This Is your warning : challenging the privileging of objectivity in serial-style podcasts

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**NANYANG
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UNIVERSITY**

**THIS IS YOUR WARNING: Challenging the Privileging of
Objectivity in *Serial*-style Podcasts**

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SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES

2017

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requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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SUMMARY

The field of podcasting studies has been throttled by an overwhelming focus on defining the medium, leading to overly general claims that treat podcasts as homogeneous whole. This paper seeks to expand the critical conversation surrounding the podcast by positioning WBEZ Chicago's *Serial*, Paul Bae and Terry Miles' *The Black Tapes* and Zack Ackers and Skip Bronkie's *Limetown* form a distinctive genre of podcasts that join a larger tradition of works written by female investigators and journalists, aimed at challenging the privileging of objectivity.

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THIS IS YOUR WARNING: The Illusion of Objectivity in *Serial*-style Podcasts

Section I: The Rise of *Serial*-style Podcasts

Once a clunky, Web 2.0 oddity on its way to obscurity, podcasting was suddenly thrown back into the spotlight in 2014 with the surprising success of *Serial*, a podcast show which follows reporter Sarah Koenig as she reinvestigates a 1999 murder case in Baltimore that may have ended in the wrongful conviction of a young man named Adnan Syed. *Serial* took the world by storm, enthraling listeners week by week as Koenig riffled tirelessly through documents, gamely carried out experiments and fearlessly chased down interview subjects to craft hour after hour of compelling storytelling that revealed just as much as it kept listeners in suspense. It became a cultural phenomenon, discussed across traditional news outlets, social media and water coolers across the globe, firmly demonstrating the viability of podcasting as a platform for high-quality content and programming.

With a large audience now primed and hungry for podcasts with the same effective formula, many online news sites began running articles that offered readers alternatives to *Serial* after it ended. Two titles slowly began to emerge: *The Black Tapes*, described by Gavia Baker-Whitelaw as “‘*Serial*’-style podcast that will scare your socks off,” (“*The Black Tapes* Podcast”) and *Limetown*, “a chilling new podcast” heralded by Caroline Framke as a “paranormal *Serial* replacement” (“*Limetown*”). These podcast share thematic and stylistic similarities; all three are podcasts that featured a highly engaging female host investigating an

enthraling mystery across a series of episodes that were released in a serialised fashion. In *The Black Tapes*, our Sarah Koenig is Alex Reagan, and the mystery is not a murder, but a series of black VHS recordings of paranormal activity which a skeptic, rational professor has yet to debunk through scientific methods. *Limetown* is hosted by yet another woman journalist named Lia Haddock, who tries to unravel the sudden and mysterious vanishing of an entire community of three hundred academics. These podcast shows are also linked by a concern regarding institutionalised authority, with all three podcast shows positioned as an investigation into the cracks and crevices that the official reports of their individual mysteries have seemed to overlook.

On the surface, these podcast shows seem to be trying to position themselves as ‘the next *Serial*’ in the wake of its phenomenal success by using the same conceit. However, rather than dismiss these podcast shows as opportunistic ‘rip-offs’ of *Serial*, conceptualising them as part of an emerging genre of podcasts makes for a more rewarding study and allows for listeners to engage with each one at a deeper and more complex level than simply entertainment for a dreary commute. These podcast shows are deeply concerned with the ways in which truth is ascertained and established, but this critique can only be surfaced if they are positioned as texts that are part of a longer tradition of storytelling, rather than completely novel inventions. As such, this project will suggest that *Serial*, *The Black Tapes* and *Limetown* form a distinctive genre of podcast shows that joins a larger tradition of works written by female investigators and journalists, aimed at challenging the privileging of objectivity. While true objectivity is rarely, if ever, achieved, it is still generally considered the most reliable method through which we can ascertain the truth and there are those who take advantage of this belief in order to manipulate and oppress marginalised communities.

Often, it is women who have their experiences invalidated due to their supposed inability to be “objective,” and as such, there is a long history of female writers who assert the right to alternative forms of truths through the stories they tell. It is from this rich and varied tradition that *Serial*, *The Black Tapes* and *Limetown* draw from and attempt to continue. By showing how these podcasts can be positioned as texts that challenge the privileging of objectivity, this project hopes to show that there is value in acknowledging, accounting for and engaging with the differences between the kinds of podcast shows available as it will expand the critical conversation surrounding podcasts. We will be able to better understand the impacts and implications of podcasting that move beyond just simple entertainment or information dissemination.

Podcasting has reached an interesting point in its short yet eventful life as a storytelling medium, having lifted itself out from the brink of obscurity to become a cultural mainstay in everyday life. However, criticism has struggled to keep up with the podcast’s meteoric rise, with research often side-lining content to focus on understanding the nature of podcasting as a broadcast medium. This is understandable, considering that many of these studies were done during the early days of podcasting, when content distributed through podcasts were similar to those in the radio. For example, Adam Curry’s *Daily Source Code*, widely recognised as the first podcast show in history, involved Curry splicing stories about his everyday life, news and things of note in the world of podcasting with music, a format reminiscent of shows already available on the radio. As such, with the content being mostly identical to what was already on the radio, researchers focused on analysing the difference in the method of broadcasting instead. One such example is Enrico Menduni’s “Four steps in innovative radio broadcasting: From QuickTime to podcasting.” As one of the earliest studies

on podcasting, Menduni's article is more interested in understanding the podcast as a medium, sidelining content by referring to it with the catch-all term of "digital sound." This study charted the link between "emerging social practices of digital sound to radio history," seeking to understand the impact of "music filesharing, web radio and podcasting" on "the present and future of radio" (Menduni 9). In this article, Menduni's examples of podcast content are indistinguishable from radio, which leads him to describing the podcast as either a tool for radio companies to extend their broadcasting reach or an avenue for young individuals to become amateur disc jockeys. Ultimately, he concludes that the podcast is "a mid-term technology, representing one of a number of possible ways for radio to face a complex digital future" as it "would appear to retain the mobile and interactive aspects of radio [which is] its valued attributes as a medium" but "yet still not offer the definitive mode of radio consumption" (16).

Section II: Genres: A New Research Frontier in Podcast Studies

In today's podcasting landscape, Menduni's conclusions feel too general, suggesting that this medium-only approach is no longer enough, an observation that Andrew Bottomley echoes at the introduction of "Podcasting: A Decade in the Life of a "New" Audio Medium." This symposium, held after a full decade of the podcast coming into being, aimed to broaden the critical conversation surrounding the podcast beyond the "scant sustained scholarly attention in the media and communication studies disciplines" and update the minimal "published research on podcasting [that] was conducted during the medium's infancy." Bottomley observes that while there has been a "fair amount of research in instructional technology about the educational uses of the podcast," as well as "some in mass communication about its incorporation into journalism and broadcast production," he also

notices that “much less attention has been paid to issues relating to the culture of podcasting, podcast audiences and listening practices, the format’s technological properties, podcast aesthetics and style and so on” (165). Hence, he celebrates the work of the researchers presented at this forum, which “utili[ses] media and cultural studies approaches” to “investigate podcasting’s culture, history, technology, aesthetic and uses” (167).

One of the key differences between the work at this symposium and the work done during the early days of podcasting involves taking content into consideration. In this new wave of podcast research, questions surrounding the podcast are less about what a podcast is, and shifts over to understand how podcasters are making use of the medium. To conduct this kind of study, researchers cannot assume that podcasts are created equal, because different podcasters use the medium in different ways to achieve different ends. As such, this new wave of research also isolates specific genres for closer analysis. Altogether, this fresh approach to studying the podcast allows for researchers to come to more insightful conclusions. For example, Andrew Salvati focuses on “fan-produced history podcasts” such as Dan Carlin’s *Hardcore History* and “considers how alternative modes of historical interpretation are enabled” through such podcasts. Meanwhile, Sarah Florini explores how “an informal network of Black American podcasters known as the ‘Chitlin’ Circuit’ functions as a contemporary digital iteration of Black counterpublics” (Bottomley 167). Carlin and Florini’s studies are examples of the types of research have taken this new approach to studying the podcast, and by doing so, surface deeper social messages, implications and purposes encoded within their specified podcast genres. This suggests that there is so much more to unearth about podcasts than just its status as a medium, and this approach involving isolating genres is one way to start breaking new ground in this field of study.

As such, this project endeavours to contribute to this burgeoning wave of research via a similar method. The sudden efflorescence of *Serial*-style podcasts presents a perfect opportunity to use this genre-based approach in order to expand our understanding of how the podcasting medium is being used by contemporary podcasters, and to what ends.

Section III: What is “*Serial*-style?”

This rise of *Serial*-style podcasts has caused some critics like K. M. McFarland to note rather cynically that there seemed to be a rise in podcasts “looking to glom onto the success of Sarah Koenig’s *This American Life* spinoff.” In this article, McFarland discusses the similarities between *Serial*, *The Black Tapes*, *Limetown*, and BBDO’s *The Message*, and offers some distinguishing characteristics of such podcasts. The first involves a mystery to be investigated. In *Serial*, this was Adnan Syed’s guilt or innocence in the murder of Hae Min Lee, but in these other podcasts, the central mystery is generally replaced by “supernatural stories.” He also establish the investigation is often relayed in a “discrete serialized format,” and feature a female “narrator/reporter” reminiscent of *Serial*’s Koenig as the main character helming the podcast (“Fiction Podcasts Are Trying Too Hard to Be Like *Serial*”). While McFarland views these similarities as evidence that these podcasts are trying to attempt to engineer and recreate the viral success of *Serial*, such similarities could also point to the fact that a distinctly recognisable genre is emerging within the world of podcasting, and with it, a unique opportunity to expand the field of podcast studies.

Branding these podcasts as ‘rip-offs’ of *Serial* also erroneously positions *Serial* itself as a completely novel invention. While *Serial* was perhaps the first of its kind to air, shows like *The Black Tapes* and *Limetown* were already in development before Koenig’s podcast hit airwaves. According to Zack Ackers, one of the creators of *Limetown*, the idea for the

podcast came to the creators a full year before *Serial* was released. He expressed his dismay and trepidation when *Serial* first came out, telling McFarland that “[w]hen [*Serial*] first came out, it was like, oh no, this sounds a lot like what we’re doing” (McFarland, “Fiction Podcasts Are Trying Too Hard to Be Like *Serial*”). Acker’s assertions suggest that this ‘female journalist investigating a scary mystery’ formula predates *Serial*, which becomes apparent when we look beyond podcasts. Women investigators and journalists have been represented in a variety of mediums throughout history, and podcasts like *Serial*, *The Black Tapes* and *Limetown* are simply modern reiterations of a longer tradition. What critics of female investigative journalism podcasts see as ‘copying’ are simply the re-deployment of tropes and techniques that have come to define this broader genre of female investigation.

Tracing these lines of influences back to these other forms of writing and storytelling would allow for a more in-depth exploration of this genre of female investigative journalism which has been emerging within the world of podcasting. It would exonerate podcasts like *The Black Tapes* and *Limetown* from accusations of being unoriginal and having shamelessly stolen from *Serial*, and help to provide a framework that will reveal the deeper social messages that underlie these female investigative journalism podcasts.

Section IV - The History of Female Investigators

Tracing these distinctive elements that make a podcast part of the female investigative journalism genre reveals a tightly interwoven tapestry of influences from prior forms of women’s writing and storytelling, and the common thread that runs through these works involves challenging the privileging of objectivity. *Serial*, *The Black Tapes* and *Limetown* are simply the latest development in a larger tradition of women investigators that began in 18th-century female

gothic novels, a form whose elements were used in 19th century immersion journalism, which then influenced many contemporary journalists today. By analysing the ways in which these forms feed into and draw from each other, a clearer picture of why these female investigative journalist podcasts use such similar characteristics will emerge. This would then show how these podcasts contain an underlying desire to trouble the trust we put in methods that claim to be objective.

Firstly, having a female protagonist investigating a scary, central mystery is a callback to the female Gothic novels of the 18th century, where the novels were used to resist supposedly 'objective' records of human experience. The Gothic form first emerged as a reaction against what Margaret Doody calls "prescriptive realism" (292). In the 18th century, novels were marked by an adherence to the tenets of "formal realism," "the premise, or primary convention, that the novel is a full and authentic report of human experience" (Watt 32). Wrought by the "aim of empirical objectivity," this style demanded that the novel "satisfy its reader with such details of the story as the individuality of the actors concerned, the particulars of the times and places of their actions, details which are presented through a more largely referential use of language than is common in other literary forms," which, according to Watt, "allows a more immediate imitation of individual experience set in its temporal and spatial environment than do other literary forms."

However, to provide a "full and authentic" account of human experience is to dictate it – to set in stone what experiences were considered 'real,' 'correct,' and 'proper,' thus marginalizing other, alternative realities. Unable to find themselves and their experiences represented in prescriptive realist novels, these excluded demographics began writing against this tradition, giving once-silenced individuals the voice and platform to tell their otherwise

suppressed narratives. The Gothic then emerged as a genre of resistance, “a momentous invention first wrought by women and homosexuals who could not be happy with the conceptual ‘reality’ on which [Prescriptive] Realism was founded” (Doody 294).

The female Gothic is one of the branches of the Gothic genre that takes on the power of resistance already encoded in the broader genre and uses it to give voice to oppressed, marginalized and silenced women. It is through the female Gothic novel that “women writers could first accuse the ‘real world’ of falsehood and deep disorder,” eventually earning the genre the distinction of being “the novel of feminine radical protest” (qtd in Wallace and Smith 2-3). Finding its genesis in Ann Radcliffe’s novels, female Gothic narratives often featured a central female character in constant fear for her safety and well-being while trapped in a large, crumbling castle and tormented by a tyrannical male figure, producing “a politically subversive genre” that “articulat[ed] womens’ dissatisfaction with patriarchal structures” and “offer[ed] a coded expression of their fears of entrapment within the domestic and the female body” (Wallace and Smith 2). Often, these central female characters would also be characterised as a kind of ‘proto-investigator.’ For example, Maureen T. Reddy argues that while Emily from Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* is often regarded as a “victimised, passive heroine of the novel,” she also “acts as a detective throughout the novel” as she “courageously explores Udolpho, trying to uncover the truth of Montoni’s past and of his present activities, searching for her aunt and looking for possible avenues of escape” (191).

These tropes from the female Gothic novels were redeployed in the 19th century, when a young journalist by the name of Nellie Bly decided to write an expose on an insane asylum on Blackwell Island. Instead of writing a straightforward article detailing her findings on the asylum, Bly chooses to give her report a distinctly Gothic flavour and by doing so, she signals a desire

for her report to follow in the footsteps of the female Gothic novels and the criticism the genre delivers. Understanding how and why Bly uses these Gothic elements is crucial to this project as the host of each of the three female investigative journalist podcasts are journalists. It bridges a gap between the terrified damsels of female Gothic novels and the investigative journalists helming the three podcasts and helps to further support reading the podcasts as challenges to the privileging of objectivity.

Using female Gothic tropes in her insane asylum report is not an entirely radical step for Bly to take as the type of journalism she pioneered had a similar political social valence to the female Gothic. Journalism was a man's world, and women journalists were rare. If a newsroom had female writers, her tasks involved puff pieces that addressed domestic concerns rather than hard-hitting, front page news. Nellie Bly was one such journalist. Despite having fought her way into *The Pittsburg Dispatch* on the strength of a letter she wrote to the editor on "the status of women," she "soon grew frustrated with her *Dispatch* assignments, which were too often about gardens, fashion and butterfly collection" (Lutes, "Introduction," xvii). Bly, however, wanted to write about "the plight of working women and other subjects she considered more worthy" (xvii). Her frustrating experience at the *Dispatch* share parallels with the issues that women writers had with formal realist novels. Much like realist novels, newspapers claimed to be objective, reporting and describing actual facts and events that happen in the real world. By consigning women writers to churn out superficial 'women interest' pieces that did little to truly explore women's experiences in the 19th century, the newspapers not only prescribed and dictated the specific kind of lifestyle that women should follow, but also implicitly denied the existence or validity of any kinds of experience that fell outside of their central narrative. These cozy images of a comfortable life filled with the frivolous wonders of gardening and butterflies were a far cry

from the experiences of women who were not able to afford the luxury and time to enjoy such things. There were women stuck working in factories, turned out on the street or imprisoned in dingy asylums across the country, and it was these stories that Bly wanted to tell, and not of garden shows and butterflies.

She finally succeeded in finding a platform for these stories in 1887, when the manager of *New York World* suggested she feign insanity and get herself committed to an asylum on Blackwell's Island, infamous for being poorly funded and operating under horrific conditions, for a story. Bly leapt at the chance and produced "Into the Madhouse," which was so successful she was eventually offered a staff position and inspired dozens of other female journalists to follow her daredevil methods of journalism. However, Bly's stunt was not simply for a catchy headline. This form of journalism came to be known as "immersion journalism," and was initially scorned as a form of "yellow journalism," news that relied on sensationalism and catchy headlines—rather than well-researched, factually accurate reports—in order to increase circulation numbers. However, immersion journalism had other aims aside from selling copies. It also aimed to "make visible, and 'expose' to the general view, what more often remained hidden away in well protected centres of power, and to use any means to this end, even the most unexpected and dangerous" (Muhlmann 62). For Bly, this was a way through which she could begin writing about the experiences of women in the margins and expose the harsh realities that these downtrodden women suffered in their day to day. She makes this aim clear in the opening of "Into the Madhouse" by recounting the conversation she had with her editor prior to carrying out her investigation. Her editor impresses upon her that "we do not ask you to go there for the purpose of making sensational revelations," and merely asks of Bly to simply "write up things as you find them, good or bad; give praise and blame as you think best, and the truth all the time"

(Bly 19). Through immersion journalism, Bly gave these otherwise marginalized and silenced women a voice for their experience the same way women writers used the female Gothic form. It is “Into the Madhouse,” her most iconic act of immersion journalism, that can be read as an expression of the female Gothic narrative as it shares distinctive aesthetic and thematic features with the genre.

