emailing me, thinking of me, sending me a graph of the increasing gold reserves of the Russian central bank” (Chapter III). In the moments after a person dies, he realizes, time compresses as we “hold up our last interaction with them and point to the nearness of it in time to explain our disbelief, as if time gives a shit” (Chapter III). Although Brian’s bitter remark—“as if time gives a shit”—suggests its linearity, I point to this moment as the conception of John’s podcast body—its

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<sup>24</sup> Artist and psychologist Kathleen Del Mar Miller comments on the intersections between “corporeal, psychic and technological” skin in her work “A Radically Open Analysis: Writing as Wrapping, Video as Skin” (Radically Open 528). In one video that one of Del Mar Miller’s transgender patients, K, made about their relationship with their skin, Del Mar Miller notes that “the digital camera becomes a technological finger” touching K (Radically Open 535). At the same time, the “camera’s technology responds to this touching and being touched by digitally recording” (Radically Open 535). The video both interacts with K’s body and becomes a body itself.

undeveloped beginning. Although time's linear progression means that Brian's last moment with John will fade into the past, podcast time allows it to persist into the future with the rest of John's recorded voice, placing John within earshot, as Rooney suggests. The series' final image presents John's birth date, implying that the seven hours before it were the podcast body's development: "On March 15, 1966 [Mary Grace] had a red-haired boy, gave him a middle name after her father Brooks, and brought him home to the 124 acres to an old house with three chimneys in the middle of the woods" (Chapter VII). Listening to *S-Town* in 2022 rebirths this body anew. Like the podcast and the clock body, the podcast body launches into the future, past John's physical life. The end last episode, whenever it occurs, is this new body's birth.

The podcast body's future-orientation contrasts the physical body's past-orientation. In kink and sadomasochist rituals (S/M or s/m in some texts), for instance, the human body transforms into an object of time, one that stretches the present as it inscribes times passed. Rather than shy away from the body, as heteronormative memorial practices have done, *S-Town* allows these sadomasochist rituals to stand freely in the podcast in the form of John and Tyler's "Church sessions." Formulating sadomasochism "as a deployment of bodily sensations through which the individual subject's normative *timing* is disaggregated and denaturalized," Freeman posits that sadomasochist rituals constitute "a kind of erotic time machine" (Freeman 137, 138, *her emphasis*). Moreover, the practice "makes possible the awareness of the body as an object," attesting to the flesh's inherent mortality and releasing the masochist from consciousness, as "the time of proprioception and the time of visual apprehension



compete with one another, and their syncopation enables the estranged consciousness crucial to ‘freedom’” (Freeman 139). Like tattoos, sadomasochism expands the body’s measure of time, releasing it from its own lifetime and cluing it into previous histories. In *S-Town*, sadomasochism emerges in John and Tyler’s Church ritual, where Tyler repeatedly tattoos and pierces John, often with empty needles or in preexisting holes (namely, his nipple piercings). John identifies his body as an object, “a bit of practice material” for Tyler (Chapter VII). Tyler, on the other hand, thinks of Church in sadomasochist terms: “Before each tattoo,” Tyler says, “I’d have to pierce his nipples. He’d get like an endorphin high off of it, just a pain fix” (Chapter VII). Beyond the body’s lived experience, “S/M becomes a form of writing history with the body in which the linearity of history itself may be called into question, but, crucially, the past does not thereby cease to exist” (Freeman 139).<sup>25</sup> Here, Freeman refers to the “temporal excess in the moment” that defines “masochistic time”—a stretched and nonlinear time in the present akin to queer temporality (McCleese 360). In John and Tyler’s case, Church stretches far into the night, fueled by Wild Turkey and existential conversations. John describes one session where he “rattled on and prattled on about a bunch of damn bullshit

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<sup>25</sup> Lynda Hart thinks of sadomasochism and desire as “theatrical” practices, which take place “*between the body and the flesh*” (Hart 10, *her emphasis*). Whereas “The ‘body’ keeps us anchored in the worlds we have constructed in ‘reality,’ ... the ‘flesh’ is a place toward which we reach that always exceeds our grasp” (Hart 10). Moreover, the gap is “a space of fantasy that cannot be filled with content, where the play *must* take place. To enter fully into the performance, one must be willing to risk leaving the security of one’s ‘self’ behind and step into this void, trusting that others will be found there as well” (Hart 9, *her emphasis*). Brandy L. Simula, likewise, views this gap as a utopia, the space in between the here and the horizon: “The impossibility of reaching the horizon, however, does not deter participants from continuing to reach for it. Instead, participants frequently frame reaching toward an impossible as one of the pleasures, one of the moments of ecstasy, available in BDSM play” (Simula 93). Note that tattoos, inscribed onto the body and engaging with the flesh, mark these utopic gaps onto the masochist’s body, places where the person has handed a part of themselves over to the tattoo artist.

that makes sense when you're drunk but probably doesn't when you're sober," implying that Church time is segmented off, bound to his clock workshop, and unreachable from anywhere else (Chapter VII).

As the body time travels, it gathers new forms of being or knowing. In John and Tyler's case, Church is more complicated, especially considering that John does not openly view his desire to be tattooed as masochistic. Still, John's tattoos allow him to time travel and to at least attempt to embody another person's pain. One of the more striking scenes in Chapter VII details John's bullwhip tattoo, which stretches from the nape of his neck to his lower back:

BRIAN REED: There's a whip that looks as if it's laying across his shoulders and neck, apparently attached to the handle on the other side of him. And that all across his back, top to bottom, are dozens of red lash marks, like in a famous historic photo that John included in a collage in the 53-page manifesto he sent me documenting society's moral decline.

A photo of a slave named Gordon who has believed to have escaped from a plantation in Louisiana, and whose back was photographed and distributed by abolitionists as visual proof of the terrors of slavery. (Chapter VII)

More than replicating the photograph's appearance, John claimed to recreate parts of Gordon's traumatic experience, and "in order to create this tattoo, John went into the woods, hand-picked a tree branch, and asked Tyler and his friends to whip him with it, and then had them tattoo over the welts" (Chapter VII). Although *S-Town* doesn't include the sounds of this whipping, it makes the listeners privy to Tyler's memory of the event.

