

Aca-Media Episode 73 Transcript

[Theme Music]

Christine Becker 00:11

Welcome to Aca-Media, a podcast about the media from the Society for Media and Cinema Studies. Oh, shit. Cinema and...

Michael Kackman 00:19

Man, you are so close.

Christine Becker 00:21

I just ... Well, and also I just, you know, inverted... You know, this is going way back. But of course, there was controversy about renaming the Society for Cinema Studies to the Society for Cinema and Media Studies. And so now, I've not only, you know, introduced media, I've inverted the order. And so

Michael Kackman 00:38

That was only like, 40 years ago.

Christine Becker 00:41

Yeah, sure. Well, and you know, we were just at SCMS, you'd think I'd have it right.

Michael Kackman 00:48

So it goes. I'm Michael Kackman at the University of Notre Dame,

Christine Becker 00:52

I am Chris Becker, also usually at the University of Notre Dame, but down in Georgia, again, for the long Easter weekend, which is kind of like a second spring break for me, because spring break was taken up by SCMS. So I get a nice little dip down here.

Michael Kackman 01:05

Well earned. Thank you for your hard work with the board on keeping that machine going.

Christine Becker 01:11

Yes, my last year. So this is my last SCMS as secretary and then we've got one more board meeting in June and then I'm out.

Michael Kackman 01:18

Right on. I bet that's well earned.

Christine Becker 01:21

Yeah.

Michael Kackman 01:22

Especially secretary, you've got a lot of shoveling to do, I would imagine.

Christine Becker 01:26

There's a lot of notetaking, which I, you know, I am good at. No one really enjoys it, but I don't hate it, and I'm decent at it. And so it's fine. But also, I'm just I'm looking forward to not having to take notes during two eight hour-long meetings, and then, you know, clean up the notes and turn them into minutes and all that. It's been a really gratifying experience. Like I kind of can't say that enough in terms of feeling like I have a voice, feeling like I'm representing portions of the membership, hearing what other people have to say, and particularly in opening my eyes to so many different ways of understanding how academia works beyond my little bubble, because I've been at Notre Dame my entire post-graduate career. And so I don't know how things work in other places. And so it really helps to learn in that room with other people, and other people who are so committed to not just this organization but higher ed in general. So I found it really gratifying experience.

Michael Kackman 02:18

That sounds like a pretty good pitch to join it.

Christine Becker 02:21

I think so, yeah. And I believe during summer is when they make a push for volunteers. And it's everything from, you know, like the awards issues, which, you know, we covered with Leslie LeMond and Vicky Johnson, if you didn't hear our episode at SCMS, you can hear it, it's on our website, aca-media.org. And so you can catch up there and get the story what happened with the awards. But it's a really huge lift to be able to, to have enough people on a committee to do all the awards. And then there's, you know, nominations, there's just all kinds of heavy lifting that needs to be done from volunteers. So I think the call for volunteers goes out sometime during summer.

Michael Kackman 02:59

Excellent. please do consider it.

Christine Becker 03:02

We also talked in that episode SCMS about, we teased what we have coming up here, which I'm super excited to share. This is an interview that Jonathan Nichols-Pethick did with Jacob Smith. Jacob is co-founder and director of the Master of Arts in Sound Arts and Industries and Professor in the Department of Radio/ Television/Film at Northwestern University. He has published traditional books, good old fashioned ones, and you know, with pages and all that, on topics such as performance and sound media, masculinity and stunt performance, and eco-sonic media. But the focus of this interview is the two experimental audio books he recently published from University of Michigan Press. So this is ESC: Sonic Adventure in the Anthropocene published in 2019 and Lightning Birds: An Aeroecology of the Airwaves from 2021. And when we say these are audio books, you might think of just a person reading from a print text. That is not these books are about.

Michael Kackman 03:55

No.

Christine Becker 03:55

And so you'll get a both a an explanation of that and also some cool clips from these, these books here in this conversation.

Michael Kackman 04:03

This is the grooviest episode we've done in quite a while so I would say stop listening to us, turn up the volume on your, on your device and enjoy this, this landscape. It's good stuff.

