Mind the Gaps: Serial Media Forms and the Affective Work of Audiences

by

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Table of Contents

List of Figures

Abstract

Mind the Gaps: Serial Media Forms and the Affective Work of Audiences develops a theory of serial form as a collectively generated audience construct. This project draws upon serial narratives from nineteenth-century British sensation novels to contemporary television and fan practices, emphasizing the interdisciplinary and transhistorical nature of serial form. It engages specifically with serial narratives that might be considered "failures" of suspense: mysteries whose solutions are obvious, stories that are "spoiled" ahead of time, and fan practices that emphasize repetition. I argue that seriality is produced and maintained, not only through the strategic withholding and deferral of knowledge, but also through audiences' conditional and unstated knowledge of what is true, and of what will probably happen narratively in the future. I term this conditional feeling "precarious knowing."

Each chapter engages with a different type of serial text, from either the nineteenth century or the present, in order to develop the construct of precarious knowing in four different contexts. Chapter One reads two nineteenth-century British sensation novels, known as "novels with a secret, that each made their secrets known early in the narrative, and so invited their readers to make serial, conditional inferences. Wilkie Collins' *No Name* offers multiple alternatives to what seems to be known, while Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* refuses to explicitly articulate what is known. Together, these novels suggest how inference-making, in addition to suspense, can sustain serial engagement. Chapter Two turns to contemporary television crime procedurals, specifically CBS's Sherlock Holmes adaptation *Elementary*. This chapter applies the type of inference-making described in the first chapter to

the process of developing attachments to serial characters, particularly in repetitive genres. Chapter Three looks at contemporary television programs and "spoiler culture" in the context of the economic metaphors that pervade contemporary discussions of serial media; metaphors like narrative "payoff," being "invested in," and "cheating." By examining an instance of critical disappointment in a television program that failed to meet early expectations – namely, the Showtime spy drama *Homeland* – this chapter discusses the centrality of economic metaphors, which imagine a fair exchange of audience time and attention for information, to popular definitions of serial form and spoiler etiquette. Lastly, Chapter Four demonstrates how this project's account of serial form can offer an expanded understanding of what constitutes serial media. This chapter argues specifically that fan practices surrounding what seems to be a non-serial, non-fictional object – the English/Irish boy band One Direction – can in fact be read productively as a process of collective serial narrative-writing, grounded in the inferences that fans make about the band's members.

Introduction: Bad Timing

This dissertation, *Mind the Gaps: Serial Media Forms and the Affective Work of Audiences*, examines seriality through three interrelated lenses – suspense in the nineteenth-century novel, the temporality of serial television, and theories of contemporary fan practices – in order to develop an interdisciplinary theory of serial form as a collectively-generated audience construct, rather than a textual one. Theories of serial suspense often emphasize the ways that texts draw in and maintain audiences through the strategic withholding of knowledge. My dissertation argues, in contrast, that audiences' relationship to a text is frequently structured by what I term "precarious knowing": a conditional, unstated belief in what may happen narratively in the future. This feeling of precarious knowing is particularly relevant to repetitive serial texts, and especially to well-established genres with formulaic outcomes. I argue that what seems at first like bad timing – or a failure to maintain suspense in the face of the audience's familiarity with a text or collection of texts – is a formal characteristic of serial fiction more broadly. Furthermore, in foregrounding the precarity or uncertainty of this type of serial knowledge, I offer an account of serial repetition, and the value that audiences might find in returning to familiar stories, that de-emphasizes a desire for comfort and safety. By centering a theory of seriality around "precarious knowing," I account for a range of serial texts and audience behaviors that resist serial suspense and surprise, and I offer a theoretically generative way to approach seemingly uncreative forms.

In keeping with these goals, each of this dissertation's four chapters engages with a different type of serial text. I start in the first chapter with two nineteenth-century British novels,

then move in the second and third chapters to contemporary US television and film franchises, and end with the online fan practices surrounding a contemporary boy band, the English/Irish group One Direction. By design, none of my chosen texts are exactly *un*-suspenseful. Secrecy, mysteries, and hidden identities are in fact central themes of each of them. For instance, my first chapter engages with the genre of "sensation fiction," popularized in the 1860s and described now as "novels with a secret,"[1] which often involve characters who have been mistaken for each other, or who have concealed their true identities. My second chapter takes up CBS's Sherlock Holmes adaptation *Elementary* (2012-2019) – a crime procedural that is concerned with discovering murderers – while my third chapter considers Showtime's *Homeland* (2011-2020), a spy drama whose first few seasons center around the mystery of whether Nicholas Brody, a rescued US prisoner of war, is secretly planning a terrorist attack. Lastly, the One Direction fans that I discuss in my fourth chapter are often specifically invested in exploring, explaining, and narrativizing the gap between the band members' various public celebrity personae and what seem to be their "truer," but more opaque, selves.

Each of the texts that I discuss in this dissertation is also often characterized as a failure of serial suspense. Nineteenth-century reviewers of my chosen sensation novels tend to note with some disgruntlement that they could easily figure out the texts' mysteries before they were revealed; television crime procedurals are notoriously formulaic and easy to predict; critics accused *Homeland*'s middle seasons of totally collapsing narratively without the mystery of Brody's allegiances to sustain them; and the One Direction fandom is rarely characterized as a serial fandom at all, while at the same time One Direction fans' interest in knowing the "truth"

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[1] Kathleen Tillotson originated this phrase in her introduction to a 1969 edition of *The Woman in White*, "Introduction: The Lighter Reading of the Eighteen-Sixties," in *The Woman in White*, by Wilkie Collins (Boston:

about celebrities is easily dismissed as obsessive or naive. In each of these cases, repetition becomes the apparent enemy of the suspenseful. One reviewer of Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1860), for instance, complained that they read the novel's third volume with a sense of "listlessness," because it "makes known to the reader nothing beyond what he has already heard or guessed."[2] Repetition here is understood to be boring; it reflects an imagined failure to appropriately space out and negotiate the serial reveal of information (i.e. to manage the reader's sense of suspense over time).

