

Go, Now, Go:
Friendship, Futures Unknown, Identity and Performance in Teen Television

by

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Abstract

This thesis is an examination of identity and the role of friendship in the formation of self and selves, within two under-examined areas of television studies: performance studies and critical analyses of Teen Television. As a journey through two serial television programs, *My So-Called Life* (1994-1995) and *Pen15* (2019-present) with a brief exploration of *Freaks and Geeks* (1999-2000), this thesis aims to position Teen TV as an ideal space for exploring the ways friendships alter the beings within them and might be exemplary at amplifying specific elements (the transient, the crucially temporal, the unsettled) of serial television more generally. Teen programs often reflect the “in progress” nature of the serialized medium itself, through narrative and characterization. By centralizing friendships as the crux of the thematic and dramatic stakes, and because teen characters are often presented on a journey of self-discovery (and because these two elements are necessarily intertwined), teen television may be particularly well-suited to the serialized televisual medium. Through a close reading of specific scenes and sequences, with particular attention paid to the performances of young actors on screen, one can uncover the connection that those performances have to other aesthetic elements of the production and narrative. Connectedly, examining the ways that performances accumulate and augment over time, one can, ever gradually, track a character that does not become solidified into a singular self, but rather – through these accumulations and augmentations (sometimes replications and inhabitations of others) – the ways that television characters (like real life people) are swayed and shifted, constantly, by those close to them. Simultaneously, these characters (through narrative and performance) are often shown learning and incorporating elements of others into themselves, developing a relationship language – through gesture, tone, costume, through improvisation and other forms of play, and through affective blending. These shifts may similarly be reflected by the viewer (multiplying the affective entanglements beyond the screen) whose relationship with characters and outward (often creative) expressions based on the characters, aesthetics, and narrative, may take on an element of friendship itself.

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As with everything, for Mom, who taught me love and who was my earliest and most constant television viewing companion.

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Introduction

Go, Now, Go: Friendship, Futures Unknown, Identity and Performance in Teen Television

“Sometimes you recognize yourself in other people right off and sometimes it’s subconscious. When you get older, you gather friends and lovers for reasons other than the accident that your houses are close together. There’s an affinity, stuff you share in common and things you seek out in other people. Something drew you together but you didn’t understand that secret undertow until one day after years and years of talking, it comes, the key story that lays it all out. Who could know at the start of that innocent evening that this was the night to make it plain. They tell you what happened and you think, we’re more alike than I knew, but of course you did know, it’s what brought you together. Incomplete children become incomplete adults. You can see it. You find each other.” (Whitehead, *Sag Harbor* 317-318)

“A lot of people, especially this one psychoanalyst guy they have here, keeps asking me if I’m going to apply myself when I go back to school next September. It’s such a stupid question, in my opinion. I mean how do you know what you’re going to do till you *do* it? The answer is, you don’t. I *think* I am, but how do I know? I swear it’s a stupid question.” (Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* 213)

This thesis attends to the ways in which Teen Television series’ can be exemplary of, more generally, television serial dramas’ exploration of the role of friendship in identity formation. Through narrative and aesthetics, specifically for our discussion through the performances of the young actors on screen, a view of friendship comes into focus, one that illustrates the ways in which selves are formed porously, shifted, shaped, stretched and drawn out through these relationships over time. Though television performance studies have been “critically neglected” (Logan, *The Presence* 14), it is often through these screen performances that the viewer becomes engaged, intimately, with the characters on screen (Logan, *The Presence* 14). In this way, the focus on the finding, building, or creating of an identity, an identity that might inform a future, or more adult shape – one which is often of central focus on these shows – takes on a further weight. Through performances, we often see the doubling of performance: where the performer on screen is playing a character, and the character on screen is performing a

role or an identity. But this thesis aims to complicate that, by exploring the ways in which friendships might be the driving force of shifts and changes of the self – changes that can be both positive and negative, conscious and unconscious, performative and revealing – over time. Serial dramas can draw out these notions in “fragments” that build upon themselves through the linkages and progression of moments, episodes and, sometimes, seasons (Logan, *The Presence* 19).

In his thesis, *The Presence of Performance and the Stakes of Serial Drama: Accrual, Transience, Companionship*, Elliott Logan discusses, at length, the crucial dimension of provisionality (as opposed to a strict focus on accumulation) in, not only, serial fiction television as a medium, but also screen performance within this medium. As Logan defines it, the provisional “emerges in the medium’s distinctive tension between accrual and transience – between the permanence of what is laid down in each episode, and its susceptibility to change, revision, or loss as further episodes continue to unfold the series’ internal history” (17). Provisionality often makes itself known through the ways that relationships are presented in these fictions and play out *over time* (32). Logan explains, “characters and performers in serial drama especially manifest the provisional as a condition of human identity, and of our bonds to one another” (38). In Logan’s argument, he explores moments of transience in serial television drama (specifically in the series’ *Mad Men* and *Homeland*) to draw out a discussion of what these fleeting moments and behaviours might offer within the space of close bonds. To do this, Logan examines several scenes and sequences where characters (notably in contrast to this discussion, Logan’s focus is on adult characters with careers and prescribed roles that inform their identities) express (through the human actors playing them) a kind of complex multiplicity. This character provisionality emerges not simply due to an accumulated understanding (by actor, creators, and viewer) of “who they are” over the course of a series through connections to past episodes, but also because serial television characters retain capacity for possibility beyond what has already been “laid down” (17). In the programs that Logan examines, characters express “the fear that we are not who others take us to be” and relatedly “the struggle to recognize ourselves in our deeds and what others make of them” (40). Logan explains that this “self...doesn't only solidify over time but is also open to change – to moments of counterpoint that upset settled familiarity and expectation” (38). Moreover, “who the characters are – to themselves, to one another, and to us – is not fixed” (38).

In this thesis, in conversation with Logan's recognition of the linkages outlined above, I argue that television shows centred on teen characters are exemplary at exploring the connection between friendship and identity formation. These connected elements are tied to both accrual and the provisional (and the necessary anxiety that arise from their connected "tension") and come to light through performance or "the mediation of...words by actors" (Logan, *The Presence* 19).

Logan explains that the provisional is

a feature of human identity or selfhood that is a fundamental subject of screen performance, and a condition that lies at the heart of interpersonal bonds such as friendship. The provisional thus forms a link between the seriality of television drama, its most salient human element (performance), and one of its principal dramatic subjects (companionship). If we attend to relationships between performance and provisionality, we might refine our understanding of seriality in television drama as a resource for the compelling onscreen treatment of companionship over long periods of time. (*The Presence* 31)

In contrast to Logan's discussion of adult characters whose identities have become more solidified (at least superficially), I am interested in exploring the ways that the provisional is revealed within characters whose sense of self, because of where they are situated in the world, is "allowed" to be or is seen to be unfixed. I am suggesting that this supposed "identity crisis on the margins of adulthood" (Brickman 157) in which teen characters are often placed at the start of a television series, is reflective of the provisional in serial television more widely, can be further reflective of the "in progress" nature of all serial television characters (child, adolescent, *or* adult) and, in fact, serial television fiction itself. By this I mean, that programs about teen characters lean toward provisionality (a provisionality that itself is an essential component in serialized television) in a number of ways and for a number of reasons, making these narratives well-suited to the medium more generally. First, these teen shows often centre on friendships within the narrative. Friendship is a reliable interest of serial drama and Teen Television programs tend to focus on friendships as the crux of the thematic and dramatic stakes. The narrative hinges on the goings on within peer groups – rather than work colleagues, or familial relationships (which are often part of these shows as well) – and these peer group connections receive the bulk of the show's attention. Second, the narrative concerns of these programs and their central characters often foreground "finding oneself." These programs are often focused, at least peripherally, on characters positioned – through their own desires or because of what they have been told by those around them – on a journey to find their place in the world. By this I

mean that teen characters are often looking for where they fit, who they fit with, and where they could fit going forward. This focus on the journey of “self-discovery” often takes the form of “trying on” types, roles, or selves (which can be considered a kind of performance), often in combination with a “fresh start,” where a teen character seizes upon something new (friends, an interest or hobby, a school) to remove themselves from their own history. Often this historical past is unseen by the viewer and is provided rather as backstory. In this way, these characters, in their earliest moments, by virtue of their place in the world and the viewer’s understanding of this place, “lean” (perhaps *more* explicitly) “toward the promises of an open future” (to paraphrase Logan, *The Presence* 39). Though, of course, this openness may be constricted by any number of societal, cultural, and economic factors. At the same time, they may also hold an anxious desire for self-definition as an end-goal, resulting in an inherent tension between (old/stale) past, (new/fresh) present, and (unknown/possibly settled) future. Third, there is a linkage between reasons one and two; they are intertwined, entangled and inextricable from each other. In other words, friendships are essential to the way in which human beings create and express themselves in the world. Friendships influence the ways that we talk, dress, and behave. In serial television, the influenced behaviours that emerge within friendships may become patterned over time and may become “part of” the character. These *may*, as noted, be seen by the viewer as performative (acting out, trying on, or hiding), but I am more interested in performance not as a mode of covering up, but rather as a means of self-exploration and expansion. Fourth, because a single friendship is (generally) not one’s only relationship in the world, there can be stress, tension and anxiety when moving from one relationship to another, or (as explicitly explored, as we will see, in *My So-Called Life*) encountering people from various relationships in the same place, at the same time. Because high school settings tend to place characters in relation to a semi-diverse array of other characters, this anxiety can naturally become heightened. In this way, and as many of these shows ultimately offer, there is no solid “self” to find, but rather various selves with various people. Finally, over time, friendships form, expand, change, and sometimes even end (to paraphrase Logan, *The Presence* 32). There is a further tie here to the collaborative and expansive ways in which serial television shows are constructed, especially if they are long running. As Lucy Fife Donaldson and James Walters explain,

Whereas for film, synthesis can be conceptualised as a tight relationship between the ‘combination, interaction, fusion’ of elements, the patterns of television take on a different quality as the shape of the text has the potential to grow and expand over time,

its internal relationships forming part of a much larger whole, developing and even reshaping the process of making. (356)

This thesis explores the crucial connection between friendships and identity formation and, connectedly, screen performance in teen programs. In doing so, I will look closely at two shows, *My So-Called Life* (ABC, 1994-1995) and *Pen15* (Hulu, 2019-present). In these examinations, I will investigate the way that serial television in general, and Teen Television more specifically, might be well-suited to draw out ideas of companionship's role in identity formation and alteration over time. In order to make these connections, I will examine the friendships between two pairs of teen girl characters: Angela Chase and Rayanne Graff on *My So-Called Life*, and Maya Ishii-Peters and Anna Kone on the series *Pen15*. Our entry points into these worlds – the worlds of Liberty High and the unnamed Middle School in *Pen15* – are through deeply, fundamentally provisional beings. To settle them would be to remove what makes them, at least at this stage of their lives, them. But, further, the provisionality inherent in the central teen characters also seem reflective of the way that television more broadly creates, builds, multiplies, and augments over time, often expanding rather than solidifying. These shows suggest that humans are slippery beings, capable of changing and contorting themselves slightly or grandly for necessity or for fancy, sometimes to obscure an underlying (possibly unknown) truth but also, more simply, because *they want to or need to* within intimate relationships.

In chapter one, I will explore the various ways that *My So-Called Life* centres on fluidity, the porousness of bodies, mirroring, and reciprocity within friendships. The show engenders intimacy through its central character, Angela Chase, in a variety of ways, not least of which is reflected and channeled through Claire Danes' striking performance and acting style. This style that, in part, shaped the series, is exemplified by her singular cry, a gesture that is woven and patterned within the narrative of the show itself. In addition, the cry is one of several gestures that is mirrored or replicated (on purpose or unconsciously) within an intimate friendship to suggest the tightening or, alternately, fraying of these relationships. Strengthening of bonds is reflected not only through this repetition of gesture, but also through the repetition of language, of costume as well as more subtly, but most notably, the blending of affect. Through these reciprocal engagements, the show suggests the possibility of the blending and inhabitation of bodies, and a lasting residue that informs identity, even when everything else has worn off. One can be "rubbed off on" in these intimate relationships and this influence is long-lasting.

In chapter two, I will explore the way that *Pen15* uses the improvisational tenets of agreement and expansion within all aspects of its production, including narrative, aesthetics, casting, and screen performances, to explore and reflect the ways that its central relationship is also reliant on these modes of play. This playful focus necessarily highlights ideas of performance, the performative, and identity building, while bringing the viewer into the mode of play as well. Aesthetically, this connected imaginary is offered to the viewer through generic ruptures. By foregrounding the idea of agreement at all costs within the central relationship of Maya and Anna, the show is pushed into darker and destructive territory, in creating a two-headed monster that rejects separation. Like in *MSCL*¹, bodies are potential sites of morphing and stretching, and identities are in states of constant shift. *Pen15* creates an “open-closed world” that allows for the expansiveness of the imaginary within defined boundaries.

The open-yet-closed world (that will be explored at more length in chapter two) is of central importance for teen narratives. In “Pushing at the Margins: Teenage Angst in Teen TV and Audience Response,” Louisa Ellen Stein suggests that the anxiety between the desire for freedom and “Themes of constraint” are part of many teen narratives (224). In this thesis, however, I argue that these specific programs push against and complicate notions of containment (of time, of space, of age, of body and of self). Thus, Teen Film and Teen Television, as well as the characters that inhabit these worlds, seem to be emblematic of the unfixed and fluid. In no way are ideas of the unfixed limited to high school set television shows, rather, these shows clarify and amplify these themes, providing further insight into the way that serialized television can foreground essential character instability. Rather than existing in a “liminal” space (as many essays about teen film and television suggest²), teen characters epitomize a similar facet of many serialized television characters and real-life people: the lifelong (or series long) “process of becoming” (Rothman ch.12). Logan asserts

A person’s identity does not simply accumulate with time, solidifying and condensing, becoming ever more familiar – while it develops out of an accrued history, it leans toward the promises of an open future, however constrained that future might seem by the weight of one’s past. It is because our futures are not yet fixed (or not fully) that we can commit to being something other tomorrow than we were today. But this tension – between the permanent facts of our past, and the openness of our future – makes the question of ‘who one is’ – and who others are to us – an especially difficult and unstable

¹ I will use *My So-Called Life* and *MSCL* to refer to the series interchangeably throughout.

² See Brickman (156-157), Driscoll (“Liminal Teen Film” pt. 3), and Stein (238).

one, which calls for sustained and retrospective interpretation over time. (*The Presence* 39)

In Logan's analysis it is this very instability – because characters are only ever fleetingly solidified and, perhaps, only ever fleetingly fully available to the viewer – that makes television performance worthy and demanding of constant consideration and mental revision (*The Presence* 33-34, 39). Like “real-life” people, characters in serial television (with the help of writers, directors, and the actors playing them) in all stages of “life” keep adding – moments, events, hurts, loves – onto themselves, building a history of past events that inform who they are. But characters are not solely formed through the experience and the memory of these past events. Tom Cantrell and Christopher Hogg describe this (specifically in relation to long-running soaps) as a state of “flux” (288), where “characters, and the associated actors, can exist within a state of continual, unresolved narrative change across multiple episodes” (289), a state that is at issue for performers and viewers alike. A character's identity is always at least partially complicated by what they are *yet to do*, what they *might become*, how they *might behave* in an undetermined future moment. Put more simply and to paraphrase Holden Caulfield above, how does one know, exactly, what they will do before they do it?

The exploration of this central mystery, the central (though often unstated) mystery of almost all serial programs (to borrow from William Rothman, “Justifying *Justified*” ch. 12) - namely who are these people, how do they relate to others, and how will they continue to relate going forward? - brings us directly to the newness of this study. Logan suggests that “Until the mid-2000s, very few pieces of writing in television studies directly addressed acting and performance in television fiction” (*The Presence* 62), a notion that is similarly noted in Philip Drake's “Reframing Television Performance” (6). Logan outlines the relative scarcity of television performance studies prior to the 2000s and the expansive “growth in the field” from 2000-on (*The Presence* 64). Though, Logan notes, “Across this increasingly large volume of scholarship, detailed stylistic criticism that relates the expressive presence of the performers onscreen to the significance of serial drama remains rare” (*The Presence* 65). This thesis intends, then, to add to two under-explored areas of television studies. First, it engages with the “texture of performance” (Clayton, “The Texture” 73), defined by Alex Clayton as “the fine detail of what is offered by actors to microphone and camera, and the manner in which that work is woven into the fabric of the film” (“The Texture” 78). I am using “performance” here to indicate

the detail or “texture” of gesture, tone and behaviour that distills itself on screen, expressed through a human actor, relating to the wider narrative “fabric” of the series, and the connected reading of this detail by an audience. For Drake it is the “accumulation” (8) of these textural patterns in performance that progressively build over the course of a season (or entire series) and that allow the viewer to recognize something distinct within a character. “As a viewer I have a privileged insight into the characters’ secret and thus can recognize both ‘them’ and ‘not them’ in their acting” (Drake 10). This interplay between what a performer expresses and what the audience learns through this expression is essential to this study. I will complicate Drake’s notion (as Logan also does in *The Presence*), however, by suggesting that, in the programs in this study, our understanding of a character’s identity is complicated by several factors, so that what is “them” and “not them” is purposefully not so distinct. Second, this thesis explores the underexamined “complex, culturally weighted category” (Ross and Stein, “Introduction” 8) of Teen Television. Teen Television can encompass a wide range of concerns, themes, characters, and genres (Ross and Stein, “Introduction” 5-6), but I will focus specifically on the teen serial narrative. As noted, I argue that teen series, though often connected with “‘low brow’ commercial culture” (Ross and Stein, “Introduction” 8), can be exemplary in drawing out the connected textures of performance and television’s often-explored themes of identity and friendships. The intersection between these two under-examined facets - screen performance in the Teen TV series - is, as one might expect, even less well-explored.³

Though there has been more critical attention paid in the recent past, as Sharon Marie Ross and Louisa Ellen Stein assert, “There is a significant dearth of work on Teen TV” (“Introduction” 11). Volumes such as the similarly titled *Teen TV: Genre, Consumption and Identity* (published in 2004) and *Teen Television: Essays on Programming and Fandom* (published in 2008) take broad looks at historical and cultural patterns in Teen Television, mainly (though not exclusively) from post-1990 on. Various other collections are dedicated to academic studies of particular shows. As Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson attest, many of these offerings are “fairly tightly focused, examining...either televisual texts themselves or their

³ Though there are relatively few performance studies that explore teen serial dramas explicitly, some worth noting are “Performing *Veronica Mars*” by Sue Turnbull (ch.2) in *Investigating Veronica Mars: Essays on the Teen Detective Series*, “Moments of inspiration: Performing Spike” about James Marsters performance in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, also by Sue Turnbull (367-373), and “Performance as Authorship: Sarah Michelle Gellar and *Buffy* Season 6” (51-68) by Aaron Hunter.

audiences without wishing to concentrate on teen TV as a genre or on the place of youth programming in the commodity culture of adolescents” (“Introduction” 4). Davis and Dickinson specifically cite volumes on programs such as *Beverly Hills, 90210* and, most notably and extensively, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, “where the lion’s share of academic attention has been trained” (“Introduction” 4-5). For our discussion, the similar collection of essays on *My So-Called Life*, titled *Dear Angela: Remembering My So-Called Life*, has been invaluable. Although Teen Television is still often overlooked, teen programs (and the specific ones significant to this discussion) seem particularly useful in interrogating television’s interest in long-standing or newly formed friendship over time, the way that friendships are often integral to shifts within character, and the way that this “shaping” might make itself known through not only narrative but also aesthetics, notably within performance. Additionally, television serial narratives may foster, over time, feelings “similar to friendship” within a viewer (Blanchet and Bruun Vaage 27). Jason Mittell contends that viewership often takes the form of “parasocial relationships,” a term dating back to communication studies in the 1950s (as both Mittell [*Complex TV* 127] and Blanchet and Bruun Vaage [20-22] explain), where a fan might “develop long-term relationships with characters” (*Complex TV* 127). In other words, because watching serial television often “feels like” formulating an intimate friendship to the viewer, and because Teen Television programs often centralize the role of friendships in the lives of its characters, interrogating these specific texts to explore the way serial television might frame friendships more generally, seems a particularly rich, fruitful, and still under-examined wellspring.

This naturally leads to another notion that each chapter will engage with. Susan Murray defines “participatory spectatorship” (36) as viewer engagement with the text beyond watching, through extra-textual expressions. These extra-textual expressions can take on many forms including writing, costuming, other forms of art, talking about or simply thinking about the show after it has finished. Thus, spectatorship itself becomes part of the activity and engagement *around* the show, outside of the confines of the screen and, possibly, the living room. As a mode of imaginative play, this creative extra-textual expression often blends with ideas that teen narratives themselves explore, specifically in connection to identity formation. These modes of participatory spectatorship can, as we will see, be helpful in exploring the way that performance (by which I mean, the actors’ performances within the show) register within the audience. The two shows that I have chosen to discuss have, either, engendered documented modes of this kind

of viewership, in the case of *My So-Called Life*, or engender participation by virtue of their gimmick and exhibit these modes as part of their narrative, in *Pen15*. Participatory spectatorship brings the viewer in closer “proximity” (Murray 36) to the show while extending the show into “real life.” This “thinking about” the text after the fact, rendered in a variety of ways, becomes an extended state of viewership and is often a function of the in-between spaces or “gaps” (Nussbaum “Tune In Next Week”) between episodes that are built into the serial format. Aaron Hunter explains, “Because of serial television’s multiple interruptions – commercial breaks, story breaks, and episode and season endings (often with cliff-hangers) – audiences are given narrative pauses in which they are encouraged to speculate about not only the meaning of an action or episode, but also the intention behind it” (55). This thesis, I acknowledge, is its own form of “participatory spectatorship” and fandom, and, in this way, it entangles in on itself. The relationship that a viewer has with a show and its characters (and, indeed, the relationship that *I have* with these shows and characters) often reflects the friendships within the shows’ narratives, doubling and spreading an influential pattern of blending beyond the screen. In this way, these shows are capable of shaping and influencing (in, perhaps, equally fleeting, and transient ways) the selves at home, watching and then thinking about, and then, potentially creating, inspired by the world of the show.

This newness does not entirely explain the reasons for studying Teen Television in the first place. Some might naturally wonder, why is a thirty-something woman still fixated on and enamoured with Teen Television at all? Moreover, being substantially removed from adolescence, what would one even have to say about it? As Davis and Dickinson acknowledge themselves, “those with a scholarly interest in Teen TV (who are mostly over nineteen, we would imagine) will have an awkward relationship with their object of study” (“Introduction” 12). This thesis may not answer these questions in full, but my aim is to suggest that Teen Television has plenty to offer a non-teenaged viewer as well as non-teenaged academics. Worth noting, is that these programs are largely written and “produced by adults” (G. Davis 131), the teen characters within them are often played by non-teenaged actors (an idea taken up explicitly in *Pen15*), and these shows may even “address, court, and successfully draw in both pre-teen and older viewers” (Ross and Stein, “Introduction” 5). For instance, *Pen15* is a show created by two thirty-something women about middle schoolers. Not only have Maya Erskine and Anna Konkle created the show, but they also play their teenage selves. In this way, the show seems to have as

much to say about and for pre-teens as it does about the way in which our younger selves extend and blend into adulthood. Creator Winnie Holzman has also declared that, in the creation of *My So-Called Life*, she did not see the series as a “teen show” (“2002 Bonus DVD”). When pressed by the network to answer the question of who exactly the show was for, Holzman refused, stating rather, “there’s no answer to that except, ‘This show is for the people who are falling in love with it’” (qtd. in Watkins). By way of personal context, I was eleven when I watched *My So-Called Life* for the first time in 1994, younger than Angela Chase by four years; I am, currently, older than Maya and Anna who play teens in *Pen15* and was, in the year 2000, slightly older than the characters that they play. The programs examined within this thesis are ambivalent about who exactly they are for, and what a viewer – at a variety of ages – can glean from them. In other words, the concerns of Teen Television can still encompass – and may even be targeted to – the concerns of entirely different demographics. This may also be reflected using nostalgia, as will be touched upon, briefly, below and in chapter two. In this way, as Davis and Dickinson suggest, “These programmes are both for us, and not for us” (“Introduction” 12).

Moreover, if we agree with Logan’s view of the state of provisionality in serial television, and the reliance on the tension between the accrued history of the past and the possibility of an unknown future (*The Presence* 17), and if we also agree that this notion is essential to series’ about teens whose lives often revolve around the ongoing mystery of who they once were, who they are, and who they might become, then one can see how a show centring on teen characters might draw out these notions in particularly fertile ways. Teen series’ frequent focus on intimate relationships building or dissolving over time highlight the way human identities can also be built and dissolved within and because of these relationships, the way that the ties of close relationships can shape us in ways known and unknown, and the way that this shaping is a never-ending process throughout life. As Logan suggests,

The provisional is a useful term for serial drama criticism because it evokes the way that objects, states of being, or relations between individuals may be – in any one moment – complete, definite, settled, but not yet finished. They remain open and susceptible to the continued unfolding of the future, subject to an eventual but yet-to-be-realised historical fate. The provisional thus has bearing on our understanding of serial drama as a medium in which each episode and season is complete unto itself, yet still linked to the series as a larger whole that was created and watched piece-by-piece, across months and years, and so which is riven by resulting tensions between unity and fragmentation. (*The Presence* 17)

Additionally, because serial television programs themselves mirror the beginnings of friendships (the viewer is thrust into learning the often-intimate details of a fictional person[s], we spend long periods of time with them, with essential gaps in between) there is yet another crucial link. Because teen shows themselves often start with newly formed friendships (see *My So-Called Life* and *Freaks and Geeks*, for two of many examples), the audience's position is further reflected and reinforced within these programs. Therefore, the characters are often "learning" each other within these relationships as the viewer also learns them.

In my exploration of these themes, I have chosen to write about *My So-Called Life* and *Pen15* for a number of reasons. *My So-Called Life* was foundational in my own, early viewing experiences (airing before my own adolescence began in earnest) and was one of the first programs I watched that offered up a teen character as fully realized and purposely contradictory as an adult character might be (something similar that I had only encountered in literary fiction and film). Part of this newness, of course, was my youthful and inexperienced viewership; there was a whole swath of serial drama that aired pre-1990 that I had not seen (and still have not). But in another respect, *My So-Called Life* was one of the first hour-long dramas that made central a teen girl character, offered her voice as the viewer's way in, and suggested that she was worthy of this focus. *Pen15* is a recent offering that explodes the Teen TV narrative in a fresh way, casting adults to earnestly play the central pre-teen roles, stretching and unsettling a viewer's buy-in, while also purposefully commenting on the way adults have often been cast as teens in high school dramas historically. I have chosen to write about these shows because, on a personal level and for a variety of reasons, some which are detailed in this thesis, I have found a connection with them. Additionally, I believe that both shows are exemplary at, over time, showing the incremental changes, sometimes fleeting, that can occur within individuals and the way that selves blend with others (through imagination, through affect) within intimate relationships. These two series connect in their focus on the friendships between teen girls, but their aesthetic views of adolescence differ wildly. Both shows, however, dwell in moments that push against certainties, against notions that *who we are* can ever be something definite and, rather, settle into moments of emotional expressiveness that feel their way to purposefully undefined conclusions. In some ways, *My So-Called Life* marked the beginnings of what we think of as "quality" television serial teen drama today. *Pen15* offers an exemplary example of the current niche landscape (airing on the streaming service Hulu) of Teen Television.

This thesis is in no way an exhaustive study of the two shows I have chosen to discuss, performance in serial drama, or of U.S.-based Teen TV in general. Nor is this a study that seeks to add to the fertile ground of the performative nature of girlhood⁴, or television representations of female friendship, to a substantial degree. There is much more to be said, for example, about the manner that Teen TV has evolved in astonishing (and positive) ways recently, especially in relation to complex expressions of teen sexuality and gender identity. Recent shows like *We Are Who We Are* and *Euphoria* explore these topics in complicated and nuanced ways and would make for a more robust exploration in a similar vein. Race and class are also largely absent from this study, though both are explored in *My So-Called Life* (in incremental degrees) and race is explored in *Pen15* explicitly. Notably (and unfortunately) also absent from my discussion is *My So-Called Life*'s Rickie Vasquez, the first gay teenage character on television (Garber). Moreover, and crucially, *Pen15* has not finished its run. Whatever future is in store for it is still yet unwritten in part because of its abbreviated second season due to COVID-19 (the creators intend to end the show with its third season; see: Fontoura). But, in my view, this unintentional pause in production and *My So-Called Life*'s early cancellation simply heightens what is already there: the notion that uncertainty (about self, relationships and life in general) is a space worth dwelling in, and is, in fact, one of the pleasures of serialized television.

“Things are different now”: A brief history of the serialization of television drama and Teen TV

If *My So-Called Life* is emblematic of where Teen Television (at least in our current understanding of it) “started” and *Pen15* is emblematic of the current brand of niche teen programming (and the niche TV landscape more generally), it is helpful to step back further still, to get an understanding of how this kind of television – the television serial – became popularized on a broader scale. In 1982, Stanley Cavell noticed something was happening in serialized television that Logan would eventually echo: “It is a contrary of the long time span that applies to individual episodes, whose events are, however dramatic, transient. So the

⁴ For more on the performative nature of girlhood in Teen Television, see Jenny Bavidge’s “Chosen Ones: Reading the Contemporary Teen Heroine” (41-53) and Francesca Gamber’s “Riding the Third Wave: The Multiple Feminisms of *Gilmore Girls*” (114-131). For an overarching cultural context, see Catherine Driscoll’s *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory*.

aesthetics of serial-episode construction comes to a suggestion that what is under construction is an argument between time as repetition and time as transience” (“The Fact of Television” 94). Like Logan, Cavell saw this “argument” – between repetition and transience, or as Logan sees it, adjacently, “between permanence and transience” (*The Presence* 1) – as something rather unique to long-running, serialized television dramas. This argument itself, as we will see, did not need to be firmly settled and would, in fact, only become more “complex” (Mittell, *Complex TV* 2). By way of historical context, in the early 80s, there was a movement towards the dramatic serial format in primetime television, shows with continuing narrative arcs running over multiple episodes, a full season, and sometimes the entire series. This format had previously, up to that point, been mainly used by the stigmatized genre of daytime soaps (Newman 16). “Evening serials became an important form of American television programming in the 1980s after the ratings success of *Dallas* (CBS, 1978-91) and the acclaim and awards bestowed on *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981-87). They became a dominant form in the 1990s with shows such as *The X-Files* (Fox, 1993-2002) and *ER* (NBC, 1994-)...” (Newman 16). Although these shows had roots in soaps, they were considered “quality TV” (Newman 16) and in 1995, Charles McGrath suggested that these series, be thought of “as a brand-new genre: the prime-time novel” (243). Emily Nussbaum frames this in another way, as the emergence of fluidity within forms. Episodic television was designed to be “formulaic” so that a viewer could follow along if they watched the show “out of order” (“The Big Picture” 18). Serialized television was more fluid, moving from one episode to the next, and demanding considered attention from the viewer to follow along. But fluidity was not confined solely to the structure of episodes:

as the years passed, TV began to warp – as comedies got sadder and dramas funnier; as primetime stories absorbed the serialized daytime model, allowing characters to change and stories to take bigger leaps; as dramas began to wrestle with worldly subject matter – TV didn’t abandon those tight, seemingly repressive genres. Instead, it worked off their restraints. It both resisted them and exploited them. In the 1970s and the 1980s, *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* and *Soap* at once mimicked and mocked the cliff-hanger-heavy style of soap operas, expanding the way that stories could be told. In the early aughts, *The Wire* critiqued the police procedural; it also *was* a police procedural. The British version of *The Office* emerged as a caustic satire of reality television, a form of resistance to a cheaply made new genre that threatened the primacy of scripted television, but it also repurposed the visual tools of reality (the confessional, the peek through the blinds, the quick flashback) as a fresh way to be funny. (“The Big Picture” 18-19)

In Nussbaum's historical assessment, TV did not only or simply move from less episodic forms to more serialized ones, but also became more fluid within genres. In other words, TV played within its own sandbox (while also, of course, being influenced by film and novels), and what it was already doing was what it continued to do, but in different and progressively more complex ways. The narrative structure of soaps, that connected years of tangled plot, migrated to primetime serials, "rejecting the need for plot closure within every episode" (Mittell, *Complex TV* 18) and resisting "definitive endings" (Ellis 108). Jason Mittell suggests what he calls "complex TV," "employs a range of serial techniques, with the underlying assumption that a series is a cumulative narrative that builds over time, rather than resetting back to a steady-state equilibrium at the end of every episode" (*Complex TV* 18). Complex TV emerged in the 90s and the "era of television complexity" has continued to evolve through the 2000s (Mittell, "Narrative Complexity" 29).

