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Queer Storytelling in *S-Town*: An Analysis of the
Use of Queerness in Podcast Production

“John B. McLemore lives in Shittown, Alabama.” This is the subject line that catches Brian Reed’s eye one day (3:01-3:10), he tells the listeners in the opening minutes of chapter I of *S-Town*. The email is from John B. McLemore himself, who is an avid listener of Reed’s radio show and wants him to come down to his home in Woodstock, Alabama, just outside of Birmingham, to take a look at the place that he calls “Shittown” and to investigate a murder case that, as the audience finds out later, never happened.

In 2017, the podcast *S-Town* took the world by storm and became a viral hit with several million downloads during its first week. The podcast follows the host, Brian Reed, on his excursion to rural Alabama, where instead of the aforementioned murder case, McLemore turns into the polarizing subject of the podcast himself, as he personifies the intersection of queerness and Southernness, captivating the audience while disrupting Southern heteronormativity. When in chapter II Reed reveals that McLemore has committed suicide, “Who was John B. McLemore?” turns into the central question of the podcast.

In this paper, I argue that Reed and the production team of *S-Town* revolutionized the art of storytelling in podcast production by queering the medium, ultimately satisfying the public’s need for more authentic stories. I show how the podcast achieved its unprecedented success by using queerness and queer worldmaking techniques to construct McLemore’s queer identity and examine how Reed is driving the queer narrative around McLemore while entering a homosocial,

codependent relationship with him. And, finally, I analyze how the podcast queered the medium using novelistic strategies and a rhizomatic narrative structure with unpredictable directions typical for queer worldmaking.

In chapter I of *S-Town*, the audience gets a first glimpse of the demons McLemore is fighting: McLemore is depressed—about the state of education in Bibb County, the corruption, poverty, being the child molestation capital of the United States, the overabundance of religion, the denial of climate change—but, mostly, he is depressed about people’s refusal to face the truth about what a dark place the world is in and their inactivity to change the world. Immediately, it becomes clear that McLemore, politically and socially, is out of place in the conservative South. But, it seems as though these aren’t the only demons McLemore is fighting: he also suffers from loneliness. We learn that he is 49 years old, unmarried, a retired horologist, and lives with his mother, who has dementia, on 128 acres of land in the woods. To keep him company, he hires young men to complete projects around his property. Tyler Goodson is one of the young men that spends a lot of time with McLemore, which, as we come to find out over the course of the podcast, is a two-way homosocial “usership,” which raises the question of McLemore’s sexuality—a question that Reed is determined to investigate in this podcast.

By creating a podcast that put the puzzle pieces of McLemore’s identity together and spotlighting the queer world that McLemore built around him, Brian Reed is using queer worldmaking techniques to drive the captivating queer narrative forward. According to Hailey Otis and Thomas Dunn, “queer worldmaking is the project of building affirming queer life worlds within, among, and between persistently heteronormative and anti-queer societies” (1). While looking at McLemore’s romantic life through the podcast, it is often not clear how open he was about his sexual orientation, and even the countless witness reports that Reed gathers

throughout the podcast fail to offer a definite answer. There are, however, a lot of instances where McLemore himself comments on being queer. In chapter I, for example, when Brian Reed still is under the assumption he'd come to Alabama to investigate a murder case, he asked McLemore how he would explain to people that a reporter from New York is down there asking questions, and McLemore responded "everyone around here thinks I'm queer anyway, I could just tell them I'm sucking your damn dick" (44:36-44:46). McLemore never shies away from hinting at or displaying his queerness, but instead, it seems to be the labels that he tries to avoid. Nathanael T. Booth argues that although Reed is trying to establish the narrative that McLemore's refusal to come out is "the result of McLemore's deep discomfort with accepting a gay identity," according to Booth, "it seems just as likely that such self-representation is a mode of deliberate irony and ambiguity" (293). Booth further argues that "the purpose of this multiplicity of labels describing acts (or the absence of acts) is to deny others, such as Reed, the right to confine McLemore within a set of binary oppositions" (293). According to Booth, "McLemore is a man who attempts to shape his own narrative with his own words. He refuses to be categorized as gay or straight" (293). But, one of the reasons why McLemore is such a fascinating character that keeps the listeners at the edge of their seat is exactly this ambiguity: McLemore is a riddle to be solved.

