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Something's Happening on ABC: Queerly Reevaluating *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life*

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Something's Happening on ABC: Queerly Reevaluating *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life*

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Abstract

Something's Happening on ABC: Queerly Reevaluating *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life*

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This research reconsiders two ABC programs from the early 1990s, *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life,* through the frames of queer-theory based textual analysis, press discourse, and fan reception. I begin by arguing that both programs, which emerged in concert with the solidification of queer studies as an academic field, exist as televisual oddities that provided a temporary space for the exploration of queer subjectivities in primetime; this analysis also invokes the non-normative positioning of showrunners David Lynch and Winnie Holzman based on their previous and subsequent work. Secondly, I posit popular press receptions/retrospectives as undermining the queer centrality of both programs by adhering to heteronormative frameworks such as "quality television." Lastly, I discuss fan reclamations of both programs through slash fiction and collaborative web forums as illuminating the intrinsic queerness of *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life* lost through dominant press narratives.

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Introduction: Something's Happening on ABC

ABC, beginning with the 1973 movie-of-the-week *That Certain Summer*-about a divorced father coming out as gay to his teenaged son-demonstrated a willingness to experiment with queer tropes in television programming. As Stephen Tropiano observes in *The Prime Time Closet,* his historical overview of gay and lesbian depictions on television, ABC's primetime soap opera *Dynasty* featured one of primetime's first recurring gay characters, Steven Carrington (Al Corly), as part of its ensemble; the program achieved camp success with gay men who congregated weekly at bars to indulge in the Carrigans' histrionics. Later in the decade, Tropiano notes, the network riled conservative affiliates by airing a 1989 episode of *thirtysomething* that, for the first time, showed two men in bed together having a post-coital conversation, denoting actual sex and deviating (with limitations, of course) from Lynne Joyrich's understanding of television as embroiled in discourses of the closet. Tracking social progress through television programming, Tropiano highlights ABC as a trailblazer, citing *Family's* "Rites of Friendship" and *thirtysomething's* "Strangers" as the first and third "Best Dramatic Episodes," respectively, to incorporate gay and lesbian storylines.

Reinforced by the promotional tagline, "Something's Happening on ABC," Tropiano's narrative suggests that the network remains unique and underappreciated in its programs' focus on queer issues, a topic that I intend to explore and complicate through analysis of two programs aired on ABC between 1990 and 1995: *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life*. More specifically my project addresses how these shows, and the extra-textual discourses surrounding them, generated complex televisual understandings of queer identities and presented a myriad of pleasures and problems for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, and queer (LGBTQ) viewers.

Twin Peaks and *My So-Called Life*, both green-lit and cancelled by ABC, present examples of mis-marketed primetime soap operas that transcend traditional genre format and engage with complex ideas about gender and sexuality as malleable constructs. Co-created by David Lynch, *Twin Peaks* features transvestitism, camp performativity, and emotional relationships with inanimate objects, all within the context of a surrealist-inspired queer netherworld. *My So-Called Life,* conceived of as a teen-drama, exhibits elements of suburban satire and youth fantasy, and provides a nuanced queer character, Rickie Vasquez (Wilson Cruz), with narrative agency and complex intersectional positioning provided his status as a poor, gay, biracial teenager. Additionally, the show alludes to the possibility of multiple same-sex relationships, most notably a central romance between protagonist Angela Chase (Claire Danes) and her best-friend/soul-mate Rayanne Graff (A.J. Langer).

My project explores both shows, firstly, from the standpoints of genre and authorship. Here I employ the work of Gary Needham and Christine Gledhill to politicize the use of serialization, fantasy, and melodrama in *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life*. Elaborating upon both shows' identification with female characters and/or males who embrace traditionally "feminine" social positions, I posit *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life* as doomed anomalies that challenge the masculine dominance of primetime scheduling. Additionally, I invoke Alexander Doty's method of identifying intrinsic queerness in purportedly heterosexual media texts and authors to discuss David Lynch and Winnie Holzman as politically motivated queer auteurs and their short-lived programs as attempts to counter hetero/homonormative logic through use of a mass medium.

Secondly, I examine popular press discourses surrounding the immanent threat of cancellation pertaining to these programs as well as celebratory articles proclaiming both

as revolutionary. Considering the divided dialogue of artistic success and financial failure inherent in critical reception surrounding these shows, I argue that these press writings remain mired in legitimating notions of "quality" that deprive both programs of their anti-normative centrality. Drawing upon the critical negativism that met *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life* following their celebrated first episodes, I discuss elements of sexist and homophobic backlash that met both shows' more melodramatic storylines. I also address retrospective academic appraisal of both programs in terms of mis-remembrance based on these reviews.

Lastly, in contrast to these historically selective press articles, I analyze audiences' recollection of queer meaning within *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life* through slash fiction and online community formations. Citing fan works from *Amatara, Bookhouse Boys*, *An Archive of Our Own*, www.fanfiction.net and www.mscl.com, I argue that such writings confront heteronormative press reconstructions of non-straight programs through anti-normative creative fiction and political collaboration.

Throughout the project, I repeatedly invoke the term "queer," rather than LGBTQ or any variant acronym, as a means to illuminate the instability of gender/sexual categorizations and to explore non, contra, and anti-straight forms of reception/production outside established chronologies of gay media visibility. As Alexander Doty writes in *Making Things Perfectly Queer*:

> I like the uses of "queer" that make it more than just an umbrella term in the ways that "homosexual" and "gay" have been used to mean lesbian, gay, or bisexual, because queerness can be about intersecting or combining of more than one specific form of non-straight sexuality. Ultimately, queerness should challenge and confuse our understandings and uses of gender and sexual categories (xvi-xvii).

Using this malleable definition, I hope to move beyond a representational politics of LGBTQ inclusion/exclusion in television programming to instead explore the anti-straight pleasures that Doty identifies as intrinsic to mass culture.

Employing Doty's usage of "queer," I pose the following questions with regard to *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life*: How do these shows' narrative structures and formal attributes defy a homonormative politics of gay inclusivity intrinsic to "hip and edgy" network shows of the 1990s? How do they use chronological asynchrony and fantasy to draw attention to historical selectivity and challenge archival truths, and how does this spatiotemporal logic contribute to the blatantly queer formal/narrative tropes of both programs? How does Doty's consideration of queer auteurs apply to David Lynch and Winnie Holzman and contrast to Elana Levine and Michael Newman's explanation of auteur theory as a legitimating construct? Additionally, popular press discourses surrounding both programs applaud the originality of *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life* while announcing inevitable failure. How might these shows constitute queer failures considering their narrative inconclusiveness and abrupt cancellations? How do these same press accounts limit, misconstrue, or erase queer discourses within the television texts themselves? Despite the erasure of queerness in many press retrospectives, how does slash fiction and web community pertaining to both shows allow fans to imbue both programs with retrospective queer meaning?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Chronicling Queer TV: Histories of Representation

Stephen Tropiano's *The Prime Time Closet*, as indicated in my introduction, provides a chronology of gay and lesbian representation on U.S. distributed dramatic television programming, his chapter on network dramatic narratives beginning with

ABC's movie-of-the-week *That Certain Summer* in 1972 and ending with *My So-Called Life* in 1995. Conveying a narrative of "social progress" Tropiano conjectures that 1970s programming used the device of homosexuality to enhance straight characterizations, while "quality" series in the 1980s provided gay characters with narrative agency, paving the way for gay youths to emerge from the closet in the 1990s. Tropiano's book, despite its theoretical limitations in distinguishing between LGBT and queer television programs, provides interesting and useful evidence of ABC's penchant for promoting LGBTQ images and advancing queer sensibilities. As a means of establishing the importance of *Twin Peaks* as narratively and stylistically comparable to *My So-Called Life* in terms of queer construction, however, I intend to upset the clean linearity of Tropiano's social-progress timeline.

Larry Gross's *Up From Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Media in America* argues that, "the entertainment and news media betray a lingering inability to break free from proscribed limitations in order to embrace the complex reality of gay identity." Similar to Tropiano's approach, but employing greater criticism with regard to 1990s programming, Gross provides a chronological narrative of gay and lesbian visibility on television, focusing at length on the "much-vaunted purchasing power of '90s gay yuppies ('guppies') to influence the media representation of gays," sometimes to the detrimental effect of prohibiting more complex portrayals in favor of "positive" depictions. Such industrial focus, while helpful in understanding network television's 1990s trend towards marketing to/from an LGBT demographic, minimizes the televisual incorporation of queer voices and the proliferation of anti-heteronormative programming during the same decade.

Similar to Gross's critique of network television programming, Ron Becker's *Gay TV and Straight America* and "Primetime Television in the Gay Nineties: Network

Television, Quality Audiences, and Gay Politics" observe the emergence of gay characters in 1990s television as a way to attract socially liberal urban-minded professional (SLUMPY) viewers on the pretense of "edgy" material. Becker, however, categorizes programs on the basis of lesbian and gay representations rather than their potential for queer readings, along the lines of Tropiano's and Gross's chronologies. He also frames his work, perceptively, within the framework of LGBT politics of the 1990s in order to demonstrate the conflicting logic of assimilation/difference inherent in both gay depictions on television and gay civil-rights struggles. Becker's writing, however, does not account for the ascent of queer studies/activism alongside LGBT politics, and makes no reference to queer-themed programming, such as *Twin Peaks* or *My So-Called Life*, that might counteract SLUMPY interests.

Also employing a chronological historiography of gay and lesbian televisual depictions, albeit with a more intensive focus on queer theory, Lynne Joyrich's "Epistemology of the Console" discusses network television's investment in discourses of closeting as a way of both revealing and hiding queerness. Joyrich argues that television makes non-straight sexuality explicit via dialogue but minimizes or erases its overt expression. Joyrich's broader historiography surrounding gay and lesbian portrayals on television remains pertinent to my argument about industrial tensions between ABC and showrunners Lynch and Holzman; I observe how these showrunners help to divest the televisual closet of its confessional logic by privileging queer emotional and sexual subjectivity.

Queer/Subversive Narrative and Aesthetic Pleasures

Alexander Doty's *Making Things Perfectly Queer* helps to complicate Tropiano's, Gross's, and Becker's historically linear narrative by identifying lesbian, gay, and queer

pleasures in supposedly heteronormative programs such as *Laverne and Shirley*. Furthermore, he argues that queer readings are intrinsic to the nature of these texts rather than alternative perspectives unique to marginalized viewers. Doty's definition of "queerness" as "a quality related to any expression that can be marked as contra-, non-, or anti-straight" also provides an important theoretical framework that I will use to help distinguish between the "queer" qualities inherent in second season *Twin Peaks* episodes, for instance, and gay-themed "quality" series that Ron Becker identifies as targeting the SLUMPY demographic.

In observation not only of the importance of heteronormative textual logic but also the political nature of television scheduling, Gary Needham's "Scheduling Normativity" questions networks' decisions to place queer-oriented programs (*Torchwood* and *Cold Case* serving as examples in his study) on the "margins of television time"-after the 10 pm hour. This concept pertains directly to ABC's decision to move *Twin Peaks* to a more obscure, later timeslot following its ratings drop in the second season, queering the show further through its placement on the schedule. I am interested, as well, in *My So-Called Life's* inconsistent placement on ABC's primetime schedule in relation to Needham's queer-theory based interpretation of televisual time.

While not directly pertinent to LGBTQ spectatorship, Christine Gledhill's "Speculations on the Relationship Between Soap Operas and Melodrama" discusses subversive aspects of the historically under-appreciated genre of soap operas. Writing that melodrama "permits emotional enactments within fantasies disallowed by social or cultural convention" (121), Gledhill explores the narrative pleasures of soap operas as imbued with political importance for women. Such work reinforces scholarly perspectives on daytime soap operas and spectatorial pleasures provided by Tania Modleski (*Loving With a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women*), Louise

Spence (*Watching Daytime Soap Operas: The Power of Pleasure*), and Jane Feuer ("Different Soaps for Different Folks: Conceptualizing the Soap Opera") amongst others. Considering the form's delegitimated status in comparison to more male-coded forms of melodrama (such as primetime serials), Gledhill's analysis explicates soap operas' importance for socially disenfranchised viewing constituencies. Considering *Twin Peaks*' and *My So-Called Life*'s reliance on textual melodrama and reverence of soap operatic narrative, Gledhill's essay remains especially relevant.

Further defying scholarly and journalistic notions of legitimate media, Judith Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* considers "silly archives" that do not adhere to established standards of cultural value as personally and politically significant for non-dominant constituencies. Using animated stop-motion and CGI films including *Finding Nemo*, *Chicken Run*, and *Madagascar* as well as stoner-comedies such as *Dude, Where's My Car?* to highlight queer narrative pleasure, Halberstam addresses celebration of forgetfulness, forged community, frivolity, gender-deviance, and societal maladaptation in these movies. Applying Halberstam's interpretive strategies to Gledhill's exploration of soap operas and melodrama further enhances the genre's non-normative potential. *The Queer Art of Failure* also presents subversive possibilities for other critically maligned, and thus "failed," elements of *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life*.

Academic Purviews: Receptions of *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life*

Marc Dolan's article "The Peaks and Valleys of Serial Creativity: What Happened to/on *Twin Peaks*?" and David Lavery's introductory essay "The Semiotics of Cobbler: Twin Peaks' Interpretive Community," both included as part of a useful anthology of academic essays pertaining to the show, address circumstances surrounding the program's cancellation and narrativizes ABC's rationale for tampering with *Twin*

Peaks' Thursday night timeslot. These works, in addition to a book co-edited by Lavery and Michelle Byers titled *Dear Angela: Remembering My So-Called Life*, provide an industrial context for ABC's cancellation of queer-themed serials useful to my own analysis.

Caryn Murphy's "'It Only Got Teenage Girls': Narrative Strategies and the Teenage Perspective of *My So-Called Life,"* out of the *Dear Angela* anthology provides an important context for understanding online fan efforts to advocate for the program after ABC announced its cancellation. Susan Murray's article "Saving Ours So-Called Lives: Girl Fandom, Adolescent Subjectivity, and *My So-Called Life*" also explores reception, and most explicitly focuses on the Save Our Show campaign "Operation Life-Support." Murray considers girl fandom and online activism surrounding *My So-Called Life* a subversive act that undermines the authority of predominantly white male television executives and empowers disenfranchised viewing communities, observations that Murphy reinforces in her section on web activism.

More problematically, Henry Jenkins' article "'Do You Enjoy Making the Rest of Us Feel Stupid?': alt.tv.twinpeaks, the Trickster Author, and Viewer Mastery" addresses online *Twin Peaks* fan fiction from the early 1990s as a gender-coded practice. Jenkins discusses ways in which predominantly upscale, straight, white men engage with the program through technology, documenting activity on a forum called alt.twinpeaks.tv. He observes how fans on this site regard *Twin Peaks* as a more "complex" form of television and attempt to solve narrative-oriented mysteries using devices such as the VCR to capture significant clues. Invoking his earlier work in "*Star Trek*: Rerun, Reread, Rewritten," Jenkins differentiates the *Twin Peaks* online discourse from fiction produced by female fans of *Star Trek,* spectators who, he observes, rewrote episode storylines to account for excluded representations in the dominant text. This work upholds binary

notions of gender, refuses to account for online anonymity/queering of web identity, helps to legitimate *Twin Peaks* as a "complex" program, and glorifies the show's presumably male fan base over minority audience members engaging with the text.

Adhering to understandings of the program's televisual superiority, Martha Nochimson discusses *Twin Peaks* in relation to David Lynch's film canon in the chapter "The Magician Longs to See" of her book *David Lynch: Wild at Heart in Hollywood*. While Nochimson's book more largely explores how Lynch "subverts traditional gender roles to offer an optimistic view that love and human connection are really possible," she challenges *Twin Peaks*, especially the second season, for its capitulations to Mark Frost's and ABC's narrative interests. Disconcertingly, though, she asserts that, "Lynch's vision is heterosexual and ultimately joyful," (27) undermining the queer pleasures intrinsic to *Twin Peaks* by attributing their accidental manifestation to the "collaborative nature of television" which, she proclaims, maintains a "deleterious effect" (72) on the series.

Michael Newman and Elana Levine's *Legitimating Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* helps to illuminate the gendered connotations of journalistically and academically qualifying certain "complex" programs as superior, and cites *Twin Peaks* as an example. Problematizing uses of auteur theory, genre study, and academic/industrial collusion to elevate the status of more "cinematic" or "novelistic" shows, Newman and Levine rightfully argue against scholarly examinations of *Twin Peaks* as an auteur project ushering in an era of "complex" television (they specifically implicate David Lavery). At the same time, their work does not discuss discourses other than "quality" that can be applied to the program, which I explore in depth.

Scholarly Gaps and Directions for Future Research

Despite the useful and abundant academic analyses of these programs as individual case studies or as part of a broad examination of the historical trajectory of queer representation on television, no writings exist currently that observe multiple ABC shows from a specific time period in the context of network analysis. Furthermore, despite Becker's and Gross's analyses of gay programming in the 1990s, neither author considers the shows in terms of fan reception, neglecting the potential pleasures gleaned from programs that, by Doty's definition, are productive of queer tropes. Through my project, I hope to address these gaps in literature and to advance a nuanced understanding of *Twin Peaks'* and *My So-Called Life*'s approach to advancing queer sensibilities during a decade critically castigated for promoting a homonormative politics on network television.

THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

I engage, firstly, in a formal and narrative analysis of the shows grounded in queer theory. Alexander Doty's work on the centrality of non-normative subjectivities in popular culture texts helps me to define televisual moments/narrative trajectories/characters in *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life* as adhering to tropes of queerness. Also, considering that Doty's, Gary Needham's and Lynne Joyrich's analyses pertain directly to Michel Foucault's work on the importance of confessional dialogue to power/knowledge relationships (*History of Sexuality: Volume 1*) as well as Judith Butler's writing on gender performativity as social construct (*Gender Trouble*) and Eve Sedgwick's theoretical assessment of the construction of the closet (*Epistemology of the Closet*), these seminal works of queer theory remain pivotal to my project as secondary texts. Select episodes from the shows themselves serve as primary case studies for formal and narrative analysis as relates to both queer positioning and homonormative branding.

Textual analysis also enables discussions of genre as pertain to melodrama, fantasy, and dramatic serial as well as invocations of auteur theory regarding David Lynch and Winnie Holzman as "queer" showrunners.

Press discourse analysis remains central to observing official documentations of both programs that counteract the intrinsic textual queerness observed previously. Here I rely upon articles in four popular publications archived through the University of Texas Library System, *The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times, The Dallas Morning News, The Washington Post,* as well as one niche periodical, *Entertainment Weekly,* to assess press constructions of both shows as simultaneously revolutionary and doomed to failure upon their initial premiers. I also preface my chapter with retrospectives from these same publications authored in the late 2000s, notably *Entertainment Weekly* DVD reviews by Ken Tucker, to highlight historical revision and mis-remembrance of *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life*. Using these reviews, and invoking *The Queer Art of Failure* and *Legitimating Television,* I observe these programs as journalistically derided queer failures that are only retrospectively remembered as "quality" texts.

Lastly, I incorporate reception analysis in order to assess the affective importance of these shows to queer spectators and to evaluate the importance of fan advocacy to subverting dominant reconstructions of *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life*. Online archives of fan writings such as *Amatara,* www.mscl.com, *Bookhouse Boys*, *An Archive of Our Own*, and www.fanfiction.net provide a variety of slash fiction narratives non-reflective of journalists' heteronormative assessment of the shows and illuminate the presence of a queer fan community surrounding *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life*. Again I invoke *The Queer Art of Failure* as my theoretical crux to argue that "unofficial" archives provide a corrective approach to audience studies.

CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

"Places Both Wonderful and Strange: Queerly Imagining the Worlds of *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life"* explores *My So-Called Life* and *Twin Peaks* as critically lauded primetime dramas that advanced queer sensibilities. Textual analyses of select episodes from the second season on *Twin Peaks* and the first (and only) season of *My So-Called Life* frame these shows as prime-time soap operas that, contrary to their marketing campaigns as episodic police procedural and teen drama respectively, employed serial narrative arcs to develop recurrent queer characters and build subversive alternate realities that function outside heteronormative constructs. From the vantage point of genre analysis, I invoke the work of Gary Needham to discuss aspects of fantasy in both programs that undermine sequential chronology; here I illuminate the importance of "imagined" locations such as the Black Lodge in *Twin Peaks* and the public/gender-fluid space of the girls' bathroom in of *My So-Called Life* to upsetting heteronormative linearity and providing liminal narrative space for the emergence of queer counter-narratives. As part of this discourse, I also incorporate auteur analysis to discuss showrunners David Lynch and Winnie Holzman as integral to these shows providing non-straight vantage points at a moment in television history when LGBTQ narrative agency remained rare.

"It's Like, Everybody's in this Big Hurry to Supposedly Remember What Happened: Misremembering and De-Queering Television Texts" discusses early reviews and press articles surrounding both *My So-Called Life* and *Twin Peaks* as illuminating a conflicted sentiment of celebration, derision, and doom. The shows' most admiring critics, including Ken Tucker of *Entertainment Weekly,* John O'Connor of the *New York Times*, and Howard Rosenberg of the *Los Angeles Times*, commend their "uniqueness" and express a desire for longevity, but pronounce them in immediate peril

due to their narrative and stylistic diversion from more formulaic primetime fare. Furthermore, these critics deride more "melodramatic" moments of the show and, ultimately, blame their non-adherence to "quality" as correlative to their cancellations. Considering the divided discourse of success and failure inherent in these articles, I intend to frame *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life* as cognizant of marginalized, queer histories but heteronormatively misconstrued by critics.

Reviews of *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life* dwell on the series as ushering in an era of "quality" television but later deride elements of soap opera, gender reversal (referring sarcastically to Rickie Vasquez as a hybrid boy/girl), or overtly queer characters (such as Dennis Duchovny's cross-dressing DEA agent Dennis "Denise" Bryson in *Twin Peaks*). Retrospectives on *My So-Called Life* allude almost exclusively to the heterosexual romance between Angela Chase (Claire Danes) and Jordan Catalano (Jared Leto) without noting aspects of fantasy and satire in the program or recognizing queer relationships such as Angela's sexually fraught friendship with Rayanne Graff (A.J. Langer). While press interviews with Wilson Cruz, the openly gay actor who plays Rickie Vasquez, frame the show as revolutionary in introducing a gay teenager to prime time, no reviews at the time of the show's release pronounce the importance of his sexual subjectivity and intersectional positioning within the narrative and all relegate his "tragic" narrative arc and "interruptive" presence to peripheral subplot. I argue that such press accounts diminish the narratives of *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life* by ignoring their queer centrality and instead unduly place both programs within the heterosexual context of quality. I end the chapter by discussing academic mis-remembrance of both shows as premised on journalistic reception rather than the texts themselves.

"The Owls are Not What They Seem: Retaking Queer Meaning" investigates audiences' reclaiming of queer meaning within the texts of *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called*

Life through slash fiction and community interaction online. Citing fan works from the online archives *Amatara, Bookhouse Boys*, *An Archive of Our Own*, and www.fanfiction.net I observe audiences construction of overtly gay relationships within the already queerly fashioned world of *Twin Peaks*. Concurrent with the show's investment in soap operatic melodrama, such fictions expand upon relational webs already in place and render implied romantic relationships (such as FBI forensic expert Albert Rosenberg's psychic kinship with Dale Cooper) explicit. As opposed to Henry Jenkins' concept of "textual poaching," I posit such writings as recognition of and expansion upon intended queerness within the text rather than a queer revision or reclaiming of a predominantly heteronormative program though alternative fiction.

Using the "official" fan-based archive www.mscl.com, I observe community web formations that chart paths to queer *My So-Called Life* fiction on a variety of forums. Uniting the interpretive relationships that these fans conjure with the program's own acknowledgements of historical selectivity, I posit these writings as working in tandem with the *My So-Called Life's* narrative diegesis rather than constructing an opposing narrative world. Again incorporating Doty's understanding of intrinsic queerness within certain media texts and Judith Halberstam's advocacy of "silly" archives, I contextualize these fan responses as recognitions of both programs' narrative and stylistic difference from other prime time fare, the subject of Chapter 1, and as corrective approaches to press erasure of textual queerness as discussed in Chapter 2.

CONCLUSION

Tropiano's account of the primetime closet magnifies the importance of ABC to LGBTQ representations on network television, but his narrative timeline overlooks the importance of programs like *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life* to queering broadcast

television at an important political moment for LGBTQ activism within and outside academia. I contend that these programs' offbeat weirdness and stubborn nonconformity presents a televisual trend that intersects with the poststructuralist notion of gender/sexuality as social creations; in this regard, both programs remain crucially different from the homonormative shows that Ron Becker describes as essential to 1990s televisual marketing.

Through this project I hope to observe and analyze the complex discourses surrounding both shows that alternately illuminate the queer logic at their narrative centers, divest them of non-straight subjective positioning, and reconstruct their affective meaning for both straight and LGBTQ-identified viewers. I also intend to problematize the strict chronology of Tropiano's timeline in my conclusion, alluding to ABC's homo/heteronormative ascription to family-centered gay-affirmative programming following its acquisition by the Walt Disney Company in 1995, shortly after the cancellation of *My So-Called Life*. I will also, in my conclusion, complicate Tropiano's historiography by queerly nodding toward ABC programs that compliment the non-normative positioning of *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life,* such as *Bewitched, Three's Company*, and *Laverne and Shirley*, shows that remain largely critically and academically maligned.

Chapter 1: Places Both Wonderful and Strange: Queerly Imagining the Worlds of *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life*

In the second to last episode of David Lynch's short lived serial *Twin Peaks,* "The Path to the Black Lodge," FBI Special Agent Dale Cooper uncovers a hieroglyphic cave painting, the queerly coded meaning of which remains obscured; commenting to his friend and partner in law Sherriff Harry S. Truman, Cooper muses, "Harry, I have no idea where this will lead us, but I have a definite feeling it will be a place both wonderful and strange." I argue in the following pages that both *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life* fashion liminal queer realms for the deconstruction of heteronormative logic on network television, and that these shows remain imbued with political significance. Like the Black Lodge, to which Agent Cooper's discovery ultimately leads, the narrative and aesthetic space of these two programs provides alternative conceptualizations of sexual desire and gender construction that upset straight and familial constructions of prime time.

This chapter first explores *Twin Peaks* from the standpoints of academic discourse, auteur theory, genre study, and formal/narrative analysis to arrive at a queer reading of the program's serial arc. I invoke Alexander Doty's method of identifying intrinsic queerness in purportedly heterosexual media texts and authors to discuss David Lynch as a politically motivated queer auteur and his short-lived program as a successful attempt to counter hetero/homonormative logic through use of a mass medium. Subsequently, I employ the work of Gary Needham and Christine Gledhill to politicize the use of serialization, fantasy, and melodrama in *Twin Peaks* before elaborating upon the show's identification with female characters and/or males who embrace traditionally "feminine" social positions. In light of network conflicts with ABC, I also assess *Twin Peak*s' irregular positioning on the network's programming lineup as indicative of its

occupying a "queer and indeterminate" (Needham) place within a heteronormatively fashioned schedule.

Connecting *My So-Called Life* to anti-normative trends apparent in *Twin Peaks*, I am interested in how the show helped to provide a temporary space for the manifestation of adolescent queerness on ABC at the height of the 1994 Gingrich revolution, which returned both chambers of the United States Congress to Republican control. My textual analysis pertains to Rickie Vasquez's sexual subjectivity and gender non-conformity within *My So-Called Life* as a politicized discourse that runs counter to the mainstreaming of gay normalcy on American television that Ron Becker discusses in "Primetime Television in the Gay Nineties: Network Television, Quality Audiences, and Gay Politics." Additionally, noting *My So-Called Life*'s privileging of adolescent spaces for the proliferation of sexual fluidity, I discuss the inversion of socially constructed gender and sexual classifications within fantasy spaces of girlhood. In observation of queer trends throughout show-runner Winnie Holzman's cannon of work, I conclude by revisiting the importance of Doty's understanding of the queer auteur for destabilizing normative discourses on and within network television.

TWIN PEAKS QUEERLY READ

Twin Peaks emerged as pivotal to discourses of television authorship beginning in the mid-1990s, providing the subject for an academic anthology published in 1995 titled *Full of Secrets: Critical Approaches to Twin Peaks* (hereafter *Full of Secrets*). Essays in the aforementioned text, notably "Lynching Women: A Feminist Reading of *Twin Peaks*" by Diana Hume George and "Bad Ideas: The Art and Politics of *Twin Peaks*" by Jonathan Rosenbaum directly position David Lynch as the show's predominant creative authority to consider questions of gender representation and political ideology within the text of

Twin Peaks. Both scholars rely heavily upon narrative and ideological analysis and, resultantly, produce questionable interpretations of the program's characters, narrative structure, and cultural influence. Hume George reverts to a hypercritical narrative analysis of *Twin Peaks*' serial arc to conclude that Lynch fetishizes tortured women and perpetuates a culture of sexual violence. Rosenbaum draws upon film theory to denigrate *Twin Peaks* ideologically, asserting that Lynch's privileging of domestic spaces within the (feminine) format of network television problematizes the show as a political text; he snidely remarks that he could never imagine a surrealist like Luis Buñuel translating his work to TV and denigrates *Twin Peaks* as politically comparable to *Peyton Place*.

As a counterpoint to Hume George's and Rosenbaum's perspectives, I am interested in reevaluating *Twin Peaks* through an alternative lens in order to posit the show as a uniquely subversive text that challenges constructs of gender and sexuality. David Lynch's privileging of the strange and deviant through his body of filmic and televisual work, from the mutated protagonists of *Eraserhead* (1977) and *The Elephant Man* (1980) to the anthropomorphic rabbits that populate *Inland Empire* (2006), compels me to consider the director's oeuvre, and centrally *Twin Peaks*, as definitively queer. How does David Lynch, then, as a self-described heterosexual, constitute a queer auteur? How does the term "auteur" connote heterosexual male creative control and what implications might this carry for non-normative readings of *Twin Peaks*? What political possibilities can a queer reading of *Twin Peaks* (an out of time out of place show featuring transvestitism, camp performativity, emotional relationships with inanimate objects, etc.) illuminate that narrative analyses in *Full of Secrets* do not consider?

To answer these questions, I first consider various definitions of auteur theory, their inherent implications with regard to gender and sexuality; thereafter, I discuss Alexander Doty's idea of the queer auteur as central to my own reading of *Twin Peaks*. In

observation of Doty's assertion in *Making Things Perfectly Queer* that, "queerness can be about the intersecting or combining of more than one form of non-straight sexuality" (xvi), I am interested in identifying formal and narrative tropes in *Twin Peaks* that relate not only to Lynch's embrace of gender deviance but also his envisioning of previously unconsidered non-normative emotional relationships (such as Margaret Lanterman's psychic kinship with her log). Additionally, as a queer viewer, I remain invested in Lynch's ability to render heterosexual interactions visibly perverse rather than hegemonically presumed by formally amplifying Hollywood aesthetics of romance, thus alluding to the idea that "something queer" lingers beneath the surface. Queerness, from this perspective, also manifests in the show's disavowal of temporal and spatial constructs that apply to what Gary Needham terms "scheduled normativity." Lastly, I consider *Twin Peak*'s reverence of soap operas and soap opera spectatorship, a privileging of feminine media forms, as a political proclamation that contradicts Rosenbaum's and Hume George's positioning of the program as apolitical and/or regressive.

AUTHORSHIP AND THE QUEER AUTEUR

The term "auteur" contains problematic connotations of male creative control that declares some works of media superior to others through the mere invocation of a revered name. Andrew Sarris famously poses in his "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962" that the worst work of an established auteur such as John Ford, whose films contain personal signature, would eclipse the best work of a studio filmmaker such as Henry King, whose presence remains invisible through his directorial process. Former *New Yorker* film critic Pauline Kael takes explicit exception to Sarris's romanticized (and male-centric) notion of director as auteur in "Circles and Squares," noting the authorial signatures of

cinematographers, production designers, musical composers, and other "below the line" talents. Writing that, "their [auteur-theory proponents'] ideal auteur is the man who signs a long-term contract, directs any script that's handed to him, and expresses himself by shoving bits of style up the crevasses of the plots," (51) Kael indicates outrage over the privileging of certain incorporated male voices such as Ford, Alfred Hitchcock, and Orson Welles over more marginalized personnel (which, I infer, includes women, homosexuals, and other minority individuals within the industry) who contribute to works of media production.

Regarding David Lynch, Jonathan Rosenbaum adopts Sarris's perspective of the revered auteur in "Bad Ideas: The Art and Politics of *Twin Peaks,*" thus reinforcing the notion of authorial control of white, heterosexual, male directors and, as a complimentary discourse, framing television as a feminine medium unworthy of the same academic consideration provided to cinema. Noting "shapely formalist designs" embedded within the show's "mechanical plot," (26) Rosenbaum ascertains that, without such authorial flourishes, *Twin Peaks* would "be as flat as stale beer," (29) positing Lynch's stylistic oddities as the program's saving grace. At the same time, Rosenbaum laments Lynch's "watering down his eccentricity and artistry" (24) through supposed concessions to the commercial interests of the ABC network. Establishing a hierarchy of media artistry, Rosenbaum maintains that "linking Lynch with the Latin surrealism of Buñuel is a grotesque kind of shorthand" (24), considering the difference in political ambition between Buñuel's countercultural subversion and Lynch's "puritanical *Peyton Place* brand of sociology" (25). Such a remark speaks to the idea of soap operas as "apolitical" in their privileging of domestic spaces over the public sphere and signifies disdain for television as a feminine medium.

Interestingly, this denigrating remark about the soapy characteristics of *Peyton Place* also reflects Diana Hume George's critique of *Twin Peaks* as a regressive brand of primetime soap that perpetuates televisually gendered power dynamics. Hume George's primary discussion of the show's first season narrative arc, however, and appropriation of Sarris's reductive auteur discourse, discounts second-season storylines that I will discuss in relation to non-normative gender positioning. Furthermore, claims regarding Lynch's recurrent misogyny also neglect consideration of his fellow writers and *Twin Peaks* episode directors such as Diane Keaton, who might factor more prominently into Pauline Kael's conception of auteur theory.

While I respect Kael's argument and could indubitably discuss Keaton, composer Angelo Badalamenti, or co-creator Mark Frost as auteurs, my analysis of *Twin Peaks* positions David Lynch as the show's author largely due to queer *Twin Peaks* fan assessment of his work and star image as anti-normative. Doty discusses the "queer auteur" as a product of reception, discussing gay allegiance to the work of George Cukor and Dorothy Arzner as premised on extra-textual knowledge surrounding these directors' deviant social and sexual positioning. As a counterpoint to Sarris's and Rosenbaum's perspectives I am interested in auteur theory not as a hierarchical construct denoting a creator's textual ownership and artistic superiority, but as a concept adaptable to viewer experience. From this standpoint, I invoke textual analysis to observe *Twin Peaks* as an intrinsically queer television series and the work of an auteur with explicitly queer narrative and formal sensibilities.