Television's movement toward seriality and complexity (and towards unstable genres more broadly), as well as the mixture of both episodic and serial narratives, would also, naturally, be reflected in its changing attitudes about complex characterization and relationships within shows, as Nussbaum makes note of above. Viewers of "complex television" are tasked with expanding "their comprehension skills through long-term viewing and active engagement" (Mittell, "Narrative Complexity" 51). Viewers of these programs can no longer expect that they will not "miss" anything if they are not "actively" engaged. Connectedly, characters in these programs no longer *necessarily* had to remain solidly consistent from one episode to the next so that viewers would understand a character's unwavering motivations if they watched a re-run or even dropped in and out of a single episode (Nussbaum, "The Big Picture" 18). In fact, television characters *might* change in gradual ways over time, "learn from their mistakes" (Ellis 108), or dramatically transform from the beginning of the show to its end, as Mittell notes is the case with Walter White in *Breaking Bad* (*Complex TV* 151-63).⁵ Mittell tracks Walter White's drastic

⁵ In Mittell's discussion of complex seriality, "The qualities of complexity: Vast versus dense seriality in contemporary television" in *Television Aesthetics and Style*, he compares *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad* and describes two distinct "vectors" of serialization. "*The Wire* embraces what we might call centrifugal complexity, where the ongoing narrative pushes outward, spreading characters across an expanding storyworld." While "*Breaking Bad* exemplifies a model of dense television, embracing centripetal complexity where the narrative movement pulls the actions and characters inward toward a more cohesive centre, establishing a thickness of backstory and character depth that drives the action" (Pt. 1 Ch. 2).

change from ineffectual family man to the terrifying, but active “Heisenberg” (*Complex TV* 153) throughout the show’s five seasons, and sixty-two episodes. Though Walter White is a useful example of the way a character might slowly but progressively accumulate or “sediment” (to paraphrase Logan, *The Presence* 148) over the course of a series, this thesis focuses on moments where the viewer can note small, perceptible (and perhaps fleeting), but crucial shifts in character, recognizable not least because of screen performance, and largely dependent on a character’s entanglements with others.

The movement toward serialization, complexity, and messiness would naturally extend to teen dramas and the characters within them, though, the (cyclical) rise in popularity of quality serial teen dramas in the 1990s is also rather unusual. As Emily VanDerWerff details, the progression toward serialization and complexity also hit around the same time that something curious was happening at ABC, which would impact the rise in teen dramas as we know them today.

In the mid-80’s, ABC was in last place among the big three networks and had nothing to lose, so it started giving interesting writers carte blanche (within the standards of American TV networks) to create interesting programs that would hopefully boost the network’s profile. It was a period that led to shows like *Twin Peaks* and *Moonlighting*...The strategy didn’t really pay off...But the dramas ABC was putting on the air were of the sort that would, in 10 years’ time, gravitate more naturally to cable. (“*My So-Called Life* set the path”)

One of those programs was Ed Zwick and Marshall Herskovitz’s *thirtysomething*, a show that “dared viewers to invest in the minutiae and intrigue of day-to-day life” (VanDerWerff “*My So-Called Life* set the path”) and presumed that “its characters’ inner lives would be rich enough that its target audience would need nothing more” (Sepinwall 17). *My So-Called Life* was *thirtysomething*’s direct progeny (Herskovitz and Zwick re-teamed as producers and enlisted writer, Winnie Holzman, to create the teen drama) and was, as VanDerWerff notes, “one of the last gasps of a particularly fertile period in the history of network TV drama” that she discusses above (“*My So-Called Life* set the path”). *My So-Called Life* suggested, during its brief broadcast life, that a teen-centred show could also be considered “quality TV.”

Although what we currently think of as Teen “quality” Television begins in the period outlined above, as Ross and Stein note, the history of Teen Television reaches back to the 1950s (“Introduction” 12). Recognizing the ongoing connection to and influence of Teen Film, in ““So Who’s Got Time for Adults!’: Femininity, Consumption and the Development of Teen TV –

From *Gidget* to *Buffy*,” Bill Osgerby details the rise in teen programming in the 50s and 60s, especially in relation to teen girls. Osgerby notes the demographic shift (an increase in the youth population) in post-war US and UK, detailing the way that shift was acknowledged by television broadcasters (71-86). More teens with disposable income meant more teens to capitalize on and, thus, there was a movement in television to offer more teen representation, first within family sitcoms (like *Leave it to Beaver*, *Father Knows Best*, and *The Donna Reed Show*) (74), as well as music television programs (73). Shortly thereafter, networks began airing programs that focused on teens (usually teen boys) more distinctly, like *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis* (74). Later, some programs specifically centred on young women characters, like *Gidget* (75) and *The Patty Duke Show* (74). Osgerby suggests that the wane in popularity of these types of programs in the 70s, was due to another cyclical demographic shift, which also explains the rise again in teen programs in the 1990s (82-83). “On both sides of the Atlantic the rise of TV programming aimed at teenagers was constituent in, and indicative of, the growing significance of youth as consumer market” (81). Ross and Stein explain “it is important to note that from a pop cultural historical perspective, the 1980s is indeed the decade when critics and TV historians begin to pay the most attention to Teen TV as a potential genre with its own aesthetic components” (“Introduction” 12). This is significant because, as Nussbaum assesses, even in the early 90s, “the best of television wasn’t considered worthy of real analysis” (“The Big Picture” 5). Teen Television was and “remains marked as a suspect category” not only because of its ties to mass-market teen film, but also because of “perceptions of TV *overall* as a low brow, deeply commercial medium” (Ross and Stein, “Introduction” 7), “often walking a difficult line between ‘quality’ and ‘popular’” (Stein 225). In other words, serial television in general has gone through a process of being considered worthy of serious contemplation. Teen Television has been largely ignored, partially because of its mass-market appeal, even as the amount of teen-centred, quality serial television accumulates and continues to be commercially as well as critically successful.

In the 1980s and through to the 1990s, with some outliers that centred on teens more specifically (such as the late 60s-set *The Wonder Years* and the Canadian series *Degrassi*), teen characters continued to be embedded within “the established domestic sitcom genre” (Ross and Stein, “Introduction” 14). The “rare and notable exception” (Ross and Stein, “Introduction” 14) *My So-Called Life* appeared at a historical moment when U.S.-based, hour-long, serialized, primetime, present-day teen dramas were defined, rather singularly, by the popular primetime

soap, *Beverly Hills, 90210* (Moseley 38). The contrast between *My So-Called Life*'s inward-looking, compassionate consideration of teens in middle-class suburbia, and the glossy sheen of the wealthy California teens on *90210* was stark for more reasons than their wildly differing settings. As Herskovitz notes, "Trying to do a television show from inside of a person's experience was a pretty new thing...Television was externalised in a very particular way, and having the subjective point of view of this girl that was not afraid to show her pain, to show her terror, that sort of thing was very new on television – and, I think, in certain ways ahead of its time" (qtd. in Roberts "Riot grrrls"). In other words, *My So-Called Life* was radical in the landscape of not only Teen Television, but *all television* at the time, for two reasons. First, the show aimed to be a serious and empathetic consideration of the (white, middle class) teen girl experience. Issues like teen sexuality, for instance, were "integrated into the broader series rather than introduced as 'very special' episodes" while equally focusing on "more mundane social issues and observations" (Byers, "My So-Called Life" 178-79). Additionally, the show focused (almost exclusively) on a single character's realistic, current-day internal subjectivity. As Jeffrey Stepakoff, the co-executive producer of *Dawson's Creek* states, "I remember watching a show that I felt was transformative. I thought, 'this is going to change everything.' It was *My So-Called Life*" (qtd. in Grady). Like many "quality" shows that followed, including the big guns like *The Sopranos* and, later still, *Mad Men*, the psychology and internal subjectivity of the main character was crucial to the narrative stakes of the program and gave the viewer their central and intimate focus. Serialization allowed for the central character to augment – as reflected through a "subjective point of view" that might not be altogether consistent or, in Angela's case, reliable – over the course of the series.

Under the Bleachers: *Freaks and Geeks* as Kindred Cancelled Spirit

As an entry point into this thesis, by way of showcasing how we will look at the two series I have chosen to discuss, I would like to offer a short sojourn, historical, contextual, and critical, into another exemplary and radically empathetic teen drama, the NBC hour-long *Freaks and Geeks* (1999-2000). *Freaks and Geeks* was the brainchild of creators Judd Apatow and Paul Feig. *Freaks and Geeks* was a compassionate and realistic portrayal of the lives of two disparate factions of teens in 1980s Detroit. The show was unique in its casting of relatively "normal"

looking and unknown young actors (many in the cast were under 18) to play its ensemble as “a radical corrective to fantasias like ‘Beverly Hills 90210 ’” (Nussbaum “The Kids and the Show”) and *Dawson’s Creek* (White qtd. in Apatow, “Oral History” 88). *Freaks and Geeks* lasted a single, shortened season, straddling 1999 and 2000, debuting in the same broadcast year as *The Sopranos*. The show was moved around the broadcast schedule, in an “attempt” to find an audience, and was eventually (as a death-knell) pitted against the wildly popular game show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* (Feig qtd. in Apatow, “Oral History” 95). In these ways, *Freaks and Geeks* and *My So-Called Life* were kindred spirits and soulmates: single season, realistic, empathetic, U.S. suburban, high school-set shows, cancelled in part because their storylines were seen as “too realistic” (Maloy 68; Teachout) or too small-scale (Kasdan qtd. in Apatow, “Oral History” 97), and whose afterlives were more significant than the networks could have known during their original broadcast. Both *Freaks and Geeks* and *My So-Called Life* had online campaigns organized by fans attempting to save the series’ (Murphy 174-175; “Robyns Save the Show Page”), found second lives in DVD releases and reruns on cable networks (*My So-Called Life* was picked up and rerun endlessly on MTV [Murphy 171-173]; *Freaks and Geeks* aired on the Fox Family Channel [Teachout], including some episodes that never aired on NBC) and eventually re-appeared on streaming services. As a result, new generations stumbled upon and devoured the shows with relative ease, placing them squarely in the cult-canon of one-season television wonders.

The long-lasting influence of both *My So-Called Life* and *Freaks and Geeks* can be found in many shows (teen-centric and more adult-focused) that have aired since 1994 and 1999 respectively. *My So-Called Life* has been cited as the partial inspiration for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Whedon 8), *Dawson’s Creek* (Stepakoff qtd. in Grady) and even shows with an adult-focus, like *Enlightened* (White). Jason Katims, the creator of *Friday Night Lights* and the television version of *Parenthood* was mentored as a writer on the set of *My So-Called Life* (Sepinwall 18). As Soraya Roberts notes, “The year *MSCL* was cancelled, The WB became home to a panoply of series that owed their lives to Angela’s including *Felicity*, *The Gilmore Girls*, *One Tree Hill* and *Buffy*. The show’s influence even reached outside the network to Fox’s *The OC*, MTV’s *Daria* and NBC’s *Freaks and Geeks*” (“Riot grrrls”). Shortly after *My So-Called Life* was cancelled, with a “relatively small audience of 10 million viewers per week” (Murray 36), broadcasters realized (once again, as they already had in the 60s, as Osgerby details

above) that teen girls were a marketable and viable audience (Herskovitz qtd. in Roberts, “Riot grrrls”). The movement toward “narrowcasting” (Wee 46) on the teen-centric channel the WB in 1995 (Wee 43) and later, with the merger of the WB and UPN, forming the CW in 2006 (Wee 57), allowed teen shows (especially teen shows that centred on girl characters) to be successful with relatively small audiences. For instance, the WB’s flagship show, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, received “between 4 million and 6 million viewers for an average episode” (Byers, “My So-Called Life” 179) and lasted seven seasons. All the WB’s “teen-oriented, hour-long dramas,” including *Buffy*, “were the direct descendants” of both *My So-Called Life* and *Beverly Hills, 90210* (Wee 49) while also bearing the residue of “quality” television more broadly (Wee 50). The “TV heroines” within these shows share in Angela’s “particular brand of mythic normality that they either embody or crave” (Byers, “My So-Called Life” 17). As Ross and Stein explain, “such programs (female-oriented, serial, hour-long melodramas which feature teen characters and are marketed toward teen viewers) have shaped (and continue to shape) the predominant perception of Teen TV at this cultural moment” (“Introduction” 17). Some more recent emotionally poetic teen shows like *In My Skin* and especially *Euphoria*, which seems to wear its love for *My So-Called Life* and the career of Claire Danes rather prominently on its sleeve, carry some of *My So-Called Life*’s legacy, especially in their use of diary-like voice-overs. Even the creators of the teen castaway drama *The Wilds* – which seems to have more direct ties to *Lost* and *Lord of the Flies* – claim to have used *My So-Called Life* as an inspiration (Harris qtd. in Bucksbaum).

After the cancellation of *Freaks and Geeks*, its creators and much of its cast have found abundant success in both film and television, and the show’s tonal influence can be seen in a new, plethoric wave of small-scale serial storytelling. These shows (mostly half-hour in length, unlike *Freaks and Geeks*) are often achingly empathetic comedies with every day, low-key, and subterranean stakes, usually employing small-scale tragedies in each episode. For instance, Apatow’s own *Undeclared* and *Love*, as well as *Louie*, *Master of None*, *Atlanta*, *Ramy*, *You’re the Worst*, *Broad City*, and *High Maintenance*, among many others, share these traits. These shows all centre on smaller scale stories with less overt thematic lessons or easily found answers, most of which balance comedy and drama, humour, and pathos. As Samuel Burleigh notes more generally, “The emphasis on awkward humour, and an overall unconventional approach to the sitcom, has similarly exploded in recent years, as evidenced from shows ranging from *The Office*

and *Arrested Development* to *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and *Girls*” (“Freaks and Geeks: One Season”). Perhaps the most distinct intersection of influence between *My So-Called Life* and *Freaks and Geeks* can be found in the aforementioned, Apatow-produced *Girls*, created by Lena Dunham. Dunham has claimed that *My So-Called Life* was deeply influential on her work⁶, and calls *Girls* the “love child” of the teen drama and “The Mary Tyler Moore Show” (Press). *Freaks and Geeks* itself “owes a significant debt” (Chaney) to unusual TV comedies like the (also cancelled after a single season) teen series *Square Pegs* and was deeply indebted to Apatow’s work on *The Larry Sanders Show*, where he was mentored by Garry Shandling (Apatow, “Garry Shandling” 109). *Freaks and Geeks* was also influenced by independent film. Feig “loved” Todd Solondz’s *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, and he notes that “the networks were trying to develop a show kind of with the same feel” (Feig “Paul Feig walks us”). *Pen15* is a rather clear successor to *Freaks and Geeks* and creators, Erskine and Konkle, have similarly cited the inspiration of *Welcome to the Dollhouse* in their work (Aroesti). Both *Freaks and Geeks* and *Pen15* utilize a similar, unusual brand of nostalgia⁷, cast unusual-looking actors, choose to focus on the relationships of social outcasts, and the small-yet-monumental moments in their lives.

On the Road: Tonal Inflection as Inflection Point

If we agree with Logan’s notion that serial drama holds tension within the inflection point between accrual and transience, if we understand that television serial drama might be ideally suited to exploring identity and friendship (and that these two features inform each other) as they play out over time, and if we also understand that “complex television” (Mittell, *Complex TV* 18) over long periods of time, is effective at showing the way that people can (though do not have to, do not always, and sometimes do so only fleetingly) change in relation to each other, then we can begin to see the way that these links might be reflected in teen drama in exemplary ways.

As an example, and introduction to my argument that serial dramas – especially ones about teen characters – are expressive of the interplay between identity and close bonds, I will examine *Freaks and Geeks*, briefly contemplating a specific scene and making connections to the larger body of the series, paying particular attention to performance. *Freaks and Geeks* was

⁶ For an interview with Dunham conducted by Danes, see “Lena Dunham” by Claire Danes in *Interview Magazine*.

⁷ See Gray (124-126) for more on this use of “complex” (124) nostalgia in *Freaks and Geeks*.

notable for its blending of both episodic (quasi-sitcom) and a more serial structure (Austerlitz 294). Each episode revolves around an A and B plot, often conveyed in a two-word episode title (for example, “Looks and Books,” “Tricks and Treats,” “Discos and Dragons”). These plots normally are separated into the “Freak” story and the “Geek” story, but often these storylines converge. Usually, the ostensible plots of the episodes end when the credits roll much like a sitcom⁸, but there are also overarching storylines, usually focused on the building of relationships within the groups, that continue throughout the season. Though there is much to be said about the construction of *Freaks and Geeks*’ plots and its own form of genre-blending, our focus will be on this overarching build of relationships and how, through the course of a series (even a single season), this build might reflect the way that relationships are the driving force in causing behavioural, gestural, and affective shifts within individuals. Analyzing a single scene will also be suggestive of the way that serial television, more generally, builds upon itself through accrual, by creating linkages to the events in past episodes, while also gesturing to a constantly “unfolding” and shaping present (Logan, *The Presence* 17). Examining this scene will be indicative of the way that other series in this thesis will be explored, by magnifying and atomizing specific moments and then pulling out again to the larger whole.

Freaks and Geeks sets up two supposedly distinct groups – the Freaks and the Geeks⁹ - that each take up small corners of the world at McKinley High School. The single season spans a school year between 1980 and 1981. Our entry point into these two groups are siblings Lindsay (Linda Cardellini) and Sam Weir (John Francis Daley). Lindsay is the elder, academically gifted, mature, earnest, and idealistic. Much like Angela Chase (as we will see), she begins to hang out with a group of more rebellious teens – The Freaks – Daniel Desario (James Franco), Ken Miller (Seth Rogen), Nick Andopolis (Jason Segel) and Kim Kelly (Busy Philipps) after her grandmother’s death causes her to question everything she thought she knew about life and herself. Both Angela and Lindsay share an uneasy notion of who they are and who they want to become, and their shifts from smart, well-behaved students to semi-rebellious teens mark the start of each series. Connectedly, and likely because of their inward-looking search for self, both Lindsay and Angela have been described as a “modern day, female Holden Caulfield” (for

⁸ see Saul Austerlitz’s chapter on *Freaks and Geeks* (291-307) in *Sitcom: a History in 24 Episodes from I Love Lucy to Community* for the ways that the program plays with and subverts the sitcom form and its conventions.

⁹ For clarity, I will refer to these groups as per the show title even though the program, as it progresses, works to dissolve, complicate, and untangle these reductive monikers for every character, including the school bullies.

Lindsay, see: Feig “Freaks and Geeks – The Series Bible”; for Angela, see: Kolbert, for one of many instances¹⁰). Conversely, Sam is the baby of the family and is committed to staying a kid for as long as possible (Feig “Freaks and Geeks – The Series Bible”). Sam’s friends, Neal Schweiber (Samm Levine) and Bill Haverchuck (Martin Starr), occupy a small portion of the larger Geek community at McKinley High. These two groups, over the course of the series, intersect and blend not only because of Lindsay and Sam’s filial bonds but also because, as the show continues to offer, labels are imprecise at best and, at worst, can be dangerous and debilitating.

As the series progresses, a number of relationship pairings formulate or continue across the supposed divides of the various social groups at McKinley: Sam’s unlikely romantic relationship with the popular Cindy Sanders, Ken’s romantic relationship with a girl from the marching band, Lindsay’s continued and strained relationship with her former friend Millie, Kim and Millie’s quasi-friendship, Daniel’s eventual foray into the world of Dungeons & Dragons with the AV club/Geek crew, and the list goes on. These pairings and groupings complicate the supposed identities of the individuals in them, resulting in further questions about who exactly one is, how one is seen, and what exactly one can be called. The movement, however, of the aggressive and acidic Kim Kelly and the still smart and studious, but newly searching Lindsay, toward each other within the Freak grouping is, perhaps, its most unusual union. Kim is, at the start of the series and her acrimonious and forced relationship with Lindsay, a loose-cannon, susceptible to blowing up violently at anyone and everyone. Lindsay, on the other hand, is a privileged do-gooder and would-be saviour, who might go along with something moderately wild, apprehension creeping in at the first sign of trouble. Lindsay is aware and anxious about the (very real) possibility that Kim and the other Freaks are using her; Kim is suspicious that Lindsay is posing. But, eventually, the two find an ease with each other that they do not seem to have with anyone else. By the end of the series, their commonality is that they both feel trapped (variously, Lindsay feels pressured to continue on the academic road her parents and teachers lay out for her; Kim is stuck because she is poor and has few academic or job prospects). That they recognize this commonality and create their own momentary freedom together, and in fact need

¹⁰ See also Barbara Bell’s essay, “Holden Caulfield in Doc Martens: *The Catcher in the Rye* and *My So-Called Life*” for a thorough picture of the way that *MSCL* was in direct dialogue – embedded *within* its character dialogue – with Salinger’s novel.

the other to recognize this possibility, is something we will come back to at the end of this thesis. More generally, and unlike in the other two series we will discuss, Lindsay and Kim's friendship is not often central to the narrative or thematic underpinnings of the series. The one episode that explicitly explores and brings Lindsay in direct contact with Kim's violent family life ("Kim Kelly is My Friend," ep.4) never aired on NBC ("4. Kim Kelly is My Friend" 11)¹¹. Because of this, for viewers at the time of broadcast, the evolution of Lindsay and Kim's relationship may have seemed even more unusual and premature. Lindsay Weir and Kim Kelly's friendship is not presented as a love affair in the same way that the two friendships in the bulk of this thesis are, and it is rarely, if ever, framed as a friendship that mirrors romance. But the friendship between Lindsay and Kim offers something reflected in each series discussed: "Our friendships are not inert...Every friendship of ours is more or less closely connected with everything else about us: every one of our friends, the more so the more intimate we are, influences the direction our life takes, just as our life's direction influences our choice of friends. Friendship is crucial to what most of us come to be in life" (Nehamas 4).

In *Pursuits of Happiness: the Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, Stanley Cavell discusses a number of romantic screwball comedies from the 30s and 40s. In his discussion of the film and central couple in *It Happened One Night* he states,

What this pair does together is less important than the fact that they do whatever it is together, that they *know how to spend time together*, even that they would rather waste time together than do anything else – except that no time they are together could be wasted. Here is a reason that these relationships strike us as having the quality of friendship, a further factor in their exhilaration for us. Spending time together is not all there is of human life, but it is no less important than the question whether we are to lead this life alone. ("Knowledge as Transgression" 88; emphasis mine)

Specifically, in relation to *Freaks and Geeks*, "hanging out" and spending time together is as crucial to the narrative thrust as any other event and, much of the time, hanging out *is* the event.

¹¹ This episode was written by *Enlightened* creator Mike White. "NBC refused to air it, and the episode finally surfaced almost a year later on the Fox Family Channel" (VanDerWerff, "Freaks And Geeks: 'Kim Kelly'"). White was particularly attuned to Teen Television and the ways that it had failed teens (and art) in the past: "I had done two years on Dawson's Creek and was trying to never do TV again. But I took a meeting with Shelley McCrory at NBC, and she pops in the pilot of *Freaks and Geeks*, and I was like, 'Oh my gosh, this is exactly what I told them you could do on Dawson's Creek, but everyone had said you can't'—the unmannered way that the characters spoke, the idiosyncratic way they all looked" (White qtd. in Apatow, "Oral History" 88-89).

But what might clarify itself in Cavell's discussion is that this knowledge of *how* to spend time together is not necessarily automatic, that screen characters like real-life humans often take time to figure each other out if that is what they desire, usually by spending time together, and this figuring out becomes clear by the behaviours, gestures, and tone of the actors inhabiting these characters. As Cavell notes, "I would like to say that in these films the central pair are *learning to speak the same language*" ("Knowledge as Transgression" 88; emphasis mine). The idea of learning to speak or coming to understand the same language, is a helpful entry point in our exploration of serialized friendships because, as we will see, the movement toward each other or, alternately, away from each other – as these shows tell us – is reliant on the various ways we communicate (or, alternately, miscommunicate or fail to communicate) through the expressions of language and gesture. Crucially, in a serial drama that lasts for a particularly long time, an actor's behaviour (their gestures, their speaking rhythm and tone) might change in relation to another actor exhibiting another set of changing behaviours. In the teen shows that we will discuss, *over time* (even short periods), the central characters are learning, grasping, and sometimes (often) failing (as is the case with Angela and Rayanne, and Lindsay and Kim) or have learned (as is the case with Maya and Anna) to speak the same language within their friendship. These learned communication styles may emerge as patterns, becoming clearer or, in turn, more muddled and complicated as the series progresses. If we conclude that long-form television drama also deals within the provisional, once a relationship language is learned, it is still always susceptible to alteration or the possibility of failure because of the ongoing and accumulating story of these characters: the way seemingly disparate events move them into contact with people outside of these central relationships, the way that both (all) characters also live lives outside of these friendships, or, have friendships with others that inform these and other aspects of their lives. As Alexander Nehamas explains, "We are who we are in large part through our interactions with our friends, and who we are with one friend is not who we are with another" (169). In chapter 1, communication works through a language of proximity, bodily possession, porousness, and specifically, the blending of affect. In chapter 2, communication works through the language of improvisational play. The way that, as a viewer, we become enveloped in these modes of communication is also important. In other words, we can see (through gesture), hear (through tone) and, ultimately, feel the way these characters are learning a shared language and we, as the episodes accumulate, are learning that language as well. What

occurs in *Freaks and Geeks* is the movement of Kim and Lindsay toward each other such that they *learn* not only how to spend time together, but also a “language” (even if that language is only evident through gesture and tone) that they can share while they are together.

To illustrate the way that these teen programs offer connected elements of the ongoing formation of identity through relationship building, its connection to the provisional, and its expression within both narrative and aesthetics including performance, let us consider a short scene from *Freaks and Geeks* that ends the episode “Looks and Books” (ep.11). In this exploration I will isolate, describe, and closely read this brief scene, connect it to the episode in which it resides, out further still to other episodes within the series, and then back in again, focusing specifically on performance and the relationship between two girls, much like I will do elsewhere in the thesis. Although the scene is narratively important, as it re-establishes Lindsay’s fraught friendship with the Freaks, its importance to the relationship between Lindsay and Kim is more subtle. In fact, one could assume that this scene’s overall importance is linked to the sitcom style of re-establishing status quo by the end of the episode (Clayton “Why comedy”). However, this scene – through the progression of the relationship between Lindsay and Kim – alters the status quo incrementally, and those incremental shifts are essential to where the characters and viewers end up at the end of the series. This closing scene (41:41-43:38), set to the soundtrack of Supertramp’s “Take the Long Way Home,” begins with Lindsay walking down a darkened path at night next to a storefront lit by two neon signs, one red, saying “Take Out” and the other yellow, offering “Burgers.” There is a glass door in the foreground on the left-hand side of the frame and inside we see a man in an apron and another figure standing by a counter, talking to each other. Lindsay is walking past a diner, it seems. As the camera pushes in on Lindsay, these two other figures disappear, never to be seen again. When Lindsay gets closer to the camera, we see that she is still dressed as she was in the previous scene: an unusual costume of a buttoned-up yellow shirt, a skirt and, crucially, no army jacket which has become her signature piece of costuming through the series. At this point in the show, we have become accustomed to Lindsay’s “studied” (Feig “Freaks and Geeks – The Series Bible”) Freak look of t-shirts, jeans, and her requisite green army jacket, once owned by her father. We will come back to this crucial, unusual costuming choice shortly. As Lindsay continues along down the sidewalk, unsure but forging ahead, the camera meets up with her. Then, the camera turns entirely around to let us see the space up ahead where Lindsay has been looking. The Freaks are sitting on top of two cars in

a parking lot, hanging out, talking, and deciding what to do with the remainder of their evening. How Lindsay has chanced upon the Freaks here, at this location, at this time of night is unclear, and yet her determination to find them late at night is relevant to this moment. The neon signs of the diner and an adjacent liquor store cast their respective glows on the sheen of the cars and on the teens' faces. As they hold onto their near empty soda cups, one can imagine the gang stopped here to grab a late-night snack at the pizza and burger joint, but the food has long since been eaten. For a moment, Lindsay simply watches and listens to the conversation of her maybe-friends (at this point in the episode the friendship has come into question), which allows us to listen, too. Lindsay's watching and studying the Freaks to understand permissible behaviour within this group has become part of the series up to this point, in another way that she "learns" the group's language. Looking, studying, and watching, and its connection to learned and ingested behaviours, will be explored at more length in chapter one. As Lindsay lingers unseen in the shadows next to the diner, we hear Kim suggest that the gang go check out a midnight movie, a "foreign film at the state theatre." The other Freaks, especially Nick and Ken, scoff at this idea, making fun of the possibility of going to see a movie that they will have to "read." But, eventually, de facto-leader Daniel says he will go and so the plan is settled.

Kim's suggestion is crucial for two entangled reasons, reasons that connect with the specific narrative concerns of the episode, and to the wider landscape of the series. Earlier in the series, Kim would never have proposed that they go see a foreign film in particular and perhaps would not have suggested an activity at all. In the episode "Tricks and Treats" (ep. 3), for instance, Lindsay joins the Freaks for a night of delinquent cavorting on Halloween (23:47-25:01; 27:06-28:07). Their "plans" are to hang out in Daniel's uncle's car, drive around and "raise hell." Concerned that they have an activity to occupy their time (and perhaps their idle hands), Lindsay suggests that the gang either go to a haunted house or the new *Friday the 13th* movie. The Freaks' "plans," though, are always vaguer than determined and they quickly shrug-off the notion that they need to do something specific. Kim explicitly and bitingly says to Lindsay, "God, Brain, why are you so hung up about doing *something*? What, are we boring to you?" Thus, in the parking lot, Kim's unusual suggestion is tinged with a Lindsay-esque residue on two counts: the mere suggestion of an activity at all and the notion that they go see a horizon-expanding foreign film, something fit for a "Brain." The suggestion of the foreign film in particular, is also connected to the story of this specific episode. In the episode's cold open,

Lindsay is pressured into “borrowing” (really, stealing) her parents’ station wagon to haul the Freaks’ band equipment to the location of a supposed gig. The car ride is anything but smooth, with everyone shouting differing directions and generally goofing off while Lindsay cautiously drives, and almost immediately they get into an accident. After finding out about the car crash, Lindsay’s parents are justifiably upset, and her father forbids her from hanging out with the Freaks ever again. Lindsay is distraught though understanding, and further she recognizes she has yet again been uncaringly used by the Freaks. The next day, while getting ready for school, Lindsay searches the furthest reaches of her closet to locate some of her more conservative clothes: a purple button up blouse and a long pencil skirt (9:03-9:35). Though grounded and forbidden from hanging out with friends, Lindsay asks her parents if she can re-join her former after-school activity, The Mathletes, an activity she quit before she started hanging out with the Freaks. With this change in wardrobe and revision of interests, Lindsay has effectively gone back in time. She even begins to hang out with her sweet, devout, and oldest friend Millie (Sarah Hagan) again.

When Lindsay encounters the Freaks at school, they make fun of her clothes and seem to brush off the car accident entirely, as if nothing of consequence happened. Lindsay explodes at them, saying: “Look, I know you don’t care about being smart, or going to school, or anything else. But just because your lives are such lost causes, don’t keep assuming that mine is” (10:35-11:51). This seems to pierce all the Freaks, but especially Kim, who chastises Daniel the next day for skipping yet another class. If Lindsay has gone back in time, her words seem to pressure the Freaks into their futures, and they begin questioning what they may or may not, can and cannot (due to their scholastic and economic circumstances being quite different than Lindsay’s) become. Kim says, in another statement tinged with Lindsay-esque idealism, “I’m going to be like a lawyer or something. I’m gonna put the police on trial and I’m gonna get guys out of jail and stuff” (12:45-12:55). This episode is not the first time that Kim questions herself in relation to and because of Lindsay. Earlier, in “The Diary” (ep.10), when Lindsay and Kim begin to hang

out as a twosome in earnest, they attempt to hitch-hike in suburbia¹² (0:01-3:44). The girls get picked up by a man who knows Lindsay's father, and, once her parents find out, they write Kim off as a bad influence and later forbid Lindsay from seeing her. "The Diary" is an essential episode in the budding relationship between Lindsay and Kim because not only do we see Kim and Lindsay spending time together as a pair, but we are also offered the notion that Kim is deeply affected by what she presumes Lindsay thinks about her, even while keeping up a disaffected and unbothered front. Kim even conflates what Lindsay's parents say about Kim (calling her a "bad banana" that might cause the other bananas to rot) with what Lindsay must also think. Just like in the later episode, Lindsay and Kim's relationship is continually fraught in part because of their simultaneous struggle to understand what the other thinks about them – true or not – and the way that these thoughts cloud a perception of self. In "Looks and Books," as Lindsay hangs out with her Mathlete teammates, she discovers that, though more focused and adept at traversing the academic waters of high school, they are also capable of being cruel and judgemental, especially toward Lindsay's Freak friends – something that Lindsay, through the course of the episode, comes to recognize within herself. After spending much time away from each other through the episode, the Freaks show up at Lindsay's Mathlete tournament to cheer her on (loudly, as though it were a sporting event) and bring a used fender to replace the one that was destroyed in the car accident (34:55-35:37). After the competition, Lindsay and her Mathlete teammates have a celebratory sleepover at Millie's place (39:01-39:21). Lindsay is there in body, but it is clear, as she looks contemplatively at Millie and the other girls, talking about square root problems and M.I.T.'s dorms, that something is wrong. Though she is capable of fitting in in a variety of settings, Lindsay realizes that she is newly alone within this group. As Lindsay tries silently to leave the sleepover after the other girls have fallen asleep, Millie catches her in the dark hallway. Lindsay explains, that although she has enjoyed hanging out with Millie, this is not where she is "at anymore. Things are different now" (40:50-40:58). Lindsay heads off into the

¹² Lindsay and Kim's narrative connection to vehicles is significant, and almost all of their (mis)adventures take place in or around automobiles. In addition to automobile-centred plots in the episodes mentioned: Kim's car is her one semblance of freedom, and in "Kim Kelly is My Friend" (ep. 4) her mother threatens to take it away. In "The Diary" (ep. 10), Lindsay stands up for Kim's lazy reading of Kerouac's *On the Road* in English class. In "Dead Dogs and Gym Teachers" (ep. 14), Kim and Lindsay accidentally run over Millie's dog while driving around in Kim's car. Vehicles are tied to real and metaphorical ideas of freedom, but often result in another form of boundedness, at least until the end of the series.

night, lying to Millie about heading home, leading to the scene where she finds the Freaks in the parking lot.