Firstly, the act of immersion journalism itself is comparable to what Walter Walpole Scott sees as a hallmark of the female Gothic novel as represented in the novels of Radcliffe, who is widely considered as the mother of the female Gothic form. He writes that

[h]er heroines voluntarily expose themselves to situations, which in nature a lonely female would certainly have avoided. They are too apt to choose the midnight hour for investigating the mysteries of a deserted chamber or a secret passage, and generally are only supplied with an expiring lamp, when about to read the most interesting documents (qtd in Miles 46).

Here, Scott is gently mocking the improbability of the circumstances that Gothic heroines in Radcliffe’s novels seem to find themselves in, due to some baffling inability to register danger. However, this image of women who willingly putting themselves in danger for the sake of investigation became a very real in the 19th century, when women immersion journalists like Bly, and the other female reporters inspired by her derring-do

“insinuated themselves into prisons, hospitals, asylums, circuses, and brothels, joined caged animals in zoos, kicked up their heels with cabaret dancers and caught rides in newfangled vehicles from automobiles to airplanes.” (Lutes, “Introduction” 2)

Bly's similarity to Gothic heroines does not just stop at this parallel. Additionally, Bly also had to feign insanity in order to investigate and uncover the material needed for "Into the Madhouse," a diagnosis often foisted onto Gothic heroines. This is alluded to in Bly's report itself, where she describes her process in trying to pass off as insane. Firstly, Bly makes constant references to the act of reading in preparation for her role. She begins her preparation by practicing the "staring eyes" that she recalls from having read reports on "the doings of crazy people" and "read snatches of impossible and probable ghost stories" to put herself in a "fit mood" for the mission (Bly 21). Furthermore, the scene she sets when describing her preparations is unquestionably Gothic. While practicing the staring eyes of crazy people, Bly informs readers that "the sight was not reassuring ... especially in the dead of night" (21). As her preparations continue, she imagines the tasks that laid ahead of her, which causes "wintry chills" to "[run] races up and down [her] back" (21). By borrowing elements from Gothic narratives to describe her attempts at performing insanity, Bly casts herself as a Gothic heroine, surrounded by a disquieting atmosphere and a sense of terror as she slowly descends into madness.

The crumbling, ancient castle where Gothic heroines are usually trapped in also makes an appearance in "Into the Madhouse," albeit in a slightly different form. Bly is locked away in a total of three institutions for women in the course of her investigation, beginning with the "Temporary Home for Females, 84 Second Avenue" (22). She is then referred to Bellevue, a hospital with a pavilion set aside for insane women, before finally being sent to the Insane Asylum on Blackwell's Island. These institutions are described to be cold, unwelcoming and imprisoning – descriptions that would fit many castles found in Gothic novels. The loud clanging bells of the Temporary Home resounding through the hallways are portentous of the horrors that Bly would encounter in her journey (22). In Bellevue, her descriptions of the "long, uncarpeted

halls” with the windows left open and letting in so much cold air that it “began to tell on [her] Southern blood” and become “quite unbearable,” recalling the draughty and foreboding castle hallways from Gothic novels (42).

And yet, “Into the Madhouse” was not just an exposé on the new ways in which women were restricted and confined into spaces that oppressed and exploited them. While Bly’s report was mainly to provide a “plain and unvarnished narrative of the treatment of the patients therein and the methods of management” of the asylum on Blackwell’s Island, she spends roughly half the report detailing the process through which she skillfully deceived doctors, policemen and judges to get herself committed into the asylum in the first place (19). Jean Marie Lutes observes that the first installment of Bly’s “highlighted not the mistreatment of asylum inmates, but rather, Bly’s success in deceiving police officers, judges, doctors, nurses and other journalists,” and asserts that by doing so, Bly “countered an expert discourse that often disempowered women (Lutes, “Girl Stunt Reporters”, 16). Hence, her report was not only to expose the affairs that went on within the asylum, but also the process through which women are condemned to the asylum in the first place.

By also reporting on the process, Bly highlights how true objectivity can never be achieved. She does this by exposing the ways in which the legal and medical experts were not as objective as they claimed to be. Her encounter with the legal system in her quest to feign insanity and be sent to the asylum on Blackwell’s Island serves to suggest that the legal system does not come to a decision through a process of logical deductions. Rather, conclusions are drawn based on individual interpretation, which is informed by personal bias. In her report, she exposes Judge Duffy — the courtroom judge that would decide if Bly was to be sent to an asylum — as an individual whose decision-making is irrational, influenced by his own personal desires and belief

in harmful stereotypes. She also exposes the medical profession by pointing out how the tests used to check for mental illnesses were invalid and unreliable. Altogether, “Into the Madhouse” is a persuasive challenge to the unwavering belief we have in scientific objectivity and the legal system. She exposes the ways through which these methods in discerning the truth are not always objective, and can fail or arrive at a false conclusion. She questions the authority of experts within these fields by revealing how personal bias can cloud judgement. Ultimately, she urges her readers to be less naïve, and become more suspicious of these methods as a steadfast confidence in the authority and perceived infallibility of these methods and the experts who utilise it would allow for these methods to be used as a way to oppress and punish marginalised demographics of society who have no way of fighting back or resisting.

Today, in the 21st century, many female journalists are carrying on with Bly’s work, using alternative forms of news reporting in order to provide alternative versions of ‘official’ accounts. Often, these women run stories that counter those put up by traditional media outlets, thereby challenging the supposed ‘objectivity’ that these outlets claim to have. One such journalist is Amy Goodman, the main host of the American TV, radio and Internet news programme *Democracy Now!* Originally a radio show, Goodman’s news programme grew from being a “niche radio program broadcast on some twenty-five independent stations” to being lauded as “probably the most significant progressive news institution that has come around in some time” by Robert McChesney (Ratner, “Amy Goodman’s ‘Empire’”). Lizzy Ratner observes that *Democracy Now!*’s growth can be attributed to the public’s desire for independent news coverage following government interference in mainstream media “during the Bush years.” As Goodman herself says, the Bush years “laid bare media that act as a conveyor belt for the lies of the Administration” and news programmes like *Democracy Now!* provided people with

alternative news stories, ones that were less tainted by political agendas (Ratman, “Amy Goodman’s ‘Empire’”). Goodman’s radio show is not the only one of its kind. Over at WNYC, Brooke Gladstone’s *On The Media* joins in with Goodman’s struggle to challenge mainstream media. Gladstone’s radio show is a “weekly investigation into how the media shapes our world view,” exposing the ways in which mainstream media can be used to manipulate how we perceive situations and events that happen around us (“On the Media – About the Show”). This interest extends beyond radio, where Gladstone has written two books which explore the interplay between truth, reality and the media. In her latest book, she argues that “there is no such thing as “objective reality,” as “reality is what forms after we filter, arrange, and prioritise ... facts and marinate them in our values and traditions” (Mantzaris, ““On the Media””). Goodman and Gladstone are journalists united by a similar goal — to remind the public that what they see in the media is not always objective and representative of the truth.

A consideration of contemporary female journalists also helps to support treating these female investigative journalism podcasts as texts that can be analysed and studied. In 2015, Svetlana Alexievich was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Masha Gessen notes that Alexievich is “the first person to receive the Nobel for books that are based entirely on interviews,” leading many to describe Alexievich as a journalist or a reporter, a label she is not entirely comfortable with (Gessen, “The Memory Keeper”). To her, she is a writer but this tension between journalism and storytelling suggests that perhaps there may be instances where is no difference between the two. For example, the “Into the Madhouse” expose that this project has explored earlier in this section is one such instance, where journalism and storytelling blur into one another. Even Alexievich herself blurs this line when she tells Guy Chazan that she once “thought about writing novels, but quickly realised that real, human stories were more powerful”

(Chazan, “Nobel Laureate”). Here, the description of her writing sounds closer to journalism than what we would traditionally consider as literature, suggesting that even if Alexievich herself resists the “journalist” label, the main motivation behind writing her books is still journalistic.

Like Goodman and Gladstone, Alexievich writes to resist. Her books are a powerful alternative to official narratives being touted about by the Russian government on their Soviet history. For example, her first book entitled *The Unwomanly Face of War* was written out of a desire to “get behind the Soviet clichés of the time and find the truth of ‘concrete things.’” Her books “exploded Soviet myths” and challenged the narrative that “war is beautiful,” placing her squarely in this movement of female journalists that show a different side to what is being trotted out as the truth (Chazan, “Nobel Laureate”). Taking these contemporary female journalists and their aims into consideration explains the decision to have a female journalist as the centre of *The Black Tapes* and *Limetown*. Instead of simply being an unoriginal way to copy *Serial*, it positions these podcasts as part of a larger movement of female journalists who use their profession to struggle against institutions that attempt to pass off their own version of events as definitive truth.

Altogether, this collection of women writers suggest that there is a larger tapestry of influences that these female investigative journalism podcasts are drawing from, and to label *The Black Tapes* and *Limetown* as copies of *Serial* would unfairly erase an entire tradition of women writers who have long struggled to use their voices as writers and storytellers to defend against the privileging of objectivity that leads to monolithic impositions of truth. Taking these writers into consideration also provides an entry point into understanding the deeper messages that belie these female investigative journalism podcasts. Beneath the entertaining narratives of these podcasts lie biting criticism that

forces listeners to contend with difficult questions that explore the nature of ‘truth’ and the often flawed methods we use to establish it.

Section V: Studies in *Serial*

On October 3rd 2014, *This American Life* released its five hundredth and thirty seventh episode, entitled “The Alibi.” Ira Glass, host of *This American Life*, began the episode by highlighting that it was a momentous day for the staffers at the radio show, telling listeners that “the date of this day has been written on our white board in big letters for months, because this is the day that we launch our first real spin-off,” and “The Alibi” was its first episode (“The Alibi”). In “The Alibi”, listeners were regaled with a story about Adnan Syed, a Pakistani-American man that may have been wrongfully convicted for the murder of his ex-girlfriend, Hae Min Lee. However, instead of keeping the story within a single, self-contained episode like all of *This American Life*’s other offerings, this new spin-off would revisit Adnan’s story and tell it across multiple episodes. Hence, the spin-off’s name: *Serial*. But this was not the only thing that was unique about the spin-off. *Serial*, Glass asserts, is “not a radio show. It’s a podcast” (“The Alibi”). This first season of *Serial* will go onto become “the medium’s first breakout hit” (Carr, “Serial, Podcasting’s First Breakout Hit”). As *Serial*’s popularity began to skyrocket, the once maligned podcast medium was suddenly being discussed once again, with mainstream media publishing pieces like *TIME Magazine*’s “You Asked: What are Podcasts?” which begins with a nod towards *Serial* and the visibility it has brought to the podcasting medium. Additionally, *Serial*’s incredible success and its status as a cultural phenomenon have also brought it under academic scrutiny, with a scholarly, critical conversation slowly but surely growing around it.

Serial has rejuvenated old conversations about the podcast, with many of these new studies interested in understanding how *Serial*'s success happened in a medium that has long been forgotten or completely ignored by the general community. For example, Richard Berry's "A Golden Age of Podcasting? Evaluating *Serial* in the Context of Podcast Histories," studies *Serial* as a "significant moment in the history of podcasting." In this article, Berry evaluates the claim that *Serial*'s success represented a "tipping point for a medium in maturity" against a backdrop of "podcasting histories, technical change and listener analysis," and ultimately argues that "while *Serial* might represent an identifiable landmark" in the history of podcasts, the success of *Serial* "may be a combination of factors, in which technologies, brands, social sharing and engaging a content all play a part" (171). He attributes its success to the strength of its narrative, as well as advances in social networking sites and developments in podcasting technology that has made finding and accessing podcasts easier. He concludes his article by asserting that *Serial* "forced many to re-evaluate the medium, as it not only raised the production quality bar ... but presented podcasting as a viable alternative platform for content creators and storytellers" (Berry 176). While Berry's article is an impressive historical survey that bridges the gap between the studies done during podcasting's infancy and the current post-*Serial* moment that podcasts are enjoying today, the article is more interested in using *Serial* as a means through which the podcast can be better understood as a medium, rather than focusing on understanding the podcast itself. As such, Berry's article does not make more specific claims about *Serial* and simply suggests that "*Serial* is a significant but not necessarily a defining moment, and one that will no doubt be of further academic scrutiny" (176).

However, as was explored in a previous section, fresh and insightful research into the podcast are often the ones that think of podcasts in terms of genre, and two other studies of *Serial* done by Mariam Durrani, Kevin Gotkin and Corrina Laughlin, as well as cultural critic Leslie Grace McMurtry exemplify this by comparing *Serial* to a specific, established form. In doing so, they are able to study the podcast with greater depth and make more insightful claims. This gradual move towards expanding the critical conversation surrounding *Serial* by likening it to a previously established form is taken up by McMurtry in her article entitled “I’m Not a Real Detective, I Only Play One on Radio: *Serial* as the Future of Audio Drama.” This article is similar to Berry’s in that it concerns itself with charting the reasons for *Serial*’s astronomic success, but where Berry’s interest is in understanding the surrounding network of technology and listening practices that contribute to its popularity, McMurtry is more interested in how *Serial* in itself makes for a compelling audionarrative experience. To do so, McMurtry situates *Serial* in a greater historical trajectory of radio drama, pointing out that *Serial* is not a completely radical cultural object, but simply an old story told in a new medium. *Serial*, she argues, is a “hearken[ing] back to the celebrated Old Time Radio of the past but presenting something entirely new.” As such, McMurtry sees the podcast as “blueprint for how to bring back nationally broadcast[ed], culturally relevant audio drama back to American listeners” (306). She extracts what she believes is a potential equation for successful audio drama and defines it as: “Seriality + high production values + star casting + fiction/reality = success?” To give her equation more credence, she likens *Serial* to a “2008-2009 radio program produced for Italy’s RAI Radio 2” entitled *Amnèsia*, which “developed a cult following based on a ritualized formula” (308). This radio program featured a central

mystery whereby a charismatic speaker “had lost one year of his life and was trying to piece together how and why” (308). It was also presented as non-fiction and aired in episodes. These similarities allow for McMurtry to suggest that there are specific traits that audio drama can have which “will create conditions for cult or popular serials that can be translated and adapted for future use” (310). The equation that McMurtry establishes in her introduction is created with traits that can as easily apply to *Serial* as it does to *Amnèsia*, and this equation structures her article at large, where she describes in greater detail how each of these aspects are fulfilled by *Serial* and has led to its success. In each section, she details how the podcast skillfully utilises qualities from older radio shows in order to engage a listener and concludes by reasserting that “the lessons derived from [*Serial*’s] popularity and success and the way its component parts break down to form the spine of a recipe [is something] that audio dramatists can use” to create more effective and engaging radio shows (320). Here, we see how analysing *Serial* in terms of genre can move the conversation from simply attempting to define what a podcast is, as McMurtry’s reading of *Serial* as Old Time Radio has helped broaden the discussion surrounding *Serial* by bringing attention to questions of craft and captivating storytelling.

Durrani, Gotkin and Laughlin’s article on *Serial* is another compelling example of how the critical discussion of podcasts can be expanded by setting specific podcasts within a genre. The writers, who are anthropologists from the University of Pennsylvania and self-admitted “fans of the show” wrote a paper entitled “*Serial*, Seriality and the Possibilities of the Podcast Format,” where they liken *Serial* to an anthropological and ethnographic study. Admittedly, the paper’s central interest still centred on the podcast medium, as they attempt to understanding “how [they] as academics might harness the

podcast medium for anthropological and ethnographic research” (593). They argue that *Serial*’s success can be used as a learning opportunity for anthropological research “to reach a broader audience than just our community of scholars working on the same subject,” and help anthropological studies as a whole to “live up to its transformative potential” (594). They then defend their claims by comparing Koenig’s investigation and presentation of the show with the research practices of anthropological and ethnographic studies on a variety of fronts (594).

However, comparing *Serial* to anthropological and ethnographic studies allows the writers go more in-depth in their study of *Serial* than Berry does, and hence, are able to make fresh and interesting claims about the podcast. One of the most insightful points made in this article arises from the writers’ assertions that “given both the popularity and the dearth of media representations of Muslim Americans,” *Serial* can be usefully understood as “a form of public anthropology about these minority races.” In making this comparison, the writers then expose *Serial*’s ethical loopholes by comparing Koenig’s representation of Syed, the Muslim man at the centre of the podcast, to those used by academic anthropologists and ethnographers. The writers surface a specific incident in which Koenig describes the central narrative of *Serial* using a Shakespeare reference, one that paints Syed through “Shakespearean representations of the Moor,” and suggests that this “shows her investments in the politics and ethics of representation do not quite meet the rigorous standards” that academics working in the field of anthropology and ethnography follow (Durrani et al. 595). Here we see how treating *Serial* as a kind of anthropological and ethnographical study allows for analysis to move away from

questions about defining the medium, and opens up the discussion up to more specific issues of representation and ethics *within* the podcast itself.