Doty notes in his chapter "Whose Text is It Anyway? Queer Cultures, Queer Auteurs, and Queer Authorship" that, despite his focus on George Cukor and Dorothy Arzner as Hollywood auteurs who self-identified as homosexual and lesbian respectively, "there is always the possibility of queerly reading the oeuvre of any director (star,

scriptwriter, etc.) by conducting a queer analysis of textual discourses articulating sexual desire and sexual identity, whether these concern queer or non-queer subjects" (25). Here, Doty emphasizes bodies of work in which "an internal criticism is taking place, which cracks the film apart at the seams" (25), an idea central to *Twin Peak*s' recurrent reminder that the owls are not what they seem, namely that normality remains a deceptive and damaging illusory force. I am particularly drawn to the show's adoption of Michael Warner's concept in *The Trouble With Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* that "to be normal is, strictly speaking, impossible. Everyone deviates from the norm in some way" (54); my analysis alludes to Lynch's unapologetic embrace of such deviations, which compliments his celebration of all things "queer" within the text of *Twin Peaks*.

GENDER TROUBLE BEHIND THE DOUGLAS FIRS

While the first season of *Twin Peaks* contains ample queer elements, my focus pertains largely to the second, less critically availed and far more complex, season; herein Lynch rapidly concludes the "Who Killed Laura Palmer?" storyline in the interest of exploring ideas of sexuality and gender construction as pertain to fantasy and the supernatural. Relevant to this section, I have selected three episodes from season two, "May the Giant be With You," "Masked Ball," and "Checkmate" as primary examples of gender deviance.

"May the Giant be With You" opens at the Great Northern Hotel following the first season's cliffhanger wherein an unknown assailant shoots Special Agent Dale Cooper, the show's protagonist. Following an odd exchange (repeated in a variation in the series finale, "Beyond Life and Death") involving a hotel attendant delivering warm milk to an incapacitated Cooper, a phantasm in the form of a giant enters the room and

delivers three riddled clues. Displayed in low-angle as a masculine force over feminized, bleeding Cooper, the giant warns that, "the owls are not what they seem," before asking for Cooper's pinkie-ring as verification of the ghost's existence. This sequence of exchanges weds Cooper to the supernatural elements residing in the Black Lodge and echoes Gary Needham's assessment of spectral elements in queer-oriented fantasy series, that "the [phantasm] located in a time somewhere "outside" or "in-between" brings the living and dead, spectral and real, old and young back together again" (156). Cooper's narrative ambitions remain bound to his doppelganger self, a queer counterpart, who resides in the Black Lodge outside constructs of conventional time and space. While the fictional town of Twin Peaks, WA outwardly presents a deceptively serene heteronormative utopia, itself a fantasy construction, the Black Lodge reveals a queerly fashioned counter-fantasy that disrupts televisually conventional depictions of "heartland" America.

Cooper's entrance into this alternative, queer world, invites more explicit gender-deviance in the second season, and privileges such non-conformity. "Masked Ball," introduces DEA agent Dennis Bryson (David Duchovny), who enters the police station, positioned in smoldering close-up, wearing a brown dress, bright red lipstick and identifying as "Denise" Bryson. Following Denise's exit, Deputy Hawke jokingly comments, "that's a good color on him." Upon first viewing, this exchange struck me as unnecessarily mocking, another example of televisual closeting wherein a queer character provides comic relief for straight viewers while "lacking power over their narrative world" (Joyrich, 455). In later episodes, however, Bryson notes the importance of "identifying with my feminine side" in order to help clear Cooper of drug charges and defeat a criminal assailant who kidnaps Cooper (which I discuss in detail below). The show's multi-episode positioning of Bryson as an active participant in the investigation

and a heroic presence defies Lynne Joyrich's televisual categorizations of non-straight characters as victims, villains, or sexless saints whose stories generally comprise one-off episodes.

"Checkmate" follows through on this promise of dominant queer positioning within the narrative. At the episode's climax, Sheriff Truman dispatches Bryson to intervene in a hostage situation where Cooper is held at gunpoint, the damsel in distress. Bryson entices Cooper's captor, Jean Renault, with an amusing display of gender performativity, lifting his skirt flirtatiously and allowing Cooper to grab a gun holstered to his thigh; together, in a homoerotic partnership, Cooper and Bryson take down the captors. As an added aside, when Cooper mentions to Bryson, who expresses sexual interest in a woman, "Denise, I thought you were no longer interested in girls," Bryson responds, "Coop, I may be wearing a dress, but I still put my panties on one leg at a time if you know what I mean," thus inviting distinction between gender, biological sex, and sexual object-choice.

Bryson's story arc over the course of four episodes echoes Teresa de Lauretis's determination regarding "the construction of gender as the product and process of both representation and self-representation" (9) rather than simply a biological distinction between male and female. Bryson's multifaceted identity as a biological male who comfortably identifies as female yet sexually prefers women also reflects Doty's analysis of George Cukor's *Sylvia Scarlett* wherein he states, "queerly seen it is an erotically daring film whose seriocomic uses of transvestitism within the conventions of a mistaken-identity plot playfully invite all spectators to experience 'queer feelings' as they move through the range of homo- bi- and heterosexual desires articulated through the text" (*Making Things Perfectly Queer,* 37). *Twin Peaks*, similarly, evokes a broad range of gender constructions and sexual inclinations that exist outside of what Michael

Warner, channeling Judith Butler, terms a hierarchy of sexual shame based in heteronormative constructs of gender identity and appropriate performativity.

MAKING STRAIGHT VISIBLE

As pivotal to defining the queer auteur, Doty specifies an objective of viewer interpretation: "Make queer positions visible and differentiate them from straight positions and we can articulate queer discourses right in the heart of existing cultural forms" (*Making Things Perfectly Queer,* 33). Fortunately, with regard to *Twin Peaks*, Lynch already provides an intratextual juxtaposition between straight and queer relational dynamics through formal techniques, amplifying heterosexuality and rendering it hyper-visible self-parody. In his viewing of *The Wizard of Oz*, Doty ascertains that "perhaps through overwhelming details we can make what is invisible to so many visible and what is denied possible" (*Flaming Classics,* 55), a strategy that Lynch, a self-professed *The Wizard of Oz* fan, accomplished cinematically through his perverse reimaging of the children's fable in his film *Wild at Heart* (1990). In *Twin Peaks*, a promotional advertisement for which parodies *The Wizard of Oz*, Lynch positions heterosexual relationships as visibly strange, while treating unorthodox pairings such as Margaret Lanterman and her log with privileged admiration.

In "May the Giant Be With You," which Lynch directed and wrote, a pair of the show's high-school lovers, Shelly Johnson and Bobby Briggs, enact a soap operatic scene of affection that takes place, typically enough, in a hospital room. Shelly lies in bed, aroused from her comatose state by Bobby, who brings flowers. They embrace and dramatically exchange proclamations of love; all the while, the camera remains at an insubstantial height and records these events through a distorted lens. Bobby's arm in the foreground completely eclipses the size of his head and body while items in frame remain

skewed and slightly off-center. Additionally, with regard to editing, Lynch holds the take for an inordinate period of time, and eventually cuts on dialogue, thereby disrupting conventions of Classical Hollywood style based in invisible editing.

Such stylistic choices, which Jonathan Rosenbaum correctly terms authorial "eccentricities," exist as politically motivated choices, a notion that Rosenbaum overlooks in his narrative analysis of *Twin Peaks*. Robin Wood, in "Ideology, Genre, Auteur," composes a list of ideological constructs that perpetuate American hegemonic ideals in the traditional Hollywood film. Notably he states that, "out of this list emerge two ideal figures. The ideal male: virile adventurer, the potent untrammeled man of action and the ideal female: wife and mother, perfect companion, the endlessly dependable mainstay of hearth and home" (86). Bobby and Shelly represent amplifications of these archetypes, as do other couples in *Twin Peaks* such as James Hurley and Donna Hayward, who, in "Checkmate," share an extended goodbye on a picnic blanket beneath a Douglas Fir tree. During this sequence, a portion of Angelo Badalamenti's thundering score, a piano melody known as "Laura's Theme," overlaps the syrupy dialogue, nearly drowning it out entirely. Lynch's play on conventional methods of Hollywood storytelling draws attention to otherwise unnoticed formal tropes of melodrama and emphasizes Wood's link between invisible storytelling and undercurrents of political ideology. In this way, Lynch's formal "quirks" serve the politically motivated function of drawing attention to heterosexuality, which would otherwise remain presumed and relegated to the realm of "normal." Instead, Lynch simultaneously "points out the queerness of and in straight culture as well as that of individuals and groups who have been told they inhabit the boundaries between the binaries of gender and sexuality" (*Making Things Perfectly Queer*, xvi).

With regard the latter portion of Doty's assertion, identifiably "weird" (read: queer) characters retain greater power within *Twin Peaks'* narrative than do their assimilable counterparts, due to heightened familiarity with "secret" aspects of the woods and the supernatural elements contained within. Margaret Lanterman, better known as the "log lady" provides a memorable example in her ability to communicate spiritually with the woods through her log. This telepathic ability allows her to lead Cooper to his abducted girlfriend Annie in "Beyond Life and Death," and evade spiritual abduction by forces residing in the Black Lodge. Margaret's embrace of and kinship with queer doppelgangers that populate an alternate dimension, which Doty describes in his reading of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* as "expressive of homosexual fears and repressed desires" (*Flaming Classics,* 30), allows her to face the Lodge with "perfect courage," while Cooper remains a captive of repressive forces, his soul trapped in the Lodge. Considering the villainy attributed to forces within the Lodge, however, Lynch might be positing queer forces as intrinsically evil. My own interpretation, however, mirrors Doty's perspective on *Caligari* wherein he surmises that the film is "about how a person can become mentally ill by succumbing to cultural pressures to lead a traditional (straight) life by repressing and denying homosexual (or bisexual) desires" (*Flaming Classics*, 38). Cooper, throughout the second season, romanticizes the serene town of Twin Peaks and attempts to integrate himself into rural life, donning plaid shirts, accepting a job as Sherriff Truman's deputy, and entering into a relationship with saintly Annie, an ex-nun. Such a performance, as opposed to Margaret's "think what you will" queerness, signifies his acquiescence to repressed desire and precludes consumption by forces within the Lodge.

QUEER TEMPORALITY AND INVITATIONS TO LOVE

As insinuated previously, the Black Lodge, especially in the series finale, "Beyond Life and Death," connotes a queer temporality wherein heterocentric concepts of time cease to exist, a notion that parallels extra-textual events surrounding *Twin Peaks*' placement on ABC's programming schedule. Gary Needham observes, "Television is organized to reflect the assumed temporal coordination of the nuclear family" and that, with regard to television scheduling, "anything after 10 pm is the domain of the marginal audience: the un-familial, the singleton, the childless couple, queers" (145). ABC, following *Twin Peaks'* ratings drop in its second season, threatened to move the show from its Thursday night timeslot to Saturday night, a decision averted largely because, "a group called C.O.O.P. (Coalition Opposed to Offing Peaks) instituted a letter-writing campaign to the network" (Lavery, 2). As David Lavery, notes, however, the Lynch-directed finale was moved from Thursday in primetime to an obscure time-slot on Monday, queerly positioning it on the schedule's margins.

Complimenting its altered timeslot, "Beyond Life and Death" takes place almost exclusively in the Black Lodge, an alternate dimension previously observed in Cooper's dreams, wherein doppelgangers of living and dead characters reside alongside other "queers" that include a dancing dwarf and the giant from the season's opening episode. Within the Lodge, which is adorned with a zigzagging black-and-white floor and enveloped in red curtains, Cooper moves between "rooms" discovering a confusing vortex that does not adhere to laws of geographic space or linear time. Furthermore, Cooper's emotive outburst upon coming face-to-face with Caroline Earle, Annie's doppelganger and Cooper's murdered former lover, causes him to more frantically search for an exit from the Lodge and surrender his soul to the forces within. From this perspective, Needham notes that, "a significant number of moments that express queer

temporality operate through intensely emotive means; the asynchronous and the nonlinear are deeply felt" (153), imbuing *Twin Peaks'* final hour with a distinctly queer sense of time that compliments its investment in textual melodrama.

Lynch's reverence of soap operatic melodrama, observed throughout his film and television oeuvre, remains central to *Twin Peaks* and exists not only as an indicator of queer affect (as Needham notes) but also as a means of politicizing feminine media forms. Christine Gledhill in "Speculations on the Relationship between Soap Opera and Melodrama" observes that, "melodrama's schematic plotting, which serves to construct improbable inter-personal conjunctures, permits emotional enactments within fantasies disallowed by social or cultural convention, which can then be worked over according to the processes of women's fictional forms as if they are real" (121). Gledhill's analysis reflects *Twin Peaks'* inclusion of and respect for soap operatic serialization as a political motivation, despite the show's first season marketing campaign as a police procedural. To reiterate his affection for the genre, Lynch incorporates a soap opera intra-text into his show, titled *Invitation to Love,* which continuously provides important clues pertaining to the diegetic world of *Twin Peaks*. Furthermore, Sherriff Truman's secretary, Lucy Moran, retains the ability to map relational situations unfolding on *Invitation to Love*, which subsequently enables her to decipher complex events unfolding within the primary narrative and imbues her with narrative agency.

At the same time, some observations about *Twin Peaks,* soap opera, and melodrama adhere to gendered notions of television scheduling. Marc Dolan, whose article "The Peaks and Valley's of Serial Creativity" appears in *Full of Secrets*, describes *Twin Peaks* as using "a serialized detective story…as an expositional framework for an off-center soap opera," (35) acknowledging the show's affection for its complex relational web of offbeat characters over its interest in resolving mysteries such as "Who

killed Laura Palmer?" Dolan, however, attributes the program's failure to reach audiences in its second season to incongruence between how it was branded and sold as an offbeat police procedural and its privileging of soap operatic serialization. Gledhill, however, notes that "the soap opera format…demonstrates an extraordinary power to hold audiences," (122) which indicates a discrepancy between Dolan's assertion and viewer sensibilities. Rather, *Twin Peaks* might not have conformed to the viewer expectations dictated by primetime scheduling. Some of the queerness that I attribute to *Twin Peaks* as a gay man "who identifies with some conception of 'the feminine' (*Making Things Perfectly Queer,* 6), resides in the show's privileging of traditionally feminine media forms as a program aired on network television during the male-coded 9 PM timeslot.

POLITICS OF IRRESOLUTION

David Lynch, who regularly speaks in riddles, discusses *Twin Peaks* enigmatically in his book *Catching the Big Fish*, writing "So things…happen and make you start dreaming. And one thing leads to another, and if you let it, a whole other thing opens up" (78). Such lack of explanation and unwillingness to resolve mysteries of meaning within his work only renders Lynch and his oeuvre more conducive to queer readings, considering Lynch's reluctance to disavow viewer interpretations. Pursuant to Doty's understanding, "queer directors express consistent, idiosyncratic stylistic and thematic concerns throughout their body of work" (*Making Things Perfectly Queer,* 18), traits inherent in *Twin Peaks* that contradict hegemonic notions of gender and sexuality. From this perspective, Rosenbaum's assertion regarding "authorial eccentricities" as a defining characteristic of *Twin Peaks* remains in line with a queer reading. However, Rosenbaum's failure to discuss the ideological implications of such moments results in a

misperception of the show as apolitical. Similarly, Diana Hume George discusses the show's narrative arc devoid of its formal flourishes, arriving at an interpretation of *Twin Peaks* as a misogynist show that propagates a "reptilian sexual ethic" (119). Viewing both the program's narrative and style through a queer lens illuminates the opaque, mysterious, unresolved quality inherent in Lynch's description of the show, which speaks to queerness itself as a complex and irresolute political positioning, an in-between space that evades definition.

RICKIE VASQUEZ'S QUEERING OF PRIMETIME

Arriving on ABC's schedule three years following *Twin Peaks'* cancellation, *My So-Called Life* helped to advance queer subjectivity in prime time. In addition to other controversial topics pertaining to teenagers in 1990s America, the program directly addressed discrimination facing gay adolescents, a topic rarely if ever explored through a serial narrative structure in primetime up until that point. As a result, the character of Enrique "Rickie" Vasquez, a 15-year-old gay, biracial teenager portrayed by openly gay actor Wilson Cruz, emerged as television's sole recurrent queer representative in prime time. Rickie's narrative arc seems especially timely considering that, in Fall 1994, Republicans, led by Representative (later House Speaker) Newt Gingrich, usurped control of Congress using inflammatory anti-gay rhetoric as a rallying point and successful campaign tactic.

I will discuss, through textual examination of three episodes of *My So-Called Life*, how Cruz's character challenged the emergent social conservatism of the New Right and proposed a counter-hegemonic discourse through Rickie's incorporation into the "traditional" nuclear family. Additionally, I will address two ways in which *My So-Called Life* upended gay-oriented marketing appeals of 1990s American television, first

by permitting Rickie sexual desires instead of a codified sexual orientation, and second, by addressing social obstacles and political barriers that gay teenagers face within a conservative political climate. Analyzing Rickie's gender non-conformity and the show's emphasis on his camaraderie with his friends Angela Chase and Rayanne Graff within the diegesis, I will also observe the proliferation of alternate romances conjured through fantasy within the gendered space of the girls' bathroom. In this way, I will argue, *My So-Called Life* proves a progressive text in its refusal to capitulate to pseudo-liberal televisual trends that intend to placate gay viewers while ultimately reinforcing Gingrich's conservative agenda. Additionally, I will invoke previous observations about David Lynch as queer auteur in a parallel argument regarding show-runner Winnie Holzman's career-long project to upend heteronormative media conventions; I argue that her multi-media oeuvre remains central to the narrative logic of *My So-Called Life* and intrinsic to the show's political appeal.

