



SOUNDING OUT THE SOUTH: *S-Town* AND THE CHALLENGES OF AURAL REPRESENTATION

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In March 2017, the podcast *S-Town* broke records by reaching ten million downloads four days after its release (Spangler 2017). Created by two producers of the hit programs *Serial* and *This American Life*, the podcast instantly attracted critical attention and set off intense debates. Three years later, with over 90 million downloads, *S-Town* has definitely established itself as a major cultural phenomenon. But the reasons for the appeal of this seven-hour-long nonfiction audio narrative about a small town in Alabama are not self-evident. *S-Town* begins, misleadingly, as a true crime podcast. Brian Reed, a reporter for the National Public Radio (NPR), is contacted by a man named John B. McLemore who asks him to investigate a case of covered up crime and corruption in his Alabaman hometown. Yet early on in the production, his accusations turn out to be a false lead. The investigation veers away from the alleged murder case to explore John's complex personality and his tormented relationship with the Southern small town where he spent his entire life, a place he hates and despises but never resolved to leave. "Shit-Town," as John calls it, becomes more than just a background for Reed's reporting: it turns out to be the actual object of inquiry, providing the show with its euphemized title.

Although critics were almost unanimous in their enthusiasm about *S-Town*, some dissenting voices argued that the podcast's formal quality could not atone for its moral shortcomings. There is no question that *S-Town* raises thorny questions of representation and even voyeurism, issues that are inherent to most investigative nonfiction stories. But in the case of *S-Town*, regional and ideological clashes further inflamed the debate. Because the podcast is partly based on recorded interviews and phone calls with inhabitants of a Southern small town, the plot can sometimes be hard to follow, even for native English-speakers. *S-Town*'s protagonists speak in what almost sounds like a foreign tongue, with its southern twang and "hillbilly lingo" (Rooney 2018, 160).



Paradoxically, this exoticism is what might account for the success of the podcast. Several commentators have argued that the show's cultural traction is based on a form of "redneck chic" (Burr 2017), the fascination of a supposedly liberal Northern audience with representations of the Deep South and its poor white rural inhabitants. In the aftermath of the 2016 US presidential election and its polarized context, sections of the American population that had been heretofore underrepresented suddenly came under scrutiny¹. For *S-Town*'s most vehement detractors, the very fact that highbrow media outlets praised the show so highly only confirmed that it was designed as "a freakshow for the NPR crowd," (Burr 2017), offering "an excuse for urban liberals to rubberneck" and aggravating the "ongoing zoological treatment of rural America by cultural elites" (Callahan 2017).

Some critics therefore dismissed *S-Town*'s staging of the South as too caricatural²; but in doing so, they failed to take into account a constitutive element of the podcast, and a major factor of its originality—the exclusively sonic nature of the medium. The transcript of the show, which is available online, begins with a foreword to the reader: "*S-Town* is produced for the ear and designed to be heard, not read. We strongly encourage you to listen to the audio, which includes emotion and emphasis that's not on the page" ("*S-Town* Podcast"). Non-visual representation, as this article suggests, is also what makes it possible for the podcast to go beyond a single, univocal vision of the South.

Admittedly, *S-Town* does not always avoid the pitfalls of stereotypical representation. The creators of the show tend to capitalize—consciously or not—on hackneyed Southern tropes. An extract from the second episode is particularly telling in that respect. The scene takes place in a hidden clubhouse at the back of a tattoo parlor, a meeting place for "misfits, (...) self-proclaimed criminals and runaways and hillbillies" (Reed 2017, Chapter 2). The reporter Brian Reed gives a quick description of the club's patrons, a cast of characters whose appearance, behavior and language check all the boxes of the redneck stereotype. However, it is worth noting that the caricature does not come only from Reed's sketchy descriptions. The characters themselves seem to be perfectly aware of the image they project and to revel in confirming the prejudices against them. As if to satisfy the listeners' appetite for cheap thrills and Southern grotesque, one of them paints a deprecating self-portrait and thus provides the reporter with the perfect script:

¹ The concomitant success of other nonfiction works such as J.D. Vance's autobiographical depiction of poor white rural communities in *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016) seems to confirm this trend. For an analysis of two of these works, see Schniedermann 2019.

² With their basic mistrust of "cultural elites," they fail to acknowledge that the basis for their argument achieves a similarly caricatural effect.



REED: (...) here's this gentleman, whose name I never do catch, who tells me, quote, "I'm so fucking fat, I don't care no more," and lifts up his shirt to show me the giant words he has tattooed on his stomach—"Feed Me."

