

# ANGELAKI

journal of the theoretical humanities  
 volume 23 number 1 february 2018  
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Francis in Angelaki on 28/2/2018, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/0969725X.2018.1435392>. <https://authorservices.taylorandfrancis.com/sharing-your-work/> (Publisher Journal website as of 12/8/2019)

## QUEER OBJECTS AND INTERMEDIAL TIMEPIECES *reading s-town (2017)*

*Abstract* This paper takes as its queer object a serialized podcast. With its story about John B. McLemore, a clockmaker from Woodstock, Alabama, *S-Town* is a blockbuster success from the producers of *Serial* (2014–16) and *This American Life* (1995–present) (the seven-part series was downloaded 16 million times in the first week of its release, with that number now exceeding 40 million). Against both affirmative and negative reception of *S-Town* – responses that tend to position the podcast either as transcending or as reproducing the idea of a backwards or lagging South – this paper argues that *S-Town* is an intermedial narrative incorporating various media that themselves comprise competing temporalities. Indexing these alternative temporalities are the intricate designs of clocks and sundials that tell of mythological time and seasonal and diurnal rhythms. There are also tattoos and other inscriptions that mark both bodies and sundials. My argument attends to the animate and inanimate forms narratively contained within the podcast, touching on Rebecca Schneider’s idea of “inter(in)animation” and Elizabeth Freeman’s challenges to “chrononormativity” in the process. From within this intermedial structure, John emerges as an intermediary whose engagement in processes of self-objectification and historical re-enactment complicates a normative timeframe and confounds conventional subject/object relations. Through a consideration of what I call the queerly intermedial form of the *S-Town* podcast, the essay looks beyond both discrete forms and regional/national concerns to gesture toward the significance of broader networks and spheres for thinking about time, space and being.

*Keywords* queer; intermedia; time and temporality; the South

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*S-Town* (2017) is an investigative journalism podcast that centres on John B. McLemore, a clockmaker who sets in motion Brian Reed’s trip to Woodstock in Bibb County, Alabama: the place that John caustically dubs “shit town” and to which the podcast’s title alludes. Brian Reed, the producer and narrator of *S-Town*, is a journalist known for his work on *This American Life*, the Chicago Public Radio program hosted by Ira Glass. *S-Town* is essentially a docudrama told in seven episodes in the form of audio files. Named “chapters” on the show’s website (<https://stowncast.org>), all seven audio files were released simultaneously on 28 March 2017, available free for either downloading or streaming. This mode of

delivery facilitates the phenomenon of “binge-watching” (in this case “binge-listening”), the practice of viewing/listening to multiple episodes of a program in rapid succession. Early in *S-Town*’s Chapter One, and in what will become recognizable as his pessimistic and excoriating style, John denounces the practices and habits associated with the current era of readily accessible, online content when he remarks of the young people that he had employed to dig a hole on his property: “you can’t get them to do nothing because they’re on their cell phone [*sic*]. And they’re tweeting, and they’re YouTubing, and they’re always on Facebook.” Despite this expressed negativity about online culture, it is John’s e-mail to Brian Reed concerning a murder about which he’d overheard the young hole-diggers gossiping that sets the *S-Town* story in motion.

Following their e-mail correspondence, John and Brian are soon communicating by telephone. On the basis of John’s claims about two local crimes (one of which is the alleged murder), Brian travels to Woodstock but, about a year after their first in-person meeting, John takes his own life. This suicide had taken place while the program was in production, displacing Brian’s investigation of the crimes John had reported. In terms of narrative sequence, the suicide is revealed to listeners at the end of Chapter Two, after John has been introduced and interviews with potential suspects for the alleged murder have been heard. It becomes clear, beyond Chapter Two, that John, not the alleged crimes, is both magnetic object of Brian’s investigation and enigmatic focus of the docudrama. Within the audio-form of the podcast, John’s voice becomes *S-Town*’s loquacious, though relentlessly negative, presence. It is as if, despite John’s passing, it speaks immediately to listeners, communicating directly through recorded telephone calls and in-person interviews.

This voice from beyond the grave structures the series, but it does so alongside an array of other communicative and/or aesthetic forms that, ranging from novels to photographs and videos embedded online, bring John to life in uncanny ways. The noun “intermedia” has emerged as a descriptor for the intricately networked arrangements that connect film to television, social media, theatre, photography and, more recently, radio.<sup>1</sup> Intermedia is most commonly defined as an artform that combines or incorporates other artforms or media.<sup>2</sup> In *S-Town*, these forms include clocks and sundials that John either made or mended, often using methods, such as fire-gilding, belonging to a much earlier time. Other forms described, referred to or evoked include: an elaborate hedge maze that John created, unrecorded conversations, letters, a novel and other print narratives, poetry, songs, film, e-mails, Google maps, theatrical rituals, tattoos and tattooing, text messages and graffiti.<sup>3</sup> In part prompted by the show’s references to the internet (Facebook etc.), my Google searches turned up drone images of the hedge maze and a photograph of the tattoos on John’s back to suggest the way in which the podcast drama can be read through the intermedia that are the World Wide Web. Some of these images appear to have been uploaded by those involved in the production of the podcast, while others (including drone photographs of the hedge maze) seem to be the result of listener interest and, perhaps, amateur investigation of information associated with the *S-Town* story. Whether as paratactical presences (it’s possible to search for an image of John online while listening to his voice) or as forms incorporated within the podcast (segments of song heard throughout), these forms animate John’s presence and give rise to rhythms and ways of understanding time that work both within and against the linear and arguably death-driven structure of the series itself. These intermedia reveal how meaning and plot can be generated across and between various artforms, including the ever-proliferating network that is the internet.

In terms of narrative timing, intermedia work in a way that is somewhat at odds with the sequential form of the podcast. Users of the internet, for example, may well have read or have heard about John's suicide, before reaching the disclosure of that event at the end of Chapter Two. Likewise, Brian Reed's description, in Chapter One's opening, of the operations of an ancient clock fits with the edited and selectively timed sequence of the podcast. The full significance of this clock can only be understood belatedly, that is only once John's story is heard, his suicide revealed and his intense attachment to clocks and sundials expanded beyond Chapter Two. The opening description of the clock poetically anticipates the ongoing narrative, especially given that the forward-movement of ticking clocks is metaphorically connected, in a later chapter, to the irreversible time of one person's (John's) life. Brian's prefatory remarks about clocks are meaningful not simply in the light of John's suicide but also in terms of the ends-driven structure of the podcast narrative itself. By this I mean the sequential or episodic movement of the podcast narrative, which arguably compels appetites for narrative resolutions of the kind that Peter Brooks theorizes in *Reading for the Plot*. The aforementioned mode of "binge-listening," with its auditors who hasten, or who are driven hastily, toward a narrative end, further augments this temporality. The narrative arc episodically discloses other details about John's life, including discussion of his homosexuality. Whether or not this narrative timing is designed to incite speculation about the connection between John's sexuality and suicidal motives, the sequential structure of the podcast incites listener desire to know what it means to time one's own death.<sup>4</sup>

While acknowledging the power of this narrative structure, it is this essay's contention that *S-Town's* *queerly* intermedial form counteracts its **end-driven** **<Query: "ends-driven", as elsewhere in the text?>** sequential form and its death-driven themes. **With the phrase "queerly intermedial" refer to the <Query: sense? Should this read 'The phrase "queerly intermedial" refers to the ...'>** dynamic, communicative structure through which homoerotic themes, practices and meanings resonate. Such meaning is transmitted not only through the podcast's various voices but also through other aesthetic modes, practices and performances. In what follows, I explore the significance of the podcast's intermedial structure for thinking about time, selfhood and the place of the South, focusing particularly on the temporally queer legacy of the Alabama clockmaker, on non-linear aspects of the grammar organizing the spoken-drama and on temporally dissonant media incorporated within the podcast.