RICKIE AND THE STANDARD NORTH AMERICAN FAMILY

In his article, "'Family Values' and the Formation of a Christian Right Agenda," Seth Dowland discusses the nuclear family as a staple of social conservatism. He states that, as early as the late 1950s, "the image of a working father, a stay-at-home mother, and well scrubbed children carried significant appeal amongst conservatives," (608) but that a change occurred in the early 1980s wherein social conservative leaders like Jerry Falwell framed "family values" in America as volatile and under-siege. As evidence for the devaluing of American families, Falwell and his cohorts cited abortion, feminism, and gay-rights as dangerous "markers of mainstream identity," (608) an assertion that Speaker Gingrich's 1994 "Contract with America" echoes. Two proposed bills specified in the Republican Contract with America, respectively named "The Personal

Responsibility Act" and "The Family Reinforcement Act," emphasize that "Congress respects the values and shares the faith of the American family" (Hunter) and propose legitimizing social conservatism through the passage of federal legislation.

Observing the discursive connotations attached to the nuclear family as detrimental to American progressivism, Michele Byers' article "Gender/Sexuality/Desire: Subversion of Difference and Construction of Loss in the Adolescent Drama of *My So-Called Life*" remains largely critical of the program's construction of the home/family as a heteronormative institution. In ascertaining that "alternatives are offered verbally in the text (with references to queer families and single-parent families) is undermined by the importance given to the Chase household, subtly reinforcing the goodness, rightness, and safety of that family space" (724), Byers maintains that *My So-Called Life* sustains fundamental tenets of the New Right's policy agenda through its privileging of Patty and Graham Chase's household.

An episode titled "So-Called Angels," however, presents the nuclear family, or as Byers terms it, the Standard North American Family, as a rigidly defined structure that requires reassessment. "So-Called Angels" opens during the Christmas season with a battered Rickie, homeless after coming out as gay to his family, wandering the streets. Despite his friend Angela Chase's initial offer to allow Rickie to stay at her house, Patty and Graham refuse, prompting Rickie to seek shelter at an abandoned warehouse. Regarding this episode, Byers remarks that Angela's parents recuse themselves of homophobia, racism, and classism after refusing to allow Rickie to stay in their home, stating:

> Patty and Graham know that it is wrong to feel as they do because they are good people. And because they are good people they re-encode for the viewer that somehow it is OK to feel this way, somewhat natural, normal, even appropriate.

> The whole realm of existence in which Rickie exists is constructed by, is erased by, the apparently simple duality between the known and the unknown (721).

From Byers' standpoint, the episode comforts heterosexual viewers through its justification of Patty and Graham's exclusionary behavior and subconscious homophobia. This analysis, however, fails to take into account the episode's concluding moments, wherein Rickie incorporates himself into the Standard North American Family and upends its basis in anti-gay social conservatism. An angel appears to Patty, and insinuates that Angela could just as easily be in Rickie's situation were it not for her [Angela's] societal advantages as a white, upper-middle class teenager. While desperately searching for Angela, who has run off in pursuit of Rickie, Patty finds Rickie lighting a candle in church. She embraces him and, at episode's close, Rickie sits with the Chases as a member of the Standard North American Family. From Patty's embrace of Rickie it can be inferred that that there is nothing "appropriate" about societal exclusion of queer youth from the Standard North American Family, presenting a partial rejection of white, heteronormative myth that directly contradicts the New Right's explicit exclusion of queer individuals from the American family. Seth Dowland observes that, "Christian Right leaders foretold this doom [American downfall] by portraying homosexuals as the greatest threats to the family…and, furthermore, Conservative Christians opposed assigning homosexuals any positions of authority over children because many of them believed that homosexuality fostered child abuse" (626), a notion that Rickie's incorporation into the Chase family flatly rejects.

Abuse against Rickie in "So-Called Angels" stems from the societal misinformation disseminated by proponents of the Christian right. Instead of further substantiating conservative myths that justify the legitimacy of such behavior, the episode reclaims institutions long appropriated by social conservatives such as the Church, the

Home, and, most importantly, the Family, and situates Rickie, in all his televisually constructed "difference," comfortably within them. The episode blatantly adheres to the notion of fantasy, observing angels in various forms, as phantasms, guiding spirits, and movie creations (Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* plays in the background), and, as a result, creates an idealistic challenge to New Right's exclusionary construction of family. Furthermore, its disavowal of a "moral" basis for discriminatory and exclusionary actions provides a counterpoint to several tenets of the Republican Contract with America.

SEXUAL DESIRE AND HETERONORMATIVE DISRUPTION

Ron Becker, in "Prime-time Television in the Gay Nineties: Network Television, Quality Audiences, and Gay Politics," discusses the inclusion of gay storylines in primetime programming in the 1990s as a selling point for wealthy urban audiences and marketing tool rather than a political progression. He writes in his conclusion:

> Just how have gay characters and issues been presented? Used as textual selling points, gay and lesbian characters and their lives often mirrored both the urban, upscale, white, and adult quality audience networks seek and the demographic profiles of the gay community created in the marketing press (43).

He further describes gay-oriented storylines in 1990s programming such as *Ellen* and *Will and Grace* as an attractive device for luring straight audience members, who occupy an increasingly diverse urban landscape, to "edgy" television programs.

Despite fleeting references to *My So-Called Life*, Becker largely ignores the program with regard to television market politics of the early 1990s. Byers, however, recognizes Rickie's lack of sexual engagement as an indicator of *My So-Called Life*'s appeal to straight viewers. She writes, "Rickie, with no potential for sexuality at present, decides to align himself with Angela's felt ability to choose abstinence…the assumption being that homosexuality is for adults only, but male heterosexuality is acceptable at any

age" (723). Becker argues that the strategy of including gay characters like Rickie in the context that Byers describes, "aggressively targets the broader audience, an audience that apparently finds a gay twist with their television appealing" (42). She perceives *My So-Called Life*'s shying away from Rickie's sexual engagement as a marketing appeal to straight audiences and an inhibiting factor to the show's progressive discourse.

Through my own engagement with the text, however, I notice significant exceptions in *My So-Called Life* to Becker's argument, notably in the episode "Life of Brian," in which the program most explicitly explores Rickie's sexual awakening. While this episode primarily focuses on Brian Krakow's sexual and social frustrations pertaining to Angela Chase and a new girl in school, Delia Fischer, Rickie features prominently as a result of his crush on a male student, Corey Halfrick. During a scene in the school gymnasium during which the boys begin to flirt, the camera subjectively sexualizes Corey from Rickie's, and the audience's, vantage point (in close-up no less), a political decision that allows Rickie to fantasize about boys and permits the spectator to indulge in Rickie's desire. This runs contrary to the heterosexual position of "comfort" that Becker discusses as marketable to affluent urban audiences and contradicts Byers's assertion that the show restricts Rickie from a sexual identity outside of his codified orientation.

This episode, in effect, also disregards the concerns of the New Right rather than attempting to offset them. "Life of Brian" ends with Rickie breaking into a fierce, aggressive dance that celebrates his sexuality and presents a defiant announcement of gay teen sexual desire at a heterosexually sanctioned school dance. The moment intentionally confronts upper class heterosexual viewers, discounts the SLUMPY audience, and refutes the validity of the New Right's 1994 policy agenda. I will elaborate upon this final point to a greater extent in the following section.

CRITIQUING SOCIAL AND GOVERNMENTAL INSTITUTIONS

Becker also argues that 1990s programming featuring gay characters caters to the demands of wealthy pseudo progressives through the process of personalization, a largely accurate assessment that aligns with Bonnie Dow's observation in her article "Ellen, Television, and the Politics of Gay and Lesbian Visibility" that, "the personalization of [gay] identity is what television and mainstream media practice do best: making us like characters, not issues" (Dow, 107). Dow discusses the late 1990s show *Ellen* at length, echoing Becker's assertions about the sitcom's desire to "make viewers like characters, not issues" (107) in an attempt to appeal to affluent straight viewers. As a result, programs like *Ellen* "take pains to establish gay political awareness and activism as oppressive" (103). Consequently, personalized depictions of (predominantly male) gay characters often appeal to homonormative ideals of affluent gay domesticity, propagating myths of an equal, tolerant American society wherein gays achieve wealth and happiness through the attributes of a benevolent meritocracy.

Given that six tenets of the Republican Contract with America pertain to fiscal rather than social policy, stating explicitly "that historic change would be the end of government that is too big, too intrusive, and too easy with the public's money" (Hunter), it remains fair to assume that the primary goals of the New Right upon taking control of the House of Representatives pertain to ensuring the privatization of wealth and protecting free market policies. As Thomas Frank states in the introduction to his book, *What's the Matter with Kansas?,* "the leaders of the [conservative] backlash may talk Christ but they walk corporate" (6), prominently advocating social issues in order to convince lower-class Americans to vote against their own economic self-interests. The predominance of solely wealthy gay characters who are both explicitly depicted as "others" and remain devoid of activist tendencies allows for both a marketing device

targeting affluent heterosexual urbanites and a political tool for New Right conservatives to argue against the extension of gay rights (provided gay individuals' obvious economic security on television). As Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis explain in their article, "Television and the Politics of Representation," about inhibiting factors of *The Cosby Show* on the African American community, "we do not want a good story, we want a classy setting," (430) a preference that prompts the upward mobilization of minority demographics on television but inhibits "the promise of equal opportunity" (422). Through maintaining a status quo with regard to civil rights and economic trends, programs like the ones mentioned in Becker's article can satisfy all eight tenets of the Republican Contract with America, both social and economic.

My So-Called Life, however, provides a notable contrast to *Ellen* in its focus on societal obstacles that gay individuals may face. Rickie remains a likeable character, especially in his loyalty to best friend and fellow outcast Rayanne Graff. Otherwise, however, Becker's and Dow's descriptions of gay characters and marketing demographics do not apply to *My So-Called Life* generally and to Rickie Vasquez specifically. The televisual image of a poor, gay, biracial teenager who suffers in society as a result of his intersectional disposition does not adhere to Becker's narrative about the heterogeneity of middle and upper class homosexual images in the 1990s. Unlike Ellen Morgan on *Ellen* and Will Truman on *Will and Grace*, Rickie struggles against institutionalized poverty, homophobia, and racism as well as prototypical teenage problems like romantic rejection and sexual frustration.

Two episodes denote the necessity for societal change as regards gay rights and the rights of the underclass. As a consequence of persistent bullying at school and the refusal of school administrators to intervene on his behalf in the episode "Guns and Gossip," Rickie stashes a gun in his locker that accidentally goes off. Instead of deriding

Rickie's desperate action, the episode positions authoritative adults, notably the school superintendent, as ineffective and morally compromised. Additionally, unlike sitcom or episodic dramatic narratives, "Guns and Gossip" remains only partially resolved when Rickie's newfound friend, Brian Krakow, refuses to divulge information about the gun. Rickie's heated monologue about the need for "some students" to carry protection denotes his activism against a negligent institution, while the homophobic policies of the school remain of primary focus, a social policy issue rather than a matter of personal "likeability."

The most counter-hegemonic episode of the show in my opinion, "So Called Angels," demonstrates the societal repercussions of "coming out," which in this case includes facing economic depravity. Rickie's family beats him, disowns him, and throws him out of the house as a result of his being gay. Teenage homelessness becomes the central issue of this episode, as Rickie is forced to take refuge in an abandoned warehouse. Poverty, an issue rarely discussed in shows targeted to affluent urbanites, exists as central to Rickie's condition, and his homosexuality carries consequences that are dire and personally affecting.

These two episodes disrupt the televisual trend of "refusing to recognize the existence of organized, systemic, or politically oppressive homophobia" (Dow, 103) through their invocation of political action, critique of social institutions, and refusal to capitulate to the demands of a "quality" audience. *My So-Called Life*'s prominent observance of societal issues facing the gay community and American institutions in need of reform challenges both the social and economic prerogatives outlined in the Republican Contract with America. Furthermore, the show provides a counter-narrative to both the GOP and the commoditized institution of American television that regularly, if unwittingly, reinforces its values.

Despite some critics' initial dismissal of *My So-Called Life* as "a sort of 'Beverly Hills, 90210,' minus the lobotomy" (Rosenberg), retrospective articles in popular publications describe the politically motivated teen drama as a taboo-breaking program. Jennifer Armstrong discusses Rickie Vasquez in an *Entertainment Weekly* cover story as "the first [gay teen] on a primetime show and the only one for another five lonely years" (36), noting the initiation of gay teen visibility on *My So-Called Life*. Armstrong, however, describes *My So-Called Life* as a steppingstone for queer depictions on television rather than as a political anomaly. She writes, "when Rickie Vasquez came out to his family on a 1994 episode of *My So-Called Life* he ended up bruised, bloodied, and living in an abandoned warehouse full of homeless teens" (36), Armstrong's implication being that such a scenario would be unthinkable in the current televisual era of gay acceptance.

I find Armstrong's "gay teen timeline," which begins with Rickie Vasquez and ends with Kurt Hummel on the Fox Network program *Glee*, oddly antithetical to progress. *My So-Called Life* remains a flawed text ideologically, notably in its final episode, "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities" that neatly resolves Rickie's narrative arc before ignoring his character entirely to celebrate the heteronormativity achieved through Angela and Jordan Catalano's union. Regardless, the willingness of *My So-Called Life* to recognize issues of societal stigma and institutional inequity facing gay teenagers demonstrates courage in its rebuke of dominant New Right myths. Furthermore, the program's blatant disregard of the quality audience's desire for heteronormatively constructed and comfortably classed gay images extends to queerly imagined relationships outside codified sexual identity, as I discuss in my next section.

ADOLESCENT DEVIATIONS AND FLUID DESIRES

Rickie's construction of a queer identity extends not only to his sexual subjectivity but also to his anti-normative performance of gender. Moreover, his identification and camaraderie with his female friends, Angela and Rayanne, within the adolescent and gendered space of the girls' bathroom "recaptures and reasserts a militant sense of difference that views the erotically 'marginal' as both a 'consciously chosen site of resistance' and a 'space of radical openness and possibility'" (*Making Things Perfectly Queer*, 3 citing bell hooks' "Choosing the Margins as a Space of Radical Openness," 153). Other "marginal" romances such as Angela's and Rayanne's kinetic bond, Rickie's devotion to Rayanne through their shared "difference," and Sharon's outburst at Angela premised on emotional abandonment, disrupt heteronormative coupling through alternate intimate arrangements and deconstruct fixed identity within a supposedly gender-conforming space.

Rickie's performance of adolescent femininity first introduces the girls' bathroom as a gender-deviant space that re-organizes notions of coupling within the series. In the pilot episode, he is seen in the mirror alongside Angela and Rayanne, applying mascara and engaging in gossip about Angela's crush, Jordan Catalano. As a somewhat sarcastic statement of desire, he comments about Jordan, "I love the way he leans." The declaration, however, mimics Angela's interior voice-over narration earlier in the episode verbatim, which overlaps a soft focus point-of-view shot that lingers on Jordon leaning against his locker. Rickie's profession of romantic yearning invites the alternative pairing Rickie/Jordon within the fantasy space of the girls' bathroom, disrupting the program's heteronormative focal point and inviting "spectators to experience queer feelings as they move through the range of homo-, bi-, and heterosexual desires articulated within the text" (*Making Things Perfectly Queer,* 37).

The multiplicity of desires outside fixed sexual identity extends to Rayanne and Angela, first seen together as a romantic duo in the series' opening shots, overlapped by the initial voice over dialogue, "So, I started hanging out with Rayanne Graff" as the soul mates jubilantly interact and prank passers-by in home-video style footage. This opening interlude speaks to the organizing romance of the series as one between the two girls, relegating the Angela/Jordan storyline to peripheral status; accentuating the explicit queerness of their relationship, Rayanne heartbreakingly declares to Angela toward the end of the Pilot, "You're so beautiful, it hurts to look at you." Appropriating the line Angela wishes Jordan would speak to her, Rayanne positions herself as the romantic center of Angela's world.

The repeated appearance of the two girls and Rickie in the mirror together within the quasi-private but communal space of the girls' bathroom presents a contrast to the heterosexually exclusive places in which Angela and Jordon interact: a darkened stairwell, the car, the home. This space allows for the proliferation of sexual fluidity and the conjuring of alternate romantic configurations that defy sanctioned heterosexual couplings. Gary Needham discusses how "queerness haunts TV and denies it the full capacity to be as normative as it wishes to imagine" (157), which speaks *My So-Called Life*'s explicit disavowal of sexual and gender fixity. Working within the limitations of network television, Holzman, her writers, and the actors identify and explicate the medium's haunting queerness.

WINNIE HOLZMAN, QUEER AUTEUR

I agree with Ron Becker that the experiences of queer individuals in the United States have been too often tailored to market projections. However, in concert with Needham's investigation of television's underlying queerness, it seems apparent that

Winnie Holzman attempted to counteract homo/heteronormative televisual trends, recognizing the fragility of familial straightness as television's organizing idiom. As *My So-Called Life*'s creator and show-runner, she, like David Lynch, appeals to Doty's conceptualization of the queer auteur as explicating non/contra/anti-straight visibility in mass media through an ideologically recurrent oeuvre. Positing Holzman as queer auteur, I briefly consider tenets of her personal biography, her creative contentions with ABC, and her recurrent investments in queer media.

Discussing the denotative queerness of *My So-Called Life,* Savannah Dooley, Holzman's daughter and co-collaborator on subsequent projects such as ABC Family's *Huge,* describes her mother's anti-normative influence in an article with the *Huffington Post*. Referring specifically to *My So-Called Life,* Dooley states, "before I realized I was gay, she was really doing some groundbreaking stuff with gay teenagers and just to come out in a house that is that accepting that it was so not a big deal was amazing for me, and you know as a queer person, I am really interested in…queer stories" (Zalaznick). As reported by Meredith Lepore of the blog *The Grindstone,* Holzman also commented during an appearance at the Athena Film Festival on the cancellation of *Huge* that "I am not willing to give up the integrity of a show. They [ABC] hired me because I'm someone they're interested in, but I still have to play ball and I still have to find the money…but I wasn't willing to be embarrassed every time I watched it" (Lepore). *My So-Called Life*'s brief run represents a similar appeal to queer ideology over capitulation to network demands and reiterates Holzman's attempts to fashion non-normative spaces on network television over the concerns of ABC executives who considered *My So-Called Life*'s appeal "far too narrow" (Zurawik).