As she stands next to the diner, Lindsay/Cardellini takes a short breath, licks her lips and steadies herself. She then timidly makes her presence known to the gang, by smiling and saying “hey.” Kim is the first to offer a reciprocal “hey” back, fluttering her eyelashes (as if in momentary disbelief) and smiling her wolfish, but now more open grin (see fig. 1). Kim’s smile here is tinged with a kind of hopeful eagerness, as if the smile itself wants to leap off the car, run to Lindsay and hug her. Kim’s words offer something similar. To borrow from Alex Clayton, “What a difference an inflection makes!” (“The Texture” 75). Kim does not say, “Hey, *Brain*,” dripping with sarcasm, as she may have in the past. Here, the reciprocal “hey” is full of genuine little-kid enthusiasm, surprise and kindness for a friend that has spontaneously, magically materialized from out of the dark night. The “hey” is an honest and excited greeting for a friend who was forbidden to be here but has shown up anyway, parents be damned. Then, to temper her excitement about Lindsay’s presence, as if realizing the enthusiasm might be over-playing her hand, Kim offers a more subdued, cool, and less childlike, “what’s up?” After Lindsay repeats Kim’s question back to the Freaks, Kim explains, partly to impress Lindsay and partly to offer another olive-branch: “Actually, we’re going to see a foreign film.” As she says this, Kim’s/Philipps’ smile bends her words upwards, coyly; her “actually” warps at its tail, extending the final syllable. Kim thinks that the foreign film will entice Lindsay to join them, but she does not realize yet (if she ever does) that Lindsay now is not in need of enticing. As a response, Lindsay smiles slightly, the edges of her lips cautiously reaching to her cheeks, but she stops herself from fully committing. She says “cool,” in a manner that suggests that she already knows this, because of course *she does*, having eavesdropped on the conversation. But that is not the only thing that Cardellini’s reading of “cool” offers. This “cool” is suggestive of someone who wants to say so much more than this single word and in fact is *thinking of something else entirely* while saying it, the word comes out as an absent-minded reflex. This “cool” reflects the fact that Kim could have said they were doing almost anything at all, and Lindsay would have responded with the exact same word, in the exact same way. In its own, monosyllabic though potent manner, this “cool” resembles what Cavell says, as if Lindsay has just discovered it, too: “What this pair does together is less important than the fact that they *do whatever it is together*” (“Knowledge as Transgression” 88; emphasis mine). Then, too quickly and connectedly,

piggybacking almost immediately on her “cool,” Lindsay asks if she can join them, but wipes the small smile off her face entirely, like she is ripping off a band-aid. What Kim/Philipps offers in response to this question (actually *while* Lindsay is still in the process of asking it) is a gesture. She bites the entirety of her bottom lip with her upper teeth so that her whole lip disappears behind her upper-toothed grin. The gesture is suggestive of her excitement at Lindsay’s question, as if to say, “I thought you’d never ask,” as well as an attempt to try to contain what might otherwise be an explosion of this joy. After the Freaks accept her back into the group, Lindsay offers a quick smile, still uncertain about offering too much, too quickly. In this way, though their gestures are different, both Kim/Philipps and Lindsay/Cardellini are exhibiting reciprocal behaviours. The girls are both attempting to “play cool,” but still offering, in a number of subtle ways, their enthusiasm about the other’s presence. Both girls are offering what they think the other might want, in an attempt at a further progression toward the other: Kim is now suggesting a productive activity, Lindsay is “cool” with whatever. When they pile into Daniel’s car and disappear into the night, Kim offers a celebratory shout, like the pop of a balloon, finally an outward expression of fully felt joy, one that will be repeated in a similar scene of a vehicle driving away at the end of the series. The scene that ends “Looks and Books” – and what Cardellini and Phillips do around the words in the scene – has the feeling of holding one’s breath for just a moment too long and then, finally, exhaling.



Fig. 1 Kim says “hey” in “Looks and Books.”

Nehamas states, “Friendship has its own mortars and pestles, its own alembics and retorts: it comes closer to transmuting the self than any alchemist ever came to transmuting his metals” (210). He goes on,

Each one of our friendships – some more, some less – contributes an element of individuality to our character. Each one leads us in a particular direction that no other can duplicate. That, of course, may result in a shattered self moving in different directions without rhyme or reason, unity, or coherence. But such a shattered self is what we are all faced with at first – an accidental self, made up of haphazard elements, picked up at different times, in different contexts, from different people, from various books, pictures, and music, from diverse social, political, and cultural environments. (221)

Kim has not, by the end of the series, become an entirely different person, but as she moves toward Lindsay, she does change in small but perceptible ways *with and next to Lindsay*. Lindsay does, too. In this way, they lead each other, as Nehamas says, “in a particular direction.” This is crucial, because it is not necessary that the characters sway or change beyond the boundaries of their friendship (though changes may extend to other relationships and other facets of life), but rather that they change *for each other* within the relationship itself and, necessarily, *retain a capacity* for these shifts. By this I mean that despite any overarching changes in their respective characters or identities, the two have become closer to each other in a way that does not dramatically alter their former (unfixed and unsettled) states of being. They do not change in the same way as Walter White, incrementally solidifying episode by episode into an ever more calcified form. Rather, it is their movement toward each other that is suggestive of an *alteration together*, and an alteration that can still be pressured by and is susceptible to outside forces. Kim and Lindsay are still, to a great and perhaps insurmountable degree, unlike the other. However, the two girls have to alter just enough for each other, through each other and in proximity to each other for any form of intimacy together to be possible.

What does a close reading of this scene in this way tell us? What will engaging in this same experiment with other Teen Television texts illuminate? As serialized television is built on the connective tissues and sinews of one moment to the next, one scene to the next, one episode to the next, one season to the next, isolating a small moment in a single episode informs us of the ways that aesthetic elements are linked together and the way that aesthetic and narrative elements can blend. This extends to the way actors inhabit their characters and relate to others in a scene. It may also equally inform us of the alterations and shifts (fleeting perhaps) within characters and within these relationships. The way someone says “hey” in a manner which they have never said

“hey” to this other person before, for instance. The way that a seemingly inconsequential vocal inflection is reflective of a more momentous (though subtle) shift in the relationship of two people who have spent time together, have spent time apart, and have come to realize – this night, *now* – crucially and formerly unthinkably, that they miss each other. This inflection tells us *so much* but can only tell us *so much* because of the build of similar though distinctly different moments that came before. Reading and recognizing these shifts in tone and in gesture can point to what Nehamas calls “textured communication” (179) or what Cavell might call friends “learning to speak the same language” (“Knowledge as Transgression” 88). Of course, the viewer is learning this language, too, in a way that allows us to read the newness inherent in the inflection of Kim’s “hey.” Nehamas explains,

Friendship is an *embodied relationship*, and its depictions require embodiment as well: they must include the looks, the gestures, the tones of voice, and the bodily dispositions that are essential to textured communication and on which so much of our understanding of our intimates is based. But no description of looks, gestures, and tones of voice can ever be complete, and so no description can communicate whether these belong to an act of friendship or not. Many aspects of the behavior of friends are irreducibly visual, and that is another reason that friendship is a difficult subject for narrative, to which description is essential. But, as we have also seen, it is inherently temporal... Looks, gestures, tones of voice, and bodily dispositions are the stuff of drama, which is, accordingly, the medium in which friendship is best represented – represented, that is, as a subject in its own right. (179; emphasis mine)

Above, Nehamas details why friendships, and these movements toward each other, might be well-suited to representation within drama. Relatedly, one can see in Nehamas’ assessment why friendships might be well-suited to representation on-screen within a dramatic television series, where one can see, feel and track shifting behaviours over long periods of time. In the specific scene we are examining, we can see that these people, Lindsay and Kim, are friends. What we knew of them before this moment (their rivalry, their mistrust of each other) is important *to this moment*. In fact, this history is essential. If one watched this scene without the knowledge of Lindsay and Kim’s history, Lindsay’s return to the group at the end of this episode and Kim’s “hey” would not hold the same weight. As Logan states, serial drama is “a medium of history and memory” (*The Presence* 145) and “a medium for exploring the place of the past in the present, which may either strengthen or break the ties of human sociality” (*The Presence* 149). As we see with Lindsay and Kim, their friendship does not magically start with this one scene, nor is this scene emblematic of their relationship as a whole. The scene, rather, marks the

moment where their formerly unthinkable friendship has become a familiar pattern. Ending the episode in reunion re-establishes a status quo that only a few episodes previously would have been unimaginable. As Logan suggests, “In finely scaled relationships between performance and space, we register how the past remains a persistent lining of the present. But we are also asked to accept that the past’s residue might nevertheless need to lift, or somehow be dissolved, if we are to keep alive our promises to the future” (*The Presence* 175). Logan’s suggestion here, that the past is carried within the present, but the future remains open, is something that we will keep coming back to throughout the thesis. I am not suggesting that Kim and Lindsay have erased their fraught past within this moment. Rather, their friendship forms – and can only form – through the slowly loosening grasps on their former feelings and preconceived notions of the other. Their friendship at the end of the series is, absolutely and without question, dependent on the dissolve of a shared past residue, one that was tense, anxious, and angry, for the possibility of some unknown future together.

Freaks and Geeks, with its focus on teens on the outskirts of popularity, suggests that people can change, over time, but they usually do so incrementally, microscopically, and often through and because of their relationships with others. As the “Series Bible” suggests, “The show is not about neat resolutions and tidy endings, not about easy solutions and pat answers. There are generally never any big victories at the end of each show – only small triumphs, bits of headway or realizations that open the door to change and improvement” (Feig “Freaks and Geeks – The Series Bible”). The relationship between Kim and Lindsay (and many of the relationships within the series) that slowly evolves into a friendship is reflective of these “bits of headway.” That specific, small, and yet grand change is reflected in the kindness of a “hey” from Kim as she notices Lindsay walk up to the group. That Kim is capable of kindness at all, especially a kindness extending toward Lindsay, after being introduced in relation to Lindsay (and us) as almost solely angry and violent, is reflective of the potential “open door” and “open future,” however incremental. “Looks and Books” purposefully also offers a view of Lindsay’s Mathlete-self (a view that, importantly, we never see at any other time in the series) as a supposed counterpoint to her Freak persona. That Lindsay can retain bits and pieces of her freak *and* geek identities within both social groups is crucial to the larger theme of the show; that no one is exactly one thing, and that the social hierarchy of high school might split us into discrete groupings, but these groupings are largely artificial and ultimately reductive.

In teen dramas, like the ones central to my exploration, friendship (especially between, but not limited to, teen girls) is rendered as an ongoing, mutual form of identity building, explored through mutability, the porous blending of bodies, and through forms of shape shifting. In these series, identity building often occurs through performative play. It occurs in basements, on couches, while sitting around talking, observing, learning, discovering an intimacy together, and, most especially, *feeling* with and through another. Serial narrative, especially in our current culture of “complex TV” (Mittell, *Complex TV* 18), is often constructed around the unspooling of certain character-based mysteries. As discussed, the central, implicit mystery of almost every serial drama (especially, most prestige dramas), thus, on some basic level, is who *are* these people at any given moment, how do they think, feel, believe, behave, and navigate the world? This mystery, seemingly internal, becomes externalized through the aesthetics presented on screen, most notably for our discussion through performance. We are told through words, actions, and any number of other creative choices how characters are thinking and feeling at any given moment, but these thoughts and feelings, too, are susceptible to alteration. Teen dramas, where a narrative of becoming is expected and often more explicit than in adult-centred drama, pose and often centralize narratively these same kinds of mysteries for their characters and, in turn, their audience: Who am I? Where and with whom do I belong? How can I be me in this world? These shows present the supposed moment in characters’ lives when the search for an identity is of paramount importance. But the specific shows examined in this thesis offer correctives to the notion that identity ever needs to be “solved,” that the search for self is not something we grow out of, the business of childhood is never finished¹³, the language of identity is often inadequate, and that trying to define oneself or others is, in itself, a failure.

¹³ My thanks to George Toles for help articulating this thought.

Chapter 1

The Intimate Disappearance of Angela Chase: Laughter and Tears as Gestural Registers, Relationship Residue

STAGE MANAGER: ...I want you to try and remember what it was like to have been very young.

And particularly the days when you were first in love; when you were like a person sleepwalking, and you didn't quite see the street you were in, and didn't quite hear everything that was said to you.

You're just a little bit crazy. Will you remember that, please?

Now they'll be coming out of high school at three o'clock. George has just been elected President of the Junior Class, and as it's June that means he'll be President of the Senior Class all next year. And Emily's just been elected Secretary and Treasurer.

I don't have to tell you how important that is. (Wilder, *Our Town* 60)

ED ZWICK: And above it all...was the feeling of imminence. The notion that everything is important, that everything has stakes of such importance.

WINNIE HOLZMAN: Yeah, like, an emergency situation.

MARSHALL HERSKOVITZ: Everything is an emergency situation. ("2002 Bonus Interview")

In a single season of television in 1994, *My So-Called Life* brought the viewer into the brain of fifteen-year-old Angela Chase played by Claire Danes. This space was like no other on television at the time, in its compassionate focus on a teenage girl, played by a teenage girl. Through Danes' expressive acting style as well as the use of voice-over within the series, the viewer was, intimately and as a kind of kindred spirit, pulled into Angela's emotionally vivid, questioning headspace. Intimacy is further explored in the way that the program examines close relationships. These relationships become the sites of blending, where two or more people shift and change in relation to each other. Inhabitation and replication of bodies, as exemplified by performative play, costume shifts, gestural imitation and repetition of phrases become motifs

within the series, suggestive of a building intimacy between characters. This use of patterning and blending is especially resonant in the friendship between Angela and Rayanne Graff. In this chapter, I will begin by suggesting that Claire Danes – at a young age – was able to shape the series through her vivid performance of a teenage girl at a self-defined identity crossroads. The “texture of” this “performance” (Clayton, “The Texture” 73), as the series progresses, is highlighted within the narrative of the show, and becomes part of the way the program engages with the idea of friendships’ role in the ongoing formation of self and selves. The series uses this televisual residue (to purposely appropriate the second name of Jordan Catalano’s band, Residue) or these patterned cues to implicitly illustrate how friendships can be both generative and constrictive to the individuals within them. This residue is reflective of both the tightening and loosening of bonds over time (sometimes simultaneously). I will suggest that this patterning is drawn out in several ways in the series: through repetitions of gesture, through repetitions in language, through costume shifts, and through the reciprocity of affect. This patterning is evident not only within the visual aesthetics of the series but also within and through screen performances. The attention that the series gives to a relationship’s power to combine and blend the bodies within, is further reflected in “participatory spectatorship” (Murray 36) and the outward expression of fans, manifesting in similar forms of mirroring explored within friendships on the show. Drawing on Elliott Logan’s understanding of serial television drama as a space of “accrual...set in tension with transience” (*The Presence* 195) and Alexander Nehamas’ notion of friendships as what we are “known and formed by” (217), I offer *My So-Called Life* and the character of Angela Chase played by Claire Danes as an exemplary example of this ongoing tension, a tension dependent on the framing of friends as a pressure point. The show offers the possibility that who we are is so deeply connected, tethered, and bonded to those we hold dear, we are “rubbed off on” knowingly and unknowingly, our pasts inform us just as our relationships do, and as we shift and sway to the pulses of our friends and family, they shift and sway to us and others, and we continue in an unending state of unfolding throughout our lives.

Crying as Creation: The Fluidity of Production, Danes as Authorial Agent, Gestural Patterning and Liquid Emotions

As Angela Chase, Claire Danes was cast at thirteen (playing a fifteen-year-old), in her first significant role on network television. Casting Danes in the central role had a considerable impact on the production due to her age, relative inexperience, and acting style. Significantly, because Danes needed to be in school for a certain portion of each day, her hours on-set were limited. This forced the creators' hands into modifying "the nature of the show," making the adult characters and Angela's friend group a larger part of the narrative (Herskovitz qtd. in Lahr). The show was, in its earliest form, intended to have solely and compassionately focused on the day-to-day life of Angela Chase as a middle-class and "ordinary" (Byers, "Gender/Sexuality/Desire" 19) teen in suburban Pittsburgh. This narrative alteration to "widen the focus" (Herskovitz qtd. in Audio Commentary, "Pilot," 7:10-7:29) allowed creator Winnie Holzman and producers, Marshall Herskovitz and Ed Zwick, to explore characters that were originally intended to be ancillary: Angela's parents, Patty (Bess Armstrong) and Graham (Tom Irwin); Angela's younger sister, Danielle (Lisa Wilhoit); Angela's new friends, the free-spirited wild-child, Rayanne Graff (A.J. Langer) and the sweet, "sexually ambiguous" (Byers, "Gender, Sexuality/Desire" 14), Rickie Vasquez (Wilson Cruz); Angela's crush, Jordan Catalano (Jared Leto); as well as her old/former friends, Sharon Cherski (Devon Odessa) and Brian Krakow (Devon Gummersall). In addition to Danes' accidental influence in expanding the character focus, she was said to have danced through her scenes, in "bobs and weaves," unaware of the "marks" that she was supposed to hit (Winant qtd. in Audio Commentary, "Pilot," 8:55-9:25). Again, the directors' ended up incorporating this into the series, focusing on Danes/Angela's movements rather than asking her to stand still (Winant qtd. in Audio Commentary, "Pilot," 8:55-9:25). As Holzman states, Danes "is a trained dancer and an athlete and her body is so expressive...she's amazingly expressive physically" (Holzman qtd. in Audio Commentary, "Pilot," 9:25-9:39). Connectedly, it was Danes' physically expressive acting style – described variously as "volcanic" (Lahr), "a tsunami of emotion" (Harewood qtd. in Lahr) "unsettled" (Kolbert), "unformed, tentative" (Rowe Karlyn ch.6), "arresting" (Taubin 37) employing a "porous physicalization," "a combination of thoughtfulness and impulsiveness," a "protean paradox," and a body that "semaphores feeling," (Lahr) – that allowed Holzman to explore an internal intimacy within the character that would doubtlessly then be expressed outward by Danes. Holzman states that in writing *My So-Called Life*, she intended to explore a "naked quality, not a person but a feeling of freedom and bondage, shyness and fearlessness"

(qtd. in Lahr). In Danes' audition, Holzman says she encountered someone who "was sexy and not sexy, free and bound up, open and closed, funny and frighteningly serious" (qtd. in Lahr). That Danes could express plural and disparate emotions with a maturity beyond her years,¹⁴ imbuing a character with contrasting, contorting and often contradictory feelings, afforded Holzman freedom to explore various storylines and the resultant emotions therein. Because of Danes' fully felt performance, she seems to have embodied this feeling of intimacy or "naked quality," at least in part through the ability to express rising and often simultaneously conflicting emotions. As Emily VanDerWerff notes, "Danes' greatest talent was being able to allow essentially any emotion – or any combination of emotions or cycle of emotions – to play across her face almost instantaneously" ("*My So-Called Life* set the path"). This expressive acting style has continued through Danes' career. For example, in discussing Danes' turn as Carrie Matheson in the Showtime series *Homeland*, Logan suggests she is "adept at rapid, extreme shifts of expression, able to contort her mouth and eyes as though in the grip of a consuming force" (*The Presence* 115). In a separate essay that discusses a specific acting moment in the same series, Logan explains,

Danes's performance is extraordinary. Central to its force are the actress's extreme facial contortions, which pull, stretch, and compress her features in conflicting directions across her face...Here, though, everything is pushed out of shape, especially the mouth, the lower lip of which curls out and over the normally fine chin that, at the front of a jaw stretched taught, has now become a bulbous protrusion, the warped jutting of lip and chin creating deep troughs of shadow that elsewhere line the face below each cheek, breaking up what is usually a pleasant unity. ("How Do We Write" 30)

I offset Logan's detail of the *Homeland* performance and Holzman's creative intentions for Angela Chase, and Danes' ability to meet those intentions, because they connect in their assertion that at the heart of Danes' performances – and thereby essential to both these characters – is the ability to move adroitly from one emotion to the next, or to express a plurality of emotions as a kind of confluence.

Throughout *My So-Called Life*'s short life, Danes' shifts of expression and ability to engender the contradictory "feeling" that Holzman sought to explore, would become part

¹⁴ See Tom Irwin qtd. in "A Female Holden Caulfield for the 90s" (Kolbert): "She's living proof that reincarnation exists...She's such an old soul"; Jeff Perry (who plays Mr. Katinski) in "Jeff Perry Remembers 'My So-Called Life' 20 Years Later": "It's like a baby knows how to play a Stradivarius"; and director of *Romeo + Juliet*, Baz Luhrmann qtd. in "The Shakesteen" genre" (Keam): "the extraordinary, unmissable characteristic about Claire is that here is a sixteen year-old with the poise and maturity of a thirty year old."

of the narrative. Of central relevance to our discussion is the narrative focus in the series on Danes' distinctive cry. In "Pilot," her cry (exhibited twice) is set in contrast to her usual calm and pensive face. Angela/Danes spends a great deal of time in the first episode actively looking (see fig. 2). By which I mean, the camera attends to Danes'/Angela's face as she fixes her large, open eyes upon things – objects, people (often her crush Jordan Catalano), or empty space – so to give the impression that she is considering them, or considering *something* in relation to them, with great, though not strenuous, purpose. There is a curiosity in this looking rarely accompanied by stressors indicated by the tightening of features. Her face is, in these looks, open to and reflective of the viewer's own looking. As Logan suggests (in his discussion of Danes in *Homeland*), this is a face of "open beauty and sharp intelligence" ("How Do We Write" 30). Angela's looking face is reflective again of interiority and thoughtfulness, and the camera's concentration on this face is suggestive of the show's movement "inside" Angela.



Fig. 2 Angela/Danes looking in "Pilot."

In contrast (though never in opposition), is Danes' cry. The first time we see a hint of this gesture is in the girls' bathroom at school, in a moment when Angela has a tearful confrontation

with her former best friend, Sharon Cherski (26:22-28:49). However, the expression is not displayed fully until the end of the episode when, after a night out with Rayanne turns dangerous, the girls are driven home in a police cruiser. After entering her house, Angela heads to her parents' bedroom and apologizes to her mother, Patty, for dyeing her hair a vibrant shade of red ("Crimson Glow") and, in addition, for "everything" (44:45-46:32). Here, Danes'/Angela's brows knot, pulling her forehead downward and causing the muscles above her brows to become pronounced furrows, her eyes narrow into crinkled crescents, and the edges of her lips push down toward her chin, while the creases next to her lips pull up her cheeks, as though she is smiling and frowning at once (see fig. 3). Although, the expression is of tightening features, pulled down, out and together, there remains an openness and intimacy about this gesture. Within this facial surge, Danes' expresses overwhelming and cascading sorrow – as if the feelings overflow onto the face as in the crash of a wave. But, this expression, too, is unshielded and unguarded, offering interiority expressed on the surface; an intimacy with Angela that the show, in its early stages, offers from all angles; we see inside Angela's head as well as into her open, beating heart. Here, and throughout the series, the cry is a way of opening Angela up further, rather than closing her off, an expression of interior emotions given exposure on the contours of the face.



Fig. 3 Danes' cry in "Pilot."

Logan explains that, throughout a television series, character development might move from the script to the performer and then back to the script again: "In whatever way the writers gradually develop a character on the page, that change is ultimately embodied in the history of an

actor's performance, which can be registered and tracked in adjustments to its presence as part of the series' wider formal fabric" (*The Presence* 51). As Holzman similarly notes when talking about her relationship with Danes, "We gave birth to each other...I was looking at someone who literally could do anything, and so I could, too" (qtd. in Lahr). In this way, the cry is not only reflective of the way that the medium is reliant on performances to create further meanings within the overall text, and the way that those meanings take on significance over time, but also the way in which the show would explore the idea of "giving birth" to identities within close and passionate relationships. Danes' cry takes on greater textural significance within the show's narrative as it moves along, even if that does not become fully apparent until the episode "Betrayal" (ep. 17) when that significance, specifically as it connects to the friendship between Angela and Rayanne, becomes pronounced. Danes was relatively unknown before *My So-Called Life* (her earlier credits include an episode of *Law & Order* and little else), so it seems entirely prescient that her acting style at the time, fluid, "porous" (Lahr) and emotionally resonant as it was, exemplified by this cry, would be explicitly woven into the narrative of the show. Herskovitz describes the discovery of the cry, again connecting Danes' acting to physicality, when Danes performed the bathroom scene described above as part of her audition: "Claire's face turns entirely red...Her body starts to vibrate and tears come into her eyes. You realize that she's having a physical experience that is *beyond acting*" (qtd. in Lahr; emphasis mine). This discovery of the cry (emblematic of the variety of emotions that Danes was able to express) and the way that it was successively worked into the narrative, becomes part of the historical and ongoing "texture of performance" (Clayton, "The Texture" 73) of the show.

In the years since *MSCL*'s broadcast, and throughout Danes' relatively long career, her "cry face" (Weiss) has continued to be celebrated (and mocked) through internet memes ("Claire Danes Cry Face Project"), articles, and a *Saturday Night Live* sketch (Lahr). "It's like she makes her mouth turn fully upside down. Her eyes seem to be looking five directions at once. It's like her whole face is chewing gum," says cast-member Kenan Thompson, playing FBI agent David Estes in a *Saturday Night Live* sketch parodying *Homeland* (s. 38, ep. 7), as Anne Hathaway playing Danes playing Carrie Matheson moves from one extreme facial contortion to another (see fig. 5). As if anticipating how the larger viewing public would come to see the cry, in "Betrayal" Rayanne also attempts to atomize, map, and replicate the gesture (as though somehow symbolic of Angela as a whole). Though, ultimately, the gesture evades the grasp of both

Rayanne's words as well as her imitation, her humorous description of the cry is as follows: "You know, your little, first," Rayanne exhales slightly by blowing air out of pursed lips in imitation. She continues, "And then your, like, mouth collapses" (05:58-6:09). Here, Rayanne attempts to replicate the action of Angela's face as she begins to cry by turning her own mouth downward, subtly (see fig. 4). Rayanne's use of imitation rather than simply words¹⁵ highlights the difficulty in finding precise language that might adequately explain the meanings behind gestures. As Logan suggests, and as Rayanne's attempt highlights, descriptions of gestures demand that we "discover and test words that strive to articulate such individual expressiveness and the significance it manifests" (*The Presence* 74). Logan also posits that, "Perhaps what we want" in relation to discussions and analysis of performance "is not explanation but clarification" (*The Presence* 24). In her use of the word "collapse" in describing Angela's mouth, for instance, a word that expresses a fall or a giving way to gravity, Rayanne's language is reminiscent of Logan's description of an entirely different Danes performance (as noted above), twenty years later. Similarly, Rayanne's description also bears a certain linguistic similarity to the description and the absurd mimicry of the cry in the *SNL* sketch. However, both Rayanne's attempt to define the cry and the parody of the gesture do so largely devoid of context, as though Angela's/Carrie's (through Danes) gestural explosions appear on her face unprovoked. In other words, because there is no attempt to understand where the gesture *comes from*, there is an essential component missing from the description. As Danes herself has argued, this kind of atomization has resulted in the gesture itself being "objectified" and "isolated from the rest of my work, like it's a tacked on thing" (qtd. in Gutierrez 229). In her attempt at finite clarification, Rayanne *does* articulate and isolate the gesture's singularity (Angela cries in a way that no one else does or can quite replicate), and its importance as part of the show's historical framework (we have seen this cry before, and we know what Rayanne is talking about). Rayanne's description of the cry here explicitly marks the show's interest in the gesture, as well as Rayanne's own positioning as someone who has taken Angela "in" (she has been specifically "studying")¹⁶ Angela in this episode to replicate her as part of a theatrical performance).

¹⁵ The difficulty in finding the adequate language for feelings is a running theme in *MSCL*. See Jolie Braun's essay "Passing Notes and Passing Crushes: Writing Desire and Sexuality in *My So-Called Life*" (107-119) for a discussion of the way that the teen characters find it difficult to describe and delineate their feelings, preferring to use the written word to express their innermost emotions and heartfelt thoughts.

¹⁶ The notion of Rayanne "studying" Angela in order to perform her, which is explicitly stated in "Betrayal," may be a reference to *All About Eve* (1950).

However, the description ultimately denies the gesture (and the individual gesturing) its reasons. Rayanne is mapping a gesture without having considered the roads leading there (we will come back to the idea of Rayanne’s reductive reading of Angela later). The necessary questions must be asked and the roads leading to this moment must be traveled. Why should the narrative hinge on the cry at all? Why are we offered a moment of the gesture being “objectified”? And why is it necessary for Rayanne to describe or perform the gesture at this, or any, moment in the series?



Fig. 4 Rayanne (AJ Langer) attempting to replicate Angela’s cry in “Betrayal.”



Fig. 5 Anne Hathaway on *Saturday Night Live* as Danes/Carrie in a parody sketch of *Homeland*.

I offer a discussion of Danes’ acting style and her cry as our entry point not because I intend to further dislocate it, but rather because of the way that the show weaves this gesture specifically, and other gestures more broadly, into its narrative, as outlined above, explicitly to explore the powerful ways that friendships can knowingly and unknowingly alter the individuals within them. We will explore the ramifications of the moment above and its connections to past and future events as we journey further through the series. Additionally, drawing attention to this

moment, further highlights Danes' influence on this specific show (and actors' ongoing influence on serial dramas more generally). In addition to the way in which this specific gesture was folded into the narrative, it is also an exemplary example of the way that the "texture of performance" (Clayton, "The Texture" 73) can leave residual traces in a serial drama over time. The emphasis on provisionality "allows for such relations – and the understandings arrived through them – to be radically revised by previously unforeseen or unplanned turns of event, performance, style or tone, and for the discoveries found therein to further ramify into the future" (Logan, "How Do We Write" 34). Danes' cry, then, is an ideal example – in a technical and creative respect – of both the provisional (an unplanned turn of events; a discovery) and the cumulative (the gesture repeats throughout the series, giving it pronounced narrative significance and turning it into a pattern in performance). As explained in an oral history of the series, the transient and "improvisational" (Herskovitz qtd. in "My So-Called Life' Producer") quality of this production necessarily informed the construction of the narrative: "Because of the rapid shooting schedule and the uncertainty surrounding the show, the writers...did not have the luxury of planning out the season's arc in advance. Instead, the story unfolded episode to episode" (Watkins). Additionally, Holzman would often inject, during production, real-life stories from the teen actors and behaviours that she witnessed them engaging in on set (Gummersall, Odessa, Cruz qtd. in Watkins), into the series' narrative. Thus, without Danes in the role, without the show being written in an episode-to-episode, unplanned, and "improvisational" manner, and without the discovery of the cry in her audition, the gesture may have never "folded" its way into the show or would have been explored in an entirely different and unknown way. The cry, then, becomes emblematic of the way that the medium utilizes patterns within performances, the way that these patterns may only become clear through their discovery/ies over time, as well as the way that these patterns might also become thematically and narratively significant. The construction of the series in an "episode-to-episode" manner becomes not unlike the process that occurs within the relationships in the narrative itself. As characters come to "learn" each other (and as the creators "learned," swayed and wrote to the rhythms of their actors; and, connectedly, as the viewer "learns" the characters), patterns emerge, shift and revise within individual characters and blend with the patterns of others. The creators of *My So-Called Life* seem to have used this patchwork construction to their advantage and *as part of* its narrative. In *My So-Called Life* cumulative patterning cues are specifically offered as a way to mark linkages within

relationships; intimacy is often physically marked by changes that appear on characters (costume changes and other physical alterations), the ways that they move (repeated gestures) and the ways that they speak (repeated phrases), suggesting that intimate relationships, rather than our own personal desire for change, is what alters someone – either consciously or unconsciously – over time.

Becoming Angela Chase: Combination Selves and Friendship's Role in Identity Creation

In the series' first episode ("Pilot"), suggestions of a building and budding fixation between Angela and Rayanne that often surface in imitation and mirroring are immediately made visible. The first scene in the series begins cueing the audience to the ways in which Angela and Rayanne formulate versions of themselves within proximity to each other, foregrounding the residual as a crucial part of their friendship. By looking at the way that the series centres on the friendship of Rayanne and Angela, focusing on specific scenes (starting at the beginning and ending with what might be considered the relationship's dissolve), one can see the way the show, using the compounding of cumulative patterning, suggests that identities/selves are constantly shifting and shaping over time, and are dependent on who one is standing beside.

Our first encounter with Angela and Rayanne, begins with an audio cue. Rayanne (though we do not know that yet) whispers over a black screen, "Go, now, go!" This opening line comes with the hint of a prompt or direction, as though Angela has missed her cue due to momentary stage fright and needs a push from her fellow actor in the wings. Crucially, these words, "Go, now, go!" (themselves repetitious and residual) are heard not only at the start of this first episode but also in every subsequent episode in the series, within the opening credit sequence. Thus, the phrase becomes patterned within the literal rhythms of the opening theme song, as well as the thematic rhythm of the narrative with its focus on cumulative patterning in relationships. These words become part of the linkage between one episode to the next, as if Rayanne is always in the wings, pushing Angela out into the world. Rayanne's words become doubly important: emblematic of a starting point for Angela and a starting point for the viewer, the propulsive energy of the title sequence itself the thrust for Angela to set out on an adventure, replicated at the start of every episode.

