

Authenticity and Authority of Voice in the Post-*Serial*
Investigative Podcast Genre

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Introduction

In recent years, audio podcasting has become a massively popular medium for long form, non-fiction storytelling. In 2019, 62 million Americans listened to podcasts regularly, more than triple the number who did so in 2013 (Adgate). Commentators have attributed podcasting's rapid rise in popularity to a confluence of technology and storytelling, originating with two developments in 2014. Firstly, Apple's iOS 8 placed a standalone podcast app on millions of users' home screens. Nuzum claims that Apple's podcast app turned what had previously been a "clubby and isolated" medium exclusively for the technology-savvy into something easily and conveniently accessible to even the most "app-averse, effort-averse, and complexity-averse" listeners (248). Secondly, long-running radio show *This American Life* released a spinoff podcast, *Serial*, which reached a level of popularity unprecedented in podcasting with its reinvestigation of a real-life murder mystery. True crime had long been popular in other media including film and television, but the newly popular podcast apps brought it to the forefront of popular consciousness, and it is clear that "*Serial* would have never been *Serial* without the introduction of the podcast app" (Nuzum 247). Described as a "revolutionary new program of investigative journalism", *Serial* received a Peabody Award in 2015 and eventually reached a listenership of 170 million (McCracken "Introduction" 1). *Serial* itself also played an important role introducing podcasting to a vast audience who may otherwise have remained intimidated or reluctant to try the new format. In the run up to *Serial's* release, *This American Life* produced a promotional video titled "How to Listen to a Podcast with Ira and Mary", in which *TAL* host Ira Glass and an octogenarian friend demonstrate exactly how to download, stream, and subscribe to *Serial's* feed. "We've come to learn that many of you do not know how to get a podcast," states Glass while an onscreen caption adds, "especially you older people" (Lind 00:16-00:20). In this video, Glass's persona and the qualities of his voice seem to encompass not just that of a journalist and radio host, but also a teacher and a friend. It is emblematic, therefore, of the relationship of trust that *Serial* and podcasts like it establish with their audiences, and which, as works of non-fiction, they rely on to be able to speak with authority. Yet, despite the popularity and impact of podcasting, the relationship between voice, authenticity and authority in the medium remains understudied. This thesis will analyse the ways that *Serial* and three other American podcasts create a new model of trust and authority, drawing on a range of literary and journalistic traditions to create a new genre I call the investigative podcast.

Since the release of *Serial*, podcasting has emerged as a popular medium for episodic, non-fiction storytelling, and an alternative to broadcast radio. *Serial* and its host Sarah Koenig inspired a

rapidly growing subgenre of long-form investigative journalism podcasts with high production values, including Brian Reed's *S-Town*, Christopher Goffard's *Dirty John*, and Jon Frechette and Todd Luoto's *The Polybius Conspiracy*, all from 2017. Unlike other podcast subgenres, these podcasts have intricate sound design, complex editing, and catchy theme tunes. They are deliberately paced with plot twists and turns, rising tension, and cliff-hanger endings to episodes. The hosts all speak with an informal and personal tone, and often connect the story to a broader theme or message about American society. My thesis will examine these four American podcasts as literary texts through the lens of audionarratology, a term coined by Mildorf and Kinzel in their book on the "interfaces between sound and narrative" to describe the study of the relationship "between oral and aural forms of expression... and their narrative affordances, structures, and functions" (v). Specifically, I will examine the role of "voice" in these texts both as a literary concept and as a literal, audible characteristic. In his book *Radio*, Arnheim describes the unrealised potential of twentieth century radio as an aural storytelling medium. Radio, he argues, has been dominated by voices that lacked emotional effect, vocal authority, and a sense of authenticity. I will argue that by assembling complex authorial voices from verbal, paraverbal, and nonverbal elements, investigative podcasts realise this potential in ways previous audio media have not.

Researchers have claimed that after 2014, "the market for serialized true crime podcasts had been established and on the coattails of *Serial* came a raft of others" (Yardley et al. "Forever Trapped" 504). Yardley et al. identify at least five podcasts released shortly after *Serial* that investigate historical murder cases in a similar style, including *In the Dark* (2016), *Accused* (2016), and *Bowraville* (2018). Violent crimes like murder and kidnapping, particularly of young women, have indeed proved popular subjects for podcast journalists "in the vanguard of the [true crime] subgenre" (505). However, many podcasts that have adopted or built upon Koenig's investigative style and format tell stories that do not involve crime, or do so only peripherally. Brian Reed's *S-Town* and Dan Taberski's *Missing Richard Simmons* are just two examples of podcasts that mention the possibility of an unsolved crime in their early episodes, but depart from this focus in favour of the inner mysteries of a subject's personal life. ABC's *Finding Drago* concerned a mystery as innocuous as an anonymous fan-fiction author, but was described as "*Serial* for *Rocky* fans" by reviewers nonetheless (Williams). To say that *Serial*'s legacy is the popularization of true-crime podcasts is, therefore, only part of the story. In this thesis I will argue that the subgenre born from *Serial*'s success is better encapsulated by a term like "investigative" podcast than simply "true crime". This is because *Serial*'s stylistic resemblance to non-crime-centric podcasts like *S-Town* is much stronger than its relationship to true-crime texts in other media, and the

form it pioneered is defined not by its content, but by its approach to the investigative process and the act of truth-finding.

A full picture of the investigative podcast subgenre is beyond the scope of this thesis. I will therefore focus on one of its most critical aspects: voice, both as a literary device and an aural feature of human speech. Typical characteristics of the investigative podcast genre include a single host, who both narrates and conducts interviews with subjects to explore a central mystery. The podcaster therefore takes on a multifaceted role as not only a detective figure in an investigation, but also as the story's author, narrator, and often active participant if not protagonist. These roles are combined into a complex authorial voice that works to build a relationship of trust with listeners. The term "podcasting" was coined in 2004 to describe what had previously been referred to as "online radio" (Hammersley). Radios have historically spoken to groups, acting as focal points of communal spaces. Throughout the twentieth century, broadcast speech was directed at the "audience as 'the family'", rather than the individual listener (Forty 31). "Podcast" however, a term derived from the words "iPod" and "broadcast", emphasizes an individual listening experience, played through headphones on personal devices. In their emotional effects, podcasts are therefore more akin to reading a novel than to listening to broadcast radio. This is reflected in the voices used by podcast hosts, who often strive to build trust with listeners through not just perceived authority but emotional authenticity and intimacy. Podcasts combine "the intimacy of voice... and the convenience and portability of an MP3 download" (Hammersley). *Serial's* host Sarah Koenig achieved a "mainstream prominence and respectability" undreamt of by "more traditional texts" of the true crime genre in print or television (Buozis "Doxing" 357). The podcast's listenership included many "highly educated, culturally literate fans who might not normally consume" true crime (357). I will argue that this is because of *Serial's* manipulation of the audience's trust relationships. The podcast's authority comes from the way its authorial voice facilitates and tacitly encourages listeners to take part in the investigation process themselves. Listeners are led to question the authority of certain voices in the podcast, but not the journalistic authority of the podcast itself.

Investigative podcasts also typically feature a central, individual subject, whose voice is scrutinised and analysed by the podcast host as part of the investigation. This thesis will explore the vocal relationships and hierarchies in Sarah Koenig's *Serial* (2014), Brian Reed's *S-Town* (2017), Christopher Goffard's *Dirty John* (2017) and Jon Frechette and Todd Luoto's *The Polybius Conspiracy* (2017). The respective central subjects of these podcasts are the alleged murderer Adnan Syed, eccentric clockmaker John B. McLemore, conman John Meehan, and conspiracy theorist Bobby

Feldstein. In each podcast, subjects' voices are fundamental to their characterization in every sense. Podcasters can build trust in - or cast doubt upon - different voices through editing and acoustic manipulation, and even if a podcast "depicts events that actually happened", listeners are "immersed in a carefully crafted storyworld" which informs how they interpret the people, places, and events portrayed (DeMair 28). The investigative podcast, therefore, is as much literature as it is journalism. The podcasts mentioned above use conventions from fiction genres as diverse as Shakespearean tragedy, Southern Gothic, noir, horror, and science fiction to filter complex and ambiguous true stories into accessible entertainment. Their depictions of plot, character, and setting are informed by these genres, and the podcasts deliberately evoke these genres' associated characters and voices to interpret the voices of real subjects. Although these literary influences are integral to the podcasts' narrative structure and effects, I will argue that this reliance on fiction texts for reference points and narrative elements is problematic for the genre's often-stated goals of objectivity, realism, and plurality of voice.

Chapter 1 will examine the first season of *Serial*, which follows host Sarah Koenig's reinvestigation of a 1999 Baltimore murder case through an intricately edited arrangement of interviews, old police and courtroom recordings, and narration by Koenig. The podcast's central subject is the man convicted, Adnan Syed, whose voice is heard over a phone line from inside prison. *Serial* is the defining text of the investigative podcast genre, against which it is helpful to compare all subsequent examples to better understand their use of voice. This chapter will explore the ways *Serial* constructs voices of authority by extending and challenging the conventions of the literary genres with which it bears the most similarities: superficially, true crime and detective fiction, but also Shakespearean tragedy. Scholars like DeMair have described how Koenig's podcast creates a relationship of trust between speaker and listener, and how voices are coded with different values based on features like regional accent and gender. I will argue that these depictions of voice are consistent with the podcast's styling of the Syed case as a "Shakespearean mashup" (Koenig "The Alibi" 06:10), which highlights the literary influences on the investigative podcast genre. Koenig's own complex authorial voice, encompassing nonverbal elements like editing as well as verbal and paraverbal ones, is the one with which listeners are most encouraged to identify. *Serial's* many constituent voices are presented with varying levels of authority by an authorial voice which always controls who is heard, and in what contexts. *Serial* creates a new formula for investigation narratives – one where cases are not solved conclusively but opened and reopened by new detective figures in the belief that previous investigations were flawed or incomplete.

Chapter 2 builds upon this discussion of investigative storytelling by examining *S-Town*, a seven-part podcast written and presented by Brian Reed. *S-Town* follows a similar style of literary podcast journalism to *Serial*, but does so in ways that depart from the strictly true-crime subject matter of its predecessor. This supports the notion of the investigative podcast as a distinct genre. *S-Town* is also a spinoff of *This American Life*, and begins with a broadly similar murder mystery to *Serial*. Reed is invited to Woodstock, Alabama by an eccentric local clockmaker named John B. McLemore who asks him to help solve a rumoured local murder. Reed soon determines that no murder has taken place, and instead concerns himself with investigating a more abstract or emotional truth about life and Gothic decay in the American South. At the end of Chapter II, Reed reveals that McLemore has committed suicide, and the podcast transforms into an investigation into McLemore's life and death, and the feuds that arise over his estate and legacy. This chapter will argue that *S-Town's* creators try to do justice to its deceased subject by emphasising McLemore's own deliberate and complex use of voice to exert authorial influence on the story. However, *S-Town* exposes a tension inherent to the investigative podcast genre between a desire to authentically represent the voices of subjects, and a need to manipulate those voices to create a compelling narrative. For *S-Town*, this tension between author and subject voices has even manifested in the legal arena. In 2019, McLemore's estate filed a lawsuit against *S-Town's* producers, claiming that the podcast amounted to a violation of McLemore's right to privacy. Producer Julie Snyder claimed, instead, that McLemore was "absolutely an active and consenting participant in the documentary" (qtd. in Maddaus). I will argue that this ambiguity in the author-subject relationship is a result of *S-Town's* move towards a more novelistic interpretation of the podcast format. Consisting of simultaneously released "chapters" rather than serially released "episodes", *S-Town* draws inspiration from Southern Gothic writers like William Faulkner and Harper Lee in its depiction of Alabamian people, places, and institutions. *S-Town's* literary inspirations show how voice interacts with genre conventions to create authoritative or authentic-seeming narrative, while actually undercutting the agency of the real people whose voices it features.

In Chapter 3, I will examine how these constructions of authority and authenticity are variously perpetuated, extended, or subverted in Christopher Goffard's *Dirty John*. *Dirty John* was released simultaneously as both a six-part podcast and a series of web articles for the *LA Times*, and has since been adapted into a television miniseries. This allows for an analysis of how podcast audionarratology effects audiences in different ways to other media. *Dirty John* tells the story of Orange County interior designer Debra Newell and her relationship with violent conman John Meehan. Like *Serial* and *S-Town*, it draws upon genre fiction to create its representations of character and plot. Genre influences on *Dirty John* include horror, in its depiction of Meehan as akin to a slasher

movie villain or inhuman monster. He is the story's monster, an "uncomplicated dream of evil" in Goffard's words. Goffard's narration and his cynical depiction of the Southern California setting also draw on the work of writers like Raymond Chandler and Joan Didion. Like John McLemore in *S-Town*, Meehan died before the podcast's production was complete. I will argue that Goffard, like Reed, effectively constructs a composite voice for his central, absent subject. Letters and messages written by Meehan are read aloud for the podcast, and an authorial decision is made each time as to whose literal voices should depict Meehan's literary one. The role of the investigator is also complicated in *Dirty John*, as the central investigative voice is not Goffard himself, but the character Jacquelyn. *Dirty John* is rich in interplay between different kinds of voice: literary voices are contrasted with literal ones, masculine with feminine, verbal with paraverbal, deceptive with authentic. *Dirty John* is further evidence that investigative podcasts do not contain a plurality of voice as they often suggest, or, if they do, they subordinate them to a unified authorial persona. This manipulates real voices to elicit emotional responses in listeners, thus inherently fictionalising the subjects.

Finally, Chapter 4 will explore how the investigative podcasters can use the previously described relationship of trust between speaker and listener to blur the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction. I will focus on Jon Frechette and Todd Luoto's podcast *The Polybius Conspiracy*. This podcast follows Frechette and Luoto's investigation of a mind-altering video game which supposedly appeared in Portland, Oregon arcades in 1981 before mysteriously vanishing. Both the podcast and the urban legend that inspired it contribute to a recent revival of interest in 1980s American popular culture and science fiction, epitomised by Netflix's *Stranger Things*, or the novel *Ready Player One* and its 2018 film adaptation. Frechette and Luoto interview key figures from Portland's retro-gaming community to try and piece together whether there is any truth to the Polybius legend. After the series finished, producers acknowledged that several key figures in the podcast were in fact fictional characters played by voice actors. This includes the central subject Bobby Feldstein, whose claims of having played "Polybius" are investigated at length in the podcast. Over the course of its seven episodes, *The Polybius Conspiracy* can therefore be read as not just an investigation into the original urban legend, but a reflexive examination of how online hoaxes and conspiracy theories form, spread, and evolve. This chapter will argue that *The Polybius Conspiracy* serves to challenge and deconstruct conventions of the investigative podcast genre. The central character Bobby is a subversion of the relationship between podcast host and subject as established by *Serial*, and questions the role that the voice of an investigative podcast's "protagonist" should play in the story. I will also argue that *The Polybius Conspiracy's* use of place creates a relationship of trust between the listener and the authorial voice. By depicting arcades, the city of Portland, and the Pacific Northwest more broadly as mysterious

and unknowable settings, the podcast encourages listeners to question the authority and authenticity of all voices in the podcast, except the authorial voice itself. *The Polybius Conspiracy* comments on forensic fandom, problematising the paranoid ways in which online communities obsess over missing details and unsolved mysteries. The many investigating voices in the podcast deliberately make it harder, not easier, to discover any kind of authentic truth, and an individual voice's authenticity becomes almost impossible to determine. Thus, Frechette and Luoto use the investigative format established by *Serial*, *S-Town*, and *Dirty John* to explore the fictionality inherent to the genre by making the authority and authenticity of its different voices much more ambiguous.

As such, this thesis charts the rapid development of a distinct genre of nonfiction storytelling in podcasting, from its emergence with *Serial*, experimentation in *S-Town* and *Dirty John*, and reflexive examination in *The Polybius Conspiracy*. Situated at the intersection of literature, journalism, and technology, the investigative podcast introduces new and compelling ways of listening and experiencing a range of voices. The examples discussed here showcase the potentials of different voices and voice-relationships for eliciting trust in a wide audience, which is a crucial area of study in an era where journalistic and investigative voices across all media are struggling to retain or reclaim their authority of voice.

Chapter 1: *Serial*

Over the twelve episodes of its 2014 first season, the podcast *Serial* follows journalist Sarah Koenig's reinvestigation of the 1999 murder of Baltimore High School student Hae Min Lee. This chapter will discuss *Serial* as a piece of creative aural nonfiction, which kickstarted a distinct subgenre of long form investigative podcasts that continues to grow in popularity. The first part of this chapter will explore the ways in which *Serial* constructs voices of authority by extending and challenging the conventions of the two literary genres with which it superficially bears the most similarities – true crime and detective fiction. *Serial* is commonly described as a true crime podcast, but *Serial* enjoys a “mainstream prominence and respectability” undreamt of by the “more traditional texts” of the true crime genre in print or television (Buozis “Doxing” 357). The reasons that investigative podcasts like *Serial* have gained such a strong foothold in a changing media landscape ultimately come down to their constructions of authority and authenticity through use of voice. Specifically, *Serial* uses complex voices – both narrative voices and literal, audible ones – to tell its story in ways which build a relationship of trust with its listening audience. In *Serial* Koenig narrates a meticulously crafted story that includes audio from police interviews and trials, commentary from various technical and legal experts, and new interviews with people connected to the case. For example, the centrepiece of Koenig's reporting is a series of taped phone conversations with Lee's ex-boyfriend Adnan Syed, who was convicted of her murder in 2000 but has protested his innocence from inside prison ever since. Koenig's own complex authorial voice, which encompasses nonverbal elements like editing as well as verbal and paraverbal, is the one with which listeners are most encouraged to identify. *Serial*'s many constituent voices are thus presented with varying levels of authority by an authorial voice which ultimately controls whose voices are heard, and in what contexts.

The second part of this chapter will address the voices and storytelling methods that *Serial* draws from a less obvious source – Shakespearean tragedy. In *Serial*'s first episode, Koenig gives her initial impression of the Lee-Syed case thus:

...on paper, the case was like a Shakespearean mashup: young lovers from different worlds thwarting their families, secret assignations, jealousy, suspicion, and honour besmirched. The villain, not a Moor exactly, but a Muslim all the same, and a final act of murderous revenge. And the main stage? A regular old high school across the street from a 7Eleven. (Koenig “The Alibi” 06:10-06:33)

Koenig identifies what she considers the literary or “Shakespearean” qualities of the real-world murder case she is investigating. Koenig does not specify which Shakespearean texts comprise the supposed “mashup”, but I will argue that the “young lovers from different worlds” evoke *Romeo and Juliet*, while the characterisation of Pakistani-American Syed as “not a Moor exactly, but a Muslim all the same” evokes *Othello*. Koenig’s qualification that the “Shakespearean mashup” exists “on paper” suggests that this is how *other* people have told this story, like the case’s original investigators and prosecutors, representing Lee and Syed not as real people but archetypes from fiction. Koenig’s statement implies, therefore, that *Serial* is poised to challenge or dispel this reading. However, this chapter will argue that *Serial* in fact perpetuates the “Shakespearean mashup” interpretation of the Lee-Syed case by casting its central voices as characters in a drama. The Shakespearean elements of *Serial* go beyond the literal voices it features, extending to its attitudes toward the authority of different forms of evidence. Moreover, while Koenig’s characterization of Hae’s murder as the “final act” implies that this is the point at which the mashup ends, *Serial*’s use of Shakespearean tropes and ideas extends beyond the point of Hae’s death and throughout its reporting of the subsequent investigation, arrest, trial, and conviction of Adnan Syed. *Othello* is a rich intertext for *Serial*, offering insight into how “voice” can function as both a literary device and as a literal, audible phenomenon in investigative podcasting. Investigative podcasts are necessarily concerned with questions of voice. Whose voices are included, and whose are excluded? Of the former, which are to be believed and trusted? Likewise, *Othello* is “not only a play of voices but also a play about voices, an anatomy of the body of speech itself, in all its illocutionary variety” (Grennan 275). *Serial*’s evocation of Shakespeare is ultimately a means for Koenig to lend herself more authority as the podcast’s authorial voice. Shakespearean understandings of justice, evidence, truth, and satisfaction are presented as preferable to the reality of the American criminal justice system, which is presented as deeply flawed and thus lacking in its own authority.

Detective Fiction, True-Crime, and Authority of Voice

Koenig presents her podcast as a work of investigative journalism, and therefore, a relationship of trust must be established between speaker and listener to give Koenig a credible and authoritative voice. *Serial* tries to achieve this by extending and challenging the conventions of the narrative genres with which it superficially bears the most similarities – true crime and detective fiction. As its title suggests, *Serial* was released episodically week by week. Episodes were made available on the podcast’s website at a regular time on Thursday mornings between October and December of 2014, each between thirty and sixty minutes in duration. The serial format encouraged

“enthusiastic listeners” to “count down the days until the next episode in much the same way as fans of crime dramas” (Yardley et al. “Secondary Victims” 474). *Serial* was not produced like a news story, with updates released if or when they are needed, but rather in the structured, episodic mode of television or radio drama. Speaking over a crackly prison phone line, Adnan becomes the enigmatic figure at the centre of a gradually unfolding murder mystery: either a cold-blooded killer manipulating Koenig and the audience from his cell, or the victim of a terrible miscarriage of justice.