My dissertation interrogates this very assumption: that repetition and "already hearing or guessing" represents a flaw in either the construction of a serial narrative, or in the audience's engagement with that narrative. It decenters the notion that a creator must keep an audience guessing in order to produce a successful serial, and also suggests how repetition can work in concert with a narrative commitment to secrecy or mystery, not just as a way to defer answers or build suspense. The aim this dissertation is therefore explicitly *not* to explore the doubtlessly vast archive of truly suspense-less serial texts. Instead, I have chosen to engage with what seem in certain respects to be narrative failures because first, I want to suggest a pattern of similar kinds of serial failures (one that that spans centuries and multiple types of serial media), in order to second, push back against the notion that these texts are failures at all. In short, if texts keep breaking formal rules in similar ways, the rules may need to be redefined. Such a redefinition is the ultimate project of this dissertation. It is for this reason – in addition to the specific chapter-level interventions in the scholarship on nineteenth-century seriality, television form, and narrative fan practices that are enabled by putting these scholarly traditions in conversation with

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[2] "The Woman in White," review of *The Woman in White*, by Wilkie Collins, *The Examiner*, 1 September 1860, 549.

each other – that this project was conceived as an interdisciplinary one. This dissertation is therefore not intended to be a complete or continuous history of serial fiction per se. Instead, I put together texts that seem temporally or formally distant from each other in order to make visible formal patterns of "failure" irrespective of specific, linear histories.

The Absence of Mysteries

In one brief example of the above dynamics as they appear in a serial text: in a fourth season episode of *Elementary,* a CBS crime procedural and Sherlock Holmes adaptation, Holmes makes a throwaway comment that "the absence of a mystery does not mean there's nothing to learn."[3] As surprising as it might be to hear Holmes casually dismiss the primacy of the mysterious, his statement points toward a genuine question asked about television narratives, and by extension, about serial narratives in general: what *is* the appeal of narratives that require long-term commitments by audience members, but are also designed around an "absence of mystery?" What, exactly, is there to learn, and how might we theorize the process of audience members learning it?

In Holmes' figuration, "mystery" is held in tension with "learning." He implies that mystery is generally assumed to lead to learning, but that this assumption should be complicated. Holmes' suggested difference between "mystery" and "learning" alludes to two general, often competing orientations toward time, knowledge, and serial narrative. A "mystery" in its traditional form is question- or goal-driven, and the process of solving the mystery involves a gradual shift in a balance from not knowing to knowing. For a reader or viewer, this balance is

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[3] "Up to Heaven and Down to Hell," *Elementary*, season 4, episode 15, CBS, 3 March 2016, *Hulu*, www.hulu.com/watch/4910d3b7-1dbb-4596-8b35-126320c8f062.

imagined to be guided and managed by the author. "Learning," while in the abstract involves its fair share of questions and mysteries, in this context refers to a less question-driven process, unrestricted by particular goals, which visualizes knowledge acquisition more as accumulation than as balancing.

These two models – of mystery and accumulation – map on to two overarching ways of describing serial forms. Although on a basic definitional level, a serial narrative can refer to any narrative released in parts with time gaps between those parts, theories of seriality in practice often emphasize a balance of repetition and suspense.[4] Repetitive serial forms are overwhelmingly common in popular media. At the same time, theories of seriality and discussions of specific serial narratives tend to emphasize the pull of an audience's desire to know. Serial fiction is commonly described, for instance, as having an "endlessly deferred narrative,"[5] where audiences ideally must wait for whatever information or conclusion has been deferred. The repetitive components of seriality are often framed as providing comfort and familiarity, while the suspenseful components are framed as exciting and compelling, and also as providing a cognitive challenge. This broad split, between serial structures that provoke feeling and those that provoke thinking in audience members, also maps on to scholarly discussions of form. Namely, scholars tend to describe repetitive forms as theoretically obvious or simple – such that form becomes mainly a vehicle for theoretically interesting issues of content – while more "serial" forms that sustain questions across longer periods of time have more potential to

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[4] See Frank Kelleter's definition in "Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality," *Media of Serial Narrative*, edited by Frank Kelleter (Ohio State UP, 2017). See also Jason Mittell's more implicit and historically-bound argument in *Complex TV* (NYU Press, 2015).

[5] Matt Hills uses this phrase to define cult media in *Fan Cultures* (Routledge, 2002), 137. Lyn Pykett similarly describes nineteenth-century sensation novels as concerned with "narrative concealment and delay or deferral" in *The Nineteenth-Century Sensation Novel* (Northcote, 2011), 5.

be theoretically interesting.[6] In very broad terms, the train of associations goes thus: repetitive serials are more formally boring and work to make audiences comfortable, while suspenseful serials are more formally complex and provoke a more critical stance in its audience members.[7]

Holmes' comment in contrast positions procedurals and other repetitive serials as in fact enabling a different kind of "learning." This framing speaks to the two intertwined arguments of this dissertation: first, that serial narratives are formally predicated on having *bad timing*; and second, that the bad timing of these serial narratives works affectively to cultivate *precarious knowing* in their readers and viewers. By "bad timing," I specifically refer to moments of seeming serial failure, such as when a mystery's solution becomes obvious before its official reveal, when audience members get "spoiled" for a plot point, or when narrative and genre formulae tacitly make a story's structure apparent to a reader or viewer. "Bad timing" therefore refers to serial stories that simultaneously *promise* and *resist* surprising an audience, such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon's 1861 novel *Lady Audley's Secret*, which, as *The London Review* noted, "is certainly [no secret] at all to the reader,"[8] or crime procedurals like *Elementary* that are built repetitively around mysteries that become more easily solved the more one watches them. "Bad timing" also refers to audience practices that reject narrative surprise in favor of other temporal feelings – such as consuming and circulating spoilers – and those that construct a continuous serial narrative out of discontinuous, repetitive textual fragments, such as when fans of the British/Irish boy band One Direction treat their tour performances as serial. In other