According to Tyler, “It was like [John] wanted to know the feeling of—wanting to know what folks went through back in that time” (Chapter VII). The circumstances around John’s tattoo—and the fact that John, Tyler, and Tyler’s friends are all white—“is shaped by the legacy of slavery and racial hierarchies in the South” (Rooney 165). Likewise, according to Saidiya Hartman, “the desire to don, occupy, or possess Blackness or the Black body as a sentimental resource and/or locus of excess enjoyment is both founded upon and enabled by the material relations of chattel slavery” (Hartman 21). Hartman and other scholars have pointed out the issues that come with using empathy or embodiment as tools for understanding enslaved people’s experiences.<sup>26</sup> We can view this moment as John’s attempt to recall and re-member past violence onto his own body, while also acknowledging that his whiteness and his attempt to “don” Gordon’s injured skin recreates “the material relations of chattel slavery.” The bullwhip tattoo, though an attempt to embody an enslaved man’s past suffering, also makes permanent John’s suffering, both at his own hands and at the hands of communities that he feels have ostracized him. The tattoo is John’s way of time traveling, gathering all the “proleptic decay and decrepitude” he witnesses and inscribing it into his skin (Chapter I). Note, though, that John only travels backward or laterally, that the suffering he claims to

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<sup>26</sup> “Empathy,” as defined by Hartman, “is a projection of oneself into another in order to better understand the other” (Hartman 19). John’s desire to “know what folks went through” goes well beyond empathy to attempted embodiment and echoes the “slave” role in BDSM play, in which “meaning is shifted in a way that seems to disassociate it from its racist history politically, while at the same time exploiting the emotional attachments to this history for sexual pleasure” (Bauer 188). Hartman discusses similar problems with requiring that “the white body be positioned in the place of the Black body in order to make the suffering visible and intelligible,” as “it becomes clear that empathy is double-edged, for in making the other’s suffering one’s own, this suffering is occluded by the other’s obliteration” (Hartman 19).

embody has either already passed or is happening currently. In this sense, John's body becomes a nostalgic archive, a measure of past and present, but a refusal of future time.

This construction of John's body as a measure of past time brings us back to queer temporality and its refusal to look toward the future. As we saw earlier in Part I, John embodies "backward" affects, including negativity, pessimism, and regret. John's pessimism is concentrated in his 53-page manifesto that he sends to Brian, which includes Gordon's photo in its "unified theory of economic, environmental, and societal decline" (Chapter IV). Although John's anxiety for the future is tied to global suffering and environmental decline, we can link its intensity to "the failure to imagine a queer future" (McCleese 369). Nicole McCleese connects sadomasochist rituals like John's to queer futurity through the *anxiety of anticipation*: "I consider the anxiety of anticipation, a formal feature of masochistic time, as anxiety about a queer future, which is relieved by the performance of another anxiety about the past, the sadomasochistic performance of slavery as erotohistoriography. The remembered past thus punishes the reader with images of slavery in order to relieve the anxiety of queer futurity" (McCleese 360). The bullwhip tattoo achieves this relief by literally punishing John in order to recall "images of slavery," or Gordon's photo. By emphasizing "guilty pleasure of this temporal excess" in the moment, John's sadomasochism replaces one anxiety with another: His anxiety for the future becomes an anxiety over pain already passed (McCleese 360). Whereas John's body denies its future, the podcast body thrusts itself forward while also re-memorizing John's past.

### *Desire and the Drive to Woodstock*

Having established that the podcast body is separate from John's actual body, we can begin to uncover our love for the podcast body and the desire it raises for an unreachable, unknowable John. Sedgwick frames desire as a "drive" toward something (*Touching Feeling* 18), whereas Oxford English Dictionary defines "desire" as "that feeling or emotion which is directed to the attainment or possession of some object from which pleasure or satisfaction is expected" ("desire," *OED*). Note that in both definitions, desire is *directed*, that its object has yet to be attained. In other words, the object of desire is both separated from the subject and within reach. Similarly, recorded voices are both present and absent, both vestiges of the body and sonic ghosts: At the advent of sound recording, images of sound recording "[eroticized] physical distance and [suggested] the depth of interconnection made possible by bodily absence" (Sterne 226). Though Sterne doesn't name desire as the dominant emotion in these images, the simultaneous "depth of interconnection" and "bodily absence" recalls desire. Here, we may also look to Sara Ahmed's argument that "queer orientations are those that put within reach bodies that have been made unreachable by the lines of conventional genealogy" (*Phenomenology* 107). By viewing recorded voices as transmitted and transmuted bodies—bodies traveling where they shouldn't, in a way they were not biologically designed to—we find that listening to and longing for a voice constitutes a form of queer desire. In *S-Town*, the podcast body entices us to seek out vestiges of John's physical body, present in the material objects associated with *S-Town* and Woodstock.

This drive to Woodstock brings us back to Muñoz's "utopia in the present," or the fleeting moments that construct queer utopias. Muñoz points to a utopia "based on an economy of desire and desiring," where "desire is always directed at that thing that is not yet here, objects and moments that burn with anticipation and promise" (*Cruising* 26). These burning moments appear throughout *S-Town*. In Chapter VI, for instance, Brian spends most of the hour talking to Olin Long, John's longtime friend who he met on a gay singles line in the early 2000s. This interview is only made possible through the podcast, since Olin heard about Brian from one of the men on John's contact list. Like John's horologist friends, John and Olin used to talk for hours over the phone. After a falling out several years before John's death, however, Olin didn't speak to John, which explains why he wasn't on John's contact list. While Olin and John's friendship was undeniably intimate, their relationship never developed into anything romantic. Still, Olin reflects on those times he *did* find himself attracted to John, when the possibility of something more drew him toward his friend. The episode ends with Olin reflecting on a day, many years earlier, when he wanted to kiss John in the front seat of his pickup truck: "I knew exactly what I wanted to do. I wanted to reach over there. I wanted to pull his shirt up, expose his belly, and just kiss all over his belly around that red hair, just to that extent. And I wanted to do it slowly and sensuously. That's what I wanted to do" (Chapter VI). This moment is one of the few descriptions of queer desire in *S-Town*. Though there are descriptions of overt queer sex or sexual contact (most of them from Chapter VI), Olin leaves us with an articulation of his *want*—a moment that never actually happened. In podcast time, we hear Olin expressing this desire in the same hour

that we hear John talk about his queerness, and Brian ask, “Did John ever have love in his life?” (Chapter VI). Although these spoken moments happened years apart in real time, the podcast offers us a call-and-response between John’s perceived loneliness and Olin’s desire for John. We can read this as a queerly timed moment, where the possibility for queer love persists beyond a falling out and a death. Moreover, by placing this expressed desire at the end of Chapter VI, Brian frames Olin as what Love calls “an emblem of eternal regret”—like Lot’s wife in the Bible, who becomes an immortalized pillar of salt after she turns to look at Sodom burning (*Feeling Backward* 5). Olin’s confession is not so much to us, but to John, mediated and memorialized through the podcast.