Placing *My So-Called Life* within Holzman's broader cannon of work also reemphasizes her queer bona fides. Holzman's writing credits on nine episodes of

thirtysomething, one of the first American television dramas to feature a recurrent gay couple and address the challenges of living with HIV/AIDS, indicates a willingness to challenge standards of prime time "appropriateness" at the height of Reagan-era social conservatism; the lyrics she composed for songs in the film *Camp*, about an alternative summer program for artistically inclined queer youths, reflect anti-normative sentiments regarding kids' sexuality; the Broadway show *Wicked* (adapted by Holzman for the stage and paralleling David Lynch's fascination with *The Wizard of Oz*) posits a reviled villain, the Wicked Witch of the West, as a queerly stigmatized protagonist who yearns to "be popular." Recognizing Holzman's appeal to non-normative constituencies through multiple and varied mass media texts contributes to the project of rendering queer discourses in *My So-Called Life* explicit and politically motivated rather than peripheral and unintended.

CONCLUSION

Queerly reading Holzman and Lynch in addition to the shows they helmed emphasizes industrially negotiating spaces for anti-normative discourse on network television and indicates the potential for transformative dialogue between non/anti/contra-straight television writers/creators and queerly positioned spectators. Doty's observation that, "queer reception doesn't stand outside personal and cultural histories: it is part of the articulation of these histories" (*Making Things Perfectly Queer*, 21) demands explicating queer texts in order to reconceive television history beyond a restrictive and linear LGBTQ timeline that charts industrial "progress" toward "positive" representations. Recognizing anti-straight discourses in diegetic worlds both wonderful and strange illuminates possibilities for decoding televisual hieroglyphics that have hinted at queerness all along.

Chapter 2: It's Like, Everybody's in this Big Hurry to Supposedly Remember What Happened: Misremembering and De-Queering Television Texts

In the pilot episode of *My So-Called Life* Angela Chase, argues with her English teacher about historical memory and her high school's yearbook. Frustrated with the book's airbrushed optimism and misconstrued perspective of student life at Liberty High, Angela laments, "I mean, this whole thing with yearbook - it's like, everybody's in this big hurry to make this book, to supposedly remember what happened. Because if you made a book of what really happened, it'd be a really upsetting book." This moment speaks to *My So-Called* Life's recognition of historical selectivity and archival omission, and remains pertinent to popular press retrospectives of the show. Through rose-colored glasses, press remembrances herald *My So-Called Life* and *Twin Peaks* as revolutionary and different, aesthetically and ideologically superior to "mainstream" television, without addressing elements of backlash that met both programs upon their original airings.

Naming the *My So-Called Life* DVD boxed set the best home video purchase of 2007, Ken Tucker of *Entertainment Weekly* writes, "Shot with moviemakers' eyes - unusual for the small screen - MSCL was deep focus in every sense. No TV show ever made young love seem so pure, so complicated, so vexed, so fleeting. One perfect season of television on DVD, with all the trimmings - something to be thankful for" (Tucker, 2007). *EW*'s review of the *Twin Peaks* Gold Box DVD set employs similar rhetoric of celebration and nostalgia, "*Twin Peaks* was among the first TV shows reviewed in *Entertainment Weekly*. At the time, I praised its 'calm, deliberate eccentricity' and gave its premiere episode a rare A+. I'd stand by that grade" (Tucker, 2007).

Conversely, early reviews and press articles of both *My So-Called Life* and *Twin Peaks* illuminate a conflicted sentiment of celebration and doom, praise and derision. The shows' most admiring critics, including Ken Tucker of *Entertainment Weekly*, Howard Rosenberg of the *Los Angeles Times*, John O'Connor of the *New York Times,* Ed Bark of the *Dallas Morning News,* and Tom Shales of *The Washington Post* commend their "uniqueness" and express a desire for longevity, but also predict cancellation and deride aspects of the shows that conflict with institutional notions of quality.

Considering this divided discourse of success and failure, I examine popular press receptions of *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life* as invalidations of queer and marginalized histories that straddle the line between exposure and erasure. Pursuant to this analysis, I ask: Based on popular press accounts of *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life* published during the shows' initial runs (1990-1991 and 1994-1995 respectively), how are these two programs discussed in terms of success and failure within the context of television? How does this divided discourse speak to understandings of televisual queerness? To answer these questions question I pose an alternative press analysis that employs Judith Halberstam's notion of the "queer art of failure" to complicate understandings of both shows' retrospective "quality" positioning.

TWIN PEAKS AND THE COMPLIMENTARY ROAD TO FAILURE

Twin Peaks' movie-length pilot aired on April 8, 1990 to near-unanimous critical praise, both for the show and ABC. Enamored with *Twin Peaks'* cinematic aesthetics, series co-creator and episode director David Lynch's "strange" authorial flourishes, and the show's complex narrative trajectories and offbeat characters, reviewers from national newspapers and one start-up niche magazine, *Entertainment Weekly*, hailed the program as a brilliant and revelatory predictor of televisual trends in the 1990s. Concurrent with

ratings discourse, however, critical appreciation involved comparison of journalists' superior tastes to those of "mass" constituencies whose non-sophistication would inevitably result in *Twin Peaks'* cancellation. Additionally, some critics soured on episodes not directed by David Lynch, describing much of the first season and all of the second as derivative, pretentious, and soapy, perspectives that adhere to auteur romanticism and distinguish the pilot from "lesser" installments.

The pilot's premier garnered hyperbolic pre-show press in addition to glowing reviews, with critics contrasting the program to television deemed more disposable. Anticipating *Twin Peaks*' premier, Howard Rosenberg asks in the *Los Angeles Times* on April 6, 1990 "First question: Can this be happening? Second question: Can this be happening on television?" (1990). Answering himself "yes and yes," Rosenberg rationalizes *Twin Peaks* airing within the framework of ABC's televisual superiority over its big-three competitors, NBC and CBS; he compares the commercial network to Channel 4 in Britain in terms of its willingness to serve as a "laboratory" for individualistic experimentation rather than a "rest home for tired ideas" (Rosenberg, 1990). Observing ABC's innovation within the discourse of network TV's endangerment in an era of new technology, Mark Harris writes upon the premier of *Twin Peaks*, "Ten years ago, the networks didn't need David Lynch. Not only did they not need him - they wouldn't have wanted him. They had *Three's Company* and *That's Incredible* [both broadcast on ABC] shows that attracted 9 out of 10 viewers without being innovative, or adventurous, or good" (Harris 1990). Concurrent with Jeffrey Sconce's retrospective argument in "What if? Navigating Television's New Textual Boundaries," that "television, when forced to compete more aggressively for audiences in the 1990s…came to recognize and exploit certain textual strength it had over other media" (96), Harris projects that "[*Twin Peaks*] could foretell a decade in which network television

programmers will have to face many more excursions into the unknown. For TV viewers, that can only be taken as good news" (1990). In applauding *Twin Peaks'* distinction from earlier ABC fare, such reviews echo ABC's own industrial discourse, apparent in an ad for *Twin Peaks* proclaiming, "ABC is looking more and more like the network of the '90s," darker and edgier than the competition, serious and removed from its frivolous past. The advertisement includes some of the show's more offbeat transitional images, including a flashing red streetlight, and emphasizes *Peaks'* "cinematic" low-key/high contrast lighting concept. Interspersed between images, excerpts of reviews from *Time Magazine* and the *The Gannett News Service* proclaim *Twin Peaks'* pilot as "the most hauntingly original work ever done for American TV."

Such praise, however, carries overt connotations of impending failure for *Twin Peaks* predicated on ratings and abstract conceptualizations of "audience" tastes. Bluntly conjecturing, "Will *Twin Peaks* be a hit? Not a chance in hell. (Well, maybe in hell)" (1990), Ken Tucker of *Entertainment Weekly* reverts to denigrating a mass audience for adhering to the types of entertainments that he and his colleague, Mark Harris, dismiss as predictable, and inferior television. Drawing comparisons between *Twin Peaks* and its timeslot competitors, Tucker continues:

> I also recognize that [unsettling drama] is not what most people watch TV for, and I'm guessing that a hefty percentage of the millions who'll tune in out of curiosity won't make it past Peaks' grim first 15 minutes. Groans of ''Honey, we're missing *Married With Children* for this?'' will resound throughout this great land, as remote-control trigger-fingers get itchy (1990).

Similarly John O'Connor from the *New York Times,* interviewing David Lynch for a Sunday edition of the paper months prior to the show's premier, writes, "whether or not a television audience can accept Lynch's weirder ideas, he has movies for his more

unbridled fits of imagination" (O'Connor, 1990), insinuating the same laziness in television audiences that Tucker sarcastically explicates.

Academics such as Eileen Meehan and Ien Ang challenge such invocations of "audience" as perpetuating fictions conjured by ratings companies. Channeling Todd Gitlin, Ang argues in her 1991 book *Desperately Seeking the Audience* that "the elevated status of research as a means of providing the institution with…ways to predict success and failure" (22) does not account for actual audience tastes but for abstract market predictions. Meehan, articulating similar concerns, in her 1993 article "Heads of Household and Ladies of the House: Gender, Genre, and Broadcast Ratings 1929-1990" writes that "the interaction of advertisers, networks, and the ratings monopolist generate the definition of the commodity audience, which is then operationalized through the ratings" (213). Ken Tucker's, John O'Connor's, and Howard Rosenberg's perspectives provide an "incitement to discourse," which Michel Foucault describes not as "silence itself-the things one declines to say or is forbidden to name" but rather "an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within overall strategies" (27). In blaming audiences for promoting allegedly lower quality programming through choice and poor taste, such critics rhetorically disavow the Foucauldian power dynamics central to industrial discourse wherein networks, ratings organizations, critics, and viewers enter into a dialogue that maintains, rather than undermines, corporate status quo. These reviewers distinguish their superiority of taste from the crassness of ratings, applauding ABC and David Lynch for the artistic "success" of the program, while blaming the audience rather than institutional arrangements for the program's inevitable failure. Invoking ratings as the ultimate determinant of televisual longevity, they work to sustain and reinforce commodity politics.

While ratings discourse remains consistent across the majority of reviews that I uncovered, most critics also invoked genre as a means to qualify, masculinize, and de-queer *Twin Peaks*. Ed Bark's article for the *Dallas Morning News* announces the show as, "*Dallas* with an IQ, *Dynasty* without all that lousy acting. It is so unusual that ABC entertainment president Robert Iger says the network seriously is considering airing it without commercials" (Bark, 1990). While complimentary, the preview denigrates soap opera form, which Christine Gledhill, citing Ien Ang's ethnography of female viewers of *Dallas*, discusses as "permitting emotional enactments within fantasies disallowed by social or cultural convention" (Gledhill, 121). Disparagingly, such comparisons ignore the gender and sexual politics inherent in *Dallas* and *Dynasty,* including challenges to gender roles that Ang observes as central to viewer reception of the Ewing family's dynamics and the favorable introduction of a gay character (Steven Carrington of *Dynasty*) to primetime. As Stephen Tropiano notes in *The Prime Time Closet*, *Dynasty* cultivated a cult following, including screenings at gay bars, indicating a marginalized history of reception that adheres to Gledhill's notes on the ideological importance of melodrama (and, I would add, camp) for the proliferation of counter-hegemonic television viewing practices.

Cognizant of melodrama's ideological implications, *Twin Peaks* celebrates queerness and poses similar challenges to gender roles and dominant conceptualizations of power; reviews both recognize and seek to diminish *Twin Peaks'* melodramatic narrative politics. John O'Connor's initial review of the pilot unusually and refreshingly notes that:

> The series slips into the traditional television form of a soap opera, complete with ominous cue music. On the surface, things seem comfortingly ordinary, right down to the diner that makes a nifty tuna sandwich and great cherry pie. But as

> the murder investigation proceeds, all sorts of nasty business are exposed, from betrayals and secret affairs to drugs and pornography. (O'Connor, 6 April 1990)

His later review of the series, however, reviles the soap opera form and lambasts the show for its redundant weirdness. In an October 1991 review, O'Connor writes:

> Instead of a dancing dwarf, Mr. Lynch this time came up with a strange giant who, in a vaguely German accent, appeared to the wounded and exhausted Agent Cooper with odd clues and warnings. ("The owls are not what they seemed.") It seems that Mr. Lynch's oft-stated belief in the redemptive powers of fantasy will be indulged more openly this season. Intuition and subconscious, do your stuff. In his *Saturday Night Live* appearance, the engaging Mr. MacLachlan had two routines revolving around who really killed Laura Palmer, both of which only served to underscore an obvious thought: who cares? '*Twin Peaks*' has done enough fiddling. It's time to get on with the show. (O'Connor, 2 October 1990)

The frustrations that O'Connor articulates speak to aggravation with the form of soap opera, which, as Tania Modleski observes, employs redundancy and narrative deference to "undercut the very notion of success by continuously demonstrating that happiness for all is an unattainable goal" (Modleski, 72). As *Twin Peaks'* second season develops, many of the "distractions and interruptions" (72) that O'Connor dismisses as overly soapy and narratively unnecessary take on explicitly queer form. Special Agent Dale Cooper (Kyle MacLachlan) enlists the expertise of cross-dressing DEA Agent, Denis (Denise) Bryson over a four-episode arc, Dale and his nemesis Windom Earle encounter doppelgangers of themselves in the queerly fashioned alternative space of the Black Lodge, and odd, outcast characters such as Margaret Lanterman, the log lady, demonstrate heightened narrative knowledge over their normatively positioned counterparts. Echoing O'Connor's sentiment that *Twin Peaks'* second season amounts to, "absurdly abstract swill, a plodding, self-indulgent farce from a director who seemingly has lost his senses, and his sense of direction" (1990), Ed Bark of the *Dallas Morning News* condemns the program's soap operatic logic and, by implication, its queer centrality.

Ironically, by abandoning the series and deferring to the wisdom of industrial discourse in the program's second season, reviewers like Bark and O'Connor substantiate the logic of ratings with which they sought exception at the time of *Twin Peaks'* premier. Bark writes:

> The joke may be on Mr. Lynch. By choosing to laugh in the face of any remaining plausibilty, he may well have killed *Peaks* ' chances to survive the season. Ratings from Nielsen's 23 "overnight" TV markets, including Dallas/Fort Worth, show sharp audience drop-offs during the show's first 15 minutes. In Dallas/Fort Worth, the Nielsens say that 236,000 homes were tuned to Peaks at 8 p.m. But by 8:15 p.m., 45,000 of those homes had tuned out.

Adopting a populist tone, William Grimes reinforces Bark's solidarity with ratings discourse, determining in a 1991 article for *The New York Times* that *Twin Peaks'* second season "subplots and peculiar characters" deterred "reasonable" viewers but will surely serve as "fodder for the academic trough. Later this month in Chicago, the International Communication Association will chew over topics like 'Sexual Politics at the Double R: A Gender Analysis of the Working Men and Women of Twin Peaks' and 'Twin Peaks' and the Paradoxical Politics of Postmodernist Representation…and then there's Europe" (Grimes). Delegitimating the show's queer discourse, first through a denigration of "mass television" and later through a tirade against academic elitism, reviewers exhibit self-contradictory stances on the show dependent upon the *Twin Peak*'s standing as a commercial "success" or "failure."

Judith Halberstam, citing Scott Sandage's *A History of Failure in America*, observes in *The Queer Art of Failure*:

> Failure, of course, goes hand in hand with capitalism. A market economy must have winners and losers; capitalism requires that everyone live in a system that equates success with profit and links failure to the inability to accumulate wealth. Losers leave no records, while winners cannot stop talking about it, and so the record of failure is a hidden history of pessimism in a culture of optimism (88).

In seeking to illuminate queer struggle as "an art of unbecoming," Halberstam argues against positivist forms of remembrance that perpetuate dominant discourses of success. Observing *Twin Peaks*' purported shortcomings as queerly influential attributes exposes popular press perceptions of the show as riddled with contradictions and uncomfortably aligned with market discourses. While retrospective reviews from these same publications, alluded to in my introduction, seek to mis-remember an optimistic narrative of unbridled success contingent on the series' superior artistry, I prefer to celebrate *Twin Peaks'* forgotten embrace of failure.

My So-Called Life and Suspended Adolescence

Similar to their appraisal of *Twin Peaks*, critics lauded *My So-Called Life* for its elevation of television programming through cinematic aesthetics and "complex" serialized structure, but foretold the show's undoing even prior to its premier. Describing the program in terms of its verisimilitude and "realistic" depiction of "actual teenagers," Ken Tucker and Ed Bark, as well as Tom Shales of the *Washington Post* applaud *My So-Called Life* for its "overriding quality" (Bark, 1994) and writerly examination of controversial issues such as teen sexuality. Conversely, less enthused critics deride the show and its creator, Winnie Holzman, for melodramatic overindulgences, denigrating the series (and its creator) as whiny and pretentious. While many reviewers expressed exasperation with *Twin Peaks* only in its second season, rationalizing the show's cancellation as the result of a soap operatic decline in quality, many of these same publications subtly mock *My So-Called Life* from its inception on pretenses of narrative excess.

