

***IN THE FOREGROUND:  
CONVERSATIONS ON ART & WRITING***

A podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP)

**“WHEN IS THIS?”: BRIAN MICHAEL MURPHY  
ON MEDIA ARCHAEOLOGY AND PRESERVATION**

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**Transcript**

**Caro Fowler**

Welcome to *In the Foreground: Conversations on Art & Writing*. I am Caro Fowler, your host and Director of the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts.

This episode is part of a miniseries on sound, in which Caitlin Woolsey, our postdoctoral fellow and also an expert in histories of sound media and 20th-century art, speaks with scholars and artists whose work explores the intersections of sound, media, and art history.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

I am Caitlin Woolsey, and in this episode, I speak with Brian Michael Murphy, a media archaeologist and poet who is also a faculty member in media studies at Bennington College. In our conversation, Brian describes how the specific temporalities and materialities of media intersect with race in ways that are often elided. And he reflects on his current project on preservation and the unsustainability of the data complex.

**Brian Michael Murphy**

*Preservation never simply maintains something that's already existing. It always produces something new.*

**Caitlin Woolsey**

Well, thank you so much for joining me today, Brian, and being willing to have this conversation and share a little bit about your personal intellectual and scholarly path and journey. And we often open these interviews just by asking very generally about what drew you into thinking about media and about the arts, about I know in your case about poetry, and a kind of more expansive sense of arts than art history proper often thinks about. But I'd love to hear you talk a little bit more about how you would trace that formation and yourself. Whether that's early experiences or as an undergraduate, or however you would think about the formation of the interests that you pursue today, in your work and teaching.

**Brian Michael Murphy**

Yes. Well, thanks for having me. I'm really looking forward to the conversation. So there are a couple of places I think I would locate it mainly in terms of how my interests developed and where that comes from. One place is in hip hop. So, growing up in hip hop culture and sort of getting into that in the late 80s and early 90s, I was exposed to a range of media forms because hip hop culture has four elements, some people say five elements. So there's MCing or rapping, there's DJing or turntablism, graffiti writing, and breakdancing. And the fifth element is - what some people say - is knowledge. So it's basically hip hop's form of scholarship. So now Harvard has a hip hop archive and Cornell as a hip hop archive, and they're great. And 9th Wonder, who was the first hip hop fellow at Harvard, said, you know, we've always had our own form of scholarship, our own form of keeping our stories, and telling our history, and our form of expertise that allows us to debate what's the best and what's the most important to preserve and to maintain in the culture. So that's one place. And then the other place I would locate it is really with my parents, because they were very encouraging of all the different things that I was interested in. There were always a lot of books around. My dad paints and does all kinds of art. And he's also pretty mystical guys. He's like one of those Black dudes that came up on comic books and Kung Fu and Sci-Fi and, you know, always sort of had a different angle on things. I was also raised Christian, but I think the particular kind of Christianity that I grew up with, and the house was infused with all that. It was like the science fiction Christianity.

So my dad's talking about how when people die, they become stars, you know? [Both laugh]. Like, literally. He actually believes that. So growing up that way, I think it sort of seeded this interest in where the material and the immaterial meet. Or what I would probably say now, which is something like the sites and the rituals and the technologies through which we make the distinction between the material and immaterial. Or we tell ourselves there's a line between the material and immaterial. And so, you know, I grew up in a house where those kinds of conversations were always possible. Anytime, any moment, you could

break into a theological discussion. And also, you know, complete with close readings and with you having to cite chapter and verse. Otherwise, nobody's going to believe you. So, I mean, that's where I really learned the things that I practiced later as a scholar. It was dealing with the Bible, honestly. I mean, it's a big set of books. [Both laugh]. And you know, you're a kid arguing with an adult, which kids tend to do. It was both a resource and an intimidating, you know, prospect to go in there and look for what's unique. [Both laugh].

**Caitlin Woolsey**

[Laughs]. Yeah, it's like that was early exposure to interpretation as a mode of argumentation, but also like a way of thinking, too, to have that close reading.

**Brian Michael Murphy**

Yes, definitely. And also, my dad was always very, very adamant about thinking about who the person writing was talking to. Who is their audience? If you want to understand what they're saying, you have to understand that they're - like scholars would say - they're in a conversation. This is not just some thing floating off in the distance somewhere that we bow down to. This was one human talking to another human or a group of humans. And so what was their world? What did they believe? What did they feel? What were they struggling with? It's really all the best questions to ask when you're interpreting the text.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

It's also fascinating to think, too, about how that early holding of materiality and immateriality and the text as an object to be mined and to be in conversation with the text as a kind of conversation partner, linked to the what you described as mystical or the kind of more immaterial elements. And yeah, I'll be really curious to hear. So, kind of moving forward, what did you study as an undergrad? Or, moving into graduate school, how did you kind of chart that particular path?