Although regretful, Olin’s presence promises the listener their own queerly timed moment when they reach Woodstock, guided by the podcast. We can trace love through the mentor-mentee relationships that *S-Town* builds between John and Brian, as well as between Brian and the show’s listeners. Guides and mentors crop up throughout *S-Town*.<sup>27</sup> According to Heather Love, “much more than the mother-child relationship or romantic love, the teacher-student relationship is an ideal, a model of generosity, repair,

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<sup>27</sup> During John and Tyler’s church sessions, for example, John sees his role as advising Tyler:

JOHN MCLEMORE: When you get two drunk guys together that have such a disparity in ages, the wisest thing for the old one to do is to keep his mouth shut and listen to the thoughts that weigh heavy on the head of the younger one. The other night when we had church, he asked me some of my damn thoughts about life and death, and, you know, whether or not I think there’s anything when you die. (Chapter VII)

Although these church sessions can be read as sadomasochist from Tyler’s perspective, they are also emblematic of the love in John and Tyler’s relationship. Like other queer utopias, church represents a utopic space for John, one where he can teach Tyler about quarks and “Einstein’s theory of time dilation,” where Tyler can learn and listen (Chapter VII). As Angela Jones defines utopia in *A Critical Inquiry*, church is one of those “simply autonomous spaces in which to breathe” (Jones 3). While this space does not represent a utopia for Tyler (and, as we find out in Chapter VII, also poses a massive health risk to John and Tyler, as the workshop is likely riddled with mercury), John’s church does represent what Muñoz’s “utopia in the present.”

and union without loss” (Truth and Consequences 240). Often, John is the teacher, sharing his horology knowledge and skill with the other men in his field, or mentoring and supporting younger men like Tyler Goodson and Michael Fuller. Brian’s goal of helping us understand John transforms him into the guide. However, if we indeed buy into Brian’s goal—to reconstruct his own experience of traveling to Woodstock, of meeting John for the first time, of coming to an understanding of him—then we believe the impossible. Brian cannot hope to accurately reconstruct his trip to Woodstock for us—he cannot buy us all plane tickets and book us hotels in Bessemer, nor can he introduce us to John. Instead, he claims to be our eyes and ears in Woodstock. Thus, listening to *S-Town* is experiencing something that will never arrive. In other words, Brian sets up a false premise, one that elicits our love for John’s podcast body and our desire for his physical presence.

Our re-listening to *S-Town* and our drive to Woodstock, then, is our desire actualized. Indeed, fans write and travel to Woodstock “asking questions that the podcast left open” (Koplowitz). Those who do make the pilgrimage to Woodstock (including myself) feel as if they’ve walked into a story; they leave behind coins, keys, and other trinkets on John’s grave, as seen in Figure 4; they sign a door at the local library, where John’s height is ticked in pencil. By listening and re-listening to *S-Town*, we reignite our desire to meet John, to go to Woodstock, to understand Shittown, to understand John B. McLemore. If we recall Ahmed’s claims that emotions should be read as collective, rather than individual, *S-Town*’s fans’ collective love for John challenges the notion that love is private, that it can only be produced for or by one person, alone. It is only by



listening to the show, by experiencing it collectively in our private spaces, that we achieve what Muñoz describes as a queer “utopia in the present.” Actualizing our desire, listeners return to *S-Town*’s constructed and queer soundscape over and over again, seeking the fleeting moments where John’s voice transmits his body forward, where the present stretches endlessly before us, if only for a few short hours.

### ***(In)Conclusion: Turning Backward While Listening Forward***

I began this thesis by arguing that podcasts are texts and that, like film or literature, we can read politics of identity and representation onto the language of sound, just as we would onto the language of images and paragraphs. More so than other texts, though, podcasting is an intensely personal experience, as we generally experience the medium individually (instead of collectively, as with film) and through our sense of hearing (as opposed to through the mind’s ear, as with literature). I went on to argue that podcasts serve as aural archives, as they capture not only a person’s voice at a particular moment, but also memorialize a cultural snapshot. At the crux of my argument, I posited that the personal, ephemeral, and cross-temporal qualities of podcasts make them ideal spaces for queer artistic exploration. Part I also explored the queer aesthetics generated through technological glitches in the first episode of *This American Life*. Read as an archive, the episode also captures the American response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and ‘90s. In doing so, the episode engages with time, dying, and futurity—topics often explored in queer art from this period. In Part II, I departed from *This American Life* to focus on *S-Town*, but continued to deepen our understanding of queer

time, failure, and memorialization. Here, I argued that *S-Town* cultivates an aesthetic of failure, from showcasing John's pessimism, to focusing on John's stasis in Woodstock. I read *S-Town* as a queer memorial for John McLemore. By combining the ephemeral nature of sound with the permanence of a streamed podcast, *S-Town* queerly memorializes John while also moving away from the statue or gravestone's emphasis on heteronormative legacy and reproduction. Instead, *S-Town* re-positions John's voice in our earshot and encourages its audience to engage with him beyond the grave, engaging our drive to Woodstock.

This thesis is by no means a comprehensive analysis of queer podcasts. In fact, I chose to write about *S-Town* because it is not queer—at least, not on the outset. As an example of an explicitly queer series, I recommend *The Heart* from Mermaid Palace and Radiotopia as “an audio art project about power and love,” which presents “personal documentary work about bodies, love, power dynamics & all of the invisible things in the air between humans” (*The Heart*). Like the early episodes of *This American Life*, *The Heart* uses glitches, layering, and narration to construct a queer sound. Many of its contributors identify as queer and are thus co-constructing a new wave of queer aesthetics in sound. Although scholars have already begun engaging with *The Heart* as a queer podcast,<sup>28</sup> I have further suggested that queer theory's productive engagement with podcasts as not only an art form, but also as a digital space for queer research. Another podcast, *Mob Queens*, begins this work by uncovering the queer history in the New York

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<sup>28</sup> See Copeland, Stacey. “Broadcasting Queer Feminisms: Lesbian and Queer Women Programming in Transnational, Local, and Community Radio.” *Journal of Radio & Audio Media*, vol. 25, no. 2, July 2018, pp. 209–23.

Italian mafia for a popular audience. Its hosts Jessica Bendinger and Michael Seligman dig into the life of Anna Genovese—ex-wife to mafia leader Vito Genovese—who transformed her ex-husband’s nightclubs into drag bars in a 1920s Greenwich Village. *Mob Queens* exemplifies a queerly productive mode of research: Its hosts pair campy conversation and commentary with adventures through New York’s clerical offices and readings from (seemingly mundane) records. The aural medium brings these elements to life: A marriage license becomes a theatrical performance; a trip to the courthouse records office, a treasure hunt. *Mob Queens* demonstrates podcasts’ accessibility for both listeners and producers make the medium the ideal place for researchers both inside and outside of academic institutions to share their work more broadly than a traditional academic publication or journal’s reach. In Part III, I put these recommendations into practice through my own podcast, *Driving to S-Town*, a form of research-creation and an extension of my academic work.