There is a moment in the final episode that brings together the meaning of the podcast's intermedia and their queer temporality. This moment comes after a number of carefully timed revelations about John, including the transmission of sounds and voices closely connected to the suicide and the withholding of John's frank discussions about his queer sexuality until the last two chapters. Apart from the controversy that these disclosures have generated about the ethics of the series' style of investigative journalism (see, for example, Alcorn), the timing of such revelations within the sequential narrative of the podcast produced unease in this listener, in so far as it seemed to draw attention to listener complicity in the ends-driven structure of narrative itself. However, existing in tension with this linear structure is the exchange that occurs when Brian visits, as is narrated in Chapter Seven, an old friend and client of John's named Bill (last name omitted for privacy reasons) in his suburban home, which is full of clocks. In this scene, Brian realizes that clocks are not just "appliances" but works of art and "feats of engineering" and, quoting Bill, that they "make you think." He describes:

... a clock with a turtle that bobs in water in a dish, and the turtle floats from hour to hour to tell the time. There's a clock with a woman pulling a sheet over the face of it, covering day with night time. There's one small clock encrusted in super detailed silver and gold and green-gold, which I've never even heard of – that's shaped like the kind of chair servants used to carry royalty.<sup>5</sup> (*S-Town*, Chapter Seven)

Brian discovers that John has worked on these clocks in Bill's collection and that he has made others "from scratch," often by using methods "from the period the clock was made," including the dangerous method of fire-gilding whereby mercury is used to plate clocks with gold or silver. When Brian asks Bill about the specific nature of his fascination with clocks, Bill responds that their allure goes back to childhood and to watching his grandfather fix a cheap kitchen clock in the house. "[Bill] was mesmerized by how this object suddenly became alive, ticking, hands turning. And he began crying as he told me." When pressed further about the emotional appeal of clocks, Bill responds that "it was just the measure of time had something to do with me." Brian's interpretation of Bill's words: "even as a kid the clock captured the feeling of time going by, going by, and never coming back." The next words we hear are from John who, his suicide having been revealed in Chapter Two, effectively speaks from beyond the grave:

If someone says the name John B. McLemore 25 years in the future, you'll remember exactly who that is. (Chapter Seven)

These words of John's offset the plaintive idea that the ticking of clocks both iterate and measure the passing of time and, by implication, a living being that moves from past into present and future. Against Bill's expressly unidirectional concept of time ("the feeling of time going by, going by, and never coming back"), the not there/there of John's voice communicates, on one hand, his irretrievable past-ness and, on the other, the immediate presence generated by a podcast that, beyond the moment of his death, places John's voice within earshot.

Like a spiritual medium, John's intermediary voice thus offsets the clock's mechanistic ticking, its linear time and what Elizabeth Freeman calls "chrononormative" temporality. The moment in which John speaks of his future legacy is an instance of what Freeman calls "temporal lag," an undertow that pulls against heteronormative perceptions of linear time, resisting the heroic forward march of capitalism's biopolitical subject who, in succumbing to labours and other demands of the present, is rewarded with the abstract hope of a better future (Freeman 3).<sup>6</sup> Alternatively, what if time returns and, in doing so, drags another time along with it? This is a question that Rebecca Schneider also asks in her study of how the theatrical arts might, in her words, "inter(in)animate" the present. Repurposing a word found in John Donne's poem "The Ecstasy," which speaks of how the souls of two lovers affectively intertwine to create the sense of a third presence, Schneider turns to contemporary re-enactments of American Civil War events in an attempt to decipher the relationship between performance and time. Schneider combines Donne's concept of "interinanimation" with an observation of Michel de Certeau's about what kind of time inheres in the relation between monuments on a city street and the proximate flow of everyday passers-by. Temporal inter(in)animation, as Schneider re-phrases it, is analogous to de Certeau's sense of the temporal relations flowing between static and living things. This dual framework allows her to explore the multiple and sensory

ways in which historical places, landmarks and performances co-constitute one another, bringing forth alternative perceptions of time in the process (Schneider 19–31).

Schneider’s “inter(in)animate” is a neologism that places together the words *animate* with *inanimate*, encapsulating her concept that an ongoing temporal stream of bodies and things might be discernible in proximity to static forms (such as monuments), momentarily syncopating the past with the present in the process. Bill’s collection of clocks includes one with a woman frozen in the act of “pulling a sheet over the [clock’s] face, covering day with night time.” The description of this clock, a photograph of which this listener found on the internet, points to a medium that is incorporated within the podcast. It is not clear whether or not John fire-gilded this golden object. Nevertheless, the clock, and its frozen woman covering time, cryptically animates a theme that *S-Town* never fully surfaces. This theme is to do with past and present representations of the American South as a place that – once upon a time the locus of gilded-age discovery, wealth and progress, the seat of the new American Republic – is now often more likely to be viewed as less-than-civil culture, including by John himself. As noted previously, the **S** of *S-Town* denotes “shit-town,” John’s pejorative phrase for his home town. **<Query: the “S” denotes just “shit”, surely?>** In addition, *S* implies the South, particularly the American South but potentially the Global South as well. While “S-Town/shit-town” refers to John’s relentlessly caustic and negative views of life in the American South, this essay’s closing emphasis on his fascination with clocks and sundials draws attention to their significance as objects that register time and place not simply in terms of an individual’s preoccupations or in terms of national/regional divisions but in terms of a cosmological measure of things. It is through a consideration of the **podcast’s** **<Query: is this referring to just one podcast or the others as well? If the latter, then change to podcasts?>** intermedial structure, which opens the listener to wider networks and spheres, that John emerges as both an intermediary who facilitates non-linear conceptions of time and as a figure who, as we shall see, engages in processes of self-objectification and historical re-enactment, confounding in the process established hierarchies and conventional subject/object relations. This essay thus queers John’s role as both object of investigative reportage who animates the intermedial podcast and as an intermediary who facilitates far-reaching concepts of time.