[Interstitial Music]

Jonathan Nichols-Pethick: (04:25) I'm Jonathan Nichols-Pethick, one of the producers for Aca-Media, and I'm here with Professor Jake Smith from Northwestern University to talk about his audio scholarship. In particular, two pieces: one called *ESC* and another called *Lightning Birds*. Jake, welcome to Aca-Media.

Jake Smith: Thanks. Great to be here and really nice to reconnect with you and talk with you again. It's been a while, but we go way back.

JNP: We do! And it's great to hear your voice. So one of the things I was thinking about when I first came across your audio work was that, you know, this is something different. This is the way of doing scholarship that I hadn't really considered before. You know, beyond wishing there was an audio book version of something that my students could listen to or I could listen to in the car. So I wonder if you could start by talking about the very idea of doing this kind of multimodal scholarship?

Jake Smith: Well, you know, I feel like I've been thinking about multimodal publishing since we were both in graduate school together at Indiana University because I feel like I've been hearing faculty peers talking about film studies and media studies as a place where multimedia, multimodal publishing made a lot of sense. We're writing about film scenes and performances and acting and camera angles and lighting. Wouldn't it be great if we could see the clip itself in the text? So it's been on my radar for a long time. And then I think it came more into focus here at Northwestern, as I've been working with Neil Verma, my colleague, and working with students in the Sound Arts master's program who are sound practitioners. And we were thinking so much about creating a sound studies curriculum that combined theory and practice in all kinds of meaningful ways. And that was very exciting to me. And I was jealous of the students doing all these wonderful audio projects. And it kind of reopened that door, I guess, in a way, for me to start thinking about how might I do that? And I had a very, very supportive relationship with an editor, Mary Frances, first at University of California and then at Michigan, who was really supportive of talking about what that might be like. And we talked about it for a long time. Many different kinds of models or scenarios by which we might do sound studies in audio. What might that be like? It took me a while to figure out what might work for me. And then I guess another thing that I would say that kicked it off - I mentioned my esteemed colleague Neil Verma, who has this practice of deep, deep listening, you know, listening to audio narrative, audio storytelling, really immersing in that world. And that was also something that really inspired me initially with *ESC*, wanting to do something like that, really wanting to work with a set of audio narratives and then use that as a springboard to doing sound studies critique in sound.

JNP: Right. And that makes me think of a distinction that you make in *ESC* between "listening to adventure" and "listening adventurously." And for listeners who don't know, *ESC* focused on a radio show from the 1940s and 1950s called *Escape* that presented adventure stories. So I wonder if you could talk a bit about what "listening adventurously" entails for you?

Jake Smith: Well, I was very inspired there by Kate Lacey, radio studies scholar who has a whole series of ways of thinking about listening in relationship to radio, and adventurous listening is one of the concepts that she presents that I found really exciting. And it has to do with listening to other voices, difference. Listening not just in maybe a kind of a narrow, comfortable niche or bubble, but, you know, in maybe kind of a public service mandate kind of a way, thinking about radio and listening as a way to expand your public, expand your notion of whose voice matters and what counts. So that to me felt like a nice counterbalance, because I ended up settling on, as you said, this series *Escape*, which are an anthology of adventure stories. And so I ended up grappling with the genre of adventure. And so listening adventurously in that Kate Lacey kind of way seemed to me to open a door, to push back against play with the conventions of adventure narrative, which is all about travel to exotic locations and such things, and can easily fall into a quite colonial, patriarchal kind of approach to the world. And I found the Kate Lacey listening adventurously a nice counterbalance to that. So that became kind of a thread and a method in a way, for what I might do in sound with those audio stories.

JNP: One of the things I love is that you use the series as a jumping off point for what you're calling eco-critical analysis that brings together those very particular adventure stories with larger histories of geography, technologies, colonialism, etc. and perhaps you could talk a little bit about how you started to think of *Escape* as fodder for those kind of critical and analytical possibilities.