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[6] Caroline Levine for instances notes scholars' propensity to emphasize resistances to form, such as "liminality, borders, migration, hybridity, and passing," *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton UP, 2017), 9.
[7] As I will discuss in my first chapter, this summary is a more apt description of contemporary media and scholarly conversations, and applies less aptly to historical understandings - and particularly nineteenth-century frameworks – of serial media.
[8] "The Last Sensation Novel," review of *Lady Audley's Secret*, by Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *The London Review*, 29 Nov 1862, 481.

words, the focus of this dissertation is serial stories – told by authors or audiences – that seemingly fail to cultivate and manage suspense.[9]

The feeling that these serials create for readers and viewers is neither quite a total *absence* of suspense, nor is it successful suspense. Instead, I argue that this feeling can be described as "precarious knowing." Precarious knowing means, in short, a state of simultaneously knowing and not knowing. In other words, it's a form of inference that foregrounds its own inferential nature, less for the purpose of actually determining a specific truth, and more for the purpose of bringing readers, authors, and texts together into a knowledge-sharing relationship that is *not* based in the exchange of time and attention for knowledge.

In formulating the phrase "precarious knowing," I am drawing specifically on work by Lauren Eriks Cline that describes nineteenth-century writers' work to invest narratives with the "precarity" of theatrical liveness. In other words, "precarity" dwells at the nexus of formal, narrative strategies with the presence of an (imagined) collective audience in ways that emphasize both an "orientation toward uncertain futures" and also one's "position[] within insecure relational networks."[10] I am also drawing on what Elaine Auyoung described as the "sense of knowingness" that Jane Austen's narrative strategies create for her readers specifically through the absence of definitive information.[11] In other words, "knowing" refers to something slightly different than either knowledge or belief (although knowing may often look very similar to both). "Knowing" in particular emphasizes the process of feeling that – or coming to feel that

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[9] This kind of serial narrative is crucially different to one that is merely slow, or plot-less, or that an audience member might find uninteresting. See instead Amanpal Garcha for a discussion of "stillness" in nineteenth-century novels, *From Sketch to Novel: The Development of Victorian Fiction* (Cambridge UP, 2009); Nancy Yousef for a discussion of intimacy and "slow reading," *Romantic Intimacy* (Stanford UP, 2013); Deidre Shauna Lynch for a discussion of reading as "going steady," *Loving Literature: A Cultural History* (U of Chicago P, 2015).

[10] "Epistolary Liveness: Narrative Presence and the Victorian Actress in Letters," *Theatre Survey* vol. 60 no. 2, May 2019, 250.

[11] *When Fiction Feels Real: Representation and the Reading Mind* (Oxford UP, 2018), 42.

– something is true. The term therefore privileges both feeling and seriality over the holding or the acquisition of knowledge. When it comes to my choice of the adjective "precarious," I could also have used terms like "provisional" or "ambivalent," but "precarious" again specifically emphasizes temporality, an uncertainty about the future, and an instability to one's relationships with texts and others. It also contrasts more directly with a term like "comfort," and thus emphasizes the risky and uncomfortable dimensions to repetitive serial media, and to this feeling of "knowing." While "precarity" might seem to align itself with a term like "suspense," the key difference between "precarious knowing" and suspense is that suspense anticipates future closure, or the resolution of that suspense. "Precarious knowing" involves more of a lateral versus a linear uncertainty: when considering potential future alternatives, one does not necessarily anticipate that these alternatives will narrow into one, resolved path. Instead, one's uncertainty lingers, resisting closure.

Methods and Terms

In this dissertation, I define seriality fairly expansively. A basic textual or formal definition of seriality is that it involves a continuous narrative that unfolds over a span of time, with gaps between its parts. Media that are most often discussed under the umbrella of "serial fiction" therefore include many nineteenth-century novels, radio shows, television programs, some film series, comics, etc.[12] Of course, not all examples of these media are serial. And the boundary between what constitutes serial and non-serial media can be quite blurry. For instance, what span of time constitutes a serial span? Is it the number of anticipated parts that makes a

[12] For instance, Frank Kelleter's recent edited collection incorporates chapters on all of these, *Media of Serial Narrative* (Ohio State UP, 2017).

story serial (i.e. is a novel released in two parts a serial novel?), or the length of the parts, or the uncertainty surrounding its conclusion date, or its distribution through a medium – a periodical, or broadcast television – with a serial structure? How long can the gaps be; must they occur at regular intervals? Lastly, and most complicatedly of all, what constitutes a continuous narrative? Must there be explicit references to past parts, or can the causal relationship of past and future events be implied?

