

1 [0:00:00] Intro Music

2 **Timothy Neale** Welcome to Technoscience. Podcast recorded at 2019 Society for the Social Studies of Science Annual Meeting in New Orleans. Produced by Timothy Neale

3 **Laura Foster** and Laura Foster. This podcast is a new initiative to share the exciting work being done in Science and Technology Studies, or STS, with wider audiences who are curious about the field. It's here to offer an approachable way to learn more about this interdisciplinary and engaged field.

4 **Timothy Neale:** Before we begin, we would like to acknowledge that this podcast was recorded on unceded Indigenous land. We recognize the first peoples of Louisiana including the Chitimacha tribe, Coushatta Tribe, the Jena Band of Choctaw Indians, and the Tunica-Biloxi Indian Tribe.

5 **Laura Foster:** In this podcast series, you'll hear interviews with STS scholars about a range of issues including what the field means to them, some of its big debates, and what its future yet might be.

6 **I: Timothy Neale** To quote the feminist philosopher Donna Haraway, "Technology is not neutral. We are inside of what we make and it's inside of us. We're living in a world of connections and it matters which ones get made and unmade."

7 **R: Laura Foster** With those guiding words, let's go to this episode's interview.

8 Music fades

9 **I: Teresa Hoard-Jackson** [0:01:22] Hello. I am Teresa Hoard-Jackson, PhD student at Indiana University in the Gender Studies department. And I am here with Michael Fischer who is the Andrew W. Mellon Professor in Humanities and Professor of Anthropology and Science and Technology Studies at MIT. Hi! How are you doing today?

10 **R: Michael MJ Fischer** [0:01:44] I'm good. How are you?

11 **I: Teresa Hoard-Jackson** [0:01:48] I'm great. So, we just have a few questions for you. We are tryin-to think about ways that we can explain your research to people who might not know much about it. So, I was looking at your bio on the internet in multiple places and one of the things that kept popping up was that you do the anthropology of media circuits. So, what does that sort of entail for like the people who aren't experts?

12 **R: Michael MJ Fischer** [0:02:09] So I'm very interested in and how the art world and the genres of different forms of art, from painting to theater to novels, provide an access to how people think, how people phrase their interests, and their psychological investments differently, in different parts of our own society and different ways in different cultures, different societies. And pair that with ethnographic work, that anthropologists do, trying to understand the empirical bases of how societies operate and pair those two things together and put them in dialogue with one another. So, media circuits, in this case, is an effort to interface anthropology with film studies and media studies, television, the internet, social media - all the modes of communication that operate in the world today.

13 **I: Teresa Hoard-Jackson** [0:03:13] I was also noticing that you tend to study all over the world. What has been like your favorite fieldwork site?

14 **R: Michael MJ Fischer** [0:03:21] That's hard because I fall in love with every site that I go to.

15 **I: Teresa Hoard-Jackson** [0:03:25] [Laughs]

16 **R: Michael MJ Fischer** People are fascinating. And I try not to lose contact with each of the fields. So, my first fieldwork was in the Carribean, in Jamaica. I haven't kept up a lot with the folks there, but I have been back a couple of times. But, my longest fieldwork experience was in Iran, which has become part of my DNA. So, I keep up with that as much as I can. And then, I worked in India for a while and now I'm working in Southeast Asia. So, I've been spending a lot of time in Singapore and traveling around Singapore. They're all favorite places. They're all-each place has taught me things that I think with and that I use to sort of interrogate the kinds of conventional understandings that Americans have. So, that's partly what I mean by "cultural genres" - you look at things from different place in the world, things look very different from those different sites.

17 **I: Teresa Hoard-Jackson** I also noticed that there was a lot about religion. So when you say that you study art and the ways that it circulates, are you also looking at like religious texts and maybe like the ways in which it's maybe looked at as fictional? So, like when they come up with, I don't know, when I was a kid, we used to have to watch *Veggie Tales* all the time. And *Veggie Tales* was a way of teaching little kids about Christianity. But like, is that something that you would do when you are in other places? -Cause I saw that you said you liked Zoroastrians and like all these other really cool religions in Iran specifically.