**Brian Michael Murphy**

Yeah, as an undergraduate, I think I started as a history major. And then I switched to psychology. And then I switched to English. And I went to a school that's perfect for me, Capital University, which is a small liberal arts school, Lutheran tradition, and very supportive of first generation college students, which is what I was. And I could just do anything, you know? I could take any class I wanted as long as I ended up with a major at the end. And that was an amazing kind of exploration. So I think by the end of undergrad, I ended up - not I think, I know - I ended up with a major in English, focused on literature, a minor in creative writing, a minor in religion, and a minor in Spanish. [Both laugh]. So I think what was happening is that there was no interdisciplinary degree there. So I was sort of making one. I didn't really know that that's what it was called, or didn't really care. But I was sort of making it. And honestly, the way I saw myself was fundamentally as a writer. I saw myself as a creative writing major. There was no creative writing major so I couldn't do that, but everything that I read and learned and saw and heard, I was seeing as a kind of fuel for my writing. But you know where I also learned a lot at that time, in terms of collaboration and creating, whether it's scholarly writing or art, was I started a band, because our school had a great conservatory of music. And I had been writing hip hop lyrics since I was probably 13 or 14. I learned so much from those guys in terms of how you create, how you take what you know, and what you can do, and put it in service to a song or put it in service to a work of art. So that was the undergrad years. Grad school is a whole other realm.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

I'm just curious, did you see the lyrical and the hip hop music that you were creating or writing and that sort of band context as being a sort of separate creative project from the creative writing you were doing sort of in a more academic setting at school? Or did you see them as being kind of extensions of each other?

**Brian Michael Murphy**

I think that they were definitely extensions. So I studied with a mentor named Kevin Griffith, who is an amazing poet. And so he would have me do an

independent study where it was just craft, I was just writing poems. And then I did another independent study with him where he would give me the facsimile edition of T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland" with all of Ezra Pound's messy comments on it. And I would have to go deep on that. And I would have to write analyses of poems and I would have to really think through the choices that were being made. And at the same time, I was taking like Harlem Renaissance, or I was taking Black women writers, or I was taking Shakespeare with Dr. Summers, which was awesome. And also it pushed me a lot. So definitely, to me, it was all one big wonderful playground.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

It's like the liberal arts dream [laughing].

**Brian Michael Murphy**

Oh, totally. Totally. Everything. I mean, like it was like, at some point, they probably should have stopped because I was like, I edited the school newspaper a little bit, I edited a literary magazine for a couple years, I debated, I was in student government. I look back on it, like, did I really do all that stuff?

**Caitlin Woolsey**

[Laughs].

**Brian Michael Murphy**

It was just amazing to me that they'd say, you can just do what you want to do. I'm like, really? Okay... To me, it was such a gift, too, that the school was thoroughly separated by discipline. Because when I went to talk to the theater professor, he was completely steeped in that world, right? And when I talked to Dr. Summers, he was completely steeped in his British literature, right? And then I got to talk to Susan Nash, who was steeped in her African American and feminist stuff. And it's like, these both can't be right. But, within their realm, absolutely, they're right. And what I found was, I had something to learn from all these different places. And all these people were brilliant. And so I think that also sort of positioned me for the kind of work I did in grad school, where doing

interdisciplinary work, you have to both respect the knowledge that's created in a given field, even if you're questioning the disciplinary boundaries and formation, you have to respect it. And because those people know way more about that conversation than you do. And then you have to be really, really clear about what is it that you're drawing from it? And then what is the contribution you're making? The people that train me did not do amorphous [inaudible]. And you know, luckily, when I went to comparative studies, which is a radically interdisciplinary department in arts and sciences at Ohio State - I did my masters and my PhD there - luckily, when I went there, I didn't know anything different. I didn't know what grad school was supposed to be. So I just thought it was normal. And what I found later is that it wasn't typical, what we experienced. So when people that have their tenure home in comparative studies on the faculty - I mean, we had a mathematician, we had American studies, we had ethnic studies, we had philosophers, we had history of religions, we had... literally you walk in and there's just wide array of people. So for instance, I'll tell you one story.