## PART III

### *Podcasting Praxis*

On July 17, 2021, I left my apartment in Saint Paul and started driving East on I-94. Somewhere south of Eau Claire—about an hour and a half into the drive—the radio started to cut out. I had it tuned to 89.3, *The Current*, a Minnesota Public Radio station. They play a mixed bag of music—a lot of local artists, some rock and pop. On July 17, I heard Janelle Monáe sing just after U2’s “Pride (in the Name of Love).” But right before I reached Hixton, Wisconsin, static bled into the music, and the songs of a nearby country station started to show through *The Current*’s lineup. Neither station was strong enough to overtake the other. Instead, they undulated, dipping in and out of earshot for miles. I reached for my handheld recorder from the seat next to me and balanced it on my thigh, hoping to pick up the static, the song, and the rush of wind over my car.

But more than the sounds themselves, I wanted to capture the moment when I crossed a threshold on my road trip. I was past leaving, no longer in range of the Twin Cities, but I was more than forty-eight hours from arriving in Woodstock. Circling somewhere in the middle, I watched the road approach my tires, watched the trees turn to farm fields, rivers, and foothills as I passed through Illinois, Kentucky, and Tennessee. I get this same feeling whenever I listen to *S-Town*, that sense of mobile stasis, of meditating in Woodstock’s sounds, the conversations between Brian, John, Olin, and

Tyler. In the car, I had countless hours to meditate, but I also felt them streaming by. My recorder was my memory.

In one of my epigraphs for this thesis, I quoted Elizabeth Freeman in *Time Binds*, one of the most formative pieces of scholarship for my work. Freeman suggests that “to write, after all, is only to hazard the possibility that there will be a future of some sort, a ‘Queer Time’ off the battlefield of everyday existence, in which the act of reading might take place somehow, somewhere” (Freeman xxiv). This meditation reflects a perpetual motion that I’ve found in scholarship, particularly in queer theory, as well as in my own work. Even though the scholars I’ve read are looking backward, toward 19<sup>th</sup> century novels or Foucauldian philosophy, they are also pushing toward some distant, unknowable future. Whereas Freeman offers her book to that future, I offer an aural archive, a podcast made from the recordings I collected during my road trip to Woodstock. This podcast, *Driving to S-Town*, captures my memories and transforms them into something new; it is a personal archive, but one that I invite you to join in some distant “Queer Time.”

*Driving to S-Town* deals in *practice as research* as well as *research-creation*.

Robin Nelson defines *practice as research* as “a research project in which practice is a key method of inquiry and where, in respect of the arts, a practice (creative writing, dance, musical score/performance, theater/performance, visual exhibition, film or other cultural practice) is submitted as substantial evidence of a research inquiry” (Nelson 8-9). Similarly, *research-creation* is “a hybrid formation, part research, part creation, part experiment that focuses on the *output of research*” (Loveless 6, *her emphasis*). As

Natalie Loveless argues, “while research-creation is (most often) linked to artistic production, its real potential rests in its demand for inter- or transdisciplinary perspective that, while marshalling the insights of emerging and developing fine arts research methodologies, exceeds the fine arts proper” (Loveless 6-7). Thus, research-creation works across, between, and through disciplines, challenging the boundaries between fine art, academia, and popular works. Along these lines, I present my podcast as evidence of the queer potential in the audio medium, not only for established sound artists, but for scholars, amateurs, and non-academic researchers as well.

My podcast constitutes research-creation and engages with the ongoing digital archive that has followed *S-Town*. In Part II, I discussed the enduring archival materials in and around Woodstock, from John’s grave and footstone to his graffitied name and corroded CDs. Rob Cover argues that, within queer digital memory, “the more we archive, the more a greater range of discourses is made available” (Cover 133). Thus, the continual archival creation after *S-Town* both revitalizes John’s public memorial and generates new knowledge amongst the show’s fans. In Woodstock, for example, one of John’s close friends, Cheryl Dodson, maintains a wildflower garden in honor of John. People send her seeds from around the world, along with cards, trinkets to place on John’s grave, and tags to hang in the town library. My podcast is not the first aural archive to come after *S-Town*, either. Tor Lundvall, another friend of John’s, released an album that incorporates some of the recordings John made from his back porch, including the sounds of train whistles and cicadas. Titled “*Tor Lundvall Presents Witness Marks: The Works of John B. McLemore*,” the album settles in John’s ears, publicizing the

sounds he saw fit to record. Similarly, as I drove to Woodstock, I recorded everything that caught my ear—the sound of the radio fading into static was only the beginning. A truck stop in Vienna, Illinois; a description of a cloud at sunset; my walk through the Birmingham Botanical Gardens; my suitcase bumping over the asphalt outside my hotel; a train whistle (likely the same one that John recorded for Tor)—all of it got caught up in my microphone. My podcast adds to this archive by recreating John and Brian’s recording practices, examining how they constructed Woodstock by recording it myself.

In line with Loveless’s definition of research-creation, my podcast is part experiment—a challenge I posed to myself. From the beginning of this project, I knew that I wanted to make a podcast that didn’t have narration. Previously, I’ve produced podcasts where I guided the story, interspersing context and background between pieces of tape from my interviewees. But for this project, I embraced the assemblage I saw in “New Beginnings,” a style of splicing together pieces of tape so that no narration was necessary. On multiple occasions—in print and on air—Ira Glass has said he used this style because “[he] wasn’t competent at writing and structuring [his] own stories until [he] was twenty-seven” (Harnessing Luck 64). Instead, he’d “interview people, get them to tell me amazing anecdotes from their lives, and then edit [himself] out completely” (Harnessing Luck 65). But through this constraint, the stories he told on *This American Life* breathed on their own. Glass fades into the background for much of “New Beginnings,” only entering the audio stage for brief transitions, or as Lawrence Steger’s sound guy. Instead, Kelly and Steger take center stage in their own stories; Glass is a steward. In my podcast, I am far from invisible; I introduce the podcast, read its credits,

and my voice appears in interviews and diary entries throughout the work. Still, by challenging myself to rely solely on my recordings, I learned to treat my voice, my observations, and myself as a character in the story, just as I treat my interviewees. With this method, I began to view the trip as an outsider with insider knowledge; a curator as opposed to a controller.