Thus, Durrani et al's and McMurtry's articles make a bold and significant step in broadening critical conversations in podcast studies by attending to questions of genre. As such, this project hopes to continue this promising trajectory in podcast studies by envisioning *Serial* as part of a larger tradition of women writers who use storytelling as a way to resist the imposition of a singular truth by institutions who claim to be objective.

Section VI: *Serial*

Part I: *Serial* as an Investigative Journalism Podcast

An earlier section of this project has set out the ways in which Bly, an immersion journalist, appropriated elements from female Gothic novels to use in her exposé on the medical and legal system in “Into the Madhouse.” This was done to signal Bly's intention to challenge the supposedly ‘objective’ methods these systems used which allowed them to pass judgement and decide what was real and true for marginalised communities, as the female Gothic was a politically subversive genre that emerged as a challenge to the ‘objective’ records of human experience in formal realist novels. This earlier section also highlighted some contemporary female journalists who follow in Bly's footsteps, using journalism in order to push back and challenge narratives that establish themselves as the truth. As a podcast which features a journalist investigating a murder and realising that there are some flaws in the official accounts of what happened on the day Hae Min Lee was killed, *Serial* is undoubtedly a part of this longer tradition of female writers and storytellers. Thus, understanding *Serial* as a work of investigative journalism which has developed along this line of resistive storytelling allows us to read the podcast as a

challenge to the privileging of objectivity by exposing the ways in which the legal system can fail to be objective. These podcasts also aim to alert listeners to the ways in which these failures can have severe and enduring consequences.

While *Serial* no doubt draws inspiration from contemporary female journalists like Goodman, Gladstone and Alexievich, Koenig's centrality and visibility throughout the entire investigation makes the podcast stylistically and thematically similar to Bly's investigation, and these similarities are worth investigating as they are methods through which *Serial* signposts the deeper social criticism encoded within the podcast.

In the wake of *Serial*'s unprecedented success, cultural critics from multiple media outlets scrambled to distill the reasons behind its meteoric rise, and the most frequently cited reason across these articles is Koenig's reporting style. Khanh Ho's "*Serial: Why Is It So Popular?*" teases out a few potential elements of the podcast that could have contributed to its success, such as the podcast's adherence to "the conventions of sequential storytelling" that leaves listeners in suspense and the "classic features of a mystery" as *Serial* is "a whodunit that combines the pleasures of a police and a courtroom procedural." However, Ho zeroes in on what he believes is the key feature responsible for its overwhelming popularity, asserting that it is "the narrator — the journalist stand-in for the detective voice — that is the true element that is addictive" ("*Serial: Why Is It So Popular?*"). This observation is echoed by Marcela Garcia, who, after giving some consideration to the changing commuting habits of millennial listeners, also argues that "the success of *Serial* resides in Koenig's genius narrative style" ("*Why is Serial so Gripping?*").

It is not difficult to agree with Ho and Garcia, especially when considering that in terms of subject matter, *Serial* is not unique in the world of podcasts as there are many true crime podcasts available to listeners for download. Some popular examples include *Criminal*, hosted by Phoebe Judge, and *Sword and Scale*, hosted by Mike Boudet. Like *Serial*, these podcasts pick up and report on interesting or unsolved crime cases and are popular enough in their own right. However, they have yet to reach the level of meteoric success that *Serial* has achieved, suggesting that perhaps it not what is being said, but how it is being said that makes *Serial* so enthralling. Syed, as Ho puts it, is “just the chump in the cage.” It is Koenig and “not Adnan” who is “the most fully developed character of the show — the stroke of genius that keeps us compelled” (Ho, “Serial: Why Is It So Popular?”).

Indeed, there seems to be something rather special about Koenig’s style of reporting, which is so notable that it has inspired parodies. One such example is Saturday Night Live’s “Christmas Serial,” where comedian Cecily Strong plays Sarah Koenig as she “investigates” the strange phenomenon of Kris Kringle, “an elf who allegedly leaves presents in people’s homes” (Saturday Night Live, “Christmas Serial”). Following its release, “Christmas Serial” was praised by media outlets like *TIME* (Grossman, “This Hilarious SNL Serial Parody”), *Vulture* (Fox, “Saturday Night Live’s Serial Parody”) and *Vanity Fair* (Locker, “Cecily Strong’s Impression”), each commending Strong’s spot-on mimicry of Koenig’s out-loud musings, asides that directly addresses listeners and her hemming and hawing while interviewing key figures of interests in her investigation. That Koenig’s style of reporting is subject to parody in ways that other podcasting hosts like *Criminal*’s Judge and *Sword and Stone*’s Boudet have not been suggests that there is

something unusually visible and central to Koenig's role as a reporter in *Serial*. It is this unorthodox style of reporting that makes *Serial* stand out from other true crime podcasts, one that situates Koenig as the central character of the report. This is an observation that even Koenig herself admits to, telling Rachel Syme that it helps her recording process to "sit down at the mike" and "kind of think of [her]self as a character and put that hat on" ("Talking to *Serial*'s Sarah Koenig").

However, while this style of reporting is perhaps novel in the podcasting medium, it is not unprecedented in the world of journalism, especially if we think of *Serial* as a work of investigative journalism not unlike Bly's "Into the Madhouse." Bly's reporting style was marked by what Lutes describes as a "finely honed sense of how to cast herself as a character in her own news stories" (Lutes, "Introduction," *Around the World*, xv). Her approach to journalism was a "deeply personal form of newsgathering," where "her own feelings about what she was doing and how people treated her were always a central element in her reports" (Lutes "Introduction," *Around the World* xix). Unlike traditional forms of news reporting where journalists efface themselves from the report, immersion journalism puts the reporter front and centre, focusing on the writer's internal experience rather than trying to establish an authoritative account of an event. However, as we have seen in Bly's "Into the Madhouse," this subjective, reporter-centric approach to news reporting has a specific resistive function that supports the report's challenge to the institution of objectivity.

Firstly, despite taking a deeply subjective approach to her report in *Serial*, Koenig conversely seems more trustworthy and reliable. In "Into the Madhouse," Bly breaks away from the conventions of traditional forms of journalism that demanded an objective,

detached approach to reporting. During her first examination by a doctor in Bellevue Hospital's insane ward, the medical examiner asks Bly if she was "a woman of the town," insinuating that she may be a prostitute. When Bly attempts to evade the question by pretending she does not understand the question, she tells her readers that she was "heartily disgusted" with the doctor. The doctor continues asking "many more questions fully as useless and senseless" as the previous one, and eventually comes to the conclusion that Bly is "positively demented." To this, Bly remarks that she "began to have a smaller regard for the ability of doctors than [she] had ever before" (Bly 43). Here, we see how Bly does not simply report on the events that happen within the asylum the way a traditional journalist would. Instead, she constantly includes her own opinions along with the facts, passing judgement as she describes her experiences. This is similar to how Koenig chooses to present her report in *Serial*, where she peppers each episode with personal asides, offering listeners the facts of Syed's case, but also her own feelings and opinions on it in equal measure. For example, in "Episode 1: The Alibi," Koenig lambasts a misstep that Christina Gutierrez, Syed's lawyer during the trial of Hae Min Lee's murder, had made while assembling Syed's case. Here, Koenig informs listeners that there was a witness named Asia McClain who could corroborate Syed's alibi during the time of the murder. She had written an affidavit attesting to seeing Syed in the library at the time when Hae Min was allegedly being murdered in a Best Buy parking lot. However, McClain was never contacted and thus, was never put on the stand during trial. If Koenig was taking a traditional approach to journalism, she would have stopped here, having given listeners the facts of the incident. However, she goes on to provide her impressions of what these facts mean, telling listeners that "[i]t would be natural for the judge to

wonder, why can't the defense produce this Asia person?" Breaking even further from the detached approach of traditional journalism, Koenig also offers her own opinions and inserts herself into the narrative, by adding: "I mean, anyone would wonder. I wondered. I wondered if maybe she was pressured into writing that affidavit. And I wondered if she was hiding something" ("Episode 1: The Alibi"). Here, the anaphora of "I wondered" clearly foregrounds Koenig's presence in the report, a key characteristic of immersion journalism, where the reporter's personality is not effaced, but is made prominent. Ordinarily, such subjective approaches to journalism make the report unreliable as it does not exercise the detached, disinterested approach that is supposed to ensure a neutral, unbiased report. However, for *Serial*, this subjective approach is precisely what gives Koenig credence as it enables her to signal her resistance against authoritative institutions.

This is also seen in the vocal quality of *Serial*, which should be addressed as it is a podcast. Multimodal Studies demands that as art begins to "use an increasing variety of materials and to cross boundaries between the various art, design and performance disciplines, towards multimodal *Gesamtkunstwerke* (a work of art that uses multiple forms), multimedia events and so on," we must also begin to look at *how* these modes work together in order to communicate its message (Kress and van Leeuwen 1). An offshoot of multimodal studies is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which draws from the similar awareness that any attempt at "meaning-making involves selecting from different modes" and "media," and then "combining these selections according to the logic of space ..., time, or both," with each mode and medium has a specific role helping a text signify, and work in sync with the other modes and mediums also present within the text in a dynamic and cohesive manner (Djonov and Zhao 1). However, CDA takes this

observation a step further, and involves itself also with “the critique of the hegemonic discourses and genres that affect inequalities, injustices and oppression in contemporary society,” and that any sustained attempts in CDA “must relate texts to their co-texts, immediate situational context, and broader sociocultural and historical contexts” and understand how these texts are embedded into society and have the power to shape, dictate or change social practices and relations (qtd in Djonov and Zhao 5). This is especially pertinent when it comes to thinking about how immersion journalism podcasts like *Serial* use sound to augment the aims of the podcast.

Unlike in print, voice is not a neutral medium. Michele Hilmes has noted that in early radio, women voices were marginalised as their “voices were deemed unsuitable for many kinds of broadcast because of the discomfort associated with the disembodied woman’s voice. Women could not represent the ‘neutral network’ as a news announcer for example, because their voices were too highly individual and had ‘too much personality’” (qtd in McCracken 189). This belief seems to have persevered well into twenty-first century technology, as the podcast, which was once “hailed back in 2004 as a “revolutionary” new tool for freedom of expression and endless creative opportunity, quickly copied the same gender stereotypes and realities that traditional broadcasting environments have demonstrated throughout history” (Shapiro, “Why are 70 percent?”). Women’s voices still suffer from the same criticism that plagued their predecessors – Jessica Grose from Slate’s *DoubleX Gabfest* as well as Tracey Wilson and Holly Frey from *Stuff You Missed in History Class* have both been the target of disapproval because of the way they speak. Grose’s voice was described as reminiscent of a “Valley girl and a faux socialite” (Gross, “From Upspeak to Vocal Fry”) and Wilson and Frey noticed that

reviews of their podcast, as well as “the podcasts that had women on them got disproportionately more vicious comments about what their voices sounded like, versus the podcasts with men on them, which got less of that,” all which suggest that the notion that women’s voices are still perceived as lacking authority is still well and alive today (Lucas, “These podcast hosts”).

However, for Raechel Tiffe and Melody Hoffman, scholars *and* podcast hosts themselves, this storm of criticism is simply a sign of the increasing amount of female voices in the world of podcasting. They observe that “thousands of podcasts are hosted on the internet, with more and more of them being hosted by a woman or multiple women” and find that this “is significant in a world that teaches [women] to take up less space and be quiet” (116). Reflecting on both their experiences as podcasts hosts as well as the experiences of female podcast hosts in general, they understand the podcast as “a medium from which to better understand the ways in which women are uniquely subjugated in the media, and more importantly, how this medium becomes a tool of resistance” (118).

In *Serial*, this “lack of authority” in the sound quality of a voice is not considered an impediment. Rather, it serves as currency in challenging truth claims made by institutions that are able to be ‘objective.’ This becomes evident when we trace *Serial* back to its ‘parent’ radio show. As *Serial* began as a spin-off of one of WBEZ Chicago’s radio shows, understanding *Serial*’s place as a text that challenges institutions of authority and the role that sound plays in this resistance begins with understanding the ethos which informs the production and presentation of *This American Life*. This ethos is one that *Serial* and its host, Sarah Koenig largely adheres to throughout the course of the podcast. There is a spirit of resistance that underpins the overall objective of *This American Life*,

one that pushes back against the increasing encroachment into and the appropriation of mass media outlets by political structures and agendas. Marc Fisher notes that the popularity of *This American Life* can be attributed to the fact that the radio show fills in a gap that has been left open by an increasing mistrust of the mass media by the general public, noting that “[f]rom the left, where corporate consolidation is seen as a villain that is homogenizing and softening a tradition of tough reporting, to the right, where the liberal elite is viewed as a force that is skewing and warping news coverage, the credibility of the media is waning.” This spirit of resistance seems to be suggested by Ira Glass’ voice, as well as the voices of the people that featured on *This American Life*. The show “does not sound polished in the ways we know from TV and radio,” thus distinguishing itself from the smooth and competent manner through which the increasingly disreputable mass media outlets deliver news and information, as this professionalism is a sign of control by some greater form of authority. Despite the fact that *This American Life* is highly edited to create this ‘unpolished sound,’ the seemingly ‘amateur’ quality of *This American Life* and its hosts creates “a sense of ease, informality and direct, unfiltered access,” and places the listener squarely in the position of the “ultimate arbiter of truth,” thus side-stepping the ever-present threat of manipulation and propaganda that haunts traditional news outlets and mass media (Marc, “It’s a Wonderful Life”). *Serial* also bears these stylistic hallmarks in terms of vocal quality and presentation. Unlike traditional radio voices, Koenig’s voice is personable, and friendly, and she, like the voices on *This American Life*, “can be heard doing what everyone else in the history of broadcasting has edited out: swallowing saliva, smacking their lips, sliding over syllables, giggling” (Marc, “It’s a Wonderful Life”). She hems and haws, occasionally stumbling over her words, and in some instances, commits

mild grammatical errors, thus setting herself apart from the calm, detached and polish manner of speaking that is usually affected by traditional forms of news reporting on the radio.

Together with the inclusion of her own personal opinions and feelings throughout the podcast, Koenig has a vested interest in eschewing all pretense of objectivity in *Serial*. Historically, the authority of journalism, like that of the legal and medical professions, has been underwritten by their claims to objectivity. However, as we have seen in “Into the Madhouse,” objectivity is impossible to achieve, and these experts in the fields of law and medicine still allowed their findings to be coloured by their own bias. Thus, by breaking away from the detached and disinterested approach that journalism historically used, Koenig circumvents accusations of hypocrisy. She does not pretend to be completely objective, and by doing so, seem more reliable and honest than any other observer.

Section VI Part II: Serial’s Critique of the Legal System

Conceptualising *Serial* as a female investigative journalism podcast allows us to come to a more complex understanding of the implications behind its investigation into Adnan Syed’s claims of innocence. In the opening of “Episode 1: The Alibi,” Koenig establishes the premise of the podcast by telling listeners: “For the last year, I’ve spent every working day trying to figure out where a high school kid was for an hour after school one day in 1999.” If we understand *Serial* as just another podcast that discusses a true crime case, then the podcast is simply an investigation into Adnan’s steadfast and enduring claims of innocence. However, treating *Serial* as a work of investigative journalism transforms it into a contemporary expression of the longer tradition of female writing and storytelling which critiques the belief in the reliability of methods like

scientific objectivity and the legal system in ascertaining truth, as well as the denunciation of society's confidence in the experts that carry out investigations via these methods. In *Serial*, Koenig points out that the legal system has unfairly convicted Adnan despite the lack of physical evidence tying him to the murder. In doing so, she highlights that the methods used by the legal system to establish the truth is not objective as it is still subject to personal bias.

At the beginning of *Serial*, Koenig's investigation seems to be motivated by trying to figure out if Adnan's claims of innocence were true. In "Episode 1: The Alibi," Koenig meets Rabia Chaudry and her brother, Saad, who are friends of Adnan. As they speak to Koenig about the case, they reveal that the motive supplied by the State was "ridiculous" and that "there was nothing linking [Adnan] to the crime — no DNA, no fibres, no hairs, no matching soil from the bottom of his boots." The only thing the State had against Adnan was "one guy's story, a guy named Jay." Following this meeting, Koenig tells listeners "what I took away from the visit was, somebody is lying here." She narrows it down and says "either it's Jay or it's Adnan. But someone is lying. And I really wanted to figure out who." However, by the end of the podcast, after spending more than a year talking to witnesses, uncovering new evidence and carrying out experiments, Koenig does not come to a conclusion. She does not accuse Adnan of guilt, nor does she state with conviction that he is innocent. Instead, she turns the focus to the legal system, pointing out that the only hard evidence that the state had was that "Jay knew where the car was," and "based on the information we have before us, I don't believe any of us can say what really happened to Hae." In light of that, Koenig argues that "[a]s a juror I vote to acquit Adnan Syed. I have to acquit. Even if in my heart of hearts I think Adnan killed Hae, I still have

to acquit. That's what the law requires of jurors," subtly criticising the jury that voted to convict Adnan for making an unjust decision based on conjecture rather than irrefutable evidence ("Episode 12: What We Know"). By doing so, Koenig calls attention to the *process* of finding the truth, rather than focusing on what the truth is in itself. *Serial*, then, is not simply an exercise in trying to figure who actually killed Hae Min Lee, but a deeper study of the methods used in this case to establish the truth regarding Hae Min's murder.