The Peabody Awards described *Serial* as “a productive experiment” in audio storytelling, and “a soulful examination of reasonable doubt in homicide trials” (“Serial”). Such prestigious storytelling awards have rarely been given to “true crime” media, suggesting that *Serial*’s acclaim is due, at least in part, to the unique potentialities of the podcast format compared to other, non-digital true crime texts. David Letzler argues, for example, that if Hae Min Lee’s murder had instead been featured on an episode of *Dateline*, “the NPR audience who doted on *Serial*” would view the Lee-Syed case as “a little tawdry, and not worthy of the kind of solemn soul-searching *Serial* provoked” (40). In her acceptance speech for *Serial*’s Peabody Award, Koenig expressed surprise at the success of her podcast, self-deprecatingly calling it “a ten-hour audio documentary about an old murder that I did not solve” (Koenig “Acceptance Speech”). Here Koenig highlights two of *Serial*’s main structural qualities and suggests that these ought to have precluded the podcast’s mainstream success because they did not conform to audience expectations of the true crime or mystery genres. In other words, *Serial*’s popularity came despite, or perhaps because of, its departure from these genres. The first such quality is its “ten-hour” total duration, which far exceeds the amount of time that television true crime shows like *Dateline* typically spend investigating a single case. Second is her inability to “solve” the murder, which denies the podcast a tidy resolution and distinguishes it from conventional detective fiction. Ultimately, *Serial* declines to draw a definitive conclusion of Syed’s guilt or innocence. However, the possibility of his innocence is *Serial*’s very premise. Syed’s guilt would mean that the justice system has worked as intended and placed the real murderer behind bars. It would also mean that Koenig’s reinvestigation was unnecessary. By suggesting that Syed’s conviction may have been wrongful, *Serial* reframes him as a possible victim himself. Syed’s voice becomes a tool with which Koenig “challenge[s] institutional truth claims from within the textual space of crime journalism” (Buozis “Giving Voice” 254). Sarah Koenig approaches the Lee-Syed case with the maxim that “all facts are friendly” and that this ought to be “more true for a cop than for anyone else” – suggesting that the role of an investigator is to discern objective truth (Koenig “The Deal with Jay” 16:20-16:25). This idea is challenged for her, however, when former homicide detective Jim Trainum posits that “rather than trying to get to the truth”, the goal of an investigator is to “build your case and make it the

strongest case possible” (16:30-16:36). A strong case is one which the jury, or the listener, will perceive as authoritative, not necessarily one which concerns itself with dogged adherence to provable fact. Detective fiction is seen as a “comforting genre” which “props up the idea of criminal justice as the strong and stable guardian of civil society” (Wilson 99). *Serial*, however, casts doubt on this view of the criminal justice system with its central conceit – the possibility of Adnan’s innocence, and with its revelation that the goal of the American legal system is not always necessarily the pursuit of truth. Koenig must therefore not only establish her voice as authoritative, but *more* authoritative than that of the American criminal justice system she is challenging.

Historically, radio voices have prioritised articulacy and projection over emotion. Koenig rejects this in her narration style, following a trend established by Ira Glass, host of the podcast *This American Life* of which *Serial* is a spinoff. Koenig and Glass do not sound like traditional radio newsreaders, but speak softly in conversational, informal language – vocal qualities that DeMair identifies as “openness and naturalness” (28). Scholars of radio broadcasting have described this vocal style as more persuasive and effective than the established convention. As far back as 1936, for instance, Arnheim lamented the fact that radio reporters of his day believed that “when they speak to a multitude, they must also speak loudly” (72). The most common radio voice, argues Arnheim, is one that “bellows *through* the microphone to an audience of millions”, when instead it ought to “talk in a confidential conversational tone”, treating the microphone as “representative of the *one* listener who sits in front of millions of receivers”. The latter is much more consistent with the voice used by Koenig in *Serial*. She frequently addresses the listener as if she is having a one-on-one conversation with them, using second-person pronouns and rhetorical questions:

If you're wondering why I went so nuts on this story versus some other murder case, the best I can explain is this is the one that came to me. It wasn't halfway across the world or even next door. It came right to my lap. And if I could help get to the bottom of it, shouldn't I try?
(Koenig “The Alibi” 38:48-39:04)

Koenig’s emotional involvement with the case could be seen as a conflict of interest, preventing her from fairly interpreting the evidence she gathers. Within the investigative podcast genre, however, it is instead an authenticating gesture, used to justify why her particular voice is suited to telling this particular story. Her emotional responses to the information that she uncovers are undisguised, creating the sense that what we are hearing is unrehearsed, free from artifice, and authentic.

More recent scholars have observed that this shift from classical radio audionarratology is perhaps a natural consequence of the emergence of podcasting as an aural medium. Podcasts differ from previous aural media in that they cultivate an individual listening experience. Radio has historically been a medium that played to a gathered audience. At the peak of their popularity radios were, like televisions, the focal point of a living room or similar space shared by a small group of people. However, James Tierney argues that narrative podcasting is a product of “the age of earbuds”. Podcasts “muffle the sounds of the immediate environment” of their audiences, removing them from “a synchronous community of listeners”. *Serial*'s episodes were released on weekday mornings, as if catering to listeners who consumed the podcast while traveling to work. Indeed, Ira Glass described *Serial* as “like *House of Cards*, but you can enjoy it while you're driving” (qtd. in Lurie). The collective experience of *Serial* came between the episodes, with fans discussing the podcast around water coolers or on online forums, but the episodes themselves were largely consumed individually. This makes the relationship between Koenig and the listener feel more intimate, and her vocal authority therefore comes not from a performance of detached objectivity, but rather from personal authenticity.

The serialisation of a story “reveals the process by which a journalist assumes a role” in it (Engley 92). Throughout *Serial*, the role that Koenig assumes is a complex hybrid of author, narrator, and protagonist. This combined role and its associated narrative voice are defining characteristics of the investigative podcast genre. We are subtly encouraged to interpret Koenig's voice as the detective figure in a whodunit, despite her clarification in Episode 1 that “I'm not a detective or a private investigator. I'm not even a crime reporter” (01:35-01:41). She introduces Hae's murder to the listener as “the case I've been working on”, phrasing which Ellen McCracken identifies as one of the ways in which “we are encouraged to see her as a detective and, more subtly, as a character akin to the fictional detective figure” (36). In Episode 8, Koenig tells detective Jim Trainum that “you're a real detective. I'm just playing one on the radio”. This is a self-deprecating acknowledgment that Koenig's role as the detective in the podcast is at least partially performative – an assumed voice rather than an authentic one, and one which is used to create a relationship of trust with the listener. Koenig's authority doesn't come from knowing all the answers, but from being apparently genuine in her admission that she does *not* know.

The characterization of Koenig as a crime-story detective is made overt in the closing moments of Episode 12. Frustrated with her inability to conclusively state either Adnan's innocence or guilt, she

confesses that she feels like “shaking everyone by the shoulders like an aggravated cop” (Koenig “What We Know” 53:10-53:15). “Just tell me the facts ma’am” she entreats, “because we didn’t have them fifteen years ago and we still don’t have them now” (53:22-53:28). Her frustrated plea for “just the facts ma’am” evokes the catchphrase of Detective Joe Friday, the protagonist of *Dragnet* (1951), which itself began on radio as a purely aural text. Like Friday, Koenig appeals for her subjects to put aside their emotional connections to a case. And like *Serial*, *Dragnet* insists upon the authenticity and truthfulness of its storytelling. “The story you are about to hear is true,” claims *Dragnet’s* opening narration. “Only the names have been changed to protect the innocent”. *Dragnet’s* history is complicated by the involvement of the real LAPD in its production. Its depiction of Friday as an unblemished investigator was approved by the police department, who also had final say over all scripts. According to Jacqui Shine, the LAPD “blurred the lines between Friday’s world and their own by treating entertainer [*Dragnet* creator Jack] Webb like an actual cop”. Shine draws a distinction in *Dragnet* between “accuracy” and “truth” which foreshadows Trainum’s cynical observations about the role of truth in the justice system in *Serial*, and the ambiguous role of podcasters like Koenig. Koenig associates herself with Friday’s proclaimed search for whole and unembellished truth, but also with the ambiguous authenticity the character represents.

Despite its obvious roots in detective fiction and true crime, much of *Serial’s* style and tone is concerned with challenging or transcending those genres. This is apparent in the podcast’s narrative structure. Tzvetan Todorov’s “Typology of Detective Fiction” argues that “at the base of the whodunit we find a duality... not one but two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation” (44). The first story must be “a story of an absence: its most accurate characteristic is that it cannot be immediately present in the book” (46). The circumstances of the crime are not narrated to the reader directly, they must be uncovered by the detective figure through investigation. The second story in the whodunit “has no importance in itself”, since its characters are purely concerned with uncovering the facts of the first story. *Serial* extends and subverts Todorov’s model of detective fiction by including at least three stories: the story of the crime, the story of the investigation, and the story of the reinvestigation. In *Serial*, the “story of the investigation” has its own significance – in contrast to Todorov’s model. Koenig’s reconstruction of the events of the 1999 investigation and subsequent trial is just as important to her overall critique of the American legal system as her investigation into the crime itself. The shift from investigation to reinvestigation narratives rejects the neat conclusions of conventional whodunits. The investigative podcast genre suggests that any investigator’s understanding of a case will be incomplete, so cases should be continually reopened and revisited by new investigative voices.

Adnan Syed and Hae Min Lee as Moor or Model Minority

According to Koenig's "story of the investigation" in *Serial*, the original investigation and prosecution of the Lee-Syed case is consistent with Shakespearean notions of race, religion, and culture – particularly in its representation of Syed's place in Baltimore society as "not a Moor exactly, but a Muslim all the same". Koenig's reference to a "Shakespearean mashup" in Episode 1 is aimed at what Corredera describes as *Serial's* "NPR audience, which is educated and thus likely middle-class" (36). For this audience, a Shakespearean interpretation of the case gives the podcast more authority as storytellers and provides the "respectability" mentioned by Buozis. A copy of *Othello* was among the items found in Hae Min Lee's backpack after her death, a revelation which has encouraged fans to draw further comparisons between the play and the podcast (Corredera 36). *Serial's* relationship to Shakespeare became the object of further scrutiny after American teacher Michael Godsey announced in 2014 that the podcast would replace *Hamlet* in his high school English curriculum. In response, Kim Newton of the American Shakespeare Center further explored the podcast's parallels to Shakespearean tragedy, positing that audiences "love *Serial* because [they] also love Shakespeare".

Serial views Adnan through the lens of *Othello*, affecting how his voice is interpreted in terms of authority and authenticity. Corredera argues that "the voices in the podcast" and "the voices of the educated persons who analyse it online" mirror early modern literature like *Othello* in their representation of race as "a complex set of issues including appearance, locale, and lineage" (34). In Shakespeare's play *Othello* is a Moorish general living in Venice, a "wheeling stranger of here and everywhere" (1.1 151-152) whose strangling of his wife Desdemona in a jealous rage is the "final act of murderous revenge" with which Koenig draws parallels to the death of Hae Min Lee ("The Alibi" 06:20). *Serial* is not unique in its use of Shakespearean language to pathologise real world criminals. In criminal psychology, for instance, "Othello syndrome" is a specific diagnosis given to patients displaying "delusional, pathological, morbid, or erotic jealousy" (Miller et al. 41). Both Adnan and Othello are well-liked men who are nonetheless regarded with suspicion because of their perceived status as a foreigner. We learn in the podcast that the jury in Syed's trial was majority African American, as is Woodlawn High School and Baltimore as a whole. Adnan and Othello are therefore both "outsiders" who are "accomplished and admired by their communities, yet doomed to suffer through their own tragic endings" (Newton). Like Othello, Adnan is initially defined as an exceptional other through his accolades. In Episode 1, for instance, we hear that Adnan was "the community's golden child". Rabia Chaudry tells Koenig that Adnan "was an honour roll student, volunteer EMT... He led prayers at the mosque" (Koenig "The Alibi" 08:08-08:23). This praise is fact-checked by Koenig,

who finds Chaudry to be “mostly right” but “a little loosey-goosey with the details” (08:34-08:38). Koenig concedes the significance of the fact that “at a high school that was majority black, they picked the Pakistani Muslim kid” as prince of his junior prom (08:48-08:54). Adnan’s depiction by Koenig as exceptional continues even after his conviction. Koenig tells us that Adnan’s behaviour in prison was sufficient to warrant the “Distinguished Gentleman’s Award” for “consistent display of character, mannerism, self-control, and ability to manage adversity” (“To Be Suspected” 41:18-41:25). This is consistent with Othello’s reputation as a renowned and noble general at the beginning of Shakespeare’s play.

Serial conflates race, religion, and ethnicity in its representations of both Othello and Adnan. Koenig’s description of Adnan as “not a Moor exactly, but a Muslim all the same” creates “a shared Muslim identity for Syed and Othello” (Corredera 36). Othello, however, is not Muslim but Christian. In the play he references his “Christian shame” (2.3 184), and Iago reveals that Othello has been baptized (2.3 363). Adnan, on the other hand “claims he just wasn’t that religious” at all (Koenig “The Breakup” 11:30-11:33). Nonetheless, Othello’s perceived foreign origins and different culture make him a “contradicting and paradoxical Islam-Christian image” who “cannot be qualified as Venetian citizen (sic)” because he is an “unacknowledgeable type of Oriental figure” (Ghanim 150-153). *Serial* characterises Adnan’s role in Baltimore in a way that is consistent with this. Adnan is frequently misidentified in terms of culture, race, and religion by *Serial*’s other voices. In Episode 5 Jay claims to have heard Adnan make a phone call in Arabic – a language Adnan and his family do not speak. In Episode 10, juror Stella Armstrong also references Adnan’s “Arabic culture”. “The guy was Middle Eastern”, says an interviewee named Josh in Episode 12, despite Adnan being American-born with South Asian heritage. Another juror, William Owens, comments more nebulously on “how the culture is over there”. Corredera calls this last comment “an Orientalizing gesture” based on a socially constructed outsider identity for Adnan which ignores the fact that “the ‘over there’ in which Syed resided would have been Owens’s own Baltimore” (39-40). This racial othering and conflation is significant because Adnan’s status as an exotic outsider is employed as an argument by proponents of his guilt. When members of Baltimore’s Muslim community attended Adnan’s bail hearing in traditional clothing, the prosecution represented them as “aiders and abettors” who might “help Adnan run away to Pakistan” to escape justice (Koenig “The Best Defense” 07:50-07:56). Quoting a trial transcript, Koenig draws attention to a statement from the prosecutor Kevin Urick’s opening argument. According to Urick, Adnan killed Hae Min Lee because he “felt betrayed that his honour had been besmirched” (Koenig “The Best Defense” 12:30-12:35). Koenig suggests that this is a veiled

reference to Adnan's Muslim heritage. She highlights the xenophobic implications of the specific language in Urick's argument:

Besmirched. That's not a word Urick used by accident. It's not a word you usually hear applied to a seventeen-year-old kid at Woodlawn High School. It's a word from the old country, where honour killings come from. This word "honour," it comes up a lot too. (Koenig "The Best Defense" 12:37-12:53)

This allusion to "the old country" aligns with Owens' reference to "over there" – a subtly xenophobic reminder of Adnan's otherness as a Pakistani-American. He becomes not a normal American teenager but the Moor among the Venetians – the so-called "wheeling stranger of here and everywhere" (1.1 151-152). Honour is mentioned frequently in *Othello*, often in reference to Desdemona's fidelity. Othello describes himself as "an honourable murderer, if you will, for naught I did in hate, but all in honour" (5.2 346-347). This is consistent with the motives attributed to Adnan by the prosecution, which characterized Hae's murder as retribution for having spurned Adnan and embarrassed him as a Pakistani man. "Within this harsh culture he has not violated any code" states a report given to detectives and quoted by Koenig in the podcast, "he has defended his honour" ("The Best Defense" 13:40-13:47). The words "besmirch" and "honour" are, however, also in Koenig's own "Shakespearean mashup" passage in Episode 1, where she speaks of "...jealousy, suspicion, [and] honour besmirched" in reference to the case. According to *Serial*, religion is an incriminating feature in America's legal system, as it is in Shakespeare's representations of justice.

Proponents of Adnan's guilt and innocence each ascribe to a stereotyped representation of Adnan as a Pakistani-American Muslim man. Charli Valdez claims that "Koenig and her team worked from a white majoritarian privilege", questioning whether Koenig, a white woman, is able to authoritatively tell a story where the main players are non-white (109). Valdez' claim that "the *Serial* team had no 'voice of colour'" is important to understand how the podcast is limited in its depiction of the case (109). In the opening moments of Episode 1, we hear Koenig speaking to several young men in interviews which are unconnected to the Hae Min Lee case. DeMair identifies the interviewee's use of "African American Vernacular English" and observes that Koenig "is not hesitant to engage with members of a minority community" (28). Her easy-going manner when talking to the young men "subtly wins the trust of the listener with auditory cues that are purely paraverbal". Despite this, the "golden child" version of Adnan described by Koenig in the same episode is consistent with what Chou and Feagin term the "myth of the model minority", a racist process "of exoticizing and of civic

ostracism” prevalent in American culture since at least the 1960s (18). Chou and Feagin give examples of other Asian-American teenagers who committed violent crimes in the late twentieth century, for example, including one whose “numerous warning signs” were ignored because of her status as a “school valedictorian” and “accomplished musician who had begun her education at a prestigious Ivy League school” (1). Adnan may be the “lascivious Moor” of Shakespeare’s *Othello* to his accusers, but to his defenders, he is the “model minority” or “golden child”. Like Othello, Adnan is simultaneously lauded by the society he lives in and considered a threat to it. He is “our noble and valiant general” (*Othello* 2.3 1-2), but also the “blacker devil” (5.2 161).

If Adnan is the story’s Othello, then Hae Min Lee necessarily becomes its Desdemona – the “perjured woman” strangled by her jealous lover (5.2 78). Alternately, she is the Juliet to Adnan’s Romeo – a star-crossed lover fated to die for a love kept secret from her family. But while *Serial* attempts to position Hae as a character in its unfolding narrative, Hae does not have a public voice in the podcast, only one assembled for her from private speech. Most figures in an aural text like *Serial* are bodiless voices, but Hae becomes the inverse: a voiceless body. This is consistent with Paige Martin Reynolds’s description of Desdemona in the final act of *Othello* as “a conspicuous corpse, with “presence without power, cognizance without control, sensation without speech” (19). Hae’s literal voice is a notable absence throughout *Serial*. She cannot be interviewed, and no old recordings of her are played. Her surviving family members also declined to be interviewed by Koenig for the podcast. In true-crime murder mysteries, the victim’s family are often interviewed not because of any specific evidence they possess or unique insights into the facts of the case, but because they provide “special access to the emotions of those affected by crime” (Yardley et al. “Secondary Victims” 13). Denied this, Koenig’s “special access” to Hae must come from artefacts like her diary rather than from the voices of her family. Koenig describes Hae in Episode 1:

She was a senior at Woodlawn High School in Baltimore County in Maryland. She was Korean. She was smart, and beautiful, and cheerful, and a great athlete. She played field hockey and lacrosse. And she was responsible. (“The Alibi” 04:23-04:35)

Like Adnan, Hae is considered an exotic other in Baltimore. The “smart”, “great athlete”, and “responsible” descriptors are consistent with the “model minority” myth discussed above in relation to Adnan. In fact, it is the supposed incompatibility of their two cultures which the prosecution posits as the reason for Hae’s murder. Adnan is afforded the opportunity to dispel his model minority reputation by adding nuance with his own voice in the podcast – even if he is not a murderer, he

admits to smaller offenses like doing drugs and stealing money from his mosque. Hae, however, is without agency and must rely on other voices to characterise her. The references to Hae's beauty place her in a long narrative tradition of using the shocking death of a beautiful woman as the catalyst in a story, from *Twin Peaks* or *True Detective*, to Shakespeare's "divine Desdemona" (2.1 73) who "paragons description and wild fame" (2.1 68). The closest we, as listeners, come to hearing Hae's voice is through excerpts from her diary, read aloud by Koenig in several episodes. The passages from Hae's diary featured in *Serial* focus mainly on her romantic relationship with Adnan. The only voice for Hae that survives is one which professes her love for the man convicted of her murder, in the hyperbolic and sentimental language of a teenager's diary. Regarding Hae's use of language, Koenig comments that "I stopped counting, there were so many 'wonderfuls' and 'sweetests' and 'best-boyfriend-in-the-worlds'" ("The Breakup" 08:40-08:45). The first passage we hear as listeners features Hae expressing her feelings for Adnan in this voice:

So, prom night she writes about Adnan. "I swear he's the sweetest guy... How can I not fall in love with this guy? Of course I gave him his first kiss on the lips, then I totally fell in love with him. Since then, I keep on falling deeper and deeper into him." ("The Breakup" 03:50-04:21)

This mediation of Hae's personal diary through Koenig's broadcast voice also shows how the podcast format allows for complex, assembled voices. Dominic Pettman writes that the rise of digital audio formats has allowed for a greater understanding of "female acousmatic voice" (147). Because podcast voices are inherently acousmatic – that is, sounds without any visible source – they challenge the tendency of visual media like cinema to "synchronise the female voice with the female body" (146). Crime film and television's "reliance on images of violated female bodies" is replaced in the podcast medium with "female voices [which] transform themselves and the victims of their discussions to haunting spectres that force listeners to imaginatively reconstruct scenes of female-directed violence" (Greer 152). Koenig's descriptions of Hae and narration from her diary are an attempt to reconstruct Hae's voice using her own, with the superlative, romantic language either as evidence of Adnan's innocence, much as Desdemona's praise of Othello redeems him in the eyes of the Venetians, or as a tragic foreshadowing of his jealous rage. Nonetheless, Hae's role in *Serial* remains voiceless in the literal sense, and like Desdemona her "post-murder posture" is, for the audience, her "enduring image" (Reynolds 20).

Trial Scenes and Evidence in *Serial* and *Shakespeare*

Much of *Serial* is concerned with examining different kinds of evidence and assigning them varying degrees of authority. As Koenig attempts to assemble a plausible version of events using information from many different sources, pieces of evidence are discovered and evaluated as meaningful or otherwise, from witness statements and diary entries to forensic tests and cell phone data. Likewise, Shakespearean plays like *Othello* feature characters attempting to discern truth from assembled information. I will argue that *Serial's* structure as "Shakespearean mashup" extends beyond its representations of Lee and Syed to its ideas regarding the comparative authority of verbal testimony and physical evidence. *Serial's* concepts of evidence and proof are consistent with those in Shakespeare's *Othello*, particularly during Othello's investigation of his wife Desdemona's alleged infidelity. When Othello is told by Iago that Desdemona has been unfaithful, for instance, Othello rejects the authority of Iago's voice alone and implores him to "be sure thou prove my love a whore! Be sure of it. Give me the ocular proof" (3.3 411-412). Maurianne S. Adams identifies the significance of the term "ocular proof" by tracing its origins in Shakespeare's inspiration for *Othello*, Cinthio's *Un Capitano Moro* (1565). For Cinthio, the term denoted "mere physical eyesight", but Shakespeare "transforms" it into "a metaphor of spiritual vision (Adams 238). No human voice, according to Othello, has authority enough to outweigh physical, visible evidence. This is consistent with other Shakespearean works. In *All's Well That Ends Well* (1623), for instance, which Helena uses physical objects like rings as "producible tokens" to prove the validity of her marriage to Bertram (Mukherji 219).