Jake Smith: Well, I could start very practically and pragmatically, which is that much of my work before *ESC* had been very much focused on kind of archival media research, traveling to archives, doing a kind of a media archaeology or study of the history of sound technologies or sound media forms. And I still do that work, love that work. But I had reached this certain kind of point in my career when I was doing lots of service. I was a faculty in residence, working with first year students at Northwestern. Suddenly those kinds of practical travel opportunities were more difficult. So I was looking for a project that I could do that would really start with listening, with deep listening, finding a canon of stories to really delve into and explore in that Neil Verma kind of method. And so that was the first step. And then I started kind of looking around for, you know, as we all do when we're starting a new research project. It was kind of top down and kind of bottom up. You know, it's kind of like, oh, I'd like to find some radio narratives, audio narratives to work with. Where might I look? What genres have been written about thus far in radio studies? Which ones haven't been considered as much? And then just listening to things. Exploring, you know, trying things out. And I think *Escape* just caught my ear in a certain kind of a way. I mean, it's at this kind of beautiful peak in that kind of artistry of radio storytelling, of that period, of the kind of mid-century period. So they just sounded terrific. And there were a lot of them, but not too many. But then I think the main thing was that I kept hearing all these environmental or ecological overtones just beneath the surface. And then it didn't take me long to start connecting some dots. There's all these animals, the rats and the ants and the birds. So stories about nature, stories about encounters with more than human nature. But also adventure quickly emerged as a kind of a genre that's doing things that eco-critics are interested in: calibrating place and planet, the local and the global. So it

ended up feeling like a very rich place to explore and to forge some of those fresh connections. Yeah. So I think that was really when I started getting some momentum and some traction there.

JNP: When you talk about doing something fresh with it and thinking through it a different way, one of the things that really stood out to me in that particular series was your inclusion of contemporary sound artists as a way to bridge the potential gap between then and now, and to consider the way that people today are thinking about these very issues. So I'd like to go ahead and play a clip to illustrate the use of these sound artists. This clip is from the fifth episode of *ESC* called "Red Forest," which features a story about a guy named Wally, a young woman named Jan who find themselves trapped by a gigantic forest fire. And let's take a listen to what you do with it when you start bringing in sounds other than those strictly attached to the narrative or the broadcast of *Escape*.

Clip from *ESC*: One way I've been encouraging you to listen adventurously to *Escape* is by mashing it up with the work of environmentally minded sound artists. The studio created soundscape of "Red Forest" would feel very different if it included the kinds of sounds we're listening to now, which are taken from David Dunn's remarkable project, "The Sound of Light in Trees." Dunn placed a transducer microphone inside pinyon trees to hear the bark beetles that were infesting forests in the southwestern United States. In these sounds, we can hear the momentary actions of the beetles, but also the damage wrought to forest ecosystems by fossil fuel driven global warming. Dunn's work provides another model for the kind of adventurous and polyphonic listening I want to bring to "Red Forest." I want to think about how those longer durations of climate change and forest ecosystem can feed back on the way we understand shorter ones like Wally's adventure. So let's zoom back in to that temporal level and see how things pan out for Wally and Jan.

JNP: That's such great stuff. Perhaps you could talk a little bit about what got you thinking about bringing in those sound artists as a way to build your analysis?

Jake Smith: Yeah, and that was one of my favorite parts about it. And that was definitely one thing that I learned about working in a different kind of multimodal approach is that it does open the door to collaboration in exciting ways. You really see that in the world of the videographic essay that's something that I've started to dip my toe into and have been inspired by and talking with other people that are part of that community. And one of the things that they'll often say, people that are working in videographic essays is: it's so collaborative, it's so different from the kind of humanities scholarship that I'm used to. So that's one thing, is that the kind of multimodal approach or working in audio-visual forms seems to open the door for collaboration in a certain kind of way. The other thing I'd say about that is that I wanted to be able to really take advantage of sound as a medium, to not have it just be a recorded version of a talk that I'm giving at conference. I mean, that would be easy just to record your lecture in a classroom and then, you know, say that you're done. So I wanted there to be thinking in sound, an argument on the level of sound. And one of the things that I'm happiest about with the *ESC*, I mean, listening back to it now again, I hear many things that I maybe would do differently, and it was a big learning curve. You know, it was the first time I did it. I was kind of learning as I was going. But one of the things I'm most proud of is that. Is just the the fact that it's that mash up, and this was one of the things that really drove me from the very beginning, was I was listening to all these beautiful.

