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Honors Project Proposal

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Queering the Ear: The Cultural Geography of Podcasts

My project argues for podcasting as a queer medium, capable of revealing unexplored space for queer artistry and joy in a highly accessible format. In particular, my research focuses on the queer time and geography of *S-Town*, a 2017 production of *This American Life*. Exploring *S-Town*'s non-linear narrative structure, the aesthetic of time pieces in the show, and the constructed border between the "Yankee" reporter and "Southerner" subject, I argue that, while ethically ambiguous, the podcast exemplifies the queer gaze and invites the listener to reexamine their own relationship to historical time, as well as the show's depictions of Southern geography. In addition to *S-Town*, I will also draw from the modern queer podcast, *The Heart,* in my introduction to celebrate the medium's potential for a more radically queer audio aesthetic. In this sense, I intend to explore both the breakthroughs and the limitations of *S-Town* for queer media, as it involves queer subjects but is not produced from an explicitly queer platform or perspective.

My project will consist of two parts: first, the academic study of *S-Town* I have briefly described above; and second, a podcast that I will write and produce. The academic portion of my project will be broken into three chapters: a broad introduction that explores the queer aesthetic of podcasts, drawing on early episodes of *This American Life* and *The Heart* as examples; a chapter discussing queer time in *S-Town*; and finally, a chapter discussing and queering of the geography in *S-Town.* The two body chapters will also include significant

discussions of *S-Town*'s ethical obligations. For instance, how does Brian Reed—the show's host—balance accuracy with artistry? Does the show cross or blur the line between voyeurism and storytelling? Is the show's depiction of queerness made for a queer audience? If not, is it accurate, nuanced, and respectful to the show's subjects? As I investigate both the theoretical and the technical sides of queer podcasts, I also intend to deepen my research by producing an experimental podcast episode in which I explore what it means to create a geographically situated podcast.

The introductory chapter in my project will include a general discussion of podcasting as a queer medium, drawing on both theoretical works and case studies. My secondary and theoretical sources will include Michel de Certeau, Roland Barthes, Matt Brim's book *Queer Poor Studies,* and a selection of works on sound studies. Because podcasting is such a diverse and broad medium, I will narrow the scope of this general discussion to the narrative and highly produced series that require script writing, sound effects, and post-production work, as opposed to interview or talk-show style podcasts, which, while significant to the industry, do not align with the production style or elements in *S-Town*.

As a technologically accessible and aesthetically innovative space, podcasting presents a unique opportunity for queer artists to share their own stories. The medium also lends itself to a queer auditory gaze, relying on embodied voices/emotions and conversational tone to connect with the listener. Explicitly queer podcasts like *The Heart* (an erotic, artistic podcast produced by Mermaid Palace) epitomize the medium's queer potential, using a range of sound design techniques to blend the physical and the audio worlds. Talking specifically about the first episode of *This American Life* in 1996 also opens a discussion of glitch theory, in which the technological limitations of a medium (such as record scratches, missed cues in live radio

broadcasts, etc.) expose the medium and create transparency between listener and podcaster (Brooks).

I have chosen to focus the two body chapters of my project on *S-Town* not only because of its popularity, but also because of the ethical questions that it raises about privacy and memory on the air. Downloaded over 10 million times in the first four days of its release in 2017, *S-Town* broke records as one of the most popular podcasts ever created. As a highly visible cultural object, *S-Town* has been praised for its innovation as the first piece of "aural literature" as well as criticized for its "morally indefensible" and "voyeuristic" exploration of John B. McLemore's sexuality and mental health (Alcorn). I intend to grapple with these ethical questions throughout my academic and journalistic research, and my project will weigh the benefits of a culturally significant queer podcast against the possible harm that it generates for its subjects. This ethical debate will include public reception to *S-Town* (such as journalistic reviews and meta-podcasts), as well as academic works like Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

The second and third chapters of my project will discuss *S-Town* specifically as a queer cultural object. While its sound is not as aesthetically queer as other podcasts, the writing in *S-Town* support a queer gaze between its subject, journalist, and audience, which I will explore through its queer time and Southern geography. In one of the only academic works so far written about *S-Town*, Monique Rooney discusses the significance of both clocks and geography in the series as part of its unique "intermedia," which she defines as "an artform that combines or incorporates other artforms or media" (Rooney 157). I will significantly extend Rooney's argument first in terms of queer time and then in terms of geography. I argue that Brian Reed

queers time by using a non-linear narrative structure and by blurring the lines between the clock body, the human body, and the body of work.

My review of the show's geography will include a discussion of Place Theory, Southern literature, and the show's assumed Northern audience. In terms of geography, the show initially creates a barrier between the urban Northern observer and rural Southern subject while at the same time breaking down stereotypes of the South as uniformly backward or isolated. As with its treatment of time, *S-Town* begins to blur geographies, drawing connections—as opposed to differences—between Woodstock, Alabama and New York City, the Pacific Northwest, and Wyoming. Indeed, the creation of an internationally available podcast challenges the stereotype of the rural South as an inaccessible or unknown place. At the same time, the podcast reconstructs John B. McLemore's (the main character's) identity of place in Woodstock through Brian Reed's (the podcaster's) ears, for the listener's consumption. This reconstruction raises ethical questions concerning the continuity of place, identity, and culture. For instance, can place or culture ever be reproduced and consumed accurately through the medium? What limitations or opportunities does audio storytelling offer? Should the goal of a podcast like *S-Town* be accuracy or artistry?

In conversation with this theoretical and academic discussion of podcasting, I will produce my own experimental podcast episode based around a summer road trip to Woodstock, Alabama, where I plan to collect scenery sound as well as my own reactions to the space. I view this aspect of my project as not only being inspired by, but also responding to, *S-Town*. Although I have produced several narrative-style podcasts during my time at Macalester, I plan to hone my artistic and aesthetic audio style using the theories and methods that I have explored in my project. In this sense, the podcast will be aesthetically experimental and academically generative.

Like the rest of my project, the goal for my episode will be to discuss and practice alternative

and/or queer modes of storytelling made possible through an audio medium.

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