For Othello, however, this belief in the unquestionable authority of such "producible tokens" is exposed as a dangerous fallacy. Iago's "producible token" to prove Desdemona's guilt is a handkerchief gifted from Othello to Desdemona, which can now be seen in the possession of the lieutenant Cassio. Iago asserts that the handkerchief "speaks against" Desdemona, a sound metaphor that grants the object its own voice, and one with significant authority (3.3 501). Othello takes this token as the "ocular proof" of Desdemona's infidelity, announcing confidently that "I saw my handkerchief in's hand!... I saw the handkerchief!", before killing Desdemona in punishment for her alleged affair (5.2 77-81). But the handkerchief which appears so incriminating in Cassio's hands is, in fact, a plot by Iago. Cassio has the handkerchief not because Desdemona has given it to him, but because Iago has arranged for it to fall into his possession. It is only when Iago's wife Emilia verbally testifies that "I found it, and I did give 't my husband" that Othello learns the truth (5.2 274-275). The handkerchief is a "false image" which leads to "misguided action" (Knapp 386). The "producible", "ocular" handkerchief in fact offers no reliable proof, the authority vested in it is misplaced, and this leads to Desdemona's death and Othello's downfall.

Likewise, *Serial* has its own fascination with “ocular proof”. The podcast’s website has a page which includes “all the visual stuff in this story”, including scanned documents, hand-drawn maps, diagrams, and letters pertinent to the case. Perhaps most notably, it includes a record of phone calls made and received by Adnan’s cell phone on the day of Hae’s murder, along with location data from the cell phone towers which supposedly places him at the scene of the crime. In the podcast Koenig calls this record “arguably the most important piece of paper among all the thousands in this case”. It is a “map” that the detectives follow “call by call, like footprints that end up at Adnan’s front door” (Koenig “Inconsistencies” 03:40-04:00). Much of the written material used in Koenig’s reinvestigation comes from Rabia Chaudry, a family friend of Adnan’s and advocate of his innocence. Rabia is introduced in *Serial* surrounded by mountains of ocular proof: “files, loose stacks, binders... all court documents and attorney’s files from Adnan’s case” (Koenig “The Alibi” 06:40-06:50). Leslie Grace McMurtry calls these visible artefacts the “corporeal evidence” of Hae’s murder, arguing that to create a sense of authenticity “the story as presented aurally by Koenig is not enough; there must be physical, written, *seen* traces” of the case (309). As depicted in *Serial*, the original investigation into Hae Min Lee’s murder and the trial of Adnan Syed gives less authority to the potentially unreliable statements from witnesses than the supposedly more concrete cell phone records. The most damning verbal testimony against Adnan is that of Jay, who claims to have helped bury Hae’s body, and Jay’s recounting of events is presented as less reliable whenever it fails to line up with the visual evidence.

Koenig uses the lack of any incriminating, tangible objects to suggest the possibility of Adnan’s innocence. “As for physical evidence”, she states in Episode 1, “there was none. Nothing” (“The Alibi” 11:36-11:39). The original investigators found “no DNA, no fibres, no hairs, no matching soil from the bottom of his boots”, and Koenig argues that this means there was “nothing linking him to the crime” (11:45-11:51). The anaphora in her speech – the repetition of “no” before each item in her list – emphasizes the incriminating evidence which does *not* exist rather than focusing on that which *does*, making it more conspicuous by its absence and thus giving it more authority. A similar anaphora appears in Episode 7, when Koenig considers that “maybe Adnan had nothing to do with this at all. Maybe it was a serial killer. Maybe there’s a clue from another Baltimore cold case” (Koenig “The Opposite” 31:30-31:38). The repeated “maybes” provide a series of possible but unsupported hypotheses meant to cast doubt on the more widely accepted version of events. This encourages the listener to speculate and imagine a hypothetical “clue from another... case” that might prove Adnan’s innocence, rather than draw logical conclusions from the available evidence.

In his discussion of the climactic trial scene from *Measure for Measure* (1623), Wilson claims that Shakespeare's plays demonstrate "the theatricality of justice, its performance by actors, on a stage, for an audience" (105). This interpretation adds yet another facet to Koenig's complex authorial role - the chorus in a Shakespearean play. In the prologue to *Romeo and Juliet*, for instance, the chorus tells the audience that in the play "a pair of star-cross'd lovers" will "take their life" (Prologue.1 6), giving the audience an expectation of the tragedy to come which foreshadows the way Koenig describes Hae Min Lee's death in the opening moments of Episode 1. Despite Koenig's statement that the "main stage" of *Serial's* "Shakespearean mashup" is Woodlawn High School, and that Hae's murder is its "final act", the Shakespearean elements of the podcast continue into the courtroom for the scenes of Adnan's original trial. Much of *Serial* is framed as courtroom drama, where audio from Adnan's trial is included to show how the jury reached their guilty verdict. According to Susan Ehrlich, trial discourse is concerned with "non-local assessments and judgments of non-speaking recipients" (140). When a lawyer questions a witness in a trial, argues Ehrlich, the two voices are not engaging in dialogue with each other but rather with a non-participatory third party, the jury. Koenig often comments on the literary qualities of the voices at trial, like when the testimony of Jay Wilds is described as "almost poetic" ("The Deal with Jay" 09:14). Koenig's ultimate conclusion is that there is not sufficient evidence to convict Adnan of Hae Min Lee's murder, describing her doubt as not "the courtroom kind" but "the normal person kind" ("To Be Suspected" 43:20-43:25). This highlights the unique ways in which authority is constructed in trial contexts as opposed to the "real world". According to Ehrlich's model of trial discourse, the subject of the lawyer-witness dialogue is not "local" but occurred in a different place sometime in the past. Hale and Gibbons delineate "two intersecting planes of reality" in trial contexts – the "courtroom reality" of the trial itself, and the "external reality" of the alleged crime, the nature of which must be determined by those present in the courtroom (203). These two realities of trial discourse are analogous to Todorov's "two stories" of detective fiction, but they are also consistent with the Shakespearean device termed "reportage" by Paul Innes, when "crucial events do not happen on the stage itself, but rather are mediated by onstage figures" (6). Innes discusses the "inevitability of such events being misconstrued" (1), which is consistent with *Serial's* central premise that the American legal system may have misinformed or misled jurors in its reportage of the Lee-Syed case.

In both *Serial's* and Shakespeare's respective trial scenes the relationship between absent voices and present ones is of particular importance. It is useful to compare how Adnan and Othello use or do not use their voice when asked to answer for their alleged crimes. While in Shakespeare's play Othello is saved by his willingness and ability to speak, Adnan remains silent at his own trial and

is found guilty. *Serial's* reinvestigation challenges the American justice system's assumptions about authority and authenticity of voice, arguing that the truth of Adnan's story is better determined by allowing him to speak, as Othello does, in his own authentic voice.

Othello's use of personal voice as a vindicating tool is most evident in the first of the play's two trial scenes. Brought before the Venetian senate, Othello is accused of seducing Desdemona through witchcraft – a capital crime. Although Othello's voice is increasingly crazed from Act IV onwards as his jealousy and suspicion grow, at this point in the play he is able to speak authoritatively and eloquently in his own defence, swaying the hearts and minds of the senators. Othello begins his defence speech with a humble assessment of his own authority of voice: "rude am I in my speech, and little blessed with the soft phrase of peace" (1.3 96-97). He nonetheless promises to deliver "a round unvarnished tale" of how he actually won Desdemona's affections (1.3 106). He describes how Desdemona fell in love with him not because of witchcraft, but because of the stories he told her of his life. Charmed by his voice, Desdemona would "devour up [Othello's] discourse" (1.3 174). According to Ielisieieva, his speech demonstrates his "rationality", "confidence" and "unruffled personality" by employing "complex sentence structures" with "dominant affirmative statements" (188). So effective are his words, that the Duke proclaims that "this tale would win my daughter, too." (1.3 197). The Duke dismisses the evidence against Othello as "no proof", but mere "thin habits and poor likelihoods", and Othello is cleared of any wrongdoing (1.3 125-127).

The voice of the accused man is a significant absence in *Serial's* trial scenes, in contrast, since Adnan Syed did not testify at his original trial. *Serial* questions whether it is more effective for the voices of authoritative legal experts to speak for others, or for people to tell their stories themselves. Adnan declined to testify at the advice of his attorney Cristina Gutierrez. Gutierrez's role was to speak on Adnan's behalf and thereby assume his voice, but *Serial* suggests that this was less authoritative than if Adnan had spoken in his own defence with his own literal voice. As evidence for this, Koenig includes statements from several jurors from Adnan's trial. One juror, Lisa Flynn acknowledges in the podcast that the lack of testimony from Adnan impacted her decision:

LISA FLYNN. That was huge... if you're a defendant, why would you not get up there and defend yourself, and try to prove that the State is wrong, that you *weren't* there, that you're *not* guilty?... get up there and say something, try to persuade, even though it's not your job to persuade us.
(Koenig "To Be Suspected" 41:20-41:38)

Flynn acknowledges that Adnan is not obligated to speak, that it is “not [his] job to persuade us”, but she insists nonetheless that Adnan’s voice would have carried more authority than that of Gutierrez. Adnan himself expresses his desire to challenge the prosecution’s narrative with his own voice, describing his feelings about remaining silent at his trial: “You never get a chance to speak. You never get a chance to say anything. That’s just the most frustrating thing in the world” (“To Be Suspected” 13:08-13:14). Koenig argues that “a trial isn’t built to hold the stories Adnan, or anyone, tells about his life” – at least, not the way trials operate in modern day Baltimore (43:25-43:30). Debating the facts and details and creating the narrative of events is the job of the legal professionals, while Adnan is judged based on his ability to exhibit good behaviour and sit in polite silence – a test of willpower that he describes to Koenig as “a trial within the trial” (12:30-12:35). Koenig acknowledges that Gutierrez’s strategy of advising Adnan to remain silent is “not uncommon” for defence attorneys, citing the risks of “open[ing] your client up to cross examination and impeachment”. But *Serial* challenges this feature of the American criminal justice system, which discourages defendants from speaking in their own voice in an Othello-style self-defence.

Because Syed’s voice is an absence in *Serial*’s trial scenes, the most important voice in these scenes is therefore that of his attorney Cristina Gutierrez. Her effectiveness at trial is the sole focus of *Serial*’s tenth episode. As early as Episode 1, we are encouraged as listeners to doubt the authority of Gutierrez, who died in 2004 and so could not be interviewed for the podcast. Chaudry argues in Episode 1 that Gutierrez botched Adnan’s defence deliberately, hoping to make more money from the appeal. Koenig is sceptical of this, and we later learn that even Adnan does not ascribe his conviction to intentional sabotage. Adnan’s professed belief is that “she made a mistake, like a surgeon’s slip of the scalpel” (“The Best Defense” 18:20). Nonetheless, Cristina’s authority as a legal expert is challenged. It is worth noting, too, that Chaudry approached Koenig to reinvestigate the Lee-Syed case because of Koenig’s previous reportage in the *Baltimore Sun* regarding Gutierrez’s fall from grace as a legal professional in 2002. Courtroom narratives are “dual-authored texts” with “the voice of the lawyer as the primary and authoritative teller” (Cotterill 149). Using audio recordings of Gutierrez at trial, Koenig criticizes “the way she questioned” the witness Jay, describing her voice at trial as “exhaustive and exhausting” (26:16). The lawyer’s “half speed pacing” and “sing-songy aggression” may have proved unappealing and unconvincing to the jury in Adnan’s trial (26:20). Gutierrez’s aggression makes Jay seem like the “underdog”, argues Koenig. “Jay probably comes off as a nice young man” to the jury, “and this white lady is yelling at him” (“The Deal with Jay” 09:05-09:10). At one point, Koenig highlights the periphrasis in Gutierrez’s definition of Pakistan as “a country formed

in the Arab world in the tip of the landmass called Asia” (“The Best Defense” 17:30-17:37). For Koenig, Gutierrez’s voice has literal authenticity in that its words are factually accurate. It does not, however, create a relationship of trust with the jury in the same way that Koenig’s does with the listeners of *Serial*, with a sense of emotional authenticity. One juror, Theodore Wojtas, appears in the episode and describes “that defence attorney” as “talking but... not saying nothing”. Producer Dana Chivvis suggests that Gutierrez’s defence was just “a lot of words”, and Wojtas concurs that she “talked and talked and didn’t prove anything” (30:00-30:30). Although we hear Gutierrez cross-examine Jay at length, and make several sound legal arguments, *Serial* highlights her failure to convince the jury that Jay’s testimony is unreliable. In the context of the trial, Koenig argues, Adnan’s own voice would have carried more authority than Gutierrez’s. In the podcast, therefore, Koenig’s voice carries more authority than Gutierrez, or any voice representative of the criminal justice system.

By prominently featuring Syed’s voice in his conversations with Koenig, *Serial*’s reinvestigation tries to give him exactly what he was denied at trial – “a chance to speak” in his own defence. However, Syed’s voice as we hear it in *Serial* is still mediated through America’s legal institutions. The conversations between Koenig and Syed have an asymmetrical aural texture – the former is recorded pristinely in a studio environment, while the latter is heard down a crackly phone line. This encourages the listener to identify more with the voice of Koenig, and distances them from the voice of Syed. *Serial* is also transparent about the practical limitations of the prison phone system, which occasionally interrupts Syed with a robotic voice reminding him and Koenig that their allotted time is nearly up. Koenig and Syed are forced to hurriedly arrange a method to continue their conversation: “Can I call you back?” “Yeah, yeah... call me back” (“The Breakup” 25:15-25:20). The same robotic voice is played at the beginning of each episode:

AUTOMATED FEMALE VOICE. This is a Global Tel Link prepaid call from.

ADNAN SYED. Adnan Syed.

AUTOMATED FEMALE VOICE. ...an inmate at a Maryland correctional facility. This call will be recorded and monitored. (Koenig “The Deal with Jay” 00:15-00:30)

The insertion of Adnan’s voice into a pre-recorded phrase from Global Tel Link’s phone service is jarring in the way it switches abruptly between masculine and feminine, human and machine voices. This recurring piece of audio is, effectively, part of the podcast’s theme music. It also reminds the

listener of the real-world circumstances in which the podcast was made. These are sometimes automated, like the Global Tel Link voice, but at one point in Episode 5, Adnan is abruptly interrupted by a prison guard and hangs up on Koenig. She then explains to the listener that “that happens sometimes. The guards come by and you’re just done, mid-sentence” (Koenig “Route Talk” 2:38-2:42). Koenig uses these aural markers to “concretize the realness of the story” and “signal the legitimacy of her report” (DeMair 31). Koenig states that these moments are important because without them “I often sort of forget where he is” (“The Breakup” 25:30). These aural obstacles for Adnan’s voice emphasise *Serial’s* premise that America’s institutions of justice inhibit the voices of the accused.

In summary, *Serial* asserts the truthfulness of its story by constructing an authorial voice that is authoritative and authentic, and which builds a relationship of trust with its listeners. This voice aims to transcend the “tawdry” conventions of true crime and detective fiction and takes full advantage of the specific potential of the podcast medium. As Koenig challenges the American criminal justice system’s treatment of Adnan Syed, *Serial’s* authorial voice instead draws inspiration from Shakespearean drama, using tragedies like *Othello* as a reference point for its concepts of evidence, justice, and truth. When Koenig paraphrases *Dragnet* in the closing lines of Episode 12, she does so out of frustration that the legal system has not concerned itself with “just the facts”, but rather with imposing an orderly narrative onto an ambiguous and complicated mystery. Over the course of *Serial*, Koenig learns that in Adnan’s case the justice system worked not as it does in detective fiction, but rather as it does in Shakespeare, where “men and women, base and creaturely things, fail to achieve justice but must try nonetheless because any other option is tantamount to chaos” (Wilson 106). *Serial* thereby casts doubt on the authority of modern American legal institutions and uses as its alternative a more literary, or Shakespearean, understanding of evidence and justice.

Chapter 2: *S-Town*

In 2017, *This American Life* followed the success of *Serial* with a second spinoff investigative series, *S-Town*, hosted by Brian Reed and co-produced by Reed and Julie Snyder. The podcast's initial premise is a Southern Gothic twist on the true-crime, murder mystery formula popularised by *Serial*. It begins with Reed, a New York reporter for *This American Life*, receiving an email from John B. McLemore, an eccentric, middle-aged horologist who lives in the small town of Woodstock, Alabama. McLemore calls his home "Shittown", railing against its crime, poverty, government corruption, poor education, and environmental collapse. The final straw, he tells Reed, is that the son of a local lumber tycoon has murdered a man named Dylan Nichols, and that authorities have done nothing despite the murderer bragging openly all over town. At McLemore's invitation, Reed travels to Woodstock from New York to help him investigate. Like *Serial*, *S-Town* follows a single story as it unfolds over an extended period. *S-Town* quickly subverts the true-crime genre, however, as Reed soon determines that the alleged murder was only ever a rumour. Nonetheless, Reed ominously warns the listener in voiceover narration that "before this is all over, someone will end up dead" (Reed "Chapter II" 19:51-20:00). That "someone" turns out to be McLemore who, at the end of Chapter II, is revealed to have committed suicide. Reed returns to Alabama and devotes the remaining chapters of *S-Town* to McLemore himself, unravelling the mysteries of his personal life, his relationship with a young local man named Tyler Goodson, and the feuds and conspiracies that emerge in Woodstock following McLemore's death.

In a more overtly novelistic approach than its precursors, *S-Town's* seven parts were called "chapters" rather than "episodes" and were released simultaneously rather than week by week. Upon its release, *S-Town* was downloaded a record-breaking ten million times in four days (Spangler). It was lauded as "true audio art" and "the first audio novel" (The Peabody Awards "S-Town"), but also challenged by critics for being "incredibly invasive" and exploitative of its subjects (Romano). The polarized responses to *S-Town* are best summarised in the title of Romano's review for Vox, which calls it "a stunning podcast" that "probably shouldn't have been made". These responses reflect a range of tensions in American society, and in this chapter I will argue that they are partly a consequence of how *S-Town's* use of voice influences the listeners' understandings of the characters and relationships depicted. I will focus on the relationship between Reed's voice and the voices of his subjects – John B McLemore in particular, but also the residents of Woodstock and Alabama more broadly. As well as *Serial*, I will compare *S-Town* to Dan Taberski's 2017 investigative podcast *Missing Richard Simmons*, which faced similar reactions and backlash to *S-Town* due to what I will argue is a

similarly exploitative author-subject relationship. *S-Town* and *Missing Richard Simmons* were produced at around the same time and were released only months apart. They are therefore less likely to have directly influenced each other than they are to both indicate the emergence of a trend in American investigative podcasting toward problematising authority and authenticity through vocal and audionarratological elements than in the genre's early landmark texts. *Serial* encouraged its listeners to identify with, and thus believe in the veracity of the voice of the podcast author, but doubt and question that of its subject. Conversely, *S-Town* attempts to position McLemore's voice as competing with Reed's for authorial control over the story. Throughout the podcast, Reed often emphasises the ways that McLemore shapes or influences how the story is told. However, *S-Town's* attempt to balance the authority and agency of its two central voices is only partially successful. Once McLemore's death is revealed at the end of Chapter II, *S-Town* becomes, like *Missing Richard Simmons*, an aural monument to its subject, which necessarily involves a much more asymmetrical relationship between the voices of that subject and the author.

John B. McLemore's Authorial Voice in *S-Town*

Reed constructs *S-Town* from many different voices but, as in *Serial*, the story is built around a series of recorded conversations between the podcaster and a central, enigmatic subject. In *Serial*, while Adnan Syed's voice influences the course of the investigation, Sarah Koenig is always ultimately the authorial figure. *S-Town*, conversely, presents McLemore as an authorial voice in his own right who shapes the narrative alongside Reed. Reed and McLemore are, especially in the early chapters, presented as two investigators working together to assemble a coherent solution to a mystery, rather than the more uncertain and adversarial relationship between Koenig and Syed. This attempt to equate the voices of podcaster and subject is apparent in the opening moments of *S-Town's* first chapter. Here, Reed gives an extended description of antiquarian horology, the field of antique clock restoration in which McLemore was a noted expert. Reed emphasises the role of "witness marks" – physical traces which reveal the clock's previous damage and repairs:

A witness mark could be a small dent, a hole that once held a screw... They're clues to what was in the clockmaker's mind when he first created the thing. 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. (Reed "Chapter I" 00:57-01:32)

This passage equates the practice of antiquarian horology with investigative journalism. Reed observes that he and McLemore are both concerned with examining evidence, exploring different paths of inquiry, and piecing together a cohesive and functional whole from disparate and incomplete fragments. An antique clock, Reed tells us, consists of “hundreds of tiny, individual pieces, each of which needs to interact with the others precisely” (“Chapter I” 00:24-00:28). By the end of *S-Town*, the podcast itself can be described the same way, with its intricately layered and edited pieces of sound from different sources. The figure of the clockmaker is a potent metaphor for someone who sets events in motion which then continue without their input, which helps justify *S-Town*’s decision to depict McLemore as shaping the story even after his death. By suggesting that the investigative journalism podcast genre inherently resembles a field like antiquarian horology, Reed presents *S-Town* as a product that could easily bear the creative mark of both himself and McLemore.

During the initial murder mystery which spans the first two chapters of *S-Town*, listeners are encouraged to understand McLemore not only as part of the polyphony of voices interviewed by Reed in Woodstock, but an authorial voice with his own motives who actively influences the genre conventions used. It is McLemore who first contacts Reed, solicits his involvement in the case, and invites him to Alabama to record a story. McLemore has much more agency in his relationship with Reed than, for instance, Adnan Syed and Sarah Koenig, who are introduced by an interested third party, Rabia Chaudry. *S-Town* emphasises the ways that McLemore and Reed’s respective intentions for the story differ or work in opposition to each other. This is apparent in Chapter I of *S-Town*, for instance, when McLemore and Reed become trapped while exploring the intricate and adjustable hedge maze McLemore has constructed on his property. McLemore laughs and explains that he has put the maze in its “null set”, arranging the many gates to the only configuration with no possible solution. Reed speculates that McLemore orchestrated this intentionally:

John seems so smart and in control... I could see him engineering this situation to make things more, I don't know, literary, conjuring this garden path metaphor that he knows I won't be able to resist. (Reed “Chapter I” 30:34-30:50)

By implying McLemore’s manipulation of events, Reed downplays his own responsibility for anything “literary” about *S-Town*’s style or content. Such flourishes, he implies, are present only because McLemore himself demands them. Later, the two visit a public library to search the newspaper archives for mention of Nichols’ death. McLemore hurries Reed “like he doesn't want me

to be as thorough as I am being”, suggesting that he knows the murder rumour is false. Reed questions, in voiceover narration recorded after-the-fact, how forthcoming McLemore is being with information – “Is this murder not real and he knows it?” (“Chapter II” 41:55-42:00). Reed, speaking here with the gift of hindsight, seems to imply that McLemore is hurrying him to make the storytelling decision that he will ultimately make anyway – to shift from a whodunit to a broader story about Shittown itself. McLemore’s reasons for first contacting *This American Life* are ambiguous. In narration, Reed claims that McLemore merely “asked me to help him solve a murder”, but McLemore’s own stated desire is more extreme – for Reed to “come down to this pathetic little Baptist Shittown and blow it off the map” (Reed “Chapter I” 03:56-04:01). In *Serial*, Sarah Koenig also often questioned aloud to listeners whether Adnan Syed was lying or misleading her, but that possibility lay firmly within the genre framework that podcast occupied. Suspect characters in murder mystery stories are expected to lie about their actions and motives. In *S-Town*, on the other hand, Reed speculates that McLemore is lying in order to exert an authorial presence over the genre itself.