Early reviews echo the unanimous praise of *Twin Peaks'* pilot episode, with similar nods toward quality construction. In his assessment of the show, Ken Tucker

writes, “The quick juxtaposition of idealized dialogue and realistic camera work epitomizes the brilliance of what the show's creator, Winnie Holzman, has pulled off: She gives Angela the dignity of her shallow deep-dish thoughts, but also permits us to see the truth, even when it contradicts our central character” (1994), appealing again to understandings of superior television as embracing cinematic aesthetics and complex characterization. Shales, describing the pilot as “daring, dark, and disturbing,” adjectives pulled verbatim from *Twin Peaks* press discourse, illuminates *My So-Called Life* as both superior to and different from other teen-oriented dramas in terms of its realism. Ed Bark, recycling his own *Twin Peaks* qualifiers, posits the program as “provocative, evocative and sometimes darkly drawn, it easily is network television's most uncompromising look at young adulthood” (1994), while Bruce Weber, John O’Connor’s colleague at the *New York Times*, more sarcastically quips that the show features “a folk-rock feel, suggested in camera angles that emphasize symbolic juxtapositions and reaction shots of quizzical, saddened or stunned faces, and made tangible in its theme music and the rest of the soundtrack” while still complimenting the show’s “nuanced handling” (Webber) of teenage subjectivity.

Even these accreditations of the show’s uniqueness denigrate *My So-Called Life’*s depiction of adolescent girlhood by mocking the show’s employment of melodramatic devices incongruent with “realism.” Other reviews more openly denounce the program as soapy and childish. In a scathing review that contrasts to his praise of *Twin Peaks*, Howard Rosenberg dismisses *My So-Called Life* as “a sort of *Beverly Hills, 90210*, minus the lobotomy,” writing that, "[Holzman] elevates these flawed characters to high-decibel stridence; just who is least grating in this series varies from scene to scene and episode to episode” (1994). While more celebratory than Rosenberg, Shales explicitly notes in his final paragraph, “there is a certain pretentious artiness to the new series, as there was to

[ABC's] *thirtysomething*," critiquing the program for feminized elements such as Angela's diary-style voice over as well as expressionistic lighting and score. Also noting passages from the pilot's voice-over, Weber chides Holzman for "inferior" elements of her writing, observing that, "Not everything said is quite so piercing and precise ('School is a battlefield for your heart' -- ugh!)." In challenging elements of the program incongruent with discourses of quality and success, Weber's otherwise positive review reveals critical frustrations with *My So-Called Life* as teenage soap opera.

In *Legitimating Television,* Michael Newman and Elana Levine discuss ways in which institutional discourses devalue teen dramas on soap operatic criteria, and their concluding observations in the "Not a Soap Opera" chapter are worth quoting at some length:

> Apart from prime-time soaps, the key place for the exploration of [familial and romantic] matter…has been so-called teen series, dramatic programs that focus on teen characters that are frequently targeted at young audiences. Such programming tends to be at two removes from the most valued and legitimated of contemporary TV. For one its association with youth brings to these series the association of youth culture as commercialized and conformist, and the ways in which the adult world tends to devalue that which is associated with the young. But such programming is also kept away from the most legitimated contemporary sites of TV through its association with the feminine (99).

Press evaluations that centralize soap operatic aspects of the program generally diminish Winnie Holzman's status as an auteur, crediting her as a television writer best known for episodes of the "whiny and pretentious" (Webber) *thirtysomething*, while attributing the show's larger success to producers Marshall Herskovitz and, of special note for Tom Shales, "Ed Zwick, who directed the epic film *Glory*." Unlike the individual attention that David Lynch received as the visionary behind *Twin Peaks* (with slight mention of co-creator Mark Frost), press sources define Holzman's effort as part of a male-dominant team effort, allowing quality discourses surrounding her show to proliferate despite

Holzman's "soapy" deviations from form. Furthermore, delegitimating television as a feminized medium, critics applaud celebrated male filmmakers such as Zwick and Lynch for elevating the complexity of programming, while discursively limiting the influence of television writers such as Holzman and Frost.

As a component to celebrating masculine achievement and diminishing aspects of the program's soapiness, critics also negatively chide the show's queer centrality, rhetorically dehumanizing Wilson Cruz's character, Rickie Vazquez, who constitutes the first gay teenager in primetime. Overtly framing Angela Chase and Jordon Catalano's (Jared Leto) sexual interaction as an element of the narrative's "mature" content, reviewers assess Rickie as a confused and superfluous curiosity. Addressing Rickie in the second to last paragraph of his review, Bruce Webber writes, "[Angela's] sidekick is a half-black, half-Hispanic, apparently gay boy named Rickie (Wilson Cruz), who likes to hang out in the girls' bathroom," while Rosenberg, in queer-bashing form, fashions Rickie as subhuman, describing him as "the show's human hybrid, the 'bi,' eyelinered, hormonally challenged, sexually ambivalent Rickie. A half-black, half-Latino, half-boy classmate, he routinely hangs out in the girls' bathroom, which somehow no one questions for several episodes" (1994). Ed Bark, rebuts ABC's press description of Rickie, writing that "Angela's and Rayanne's running mate is Rickie Vasquez (Wilson Cruz), who wears eyeliner and an earring, has problems fitting in, and is diplomatically described in ABC press materials as a 'sweet, somewhat androgynous boy who is half-Hispanic and half-black.'" Bark both hints at the network's reluctance to announce Rickie as gay and sarcastically implies that such clearly denoted sexuality would render him an unnecessary freak. Tucker's review ignores Rickie entirely, describing him in two words of explication as "Angela's pal." Dismissing other elements of queerness, notably Angela Chase's romantically fraught friendship with Rayanne Graff (A.J. Langer),

critical assessments rewrite the show as a heterosexual quality text featuring unnecessary elements of gender-deviation and confused sexual identity attributable to a single character.

Publications that malign more melodramatic aspects of the program and decentralize queerness also infantilize the show's (presumably) female fan base as hysterical and unreasonable. Journalists' positioning of the show and its proponents as exclusively teen-centric, irrational, and unserious perpetuates *My So-Called Life*'s delegitimation through its association with teenage girl fandom and histrionic expressions of childish behavior. This press discourse, I contend, reinforces ABC's determination of the show as too adolescent for adult viewers. Ultimately, critics frame *My So-Called Life* as simultaneously too "controversial" for a family oriented timeslot, due largely to its overt discussion of queer sexuality in primetime, but too teen-oriented to entice "mature" audiences, suspending the show in a failed state of adolescence.

In the tradition of *Twin Peaks* negativism, critics invoke ratings unsustainability to discredit *My So-Called Life* as a televisual success. Writing in a segment of his review titled "Funeral Plans," Bark announces the program as in immediate peril since "the late-summer launch of So-Called Life enables ABC to cut its losses before the 'regular season' ratings race begins on Sept. 19… when it will be fighting for survival against two established comedies - NBC's *Mad About You* and Fox's *Martin*" (1994). Unceremoniously announcing the series' cancellation, Anita Gates of the *New York Times* writes, "the cause of death was low ratings, recently estimated at 10 million viewers, followed by a two-month hiatus," while Jessica Shaw of *Entertainment Weekly* reports at the end of *My So-Called Life*'s first season run that, "[ABC] will shelve the low-rated drama (it's consistently in the bottom 10 of the Nielsens)."

Critical assessments of *My So-Called Life* also focus on fans' failed efforts to save their show as an immature response to the rationality of ratings. Most condescendingly, Jessica Shaw quotes a member of the fan group "Operation Life Support" as exclaiming, "may the fires of Hell split the Earth and envelop you and all your evil cohorts who have so heinously murdered such a fine program," indicating a rabid and hysterical response to the show's understandable failure in the ratings. Contextualizing these fan efforts as effete, *New York Times* writer Anita Gates conjectures that "maybe it has been different since the networks realized that 50,000 letters may be a big bag of mail but they still represent roughly 1/19 of a rating point (one rating point represents 954,000 homes)." Both articles correlate such fan responses with failure, observing that, although "valiant efforts were made to save [*My So-Called Life*], including those of Operation Life Support, a group of fans on America Online who raised money to place ads in Hollywood trade publications begging ABC not to let the show die, when the network announced its fall schedule on May 17, 'My So-Called Life' wasn't on the list" (Gates). Interestingly, Gates' article also references *Twin Peaks* as an early example of fan failure, noting that, "as the 1990's began, something changed. Fans of series-on-the-brink organized, the networks listened politely, and the shows disappeared anyway. In 1991, David Lynch's offbeat ABC drama *Twin Peaks* breathed its last, despite the efforts of the 11,000 members of Citizens Outraged at the Offing of Peaks." In her *Entertainment Weekly* piece, Jessica Shaw quotes an ABC executive, Brian McAndrews, as stating, "the number of protests is not statistically significant. *My So-Called Life* has to grow beyond that hard core." In printing this statement without analysis, Shaw echoes industrial discourse and delegitimizes fan responses as niche and irrational approaches that do not yield results. Quotes from fans, such as the response that opens Shaw's article, illuminate adolescent responses to the "adult" business of institutions.

Judith Halberstam draws connections between childhood, failure, and queerness to conceive of "other ways of knowing" outside the heteronormative determinants of success that Shaw and Gates construe as essential to *My So-Called Life'*s continuation. Paraphrasing Katharine Bond Stockton in a chapter on "Animating Revolt and Revolting Animation," Halberstam indicates that, "childhood is an essentially queer experience in a society that acknowledges through its extensive training programs for children that heterosexuality is not born but made" (27). Fans' willingness to "fail well, fail often, and learn to fail better" (24) despite the disciplinary and mocking rhetoric of journalists reflects a refusal of heterosexist logic determined by monetary results; instead such responses nod toward Halberstam's understanding that, "rebellion is ongoing," and acknowledge irrational collectivity as "offering us the real and compelling possibility of revolt" (52) outside the masculinist dictates of popular press.

CONCLUSION

In the final chapter of *Legitimating Television*, Newman and Levine discuss ways in which academic scholarship embraces "quality television," and resultantly reinforces industry discourse. Citing *Twin Peaks* specifically, they write:

> When scholars fail to interrogate the discourses of media industries, including those of creative personnel, they lend that discursive authority to their own scholarly reputation. Thus, when [David] Lavery quotes David Chase on his disdain for television and his refusal to let *The Sopranos* fall into the soap opera traps of *Twin Peaks*, he lets this comparison stand as fact (165).

Lavery also serves as editor of *Full of Secrets: Critical Approaches to Twin Peaks* and co-editor (with Michelle Byers) of *Dear Angela: Remembering My So-Called Life,* the only academic books entirely dedicated to critical evaluations of these two shows. While illuminating essays in both volumes provide important correctives to press criticisms of fandom, notably Susan Murray's "Saving Our So-Called Lives: Girl Fandom, Adolescent

Subjectivity, and *My So-Called Life*" in *Dear Angela* and Henry Jenkins' "Do You Enjoy Making the Rest of Us Feel Stupid: alt.tv.twinpeaks, the Trickster Author, and Viewer Memory" in *Full of Secrets*, too many articles evaluate the programs on criteria of faulty press retrospectives. Recollecting the shows as critical successes, Lavery, Byers, Martha Nochimson and others adopt the rhetoric of journalistic favorability, fashioning *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life* as critical darlings without more closely interrogating press projections of failure. From a different standpoint, Ron Becker's frustration with legitimating notions of "quality television" in *Gay TV and Straight America* compels him to list *My So-Called Life* among several gay-inclusive shows industrially and journalistically targeted toward a white, upscale, urban, and straight demographic in the mid-1990s. Without attending to the program's curtailed longevity, queer-inclusive production, and anti-gay press backlash, Becker adopts and then challenges an institutionally sustained narrative as historical fact.

Halberstam writes that "institutions qualify and disqualify, legitimate and delegitimate, reward and punish; most importantly, they statically reproduce themselves and inhibit dissent" (10). Employing "alternate ways of knowing" based in queer theory, I seek to expand Newman and Levine's discourse on televisual legitimation by celebrating *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life* for failing spectacularly and embracing televisual elements antithetical to industrial, journalistic, and academic configurations of quality. My project of recognizing queerness in *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life* corresponds with Alexander Doty's championing of *Laverne and Shirley*, *Pee Wee's Playhouse* and *The Jack Benny Show* as texts that "account for the existence and expression of a wide range of positions within culture that are non-, anti-, or contra-straight" (3). Re-examining press discourses of the shows, from this perspective, illuminates instances of academic and journalistic mis-remembering and de-queering of

Twin Peaks and *My So-Called Life* that, like Angela Chase's yearbook, serve only processes of selective memory.

Chapter 3: The Owls are Not What They Seem: Retaking Queer Meaning

"We will wander, improvise, fall short, and lose our way. We will lose our way, our agendas, and possibly our minds, but in losing we will find another way of making meaning in which no one gets left behind" (Halberstam, 25).

While press sources evaluated both *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life* on fluctuating criteria of success and failure, fan responses reveled in aspects of the programs deemed frivolous and antithetical to "quality" television. Retrospective *Twin Peaks* slash fiction explicates the show's queer subtext through romantic interludes and takes pleasure in narrative irresolution, elements of the show that riled critics during *Peaks'* second season run. Fan fiction entries compiled through *My So-Called Life* web forums similarly adopt institutionally marginalized perspective to illuminate the show's queer centrality through teen melodrama. Despite "official" fan fiction archives such as *Twin Peaks Online* and www.mscl.com largely featuring heteronormative storylines that take form in the continuance of straight romances (or more disconcertingly "rectify" the sexual positioning of queer characters), discussion threads on these sites provide portals into alternative forums that highlight sexual and emotional exploration that appropriately transcends strictly canonical boundaries. As an approach to discussing the narrative agency of queer viewers who found pleasure in and identification with *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life*, I apply Judith Halberstam's notion of the queer art of failure to non/anti/contra-straight subjectivity on display in "non-official" web archives. In doing so, I argue that minor, and, in Halberstam's terms "silly" archives provide queer-inclusive ways of restoring counter-hegemonic meaning to dominantly hijacked texts. I also invoke scholarly work on both programs' fandoms by Henry Jenkins, Susan Murray,

and Caryn Murphy as a point of departure for understanding the subversive potential of alternative communities.

TWIN PEAKS' ALTERNATIVE COMMUNITY

As previously mentioned, *Twin Peaks* provided a liminal space for explorations of queerness on network television between 1990 and 1991 but ultimately failed to achieve popular success and televisual longevity. Following a burst of critical praise that hailed David Lynch's and Mark Frost's neo-surrealist soap opera as "new and different…TV like no other TV" (Rosenberg), and, "beautiful and eccentric" (Tucker), ratings declined following the resolution of the program's central murder mystery (Who killed Laura Palmer?) early in *Twin Peaks*' second season. Reviewers, notably John O'Connor of the *New York Times,* derided the show in its "failed" second season as repeating tired visual motifs, indulging in melodramatic plotlines, and, ultimately, going nowhere.

The meandering aspects of *Twin Peaks* that O'Connor cynically construes as obstructive to success, prompt me to consider the show as a queer failure. Judith Halberstam observes in *The Queer Art of Failure* that "being taken seriously means missing out on the chance to be frivolous, promiscuous, and irrelevant" (6), and poses alternatives to neoliberal understandings of "success" and "failure" that involve "more undisciplined knowledge, more questions and fewer answers" (10). Pursuant to Halberstam's discussion of failure's productivity, I ask: How does fan reclamation of *Twin Peaks* through alternative fiction illuminate the program's intrinsic queerness, lost through dominant press narratives and academic discourse?

To answer this question, I begin by addressing academic and press perspectives surrounding *Twin Peaks* that frame the program in terms of "quality" but also allude to creative shortcomings and loss of authorial focus, qualifying and disqualifying the show

in gendered terms of success and failure. I then analyze fan fiction entries collected through a queer online archive, *Amatara*, which derive largely from second-season *Twin Peaks* story lines and navigate extra-textual timeframes. I argue that these retrospective pieces constitute, in Halberstam's terms, a "silly archive" that serves as a corrective to official and legitimated understandings of *Twin Peaks*. Firstly, I investigate the archive's temporal dimensions as an expansion on the show's queer logic. Secondly, I observe the Amatara entries' emphasis on romance, affect, and sex as correspondent to the show's privileging of peripheral character interactions and emotive responses academically and journalistically discredited as "non-serious." Finally, I assess the irresolute, dark, and confused endings to entries collected through *Amatara* as illuminating questions rather than answers, and prompting readers, in Halberstam's estimation, to get lost and stay lost. Through convoluted narratives, irresolute mysteries, redundant motifs, and irrelevant tangents that parallel the shows, this fan fiction introduces counter-logic to academic discourses and press reviews and, in my estimation, restores the program's intrinsic queerness.

ACADEMIC PURVIEWS AND SCHOLARLY ALTERNATIVES

Twin Peaks' re-airing on the cable channel "Bravo" in 1994 featured introductions to each episode by one of the show's more enigmatic and narratively peripheral characters, Margaret Lanterman the log lady. Margaret's communications with a tree log provide her with obscure insights about the mysterious woods surrounding the town of Twin Peaks, and allow her to navigate queer netherworlds that prove perilous to characters employing traditional rationality. Introducing the series' second to last episode, Margaret cryptically states:

> There are clues everywhere--all around us. But the puzzle maker is clever. The clues, although surrounding us, are somehow mistaken for something else. And

> the something else--the "wrong" interpretation of the clues--we call our world. Our world is a magical smoke screen. How should we interpret the happy song of the meadowlark, or the robust flavor of a wild strawberry?

Margaret's ending invocation of pleasure and diversion as a counter-logic to tactical puzzle solving and finding answers, provides an apt summation of *Twin Peaks*' second season, which revels in throwaway plotlines, humorous interactions, red herrings, abandoned mysteries, and fleeting characters. In discussing ways in which dominant framings of *Twin Peaks* undermine the show's second season logic of "resistance, revolt, and utopia" (Halberstam, 29), I introduce critical and academic dialogues mired in heteronormative ideas of success and failure before briefly expanding on Judith Halberstam's scholarly alternative of "queer failure" as pertinent to *Twin Peaks* and its retrospective fan fiction.