18 **R: Michael MJ Fischer** So, my interest in-in religion, I guess, is because I'm not Christian and I'm a minority in a Christian world, so that's-that's one impetus. I was recruited initially to do um some kinship in a broad international comparative study of kinship

practices between West Africa, England, and the Caribbean, and the United States. But, I ended up writing my own dissertation on religious behavior in Jamaica and looking at, um, the interface of what was below, um, what might be recognized in the United States as "formalized denominations," or churches, and so-called "cult behavior" that Afro-religions, trance behavior and so on, uh was fascinating. So, that was one study and it-it was a way of working out the Weberian -proach, um, sociological analysis of, um, the dynamics of religious organization in Protestantism. So then for my dissertation, I wanted a non-Christian setting to tet that against and I ended up going to Iran to study Zoroastrianism - the uh imperial [0:04:59] religion of ancient Iran. And no social scientist at that point had studied that religion, so I did a study of Zoroastrians with a very simple schema in mind of comparing village Zoroastrianism with town Zoroastrianism with-with city Zoroastrianism. But as things turned out, I did a study in a, what then was a small city of 100,000 people, which was a community that would eventually be part of the revolution that-that came, uh, at the end of the [19]70s - and was composed of a majority of Shiites and Jews, Bahais, um, and Zoroastrians. So, I did a kind of second comparative study between those communities in that setting. I also went to India and followed up with Zoroastrians there as well as some Muslims who had migrated from this town in Iran called Yazd to, um, Bombay, now called Mumbai. So, religion, comparative religion, history of religion, um, has been an important of what I've done, but um, we're not doing religious studies here. So what's the connection with uh STS, science studies and so on? So, I was eventually recruited to rebuild a small graduate program at uh Rice University. So, two things happened: I and George Marcus wrote two books that kind of shook up anthropology. One was called *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* and the other one was a collection of-of essays that George and Jim Clifford edited called *Writing Culture*. *Writing Culture* was written for the anthropologist and was an effort to turn anthropology into thinking about the contemporary world in a critical kind of way. So, it was a-a really kind of manifesto, a reading of our generation's work in reaction to previous generations. So, it was not well received by the older generations, very well received by graduate students who we were writing for, we also hired in the anthropology department Sharon Traweek, the-one of the founding women of STS. She and I attempted to start building the interface with the sciences and we had the collaboration of the historian of science at Rice as well and we started to try and do a few things, but life intervenes and Sharon, uh, went off to UCLA and I went off to MIT. And the reason I went off to MIT was because I was interested in this interface with science and technology. Where better to do it than MIT? So, I went to MIT without any credentials in science studies, I must say, looking back, except that I have a mother who was a scientist, so I grew up with scientists. And I started reading the literature on science studies and I found it very problematic and that was my job talk which was, "I can do better than that." [Chuckles] And they hired me. [Laughs] So, then at MIT, I gradually attempted to try to build an STS program with five other colleagues who were hired at the same time - integrating the faculty that had already been there. It's a complicated history, but we built a core program (unintelligible) and other courses around that. And that program has prospered. It has put out fabulous PhDs. So, gradually, I, you know, I got into-into STS, but you asked about religion, so I've tried to move the conversation in that direction.

19 **I: Teresa Hoard-Jackson** [0:10:08] Oh no no no.

20 **R: Michael MJ Fischer** [0:10:10] [Laughs]

21 **I: Teresa Hoard-Jackson** Um, thank you for your answer because actually, [Chuckles] you answered most of the other questions that I had.

22 **R: Michael MJ Fischer** [0:10:15] [Laughs] Oh good good.

23 **I: Teresa Hoard-Jackson** [0:10:15] Like uh, what sort of influenced your work? Like, how did you get here? Also like, how did you come to science and technology studies? So, you did answer like two of my other questions I had. But, we do always try to ask this fun question to our interviewees and that one is: what do you think you would be doing if you didn't become an academic? If you were, you know--

24 **R: Michael MJ Fischer** [0:10:35] --Well, there was never any question that I was going to be an academic.

25 **I: Teresa Hoard-Jackson** [0:10:37] [Laughs] Okay.

26 **R: Michael MJ Fischer** My parents were both - well, it depends on how you define "academic." They're both intellectuals - one a geographer, one a mathematician-geodesist. I might have gone into foreign service, um, I took the exam for the foreign service - a bunch of us did, graduate students at the University of Chicago. There was a slight problem - this was the Civil Rights/Vietnam War period and we'd been trained at Chicago in asking questions about the presuppositions of questions that people ask. And so, when we got to the oral part of the ex--, I think we were all flushed out because um, you know, they ask questions where you could tell that they-there was a particular answer that they wanted. And we played with that and they didn't like that. Alright?

27 [Both laugh]

28 **R: Michael MJ Fischer** Uh, you know, I might have-I might have gone that way. I've thought of that a number of times. I might have gone to work for the government in some capacity. As a college student, I had worked for the government, uh, in- I'd worked at NIH for a couple of summers. And so, I was interested in the research efforts that were going on there. I had worked for the Army Map Service doing, interviewing about poverty along the Mexico-US border for a presidential commission on that subject. But I, in the meantime, I had become an anthropologist which was a harder sell in all of those places. So, you know, I got a job, which was a really good job, while a lot of my colleagues were washed out of that generation. People complain about jobs today and it's really rough today, but it was also rough back then too - both for political reasons -cause a lot of people changed their fields, went into

divinity school, fled to Canada, you know, all sorts of things. There's-so there's half a generation that was lost at that time. So, I was happy. You know I got a great job - several jobs repeatedly. Um, I taught at Chicago for a year, then I was at Harvard for 8 years, and I came to Rice for technically 11 years - I was away for fieldwork for a couple of those years. And in-and now at MIT, so I have no complaints for the academic system for me.