The contest between Reed and McLemore’s literary voices highlights that way that, like *Serial*, *S-Town* uses literary reference points to make its characters and themes more familiar for listeners. Unlike *Serial*, however, *S-Town* presents these literary comparisons as being suggestions to Reed from his subjects. This reinforces the perception of the subjects’ agency in the creation of the podcast. Southern Gothic fiction writers like William Faulkner inspire much of the podcast’s atmosphere and tone, for instance. In Chapter I, Reed references Faulkner’s short story “A Rose for Emily”, which chronicles the life and death of a reclusive woman in a small Southern town from the collective point of view of the gossipy townsfolk. The editing of *S-Town* seems to emulate the narrative voice of “A Rose for Emily”. Faulkner’s story uses first-person plural pronouns to represent a collective narrator who speaks on behalf of the entire town of Jefferson. For instance, when discussing Emily’s potential suicide “we all said, ‘She will kill herself;’ and we said it would be the best thing” (Faulkner “A Rose for Emily” 236). The gossipy, polyphonic descriptions of a character who is not present foreshadows scenes in *S-Town* like the Black Sheep Ink interviews in Chapter II, where Reed presents a series of local voices who take turns speculating about John B. McLemore’s personal life, eccentricities, and wealth. As Reed himself digs deeper into McLemore’s personal life, however, the investigation becomes a highly personal and emotional process. This makes the passive, collective narration of Faulkner less applicable to *S-Town* as the podcast progresses, since Reed becomes a more active authorial figure throughout his investigation.

Reed clearly intends *S-Town* to be compared to Faulkner's story, but he suggests that the decision to include "A Rose for Emily" as a point of reference is one made vicariously through him by McLemore. Reed points out that the story was one of several given to him by McLemore as "bedtime reading" upon his arrival in Alabama. The "unifying theme" that Reed detects in McLemore's recommendations is "a creeping sense of foreboding" and an "undercurrent of depravity" in polite society (Reed "Chapter I" 33:20-33:34). Reed implies that the stories are meant as an induction into McLemore's own worldview, although we never hear McLemore confirm it. For Faulkner, the American South is "less strictly a set of geographic coordinates" than "a sociopsychological space representing a particular relationship with history" (Child 51). By invoking Faulkner, therefore, the podcast introduces the idea that the term "Shittown" refers not just to Woodstock, Alabama, but to McLemore's depressive state of mind. Reed ascribes specific motives to McLemore for giving him this "bedtime reading", although we never hear McLemore confirm them. The stories are, for Reed, further evidence of McLemore "engineering the situation" behind the scenes, tempting him with literary metaphors just as he did in the maze. Reed thus presents the overt literary references in *S-Town* as originating with its subject, evidence of McLemore's own authorial presence in the podcast, rather than a device added by Reed himself. Reed's voice retains the podcast's audionarrative authorship because of his ability to shape the editing and postproduction process – McLemore's voice is only present in *S-Town* to the extent that Reed and the other producers allow it to be. McLemore, however, tries to achieve a kind of literary authorship by consistently exerting his influence on Reed's interpretation of people, events, and places.

Of McLemore's "bedtime reading" stories, Reed depicts "A Rose for Emily" as the most aligned with McLemore's own voice. The Zombies' 1968 song of the same name is used as the ending theme for each chapter, regularly reminding listeners of the connection following the story's introduction in Chapter I. As noted by Alexis Petridis, The Zombies' adaptation of Faulkner's story "concentrates on the heroine's otherness, her isolation, her sense of chances missed". The melancholy and frustration suggested by the song have clear similarities to how McLemore's own life is depicted in *S-Town* – Reed's account of McLemore's failed romances in Chapter VII is perhaps the clearest parallel. An aural text like *S-Town* necessarily shares thematic elements with "A Rose for Emily", since the conflict between the authority of the spoken word and the written word is central to Faulkner's story. The latter comes to outweigh the former in "A Rose for Emily", despite the resistance of the title character. According to Clay Morton, Miss Emily Grierson refuses to "accept the diminishing importance of orality in an increasingly typographic culture" (7). Miss Emily is the only person in the town of Jefferson, Mississippi to not have a mailbox installed in front of her house. She also refuses to obey the Board of

Aldermen's demands that she pay tax when these demands are submitted in writing. Miss Emily acknowledges that she "received a paper" but cites her previous spoken agreement with the Colonel Sartoris as being more binding, despite the fact that Sartoris is long dead and "there is nothing on the books" to verify his words (234). Orality is "a central feature of the dead world that Emily Grierson refuses to bury" (Morton 7). This can also be seen in her infatuation with a railroad worker named Homer, whose namesake the Greek bard represents the epitome of oral storytelling culture. Although John B. McLemore was undoubtedly a prolific writer, he seems to likewise prioritise oral storytelling, and the podcast indulges his flair for this on many occasions. "I would like to talk to you by phone if possible," he tells Reed in his first email, "this is just too much to type" (Reed "Chapter I" 04:00-04:04). We then hear the subsequent phone call play out almost unedited, with John's voice dominating for minutes at a time. He gives a lengthy, rambling description of his life, his town, and finally the alleged murder of Dylan Nichols. If McLemore is indeed Reed's fellow journalist in *S-Town*, he is a particularly gonzo one. McLemore's bemoaning of his hometown's "proleptic decay and decrepitude" has distinct echoes of, for instance, Hunter S. Thompson's article "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved", in which he indicts the "whole doomed atavistic culture" of his own Southern home state (31). But McLemore's voice is also consistent with Rachel Hawley's concept of "vile humour" – a Southern Gothic genre feature in which characters use darkly comedic language as "defiant acts" which "reform the southern landscape" (i). McLemore's voice has a "rococo Southern musicality and a stand-up's timing" (McHugh). He sarcastically and bitterly compares Woodstock to war-torn regions like Fallujah and Darfur, and he relishes outrageous or morbid jokes about depravity and death. He makes frequent use of malapropisms and mispronunciations like "hajib" (hijab) and "Jebus" (Jesus). Wilgus describes McLemore's paraverbal delivery in the podcast as "heavily rehearsed and partially improvised", supporting the idea that this is an intentional flourish of McLemore's for comic effect. Wilgus expresses doubt that "McLemore could have said 'gen-yoo-wine murder!' without some degree of relish", for instance. By highlighting the performative aspects of McLemore's voice, *S-Town* thus represents the Southern Gothic genre features as being McLemore's authorial contribution as much as Reed's.

McLemore's other creative work supports the idea that he is actively shaping the aural storytelling of *S-Town* rather than passively giving Reed information as an interviewee. After the release of *S-Town*, it came to light that McLemore had produced several pieces of experimental music between 2003 and 2012. These abstract, ambient pieces combined the existing work of musician Tor Lundvall with original instrumentation and field recordings made on McLemore's property. He sent these recordings to Lundvall, who published them in 2018 as the album *Witness Marks: The Works of*

John B. McLemore. Examining both McLemore's posthumous album and his voice in *S-Town* itself, it becomes clear that he had a keen understanding of audionarratology and soundscape ecology. Soundscape ecology separates sound into anthropophony, biophony, and geophony. In "A Worthwhile Life Defined", an essay by McLemore that is part of his suicide note and is quoted at length by Reed in *S-Town*, he looks back on his life and expresses gratitude that the property on which he lived has a richness of all three (Reed "Chapter VII"). He admires the geophony of the non-biological natural world, like the "babbling creek" (55:56), as well as anthropophony, the sounds of humans and human-made objects. "Sometimes I just spent hours playing my records" he says, or else spending dark nights alone listening to "the creaking of the old house" (56:45-57:04). Perhaps most significant is his understanding of biophony, the sounds of plants and animals. McLemore writes that he "spent time in idle palaver with violets", and "audited the discourse of the hickories, oaks, and pines" (56:02-56:19). McLemore's written voice is rich in sound metaphors like "palaver" and "discourse" when describing the natural world, elevating the flora of his home from mere sources of sound to partners in conversation.

The tracks on *Witness Marks* show a similar appreciation for sound and soundscape ecology, often blurring the lines between anthropophony, biophony, and geophony for artistic effect. "Clock Chimes in the Mist", for instance, features the sounds of clock bells, birds, insects, wind, and rain. The track "His Darker Paintings" features seed pods from the showy rattlebox plant, which McLemore collected, dried, and repurposed as musical instruments. Ryan Martin, co-founder of the record label that released *Witness Marks*, argues that the tracks on the album constitute "personal documents", or "beautiful audio photographs" of "everything in his immediate vicinity" (qtd. in O'Neill). McLemore even gives very specific instructions regarding how the album should be heard. "It requires a nearly isolated listening environment", he says in the album's accompanying notes. "It should be heard after midnight, in the late fall of the year" (Lundvall & McLemore). These tracks are "the closest someone will get to hearing what McLemore heard" on the "dark nights alone" mentioned in his suicide note, implying that the album has more insight into McLemore's subjectivity and is therefore a more authentic representation of his psyche than *S-Town*. (Lozano). *Witness Marks* thus supports the idea that McLemore could use his voice creatively to make evocative aural representations of the world in which he lived.

McLemore's authorial agency is suggested in *S-Town* even when he is not speaking. Reed suggests, on several occasions, that he is being encouraged to say things that McLemore does not wish to say himself. McLemore will show Reed something visually that he knows will prompt a surprised

reaction, and then admonish him for describing it out loud. In Chapter I, a drunk McLemore exposes his tattooed and pierced torso to Reed “for no apparent reason, and certainly not because I asked”. When Reed comments on McLemore’s nipple rings, McLemore replies, “oh, we weren’t gonna talk about those” (Reed “Chapter I” 40:45). More significantly, in Chapter IV, we hear Reed react to McLemore casually and unexpectedly showing him the suicide note he has prepared on his laptop. McLemore opens the document without naming it, prompting Reed to exclaim “your suicide note”. McLemore tells Reed “we weren’t gonna call it out loud, but you did!” (Reed “Chapter IV” 01:09). He then teasingly calls Reed “big mouth” and claims “you shouldn’t have said that... we didn’t have a camera”. Reed observes that despite his protestations, McLemore does seem to be inviting him to comment on what he is being shown. “He claims he doesn’t want to talk about” the suicide note, “but he’s the one that brought it up,” says Reed in narration. In these examples, Reed establishes the idea that McLemore’s stated wishes regarding what information is included or excluded from the podcast do not always align with his *actual* wishes for the story. This foreshadows a scene in Chapter VII, when McLemore tells Reed information that is explicitly off the record, even asking him to “hit the kill button” on his microphone and stop recording entirely. Rather than omit the recorded conversation from the podcast, Reed plays McLemore’s voice right up to the moment he turns off the microphone, heightening his listeners’ curiosity. Reed chooses to include the information despite McLemore’s request, summarising it in his own voice and arguing that McLemore would only have wanted certain, specific details kept secret. Reed states that his journalistic aim and the thesis of his podcast is to “understand” John B. McLemore, because “trying to understand another person is a worthwhile thing to do”. Janet Malcolm argues that a journalist is necessarily “a kind of confidence man” who tells a subject’s story by “gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse” (1). In *S-Town*, this is applicable to not just the podcaster but the subject – since McLemore may also be a “confidence man” who brings Reed to Woodstock by inventing a murder. Reed’s apparent breach of confidence here is made more palatable because the podcast has already suggested that McLemore’s protests are actually subtle encouragements for Reed to include such information.

S-Town as Monument and Memorial

S-Town thus uses John B. McLemore’s voice in a way that departs from the conventions established by *Serial*; it is not simply subject to the reporting of the podcaster, but an authorial force in his own right. This is most apparent in the podcast’s first two chapters, before McLemore’s death is revealed. However, *S-Town* contains a second, conflicting representation of McLemore’s voice, by treating it as an artefact to be monumented and memorialised. In this section I will argue that

wherever *S-Town* attempts to monumentalise McLemore, it reasserts the authority of Reed's voice at the expense of McLemore or the podcast's other subjects.

Despite the attempts by Reed to highlight McLemore's authorial input into *S-Town's* content, genre, and tone, it is ultimately Reed's voice that is given the most authority. Part of this comes from the way Reed, at times, takes on the voice of an omniscient narrator. Reed has named Edward P. Jones's novel *The Known World* as a specific influence on his style of narration in *S-Town* (Lau). When talking about a character's actions in that novel, Jones often slips into future tense to describe something that will happen long in the future. This is something that *S-Town* imitates on several occasions, for instance in his account of Goodson at McLemore's funeral:

BRIAN REED. Tyler will be the one who makes John's tombstone. It'll be a couple of months before he does it... [he] will haul the heavy stone into the cemetery and place it at the head of John's grave. (Reed "Chapter III" 46:30-46:40)

Reed has since acknowledged that this tense shifting is "a weird thing to do in a reported radio story" (qtd. in Lau), but that it was an inevitable outcome of the way the story unfolded in real life. Because Reed was reporting on McLemore for a period of three years and assembled the podcast at the end of the process, he had "accidentally given [himself] the power of omniscience" (qtd. in Sawyer). The omniscient narration is also a defining characteristic of the "ethnographic realism" subgenre of literary journalism (Giles & Roberts 102). McLemore himself, however, does not have the same position of omniscience. His voice appears in every chapter of *S-Town*, but beyond Chapter II it is effectively as a ghost, through audio material that is being put to uses beyond what he could have anticipated. This is a notable difference from *Serial*, which released episodes as the reinvestigation was still occurring and therefore could not use the same omniscient narration style. Adnan Syed's voice is an active presence in Koenig's investigation until the final episode of *Serial's* first season. He even advises Koenig on how to present her ultimate conclusions to the listener and, though she disregards this advice, she includes that advice in the podcast. Reed's decision to continue reporting on McLemore so far beyond the time of his death gives Reed's voice greater storytelling authority and undercuts McLemore's implied authorial input, since McLemore is unable to move between narrative levels as Reed does.

The hierarchy of vocal authority is also displayed in *S-Town* through non-verbal audionarratology like sound editing and music. Even if the podcast allows McLemore to speak in his

own words, Reed and the production team ultimately have control over his voice is perceived. This sets Reed apart from others who have dealt with McLemore's legacy and voice. Tor Lundvall, for instance, curated and published McLemore's music as another monument, the *Witness Marks* album, but explicitly described it as a co-authored text and presented McLemore's artistic voice unaltered. In *S-Town*, many recordings of McLemore are included in the podcast because they showcase his unconventional use of language, and these are occasionally edited in ways that deliberately make him seem less authoritative to the listener. At one point in *S-Town*, John expresses his frustrations about the state of the world in a rant to Reed over the phone. The rant is an expletive-laden tirade that Reed describes ironically as "some of John's most virtuosic work".

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, peeking 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 me some tea. (Reed "Chapter V" 48:20-48:53)

In this passage, John's voice is overlaid with opera music – specifically, Andrea Bocelli's performance of "La Donna e Mobile" from Verdi's *Rigoletto*. This is a call back to the beginning of the chapter, when Reed interviews Tyler Goodson's grandmother Irene. Irene bemoans the world's various injustices, from local and personal issues like Tyler's legal problems, to larger ones like the US presidential race. She tells Reed that her method for coping with these problems is to "take my medicine and take my Bocelli... if you hear me play Bocelli, then you know I'm sad" (Reed "Chapter V" 4:55). An excerpt from "La Donna e Mobile" is then edited into the scene. Reed establishes that this piece of music is used by characters in the podcast to drown out or distract them from issues that are unfixable, or too distressing to think about. Reed, like Irene, tries to drown out a problem that is too large, too exhausting, or too inconvenient to deal with meaningfully – McLemore's unceasing pessimism. Even McLemore himself resorts to a comforting but meaningless gesture, his tea, at the end of his "virtuosic" rant. During the rant, Bocelli's performance builds in intensity, reaching its peak after "won't you?". It highlights the bathos of McLemore's final, exhausted "I gotta have me some tea" and turns it into a wry punchline. The music in this sequence is an "acoustic alchemy" that both "counterpoints and elevates" McLemore's voice (McHugh). He speaks in a loose stream-of-consciousness style rather than complete sentences, and his cadence and tone indicate exaggerated and overblown emotion. This is a deliberately theatrical performance on McLemore's part, but it is

clear from other moments in the podcast that the content of what he is saying reflects sincerely held beliefs. For listeners, the scene further highlights the give-and-take relationship between the voices of McLemore, who uses the podcast as a platform to espouse his nihilism, and Reed, who tempers it through editing techniques.

The scene also contains comedy in the juxtaposition between the opera, epitomising refinement and high culture, with McLemore's broad accent and "vile humour". *Rigoletto* is one of the most immediately recognizable opera to a mainstream audience, having been used widely in other media. John Storey, for instance, observes that "La Donna e Mobile" has featured in American TV advertisements for products including ragu pasta sauce, and the pizza restaurant chain Little Caesar's (47). The aria's "extensive use... in advertising and on film soundtracks" is evidence of the "integration of opera into popular entertainment" (Storey 47-48). According to radio theorist Rudolf Arnheim, opera singers are "concert-hall artists" rather than "microphone artists" (78). Opera represents a voice "whose normal volume... is acoustically too loud for broadcasting" (79). It is a pre-microphone approach to vocal performance, where reaching a mass audience required physical, vocal projection. By Arnheim's criteria, McLemore is a clear example of this voice. The "powerful mass effects" employed by "the lecture hall, pulpit and stage" are not applicable to the medium of broadcast audio (Arnheim 78). A "microphone artist", however, is aware that because "the normal distance between sound-source and microphone is inconsiderable," there is a "spiritual and atmospheric nearness of broadcaster and listener" (77-78). For Arnheim, "the quiet voice trembling with inner emotion", "the suppressed outburst," and "the note of real feeling that needs no blustering to make one aware of it" are much more suitable for broadcast voices. This is much more consistent with the voice of the typical investigative podcast host – a voice "that [Ira] Glass incarnates, and that Brian Reed embodies". It is "sensitive, hesitating" and "transparently liberal" (Mead). The use of Bocelli to accompany the "virtuosic" rant therefore underscores the distinction between Reed's voice, which is ideally suited for the podcast format, and McLemore's, which is made to seem ridiculous, theatrical, and out of place, acoustically marking him as an outsider to the audience of "well-educated, well-off urbanites like Reed himself" (Callahan).

As the podcast goes on, it becomes a way for Reed to transform the ephemeral and evanescent sounds of human speech into artefacts which can be made into permanent monuments through the recording process. This is evident in moments when Reed deliberately includes voices that have unusual or distinctive vocal qualities. McLemore is the clearest example, but there are a range of others. For example, one of the patrons of the Black Sheep Ink clubhouse, identified only as

“Razor”, is first heard by listeners making a non-lexical vocalization, described in the podcast’s official transcript only as “jackhammer noise” (Reed “Chapter II” 5:35). He goes on to speak in an Alabamian accent so thick and fast that Reed is forced to interpret for listeners, qualifying that his translation is only what “I believe” Razor is saying. For an NPR audience that are primarily “well-off urbanites” and not from the rural South, the accents themselves are a paraverbal novelty (Callahan). Another of the more distinctive voices in *S-Town* is that of Tyler’s uncle Jimmy, who has brain damage from a gunshot wound that limits his verbal communication to exclaimed words and short phrases. In audio from McLemore’s wake, Jimmy can be heard interjecting “Death!”, “Money!”, and “Yessir!” into a group conversation in ways that are acoustically “reminiscent of Gospel affirmations” (McHugh). The producers at Pineapple Street Media, the studio behind *Missing Richard Simmons*, speak of this scene with “jealous admiration”, and describe Uncle Jimmy’s unique speech patterns as “a podcaster’s dream” (Mead). The fact that voices like Jimmy’s are deemed particularly desirable by podcasters supports the idea that the goal of a text like *S-Town* is to collect, showcase, and record the unique or nonconventional paraverbal traits of its othered subjects.

Reed’s treatment of nonconventional Southern voices as novelty is foreshadowed in one of the most direct precursors to *S-Town*, a 2010 episode of *This American Life* titled “Georgia Rambler,” inspired by Charles Salter’s long-running newspaper column of the same name for *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Much like *S-Town*, the “Georgia Rambler” episode presented an opportunity for *This American Life* to explore exceptional figures in the small-town American South. The premise of the episode was that nine *This American Life* reporters would, like Salter, travel to a small town in Georgia chosen at random, “walk around, and talk to people until you find a story” (Glass et al. “Georgia Rambler” 02:40). In each of the “nine counties from a hat”, a reporter attempts to find and interview “the most unforgettable person in town”. This process is designed to unearth local outcasts, eccentrics, and exceptional talents, and if repeated in Alabama, would likely have led *This American Life* to John B. McLemore years earlier. Both the original “Georgia Rambler” newspaper column and the *TAL* adaptation perpetuate the idea that the American South is a region where a reporter can pick a town at random and discover an “unforgettable voice” worth immortalising. Where *TAL*, and later *S-Town*, built upon the newspaper column is that the voices themselves are preserved not just as transcriptions but as aural monuments to the original speakers. The concept of audio recording as a tool for immortalising or memorialising particular voices can be traced to the technology’s earliest days. Thomas Edison wrote of the phonograph’s exciting capacity to permanently preserve “the voices as well as the words of our Washingtons, our Lincolns, our Gladstones, etc.” so that their “greatest effort” in oration might be accessible forever (534). In the age of digital recording and podcasts,

however, it is not only the voices of world leaders that can be recorded. *S-Town* and *This American Life* instead prioritise the voices of non-famous people with lives or voices deemed unique or interesting. This shift reflects the post-2016 media landscape in which investigative podcasts have become popular – an oversaturation of recorded speech from the country’s leaders, and an increased desire among a liberal audience for insight into conservative, small-town America.