## II <Typesetter: “A” heading>

*S-Town*’s focus on a white man living in the majority white town of Woodstock, Alabama has generated controversy, not least as a result of its timing. Its early 2017 release took place in the wake of the election to Presidency of Donald Trump and his divisive appeals to so-called “forgotten” Americans, a category that summons the idea of hard-working men and women (often assumed to be white) associated with the Fordist era of flourishing industry and manufacturing that is now in decline in many areas of the United States. Moreover, *S-Town*’s March 2017 publication places it between two violent events directly provoked by white nationalist anger over the removal of Confederate statues in the South: one armed showdown took place in New Orleans and another erupted in Charlottesville in August 2017. While the polarized reception of *S-Town*’s representation of a suicidal white man and “redneck” culture in the American South should be understood in terms of Trump-era politics, it taps into

long-standing ambivalences about the South as a region that, as Jennifer Greeson argues, since the nineteenth century has played a foundational yet anomalous role in political and legal depictions of the United States as the globally dominant, enlightened nation-state. For Leigh Anne Duck, likewise, representations of the South as an exceptionally atavistic locus of race segregation have been placed in the service of depictions that run counter to the nation-state as bastion of equality, freedom and progress. For Duck, such categorizations of the South not only disavow innovative literary treatments of and from the region but also downplay the existence of race apartheid occurring in other parts of the country.

Ongoing anxiety about regional difference, and the role that perceptions of racial division play in maintaining North/South divides, can be discerned in both positive and negative reviews of *S-Town*. On one hand, there are those who have applauded *S-Town* as “quality” drama that, in transcending the ordinary true-crime genre or even producing “Aural Literature” (see, for example, Quah; Larson; Waldman), tells a sensitive and original story. On the other hand, it has been labelled “high-art” condescension that, through the perspective of its New York narrator, recycles clichés about Southern life, emphasizes regional idiosyncrasies and focuses on instances of sexism and racism within the majority white community of Woodstock, Alabama (see, for example Bady; Hooton). Brian Reed’s simultaneously wide-eyed and educative approach to his experiences and encounters in Bibb County arguably reproduces social hierarchies on the basis of regional difference. From the outset, the series’ narrative tone implies a naïve listener who, like the investigator himself, will be educated in the ways and manners of an othered group. This narrative structure is openly explicated in the following recorded exchange from Chapter One in which Brian tells of how John persuades him to travel to Alabama to investigate the alleged crimes:

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

JOHN B. McLEMORE: Proleptic decay and decrepitude.

BRIAN REED: So eventually, I decide I’ll come check it out.

JOHN B. McLEMORE: I was just dying for them to search this house without a warrant. I think they knew it.

BRIAN REED: That’s right after this.

John says his home town is filled with “proleptic decay and decrepitude.” I’m not ashamed to say I had to look up the word “proleptic.” It means using a word or phrase in anticipation of it becoming true. When I go to Alabama, I don’t want to cause any trouble, proleptically speaking, so John and I discuss a plan.

The enchantment that the urbane northerner (Brian) senses when beckoned by the provincial Southerner (John) to “his world,” as if a “portal” had opened, is quickly dispelled when John describes his place as one of “proleptic decay and decrepitude” and thereby encapsulates his view of the place he dubs “shit-town.” To some extent, this shuttling between utopian and dystopian imaginings of the Southern place is of a piece with the “middlebrow” manner and structure of the public-radio podcast,<sup>7</sup> yet this narrative style is intensified by metaphorization of regional difference, which is inflected by a history of race segregation. Magical descriptions of John’s nineteenth-century plantation home and awe-inspired renderings of the giant hedge-maze (comprising sixty-four “solutions”) that John had built on the property with the help

of his friend Tyler Goodson are countered by recordings of “hillbilly” lingo, racist slurs and acts of violence that Brian encounters in Bibb County. This part-enchanted and part-disparaging style is echoed when Brian presents himself as the intermediary who – “not ashamed” to translate foreign words for his listeners and pre-emptively preparing for the “trouble” his own foreign presence may cause – moves between the world to which John beckons him and the conventionally more sophisticated world of his implied listeners.

“It means using a word or phrase in anticipation of it becoming true,” Brian reports as he decodes the word “proleptic” as well as other sights and sounds for listeners who are positioned, like Brian himself, as naïve outsiders willing to be educated in the idiosyncratic ways of provincial folk. That “proleptic” is not a word that is readily associated with folksy provincialism troubles, however, the idea that *S-Town* is simply reproducing an ethnographic or investigative account of the South. John’s proleptic statement, moreover, reverses and substitutes the terms of such a generic approach, through which Brian would normally be understood as investigative subject and John as investigated object. “Proleptic decay and decrepitude” introduces not only John’s “high” vocabulary and wide-ranging knowledge, which itself overturns polarized metropolitan/provincial hierarchies. It also anticipates John’s role as intermediary who, displacing Brian at key moments, summons a near future in which he will have died (an event bringing the ultimate “decay”), his voice effectively haunting listeners temporally positioned beyond the moment of his suicide. If we consider again the episodic frame of the narrative, with its editorially selected and carefully timed events and disclosures, then it’s worth noting that the exchange above was initially recorded when Brian first met John and therefore at a moment at which Brian cannot know that John is going to die in the near future. The word “proleptic” thus operates meta-proleptically as it gestures obliquely to a narrative structure in which the object of investigation (John) tacitly plans a suicide that will later become the focus of Brian’s (the investigating subject’s) investigation.

Further complicating this structure, with its reversals and substitutions of conventional subject/object positions, are John’s statements and ruminations about time. Before I expand on my argument concerning John’s complex role as both intermediary and queer object in the podcast, it is worth dwelling on an episode that countenances the idea of linear temporality. Following his arrival in Woodstock, Brian tracks down and interviews the young man whom John had named, on first e-mailing Brian, as the murderer of another Bibb County local. John’s initial claim to Brian is about Kabrahm Burt, the son of a wealthy family and the owners of a company called K3 Lumber – a name that, particularly in the current Trump era of racially divisive rhetoric and of media attention to white supremacist views, cannot be disentangled from the legacy of the Ku Klux Klan and its history of racially targeted violence. As already mentioned, John had overheard news of the murder from local kids. They had talked of how Kabrahm had brutally kicked and beaten to death another young man, named Dylan Nichols, after the latter had lashed out at Kabrahm’s friend with a knife. Brian’s interview with Kabrahm is heard in Chapter Two, following which Brian repeats to John details heard from Kabrahm that match John’s initial reports, except for the vital information that Dylan had not died as a result of the beating. On recounting to John the important news that Dylan is still alive, Brian also tells Kabrahm’s version of events, including colourful detail about having been “hiding in the woods.” It is worth reproducing the following lengthy exchange, which provides a snapshot of John’s complicated view of his hometown

and an example of how his contrarian views frustrate the assumptions about time underpinning Brian's investigative approach:

JOHN B. McLEMORE: I'm sitting here looking out the window at the clouds going by, just in loathing disgust at the town that I live in and the fact that I didn't pack my bags and get the hell out of here decades ago. I think it's the part about hiding in the woods that did it. That's just so classic Bibb County. I don't know how many times I've heard that expression in my life – "hiding in the woods." I think hiding in the woods in Bibb County is like having your afternoon tea in London.