The opening scene immediately places the viewer in an intimate encounter with Angela and Rayanne, while also gesturing toward notions of performance and the already morphing relationship between the two girls. In other words, at the very earliest moment of the narrative, the relationship between Angela and Rayanne is generative, intimate, and performative. Scott MacDonald explains,

The Pilot opens, implicitly *in medias res*, with a three-minute montage establishing the developing friendship between Angela Chase...and Rayanne Graff...Their relationship is crucial to the change in Angela that is the impetus for the events that follow in this and subsequent episodes. Angela and Rayanne are goofing around on the street, pretending to be in trouble and panhandling from passersby. For the only time in the run of the series, these characters are addressing the camera, and implicitly the viewers, as if we might be willing to respond to their requests. (35)

As the description above suggests, in our initial introduction to Danes as Angela and Langer as Rayanne, the two girls are *acting as if* they are other people and, in doing so, also acting like each other (00:01-01:01). Immediately, the viewer is cued to encounter modes of this kind of performance within the show (when one might act like someone else), while also positioned *as* the passerby and as a player in the scene. Thus, the scene engenders a rather (potentially unnerving) proximal intimacy from the outset, by placing the viewer “in” the action. As noted in the quote above, the viewer is framed as the only “other” for much of the scene; it is Angela and Rayanne *only* that command the frame and the camera (and, in turn, the eyes of the viewer) moves around *with them*, playfully in verité style, suggesting, immediately, their importance within the series. After Rayanne’s cue, Angela, nervously and rather politely says to the unseen passer-by (viewer), “Um... ‘scuse me.” Angela looks down and sheepishly smiles, unable to continue. Rayanne jumps in quickly, saving her friend from inaction and a missed line, and says, in a business-like manner, “Could you spare some change? For a phone call. It’s an emergency.” Any notion that this is an *actual* emergency is erased by the overt casualness of Rayanne, a casualness that suggests she has done this before, and Angela’s inability to keep a straight face. Here, Angela and Rayanne are hanging all over each other, like loose fitting clothing. In fact, because of their pawing and proximity, their clothes shift, and backpacks fall to the ground; their bodies touch, as if their personal spaces are one and the same. Every so often they look at each other (especially Rayanne, who can be seen “studying” Angela even here). They move constantly, along with the camera; their weights shift on one leg, then the other. Their movements are framed as both symbiotic yet clumsy; like puppies in a litter that bump into and

walk over each other but never seem to mind. Put simply, the first scene offers us two girls, one bold, one shy, pretending to need spare change. But closer examination reveals an intimate space afforded to the viewer (as scene partner, pushed on stage as well), thrust into a relationship between two girls where proximity, creativity, construction, and playful repetitions are rendered as focal point.

There is a jump cut and a second attempt at procuring some change. The patterning of the scene reinforces notions of repetitious and segmental construction (itself a crucial element in television serial drama) and the residue of one idea linking to the still unformed next. In fact, the entire scene plays out through accumulations, the kind of “yes, and” play of children and improvisors. (The use of improvised play within friendships will be given more central focus in Chapter 2). Angela says, “See ok. See this guy, like...” and once again she trails off only for Rayanne to pick up the line. “Robbed our bus...tickets...and, um. You know, my sister and I. *We’re twins.*” In addition to the physical closeness of these two characters and the already accumulating patterns within the scene, we are also introduced to the metaphorical notion of Angela and Rayanne as twins and mirror images. This notion almost immediately takes on a more complicated shape, however. Angela quickly and perceptibly suggests that they are *not quite* mirror images saying, “No, we’re not the kind of twins who look alike, but...” Indeed, they do not look alike and, in fact, are most notably separated by costuming in this first scene. Angela still has mousey-blond hair that has not yet been dyed her trademark “Crimson Glow” red, and is wearing a more conservative wardrobe (muted, pastel colours, a crocheted vest) than the bolder plaid prints she comes to settle on later in the series. Rayanne is rather how we will come to know her: long, Janis Joplin-esque hair (Norris qtd. in Watkins) tied loosely in a ponytail without her customary braids, dangling yin-yang earrings, arms adorned with yellow concert wristbands from shows gone-by, and outfitted in her own requisite 90s plaid. As the show progresses, changes in style of dress, swapping clothing, and the physical appearance of both girls alter subtly,¹⁷ eventually becoming influenced by each other and other friends. (We will come back to this costume patterning later). Rayanne jumps in again, “We just finish each other’s...” only to have Angela complete the line, “...sentences.” This helpful completion is in

¹⁷ For a more thorough discussion of costume evolution, repetition and blending throughout the series, see “The Complete History of Angela’s *MSCL* Wardrobe” (Martin) and “Riot grrls, beta males and fluid fashion: how *My So-Called Life* changed TV forever” (Roberts).

fact what they have been doing, or trying to do, throughout the entire panhandling sequence: namely, the two girls complete each other's thoughts, imaginatively generating and building as they go. This verbal completion also gestures toward a grander notion, one that is essential to *My So-Called Life*'s narrative and the discussion here, in which friendships influence, shape and inform the individuals in them. Just as the girls complete each other's sentences, they have an ongoing role in shaping each other's conception of self throughout the series. As Nehamas says, friends play a crucial role in the creation of selves and "the lifelong process of self-construction" (211). The scene then introduces us to these patterning cues – costuming, phrases, and gestures – that will become emblematic of the strengthening of relationships throughout the show.

There is yet another restart. In this, what becomes their last attempt at procuring change (monetary change and, more generally, alteration), the girls are both fully intoxicated and enthralled by the other's emotional charge, with no attempt to engage with the passersby in even a partly convincing manner. Angela begins again by saying, "Um, hi, could you..." though the sentence is broken by her uncontrollable laughter as she looks over at Rayanne. Danes'/Angela's face offers Rayanne an uninhibited, full-to-the-brim smile, and then, she screws her eyes up tight while still smiling, as if this will close-off or mask her laughter from others, like a baby playing peak-a-boo. As she does so, Rayanne comes into frame, first hugging Angela as if to hide her, and then pushing her down. Angela, fully at ease and consenting to this move, disappears behind Rayanne, momentarily. Here, Rayanne again takes over the space, this time with her body rather than her voice, as if to suggest, "I'll take things from here." Angela stands directly behind Rayanne so that the viewer sees the edges of her body as she shifts her weight and shakes as she continues to laugh. This positioning again connects the duo together, as a linked form, singular and plural all at once. Though it may seem in this scene that Angela and Rayanne are playing "others," they are also engaged in play that allows them to feel each other out, literally and figuratively, discovering the possibilities in their friend. Even in the show's earliest moment, the borders between the two girls are slippery, permeable, and somewhat hazy; their bodies are their own, but they flit around each other permissibly, with and excitement and relative ease. Here Rayanne *does* replace Angela, but never to completely supplant. In fact, Angela (or a version of Angela) is crucial to the stories that Rayanne offers the passersby. Rayanne says, "She's, she's...upset. See, you look a little like her mother who's in a coma," creating another alternate reality for Angela; a crudely imagined other. At this suggestion, Rayanne, too, loses her focus

and begins laughing at her own absurdity. Rayanne turns around toward Angela and an elderly couple walks past the girls, shocked, incredulous, and huffy, looking back at the disruptive scene, though they continue along¹⁸. Directed at this couple and then quickly turning back to Angela, Rayanne says, “Angela! Excuse her, she’s hypoglycemic. I better get her some chocolate.” At this suggestion, the girls are in full, delighted hysterics, both of their mouths open wide in smiles directed towards each other; laughing so hard that no sound comes out; laughing so hard they could just as well be screaming. In this final crescendo, the girls rile each other up into a joyous emotional lather where, to each other, they may as well be the only people in the world. Here, the girls are separated by the small distance between them but connected by a thread of open-mouthed joy; an electric charge and invisible line between the girls’ mouths as they mirror each other in the emotional display of simultaneous, unruly delight (see fig. 6).



Fig. 6 A thread of open-mouthed joy in “Pilot.”

As the girls run off from their scene at the outdoor mall, smiling and laughing, with the propulsive energy of the first scene still on display (sonically reflected by W.G. Snuffy Walden’s rhythmic theme on the soundtrack, like an excited, fluttering heart), the viewer hears the first of Angela’s voice-overs that will come to begin, end, or interject the goings on of the show (00:50-01:12). In this first diary-like inner monologue (Holzman “A Conversation with”) we are

¹⁸ This judgemental look from the older couple is reminiscent of the look of an older woman directed at Mary Richards as she joyously tosses her hat in the air in the opening credit sequence of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*.

introduced to Angela's interior world or "psychic space" (Herskovitz qtd. in Audio Commentary, "Pilot", 6:40-6:53). As the series progresses, the viewer comes to expect that, on occasion, Angela will offer thoughts through this narration that contemplate the action on screen or, alternately, a disconnected and stray thought that appears as if from nowhere. Like the cry and Angela's pensive face, the voice over offers another form of intimacy and an internal space pulled to the surface. Here, Angela's inner-most thoughts are offered as though the viewer was a friend engaged in secret sharing. If the first scene brings the viewer into immediate intimacy with Angela and Rayanne, we are now pulled even closer, and enveloped into the internal space of Angela's brain. Angela says, by way of explanation and introduction, "So, I started hanging out with Rayanne Graff just...for fun...Just 'cause it seemed like if I didn't I would...die or something." The psychic intimacy of the voice over is further heightened through imagery on screen: the left half of the frame fades into a close-up of Angela's face set against a black background. The right part of the frame continues to show the image of the girls running down the sidewalk toward a group of three businessmen. The first scene of the two girls panhandling, it appears, is now part of Angela's memory. "Things were getting to me," Angela continues as the shot of the girls running fades into a thick black space, now surrounding the contemplative face of the girl. She goes on, "Just how people are. How they always expect you to *be a certain way*... even your best friend." As Sharon (the former best friend, though at this point this is only inferred connection) appears from out of the darkness, the area behind Angela comes into focus and we see that she has been staring off into space while standing in the hallway at her high school. Here, "Angela" is in multiple places at once, engaging with multiple people at the same time. In both memory and in the present – a past/memory that includes Rayanne (her new friend) and a present that includes Sharon (her old friend) – there is a pull to attend to both sides. Stated rather plainly in this morphing image accompanied by voice over are the immediate stakes of the series: Angela has come to a crossroads in her life where she can no longer commit to being this "certain" person. She has found both disruption from her old life and the ability to be *uncertain* with Rayanne as exemplified by the slightly dangerous play and performative aspects of the first scene. The series, we may then intuit, will be a journey to discover who Angela is, in the wake of leaving this "certain" person behind. The narration offers a corollary to the notion that has formerly been stated by the images: Angela feels a plurality of "selves" that add upon each other

as they also fragment, a pull from the past (as embodied by Sharon) and the excitement of an undefined future (as embodied by Rayanne).

In this early moment, with its multiplying Angelas, the show *seems* to be setting out on a journey that may lead Angela to a discovery of who she is: a final, singular self that is actively rather than passively living. Angela continues her voice-over: “So, when Rayanne Graff told me my hair was holding me back, I had to listen. ‘Cause she wasn’t just talking about my hair. She was talking about my life” (02:38-02:55). Angela’s change in hair colour later in the “Pilot” episode is meant to inject something exciting (“fun”) into her life that was not there previously, even if the fun is simply the excitement of upending people’s expectations. The notion of a change in hair colour that might seem frivolous has wider and more consequential implications for who Angela is and who she might become. But who, exactly, is that? As Susan Murray notes about the dye job,

Angela continues to struggle to define the act’s meaning as an initial step toward controlling the direction of her life...In the case of Angela, the dying of hair appears as an act of self-production and performance. The physical changes lead to alterations in the expectations and conceptions of other individuals in the girl’s life. The act *destabilizes the idea of a fixed identity* and allows Angela, as one fan put it, “to keep them guessing.” (41; emphasis mine)

As Murray suggests, Angela’s inability to define this act or define herself is crucial to the stakes of the narrative. If Angela understood herself firmly, now in this moment, there would be no narrative thrust. However, Rayanne’s inclusion in the formation and conception of this creation of self is just as essential. Rayanne’s influence on Angela’s hair is the first visual cue (a costume change) that the show offers, implicitly marking the way that friendships have the power to modify the selves that reside within them. Instead of organizing Angela’s life in this “certain” way, the relationship with Rayanne (and Rickie), and all of its associated generative identity play, *disorganizes* Angela’s life in a way that she can no longer order as “so-called.” The notion that Rayanne accepts, and further influences Angela’s unsettledness will become complicated as the show progresses.

If the program sets out on a journey to “find” Angela, we are continually offered moments that undercut the possibility that an identity can ever be “found” like a set of lost keys. In this way, the show nestles into the fraught intersection between accrual and transience that Logan suggests is at the heart of all serialized television drama (*The Presence* 37-38). In other

words, the start of the series (like so many teen dramas where the first episode offers, say, a new school, new friends, a new planet, a new role with new responsibilities, or simply new scholastic or extra-curricular possibilities) purports to be about a fresh start for Angela that might eventually lead to a semblance of understanding of who she is. But for this fresh start to even happen, it is necessary for one to break from (and compare to) a stale past. In this way, Angela, herself, characteristically embodies and often expresses the anxieties inherent in this tension between accrual and transience. For example, in “Pilot” Angela says to a teacher worried about the change in her appearance, “It just seems like, you agreed to have a certain personality or something, for no reason, just to make things easier for everyone, but when you think about it, I mean, how do you know it’s even you?” (15:39-15:59). Similarly, in the episode “Pressure” (ep. 13), Angela states, “People always say how you should be yourself. Like *yourself* is this definite thing, like a toaster or something. Like you can know what it is even” (46:30-46:45). If Angela sheds her “old” friends and old life she is also attempting to shed this line of thinking. In this same vein, the show explores the ways in which Angela and the other characters (adults included) might knowingly and unknowingly, by necessity or osmosis, shift behaviours, gestures, costumes, or ideals to move in the rhythms of those around them. Logan suggests that serial drama is ideally suited to detail these shifts in behavioural rhythm, over time, expressed through television performance: “What is given expression in human action – as through screen performance – is a person, but one whose identity and relations to others are not fixed” (*The Presence* 40). Logan continues, paraphrasing Nehamas, “Through the formation of their bond over time, friends and other close companions ‘do not discover their ‘real’ self’ – each helps the other to create it” (*The Presence* 40; Nehamas 211). Angela believes, as she outlines in the statements above, that because of the world she lives in and what she has been sold by those around her (or what she believes she has been sold), there is some push and urgency to either “find” herself newly, or to continue to be the self that she has always been. But the show rather continually lands on the notion that the self is liquid. There is a pressure point here: an individual is being shifted and swayed through diverse friendships and relationships, while also navigating the anxieties inherent in trying to find the solidity of a “real self.” Angela desires a future of possibilities that she believes are being partially denied to her when others tie her concretely to her past. Angela also seems to intuitively understand the points that Logan and Nehamas make above about the power of relationships in relation to the formation of a self. When her long-time

neighbour, the studious and somewhat socially awkward Brian Krakow, interrupts Angela, Rayanne, and Rickie in the hallway, Angela explains in voice-over, “What I, like, dread is when people who know you in completely different ways end up in the same area. You have to develop this, like, combination you on the spot” (“Dancing in the Dark,” 11:57-12:12). Here, Angela acknowledges that “you” might necessarily alter depending on where you are in time and space and, most especially, your proximity to the various people you know. Nehamas states, “who we are with one friend is not who we are with another” (169). Angela’s thought equates this “combination you” with a kind of performance, an “act” that she suggests everyone is always engaging in (“Pilot,” 33:38-33:43); something and someone created on the spot, quickly and haphazardly. But the statement also perceptively details the way that a person can be known to different people in “completely different ways,” suggesting that a blended, combination self might not be “acting” but an essential way of engaging within an array of close relationships.

The understanding of the self as a combination and consequence of close bonds, becomes more thematically significant as the series progresses, while also being reflective of the medium of television itself, working as it does, in its own form of combination and collaboration, over time. In addition, the understanding of “combination” selves seems reflective of the way that a viewer might gather information about characters throughout episodes and seasons and start feeling a kinship or affinity towards them. If what we desire from writing and reading about television *performance* is “not explanation, but clarification” (Logan, *The Presence* 24), perhaps what we want to understand from television *characters* in serial drama is *not* an explanation, clarification, or a distillation of a self over time and under pressure formed into a crystalized identity, like a diamond (see Logan, *The Presence* 37-40, for more about how characters “solidify” but also remain “open”). Perhaps, instead, what we want from these characters, (and what *MSCL* comes to suggest), as they entangle and sway with the rhythms of others in intimate relationships, *is a form of multiplication and augmentation*. As William Rothman argues, some television shows and characters (through the actors portraying them) are capable of offering “the mystery of human identity: the fact that we are mysteries to each other and ourselves” (“Justifying *Justified*” ch. 12). Put another way, as much as viewers may want to come to an understanding of the rhythms and consistent patterns of beloved television characters (and as much as we *do* begin to understand them through presented patterns of behaviour and consistent modes of being) we *also* want these characters to retain the capacity for possibility.

In *Sex, Drugs and Cocoa Puffs*, Chuck Klosterman glibly describes Angela Chase: “byzantine and unpredictable and emotionally complex, and all that well-crafted nuance made her seem like an individual. But Angela was so much an individual that she wasn’t like anyone but herself” (146-147). Although Klosterman marks this as a failure and an indication of the way that “Conscious attempts at reality don’t work” (146), he is unintentionally perceptive about the complexities of characters that can begin to draw themselves out within serial dramas over time. In an attempt to criticize, Klosterman also uncovers one of the pleasurable aspects of television viewing, something that *My So-Called Life* excelled at, and something serial television is uniquely suited to capturing: over the course of a series, in various moments and episodes, characters can be both, “like themselves,” and also “unpredictable.” In other words, part of the reason that a viewer might become invested in a series is in the ongoing discovery of a character, a discovery where one might track both consistent patterns and unusual modes of behaviour. Sustained and attentive viewing allows one to learn about and spend time with a character, to see them behave “like themselves,” witness their various relationships with others, and become accustomed to the ways (through the performance of the actor portraying them) they move throughout their world. But becoming accustomed also positions the viewer to be attuned to moments in a series when characters, through their relationships with others and the world around them, do not behave in a progressively linear manner. Angela’s ongoing struggle to find herself while also being swayed by those around her, then, is something that Logan explains is at the heart of all serialized television: the tension between an ever-accumulating past and “the openness of our future” (*The Presence* 39).

Becoming Angela Chase

The notion of “combination” selves that Angela lands on, and that Logan and Nehamas see as essential to both real-life friendships and the exploration of friendships on television (and other dramatic art), is further complicated when the desire to become *someone else, a specific someone* is investigated by the series more distinctly. As discussed, in this process of ongoing becoming, one might be swayed one way or another through various close relationships. In other words, as Nehamas suggests, friends *do* have a continuous role in shaping us, and vice versa, through proximity and over time (24). *MSCL* explores what happens when an individual

forcefully contorts themselves into the shape of another person and when the feeling of that other person, having taken up residence inside one's body, becomes necessary for survival. But how might one "become" the beloved other, if that person, as *MSCL* tells us, is also an ambiguous and ever-shaping being?

"Betrayal," the show's seventeenth episode, begins with Angela's customary voice-over. Here, a conventional statement turns into a surprising, perhaps formerly unthinkable one. Angela says, "I loved Jordan Catalano so much. And talked about him so much. And thought about him so much. And it was like *he lived inside me. Like he had taken possession of my soul or something*. And then, one day...I got over him" (01:10-02:20; emphasis mine). The voice-over takes the viewer through the journey of a rather easy (perhaps too easy) exorcism: all it takes is the movement of time, one day (in love with him) to the next (over him) to be free of this possession. After Angela is freed of Jordan, her body is her own again, as illustrated by a joyous, improvised dance performed throughout her bedroom. The viewer may linger in this rather spontaneous freedom and the liberating notion that Angela is finally, swiftly "over" Jordan, the former preoccupying force of so many of her voice overs. But the scene also cues the viewer to think about patterns of possession. Moreover, the voice over suggests the connection between a desire for someone and that desire contributing to an infusion of *their* body (as though through accumulation and residue of thought) into one's own. The suggestion in this episode (and a running theme in the series) is that one may become so deeply entangled with another, especially in intimate relationships (even if that intimacy is figured as mainly imagined), and so cloaked in the thoughts or feelings of the other, that one may begin to carry psychic pieces, talismanic fragments, or the ephemera of that other, both inside and outside of oneself. Extraction of these pieces or that residue may turn out to be impossible, even if that other has been removed (or removed themselves) from one's proximal orbit. Once this residue builds and takes hold, these fragments of the beloved other linger and persist.

Angela registers her infatuation of Jordan as a possession of soul; he is carried around not only within her mind (a mind that the viewer has access to) but also within her person and, in this way, intimacy and obsessive fixation is understood on a continuum of *becoming* another person or that person *becoming* part of you. At this point in the series (the seventeenth of nineteen episodes total), the viewer has come to witness numerous moments where characters have taken on the roles of friends or family members, figuratively and sometimes *magically* "becoming" or

inhabiting others¹⁹. This possibility, offered by Angela's narration, may attune the viewer to think about the ever-present and expanding possibility of actual inhabitation and role-reversal. In other words, the viewer knows that "becoming" someone else, through physical or mental proximity, is eminently though provisionally (and sometimes only superficially) possible within the scope of the series and bodies are open for inhabitation in a way that is established and acceptable. For example, in the episode "Halloween" (ep. 9), several characters "become" variants of each other (as well as more generic fictional characters) through costuming and performative shifts. Angela suggests that Halloween is "your one chance all year to be someone else" (01:18-01:22) but, as we will see, the show proposes that this is not a one-day-only possibility. Notably in this episode, Danielle dons an "Angela" costume for her evening of trick-or-treating. Here, the plaid shirt, Doc Martens and "Crimson Glow" wig that Danielle sports are a comically convincing imitation of her sister (16:51-17:53). Patty even momentarily mistakes Danielle for her older daughter, and it is not simply the costume that works to replicate. Danielle apes Angela's (Danes') gestures, by hugging her arms around her torso, languidly leaning against the fridge, speaking in Angela's rhythms, pausing her sentences momentarily and then continuing, interjecting her sentences with "like," closing her eyes slowly, and keeping them shut for a considered thought. In "doing" Angela and reproducing her costume, gestures, and phrases (the very markers that the show uses to track intimate relationships), Danielle scares her parents into believing the act (Brooks 134-135). This fleeting belief underscores the possibility that performance or inhabitation of another can be deeply, if momentarily, felt and that Angela, in a crude, comedic way *can* be superficially replicated. By reducing Angela to a wig, a plaid shirt, and a set of mannerisms, Danielle's Halloween act is meant to draw attention to the comedic aspects of Angela's recent behaviour. In other words, yes, in some ways Angela *is* like this. But, within this performance, Danielle also unintentionally underlines the many moments and events – moments and events that cannot be expressed through costuming or crude mimicry – that have "become" part of Angela and the viewer's understanding of Angela over the course of the series.

¹⁹ Chris Brooks discusses uses of magical realism in *My So-Called Life* in the essay, "My So-Called *Magical Life*: Magical Realism Joins the Chase(s)." In the essay, Brooks notes that although the show was often praised for its realism, it also often delved into the "literary movement known as *magical realism*, an imaginative form that blends moments of magic into...otherwise 'realistic' scenarios" (131). As we will see, in the episode "Halloween" there are a variety of "magical" inhabitations: Danielle as Angela, Rickie as Brian; Angela as Rayanne's aunt, Jordan as Nicky Driscoll, Patty and Graham as Rapunzel and a pirate respectively. There are also more subtle versions of inhabitation that take place throughout the series, notably Brian ghost-writing a letter of apology to Angela "from" Jordan.

Crucially, this inhabitation, once over, still has lingering residual effects. Danielle spends Halloween night trick-or-treating with Sharon, discovering that her desire to “be Angela” may extend beyond a simple joke and into a kind of affection. After Danielle takes off her costume, and tenderly puts the plaid shirts she has “borrowed” back in her big sister’s room, she seems to have held onto some empathetic understanding of Angela by “being” her. In other words, Danielle has been “rubbed off on” by Angela not simply because of the night of being her sibling, but also by the many years of living with her sister. Danielle even leaves some Halloween candy for Angela: a little, red, cellophane wrapped sucker.

That Danielle uses the exact markers – costume, gesture, and phrases – that the show also offers to express the tightening of relationship bonds is significant. The costume swaps overtly presented in “Halloween” are more subtly presented throughout the series. “The seamlessness of her friendships was depicted in the fluidity of the characters’ wardrobes, with Angela later in the series...sporting the kind of shearling jacket favoured by Jordan...Various characters – Brian and Rickie, Angela and Rayanne, Angela’s younger sister – even switched looks...to explore each other’s identities” (Roberts, “Riot grrrls”). For example, Angela and Rayanne explicitly trade parts of their respective costumes in “Pilot.” Additionally, by the end of the series, Angela and Jordan come to look strikingly similar; their hair colours and styles, and their clothing choices mirror the other. In addition to similarities in costuming, characters repeat cherished phrases throughout the show as a kind of social contagion. These phrases work their way through the school from one character to another, sometimes even making their way to parents and teachers. Phrases like, “it hurts to look at you,” “in my humble opinion,” and “it’s just a stupid play” are repeated in specific episodes or throughout the series. Words used as emphasis or interjections like, “or whatever,” “the repetitive use of ‘thing’ preceded by a variety of modifiers” (Bell 145), and the “nonstandard” use of the word “like” to highlight parts of a sentence (Bell 147) are used by various characters in every episode. Marking these shifts through clothing and other bodily changes, as well as these repeated phrases, the show highlights the tightening (or loosening) of relationship bonds over time and the way that individuals are “rubbed off on” by those close to them, knowingly and unknowingly. These motifs are illustrative of residual blending (even if they are potentially ephemeral or fleeting) within relationships, and they highlight the medium’s exemplary ability to, over time, establish the identity shifts (or “combination selves”) inherent in friendships and close relationships.

With this notion of inhabitation and blending established as part of the accepted world of the show, and with visual and oral patterns understood as part of the way the show explores tightening intimacy within relationships, Rayanne's desire to "become" Angela in "Betrayal" – a replication that Rayanne claims is solely for her role as Emily in the school's production of *Our Town* – registers as a possibility within reach. Although Angela's voice-over at the start of the episode references Jordan, the connections to Rayanne's ongoing infatuation with Angela are notable. Early in the series, Rayanne's mother, Amber, describes Rayanne's desire in a way that echoes Angela's desire for Jordan

Angela! Oh, Rayanne talks about her all the time. She's in love with her! *She wants to be Angela*... Oh, you know kids. They find one person and they just can't get enough of them! It's like being in love, only they're not allowed to have sex... Don't you remember? There'd be, like, this one person, who had, like, perfect hair, or perfect breasts, or they were just so funny, and you just wanted to eat them up – just live in their bed, and *just be them*. It's like everybody else was in black and white, and that person was in color. Well, Rayanne thinks Angela is in color. Major color. ("Guns and Gossip," 16:56-17:40; emphasis mine)

The assertion here is that the platonic and, though denied by Amber, possibly erotic love that Rayanne feels for Angela is all-consuming and absorbing (that Rayanne is both consumed by Angela mentally but also wants to consume Angela physically) and, in this way, Angela has "possession of" Rayanne's "soul." Rayanne and Angela both *feel possessed* by an outside force (Rayanne by Angela and Angela by Jordan), but it is *their* infatuation with that person/force that brings about the feeling within *them*. Amber, in her statement above, foregrounds the blending of bodies within these kinds of friendships while gesturing to the possibility of something insidious ("you just wanted to eat them up" and "live in their bed, and just be them"); a darker world of obsessiveness that will become more pronounced throughout "Betrayal." Rickie asserts this same idea to Angela, explaining, after Rayanne drunkenly sleeps with Jordan, "I mean, face it. She's always partly wanted to *be you*" (39:02-39:10). Here, Rickie suggests that the act of sleeping with Jordan was Rayanne's "messed-up" way of becoming Angela. If Rayanne cannot sleep in Angela's bed and cannot sleep with Angela, then she will become like Angela in a more roundabout way, by "sleeping with" the guy that Angela desires. This conflation of bodies is expressed earlier in the series. In "Pilot", while Rayanne, Angela and Rickie are discussing lines that a hypothetical lover could say before engaging in the act, Angela offers up, "You're so beautiful, it hurts to look at you" (34:55-35:34). Later in the episode, after getting accosted by

two older men in the parking lot of a nightclub, the girls are driven home in a police car. Before getting dropped off, Rayanne, drunk, looks moonily at Angela. Walking the edge of intoxicated parody and utter sincerity, Rayanne says, “With your hair like that, it hurts to look at you” (39:05-39:17). Here, Rayanne takes on the role of a would-be lover (Jordan) while also purposefully echoing Angela’s line. Rayanne paraphrases Angela’s words to suggest her own feelings while connecting them to Angela’s recent physical alteration, an ephemeral alteration that Rayanne herself has influenced and continues to influence throughout the series. This use of Angela’s phrase further complicates where Rayanne sits in the relationship, as she positions herself both as potential lover and Angela herself. Later in “Betrayal,” Rayanne says to Patty: “I guess *you* can’t really hurt someone this bad unless *you* really matter to *them*” (29:05-29:15; emphasis mine). Rayanne conflates her ability to hurt Angela as a confirmation that (at one time) she, herself, mattered to Angela. In this way, Rayanne complicatedly underlines her hopes that Angela feels as possessed by her as she does by Angela. The conflation is complicated further, because it is Angela who pushes Rayanne to try out for the part of Emily in the first place. Even as Rayanne may feel possessed *by* Angela, with the ability to walk around being inhabited by her mentally and soulfully, she attempts to inhabit Angela (or have Angela inhabit her) in a more forceful way in “Betrayal”; an attempted bodily take-over that results in a “performance” that is once destructive as well as generative.

In Living Colour: Rayanne as Angela’s Fan and Audience Reflection

Although several critical discussions of *My So-Called Life* detail ideas of performativity related to identity within the narrative²⁰, discussions focusing on the screen performances in the series are relatively few aside from reviews (both from the year of broadcast and more recently) praising their quality. Critical papers that discuss the unique moment in the series that will end this chapter – a scene where Rayanne and Angela accidentally rehearse a scene from *Our Town* together – often engage with the scene peripherally and rarely refer to the performances within the scene²¹. Holzman herself has cited the lack of critical discussion about the scene (Holzman

²⁰ See Byers (“Gender/Sexuality/Desire” 13-34), Murray (35-48), Braun (107-119), Diffrient (81-209).

²¹ See Diffrient (204) and Roberts (*In My Humble Opinion* 40, 75); for a slightly more thorough discussion, see Preskill & Jacobvitz (219-220),

“Geeking Out”). The scene that ends “Betrayal” is, at once, a culmination of the entangled blending within the friendship between Angela and Rayanne as well as, seemingly, a movement toward withdrawal. As viewership attachment to television characters and programs are often presented as “similar to friendship” (Blanchet and Bruun Vaage 27), written responses from viewers offer an intimately entangled view of the series. Because of these attachments, considered exploration of performances, specifically their ability to engender affective intimacy within the viewer, *can* be gleaned from the written reactions of non-scholarly viewers where the act of watching is rendered as another form of performance. An example can be found in a short essay in the booklet accompanying the DVD boxset. Called “The Limbic Appeal,” actor and comedian Janeane Garofalo briefly mentions the *Our Town* scene: “So deep and profound is my love for *MSCL*, I have memorized each episode: I can mute the sound, play all the parts and cry every goddam time Rayanne does the scene from *Our Town*...” (12). Notably, as a viewer, Garofalo registers herself as *part* of the performance in a repetition of the emotional expression on screen. Much like Rayanne’s imitation of Angela’s cry, Garofalo shifts to replication to draw out an understanding of the scene and of the emotions within it. Instead of exploring what the characters are *doing* during the beloved *Our Town* scene, Garofalo notes how what the characters are doing makes *her feel* (in another form of inhabitation or possession) and creates a psychic and physiological linkage – an emotional fusion or combination self – between herself and all the characters. For Garofalo, watching allows her *to enter* the scene and, by engaging in reciprocal emotions, she becomes part of it. By playing all the parts, a new form of emotional plurality, mental possession, and a kind of memorialized residue seeps beyond the screen. Similarly, Michele Byers speaking as a fan (amid an otherwise academic essay) states, “In my mind, the beauty of these episodes is the way they threw me – painfully, delightfully – back into my fifteen-year-old body, my fifteen-year-old self” (Byers, “My So-Called Life” 179). In both Garofalo’s and Byers’ account the catharsis of “feeling” emotions – pleasurable and painful (painfully pleasurable) – are tethered to what the characters in the show are feeling and, necessarily, what the actors in the show are performing. Just as a viewer might be drawn into the series after being cast as a passerby in the panhandling scene, Garofalo and Byers express the experience of watching as though they are “in” the show.