So as a graduate student, I was in my coursework for my PhD, so I hadn't written my prospectus yet. And we wanted to put something together that would bring together graduate students who are working toward their perspectives, and get some feedback from the faculty. Because you can imagine, all the students were doing different kinds of projects, because they're each charting their own pathway and creating their own theoretical framework. And so we didn't always see each other as much as we wanted to. So, we're like, we're gonna do this thing called Pizza and a Paragraph. Sounds nice enough, right? You order a couple pizzas, cram students and faculty in the little conference room. And you know, two or three people will present a 10 minute precis on their prospectus as it's coming along. And when we did that, you had to then answer questions from these people, right? You got the mathematician, Brian Rotman, who's written a book on the Semiotics of Zero, he's asking you a question. And then you got a question from Ruby Tapia, there is no sharper visual culture person for my money that I've ever seen. And then you've got you know, Tom Kasulis, who's the expert on Zen Buddhism outside of Japan. And I thought that was just

normal, that I would have to field questions from all these different things, right? And that's just 3 out of 10 or 12 people that were there, right? Ethnographers, critical anthropologists, and they're just like, throwing all this stuff at you. And so by the time I got to dissertation writing, I thought that's just what graduate school is. Of course you would have to deal with Kris Paulsen asking questions about indexicality. And then the very next question about sexuality from [inaudible]. But looking back, it was an intense form of training. And as I said, I think if you look at it from that perspective of what you have to do to write something that those people would want to read, it could never be amorphous [laughing]. It just can't.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

Right. Were there particular texts, or artworks, or music that you were thinking about in particular that influenced you during that time?

**Brian Michael Murphy**

As a media archaeologist, I'm not really much one for origin points, but I'll engage in that a little bit because I think it makes sense to [both laughing]. My first day in the department they had a welcome reception, and there was a professor there named Dan Reff, who was a very important mentor for me, he's very down to earth and very friendly and very smart, and he was an ethno-historian. And long story short, I knew that he went every year to this Mediterranean studies conference. And we had talked about it before and I said to him, just casual, I was like, Oh, are you going to that conference again this year? He said, oh, yeah, it's gonna be in Barcelona in the summer. I was like, oh, that's cool. He was like, hey I know you like Spain, you want to go? It's in Barcelona. I'm like, yeah. [Both laugh]. He said, well, if you can put together an abstract in the next week and send it to me, then I'll talk to my colleague in Brazil and we'll put a panel together and we'll go. I was like, uh what does it need to be about? He said, the theme is Catalonia and the Mediterranean. And I'm thinking, I'm interested in race and mysticism.



What am I going to say about Catalonia? But I was like trip to Barcelona? Let me figure this out. So I was like, I'll go on the internet one night, see what I can find. And I go on the internet and lo and behold, I find the case of El Negro of Banyoles, which was an African's body, an African who had been taxidermied and stuffed by a French taxidermist in the 1830s, and had been put on display in a natural history museum in Catalonia from 1916 to 1997.

And that ended up being my master's thesis. So I traveled over to Spain, I went to the National Museum of Anthropology in Madrid. But mostly what I did is I read everything I could about preservation of all forms, right? So that of course took me into art history, it took me into museum studies, it took me into a sort of histories of anthropology, Foucault, history and museum, Tony Bennett's "Exhibitionary Complex." I mean, that article was huge for me. I read that in my first term of grad school and just seeing the way that evolutionary theory materialized in world fairs, sideshows, and other kinds of displays, ethnological show business, the trade and exotic objects. All of that, you know, was basically these theories of race, these theories of civilization versus permissivity taking form. And then, of course, those displays and those performances, then become the technology through which, or the means by which wonder, a state of wonder and amazement in the populace is induced. And in a state of wonder, in a state of amazement, in a state of shock, that is the perfect time for the implantation of a discourse or an ideology to say, yes, this is who they are, this is who we are, this is where we are, this is when we are, we are the future, they are the past. And so by the time I'd done the master's thesis and digging into that, and reading about taxidermy, photography as a technology of preservation, etc., that sort of set the scene for getting more into Media Studies proper, later on.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

You mentioned a few minutes ago that you sort of consider yourself a media archaeologist. I'd love to hear you kind of explain how you think about that term, and how you think about media studies or being a media archaeologist in relation to objects. And also thinking about sound in particular, as well as images, since I know that that's a piece of your work as well.