Golden Age studio-driven radio narratives, and at the same time, I was absolutely in love with all this contemporary wildlife field, recording these two different forms that seemed to be very different in some ways, but I kept wanting them to come together. I'd be listening to these beautiful, immersive field recordings, and then I'd think, I want a story to emerge out of this, and then I'd be listening to these Golden Age narratives and be thinking, I want the story to stop for a minute and just let me immerse in this place that we're visiting. So that was one of the things that spurred the project is wanting to think about, how could I mash these things up? So that's the way I figured out to do it. And then that became this wonderful opportunity to reach out to some of these sound artists that I admired so much, and they were so kind to allow me to, you know, use their material. And they were so supportive of that. And so that was a wonderful experience. And I was like, I want to do more of this, you know. And with *Lightning Birds*, I wanted to do even more of that kind of collaborative stuff. I'm tired of just listening to my voice. I want to interview people and bring in other voices. So it just kind of opened the door to other kinds of collaborative scholarship that I got very excited about.

JNP: Yeah. One of the things that really stuck out to me, especially with *ESC*, was how layered the audio production is. You know, every sound I was hearing was there for a reason. And obviously I'm not surprised that you would take sound seriously. You bring to the production a real attention to detail. A real love of sound comes through the pieces that makes them so much more enjoyable to listen to than, as you said, if it was just a lecture that you recorded.

Jake Smith: Well, that's very that's very nice of you. Although one thing I would say, you said that *ESC*, you know, was very layered and every sound is there, very thoughtful. Maybe a little too layered. You know, going back and listening to it now it feels like a first project to me in that there's just like so much going on all the time. I got very interested in this idea of kind of sonic italics, you know. So when I'd mention a term that maybe is, you know, like listening adventurously or slow adventure, one of these kind of new terms that I'd coined for the project, I'd kind of try to bracket it in sound. And to me, listening now, it's like a little too much. But one of the things I learned moving from *ESC* to *Lightning Birds* was just to give things a little more space. You don't have to cram every single second. *ESC* seems a little "short attention span-y" to me. But it's true that it's trying very hard to keep your attention and give you a feast for the ears. So that was part of the motivation.

JNP: I do think it works on that level. And I know what you mean. It's it's like when you're a young, talented musician and you try to bring out everything in your bag of tricks.

Well, the other thing, just on that point, the other thing I'd say is that I think it's good that *ESC* and *Lightning Birds* are a little amateurish. You know? I think in some ways it's correct that it's not completely polished. It doesn't sound 100% like a professional podcast. That's not what it is. That's not what I'm doing. This is kind of a strange hybrid form that should be, I think, a little ragged around the edges compared to a professional podcast. It's a different kind of voice. You know, I don't think I should be hiring pros and make this sound 100% slick. It's it's a different kind of sound work. So I like that. I'm not offended by the fact that it's a little, you know, kind of flawed and ragged and and wonky from time to time.

JNP: Which is funny to hear you say, because I didn't find it flawed or wonky at all. In fact, I was pleased to be hearing something so carefully crafted. But I want to switch to talking about *Lightning Birds*, which was actually the first piece of yours that I'd heard. And before we get to a question, I want to play a couple of minutes from the very beginning of the piece. So here we go. This is the opening few minutes of *Lightning Birds*.

Clip from *Lightning Birds*: Lightning. Birds. An aero-ecology of the airwaves. People have often thought about radio in relation to the sky. Early newspaper accounts of radio had headlines like "Messages in the Air" and "Out of the Clouds." We talk about radio existing in the airwaves, and commercial images like the logo for RKO pictures depicts radio as a halo of lightning bolts, with its tall transmission towers and messages carried by waves in the atmosphere, radio is what John Durham Peters calls a "sky medium." Other examples of sky media are flags, beacons, spotlights, and fireworks. So we're used to thinking about radio existing in the sky, but we don't usually acknowledge that humans share that space with other creatures, most notably with birds. For birds, the sky is a habitat which biologists call the aerosphere. For migratory birds, especially, the sky is a landscape full of meaning and significance as they orient to the sun and stars, gauge the winds, and monitor the changing seasons. As human technologies have moved into the sky, they've become entangled in this aerospheric habitat. *Lightning Birds* explores the contact zone between radio technologies and the aerosphere. Over the next five episodes, we'll be riding the crosswinds of bird migration and radio history to undertake an aeroecology of the airwaves.