Relying on only my recordings also meant that I had to record as much sound as I could. Every noise became fascinating. This mode of viewing the world—through my ears instead of my eyes—felt textural, as if everything were buzzing with possibility, as if sound were a fabric I could stitch together. The static I heard over the radio on my first day, I thought, could be rain. One time, it was: On my second day driving, I hit massive thunderstorms in Tennessee and Kentucky. The rain hammered onto my windshield and tore up the mud from the foothills that rose above the interstate. I tuned the radio to Kentucky's Traveler Information AM radio station and heard the staticky voice warn me that flash flooding had blocked one highway and was threatening travel on another. The rain pounded. The static roared. In the sonic chaos, they bled together; if I had been able to record this moment, my microphone wouldn't have been able to tell the difference between rain and radio static. I could not fit all these moments into my podcast, nor did I expect to. Instead, this podcast is meant to meditate on moments that I managed to capture—sitting next to John McLemore's grave, sketching his headstone; listening to his recordings in the Woodstock public library; reading a poetry book on my Airbnb's porch—to sit with them, to not turn away, to imagine what came before and after them. Now, I invite you to sit with me as we visit Woodstock.



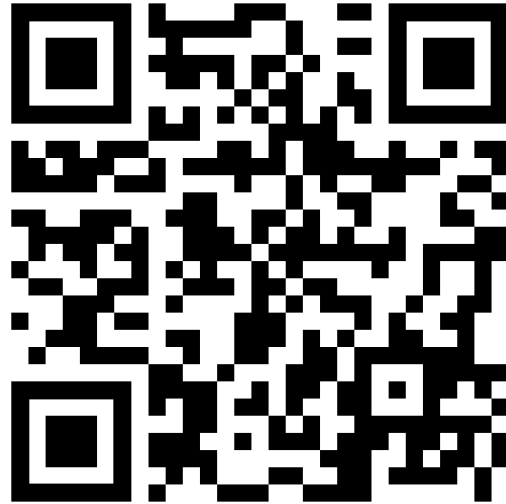


Figure 6. QR code for the podcast *Driving to S-Town* by Kira Schukar.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> To listen to the podcast, scan the QR code with your phone's camera and open the link. If you are having trouble accessing the file, please reach out to me at [schukarkira@gmail.com](mailto:schukarkira@gmail.com).

## APPENDIX: TRANSCRIPT FOR *DRIVING TO S-TOWN*

This transcript is a mixture of the script I used to create my podcast and a transcript of what each sound contains. Note that the labels in brackets (e.g. [PACKING AWAY SUITCASE]) refer to specific sounds that I recorded. When naming these sounds, I tried to be as descriptive as possible: The title refers to what I was doing or where I was during the recording. Any dialogue that appears in the recording is listed underneath the title. Still, it is impossible to capture every sound in the podcast. Instead, you can read this transcript as a vestige of the podcasting process—one of many complete steps toward making the mp3 file linked above. If you would like to explore the transcript, I recommend following along with the podcast as you read it. However, if you can't listen to the podcast in its audio format, I hope that this transcript can provide an alternative insight into my research-creation process.

### [INTRODUCTION]

KIRA: A quick content warning before we start. A major topic in the podcast *S-Town* is suicide. While suicide is not the focus of *this* podcast, it does come up a few times. You might want to listen in a space where you feel comfortable pausing the recording if you need to.

Also, if you or someone you know are struggling, you can call the national Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255. Again, that number is 1-800-273-8255. You can also text the Crisis Text Line at 741741. Just text any message to

that number, and you'll be connected with a counselor. You can contact these lifelines any time, any day, and someone will be there to support you.

[BEAT]

Hi everyone. My name is Kira Schukar. I'm a senior at Macalester College. This podcast is a part of my undergraduate honors thesis called *Queering the Ear*, and it's meant to work in tandem with the academic research I've done over the last year. *Queering the Ear* asks how podcasts can engage with queer theories and aesthetics, whether they're spotlighting LGBTQ+ relationships or bending the rules of time and memory.

I dedicate a huge section of my thesis to the podcast *S-Town*. *S-Town* was made by *This American Life* in 2017, and it's hosted by one of their producers named Brian Reed. The show follows the life of John B. McLemore, who reached out to Brian in 2012. John spent his entire life in a town called Woodstock, Alabama—he lived and died in his childhood home there. And in July of 2021, I drove to Woodstock from *my* home in Saint Paul, Minnesota.

All of the sounds and voices that you'll hear in this podcast came from that road trip—they're interviews, roadside recordings, audio diaries, lost sounds, and everything in between. This podcast has no narration, nothing written after the fact. Instead, I've layered the sounds I collected to recreate my memory of the trip and transform it into something completely new.

Writing and producing this podcast played a huge role in how I approached my academic research. It made me think about sound like fabric—something I could

stitch together like a quilt. But the people I met on my trip and the places I saw also changed the way I viewed *S-Town*. I realized that the show didn't end with Chapter VII. The podcast's fans and the people who visit Woodstock keep adding to the story. This podcast is a record of those additions. It's also my own contribution.

[BEAT]

I hope you enjoy.

Bring in [PACKING AWAY SUITCASE] and fade out

Bring in [THE CURRENT FADING OUT] and fade out

[JULY 17 DIARY]

KIRA: Alright, uh...I'm doing my first, uh, recorded diary. This is a little awkward, but I am driving through Illinois. I'm almost to Decatur. I have like 35 minutes left...

Fade out [JULY 17 DIARY]

Fade in [PACKING AWAY SUITCASE] and fade out

Fade in [REST STOP IN VIENNA, IL] and play underneath [INTERVIEW WITH KATIE WILLIS]

Fade in [INTERVIEW WITH KATIE WILLIS]

KATIE: I mean I guess you're kind of like the people that came down for the podcast—right?

KIRA: Yeah! I mean the, Brian Reed, the producer and the guy who did all the interviews is from New York. So, like different, different Northern state.

KATIE: Right, I just mean, like you were gonna go stay in at least close proximity to

KIRA: Yeah, but like I feel like I'm...almost trying to like recreate his kind of like journey down. You know what I mean? Like, having never been to Alabama? I'm just kinda coming here and seeing what it's like [laughing].

KATIE: [agreeing] Mmm, yeah.

KIRA: And trying to, like, get a sense of how people feel about the community...

Fade out **[INTERVIEW WITH KATIE WILLIS]**

Fade in **[INTERVIEW WITH CHERYL DODSON 1]**

KIRA: That's like exactly how I felt is I just kind of wanted to know more about him because, I mean, like you were saying earlier, it's hard to fit 50 years into a 7-hour podcast

CHERYL: Right.

KIRA: and really represent him as his whole self.

Continue playing **[REST STOP IN VIENNA, IL]**, then fade out

Fade in [**PACKING AWAY SUITCASE**], then cut out

Fade up to [**BIRMINGHAM BOTANICAL GARDENS**]

[**BIRMINGHAM BOTANICAL GARDENS**]

KIRA: So right now we're in the Birmingham Botanical Gardens. Which is so beautiful. It's so green and right now you know there are a lot of familiar plants, but right now I'm under a tree and I can't identify it, but it has these big leaves that are like the size of two of my hands put together.