**Brian Michael Murphy**

So, media archaeologists attend to - and as one, I see that title this way, and there are a few things that sort of unite us, if you will. One is a strong emphasis on materiality, and a sort of insistence on the material nature of data, information, sound, all these things which have been talked about as immaterial, very much. So that's one thing. Another thing is a fascination with and/or appreciation for, perhaps obsession with obsolete media [laughing]. Forms of not just things that are obsolete, in the sense that they have been surpassed by some other medium that's become dominant, but also media we'll call imaginary media. So, media that actually were never created or never materialized fully. The media that lost the battle, right? When the [inaudible] with Edison was on fire, right? [Both laugh]. Looking back at those, because those tell us something about that moment, too. So that's the second thing. I'd say the third thing is an interest in the layering of temporalities in various media materials. And by that, you know, you can look to work in media archaeology, which talks about how computation and digital technologies operate on a micro temporal scale. So they operate on a different timescale than human thought and existence. Or people like Jussi Parikka and his book, "Geology of Media." And geology and media talking about geological timescales. And so seeing digital technology, digital devices as an outgrowth of geological processes where those minerals and fossils form and then of course, you know, most of their life is their afterlife, is e-waste and trash, right? It's really just this little blip where they're used as phones. And then they're re-enrolled in that geological timescale, as you know, they folded back into the earth. For me, I'd say the other thing that I'm interested in is-, I'm really interested in race and media archaeologists have not tended to look much at race, in my experience, in things that I've read. I think that's starting to change a bit. So for me, I've really been influenced by people that are outside of media archaeology. But then I sort of bring that sensibility to that approach. One more thing I'd mentioned is, people that have really influenced me like Lisa Parks, Nicole Starosielski, Teng Wei, are people who look at infrastructure very intensely and really believe in visiting these infrastructural sites. So these are all things that I've done. And so you mentioned the word object. When I write

about photography, I write about them as objects. And I'm really not trying to be like overcomplicated, or, I'm not trying to be more interesting than just an image. It's just, I've had experiences where it doesn't make sense not to do that. I mean, going to a place where photography has been preserved in an underground freezer and it has a smell, it has a temperature, it has a - you know, the Corbis Archive, which is 200 feet underground in Pennsylvania, it's now operated by Getty, that's another story. You know, they have a weight. When they get licensed, they put a sticker on the back. If that happens 50 times, it's not a light photograph, right? And so when I was down there doing research on lynching images, to get a cold photograph, whose decay you can smell, that has a weight when you pick it up. These are things that in what world would you ignore those tactile olfactory details? So I mean, that's how I see it. And I think that's a bit about what media archaeology means to me. [Both laugh].

**Caitlin Woolsey**

I mean, you were talking about geologic time, and I think about, too, that kind of layering, as not just being a kind of, you know, stratum of the earth, but these sort of temporalities that - of the image, of the object, or of the subject of those images - that are kind of, you know, fusing and layering in any particular moment.

**Brian Michael Murphy**

Right, right. Yeah. I mean, anything that's present is present.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

Mhm.

**Brian Michael Murphy**

Everything that's here, is present. And we find ways of making it the past. So when I went to the National Museum of Anthropology in Madrid, which is where - it's a long and sad story, but I went there, because apparently when they repatriated the body of el Negro, the museum retained his skin, and they kept it in storage in the museum. And so I went there to see like, what is this place?

What is this museum, where they would choose to keep a skin? And one of the things that they had - this is not uncommon in natural history museums - is you have the main wing, and then you have the side wings. And one was a exhibition of paintings, and the other was, on the it door said something like, this is a cabinet of curiosities, the kind of room that used to be in museums like this. And I walk into the room, I think, it's, it's here, it's still actually here. [Laughs].

**Caitlin Woolsey**

It's still here, yeah [laughing].

**Brian Michael Murphy**

And, and so I'm going to, you know, having that experience and going down to Corbis, you know, which was originally a limestone mine, and then was converted into Iron Mountain. And then the Corbis, the Bill Gates's Corbis vault was one of the many vaults down there. And I'm sitting down, there the limestone walls from when it was a mine, and you've got the Bettmann Archive collected in the 20th century, bought by Bill Gates in the late-20th century, digitized in the 21st. The photo is of something from the Cold War, the limestone of the walls form 300 million years ago... and actually the facility was a Cold War storage facility before Iron Mountain bought it. So really it was built in the 50s. So it's like, when is this?

**Caitlin Woolsey**

Right.

**Brian Michael Murphy**

Right, exactly. So that's like -

**Caitlin Woolsey**

It's all, it's all present when you're there.

**Brian Michael Murphy**

- all present. And so, media archaeology gives me ways to talk about that, that's not just amorphous. Right? Or that's not just saying something like, there is no time. No, there are layers of temporality that get embedded in these things and impose upon these things. And we can analyze that layering.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

Right. How do you think about this relation between the kind of like - I believe that you're teaching this year on digital materiality and these are questions that you're thinking about - so I would love to hear you speak a little bit more about how you think about materiality in terms of so called old media and so called new media and the kind of virtual or digital realm.