JNP: Now, in this piece, you talk about wanting to tell different kinds of stories as a media historian and thinking about birds, as sky media seems to allow you to do just that. So I wonder what led you to connecting birds and early radio in your thinking?

Jake Smith: Well, you can kind of see a hinge from *ESC* to *Lightning Birds* between the the *ESC* episode about lighthouses, and I was learning a lot about lighthouses, and had discovered all this fascinating material about birds and the study of bird migration at lighthouses. So that kind of became its own pendant that broke off from that project. So that was the seed that that grew into thinking more about bird migration and radio. And I mean, John Durham Peters work on elemental media and logistical media: that kind of work, that kind of approach to thinking about what is radio. Radio could be, you know, popular music and broadcasting and news, but it could also be radar and radio telemetry. So thinking broadly about a radio assemblage and that history and then finding a surprising set of articulations and links to the study of bird migration. I think that was the tipping point that made this feel like a standalone project. But I'm glad that *Lightning Birds* was the first one that you heard, because for one thing, it's much shorter and that's another good example of figuring this out as I was going. I mentioned that with *ESC* Mary Frances and I had talked through many, many different ways that this might work, many different models. And then we finally settled on something that we thought could work and then the next step was, "Okay, why don't you make a proof of concept?" So I made a proof of concept episode to see: will this work or will it just be a complete mess? Will this translate into audio at all? And it was good news and bad news. The good news was, hey, I think this will work. The bad news is, if this is going to work, it's going to be, what, nine 45 minute episodes? It's just massive. So it was a huge time commitment and a huge amount of work. So one of the things I learned going from *ESC* to *Lightning Birds* was that was too much. So how can I figure out a scale for this kind of audio project

that's more manageable, both for me and for the listener? That's a lot to ask somebody to commit to, you know, listening to 9 or 10 hours of something. That's a lot. So I was much happier with the scale of *Lightning Birds*. But again, I kind of didn't know that until I tried it. When you're in graduate school, you figure out like, this is an idea that's the right scale for a 15 minute conference presentation, and this is the right scale for a 30-page paper proposal. And this is the right scale for a whole dissertation. I didn't know that. And so I figured that out in the course of making *ESC* and *Lightning Birds*.

JNP: It's interesting to me that you took on in these projects something so much more demanding potentially, than doing what we're used to: you know, doing the research, visiting archives, writing the text, copy editing and then being done. And you introduced another level of difficulty here with editing and recording things in a way that made sense, etc. But it also struck me as requiring you to really rethink how you write. You know, as academics, we learn to write in a particular way generally, but it doesn't always work or translate to listening. How much did taking this kind of project on impact your stylistic decisions about the way you were going to structure and present these analyses in order to make them legible in audio form?

Jake Smith: It's a great question, and it was one of the things that I found most exciting about the process. Because, I mean, rethink is right. I had to really...you know, I started with *ESC* writing out chapters and then would do many different passes of recording it. What you end up hearing in the final *ESC* is I think the third or the fourth complete voiceover, and just don't even get me started about voiceover. Voiceover is...there's a reason that there's professional people that do this because it's a skill all its own. It's so hard. And so I was a total amateur kind of moving into that world. So much to learn just in terms of that, just in terms of facing the cosmic horror of mouth noise and being able to get up the next morning and do it again. I mean, that kind of thing was much to learn. But like you said, the writing part...so I had to, you know, edit and re-edit and re-edit and I thought this was so pithy. And then I'd sit in front of the microphone and say it and it wouldn't feel right. So that took a long time. And that's a big difference. I hear going back and listening to *ESC* and *Lightning Birds* is I got better at it. *ESC* still feels kind of like I'm reading a paper to me, and I got better at communicating to the microphone, I think, between the two. But it's a real skill. I mean, one of the things that struck me immediately is that citation is very clunky, and it's something that we do constantly. "According to Kate Lacey, adventurous listening is blah, blah, blah," and the energy just pop...you know, when you're saying it in this context to a microphone, like you're talking to somebody that's a foot away from you, that just decelerates everything. So I had to find other ways of doing that. And that's one of the beautiful things that I feel like audiographic work like these, you know, doing scholarship and sound has learned from the videographic essay, which is this wonderful multimodal combination where you have the audio and the visual, but then you might have an accompanying statement where there's a bibliography and sources are cited, and you can follow up. So I think there's more experimentation to do with how you link those different forms and mechanisms: the bibliography, the citing of sources, and the communication of ideas. But that was one thing that I had to recalibrate moving to the ear.