Fade out [**BIRMINGHAM BOTANICAL GARDENS**]

[**JULY 18 DIARY 2**]

KIRA: it's it doesn't feel real. I'm actually here

Isolate and bring up [**WOODSTOCK TRAIN WHISTLE IN DISTANCE**]. Fade up and cut off suddenly.

[**HARD PAUSE**]

[**BEAT**]

[**JULY 20 DIARY**]

KIRA: Alright, uhm so I just arrived in. In Woodstock I just. I just arrived in Woodstock, and I pulled into the Community library. And I'm going to be meeting Cheryl Dodson here at 3 o'clock.

**[INTERVIEW WITH CHERYL DODSON 1]**

CHERYL: When they interviewed me, Brian Reed said, I've noticed that all of John's friends are talkers. [KIRA and CHERYL laugh] So you'll have to interrupt me 'cause I keep talking, but it's funny you after he said that I was like, 'Oh well, I guess so.' But he said he enjoyed it. He said, 'these southern people and their stories.' [laughing]

[...]

CHERYL: One friend that I've made from the podcast. She said that after the podcast they were really grieving John and they needed somewhere for that grief to go so. So that's how the tag project that's over there and the wildflower seeds started 'cause I didn't want to do a GoFundMe, I didn't want it to look like I was personally taking up money. I thought that that just didn't look right. So I said, well, people asked what his favorite flower was and I said, you know what? He loved wildflowers. So I said, if y'all mail me seeds I'll plant them and then, the other thing was people wanting to come to the area but couldn't, so we would say we'll decorate A tag and we'll put it on the gate and then we didn't know it. But then we got. I don't know a couple 100 tags...

Fade out **[INTERVIEW WITH CHERYL DODSON 1]**

Transition into **[INTERVIEW WITH CHERYL DODSON 2]**

**[INTERVIEW WITH CHERYL DODSON 2]**

KIRA: And so when people send you the the wildflower seeds, do you get a lot of those, every year or?

CHERYL: The first year we got a lot. I think I got them from 27 states and five different countries, and same with the tags. Most people did both when they participated. So then the second year I still got. There's a few people that really stay in touch and you know, and they would mail like a pound of 'em, you know. And then last year with COVID we didn't, but it was kind of funny the flowers bloomed anyways...

Transition to **[PLAYING UKULELE WITH THE CRICKETS]** playing underneath

**[INTERVIEW WITH CHERYL DODSON 3]**

**[INTERVIEW WITH CHERYL DODSON 3]**

CHERYL: I I saw the transition the first time I—I was just saying come to my house on Sunday afternoon, you know? So I might have six people on Sunday afternoon at the house. Well, when we were sitting there one Sunday afternoon, one lady just broke down in tears and said I lost my sister and then that's where I saw the transition to how people what was, what they were relating to and what



was really, you know, drawing them to it. And so over and over again it started being someone—and I think, maybe John gave them that understanding of how their loved one felt, you know? And so, so yeah, they—it was like they were, they were on a journey. And then we had people too that said, I *am* a John, so you know they wanted to explore the area he was from, and it came to where it was real popular during the summer because of road trips. So a lot of people would message “I’m on a road trip.” You know, and they want to, they want to go to the cemetery they wanted just to see see things in the area.

**[WALKING AROUND CEMETARY]**

KIRA: All right, here we are. There's a chain link fence and two different gates made out of brick and cast iron. I was just gonna walk for a little bit and maybe just keep recording. Um, see how that feels. All right, here we go.

Sit with **[WALKING AROUND CEMETERY]** for a while

Keep **[WALKING AROUND CEMETARY]** under **[INTERVIEW WITH CHERYL DODSON 3]**

**[INTERVIEW WITH CHERYL DODSON 3]**

CHERYL: I think it's almost like when they do that pilgrimage, they need some type of healing.

**[WALKING AROUND CEMETERY]**

KIRA: So I've just been sketching the footstone and a couple of things around the gravestone that people have left. Um. There's a beautiful like winged key with a clock in the middle of it that somebody left a few other keys too, but there's a bracelet and some Miller Highlife bottle cap [laughs quietly]. And some, some shells. And a little crocodile figurine, a little doll and a cat figurine, which is kind of interesting. A little Altoids container, not sure what's inside of that. Oh and an Angel reading.

Fade in crickets from **[PLAYIING UKULELE WITH THE CRICKETS]** under

**[WALKING AROUND CEMETERY]**

**[WALKING AROUND CEMETERY]**

KIRA: It feels very real being here, I guess, but also a little surreal. 'Cause it feels like walking into a story. I've heard other people have used that phrase, too. Even though it's real life, but I guess that's what podcasting does. Makes real life feel like a story.

Fade out **[WALKING THROUGH CEMETERY]** and keep **[PLAYING UKULELE WITH THE CRICKETS]** under **[INTERVIEW WITH CHERYL DODSON 1]**

**[INTERVIEW WITH CHERYL DODSON 1]**

CHERYL: And it, you know, it's kind of funny. But then people, just like you would make a pilgrimage to town and they'd get on the door. So it's been a—it's, it's been a journey for myself as well so. I'll think about that. I was like, you know, my relationship with John continues even though. Uh, it's not—it's, it's one-sided now. But he, he was a big, big factor on me. I was about 27 when I met him, and I'm 49 now.

Fade out **[PLAYING UKULELE WITH THE CRICKETS]**

**[INTERVIEW WITH CHERYL DODSON 1]**

CHERYL: But I tell people the most important thing to me when they come to town is that, I'll take you around, I'll show you the town, but it does not end at that cemetery. His story—he had an impact. And and that's the most important thing to remember to me is not, not there.

**[LONG BEAT]**

Fade in **[JOHN'S RAIN RECORDING]** under this section

Bring in **[PACKING AWAY SUITCASE]** and fade out

Bring in **[THE CURRENT FADING OUT]**

Track stops. CD whirrs. Rain resumes.

Bring in **[PACKING AWAY SUITCASE]** and fade out

Track stops. CD whirrs. Rain resumes.

Bring in [**REST STOP IN VIENNA, IL**]

Track stops. CD whirrs. Rain resumes.

Fade out [**REST STOP IN VIENNA, IL**]

Keep [**JOHN'S RAIN RECORDING**] under [**JULY 18 DIARY 2**]

[**JULY 18 DIARY 2**]

KIRA: I was just doing some research for tomorrow. I think I'm going to go to a park. The botanical gardens, they're like right by my hotel. And then drive up to, um, the Burdock Book Collective. They're only open on Wednesdays and Thursdays, but I'm meeting with one of the founders tomorrow around 3 or 4. Her name is Katie. She's from Birmingham, so she'll be really good to talk to, hopefully.

Fade out [**JOHN'S RAIN RECORDING**]

[**JULY 18 DIARY 2**]

KIRA (CONT.): And then I'm going to drive to Woodstock.