[JOHN: SIGH]

BRIAN REED: You know, there is another way John could have responded to all this news. I dare call it the normal way. That sigh he let out, rather than being one of despair, could have been one of relief – relief that a young man has not been killed, that local officials have not been bought off by a powerful, rich family, and that, in fact, law enforcement has done what appears to be a competent job responding to this incident. Shittown, at least in this case, doesn't look so, so terrible to me.

[PAUSE]

BRIAN REED: I don't know. Progress, right?

BRIAN REED: But no. I've learned that sometimes you catch John in a spell of depression, sometimes you catch him in a bout of mania, and sometimes, like today, I think, you catch him in an alchemy of the two.

JOHN B. McLEMORE: I'm trying to think of a snappy comeback to that.

BRIAN REED: Because what is it, if not progress?

JOHN B. McLEMORE: Oh my God. Oh, Lord, it's just a clusterfuck of sorrow, isn't it?

BRIAN REED: A clusterfuck of sorrow.

JOHN B. McLEMORE: It's kind of like progress as in ISIS is making progress. You know, it's that type of progress.

[LAUGHTER]

It's like ISIS, is all I can come up with. Oh, shit.

[LAUGHTER]

BRIAN REED: Damn, man. I'm over here busting my ass off. When you contacted me, you wanted to know what actually happened. So it's progress in that sense, right?

JOHN B. McLEMORE: It's progress in that sense.

Having been brought to Woodstock to investigate a murder that has, as it turns out, not "happened," Brian does not so much "catch" John as he is himself caught out by a man who himself appears to be caught in an alchemy of depression and mania. The podcast form can, in this context, be understood as itself a kind of "gilding" of various elements. Further on in the series, and in an oblique repetition of the idea that bodies might be "caught" in an "alchemy" that exceeds rational agency, there is speculation about whether manic-depression (of which John shows signs) might be a result of mercury poisoning, transmitted from John's fire-gilding methods. This alchemical undertow pulls against rhetorical structures as does John's "catching out" of Brian. The mercurial exchange overturns the subject/object position of the investigative genre through John's parodying of Brian's report about Kabrahm, which, again reversing the metropole/province hierarchy, compares "hiding in the woods" with



drinking tea in London. Reversal of narrative expectation also occurs through John's nihilistic insistence that such activities do not amount to the "progress" that Brian associates with investigative reportage and thus with the Northerner's take on an ostensibly backwards South. This also challenges the idea that telling about "what happened" somehow moves us forward. Here John intermediates an alternative temporality, by which I mean that his words draw attention to temporalities and modalities that exist at odds with progressive ideas of time. Such "intermediation" is enacted when John refers to Kabrahm's beating up of Dylan as a "clusterfuck of sorrow" and when he anticipates the "decay and decrepitude" of life, momentarily short-circuiting, in the process, the ends-driven compulsion of narrative sequencing itself.

In terms of the podcast's murderous and/or suicidal plots, the exchange between Brian and John above raises the question of whether John had ever believed that Kabrahm had killed Dylan. Was this merely a ruse that John concocted to bring the *This American Life* reporter to Bibb County? My concern is not so much with these questions – which have been significant to discussions about the ethics of the series (see "Gilded South" **<Query: this is "Souths" in the bibliography. Please advise>**) – but with the idea that John functions, within the Southern-town story, as both an intermediary and as a queer object within the narrative. Throughout the recording, John's voice simultaneously anticipates that which comes to pass and speaks back to the present from beyond the grave. John's role as temporally queer intermediary gains further force from the intermedial structure of the narrative. With their variously expressive forms, performances and temporalities, these intermedia upset received ideas, particularly concerning the potential for thought and transformative communication in a (Southern) time and place perceived to be socially/politically regressive or incapable of change. John's pejorative view of Woodstock as a "shit-town" is complicated, for example, by the fact that John's coming-to-life takes place posthumously and through the "muck-raking" investigative drama that is *S-Town*/"shit town." "Proleptically speaking," Brian tells us toward the end of Chapter One, he wishes to discuss a "plan" with John so that his (as he later refers to it) "Yankee" presence in the South does not cause any "trouble." Yet the "decay and decrepitude" of which John speaks, and that already precedes their plan, names the death that will follow on from Brian's first journey down to Bibb County as John's proleptic decay and decrepitude become the literal "shit" of a story world in which John's disparaging expressions cannot be separated from his abiding narrative presence.

The word "shit" arises frequently throughout the series, ranging from its implied presence in the series' title, the expletive repetition of the word throughout the drama and its use in both literal and more metaphorical contexts. "Time does not give a shit" Brian says melancholically after first learning of John's death (Chapter Three). The tattooist Bubba – co-owner with Tyler Goodson of Black Sheep Ink – refers to "shit" when he ruminates on why it is that John, having previously disparaged the practice, wanted to be tattooed in the last year or so of his life. He wrote all that "shit down," Bubba tells Brian, referring to how John documented what he heard about Bubba and Tyler's financial struggle and then paid for his many tattoos thus helping them pay bills. Here it is as if Bubba knows that the medium of writing productively supplements and redeems the "shit" that is Tyler and Bubba's everyday financial struggle. Writing here becomes a medium that, in contradistinction to speech, turns wasteful "shit" into something socially useful. In a counter-moment, and one that has attracted controversy, Brian invokes shit as the equivalent of that

“decay and decrepitude” that John seems to oppose to ideas of progress and social utility. This invocation of decaying “shit” takes place when Brian openly justifies his decision to disclose and further investigate details that John has confidentially reported about the queer sexuality of closeted Bibb County men. When Brian reasons about what some have since considered an unethical disclosure (see Romano), he implicitly returns to John’s words about proleptic decay and decrepitude. “[S]ince John died,” Brian claims, “two other people who knew him well have told me the same information on the record,” before going on to state that “John was very clear that he did not believe in God or an afterlife. So John, in his own view, is worm dirt now, unaffected by this ...” (Chapter Six). The idea that the posthumous John is now the equivalent of “worm dirt” resonates further when Brian, in a flash-forward to the near future, gives details of John’s burial:

Tyler will be the one who makes John’s tombstone. It’ll be a couple of months before he does it. But as time goes on, no one else will get John one. John loved old cemeteries and gravestones, and it’ll start nagging at Tyler that John’s in the ground, decomposing into worm dirt, without so much as a marker. Tyler won’t have any money for it, so he’ll find an old piece of gray concrete – actually a leg off one of the benches at the table in back of his granny’s house – and he’ll paint it a rich brown so that it looks like a carved piece of oak ... (Chapter Three)

Brian’s use of the future tense (“Tyler will be ...”) here chimes with John’s earlier anticipation of the death that has now taken place. Both Brian’s and John’s flash-forwards express the flexibility of language, its capacity to account for a kind of temporal loop. Grammar can simultaneously foretell time and tell of what has already taken place. A grammatical feedback and feed-forward structure is enunciated when Brian tells of what “will” come to pass when he and Tyler take care that John has a proper burial. John’s anticipatory pronouncements about “decay and decrepitude” can, in this context, be associated with the “shit-town” of the podcast title, where “shit” implies a John who is not necessarily headed toward narrative closure so much as part of a living cycle. This is communicated through the association of John’s body with the decomposing earth, the “worm dirt,” that will surely reproduce further life. John’s body is here posthumous in the etymological sense of the word: *post* (after) and *humous* (earth/burial ground), implying a state of being human or a state of being *after* human-ness that involves a return to the earth that is already associated with human/*humous* substance. Connected to these *pre-* and *post-humous* meanings is *S-Town*’s attentiveness to John’s posterity. Throughout the series, John’s body, and the marks on that body, are linked with the “shit” or “worm dirt” of the place in which he dwells. This suggests that *S-Town*’s John is an intermediary for a time and a way (or substance) of being that exists both prior to and beyond this life.