In the absence of physical evidence, it is the testimony of Jay Wilds, who claimed that he was an accomplice to Adnan for the murder of Hae Min Lee, which convinced the jury that Adnan was guilty. Exploring Jay's involvement in Adnan's conviction allows Koenig to point out that using testimony to determine the truth of an event is flawed because stories told by individuals are unreliable as they are susceptible to the fickleness of memory or more dangerously, malicious manipulation.

Jay's role in Adnan's conviction is introduced in "Episode 1: The Alibi," where listeners find out that "[i]n the early morning of February 28, 1999, Adnan was arrested by Baltimore City detective." Koenig informs listeners that "what [he] didn't know is that just hours before they picked him up, the cops had interviewed his friend Jay." By including this additional bit of information, Koenig hints at the importance of Jay's story to the case, as it directly contributed to Adnan's arrest and eventual conviction. She plays a tape recording of the interview, where Jay tells policemen that he initially had a conversation with Adnan, who told him that "he was going to kill that bitch, Hae [Min] Lee." In this segment of the podcast, Jay's testimony is spliced with Koenig's narration, where she summarises certain portions of the recording. After we hear Jay telling policemen about what Adnan said about Hae Min, Koenig takes over and listeners hear

her relaying Jay's story, instead of listening to Jay tell it himself. However, Koenig is careful to remind us that she is telling Jay's story, prefacing claims with "Jay says," or "[a]ccording to Jay." Highlighting her take-over of Jay's narrative reminds listeners that what they are getting is second-hand, and subtly hints to listeners that what stories *are* are simply second-hand recounts of an event that happened. It is always filtered through a medium and is always at risk of being unreliable ("Episode 1: The Alibi").

In "Episode 4: Inconsistencies," Koenig uses Jay's constantly changing testimonies to highlight how using stories to access the truth is an unreliable method. Jay's recount of what he did with Adnan on that fateful day is never consistent. She reads from the notes of the detective that interviewed Jay, telling listeners that at first, Jay gives the policemen a very vague recount of the day, saying he "walked to the mall, got his girlfriend a new bracelet for her birthday," then "hung around" with the brother of Jennifer Pusateri and then "talked to Adnan sometime in the afternoon." However, "twenty minutes later they start taping and Jay tells them a whole different story." This is the first of Jay's many abrupt changes to his testimony as to what happened on the day itself. Later, Koenig tells us "[t]he cops interview him at least four times that [she] knows of," and that "two of those are on tape." She also notes that he tells this story twice, because of the mistrial that happens during the first proceeding, and concludes that "at least, six times he's told what happens." However, "each time," Koenig tells us, "some details shift." She gives us some examples, such as the mall where Adnan and Jay go on the morning of the murder. In the first tape, Jay tells policemen that they went to "Westville Mall," but in the second tape, recorded two weeks later, he says they went to "Security Square Mall." This, Koenig acknowledges, is a small detail that one could explain away as a mistake, where

“[m]aybe Jay misspoke when he said Westview initially.” She then tells us other, more significant details that also shift in between re-tellings, where Jay tells policemen that “[t]hey’re grabbing some food at a restaurant when Officer Adcock calls Adnan asking if he’s seen Hae.” However, Jay’s story changes yet again when he tells the story one more time, saying “that when that call comes, they’re at a friend’s apartment” (“Episode 4: Inconsistencies”). Jay’s constantly shifting accounts of what happened on the day of Hae Min’s murder suggests that if his ever-changing story is the only piece of evidence available, then no one will ever be able to know with certainty what truly happened when Hae Min was killed.

Koenig also draws attention to the possibility of manipulation in testimonies by mentioning the unethical steps that Kevin Urick, the prosecutor, may have taken in presenting his case to the court. Jay, who alleged that he was a reluctant accomplice to the murder, was a witness for the State and had been “charged with a felony.” Jay was charged for being an “[a]ccessory after the fact to first degree murder” because of his role in Hae Min Lee’s death. Koenig informs listeners that “[h]e pled guilty and had an agreement with the State that if he cooperated ... his sentence would reflect that.” Ultimately, Koenig tells us that “[i]n the end, he got no jail time.”

In order to make this plea, Jay had a lawyer named Anne Benaroya, who represented him pro-bono despite the fact that “she was a private defense attorney.” While being interrogated by Christina, Jay admits that Kevin provided him a lawyer, a point that Christina believed “would change the course of the proceedings” and lead to Adnan’s acquittal. She tells the court that “[t]here is no jurisdiction in America that affords a prosecutor the right to pick counsel for its witnesses,” emphasizing the irregularity of the

situation by exclaiming “Nowhere!” Koenig simplifies Christina’s indignation to her listeners, explaining that “[i]f Jay got a free lawyer thanks to the State ... that’s what’s called a benefit. It’s worth money, and it could look like Jay is being paid by the state for his testimony,” or even worse, “Jay felt beholden to the State for giving him this benefit, and therefore might lie to please them” (“Episode 10: The Best Defense is a Good Defense”). Christina’s arguments in court indicates yet another reason why relying on testimony may not be effective at getting to the truth of an event. It shows that testimony can be manipulated to suit a specific agenda, and thus obscure the truth of what really happened.

While manipulation of testimony can impede the process of understanding what truly happened, it may still be possible to parse through the changes if there is a clear agenda behind the manipulation. However, Jay’s consistently shifting stories allow for Koenig to surface a more complex issue regarding manipulated testimonies. Of Jay’s ever-changing testimony, Koenig says that “some of these discrepancies seem small to me but understandable and some are significant and confounding,” suggesting that the *way* stories shift can also make apprehending the truth more difficult (“Episode 4: Inconsistencies”). After highlighting the changing detail of where Adnan and Jay were after the murder, Koenig suggests that it is easy to “chalk them up to Jay trying to protect his friends — or trying to protect himself.” However, she highlights a discrepancy that she describes as “the mother of what the cops call Jay’s inconsistencies” and involves “where Adnan first showed him Hae’s body in the trunk of the car.” She plays the first tape, recorded on February 28th, where Jay tells the policemen: “I went to pick him up from off Edmondson Avenue at a strip and he, uh, popped the trunk open and...” Here, the policeman interjects

to ask him a question about Edmondson Avenue, but the implication is clear — in this first interview, Jay establishes that he first sees the body there. However, on March 15th, Jay tells policemen that he saw Hae Min’s body while in a Best Buy parking lot. Koenig explains that this shift is “a problem for the cops ... [b]ecause it is not something you forget — where you saw a dead body.” But for Koenig, what is more pertinent here is not so much that the shift happens, but why it happens. She wonders out loud, “[i]t’s not a slip of the tongue and it’s not clear what the calculation is. ... What’s the advantage of one place over the other? Why tell this lie?” (“Episode 4: Inconsistencies”). This surfaces a more complex problem with the manipulation of stories. If the *reason* for manipulating the story is evident, then one might be able to make an educated guess as to what the lie is. For example, in the incident between State prosecutor Kevin and Jay that was mentioned earlier, it was clear that Kevin had a vested interest in having Jay tell a story that would make Adnan look guilty. For that, one could reasonably suggest that Jay is lying about Adnan being the one who killed Hae Min. However, as Koenig mentions, the shifting locations for the trunk-pop has no clear agenda behind it, so there is no way to tell if Edmondson Avenue or the Best Buy parking lot is the lie. Thus, if it is not clear what the agenda for manipulation is, then the truth becomes murkier. This more complex criticism about relying on stories to access the truth is also reiterated in a later episode, where Julie Snyder, one of the producers of *Serial*, is reviewing interview transcripts and notices a discrepancy between Jennifer Pusateri’s and Jay’s account of “where she picked him up on the night of the thirteenth. Synder also finds an inconsistency regarding where and when they got rid of Jay’s clothes and boots. Koenig tells listeners that “Jenn says she picked Jay up at Westview Mall, where she saw Adnan,” whereas “Jay says, that didn’t

happen. He says, she picked him up at his house, and that he dumped his clothes on the same night.” Here, Snyder cuts in and tells us that this discrepancy “hasn’t been reconciled” and “actually both kinda dig into it.” She then expresses absolute confusion, speaking in short, clipped, unfinished sentences, exclaiming that “somebody is wrong, and I don’t believe it’s an oversight, but I cannot work my head around — what is the — what is the lie that’s minimizing what?” This is a re-expression of Koenig’s confusion over Jay’s shifting trunk-pop story, where if the agenda for manipulating a story is unclear, then it becomes even more complicated and difficult to understand what the truth actually is. Koenig sums Snyder’s confusion up and states, “[w]hat’s the utility of which lie?” which is repeated by Snyder, who agrees and says “[y]eah. What’s the utility of which lie” (“Episode 12: What We Know”). Here, the repetition of the phrase and the double determiner of “what” and “which” illustrates how complicated unraveling the truth becomes when it is not clear what the agenda for manipulating stories are.

On top of addressing the different ways that the manipulation of stories makes it difficult to access the truth of an event, Koenig also discusses what it means to have no story in a situation where the only access to the truth is through stories. The State laid out a case that accused Adnan of killing Hae Min sometime between 2:15pm, when Woodlawn High School let out its students, and 2:36pm. However, Adnan has no story to refute this. Koenig tells us that “[a]fter school is when his memories become nonspecific. Usually we did this, or we probably would have done that.” When we hear Adnan speak, he is garbled, confused and non-sequitur, saying that it “seems like I remember things that are beneficial to me, but things that aren’t beneficial to me, I can’t remember.” He admits that his memories may not be his, saying that what he remembers of the day is “bits and

pieces that comes from what other people have said that they remember.” He concludes by telling Koenig: “the only thing I can say is, man, it was just a normal day to me. There was absolutely nothing abnormal about the day.” Here, Koenig points out how having no story can be just as confusing as having a constantly shifting story the way Jay had. It becomes “problematic ... [b]ecause it plays both ways.” Not having a story could be proof of *both* innocence and guilt. If Adnan “is innocent, right, it’s any other day, of course he doesn’t remember.” However, Koenig contends, “you can also read as, how convenient, he doesn’t remember the day. So no one can fact check him, or poke holes in his story. Because he has no story” (“Episode 1: The Alibi”).

With Adnan’s having no story and Jay’s ever-changing stories regarding the events that happened on the day Hae Min was killed, it was up to the legal system to arbitrate between the two and decide who to believe. Adnan was tried twice court, with Jay testifying at both trials. The first ended in a mistrial, whereas the second one found Adnan guilty and sentenced him to prison for life. Ideally, the legal system should be a trusted institution run by experts who are intelligent, skillful and unbiased in their attempts at determining the truth, while having safeguards in place to ensure that miscarriages of justice will not occur and unfairly condemn an innocent party. However, the conduct of jurors and lawyers in Adnan’s two trials suggest that the legal system can fail in determining the truth, casting doubt and suspicion on its supposedly objective methods. Koenig’s attack on the legal system arises from one simple, yet rather powerful assertion: the system is run by people, and people are fallible. Where Bly had only to deal with one individual, Judge Duffy, during her run-in with the legal system in her “Into the Madhouse,” expose back in the nineteenth century, the legal system that Adnan faced in

the twenty-first century is much more complex, and thus, are more susceptible to mistakes that can compound and cause the wrongful conviction of an individual. In *Serial*, Koenig closely examines all the different parties that make up the legal system, and points out where and how they could go wrong. In doing so, Koenig challenges the trust that we have in the legal system in establishing the truth and points out how the system could fail and end up oppressing innocent individuals.

Unlike Bly, who was at the mercy of a single judge, Adnan's fate was decided by a jury, which is made up of twelve ordinary individuals. Randolph Jonakait explains this shift towards the jury system as a "balance and check" against "the powers of governmental officials." According to Jonakait, "because judges are human, they can be affected by forces that impede neutral decisions," and as such, "juries protect against such human fallibility" (29). While it is true that juries can protect against the judge's human fallibility and lead to more trustworthy legal system, juries themselves are made up of human beings who can be just as fallible as a judge can be. Koenig explores this fallibility of jurors in *Serial* as individuals that are subject to misinformation and biases, which can lead to a wrongful conviction.

In the beginning of "Episode 10: The Best Defense is a Good Defense," Koenig plays an extended recording from Adnan's jury selection, where the judge, William Quarles, asks a pool of potential jurors some questions in order to ascertain if they can be fair and impartial. Firstly, the judge asks this of the pool: "Have you or any close family member ever been the victim of a crime, convicted of a crime, served time for a crime, or have pending criminal charges?" We hear eight individuals go up to the bench and explain their answers to Judge Quarles. After they finish informing him of their personal incidents,

Koenig interjects and says “Quarles asks all these people whether they think they could still be impartial jurors on Adnan’s case. Some say no and they get dismissed. Some say yes and he sends them back to their seats.” She informs listeners that Judge Quarles “was on the lookout for prejudice, all kind of prejudice.” While this recording shows listeners the kinds of checks and balances that are in place to ensure that the jury can be fair and impartial, it relies on the honesty of the potential juror in admitting that they cannot be impartial. Koenig alludes to this possible fallibility of the jury selection process by including one last exchange between a potential juror and Judge Quarles. This potential juror tells Quarles that he cannot be impartial because he had a friend who was of the Muslim faith and “seen him mistreat his family, his wife and everything,” to which Judge Quarles replies “[o]kay, I appreciate your honesty” (“Episode 10: The Best Defense is a Good Defense”). Should jurors not have the self-reflexivity to examine their own biases, or even worse, be untruthful about the prejudices that they hold within them, the jury will be compromised and these checks and balances of questioning the potential jury pool will be rendered useless.

Furthermore, there are certain kinds of innate human tendencies within jurors that can sway a jury, but cannot be easily identified through the kind of questioning that we hear Judge Quarles carry out. In “Episode 8: The Deal with Jay,” Koenig plays a recording of Christina Gutierrez, Adnan’s defense lawyer, cross-examining Jay Wilds on the stand. Wilds was the prosecution’s star witness, claiming that he aided and abetted Adnan in burying Hae Min’s body after he had murdered her. In this recording, Christina is trying to discredit Wilds’ story in court and pin the murder on Wilds himself. Her manner of interrogation is loud and aggressive as she interrogates Wilds, her voice taking on a jarring,

sing-songy cadence that comes off as antagonistic and patronising. Following this recording, Koenig wonders if “moments like this hurt Adnan’s case rather helped it, because, Jay seems like the underdog.” She explains that “[i]t’s Baltimore. Half the jury is black, seven out of twelve actually,” and to them, “Jay probably comes off as a nice young man and this white lady is yelling at him” (“Episode 8: The Deal with Jay”). Here, Koenig points out that the black jurors could have been swayed by their personal bias, and led them toward convicting Adnan not based on the facts, but on the sheer optics of having a white woman berate a black man on the stand. This sort of bias is not something that can be predicted, identified and removed during the jury selection process, and yet, it can have untold effects on influencing the jury in a certain direction.

In the same episode, Koenig also points out how jurors do not always have access to all the information that has been gathered regarding their case, and how this may affect their decision to convict or acquit. She interviews Stella Armstrong, a juror who voted to convict Adnan. Koenig spoke to Armstrong as she “wanted to know, from Stella Armstrong, why she voted to convict Adnan Syed,” and informs listeners that upon hearing the question, Armstrong “immediately talked about Jay, that she believed him.” Here, we hear from Armstrong directly, who tells Koenig that she remembered being struck by Wilds’s testimony. She was convinced that Wilds was telling the truth as she believed there was no reason for Wilds lie about helping Adnan move the body, as “[h]e still had to go to jail.” However, when Koenig informs Armstrong that Wilds actually “didn’t go to jail,” Armstrong is at first surprised, then thoughtful, muttering “[t]hat’s strange. That’s strange...” in a pensive tone, as if suddenly seeing the case from a completely new angle (“Episode 8: The Deal with Jay”). Through this exchange, Koenig

highlights how this one juror's vote was based on incomplete information and could have been reversed should she have had access to all of it. By doing so, she surfaces yet another potential point of failure in the legal system, where uninformed jurors could end up handing down wrongful convictions.

Another section of the legal system that Bly did not have access to is having a lawyer. When Bly is sent to the courthouse, she is accompanied by a police-officer and the assistant matron of the Temporary Home and both are treated by Judge Duffy as character witnesses to Bly's supposed insanity. Both attest to her erratic behaviour and Bly is sent to the insane ward in Bellevue Hospital. Because her intention was to be sent to an asylum, she did not need to defend herself against this decision made by the judge. However, the fact that she did not have access to one is troubling, especially when we take into account the many women who were wrongly judged of having lost their sanity and unjustly committed to an insane asylum. These women, as mentioned in an earlier section, were mostly sent there on the basis of someone else's accusations, and had no way of defending themselves. As such, the role of a lawyer in the legal system should lead to better representation for these maligned individuals, giving them useful and constructive ways to resisting false claims and avoiding wrongful sentencing. However, Koenig's discussion of Christina Gutierrez, Adnan's lawyer during his trial, shows how lawyers are fallible, and their errors could invariably hurt the very individuals they are tasked to protect.