S-Town’s latter-half shift into podcast-as-tribute is foreshadowed by Reed’s interest in the power of physical memorials and monuments, which can be seen in both *S-Town* and his work for *This American Life*. In a 2018 episode of *This American Life* titled “Random Acts of History”, Reed relates an anecdote from his time in Alabama reporting for *S-Town*, but which was not included in *S-Town* itself. While exploring “the ruins of the old state capitol” in Tuscaloosa Park, Reed stumbles across a historical plaque commemorating a speech made there by a Native American chief in 1835. Even as his tribe are being forcibly removed from their land, the chief praises white Alabamians as kind and gentle, presenting their treatment as inevitable and morally justified. “I see the Indian fires are going out,” reads the plaque. “We leave behind our goodwill to the people of Alabama... and to the men who make the laws” (Glass et al. “Random Acts” 01:30). This plaque amongst the ruins fits with *S-Town*’s Southern Gothic styling of Alabama, since “Southerners are fascinated by almost anything in ruins, be it graveyards, mansions, barns, or cars” and Southern Gothic literature “reflects that fascination” (Rash 67). Something about the plaque impels Reed to return repeatedly. He is confused by its sentiment, reasoning that the speech must have been sarcastic, mistranslated, made under duress, or perhaps fabricated entirely. Raelynn Butler, a Muskogee Creek historian, shares his scepticism. Butler tells Reed that the speech as transcribed on the marker “misrepresented the way that... I know my family feels about removal” (*TAL* “Random Acts”). The speech “did not sound accurate” to Butler. Reed and Butler question the authenticity of the plaque compared to the original. But regardless of its authenticity, Reed acknowledges that the plaque has a great sense of authority and importance:

BRIAN REED. I have never forgotten this thing. It stayed with me. And every time I went back to Tuscaloosa... I would go, at some point during the trip, walk over and read it again. I brought my wife one time... I've been there a bunch.

IRA GLASS. It made an impression?

BRIAN REED. Yes. (Glass et al. “Random Acts” 00:15-00:42)

For Reed, the plaque has authority because it physically persists, regardless of how authentic its representation of the original voice is. Pascal Bardet writes that historical markers are a way of “infusing history into the landscape”, or of “inscribing or imposing one’s authority over a given area without which the relationship between belonging, identity and territorial domestication is lost” (8). However, they are also “products of amnesia or overemphasis” (4). Similarly, creating a podcast to monumentalise recordings of McLemore’s voice involves imposing the authority of the podcast creator over that of McLemore. “No place is a place until things that have happened in it are remembered in... monuments”, writes Wallace Stegner, noting that for this purpose, “fictions serve as well as facts” (202). For Reed, turning a voice into a monument is meaningful regardless of authenticity compared to the original.

This is supported by how *S-Town* emphasises the few physical markers that remain in Woodstock to memorialise McLemore. As mentioned above, Reed is particularly interested in the tombstone that Tyler Goodson makes for McLemore’s grave. He gives an extended description of it in Chapter III, detailing the materials and craftsmanship that Tyler put into it, and claiming that it looks “like nothing else in the whole cemetery”. In Chapter VII, Reed even ventures into the woods to find another such monument - a spot under a bridge where McLemore and Goodson graffitied their names on their final day together. The location seems to epitomise the decay and depravity that McLemore hated about his town. To reach it, Reed passes “a bunch of garbage... a rotting deer carcass, and weirdly, the half burnt medical records of an infant” (Reed “Chapter VII” 52:48-52:55). The graffiti however, is in a spot “just a little bit cleaner” with only a small amount of litter. Reed explains that McLemore also assigned great authority to monumented texts, like the mottos engraved on his beloved sundials. McLemore even has a tattoo of one such sundial motto, we learn: “omnes vulnerant, ultima necat,” meaning “each wounds, the last kills” (“Chapter VII” 48:45). But, as Reed laments, many of the physical monuments to McLemore are destined to fade. His property, for instance, is sold to the Burt family who McLemore originally claimed covered up the murder of Dylan Nichols, and who plans to harvest the land for timber. Kendall Burt also tells Reed bluntly that he “probably will not put forth the effort or the money” to maintain McLemore’s hedge maze. The inevitable decay of McLemore’s physical legacy leads Reed to turn the podcast into his own aural monument to McLemore’s voice.

Reed’s use of voice-as-artefact and podcast-as-monument represents a shift in post-*Serial* investigative podcasting to a genre where the voices of subjects are valued not because of any

inherent authority or agency, but as tools for the podcaster to create a desired narrative effect. This is another narrative decision that is influenced by “A Rose for Emily”, which Faulkner intended as a tribute to his title character, the “poor woman who had no life at all” (Faulkner “At the University” 87). The Zombies’ song uses the same metaphor of the rose as an offering of tribute, denied to Emily all her life by those who “come and go/to give each other roses from her tree” but given to her through the act of telling her story. Dan Taberski’s podcast *Missing Richard Simmons* is another example of the investigative podcast as tribute or monument, and is a valuable comparison piece to *S-Town* because it states in more overt terms the aspects of its author-subject relationship that Reed only ever implies. Taberski’s podcast foreshadowed the investigative method that Reed’s podcast typified, with critics describing *Missing Richard Simmons* as “just a warm-up” to *S-Town* in its treatment of its subjects’ voices (Larson “Missing Richard Simmons”).

Like *S-Town*, *Missing Richard Simmons* has a central subject who does not actively participate throughout, and the podcast therefore similarly becomes an aural monument to an absent voice. *Missing Richard Simmons* concerns the titular celebrity fitness guru, who suddenly retreated from public life in 2014 after a thirty-year career, refusing to speak to even his closest friends. Taberski, a documentarian and regular attendee at Simmons’ fitness classes, sets out to discover why. He interviews Simmons’ friends, family, and business associates, encouraging and participating in the public speculation about Simmons’ whereabouts, health, and wellbeing, although he is ultimately unsuccessful in his goal of speaking to Simmons himself. Simmons’ disappearance “was treated as a death by many of his fans”, and Taberski’s podcast became “a platform to process grief and loss” (Boling et al. 6-7). Taberski’s persona in the podcast is not an impartial investigator, therefore, but a concerned friend. Solving the “mystery” of the disappearance is, he implies, an act of tribute and is in Simmons’ own best interest, despite all available evidence suggesting that Simmons simply wants to be left alone. Taberski describes an incident from years prior when Simmons bought a \$100,000 diamond ring as a gift for Barbra Streisand, who he had never met. The podcast includes audio from a 1994 TV interview where Simmons admits this unapologetically. For Taberski, this anecdote proves that “Richard really digs a grand gesture,” and that Taberski is therefore justified in creating the podcast as a “grand gesture” of his own. This foreshadows Reed’s notion of the podcast as monument. Reed’s claim in Chapter VII that “trying to understand someone is a worthwhile thing to do” implies that whatever McLemore may have wished, Reed himself has not only the authority but the moral obligation to investigate his personal life.

Both Reed and Taberski make claims about the private lives of their subjects which are not supported by available evidence, but which fit into dramatically satisfying narratives – something which is only possible because their own voices have more authority than the absent subjects they are supposedly monumentalising. Taberski, for instance, speculates that Simmons is being held hostage by his housekeeper. He makes a pointed observation in Episode 4 that Simmons’ only media appearance since his withdrawal in 2014 was on *The Today Show*, joining via phone call to dispel the rumour. Taberski questions why Simmons chose a phone call rather than a live video for his appearance, suggesting that Simmons was speaking under duress and that ocular proof would have revealed the truth. “There was no Richard to see, only the voice on the phone... what’s that about?” he asks (Taberski “Till the Day I Die” 07:15). Evoking a cinematic cliché, Taberski suggests that *The Today Show* might “cut to the shot that reveals the kidnapper holding a gun to his head”. In another example, Taberski addresses a rumour reported by several news outlets that Richard Simmons had withdrawn from public life because he was undergoing a gender transition, suggesting that it would be consistent with Simmons’ flamboyant personality and penchant for crossdressing:

UNNAMED MALE NEWSREADER. Is Richard Simmons now a woman? That’s the shocking new headline from the National Inquirer...

DAN TABERSKI. It wouldn’t be the world’s biggest shock, would it? It would certainly explain why Richard’s been physically hiding for so long. (Taberski “O Brother, Where Art Thou” 03:30-03:48)

Taberski ultimately concludes that Simmons is neither being held hostage nor transgender, but the *Missing Richard Simmons* podcast entertains both theories for long enough to encourage speculation among listeners. This reporting bears similarities with Reed’s, which also occasionally speculates about McLemore’s most intimate secrets with little or no conclusive evidence. In Chapter VII, for instance, Reed describes what he interprets as John’s failed attempts to find romantic relationships. Reed implies that John’s depression stemmed in part from his loneliness, and his lack of a monogamous relationship more specifically. “Did John ever have love in his life?” Reed wonders, “or did he spend the entirety of a lifetime without it?”. The relationship between McLemore and his former romantic interest Olin Long is likened to that between the main characters in Annie Proulx’s “Brokeback Mountain”. Reed draws parallels between McLemore and the character Ennis, who laments that he cannot be with the man he loves since he is “stuck with what I got, caught in my own loop, can’t get out of it”. Reed has learned from Long that McLemore identified with the story and

called it “the grief manual”. As with “A Rose for Emily”, Reed uses works of fiction as reference points for the characters in his podcast, but in this case relies on the literary trope of the tragic or doomed gay romance to the point that he misinterprets or mischaracterises aspects of his real life subject’s personality. Reed implies that McLemore must have been in need of “the kind of love... you could write a country song about”. This, he explains, is “the kind of love I hear about... on the country music stations as I’m driving around west Alabama”, which he illustrates with a clip from Canaan Smith’s “Love You Like That”. This is a sentiment that Reed presumes McLemore must have had, rather than one that we ever hear expressed by McLemore himself. Romantic love is never mentioned in McLemore’s treatise on the “worthwhile life defined”, for instance. Indeed, the country songs Reed mentions as a template for romantic love seem more likely to be part of the Southern culture that McLemore so detested.

Reed’s ability to “understand” McLemore is hampered by the fact that he relies on his own worldview to interpret McLemore’s life and relationships, which affects *S-Town*’s authenticity as a monument to his voice. Before McLemore’s death, he and Goodson would regularly perform a body modification ritual they referred to as “church”, in which McLemore would be repeatedly pierced and tattooed with an empty needle. This act is described in great detail in *S-Town*’s final chapter, especially the role it played in McLemore’s last night alive. Reed interprets “church” as a form of self-harm, an “elaborate form of cutting” that aligns with his understanding of John’s depressive mental state. Reed goes so far as to include illustrative audio from one of these sessions, taken from Goodson’s phone, sharing the sounds of John’s muffled groans and expletives. Other commentators, however, have accused Reed of misunderstanding or oversimplifying “church” to make McLemore better fit the intended literary type, and erasing part of his complex sexuality. Aja Romano, for instance, asserts that “church” as described in the podcast is more consistent with the established BDSM practice of “needle play” than with self-harm, and that Reed therefore “frames John’s fetish as a dramatic twist” by “implying that BDSM itself is inherently shocking, sinister, unstructured, and dangerous”. In conversation with Reed, McLemore himself downplays any emotional or sexual element to “church”. He claims he is only providing his body as “a little bit of practice material” to help Goodson improve his tattooing. “Church” also aligns with McLemore’s hatred of Alabama’s religious institutions. The terminology that McLemore and Goodson have invented to surround the ritual are parodies or appropriations of religious language and symbols. McLemore claims that “Wild Turkey is the holy water. The little filthy-ass room is the sanctuary... The tattoo needles are the reliquaries” (Reed “Chapter VII” 38:50-38:56). Goodson carries his tattooing equipment in what he calls his “minister’s case” (“Chapter II” 12:50). This is another example of the McLemore and Goodson’s “vile humor”, but

through his simplified understanding of the practice Reed undermines its clearly intended subversive force. The reduction of McLemore's agency and the diminished authenticity of his depiction are thus an unavoidable consequence of Reed's attempt to shape McLemore's voice into an emotionally satisfying monument.

In *S-Town* and *Missing Richard Simmons*, the relationship between author and subject is even more asymmetrical than in *Serial* since the subjects have no ongoing opportunity to contribute their voices. As discussed in the previous chapter, Syed's voice is important in *Serial* because Koenig argues that it was absent from the original investigation. Syed did not speak at trial, so *Serial* gives him the opportunity to do so now, for the first time. For Koenig, her subject's willing participation is not only considered an endorsement of her investigation, but also a piece of evidence in his defence. As she asks at the end of the season's final episode, "why on earth would a guilty man agree to let me do this story?" (Koenig "What We Know" 52:50). Taberski and Reed, however, create extended narratives about subjects whose voices are notably absent. Taberski has decades' worth of existing public recordings of Simmons to make use of, and Reed has his own taped conversations with McLemore from before his death, but both podcasters are forced to use this material in projects that exceed what the subject could have anticipated. With their respective subjects both absent, *S-Town* and *Missing Richard Simmons* each substitute voices of people close to the subject, asking for their approval to justify further investigation. Talking to Richard Simmons' long-time friend, Gerry "G.G." Sinclair, for instance, Taberski asks bluntly for her blessing to continue his podcast:

DAN TABERSKI. Do you think I should try to find Richard?

G.G. I wish you could. Just, I wish you could.

DAN TABERSKI. I'm gonna try. (Taberski "Stakeout" 11:00-11:05)

There is an almost identical exchange in *S-Town's* third chapter, soon after McLemore's suicide. Talking to Allen Bearden, a former acquaintance of McLemore's, Reed asks if Bearden thinks he should continue to contact the people McLemore wished to be notified of his death, despite this officially being the responsibility of Woodstock's town clerk Faye Gambol:

BRIAN REED. Do you think I should call the other people on the list?

ALLEN BEARDEN. I think it would be a good idea, I mean, to further investigate...

BRIAN REED (NARRATION). And for the second time, I find myself embarking on an investigation at the behest of an Alabamian horologist. (Reed "Chapter IV" 34:08-34:46)

Reed is therefore even more explicit than Taberski in his use of interviewees' approval to justify his reporting both to himself and the listener. Reed works his way down McLemore's list specifically "at the behest" of Bearden, just as he investigated the alleged murder of Dylan Nichols at the behest of John B. McLemore. This suggests that both Reed and Taberski acknowledge, at least to some extent, that their investigations are intrusive, and that they should not continue uninvited. It also suggests that they anticipate that without this justification, the listener will find the investigation morally off-putting. These passages highlight the narrator's importance in the investigative podcast genre compared to the subject – the story serves not the needs of the subject, but of the author and those around them. Taberski is ultimately much more reflective than Reed regarding his role and motives as an investigative podcaster. When his attempts to contact Simmons ultimately fail, Taberski concedes that Simmons "sent the ring back", as Streisand had. In the podcast's final episode, he asks himself a "terrifying question" about the ethics of his investigation. If Simmons is fine, as evidence seems to indicate, then "what does that make me, the guy who just can't get himself to believe it?" (Taberski "A Day at the Beach" 09:40-09:50). Taberski thus acknowledges that his search for answers is, at least in part, a selfish endeavour to satisfy or capitalise on his own curiosity, while Reed maintains that his investigation is morally justified.

In conclusion, *S-Town* represents a new stage in the investigate podcast genre that experiments with the relationship between the voices of author and subject with mixed effects. *S-Town's* depiction of McLemore's voice varies in authority and authenticity depending on its relationship to Reed's voice. Through a more symmetrical relationship between author and subject, Reed tries to combine the strengths of McLemore's voice and his own to effectively co-author a Southern Gothic, non-fiction biographical novel told entirely through sound. However, this conflicts with Reed's impulse to create to be a tribute or monument to McLemore's voice, and those of other people in Bibb County. *S-Town's* consistencies with other texts like *Missing Richard Simmons* indicate a new trend of podcasts that work as monuments to absent or non-participant subjects, often at the expense of that subject's control over their own voice and story. Podcasts like *S-Town* thus highlight

both the potentials and limitations of the long-form narrative podcast format for creating a factually and emotionally authentic portrait of a real person.

Chapter 3: *Dirty John*

In 2017, Christopher Goffard's six-part investigative podcast *Dirty John* was released as a co-production between the podcast network Wondery and the *Los Angeles Times* newspaper. It tells the story of Debra Newell, an interior designer from Newport Beach, Orange County, who meets the charming John Meehan through an over-fifty dating website. After a brief romance, Debra marries Meehan against the wishes of her adult daughters Jacquelyn and Terra. Meehan becomes increasingly hostile and threatening to Debra and her daughters after they discover that he is not, as he claims, a wealthy anaesthesiologist, but rather a prolific conman and pathological liar. Meehan continues to terrorise and manipulate Debra and her family, until Terra eventually kills him in self-defence after he attempts to abduct her. Like *Serial* and *S-Town*, *Dirty John* draws on genre fiction in its representations of characters, settings, and events - in this case, hardboiled crime fiction, and horror. The *Dirty John* podcast has spawned numerous retellings of the same case in various formats. In addition to the original podcast, it was simultaneously released as a series of articles for the *LA Times* website. A television series also titled *Dirty John* was released in 2018, telling a fictionalised version of the story (Cunningham).

In terms of audionarratology, *Dirty John* uses techniques that are consistent with previous texts in the genre – narration, interviews, archival material, and music. *Dirty John* also has a literary approach to setting that closely resembles *S-Town*. Just as Reed uses Southern Gothic literature as a reference point for his exploration of an Alabama-based mystery and its associated themes, Goffard evokes literary representations of Los Angeles and the surrounding counties in ways that contribute to his thematic interest in masks and facades. However, it also represents an extension of the conventions of long-form, investigative journalism podcasts that *Serial* and *S-Town* established. It strictly limits its use of nonverbal audio as a marker of authenticity, and is highly subversive regarding authority and authenticity of voice – using audience perceptions of certain voices to manipulate their interpretation of events. Like *Serial* and *S-Town*, *Dirty John* relies on a relationship of trust between the authorial voice and the listener. This chapter will argue, however, that *Dirty John* creates this relationship by centring the voices of subjects, and by giving them authority to a much greater degree than in the podcasts discussed in previous chapters.

Nonverbal Audio and Authenticity

Through its use of nonverbal audio, *Dirty John* epitomises the tension between journalistic truth-telling and sensationalist entertainment which has come to define the investigative podcast genre. The two nonverbal techniques in question are editing and sound effects, which work towards opposite effects in the podcast. In a keynote speech describing the process of making *Dirty John*, Goffard highlighted the differences between the storytelling style of the *LA Times* and Wondery, claiming that their two “cultures” were “not always in harmony” during *Dirty John’s* production (Goffard “Telling the Truth”). For the *LA Times*, the podcast was “first and foremost a work of journalism”, while for Wondery it was an entertainment product. In the same address, Goffard describes an early edit of the podcast in which nonverbal sound effects were used “extremely liberally” to create immersive soundscapes for various scenes. To illustrate the scene in Part 1 where Meehan and Debra move into a Balboa Island house together, for example, ocean sounds were originally heard in the background. Goffard had attempted to record ambient sound from the actual location. Microphone in hand, he “leaned right over the water until my nose almost touched the foam and tried to catch the sound of the gently lapping Balboa Island waves” (“Telling the Truth”). This would have been reminiscent of scenes in *Serial*, *S-Town*, and *The Polybius Conspiracy* which take place in natural environments like forest, using ambient geophonic or biophonic sound as a marker of authenticity, placing the listener directly within the world of the story.

In the case of Goffard’s Balboa Island recordings, however, distortion from the wind rendered the audio unusable. Wondery’s sound editors instead provided generic sound effects of lapping waves from a database, setting a precedent for a great many more “non-literal” sounds. In the scene where Debra and Meehan first meet in an upscale restaurant, stock sounds of clinking cutlery and indistinct chatter were layered beneath Goffard’s narration to create a more immersive soundscape. According to Goffard, this “sounded more like a restaurant than the actual restaurant”, suggesting that paradoxically, these “phony” sounds can seem more authentic than the real environments they represent. In Part 3, when Goffard describes Meehan’s childhood in a casino, Wondery’s sound engineers layered in the sound of a roulette wheel to “suggest the atmosphere”. When Meehan is taken to hospital, the early edit of the episode contained sound effects like doctors being paged. Goffard ultimate decision was that the “non-literal” effects lacked the authenticity that would have come from recording the sounds in the actual locations of the story. They are “platonically perfect” –

technically pristine recordings which lack the literal authenticity of Goffard's own recordings while also sounding *too real* ("Telling the Truth"). Goffard draws a distinction between nonverbal audio as an "aesthetic choice" and "ethical choice" in podcast production. Music, he argues, is an aesthetic choice since it sets a tone without claiming to represent a literal part of the narrative. The stock sound effects, however, are ethical choices because they are substitutes for specific elements of the story and can therefore lead audiences to "question the veracity of our work" ("Telling the Truth"). All of the "non-literal" sound effects "had to go", and these evocative but "phony" sound effects do not appear in the version of *Dirty John* which was eventually released.

Dirty John is unusual among investigative podcasts for taking this seemingly purist approach to nonverbal authenticity. This is evident from a comparison with another of Wondery's investigative podcasts, *Dr Death*. In this podcast, reporter Laura Beil tells the story of Dallas surgeon Christopher Duntsch, who maimed patients by botching their surgeries either intentionally or through extreme malpractice. The most dramatic moments of the story are the surgery scenes, in which the botched operations are recounted in excruciating detail. Beil lists the steps and missteps taken by Duntsch, accompanied, in many cases, by sound effects suggestive of an operating theatre: heart monitors beeping, voices of doctors and nurses, and the clatter of surgical equipment. These all work to heighten the sense of horror, but none of them are examples of actuality. This has become Wondery's signature style of audionarratology in its investigative podcasts, with *Dirty John* notable as an exception due to the mediating influence of Goffard and the *LA Times*. Goffard intends *Dirty John's* minimal sound effects as a marker of authenticity that separates it from other true-crime storytelling, but the podcast's coproduction status highlights the tension between investigative podcasting as journalism, and as entertainment.