The intermedial form of the podcast is integral to understanding *S-Town*’s complex engagements with being and time. What, then, are the “queer” implications of this form and what do these queer traces have to do with the way *S-Town* positions itself in relation to the American South/south? **<Query: “South”? There seems to be some variability in the use of a capital “S” (and “N” for “North”), throughout. Have opted for initial capitals for “North”, “South”, “global South”, “Northerner”, Southerner”, as per convention, but please amend, Monique, if this is wrong headed!>** Queer theory suggests that performance is key to both the intersubjective energies and intermedial dynamics animating *S-Town*’s narrative – in

particular, the performative significance of tattoos and tattooing deserves attention, as does the part played by the so-called “church” rituals involving John and Tyler Goodson and, finally, the temporally queer interaction between insignia and the clocks and sundials made by John. In addition, John’s fascination with past and present media (photographs and clocks) raises questions not only about the queer relation between John, Tyler and their objects but also about the role that racial difference, particularly as it pertains to the history of slavery, plays in processes of objectification that augment their bond. As we shall see, the revelation of queer intimacy between white men takes place via a performance in which John willingly subjects himself to whipping and which problematically bears witness to a violent history of slavery and of subjugation of African Americans in the South.

### III <Typesetter: “A” heading>

As already noted above, reception of *S-Town* registers ongoing cultural sensitivity about the politics of telling a story about the South that focuses on the pessimism of a white man and represents the views of others who, also white and male but much less well-off than John, call attention to their own disenfranchisement. Sensitive to how he might be received, that is as a cosmopolitan liberal reporter from the North, Brian Reed reflexively considers in advance his status as a New Yorker visiting Woodstock. Not wanting to make “trouble” (Chapter One), Brian notes how in preparing to visit Woodstock he attempted to conceal the fact of his marriage to an African-American woman as well as the fact of his part Russian-Jewish heritage. Such hesitancy is vindicated when the views propounded unapologetically by the tattoo artist who “goes by the name” of Bubba are heard. Openly espousing racism and sexism, Bubba rants about how “if you got a taxpaying job, you got to take care of some nigger’s wife that’s in jail because she’s drawing a child support check.” Bubba here rehearses the wounded white masculinity and anti-liberal view stereotypically associated with demographics in the South as well as other regions of the United States, particularly in the racially divisive moment of Trump-era rhetoric. At the same time, Bubba expresses awareness of hierarchical regional divisions, including widespread assumptions that associate apartheid with the South rather than the nation at large. “You’re just as racist as we are,” Bubba comments to Brian (Chapter Two). Cognate with Bubba’s expression of ambivalence about race – or, more precisely, his ambivalence about the idea that being a white man living in the South is necessarily equivalent to being racist – are the tattooing performances and other rituals that are disclosed from Chapter Two onwards. As we shall see, further ambivalences about race emerge through queerly intimate rituals between white men, including fascination with the objectifying legacy of slavery.

The way in which Bubba and Tyler talk about tattoos and tattooing both reproduces and destabilizes stereotypes about white men in the South. Black Sheep Ink is the tattoo parlour that Tyler Goodson and Bubba co-own and that Brian Reed visits, in Chapter Two, as part of his search for information about Kabrahm Burt. Located in a room hidden at the back of a public bar, the parlour is entered through a secret door, ensuring exclusive access to white customers. Brian’s narrative draws attention to the defensive racism of the subcultural group that congregates in this parlour, as he elaborates briefly on Black Sheep Ink’s close and uneasy proximity to the city of Bessemer and its majority black population. Yet Brian also evinces sympathy for Black Sheep Ink’s misfits, who are described as disenfranchised white

men on the “wrong side of the law,” possessing little sense of purpose (Chapter Two). Within this subculture, tattoos mediate a range of dispositions and experiences. There is, for example, the “feed me” that is tattooed across the distended stomach of one Black Sheep customer and the pistons, whip and other marks tattooed on John’s back. A Google search of “Black Sheep Ink” brings up photographs of other tattoos associated with the parlour and posted on the business’s Facebook page, including one of a buxom woman sitting, with cowboy hat on, astride a cannon.

Bubba speaks of tattooing as a social ritual, comparing the communications that take place during the ritual with “therapy” (Chapter Two). Bubba tells Brian of how, when questioning a client about his/her motivations for choosing a particular tattoo, he learns about everyday appetites and proclivities. Tattoos and the performance of tattooing here mediate states of consciousness or ways of knowing. For example, Bubba interprets John’s late-stage desire to be tattooed as a kind of death drive. Having previously heard only negativity about tattoos from John as well as constant disparagement about the “failures” that are obsessed with them, an admission that links John’s corrosive pessimism directly to the situation of white men of Black Sheep Ink (rather than African Americans), Bubba wonders whether the “pistons” and other “redneck ass” tattoos that John was getting “tatted up” with were in preparation to “blow his brains out” (Chapter Two). This description of a scene in which John appears to be becoming (rather than born) a redneck has implications for thinking about white masculinity, at least as it operates within Black Sheep Ink, as a performative rather than stable or authentic category. Indeed, Bubba’s conception of bodily inscription is that it is essentially a performative enactment of both living desires and death drives.

On one hand, tattoos operate in the narrative as media that posthumously enable multiple interpretations of John and of his views of life and death. On the other, tattoos and tattooing are associated with performative rituals that are themselves intermedial and that speak to queer temporalities and ways of being that are, in turn, shaped by the legacy of slavery/racial hierarchies in the South. The performative rituals, involving John and Tyler, work against Bubba’s reading that John’s tattooing either signifies suicidal tendencies or functions as an alibi for John’s tacit support of Tyler Goodson. John and Tyler’s relationship is contextualized through narrative elaborations of Tyler’s troubled background, including Tyler’s struggle to come to terms with the sexual abuse he suffered from his biological father. Tacit interpretations of John’s support as a kind of surrogate paternity for the younger man (i.e., for Tyler, in particular) feed into the “chrononormative” temporality that Freeman theorizes, whereby John’s relationship with Tyler might only be understood as supplementing a wounded or absent genealogical inheritance. By contrast, and as it is described separately by John and then Tyler, the tattooing seems to provide a temporal and spatial escape from everyday social pressures and family expectations. Narrative descriptions are of tattooed timepieces (clocks, sundials) and of marks on John’s body that, the result of either ritualized whipping and/or tattooed inscriptions over the whipping marks, are pictorial markers of time. This intertwining of graphic recording of time with performative process (the process of tattooing here inscribes time and is inscribed by it) is a reminder of the grammatically and narratively loop-ish order of the series. This is the structure that includes anticipations of decay along with retrospective ruminations on John’s motivations. Adding to this non-linear arrangement is the intermedial form of the tattooing rituals, which include performative re-enactments of John’s research into the slave history of the South. These rituals and re-enactments simultaneously give form to a white Southerner’s

preoccupation with racial difference and function as a holding place for the “queer timing” that, in many ways, characterizes John and Tyler’s relationship. The latter temporality and the legacy of slavery intertwine, or, to use Schneider’s word, become “inter(in)animated,” through the rituals that take place in John’s clockshop, the full description of which is left for the final chapter.