In the first episode, Koenig describes how Adnan's case was brought to her attention by a friend of Adnan named Rabia Chaudry, who "thought the attorney botched the case-- not just botched it, actually, but threw the case on purpose so she could get more money for the appeal." According to Rabia, she believed Christina needed the money

because “[s]he’d been sick” during Adnan’s trial (“Episode 1: The Alibi”). Koenig discusses Rabia’s claims in greater detail within a later episode, where she tells listeners that she will “address this question head on. Did she blow it?” Koenig eventually asserts that “I do not agree with Rabia’s assessment of Christina. I do not believe Christina threw the case on purpose” on the basis of “the transcripts and watching the trial videos,” where Koenig observes Christina “scrapping on Adnan’s behalf at every opportunity.” However, she concedes that “it does seem as if something not right was happening at the time” (“Episode 10: The Best Defense is a Good Defense”). As such, while she does excuse Christina from the accusation that she deliberately mishandled the case, Koenig does admit that there are circumstances that can cause a lawyer to become an ineffective counsel to the clients they have sworn to protect.

When Adnan is first accused of murdering Lee, Christina, one of the top lawyers in Maryland, is recommended to his family. Koenig mentions Christina’s accolades as a lawyer, informing listeners that she was “was a giant in the profession ... [n]ot just in Maryland, but nationally,” and that in the course of her investigation, “about six people” told Koenig that Christina “was brilliant, not in a hyperbolic way either.” As such, when Adnan’s family “consulted with friends and leaders at the mosque about who to hire,” “everyone said, she’s the best, she’s the best” and Adnan’s family was “begging her to take [the] case.” Koenig tells us that the family “felt like they were lucky to get her.” Here, Koenig expresses the faith that individuals put into their lawyers, hoping that they will defend their clients from unfavourable outcomes in their court cases. And to some extent, Christina seems to live up to expectations at first. Adnan speaks glowingly of “Miss Christina,” telling Koenig that “if you combined a doctor, a nurse, a school teacher, a

coach and your parents ... then you may have an idea of how much I trusted Miss Christina.” Koenig tells us that in Adnan’s first trial, the jury was polled and they were “giving the indication that they’re going to acquit,” suggesting that Christina was at first effective in defending Adnan. However, this first trial ended in a mistrial, requiring a second trial, where Adnan was eventually convicted of murdering Lee despite the fact that there was reasonable doubt that he actually committed it. Koenig tells us that the reason for the mistrial is Christina. She plays a recording of a moment during the first trial, where Christina tells the court that she wants to block prosecutor Kevin Urick’s request to show the jury “exhibit thirty-one to the jurors” on the grounds that she had not seen it prior to the trial. However, Judge Quarles calls the two lawyers to the bench and informs Christina that she had “already stipulated” to this piece of evidence, accusing her of lying in court. After the recording ends, Koenig comments: “I don’t want to overdo it here, but it’s possible that had this bench conference not happened, Adnan’s whole life could have been different” (“Episode 10: The Best Defense is a Good Defense”). Here, Koenig implies that even the most acclaimed lawyer can make mistakes that would severely impact the clients that they are defending. Christina, or more specifically, Christina’s conduct during the time period where she is hired to defend Adnan, makes for an interesting case study in the ways in which lawyers can be prone to error and can fail to defend their client, leading to an unfair and unjust sentencing by the court.

As was mentioned earlier, Christina was unaware of the racial dynamics during her aggressive interrogation of Wilds, a young black man, in front of a jury of black individuals. While Christina’s aggression could simply be seen as an expression of her forceful approach in court, which was described by Judge Quarles as “a pitbull on the

pantleg of justice,” there was another moment at Adnan’s trial where Christina exhibits this lack of awareness regarding racial dynamics and the ways in which it could have influence the decision of the jury. Koenig tells listeners that despite the fact that the jurors claimed that “Adnan’s religion didn’t affect their view of the case,” “stereotypes about Adnan’s culture were there lurking in the background.” However, Christina’s opening statement in the trial emphasised, rather than effaced, Adnan’s Pakistani origin and Islamic religion, inadvertently intensifying any latent bias in the jurors. Koenig tells listeners that Christina “obviously knew, despite what happened at jury selection, that the jurors might be prone to anti-Muslim, anti-foreigner sentiment.” In spite of this, she chooses to lecture the jury about Pakistan and Islam, spending “what seemed to [Koenig] a *nutty* amount of time during her opening, talking about what an immigrant is, what a mosque is, what Pakistan is.” For example, she describes Pakistan as a country “[a] country formed in the Arab world in the tip of the land mass called Asia,” calling attention to both Adnan’s racial and religious otherness (“Episode 10: The Best Defense is a Good Defense”). This insensitivity on Christina’s part troubles the objectivity that jurors are supposed to have while listening to a case as she increases their suspicions of Adnan and confirms biases that they may have had of his race and religion that could have motivated him to murder Hae Min.

Despite Koenig’s disagreeing with Rabia’s belief that Christina botched the case for money, she does provide listeners with some reasons as to why Rabia would come to such a conclusion, tacitly admitting that one of the reasons how the legal system can fail the innocent is corrupt lawyers. Listeners also hear from Shamim Rahman, Adnan’s mother, who tells Koenig that Christina initially asked for fifty thousand dollars to

represent Adnan, but “that fee would more than double by the end of the second trial.” Koenig tells listeners that “toward the end of the second trial, Christina had begun to bully them about money,” demanding ludicrous amounts in order to hire experts for the case that never showed up. Furthermore, it is not only Adnan’s family that Christina demands money from. Koenig also informs listeners of another couple who had retained Christina’s services in their own legal proceedings. The couple, Ron and Sue Witman, tell a similar story to that of Shamim’s. “At first, she was great,” Koenig relays to her listeners, “[b]ut then as time went on, things started to get weird,” and this was “around the same time she was working on Adnan’s case.” Christina’s health had begun to flag and she was “hospitalised at length” by the end of that year as she “had diabetes. She had MS (multiple sclerosis)” and got “very very sick.” However, Christina persisted and “asked for an additional sixty five thousand dollars for work she had to know full well she couldn’t do” as well as “twenty five thousand dollars for an expert” that Christina never paid. The Witmans, Koenig tells listeners, “feel as though she was lying to them, trying to get as much money out of them” (“Episode 10: The Best Defense is a Good Defense”). The Witmans’ testimony of Christina’s conduct points out the possibility of corruption within the legal system, especially with lawyers who may place earning money ahead of defending their client.

Still, with all this damning evidence against Christina, Koenig tempers the accusations of corruption by suggesting that “a more generous assessment” of Christina’s mistakes “would be that Christina was in denial about how sick she was.” However, this does not mitigate the fact that her denial of how sick she was failed not just Adnan, but the Witmans as well. Christina’s slow, gradual spiral into crippling illness and her refusal to

acknowledge her inability to work suggests that not only is the legal system run by individuals who are susceptible to natural, unavoidable weaknesses, it is also threatened by the fact that these individuals may not recognise their own weaknesses nor have the right people around them to inform them that they cannot operate at proper capacity. As Ron puts it, “it should have been clear to everyone around her that Christina couldn’t keep up with her cases, but no one cried uncle” (“Episode 10: The Best Defense is a Good Defense”).

As such, the two sections of the legal system that should have helped Adnan avoid conviction based on the minimal evidence that was presented at Court ended up failing him on multiple accounts, allowing the prosecution to impose Jay’s damning accounts of the day Hae Min was killed onto Adnan and allow the Court to establish that version as the truth despite not having any concrete evidence that tied him to the crime. Both the jury and Gutierrez seem to have failed to exercise objectivity and were unable to completely eradicate their own biases and agendas while ascertaining the truth of Hae Min’s murder.

Section VI Part III: Media Technology: The New ‘Objectivity?’

For those listening in 2014 and beyond, the idea of Adnan having no story to account for the fateful afternoon when Hae Min was killed can come off as slightly absurd, considering that we now have many different ways to capture, record and store the things we do, see and experience in a single day. With cameras in the sky and on our phones, it is difficult to imagine Adnan’s situation happening today. This is something that Koenig herself recognizes, evident in the way she opens the first episode of *Serial*. Even before establishing the details of the case she will discuss in the podcast, she begins with a little thought experiment. She says: “I just want to point out something I’d never really thought

about before I started working on this story. And that is, it's really hard to account for your time, in a detailed way, I mean." To illustrate her point, she speaks directly to the listener, inviting us to participate in this thought experiment with her by asking "How'd you get to work last Wednesday, for instance? Drive? Walk? Bike? Was it raining? Are you sure?" Each question, essentially rhetorical, is delivered with increasing forceful urgency and scepticism, without pause for the listener to formulate a reply. This distresses the listener and creates within them an anxiety that is underscored by the conclusion of her thought experiment where Koenig empathetically says: "It's hard." Having provoked listeners into feeling this anxiety at the inability to recall their movements off the cuff, she explains to the listeners that this thought experiment was the "situation in the story [she's] working on, in which a bunch of teenagers had to recall a day six weeks earlier," and to make matters worse, "they had to do it without the benefit of texts or Facebook or Instagram" ("Episode 1: The Alibi"). Here, Koenig suggests that these technological developments that were not available to Adnan have the ability to alleviate the anxiety of forgetting. Media technology helps to record, capture and freeze a moment forever, trapping in place for future reference what would otherwise be lost into the ether of unreliable memories. Historically, this form of technology has always claimed to bring people closer to the facts of a situation or event as it is able to capture and reproduce "reality" with greater fidelity. Moreover, each wave of development in media technology aims to make the truth more accessible to the general public, allowing individuals to independently ascertain the veracity of claims about a specific event, rather than rely on 'objective' experts for information.

An early iteration of such forms of media technology is the realist novel that emerged in the 18th century. This project has made reference to the realist novel in an earlier section, citing Ian Watt's definition of formal realism as "a full and authentic account of human experience." It is this tenet of the realist novel that allows us to recast the novel as a kind of media technology that records, captures and transmits information that allows its readers to access "truth" in some way. A realist novel, according to Watt, is "under obligation to satisfy its readers with such details of the story as the individuality of the actors concerned," the "particulars of times and places of action, and is written with a 'largely referential use of language than is common in other literary forms' (31). Novels that did so were considered realist as it broke away from the romance genre that traded in types rather than in specific, individuated characters, played their stories out against an abstract setting and wrote in a style of language that was not reflective of contemporary usage. However, where Watt attributes this turn to the rise of a Protestant middle class, Michael McKeon sees this shift as a response to "two defining 'crises' that plagued the early modern period," summarized by Brean Hammond and Shaun Regan as the crisis over "how it is possible to use narrative to tell the truth," and a crisis over "the relationship between the external social order and internal values." Grappling with these two questions led to the genre of romance being "discredited because of its idealism and implausibility," and it was "gradually replaced by a narrative mode of naïve empiricism that was committed to truth-telling" (Hammond and Regan 9). As such, the novel was positioned as kind of medium that would record and transmit an accurate and truthful reflection of everyday experience.

While the novel claimed to be able to “approximate the texture of everyday happenings,” it was still only an approximation, and restricted to textual experience (Hammond and Reagan 2). As Friedrich Kittler argues, “writing...stored writing, no more and no less” (7). When the 19th century rolled around, new forms of media technology were invented. Rather than only containing written text, these new machines were able to record, store and replay sounds and images, allowing them to create a more faithful representation of reality. These machines could recreate a sensory experience that brought people closer to the experience of reality than simply reading off a page. Kittler points to the invention of the phonograph and the kinetoscope in 1892, and the consequent development of these machines into cinema as a turning point in media technology development as humanity suddenly had in their possession machines that could “record and reproduce the very time flow of acoustic and optical data.” More importantly, as Kittler points out most insightfully, these machines were finally able to store time (3). Essentially, these new inventions could encapsulate a moment, trap it in storage and replay it on demand, allowing individuals to access a point in time “as-is;” able to look at images and be enveloped by sounds that they would have experienced if they were actually there in person at the time.

In the 21st century, media technology has evolved along two trajectories. On top of being able to record and replay images and sound with even greater clarity, media technology today is marked by a sharp uptick in accessibility and speed of transmission. Cameras that can capture crystal-clear audio and visual information have shrunk down to such a manageable size that they are able to fit easily in a pocket or bundled unobtrusively with cell-phones, making such recording devices more readily available to the general

public. Recent developments in media technology have provided viewers with greater control and immediacy, providing people with an immediate and unfiltered access to a time, space or event. For example, recording devices are now capable of multidimensional recording, where images and videos can now be recorded in panorama, stitched together and presented in such a way that the viewer now has control over the frame and the angle of the shot, as they have access to multiple perspectives. This has been implemented across many videos hosted on the social networking site Youtube, where videos curated on their “Virtual Reality” channel allows viewers three hundred and sixty degree views of what an individual might see if they were to go hang gliding over Yosemite National Park (Nature on PBS, “Hang Glide over Yosemite”), take a tour of Japan’s ancient and modern marvels (Discovery, “Tour Japan’s Ancient History”) or even diving off the coasts of Italy to observe the threat of global warming to coral reefs (Time, “The Crystal Reef”). In these videos, viewers can swipe their screens to manipulate the angle of the camera and look wherever they like as they are no longer confined or hemmed in by a single frame. Social networking sites have also allowed for a greater immediacy in the recording and transmitting of information by media technology, with Facebook and Instagram providing their users with a “Live Video” option that can be used to seamlessly record and stream to viewers as they go. This sense of immediacy allows viewers to feel as if they are experiencing a situation in real-time, and lend these videos credibility as there is no time-lag between the recording and the transmitting where video manipulation could have been carried out.

This empowering of the individual through greater accessibility to media technology has resulted in greater democratisation, where individuals are able to establish

the truth about an event for themselves without having to rely on experts to understand what happened. One key example in recent times is the ways in which cell-phone recordings are currently being used to provide truthful accounts of altercations between policemen and black people. Where law enforcement could have previously gotten away with using brutal tactics on their suspects by falsifying police reports, cell-phone recordings now can preserve the facts of an incident and expose these policemen who use savage and cruel methods in dealing with their suspects, as seen in the cases of police brutality involving Eric Garner and Michael Brown. As Camille Studebaker notes, the ubiquity of cameras on cell-phones has led “many people have embraced their role as the watchdogs of law enforcement by recording incidents as they happen,” which has created “a new standard of accountability for police departments and filling in gaps that would otherwise remain unseen” (“Cell phones shed new light”).

As such, media technology in the 21st century seems to herald a new age where the truth becomes easily accessible. An event can be captured and replayed with accuracy, giving individuals unprecedented access to the situation and allow them to know what “truly” happened. This expectation for media technology to definitively establish the facts of a situation is reflected in *Serial*, where Koenig seeks out different forms of media technology in hopes of finally getting to the bottom of the afternoon in which Hae Min was killed.

When Koenig hears of Adnan’s alibi, in which he claims to be in the library during the time of Hae Min’s murder, she tries to find out if there are ways of proving Adnan was really there, aside from the shaky affidavit provided by Asia McClain. She zeroes in on a detail within a letter Asia sends Adnan, where she “mentioned there were security cameras

inside the library.” Koenig and her producer rush down to the library and begin to question the manager, asking if “there was a security system back in ‘99 that could’ve been checked at the time.” Here, both Asia and Koenig hope that the video cameras would have recorded and showed them the truth of Adnan’s whereabouts during that fateful day. However, Koenig comes up short, and in doing so, gestures towards one possible failure of media technology available at the time. The library recycled the video tapes, and “so even if on the very day that Asia had written her first letter” and “Adnan’s lawyer had run out to find the security tape, it probably would have been non-existent” because it would have been overwritten by then. However, this does not dissuade Koenig whatsoever, and she asks if there was evidence that Adnan was actually using the computer to check his email. When the librarian tells her that there was, Koenig asks: “and what was the system then?” “System” conjures up a very mechanical image, indicating Koenig’s hope for some kind of media technology that might have captured Adnan’s presence in the library. Thus, when the librarian tells her that it was simply a “[p]iece of paper and pencil,” Koenig’s disappointment is palpable and suggestive of the deep and abiding belief that individuals in the 21st century have in media technology and its ability to allow individuals to access the truth of a specific event (“Episode 1: The Alibi”).

This reliance on media technology and the unwavering belief in its ability to accurately tell the truth is also how Adnan gets convicted. Despite Jay’s ever-changing story, prosecutors still use it to nail Adnan with the murder of Hae Min because it seems to line up with a key piece of evidence that they believed had recorded the location of Adnan’s phone during the day she was killed. In the investigation of Hae Min’s death, detectives subpoena Adnan’s cell phone records, which Koenig describes as “arguably the

most important piece of paper among all the thousands in this case” as the detectives and prosecutors in court will use it as a “map. And they’ll follow it call by call by call, like footprints that end up at Adnan’s front door” (“Episode 4: Inconsistencies”). Koenig tells us that during the trial, “the prosecution had a big blow up chart of the call records ... with blanks beside each call” and “[e]very time a witness identified a call on the list, the prosecutor would label it with a sticker.” Adnan recounts the experience, saying that “[i]t was a pretty powerful thing” to witness in court as the act of labeling a call every time as Jay was testifying made it seem like “they were using the cell phone records as proof for all the testimony.” This shows how much weight and influence media technology has in convincing individuals that it allows them unfettered access to the truth of an event. It is used as a kind of proof that validates claims to truth, and allays the anxiety that comes with the unreliability of stories. This is something the prosecutors knew, and exploited during the trial, as evidenced by their assertions that “you might have your doubts about Jay, but the call record doesn’t lie.” Every time a call was made, a cell tower was pinged, and that was something, the State said, that “Jay couldn’t possibly have known which towers were getting pinged when. He couldn’t fabricate that.” “So,” Koenig tells us, “the cell towers, and the calls and Jay story, the way they all meshed, prosecutors argued, was irrefutable” (“Episode 5: Route Talk”).