Conversely, however, Goffard's use of editing works toward creating not journalistic authenticity but narrative tension. *Dirty John* is a clear example of how a voice in a podcast does not belong only to its original speaker, but is mediated through the authorial voice to create a specific narrative effect. This is evident from the podcast's first episode, when editing techniques are used to alter the meaning of narration by Matt Murphy, Assistant District Attorney for Newport Beach. Murphy is the first voice we hear in *Dirty John*, and Goffard introduces him as "a man who prosecutes murders for a living" – a "veteran" attorney with years of experience investigating violent deaths. This establishes Murphy decisively as a voice of authority. He is a real person, in an official position, giving a true and honest account of events. Nonetheless, his voice in the podcast is used to mislead and

obscure the reality of the case. In the opening moments of *Dirty John's* first episode, Murphy reads aloud from an autopsy report:

There are a total of thirteen stab wounds which penetrated the body. They are all arbitrarily numbered, from one to thirteen. There are eight wounds noted on the left side and upper back, in the shoulder and scapular area, where wound number one is on the top of the left shoulder... Wound number thirteen, which is the fatal wound, is the upper left eyelid, one centimetre in size. (Goffard "The Real Thing" 00:12-02:00)

This passage presents a slew of information, quickly overwhelming listeners with highly specific details, but is ultimately unimportant to the story. The autopsy report gives highly specific details and uses medical jargon, with a built-in claim of authority because it is a direct recitation from an official document. This disguises the fact that a crucial element of the report is left unstated – the identity of the corpse. Minutiae like the exact number and locations of the stab wounds are less relevant to the story than who "the body" belongs to, but this remains ambiguous. This allows Goffard to employ a deliberately misleading piece of aural sleight-of-hand. The sequence ends with Murphy's one-line summary of the autopsy report – "what it tells you is, this young woman fought like hell" (02:08-02:12). An ominous drone accompanies Murphy's voice here, leading into the "careening fiddles" of the podcast's opening theme music (Goffard "Telling the Truth"). The body remains unnamed, but the listener is strongly encouraged to conclude that "this young woman" is the one who has been killed despite having "fought like hell" to save herself. The identity of the stabbed person is initially obscured from the audience to create tension, but as Meehan's hostility to the Newell family escalates over the course of the story, listeners are made to fear for the safety of any character who fits the "young woman" descriptor.

Had the story been told completely linearly, this dramatic tension would have been greatly reduced. Logically, the audience can deduce that none of the Newell women will die, since we hear each of their voices in the podcast. Likewise, since Meehan's voice is only heard in old recordings, listeners can reasonably infer that he is dead. The precisely controlled use of Matt Murphy's official, authoritative voice at the start of the episode is therefore necessary to introduce enough doubt of that fact for the story's ending to remain unpredictable. At the end of the Part 5, audio from a 911 call is played as a teaser for the finale. The voices of multiple bystanders are audible, with panicked statements that "there's been a stabbing", and that witnesses had seen "this guy just raising his hand up and down". This sequence is again carefully designed to obscure the outcome of the fight between

Terra and Meehan, and thereby preserve the surprise of the twist ending. By the end of the podcast it is revealed that the young woman, Terra Newell, did not receive the stab wounds but gave them in self-defence, and that the dead body is that of Meehan himself. Murphy's voice bookends the podcast, as he is also featured in the final moments of Part 6 with the proper meaning of his words undisguised. The voice of officialdom represents a return to order, now that the monstrous John Meehan has been reduced to a collection of "arbitrarily numbered" stab wounds. In both the autopsy report and the 911 call, nonverbal editing techniques are used to give an ambiguous or misleading impression of verbal material from an authentic source.

In both *Serial* and *S-Town*, information is often revealed not when it would be most honest to do so, but when it best suits the structure of the story. When Goffard initially obscures the outcome of Terra and John's fight through editing, it represents a continuation of this technique. By revealing that they know more than what they choose to share with the audience, podcast authors create a mystery not for the detective figure in the podcast but purely for the listener. Brian Reed, for example, hints at John McLemore's death in *S-Town* before reaching that point in the story, cryptically stating that "before this is all over, someone *will* end up dead" in Chapter II. This allows him to use McLemore's suicide as a plot twist ending to that chapter. *Serial* ends several of its episodes with Koenig hinting at information she possesses which will not be shared until the next episode. The web article version of *Dirty John* omits the opening scene with Murphy reading the autopsy report, instead skipping straight to Debra and John's first date. The same trick of audience manipulation is not as compatible with the article format. A quote with its parts so misleadingly rearranged and omitted would, in a written article, be considered a more blatant misrepresentation of the original source. The 2018 television series, however, retains the ambiguity of the podcast's opening. The first episode, "Approachable Dreams", opens with images of stretchers being rushed into a hospital while a worried Debra looks on. There is also ambiguous footage of the aftermath of the attack, like bloodstained clothing and a bloody knife falling onto concrete. It is unclear who is on the stretcher and whose blood is on the knife. Goffard's manipulation of Murphy's voice in the opening scene is therefore a decision that builds upon precedent in other investigative podcasts and is more consistent with dramatic narrative than with conventional journalism.

Following the podcast, the Meehan-Newell case was featured on an episode of NBC's *Dateline* titled "The Women and Dirty John". This episode provides insight into how the podcast's storytelling bridges old and new forms of true crime. As noted in Chapter 1, part of what distinguishes an investigative podcast from a show like *Dateline* is the former's use of narrative "levels" (Letzler 41).

Letzler identifies four such levels in *Serial*, for instance. The first two are the events of the day of Hae Min Lee's murder, and the events of the original police investigation and trial. These are analogous to Todorov's "story of the crime and story of the investigation" (44). The other two, distinctive to the investigative podcast genre, are the story of Koenig's reinvestigation, and Koenig's reflection on the process of that reinvestigation. For most of the *Dirty John* podcast, there are only two narrative levels. The first is Meehan's victimisation of the Newell family in 2014-2016. The second is Goffard's reporting and interviewing after the fact. These are largely kept indistinct, as Goffard's investigating process never becomes a story in itself. To separate the story into clearer narrative levels would draw attention to the fact that Terra is alive during the latter one, and therefore cannot have died during the former. Conventional pre-*Serial* true crime like *Dateline* "never rises above three narrative levels, tends to stick to two, and often goes out of its way to streamline everything into one" (Letzler 42). "The Women and Dirty John" has a comparable narration style to Goffard's podcast, darkly playful and humorous. In one scene the narrator trippingly alliterates that Meehan is "a dashing doctor, but [Debra's] daughters have doubts". In another, it puns that one of Meehan's dubious stories is "a shaggy dog tale", while footage plays of Terra walking her dog. It also imitates the podcast's ambiguous editing to create tension. The *Dateline* episode begins with audio from the same 911 call as the podcast, expositing that there has been a stabbing but again obscuring who the victim and attacker are. Footage of the actual parking garage and other settings is also shown, in a visual equivalent of what Goffard attempted with his recording of ambient sound from the real locations. On a spectrum from *Serial* to *Dateline*, the *Dirty John* podcast therefore lies somewhere between, taking storytelling cues from each to create a more stylised and fictionalised true crime narrative.

Authority of Voice

Dirty John attempts to subvert conventional ideas of whose voices can be considered authoritative. The clearest evidence for this is its representation of Debra, Jacquelyn, and Terra. All three speak with strong Southern Californian inflections – what has derisively been called the "Valley girl" accent, commonly associated with "the stereotypical ditzy, young, well-to-do, white women from the San Fernando Valley" (Woo). These qualities include vocal fry, upspeak, use of curse words, and the use of the word "like" as a filler. Upspeak is significantly more common and more pronounced in voices of Southern Californian women than men (Ritchart & Arvaniti 2014), and Linneman notes that women whose voices have this paraverbal feature are typically perceived as less authoritative and more uncertain (101). As Tiffe and Hoffmann have noted, however, "voices of women on podcasts often reflect the exact qualities that are policed and criticized by contemporary society" (117). The

women in *Dirty John*, particularly Jacquelyn, exhibit all these paraverbal traits unapologetically. *Dirty John* thus challenges conventional understandings of vocal authority by representing the voices of women like Jacquelyn and Terra as authentic and trustworthy.

Dirty John differs from most investigative podcasts in that the podcast host is not also the primary detective figure. *Serial*, *S-Town*, and *The Polybius Conspiracy* all follow a reporter's ongoing investigation into a crime or other mystery, while *Dirty John* tells a story which has already come to a conclusive ending with Meehan's death. Rather than trying to identify a killer, Goffard is "looking for some burning insight, some skeleton key that might unlock a person's personality" – a search he openly admits is futile (Goffard "Terra" 34:45). The role of detective figure is instead filled by Jacquelyn, whose own investigation into Meehan during his life is narrated after the fact, and forms much of the podcast's story. Specifically, Jacquelyn's characterisation is consistent with that of hardboiled crime fiction, defined by a jaded worldview that allows her to see through the lies and facades of American society. Her mother and sister want to "believe the best in people rather than see any of the bad things" (Goffard "Escape" 15:20). Jacquelyn, on the other hand, considers herself more cynical and pragmatic than this, although she acknowledges that "I could probably be a little bit more like them; it would do me some good". In Part 1 of the podcast, Jacquelyn makes the decision that she will begin her own investigation into Meehan's past. She explains that "I just had such a hatred and such a good intuition about John being an evil person", but "I needed more facts and more evidence" (Goffard "The Real Thing" 36:50). She fills the same role that a detective figure like Koenig does in *Serial*, gathering evidence and assembling the strongest case possible. It is Jacquelyn who places a tracker on Debra's car when John borrows it, and she hires a private eye to look into John's background. In Part 6, Jacquelyn spots Meehan in a hired car and attempts to tail him in a taxi. Jacquelyn, rather than Goffard, is the central investigator in the story, and Goffard accordingly gives her voice greater prominence in scenes involving evidence and the investigative process.

While the women central to the story of *Dirty John* - Debra, Jacquelyn, and Terra - are represented as voices of authority, the men in *Dirty John* are often unreliable, ineffectual, and unable to provide any meaningful resistance to Meehan. When Meehan attempts to intimidate Debra and Terra in Part 1, for instance, Terra's boyfriend Jimmy fails to intervene because, as he puts it, "I a broken hand at the time... I couldn't do anything in that moment" (Goffard "The Real Thing" 22:15). Matt Murphy represents the legal system, but his role is merely to pathologise Meehan after the fact, rather than actively protect or prevent Meehan's actions. In Part 5, divorce lawyer John Dzialo intuits that Debra is in danger and decides that "this woman needs some protection... this office is going to

try and do it as much as we can” (Goffard “Escape” 07:03-07:12). However, Dziolo eventually gives in to Meehan’s demands for money and does nothing to protect Debra or her daughters. Dziolo’s hollow words indicate the extension of a trend established in *Serial* and *S-Town* – investigative podcasts challenging the authority of American legal institutions. In *Serial* Koenig posits that Christina Gutierrez and the criminal justice system failed to properly investigate the Syed-Lee murder case. In *S-Town* Reed casts doubt on Woodstock’s voices of officialdom like town clerk Faye Gambol, and allows McLemore’s voice to rail against the American government at length. Likewise, Goffard’s podcast casts doubt on the ability of cops, lawyers, and judges to protect its protagonist and her daughters from Meehan. Investigative podcasts highlight how certain voices are less authoritative than they appear at first. In *Serial* and *S-Town*, this is seen in the depiction of institutional voices. *Dirty John* contributes to the evolution of the investigative podcast subgenre, therefore, by extending this to patriarchal American society more broadly. As an investigative podcast, *Dirty John* relies on constructing a voice of authority for itself, and does so in part by exposing the lack of authority in male voices traditionally authorized by institutions and genres associated with true crime.

Masks and Facades

Dirty John is thematically concerned with the relationships between deceptive outward appearances and authentic truth. The story explores the differences between the private and the public self, with masks and facades becoming important motifs. This is exemplified by both Debra’s showrooms and John’s various assumed personas. This serves to create an image of Orange County where people are concerned with projecting an idealised, platonically perfect facade to hide a seedier or messier reality. In Part 1, Goffard describes Newport Beach in terms of its popular image as a seaside paradise:

“If you’re from somewhere else and have a mental picture of Orange County... Newport Beach is probably part of that image. It’s the side of the county that the tourist guides want you to see. Pacific Coast Highway runs through it, luxury shopping, piers and surf shops and plastic surgeons, yachts and cliffside mansions.” (Goffard “The Real Thing” 01:00-01:30)

Like Sarah Koenig and Brian Reed in their respective podcasts, Goffard addresses an audience who is “from somewhere else”, for whom tourist guides and postcards may be their only point of reference for the region. He therefore contrasts the “tourist guide” California with what he considers

the authentic one – a darker, seedier vision consistent with the “journalism noir” tone of *Dirty John* (Larson “Dirty John”). Newport Beach thus becomes another example of the podcast’s fascination with the relationship between facades and reality. Insight into Goffard’s vision of Orange County can be gleaned from his 2007 hardboiled crime novel *Snitch Jacket*, which was inspired by his time as a court reporter. The novel’s opening pages describe the city block in which much of the story takes place as one that “the Orange County Chamber of Commerce will never allow to blight a postcard” (11). This highlights the city’s duality, drawing a distinction between the “postcard” California and the dirtier reality. Reviewing *Snitch Jacket*, Norris describes the stereotypical vision of Orange County in terms of “sunshine, surfboards, picnics and beautiful people”, a place where “malevolence did not reside” (7). It becomes clear, however, that “there was no way to reconcile [that] fictitious O.C. with Goffard’s” (Norris 7). This response to *Snitch Jacket* is revealing because it presents both the Orange County of the novel and the Orange County of Norris’s utopian dream as “fictitious”. Neither extreme authentically represents the setting, because lies and false images are so ubiquitous that an objective rendering may be impossible.

Much like *S-Town*’s emulation of Southern Gothic literature, *Dirty John* draws on several twentieth century writers for whom violence and chaos is a part of Los Angeles’s natural landscape. The hot and dry Santa Ana winds, for example, are believed to bring out a restless and violent energy among the inhabitants of Los Angeles and Orange County. These winds have been used by many writers to evoke the potential for violence that sits under the surface of coastal California life. Even the *Los Angeles Times*, in 1988, described the local superstition of the “devil wind” affecting peoples’ behaviour and increasing rates of violent crime (Needham). In *Dirty John*, Debra Newell first meets John Meehan in October of 2014. Joan Didion writes that October in California is “the season of suicide and divorce and prickly dread, wherever the wind blows” (19). The Santa Ana brings violence, unrest, and domestic discord. During the winds, “my only neighbour would not come out of her house for days... and there were no lights at night, and her husband roamed the place with a machete” (Didion 177). “The wind”, writes Didion, “shows us how close to the edge we are” (180). Further precedent can be found in the opening lines of Raymond Chandler’s 1948 story “Red Wind”:

There was a desert wind blowing that night. It was one of those hot dry Santa Anas that come down through the mountain passes and curl your hair and make your nerves jump and your skin itch. On nights like that every booze party ends in a fight. Meek little wives feel the edge of the carving knife and study their husbands' necks. (Chandler 211)

In *Dirty John*, Goffard agrees with Chandler and Didion that domestic unrest and troubled marriages are inherent to California's climate and landscape. It is revealed that before marrying Debra Meehan lived in an RV park in Cathedral City, "out in the California desert" (Goffard "Newlyweds" 18:05). His movements thus mirror those of the Santa Ana itself, moving swiftly westward from the desert to the coast and bringing violence and discord with him. Meehan himself also gives off an outward appearance which is deceptive and not representative of his true character. The podcast seems to suggest that there is no voice for Meehan that can be completely authentic. Meehan is a man "camouflaged in physician garb", whose life is an extended exercise in performance (Norris 8). Jacquelyn describes Meehan in his medical scrubs as looking like "a man wearing a costume" (Goffard "Newlyweds" 06:00). Goffard makes an almost identical statement about Meehan in his wedding tuxedo. During one of his previous cons we learn that Meehan, who was calling himself Jonathan and claimed to be younger than he was, "shaved five years off his age and added five letters to his name" (Goffard "Filthy" 14:15). Meehan claims to have spent a year working for Doctors Without Borders as an anaesthesiologist in Iraq. He tells thrilling but implausible stories of his heroism overseas. In reality, he is a medical school dropout and spent that year in prison. Goffard's description of his psychopathic antagonist is influenced by William March's novel *The Bad Seed* (Larson "Dirty John"):

They presented a more convincing picture of virtue than virtue presented of itself—just as the wax rosebud or the plastic peach seemed more perfect to the eye, more what the mind thought a rosebud or a peach should be, than the imperfect original from which it had been modelled (March 186).

Goffard draws parallels between this depiction and Debra herself. Debra's job as an interior designer involves the creation of what she calls "approachable dreams" (Goffard "The Real Thing"). In Part 1, as part of his introduction of Debra, Goffard describes the showrooms at her company "Ambrosia Interior Design" as "glossy ads in upscale lifestyle magazines" ("The Real Thing" 08:50-09:00). Like Newport Beach, and Southern California as a whole, Debra's interior design firm is an environment carefully constructed to suggest a romanticised, perfect domestic space. However, Goffard suggests that the dreams advertised by the showrooms are hollow. They are beautiful and desirable, but devoid of "kids' toys", "dirty dishes", or other reminders of "the messiness of actual living" (09:15). Debra collects hardcover books, sorting them by colour to use as "nice furniture in perfect homes". Their content is irrelevant, with the only stipulation being that "we don't want anything that says death or sex on it" (10:00-10:10). These books, observes Goffard, "might as well be blank".

Like Chandler and Didion, Goffard also defines Southern California by its consumerism and materialism. He frequently identifies the specific brands of clothes, cosmetics, and other products which appear in the story not out of any specific relevance, but to reinforce the consumerist values of its setting. We know the makes and models of Debra's cars, and the designer clothes she and her daughters wear. When Debra prepares for her first date with John, for instance, Goffard specifically mentions her "Chanel bag" and "Gucci stiletto heels". After Debra buys John a whole new wardrobe, Goffard specifies that "they went to Brooks Brothers". With these clothes, Meehan is inducted into the world of Newport Beach. This is taken to its incongruous extreme in Part 6, when John Meehan assembles a "kidnap kit" which includes "an Oakley backpack" and "six knives from a Belgique cookware set". These brand names are juxtaposed with the violent purpose for which they have been used. They suggest that Meehan is a uniquely Orange County killer – one whose tools and methods reflect the wealth and shallow consumerism of that setting.

John Meehan as Absent Subject

As with *Serial*, the voice of one of *Dirty John's* central figures is conspicuous in its absence. John Meehan, like Hae Min Lee, died before the podcast began production and was never interviewed for it. A composite voice for Meehan is therefore assembled from existing material. When this material includes audio, we hear Meehan's voice directly, but when it is written it must be read aloud for the podcast. The decision of whose voices to assign Meehan's words in different contexts is a narrative choice that influences how authoritative we perceive Meehan's voice to be.

Dirty John occasionally plays Meehan's voice directly using old amateur recordings from various sources. The podcast uses this material to suggest Meehan's multiplicity of voice, and to heighten the contrast between the facade and the reality of his nature. When Meehan's literal voice is played in the podcast, it highlights the different roles that his voice could perform. There are few scenes in *Dirty John* in which we hear Meehan's real voice. The first is in "Part 3: Filthy", in clips from Meehan's wedding to his first wife Tonia Sells. In this audio Meehan sounds carefree, conversing with wedding guests and making jokes. Goffard highlights how artificial the scene seems. An unnamed groomsman is quoted as saying that it resembled "a Don Draper wedding" – a reference to the star character of TV drama *Mad Men*. Draper embodies a suave, womanising, nostalgic notion of masculinity that Meehan seems to idealise. By comparing Meehan to Draper, however, the podcast highlights that Meehan's outward displays of love and happiness are entirely performative. Generic

well-wishes and congratulations are offered, but nothing of any substance is revealed about Meehan, his past, or his relationships to those present. The man giving the toast “might be describing a guy he’s just met for all we learn about him”.

A second source for audio of John’s voice is a series of recorded phone calls in which he threatens his ex-wife Tonia, after their marriage has started to unravel. These contrast sharply with Meehan’s voice in the wedding video. Here he is not projecting the idealised version of himself to a roomful of people, but speaking in a hushed, menacing voice to a single victim. Goffard notes that Meehan would brag about his supposed family ties to the mafia. Whether these connections were real to the extent he claimed is doubtful, but his bluster and cryptic threats in the recordings reflect the gangster persona he performed to intimidate his victims. The third and final instance of Meehan’s literal voice comes in the final moments of Part 6, from a video of his wedding to Debra. Once again, Meehan sounds carefree and innocent as he recites his wedding vows. The podcast’s final words are Debra’s, quoted by Goffard: “Doesn’t he look happy?”. Even now, after the extensive investigative process and exposé of Meehan’s deceptions, the illusion he fostered is so strong that Debra still, on some level, believes that his love for her was genuine.

On other occasions where no archival recordings of Meehan exist, Goffard himself adopts Meehan’s voice by reading aloud material written by Meehan. Goffard thus performs Meehan’s voice in the same way that Sarah Koenig does for Hae Min Lee in *Serial*. In interviews since the podcast’s release, Goffard has acknowledged that assuming Meehan’s voice necessarily involved a level of identification with him. He describes this process as “inhabiting his [Meehan’s] brain and personality” and claims that he found it deeply difficult and unpleasant (Norris 8). In Part 2, for instance, Goffard reads both sides of a text message conversation between Meehan and Debra’s nephew Shad. This sequence showcases Meehan’s use of hostile and cruel language, taunting Shad with crude and expletive-laden jokes about the death of his mother. Goffard’s performance of Meehan is thus intended to capture the anger and hatred that he argues is Meehan’s authentic voice.

On still other occasions, John’s words are read aloud by his victims. This is the final part of the composite voice assembled for Meehan in the podcast, and is also the most subversive. Giving his victims the chance to perform Meehan’s words themselves is used as a symbolic act of resistance against him. For example, in Part 5 a love letter from Meehan containing barely disguised hostility and threat is read by its original recipient, Debra. In one of the more poetic flourishes of Goffard’s writing, this letter is described as “a treacly bonbon with a core of arsenic” (Goffard “Escape” 23:54). Having

Debra read John's letter allows her to punctuate his words with her own in order to reject his lies. When John writes that "I can't imagine living without you and your absolutely nutty family", Debra pauses to clarify "they're not nutty, by the way" (24:50). A similar scene in the same episode involves Jacquelyn reading a chain of abusive emails from Meehan, highlighting their absurd and obvious lies. "Nobody cares about you... you don't have a mom" states one message from John. "She's right next to me and we're reading your emails together", quips Jacquelyn for the podcast (27:55). Meehan remains menacing and hostile in these passages, but Debra and Jacquelyn's voices rob his words of the impact they would have originally had. Jacquelyn, especially, seems to read Meehan's words with a dark and sarcastic humour, highlighting the absurdity of his lies and his blatantly obvious attempts to turn her against her mother. In these scenes, the use of narrative levels is especially relevant. It is the distancing effect of the second narrative level, reading the messages once Meehan is no longer an immediate threat, that allows the women to reclaim this authority from his once intimidating voice.