JNP: You know, one of the things I think about a lot is how we might try to find ways to reach more people with our work. You know, we tend to work in a sometimes rarefied atmosphere and write in a way that people outside of academic circles may not be interested in. And this makes me wonder about

younger scholars who are trying to navigate the gates of academia, but who want to pursue audio work or videographic work for their own scholarship. What would you advise younger scholars in this regard?

Jake Smith: It's a great question and really important considerations. And I teach courses now at Northwestern, at both the undergraduate and the graduate level, where we make video graphic essays. But for PhD students, graduate students, they're always does have to be a bit of a caveat. This is an emerging field, peer reviewed online journals, wonderful things happening, conferences. So I think it is gaining considerable recognition, thanks in no small part to presses like the University of Michigan Press that, you know, took risks on things like this. But it is important to think about: maybe we're not at a place where you can put all your eggs in that basket. I think it's good if you're a PhD student, to be still honing your skills at the classic peer reviewed journal article publications that will look wonderful on your on your CV. So yeah, I was in a nice position where I already, you know, had a job, had tenure. So I had some time and space to experiment with this. But I - especially with the videographic essay, it's definitely become a quite recognized form, and a really exciting international community of practitioners and multiple peer reviewed places where you can get, You know, absolutely legitimate publications on your CV. So that would be one thing I would say is just be mindful of the fact that it should be probably working in parallel with more legible endeavors, like the peer reviewed publication at this point in time. I think another thing I'd say on the warning side is, as you heard from my experience, it's time consuming and labor intensive. I really enjoyed it. I liked the challenge of of doing my own music and editing sound. I enjoyed that. But it was a lot of work. I mean, more work than if I had just been writing and publishing a more...a written text that I was more familiar with. So it did take more time, and it was very labor intensive. I also don't think it's right for every project. One of the things I'm happiest about now is I can tailor a particular project to the form that I think makes most sense. Some projects I might think, no, this is actually, this would make the most sense as just a written journal article. That's the way I can most effectively and productively put this idea into the world. And then another idea might come along: "Oh, actually, this would work best in sound and audio. And here's how that might move forward. Or actually, a videographic essay would be the best way to express this idea. I like having those options on the table and be kind of putting appropriate things in the right avenue. So those are all considerations, I think. But also on the on the plus side, I would say to somebody that's interested in this, don't be intimidated. One of the things when I taught the PhD course on the videographic essay, I had set up all these elaborate tech frequently asked questions, and I had a ringer engineer in the room for our lab sessions just in case questions came up, and the students were like, "No, we're okay. We're fine. If we have a question, we just Google it and move on." So I feel like it can be intimidating to think about working in sound or visual editing, but you can get over that hump very quickly. And finding help is easy, especially if you're in an environment where there's, you know, folks working with you at the same level. So if you're interested in it, I would say, don't be intimidated. Go ahead and give it a shot.

JNP: Exactly. I mean, the nature of editing software alone assures that we're always going to run up against something we don't know how to do, and we have to look up. And of course, nobody has the entire set of technical skills they need to do a project like this.