This “queer timing” has to do not only with the evocation of temporal lag (Freeman), but also with a feed-forward mechanism at work within the narrative. The first mention of tattoos and tattooing had, for instance, occurred in the first chapter, when Brian had visited John in the clockshop on one of his earliest visits to Woodstock. Echoing the temporal discontinuities that open the series, Brian’s description of John’s home then was of a 200-year-old place that simultaneously holds remnants of the past and already summons the future. In Chapter One, Brian remarks of the late nineteenth-century structure of the dwelling that looks like it “hasn’t changed since the Civil War” and notes the graveyards of people who had died in the 1880s, before anticipating the narrative significance of the workshop (later known as the “clockshop”) that he and John wander past when John gives him a tour of the property. “I’ll later learn” says Brian that “[the workshop] is filled with disassembled clocks, as well as the rare machines and tools and chemicals he uses to restore them” (Chapter One). On a later return visit, Brian finds John in the workshop and it is there that he first meets Tyler and Tyler’s brother Jake Goodson. Introducing Tyler is Brian’s description of his standing, “shirtless and tattooed, with an anatomical heart on his chest that says “Misery loves company.”” The men are drinking whisky while sharpening tools and at one point Brian is taken aback when John lifts his shirt and flashes his own bare chest at Brian, on which Brian catches a “glimpse” of “what’s possibly a beaker and maybe a clock-type thing” (Chapter One).

There is no reference made to the (queerly) erotic mood of this scene. Nor is there any explicit link made, at this or at any other point in the series, between the respective tattoos on Tyler’s and John’s chests. However, the final episode’s focus on the ritual that John and Tyler had called “church” – one that had involved tattooing, nipple-piercing, cutting and whipping – tacitly speaks to the connection between anatomical heart and clock. “Church” was a ritual that had taken place in John’s clockshop. It had begun with the tattooing that, Brian remarks in Chapter Seven, Tyler had recommended to John as “therapy” and as “distraction” from his “tortured thoughts,” intensifying in frequency and method in the weeks leading up to John’s death. When John’s back and chest were all but covered with tattoos, Tyler had begun tattooing over existing tattoos until he was eventually using a needle without ink so that John could continue to experience the administered pain. “Church” transforms from therapeutic distraction to intermedial performance when Tyler shows Brian a video of one of these sessions and Brian notes that the internet is full of such “cell phone” videos in which “dudes” inflict pain on one another (Chapter Seven). John and Tyler’s renaming of the location and objects associated with “church” is similarly performative. John tells Brian of how the clockshop, for example, had been renamed the “sanctuary” and the tattoo needles referred to as “reliquaries.” Brian defines the latter as “a container that holds a holy relic, like the bones or ashes of a saint” (Chapter Seven). No longer simply a pen-like instrument that inscribes a surface, the tattoo needle becomes here a container of a sacred substance.

Quasi-sacred ritual is intertwined with historical re-enactment when Tyler shows Brian a photograph of John’s bare back. The photograph reveals the tattooed bullwhip that had stretched across John’s shoulders and neck and the dozens of red lash marks that are

... like in a famous historic photo that John included in a collage in the 53-page manifesto he sent me documenting society's moral decline.

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

... Tyler tells me that in order to create this tattoo, John went into the woods, hand-picked a tree branch, and asked Tyler and his friends to whip him with it, and then had them tattoo over the welts. (Chapter Seven)

For Roland Barthes, the photograph records a moment that is never coming back. "What the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially" (Barthes 4). Punctuating passing time, Barthes's "punctum" is a trace of the past that is also a wound (a puncture), indexing the immediate context from which it was taken. For Barthes, a:

Latin word exists to designate this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument: the word suits me all the better in that it also refers to the notion of punctuation, and because the photographs I am speaking of are in effect punctuated, sometimes even speckled with these sensitive points; precisely, these marks, these wounds are so many *points*. (Barthes 26–27; emphasis in the original)

The scene described above implies a fetishization of the photographic wound, as the punctured and punctuating marks that John has observed in the photo of the slave are performatively repeated on his own body. The use of the tattooing needle intensifies the marks left by that which Barthes calls a "pointed instrument" (26), which is the camera lens that punctuates time. In the context of John and Tyler's ritualized "church," such temporal marks and corporeal wounding should be distinguished from the "accident" and non-agential "break" through which Barthes locates the punctum, through which he separates the marks on the photograph from the intention of the photographer. By contrast, as the result of theatrical and mutually permissive role-playing, the marks left by John's whipping and tattooing are about individual will rather than accident or involuntary subjugation to punishment. Such ritualized punishment and wounding must be distinguished from the situation of the photographed slave, whose beating John has voluntarily imitated.<sup>8</sup> That John's requested beating is an act that had been gleaned from a photograph nevertheless speaks to the complex interactions and integration of various media (performance, bodily inscription, photography) organizing the recorded drama.

The queer meaning of John and Tyler's "church" ritual is, for example, accentuated by its placement in the final episode of the podcast's sequential narrative. My introduction notes the unsettling timing of John's suicide as it takes place in the context of the edited podcast, its "binge-listening" tempo and its co-optive appeal to narrative appetite for endings. Similarly, narrative disclosures about John's queer identity and intimacies in the last two episodes of the series play uncomfortably into plot-based drives, in so far as these disclosures are withheld until the penultimate chapter of the series, providing missing pieces to the story thus far provided of John's

life. Preceding Tyler's and John's separately recorded elaborations about "church," there are the stories and impressions from John's long-term acquaintance Olin. The latter tells of how he had met John on a gay dating website, of their subsequent friendship and of stories he had heard from John about another intimate of John's who had probably broken his heart (Chapter Seven).

The temporal structure of the podcast narrative adds a complicated dimension to an already fraught structure through which intimacy between white men is enacted with reference to the objectifying oppressions of slavery. "John was actually quite good at appreciating the time he had. That wasn't his problem. His problem was a proleptic one. He saw nothing but darkness in the future. Shittown, for John, was not believing that anything good would last" (Chapter Seven). In tension with Brian's interpretation of John's "proleptic" problem and with the ostensibly deathly drive of John's sexual orientation is the "church" performance and the pivotal role that Tyler Goodson plays within a narrative that works in other than straightforwardly linear or plot-driven ways. During Brian's aforementioned visit to the Black Sheep Ink parlour (Chapter Two), there is a moment that explicitly prefigures Tyler's role in "church." He is described "crouched" on a bar, holding a business case that ...