While the mere existence of these sorts of complicated questions need not dissuade scholars from using some form of the above textual definition of seriality, this last question in particular – about the role of implicature in creating narrative continuity – points toward another possibility. Implicature is more subjective than the other rules suggested above, requiring both a speaker and an addressee who can understand what is being implied. If serial continuity can be implied rather than overtly stated – and obviously I believe that it can be – audience becomes centered as a crucial formal, definitional component of what constitutes seriality.[13]

In the case of both Victorian novels and American television, questions arise about how to account methodologically for the role of readers or audiences. To vastly oversimplify: discussions of nineteenth-century literature tend to privilege "readings" of the novel, and have

[13] Serial fiction is particularly notable for the power it affords (or is imagined to afford) to audiences. Because serial stories are released over time, audiences have the chance to react to pieces of that story before the remainder is released or even created. Serial fiction holds out the possibility that audience responses might alter the course of a narrative. This hope has motivated myriad fan campaigns, from requests to resurrect Sherlock Holmes, to requests to resurrect *Star Trek*, to (unsuccessful as yet) requests to resurrect *Star Wars*' Kylo Ren. See Annemarie Navar-Gill and Mel Stanfill's discussion of two recent queer fan campaigns on Twitter and the limitations of these kinds of campaigns, "'We Shouldn't Have to Trend to Make You Listen': Queer Fan Hashtag Campaigns as Production Interventions," *Journal of Film and Video*, vol. 70, no. 3-4, 2018, 85-100. Notably, fans' ability to assert control over a narrative depends on creators' willingness to allow it. I am arguing instead that readers and viewers create serial narratives *as* serial – a formal or definitional proposition – influenced but not determined by their production context.

developed various scholarly methods for reading the novel.[14] These methods account for nineteenth-century literature's sense of textual plenitude and inaccessible audiences.[15] In contrast, television studies developed around the historiographic problem of textual ephemerality: the fact that most television programs were not recorded or preserved in the medium's early years. Consequently, television scholars – including scholars of contemporary television, when texts are more accessible – have decentered textual analysis, tend not to distinguish as finely among scholarly methods of "reading," and often privilege evidence of actual audience responses or behavior in their scholarship. There are, of course, advantages and disadvantages to both disciplines' approaches to understanding the relationship between text and audience. This project aims not so much to combine these approaches into a new method of "reading," but rather to theorize the relationship between serial text and serial audience in a way that can be used by, but does not aim to replace, the prevailing methods of both fields (which would be quite an ambitious goal for a dissertation). To do this, I look toward fan studies, which as a field tends to be concerned with concrete and specific audience communities, but which is also invested in accounting for the role of affect in – and overall, in theorizing less tangible elements of – media consumption.[16]

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[14] See Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan's overview of recent scholarly methods of reading, including Best and Marcus' surface reading, Moretti's distant reading, Levine's formalism, Freedgood's metonymic reading, and Schmitt's literal reading; "Victorianists and Their Reading," *The Routledge Companion to Victorian Literature*, edited by Dennis Denisoff and Talia Schaffer (Routledge, 2019).

[15] In truth, scholars do only have access to a subset of nineteenth-century texts. See Mark W. Turner, "The Unruliness of Serials in the Nineteenth Century (and in the Digital Age)," *Serialization in Popular Culture*, edited by Rob Allen and Thijs van den Berg (Routledge, 2014). Alternatively, many accounts of nineteenth-century reading do exist. For two foundational examples, see Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader 1837-1914* (Oxford UP, 1993) and William St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge UP, 2004).

[16] To be clear, there are many television and media scholars who are not in fan studies who discuss televisual affect and the position of the viewer, and whom have been tremendously influential on this dissertation. This list includes Robyn Warhol's *Having a Good Cry* (Ohio State UP, 2003); work in soap opera studies and particularly Tania Modleski's discussion of soap opera narratives as modeling "waiting," *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced*

There is one issue of terminology to clarify in this context: namely, my use of the term "audience," which might imply that this dissertation is using audience practices as a source of evidence. While I do engage with actual readers and viewers – particularly, some professional nineteenth-century critics in Chapter One, professional television critics in Chapter Three, and One Direction fan communities in Chapter Four – this dissertation is not, methodologically, an audience study. While my understanding of "audience" shares some elements with the traditional film theory concept of "spectatorship" (since I am mainly discussing a theoretical, rather than an actual, relationship between text and viewer), it differs in several crucial ways. First, film spectatorship traditionally imagines that the text (or the filmic apparatus) structures the viewing experience and positions or produces a viewing subject, whereas I am essentially arguing the opposite. Second, it imagines a unified, idealized viewing experience, in contrast to the chaotic and contradictory viewing experiences of living audiences, which is the type of viewing experience this project is aiming to theoretically capture. Third, and most simply, "spectatorship" implies a relationship between viewer and screen, whereas I prefer a term that can better encompass multiple media. "Readers and viewers" feels unwieldy – although I do use that phrase as well – but for lack of a better alternative, I use "audience" throughout this dissertation to refer to a theoretical but collective community of media consumers.

Similarly to Jason Mittell's assertion about television genres – that while they are "categories of texts, texts themselves do not determine, contain, or produce their own categorization"[17] – seriality does not determine itself. The fact that a text is published "serially" does not alone make it "serial." In other words, seriality is a term that describes a textual form,

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Fantasies for Women (Archon, 1982); and work in queer television studies, especially Amy Villarejo's *Ethereal Queer*: *Television, Historicity, Desire* (Duke UP, 2014).

[17] *Genre and Television*: *From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (Routledge, 2004), 11.

which does not necessarily mean that seriality should be defined through a set of strictly textual rules. Mittell suggests that genres can be defined, not as categories or constellations of textual traits, but as a process of genre-*making* that involves "complex interrelations between texts, industries, audiences, and historical contexts."[18] Similarly, seriality can be defined as the process of creating a meaningfully continuous narrative over time and across temporal gaps. The "creator," under this definition, can refer to a traditional author who writes a continuous narrative, to industrial or medium-specific conditions that encourage continuity, to audience members who infer continuity, and, crucially, to the interaction of all of these at once. As Mittell has done for genre, then, I am suggesting a cultural definition of serial form, but unlike Mittell, my methods are not exactly those of cultural studies. I am less interested in how specific texts come to be understood as "serial," and more interested in theorizing the process of implicature and inference that I argue constitutes seriality.