While Koenig does not necessarily believe Jay’s stories, she also exhibits this belief that the cell tower records were irrefutable. In “Episode 5: Route Talk,” she and her producer, Dana Chivvis, find “a handwritten itinerary, dated March 18, 1999” where Jay laid out a route for the cops detailing what he and Adnan did that day. Koenig and Dana then try to “recreate what Jay says happened on that day,” and as they drive around

Baltimore, it slowly emerges that Jay's story does not fit into the call log and cell tower records as neatly and as closely as the prosecutors made it out to be. As they try to recreate the timeline, they reach the Park and Ride where Hae Min's car was dumped. Here, Jay tells detectives that he makes a call to a weed seller named Patrick, but Koenig tell us that "this is where things start to get off course." While there is indeed a call to Patrick on the log, it is "at 3.59pm," and Koenig and Dana have only made it to the Park and Ride at "a little after 3pm." Thus, Koenig declares that Jay's testimony "ha[s] a time problem." Later, Koenig and Dana go to a golf course, where Jay asserts that Adnan had made a call to his friend, Nisha. Here, Koenig finds that while "the time works for this one" as it "matches Jay's story," "[i]t doesn't match the cell tower in the call records" as it is pinging "a tower near where Jay tells cops they were driving that afternoon." This hole in Jay's story affects "all of these calls from the middle of the afternoon," suggesting that the prosecution was deceitful in its use of the cell tower records. In this short experiment, despite the fact that Koenig disagrees with the prosecutor's understanding of the events of the day via the cell tower records, she too, is putting stock in the fact that the cell towers are telling the truth; that they are accurately accounting for where the phone is, and by proxy, where Adnan and Jay are on that day ("Episode 5: Route Talk").

Koenig tell us that "[t]he most incriminating stop on their route that night is, of course, Leakin Park," which, according to Jay, is where they buried Hae Min's body. Because there were "two incoming calls, one at 7:09 and one at 7:16, that hit a tower at the northwest end of the park," it seemed to corroborate Jay's story, and thus, supports his claim that Adnan was involved in the murder of Hae Min. Koenig then asks Dana if Jay and Adnan "could ... have been someplace else besides digging a grave in the actual park,"

as the range of that cell-phone tower “reaches just beyond just the territory of the park.” Dana suggests that it is possible that the two could have been at Patrick’s house, or some nearby strips, but like the prosecution, she believes that “they probably were in Leakin Park,” as it would be too much of a coincidence if Jay lied and could come up with a story that had “the cell records corroborate the key points.” Here, Dana seems almost unreasonable, considering that listeners had just followed her and Koenig as they tested the prosecution’s timeline and had found issues with it. However, Dana’s assertions, juxtaposed with Koenig’s skepticism, hints at the problem of interpretation when it comes to using media technology as a method to ascertain the truth of what happened (“Episode 5: Route Talk”).

Section VII: Female Investigative Journalism Podcast as a Genre

After the first season of *Serial* ended, Adnan Syed’s conviction was overturned. This ruling, which came after seventeen years behind bars, was brought about by the work of lawyer and *Serial* podcast listener Susan Simpson, who uncovered a fax sheet stating that cell tower records that were used by the prosecution to convict Adnan of the crime were unreliable. There was a small loophole in the AT&T cell records they used to corroborate Jay’s story that lawyers on both sides of the case and even Koenig herself had missed. There was a cover sheet on the cell records that stated “Outgoing calls only are reliable for location status. Any incoming calls will NOT be considered reliable information for location” (Simpson, “Serial: How Prosecutor Kevin Urick Failed”). As was mentioned earlier, the most damning bit of evidence on the cell tower records were the two *incoming* calls that placed the phone in Leakin Park. However, with this new discovery on the call records, this would mean that prosecutors cannot safely say that Jay

and Adnan were in Leakin Park when Hae's body was supposedly buried. After the ruling, Simpson reflected on what the decision meant for the legal system as a whole, calling it a "wake up call for courts all over the US." She suggested that Syed's case "perfectly illustrated ... the dangers of misuse of forensic science," lambasting irresponsible "lawyers, prosecutors and defense attorneys" who [look] at scientific or engineering evidence and [say] 'I know how to use this to fit my case. I don't know how it works, I don't know what it means, but I can twist this around to work for the case'" (qtd in Khan, "The Reasons"). Simpson's harsh disapproval of the misuse of the cell tower records emphasizes the issue of interpretation that was gestured at in the podcast, when Dana and Koenig disagreed on whether the information from the cell tower records could really show that the two teenagers were in Leakin Park at the time. Simply having a record of what happen is not enough to establish exactly what happens as interpretation plays a huge part in parsing what the recorded information means. Thus, while media technology has the ability to record and store a log of what happened at a specific time and place, it does not necessarily ensure that the recording is completely objective and will always allow access to the truth.

The Black Tapes and *Limetown* join *Serial* in questioning the reliability of objective methods used to ascertain truth, but turn their focus away from the legal system and concentrating it on media technology instead. Despite investigating fictional mysteries in their shows, the two podcast present themselves as journalistic endeavours. The hosts of the two podcasts, Alex Reagan of *The Black Tapes* and Lia Haddock of *Limetown*, are characterised as journalists, and carry out their reporting with the same personal investment as *Serial*'s Koenig, physically involving themselves in unearthing information,

hunting down witnesses and conducting experiments for their story. Like Koenig, the reporting is also deeply personal, with Reagan and Haddock including their opinions and feelings as they go along. Furthermore, *The Black Tapes* styles itself as a podcast spin-off of a radio show called “The Pacific Northwest Stories,” a fictional backstory for the podcast that is evocative of *Serial*’s beginnings, whereas Lia Haddock identifies as a reporter with the fictitious “American Public Radio” in the first episode of *Limetown*, which, again, is reminiscent of the way *Serial* is an off-shoot of a larger radio show. They also use a similar reporting style to that of Koenig, colloquially known as the “NPR voice.” This voice, generally used by reporters on the National Public Radio syndicate, is defined by Teddy Wayne as a kind of reporting that uses “looser language,” and “generously employs pauses, and, particularly at the end of sentences, emphatic inflection,” resulting the “suggestion of spontaneous speech and unadulterated emotion (“NPR Voice”). The NPR voice has become the hallmark of female investigative journalism podcasts like *Serial*, with the hosts of *The Black Tapes* and *Limetown* affecting a similar reporting style to that of Koenig in *Serial*.

As such, there is clear trend in podcasts that is emerging. Like *Serial*, these podcasts also join the longer tradition of female writing and storytelling, featuring their own female investigative journalist uncovering the secrets behind a mystery and criticizing the objective methods used to ascertain truth along the way. *The Black Tapes* describes itself as a “serialized docudrama about one journalist’s search for truth, her enigmatic subject’s mysterious past, and the literal and figurative ghosts that haunt them both,” thus clearly positioning Alex Reagan as a journalist (“Our Shows”). This is also reiterated within the podcast itself in “Episode 2: A Tale of Two Tapes Part II,” where Nic

Silver, the ‘producer’ of *The Black Tapes*, expresses concerns over Reagan’s approach to accessing information needed for the podcast. Silver questions Reagan, informing her that her approach may not have been entirely ethical, to which she replies by consulting “two separate sections of the journalistic ethics code” and reading them out to Silver to defend her actions. In doing so, Reagan subtly reasserts her characterization as a journalist to listeners of the podcast. In *Limetown*, Annie-Sage Whithurst plays Lia Haddock, “an investigative reporter with APR” (“Episode 1: What We Know”). Like *The Black Tapes*, the creators of *Limetown* have also created a fake radio show in order to lend credibility to Haddock’s journalist credentials. Furthermore, Haddock is also given a backstory that bolsters her characterisation as a journalist. She informs listeners that she has a personal connection to the mysterious disappearance she investigates in her podcast, revealing to listeners that her uncle, Dr Emil Haddock, “was counted as one of the missing” and confesses that “it is fair to say that Limetown and the questions it left in [her] family played a large part in why [she] became a reporter in the first place” (“Episode 1: What We Know”).

Like Bly and Koenig, Reagan and Haddock become central characters in their report – their own experiences, struggles and relationships with others in the show often overshadowing the actual mystery they are investigating in their podcast. Their podcasts are marked by an explicit acknowledgement of the reporter’s subjectivity and personal bias. Reagan and Haddock acknowledge their personal investment and deeply subjective approaches in their investigation. As was earlier mentioned, Haddock’s interest in investigating and reporting on Limetown stems from a familial connection to the tragedy, one that she lays bare early on in her report. Similarly, while Reagan starts her

investigation bravely, her confidence starts to waver when the ‘Black Tapes’ begin to involve demons. Despite this, she does not shy away from revealing her fears and insecurity while investigating, telling listeners: “To be honest, this is the part of researching the paranormal that I wasn’t looking forward to. Ghosts I could handle. Demonic possession? Not so much” (“Episode 5: The Devil You Know”). She reiterates this fear again in another episode by saying “this week we’ll be digging into two of my least favourite aspects of paranormal investigation: demons, and psychiatric hospitals.” (“Episode 6: The Devil’s Door”).

In an article reviewing *The Black Tapes*, Nino Cipri notes a distinct shift in the explosion of podcasts that sprung up in the wake of *Serial*’s success, writing that “oddly enough, there seems to be a growing subgenre of ‘intrepid female journalist uncovers a supernatural conspiracy’” (“The Black Tapes Podcast”). Indeed, *The Black Tapes* deals with supernatural incidents and *Limetown* investigates a sudden and eerie disappearance of three hundred individuals from a neuroscience research facility. While Cipri considers this turn as “odd,” it becomes less surprising when these podcasts are understood as works that draw elements from the female Gothic novel, as well as subsequent forms of female writing and storytelling that were inspired by it (Cipri, “The Black Tapes Podcast”).

While *Serial* may not seem Gothic on paper, the chord progression that serves as the theme song for *Serial* is simple but creepy, and setting it at the beginning of each episode creates a sinister mood that will haunt the podcast as a whole as Koenig uncovers duplicitous witnesses, miscarriages of justice and possible conspiracies that may have unjustly put Syed in jail. Meanwhile, *The Black Tapes* and *Limetown* are more visibly Gothic with supernatural mysteries forming the central concern of their podcast.

Furthermore, the hosts themselves can also be thought of as female Gothic heroines, often finding themselves in great peril during the course of their investigation. For example, after meeting the first witness and survivor of the Limetown tragedy, Haddock comes slightly closer to unravelling the mystery behind the town. However, after she makes her way back to her hotel room, she is startled awake at “2:37 in the morning.” As she records, she narrates the experience in real time, telling listeners that she “woke up to someone banging on the door and shouting [her] name.” As she moves over to the window, she sees “what appears to be a man in his forties... slamming his head into [her] door.” She confronts him by shouting through the door, demanding to know what he “wants from [her],” to which the man replies by screaming “This is your warning, Lia Haddock!” (“Episode 2: Winona”). This incident will come to set the tone for the rest of the podcast as Haddock is constantly threatened by sinister phone calls and cryptic messages relayed through people connected to the Limetown tragedy, suffusing her entire report with a sense of danger that intensifies as her investigation progresses. *The Black Tapes*’ Reagan suffers from a similar form of harassment throughout her investigation into Dr. Richard Strand’s series of supernatural recordings, receiving mysterious voice recordings on her cellphone and at her office that try to warn her of the dangers she may have put herself in by working with Dr. Strand (“Episode 4: Turn that Frown Upside Down”).

Situating these podcasts in the larger trajectory of texts which involve female investigators and journalists reveals their pre-occupation with engaging in questions of truth and authority. Each of these podcasters run up against authoritative accounts of an incident, and have found them wanting, leading them to launch their own investigations in

order to uncover what cracks have been papered over, reassemble what has been pruned off and unearth what has been left in the interstices in official accounts of their individual mysteries.

The target in *The Black Tapes* and *Limetown* is media technology, which are tools that are used to record, store and transmit information. Historically, this form of technology has always claimed bring people closer to the facts of a situation or event as it is able to capture and reproduce ‘reality’ with greater fidelity. As machines, recordings made by media technology seem more trustworthy than eye-witness testimony as machines are supposedly objective and will not be influenced by bias, prejudice and personal agenda. However, as Susan Simpson’s discovery after *Serial*’s broadcast has come to show, media technology is still not able to provide an objective recount of the truth as recordings can be manipulated and misinterpreted. This susceptibility of media technology is explored in *The Black Tapes* and *Limetown*, where they challenge the deep and abiding reliance individuals in the twenty-first century have today on media technology to understand the truth of a situation or an event.

Section VIII: *The Black Tapes*

Part I: The Failure of Media Technology

The Black Tapes follows Alex Reagan, the host of a podcast spin-off from the fictional radio show called Pacific Northwest Stories. Originally a podcast that set out to cover “interesting people with interesting jobs,” Alex becomes intrigued by the subject of the pilot, in which she dives into the “crazy world of paranormal research.” While her investigation into this was slated to be a one-off episode, she meets a man named Dr. Richard Strand, a paranormal researcher with “degrees in religion, and psychology and

psychology from Yale” who strangely, “doesn’t believe in ghosts.” While interviewing him for the first episode, Alex stumbles upon a row of “numbered black VHS cases,” that contained recordings of supernatural incidents that Richard and his institute “[didn’t] have the resources or technology to disprove. Yet” (“Episode 1: A Tale of Two Tapes Part I”). It is the contents of these black VHS cases that will become the central focus of the podcast, hence the title, *The Black Tapes*. Like Sarah Koenig in *Serial*, Alex will question witnesses, uncover evidence and attempt to prove or disprove the validity of the recordings, and through her investigation, *The Black Tapes* surfaces a challenge towards *Serial*’s impassioned belief that media technology would allow us unfettered access to the truth of an incident by highlighting the need for interpretation and the possibility of manipulation when using media technology to access the truth.

Unlike in *Serial*, the mysteries that Alex investigates are all recorded. She is able to watch and listen to these ‘supernatural incidents’ that happened, and has access to these events in ways that Koenig only could wish she did during her own investigation. However, despite the fact that these incidents are on record, Alex is unable to decisively state if each incident is truly the work of supernatural forces. During her investigation, she encounters many recordings that do not fully capture the supernatural incident at hand, which suggests that while media technology may have the potential to record incidents and replay it back for future reference, it is liable to having gaps within its recording, obscuring certain facets of the event. While investigating an incident involving a demon board, which is a kind of Ouija board made for “more serious communications ... [w]ith darker spirits,” Alex is shown a recording of an experiment that was “shot on the campus of the University of Washington in 1993.” In this experiment, the researcher, Professor

Isaiah Roth, and some volunteers play with a demon board. At first, Alex watches the recording and sees the planchette moving across the board, seemingly communicating with a man named Samuel, who was murdered in 1985. One of the participants, Michelle Braid, reacts badly to this information as she had a grandfather named Samuel who died in that same year. As Isaiah presses on with the questioning, listeners hear the planchette slide wildly around the board, the scraping sounds reaching a crescendo and then clattering off the board, followed by the surging of electricity. Then, Isaiah whispers “[o]h my God” in tones of wonderment and horror before the lights click off (“Episode 8: Board to Death”). The individuals involved in the experiment are left in the darkness, and so are we. Here, the podcast leverages on the medium’s “audio-only” quality in order to physically manifest the problem that Alex is experiencing in investigating this specific ‘Black Tape.’ Just as we are unable to see the recording, she too, is unable to see anything past this point of the recording because of the power outage. This ‘blindness’ that both the listeners and Alex experiences helps to surface a problem with relying on media technology as a method through which we can apprehend the truth of an incident. Recording technology does have its limitations, such as requiring adequate lighting and having proper camera positioning. This second limitation is also referred to in the investigation of this specific ‘Black Tape.’ After the recording ends, Alex asks Richard about the Isaiah’s final words in the recording. Richard is at first evasive, but as Alex presses him, insisting that “it looked like he saw something, in the room, across from him.” Here, Richard relents, and says that “[u]nfortunately, he was looking directly under the mounted camera” (“Episode 8: Board to Death”). As such, even though there is a recording of this incident, Alex does not have full access to the event as she is limited by

the camera angle and is unable to see beyond its frame. This is yet another failing of media technology and thus, a reason why it does not necessarily allow individuals access to the truth of a specific event.

Later, Alex follows up with two individuals who were directly involved with the experiment. She interviews Professor Peter Sodenfield, who “helped conduct that research back in 1993.” He tells Alex that Isaiah had told him that “he saw something standing there” under the camera that seemed to be a tall, dark figure. She asks if “anyone else report seeing that figure,” and Peter tells her of “a young woman in the group, the brunette in the video sitting to Dr. Roth’s immediate left.” This young woman is Michelle, the volunteer who had reacted badly to the demon board earlier in the episode. In her recount of the incident to Alex, Michelle focuses on the smell that was in the room, and dwells on it, describing it as “almost like a musk, but rotten. Like a wet rotten deer.” Bringing up the experience of smell gestures toward another limitation that cameras cannot capture and replay back later, thus highlighting another reason why media technology can never fully recreate a specific situation again. When Alex encourages her to elaborate on what she saw, she once again brings up the smell in the room, saying that “the musky dead animal smell was overwhelming at this point and that thing was just standing there.” With further prompting by Alex, Michelle goes on to describe “that thing” as having “two legs, but like an animal: tall, thick, maybe like a deer. And it had really long black hair covering its face. And it was ... smiling.” Michelle’s pre-occupation with the smell in the room, the one she describes like “a wet rotting deer” leads listeners to wonder if the visual description of “that thing” she saw was influenced by the deer-like smell (“Episode 8: Board to Death”).