Jake Smith: It's another indication of how this could be potentially a really exciting collaborative process. You've got a friend who is really good at voiceover, enjoys it, has a theatre background, has a

wonderful voice, and actually enjoys that work. Maybe you're working together or maybe you're, you know, the voiceover stuff is too hard, so I'm going to think about audio projects that don't involve my voice at all, they're oral histories, they're interviews with other people, they're working on more of a kind of a musical or a sound art level to make an argument in sound. In my two projects as well, *ESC* and *Lightning Birds*, I worked with an engineer to master them, so I did the writing and the voiceover and the editing, but then I hired someone to master them and to help with some final levels and kind of editing tweaks at the very end. So that was something that I couldn't do on my own. It kind of felt like - and the, you know, University of Michigan Press didn't know how to do this - it was kind of like, "Hey, here's my manuscript. Would you do the type printing now?" And they're like, "What? We don't do mastering. We're not a record company. We don't do that." So I had to kind of outsource and collaborate with an engineer, Liam Davis, who I really love and respect. And so he did that part, you know, so I couldn't do everything. That was the part where I had to collaborate and use some, some research budget to do that final audio stage of it. So just as an indication that there are many phases to this kind of work that opened the door perhaps to collaboration and maybe that's a great thing. Maybe that's one way that this is a kind of scholarship that goes against the grain of our very isolated approach to research.

JNP: So I want to circle back to a question about the content of your pieces. I'm really interested in your inclusion in *Lightning Birds* of Paul Gallico's story "The Snow Goose," and how you settled on that as a through-line for the whole piece.

Jake Smith: Well, part of it was just, I love stories and with *ESC*, I loved working with narratives, and so I wanted...I couldn't let it go. Even though *Lightning Birds* was becoming a different kind of project, it was about, you know, science history and the history of radio technology and interviews with ornithologists. So it was becoming a different kind of project, but I wanted to have narrative in there, partly because one of the things that excites me about scholarship for the ear is that it can have all these different kind of emotional affective. Points of connection. You know, you move into music, suddenly it moves into kind of a NPR driveway moment, you know, giving the listener some time to synthesize ideas. And so it becomes kind of a musical, atmospheric moment. And I loved having narrative in there, too, being able to have analysis and interviews and music and sound, but then also have narrative folded in. And as you were saying, I feel like that's one of the things that maybe helps some of the ideas to reach different kinds of listeners, different kinds of learners that will really absorb things through story, narrative, character. So I was excited about keeping a narrative component in the project. And in earlier scholarship, I'd written a book about spoken word records, children's records. So I'd been listening to audio narratives from that era. And that's when I'd first discovered "The Snow Goose." And when I started thinking a lot about migration, bird migration, I was wondering about narratives that thematize bird migration. And so I remembered that and came back to it. And then the more I listened to it, the more I found these wonderful echoes and resonances of other things. And so, as you said, you know, one of the risks, maybe, of the *Lightning Bird's* project is that it's jumping around, it's moving from episode to episode or chapter to chapter. One thing you might notice is that from *ESC* to *Lightning Birds*, I stopped talking about podcasts. When I was making *ESC*, I was thinking that I was making a podcast, but then I kind of realized by *Lightning Birds* that no, this is more like an audiobook. I'm not making a podcast that's going to drop a new episode for the rest of eternity. This is a standalone audiobook. Boom. You know, with these five chapters, and then it's done. So, but with this *Lightning Birds* audiobook, I needed a thread, some continuity, that would be something. And so that's one of the functions that "The Snow Goose" serves. The other thing I liked about "The Snow Goose" that carried

over from *ESC* is that I loved finding stories where there were multiple adaptations of it that, you know, provided this really rich sonic tapestry. So there's the central text, which is this children's record version of "The Snow Goose." But then there's other radio adaptations of it. There's several film and television adaptations of it, and those soundtracks can come in and play and kind of weave out, build out the story in different ways. So I liked having the multiple adaptations to play around with sonically as well.

JNP: And again, we come back to that notion of layering and using audio to communicate ideas in a potentially far richer way than just reading descriptions on a page. And that really does come through in the work. So for listeners, you should absolutely check out both *Lightning Birds* and *ESC*. You can find them both on the University of Michigan Press website and also through Fulcrum.org. They are masterful pieces of scholarship and wonderful listening. And again, thank you so much for joining us, Jake.

Jake Smith: Thank you so much. Really fun talking with you. And I really appreciate it.