Similarly, in her essay “Saving Our So-Called Lives: Girl Fandom, Adolescent Subjectivity, and *My So-Called Life*,” Susan Murray explores the way that teenage girls,

especially those writing in virtual communities, saw “themselves” in the early 90s – likely for the first time – presented on the TV screen.

it was these teen girls who consistently and emotionally voiced the importance of the text’s *proximity* to their own lives in their on-line writing. This sense of *proximity*, I contend, stems from a number of factors, including the manner in which adolescent girls use both television and computers to see themselves as part of the sensuous ‘world’ of the television and computer imaginary; the fact that girls who identify more closely with *MSCL* believe it was created as a representation of their own lives; and the apparent process of intense self-creation and experimentation that teen girls find themselves in as they struggle with ambivalence toward their encroaching “womanhood.” (36; emphasis mine)

Thus, it was not only girls seeing “themselves” onscreen that became important. It was also the multiplying and collaborative form of television viewing, involving expression through writing and identity play within a community of like-minded girls, that became crucial to what Murray calls “participatory spectatorship” (36). The novelty of this kind of show – a show that gave teenage girls as much attention as another show might give, say, doctors or police officers (two shows that had cultural relevance at the time were *NYPD Blue* and *E.R.*) – was, at this time, significant. “At the time the series appeared, girls were largely alienated from television” and the interest in the show eventually “galvanized its fans to develop an online community...and to organize national protests when it was cancelled” (Rowe Karlyn ch. 6). Thus, the show gave these young women screen reflections of “themselves,” screen personas to emulate, and, in turn, these fans fostered an accessible online community to discuss and think about the show and their own identities (Murray 37). This creation of community and writing contributed to a further sense of closeness or “proximity” (Murray 36), connecting screen lives to their own lives, reflected, and heightened by the show’s focus on intimate friendships. In *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, Henry Jenkins similarly writes about fans, most notably female fans, proximity (as opposed to “casual” or distant viewing), “the pleasures of affective immediacy” (62), and the way that these active viewers engage with the text in intimate and creative ways. Relevant for our discussion is the connection that Jenkins makes between the viewer, the program, and a feeling of possession through proximity. We may also recall Amber’s connection between possession and consumption. Jenkins explains, “The Text is drawn close not so that the fan can be possessed by it but rather so that the fan may more fully possess it. Only by integrating the media content back into their everyday lives, only by close engagement with its

meanings and materials, can fans fully consume the fiction and make it an active resource” (64). These expansive and outward entanglements – residual repetitions, imitations, and blending outside of the screen – are evident within Garofalo’s fan essay and the online message boards that Murray discusses. Because *My So-Called Life* celebrates or (at least) tenderly explores the way that relationships often engender blending through repetitions in costuming, gesture and turns of phrase (and the way that these repetitions would necessarily be part of the performances within the show), this kind of “copying” (Lewis qtd. in Murray 42) naturally seemed to bleed outward into the relationships that these specific viewers formed with the show and its characters.

As Murray notes, in discussing distinctions in viewership practices, “female fans, specifically adolescents, interwove the text with the reality of their own everyday, using the show to wrap their own desire/pain/ambivalence in, through, and around the narrative” (39). Because of television’s ability to foster “proximity” and, more than that, intimacy, this subset of fans became and behaved much like the characters on the show, especially in moments where characters’ behaviours were also influenced by intimate relationships. Additionally, the patterning and repetition inherent in friendships within the show’s narrative was once again amplified by the “heavy rotation” in syndication when it was picked up by MTV (Watkins). In other words, endless reruns worked as another form of patterning and repetition. Although this did not extend the life of the show, it extended its afterlife, and for a certain subset of fans, as Soraya Roberts explains, “it got into our brains that way” (qtd. in Williams). Like Danielle and Rayanne (as we will see) in relation to Angela, these fans were “rubbed off on” in proximity to the series and the characters in it, thinking of themselves as likeminded creatures, acting as and dressing like the characters on the show (mainly Angela), dying their hair red (Murray 40-41) and engaging “in fluid states of identity play” (Murray 39)²². These viewers take on both “Angela’s play with and confusion over shifting identity positions” (Murray 44) *and* Rayanne’s desire to both become Angela and influence her in this play, suggesting “the fluidity of female spectatorship” and “the conflation of the desire ‘to be’ and ‘to have,’ leading a girl to hold onto

²² For another, similar discussion of Teen TV fandom, online communities, costuming and identification, see Jennifer Gillan’s essay, “Fashion Sleuths and Aerie Girls: *Veronica Mars*’ Fan Forums and Network Strategies of Fan Address.” Notably in her piece, many of the fans that identify with and copy *Veronica Mars*’ style claim to be adult women (185). Fanfiction and extra-textual expression are also explored in Louisa Ellen Stein’s “Pushing at the Margins: Teenage Angst in Teen TV and Audience Response.” In this essay, Stein looks at various types of fanfiction based on the programs *Gilmore Girls*, *Veronica Mars* and *Supernatural*.

the feelings of a crush” (Murray 45). Much like Garofalo, these viewers form “combination” selves as they “play all the parts.” As viewers seek to replicate Angela in their own identity play, they also behave similarly to Rayanne in “Betrayal,” whose desire to become Angela positions her as both viewer (of Angela) and performer (of Angela).

What seems striking within this fan behaviour is how proximity and intimacy generate in both physical manifestations (hair colour, costuming) of sameness, as well as expressions of emotional similarity. In Murray’s essay, she focuses on the fan reception and writing on online message boards. One such fan explains, “This show folds me into another space; it turns me inside out. The cold reason of my normal waking life changes places with the soft, sensitive interior that’s normally protected from the elements...And only when I experience *those emotions* do I *really imagine* that I am actually alive. And isn’t feeling alive a reality? Isn’t it the best reality?” (“Yadwigha” qtd. in Murray 39; emphasis mine). This remarkable reaction is notable for several reasons. First, the viewer acknowledges the show’s concentration on intimate interiority, a psychic or imaginative space, as a space worthy of exploration, which, in turn, lends weight to the viewer’s own “sensitive interior.” Second, the fan feels like Angela in that there are two distinct modes of her own life, one that is cold and unfeeling and one that is “soft” and “sensitive.” Thus, this girl feels her life is fractured into discrete elements: a “so-called life” (one that this fan describes as “cold reason”) and *actually living*, much in the way that Angela describes her life in “Pilot.” Because the viewer has been positioned intimately, physically, emotionally, and mentally with Angela/Danes, there is likely a tendency while watching the series to feel *like her*. Further, for the fan, it takes experiencing emotion, crucially an emotion that is here reflected through watching or viewing someone *else’s* emotion (witnessing a *performance* of emotion), to “imagine” that one is really living. Or, more precisely, it takes imagination (an empathetic understanding or the *taking in* of someone else’s feelings) to feel emotion. These may seem like contradictory modes, imagination and reality, but this fan (informed by the show’s viewpoint) does not see them as distinct. Instead, it is “normal waking life” that is at odds with feelings, imagination and *really living*. In other words, seeing fully felt emotions expressed through performance, allows the fan to engage with those same or similar emotions in “real life.” As Mittell suggests, this kind of fan behaviour can be “active, participatory” especially in the moments when viewers “temporarily *give part of ourselves* over to a fiction to produce intense emotional affect” (*Complex TV* 127; emphasis mine). Not only

does this fan behaviour suggest the engagement with a television show and its characters as though they are friends, but these fans are also reflecting the same form of patterning and shifting, (costume, turns of phrase, gesture, and affect) that the show offers and legitimizes to highlight the tightening of close bonds.

I bring up these written viewer reactions because the blending of *emotions* (rather than gesture, costume, and turns of phrase) as a form of communication within friendship are crucial to the episode and scene that we have been circling. That Rayanne and Angela will come to use the words of Thornton Wilder in this episode to “wrap their own desire/pain/ambivalence in, through, and around the narrative” (Murray 39) and express emotion by engaging in (and performing) his text, is also reminiscent of the fan experience above. The empathetic “understanding” of the other through feeling *like them*, *becoming them* and *performing them* is explicitly explored and complicated throughout the episode. Notably, Rayanne behaves much like these viewers, in her desire to “become” or replicate Angela. The show acknowledges, legitimizes, and complicates the way that blending manifests within friendships; it also highlights the way that blending might manifest between two performers playing friends on screen. In turn, viewership becomes its own form of blending, strengthening the notion that fan engagement with the show – through writing, costuming, and thinking – is reflective of the narrative interests of the show itself and is illustrative of the analogy between viewership and friendship.

“When you call someone’s name, like, kind of loud, and they don’t hear you, it makes you feel really lonely”: Feelings of Possession and Imitation in “Betrayal”

In “Betrayal,” Rayanne gets cast as Emily in the school's production of *Our Town*. Rayanne decides that, because Emily is “sweet and innocent,” and that these descriptors also align (at least partially) with her conception of Angela, she will *use* Angela's gestures, tone of voice and her movements as her entry-point into the role (03:15-03:31). Rayanne becomes both a viewer or “fan” of Angela (“studying” Angela's movements and behaviour to “become” her) as well as the performer of this replication. Like Danielle in “Halloween” (see fig. 8) in her audition for the role of Emily, we see Rayanne wrap her limbs around her body (see fig. 7), move more slowly and speak lightly (04:30-04:50). The audience is attuned to understanding these gestures

as Angela's, not only because we have seen them done by Angela/Danes herself (see fig. 9), but also because we have previously seen them replicated by Danielle in the earlier episode. Here, seriality functions to highlight these repeated rhythms, moving from body to body, and from one character to another. Rayanne explicitly details this imitation to Angela, saying about the audition, "I became you"; "Emily's supposed to be sweet and innocent, so I just imitated you" (03:15-03:31). Because of the established pattern of inhabitation in the series, the viewer may believe Rayanne's pursuit of becoming Angela will prove successful.



Fig. 7 Rayanne in "Betrayal."



Fig. 8 Danielle in "Halloween."



Fig. 9 Angela in “Guns and Gossip.” The wrapping of limbs.

But “becoming” and “imitating” are two uniquely positioned modes, and throughout the course of the episode, it becomes clear that neither are precise to what Rayanne is after. By defining Angela in discrete terms, Rayanne further reduces Angela and, thus, cannot seem to find the way *back to* her friend in either performance or within their fracturing friendship²³. Moreover, Angela’s formation of friendship with Rayanne began as a move away from these stagnant definitions and, in fact, all definitions. That Rayanne lands on the thin descriptors, “sweet and innocent,” however true they may be for Angela (and Emily), is a way of pushing definitions on an indefinite thing: a person, *this* person. Like with Danielle on Halloween, Rayanne’s attempt at becoming Angela begins by putting limitations on her to contain her as something reproducible. Nehamas suggests that once we know – or think we know – everything about why we love our friends, we effectively end our bonds with them (135-36). Once Rayanne defines Angela and, in doing so, denies Angela her “open future” (Logan, *The Presence* 39) she loses all sight of her. Rayanne’s first betrayal is this act of definition.

Before we delve deeper into the scene that closes the episode, it is necessary to point out that this scene and the episode, is brushed with a lingering and crucial residue from earlier episodes – two separate moments that are potent memories within the series and inform Rayanne’s decision to suffuse Angela into her Emily performance. In the episode “On the Wagon” (ep. 14), Rayanne briefly becomes the lead singer of Jordan Catalano’s band, Frozen Embryos. On the night of her debut performance, Rayanne gets stage fright, loses all the words to The Ramones’ “I Wanna Be Sedated,” and is unable to sing, prompting Jordan to take over

²³ My thanks to Jane Walker for help articulating this thought.

(34:07-36:35). Angela is crucially absent from witnessing this failed performance, choosing to spend the evening at home. This choice is informed by another moment, reaching further back into the series, when Rayanne almost dies from alcohol poisoning at a party, leading Angela to call for her mother's help to manage the crisis ("Other People's Mothers," ep. 10). Rayanne suggests to the school councillor (though she walks back on this assertion) that the event of her overdose (and her ongoing issues with alcohol prior to this event) may have resulted in a "distance" between herself and Angela ("On the Wagon"). Angela also acknowledges this growing chasm, while explaining to her parents why she does not want to attend the Frozen Embryos show: "It's something between Rayanne and me that I can't even describe, but it's there, and it's been there for, like, awhile, since that night when you had to drive her to the hospital. It's this *thing* that we never talk about" ("On the Wagon," 31:25-31:43; emphasis mine). There is an unstated hint that the reason, or one of the many reasons, for Rayanne's disastrous Frozen Embryos concert is the emotional letdown of a best friend not showing up. Rayanne's use of Angela as her Emily template, then, gestures to the notion that she is keeping Angela *with her* (using Angela herself or *the feeling of her* as a kind of talisman), within a psychic proximity to mitigate for the possibility that Angela will not attend this performance either.

After Rayanne sleeps with Jordan midway through "Betrayal," Angela reads Rayanne's "act" (both the act of sleeping with Jordan and the act of "acting" as Angela for her performance of Emily) not as a way of keeping her friend close, but as a cruel "game." Angela decides that her revenge will be joining the imitative behaviour, creating a warped, funhouse mirror of replication reflected on either side (the playful "twinning" of the panhandling scene turned on its head). Angela makes a distinct costume and performative change at the end of the episode: she puts on dramatic eye makeup and wears multiple braids in her hair (a hairstyle frequently worn by Rayanne, that has been previously adopted by Angela in the party sequence in "Other People's Mothers"); she acts sexually aggressively towards a boy named Corey and she asks him if he has anything to drink (37:05-38:45). The imitation of Rayanne here is so crudely cruel, designed specifically to hurt, even if it goes largely unseen by the person being imitated. Angela's reduction of Rayanne to messy party-girl is reminiscent of Rayanne's defining Angela in more positive, but no less reductive terms. That Angela chooses to amplify Rayanne's substance issues and her promiscuity registers as a caricature. Angela's imitation, though cruel,

ultimately has the same result as Rayanne's use of Angela in her performance: she holds onto her. As the girls mark the distinct differences in their own character(s) by playing the other, they also suggest how much of the other they have retained. In other words, their entanglement transcends its own unravel.

This tethered fraying brings us to the unusual and rhapsodic scene that takes up the last five minutes of "Betrayal" (42:25-47:07). The scene is the emotional apex of the complicated relationship between Angela and Rayanne, as well as an exploration of its disintegration. Rather than a direct continuation of an unfinished fight from earlier in the episode, or a movement back toward each other through a considered discussion of what they have been through, the scene offers a connection through emotion, without the girls' words to accompany. In the scene, Rayanne stands on the high school auditorium stage, rehearsing a scene from *Our Town*, still reeling from the fraught discussion with Angela mere moments earlier. In this earlier encounter, backstage of the auditorium, Rayanne acknowledges her awful mistake and expresses to an obstinate Angela that, in losing her friend, she will be losing "everything." Relatedly, in the play, at this juncture, Emily, now dead, has gone back to a moment in her past (her twelfth birthday) and in doing so comes to realize the way that she and all people while alive are fundamentally "blind" to the simple, small, and sometimes monumental joys around them. These two moments, Rayanne's loss of "everything" and Emily's discovery of life in death, have clear connections. Without making overt references to events from earlier in the series' and using Wilder's scene as a not-quite analogous stepping-stone to the goings on in the girls' lives, the scene becomes an exemplary reminder of both the residual (the factual accrual of history within a relationship) and the remaining possibility of fleeting connection. In other words, the scene retains some of what Angela and Rayanne have shared together – their ability to create and rub off on each other – while also suggesting a fracture with a still-as-yet-undetermined endpoint. Because the scene within the play concerns a look back at an event that shaped (even unknowingly at the time) the life of Emily, the scene within the show pushes the girls (and naturally the viewer) to look back on their recent pasts (specifically the titular betrayal), and perhaps even further still to moments with each other that they cherished (like the panhandling scene). In turn, the audience may connect any number of seemingly disparate events that have led up to this point (the disastrous Frozen Embryos performance, Rayanne's alcohol poisoning). But how can a scene be, at once, about a relationship on the brink of its end while also retaining an openness for that

relationship's possibly still entangled future? Just as the scene subtly highlights moments that have shaped Rayanne and Angela's relationship, and have shaped Rayanne and Angela themselves, it also foregrounds the accidental, the playful, the fleeting, and the magical.

Rayanne begins the scene, vacantly rehearsing her lines, her arms flapping at her sides like a ragdoll or a young child who does not want to do her homework. She is almost immediately interrupted by her director, the English teacher, Mr. Katimski, who is confident that the scene will be "just great," however, something (more than one thing, really) needs his attention. One of the other actors is absent, and Katimski calls on Angela, who has been painting sets, to stand in for the rehearsal. Angela silently, reluctantly agrees for reasons left unclear. There is no suggestion that Katimski has prior knowledge of the rift between the girls or that he is attempting to help mend the wounds between them. Whatever intuitive powers that Katimski has – elsewhere in the series, his intuition seems significant, especially concerning Rickie and at least one essay refers to him as a "realistic 'magic teacher'" (Kte'pi 161) – they do not seem to be part of his bringing Angela on stage at this moment. Angela's entry on stage is happenstance, though this happenstance turns into accidental magic. Once Angela takes her place on the stage, Rayanne is stirred into now fully present feeling. Rayanne begins to shift her body, rigidly alert, in decided contrast to her imitative, casual body curling in the audition, or the arm flailing despondence from mere moments earlier. This alertness is unlike the Rayanne we have come to know, normally all lumber and weighty boldness. Here, Langer depicts a considered thoughtfulness and containment in Rayanne's movements, as if she has become an accountant of her own fragility, not pushing anything too far for fear something will shatter. Because of Rayanne's/Langer's outward blustery confidence, it is the restrained movements – otherwise small but quick – that feel pregnant with meaning. We see Rayanne react to Angela entering the creative space by digesting it for a moment, eyes down in thought. Angela – the real Angela, not an imprecise imitation – has tumbled into this space. How can Rayanne play Emily as Angela when the real Angela is looking right at her? If Rayanne was mitigating the possibility of Angela not attending the performance by attempting to *become* her, what happens when Angela is not only audience but also a fellow actor?

As the scene continues, Mr. Katimski, rather frantically says, "And, could you...stop *acting*, please?" At this moment, Angela looks at Rayanne, knowing that Rayanne is looking elsewhere, with her own studying gaze, perhaps perceiving something unusual and worth

investigating in Rayanne's behaviour: a timidity, a softness, and a vulnerability. But just as quickly as Angela/Danes looks at Rayanne, she shields her eyes again. Katimski then clarifies, "Stop acting. There's really no need for it. You see, Emily is dead. The life she had is over. That's a pretty big deal. I mean, oh, gee-whiz, she is only just now realizing how precious every moment of that life really was. And that she never fully appreciated what she had." Here, Rayanne sneaks a quick look at Angela to check in on her reaction, slightly embarrassed for having been given this bit of direction. Angela purposefully avoids Rayanne's eyes, forcefully refusing to accept their invitation by looking determinately down at the script. Then, Mr. Katimski says two words that crucially change the tenor of the scene even further, "Just imagine..." With his customary speaking rhythm full of pauses and stammers, Katimski inserts a short but essential pause here so that Rayanne and the viewers are left to linger for just a moment on the word "*imagine*." Mr. Katimski continues, "...what that must feel like, Rayanne". Rayanne then looks out and down, somewhere beyond the lip of the stage that we cannot see. Within this pause, Katimski seems to cast a spell of sorts. The emphasis given to *this* word, "imagine," *here*, is significant. Again, Katimski's intuition, seemingly supernatural (though unknowing), extends toward the girls in another way. Though he does not know that Rayanne has chosen to imitate Angela (at least to our knowledge), he can *see what she is up to*, and he needs her to stop. Here, we might recall the words of the internet fan: "only when I experience *those emotions* do I really *imagine* that I am actually alive. And isn't feeling alive a reality? Isn't it the best reality?" ("Yadwigha" qtd. in Murray 39; emphasis mine). The rehearsal scene is operating within these same seeming contradictions and suggesting that they are not contradictions at all: imagination (perhaps the most crucial aspect of a fully embodied performance and fully engaged viewership) results in a reality that engenders feelings (within both performer and viewer), and, in turn, those feelings (good or bad) make one feel alive. Though this scene posits the potential of an "act," in fact it turns into a scene that contrasts with James Naremore's concept of "performance-within-performance" (80), where an actor might express "dual signs," or "dramatize situations in which the expressive coherence of a character either breaks down or is revealed as a mere 'act'" (70). Here, the subtext of the scene and the text are running on two parallel and equally weighted tracks. The girls are using the "cover" of a theatrical rehearsal to express what they are really feeling for and through each other. Unlike scenes of "performance-within-performance," this is not a situation where the viewer can see some emotional truth

“underneath” the surface. Rather, here, the privilege of seeing and feeling the emotions expressed are open to all witnesses: Angela, Rayanne and the viewer in equal measure. Although obscured by the imprecise words that they read from their scripts, there is no denying that the girls, here, finally, are feeling what they mean.

The inclusion of Angela (the *infusion* of Angela) back into emotional proximity with Rayanne shifts the weight of this scene for Rayanne, Angela and almost certainly the audience. However, the call to *imagine* shifts the scene into an empathetic exploration of affect, one where another’s feelings might blend with one’s own – and because of this blending (blending that we have seen previously as costume and gestural patterning, and repeated phrases) – the scene becomes emblematic of the way that friendship is portrayed in the series. In *The Transmission of Affect*, Teresa Brennan explains,

The transmission of affect, whether it is grief, anxiety or anger, is social or psychological in origin. But the transmission is also responsible for bodily changes; some are brief changes, as in a whiff of the room’s atmosphere, some longer lasting. In other words, the transmission of affect, if only for an instant, alters the biochemistry and neurology of the subject. The ‘atmosphere’ or the environment literally gets into the individual. Physically and biologically, *something is present that was not there before*, but it did not originate sui generis: it was not generated solely or sometimes even in part by the individual organisms or its genes. (1)

Ultimately, the girls find a still potent connection not by “becoming” each other but rather by meeting each other within this transmission (a place that they have met each other before), and generating a mutual emotional expression, resulting in a more intimate connection and a richer form of entanglement than their former imitations offered. Brennan describes this kind of mutual feeling, especially within friendship, as an “opening through which one feels the other’s pain or joy as one’s own” (123). This affective connection or “opening” threads all the way back to that first playful panhandling scene. Additionally, Katimski’s call to imagine suggests a world in stark contrast to the one that Angela (and perhaps Rayanne) sees around her (or believes she sees), the one that she has been rallying against: a world that asks one to formulate a single identity and stick to it. Instead, all notions that acting can be conflated with “imitation” or “lying” (as Rayanne and Angela previously suggested, respectively) are summarily removed. The surprise magic of the scene, then, is not so much how it happens or how Angela is commandeered into inclusion on stage but, rather, that performing the scene results in a

conversation between the two girls threaded *through emotional language* that they would otherwise not have had, or were not ready to have, using their own words.

Rayanne continues looking down for a moment longer, still absorbed by the thought provoked by Katimski's direction. Then, her eyes flick upward and widen slightly with a brief, almost undetectable flash. Something within the direction to imagine has hit Rayanne on both an emotional and creative level. Rayanne repeats the first part of the scene as a summersault of tumbling words. She says her lines in a clipped, rapid fashion, as though she is starting before she is ready and as though it hurts even to speak, the pain a bubble ready to burst in the very top of her throat. She finally meets Angela's gaze in the line, "look at one another," as if the line demands it, and the look seems to penetrate Angela. It is in this moment – this look – that the narrative shifts into a purely emotional movement. As Garofalo suggests, the viewer could watch the scene with the sound muted (as though it were a silent film) and still be penetrated by the same emotions.

As Angela stands fixed in spot, her arms are folded and held tightly next to her body, hugging herself – in not a dissimilar manner to the way that Danielle and Rayanne pretzeled their own bodies while "being" Angela – she attempts to shield herself, at first, from allowing Rayanne's own emotional outpouring to pierce her, still bearing the irritable residue of the earlier confrontation. Angela keeps her eyes mostly down, shaded by their lids, or purposely fixes her sight elsewhere, to deny Rayanne the satisfaction of seeing her fully. The urge to leave the space is apparent in the lobbing movement of Angela's head, looking for something, anything to occupy her gaze. We know by the way that she is holding herself (literally cradling her body) and withholding herself (shielding herself from complete view) that *something* is happening within her and is about to be expressed outward soon enough. To borrow again from the internet fan, she will soon be turned "inside out." The energies expended withholding emotions will eventually give way to an emotional torrent, where inner turmoil is not simply expressed outward but rises to a crescendo. Here, the audience may begin to anticipate the eventual pleasurable explosion of expression that has taken on a larger gestural import within this episode: the very cry, expressed by the only one capable.

As the scene continues, the camera pushes in gently on the girls' faces, reverently. Here, unlike in the panhandling scene, the camera's movement is slow and lingering, rather than frantic and buoyant. However, the focus of the scene is the same. The two girls alone receive the

camera's concerted attention, and the emotions that register on their faces are given aesthetic space for full expression. Even when another character in the scene reads their line (in this case, Abyssinia playing the Stage Manager), we are offered only the faces of Angela and Rayanne, in successively more intimate close-ups, reacting, variously reaching out to, and avoiding each other as though they were the only two people in the theatre space and perhaps, again, the world. As the camera tightens on their faces, the effect is of shortening the gap between them and making it seem like they are moving ever closer to each other. The velvety lighting in the auditorium, without the benefit of full stage lights, also emphasize the girls faces, wrapping them in shadows. This envelopment becomes reminiscent of the darkness that shrouds Angela in the transition from the panhandling scene to the one in the school hallway in the first episode.

Rayanne progresses through Emily's dialogue: "I didn't realize. So all that was going on and we never noticed. Take me back – up the hill – to my grave. But first: Wait! One last look. Good-by, Good-by, world. Good-by, Grover's Corners...Mama and Papa. Good-by to clocks ticking." All the while, Angela, to avoid looking at Rayanne, positions her sight to the ceiling, or cradles the bridge of her nose in her fingers, and looks down and away; her brows slightly knotted, her chin slightly pulled up towards her bottom lip. Later, Angela/Danes begins to caress her face, pushing away nothing, touching her cheek and at a spot under her chin; the sensation of an unconscious distraction, to calm and soothe. Finally, with conviction, reaching the end of the section in the play that they have set out to rehearse, Rayanne/Emily says, "I'm ready to go back." Then, Angela, still touching her forehead with her hands, eyes veiled by their lids, looks up, while her head is still positioned downward (as if to say, "I offer you this look but not the rest of me"). It is here for the first time in the scene that Angela and Rayanne's eyes settle onto each other. There are tears in both sets of eyes; a reciprocity of affect and a blending in expression that results in an imprecise mirroring. We know that Rayanne does not (cannot) cry like Angela even when she tries. But now she has stopped trying. Rayanne's face is quieter than Angela's as tears stream down her cheeks, though her own overwhelming hurt is clear. Rayanne even offers a half smile through tears on occasion, perhaps a reflexive interpretation of the "wondering smile" (Wilder 88) that Emily is said to exhibit in the stage directions, that also, simultaneously, extends a slightly pleading apology to Angela. In contrast, Angela's chin undulates, her eyes well, her mouth "collapses" (precisely as Rayanne described earlier in the episode). Unlike that first fully expressed cry in the "Pilot," her eyes here are open and fixed now rather than tight half-moons.

Danes' cry face and her looking face have themselves converged. As she attempts to steady herself to contribute to the scene, she is pulled into two directions. She starts to open her mouth and, for a brief, half-second, her voice is caught. Then, in an unusually high octave, sounding like she has taken in water and is on the verge of drowning in a lake of her own tears, Angela says her one and only line: "Were you happy?"²⁴ Saying the line releases a tidal wave and, with a slight bit of embarrassment and as if to compensate, Angela places a thumb in her mouth and bites down on a nail, or some skin, as if to shield once again the singular gesture that has now become impossible to hide.

Rayanne looks back near Angela, eyes full of tears yet to fall, now focusing slightly to the side, suggesting she has taken a position of introspection, somewhere inside herself. Rayanne takes a contemplative pause, almost smiles, and answers the question: "No." Langer plays this moment as a just now understood admission, as if *this* is the connection between Emily and Rayanne that she had summarily missed in her forceful connection of Emily and Angela. In a whisper she turns back to Angela and says, "I should have listened to you." This line, and its delivery by Langer, holds the clearest link to Rayanne and Angela's current state. Rayanne offers this whisper like a kiss to Angela as though it came from her own brain, in this very moment, as a secret admission, unrelated to the rest of the scene; suggesting *this is for you only*. Angela nods slightly, imperceptibly, as if to assert her not-fully-formed-understanding of Rayanne's intent. Then, just slightly louder, Rayanne goes on, "But that's all human beings are. Just blind people." Though there is more to the scene in the play, the rehearsal ends here. After a beat, Angela moves her chin forward with her jaw. She looks down and pushes her tongue in front of her teeth without opening her mouth. This movement of jaw seems to indicate a return to earlier obstinance, as if by tightening her face she is injecting the former underlying anger and tension back into the space that had been, mere seconds ago, consumed by an entirely different tenor of emotion. She makes a small noise, a suck of her teeth, as if to say, "not today." However, before exiting completely, she gives Rayanne "one last look." Rayanne looks down, quietly reciprocating the removal of self from emotion, and pushes her hair behind her ear, an

²⁴ The stage directions suggest that the role of Mrs. Gibbs and all the other dead, should be read "without sentimentality and, above all, without lugubriousness" (Wilder 79). I am noting this simply because of the direct contrast to which the scene is read within the show, and the way that difference changes the scene within the play for the girls. The stage directions themselves seem to be entirely disregarded (if they were ever considered at all) because of the off-stage emotions that erupt while "performing."

unconscious and seemingly inconsequential gesture belying its own importance. Earlier in the episode, while “studying” Angela, Rayanne perceptively notes, “when something matters to you, you do this, like, hair flick thing,” pushing her own hair behind her ear in mimicry, a gesture she later repeats purposefully in her audition. Here, Rayanne reproduces Angela’s gesture in a way that seems habitual and unaware while also, however unknowingly, underscoring the profundity of the moment. Indeed, Angela may have metaphorically removed herself from the stage’s connected space, but Angela’s residue has *not left Rayanne*. Rayanne, it seems, has internalized this gesture, and made it part of herself, suggesting that the connection (at least on one side) remains intact.

Much like in the show’s very first scene, Angela and Rayanne generate a connection in the *Our Town* rehearsal by “playing” other people. In closely reading this moment, the connections to that first scene – the mirroring, the gazing, and the reciprocal gestures – become even more pronounced. As Stephen Preskill and Robin Smith Jacobvitz describe the scene, “Rayanne’s and Angela’s distance from each other is momentarily bridged by the power of the last scene from the play, which they end up rehearsing together” (219). This short description, though accurate, glosses over something that, to my mind and as I have detailed above, is crucial to the way the scene ultimately unfolds and threads back toward the imaginative play of the first scene. As Preskill and Jacobvitz argue, the last scene of *Our Town* holds power, certainly, and its connections to the girls’ own lives seem to register and engage them. However, once the emotions felt through the start of the theatrical rehearsal take hold, it is *the emotion* (rather than those unmissable yet imprecise connections to the play itself), generated through the call to imagine, that becomes momentarily unshakable, anchoring the girls to their spots on stage and binding the girls once again to each other. There is evidence of the parallels that the *Our Town* scene offers for Angela and Rayanne and directly connects to the challenge “to wrest meaning from the dailiness of their lives and to remain as wide-awake to each other as possible” (Preskill and Jacobvitz 220). But how ever clear the connections in the play are to the girls’ lives, there is also something to be found in the connections that occur in *contrast* to the words that are said. What I am suggesting is that *because* the words are imprecise, the communication in the scene comes from the expressive emotions (and thereby the performances) beyond their direct or indirect connections to what is being said. Because of that imprecision, the deepest connection is found not within the play and its parallels to the girls’ lives, but rather within shared emotional

expression. Thornton Wilder's words are lovingly felt, necessarily instructive and, ultimately, are moved *beyond*²⁵ (or as Rayanne might say, “so beyond”). In other words, when Rayanne says her lines, she *could* very well be saying these words to Angela (especially her “No” and “I should have listened to you,” as noted above) about their own lives, but there is also a necessary disconnect between what is said and how the words apply to the situation off the stage. If Rayanne simply started saying these words to Angela in the hallway, devoid of any context, they would not make sense and, similarly, they only make peripheral or parallel “sense” here. The “texture of performance” (Clayton, “The Texture” 73) is (at least in part) where and how we make connections to the rest of the series, and this texture is driven not entirely by what the girls say within the scene (the words, of course, are not their own), but rather what they *do* around those words, and how the expression of emotion connects to the goings on off-stage. Just as in Rayanne’s attempt to clarify Angela’s cry devoid of context, this scene demands that context – the past – is attended to even as it also relies on spontaneity and provisionality. To borrow again from Clayton, Langer and Danes are “fully ‘inside’” (“The Texture” 75) of the performance, though not *exactly* the one the scene purports to be “about” on the surface. Wilder’s words are being *used* to get to the emotions, and these emotions register deeply, not *only* because of the play’s undeniable truth and beauty, but because of the girls’ recent past and, to borrow from Logan, their “shared history” (*The Presence* 149). Thus, the girls (like the fans of the show) weave the text around and through their understanding of their own lives (Murray 39) and they make the text work *for them*.