Academic analysis of *Twin Peaks* regularly celebrates the show as an early entry into the manufactured cannon of "quality" (Ron Becker) or "complex" (Jason Mittell) television, reiterating disciplinary constructions of success evident in press articles. Martha Nochimson, in her book *The Passion of David Lynch: Wild at Heart in Hollywood*, mistakenly and without adequate explanation states that "Lynch's vision is heterosexual and ultimately joyful" (27) before discussing *Twin Peaks* at length in a chapter titled "The Magician Longs to See" as an auteur project that elevates television through an individualistic exploration of anti-rationality. While Nochimson applauds Lynch as auteur, she denigrates *Twin Peaks'* second season as a casualty of "decisions made by commercial television hacks" who exposed Lynch's artistic project as "vulnerable to the traditional ideas about popular culture held by the network [ABC]" (75). Jonathan Rosenbaum, a former film critic for the *Chicago Reader*, presents similar perspectives in "Bad Ideas: The Art and Politics of *Twin Peaks,*" in which he states, "*Twin Peaks* would be as flat as stale beer" (26) without the eccentricity of vision

provided by Lynch, most apparent, according to Rosenbaum, in the show's pilot. These critics applaud a romanticized auteur for raising television to a higher creative level, and attribute *Twin Peaks*' decline to abstract forces of commercialized broadcasting; such purviews revel in discourses of artistic success and televisual failure, reinforcing TV as a feminized and illegitimate mass form and male artistry as an individualized, superior, and noteworthy qualifier for programmatic exceptionalism.

Writing that "select instances of convergence-era television are cited for their difference from network TV and/or advertiser-supported TV" (162), Newman and Levine identify the type of distinctions that Nochimson and Rosenbaum present between high and low television as enveloped in classed and gendered subjectivities of taste. Describing auteur discourse as essential to sustaining "quality" discourses, Newman and Levine identify *Twin Peaks* specifically as a site of academic infatuation amongst dominantly positioned male scholars, problematizing writings by Jason Mittell, David Lavery, Jeffrey Sconce, and Henry Jenkins that herald the program as ushering in another "golden age of television" through narrative complexity and cinematic aesthetics. Newman and Levine illuminate the detriments of qualifying programs on the pedigrees of success and individual achievement by challenging articles that "pay for the legitimation of [television] through a perpetuation of hierarchies of taste" (171) as detrimental in reiterating politically and representationally fraught discourses of televisual progress. I echo Newman and Levine's argument that analyzing *Twin Peaks* within the criteria of success and advancement while lambasting "ordinary" television presents an upper class, masculinist narrative of legitimation.

While *Legitimating Television* references *Twin Peaks* largely as a site of academic qualification, the book, as previously mentioned, also alludes to industrial and press interpretations that discredit the show on the basis of its genre-deviant qualities.

Scholarly denigration of *Twin Peaks* as soap operatic reinforces both John O'Connor's assessment of the program as "fiddling" rather than retaining narrative focus, and Nochimson's claim of lost authorial address. It is these elements of failure fueling institutional disdain (whether academic, journalistic, or industrial) that I will address as queer.

Pertinent to Newman and Levine's discussion, Judith Halberstam maintains, "Disciplines qualify and disqualify, legitimate and delegitimate, reward and punish; most importantly, they reproduce themselves and inhibit dissent" (165). As an alternative to the delineated attention to success and failure perpetuated through academia and press, I turn to what Halberstam might term a "silly archive" of online fan fiction to explore the frivolous, meandering, and irresolute spaces of *Twin Peaks*. Emphasizing the strawberries and meadowlarks over smokescreens of narrative complexity, these entries celebrate *Twin Peaks* as critical failure and undermine politically fraught notions of quality.

AMATARA'S QUEER TEMPORAL DIMENSIONS

Subtitled, "amat aram alterius mundi: loving the refuge of alternate wor(l)ds," the online archive *Amatara*, a user profile within the site www.dreamwidth.org constitutes a hub for fan fiction entries that indulge in romance, sex, and beauty pertinent to the expanded world of *Twin Peaks*. One way in which this archive explores queer sexual subjectivity is through slash fiction, a form of fan writing that adopts diegetically heterosexual characters and reconfigures them in non-straight relationships. Often adopting the perspectives of marginalized and peripheral characters, works compiled through *Amatara* originate predominantly from other slash fiction archives such as *The Bookhouse Boys*, *An Archive of Our Own*, www.fanfiction.net and *ReoCities* but enter into community dialogue through the use of this forum and retain an element of queer

exclusivity – the alternative refuge of the archive's title. Introduced as a site for indulging, most specifically, in narratives that elaborate upon the romantic relationship between *Twin Peaks'* protagonist, FBI Special Agent Dale Cooper, and his field partner, Albert Rosenfield, a bureau forensics expert, *Amatara* includes entries that date back only as far as 1999, nine years after the show's original airing. Provided the ephemerality of web postings and the invisibility of queer histories, I first observe the convoluted temporality of the entries collected through *Amatara*, and their relationships with canonical chronology, as muddying navigations of time and establishing queer archival process. Additionally, as opposed to Henry Jenkins' understanding of slash fiction in "*Star Trek* Rerun, Reread, Rewritten: Fan Writing as Textual Poaching" as a "feminine counter-text that lurks in the margins of the primary text" (49), I observe multiple variations of slash fiction on *Amatara* that reiterate rather than rewrite the textual queerness of *Twin Peaks* and complicate Jenkins' notions of masculine/feminine web identity.

Three of the earliest entries on *Amatara*, all by the author "DBKate," reflect romantic exchanges between Albert and Dale that occur between seasons one and two, prior to the season one, and immediately following the resolution of the "Who Killed Laura Palmer?" narrative in season two respectively. More importantly, the entries' investment in exchanges deemed irrelevant to the show's murder mystery plot render their time-placement within the series less consequential than their emphasis on illuminations of queer memory throughout, before, and after the narrative diegesis of *Twin Peaks*. "Coincidence" (1999) forefronts Albert's mental interiority as he drives from Seattle to Twin Peaks in response to the first season's cliffhanger, that Dale has been shot by an unknown assailant. "Wonderful" (1999) occurs immediately following the revelation that Leland Palmer, under control of a spirit named Bob, killed his

daughter, Laura. “Last Dance” (2000) occurs pre-cannon and conjectures about Albert and Dale’s initial meeting during an undercover assignment at a gay bar.

All three of these writings illuminate queer conjectural temporalities and advance the series’ investments in time travel and alternate fantasy spaces. Emphasizing the tender exchange between the two lovers that occurs as Albert dresses Dale’s gunshot wound, “Coincidence” illustrates non-cannon events that occur during a point of transition between two seasons, while “Last Dance” eschews sequential temporality entirely, traveling back to a time before Laura Palmer’s murder. “Wonderful” imbues narrative occurrences following Leland Palmer’s death with a coterminous subjectivity that diversifies perspective rather than dispel the chronology of intertextual events. As Gary Needham observes in “Scheduling Normativity: Television, the Family, and Queer Temporality,” “attempts to represent same-sex desire” manifest through “recourse to anomalous temporalities” (157), an understanding of televisual time that applies to both the in-between timeframes that DB Kate’s entries explore as queerly significant and characters’ queer time travels within the show itself. The textual space of the Black Lodge in *Twin Peaks*, for example, populated by character doppelgangers, dancing dwarves, disembodied spirits and other manifestations of queerness, presents the possibility of multiple conjoined time frames rather than a singular diegetic “reality” to which fan fiction must cohere. Thus, DB Kate’s entries adhere to, rather than disavow, *Twin Peaks*’ overt investment in alternatives to an objective, heterocentric timeframe.

My investment in *Amatara,* as an unofficial, out-of-time, and incomplete archive, reflects Halberstam’s interest in “small projects, micropolitics, hunches, whims, and fancies” (21). Unlike, alt.tv.twinpeaks, a discussion board that allowed for exchanges (largely regarding plot) between white, heterosexual, well-educated men during the time of the program’s original airing (1990-1991), posts from which are archived on *Twin*

Peaks Online (www.twinpeaks.org), *Amatara* sidesteps officialdom and legitimation. Posts illuminated on sites such as *Twin Peaks Online* provide a selective history that erases queer fan investments in the show and adheres more strictly to unrelenting canonical chronologies. By contrast, the retrospective writings composed after 1999 hint at queer spectatorship during the time of the show's original airing, and present alternative memory as evident "in flashes and fragments" (Halberstam, 54), outside the discourse of coherent linearity and straight time.

DEAD ENDS AND DARK ROMANCE

In "'Do You Enjoy Making the Rest of Us Feel Stupid?: alt.tv.twinpeaks, the Trickster Author, and Viewer Mastery," Henry Jenkins discusses *Twin Peaks* online interaction and fandom within the context of heterosexual, upper-class maleness. Writing that, "net responses reflect the particular cultural interests and strategies of…college educated, professionally oriented, technologically inclined men" (53), Jenkins observes *Twin Peaks* fans' online world as an "interpretive community" (52) invested in "the search for answers to narrative questions" (56). Briefly nodding towards other fan constituencies, Jenkins states, "if *Twin Peaks* was a mystery, it was also a soap opera and many female fans of the series focused on the bonding of Harry Truman and Dale Cooper" (60), but then posits the web forum central to his argument as a technological and, therefore, male space, reverting to poorly rationalized assumptions about gender binaries to justify his claims about alt.tv.twinpeaks' dominant fandom.

While *Amatara* provides fans similar leverage to negotiate important narrative moments and reorganize the diegetic chronology of *Twin Peaks*, the site focuses less on answers and more on questions. Furthermore, *Amatara*'s author complicates frustrating categorization of gendered fandoms that Jenkins forefronts in his examination of

alt.tv.twinpeaks. In her "user profile," *Amatara's* anonymous creator describes herself professionally as "formerly a grad student in physics, now in finance and ICT" (*Amatara*), interests that might presumably align her with Jenkins' and Sherry Turkle's conceptualization of *Twin Peaks'* "male" hacker fans who "prefer the technical precision of Bach over the emotionalism of Beethoven, the complex discursiveness of Escher over the blurry impressionism of Monet" (Jenkins, 55). Rather, in her descriptions of entries and justification for writing her own fan fiction, the author alludes to moods, feelings, and descriptive adjectives of sensation and pleasure rather than using the "informational economy of the net" to "stake out a claim for superior knowledge of the shared narrative" (Jenkins, 56). Describing one entry, "I Am a Lonely Soul," as a "brilliant mindfuck of a fic, circular and confusing and claustrophobic," *Amatara's* author poses a counter-logic to the search for narrative answers through technological manipulation that Jenkins observes as central to the male *Twin Peaks* fandom he seeks to legitimate. Additionally, the anonymity of the users on this forum (aside from the site's author, who describes herself as a "girl in a man's world") works to obscure gender designations and complicate the binary that Jenkins presents between male and female fans of the show and their correspondent gravitation toward defined online spaces.

Fan fiction on *Amatara* employs a "different, a queer, and more fluid form of knowing that operates independently of coherence, or linearity, or narrative progression" (Halberstam, 5), a knowingness outside binary categories that draws on tangential, seemingly insignificant moments. While Jenkins quotes an entry on alt.tv.twinpeaks as stating "the first season we set up who was good and who was bad. This season we do a reverse flip and change them entirely: Donna becomes BAD, Josie may turn out to be GOOD" (author's emphasis, 63), *Amatara* evokes pleasure in character ambiguity and indulges in "connections between queerness and negativity" (Halberstam, 98). "Nothing

Left to Hide," for example, authored by Ingridmatthews, fashions a confused romantic triangle between the deceased Laura Palmer, her "good guy" boyfriend, James Hurley, and her "bad guy" ex, Bobby Briggs, that forefronts homosocial tension between the two boys, and explores the emotive logic of their attraction. Rather than "reversing" Bobby and James as "bad" and "good," respectively, "Nothing to Hide" removes the characters from the heterocentric world in which Jenkins and his puzzle-solving fans place them in order to beautifully queer their dramatic intentions. Once Ingridmatthews dislodges Bobby's narratively peripheral subjectivity from the service of propelling the mystery's forward trajectory, "unbounded forms of speculation" materialize that "ally not with rigor and order but with inspiration and unpredictability" (Halberstam, 10). From this standpoint, the entry's "unexpected and screwed-up POV" (*Amatara*) extracts a throwaway moment from the diegesis and presents it as pivotal to the illumination Bobby's sexual and emotional infatuation with both Laura and James:

> Maybe it's the way Bobby's staring or the loud idling of his car but Hurley turns around, scowling as if he knew Briggs was there all along. Their eyes meet and something sparks, making Bobby's throat turn suddenly dry and tight. He's driving so fast the hood of the car begins to rattle. Screwing with the radio doesn't help, the song sounds distorted, like a girl's laughter. Like Laura's laughter and that's when Bobby finds himself crying, sobbing as he drives, the world blurring all around him. Fuck you, Laura. I never told you, but I hated you. God, how I hated you. And fuck you, James Hurley. I hate you too. (Ingridmatthews)

Drawing on the *Twin Peaks'* overt investment in melodramatic irresolution, most evident in its incorporation of a soap-opera intra-text, *Invitation to Love*, into its diegesis, entries like "Nothing to Hide" explicate storylines contingent on feelings and moods, loose ends and cyclical complications. Such writings locate queer televisual logic, as discussed by Gary Needham, through "intensely emotive means" (153) and, in Halberstam's terms, meditate on "desiring and melancholic relations between the living

and dead" (89). Another entry, "Victory" by XParrot, opens minutes after *Twin Peaks'* series finale cliffhanger, in which Dale Cooper's soul remains incarcerated in the Black Lodge and offers a desperate final exchange between Dale and Harry Truman that prolongs Lynch's promise of narrative inconclusiveness. Rather than allowing for narrative finality or serial continuance by permitting Dale to either die or escape from the dark spirit Bob's corporeal stranglehold, "Victory" ends with Dale suspended in an indefinite and irresolute state of madness and supernatural possession. This work fatalistically informs the reader that the cycle of spiritual usurpation, death, and release will recur in another body following Dale's demise and Bob's escape from his temporary residence inside of Dale. Elements of circularity and repetition that Halberstam applies to stoner comedies such as *Dude Where's My Car?* seem relevant to "Victory" in that, "its eternal spiraling…becomes a new performance of forgetting and a new (and failed) attempt to advance, progress, and accumulate knowledge. The seeming irrelevance of the time loop masks a highly charged narrative in which cause and event continue to switch places until causality ceases to produce the logic for narrative movement" (61). In recognizing and sustaining narrative suspension in conjunction with romance and emotion, "Victory" and other *Amatara* fan fiction entries, propel a vital celebration of failure evident in *Twin Peaks'* soapiest and most institutionally delegitimated moments.

My So-Called Life's Queer Readers

Similar to alt.twinpeaks.tv and its web successor "Twin Peaks Online," www.mscl.com, "the world's largest, most-visited tribute web site devoted to *My So-Called Life*," outwardly seems to de-queer the show. Many entries provide continued narratives emphasizing the relationship between Angela Chase and Jordan Catalano, which either end in marriage or chart other heteronormatively sanctioned paths out of

adolescence and into adulthood. Problematically, several posts elaborating upon the show's "central" romance also deprive Rickie Vazquez and Rayanne Graff of narrative agency, placing these characters in tangential supporting roles. Such fan activity helps to substantiate scholar Jes Battis's concern in "My So-Called Queer: Rickie Vazquez and the Performance of Teen Exile" that, "MSCL is constructed around the idea that audience members should want to be Angela" (76), and that *My So Called Life* urges viewers to adopt the Chase household as the "only viable option for those who wish to belong" (76).

While heteronormativity remains prevalent on the site, I argue that www.mscl.com also provides a forum for fan discourse and presents portals into alternative realms of fiction that celebrate queer inclusivity outside the restrictive boundaries of straight domesticity. Firstly, I employ Susan Murray's "Saving Our So-Called Lives: Girl Fandom, Adolescent Subjectivity, and *My So-Called Life*" in conjunction with Halberstam's writing on both adolescence and assemblage to discuss subversive tenets of www.mscl.com most evident in community discussion threads. Secondly, I discuss slash fiction entries compiled through www.fanfiction.net as employing melodrama and romance to imbue "invisible" characters with narrative agency, contemplate alternative family configurations, and disrupt the legitimating discourse of "realism" As part of this explication, I argue that these entries and the marginal archives through which they are catalogued advance *My So-Called Life*'s textual ruminations on historical selectivity and the productivity of failure.

Queer Communality: Sharing and Exploration on MSCL.com

In her chapter, "Animating Revolt and Revolting Animation," Judith Halberstam discusses the queer importance of collective thinking. Describing the utopian vision of *Chicken Run*, Halberstam surmises, "in this film an anarchist's utopia is actually realized

as a stateless place…a diverse collective motivated by pleasure and control over one's labor" (32). As scholars writing on *My So Called Life* and its "save our show" campaign, "Operation Life Support" note consistently, the program fostered a dedicated online assemblage invested in expanding the show's longevity out of identification with Angela Chase's "emotional memory…and subjective experiences" (Murphy, 169). In her article, "'It Only Got Teenage Girls': Narrative Strategies and the Teenage perspective of *My So-Called Life,"* Caryn Murphy dedicates a section to online narratives and teen fan activism. Writing that, "*MSCL* fan fiction is really another form of activism [since] writers often begin their scripts at the moment where the series left off…which denies the fact that networks ultimately hold the power to determine which shows will be produced," Murphy identifies an act of resistance that reverses gendered power dynamics. Susan Murray's "Saving Our So-Called Lives: Girl Fandom, Adolescent Subjectivity, and *My So-Called Life*" more explicitly notes that, "the writings of girl lifers contain an activist sentiment that not only worked to save the show, but to save Angela's 'life'…against the wishes of powerful and predominantly male network executives" (46). Evaluating www.mscl.com as a site of communal protest and fantasy then, despite the heteronormative storylines of many entries, imbues the archive with the queer significance of utopian anarchy.