MAN 4: Tell him. Tell him. Give him a picture. I'm a 6-foot, 350-pound bearded man in a John Deere hat with "Feed Me" on my belly, just so y'all get a clear picture here. (Chapter 2)

The physical description of this man with no name, heightened by the reference to "the giant words he has tattooed on his stomach," creates a grotesque effect, which turns him into another character in this gallery of Southern *freaks*. The "John Deere hat" he is wearing—a promotional item given away by a company selling heavy agricultural equipment—works as a synecdoche, a symbolic indication of the cliché that this disillusioned overweight white man from the rural South stands for. But his tattoo and self-portrait also reveal the degree of conscious irony at play here. He feeds the reporter with these tropes because he knows that they will match the listeners' expectations for what they consider to be a realistic, warts-and-all depiction of the South. In doing so, he confirms Flannery O'Connor's words about Southern fiction: "I have found that anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic" (O'Connor 1969).

The grotesque self-portrait is explicitly directed at the prospective listeners of Reed's show ("Tell him. Give him a picture"³; "[J]ust so y'all get a clear picture here"). The repetition of the term "picture" implies that the audience will associate what they hear with predetermined mental representations. Although such clichés can indeed function at a visual level, the impression here is conveyed through sound, and only through sound—in this case, the protagonists' heavy Southern accent and the colorful language they use:

RAZOR: Beep, beep. Back it up. I was parked on the side of the road. I looked down there. I said, son of a bitch. He wakes up. You have Willard come by, see him laying in the yard, thought he died. Ambulance is there. They already called the ambulance, man. Bastard's laying out there in the yard, got an ounce of pot laying beside him, six beers. He's just shit-faced.

BRIAN REED: I believe he's telling a story about his friend Willard, who is impervious to death. (Chapter 2)

The contrast between the interviewees' idiolect, including linguistic deformations ("lay" for "lie") on the one hand, and the reporter's sophisticated narration on the

³ In the audio, it is unclear whether MAN 4 uses the contracted plural "them" as in "Tell'm" or the singular "him" used in the transcript; the plural would be more coherent with the rest of his utterance.



other, is particularly striking. In the same way Reed (ironically?) referred to “MAN 4” as “this gentleman” in the previous extract, he is now rephrasing—or translating—what the character named Razor just said. This effect is emphasized by the editing, which juxtaposes live recordings of the interview and the retrospective, studio-recorded, frame narrative. The assumption here is that listeners will be more familiar with Reed’s public radio host voice, his poised wording and tongue-in-cheek delivery.

As a matter of fact, Reed acknowledges his position as an outsider to this world before giving the floor to a third man, in what will be the climax of his encounters with the club’s patrons:

REED: (...) I pretend to do a number of things that make me feel very uncomfortable in order to keep as low a profile as possible, such as act like I’m not shocked or upset or scared when someone says this to me, a radio producer with a microphone, in the first few minutes that we’re talking. At the risk of ruining any surprise, the statement is racist and nonsensical, replete with multiple uses of a terrible word.

BUBBA: You know, we had a tax-free labor. It didn’t have nothing to do with a bunch of niggers picking cotton. And we worked our ass off, and we got—we earned everything we got. (...) So now we have no—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— (Chapter 2)

If the first two interventions were almost provocatively caricatural, grotesque in their excess, the tone suddenly becomes less light-hearted as Reed witnesses an unfiltered instance of explicitly racist speech. In this short extract, a man who will later “display a rather fluent knowledge of the differences between various white supremacy groups” (Chapter 2), deploys the typical rhetoric of racial bigotry: repeated uses of the word “nigger,” apology for slavery, stigmatization of the so-called *welfare queens*. The snippet is faded out, probably because a few seconds of his tirade are enough to give a “clear picture” of his ideological positions. This chilling extract seems to confirm another reality about the South, where unfiltered expressions of racism and white supremacy reveal that parts of its population have not come to terms with their slaveholding and segregationist past.

Upon his first visit to John B. McLemore’s estate in Chapter 1, Reed describes a house “that looks like it hasn’t changed since the Civil War,” before stating that “[t]he whole place feels like it’s of another time.” This double-edged comment can be interpreted as another reference to the South’s dubious past; but it can also be reconsidered as a praise of the timelessness of the setting, a way of showcasing its historical and cultural richness. Indeed, *S-Town* does not shy away from giving a more contrasted, nuanced voice to the South. A beautiful illustration for this is to be found in a conversation between Reed and Mary Grace McLemore, John’s eighty-year-old mother. When Reed asks her how old the house is, she gives this cryptic answer: “Since time, I



reckon" (Chapter 1). As she substitutes the measurement of time by its very object (the term "time" itself), Mary McLemore offers an example of pure spontaneous poetry. In his article entitled "What do Southerners hear in *S-Town*?" Matt Thompson picks up this example to underline the importance of sound as an expressive medium:

No phrase from the series rings in my memory more clearly or musically than this, from John's mother Mary Grace in the show's first episode: "Since time, I reckon." The pixels here can't do that utterance justice; such an evocative little twist of language could only have been crafted out of the melodies of Southern speech. (Thompson 2017)

The spoken word has an evocative power that images or text ("the pixels") cannot compete with. Sound therefore appears to be the ideal medium to grasp different Southern realities and to convey them as faithfully as possible.