John Meehan as Horror Villain

Rather than an authentic or identifiable character, John Meehan is often represented in ways consistent with inhuman antagonists in horror fiction, like zombies or slasher movie villains. *Dirty John* therefore contributes to a tradition of horror texts in which a patriarchal figure is represented as an intruder who threatens the security of a family structure. Within this framework, Meehan is a "wicked stepparent stereotype" who attempts to steal Debra away from her children (Claxton-Oldfield & Butler 879). The horror of *Dirty John* comes in part from the ease with which Meehan ingratiates himself into the Newell family. He marries Debra and moves in with her in a matter of weeks, is beloved by her mother Arlane, and swiftly becomes a fixture at holidays and family gatherings. As soon as Debra is convinced John is "the real thing", he has successfully insinuated himself into her life. In Part 6, for instance, Goffard uses the word "stepfather" for the first time in reference to Meehan's relationship to Jacquelyn and Terra. This is when Meehan is at his most dangerous, and when he poses a direct threat to Terra. In so-called "family horror", "the monster is now the patriarchal father" (Williams 214). Meehan's depiction as a threatening, corrupted patriarchal figure evokes dozens of cinematic "domestic horrors" released in the US since 1987, including many "in which a woman is terrorized by her own domestic partner within the walls of her home" (Brent 117).

Meehan's victims also expect him to fulfil the role of a slasher movie villain, someone seemingly unstoppable and motivated purely by violent intent. The parking lot confrontation between Meehan and Terra is told in a way that echoes the climax of *Halloween* (1978), for example. We hear

how Meehan stalks his victim and lies in wait. There is dramatic emphasis on the knife falling from Meehan's hand, Terra reaching for it, grabbing it, and using it against him. Even as he lies braindead in the hospital Meehan looks as though he "might spring bolt upright from his deathbed, animated by sheer rage, to attack again" (Goffard "Terra" 27:45). This is an image consistent with the slasher trope of having the seemingly defeated killer resurface for a final scare. Meehan is often described in the podcast as non-human or literally monstrous. According to Michael R. O'Neil, Meehan is "a shark... and he looks for his prey" (Goffard "Escape" 32:20). John Dzialo's impression of Meehan was that "his forehead's going to break open right in front of me... I am sitting here in the presence of evil incarnate" (12:10). Thirdly, Matt Murphy diagnoses Meehan as having "green worms in the brain". He claims that "You can't explain how they got there and you can't get them out", suggesting that Meehan's evil is the inexplicable and incurable result of an alien parasite (Goffard "Terra" 35:00-35:10). Colourful epithets from Goffard himself to describe Meehan include "devil-tongued flim-flam artist", "black-hearted Lothario", and "a creature of pure malignancy" (Goffard "Terra"). But if John Meehan is *Dirty John's* slasher villain, then Terra Newell is necessarily its final girl, who "by virtue of her refusal to engage in licentious behaviour... is rewarded with survival" (Weaver, et al. 32). Terra's "refusal to engage in licentious behaviour" is largely communicated through her Christian faith. She loves music about "drinking beer, having a good time, and still loving God" (Goffard "Terra" 07:05-07:10). Goffard even describes a Bible verse tattooed on her foot on two separate occasions (Goffard "The Real Thing" 15:07; "Terra" 08:09). Terra is also portrayed as innocent and unassuming throughout the series:

Her voice was so soft that waiters had to lean in and ask her to repeat her order. As a kid, she was usually the smallest one on the recess yard and so uncompetitive in softball games that she didn't even bother swinging at pitches... the classic, wouldn't-hurt-a-fly personality. (Goffard "Terra" 06:30-06:50)

The climax of the podcast, foreshadowed by Matt Murphy's reading from the coroner's report in Part 1, is Meehan's ambush of Terra in a rooftop carpark with a knife. Terra manages to take the knife from John and kill him with it. This is something Kelly Connelly identifies as significant in archetypal slasher film *Halloween* (1978), in which final girl Laurie Strode similarly tries to defend herself from slasher Michael Myers' by using his own weapon against him. Even the weapon itself is the same – a kitchen knife. Connelly notes the phallic implications of the knife, describing it as "the male weapon of destruction" (16). Laurie stabs Myers with the knife, but is "unable... to use the masculine weapon in an effective manner", since Myers refuses to stay dead (16). According to the podcast, however, Terra successfully uses her knowledge of horror genre tropes to permanently

defeat the villain of the story. Terra's love of the television drama *The Walking Dead* is mentioned repeatedly throughout the podcast, and the way she kills John – stabbing him through the eye, is compared to the trope of having to destroy a zombie's brain in order to permanently defeat it. It is foreshadowed in Part 5, when Terra's boyfriend Jimmy describes a scene from *The Walking Dead* where a woman "ends up just stabbing the thing to death in the face" (Goffard "Escape" 16:45-16:50). "I guess that was my zombie kill", Terra says of the fight afterward (Goffard "Terra" 22:30). Meehan does not rise again from his hospital bed but is cremated and "turned into black smoke" ("Terra" 30:03). His defeat is total – he is physically overcome and his attempt to drive the Newells apart is unsuccessful. The podcast thus ends with a sense of closure that is uncommon in both horror fiction and investigative podcasts. This supports the claim that *Dirty John's* particular style of authoritative storytelling is based on asserting and emphasising the power and agency of its subjects, rather than its authorial figure.

In conclusion, *Dirty John* represents the logical extensions of genre features established by podcasts like *Serial* and *S-Town*. Because *Dirty John* is a story told in past tense rather than an ongoing mystery, precise control is exerted over exactly what the audience knows and when to create dramatic tension. While *Serial* and *S-Town* each use conventions from fiction to filter their complicated true stories into digestible and compelling listening, *Dirty John* makes these elements an integral part of its narrative. John Meehan is explicitly represented as a horror movie villain, and Terra is only able to survive her confrontation with him because she identifies with a protagonist from zombie fiction. By focusing on a central figure who is vocally absent and by using a non-authorial voice as the investigator, *Dirty John* represents a style of investigative podcast that attempts to separate the roles of author, subject, and protagonist to a much greater degree than previously seen.

Chapter 4: *The Polybius Conspiracy*

Jon Frechette and Tod Luoto's *The Polybius Conspiracy* is a hybrid of investigative podcast and scripted audio drama, released in 2017 as part of Radiotopia's *Showcase* series. It follows Frechette and Luoto as they travel to Portland, Oregon to investigate the urban legend of a video game called "Polybius". "Polybius" is alleged to have appeared in several Portland arcades in 1981, causing ominous symptoms in players and attracting attention from mysterious men in black, before vanishing just as mysteriously a few weeks later. Although its existence has never been proven, the game has been the subject of countless conspiracy theories on online forums – often associated with government mind control experiments like MKUltra (DeSpira). Frechette and Luoto interview key figures from Portland's retro-gaming community to try and piece together whether there is any truth to the *Polybius* legend. After the series finished its original run, listeners determined that several figures in the podcast were fictional characters played by voice actors, including its central subject Bobby Feldstein. A Portland journalist named Naomi Halbrook, interviewed in Episode 3, is also an invention of Frechette and Luoto, as is the newspaper for which she writes, the "Tualatin Tribune". The fictional content of the podcast was not acknowledged in the show's credits, or in any promotional material. *The Polybius Conspiracy* can therefore be read as not just an investigation into a potential hoax, but also a form of hoax itself. The podcast reflexively examines of how such hoaxes and conspiracy theories form, spread, and evolve, and this chapter will argue that *The Polybius Conspiracy* also challenges and deconstructs the conventions of the investigative podcast genre. The central character Bobby is a subversion of the relationship between podcast host and subject established by *Serial*, and questions the role that the voice of an investigative podcast's "protagonist" should play in the story. I will also argue that *The Polybius Conspiracy's* use of place creates a relationship of trust between the listener and the podcasters by depicting arcades, the city of Portland, and the Pacific Northwest more broadly as mysterious and unknowable settings. The podcast encourages listeners to question the authority and authenticity of all voices in the podcast, except the authorial voice itself.

Bobby Feldstein as Protagonist, Subject, and Co-Authorial Voice

In *The Polybius Conspiracy*, the voice of Bobby Feldstein highlights the complex role of the subject's voice in investigative podcasts. Bobby, as he is presented in the podcast, is a Portland man

who claims to have played *Polybius* as a child in 1981. He claims to have suffered ill effects as a result, and to have been abducted from his home shortly after. According to the podcast, Bobby was later found in the Tillamook state forest outside Portland, where he maintains he had been held captive in an underground tunnel. The abduction remains unsolved, and Bobby's assertion that it was connected to *Polybius* as part of a government mind-control conspiracy has made him a local figure of ridicule. The truth of what really happened to him during his disappearance becomes the podcast's central mystery, and he accompanies Frechette and Luoto as they explore Portland and interview other characters. Through Bobby, the creators of *The Polybius Conspiracy* explore the relationship between author and subject in the investigative podcast genre, challenging the model established by *Serial*, *S-Town*, and *Dirty John*.

Like the podcasts discussed in previous chapters, *The Polybius Conspiracy* is assembled from interviews with people connected to the central case, with connective narration from the host – in this case Frechette. Because the urban legend of “Polybius” is inconsistent and vague, Bobby serves as an identifiable character through whom the story of the game can better be told. At least initially, Bobby's voice serves a similar narrative purpose to that of Adnan Syed in *Serial*. Both men claim that a traumatic event from decades earlier has been misconstrued, and both have spent the intervening years trying with very little success to set the story straight and convince others that they are telling the truth. In *Serial*, Koenig's taped conversations with Adnan are the centerpiece of her investigative reporting. *Serial* gives a platform to a voice that was unheard during both the original trial and the subsequent years in prison. In *The Polybius Conspiracy*, Bobby is likewise frustrated that his story has not been taken seriously by the public, and sees the podcast as a means to amplify his own voice.

The relationship between Bobby and the podcasters is much more combative than the one between Adnan Syed and Sarah Koenig, however. This relationship highlights the tension between storyteller and journalist in the investigative podcast genre, as Frechette and Luoto struggle to determine what role Bobby's voice should have in their investigation. Bobby is the first voice we hear in *The Polybius Conspiracy*, describing the moment he was reunited with his parents following his abduction (Frechette & Luoto “The Player”). His voice is hesitant, containing long pauses and disfluencies like “um” and “uh”. This gives his statement the appearance of being unrehearsed and emotionally authentic, encouraging the listener to identify with his voice before any context for his speech has been given. Following this, Frechette's narration introduces Bobby as an archetypal figure in a way that is comparable to Sarah Koenig's Shakespearean rendering of Adnan Syed, or Brian Reed's Southern Gothic one of John B. McLemore:

Bobby is that awkward kid you went to high school with, who never quite fit in. Always on the fringe, probably a few pounds over or underweight, with that one abiding passion that just didn't quite mesh with the school culture. In Bobby's case, it was video games... (Frechette & Luoto "The Player" 00:30-00:48)

From these opening lines, listeners are encouraged to equate Bobby with figures from their own childhoods – “that awkward kid you went to high school with”. Bobby is immediately othered, and is introduced not as an individual but a stock character. A specific description, such as whether he is “over or underweight”, is less important than what he represents – the recognizable figure of the teenage nerd. By placing Bobby within this archetype the podcast constructs an identity for him as its protagonist, one who is immediately identifiable with the protagonists of countless pop culture examples from which *The Polybius Conspiracy* draws inspiration. Some of these are acknowledged by Frechette in Part 2, “The Missing”. These include *The Goonies* (1985), which also depicts a group of children lost in a series of tunnels under an Oregon city. Other points of reference include *The Last Starfighter* (1984), and “The Bishop of Battle” from the anthology horror film *Nightmares* (1984), both of which feature young men playing mysterious arcade machines that are revealed have supernatural or extra-terrestrial origins. A sinister arcade game also appears in Robert Maxxe's 1984 novel *Arcade*, which has been identified as the most plausible inspiration for the Polybius urban legend (Dunning). In *Arcade*, the game is designed to “reach into the minds of children and instruct them... to become subject to the game's power” (Maxxe 253).

The podcast's description of Bobby as a young man is consistent with the “gamer as protagonist” of 1980s cinema described by Kokurek (115). In films like *The Last Starfighter*, *TRON* (1982), and *WarGames* (1983), the “boy technologist” becomes “an essential line of defense against the dangers of computer technologies run amok” (115). Likewise, the podcast claims that Bobby's proficiency at video games makes “the difference between invisibility and notoriety” in 1980s Portland, and makes him “the special person that, deep down, he knew he was” (Frechette & Luoto “The Player” 01:05). Significantly, we do not need to rely on Bobby's voice alone to confirm that his gaming prowess made him exceptional, it is supported by other voices in the podcast. Portland retro-gaming enthusiast Dylan Reiff states in the podcast that at one time, Bobby's initials filled every space on the *Tempest* high score table at a local arcade. According to Reiff, this is “an assertion of dominance” which marks Bobby as “super-nerdy” but also “un-fuck-with-able” (TPC “The Player” 18:00-19:00). This representation of Bobby is, like the aforementioned pop culture examples, “an

appealing defense of geek masculinity” (Kokurec 119). Bobby’s role as the exceptional, “boy-technologist” protagonist of *The Polybius Conspiracy* is soon challenged, however. As he grows older and fails to mature as the society around him does, he becomes less and less exceptional. As an adult, Bobby’s identity is more consistent with Lori Kendall’s characterization of the nerd stock character as “asocial and incompletely adult” (263). In the podcast, we quickly learn that Bobby is prone to childish, highly emotional responses. When Bobby gives an underwhelming performance at a video game tournament, Reiff states that “it’s depressing to see a grown person get angry over something that’s... at the end of the day it’s a game” (Frechette & Luoto “The Player” 18:45). By the time of the podcast, Bobby had neither the maturity to successfully live in an adult world, nor the technical skill that once made him exceptional.

Reviewers have claimed that Bobby’s association with the “nerd” stock character is what makes his voice sound authentic, although it alienates him from the world in which he lives. Jacob Brogan identifies particular vocal attributes that suggest Bobby, at least, “really *believes* what he’s saying, whether or not it’s true”. Whenever Frechette, Halbrook, or anybody else questions the veracity of his story about “Polybius”, Bobby exhibits the so-called “nasal buzz of the archnerd” (Brogan). This stock-character-associated paraverbal trait signifies his indignation at being disbelieved, and his insistence that the podcasters treat his voice as authoritative. This contrasts with Adnan Syed in *Serial*, whose voice we only ever hear as calm, personable, and friendly with Sarah Koenig. Syed readily presents his version of events but does not insist that Koenig treat it as authoritative. He in fact advises her to “go down the middle” in her reportage, to give all voices involved equal authority “point for point”, and ultimately “leave it up to the audience to determine” whether he is guilty or innocent (Koenig “What We Know” 51:00). The nerd as a stock character in popular culture is defined in part by their “connection with technology, particularly computers” (Kendall 263). Kendall describes an uneasiness around computers stemming from “ambiguity concerning whether computers actually ‘think’ or are in some sense alive”. Because nerds “understand and, worse still, enjoy” computers, they are engaging in “contact with... liminal quasi-creatures” which itself “conveys liminality” (263). Bobby even likens himself to a machine, describing the stress of playing *Polybius* as “straining my circuit boards” (Frechette & Luoto “The Player” 12:30). When arcade cabinets are included in the definition of “computer”, Kendall’s framework proves useful for understanding the role of Bobby’s voice in the podcast. Bobby’s obsession with gaming and with *Polybius* in particular places him in “a category of human partitioned off from the rest of humanity” (Kendall 263).

This is Bobby as listeners experience him: isolated, awkward, and unable to meaningfully contribute evidence to the investigation beyond his own, unverifiable story. “I’m at the point where I don’t care anymore”, he explains in Part 1. As the podcast continues, however, he takes on another role as fellow investigator alongside Frechette and Luoto. He accompanies them on interviews with other characters, and to locations relevant to the case to look for clues. However, Bobby’s cynical outlook and frustration with the lack of support for his story manifests in hostile exchanges with several characters during this process. Bobby argues that his abduction was not given the attention it deserved. For example, in Part 3 of the podcast, “The Cassette”, Bobby lambasts reporter Naomi Halbrook (also a fictional character) for failing to investigate his disappearance in 1981. Bobby argues that “people like you”, meaning journalists, are supposed to “find people like me... find justice [and] bring voice to the person who doesn’t have a voice” (Frechette & Luoto “The Cassette” 26:10). For Bobby the role of investigative journalists – explicitly Halbrook but implicitly Frechette and Luoto as well – is to provide the strongest platform possible for the voices of those affected by a case, rather than craft their own narrative using the voices of others as they see fit. Bobby’s outburst causes the interview to be cut short and after this, irritating Frechette and Luoto through his counterproductive interference in the investigative process.

Frechette and Luoto ultimately fail in their investigation in that they never reach a definitive, provable solution to either the question of *Polybius’* existence, or exactly what happened to Bobby in 1981. This failure can be directly attributed to their alienation of Bobby in Part 4, “The Rewind”. In this episode, Frechette and Luoto are approached by television producer Mitch Marcus. Marcus is the producer of a competing documentary project about the “Polybius” legend, an episode of the History Channel series *The Unexplained* (2016). Marcus asks the podcasters whether they have interviewed anybody in Portland who claims to have played “Polybius” in the 1980s, so that Marcus can feature them on his program. Frechette and Luoto decide not to refer Bobby to Marcus, wishing to keep Bobby’s testimony as an exclusive feature of their own investigation. When Bobby discovers this, it becomes a cause of major conflict between him and the podcasters, since he believes that the role of Frechette and Luoto should be to help his voice be heard as widely as possible, and that they therefore should have allowed him to appear on *The Unexplained*. From this point on, Bobby refuses to help with the investigation, depriving Frechette and Luoto of any more insight into the mystery. The conflict in “The Rewind” is ultimately between whether the voice of a podcast’s subject should be fully independent part of a polyphony of voices, or one voice among many to be controlled directly by the author. By denying Bobby the opportunity to appear in another documentary project, Frechette and

Luoto assert ownership over his voice and the authority or authenticity it brings to their podcast – something which alienates Bobby and ultimately hinders their investigation.

Constructions of Authority and Authenticity

Although characters like Bobby Feldstein and Naomi Halbrook are fictional, *The Polybius Conspiracy* also features interviews with several real figures from Portland’s retro-gaming and walking tour communities. These include Portland historians and gaming enthusiasts Joe Streckert and Doug Kenck-Crispin, and journalist Catherine DeSpira. The latter wrote an article extensively debunking the existence of the *Polybius* game for *Retrocade Magazine* in 2012. Also featured is Ernest Cline, author of *Ready Player One*, itself a mashup of 1980s pop culture references. These verifiably real figures appear in the podcast to lend authority by blurring the boundary between fact and fiction, although even these “real” voices contribute to the fiction of the podcast by acknowledging characters like Bobby as if they actually exist. After the series had finished, the podcast’s executive producer Julie Shapiro clarified in an email to journalist Jacob Brogan that *The Polybius Conspiracy* is “a hybrid of fact and fiction”. According to Shapiro, Frechette and Luoto “investigated the legend (exhaustively) and interviewed real people, but have also woven in a fictional narrative thread, throughout” (qtd. in Brogan). *Showcase*’s stated goal is to provide “an opportunity to experiment” with podcasting’s “stylistic parameters” (Taylor). A promotional article asserts that “no two *Showcase* series will sound alike”, with only the assurance that each series will contain the so-called “Radiotopian elements” of “bold ideas, strong storytelling, and innovative, sound-rich production” (Taylor). Radiotopia is best known for nonfiction podcasts like *99% Invisible* or *Criminal*, so by associating *The Polybius Conspiracy* with “Radiotopian elements”, the podcast’s producers subtly encourage listeners to trust the veracity of its content. *The Polybius Conspiracy* was the second series to feature on *Showcase*. The first, Damon Krukowski’s *Ways of Hearing*, was an essayistic exploration of music as an art form – not quite conventional documentary, but decidedly not fiction. To create the illusion of honesty, *The Polybius Conspiracy* therefore relies on audiences’ expectations of the context in which it was made. Likewise, *Serial* was released by WBEZ as a standalone spinoff from *This American Life*, using the reputation of that established program to help bolster its own relationship of trust with its audience. *Polybius* lends itself further journalistic authority by imitating *Serial* itself, adopting an episodic format with new instalments released weekly to create a single, long-form narrative.

By using voices and relationships in this way, *The Polybius Conspiracy* convinced several early reviewers that Bobby was a real person, even if the story he was telling was dubious. The podcast

therefore showcases the distinction between a “true story” and an “honest one” (Brogan). Any investigation narrative, even one like *Serial* which features a real case, necessarily includes voices which are giving untrue versions of events. As with Syed, the podcasters are forced to consider the possibility that the central voice in their story is leading them on a fool’s errand. Syed had an obvious motive for lying about his innocence, to try to overturn his conviction. Conversely, Bobby’s skeptics struggle to justify why he would devote his life to telling a fabricated story for no obvious gain. Bobby denies the suggestion that he is lying to enrich himself, calling it a “bogus argument” and claiming the tour is “a lousy way to make a living” (Frechette & Luoto “The Player” 20:30). The accepted explanation eventually seems to be that Bobby has been telling his story for so long that even he is unable to distinguish fact from fantasy. For Frechette, Bobby has been gradually “becoming his narrative” until “it wasn’t a part of him, it was the only him” (Frechette & Luoto “The Final Level” 26:14). In the same episode, Luoto suggests that Bobby “so completely believes his own bullshit that it’s not bullshit anymore”, and another character Rubin asks, “who is Bobby without his story?”. But even if Bobby’s story itself is a lie, *The Polybius Conspiracy* can be an “honest” story if the authorial voice – that of Frechette and Luoto, is authentic in its descriptions of people and events. Early reviewers like Quah and Van Buren believed that *The Polybius Conspiracy* was honest, in that it was a sincere attempt at investigative journalism on the part of the producers. By constantly raising new questions as old ones are answered, and by leaving listeners without conclusive answers at the end, investigative podcasts like *Serial* “fetishize uncertainty” (Brogan). It is the questioning which audiences find compelling, not the solutions. As Frechette notes, the game’s title can be read as an ironic reference to the Ancient Greek historian Polybius, who was “known for being a factchecker” (Frechette & Luoto “The Player” 17:10). The ultimate effect of *The Polybius Conspiracy*, therefore, is to challenge the authority of the investigative podcast format established by *Serial* and its successors, demonstrating the ways in which different forms of evidence can be misleadingly presented as honest, and different modes of authenticity can affect a podcast’s authority.