The site's discussion spaces more overtly serve to identify minor archives of slash fiction and propel queer exploration of *My So-Called Life*. On the left portion of the screen, www.mscl.com features navigable tabs that allow visitors to either search the "Library" of its members' fan fiction or enter the "Cafeteria," which leads to a discussion forum for the exchange of community information. A thread titled "slash fiction" within the discussion board compels a conversation about connotative queer sexuality in the show and links to entries housed by www.fanfiction.net, www.wearemany.net, and other

"non-official" sites. From this standpoint, www.mscl.com functions similarly to *Amatara* in its ability to provide a perpetually incomplete but ever-expanding compilation of alternative fiction curated by fans.

Halberstam argues that a "mode of being where the emphasis falls on cooperation, trade, and sharing…animates all kinds of knowledge projects that should not be considered irrelevant or naïve" (52). The slash discussion thread on www.mscl.com illuminates such communal interchange as fans procure pathways for queer exploration through links to subversive and affecting queer fan fiction. A visitor uncovering a widely popular story by Ace Hart Hunter titled "Jordan" (depicting a romance between Jordan Catalano and the off-screen character Tino), writes:

> I love seeing the familiar from a different vantage point, reading other people's writing styles, and never knowing what comes next. There's a few editing mistakes, and some lines and choices don't ring true for me, but this story is really strong. He's a gifted writer, and uses a great economy of language. I'm really happy right now after reading this story. It's cool reading good writing, and it's such a relief to get away from my own fan fictions and to look at the characters and the stories from different perspectives. I love how this story just turns around everything we took for granted. I love when Jordan describes his feelings about Angela, it was great. The story doesn't seamlessly fit into the world of the actual series, but I don't feel that all fanfictions [*sic*] need to play the role of the missing episodes. I like that it takes us somewhere new so completely (Barsch).

Rather than reject queer fictions, the site's creators also enter into this dialogue and attempt to provide sources for queer fictions that can then be included on www.mscl.com. This sense of "cooperation, trade, and sharing" provides a stark contrast to institutional discourse surrounding *My So-Called Life* fans. In my previous chapter, I presented press articles characterizing teenaged fans as naïve and hysterical, their work to save a television show silly and irrelevant, and their efforts failed. In arguing that *My So-Called Life*'s heteronormativity eclipses potential queer readings and that viewers will identify with Angela's privileged perspective, Jes Battis discounts fan dialogue and

presents abstract understandings of "audience." Conversely, sites like www.mscl.com present compassionate spaces for cooperation and sharing, for wandering and experimenting; they "offer strange and anticapitalist logics of being and acting and knowing, and they will harbor cover and overt queer worlds" (Halberstam, 21).

Teen Melodrama and Queer Romance

While Susan Murray's essay provides excellent perspectives on girl fandom and the subversive potential of online spaces, parts of her work strive to legitimate the show and its fan community through discourses of realism and quality. Quoting Murray's perspectives in her writing, Caryn Murphy contends, "Susan Murray has argued that *MSCL* fits into the genre of 'quality,' 'defined by its ability to skillfully navigate through complex social and personal issues without entering into clichés, easy wrap-ups, or melodrama'" (170). Without endorsing Murray's explanation of the program's online following as tied to quality, Murphy does discuss *My So-Called Life* as emphasizing "emotional realism." Invoking Ien Ang's concept from the seminal text *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera And the Melodramatic Imagination,* Murphy describes "a gendered process of reading in which women are more likely to…enter directly into the fictional world, focusing less on the extra-textual process of its writing than on relationships," and surmises that "the show does not necessarily present realistic situations, but it strikes a chord with viewers in terms of honest characterizations" (171). I agree with Murphy, but contend that emotional realism, in the show and in fan fiction postings, manifests through the device of melodrama, not in spite of it. Furthermore, I challenge gendered process of cataloguing fan fiction, considering that online anonymity obscures the male/female binary and thus allows for queer evaluations of web identity.

Like *Twin Peaks* postings compiled through *Amatara, My So-Called Life* entries catalogued through www.fanfiction.net highlight romances between secondary characters and emphasize emotional exchange over narrative trajectory to queer effect. Furthermore, these writings affirm alternative familial dynamics inherent within the diegetic and expanded universe of *My So Called Life*. The aforementioned entry "Jordan" by Ace Hart Hunter presents an intimate exchange between Jordan Catalano and Tino, who is mentioned in many episodes of the show but never appears on screen. Unlike the privileged upper middle-class vantage point that Jes Battis describes as dominant amongst *My So-Called Life* viewers, the perspective of "Jordan" observes the connection between two impoverished gay male youths and the complex familial dynamics shared outside of the middle-class two-parent home. Tino dresses Jordan's wound, while Jordan finds comfort in Tino's lower class home, rather than in the lavish Chase house that Battis describes a heteronormative hallmark of the show. A passage in "Jordan" observes, "I'm still squirming with his [Tino's] hand under my shirt when his mom walks in. She shoots us a grin and Tino grins right back. God only knows she's caught us up to way worse things. That's cool too because she gets a real kick out of it. She really whoops it up when she walks in on us making out" (Ace Hart Hunter). This humorous and affectionate passage illuminates the visibility of marginalized worlds and agency of queer characters within the perceptive writings of *My So-Called Life*'s fan-base. It also presents not only a queer romance but also a familial dynamic that does not conform to dictates of normative domesticity.

Entries like "Jordan" also vividly describe erotic exchanges, which add to the "emotional realism" of their melodramatic logic. Expounding on the moments of teen lust and romantic infatuation in the show that critics deride as antithetical to quality, "Jordan" and other writings on www.fanfiction.net invite pleasure through delegitimated means.

The story ends on a passionate moment wherein Jordan describes how Tino "sighs in relief and kisses me hard, rolling me onto my back and running his tongue along my bottom lip" (Ace Hart Hunter). Rather than refute the moment's narrative credibility, respondents on the site express infatuation with the entry (rated as the most popular on www.fanfiction.net's *MSCL* board), commenting on the post's combination of romantic charge and melancholy exposition. While "Jordan" remains my primary case-study largely due to its popular following, other entries, such as "Too Late" involving Rayanne's attraction to Angela, and "The Bad Idea," which illuminates the romantic implications of Rickie and Brian Krakow's close friendship, denote non-normative and melodramatically fashioned relationships existent within the text of *My So-Called Life*.

These queerly fashioned stories also exemplify *My So-Called Life*'s self-aware attitude regarding historical selectivity and the subjective nature of archival process. Noting the multiplicity of voiceovers other than Angela's as the series progresses, Caryn Murphy observes, "this [device] points to ways in which the series narrative has opened up to include other storylines that don't involve Angela. Nine other characters offer voiceover, and none of them relates directly to Angela's perspective" (170). The show's narrative strategy of illuminating the fallacy of objectivity allows online fans to add to the polysemy of character voiceovers without interfering with diegetic "reality." Entries such as "Jordan," therefore work in tandem with the show's queer logic rather than provide an "alternative" to the images presented onscreen. *My So-Called Life*'s investment in fantasy, apparent in episodes like "Halloween," where Angela participates in events of the past to which she was not privy, allows for the "unleashing of new forms of memory that relate more to spectrality than to hard evidence, to lost genealogies that to inheritance, to erasure rather than inscription" (Halberstam, 15). Fan writings and online community formations invigorate this queer project of alternative archivization.

CONCLUSION

Ien Ang, advancing the need for creative ethnographies of television fans, writes in *Desperately Seeking the Audience* that, "seriously taking up the virtual standpoint of actual audiences is likely to highlight the limitations of any particular institutional arrangement of television" (166). In solidarity with Levine and Newman's exasperated stance against television's academic legitimation, I have attempted to take up Halberstam's call to advance "subjugated knowledge" of *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life* through use of alternative archives. In doing so, I repeatedly got lost. The infinite web channels available for online discourse render a comprehensive overview of queer *Twin Peaks* fan fiction impossible, and I lost my way in subjectively determining which entries to cite. In attempting to explicate one show as queer without falling into traps of biased legitimation, I began to wander. And while my breadth of coverage in the preceding pages remains limited, I celebrate Halberstam's sentiment that, "the queer art of failure involves the acceptance of the finite, the embrace of the absurd" (187). Advancing *Amatara*'s and www.mscl.com's explication of counter-hegemonic and queerly explicit moments in *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life* provides an opportunity to, tweaking Ang's political manifesto, *un*-seriously take up the standpoint of audiences. Celebrating these shows' failure with an illegitimate cohort of fans reveals deeply felt and fleetingly beautiful rewards.

Conclusion: Queerly Reevaluating ABC

Alexander Doty's 1992 conclusion to *Making Things Perfectly Queer* emphasizes the political importance of engaging in queer examinations of television history and contemporary media texts. Following detailed, auto-ethnographic accounts of watching *Laverne and Shirley, Pee-wee's Playhouse,* and *The Jack Benny Show*, Doty writes:

> If mass culture remains by, for and about straight culture, it will be so through out silences, or by our continued acquiescence to such cultural paradigms as connotations, subcultures, subcultural studies, subtexting, the closet, and other heterosexist ploys positioning straightness as the norm. Indeed, the more queerness in and of mass culture is explored, the more the notion of what is "mass" or what is "popular" is therefore "straight" will become a highly questionable given in cultural studies – and in culture generally, for that matter (104).

Through my textual, press, and reception study of *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life*, I have sought to illuminate the intrinsic queerness of both shows and provide a counter-logic to largely heterosexist academic and journalistic appraisals of these programs and their creators. In doing so, Doty's reassessment of auteur theory as a "way to combine queer cultural history and cultural practices with established theoretical models" (*Making Things Perfectly Queer,* 28) and Gary Needham's affect-laden approach to genre studies guided my study away from legitimating pretenses and toward identifying queer pleasures in failed shows. Judith Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* provided a theoretical basis on which to challenge institutionalized standards of quality and assess *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life* through the amateur art of fan narrativization. Through this process, Doty's underlying objective of dismantling the fallacy of heteronormativity in mass culture coalesced with Michael Newman and Elana Levine's call for an end to televisual legitimation in cultural studies. I discovered the inseparability of these political aims through the progression of my work and, while some

contradictions prevail, I contend that legitimation underscores not only masculinist logic, as Newman and Levine assert, but undermines the queer potential of television.

My first chapter addressed, in Doty's terms, the "non-anti-contra straight" formal and narrative logic governing *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life*. As I demonstrated, *Twin Peaks'* exaggerated employment of classical Hollywood devices to parody visual signifiers of heteronormativity and present the familiar as strange. Similarly, I explained that *My So-Called Life*'s ascription to hyper-stylization, underscoring the prevalence of fantasy spaces and the show's overt textual reconsideration of heterosexual historicity. In my assessment of both shows' privileging of gender nonconformity and homosocial intimacies within fractured timeframes, I revealed obstructions to socially sanctioned dictates of normalcy. Focusing on Rickie Vazquez's sexual agency and gender deviance in relation to demands of the Standard North American Family as well as *My So-Called Life'*s central investment in Rayanne and Angela's romance as a queer counter-logic to the Jordan-Angela conceit, I argued that the show presented textual alternatives to straight and familial romantic paradigms. Similarly, using second-season *Twin Peaks* episodes, I revealed the contrast between Denise Bryson's narrative accomplishments through gender fluidity and Dale Cooper's demise through failure of straight male performativity.

Observing the anti-normative proclivities of David Lynch and Winnie Holzman, I also implemented Doty's queer framing of auteur theory. Newman and Levine discuss auteur analysis as a central component to legitimation, noting that "in convergence era television, authorship is not only central to the textual appeals of Quality TV, but also to the culture of television appreciation and fandom in the niche audience segments to whom legitimated practices are addressed" (58). Doty's approach presents different political aim. His recognition of a "queer version of authorship in order to indicate where

and how the queer discourses of producers and readers might be articulated within, alongside, or against the presumably straight ideologies of most texts" (*Making Things Perfectly Queer*, 38) allows for a reassessment of "quality" not determined through complexity of storytelling or superiority of individualistic stylization. Instead, I maintained that David Lynch and Winnie Holzman recurrently pay homage to anti-straight (and delegitimated) lexicons of pop-cultural queerness, invoking the language of teenaged melodrama, daytime soap opera, and serialized fantasy to present queer logic and reach diverse fan communities largely disinterested in institutional notions of "quality."

Challenging press legitimation of *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life* on the basis of "quality," I argued that retrospective praise for both programs on the pretense of artistic superiority invites selective memory that disregards homophobic and misogynistic journalistic disdain for theses shows' "inferior" elements. As I traced journalists' accounts of *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life* through the duration of their short airings, it became evident that heterosexual readings of both shows abound through mediated discourse rather that from the texts themselves. I encountered repeated announcements of failure embedded within praise for "superior" television (largely centered around "straight" filmmakers David Lynch and Ed Zwick). However, Judith Halberstam has argued that the very qualities critics malign, melodrama, meandering plotlines, teenaged romance/sexuality, and comedic asides, are key to queer pleasure. Highlighting these "failed" elements as queerly significant, I asserted that heterosexist perceptions of *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life* as "quality" shows remain attributable to historical mis-remembrance.

To consider alternative recollections of *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life* outside the journalistically created and academically validated classification of "quality"

television, my final chapter analyzed narrative writings from queer online communities and argued that non/anti/contra straight fans have helped to restore the programs' queer intent and at times created new queer meaning. I observed that queer fans draw upon the shows' most delegitimated elements to produce subversive narrative continuances, explicate minor moments within the diegesis, and fashion denotative same-sex relationships often alluded to within *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life*. Again invoking Halberstam's ruminations on failure, I validate amateur archives as a way to conceive of histories outside of officialdom. Conceding that sites like *Amatara* and www.mscl.com remain incomplete and their contributions finite, I recognize them as forums signaling the existence of queer subjectivities regularly unaccounted for in academic and journalistic considerations of "audience" and "fandom." Pursuant to Doty's auto-ethnographic scholarship, I advocate for these archives and their contributors as explicating the queer centrality of *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life* and engaging in collaborative projects of "undisciplined knowledge" (Halberstam, 10). These marginalized writings, which indulge in "insignificant" narrative moments, speak to the shows' rejection of historical chronology and heterosexist "objectivity."

This multifaceted approach borrows from Julie D'Acci's celebrated "Circuit of Cultural Studies" model, discussed in "Cultural Studies, Television Studies, and the Crisis in the Humanities," in attempts to reconcile an escalating tension between television studies and queer theory. Quinn Miller writes in "Queer Recalibration," a short piece included in a special "In Focus" section of *Cinema Journal* dedicated to queer media scholarship, that "in spite of TV's rich queer history, scholars routinely suggest that queer media studies hit a dead-end with television," before expounding upon the medium's cultural evisceration at a *GLQ* roundtable in 2006. Miller concludes the piece by arguing that "there is a lot more to TV" than "quality programming, explicit LGBT

content, and respectable role models…television presents its own strange representational system full of logics that defy dominant ideologies of identity and visibility" (143-144). At present, too many studies exist that amplify a homonormative politics of gay male assimilation on network programs, and few of these writings rigorously explore such shows' destabilizing influence (exceptions such as Lynne Joyrich's superb "Queer Television Studies: Currents, Flows, and (Main)streams" notwithstanding). Through my discussion of *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life*, I have chosen to amplify anti-normative discourses that proliferate within and beyond both texts despite industrial constraints and the mediating influence of press outlets. In concert with scholars who recognize and celebrate television's queer possibilities outside of the medium's hetero/homonormative contextualization, I have endeavored to demonstrate that queer theory and TV studies remain integral to one another rather than diametrically opposed.

As I indicated in my introduction, I consider the uniquely queer failures of *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life* resonant with the ABC network's broader history of non-normative programming. While Doty has written on the lesbian pleasures inherent in *Laverne and Shirley,* Patricia White has focused critical attention on the subversive implications of Agnes Moorhead's socially deviant witch "Endora" in *Bewitched*. I began my work by invoking Stephen Tropiano's chronology of "The Primetime Closet," noting his extended emphasis on shows like *Dynasty* and *Roseanne* as significant to exploring non-anti-contra straight trends applicable to ABC and its legions of non-straight viewers. To this list I would add *Dark Shadows,* which has cultivated a queer cult following as a result of its campy monster-laden soap-operatic rebut to heteronormativity (as discussed most recently by scholar Harry Benshoff) and *Three's Company*, a charmingly frivolous deconstruction of sexual performativity.

In future research, I hope to engage an expanded history of ABC that considers the shows cited above within the context of the network's marginalized, third-tier standing. While I have observed ABC from the limited standpoint of two short lived shows, larger questions of how the network's programming, advertising, publicity, and viewership changed under the ownership of various corporations persist. Importantly, rather than establish a narrative of industrial progress, I wish to explore the non-normative pleasures available in earlier programming that might have diminished following ABC/Capital Cities Communications' merger with the Walt Disney Company in 1995, after which denotatively gay shows like *Ellen, Ugly Betty,* and *Modern Family* received critical attention and establishment praise. At the same time, drawing upon Sean Griffin's work on Disney's anti-normative dimensions in *Tinker Belles and Evil Queens*, I also hope to critique prevalent assessments of ABC's post 1997 programming as fully adherent to assimilationist and familial discourses. Charting the failures of *Twin Peaks* and *My So-Called Life* helps to project a more complicated history of ABC and of mass cultural queerness that illuminates televisual spaces, past and present, imbued with subversive possibility.

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