... he carries around with him. He calls it his minister's case. It has a sticker that says "minister" slapped on the outside, and it's filled with his tattoo machines and a gun and his welder's cap and some nipple **jewelry** **[sic]**, **<Query: "jewelry" is American English and not a misspelling. Delete "[sic]", as it is understood that this is American source material and therefore American English would be used?>** and his Black Sheep Ink business cards, and also his minister's **license**, **<Query: this, too, is American English spelling (for the noun), so if "[sic]" is retained above then it should be inserted here and for all other occurrences of American English elsewhere>** which he got online because he wanted to found a non-denominational church, where people of all backgrounds could come together and talk it out. (Chapter Two)

While there is no subsequent mention of this picture of Tyler with his "minister's case," his non-denominational administrations obviously play a key role in the final episode. The above picture, embedded in Chapter Two, anticipates the "church" ritual and communicates the recorded narrative's queerly dissonant invocations of past, present and future time. This dissonance is uncannily articulated, and can be understood in terms of Schneider's inter(in)animation, when Tyler says of the punishing re-enactment of the historical photograph: "[i]t was like he wanted to know the feeling of – wanting to know what folks went through back in that time." That John "wanted to know the feeling" separates his voluntary act from the enslavement itself that he wants to know about.

In dwelling on the significance of this re-enactment, my intention is thus not to repudiate the damaging legacy of slavery and what this history has meant for the continuing existence of white supremacist social structures in the United States. Indeed, as scholars such as Christina Sharpe and Frank B. Wilderson argue forcefully, the legacy of slavery continues to pose a grave problem for African-American civil rights, autonomy and agency. Rather, my intention is to connect John's queer fascination with processes of objectification to his interest in far-reaching temporalities. While the imitation of the photograph looks back to a fraught history, my final examples of intermedia within the podcast refer to forms that orient S-



*Town*'s focus on regional/race difference beyond a specifically national context and toward a broader network/sphere.

The final chapter of *S-Town* intertwines intermedia with queer intimacies and temporalities. Following Tyler's and John's recorded versions of what took place in "church," Brian tells of how on the front of John's body there is one "of a sundial," and of how "John included a sundial motto there on his chest. The one he chose is *omnes vulnerant, ultima necat* – each wounds, the last kills" (Chapter Seven). Brian's translation of *omnes* as "each" here is notable, given that *omnes* is equivalent to "all" and the phrase is commonly translated as "all (hours) wound, the last kills." Brian's translation of *omnes* as "each" fits within an overall picture that the podcast has created of John. This picture emerges through the podcast's analogue of a marked and wounded object (tattooed chest, the marks left from beatings, the re-enactment of a photograph of a beating). It also emerges through descriptions of John's impressive knowledge of ancient clocks, sundials and astrolabes and of his far-reaching understanding of cosmological time and of more local history. The conclusion augments the characterization of John's rare knowledge and "saint"-like submission to punishment. After providing a brief summary of John's colourful ancestry, telling of shady types who swindled land left to John's mother, Mary Grace, the series ends with an image of her, sitting on her land, pregnant with John, and praying to God for a "genius." Such a picture potentially rarefies John's suicide, making his death more exceptional than those that came before it (including those of slaves). The recording of John's death is here analogous to Barthes's "Photograph," which creates its own worthiness as it over-determinately draws attention to "*something or someone* [...]" **<Query: brackets OK as added, to indicate inserted ellipsis (journal style)?>** [involving] Photography **<Query: capital "P" in the original?>** in the vast disorder of objects – of all the objects in the world: why choose (why photograph) this object, this moment, rather than some other?" (Barthes 6; emphasis in the original).<sup>9</sup>

Such questions about the worth of the putatively exceptional over the more general tell of a narrative desire for a "this" that demarcates a thing or person from the "vast disorder" (ibid.). Does Brian's (mis)translation of *omnes vulnerant* as "each wounds," rather than "all (hours) wound," suggest a similar privileging of the exception or the genius over the general? These questions return me to the queer correspondence between Tyler's anatomical heart and John's sundial as well as that between tattooed timepieces and their written inscriptions. **In this context, "each" can ambiguously suggest both shared alienation/mutual wound and private experience?** **<Query: this is not a direct question, as it stands. Should "can" precede "each", to make the sentence a question?>** There is, likewise, the description of "each" of John's and Tyler's proximate but separately "established" initials and dates that, in the final chapter, Tyler tells Brian that he and John had left underneath a bridge on the day before John's suicide. That day was Father's Day (21 June 2015) and, following an argument with John over the latter having insulted Tyler's daughter, the two men had spent an afternoon walking near the Cahaba River in a National Wildlife Refuge.<sup>10</sup> Brian finds the graffiti on the support of a bridge that overlooks a bend in the river: "Tyler's initials on one side, with an "Established 1991." John's on the other, "Established 1966." The "established" names and dates, which perhaps resonate with the significance of "Black Sheep Ink" as a business establishment that John helped Tyler keep afloat, are placed in a spot overlooking the river. There is an evocative proximity at work here between the temporally static (the "established") dates and names of the graffiti and the flowing time of the river. Also existing amidst the incessant streaming of time are the relatively contained



temporalities afforded by the graffiti as well as performance, tattooing and other discrete rituals that are intermediated by the podcast. Momentarily memorialized yet proximate to the river that flows on regardless, these insignia hold their own proleptic effacement, their eventual “decay and decrepitude.” The relationship between the “each” and the “all” might thus be thought of as analogous to the proximity between the podcast and its inscribed media (graffiti, tattooing, etc.) and incorporated performances (the “church” ritual). These intermedia communicate in particular ways but they exist in proximity to an indifferent temporality (including the downloadable/streamable mode of binge-listening) that streams on, overlooking such meanings.

Proximity between intermedia and streamed recording is evoked in an earlier moment. After the meeting with the clockmaker Bill, Brian includes an interview with Tom Moore, a chemistry professor who had taught John when he was an undergraduate. During the interview, Tom shows Brian his own prized possession: a sundial that John had made especially for him. Tom is audibly moved when he recounts the time that John had taken to construct the object, which, Tom guesses, was begun in about 1984 and completed in 2012 or thereabouts. Brian describes it this way:

In the middle there’s a tiny button which flips up the gnomon – that’s the centerpiece of the sundial, the one that casts the sun’s shadow. Gnomon means “the one who knows.” This gnomon has Tom Moore’s initials in it. And the sundial is designed specifically for the latitude and longitude of Tom’s home.