S-Town's vision of the South is further complicated by the protagonist of the podcast, John B. McLemore, and his profound atypicality. His voice, which we hear through recorded phone calls and in the interviews that Reed conducted with him, is key to the show's originality. John is very critical of his Southern birthplace, but it is also an inherent part of him; his voice therefore comes across as a sort of third way between Reed's sophisticated speech and the "hillbilly lingo" of his co-dwellers (Rooney 2018). Sarah Larson, in a review of the show for *The New Yorker*, described the mental exercise it demands from a "Northern, liberal NPR listener": "hearing such things levelled against mostly conservative Southern whites, in a mellifluous spiel by a liberal Southern white man with a thick accent, is a mind-bender in itself" (Larson 2017).

In one of his many diatribes against his hometown, John describes it as filled with "proleptic decay and decrepitude" (Reed 2017). The journalist admits that he had to look up the definition of the term "proleptic" and he will reuse the word as a leitmotif throughout the narrative, showing that the use of elevated literary vocabulary is not the preserve of reporters from a supposedly Northern cultural elite. Similarly, a recording of a phone conversation between Reed and McLemore features another unexpected shift in speech register:

REED: (...) Once, he got in touch at 1:30 in the morning because a bunch of cops had been in his yard.

JOHN B. McLEMORE: And I had the praetorian class cowering behind that uniform. (Chapter 1)

McLemore's ironically antiquated words ("the praetorian class") are made explicit by Reed's informal *translation* ("a bunch of cops"). Processes of lexical borrowings and shifts from formal to colloquial speech therefore do not only take place from South to



North; they also happen in reverse. In other words, the relationship between North and South is not a binary opposition but rather a fluctuating, dynamic one, which is being re-negotiated throughout the podcast.

Once more, what makes this finesse possible is the aural medium of the podcast that brings together a variety of voices. At first sight—or listening, rather—*S-Town* seems to exemplify the literary concept of “polyphony” as defined by Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin used this musical metaphor to describe literary works that stage “*a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses*”; the characters in these works are “*not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse*” (1963, 6-7, italics in the original). Drawing on this concept of polyphony, David Lodge’s category of the polyphonic novel seems to be a perfectly fitting definition for audio (nonfiction) novels such as *S-Town*, where “a variety of conflicting ideological positions” are literally “*given a voice* and set in play both between and within individual speaking subjects” (Lodge 1990, 86, italics mine; Schniedermann 2019).

But Lodge also adds that these positions should not be “placed and judged by an authoritative authorial voice” (1990, 86). In *S-Town*, the polyphonic structure finds its limits because ultimately it is Brian Reed’s retrospective narrative that frames these voices and positions. On a second or third listening of the podcast, one cannot help but notice how often the editors chose to fade out the voices from live interviews to return to Reed’s studio-recorded frame narrative. This happens very often for brevity or clarity reasons. Indeed, long tirades are shortened, parts of the dialogues are synthesized, and obscure or confused passages are rephrased in order to maintain the pace of the narration and the listeners’ attention. But though there might be editorial arguments for these story-telling devices, it is hard not to hear them for what they are: interruptions that silence individual voices in order to return to the authority of the author/narrator who ultimately speaks *for* them. The fade-out adds another layer of symbolic violence, with the speaker’s voice gradually disappearing, as if it was losing its interest, momentarily overlapping with the narrator’s voice before it is completely muted. At times, the studio-recorded narrative is so overpowering that it turns the live recordings into more of a soundscape, only to convey a veneer of Southern *authenticity*. The proportion of live recordings tends to decrease as the podcast comes to an end; the last episode is almost exclusively studio-recorded. Even though it avoids formulating any too definitive conclusions, the epilogue does imply a sense of closure and the idea that the narrator, in the end, has the last word.

S-Town presents itself as an acoustic exploration of life in a Southern small town. The podcast *sounds out* the South, both metaphorically and literally: through the medium of sound, it digs into the secrets and the past of a man and his environment and probes them in search of the *real South*. The aural medium is what enables the podcast to bring together many different voices and positions in order to create a more contrasted, multi-faceted representation. But because the reporter frames and controls the



entire narrative, *S-Town* also runs the risk of ruling out the other protagonists, fading out their voices in favor of an authoritative narrator, and ultimately sounding them out of their own story.

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