As though through mesmerism, once they begin the rehearsal, the girls intuit that the scene *must* play out, *no matter* the emotional turmoil it is causing or perhaps *because of* the emotional turmoil it is causing. If this moment suggests a bridging of distance, and I believe that it does, it does so by connecting the girls through a generative act of emotional expression, reminiscent of finishing each other’s sentences in the first scene. As Logan contends, although serial dramas ask us to attend to an ever-building past, certain moments ask us to be keenly aware of the way that “the past’s residue might nevertheless need to lift, or be somehow dissolved, if we are to keep alive our promises to the future” (*The Presence* 175). Indeed, something of the atmosphere between the girls has *changed* as if by magic, as if by love, as if through imagination and through art. However, it is less the residue needs to lift or be dissolved,

²⁵ My thanks to George Toles for his help articulating this thought.

and rather that this past residue needs some capacity to breathe to keep alive these future promises (however fleeting); a capacity that has, up to now, been kept shuttered. In other words, the release of the residual emotions, brought to the surface because of the play as well as the girls' recent confrontation, *becomes* the venue for connection. As the fog that engulfed the girls momentarily dissipates, the unsaid "thing" can finally be expressed. If Rayanne "becomes" Angela in this episode, it is not (or not *only*) through her unlikely sleeping with Jordan, her aping and ingesting of gesture, or her more subdued costuming, but also through a capacity to internalize, be hurt, and to admit (if only gesturally) that she has been penetrated and possessed by an outside force. By understanding that both girls have been rubbed off on by each other throughout their friendship, we can track these slow adjustments, accumulations, and growing similarities, both visual and emotional, even if the characters cannot. Within this specific rehearsal scene, the formerly cynical and crude imitations by both girls become supplanted by something else entirely, resulting in Rayanne and Angela both *sharing and creating again* in this somewhat inscrutable, generative, elastic emotional moment. Ultimately, their feelings blend, bleed together and mutate, creating a line of feeling from one girl to the other, invoking a distorted version of the joyous open-mouthed connection of that very first scene.

As the "performance" of *Our Town* is replaced by the foregrounding of emotions and the eventual extraction from them, the viewer is left considering where each girl stands as they literally walk off opposite sides of a stage; their moorings unbalanced in general, by their earlier "acts" of *being* each other, now replaced by a "going back" to their already destabilized selves and the ongoing fraying of their relationship. Because we have come to understand Angela and Rayanne in relation to each other, the process of their relationship dissolve further destabilizes what we know of them. But the *Our Town* scene complicates this by suggesting that, even within its dissolve, the bond remains. The scene (as is consistent with other aspects of the show) works to open up rather than close off and express indefinites rather than certainties. In other words, the scene works to remind us of the still present and vital connection between the two girls. And, unusually, the closest the girls ever get to each other (emotionally, psychically) happens within what might succinctly be described as a "break up" scene. The resultant questions that the show leaves the viewer with at the end of this episode has the effect of an atypical cliff-hanger. As Emily Nussbaum explains, the cliff-hanger is a "climax cracked in half" and is "the question that hovers in the black space between episodes" ("Tune in Next Week"). Crucially, cliff-hangers

borrowed from soaps (“Tune in Next Week”) and rely on serialization rather than an episodic format to work. The black space, the in-between, and the connection to the next episode is required to add up to anything at all. In that black space, in this instance, a viewer might ponder whether the “bridge” of connection between Angela and Rayanne will continue. Or rather – in the movement of two girls to opposite wings – if they will continue to forge ahead in separation. Or, perhaps, (as was my intent in detailing above) what exactly was happening on that stage at all. Nussbaum sees cliff-hangers as a kind of conspiratorial connection between the creators of a show and its viewers; where everyone involved in the relationship with the show can see the stakes writ-large:

But there is also something to celebrate about the cliffhanger, which makes visible the storyteller’s connection to his audience – like a bridge made out of lightning. Primal and unashamedly manipulative, cliffhangers are the signature gambit of serial storytelling. They expose the intimacy between writer’s room and fan base, auteur and recapper – a relationship that can take seasons to develop, years marked by incidents of betrayal, contentment, and occasionally, by a kind of ecstasy.

That’s not despite but because cliffhangers are fake-outs. They reveal that the story is artificial, then dare you to keep believing. (“Tune in Next Week”)

What can be parsed out of this assessment, in relation to this moment in *MSCL*, is that an exquisitely drawn emotional moment, and a rather “quiet” one at that, is positioned as and with the dramatic weight of an explosive and possibly revelatory cliff-hanger.

Crucially, there is no closure for Rayanne and Angela’s friendship and no confirmation of either a clean break or relationship on its way to mending. The friendship is left in a state of flux in an extension of the cliff-hanger through the two remaining episodes. After mainly keeping their distance again in the last episode of the series, the girls’ final and only scene together occurs midway through “In Dreams Begin Responsibilities.” The brief scene, a strained conversation, hints at the pain still lingering from the events of the earlier day’s rehearsal but is striking for its lack of discussion about it (21:23-22:20). This lack serves only as a reminder, a memory of residual emotional electricity slowly losing charge, and the capacity for affective communication now all but dissipated. Logan’s contemplation of a scene from *Mad Men* seems apt here: “At issue, then, is what it means for their relationship if the previous night’s mood lingers only as an absence to be avoided, something to be denied, its ties to the present cut loose” (*The Presence* 152). Indeed, in the final episode, Rayanne is once again absorbed in her

excitement about opening night. Angela has reverted once more to crushing on Jordan after receiving an apologetic letter from him (that Brian secretly wrote). It is as though Rayanne and Angela have, separately and together, gone back in time. If the girls learned anything about each other (or life and death) within the rehearsal, that knowledge seems to have either necessarily evaporated or is again just beyond their grasp, another chasm left by the passage of time and their own stubbornness. Perhaps this evaporation and denial is necessary for the girls to move on *without* each other. The explosively emotional moment on stage becomes yet another “thing” that Angela and Rayanne “never talk about.”

My So-Called Life's last episode is marked by this curious turn backward – one that seems paradoxically new. The show began by offering multiple Angelas, specifically engaging with Angela's many selves and contradictory thoughts and feelings, showcased through Danes' unique ability to express plural emotions, and through Angela's inconstant voice over, rendering her manifold but intimate. Though the series largely retains Angela as its central focus throughout, the intimacy afforded in the viewer's access to Angela's inner voice eventually subsides (Murphy 169). Angela's voice-over stops at around the 8-minute mark of “Betrayal,” in the penultimate episode, “Weekend,” Angela's voice-over is replaced by Danielle's, and in the final episode, there are only two instances of Angela's inner monologue, both contemplating a dream about Jordan Catalano. By limiting her intimacy with the viewer, the show renders Angela even more elusive, resulting in a kind of “disappearance” that seems reflective of Angela's frustration in trying to define herself in distinct terms. The disappearance also seems reflective of Rayanne's experience with her friend. For all Angela's efforts of transformation – and Rayanne's influence on these efforts – she is, at the end of the series, in her turn back toward Sharon and Jordan, moving toward her beginnings, of a before life that we (and Rayanne) never saw. In yet another way, Angela is “like herself” and “unpredictable.” But in the final scene between Angela and Rayanne, the ties to the shared past, muted and perhaps now evaporating as they are, are readily available if the viewer is attuned to see them. Rayanne's lingering connection to Angela, her *need* for Angela to be present with her (and similarly, that same need for the show and the viewer), is presented as a fitting final change in costume; one last talisman for the road. In this final scene between the two, Rayanne has dyed a formerly white streak in her hair an orange-y red, like a knock-off Crimson Glow. The ground upon which the girls stand has incrementally shifted, their entangling influence on each other *has blended them*, and they have subtly switched

places: Angela pushes Rayanne onto the theatrical stage; Angela influences Rayanne's hair colour; Angela is now reflective of the audience taking in Rayanne. The suggestion in this final physical alteration is that Rayanne keeps Angela with her – their “shared world” (Logan, *The Presence* 107) is at least mentally available, choosing to announce this continued psychic residue as a physical (if ultimately ephemeral) mark. The mark does not bring Angela closer to Rayanne, and it does not mend the fray, but it does suggest that Rayanne is not “over” Angela, and that Angela still retains the power to possess.

Chapter 2

Student Bodies: Muscle Memory and Middle Kids, Exiled Couples, and the Performative Past in *Pen15*

“It’s too late, you know. We already are our characters. We are Joe and Deborah, Maya. So, when we kiss it will still be us” – Gabe (“Play,” s.2, ep.6, 37:07-34:20)

Pen15, a show that places distinctive importance on meanings made through imaginative improvisation, explores the friendship between Anna and Maya, two awkward middle-schoolers and best friends. Set in the year 2000, in the days of AOL Messenger, The Spice Girls and The Backstreet Boys; when no one had a tiny computer in their pocket at all times and when a girl might rip a full-page image of Jared Leto in all his Jordan Catalano-glory out of a teen magazine and post it on her bedroom wall; the show plays with and stretches autobiographical memories where, through imaginative play both inside and outside of the narrative frame, the past might be collapsed with the present. The space of adolescence, where one is motivated by interests in self-discovery and identity formation, while also being a space that allows for and accepts performance as part of this discovery, is foregrounded by the overall conceit of the show. Thirteen-year-olds Anna and Maya look strange, have few friends, and are obsessed with boys who (mostly) do not reciprocate. Their strangeness comes from their gangly bodies, their off-putting, too large smiles filled with dental appliances and the fact that Anna and Maya are played by adults (thirty-something actors, Maya Erskine and Anna Konkle, real-life best friends, playing somewhat fictionalized versions of their younger selves²⁶) while the rest of their schoolmates are played by actual pre-teens²⁷. The show foregrounds the mode of performative play that I will refer to as improvisation (spontaneous make-believe that casts Maya and Anna in different “roles”) throughout the series, through the casting of adults as preteens, and through the use of the autobiographical within the narrative, marking all aspects of the production part of this

²⁶ For clarity, I will refer to the actors, Maya Erskine and Anna Konkle as “Erskine” and “Konkle” throughout, while referring to their characters as “Maya” and “Anna.”

²⁷ As many features on *Pen15* point out, the Comedy Central show *Strangers with Candy* starring Amy Sedaris had a similar conceit – a forty-year-old re-enters high school – but with much different results (see Chavez, for one such example). I would be remiss not to mention that at twenty-two, Cameron Crowe posed as a high school student to do research for a book that would be adapted into the film, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (Harrington).

ongoing stretching and morphing. In this chapter, I will explore the ways that collaborative improvisational play within the narrative is used as both the site of generative meaning making and identity formation, but also the way that mutual subjectivity can be constrictive, consuming, and destructive. I will suggest the ways in which all serial TV, and *Pen15* in particular, plays with improvisational tenets of agreement and expansion. I will begin the chapter by explaining the ideals of improvisation and the way that these ideals seem to inform the central relationship on the show and expand outward toward the viewer. Then, I will explore the ways in which the show uses these improvisational tenets within the narrative through the central characters' interest in playing "pretend," as well as within the broader technical construction of the program. As the show "plays" with and subverts television conventions, it also contorts the past, bodies, identities, aesthetic modes, and the narrative itself. As a celebration of improvisational play that makes room for its plausible darkness, *Pen15* contemplates notions of body fluidity and mirroring and, within narrative ruptures, displays the inner world of Maya and Anna outside the bounds of their brains. In doing so, the show gestures toward the realness of pretend, as well as notions of the unfixed and unsettled within a constructed, contained, but also open space.

Best Friends Forever: Improvisation and Agreement as Relationship Language

Before discussing specific moments of *Pen15* in detail, it is necessary to define what I mean by "improvised play." Improvised play and the craft of theatrical improvisation foregrounds and privileges spontaneity and agreement, where the game players are celebrated for being nimble – in their brains and on their feet – in their shifts from one suggestion to the next. For those that improvise on the stage, the central tenet of this kind of theatre is often thought of as a single rule in two parts: 1.) agreement and 2.) expansion. By this I mean, if your play-partner offers a suggestion within "a scene," whether it is that you are stuck in a whale's belly or that you are an alien from another planet on a holiday to Earth visiting the Louvre, you agree to those imagined boundaries. Further, you do not simply agree but you also *expand upon*. For example, you are stuck in a whale's belly (my play partner's contribution), *and*, within the confines of the belly, it is also the grand opening of the sushi restaurant you manage (my contribution). Most improvisers refer to these two steps in the singular, as the "Yes, And" rule or "mantra" (Hines

10), where the “yes” signals agreement and the “and” signals expansion²⁸. Will Hines describes improv, similarly, as a process of “adjusting and confirming” (30) where, in a scene, “you confirm the information that has already been said, then add more” (10). As Viola Spolin suggests, “Improvitational theater requires very close group relationships because it is from group agreement and group playing that material evolves...” (10). In this kind of collaborative play (both in a child’s bedroom or on a stage), things happen as they happen, spontaneously (Spolin 35). In other words, there might be a created history or a past for these characters, but that history (like everything else) is created on the spot. Crucially, it is the “buy-in,” belief and agreement with the original suggestion that creates the impetus for expansion in the next suggestion. In this way, improvisational play should always offer the *invitation* (on the part of everyone playing along) for more agreement and more expansion so that – if one wanted – the game could continue forever within the accepted boundaries. However, these rules, just like any others, are breakable. By this I mean, sometimes they can be broken (by disagreeing, for instance) in a way that still moves the scene forward²⁹. *Pen15* understands that, even while adhering to these tenets often, that tethering completely to rules can be restrictive. When the rules bend, as we will see, the show becomes richer and more complicated. Improvisation *is* performance but it aligns most, in my view, to the way that children play; moving in and out of fully inhabited imaginative states; skipping from one idea to the next, like flat stones flicked onto a watery surface. This kind of play just happens (“yes”) and then is now happening (“and”).

In *Pen15*, Anna and Maya revert to these rules, in part or in whole, all the time, not only when they play but also when they speak to each other in more mundane moments in everyday life. Many of the conversations the girls have are variations on this theme: Anna/Maya saying they like or hate something and Maya/Anna emphatically and enthusiastically agreeing, even if it is clear this is a lie, hurtful or they do not understand what they are talking about. Consider a moment in the episode “Three,” (s. 2, ep. 4) where the girls are looking through long racks full of clothes at a thrift store. The girls use the word “loaded” to signify items that they think are stylish and cool. Part of their conversation plays out as follows:

MAYA: *That* is loaded, though.

ANNA: Not loaded.

²⁸ see Tina Fey’s “Rules of Improvisation” in *Bossypants* for a humorous explanation of this and other improv “rules” (83-85).

²⁹ see Mick Napier’s *Improvise: Scene from the Inside Out* for more on this (3-15).

MAYA: Not loaded, I agree.

ANNA: We don't like it.

MAYA: Yeah, I don't like it. (13:46-13:52)

Here, the girls formulate a mutual opinion by landing on the fact that they do not like an article of clothing even though Maya, first, suggests that she does. Though this seems to be in tension and contradiction with the improvisational rule of agreement without condition, ultimately the girls rather easily *twist* themselves into agreement. In the scene above, Anna even makes this mutual agreement overt, compounding the certainty of the statement, by saying, “we don't like it,” again underscoring the notion that their likes and dislikes are always mutual when they are together, even if that is not entirely true. This short moment offers up one of the central tensions of the show: that in moments of agreement between Anna and Maya (which are most moments on the program) there is also an underlying hint that the truth may plausibly be to the right or the left of strict consensus. In other words, to sustain and fertilize their friendship they need to always be affirming a singular opinion even when that opinion is only true for them in tandem.

That Anna and Maya have decided that they *must* always agree is part of the series' fundamental stakes. If at some point they do not agree or do not agree fully, what then? In a brief pause (like a commercial break) from their soap-opera-esque improvised play with small animal dolls called “Sylvanians,” Maya asks, “can we, like, never not do this?” and continues, “I just mean, like, I want to play Sylvanians ‘til we’re, like, old.” An anxiety seeps through this line of questioning, inviting the possibility that, eventually, one of the girls will no longer want to play. However, Anna responds in the affirmative: “I want to do it, like, always; like every Friday night” (“Miranda,” s. 1, ep. 2, 00:01-01:15). Here, not only does the game play quickly establish Maya and Anna's ongoing commitment to collaborative improvisational play, but there is also a clear connection to television itself (the idea that this might continue happening in an episodic fashion, *every Friday, always*). Agreement as exemplified in moments of visual mirroring (as we will see) or verbal acceptance and affirmation (as in the cases above) is necessary for the ongoing survival of their relationship. Much of the first season explores the idea that Maya and Anna want and perhaps need to do “*everything together*” (s. 1, ep. 1, 01:35-01:45) including their first romantic and sexual encounters with boys. For instance, in “Wild Things” (s. 1, ep. 8) when Anna is heading off for her first kiss, Maya suggests, “I’m gonna be there with you, in your head” (12:40-12:45) further contributing to the idea the girls are deeply (and passionately)

invested in a kind of concurrent, co-dependent, and simultaneous imaginative play and identity formation. In this way, Anna and Maya are separate beings that seem to share in mental movements, as if ideas and opinions can only be true if the other agrees. As Maya and Anna say at the end of the first episode, “I’ll do it if you do it” (26:10) a kind of overriding mantra that exemplifies agreement above all else, but further highlights a trepidation before full commitment; a small pause before holding hands and jumping off the cliff.

In contemplating modes of agreement, it seems worthwhile to consider what this also means for the audience watching the show. Of course, viewer “buy-in” and acceptance of the narrative is not a unique feature of *Pen15*. What becomes apparent, though, during the series is that though the viewer is meant to see Anna and Maya as children, their characters fully felt and compassionately considered, there is also the possibility that in some moments the audience will see them as adults. The disconnect between what we see, what we feel and what we are told is ever-present (yet not overwhelming or constrictive), sometimes intentionally off-putting, especially in romantic moments with child actors (where body doubles are employed; see Konkle qtd. in Aroesti), and is an underlying, bubbling brook *reminder* of the performances of Erskine and Konkle. As Alex Clayton notes, “Television’s habitual candour about contrivance works positively to comedy’s advantage. Rather than making efforts to camouflage the signs of constructedness, comedy is so often disposed to declare its own artifice, relieving viewers from an absorption in fiction to follow the workings of comic operation as such” (“Why comedy”). This may well be true, and the sight of two adults playing young teens may be the impetus for surface comedy. But beyond the humour that the show’s casting inflects, I am suggesting that not only does this “gimmick” (Mangan) work to highlight its own “constructedness,” it also serves to invite, foster, and reflect the viewers own imagination. Because of Erskine and Konkle’s own buy-in to their characters and to the show’s conceit, there is also the possibility that the audience mistakes (or accepts) them for teens from the outset. As fan of the show and sketch comedy alum Bob Odenkirk suggests about the relationship between the show, the actors, and the viewer, “you soon stop thinking about their ages. You lose yourself as they lose themselves in those characters” (qtd. in Schneider). Similarly, Emily Nussbaum notes, “Erskine and Konkle play their roles straight, with such earnestness that it’s easy to forget that they aren’t actually thirteen. Yet, when they’re hurt, we feel it as both a trauma and a cathartic memory...the show’s best sequences capture the awkward theatricality of certain moments in adult life, when you are

bleakly aware of how much you are performing yourself” (“Middle-School Mortification”). In this way, the audience is invited to play pretend, or “lose themselves,” right alongside the actors *and* the characters. By subtly making apparent the not-quite-rightness of its central characters and (if the viewer knows about the show’s creation) its autobiographical and meta-textual patchwork, the show highlights its own construction. *Pen15*, while commenting on its own “constructedness” within this “gimmick” of casting, is also slyly commenting on and subverting the medium’s larger historical use of (usually aesthetically appealing) adults in teen roles – a practice that presents “teens” on screen without presenting teen *bodies* on screen. Because of the medium’s ubiquitous use of adult actors to play teen characters, the viewer’s relationship with this convention – especially if said viewer is a common viewer of the teen drama – is likely unproblematic or at worst a mild annoyance. But *Pen15* positions itself uniquely in this regard by moving the goal posts *just slightly* on either end (30-year-olds playing 13-year-olds rather than the more conventional 20-somethings playing 16-18-year-olds) and by doing so stretching the viewer’s imagination and agreement with this convention, too, *just slightly* further, causing a likely ebb and flow between total belief and incredulity.

One might also note, as Logan suggests, the way audience acceptance and agreement may engender and be reminiscent of the feelings or the familiarity of friendship (*The Presence* 15). This may be especially true in the case of a show where close bonds – a friendship – are at the forefront. Logan explains that it is the tension between “accrual” and “transience” within “the serial form that most tightly links the conditions of long-form drama with those of close interpersonal bonds” (*The Presence* 195). Accrual, for our purposes, is the accepted history (“yes”) and transience is any shifts or changes in character (“and”) from what we already (or *think* we already) know. Moments of transience then become a further part of the ongoing and accepted history, and on and on until the end. Logan explains, “Serial drama involves an ongoing interplay between intention and duration, as what was meant at a certain point is placed under the pressure of what comes to follow. With the introduction of each new episode, the form of the whole itself expands and changes, shifting the place – and, potentially, the significance – of preceding episodes and moments” (*The Presence* 33). As we have seen, this central tension is uniquely at play in teen dramas in part because of the way teen characters are so often involved in “finding themselves” through and especially *within* friendships, and the way that this self-discovery so often takes the form of “performance.” In other words, because teen characters

might often be shifting and expanding ideas of “who they are” and “where they fit” in relation to others, there might, necessarily and by virtue of subject matter, be more moments within shows focused on these characters that purposefully make this tension pronounced. In conversation with Logan’s ideas here, I am suggesting that *Pen15*’s foregrounded moments of improvisational play highlight the ongoing “provisionality” of the characters within the narrative. This kind of play also points to the in-progress construction of the friendship at the heart of the show (which may in turn be reflected by the viewer), as well as the provisional way that serial dramas are often built and shaped over time. Identity becomes another playful, artful, and crafted thing; another ongoing story to be collaborated upon. Creation, in the sense of making or building something, is essential to *Pen15*’s notion of the way Maya and Anna navigate their own friendship and the larger world. It is this mutual collaboration in the creation of selves, specifically through improvised play, that the show is interested in exploring. In turn, Maya and Anna’s “creation” of self and selves, over the course of the series is reflected by Erskine and Konkle’s own creation. *Pen15*’s use of imaginative improvised play, as part of the narrative as well as a technique in the day-to-day filming of the series (Saraiya; Scherer) becomes reflective of both the exploration and expansion of identity *as collaboration*, as well as collaboration and expansion within serialized television itself.

“Seventh Grade is going to be so amazing”: Expansion, Malleability and World Building

Agreement is crucial to sustaining the friendship between Anna and Maya. It is foregrounded in their spontaneous imaginative play, as well as their all-consuming agreement in everyday life. In addition, agreement is highlighted in the casting of adults as preteen characters and the “buy in” from the audience. Although the show is not happening live and the “spontaneity” presented is scripted and planned, the program celebrates spontaneous improvisational ideals – agreement and expansion – and foregrounds them in both subtle and pronounced ways. Let us begin to consider, then, the second part of the improvisational tenet: expansion. Expansion happens when there is a turn from strict agreement to agreement with *addition*. Without addition, there is no movement forward (in other words, no story to be told) within the improvisational play. *Pen15* plays with and twists ideas of spontaneous addition or

mutation in a number of ways that we will discuss: malleability of bodies, malleability of the past, malleability of aesthetic style and malleability of the narrative.

“I’m the ugliest girl in school”: Malleability of Bodies

In their performances of their past selves, Erskine and Konkle’s own bodies become sites of play. Erskine and Konkle appear as Maya and Anna, often as radically grotesque shapes or radically awkward beings, an odd couple and a couple of oddities. Anna is long-limbed, long faced with long blonde hair; a tall and lanky “string bean” (Nussbaum “Middle-School Mortification”), she plays Anna from her mouth with a gigantic smile full of braces and lips that do not quite cover them. Her mouth contorts into shapes that are as expressive as her eyes: a giant, easy smile, an equally large frown, a confused curl of lips or a perturbed pucker. As her eyes follow, in a laugh or a sob, the audience is steered into Anna’s feelings through this rather constant movement of her mouth. Similarly, Anna often curves and contorts her torso into a C to make herself appear smaller and, by doing so, attempt to physically level herself with those around her. She often folds one arm across her body to hide her stomach from sight, a gesture that came directly from Konkle’s real-life childhood worry about her midriff (Konkle qtd. in Stanford). Anna both folds and buttresses to contain her body for fear that too much of her might show. A learned posture that has now taken root in her spine, contouring into this shape has the effect of jutting her neck and head out in front of the rest of her like a giraffe. Hiding is imbued in Konkle’s movements (even as this is constantly contradicted by her length) and in the way she internalizes emotions. In intimate scenes with her parents, who are going through a separation, she holds herself still, too, and lobs her head cautiously to one side or the other, as if somehow a fabricated stillness and smallness will also manufacture “rightness” both in her body and her life. Though Anna is not presented as exclusively timid, she often contorts herself into uncomfortable shapes for what she assumes will make others more comfortable. Maya, on the other hand, is shorter than Anna, with an unfortunate black bowl cut. She has a Japanese mother (played by Erskine’s real-life mom, Mutsuko Erskine, in yet another conflation of the real and make-believe) and a white father (Richard Karn). Erskine plays Maya as a class-clown goofball, prone to pulling faces and speaking in silly voices, making up songs and sharing them with whomever is in the room. Perhaps because Maya’s homelife is less tense, Erskine physicalizes her

performance wildly by jumping up and down, wiggling or humping the air and/or furniture, flailing her arms, or punching them downward when she is upset. Erskine plays Maya with a loosey-goosey comportment as if her limbs speak, loudly, in an energetic language all their own. Maya seems to have discovered that movement within her body (dancing, jumping, flailing, humping) is fun, feels good and puts her in the spotlight, her shaky confidence expanding the more laughs she gets. Maya is better at transcending the divide between herself and the boys through her use of vulgar and physical humor (her Ace Ventura impression is a hit with her classmates in the first episode and continues to be a running gag throughout the series) but is rarely seen as romantically desirable³⁰, at least by the boys she claims to like. Often the target of subtle and overt racism, Erskine as Maya gets smaller and more internal as these blows hit her, as if getting pricked with tiny pins that slowly work their poison through her body. In these moments, Erskine speaks in a soft mumble and looks somehow even younger than thirteen. As Eleanor Stanford notes, “Just as they drew on memories from middle school, their bodies have remembered what being 13 was like, too” (“The Catharsis of Pen 15”), suggesting that the physicalizing of these performances is as much retained muscle memory as it is muscle movement. Erskine and Konkle do not simply conjure images of their past selves, they stretch, mould, and play with them like silly putty. They inhabit their characters with a mutable muscularity; where movement of body becomes essential to the shapes and forms that their characters take on and the feelings that these shapes and forms project and impart.

Though they might successfully morph into thirteen-year-old versions of themselves by stretching or moulding their musculature, Erskine and Konkle’s bodies are decidedly “too large” (Fry) and too old for their roles. Even as they “bind their breasts” (Nussbaum “Middle-School Mortification”) and add hair to their faces (Erskine qtd. in Scherer) to make themselves look younger, they also choose not to entirely hide the laugh lines and wisps of forehead wrinkles that age has given them. They squeeze their adult-sized forms into ill-fitting crop-tops and low-rise jeans made for children (A. Davis). They take up more space physically than their pre-teen counterparts and they physicalize movements clumsily and often clumsily. The bigness

³⁰ Maya’s lack of desirability is complicated by a sweet, long-time friend and one-time crush named Sam (in another conflation of the real and make believe, Sam in the series is a stand-in for Sam Zvibleman, the third creator of the show [Heltzel]). Sam’s devotion to Maya becomes further evident in the second season. Sam all but declares his romantic interest to Maya, saying that he wished it was himself rather than Gabe that got to share in an on-stage kiss (“Opening Night”). Maya’s refusal to hear or fully grasp what Sam is saying suggests that her relationship with Anna may not sustain this level of devotion and attention from someone else.

and unruliness of their bodies is never figured as in any way sexually appealing or desirable and, in fact, they are mainly seen as the exact opposite. Wanting to be seen and wanting to hide is a constant dance for Anna and Maya and they do not know the steps. Maya and Anna are always both *too much and not enough*; too horny and yet also undesirable; not pretty enough, not girly enough and in Maya's case always *too other, not white enough*. Anna and Maya cannot find equilibrium because, in the way that so many of those living through this stage *feel*, their forms do not and will not allow for it. Indeed, "authentic" tweendom is not instantly or essentially available to Konkle and Erskine in a way that, in turn and because of these very contradictions, *feels* exact and authentic to this stage of life. In fact, the pronounced "differences" in form also reinforce a certain – though indistinct – similarity with the other kids (the actual child actors) that populate the school. Because all the bodies presented on screen are "unusual" for a teen show, all strangely and beautifully aesthetically imperfect, where no one fits the mould of a *90210*-esque model, this creates a universality of unusualness. To further mark the girls and insult them, in the episode "Wrestle" (s. 2, ep. 2) the boys begin to call them "Big Smelly Bush," choosing an insult that ties directly to the pronouncement of their bodies, their sexuality, and the way that they might unconsciously, unknowingly, and unintentionally take up additional, pheromonal space. The insult purposely and precisely causes fear and shame in equal measure. In calling them both "big" and "smelly" the boys cruelly insult the girls for being improperly immodest, both too female, with gigantic and odorous genitalia that cannot be contained, and not feminine or discreet enough because of it. As their sexuality is tied so deeply to the stakes of the show, the many moments where the girls are shamed for exploring their own sexualities are especially fraught. In addition, the insult links them in the singular, in an unwanted form of twinning, as if they share the body part as well as everything else. The girls *do* take up space with their bodies and their voices, often as a singular unit, sometimes accidentally transgressively so, and yet seem to be at best ignored or at worst ridiculed by their classmates and their family.

Seventh Grade Forever: The Malleability of Time

Complicating the notion of the "too-big body" further, between seasons one and two, the actual pre-teens that play Maya and Anna's classmates *have* grown and changed, marking an even more distinct contrast between the children's actual growth and the adult-children's relative

stasis. This (though likely unintentional) works to suggest, too, that as much as Anna and Maya are different than the other children in their bigness, they are also always staying still, holding onto their childhood in their paradoxically adult-sized bodies. The tension between growth and stasis is reinforced by the notion that, at least as of season 2, the girls will stay in seventh grade “forever” (Bentley) resulting in another explosion of the constructed past and creating a temporal space that is animated while also fixed. In other words, much like the medium the show inhabits that foregrounds both repetition and provisionality over time (Logan, *The Presence* 32-33), bodies on *Pen15* are always reminders of sameness *as well as* plausible and persistent change. Indeed, Erskine and Konkle have suggested that, though the characters will remain perpetually thirteen, there is still a need for them to “grow” in a psychological sense throughout the seasons (Erskine qtd. in Villarreal). As Lucy Fife Donaldson and James Walters suggest, “television creates opportunities not only for change (important to genres as diverse as the drama serial and the makeover show) but also for sameness (a key feature of the long-running soap opera and central to the familiarity required for the presenter of a chat show)” (353). I would also add that sameness is often a key feature of the animated series and, sometimes, the long-running sitcom, where time moves cumulatively but may never move *forward* in any material way. *Pen15* again plays with and adds onto these notions offering an expanded and collapsed view of this point in the girls’ lives. By resting within the space of seventh grade, the show can open and expand upon this specific moment in time. Additionally, the show hints at the way time can feel, at various moments in life, like it is standing still. As Erskine says about the feeling they are after, “You never fully leave that place. No matter what age you are, you can revert so easily back to that feeling of being out of place” (qtd. in Drell). In a way that is both fleeting and suspended, “out of place,” and of a specific moment, the show foregrounds serial television’s central tension with time: that, as a movement forward, it is potentially open, while also always being a contained version of that movement within episodes, within episodic time limits, and within seasons. This results in a vast past, one where the space is open, malleable, and capable of expansion, while also closed off within boundaries and borders. This works to celebrate, as I see it, the structure of serial television itself. In this way, the “Yes, And” mode of agreement and expansion is similar to the formulation of all fictional serialized television: over time, a series constructs an accepted history and then adds to it. The addition might serve to reinforce what we already know but it may equally shift and change or build upon the narrative bricks already established. This history

is accepted by the audience (though, perhaps, not always enjoyed), by the creators and by the actors within the show. In *Pen15*, time becomes something else for Erskine and Konkle to play with, as part of both a closed (the boundary of a perpetual seventh grade) and open world (a perpetual seventh grade where anything else might happen). By suggesting temporality, too, is flexible, unsettled, and changeable – a site of play – while also being contained, the show subtly foregrounds television’s tension with time.