[Interstitial Music]

Michael Kackman 43:57

All right, that was good stuff. You know, we think about ourselves as scholars of visual media so much that that is such an ingrained part of our not just like the stuff we do, but our entire intellectual identity. And it's really, really great to just start thinking about thinking with our ears.

Christine Becker 44:18

Yeah, and we've, you know, talked through even on this podcast conversations about video essays and how great it is to be able to do video essays since we are visual scholars. But this is another way of thinking about that both in terms of that notion of the audio, like you said, but I also love the idea of exploring media in areas we wouldn't necessarily expect to explore media. We talked about this a little bit in our, in that previous episode about like dolphin studies, but here this idea of just what are the implications for how we consume media, you know, well beyond just our, you know, the devices upon which we listen to it, and so I just really love the implications of thinking about that too.

Michael Kackman 44:56

Yeah, you know, something is as simple as a bird song ID app as a kind of mediated relationship with the natural world that is every bit as transformative as being able to go outside and hold your phone up to the sky and identify constellations. You know, it is transformative of our physical relationship with the world and really, really cool ways.

Christine Becker 45:21

And sort of like with video essays, I love to find ways to bring this into not only my own scholarship, but the things we assign for our students to do. You know, I think it's a fairly relatively common thing now to have students do podcasts. And so I love this idea of thinking through it's not just where you're talking to a microphone just as much as you'd be talking to another person, but working in audio clips, thinking through the audio nature of the world we live in. I think that's a really, you know, important area that we can introduce the students to.

Michael Kackman 45:50

Yeah, cool stuff. So big thanks to Jake Smith for this really, truly groundbreaking work and also to Jonathan Nichols-Pethick, our amazing new colleague for setting up this conversation and preparing it. Yeah, really great stuff. So you're watching anything?

Christine Becker 46:07

Well, it being Easter weekend and coinciding with March Madness. I've been watching a lot of sports. So the baseball season has just kicked off, so I'm watching some of that. But the NCAA championships both men and women have been so good. And in particular, shoutout to the women's tourney, which has just been incredible. Not just interesting stars, interesting narratives, but just like really good basketball, just some really great games. So I'm excited for today's game. We'll obviously you'll be hearing this much later. But this is the big showdown between Iowa and LSU coming and then USC and UConn, like you just could not get better basketball, better storylines, and I'm just so excited and happy for for women's basketball and women's basketball fans. It's a great time.

Michael Kackman 46:48

Yeah, these have been some there been some great games. Notre Dame had a pretty good run.

Christine Becker 46:52

Yeah.

Michael Kackman 46:53

Made it to the Sixteen, and just couldn't quite get past Oregon State. But good games, really good games.

Christine Becker 47:00

Yeah, look out next year for Notre Dame. Gonna be a super team, I think

Michael Kackman 47:04

That's right. And imagine if they playing with more than eight players.

Christine Becker 47:09

Right. Hold on to those ACLs, everyone. Let's get through it.

Michael Kackman 47:12

Yeah. All right. Thanks for listening to us. And thanks again to our co-conspirators, Jonathan Nichols-Pethick, who of course, was central to this episode. But also, we are grateful to David Lipson from the University of Strasbourg, joining us from Paris.

Christine Becker 47:31

Yes, we're international now.

Michael Kackman 47:33

We are truly international.

Christine Becker 47:34

Closer to our home, we've got Frank mondelli, University of Delaware, and Stephanie Brown at Washington College.

Michael Kackman 47:40

As well as Todd Thompson, bearer of the golden ears and holding things down at the University of Texas at Austin.

Christine Becker 47:47

And our usual thank yous to people who put a little bit of money into this podcast. And so that's SCMS and Notre Dame.

Michael Kackman 47:53

And of course, we are grateful to you faithful listeners. Best of luck with the labors that lie ahead for those of you that are still in the middle of a semester or quarter, and enjoy the eclipse.

Christine Becker 48:07

Yeah, and I hope you hear the birds differently. Now that spring has arrived, you've got more to think about when you hear those birds chirping.

Michael Kackman 48:14

And listen to them during the eclipse. See if we get any twilight sounds.

[End Music]

[Bird sound]