In this project, I focus in particular on the opportunities that this more process- and audience-based definition of seriality offers for exploring the relationship between traditional commercial serial media – nineteenth-century novels and twenty-first-century television specifically – and noncommercial fanworks, including both fanfiction and nonfictional fan practices (like speculation, spoilers, analytical arguments, theorizations, etc). As Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson have noted, fanworks can be understood as "works in progress," both because individual creators often publish their fanfiction serially in parts, and also because fandom as a whole is engaged in processes of repetition, transformation, and reworking its

[18] *Ibid.*, 10.

source materials.[19] Fan studies and theories of fanfiction are therefore centrally concerned with how to understand collectively produced, repetitive serial narratives. This work tends to receive limited attention in television and media studies more broadly, perhaps because it is seen as so specific to fanfiction and fan cultures. I hope that this dissertation can offer some ways that fan studies might be helpful for television and literary scholars, not just because understanding the behavior of fans is valuable for understanding media and audience practices, but also because theories of fanfiction as a form can illuminate how serial television and serial novels work. This is true irrespective of the fan communities (or lack thereof) that specific television shows or media properties are linked with.

This expansive definition of seriality is able to encompass a wide range of texts that scholars have argued are (or should be considered) serial, from Major League Soccer[20] to Wikipedia.[21] This definition may also better account for transfictional narratives and characters, i.e. when narrative is distributed across spaces, media, or texts but is still experienced sequentially in time.[22] It may also account for non-continuous episodic series that are read as continuous, like the detailed timelines that Sherlock Holmes readers have created to organize Conan Doyle's original stories in chronological order,[23] or like watching every episode of *Golden Girls* in order even though it's not technically necessary to do. Lastly, this definition may

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[19] Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson, "Introduction: Works in Progress," *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (McFarland, 2006).
[20] As Abby Waysdorf has argued in "The Creation of Football Slash Fan Fiction," *Transformative Works and Cultures*, vol. 19, 2015.
[21] As Erinç Salor has argued in "Circling the Infinite Loop, One Edit at a Time: Seriality in *Wikipedia* and the Encyclopedic Urge," *Serialization in Popular Culture*, edited by Rob Allen and Thijs van den Berg, Routledge, 2014.
[22] For a discussion of nineteenth-century transfictional characters, see Erica Haugtvedt, "The Victorian Serial Novel and Transfictional Character," *Victorian Studies*, vol. 59, no. 3, 2017, 409-418. For a discussion of contemporary digital transmedia narratives, see Louisa Ellen Stein, *Millennial Fandom: Television Audiences in the Transmedia Age* (U of Iowa P, 2015).
[23] William Baring-Gould's *The Chronological Holmes* (Pound Ridge, New York, 1955) for example.

productively accentuate the relationship between adaptations/retellings and seriality. Each of these examples represents a potential application of this definition in future work.

Seriality's Long History

English serial novels, as a specific popular form, developed out of the periodical press of the 1830s. Fiction before the 1830s was published in parts, and sometimes also circulated in periodicals, but shifts in the publishing industry through the early decades of the nineteenth century made it more profitable for journals and magazines to run new, serialized novels in greater numbers.[24] These serial novels were published in either monthly or weekly periodicals, or, like Charles Dickens' *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-7), published individually in discrete parts. Monthly periodicals were more expensive, catered more to the middle class, and their novels were understood to be more literary. Weekly periodicals, in contrast, only cost a penny and thus were more accessible to working class readers; novels in "weeklies" were seen as more melodramatic, suspenseful, and often indecent.

Some of these class and taste stratifications shifted around the 1850s and 1860s, when middle class periodicals like Dickens' *Household Words* began to be published in weekly installments, and when "sensation novels" gained popularity with a middle class reading public.[25] This shift goes some way toward explaining the anxiety that surrounded this sensational literary trend. Sensation novels as a genre tended to traffic in shocks and suspense, and to explore themes like bigamy, murder, mistaken identity, and madness. Critics worried that these

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[24] Briefly, "taxes on knowledge" – taxes on the press – were abolished, reduced, or altered. These changes made it cheaper to publish fiction in both monthly and weekly periodicals, and thus was one contributor to the expansion of the periodical press through the nineteenth century. See Graham Law, "Periodicals and Syndication," *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*, edited by William Baker and Kenneth Womack (Greenwood, 2002).
[25] See Pykett's *The Nineteenth-Century Sensation Novel* for additional overview of sensation novels.

novels would have a dangerous influence – particularly on impressionable female readers – because of their working class plots and affects, which were linked implicitly with faster, working class, serial temporalities.

Nineteenth-century serial temporalities, and the popularity of serial fiction in the nineteenth century overall, have often been tied to the growing power of the middle class, both in terms of purchasing power as noted above, and also ideologically. As Linda Hughes and Michael Lund in particular have argued, Victorian seriality – and particularly Victorian serial realism – sits at the intersection of middle-class capitalist and domestic temporalities. In other words, serial fiction's endlessly deferred narratives and regular publication rhythms promised steady, continuous, progressive growth; suspenseful narrative structures promised future reward in exchange for an investment of time and attention; and much like the domestic sphere in general, realist plots promised an escape from "the real world" outside the home that was nevertheless still grounded in the ontological "reality" of everyday life.[26] In addition, serial fiction became associated both with the ephemerality of periodicals, and with fast, automated, routinized technologies like the railroad or the automaton.[27] In both nineteenth-century and scholarly accounts of Victorian serial publishing and reading, seriality's formal and temporal characteristics – its combination of repetition and deferral; its simultaneous associations with suspension and accumulation – are therefore key to producing its ideological effects.