The podcast creates the narrative that although McLemore never seems to officially come out to the town's folks, he is disrupting Southern heteronormativity by living his queerness and entering relationships with presumably straight men that often distort the line between homosocial and homoerotic relationships. According to Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, heteronormativity is defined as "the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent—that is organized as a

sexuality—but also privileged” (548). In other words, heteronormativity is the heterosexual standard by which society creates social rules and judges on what is to be considered normal and what is to be considered deviant. While McLemore’s sexual orientation remains unspecified, he still defies heteronormativity in that he is not abiding by society’s rules, such as getting married, having children, or being in a monogamous relationship in general. He seems to make his own rules when it comes to relationships, the motivations for which are ambiguous. McLemore’s relationship with Tyler Goodson, for example, could be described as a mentorship of father and son quality. In chapter III, it is revealed that McLemore and Goodson spent the day leading up to McLemore’s suicide together, because it was Father’s Day and they wanted to go fishing. Goodson reports that McLemore is “just about the only daddy he’s got” (11:04-12:00). Later in the episode, however, Goodson reveals that jealousy might have been the reason that McLemore committed suicide that very night, as McLemore could not stand the thought of Goodson returning home to his new girlfriend and children. The jealousy and possessiveness displayed by McLemore seems to be uncharacteristic for a friendship or mentorship. This behavior, however, appears to be a common thread that affected a lot of former relationships of McLemore’s with other young men we get to know throughout the podcast that McLemore took “under his wing,” which becomes clear when in chapter V Reed tracks down Michael Fuller whose relationship pattern with McLemore precisely resembles that of Goodson’s relationship with McLemore. Fuller describes McLemore as “just a safe place to be” (51:40-57:02). This shows that it’s difficult to categorize the relationship between McLemore and Goodson or Fuller, as their relationship, even though not being openly gay, seems to transcend a platonic homosocial relationship due the nature of McLemore’s feelings. Reed and the production team of *S-Town* therefore create the narrative that McLemore took young straight men under his wing and tried to

“rescue” them from their troubled lives. In return, however, he expected companionship and exclusivity. Looking at some of the relationships that McLemore built during his lifetime through the podcast, it becomes clear that he did find ways to live his queerness, while ultimately disrupting the heteronormativity that was established around him by including his social environment in his queer world, whether consciously or unconsciously.

Therefore, as Brian Reed gets immersed in McLemore’s world, Reed’s own heteronormativity gets disrupted in the queer creation of this podcast as, unconsciously, Reed enters a homosocial mentorship with McLemore that reminds in part of the mentorship relationship McLemore had with the other young men he took under his wing, such as Tyler Goodson and Michael Fuller. Throughout the podcast, the audience receives more and more detail on the kind of relationship that Goodson and McLemore had. A relationship that McLemore at some point describes as “usership,” since McLemore serves as Goodson’s benefactor. Reed inevitably gets invited into this queer world and receives the same kind of mentorship that Goodson received. At the end, Reed and McLemore establish a codependent and homosocial relationship with Reed providing McLemore with platonic intimacy and companionship, while McLemore provided Reed with the fodder for one of the most successful, but also controversial podcasts to ever exist. McLemore turned Reed’s life around, just like he did with Tyler Goodson and Michael Fuller. Therefore, in a way, he became Reed’s benefactor.

Hence, as McLemore lost companion after companion, he turned to Reed, a radio show host from New York, who would turn into a confidant whom McLemore could confide his secrets to and consequently reveal his unvarnished queer identity. Thus, McLemore offered his life story to Reed; and the production team of *S-Town* knew that to tell McLemore’s story

required an untraditional approach of storytelling. In an interview with Miranda Sawyer, Reed talks about the literary approach that the *S-Town* team chose to tell McLemore's life story:

‘What’s different about S-Town is that, in terms of technique, we also turned to novels.