Bring in [**BIRMINGHAM BOTANICAL GARDENS**] with [**INTERVIEW WITH KATIE WILLIS**]

**[INTERVIEW WITH KATIE WILLIS]**

KATIE: But we have burdock growing. There's burdock here. And then a little bit of—this is, the big burdock is from last year, and then we have, like some new burdock growing, and then we're doing medicinal herbs, and like also mixing in some natives um, 'cause I started a landscaping job, and. So, so people have been giving us native plants to put in as well.

KIRA: Cool, right, so what do you guys use the garden for, like what's kind of the the idea behind it?

KATIE: Uh, well we wanted to be—especially with COVID stuff—it's nice to have—and you'll see once we go inside—just more space for people to be.

Because the room that we use is pretty small, though there's like potential to open it up by removing furniture and stuff. But we just wanted to have more space for people. Come and not feel like they had to come and buy a book to be here, 'cause that's not, [train whistle in background] I mean we're not gonna, we don't make money. Uh, it's not our goal to sell books—I mean, it *is* our goal to sell books [KIRA laughs], but like you know we don't want people to feel like that's a necessity in order to be in the space.

Keep **[INTERVIEW WITH KATIE WILLIS]** over **[BIRMINGHAM BOTANICAL GARDENS]**

KATIE: So this is the, the bookstore. Uhm, these are all used books that we have. And then we've been doing pop-ups, so all of our like new inventory we

keep in these boxes. And then take them, like we load up our cars with tables and books and go sell them different places.

KIRA: Yeah, so do you guys go to like different farmers markets or just like—are there...?

KATIE: Uhm, we so we, we started out as a pop-up bookstore and we would go, we went to some breweries ,which was like a funny experience 'cause it's mostly like white bro dudes [KIRA laughs] who like are like, “I don't think that this is feminist,” and we're like, “what do you know what feminism is?” But then we've also, like our—one of our most recent pop ups was at this kombucha place, um, that's like right down the road and we did really well there. And, and there's like been some street markets that we've gone to.

Fade out [INTERVIEW WITH KATIE WILLIS] and keep [BIRMINGHAM BOTANICAL GARDENS]

[BIRMINGHAM BOTANICAL GARDENS]

KIRA: So we're in the Birmingham Botanical Gardens...I'm just going to keep recording.

Keep [BIRMINGHAM BOTANICAL GARDENS] and bring in [INTERVIEW WITH KATIE WILLIS]

**[INTERVIEW WITH KATIE WILLIS]**

KATIE: It was mostly just like, we saw a need for, I think there was a need for more independent bookstores and also a need for queer space, um. Because there are a lot of queer people in Alabama, and in the South, even though there's this idea that, you know, we're all like in hiding or don't exist. Um, and I think we just need more spaces where it's like okay to be. And we definitely need more sober queer spaces because a lot of the programming is you know around gay bars. So that was another reason that we saw a need for the bookstore.

**[BIRMINGHAM BOTANICAL GARDENS]**

KIRA: Oh, I took some photos by this one pond that has a statue of a girl and she's kneeling over the water and she's looking at this, bullfrog [laughs]. Bullfrog statue in the middle of the pond. Um. That's what I'm standing next to right now, and she's kind of swathed in all of these bushes with bright green leaves. And she's kind of hidden in there, and there's all this really long grass all around the pond and ferns that are kind of dipping their leaves into the water.

Continue playing **[BIRMINGHAM BOTANICAL GARDENS]** underneath

**[INTERVIEW WITH KATIE WILLIS]**

Keep **[BIRMINGHAM BOTANICAL GARDENS]** underneath **[READING JOHNNY COLEY'S POEM]**

**[READING JOHNNY COLEY’S POEM]**

KIRA: All right, this is me reading a poem by Johnny Coley, uh, who is in Alabama—actually Birmingham poet.

The back of the book says that Johnny is uh, “a sage of the Birmingham experimental scene” and this book is a quote, “brilliant chronicle of queer life,” unquote. So this is the first poem in the book, and so far it's my favorite, although the other ones are great too. But this one is just so beautiful, so it's called “lovely ricochets,” and it's for Davey Williams.

“How the patient light becomes dazzle everywhere in her eyes on the dark green magnolia, on the car door, sifting down bright and shimmering just—out just beyond the porch and the roof...”

Weave together **[READING JOHNNY COLEY’S POEM]** with **[INTERVIEW WITH KATIE WILLIS]**

**[INTERVIEW WITH KATIE WILLIS]**

KATIE: Yeah, I think—I grew up here and did not imagine living here as an adult, like the whole time I was in high school. I was like, “okay, I'm going to go to college somewhere out of state and I am just going to be gone.” Um, because I felt so different and, like I didn't have a space where I belonged. And I know that a lot of—like, yeah, a lot of people I grew up with have like felt that way. A lot of



people that I met here as an adult and who haven't been able to leave Alabama feel that way. I think it, it took me leaving in order to come back and like fully appreciate this place.

Start bringing back **[READING JOHNNY COLEY'S POEM]**

**[INTERVIEW WITH KATIE WILLIS]**

KIRA: Yeah, what? What brought you back?

**[READING JOHNNY COLEY'S POEM]**

KIRA: "...indistinguishable but separate from to go on continue. It's actually easy. It does itself slow, decent slow descent of the lights all around where you are walking, possibly with some difficulty slowly. Embrace of cozy night and sleep. I painted the word chrysanthemums today in white watercolor on blue watercolor. Chrysanthemums are blooming in the cold, he says..."

**[INTERVIEW WITH KATIE WILLIS]**

KATIE: Yeah, just like being away gave me time to re—to reflect on Alabama and the South in a different way, to hear how people like saw us.

**[READING JOHNNY COLEY'S POEM]**

KIRA: "...feelings, he says although we know the world is empty, birds flutter up out of the dark leaves." (Coley 9)

**[INTERVIEW WITH KATIE WILLIS]**

KATIE: Like there's this idea that the South is so bad, but it's just, it's just horrible in different ways in other places, and I like hate that we get such a bad rap, because I think you know after coming here and seeing like—becoming part of this queer community that I'm a part of, I'm just like, oh we're like pretty amazing and creative and the South is radical. It's just the politics that are bad. It's like not the people. And I think I really wanted to reconnect with that.

Fade in **[BIRMINGHAM BOTANICAL GARDENS]**

**[READING JOHNNY COLEY'S POEM]**

KIRA: I just think that's a beautiful poem.

Fade out **[BIRMINGHAM BOTANICAL GARDENS]** and fade in **[CRICKETS OUTSIDE]**

Bring up **[WOODSTOCK TRAIN WHISTLE IN DISTANCE]** and cut off all sound suddenly

**[INTERVIEW WITH CHERYL DODSON 1]**

CHERYL: What I tell people S-Town is, is it's the geographical coordinates of anyone who's suffering from depression. You know, so if you are depressed, you live in S-Town.