**Brian Michael Murphy**

What I'm thinking about right now is what happened with Corbis. So you have tens of millions of images that are owned by Corbis, which was Bill Gates's stock photography and image licensing company. And he had imagined, back in the 80s, he had imagined that in the future, people would have these giant wall screens in their homes, like in "Fahrenheit 451." And the name of the game, younger Bill Gates thought, was to own the digital rights to all these images. Because you know, if you want to display like, "Starry Night," you would pay for the license to do that in your home. You wouldn't have to have \$50 million to buy the actual painting, right? Of course, he didn't foresee Target posters and all these other things -

**Caitlin Woolsey**

Right [laughs].

**Brian Michael Murphy**

- but he also didn't foresee that the screens would be the small screens, right, that would that would chart the course of the future that he was imagining. And so, Corbis never really made money. And he actually sold it a few years ago to an investment group called the Visual China Group. And so now that Corbis vault and all those images are operated by Getty on behalf of the Visual China Group.

So now, Getty officially has like no competition. So, to your question directly, I guess what I think about is, you know, in the new media old media debate 20 years ago, and people are talking about what's going to happen to photography, analog photography, now that digital has come along. You know, of course, people realize analog is not going away, digital didn't kill it just like photography didn't kill paints. And we know that now. So, what I think about is sort of Bill Gates's is miscalculation. He did not foresee the way that images would be abstracted and aggregated as data, again, to circulate these very particular ways. I think a couple of people that are writing about this in a really powerful way are Trevor Paglen and Kate Crawford, and they're writing about algorithmic images, operative images. They're writing about how not only are images being turned into data that circulates with all these other media forms like sound, but operative images are images that are created by artificially intelligent machines for viewing by other artificially intelligent machines. And it doesn't even quite make sense to say they're being viewed, because they actually don't take visible, phenomenal form. But, you kind of have to talk about them as images, because - Paglen argues anyway - they are now the dominant, in terms of number, of the dominant form of images being created in the world. There are more of these images than anything else. And they never appear. But nevertheless, they are what machines see and what machines communicate to each other about their seeing. So that's really what I'm thinking about now, in terms of - because that's a really tangled, fixed spot to think about materiality. What precisely is material in there? What is the nature of that material where one neural net is communicating to another one?

**Caitlin Woolsey**

So we've spoken a little bit about some of the instances that you've encountered in terms of preservation of images and other kinds of objects, like the photographs in the Corbis archive, but what are some examples that you've come across in relation to sound in particular, and these questions of preservation?

**Brian Michael Murphy**

In the Crypt of Civilization - which was a chamber that was sealed in 1940 and meant to be opened in 8113 - there was a metal LP that had recordings of a message to the people of the future who would open the crypt that Thornwell Jacobs created. What I'm also interested in is how, whether sound or in images, there are these things that I call backup loops, which is where you have like a new media format, like microphone, which is backing up paper, but then you have someone that's like, yeah, and just in case, this new media thing doesn't work out, let's back it up in etching or ceramics or something ancient. So I like this because it reverses any notion of progress in media history in relation to data format. And so, you know, those objects like that, that sort of disturb our typical sense of what an image is, or what sound recording is, always fascinate me. And then a more contemporary example, is the Voyager Golden Record. The images that are on the Voyager, that are "on the record," are recorded as sounds. So they were basically encoded by this company called Colorado Video, which invented this technology, and they imagine it being used to send video signals through phone lines. So basically, the sounds are converted in such a way that - it's very complicated, but long story short, if it's a black and white image, there's just one burst of sound on the record, and if it's a color image, three bursts of sound, as the three primary colors need to be combined in certain ways to compose it. And the first image was a solar spectrum with absorption lines, which was supposed to function as kind of a key for the aliens to understand that these sounds are images. And then you get these wonderful examples and they're referring back to what I was just talking about, where you have like a letter from President Jimmy Carter, which of course was a paper document. They took a photograph of it, they projected it as video, they encoded the video into sound waves, they put the sound waves on analog tape, and then they took the analog tape and etched it into the metal Golden Record. So, when it comes to thinking about sound and preservation, I am often interested in these moments of complexity and where formats get blurred or looped. And then, I guess the - circling back to images - when the Voyager actually got out into outer space and was taking "pictures of the other planets," what it was actually doing was it was sort of recording visual information, pixel by pixel, that it was sending back to Earth through radio waves. And we usually associate radio with sound because

of the broadcast industry, but radio waves are radiation, they're actually light. So I'm really interested in all of these, how the frames that we bring to these media data phenomena really sort of confuse us. [Laughs]. And then I love these objects that sort of confuse us back.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