Arcade Cabinets as Technological “Voices”

Perhaps the most distinctive narrative element of *The Polybius Conspiracy* is its use of setting. Just as *S-Town* exploited the literary history and connotations of the American Deep South to inform how its voices are portrayed, *Polybius* likewise employs the cultural associations of its various settings to create an atmosphere of unease, ambiguity, and mystery. I will argue that setting is one of the key ways in which Frechette and Luoto “fetishize uncertainty” (Brogan). The first and most obvious of these settings is the arcade itself. *The Polybius Conspiracy* evokes the unique and iconic soundscape

of an arcade floor which, according to Mark J.P. Wolf, will forever be “embedded in the consciousness of everyone who was a child during the late 1970s and early 1980s”, a group which includes Bobby (119). DeSpira’s “Reinvestigating Polybius” begins with a nostalgic evocation of a Portland arcade:

I remember... the summer of 1983 and being swept up in the sudden excitement of lights blinking from ranks of new video games calling out electronic responses like a choir practice of robots. I remember the world awash with light, excitement so on the edge you could feel the pulse of it coming off of people’s bodies... Some things time just can’t wash away.

This nostalgia is also exploited by *The Polybius Conspiracy*. With a synth-heavy musical score, retro-arcade setting, and references to ‘80s pop culture, it deliberately situates itself within a recent wave of texts that capitalize on nostalgia for the period including *Wreck It Ralph* (2012), *Stranger Things* (2016), *It* (2017), and *Ready Player One* (2018). However, the soundscape which is, for DeSpira, “like a choir practice of robots” is, for others, a nightmarish cacophony. Wolf writes that “to walk into an arcade was to experience an overwhelming onslaught of crashes, laser guns, synthesized speech, and electronic beeping music, all competing for our attention” (119).

In the podcast, Cat DeSpira draws a distinction between “the mall arcades” – the wholesome environments shown in advertisements, and the “inner city arcades”, which were much seedier (Frechette & Luoto “The Missing” 04:40). The latter are the arcades in which Bobby’s story takes place – home to rumours of drugs, gambling, and underage prostitution. In her article investigating the Polybius legend, DeSpira concludes that the game never existed, but suggests that the story has its roots in the conflation of various cases of gaming-related scandals in 1980s America. Children did, in some cases, experience ill effects from extended play sessions of certain games, but never to the extent described in the “Polybius” legend. Further, government agents did, in fact, raid arcades on several occasions in the 1980s – not due to a covert mind-control experiment, but because of arcade owners running illegal gambling operations using modified cabinets (Dunning). In this context of the darker side of arcades, the *Polybius* cabinet is described by Frechette in Part 2 as “a new kind of predator – one of coils and cables and circuits” (Frechette & Luoto “The Missing” 06:15). The use of “predator” as a descriptor likens the arcade machine to a malevolent entity with its own agency and sinister motivations. The official cover artwork for *The Polybius Conspiracy* is a low-angle shot of a game cabinet against a dark background, casting the machine as an ominous, intimidating presence. The idea that an arcade machine could have its own sinister agency is consistent with Jeffrey Sconce’s suggestion that the cathode ray tube monitors of the era possessed a seemingly haunted quality:

Early viewers will always remember the eerie presence of the slowly fading dot of light appearing at the center of the screen once the set had been turned off, a blip that suggested something was still there in the cabinet even after the image itself had vanished. (Sconce 4)

The arcades in *The Polybius Conspiracy* have a cacophonous, oppressive atmosphere, turning them into gothic spaces that threaten and overwhelm the listener. *The Polybius Conspiracy* uses sound effects from classic arcade games, often layered on top of each other to simulate the soundscape of a real arcade. Video game sound effects have a unique audionarratology, designed to elicit strong psychological responses in players. Sebastian Domsch differentiates three kinds of sound effects possible in video games: diegetic, extra-diegetic, and ludic. “Ludic sounds” are ones which serve as “communication about game rules”, such as “the sound of having reached a new high score, or of having managed a certain combo move” (190). These are the effects most commonly used in the podcast. For people familiar with the games, each sound effect has a specific and deeply ingrained meaning, like the iconic game-over sounds from 1980s arcade games like *Pac-Man* and *Tempest*. Layering them together into a cacophony creates an unsettling soundscape where conflicting impulses and ambiguous rules create anxiety and uncertainty in listeners. *The Polybius Conspiracy* thus subverts the nostalgic vision of 1980s arcades in favour of a more dangerous, predatory one.

“Weird Portland” as a Mystery Setting

Equally important as a setting for the podcast is the city of Portland itself, especially local interest in walking tours and historic mysteries. Reiff, a prominent figure in Portland’s retro gaming community who worked as a field producer for the podcast, observes that there is a fascination among both locals and visitors to the city with a “spooky” aesthetic called “Weird Portland” (Frechette & Luoto “The Player” 19:41). Joe Streckert (Frechette & Luoto “Next on Showcase”) notes that the city’s tourism slogan “Keep Portland Weird” aligns with the city’s reputation as a hub for liberal politics and alternative lifestyles, satirized by series like *Portlandia*. Portland itself is home to the urban legends like “Polybius”, the Shanghai tunnels, and countless supposed hauntings, including “a ghost named Nina” mentioned by Frechette in the podcast (Frechette & Luoto “The Player” 19:10-1918). On Radiotopia’s website, the first episode of *The Polybius Conspiracy* is accompanied by an original illustration by artist Jin Lim. The image depicts the interior of an arcade, with a *Polybius* cabinet

surrounded by references to other Oregon urban legends and unsolved mysteries. These include three figures standing at arcade machines: The giant cryptid Bigfoot, a ghostly woman in nineteenth century dress who is presumably the aforementioned Nina, and a Grey alien, in reference to Oregon's "important role in the history of UFO lore and sightings" (Bartholomew 194). The carpet is patterned with tiny images of a figure parachuting from a plane, in reference to the unsolved 1971 case of D.B. Cooper, a skyjacker who is now likely "somewhere in the mountains of the Pacific Northwest, a silent pile of bones, surrounded by decaying \$20 bills and an old, tattered parachute as his shroud" (Yuskavitch 13). On the podcast's twitter account, this illustration is posted with the question "how many Oregonian urban legends can you spot here?" (@PolybiusPod). Frechette and Luoto thereby encourage listeners to place their podcast within a long tradition of unsolved and explained phenomena, creating a setting in which a mind-altering video game seems more plausible.

A specific institution of Portland that is integrated into the podcast's themes is the walking tour business. In the podcast, Frechette and Luoto interview real figures associated with Portland's walking tours to create an authentic evocation of the city's culture. Bobby himself runs a tour around Portland, guiding them to places he maintains are connected to the conspiracy. Bobby does this because he claims that his voice is more authoritative when he is telling his story in person. Testimonials from people who claimed to have played "Polybius" have appeared online since the early 2000s, often anonymous and unverifiable. Bobby describes such posts as "smoke and mirrors" and contrasts them with his own walking tour, which he claims is "the exact opposite of that" (Frechette & Luoto "The Player" 20:50-21:03). On the walking tour Bobby's voice is embodied and unmediated, "you can actually meet me in the flesh, you can shake my hand". Bobby's suggestion that the voice of a walking tour host is more authoritative than that of an anonymous internet commenter is challenged, however, by the other voices in the podcast. According to Frechette, the world of Portland's walking tours is the perfect place for "an outsider seeking a captive audience" (Frechette & Luoto "The Player" 19:28-19:31). Such tours "frequently combine the historical and the fantastic" and the people who run them "are often just as eccentric as the subjects they exploit". London writes that Portland's walking tours often use a "selective memory of the past" to depict a "real imaginary", blending folklore with real history (155). As a case study, London examines Michael Jones' "Shanghai Tunnel Tour", which professed to showcase the same fabled tunnels that appear in *The Polybius Conspiracy*, but was instead exposed as a hoax (157). Luoto eventually revealed that *The Polybius Conspiracy* was created as a "digital campfire" (qtd. in Brogan), a forum for exaggerated or wholly invented stories to be presented as truthful for the entertainment of others. Through the podcast's

use of Portland as a setting, a digital walking tour becomes an equally valid metaphor for the ambiguous fictionality of its content.

Forest Scenes, Biophony, and Geophony in Investigative Podcasts

Although most of the action takes place in the city of Portland, *The Polybius Conspiracy* is bookended by scenes in the nearby Tillamook state forest, which becomes the final and most mysterious setting of the podcast. In “Part 1 – The Player”, Bobby narrates the story of his supposed abduction and escape from the forest, and in “Part 7 – The Final Level” Frechette, Luoto, and Rubin return to the forest to reach a set of coordinates they have decoded from a Polybius square. Yuskavitch writes of the Cascadian region’s “deep forest and deep water”, which he describes as “two ubiquitous aspects of the Oregon landscape” (x). According to Yuskavitch, “mysterious landscapes beget mysteries”, and the unsolved mysteries in the forests of the Pacific Northwest “manifest themselves as dangerous creatures that confound science and pose dire danger to all who encounter them” (x). *Polybius* is not even unique in combining the mysteries of the Oregon wilderness with internet rumour. The “Pacific Northwest tree octopus”, for instance, was a cryptid alleged to exist in the forests of Washington and Oregon as part of an early online hoax (Loos et al.). The natural environment of the Pacific Northwest has, in combination with modern technology, helped to create “an Oregon part known, part unknown, and part unknowable” (Yuskavitch x).

The shift from urban to wilderness settings is especially noticeable in the podcast format, because of the different soundscapes of those settings. A framework from soundscape ecology is useful for interpreting this (Pijanowski et al. 1213). Scenes in the city are dominated by “anthropophony” – sounds that originate from human activity, like cars and machines. This is especially noticeable in *The Polybius Conspiracy*’s aforementioned arcade scenes, for instance, or *Serial*’s scenes at Woodlawn High School where students’ chatter and ringing bells punctuate the narration. Forest scenes, in contrast, are dominated by the “biophony” of birds and insects, and “geophony” of running water and rustling leaves. The forest scene in Part 7 of *Polybius* places particular importance on the sound of water, because it confirms the existence of a stream from Bobby’s story. This echoes similar scenes in other investigative podcasts, including *Serial*, and work toward the same narrative purpose. The Tillamook State Forest scene from Part 7 of *The Polybius Conspiracy* parallels the Leakin Park scene from Episode 2 of *Serial*, for instance. Both scenes begin with the sound of footsteps crunching through leaf litter – a *mise en scène* approach which thrusts

the listener directly into unknown surroundings. Much of the dialogue is colloquial and conversational, reinforcing the perception that what is happening is unedited and unfolding in real time. In both podcasts, a small group of people explore the forest together, but are recorded on a single microphone held by one member of that group. Conversations therefore take on an inconsistent audio quality, where the volume and reverb fluctuate unpredictably as characters move around each other in physical space.

Tillamook forest and Leakin Park are each presented as disorienting and ambiguous spaces that defy the podcasters' attempts to discern truth. In *Serial*, Koenig and several other investigators journey into Leakin Park to revisit the spot where Hae Min Lee's dead body was discovered. The wilderness environment also connects each podcast to another faux-documentary example – Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez's *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). This found-footage horror film involves a small team of documentarians who venture into the woods around Burkittsville, Maryland to investigate a local supernatural legend, and portions of *The Blair Witch Project* were, in fact, filmed in Leakin Park (Balkan 64). Koenig characterizes Leakin Park as “really a rambling forest” (Koenig “The Alibi” 04:55). It is “over a thousand acres” and is a common site for the discovery of murder victims. Koenig supports this by including the voice of an unidentified Baltimore man, who jokes that “while you're digging in Leakin Park to bury your body, you're gonna find somebody else's” (Koenig “Leakin Park” 04:10). Koenig claims that many “law-abiding Baltimoreans” don't even know where it is, casting the park as innately mysterious – paradoxically immense and invisible. This is consistent with *The Polybius Conspiracy*, in which rock formations and landmarks that Bobby describes seeing during his escape cannot be located by searchers. Frechette narrates that “out here in Tillamook, it was too easy to doubt ourselves. To see what we wanted to see, even if it wasn't really there” (Frechette & Luoto “The Final Level” 03:40-03:45). In *Serial*, as the scene progresses the group moves into the trees and the sounds of traffic become fainter and less distinct. Anthropophony recedes and is replaced by biophony and geophony. Even though Koenig acknowledges that the road is still visible from the gravesite, the soundscape of the scene creates a sense that the voices are isolated from urban surroundings.

In conclusion, *The Polybius Conspiracy* is a complex re-examining of the models of authority and authenticity constructed in the investigative podcast genre since the release of *Serial* in 2014. It begins with a broadly similar premise to *Serial*, reinvestigating a mystery from decades prior by interviewing a variety of people and visiting locations relevant to the case. However, it challenges the conventions *Serial* helped establish, including the role of the subject and their relationship to the

author. Frechette and Luoto fail to effectively use Bobby's voice in their podcast and thereby alienate him, problematising the tendency of podcast authors to control the voices of their subjects. Frechette and Luoto also examine the process by which rumour, fact, and speculation merge to create compelling but often unverifiable narratives, both in online and offline settings. Portland, Oregon and the surrounding wilderness become a rich metaphor for the uncertain authenticity and authority of post-*Serial* investigative podcasts.

Conclusion

The preceding chapters describe a distinct subgenre within podcasting that emerged in 2014 and has proliferated and evolved in a remarkably short space of time since. Commonly misidentified as true-crime, it is more accurately encompassed by the term “investigative podcast” which also accounts for works that use the same techniques to explore mysteries other than unsolved violent crimes. Michael Curtin describes the life cycle of genres as one of “innovation, imitation, [and] saturation” (248). Curtin was writing about broadcast television documentaries in a pre-podcast world, but the development of investigative podcasting since 2014 is evidence that this “familiar cycle” can occur with increased rapidity in the digital era. Podcasting has levelled the audio storytelling playing field between radio veterans like Sarah Koenig and Brian Reed, and people who had never worked in audio media like print journalist Chris Goffard, or documentary filmmakers Jon Frechette and Todd Luoto. The varied approaches to investigative podcasting taken by these reporters showcase the genre’s adaptability and malleability, and the future of the genre will doubtless involve further evolution and demand further study.

The investigative podcast genre began in 2014 with *Serial*, which was innovative with its intimate and personal narration by a single host, dramatic structure sustained over multiple episodes, and literary sensibility that strove for greater emotional effect than simple, objective reportage. Sarah Koenig and *Serial*’s producers identified and took advantage of podcasting’s inherent strengths as a storytelling tool, creating a signature authorial voice that feels simultaneously authoritative and emotionally authentic. Imitation followed quickly with a slew of other podcasts – many that were true-crime in content but, crucially, some that were not. By 2017 the investigative podcast genre had crystallised into a distinctive and recognisable format with the release of podcasts like *S-Town*, *Dirty John*, and *The Polybius Conspiracy*. *Serial*’s legacy is observable in even more recent works through very specific audio cues that have become genre staples. For instance, the robotic greeting of the prison phone service that features in *Serial*’s opening credits has become a recurring motif in investigative podcasting – an aural shorthand that harks back to the genre’s ur-text and evokes its distinctive author-subject relationship. CBC’s 2019 podcast *Hunting Warhead* prefaces the voice of its own incarcerated subject, Benjamin Faulkner, with an automated message that we are hearing “a prepaid call from an inmate at the Daviess County Detention Centre, Kentucky” (Fairless 47:25). Even more recently in 2020, this device transcended the podcast medium altogether and appeared in Netflix’s documentary series *Tiger King*. *Tiger King*’s subject, zookeeper Joe Exotic, is also introduced

with an automated voice stating that “this is a prepaid call from... an inmate at the Grady County Jail” while a static image of the jail’s exterior appears onscreen (Goode & Chaiklin).

Only four years after the release of *Serial*, the market for investigative podcasts had become sufficiently oversaturated for its defining features to be highlighted and exaggerated to great effect in parodies like The Onion’s *A Very Fatal Murder* (2018). In that podcast, fictional reporter David Pascall endeavours to find “the most interesting, violent, culturally relevant murder cases in America” for the express purpose of creating a hit podcast (Nantoli & Hoepfner). The same year, television series *Portlandia* skewered investigative podcasts and the reporters who create them in a sketch titled “NPR podcast” (Brownstein). The segment features two podcasters, played by comedians Fred Armisen and Carrie Brownstein, whose attempts to report on an unfolding murder investigation frustrate and bemuse the local law enforcement. They play a mimicry of *S-Town*’s theme tune on a banjo during a police briefing, adjust the police station’s soundscape to their liking by making the phones ring unnecessarily, and centre themselves as the heroic investigators rather than the real detectives. This sketch is evidence that the very voices that made investigative podcasting’s foundational texts authoritative are now overused enough to become comedic.

For now, the narrative model discussed in this thesis continues to dominate despite its saturation. 2020 saw the release of Patrick Radden Keefe’s podcast *Wind of Change*, which investigates the theory that a hit 1990 rock song was secretly written by the CIA to help bring about the end of the Cold War. *Wind of Change* is consistent with the narrative structures and voices that feature in the podcasts discussed in this thesis. An investigator learns of a mystery that seems unlike any they have covered before, develops a fascination or even obsession, and invites the listener to join them in that fascination through personal, intimate narration of every detail and twist in the case. In print journalism, Radden Keefe claims, these structures “would feel overly self-referential,” but “in a podcast it’s quite natural” (qtd. in Lyster). Even the subject matter echoes that of a podcast discussed above, *The Polybius Conspiracy*, in its assertion of a sinister or secret origin to an old piece of pop culture. Going forward, however, the future of investigative podcasting remains a fascinating mystery itself. Curtin’s “familiar cycle” demands an innovation, but it remains unclear what this will look like.

This thesis has focused largely on the voice of the investigator figure in this genre, and the relationships and hierarchies that this voice forms with those of their subjects. Future developments in investigative podcasting will reveal whether this voice is indeed essential, or if these kinds of stories can be told without it. Are the genre’s long-form explorations reliant on the personal relationship

between listener and host, or could an investigative podcast exist without a central investigator figure at all? Future research might attempt to answer this by comparing podcasts like the ones discussed here with examples where the author/subject divide is blurred, complicated, or abolished entirely. For instance, another podcast that focuses on incarcerated voices is Radiotopia's *Ear Hustle* (2017). Co-hosted by inmates at San Quentin Correctional Facility, and produced in a media lab within the prison itself, a comparative study between *Ear Hustle* and, for instance, *Serial* might give insight into how hierarchies of vocal authority shift when a podcast is explicitly created as a collaboration between journalist and subject.

Podcasting as a whole has proven popular for an incredibly diverse range of voices. For example, programs created and hosted by people of colour have consistently top download charts, such as NPR's *Code Switch*, and the *New York Times*' *1619*. However, investigative podcasts like those discussed here have so far been dominated by a particular kind of authorial voice: white, liberal, coastal elites with a strong sense of vernacular and a basis in the public radio tradition. These are voices that, in cases like *S-Town* or *Missing Richard Simmons*, impose themselves into the stories of others uninvited, rather than engage meaningfully with the voices of the subject. As demonstrated in previous chapters, a recurring shortfall of prominent investigative podcasts has been authors' struggling to justify why their voices, specifically, should be the ones to tell these stories. This is evident in Sarah Koenig's treatment of African American and Asian American communities in *Serial*, or Brian Reed's attempted insight into the world of the disenfranchised, Trump-voting, small town America.

The genre's next significant innovation may, therefore, be an extension of a trend that is already emerging: investigative podcasters exploring cases that have a specific connection to their own lived experiences, bringing significant autobiographical influences to the genre. Jonathan Hirsch's 2018 *Dear Franklin Jones*, for example, is a seven-part exposé of the religious cult in which he was raised. His personal connection to the story gives the podcast a more confessional quality, and also provides him with access to important interviewees including his own parents. Another example is Rebecca Nagle's 2019 podcast *This Land* which, like *S-Town*, uses a murder mystery premise as a jumping off point to tell a much broader story. In this case, that story is a Supreme Court case regarding Native American land rights that will "determine the future of five tribes and nearly half the land in Oklahoma" (Nagle). Nagle is a citizen of the Cherokee nation, and in the podcast's opening moments explains that a part of the land in question "has belonged to my family for more than a hundred and eighty years." This means that, unlike in the podcasts discussed in this thesis, her authority of voice

and the relationship of trust between her and the listener are based on her personal connection to the story she is telling.

The recency and rapidity of the post-*Serial* investigative podcast boom means that only a small amount of scholarship is currently available into how the genre functions, and how it relates to the broader context in which it is produced. Future research might also focus on podcasting's role in shaping public perceptions of authority and authenticity in media voices. Questions like these are beyond the scope of this thesis, but are particularly important in the era of "fake news" when podcast journalists are, like all journalists, struggling to reclaim their authority of voice in a media landscape where "perceived credibility... has been negatively impacted by the rise of the fake news phenomenon" (Ross & Rivers 2). Examples like *The Polybius Conspiracy* have already experimented with the form's potential to trick, mislead, suggest, or persuade. This highlights another important area for future research – the relationship between a genre like investigative podcasting, with its central ideas about questioning or believing different voices, and conspiracy culture, especially as it exists online. If investigative podcasts suggest that mysteries should not only be investigated, but reinvestigated again and again by new, self-appointed detective figures, does any notion of authentic truth inevitably give way to conspiracy and conjecture? As investigative journalism podcasting moves further into the mainstream, it is inevitable that this will be the medium of choice for many more nonfiction storytellers looking to bring their voices to a wide audience. While it remains to be seen exactly how these voices will manifest, it seems clear from an examination of major investigate podcasts released thus far that their success will rely on the audience's perception of them as authoritative and emotionally authentic.

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