Yeah, John was really struggling with depression. There was a lot of warning signs I missed. I know now because after the fact, I made it my mission to educate myself and find out what we can do to, to help people like John, but at the time, suicide was taboo to talk about. And, and so we, we really didn't deal with it—or the way that we dealt with it was by not dealing with it.

[...]

CHERYL: What happened after the podcast came out, I found some of John's business cards in his workshop. And people that were being kind online, I thought you know, these people would appreciate him, so I would mail 'em. And I would get people crying and stuff. So after I ran out of the originals, I went to have him reprinted and when I got to the printer, a young man was at the counter and he said, "did you know him?" And I said, "I did," and I said, "I'm trying to help people like him," and he said, "can I give you my sister Katie's number? She works with Alabama suicide prevention" or she's going to school to help people like him. So, uh, he gave her my number. She called me and we met for coffee and she said I would like to encourage you to take the at-home study course. So what QPR is, is it's just like CPR for physical health, but QPR's for mental health. So when somebody is in crisis, it gives you some ideas of how to have a conversation with them. You know, because that's what we find is that people

need to feel heard. You know so, so that's what that's what we do now. But I took that course and, I don't know, I'd say it's been about three years now that I've been speaking publicly.

Bring in **[CRICKETS OUTSIDE]**

**[INTERVIEW WITH CHERYL DODSON 1]**

CHERYL: What I think about with John. I'd just like to know if John was looking down that he would say that we did the right thing by him. You know it makes me emotional, but I want him to know that I think maybe with him not having a spouse and not having children, I feel protective of his memory. And I'm like— like now, that's not saying he didn't get mad and cuss me out [laughs] you know, because I think about that, like when I'm planting wildflowers, I think I bet he'd tell me I'm doing it all wrong. Like you don't like you don't, you know. But it's funny, you know, but when somebody cares about you that way, it's a rare thing in this world.

I've got a little notebook and if I'm, you know your memory is a funny thing so sometimes something will trigger it and you know I'll think it's very important, so I'll write it down because I'll think about like, like an aspect that wasn't addressed in the podcast was his love for music. So he had a great couple a thousand CDs, um, in his collection, and so I always like people to know that because I think that's an important, important side of him that's just, uh, tells a lot

about him. Yeah, he was just, uh, really, he liked to collect, um, he liked a lot of British music, he liked um, he loved '80s, and that's where we connected. That's where our friendship began was music...

Fade out [**CRICKETS OUTSIDE**] and fade in "Safety Dance" from [**JOHN'S 80S MIX FOR CHERYL**]. Play underneath [**CHERYL UNBOXING CDS**]

[**CHERYL UNBOXING CDS**]

CHERYL: ...And I brought that...CD player. This is some great—the thing about when. These are some CDs he gave me. But I didn't know if you'd want to listen to some of this stuff.

KIRA: Yeah!

CHERYL: Which now, here's John. This is typical: Booty Mix. [KIRA laughs]. You know. But, there's another Goo Goo Dolls. But yeah. And look this is typical John too. See how these CDs are getting eaten away?

KIRA: Yeah...

CHERYL: He had his own theory of what to clean CDs with, and obviously it does not last long [chuckles] [door opens]. But yeah, I just thought that might be—since we can't go out to the property, I thought this would put you in touch...

Fade out [**CHERYL UNBOXING CDS**] and fade up [**JOHN'S 80S MIX FOR CHERYL**]

Track ends. Series of CLICKS as KIRA replaces the CD. CD whirrs. Intro to Pet Shop

Boys song plays and stops suddenly.

Bring in [**JOHN'S MORNING BIRDS RECORDING**] then quickly transition to

[**JOHN'S RAIN RECORDING**]

Skip to next track: John's backyard just after rain.

[**JOHN'S RAIN RECORDING**]

CHERYL: ...I'm gonna step away to the bank to sign some papers, but I'll be back, I was just gonna let you know.

KIRA: Alright, I'm listening to, just this recording of rain [laughs]

CHERYL: Which one? Oh rain.

KIRA: Yeah, there's a bunch that are just like "Rain" or like "After Rain."

CHERYL: And see to me that's beautiful to me.

KIRA: Yeah, well it's also, you know I've been making recordings of just like all the cicadas at night and everything, so it's weird because I've been making, like very similar recordings— [laughs]

CHERYL: That's funny

KIRA: —while I'm here. And then to find these, it's kinda jarring...

CHERYL: Everybody finds that little thing that goes—that connection. Well that's why, I'm glad, I thought about that today because I thought, you know in this move I'm so chaotic. But I remember bringing this down here for safe keeping, and I thought, I bet you would appreciate that [chuckles]

KIRA: No, I really do. Thank you.

CHERYL: Oh, you're welcome.

[crickets and drizzle from CD player]

CHERYL: [indistinctly] Hey Kira, do you wanna meet my husband?

KIRA: Oh, sure!

**[JOHN'S RAIN RECORDING]** fades out

[BEAT]

**[END CREDITS]**

KIRA: Thank you for listening to this podcast. All recordings, production, and sound mixing were done by me, Kira Schukar. Funding for this trip was provided by the Critchett Committee at Macalester College.

This podcast included a short clip from the song "Safety Dance" by Men Without Hats. The song was on John McLemore's '80s mix that he made for Cheryl Dodson.

The poem you heard on this podcast was written by an Alabama artist named Johnny Coley. Johnny's poem is called "lovely ricochets," and it's from his most recent book, *Suggests Nightfall*. You can buy the book and hear recordings of

Johnny reading his work at [sweetwreath.bandcamp.com](http://sweetwreath.bandcamp.com). Again, that's sweet wreath dot band camp dot com.

I would like to extend a huge thank you to my interviewees, Cheryl Dodson and Katie Willis. They were absolutely incredible to talk to, and I could not have made this podcast without them.

If you would like to learn more about Cheryl's work on suicide prevention, I encourage you to check out the Alabama Suicide Prevention and Resource Coalition. Their website is [asparc.org](http://asparc.org). Again, that's A-S-P-A-R-C, dot org. And if you're ever in Birmingham, stop by Katie's store, the Burdock Book Collective. You can find out more about Burdock and their books-to-prisons project at [burdockbookcollective.com](http://burdockbookcollective.com). "Burdock" is spelled B-U-R-D-O-C-K. Again, that's burdock book collective, dot com.

Of course, there were many more people that I interviewed and talked to for this project whose voices did not appear in this podcast. Thank you to everyone who welcomed me to Birmingham and Woodstock and who made this trip a truly memorable experience.

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Thank you for listening, and take care.



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