Here, *The Black Tapes* introduces the idea that when confronted with the unknown, individuals will attempt to understand it through prior experience.

This will become important later, when Alex looks at a video recorded by a man named John Uvela. Before viewing the video, she engages in some friendly banter with John, mentioning that she's "seen more VCRs this month than [she has] in her whole life," to which John good-naturedly replies "[w]ell, some things you can't play on Blu-ray." The contrast between VCRs and Blu-rays suggest that the recording that Alex is going to watch will be of low quality and may not feature clearly defined images, an expectation that is further bolstered by John's description of the recording as an "amateur video of those caves back in '92" as well as the beginning dialogue of the recording itself, where a young boy yells at his friend, Johnny, to "hurry up!" to which Johnny replies, "give me a second, light's terrible!" Alex herself admits to the poor quality in her narration later as she describes the footage, saying that "the sun was setting so the images were grainy and not very clear." Listeners then hear a scuffling from within the cave, and the boys in the footage reacting to it. The camera jostles, someone swears, and the VCR stops. Here, Alex helpfully describes what she sees in the footage, telling listeners that "the boy named David yells. Something comes screaming out of the cave. Then they all run away." She muses that the 'something' "might be a bat flying really close to the camera," but John rewinds and pauses the video to allow Alex to look at the "something" with greater scrutiny ("Episode 12: Shadow Dancing"). Here, John illustrates one benefit that media technology has in helping investigators to understand the truth of an incident as it allows them to pause, absorb and study discreet moments with greater detail.

Alex does not reveal to listeners what she sees until much later, when we hear her in conversation with Richard, who has also seen previously seen this tape. In this conversation, Alex is furious with Richard for not telling her about John's tape earlier. Here, Alex comes off as unreasonable, as listeners have no clue as to why she would be angry with Richard until she asks him: "[t]he description of what they saw flying out of that cave, do you remember?" He apologises and tells her he does not, to which Alex testily replies, "[h]er face. When he paused the video. It was exactly the same. The hair, the teeth, it was the dark cloven-hooved figure that woman described from the demon board experiment." Having already put Alex in a situation where she comes off as unreasonable, listeners are more likely to doubt her interpretation of what she saw. This, along with the fact that the footage was grainy *and* the reference to Michelle's description of the deer-like figure, works to suggest that Alex is perhaps suffering from pareidolia and is seeing patterns in things where they do not actually exist. Her interpretation of the video is thus influenced by her prior experience with Michelle's description of the dark shadow. This is further supported by Richard's response to her outburst; a curt dismissal of her conclusions by saying: "[t]hat sounds like you're reaching" ("Episode 12: Shadow Dancing"). Alex's engagement with John Uvela's recording shows how despite having a record of a specific incident filmed for posterity, it does not necessarily lead to a clear, definitive picture of what truly happens in an incident. Furthermore, that Alex and Richard have differing conclusions despite seeing the same thing suggests that media technology is not free from the need for interpretation. It does not always conclusively present a whole and indisputable picture of a situation.

Because these recordings still require interpretation to understand what has happened, the “truth” of an incident recorded by media technology will still be dominated by those who claim to take a more objective approach to interpretation. The first episode of *The Black Tapes* begins in a way that is almost identical to that of the first episode of *Serial*. Koenig begins her podcast by mentioning: “For the last year, I’ve spent every working day trying to figure out where a high school kid was for an hour after school one day in 1999” (“Episode 1: The Alibi”). Alex Reagan, occupying the same role as Koenig for *The Black Tapes*, begins the podcast by informing the listeners: “For the last two months, I’ve been immersed in the fascinating world of paranormal investigation.” This near-identical introduction where Reagan frames the objective of her podcast in this manner is a stylistic allusion that compels listeners to associate *The Black Tapes* with *Serial*, and draw a connection between the aims of Koenig’s podcast and *The Black Tapes*.

Serial’s opening begins with Koenig framing her entire investigation by a single question: “trying to figure out where a high school kid was for an hour after school one day in 1999” (“Episode 1: The Alibi”). This question, while seemingly simple and almost trivial on the surface, belies the larger aim of the podcast, in which Koenig tries to disprove the state’s version of what happened in that hour and offer alternative accounts. In *The Black Tapes*, Alex offers a similar question, rhetorically asking listeners: “And [listening to ghost stories] is fun because we know it’s not real. Ghosts don’t actually exist. Do they?” (“Episode 1: A Tale of Two Tapes Part I”) The similarity here then causes listeners to comfortably assume that *The Black Tapes* will share the same objective as *Serial* – to challenge a widely accepted truth deemed as the authoritative account through a concerted effort in investigating the other side (or sides) of the story.

Section VIII Part II: Media Technology and the Need for Interpretation

This rhetorical framing question that sets up the objective of *The Black Tapes* is also interesting in the way it models the tension between scientific objectivity and subjective experience. On one hand, there is the logical approach to the supernatural, that “we know it’s not real,” but the doubt expressed in her follow up “do they?” suggests that this podcast will directly challenge this rational approach (“Episode 1: A Tale of Two Tapes Part I”). This struggle between scientific discourse and subjective experience is mapped onto the gender binary where women are “defined as other to man” and “are subordinated to a regime of ideas, values and practices (patriarchy) in which their position is demarcated and authorised by ‘nature’ as different from and less than males in terms of powers, moral character and physical strength” (Botting 11). Mapping this tension between rational scientific discourse and unprovable subjective experience onto the gender binary suggests that women still retain their supposedly essential proclivity towards sentimentalism, irrationality and hysteria that hinder them from fully embodying a rational approach to understanding the world around them. This becomes evident in the short interviews that Alex carries out following her rhetorical “do they?” framing question. She asks her interviewees the same question: “Do you believe in ghosts?” and presents the answers of four people, three female, one male. The first interviewee, a woman, evades the question with humour and does not give a clear answer. The second is a man, who states that he does not believe in ghosts, but backtracks slightly when he seems to suddenly remember that “there was this one time...” The two other women unequivocally state their conviction in the belief that ghosts exist – one having heard a ghost pretending to be “her mother in the kitchen,” and the other having felt Anne Boleyn in the Tower of

London. That the only interviewee to express any doubt in the existence of ghosts is the male one is significant, as it associates the male gender with the rational and the logical. Furthermore, nestling his interview in between the two women who have had experience with the supernatural turns his dismissal of these people as “either looking for attention or schizophrenic” into accusations, and casts these individual experiences of women as trivial or hysterical, thereby reinforcing the “men-as-rational | female-as-irrational” binary associations (“Episode 1: A Tale of Two Tapes”).

As Alex conducts these interviews, we hear noises in the background: a busy street, the low, rushed hum of traffic and occasional bird chirping which suggests that Alex has interviewed regular, everyday people she finds off the street. However, this stereotype of the “men-as-rational | female-as-irrational” binary is not limited to just the general public. Alex later interviews two experts, Dr. Emily Dumont and Dr. Richard Strand, who stand at opposing sides on the debate over paranormal existence. While both are trained in religious studies and engage in paranormal research, Richard is characterised as a rational, skeptic researcher who is fiercely dedicated to the belief that there is a scientific explanation for any supposedly supernatural experience, whereas Emily is just as vehement in her belief that the paranormal exists. Alex’s representation of the two researchers seems to also be informed by the “men-as-rational | female-as-irrational” binary, pointing to the enduring, pervasive nature of this stereotype that marginalises women on grounds of their supposed inability to remain objective, logical and rational.

Richard is said to “be on a mission to debunk all claims of the supernatural,” and has set up “The Richard Institute ... offering a million dollar reward for any proof of the supernatural.” However, listeners are told, this reward has not been claimed since 1998. Our

first sustained introduction to his character finds him at an academic conference at “the Institute of Paranormal Research in St. Louis,” where he is shown to be attacked by multiple audience members for his skeptical approach to understanding a paranormal event known only as “The Wilson Case.” His slow, steady and emotionless voice when fielding these questions lends an air of credibility to the various scientifically-backed reasons for him to continue his disbelief in the paranormal. This is in sharp contrast to the smug, accusatory tones taken by those asking the questions, further reinforcing the impression of Richard’s reliability by making him seem like an embattled voice of reason in a sea of hysterical and deluded believers. On the other hand, the presentation of Emily’s character does not invite the same level of confidence. Despite being a professor of “religious studies at the University of Illinois in Urbana, Alex chooses to focus on her appearance instead, describing to listeners that she is “stout, with short bangs and a Ramones t-shirt.” This unusual step in describing her appearance diminishes Emily’s academic credentials as it focuses on her appearance rather than her academic achievements, and works to suggest that she is somehow deviant from the conventions of an academic setting, and therefore not as trustworthy as Richard. Alex continues to call Emily’s credibility into question, revealing that in addition to her paranormal research, Emily is also a fiction writer. Here, Alex asks Emily if her “paranormal investigation fuels [her] works as a fiction writer,” unintentionally associating her research with the idea of fiction and thus calling the credibility of her investigation findings into question. However, even though Emily attempts to defend herself and her credibility, it is undercut by the *kind* of fiction Emily writes – described as “More *Fifty Shades of Grey*, but darker, and far more literary.” Interestingly, in the following bit of narration where Alex reflects on the

way Emily is “offended that [she] mentioned fiction in the same breath as paranormal investigation,” Emily is referred to as “Miss Emily” twice, rather than by the appellation of Dr., which Emily had been referred to prior (“Episode 1: A Tale of Two Tapes”). This diminutive prefix that Alex appends to Emily’s name is representative of the underestimation of women and their intelligence, and seems to suggest that Emily’s fictional writing pursuits somehow diminishes her intellectual standing, and makes her incapable of objective thought. Thus, despite having similar qualifications and education as Richard, Emily is cast as unreliable and untrustworthy, trading in pseudoscience rather than engaging in rational scientific inquiry.

Her ability to conduct paranormal investigations is called into further question when Alex follows Emily on an investigation in a “small credit union that sat near the shore of Lake Manteno” which “sits atop land that was once occupied by a psychiatric hospital from the 1930s.” This psychiatric hospital suffered a terrible tragedy in 1939, where four hundred patients came down with typhoid fever and a hundred ended up dying. The event, we are told, “became known as the Manteno Madness.” The investigation provided evidence of supernatural presence through flickering flashlights, electromagnetic field measurements and a recording of doors mysteriously opening by itself, which Emily believes proves a supernatural haunting in the area. However, when Alex brings these pieces of evidence to Richard, he demolishes each one with a scientifically rational explanation, attributing the happenings to a logical, physical occurrence rather than some supernatural source. He disparages Emily’s investigation team by prefacing his debunking with an invitation for Alex to “function on their level for a moment,” suggesting that his own logical and rational approach is far superior to that of Emily, and also insinuates that

Emily “knows very little” about “purely scientific terms.” Richard attributes Emily’s inability to logically process these findings to a propensity towards apophenia, which he explains to Alex as a desire to “really just want to believe, and to that end they force supernatural meaning into meaningless events and patterns,” hinting that Emily is not capable of an objective, scientific approach and has allowed her emotions to influence her findings. To prove his point, he asks Alex to show Emily — who believed she saw an apparition during her investigation — “an old photo of somebody’s great grandfather.” He suggests that Alex “[t]ell them that he was a patient that died in that room,” and asserts that “they [will] tell you they recognise him.” When Alex does as Richard asks, Emily confidently declares “[t]hat’s him! That’s the man I saw!” and even emphasises that she is “[p]ositive” and would “recognise him anywhere” after Alex asks her if she is sure (“Episode 1: A Tale of Two Tapes”). Here, Emily Dumont comes off as a fraud and listeners are compelled to believe Richard’s version, mimicking the way that “logical” interpretations made by a male authority figure will always be considered definitive and reliable.

Section VIII Part III: Manipulation in Media Technology

Richard’s insistence that supernatural events always have a logical explanation allows for *The Black Tapes* to surface the problem of manipulation in recordings made by media technology. After speaking to Emily and realising that Richard’s theory on apophenia may hold some weight after all, Alex asks him about “all the high tech ghost hunting equipment in his office.” To Alex, if supernatural experience can be explained by people who truly want to believe being in places with a tragic history, why would Richard need all this equipment to debunk it? Richard tells her that the Strand Institute and its

researchers “need to keep up to date with the latest technology so we know how everything works and how the data can be manipulated” (“Episode 1: A Tale of Two Tapes Part I”). Throughout *The Black Tapes*, Richard explains away supernatural incidents by chalking it up to manipulation. In “Episode 5: The Devil You Know,” Alex and Richard review another ‘Black Tape,’ this one of Jessica Wheldon’s exorcism by priests from the Catholic Church. Listeners hear Jessica’s wretched, hollow screaming and Alex reacting with shock and horror as the tape plays. Occasionally, Alex interjects to describe what she is seeing for the benefit of the listeners, telling them that Jessica, “a little girl on her back on the bed, for one full second, lifted those huge men off their feet,” despite them “using all their weight to hold her down.” Even more concerning was the fact that “she does [it] a few more times.” However, the most distressing thing for Alex “were the sounds. The howls coming out of the girl. They didn’t seem human.” When the recording ends, Alex turns to Richard and says, “I’m guessing they added those sounds in post-production, along with special effects involving the bed?” To her great surprise, Richard disagrees, telling her that “[t]hose sounds were coming from the girl.” Shocked, Alex elaborates on her assertions, telling Richard that “[s]omeone could easily do all that stuff with a computer. *I* could pull it off. Easily. An hour in the edit suite” (“Episode 5: The Devil You Know”).

Here, Alex leans gently on the fourth wall, as listeners would realise that the screaming that they had just heard is *actually* an audio manipulation that they are supposed to accept as a recording of something that actually happened. Thus, by paralleling Alex’s experience of the taped exorcism with the listener’s experience of the podcast, *The Black Tapes* raises the issue of manipulation within recordings, and how it

can make false experiences seem real. Additionally, Richard's surprising disavowal of digital manipulation of the recording allows for the podcast to surface another form of manipulation. While Alex is convinced that the recording itself has been tampered with, Richard tells her that it "wasn't manipulated by a computer after the fact," and that he knows because he "was the one recording," standing "about seven or eight feet from the bed." Richard tells Alex that the incident could have been made to seem convincing by "plant[ing] some speakers and stag[ing] the more dramatic action," and muses that if he knew that "they were going to stage such an elaborate... presentation," he would have "set up additional equipment and microphones around the house." The theatric diction used in Richard's description of the exorcism suggests that manipulation can occur not only on the recording but in the recorded incident itself. Just because media technology has captured an incident does not mean it actually happened, as it does not preclude the possibility of staging. As Richard later tells Alex, it would be very easy to fake an exorcism like Jessica's, thus nullifying the validity of the recording that he and Alex had watched. When Alex asks him why the individuals involved would go to the extent of staging such an elaborate exorcism, Richard tells her that if the taped exorcism leaked, it would "convince untold numbers of people that the Devil is real," and would generate an interest in the Catholic Church ("Episode 5: The Devil You Know"). By doing so, Richard gestures towards the ways in which manipulation of such recordings can be influenced by a specific agenda and as such, recordings should not necessarily be considered as objective truth. Thus, *The Black Tapes* disabuses listeners of the hopeful notion that media technology can and will bring us closer to knowing the truth of an incident by staging the

need for interpretation and the possibility of manipulation when engaging with recordings done by media technology.

Section IX: *Limetown*

Part I: The Dangers of Podcasting Technology

As was explored, *The Black Tapes* has a vested interest in using the podcast medium itself to their advantage, utilising the ‘audio-only’ quality of a podcast to augment their criticism of media technology. But where their criticism is mostly centred on audiovisual technology like video cameras and VCR players, “Episode 3: The Unsound” turns this critical lens inward and casts suspicion on the podcast form itself.

In “Gothic fiction and the Evolution of Media Technology,” Joseph Crawford outlines a trend in new media forms, observing that any new media form will always tend towards Gothic expression as “every new form of popular media” will “rapidly adapt to the articulation of Gothic fiction because it is through the Gothic that such media technologies are best able to express their own natures” (36). With the rise of female investigative journalism podcasts, these kinds of podcast shows have marked themselves out as a site for expressions of resistance against the tyranny of authoritative accounts of the truth. However, “Episode 3: The Unsound” of *The Black Tapes*, and subsequently, the *Limetown* podcast show, reveals an anxiety over these podcasts themselves becoming an authoritative account of the truth.

In this episode, Keith Dabic, the guitarist and songwriter of “Hastur Rising,” calls Alex after listening her podcast show and tells her that he has a recording that he thinks she would want to hear. Alex gives listeners some background info on the band, describing them as a “popular underground hard rock band” from Seattle that was “often

in the news because of their ongoing conflict with the religious right.” The lead singer had apparently committed “violent suicide a couple of weeks ago,” and “[l]ocal church groups have picketed their concerts, claiming they promote Satanism.” There were also rumours of “a live animal sacrifice at one of their concerts” (“Episode 3: The Unsound”). This intensely Gothic description of “Hastur Rising” primes listeners to feel a sense of danger and apprehension of the recording he wants to discuss with Alex: a high, reedy noise also known as The Unsound.