Early on, Julie and I sensed that the details and the metaphors that John was handing me—the maze, clockwork—were novelistic. And with a novel, people will open the first page, engage with a character and may not know what’s going on for the first 50 pages.

We thought we could do that with a podcast.’ (Booth 274)

Contrary to other podcasts, *S-Town* was not released episode by episode, but it was recorded and produced over years and then released at once. Hence, the narrative structure of the podcast reminds more of a novel rather than a traditional podcast, which is also highlighted by the fact that the episodes in *S-Town* are called chapters. *S-Town* then, like a novel, is constructed of seven chapters that built on each other and progressively tell a story while creating suspense. Therefore, the events of McLemore's life and death are not unraveled in chronological order, but rather in a narrative order that creates the biggest plot twists and offers the most suspense. One instance of such a plot twist is when, at the end of chapter 2, seemingly out of nowhere, Reed receives a call with the news that John B. McLemore had committed suicide. The audience of *S-Town* here gets completely blindsided as the main character of the podcast, who the audience had just established a relationship with, is now dead after only two episodes, leaving the audience puzzled and wondering what could possibly be next. In the same way, even though Reed dropped hints throughout the podcast that McLemore might be queer, McLemore's sexuality is not really discussed until the last two episodes, showing that Reed saved this detail for a sort of grand finale that sheds new light on a lot of the questions that had been raised throughout the podcast.

Instead of being created with a traditional novelistic story arch, however, *S-Town* was created with a rhizomatic narrative structure without clear beginning or end that is typical for queer worldmaking, ultimately accentuating the queerness of McLemore's identity. As theorized by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, a rhizome is a concept that has no clear beginning or end, but instead is organized like a mycelium, the root system of mushrooms, that grows and expands in unexpected directions, constantly developing and adding new shoots without hierarchy as would be the case with a tree system. Deleuze and Guattari explain that "a rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*" (25). This concept is further clarified by Brent Adkins who explains that "Rhizomes do not propagate by way of clearly delineated hierarchies but by underground stems in which any part may send additional shoots upward, downward, or laterally. There is no hierarchy. There are no clear lines of descent" (23). Brent Adkins clarifies the key of this concept, writing that "the key to the rhizome, and the reason why Deleuze and Guattari take it up as a way of thinking about not only books but things in general, is that the rhizome continually creates the new. It is not predictable. It does not follow a linear pattern of growth and reproduction. Its connections are lateral not hierarchical" (23).

These interwoven, rhizomatic patterns then can be found throughout *S-Town* and are especially present in the ambiguity when it comes to solving the riddle of McLemore's identity. Throughout the podcast, bits and pieces of information and details on McLemore's life are released in a way that every new piece of information shifts the narrative entirely and creates a new logical strand. This narrative structure has the effect that the mystery keeps on going as there are a multitude of potential pathways the listener can follow to create McLemore's identity. On the other hand, however, this narrative structure also has the effect that the mystery never