Television has historically occupied a similarly fraught position in the binary of domestic commodity versus art, and theories of television have similarly emphasized both its ephemerality, and the ways that hierarchies of affect have coalesced around the temporal

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[26] *The Victorian Serial*, (UP of Virginia, 1991).
[27] See Nicholas Daly's *Literature, Technology, and Modernity, 1860-2000* (Cambridge UP, 2004) on railways; and for a discussion of automata, see Nicholas Dames' *The Physiology of the Novel* (Oxford UP, 2007), 64-5.

dynamics of serial repetition and suspense. Early theories of television continuity, for instance, drew heavily on Raymond Williams' concept of "flow." Williams contended that textual analyses of television should not necessarily be divided by program, because the experience of watching television is one of being carried onward from segment to segment, and from program to program.[28] In other words, Williams locates continuity in a combination of medium and viewer; "flow" furthermore emphasizes domestic viewing rhythms and ephemerality.

Long-running programs on US television were traditionally divided formally into serials and series, where serials refer to narratives with continuous plotlines and series refer (confusingly) to narratives that involve the same characters but not continuous plotlines.[29] The quintessential example of a television serial was the soap opera, while the quintessential example of a television series/episodic program was the sitcom.[30] While this distinction between serial and episodic television was arguably always rather artificial, it began to break down most visibly in the 1980s and 1990s alongside the rise of discourses of "Quality TV."

The use of the term "quality television" to mean an aesthetic characteristic coalesced in the 1970s around Grant Tinker's MTM Enterprises and the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*.[31] In the 1980s, "quality" came to refer to what Robert Thompson called "serious, literary, writer-based drama" programs starting with *Hill Street Blues*.[32] In other words, labels like "serious" and

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[28] *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (Fontana, 1974).
[29] For clarity, I will generally in the future refer to this type of narrative structure as "episodic" rather than "series."
[30] See Jane Feuer, "Narrative Form in American Network Television," *High Theory/Low Culture: Analysing Popular Television and Film*, edited by Colin MacCabe (Manchester UP, 1986), 101-114; Sarah Kozloff, "Narrative Theory and Television," *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled*, edited by Robert Allen, 2nd ed. (UNC Press, 1992), 67-100.
[31] As Kirsten Marthe Lentz has pointed out, MTM's "quality" (particularly its self-reflexivity) is part of how it constructed itself as a feminist program, in implicit contrast to the realist "relevance" of Norman Lear's Tandem sitcoms, which were concerned with televisual representations of race; "Quality versus Relevance: Feminism, Race, and the Politics of the Sign in 1970s Television," *Camera Obscura*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2000, 44-93.
[32] *Television's Second Golden Age: From* Hill Street Blues *to* ER (Continuum, 1996), 13.

"quality" began to be formal descriptors attached to a particular kind of serial program to describe detailed, "entangled and continuing" plots, with a focus on gradual character development.[33] After around 1996, in the "post-network" era marked by the growth of cable, "quality TV" came to be particularly linked both with particular networks (like HBO) and with narrative complexity, which starts to refer less to complex character changes and relationships, and more to enigmatic plots.[34] Interestingly, popular references to television as "Dickensian" also increase in the mid to late 1990s. In other words, comparisons between television and novels begin to emphasize the seriality of both.

Michael Newman and Elana Levine emphasize that discourses of legitimating television, like references to "serious," "quality" or "complex" television, tend to draw contrasts with past ways of viewing: "New is elevated over old, active over passive, class over mass, masculine over feminine."[35] I would also add suspense and closure over repetition and accumulation to this list. One risk of this historical narrative is that it has the potential to naturalize the development of more highbrow serial narratives as a historical inevitability and as more formally complex.[36]

Suspense, Serial Inferences, and "Precarious Knowing"

My formulation of seriality seeks to reconfigure the relationship between the repetitive and the suspenseful elements of serial fiction, in part by foregrounding the complex effects of repetition. Linda Hughes and Michael Lund, for instance, argue that suspense is the temporal affect most closely associated with Victorian seriality, while Caroline Levine makes a similar

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[33] *Ibid.*, 71.
[34] For a formal argument about this relationship between "complexity" and narrative enigma, see Jason Mittell's *Complex TV*.
[35] *Legitimating Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (Routledge, 2012), 5.
[36] See also Elana Levine's *Her Stories: Daytime Soap Opera and US Television History* (Duke UP, 2020).

case for Victorian realism. Levine specifically links the *feeling* of suspense with the more ethical or epistemological notion of *suspending*, as in suspending judgment or suspending conclusion. She argues that when readers are in the middle of a narrative, or are in the midst of a serial gap, they are in a state of skepticism and doubt similar to that which is encouraged by the scientific method, where one forms hypotheses that may or may not be proven true. Levine further argues that:

> the pleasure of this pause is, at least in part, an excitement about the fact that the world may defy convention, resist authority, elude familiar representations. Thus we actually come to enjoy the split between world and mind, delighted to imagine that we do not know. Suspenseful narratives teach us to take pleasure in the activity of stopping to doubt our most entrenched beliefs.[37]

In Levine's formulation, then, "pleasure" is tied to knowledge, or rather, to a lack of knowledge with the expectation of future knowledge. In addition, suspense produces a proliferation of possible alternatives precisely *because* we do not yet know, and it encourages us to invest on some level in the belief that those alternatives *might* be true. As Levine further argues, this effect does not end with the conclusion of a narrative: "closure does not so much dictate an arbitrary conclusion, as it compels us to recognize the *otherness* of the world, the ever-present possibility that the facts may refuse to validate our prejudices" (47). While Levine's formulation of suspense is primarily founded in moments of genuinely not knowing, this last passage emphasizes that there are lingering epistemological effects of suspense even when the truth seems to be known. While the world of a particular narrative has narrowed toward a singular