But you reference that often media archaeologists, it's not a kind of bounded, recognizable discipline or field, but it's often people working in different disciplines or different areas who are working in a particular kind of way, or following certain kinds of approaches, or asking questions in certain kinds of ways. And you teach at Bennington College, which is a small liberal arts school and has a very interdisciplinary orientation overall, I would say. I mean, you can speak to this better than I can. But I'm curious how you found teaching here and how you cite yourself in a place that doesn't have kind of traditional departments, I think, in the way that even most other liberal arts colleges still hold on to these kind of departmental distinctions. And has that changed the way that you think about your work?

**Brian Michael Murphy**

I think what it has changed, perhaps, is I've had to think more about media archaeology as an artistic practice. Because that's the other thing about media archaeology, is that it's comprised of scholars, and artists, and scholar artists. So people who are theorizing in sophisticated ways about the art that they make, or people who are creating art that then becomes sort of fodder for media archaeologists. Because it's like, well, that's my dream, I always wanted somebody to create a, you know [both laughing], a Faraday cage that you could stand in. And so at Bennington, so many of the students are focused on making. There's so many students who are located in visual arts, or dance or, drama. And so what's happened to my teaching is I've created more pathways for creative projects. I've introduced more readings that sort of engage with media archaeology as something that you can do, and make things to sort of engage the questions. Beyond that, you know, I'm located within a discipline - we call them discipline groups, they're not really departments, that don't have chairs -



but it's called Society, Culture, and Thought. So it's very interdisciplinary. It's very much heavily weighted toward the social sciences. And it's been good, you know. We have great conversations. Students take my classes. And because the students are so different in what they're looking to get out of it - I mean, I have students who are artists now, like they're filmmakers now, right? I had a student in my first year here who was showing a premiere film at Sundance Film Festival. So this is not like something they're going to do later. Like, they're already doing it.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

Right. They're making now.

**Brian Michael Murphy**

So, how can I contribute to that person's development the way that I'm supposed to as an instructor, but also make it interface with the scholarship that I'm talking about? So what I'll often do, for instance, is I'll have students write a short paper at the beginning of a course telling me what they're trying to get out of a course. Telling me how they imagined this course relates to their plan, which is their particular pathway through Bennington's curriculum that they've constructed with a committee. So it's much more like graduate school in certain ways, in that they have a plan committee. And it's really, really challenged. I think it would really, really be challenging to be a student here and to be asked to do these things that were challenging for me in graduate school. I mean, they're undergraduates trying to do these things. But I think it's worth it.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

I'd love to hear you speak a little bit more about how you see music or poetry inflecting your scholarship or your media archaeological thinking, and vice versa.

**Brian Michael Murphy**

My work in all these different areas really grows out of relationships, and is sustained by relationships. And so with poetry and all forms of creative writing, you know, I've been lucky to have these interlocutors, these friends who are

great writers, and I've had a series of writing buddies over the course of my adult life. And once I started my PhD, what happened at the same time is my writing buddy at the time was the director of the Kenyon Review Young Writers Workshop, which is for 16 to 18 year olds, it's a two week summer program, it's amazing. It's like a hundred students get there, and they're like, I'm the only writer who's ever lived. And then they're like - you know, they see there's a hundred people just like them. I mean, it's explosive. [Both laugh].

But the model of that workshop is that all the instructors write with the students. So if I give them a prompt and I say you have 20 minutes to start a short story that has a supernatural character, I have to write for 20 minutes. And then we share what we just came up with on the spot. So I've done that for like 10 years. And so every summer no matter what I'm working on - I'm working on "We the Dead" or we're writing a peer reviewed article - I go to Gambier, Ohio for two weeks, and all the other instructors have MFAs and PhDs in creative writing. I'm the only one who didn't. Actually originally, that was my original plan, was an MFA in poetry.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

[Laughs].