The past in *Pen15* is crucially both the space of play and of potential trauma. In this way, Erskine and Konkle create a space like the one Emily inhabits after her death in *Our Town*. Unlike Emily, however, in returning to moments from their real pasts, Erskine and Konkle can *play with, or expand upon* these moments as well as their own bodies *within* this constructed space. They have a tactile and material effect on this world. As Erskine explains while describing the divorce storyline that commands so much of season 2, “It was heartbreaking to *watch you*, as an adult, not only talk about it, but there was that moment of realization of ‘Oh wow, little Anna went through this. I’m so sorry’ ...I never fully understood it until I got to *watch* my friend *actually live it out through a character*” (qtd. in Thorne; emphasis mine). The very creation and construction of the show allows the actors to experience moments from their memories (their “little” selves) that pluralize modes of play inside the bounds of the show’s narrative. In addition, because Erskine and Konkle met in their real-life much later as University students (Aroesti), they have modified their separate real-life childhoods to include each other within this narrative, turning the show into a further site of collaborative play, viewership, addition, and expansion. In her statement above, Erskine watches an event from Konkle’s real life played out as television performance. But, here, as a viewer, Erskine conflates the real past with the constructed present; a purposeful conflation that the show also contends with. In doing so, Erskine, as viewer, watches Konkle “live out” a moment in her past rather than act it out/act out, combining and mixing Anna and Konkle, and suggesting the hazy divides between the character and the actor, real and make-believe, within a constructed form of time travel. Additionally, as Erskine notes above, this is a space of total immersion (or total agreement, in improvisational terms) within a created space; the *living out* of an event. This turn of phrase might also offer up a notion about the way in which Erskine and Konkle think about their show and their participation within it: namely it is a created space – a created space of a “real” past – that one can inhabit fully. For

Erskine and Konkle, the past becomes a space of play, a space for narrative expansion, and a place to uncover truths, that suggests its vital and ongoing links to the present.

“Can we, like, never not do this?”: Malleability of Imagination and Identity

In another playful use of time, the show can also present Konkle and Erskine *as* adults where warranted, resulting in a rapid movement of time forward, exemplified by playful and narratively spontaneous ruptures within aesthetic modes, including performance. In these moments, playful imaginings and inhabitations of identities foreground not only Maya and Anna’s desire for the assumed power associated with adulthood, but also the way in which the girls’ understanding of themselves (as mostly powerless, romantically undesirable and ignored beings) is continually constructed within imaginative improvised play. Erskine explains that because of their experience (and meeting) in an experimental theatre school, she and Konkle wanted to and, in turn, *believed they could play* any kind of character. “We created roles we wouldn’t normally be cast in...There’s no world in which we would be cast as 13-year-olds, or old men and women, and those were the roles we were drawn to...” (qtd. in Travers). The created world of *Pen15* allows Erskine and Konkle to conceivably, through the conceit of the show and through the foregrounded importance of imaginative improvisational play within the narrative, fully inhabit any variety of characters: young, old, man, woman, sentient creature, inanimate object. In other words, because of Maya and Anna’s own character-driven interest in “pretend” and spontaneous improvisational play, Erskine and Konkle can also inhabit a multitude of characters as actors. For example, in the episode “Wrestle” (an episode where the girls join the boys wrestling squad in order to get closer to them), we see Anna in a brief imaginative passage where, while looking in her bedroom mirror and practicing small and indistinct flexing poses with her arms, she turns into a sexy adult wrestler named “The Anna-ihilator” (11:16-12:06). The hint of crowd noise plays over the soundtrack, first imitated by Anna herself, and there is a jump cut to a transformed Wrestler Anna, leaping onto a reading-pillow opponent. As she uses her body to pummel her inanimate adversary into submission, we see Anna removed from any of her former awkwardness, stillness, and bodily containment. Her movements, though blunt, are also controlled, aggressive and assured. Wrestler Anna’s excessive, dramatic makeup, and long, perfectly styled hair, her fishnet body stocking and patent

leather shorts, wrapped tight against her more voluptuous body, immediately render her “Woman” with a capital w and an exclamation mark. Wrestler Anna is an assertive, future-tense and imagined version of not-quite-Anna, and yet still occupies Anna’s otherwise unchanged childhood bedroom, a sight-gag contradiction in aesthetics. As woman, as *this* woman, Konkle is striking, commanding, brash, dangerous, beautiful and, seemingly, a foot taller than her already tall pre-teen self, unconcerned about the shape that her upright body takes on. In fact, she looks nothing like Anna at all. Aside from the shape of her face and her distinct nose, one might find it difficult to locate little Anna underneath. She is fleshy and muscular, sexualized, and powerful, or “hot and strong,” as Anna’s crush Alex says, also imagined into being, as the only member of her adoring crowd. The Anna-ihilator occupies and commands the small space of the bedroom grandly and assuredly. Here, in her imaginative world, Anna is afforded a fleeting opportunity to discover her physical strengths and expressive power.

Similarly, in a mirror scene to the scene in the mirror above, in the episode “Play” (s. 2, ep. 6, 9:05-11:06), Maya, alone in her bedroom, begins a clunky scene rehearsal of a (ludicrously adult-themed) play called “The Days are Short” in which she has been cast to play the lead. From there, after a few false starts, Maya finds a voice and transforms into a much older woman, the character for whom she has been cast, named Deborah. Deborah appears to be the type of sexy, stylish, slightly dangerous, and broken woman that has stepped directly out of a ‘40s or ‘50s melodrama, seemingly ten cigarettes and three cocktails into the night. As the house lights magically turn off in her bedroom and the “stage lights” turn on, we see the suddenly transformed Maya sitting in the same position at her desk covered with brightly coloured gel-pens, knick-knacks and a photo of her and Anna. This Maya/Deborah holds a cigarette in one hand and a glass filled with brown liquor in the other. Dramatic music swells. Deborah is tipsily languid with a hint of shaky disquiet, making slinky movements with her arms, as if the objects she holds are extensions of her limbs; these movements determined by her intoxication. And she is intoxicating. She wears a glamorous green dress and her chin-length hair, flecked with wisps and whispers of grey, is coiffed though slightly undone, as if it was perfectly styled at some point earlier in the day. The camera lingers and closes in on her hand holding the cigarette and she tips the burnt end upward. Deborah recites her monologue with a Brooklyn-accented husky growl, inflected with many years of her vices of choice. The monologue ends with Erskine-as-Maya-as-

Deborah narrowing her eyes defiantly and saying, “I’m it, baby, I’m it”; a determined, bitter snarl tinged with tears as she purposefully butts out the half-smoked cigarette.

But where do thirteen-year-old Maya and Anna exist in these imaginative performances? Do they? Are these scenes – comedic but played in earnest – meant to suggest that Maya and Anna have disappeared completely or disappeared momentarily into these women? Or, rather, do these moments suggest that imaginative improvisations that puncture the everyday are crucial to the way in which Anna and Maya are beginning to understand the many selves within them and available to them? The show seems to offer up these women as *kinds* of performative womanhood, rather than real future possibilities for Anna and Maya, but also chooses to leave the full purpose of their inclusion ambiguous. After all, Anna’s foray into wrestling is short-lived and the Deborah that we see on opening night is not quite as commanding as the one we see in the bedroom. These short ruptures into Anna and Maya’s imaginations speak to feelings of anger, helplessness, and lack of control that the girls are constantly navigating. These moments also glancingly suggest that Anna and Maya prize aspects of each other (Maya’s bodily boldness; Anna’s subtle containment) that they, perhaps, do not always believe they possess themselves. But crucially, the show also offers the possibility that Anna might find *some* power in athletics and Maya might find *some* aspect of her voice in the theatre. These transient transformations are fully and completely realized within the minds of the girls and, though the “real-life” versions of these performances are more muted in the light of day, some real residual strength has been retained when Anna is in the wrestling ring and Maya is rehearsing the scene at school. In fact, it is improvisation, the literal throwing away of the script the next day during rehearsal, that gets Maya back to the place that she was in the bedroom – free to be inhabited by Deborah again (13:30-16:00). The drama teacher, Mr. Rosso says, “Don’t worry about the lines,” as he riles Maya up with warm-up exercises. As Maya and her scene partner, Gabe, engage in an exhilarating, electric and finally realized version of their fight scene, the camera begins circling around them offering even more momentum. The camera becomes part of the swirling excitement, the buoyant lift of Maya finding and feeling the character, or that character finding and feeling her, in front of an audience, even if it is a tiny group made up of her castmates. Here, inflections of the same accent and growl that Deborah had in Maya’s bedroom can be heard, though they surface more subtly. The residue of the bedroom rehearsal is apparent if just slightly diluted. After the rehearsed performance Maya, laughing and delighted at what just happened

says, “I, like, blacked out,” again suggesting something formerly unknown and uncovered from *inside* that overtakes entirely. As Gabe astutely describes it in the quote that I have chosen to open this chapter, “we already *are* our characters” (even if, here, he is using this as an excuse to avoid a stage kiss with Maya). The separation between character played and actor (Maya and Anna, Deborah and the Anna-ihilator) becomes purposefully muddled in the same way that it is for the actors within the show (Erskine and Konkle). Inside these private, imaginative, and open spaces, the girls can transform or “lose themselves” in these powerful and in-control versions of womanhood that exist as parts of other constructed narratives (wrestling, melodrama). As an accumulation of identities tried-on, taken off and importantly, if peripherally, retained, these moments offer fleeting, though residual, agency. In other words, this spontaneous play might be brief, one might dip in and out of it like a toe in the water, but when it ends, whatever was created within an imaginative state does not disappear entirely. A truth offered by the show seems to be that parts of ourselves can be found in moments that move us beyond what we have been told about ourselves and, in fact, what we might believe about ourselves. When we play “others,” especially in this kind of fully felt imaginative way, there is some residue that comes through, outside of the imaginative state. If there ever is an outside.

“This is all real and this is a sign”: The Use of Narrative Ruptures and Malleability of Narrative

As Erskine and Konkle play versions of their younger selves, one is reminded of the way in which performance is so often a constant mode throughout life. Anna and Maya’s navigation of the world allows for improvised play but also always demands a certain kind of performative mode – in trying to understand what this mirror-friend and their other peers deem as acceptable behaviour – a tension that suggests these kinds of performances can be both helpful and hurtful, both freeing and restrictive, often simultaneously. In these cases, agreement is used as a safety net. As Anna offers, “Maya and I play pretend too, but not everybody does,” (“Three,” s. 2, ep. 4, 6:57); an anxious assertion that at once acknowledges Maya and Anna’s imaginative capacity and openness, while also hinting that this play might mark them as derisively different – too childish perhaps – from “everybody” else. In yet another way, in this world anything that marks difference and disagreement is seen as a potential danger, even if that very thing allows them to

feign “similarity.” The improvisational play that the girls engage in plausibly makes them more adaptable in situations where they must jump through trials and tests from the popular group. But it may also mark them as “childish” and make them seem starkly different, and therefore this play is done almost entirely alone or alone as a couple. Thus, the girls are adept at using improvisational tools learned from play in everyday life in the service of ill-formed and indistinct deception. This survival mechanism is presented as necessary and equally nefarious; disagreement can be dangerous if it goes against the group but, as we will see, the show leaves room for and contemplates the notion that exclusive and all-encompassing agreement can be equally fraught. Although Anna and Maya do engage in this type of performance regularly to conform to the perceived ideals of their peers or to mask their true feelings (in other words, to lie to others and themselves), I am more interested in moments when the girls use performance – what I refer to as “improvisational play” – as a mode of meaning making and transient identity formation. These specific improvised moments serve to inform the viewer of some other possibility that *could* exist within the character(s). This, again, is a different kind of “performance-within-performance” (Naremore 80). Rather, these modes of performance-within-performance suggest an *addition to and an expansion of* rather than a mode of hidden, yet essential emotion, while also offering, as we have seen, a truth that is no less essential. Sometimes these are private moments of interiority for Maya and Anna separate from each other, as in the moments in “Wrestle” and “Play” above, but more often these moments reinforce their mutuality as they collaborate in tandem (like their play with Sylvanians). Maya and Anna are in a rather constant state of progressive shape-shifting that allows for the retained possibility that one might never arrive at a definition or an endpoint. This takes on even further significance within the limbo-like boundary of seventh grade forever.

Pen15 is interested in contemplating the ways in which identity formation and self-expression can happen within relationships and the ways in which mirroring, replication, and refraction – another kind of improvisational doubling – can be both creative and plausibly destructive. As Konkle suggests, “if you’re lucky enough to have that best friend, you have this mere reflection that you get to look out as even better than you. And they love you, and you love them. And there’s this sort of circle of identity that you’re forming together” (Erskine and Konkle “Pen15 Stars”). As described earlier, Anna and Maya are dissimilar in their looks, their gestures, and other behaviours. However, because of this and because of their devotion to each

other, it is not uncommon for them to express a constructed sameness, or “a circle of” shared identity (a visual agreement), in other ways. In the episode “Anna Ishii-Peters” (s. 1, ep. 9), Anna stays with Maya’s family for two days while her parents go on a couple’s retreat to mend their failing relationship. At first, Maya and Anna delight in spending the hours together that would usually be reserved for their immediate families: after school, dinner time, those moments before falling asleep. They claim, “we are sisters,” romp around the house together, call each other twin, practice dance moves in unison (03:12-04:08), wear the same shirts to school and stretch out a single shirt and wear it at the same time, like a two-headed monster. Much like Angela and Rayanne, Maya and Anna’s claim to be sisters and also twins is meant to express a similarity beyond looks, at least at first, expressed through shared subjectivity, imagination and proximity. Maya and Anna (and Erskine and Konkle), too, are the kinds of twins that finish each other’s sentences³¹ in a kind of mutual thought production or “ESP” (Konkle qtd. in Thorne). As the episode progresses, the excitement of spending time together fades as Maya begins to feel that Anna is taking over her role within the family unit, becoming a “better” version of daughter/sister. Here, the notion of reflection becomes warped in the horrific fabulation of a bodily take over: the body double turned body snatcher that works to replicate and then replace. Anna scats with Maya’s dad, she jokes (and flirts) with Maya’s brother, and enjoys Maya’s mom’s cooking. At one point, we see Maya’s mother tenderly brushing Anna’s hair and from Maya’s point-of-view, Anna’s blonde hair magically turns black, suggesting that not only has Anna become the “better” daughter, but she may have turned into Maya herself (18:40-20:42). Here, the realism of the episode ruptures and begins to take on aesthetic modes of a Hitchcock film or a female-led psychological thriller (like *Single White Female*), that directs the viewer further into the workings of Maya’s brain and casts Anna in the role of the body snatcher. How quickly, here, does mutual subjectivity shift to a singular view from within Maya’s brain alone. Maya and Anna’s connection *is* profound and loving, but the show leaves room for the notion of constrictive co-dependence; that sometimes a grasping desperation for similarity and familiarity, and the manipulations and twisted agreements – mental and physical – required to see a mirror reflected, can also cause fractures and rifts.

³¹ In another similarity between Angela and Rayanne, real-life Erskine and Konkle’s “conversation is regularly interrupted by moments of gushing praise, a smattering of ‘awwws’ and plenty of *finishing each other’s sentences*” (Thorne; emphasis mine).

Although *Pen15* does not trade in genre conventions as metaphor at all times (unlike in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Veronica Mars*, where the horrors and mysteries of adolescence are explored directly through replication and subversion of genre tropes and conventions), the girls' imagination is given the power to turn scenes into aesthetic and surreal genre-shifting oddities in ways that serve to highlight not only how the girls make meaning from and through pop culture, but also the foregrounded significance that imagination has in their lives. Indeed, the show bends and contorts into odd shapes of half-genres that highlight horror, grotesqueries, and, sometimes, forms of magic. Much in the way the show plays with bodies and time, it also plays with genre – expanding and stretching stylistic aspects to fit needs. Often, these stylistic ruptures are meant to convey the inner psychology of the girls, serving to highlight their inner-most desires, exemplified by imaginative modes that play out in the style of a horror or thriller film (sometimes musical, sometimes action film). These ruptures are emphasized by pronounced aesthetic shifts in musical motifs, stylistic camera movements, editing and, of course, performance. These ruptures behave not unlike Angela's voice over, in that we are offered interiority through externalization. A rupture in the season 1 finale "Dance," for example, sees the girls shaving their legs (together, naturally) for the first time in a bathtub, as their mothers offer them advice (7:13-9:28). Prior to the scene, Maya has been working through feelings of betrayal after learning that Anna is speaking to and spending time with another girl. The absurdity of the scene – seeing the girls in bathing suits in the same bathtub shaving their incredibly hairy legs (the largeness of their legs foregrounded in the composition of the shot, making them look even larger and hairier; unmistakably adult) – makes way for an eventual contemplation of betrayal and lies through the filmic mode of the thriller. As the girls begin to shave, an ominous, low-toned score starts to play over the soundtrack, contributing to an impending sense of dread. The camera works in close-ups on the girls' faces, pushing in to examine, suggesting the uncomfortable proximity of bodies; a proximity that formerly would have been accepted and welcomed. These close-ups highlight the laser focus of Maya's eyes on Anna and Anna's eyes shifting in relation to this attention. As the girls shave their legs, the sound of razor scratching skin and pulling out hair becomes more pronounced and plausibly dangerous, the possibility of blood from a nick in the skin ever-present. The sound serves to aggravate an already tense situation, like nails on a chalkboard. As the girls talk to each other about events tied to the ongoing rift between them, the viewer is offered visual and musical cues

– cues that bear resemblance to the thriller genre, even if the underlying narrative does not – that is suggestive of the girls’ imaginative and interior state. In these surreal moments, the show often bears resemblance to the horrific pool party scene in the film *Eighth Grade* (2018), where the event, seen through the mind of middle-schooler, Kayla, like any number of seemingly inconsequential moments in preteen life, takes on monumental significance (see fig. 10). As illustrated by the aesthetic mode of the horror film, the event has the potential to turn into a freak show, causing horrific traumas and embarrassments (22:49-24:05). *Pen15* privileges modes of imagination, illustrated by surreal filmic ruptures, while retaining the complications and failures that might arise from and within these imaginative modes, especially when the “real” world becomes entangled or interferes with them. Within these surreal scenes, the show creates and allows for linkages and tethers between the imagined but genuinely magical and the concretely real and, in turn, further connections between the girls use of the imaginative to create and connect, and Erskine and Konkle’s ability to do the same within the narrative and technical construction of the show.



Fig. 10 The pool party in *Eighth Grade*. In Kayla’s mind (seen in the upstairs glass door), the party presents a myriad of possible horrors.

In *Pen15*’s second season, Anna is situated in the ongoing wake of her parents failing marriage and her own social marginalization, alongside Maya, from the rest of the kids at school. Anna and Maya share the commonality of exile with a long line of female Teen TV protagonists from Buffy Summers to Veronica Mars (Bolte 94-95) to, in a lesser degree, Lindsay Weir and

Angela Chase (and their own warped-mirror-friends, Kim Kelly and Rayanne Graff). Unlike Buffy Summers or Veronica Mars, Anna and Maya lack the magical acumen or the investigative street-smarts to fully transcend their alienation and, unlike, Angela Chase or Lindsay Weir, who have purposefully shunned more normative and popular groups, these girls want desperately to fit into the larger social group that constantly pushes them away. Although Maya and Anna are fleetingly invited to join groups of more popular girls, these moments usually end in scenarios where the duo has been manipulated into hurting a member of the group or situations that work to separate the two from each other. Season 2 offers a literal third monster head, a girl named Maura who wedges her way into the friendship (“Three”, and “Sleepover,” ep. 5) but the two-part story serves ultimately to reinforce the friendship of Maya and Anna as a singular unit. This alienation of coupledness – that Anna and Maya are alone *together* and that, indeed, their very survival is possible because of this togetherness – eventually leads to an episode (“Vendy Wiccany,” s. 2, ep. 3) where notions of mutual identity formation within improvised play are highlighted, expanded upon, and complicated. As Caralyn Bolte explains, “Exile is not necessarily a separation of one person from a group; as the psychoanalytic theorist Julia Kristeva argues, an individual psychic exile can also cause ‘the subject [or the person involved] to be reinhabited by a strangeness that is powerfully affective. It exalts and casts down, promotes ungovernable impulses, creates fantasies of horror and delight’” (94). The episode explores exile and marginalization and the ways that marginalization informs the girls creative identity play and “participatory spectatorship” (Murray 36) through “fantasies of horror and delight” (Kristeva qtd. in Bolte 94). By foregrounding this kind of improvised play, the episode highlights all modes of performance that have been at issue throughout the series: temporal, bodily, aesthetic, collaborative, and imaginative. Ultimately, the show complicates this kind of play, suggesting that taken to an extreme a consuming wave of pretend might also turn into a riptide.

“Vendy Wiccany” begins with the girls watching an opening scene of the Canadian teen horror anthology storytelling series *Are You Afraid of the Dark?*³² while Anna’s parents fight in the other room (0:01-1:55). Crucially, this viewership is interrupted by the “reality” of the adults’

³² *Are You Afraid of the Dark?* aired on YTV in Canada and Nickelodeon in the US. Though niche, many viewers the ages of Erskine and Konkle will likely immediately recall the show. The episode in question, “The Tale of the Dollmaker” (s.3, ep.5,) is the story of a girl named Melissa who discovers her friend, Susan, has mysteriously vanished. As Melissa discovers, Susan has been transformed into a tiny porcelain doll and is living in a dollhouse in the attic of the house next door. Melissa must break the spell to save Susan from her imprisonment.

fight and the girls choose to leave the episode unfinished and instead seek refuge outside. In turn, the viewing of this TV show results in an example of “participatory spectatorship,” (Murray 36), as the girls weave “the text with the reality of their own everyday” (Murray 39). Through collaborative improvised play, the girls first imagine themselves to be and then really seem to turn into gibberish spouting witches,³³ to both stave off painful emotions and to establish control. In this way, their television viewing becomes the impetus for a kind of imaginative play that ties directly to their sense of self/possible selves and creative world-building. As David Buckingham notes, young people often use television (and other media) as “not a powerful source of dominant ideologies, but on the contrary as a ‘symbolic resource’ which [they] use in making sense of their experiences, in relating to others and in organising their daily lives” (13). Buckingham continues, saying that television offers “material for experimentation with alternative social identities, if only at the level of fantasy or aspiration” (13). Crucially, and not unlike Erskine and Konkle themselves, Maya and Anna are both viewers and participants, creating an imaginary world befitting an episode of *Are You Afraid of the Dark?*, casting themselves in the central (though villainous) roles and, in turn, constructing a scenario where they might be, at least at first, in control. Equally important is the notion that Anna and Maya (again in a mirror of Erskine and Konkle) can transform the space through their imaginations and, moreover, can transform genre conventions and the framework of *Pen15* itself. Unlike the many scenes in previous episodes where imaginative moments briefly rupture the more realistic day-to-day (as in the moments in “Wrestle,” “Play,” and “Dance”), here, the girls’ imagination overtakes and entangles with the entire episode and, in fact, we are placed within their imaginations from the moment the girls leave Anna’s living room. By turning themselves into the protagonists (again, in a metatextual way, referencing *Pen15* itself), the girls offer themselves a kind of marginal agency and

³³ Curiously, there is an episode of *Are You Afraid of the Dark?* called “The Tale of the Mystical Mirror” (s.5, ep.4) that *does* include a witch (though this is not an uncommon fantastical figure in the series). Although the episode is not explicitly referenced in this episode of *Pen15*, it bears some notable, though possibly accidental, similarities. The *Are You Afraid of the Dark?* episode, may even be slyly referenced in the end-credit sequence of “Vendy Wiccany” where we see Anna howling and barking at the moon. “Mystical Mirror” explores ideas of female beauty standards and transformation. In the story, a beautiful woman (who is a witch) poisons young girls to capture their beauty, tricking them into drinking potion by offering them eternal youth. The potion transforms the girls into dogs. While going through the process of transformation, the girls’ screams change into the sounds of howling and barking, sometimes accompanied by a shot of a full moon. The episode features Laura Bertram from the Canadian teen series *Ready or Not*, a popular youth program in Canada, that also explored the lives of two best girlfriends in elementary, then middle school, starting in grade six and eventually ending in grade nine.

influence in both the tale and their “real” lives. No longer does imagination puncture real life, rather real life interferes with Maya and Anna’s simultaneous imaginative states. As in *MSCL*’s “Betrayal,” narrative mirroring of an established text is foregrounded while the show’s inner narrative also eventually leaves the source-text behind (in another form of expansion). Crucially, the story that the girls create is not the same as the episode of TV they partially watch. The action extends outward, beyond the screen, through the viewer (here also the actors) within their imaginative play. In *Pen15* the boundaries between bodies, between genres, between the imagined and the “lived through,” between past and present and between the television screen and the “real” are playfully porous.

As the episode turns into the world of the darkly imaginative and as the girls sprint off from Anna’s house, their feet appear to linger above the ground giving the momentary impression that they are floating or flying (1:58-2:19). Again, the show seems to want the audience to register the entry into the imaginative mode without making it pronounced, as if the girls are easing into this improvisation in tandem with the aesthetics of the show. As they enter a mystical and mist-filled forest space, the camera moves through the wooded area curiously and slowly along with the girls, as if noticing enchantment as the girls do. The wooded space, as well as the mystical plane imagined into being by the girls, seems reminiscent of the “Fourth World” in *Heavenly Creatures* (a film that, like *MSCL*, was released in 1994), a world that is similarly creative and destructive. Once settled in the forest, to distract her friend from the sharp edges of her home life, Maya begins to make up a story suggesting that the forest is populated by thieving leprechauns (one that Anna is slow to agree with until she brushes off the anxiety from “real” life). From here, the girls play a game of generative storytelling where they gleefully scare each other and collaborate on a tale about a witch named “Vendy Wiccany” (inspired by the name of a woman – Wendy Viccany – that appears on a business card that they find stuck in a tree). Like almost everything they decide upon, as in the thrift shop scene, Anna and Maya come to the idea of the witch through playing a game of water-testing, where one girl floats a notion to see what the other agrees with, likes, and accepts. Again, the girls tell the tale of Wiccany in a collaborative, “Yes, And”-style. By doing so the show once again suggests that imagination is a powerful force, and more powerful still if someone else also believes, buys-in, and contributes further. The story seems to infuse the girls with imagined power in the very telling of it and they

land on the notion that Wiccany, Mother Witch, wants them also to become witches who can cast spells and manifest their wildest dreams.

It is worth looking, specifically, at the way that the scene bends and shifts towards the ideas of agreement and expansion. The scene's structure is reminiscent of and plays out as an expanded version of the short exchange in the thrift shop:

ANNA: I was joking but look.

MAYA: Stop it!

ANNA: This was in the tree.

A piece of paper flutters to the ground.

MAYA: Stop!

ANNA: Oh my God!

MAYA: Stop! Oh my God, don't let it get away.

ANNA: Get it. Seriously.

Maya opens the folded-up piece of paper to reveal a business card with a small photo of a woman by the name of Wendy Rochelle Viccany.

MAYA: OK. Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. Stop, stop, stop.

ANNA: What? Stop.

MAYA: Why is there freaking paper in the tree?

ANNA: Paper comes from trees, you nut.

MAYA: Or, what if it's...

Maya gestures to the tree as though it is trying to tell them something.

ANNA: (whispering) What? (gasps) What if it's...

MAYA: Yeah, what if it's—

ANNA: It's Wendy Rochelle Viccany. Wiccany. Knock, knock, anybody home?

MAYA: What?

ANNA: It's Mother Witch. It's Mother Witch.

MAYA: No, I know, but Anna, that's a V not a W.

ANNA: Maya, are you out of—

MAYA: That's a—

ANNA: Are you serious?

MAYA: Yeah!

ANNA: Come on! In Germany, they pronounce V's as W's. Viccany is an alias for Wiccany.

As Anna runs her fingers over the business card, the first letters in Viccany's first and last name magically swap places.

ANNA: She has to just have that to protect herself...

MAYA: Oh my God.

ANNA: ...from signs and codes.

MAYA: And, and things like this – like V's!

ANNA: And she left this for us to know that this is all real and this is a sign.

MAYA: Oh my God.

Maya and Anna both look up at the sky.

ANNA: Hi!

MAYA: Hi!

ANNA: (whispers) Mother Witch!

MAYA: With her power and her guidance, we can ask for all the shite we want in the world. Anything we want! (5:56-7:14)

Examining the scene above, we see an example of how Anna and Maya create and bend meanings through imaginative play. The scene offers not only the way that Anna and Maya formulate a mutual subjectivity, but also the way they come to these notions through spontaneous improvisation. The “rules” of improvisation are easy to spot within the text above; namely, they come to a rather quick, though somewhat shaky, agreement and, once they do, they expand further upon the story in collaboration. The end of their conversation explicitly uses the “Yes, And” mode, where one of the girls offers a suggestion that is agreed to and then added to by the other girl (“*And*, things like this”; “*And* she left this for us”). Although, much like the thrift shop scene, the Wiccany tale includes an early push-back from Maya, ultimately, the girls collaborate upon the idea of Wiccany spontaneously. Further, the girls make concrete assertions that serve, ultimately, to progress the story (“In Germany they pronounce V’s as W’s”; “She left this for us”; “We can ask for all the shite we want in the world”). Though Maya starts the scene by “blocking” Anna, in improvisational terms, by saying “stop” and suggesting that the letters of the name do not align with what Anna is saying, she also initiates and invites Anna into the possibility of the magic by gesturing to the tree as if *it* knows something and by ensuring that the business card is not lost in the wind. Anna must jump through just enough hoops to make Maya’s belief credible. Even Maya’s blocking comes with a twinkle in her eye, saying stop while inviting Anna to tell her more.

Once agreed upon, the expansion of the Wiccany tale continues to blend and bleed through the remainder of the episode until it overtakes everything. When one of the wishes comes “true” (Maya’s father coming back home unannounced), the girls become so invested in their claims that they start to cast spells obsessively. Their role-play becomes all-consuming, turning impulse into an addiction: pulling out their own hair (something we have seen Maya do compulsively in earlier episodes; here, self-harm is referenced but its causes left ambiguous), collecting fingernails and stealing personal items from classmates to use these objects in their spells. Ultimately, the girls become so wrapped up in their act and obsessive in their casting of spells, that they begin speaking partially in English and partially in a made-up witch language that they seem to be improvising as they go. Again, the made-up language underscores a kind of

mental connection that the girls share, one where they are linked – as “twins” – in both psychic space and in creative construction. Later in the episode, they double-down on their monstrous outsider status, scaring and disgusting kids who watch them perform spells in the school’s abandoned greenhouse. In the greenhouse, they shout in their made-up language, shake, jerk their heads left and right and up and down, flick their tongues, and roll their eyes back so that only the whites show. Even here, within their possession, is a replication or homage to the bleary-eyed viewing of a horror film or TV program, half-watched sometime in the wee hours of the morning, with the sound on low. In another moment of connection and mirror formation, Maya pulls Anna’s head in towards her own, as if they might kiss, and they shout directly into each other’s mouths (see fig. 11). In this gesture one might recall the silent, open mouthed and psychically connected laughter of Rayanne and Angela in their equally improvised panhandling scene (see fig. 6). In the greenhouse (17:10-19:15), the camera mimics the girls’ jerky motions in its quick zooms and cuts to close-ups. Again, the technical aesthetics of the show are intent to follow Erskine and Konkle’s performances. The girls’ movements are both erratic and rhythmic and these gestures are underscored by the similarities in their incantations, chanting, repeating, and shouting. Maya explicitly expresses these compulsions and repetitions saying, “I can’t stop, I’m gonna die,” as she scream-chants a repeated gibberish phrase until she begins frothing at the mouth. At this point, the improvised “identity” controls Maya and Anna and they allow and will it to take hold, encouraged by the other in mutual possession and a mirror dance of chaos. Here, the ability to create an identity, one that is crucially mirrored by another, is figured as both potential safe haven for those involved in its creation, and an equally uncontrollable force where the idea of expansion might also take on a destructive capacity.



Fig. 11 Anna and Maya shouting into each other’s mouths.



Fig. 6 A thread of open-mouthed joy.

Anna's most important wish, of course, is for her parents to get back together; her feelings of exile extend to her fracturing family unit. When it becomes clear that this wish will not come true, the rest of the world will not play along, and that her constant spellcasting and strange behaviour is resulting in her parents second-guessing their continued cohabitation (one of her wishes is, heartbreakingly, to not be "a problem"), Anna can no longer take it. She sets off, back into the enchanted forest where she is determined to make herself disappear. As Anna invites Maya to join her in this final spell saying, "we'll do it together," the viewer might recall all of the formative events that the girls have experienced together up to this point: walking onto the middle-school grounds for the first time, getting "felt-up" by the same boy at the same time (an event the kids oversexualize, calling it a "threesome"), sharing their first cigarette – a growing list of ongoing firsts. One, too, might begin to wonder how far the co-dependence will extend. The viewer's knowledge of the preceding episodes makes it clear that Anna and Maya are not really witches, we know that this turn is likely fleeting-fancy, and that the next episode will not revolve around the girls speaking in tongues or adding Stevie Nicks-esque layers from the dress-up bin to their wardrobes. And yet, the show retains the possibility that something truly bad *could* happen and, indeed, *is* happening. The turn to the fantastical, one that is at first conjured for Anna by Maya as a balm of sorts, makes room for the possibility that this imaginative world is also plausibly nefarious, wrapping its tentacles around reality, shrouded in

the guise of “pretend,” grasping only tighter when the real-world interferes. Here, it is not simply the power of imagination that is explored but the *belief* in it; a power that takes on greater significance when you are joined by a fellow believer, especially when that believer reinforces and reciprocates the beliefs by mirroring them. Again, it is the *realness* of the imaginative world – though this time steering toward dangerous – that the show highlights. As Anna’s mom suggests about her daughter’s recent behaviour, “that doesn’t sound like pretend to me” (21:49). Here, there is a crucial tension (as there was with Angela, between “fun” and “I would die or something,”) between the negligible amount of control the girls have (mostly that which the girls share; their imaginations) and the many other things – namely everything – fully out of their control. In *Pen15* identities can be passionately created and fully inhabited, even if the adoption of these identities is likely fleeting. In their discarding, like the shedding of so much skin, one might find another kind of horror.