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[37] *The Serious Pleasures of Suspense: Victorian Realism and Narrative Doubt* (U of Virginia P, 2003), 10.

path, our memory of those alternative possibilities – of what might have been – remains such that the "real" narrative might still feel like one of many.[38]

Levine's definition of suspense might therefore shed light on the continuing pleasure that audiences feel when rereading or rewatching. While some theories of rereading and rewatching emphasize the comfort of always already knowing what will happen,[39] Sean O'Sullivan for instance emphasizes the feeling of suspense produced by knowing that the "inevitable" is coming,[40] while Amanda Ann Klein and R. Barton Palmer argue that repetitive forms like sequels, remakes, reboots, and others should be understood as "multiplicities" rather than as repeats. They argue that these texts are "not generated by some simple desire on the part of viewers to consume the same object over and over again. The 'same thing' that the viewer sees time and time again is always different from the 'same things' that precede and follow it."[41] In other words, O'Sullivan argues that one might feel suspense about a known narrative outcome, while Klein and Palmer question what constitutes a known narrative outcome in the first place. Both these arguments suggest that the affects associated with knowing and repeating might go beyond a sense of familiarity or comfort.

As I have noted above, Caroline Levine has argued that suspense or suspending exists in the temporal gap before coming to know, and furthermore, that this act of suspending produces multiple different potential versions of reality. This argument therefore intersects with the work of cognitive literary theorists and theorists of realism seeking to explain the relationship between

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[38] See also Catherine Gallagher's *Telling It Like It Wasn't* (U of Chicago P, 2018) on counterfactual histories, and Andrew H. Miller's *Burdens of Perfection* on the "optative" in realist fiction (Cornell UP, 2008).
[39] For instance, Derek Kompare's *Rerun Nation* (Routledge, 2005) addresses the relationship between the repetition of rerun syndication and nostalgia.
[40] Sean O'Sullivan, "The Inevitable, Surprise, and Serial Television," *Media of Serial Narrative*, edited by Frank Kelleter (Ohio State UP, 2017).
[41] "Introduction," *Cycles, Sequels, Spin-Offs, Remakes, and Reboots: Multiplicities in Film and Television*, edited by Amanda Ann Klein and R. Barton Palmer (U Texas Press, 2016), 3-4.

fictionality and reality.[42] For instance, Elaine Auyoung, writing about Jane Austen, has argued that Austen's characters in particular provoke such strong feelings from readers because she cultivates in them a "sense of knowingness."[43] This sense of knowingness is produced by the repetition of opportunities for readers to make the same or similar set of social inferences about these characters over and over again. That is, Austen's ironic and indirect style combines with repetition and the stability of a character's "habits of mind"[44] to make those characters *feel* particularly well-known, not *despite* Austen offering relatively sparse amounts of narrative information, but in fact *because* of it. In other words, Auyoung suggests a gap between what Austen says and what readers infer, and it is that very gap between what is directly articulated and what is known that produces a sense of intimacy with the character, text, or narrator/author. What Auyoung suggests is that we can see Austen's repetition of character "habits" as not a repetition of information per se, but as a repetition of that gap. This argument therefore has potential implications for understanding the relationship between knowledge and intimacy in the context of a serial narrative structure.

In addition, the process of reading Austen that Auyoung describes is essentially automatic – a cognitive process that readers do instinctively. When applied to seriality, where the space between *thinking you know* and *being told* is a temporal rather than stylistic one, it is easier for audiences to be aware of what they do not know for sure. As I will argue throughout this dissertation, putting together Levine's account of suspense and Auyoung's account of repetition yields an understanding of seriality that foregrounds the multiple simultaneous narrative

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[42] See, for instance, Marie-Laure Ryan's *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2* (Johns Hopkins UP, 2015); Blakey Vermeule's *Why Do We Care About Literary Character* (Johns Hopkins UP, 2010).
[43] *When Fiction Feels Real*, 42.
[44] *Ibid.*, 49.

possibilities that are generated *before* and even *after* audiences are given conclusive narrative information, as well as the intimacy that is cultivated through inference, or through simultaneously knowing and not being told. I call this feeling "precarious knowing," or the feeling of simultaneously knowing what will probably happen, and remembering or imagining other versions of how a story might go.

This feeling, furthermore, is what fan practices are built upon. Francesca Coppa, for instance, has defined fanfiction in part as "speculative fiction about character,"[45] where fan authors take existing characters that they often feel they know very well, and put them in new scenarios or new universes. Most fanfiction, like other repetitive genres – romances, crime-solving stories, etc – has a strong tendency toward closure and happy endings, and clearly recognizable generic tropes and structures. At the same time, any individual work of fanfiction is built upon, and is in dynamic conversation with, the "archive" of other existing fanworks.[46] Much as works of adaptation exist in intertextual relationships with each other,[47] fanworks implicitly build upon and comment upon each other, so that reading any individual work of fanfiction sits in parallel to – and calls upon a reader's memory of – the narrative structure of its source text and of other fanworks. In short, a fanfiction reader can infer what will happen, while also remembering what *won't* happen, so even very familiar narrative formulae take on a multiplied version of what Caroline Levine called "the *otherness* of the world."[48]

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[45] *The Fanfiction Reader: Folk Tales for the Digital Age* (U of Michigan P, 2017), 12-13.
[46] See Abigail Derecho, "Archontic Literature: A Definition, a History, and Several Theories of Fan Fiction," *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, edited by Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson (McFarland, 2006).
[47] See Robert Stam, "Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation," *Film Adaptation*, edited by James Naremore (Rutgers UP, 2000); see also Christopher Anderson, "Reflection on *Magnum, P.I.*," *Television: The Critical View,* edited by Horace Newcomb, 4th ed. (Oxford UP, 1987).
[48] My understanding of fannish methods of reading differs from how others have understood "fan reading." Cornel Sandvoss for example distinguishes "literary texts" that contain "a multiplicity of meanings" which in turn create