gets solved, as there is no end point and therefore no solution. Applying this concept to *S-Town* then, we see that a lot of the questions surrounding McLemore's character are interconnected. One of these questions that the podcast is trying to solve, for example, is why McLemore committed suicide. There are different theories that the podcast is exploring, ranging from his depression and despair regarding the dark place the world is in, to his alleged suppressed sexuality and being hopelessly in love with Tyler Goodson as their dispute on the day of McLemore's suicide may have been a factor in McLemore's decision to commit suicide, to the final and newest theory that McLemore was suffering from mercury poisoning which might have set off his "madness." The latter theory, Reed explores in chapter VII, which is the last chapter of the podcast series. After several witnesses revealed to Reed that, throughout his career, McLemore used a process called antique fire gilding, which requires burning mercury, Reed googles the symptoms of mercury poisoning, or "mad hatter's disease," and finds that the symptoms include "anxiety, irritability, insomnia, emotional instability, depression, and suicidal thoughts" (31:18-21:13)—all of which perfectly fit the description of McLemore. This revelation then adds an entirely different theory to the mystery of John B. McLemore: Was the cause of McLemore's depression of a medical nature instead of his loneliness? Again, the listener has to start over and track an entirely new lead. However, despite offering a new take on the case, this theory still doesn't solve the mystery. Instead, as is the case in a rhizomatic structure, the new theory simply adds a new strand of information and thereby creates new connections and new pathways that the audience can follow. Neither of the theories revealed in *S-Town* are superior over another theory as there is no hierarchy in a rhizomatic structure. Rather, every theory adds new intersections to a growing network of possibilities. Therefore, not only is *S-Town* creating and broadcasting a queer narrative around McLemore while disrupting heteronormativity, the

rhizomatic structure of the narrative in itself is queer, as it does not follow established norms and hierarchies, but rather creates a network of multiplicity, defying binaries and linearity in the process, like queerness itself.

With the production team of *S-Town* using novelistic techniques and rhizomatic structures that accentuate McLemore's identity, McLemore then becomes a character in his own story. Nathanael Booth, who compares McLemore's representation in *S-Town* to the representation of small-town queer men in literature, argues that "John B. McLemore, while a real person, is a constructed character within *S-Town*. His queerness, though real enough, functions as a literary device within the text" (281). Therefore, instead of being in charge of his own narrative, McLemore becomes a literary trope in his own story. Indeed, *S-Town*, though based on the story of a real human being and set in a real town, often sounds so incredible, so unbelievable, that the first thing that people do when they first listen to *S-Town*, is looking up *John B. McLemore* on *Google* to see if this story is in fact real—I would know, because that is exactly what I did. What listeners will find are pictures of the real John B. McLemore, his grave on which fans have carefully placed souvenirs, and his house with the famous hedge maze bookmarked on *Google Maps*. John B. McLemore is, or was, very much real. The novelistic storytelling, however, sometimes blurs the lines between reality and fiction as the audience gets immersed in this story and carried away by the mystery. Booth further argues that "these characters are not merely plot or thematic devices, but they exist for the development of the putatively straight protagonist" (275). In *S-Town*, Reed takes the place of the putatively straight protagonist who goes through character development after meeting McLemore, as his life subsequently is turned upside down, not only because of the lessons he learns from McLemore, but also as a consequence of the podcast's immense success.

At the end, *S-Town* became a hugely popular podcast, breaking records and winning a George Foster Peabody Award in the category of Radio/Podcast for “breaking new ground for the medium by creating the first audio novel, a non-fiction biography constructed in the style and form of a 7-chapter novel” (The Peabody Awards). Brian Reed received newfound fame as the host of the wildly popular podcast *S-Town*, even appearing on TV shows such as *The Tonight Show* with Jimmy Fallon, talking about the creation of the podcast and his friendship with McLemore. Despite being an award-winning podcast, however, *S-Town* also received a lot of backlash for exploiting the intimate relationship that Reed had established with McLemore to “out” a gay man and reveal his secrets, while confining him to a narrative. And while this critique is warranted and a conversation about this issue is definitely necessary, I think that we also have to take into account that Reed was invited into McLemore’s queer world and got absorbed by the queer narrative. By using queer worldmaking techniques, Reed manifested the legacy of an extraordinary man—John B. McLemore—a genius often beyond comprehension, that defied all binaries during his lifetime and created his own progressive world within a repressive system. The immense outreach and influence of the podcast serves as proof that *S-Town*, by queering the medium with queer worldmaking techniques and rhizomatic structures, effectively told the story of John B. McLemore whose queerness polarized and affected many lives, ultimately creating a new way of queer storytelling, satisfying the public’s need for more authentic stories in the process.

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