When Alex asks Richard about The Unsound, the fear and apprehension that listeners have already begun to feel over this recording is heightened when he reveals some of the myths and stories that have become associated with it. He tells Alex that “the Unsound comes with quite a compelling narrative” and that “a number of myths... have developed around it over time.” One other name for The Unsound reveals the dark backstory that follows the recording. Also known as the “Diabolica Lyricasis,” or “The Devil’s Note,” Richard explains that “the most common myth is that The Unsound summons or invites a demon into the world,” as the sound is “his voice, gently asking the listener to invite him into his world.” This myth about The Unsound could serve as an allegory for podcasting, where listeners “invite” a compelling voice into their ears. By paralleling the podcast host with a demon, this could also gesture towards the way podcasters may be broadcasting information that is dangerous and potentially harmful.

This is further emphasised by Richard’s subsequent revelation about The Unsound. The undercurrent of fear and apprehension that listeners already have about the sound is confirmed when he tells Alex that “[e]veryone who hears The Unsound dies within one year of their initial exposure.” He relays information about a “scientific outpost in

Antartica in 1962,” who had picked up The Unsound on their instruments, and “all died within a year.” Listeners hear how “[o]ne of them died on the base due to a staph infection,” while “the other four died in a mountain climbing expedition,” and that all this had happened within a year of them hearing The Unsound (“Episode 3: The Unsound”).

After introducing listeners to this litany of terrifying myths and horrific stories surrounding The Unsound, Alex then gives listeners the opportunity to listen to the recording itself. She prefaces it with a disclaimer, telling listeners that her producers “have informed me that I have to read the following disclaimer: If you listen to the sound, you’re listening at your own risk.” She tempers this by saying that she has heard the sound “numerous times” and “so far, [she hasn’t] seen a single demon,” but suggests that if the listener is “afraid or superstitious,” they can “skip ahead ten seconds.” Here, *The Black Tapes* stages a moment of crisis in podcaster-listener relationship. Here, Alex’s experience is provided as insurance against this recording that *could* kill the listeners, but they are also given a choice to skip it. Putting listeners into this moment of crisis forces them to confront the implicit trust that they have had in Alex throughout the podcast — if we have fully trusted her experience thus far, why are we suddenly apprehensive in this specific moment? Furthermore, her dismissive attitude towards the disclaimer, seen in her rather disdainful tone when she says “my producers have informed me that I have to read the following disclaimer” makes Alex seem irresponsible, suggesting that podcasters are not always trustworthy and that listeners should not accept their thoughts and idea wholesale (“Episode 3: The Unsound”). Subsequently, that *The Black Tapes* gives their listeners the opportunity to either stay on and listen to The Unsound or to skip ahead then empowers

listeners and asserts that they cannot simply be passive listeners. They must exercise their own judgment and make decisions for themselves to either believe the podcaster or not.

At the end of the episode, *The Black Tapes* stages the consequence of being passive listeners. Alex's investigation into The Unsound leads her to the house of Jeff Wendt, the lead singer of Hastur Rising who had violently succumbed to suicide. His mother had kept his recording studio completely untouched since the suicide, and Alex discovers that "[h]e was in the middle of recording something." She plays the track on the computer, a short, heavy metal piece, and then suddenly begins to click around. When an alarmed Richard asks her what she is doing to the track, Alex tells him that Jeff's program is "the same program we use in the studio." Here, Alex mentioning that Jeff uses the same program as she does in her own recording studio for her podcast gestures towards a parallel between The Unsound and the podcast. She then tells Richard that she is "just gonna mute some of the tracks" and listeners hear some keyboard noises. The music then quiets and the track is left playing the unmistakable reedy noise that is The Unsound. Unlike the previous broadcasting of The Unsound, listeners have no choice in this moment. They have been forced to listen to it and are now implicated in the one year curse. Coupled with the paralleling of the podcast with The Unsound, giving listeners no opportunity to skip the sound suggests that they are completely at the mercy of the podcaster. The contents of a podcast are completely in the hands of the podcasters, and listeners cannot always depend on the podcaster to remind them to be skeptical and to exercise their own judgment the way Alex did in the beginning. Later, Alex finds out that Jeff had been "seeding" the track that was underlaid with The Unsound. Here, Richard fulfills the role of the 'technologically-unsavvy' older person, and asks Alex what seeding

is, to which she replies “he’s.. Um, he’s made it available for download. For free. Anywhere in the world,” and “[j]ust over six million people” have already downloaded it (“Episode 3: The Unsound”). While this could very well be just a moment for the podcast to further establish Richard’s characterization, having Alex spell out exactly what seeding and downloading also calls attention to the fact that this is exactly how podcasts are currently being distributed. It also gestures towards the danger of having podcasts with irresponsible or harmful content spread and affect a large number of people.

While this criticism of the podcast is limited to this single episode in *The Black Tapes*, the *Limetown* podcast show can be considered an extended meditation of the dangers of podcasting. As Lia Haddock investigates the mystery of Limetown, her findings on the research facility and the technological equipment they were developing allows for the podcast to criticise the sheen of reliability and truthfulness that immersion journalism podcasts affect and points out how this seductive overlay can hide darker agendas and allow it to pass off dangerous or harmful information as the truth.

From as early as the first episode, *Limetown* does a very delicate balancing act between trying to pass itself off as a podcast investigating a real incident while at the same time gesturing towards the external world-building that goes into creating a fictional podcast. The first episode starts with a compilation of news clips and recordings of 911 emergency calls about a violent incident in the middle of Limetown, lending a sense of realism to the research facility and the disaster that happened within it. This is then followed by Lia’s self-introduction, where she is set up as a ‘Sarah Koenig’ type of investigative reporter hosting a spin-off podcast from a radio show. This recalls *Serial* and its real-life subject matter, further lending credence to *Limetown*’s claim to realism.

However, Lia subsequently segues into her attempt to uncover the details of the Limetown research facility, reaching out to Terry Hilkins, a reporter who has been covering the Limetown story on and off for the past ten years, as well as Hunter Garrett, the biographer of R. B. Villard, whose company bankrolled the Limetown project. The conversation between Hunter and Lia is peppered with references to works of literature, theatre and television. At first, Hunter tells Lia that Limetown was Villard's "passion play," referring to the dramatic representation of the Passion of Jesus Christ. He then describes Villard as a "tragic figure," to which Lia replies, "[h]e's Don Quixote." Here, the constant comparing of Villard to theatre and fictional roles reminds listeners that the podcast is an edited, constructed version of "reality," where the voices are curated and edited to present a specific character that the podcast wants to position them as. Even if the voices are from real individuals, like in *Serial*, they are still used as characters constructed by the podcaster to tell a story ("Episode 1: What We Know").

The description of the research facility itself is also subjected to similar references to fictional places, or places that are constructed and thus affects a certain level of artifice. Hunter reads Lia the press release that Villard circulated to entice researchers into coming to Limetown, which said "[w]e want this town to be a place that researchers and their families want to live in. A place where work, family and fun come together for the betterment of the world." Upon hearing this, Lia remarks that Villard "made it sound like Disneyland or something." Later, as she speaks to Terry, he describes the daily lives of Limetown residents as "Mayberry, only it was run by some of the smartest people on the planet. On one level, describing Limetown as a kind of "Disneyland," or a "Mayberry," the fictional community in two popular American sitcoms, works to suggest that the

veneer of perfection that surrounded the early days of Limetown was complete artifice and veiled a more sinister reality (“Episode 1: What We Know”). However, it could also gesture to how Limetown itself is a construct within the podcast itself, a completely fictional place thought up for the narrative of the podcast. In doing so, *Limetown* reminds listeners that despite *seeming* like it is a work that is referencing a real research facility, it is merely a construct. Altogether, this opening section of the podcast stages a kind of metacommentary that exists in female investigative journalism podcasts, where it claims to be real and raw while at the same time being narrative constructs assembled by the podcasters and their team of editors.

As Lia continues on with her research across the subsequent podcasts, she meets survivors from the disaster that led to the disappearance of the three hundred people that worked and lived within Limetown. As she speaks to them for the podcast, they reveal the true purpose of the research facility to her. While Terry was only able to tell her that Limetown’s “publically stated purpose” was a dedicated research study to “gain a full understanding of the human brain,” the survivors of Limetown reveal a more complex project (“Episode 1: What We Know”). In “Episode 2: Winona,” she meets a survivor named Winona, who worked as a janitor in the research facility. She tells Lia of “that night,” where she witnesses a curious incident while cleaning up in the research facility. On that night, she sees two men working in separate rooms but strangely, “their movements are the same,” despite “fifty feet of difference between the men.” She then leaves and resolves to “come back later at the end of her shift,” where she compares the two drawings in both rooms, “a still life of a bowl of fruit.” She places the drawings on top of each other and realises that despite being drawn in different colours, “everything

else between the two drawings is exactly the same.” She tells Lia that “they were identical in every single way, including the mistakes.” Winona then “searched the rooms for any possible connection between the two: cameras, secret openings, anything,” but comes up short (“Episode 2: Winona”). After telling Lia this story, she does not explain any further, leaving Lia with only this story, and a lot of confusion. However, the mystery surrounding this will become a lot clearer when Lia meets the second survivor, a man named Reverend Warren Chambers, who worked in Limetown as a large animal veterinarian hired to oversee the testing of Limetown’s biomedical engineering development on pigs. In their conversation in “Episode 3: Napoleon,” the Reverend reveals that Limetown was trying to develop technology that enabled the “transfer of thoughts between others without verbal communication,” effectively explaining how the two men that Winona saw were able to draw the same thing despite being fifty feet apart. While mind-to-mind communication as explained by the Reverend has yet to be developed in our current-day existence, the act of listening to a podcast can be conceived as a similar experience. Listening to a podcast, especially with headphones, mimics having a direct line from the podcaster who delivers their thoughts and ideas directly into our heads. This is further supported by aural diction that the Reverend uses the first time he links up with the pig, saying that “[t]he first time I heard him, I heard calm” (“Episode 3: Napoleon”). Later, Lia meets Dr Max Finlayson, the lead researcher in Limetown, who describes the technology to her. He tells her that “once this thing is inside you, you essentially become your own shortwave radio station, broadcasting thought out into the world” (“Episode 4: DDOS”). Given the podcasts’ closeness to radio, this too, seems to point towards the Limetown implant as symbolic of podcasting. In conceptualising *Limetown*’s mind-to-mind communication technology as a

kind of podcasting, the Reverend's experience of having being implanted with this technology can thus be read as an indictment of the deeply subjective approach that podcasters take in their own podcast shows.

The Reverend tells Lia that the mind-to-mind communication technology was initially tested on pigs, which "was refined until we got the fifth iteration." This was when the Reverend was implanted and they attempted to see if he could communicate with the pig. He then outlines some of the difficulty faced when trying to communicate with pigs, telling Lia that "[p]igs are finicky as hell," and "you can't work with them unless they trust you," but "maybe most importantly, they don't speak." As such, the Limetown research team hypothesized that "what could be relayed between subjects was raw emotional data," and created "hardware [that] could interpret emotional changes in the brain and translate them to simple synthesized tones." This communication of emotion calls back to the deeply subjective approach to female investigative journalism podcasts, where the hosts allow their emotions to bleed into their presentation of their reports and communicate them through a varied range of tones in their voice that are usually not present in traditional forms of journalism and reporting. As the Reverend elaborates on the feeling of communicating through the exchange of emotional data, his experience could be taken as a criticism of the emotional quality of this type of podcasting. He tells Lia of a surprising development when he first linked up with the pig, Napoleon, revealing to her that while he and the research team had anticipated being able to "hear" Napoleon, they "didn't expect ... the emotional transfer" to happen. He describes this emotional transfer as being able to physically feel the emotion that he hears from Napoleon, saying, "I heard calm. And then I felt a wave of calm come over me." He chalks this transfer up to the way

animals process emotion, stating that “[w]hatever they feel, they feel purely and uh, persuasively” (“Episode 3: Napoleon”). This emotional transfer could gesture towards the way emotional appeals in female investigative journalism podcasts can be an extremely persuasive rhetorical device used by the hosts in order to influence our opinions and judgments. As such, like *The Black Tapes*, *Limetown* also advocates active listening while consuming a podcast.

This is seen when Max explains a second portion of the mind-to-mind communication technology to Lia, called “the supplement.” He tells her that thoughts are constantly swirling around in an individual’s brain with no specific focus and with just the implant, they would only be able to hear a “Word Soup,” or a mess of sound. In this portion of the podcast, Max’s dialogue is underlaid with loud but indistinct chatter for the listeners to experience the “Word Soup” and only fades out when Max begins speaking of “the supplement,” a pill that implanted individuals can take in order to “focus in on one distinct and recognisable voice at a time” (“Episode 4: DDOS”). The sharpening of voices into Max’s single one stages the need for active listening and gestures towards the importance for podcasts listeners to be able to parse through the content and decide on what is real or true by themselves, rather than simply allowing the cacophony of voices to descend upon them and influence their thinking.

Section IX Part II: Dangerous Podcasts and the Need for Active Listening

The need for active, discerning listening becomes the focus in the last two episodes of *Limetown*, where Lia unravels the mystery behind the flurry of 911 calls heard at the beginning of the podcast. Referred to as “The Panic,” the reasons behind the sudden eruption of violence in the middle of the Limetown research facility was never clear until

Lia meets Deirdre Wells, Max Finlayson's wife, and Lenore Dougal, who led the rescue and clean-up crew following The Panic. Their explanations of the conflict that led to The Panic surfaces twin problems with the perceived democratisation that is brought about by podcasting technology.

Before the podcasting medium, anyone interested in making and broadcasting audio content was at the mercy of radio stations. They had the equipment required to record and mix a radio show, and controlled the method of distributing the finished product. But what they also had were corporate sponsors, opinionated producers and perhaps even political agendas to be mindful of or cater to. These institutions could block any kind of subversive audio content from being made, let alone being broadcasted. However, with the increasing accessibility of recording and distribution technology, these barriers to entry are slowly being removed and almost anyone is able to create and distribute their podcast right from their own living room. Recording equipment is now relatively cheap and accessible, easy-to-use mixing softwares such as GarageBand often come pre-loaded onto laptops and podcasts can be delivered without difficulty to an eager audience through websites like SoundCloud and Squarespace, which offers to-be podcasters highly affordable packages to host their audio content. This ease in recording and distributing a podcast means that creators of audio content are free from the pressures of having to self-censor to keep in line with a radio station's leanings. While podcasting technology seems democratic in theory, the reality of podcasting still requires funding and advertising, as evidenced by the infamous Mailchimp ads at the beginning of *Serial* and the multiple Audible.com endorsements sprinkled across *The Black Tapes*. This need for

funding, and the corporate control that the podcast is still subject to on some level, is discussed in *Limetown*.

In “Episode 5: Scarecrow,” Dierdre admits that she was “responsible for The Panic.” She explains that when the implant was cleared for human use, it was not distributed to all of the residents in Limetown as researchers required a ‘control group.’ However, as more and more people were implanted, the non-implanted residents, who called themselves The Old School, began to feel shafted as those who could “communicate non-verbally ... began to feel like the special ones” (“Episode 5: Scarecrow”). The discontent that The Old School felt came to an explosive head when they realised that Deirdre, who was originally not selected for implanting, was able to communicate non-verbally with her husband, who had given secretly given her the technology. While Deirdre never reveals why her husband eventually relented and gave her the technology at great risk to himself and the Limetown project, Lia later finds out from Lenore that Max had panicked when he saw the overseer of the Limetown Project considering selling Limetown to a large, mysterious corporation who would have eliminated everyone in the facility without the implant to facilitate the transfer (“Episode 6: Cost-Benefit Analysis”). Here, if we follow the conceit of the implant as podcasting technology, then the uneven distribution of the implant suggests that podcast technology is not as evenly accessible to everyone and thus does not ‘flatten’ the field of broadcasting as democratically as it is hailed to be. Coupled with Lenore’s expose on the shady corporate influence that was sinisterly courting the technological developments of Limetown, the conflict over the implants gesture towards the ever-present threat of corporate control within a podcast.

Ultimately, *Limetown*'s exploration of mind-to-mind communication technology presents a rather self-reflexive critique of the immersion journalism podcast genre, highlighting the flaws within its stylistic and thematic nature that can be appropriated to manipulate listeners for a specific purpose or agenda. It represents a landmark work in the field of immersion journalism podcasts as it does not simply reproduce the form to tell a story, but goes a step further to analyse and critique the form itself.

Section X: Conclusion

There is no doubt that many podcasts seem to be trying to position themselves as 'the next *Serial*' in the wake of its phenomenal success by using the same techniques to tell their stories, but to denounce these podcasts as copy-cats would be to take a very narrow, almost isolationist view of podcasting, one which assumes that podcasts exist in a secluded bubble. However, in our current day and age, the podcast has grown from an obscure medium used by niche audio broadcasters into a complex, influential cultural object that research has yet to fully apprehend. Every day, podcasters find new and interesting ways to use the medium, and podcast criticism must keep up by expanding its focus and go beyond questions of the medium. As this project has tried to show, studying the podcast for just its technological properties would blind us to the underlying aims, impacts and purposes podcasts have. Rather than reduce the podcast to its technological properties, research should expand its sights further and gain a deeper appreciation of its full complexities.

While they are some of the most visible examples of the podcast, the three which are explored in this project represent but a small sliver of podcasts available on the market today. More research could definitely be done into other genres within podcasting, or

even variations within the investigative journalist podcast form itself. We have only scratched the surface of understanding podcasting as a cultural form and all these possibilities represent exciting new frontiers of research to be explored.

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