As Brian interprets it, the “gnomon” is the centerpiece of the sundial, the “one that casts the sun’s shadow.” From *gno* meaning “have power to, be able to, know to,” the gnomon has played a pivotal role in the calendar time that is itself foundational to Western knowledge systems. The invention of the sundial and its gnomon prefigures the Gregorian calendar, indexing the paradigmatic connection between sun-based measuring tools and the invention of clocks and calendars. Brian’s literal translation of the gnomon personifies the inanimate object, implying a “one” who knows. Alternatively, and in a reverse interpretation, his identification of the gnomon tacitly objectifies John as a gnomon-like knower of time and its complex movements. The latter interpretation echoes clock collector Bill’s melancholy about the relentless mechanical ticking of clocks and of human life caught within the unidirectional movement of the calendar. The human condition, according to this view, is oriented toward a future and away from a past that is “never coming back” (Chapter Seven). Is it in view of this forward-moving time that we should understand the graffitied initials of Tyler Goodson and John B. McLemore, remaining on the bridge support, continuing to stand by the river that flows? If understood as intermedia that disrupt sequential time, both the initials engraved on Tom Moore’s sundial and John and Tyler’s graffitied initials momentarily suspend time. Read this way, engraved, inscribed and tattooed insignia exist at odds with and inter(in)animate the forward march of time, holding traces of past lives in abeyance. Tattoo needle and engraving pen become, in this context, more than writing implements. They instead fulfil John’s “church” name “reliquary,” becoming containers or keepers of relics that continue to queerly intermediate the time-measuring objects of which they are a part.

This essay’s dwelling on the significance of John’s queerness as it resides in spoken words, engraved initials, tattoos, clocks and sundials has run the risk of fetishizing his particular loss, of positioning him as the “gnomon,” the “one,” the

“genius,” the “saint.”<sup>11</sup> As well as referring to “the one who knows,” the gnomon refers us to the cosmological orientation or inclination of any “one” perspective. In the northern hemisphere, the gnomon is normally oriented so that it points toward the North celestial pole. Here, the inclination of the one (the gnomon) situates the object (including John as “genius”) not simply within the American South but within a vast cosmology. By lingering on the flash-forwards and flash-backwards that organize the drama, and in thinking about the Latin phrase inscribed on a sundial, this essay has drawn attention to the expressive forms and media that animate the *S-Town* podcast and that are held within what might otherwise be understood purely in terms of formal dimensions (the sequential movement of the podcast) or in terms of nationally contained history (the particularity of the American South). These intermedia have told us something of the immediate contexts out of which they were born and from which they may be transported into the future. They also tell us something of the queer dispositions and inclinations of time-collectors, timekeepers and time-takers, including he who chose a sundial to mark the decay and decrepitude of a time that will be visited upon us all.

disclosure statement <Typesetter: “A” heading>

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author. <Query: correct?>

notes

1 Rémy Besson discusses the emergence of intermediality as a “strategic response” to the “hyper-specialisation of research in the humanities” (139). Much discussion of intermediality has focused on the form and function of film, including early silent film, in the context of the larger media ecology that film incorporates and to which it is inextricably connected. On the intermediality of film, see Besson; Chamarette; López; Mueller; Shail. For an intermedial reading of theatre, see Chapple and Kattenbelt’s edited collection *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance*; see also Nelson. Rosemary Overell writes about the intermediality of television and microblogs. See Edmond for a reading of the intermediality of contemporary podcasting – a narrative form that simultaneously incorporates other media and is itself embedded in globalized digital networks and adds a new dimension to scholarship that has tended to focus on the intermediality of film. My conceptual approach to intermedia aligns most closely with that of Ágnes Pethő as set out in her *Cinema and Intermediality*.

2 Throughout this essay “intermedia” is a plural noun but in this instance, where I refer to how it functions as “a noun,” I use the singular.

3 William Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily” is an intermedial form with which this essay doesn’t engage, even though it has significance for the theme of time and for the way in which the *S-Town* episodes are structured. Apart from Brian’s opening reference to Faulkner’s story – it is one of a number of reading materials that John recommends to him – each episode ends with a rendition of The Zombies’ song “A Rose for Emily,” which is based on the story.

4 On the immense popularity of *Serial*, the *This American Life* podcast that precedes *S-Town*, and the immersive qualities of this particular form of audio-drama, see McMurty. In another essay, Richard Berry considers the popularity of *Serial* in the context of technical change and podcast histories (“A Golden Age of Podcasting?”).

5 This and all subsequent quotes are taken from *S-Town*’s chapter transcripts, which can be found at <<https://stownpodcast.org/>>.

6 On regulatory time and the biopolitical management of bodies, see also Dana Luciano, *Arranging Grief*. In addition to work that investigates the relationship between sexual orientation and normative ideas of time, there is the important scholarship that probes the “metronormativity” (Halberstam) of urban-based queer identity. See in particular Herring; Halberstam. For studies of “queer rurality” that have been published in the wake of Halberstam’s argument about metronormativity, see Colin Johnson as well as Gray, Johnson, and Gilley’s edited collection *Queering the Countryside*.

7 Following Joan Shelley Rubin and Janice Radway’s influential work, scholarship about middlebrow pivots on the social value (Rubin), as well as gender-inflected denigration (Radway), of literature and art ostensibly made for the purposes of broad accessibility, educative value and social/cultural distinction. That prevailing accounts of middlebrow as “reception practice” tend to focus on the role of literary/aesthetic objects in the context of the larger culture industry can create difficulties for tracking middlebrow across national “borders,” raising “issues such as audience and address, genre and authorship and legibility and universality” (see Galt and Schoonover). The reading of middlebrow as both a mode of reception and a culture-industrial product also tends to overlook the distinct ways in which any given cultural form interacts with other media that, ranging from filmic, journalistic, televisual texts and radio podcasts, may contain elements that contradict the alignment of aesthetic forms with social value.

8 See Leo Bersani’s argument about sado-masochistic practices in *Homos*. Elizabeth Freeman challenges Bersani’s reading in her chapter “Turn the Beat Around,” in which she explores what she calls the “erotohistoriographic” implications of performances in which “the individual subject’s normative timing is disaggregated and denaturalised” **<Query: “s” spelling in an American publication?>** (*Time Binds* 137).

9 Barthes’s *Camera Lucida* attends to the specific properties of photography – to what Barthes refers to as the technology’s “own genius” (3) – at the same time as it places photography within a broader spectrum through which the exceptional moment it privileges is questioned. My reading of photography in the context of *S-Town* as intermedia aims, similarly, to acknowledge photography’s specific qualities while understanding how its elements interact with other media, such as performance/re-enactment. For an inspiring reading of photography as “ec-static visual object” that also draws on Barthes, see Cannon.

10 The date on which John took his own life (22 June 2015) also holds significance in relation to calendar and clock time. In 2015 in the United States, 21 June was the day on which Father’s Day was celebrated – an occasion that signifies in a particular way within the drama, with its implications that Tyler’s relationship to John is one

reading *s-town*

informed by the sexual abuse he suffered at the hands of his biological father. Similarly, the persistent references to Father's Day (21 June 2015) rather than to the summer solstice (which takes place over 21/22 June each year in the northern hemisphere) uncannily **displaces** **<Query: "displace"? "references ... displace">** the seasonal rhythms that undergird calendar time.

11 Through its privileging of John's peculiar perspective on death and decay, the podcast, and this essay, may be guilty of overwriting, for example, the experience of a slave known only by the name Gordon and one whose beating John has re-enacted. Such an approach may similarly be read as fetishizing a certain kind of knowledge, including that of the supposedly knowing investigator or that of the academic scholar whose approach somehow trumps that of the plot-driven binge-listener.

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