**Brian Michael Murphy**

And I was turned to the dark side by a mentor who said, if you think you want to do a PhD one day maybe, you need to go do an MA in something that's really, really hard and get as smart as you can. Though like an MFA in poetry would be fun, and you'd write, and it'd be great, but like, it's not going to challenge you in the way that you need to be challenged to get ready for the PhD. So anyway, that's sort of been my substitute MFA experience. There's 10 years there. And so you know, from that to... right now, I'm helping to relaunch the "Northwest Review," based in Portland, Oregon - and you know, the publisher and editor whose baby this really is, S. Tremaine Nelson, is like, my literary brother from another mother. I mean, if you leave us up to your own devices, we will talk half

the day about the form of the novel and aesthetics, and it'll be very heated. Of course, the other half the day we'll talk about, like, grunge and 90s hip hop.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

[Laughs].

**Brian Michael Murphy**

But really, the magazine is really the concretization of these things that we were going to talk about anyway. And then we've roped in some friends from Kenyon, he's roped in some friends from his MFA. And so right now it feels like it flows together really well. In graduate school, didn't always feel that way. Earlier in graduate school, I was trying to write scholarship the way that I wrote poetry. And they're like, you're not allowed to do that. [Both laugh]. I remember Barry Fang, who is a great writer, and, you know, was in a band back in the day - so he knows what it means to be an artist. He's like, you can write poetry, flowery, wonderful stuff all day. He's like, that's great. What you need to learn how to do is to write one dry, boring, declarative sentence at a time, each one expressing that single piece of information.

I'm like, really? He's like, yeah, I know, it's terrible. But once you learn how to do that, once you learn how to do that, and you stop writing ahead of your evidence, you stop trying to use evocation instead of argumentation, once you learn how to do that and really stick close to your evidence, then you can break out into these really beautiful, resonant images. You can use that, but you can't do it until your reader is fully on board because you've been absolutely clear about what you're up to.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

So to continue this thread, perhaps, about machine vision, machine learning, I know that you have a book coming out this year titled "We the Dead: Data Preservation at the End of the World." Could you share a little bit about that book project and your thinking and how it brings together some of these themes of the sustainability or unsustainability of data preservation, as you see it today?

**Brian Michael Murphy**

Yeah, so "We the Dead" is a book that tells the story of how we arrived where we are, which is Americans being pretty much the most prolific preservers of data in all forms that the world's ever seen. And so, I was really interested in why we preserve as humans broadly. But really, it's more specifically, why did this intensify so much in the 20th century in the United States. And so what I do is I look at the emergence of what I call the data complex, which are the technologies, infrastructures, sets of practices including archiving, that develop in the early-20th century in America, and shift and change as certain crises emerge. And so during the Depression, you have the first permanent time capsules that are created to last over 5000 years, the Westinghouse Time Capsule, the Crypt of Civilization. So they're trying to preserve microfilm for over 5000 years, and they're doing it based on some very, very recent studies, which were actually still ongoing at the time, by the Bureau of Standards, to finally establish, scientifically, how to permanently preserve paper. This actually had not been agreed upon yet. And so paper chemistry was studied. There were all these studies about humidity and temperature and how to ward off insects and how to inject the glue of the binding with pesticides to kill anything that might try to eat it, like silver fish and stuff like that. So then you move up through the Cold War. So I look at the establishment of all these bombproof bunkers for corporate and government records, which of course coincides with the full blown emergence of what media studies scholars call the data body - which is that that thing that we carry around in addition to our biological body, which is all the records all the data about us.

And then up into the digital age, looking at things like Corbis, Trevor Paglen's last pictures project, Bezos and other people that want to now launch data into outer space and store it up there and take civilization there, etc. So in terms of the archive, one thing that I do in the book is I sort of flip inside out what sometimes happens in scholarship where you do all this archival work, you gather all these objects, you use a fraction of them, and you use them to lend weight and credibility to your argument. Some people go beyond that, of course,

and talk, as we said before, about the objecthood of this thing they found, talk more about the context, talk maybe a little bit about the history of the archive where it was found. The way that I tried to flip that inside out - because I literally couldn't find a way to write the book without doing this and I couldn't make my argument makes sense without doing this - is I write actual narratives of going to the archives, of being in the archives. Like, what happens when you go to the Heinz History Center and you're looking for the the Westinghouse materials, right? What do you encounter when you get there? Corbis, of course, was very important because it's a securitized facility. So narrating the spikes that are laid down before you can drive in and the armed guard who takes your ID and gives you a badge and searches your car, etc.