29 **I: Teresa Hoard-Jackson** [0:13:04] Mmhmm.

30 **R: Michael MJ Fischer** Right-for? And because it's MIT and Rice, my students have done pretty well too, so happy about that. You know, if you ask me today, I mean I might want to go into law, but probably not because it's really important institutionally in-in-in trying to intervene and correct social problems and so and so forth. On the other hand, there's a lot of memorization of you know, uh cases. There's a lot of talk in STS about social construction and all of that, well the law constructs things. So-so, I don't know if I would have done well as a lawyer. I might have. Uh-sometimes I think I should have become a doctor. I couldn't have become a doctor at the time because I fainted at the sight of blood.

31 [Both laugh]

32 **R: Michael MJ Fischer** [0:13:54] You know, that kind of stuff. But now that I've seen enough and done enough, I probably now would have the intellectual fascination to-to be able to do that. And I have been doing a lot of work with biosciences and-and teach partly in the, and have taught partly in the medical school, um, at Harvard. So again, that's another fascination. So, there are a whole of variety of uh directions. Better way to answer might be that some of my students who have not gotten jobs in academia, have ended up working in industry and doing really interesting stuff - working on driverless cars, for instance. And you know, working for the big corporations and trying to figure out, so STS often talks about the big institutions in society. And I should say one of my interests in-in moving into science and technology studies from anthropology or with anthropology, with anthropological tools, has been, um, the curiosity about the kind of society that we're building around ourselves. So, going off to other places is fascinating and interesting, um, but, a lot of anthropology gets marginalized -cause it's not dealing with the central institutions in society and there's nothing more central than science and technology and all of its ramifications. So, uh, so, for my students who work in the-the sister organization to our organization which is EPIC, which is the ethnographers who work in corporate settings and who still want to contribute to academic understandings of that part of the world, but who are constrained by the intellectual property, proprietary knowledge, not able to speak publicly which is something that is not novel to me. Because people who work in the government also have constraints about what they can di-disclose publicly, but there are ways of writing about that. So, I'm very interested in practices of writing, different kinds of writing, so go back to *Writing Culture* - that was all about how do you write things that are vivid and-and do analytic work at the same time in different ways? So if-if there are problems about privacy or intellectual property or so on, you don't just throw up your hands and say well, you know, that's off limits, um but, you find a way to write about it that doesn't put people in harms way. It protects the people that you're working with and that you're invested in, but there are ways of writing about that. So, there's actually a very interesting book that uh Melissa Cefkin, one of my former students who now work-was working at that point for a different uh Fortune 500 company, now works for Nissan on driverless cars, put together uh that was on precisely that problem of: how do you write from uh, although you're employed by one of these big corporations? It's a similar problem in a lot of the biotech companies of people getting access, um, and then how do you write about it without revealing things that you shouldn't reveal? And those are all interesting struggles within the field for STS as well.

33 **I: Teresa Hoard-Jackson** [0:17:38] I do want to thank you so much for joining us here today at Technoscience. And I want to also say that we really appreciate your very, um, detailed answers for thinking about ways that science and technology have changed, not even like just recently, but over time for thinking about the early ways that people were sort of moving from traditional disciplinary boundaries to a more interdisciplinary space where people can explore things that they've always wanted to explore beyond sort of thinking about all of the political ramifications at the same time, and the constrictions that come with that. So, I want to thank you so much for joining us here today.

34 **R: Michael MJ Fischer** [0:18:17] Thank you.

35 Music outro

36 **I: Laura Foster** You've been listening to Technoscience - a podcast recorded at the 2019 Society for Social Studies of Science Annual Meeting in New Orleans. And produced by Laura Foster

37 **R: Timothy Neale** and Timothy Neale in association with the Society and with support from Alison Kenner, Teresa Hoard-Jackson, Aadita Chaudhury, Konstantin Georgiev, Juan Franscisco Salazar, and Duygu Kasdogan. The intro and outro music is by the Young Fellaz Brass Band from New Orleans, Louisiana. Find them on Instagram and gmail at youngfellazbrassband. That's Fellaz with a Z.

38 **I: Laura Foster** Thanks for listening and catch you soon for the next episode.

39 Music fades