Anna lands on a disappearance spell as something she *can* seemingly control. Disappearance would be the ultimate exile, an exile from her own body, from any identity and any further expansion. Here, disappearance, or losing oneself, is figured as destructive permanence. Further, it would be a way of de-problematizing herself for others, especially her classmates and her parents. In the failure to become a witch with the power that Anna desires, she finds something to alter which she does have a certain, though imprecise, amount of control: her own body. Maya finds Anna sitting cross-legged in the cold, dark woods, looking as though she has been crying for hours, her large, wet, and tired eyes visible only when the moonlight hits them (25:25-29:15). She sits with a knife on the ground beside her and a cut on her arm as she collects her own blood in a fire bowl. Anna’s voice is calm, too calm, though this is betrayed by sniffles and staccato catches in her throat as she speaks in low tones and whispers. Caught in this imagined world but also all-too-real space, an already scared Maya becomes visibly more agitated as she watches her friend in this lonely state; a state Maya knows she cannot enter or reciprocate fully. Maya reluctantly concedes to playing along by unconvincingly pretending to cut her finger with the knife so that she can join Anna in “spelling.” Anna is singularly focused on her final spell, though, and does not notice Maya’s pantomime. Maya timidly repeats Anna’s “final” incantation: “Presence is too much for those around, or those around too much. Surely pretend we are gone and never did exist.” The words and repetition of the incantation further suggest the connection between the two and the belief that they will be together even in

disappearance. The incantation also highlights the word “pretend,” suggesting the continued importance of this mode of make-believe. Though, it remains unclear who would be doing the pretending, Anna and Maya or everyone else; a hint that the disappearance would finally force everyone else into the mode of make believe as well. It is then that Anna, after giving her friend a look suggesting a shift in the emotional atmosphere, something distinct that she feels within herself, and crucially *only* within herself, begins to act out the disappearance of her body starting with her fingertips³⁴.

Importantly, the communal mental space, the ESP and “Yes, And” play of the greenhouse scene is no longer available, Maya does not immediately understand, and the mirror is shattered. The fraying tether here suggests that, although the girls’ strain and stretch for connection above all, they are and will be going through parts of life alone. “Do you see my fingers? They’re, like, leaving me,” Anna says while looking at her hands, her long fingers stretched in front of her face; her voice quivering and shaking, “but the pain is going away, too, actually.” Anna’s “act” is convincing and Konkle plays these moments with an unsettling mixture of calm serenity and internal agitation, sometimes offering a small, unconvincing smile and sometimes muttering more gibberish under her breath. The viewer is offered Konkle playing a girl cold and alone in the woods, somehow calm, still, and unfazed by her surroundings, as if the dark and temperature are having no material effect on her body. Maya watching this is distraught, scared and crying, pleading for her friend to stop both the charade and the real contemplation of disappearing, saying, “you’re not disappearing, you’re right here.” Suddenly, there is a decided shift in Erskine’s voice; a change from scared, squeakily helpless little girl to a more determined figure, desperate to save her friend from these ongoing hurts. It is as if something of Maya’s future, adult self is momentarily available to her here and now (a plausible anticipation of Deborah in the episodes to come) – because this was always there, after all – to jolt Anna back into the present(past). The scene plays out in a similar manner to the original telling of the Wiccany tale but now Maya *refuses to agree*. This refusal is an unusual turn for the girls and even in this scene Maya strains for agreement until she no longer can. Maya tells Anna she loves her and begins pawing at her, finally moving in for a full-body embrace, holding her and hanging on tightly, as

³⁴ This may also be a specific reference to “The Tale of the Dollmaker.” In the episode, Melissa begins to transform into a doll, starting with her hands turning to porcelain. In the episode, turning into a doll is figured as disappearance.

if this grasping envelopment will keep Anna in place. Maya says “I love you” repeatedly and this, too, turns into an incantation of sorts. Anna repeats these words quietly, so quiet that the audience might miss them and then adds, “I’m sorry,” suggesting that what is done is done. Maya finally says “I need you. I’m your family. Let’s be together forever.” In the word “forever” there is a reminder again of the Sylvanian episodes, the metatextual, the conflation of past/present/future, and the expansive limbo-like state of seventh grade in perpetuity. The linking of Maya and Anna, here presented as bodily envelopment, as well as the notion of temporal permanence – the assertion they do and must exist for each other, in this moment *and* forever – breaks Anna from the spell (and the compulsion to keep “playing the game” to a destructive conclusion).

As in most fairy tales, even the scariest ones, love breaks the spell. But, here, there is also a return to another form of magic. As is the case so often with Maya and Anna, like in the fight dance that ends the episode “Posh” (s. 1, ep. 6, 24:40-25:15) or the *West Side Story*-esque, magical “only we exist” dance sequence in the episode “Dance” (s. 1, ep. 10, 17:22-18:37), love is expressed not only through words but is also physicalized, through the closeness and proximity of Maya and Anna’s bodies, often in mirror formations. Like in these dance scenes that work to patch a fracture between the two, there is a return to another kind of spell in the woodland space: the ongoing romantic spell of Anna-Maya united as the two-headed monster. Maya and Anna might stretch to the very edges of their improvised game leading to a destructive breaking point. But the history of the show suggests that, although the girls might separate for moments, they will always return to each other and each other’s bodies as a ballast. The circularity of their relationship, much like the circular format of the sitcom itself, “which typically works to get the characters back into position for another round of events next week” (Clayton “Why comedy”) requires that Maya and Anna can grow separately to a point, but their growth must always push them back towards each other. Much in the way the panhandling scene in the “Pilot” episode of *MSCL* suggests the twinning of Angela and Rayanne through imaginative play and proximity, the forest scene expands on the notion of the forever togetherness of Maya-Anna. In saving Anna from disappearance, however unknowingly, Maya also keeps her in this forever-13, forever-together and in love, and, yes, plausibly painful world, too; even Maya’s compassion is tinged with possessiveness. As they hold each other, maybe too tightly, their bodies entangled on the cold ground, one might wonder if they are also holding on

for dear life. As Logan states about textual and textural relationship residue in serial drama, “While a friendship needs to acknowledge its cherished history, it must also remain... open to a different future, one we hope to be better, but which holds as much potential for further pain and failure” (*The Presence* 147). As Anna rests, curled up on Maya’s legs, a light is turned on in the background and a window frame appears in the distance. Finally, in a return from Oz or Neverland or The Fourth World, it is the mystical forest, rather than Anna, that disappears. The forest dissolves and we are returned to Anna’s suburban backyard. The foliage is replaced by the familiar family home and a lone tree on the left. We realize the girls have been in this very spot all along. From inside the house Anna’s mom calls out for her. But the girls remain on the grass and take each other’s hands, a gesture that continues their former bodily envelopment even once they are extracted from it. Anna has not disappeared and, further, she is tethered in real-life, in make-believe and in their mingled forms (as sister, as twin, as two-headed monster), always, to Maya. Finally, Maya makes a little noise, a quasi-laugh, that Anna repeats (of course); Anna absent-mindedly strokes a braid in her hair, lost in undecipherable thought but also in the hand holding. As the imagined magic of the witching-hour wears off and the magic of Anna-Maya united again takes hold, they continue to grasp those hands until the credits roll. We might be reminded, here, in this final image, of a mirror moment that ends the first season (24:55-27:07): after sharing their first cigarette in Maya’s backyard, Anna asks if Maya wants to go inside. “No”, Maya says, “let’s just stay out here,” as they linger in an embrace. One might imagine the true end of Maya’s sentence. The two missing words that fill in the blanks: “together” and “forever.”

“Just Breathe”: Separation as Growth

The notion of “together forever” is necessarily complicated at a number of points within *Pen15*’s two seasons, a complication that has been subtly percolating since the earliest stages of the series. Moments where the girls can – or are forced to – forge their own paths and interests separate from each other are explicitly explored in the episodes “Solo” (s. 1, ep. 4) and in the two episodes leading to the theatrical performance of “The Days are Short,” “Play” and “Opening Night” (s. 2, eps. 6 and 7) amongst others. In “Solo,” Maya is tasked with a 3-note timpani solo in a band concert. The pressure to hit these three notes in rhythm to the music weighs on Maya

heavily, in part because her father plays drums in a “professional Steely Dan cover band.” He even returns from his band’s tour specifically to watch Maya perform (comparatively, Anna’s father will miss another crucial performance, which we will come to shortly). Moreover, Anna is more musically inclined than Maya, can play the French horn competently, and is a gifted singer, something that seems to be well-known and gives her a certain cachet amongst the school population. After witnessing Anna’s gorgeous performance of Ave Maria – a performance that suggests that Anna does not have to work at this, it comes from her naturally – Maya’s body rebels against her (18:38-23:27). Maya’s hands freeze into claws, and she cannot properly hold her drumsticks. She tries to calm herself by breathing through the anxiety as she stands backstage, but nothing seems to work. As the performance nears, Maya takes the stage, hands still frozen into stiff beaks, and steadies herself behind the large timpani kit. She smiles at her dad in the crowd. But as the music starts, she misses her cue. Sam, himself playing percussion, helpfully reminds her to “just breathe.” As she does, she begins to hit the drums as though she is a robot whose programming is on the fritz; she juts out at the drums and corrects her movement in a herky-jerky non-rhythm. Quickly though, she begins to settle into this frantic motion (some might call it breathless), committing to the movements and tempo of her own making. First, she closes her eyes and then begins to wiggle her upper body as she hits the four large drums once at a time on no discernable beat. Her torso spins side to side as she does this, with her lower body planted in place, having the effect of an even more pronounced hurried motion. Then, a magical spotlight hits her as she begins to beat the drums in unison and then again more arrhythmically. Maya begins to open her mouth in a demon smile and point her eyes upward, like “*The Exorcist*,” as Sam later describes it; suggesting that this improvisation might also be possession (much like in the greenhouse scene). Here, the improvisational turn provides Maya with an unharnessed power. Eyeballs fix onto her, and she commands the stage, not because of a beautiful, controlled, and scripted solo like Anna’s, but because her desire to not get left behind is so pronounced, her body seizes up and then revolts outwardly. If Maya is worried that she will be left behind by Anna, she creates an (unplanned, compulsive) improvised scenario that ties her to Anna’s recent equally arresting performance, while also ensuring that no one else will be able to keep up. She hits the drums harder and harder, louder, and louder, her face becoming more intense and aggressive, saying though only through bodily convulsions, “Look at me, everyone must look at me.” She begins chanting gibberish. The audience and the band are shocked silent at

Maya's display, but after the accidental improvised solo, the song continues as it was. Like with her Ace Ventura impressions, Maya gets people to temporarily look at her by doing something unexpected and, perhaps, unstoppable. Unlike Anna's containment and precision in performance, it is Maya's outward expressiveness that seems to offer her power. Even if she cannot (or does not want to) do the solo "properly," she will gain the audience's attention through a performance so wild no one can look away. As if to punctuate her body's spontaneous expression, rebelling once more, at the end of the solo she vomits.

If Anna and Maya are separated from each other in this episode through their differing interests (or the assignments they are tasked with accomplishing), through the perception that Anna might be getting too far ahead, through their distinctly arresting performances, and if strain is put on their relationship because of this, then they pull (strangle) each other back to the singular two-headed monster and "back into position" for the next episode (Clayton "Why comedy"). When Brendan shows interest in dating Anna, the girls mull it over, eventually deciding that she should accept. At the end of the episode, the girls declare:

ANNA: I have a boyfriend!

MAYA: We have a boyfriend!

ANNA: We do! (27:04-27:19)

Again, the show works – in sitcom style – to pull the girls back together, in a singular, though tense agreement, at the end of the episode so that they may start again in this mode in the next. It does not matter that Maya is not part of Brendan's plans and if Anna is more excited about the interest shown than the specific boy showing interest, but rather that the moment happened, and that the girls were side-by-side when it did.

The subtle but persistent growing divide is most strenuously addressed in the episodes "Play" and "Opening Night," the two episodes that draw the second season to its abbreviated pause. These connected two episodes separate Maya and Anna and then pull them back together in a recognizable way, in a similar fashion to the examples above. However, by the end of these episodes, though the girls are "back together," they also remain unusually separated. The casting of Maya in "The Days are Short," and Anna's being left without a part, causes an immediate tension between the girls. Maya tepidly and unconvincingly exclaims, "I don't want to do it without you" (0:01-2:58). Again, this situation causes the girls to go through their routine, loudly

protesting their impending separation and claiming their co-dependence. Anna even offers a reprise of her Ave Maria performance, to entice Mr. Rosso into reconsidering giving her a part. But eventually Maya is swept off into rehearsal by the singing praises of the other theatre kids, and Anna is left outside the classroom looking for something else to do. To stay “2gether for da show” (as Anna says later in an AOL chat) (7:20-9:05), Anna discovers a workaround. She joins the backstage crew, or the “techies,” which allows the girls to remain in each other’s proximity even as they occupy different groups. This results in an unintentional further divide because of what appears to be a traditional and longstanding feud between the actors and the techies, a feud that seems to magically foment within anyone occupying these roles. Moreover, this divide seems to reinforce the notion that the girls – even though they protest the possibility – are quite capable of having experiences and performing well in these experiences without each other. This causes strain on multiple counts. First, the girls feel they need to express or constantly reassure the other of their co-dependence by loudly exclaiming that they do not want to engage in an experience without the other. Even when they discover that the task or activity is not so bad solo, they must keep up the charade. Second, they find something that offers some internal and potentially external power but, complicatedly, this is a power that they cannot share. It becomes clear that in addition to the stress that both girls are under, an overriding tension has wormed its way into their relationship because they have not been spending every waking moment together. In other words, tension arises because each girl is publicly having important experiences, even and especially first-time experiences, experiences that they enjoy without the other, something that they vowed never to do. This is another way that slyly, in the second season especially, the idea of “expansion” of the characters is explored without altering the temporal space of the show. By this I mean, it is not aging that allows for “growth” of the characters but rather movements away from each other, with others, and back together again that allows for augmentation.

As the “cool,” older (and possible love-interest for Anna) techie Steve suggests, quoting Bruce Lee, “Adapt what is useful, reject what is useless, add what is specifically your own” (12:53-13:23). This quote works as its own kind of improvisational tenet. In her work with the techies, Anna, like Maya with drama, discovers some of her own singular power; a power that she does not discover until she speaks up against the inaction and laziness of her fellow backstage crew. Here, Anna’s power is in organization, efficiency, and leadership of a team. Quite quickly, Steve christens her both “Obi Wan Kenobi” and Stage Manager. There is a joy

and precision with which Anna cleans up the stage and places the props just so after everyone has left the theatre space. There is an illusion of control, finally, and a possibility for technical precision in Anna's new job. This is something, it seems, that she can get right and fix, if everyone else would just listen. Again, Anna's bid for control is dependent on everyone around her playing along.

As the curtain goes up on the "Opening Night" performance, however, the show starts with a snag (4:12-11:10). There are missed cues on both the actors' and techies' side. When it comes to the stage kiss that Maya and Gabe have been anticipating and dreading, respectively, at the very last second, Gabe covers his mouth leaving Maya to kiss the back of his hand instead of his lips. As Maya stands on stage, shocked, she looks out at the audience, waves of embarrassment on her face, realizing (however imprecisely and unknowingly) that the crowd has just witnessed her real-life romantic rejection. Because of this, she blanks on the next line (reminiscent of Rayanne's rejection by Angela at the Frozen Embryos concert and her subsequent stage fright). Anna takes it upon herself to do something about this, to set things right and regain control of the situation. To get Maya's attention, she climbs the catwalk above the stage, and begins to pour glitter onto Maya's head below. Maya looks up and Anna whispers the next line to her. This little bit of techie improvisational magic allows for the play to continue and, eventually, fire on all cylinders. The magic of the performance, spurred by improvisation, is represented by an interpretive dance, rather than a reading of the play, where the techies, actors, director, and audience are all involved differently in a collaborative effort. As Steve parroting Bruce Lee suggested, here everyone adds something "uniquely" their own and because of that, rather than technical precision alone, the play is a success. After boisterous applause during the curtain call, Anna and Maya finish the dance in a short coda – they each thank each other by placing a hand on their heart, in an illustration of their return to each other.

A Conclusion

“Forget what I said. Forget this whole conversation” – Brian Krakow (*My So-Called Life*, “In Dreams Begin Responsibilities”)

In one final way, *My So-Called Life*, *Pen15* and *Freaks and Geeks* entangle together, unintentionally, and unknowingly. Each show “ends” with a scene in which girls are driven away in vehicles, finally and sometimes forever. These driving scenes centralize and acknowledge the idea of perpetual character provisionality in a way that transcends “abbreviated” endings. Once again, these endings offer up uncertainty and the unfixed state of being, suggesting that these are states worth dwelling in, sometimes as a means of closure.

Unlike with so many previous episodes of *Pen15*, the strain on Maya and Anna’s relationship at the end of “Opening Night” is sustained to its close with no option of agreement and expansion as a singular unit. Though they have returned to each other by episode’s end, starting with their heartfelt coda mentioned above, they continue to experience emotions singularly (much as they always have, even if they have denied that possibility). Maya and Anna’s separation in this episode is reflected in their solo ventures with boys in the episode’s latter stages – Maya with Gabe in Anna’s dad’s car and Anna with Steve drinking behind the pizza parlour – but is most pronounced in the sequence that closes the episode.

In this final scene that “pauses” the second season (due to COVID-19), Maya and Anna, are driven away from the once celebratory turned melancholy scene at the pizza parlour, by Anna’s father in his new (used) Solara convertible (33:40-35:25). The car itself is symbolic of the ongoing tension between Anna’s parents as well as an admission of her father’s absence from the play performance. The convertible is momentarily impressive to Anna, Maya, and their friends but, for Anna, it also comes with a recognition and acceptance of her parents’ separation. It seems that the car – and her father’s oblivious absence from an important event while purchasing the vehicle – allows Anna to finally see some of what her mother has been dealing with for years. The car, too, becomes the site of a “break up” between Maya and Gabe, as they sit in the front seat of the Solara as its parked behind the pizza parlour. As the girls leave with Anna’s dad, taking them on a congratulatory car ride, with “One Fine Day” ironically playing over the soundtrack, the high from the performance earlier in the night, and the excitement of

driving in a vehicle with no roof, vanishes rather quickly. Anna's dad says, "we're gonna have some adventures in this baby, aren't we? Me and you," and Anna's slight smile after raising her arm to feel the wind pass by, fades entirely.

Separated not only by the front seat and the back, Anna and Maya are isolated in their own similar though distinct and all-encompassing miseries. Anna and Maya may be learning of a new way of being and that, for their relationship to continue, they may need to separate from each other just slightly: to cry alone, to feel alone, to experience alone. They each stare off into different directions in various states of despair, stuck in their own heads, with no way back to each other for this one moment, at least. In a way, this scene recalls the close of "Vendy Wiccany," as the two are again separated in emotion, but now do not or cannot bring each other out of their respective despairs, trapped within this speeding object, the mobile reminder of two breakups. This shared misery is made available only to us, the audience, carried along with the girls, as we look at them head-on. Finally, Anna's dad tells her that he is going to look for a new apartment and hits her with one last blow. Anna will have to decide between her two parents and choose who she wants to live with. As the streetlights hit her face, she turns away from her father sharply and we see that she has silently begun to sob, a secret gesture, for Anna and us alone. Then, Anna raises her arm, fist clenched tightly and looks at it resolutely, repeating a gesture that Steve has done, supposedly to control his body temperature. Anna tries, as is her constant want, to search her body for control.

As many past promises as Anna and Maya have made to do everything together, this is in fact impossible and has always been only a half-truth. This scene suggests that not only will the girls experience events without each other, they may *need to* for their own survival, separate and together. This moment purposefully separates the girls, physically (Anna in front, Maya in the back) as well as emotionally, while keeping them "2gether" within the moving vehicle, marking the moment as something altogether new. Here, the girls are so wrapped in their own singular emotions that they end up allowing the other to finally *feel* separately. In fact, the scene seems to illustrate a moment when the girls are no longer even contemplating the other – or trying to contort themselves into a mirror version for the other – in relation to themselves. It is up to the audience to make the connection between the girls and their mental states rather than the girls themselves. This moment, with each other but not necessarily unified in their experience, may end up *feeling*, to the viewer, like growth. The sitcom model here is broken just slightly so the

girls are “back together” on the surface, but with an addition of something else fluttering around each of their edges. No longer are the girls “back” in “position” (Clayton, “Why comedy”) for the next episode. Not only is there the plausibility of their separate worlds expanding through different and solo groupings, but also the notion that they must and will go through events, emotions and experiences the other cannot share. This may expand on the tensions that already exist within the relationship, but a separation may also lead to different avenues in which the relationship thrives. In this way, *Pen15* offers this moment as another fresh form of expansion, malleability, and augmentation. This “ending” suggests that combining “what is specifically their own” to the relationship might just be their next necessary addition.

Similarly, the scene that ends *Freaks and Geeks* is also of two girls getting into a vehicle being driven away into the unknown. The mysterious way this scene plays out illustrates and reinforces the indistinct as a means of closure. In “Discos and Dragons” (ep. 18) Lindsay is chosen by her teachers to attend an academic summit on the University of Michigan campus. Throughout this final episode, Lindsay expresses her ambivalence and, in fact, annoyance about the prospect of spending even part of her summer at an academic summit, something that feels like “school again,” something that her teachers believe she should be excited about. But at the end of the episode, Lindsay gets on the bus heading for Ann Arbor, after tearfully saying goodbye to her family and telling her mom that she loves her, a statement that only belatedly turns into an apology (39:53-43:38). We see, briefly in montage, Lindsay/Cardellini stare out the window on the bus as it travels along, contemplating an ambiguous something, a sombre anxiety has crept onto her face, overwhelming whatever bittersweet farewell she put on for the benefit of her family moments earlier. When we see the bus turn a corner, and Lindsay get *off* the bus moments later, we may assume she is at some juncture in her travels to the academic summit or has arrived at her destination. As Lindsay steps down from the bus, full of worry and uncertainty, she looks around and fixes her gaze ahead on something unknown. The gaze here remains ambiguous, though hesitant, as though she might want to turn right around and head back onto the bus or run away. When we see what Lindsay is looking at, some of the hesitation becomes clear. Kim is waiting at the bus stop, looking off in another direction. Lindsay can momentarily allow for her uncertainty to linger because Kim has not yet met her gaze. When Kim turns to face ahead, she spots Lindsay and begins to smile. At first the smile is small, with some teeth showing and then it grows larger, lifting her chin slightly as a form of greeting. This gesture

seems to suggest slight relief as if to say, “I wasn’t sure if you were gonna show.” But show Lindsay does, and quickly offers her own equally full smile, though still tinged with an anxiety that has carried over from the bus trip. Lindsay/Cardellini breathes in slightly and, as a means of moving herself forward, she licks her lips, precisely as she did before asking the Freaks if she could join them at the movies in “Looks and Books.” Here it is again, that feeling of a sigh and the momentary release of anxiety, as if to say, “I’m ready now, let’s go.” Kim makes a silly face perhaps as a means of underlining the excitement and diffusing the tension that she also feels, bugging her eyes and sticking out her tongue as the two get closer to each other. They greet each other in an embrace, talk and laugh, before heading over to two McKinley students we have recently learned are Deadheads. We can only attempt to read the girls’ lips as their dialogue is covered by the Grateful Dead song “Ripple” playing over the soundtrack. We come to realize – by connecting the indistinct and purposefully secretive dots – that together, Lindsay and Kim have formulated a secret plan at an unknown juncture, using the academic summit as their cover, and have decided to set off for a few weeks of following The Grateful Dead across the country as they tour the US.

The show has offered hints and clues that lead to this surprise moment and choice – Lindsay’s fleeting discussions with the two Deadhead students in the lunchroom, Kim’s assertion that she has no means of escape for the summer – but nothing concrete, and these clues only add-up on re-watch. Logan suggests serial television is “a medium characterised by tensions between fragmentation and unity and one in which the ongoing accrual of the past is weighed against the promise of an ‘open’ as-yet unrealised future” (*The Presence* 155-56). By centralizing fragmentation (we can revise our notions of the stepping-stones leading up to this point through memory, but only after the fact) and making it essential to the surprise, the show uses this aspect of the medium to its advantage. Kim and Lindsay’s friendship has always been disjointed and by using that feature of the relationship – the way that it has been backgrounded, hidden from view (both intentionally and unintentionally), or offered only in glimpses – the series can build to this moment without projecting it. The final fragment, the final chasm of the ending also underlines the themes of the show. The looming summer ahead could have progressed in a predetermined direction. A predetermined summer would have only reinforced other people’s reductive visions of Lindsay and Kim – the studious middle-class good-girl, and the unintelligent, working-class loser – visions that Lindsay and Kim have learned, through spending time together, are not

entirely accurate about the other. This final choice echoes Nehamas' assertion that, "Because of their desire to create a different, unanticipated future, friends give each other power over each other and put their respective identities in question" (138). This notion and the surprise of this scene is reflective of ideas that the program has continually suggested about human lives more broadly: that people are complex beings, capable of moving in a variety of directions, capable of forming bonds with others both like and unlike themselves. As with Angela, Lindsay's family and teachers have demanded that she be a *certain way*, but the Freaks and Kim, have allowed her to be or become uncertain, which at this point in her life, she accepts as necessary. As Lindsay says to Millie at the end of "Looks and Books," "Things are different now" (40:54), and one of those things is, of course, herself.

This final choice – the choice to forgo the academic summit entirely, and to head off with the Deadheads – is a crucial, though distinctly different, repetition to the one that occurs at the start of the series. In essence, Lindsay's choice in this ending echoes her choice to hang out with the Freaks. But this time, crucially, Lindsay is not alone as an outsider in a new world. Kim is along for the ride. The episode suggests – if only after the fact – that Kim and Lindsay needed each other, they needed to discover sameness within each other, the sameness of feeling trapped, of feeling like the summer *would have been fixed*, destined, and determined even before it began, for this escape together. As formerly noted, Nehamas states, "Each one of our friendships – some more, some less – contributes an element of individuality to our character. Each one leads us in a *particular direction* that no other can duplicate" (221; emphasis mine). The ending of *Freaks and Geeks* realizes this notion symbolically and literally. Ending the season on the start of a literal journey underlines the notion of cyclical uncertainty and cyclical becoming. Moreover, it embraces the notion that people are diverse and multifaceted beings, complicated and capable of moving in different directions often because of their bonds with others. The story of *Freaks and Geeks*, as Emily VanDerWerff suggests, has always been Lindsay's ("*Freaks and Geeks*: Discos and Dragons"), but it has not always belonged to Lindsay and Kim as a pair. What is ultimately surprising about the ending is that it centralizes the pair and their friendship after backgrounding the relationship for much of the series. If Lindsay had set out with the Deadheads on her own, this ending would certainly be illustrative of a forever unknown future, but because the ending journey includes and, in fact, *needs* Kim, it suggests that this now intimate friendship remains essential to the ongoing "process of becoming" (Rothman ch.12). Kim magically even shows up

with the green army jacket that Lindsay has been wearing all season, allowing her to alter her costume once more. Lindsay's movement backward, as reflected in her journey to the furthest reaches of her closet and back to the Mathletes in "Looks and Books," results in a discovery and admission that she is no longer *that* person. The army jacket has become a patterned and recognizable feature on Lindsay, carried along with her and worn episode to episode, only removed when the viewer is meant to notice the difference (as in "Looks and Books"). Yet, here at the end of the series, the jacket is put back on after an absence, offered by Kim like a talisman, to exemplify transience and another, final "fresh start."

In its own way, this final scene echoes not only the start of the series, but the one that ended "Looks and Books." Lindsay is again choosing a forbidden journey with a forbidden person, heading off into a vehicle on an adventure unseen, while also, mirroring the very start of the series and Lindsay's original choice to begin hanging out with the Freaks. As Kim and Lindsay hug and laugh, Lindsay's anxiety, surely still present, disappears behind her enthusiasm. The inaudible dialogue between the two, again reinforces the notion of the secret plan, this information still and ever kept hidden from the viewer. And, as the van's windowless sliding door closes on the girls, we lose sight of them, forever. We see only Laurie, the girl Deadhead, in the driver's seat, screaming in delight, an imprecise mirror of Kim's balloon-pop shout in "Looks and Books." We see a van covered in painted question marks and the motto, "Stay Calm," reflecting again this uncertainty. Quite literally the girls enter a moving series of questions, the unknown painted squarely on the van. We see the van drive down the street and pause at a stop light, then eventually keep driving. Lindsay and Kim get to leave everything behind for a few weeks one summer, together, heading off into a forever indistinct and perpetual unknown.

As VanDerWerff states about the moment where Lindsay leaves us, and where the show ends, "She's always just ahead of us, driving into undiscovered country" ("*Freaks and Geeks: Discos and Dragons*"). The use of the word "always" here is crucial. Lindsay (and Kim) leaves the program forever on a journey and this journey, yet again, "leans" with finality "toward the promises of an open future" (Logan, *The Presence* 39). This leaning is underlined and highlighted within cancellation – "always" – in a more pronounced way than it would have been if the show had continued. Similarly, although we stay fixed on Anna and Maya within movement as they head off in the Solara, they too are cast with the glow of streetlights and an ambivalent, melancholic separation, like a new and "undiscovered country" of their own.

Because of the pause (or gap) between episodes, we get to linger in this space a little longer, making its significance more pronounced. Here I would like to, one last time, come back to Logan who states:

serial drama may give credible aesthetic form to the idea that our pasts can, despite their permanence, be transformed, for better or for worse. We might keep alive the promise of a new future, or confront the erosion and loss of life that we had imagined. In the images of close companionship...the stakes of either outcome are shown to be nothing less than the survival of a shared world – the creation and sustenance of which depends on the history and fate of a pair's gestures, looks, words and expressions. (*The Presence* 197)

What we know of Lindsay and of Kim, of Anna and of Maya, of Angela and of Rayanne, is “dependent” on the connection and the historical past that each pair shares, illustrated by “gestures, looks, words and expressions.” But these endings again complicate and unsettle the ground upon which we have come to stand. Each ending or pause, gestures once more toward the anxious yet potentially beautiful unknown and the “undiscovered country” that is life, that is a friend, that is the self.

As previously suggested, these characters sway to the notion that what they are *yet to do*, what they *might become*, how they *might behave* in an undetermined future moment is just as crucial as what they have already done. Here now, within these “endings,” is that future moment writ large, only to be complicated by the notion that traveling off into the still further unknown is where we leave them. Where do they end up and who will they be when they get there? The question (the mystery) that the show posed at the beginning is asked again, in a slightly different way, within each “ending.” As William Rothman succinctly states, on occasion, a television character (like those in his essay on *Justified*) “incarnates, in the way every real human being does, the mystery of human identity: the fact that we are mysteries to each other and to ourselves; that our identities aren’t fixed, that we are in the process of becoming” (“Justifying *Justified*”). Rather than solving the mystery of character, finding the self, or settling on an identity once and for all, these endings underline “the process of becoming” by restating the questions: Who am I? Where and with whom do I belong? How can I be me in this world? The answers may have changed, may indeed always be changing, but the questions persist. This thesis has aimed to explore the ways that the Teen Television series – with an emphasis on becoming, the finding of self and coming of age – can be seen as exemplary of television serial narrative more generally. Serial drama retains a capacity to highlight, over time, accumulation,

augmentation, and modulation within its characters through narrative and aesthetics, notably performance. This is especially true in the ways that serial drama often contends with formation of identity, the essential part that friendship plays in this ongoing formation, and the way that this occurs, necessarily, through temporal movement. The specific teen series and the characters explored in this study, even and, in fact, because of their abbreviated “endings,” are reflective of the serialized program itself – throughout their broadcasts – favouring notions of continuing, unfolding and accumulating.

This past year has felt abbreviated, too. A year that has imprecisely paused, begging for the rhythm to continue in some former, perhaps now impossible to return to way. But there are rhythms to be found in the abbreviated, there are meanings to be made lingering in the unsettledness of the always becoming, the never quite there, the still yet to be. The programs in this study offer us the notion that endings cut short, unintentional, and too early can be as full of meaning as ones that are wrapped up and tied neatly with a bow. These endings suggest, once again, that these characters continue, ever unsettled, even as they paradoxically also remain fixed by the close of the episode, and the black of the screen as the credits roll. *My So-Called Life* and *Freaks and Geeks* were cancelled after a single season. *Pen15* is unfinished but will linger in seventh grade forever. Our teen characters “end” their relationships with us being driven away in vehicles toward an unknown that impossibly promises more, and the hazy outline of a future still up ahead. *My So-Called Life*, too, ends with Angela Chase being driven away into the night (43:19-46:38). Jordan Catalano picks her up in his red car, as she stands on the sidewalk with Brian Krakow after a fraught, tender, and unforgettable conversation that Brian implores her to erase from her memory. After Angela gets into the car, she turns back, already moving forward too quickly yet still stationary, and looks out the passenger-side window, offering Brian (and us) “one last look” and an ambivalent, Mona Lisa smile. As with the final, unseen performance of *Our Town*, the audience is left in a state of the unknown, forever lingering in the space of a looming opening night and a friendship hanging by threads. At the end of the series, Angela is driven away in Jordan’s car, still moving, and shifting and yet frozen in time; fleeting and permanent – never known, fully and purposefully, to herself, to Brian, to Rayanne, or us.

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