This all was important for the kind of argument I want to make about why the data complex is not just Andre Bezin's mummy complex - well, we've always saved stuff, you know, the Egyptians preserved things. It's like, the Egyptians preserved things if you're talking about mummies and tombs, you're talking about a very different conception of the afterlife and how those things are going to be used. It was about the afterlife. What we've managed to do with the data complex, is we have made the preservation and circulation of this data so fundamental to every single financial and social transaction, an institutional operation that everyday life now literally can't function if the data complex were to go away. We absolutely rely upon it. So I was really interested in how we got there, because a hundred years ago, this is not the case. A hundred years ago, not even everybody had a birth certificate. I mean there's so many things that happened between - there's a great book called "How We Became Our Data" by Collin Koopman. And he looks at this roughly 1890 to 1930 moment, where the data body - he calls it the informational person - but really, really comes into full blown emergence. Yeah, so with archives, I see them as having their own story that I like to tell in intersection with my story.

### **Caitlin Woolsey**

So if the book is looking at this impulse towards preservation at this scale that would be unimaginable a hundred years ago, or 120 years ago, it seems like

there's another piece of your work that is interested in disintegration, or destruction. I'm thinking about in some of your poetry as well. But do you think about that? To me it seems that that might be one of the stakes to the kind of implicit underpinnings of the book project, is that we've built up this complex and these information bodies or data bodies and can we continue? I guess the question is, can we continue in this way? And what happens if we don't or can't? And maybe it relates back to this materiality and mistaking things that we think of as immaterial but actually have these very concrete material effects or after effects.

**Brian Michael Murphy**

Yeah it's definitely related to that. I guess the way I would say it is that you know, preservation is often opposed to decay. That's the way we think about it, right? You can preserve something or you can let it decay. One of the things that I argue in the book is that preservation never simply maintains something that's already existing. It always produces something new. There was nothing like *el Negro* before the taxidermist did the taxidermists work. It wasn't simply saving something from the past to make it persist into to the future. But preservation is this incredibly powerful discourse, because it says it's doing just that. We're not even doing anything. We're just making sure that this thing that's already here, persists. [In a joking voice] 'And it's for the children, it's for the unborn children of the future, who this really belongs to.' It's just this incredibly powerful - It's a performative move, really, because you're affecting something that didn't exist before in this really amazing and sort of clean handed way, right? So with decay, I got for a while there really interested in people like Hiroshi Sugimoto, who does photographs of decayed theatres, as well as a two hour long exposure of an entire film, these glorious images, right? I'll get interested in Bill Morrison and his films. He makes non-narrative films from decayed stock footage. De's written beautifully about decay and how that links up with our fear of our own mortality and how everyday life is sort of based on denying and repressing that. So I think for me, where I end up going in the book was more of what you're talking about, which is, we know that digital technology as it is unsustainable. We know it's

unsustainable, because the earth can't support not just the power that it requires, but also the minerals and metals that you need to make this stuff.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

Right, the extraction.

**Brian Michael Murphy**

Right. They're limited, right? There are things happening right now, which both show how unsustainable all of this is. Like, well, going to space is one of the least sustainable things. But also, in the eyes of the people doing it, they're like, oh, but this is going to change everything, because once we have access to more resources, and we no longer have the finite pool of resources that Earth offers, we can just take the data complex across the galaxy.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

Totally open. It's almost like mistaking the way that these different temporalities or histories are already layered, and just assuming that that there can be a kind of eternal present that isn't inflected with all these much more complicated and often highly problematic factors or components or -

**Brian Michael Murphy**

Yeah, and I'm always interested in how we tell the story of an object. Because when you say you're preserving a film, for instance, which version of the film? If we take some of the insights from process philosophy and all these other places seriously, or even like Henri Bergson, and duration and flux and all these things, then as soon as a photograph is produced, a frame of film is produced, it's already decaying and disintegrating, right? And our culture arbitrarily chooses moments. We're like, no, that's the actual one. That's what it looks like when it's decayed, this is what it looks like when it's pristine. It's like, well, why is the pristine one pristine? Why isn't the decayed one beautiful? What can we learn from decay? And so I guess, rather than being an evangelical about decay and its beauty - which is how I felt at one point [laughs] - now I'm more just trying to think really carefully and sharply about the choices that we make when we

construe any given object as essentially this appearance and not that. And why that's happening and how it's connected to something bigger.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

Right. Well, thank you for sharing about your work and all the different influences that got you to where you are. It's been a real pleasure. Thanks, Brian.

**Brian Michael Murphy**

Yeah, thank you.

**Caro Fowler**

Thank you for listening to *In the Foreground Conversations on Art & Writing*. For more information on this episode and links to the books, articles and artworks discussed, please consult [clark.edu/rap/podcast](http://clark.edu/rap/podcast). This program was produced by Caitlin Woolsey, Samantha Page, and myself, with music by lightchaser, editing by John Buteyn, and additional support provided by Jessie Sentivan and Alice Matthews.