Chapter Summaries

My first chapter, "Everybody's Secrets": Sensation Fiction, Serial Gaps, and Unspoken Knowledge," reads two Victorian sensation novels – Wilkie Collins' *No Name* (1862-3) and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1861-2) – in the context of "precarious knowing." These two novels both make their "secrets" known to their readers early in the narrative, but they also simultaneously offer additional, provisional possibilities of how the story might go, or how the reader and characters should interpret characters' actions. As a result, the process of reading invites the reader to repetitively make inferences about what is going on in these novels. These acts of serial inference-making, because they are "provisional," do not function entirely to reinforce readerly certainty about the knowledge they are inferring or to empower the readers as superior interpreters of guilt. Instead, the co-occurrence of these multiple possibilities, and the fact that these possibilities are not totally shut down as the narratives progress, works to create a leveling effect between reader, characters, and text.

Where in the first chapter, the concept of "precarious knowing" helped to register an equalizing of knowledge, my second chapter extends this framework to the cultivation of intimacy with serial characters. This chapter, ""Mystery Solved": Secrets, Procedural Characters, and Friendship on CBS's *Elementary*," considers in particular the familiar, repetitive genre of the television crime procedural, as exemplified by CBS' Sherlock Holmes adaptation *Elementary*

"semiotic ambiguities and challenges," from "fan texts," onto which a fan projects a singular, personal meaning (143). In other words, fan texts are relatable texts, and the work that a reader does to impose that feeling of relatability onto a text has the additional effect of foreclosing other meanings, according to Sandvoss; *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption* (Polity, 2005). Instead of thinking in terms of fannishness and relatability, I prefer terms like intimacy precisely because, as Nancy Yousef notes in *Romantic Intimacy*, intimacy implies a parallel relation, rather than suggesting that an emotional relationship with a text necessitates a dissolution of self and other (text into reader, or vice versa).

(2012-2020). The formal repetitions of a procedural are often characterized as comfortable or soothing, in implicit contrast to the rigors of surprise. This chapter illuminates both the challenges and the rewards of forming attachments to repetitive media objects – of imagining, for instance, that a television show is like a friend. I argue that *Elementary* grounds its definition of friendship, its formal relationship with viewers, and its constructions of character in repeated failures to manage information (to keep secrets, to solve crimes, etc). The formal use of repetition in this context emphasizes not just familiarity, but also the struggle of making something familiar. And this combination is also what produces textual intimacy.

My third chapter, "Imagined Economies: Suspense, Spoilers, and the Payoffs of Contemporary Television Serials," considers the shifting economic metaphors that describe suspenseful narrative pacing. These metaphors include, for instance, being "owed" information, experiencing narrative "payoffs," and "cheating" by consuming spoilers. I focus in particular on the way that the metaphors that contemporary television critics used to describe one specific television show, the Showtime spy drama *Homeland* (2011-2020), changed over time as it declined in quality. *Homeland* enacted for its critics a kind of slow spoiling: a serial that became so repetitive that its mystery was effectively ruined. These critics then framed their disappointment in economic terms, implying that the ideal relationship between serial and viewer is one grounded in a fair exchange of information. I argue that these notions of "fairness" and betrayal extend to discussions of spoiler etiquette more broadly. The fantasy of the perfectly unspoiled story – and its ancillary fantasy, of a well-behaved audience who knows exactly when and how *not* to spoil others – has an often-powerful hold on our popular imagination. This chapter puts pressure on that fantasy.

My fourth chapter, ""Hotel Rooms and New Tattoos": The Seriality of One Direction," extends the serial reading methods developed in the first three chapters to a nontraditional serial text: the massive online fandom surrounding the boy band One Direction. One Direction fans engage with the band and with each other in a variety of ways, from attending concert tours, to reblogging celebrity photos, to creating fanfiction. This chapter argues that we can understand all these fan practices together as building a larger serial narrative that fans themselves write about the band and about their own role in the story of One Direction. Fans use these distributed, serial practices of storytelling and character-writing as a shared language through which to register the work of celebrities and fans – and particularly LGBTQ+ fans – of navigating contemporary media industries.

Each of my chapters' case studies were selected more for their typicality than their uniqueness, although I do engage, through close reading, with the specifics of these texts as well. For instance, I discuss *Lady Audley's Secret* in Chapter One in part because it contributed to the template of "the sensation novel" that future authors followed or resisted, but while it certainly looms large in scholarship on the sensation novel, it is slightly less canonical than Collins' *The Woman in White*, which I only discuss more obliquely in conversation with *Lady Audley's Secret* and Collins' later *No Name*. Similarly, *Elementary*, in addition to being a Sherlock Holmes adaptation and possibly relating to the nineteenth century in interesting ways, is a fairly typical example of a CBS crime procedural. It is not particularly canonical, unique, or transformative of the genre – it is not *Law & Order* or *CSI*, for instance. I could have chosen many other CBS procedurals to write about in Chapter Two. For example, I nearly selected *Criminal Minds* (2005-2020) instead, and in retrospect that choice would probably have worked equally well. In Chapter Three, *Homeland* is representative of the myriad shows every year – the quintessential

example of which might be *Twin Peaks* (ABC 1990-1), that start out with critical praise and that eventually become disappointing, in part because the show appears at first to be driven by a mystery that it then either fails to solve, reveals itself to be uninterested in solving, or prematurely *succeeds* in solving. And lastly, while on the one hand One Direction's specific trajectory was both startling and difficult to replicate, many of the fan practices I discuss in Chapter Four appear in other fandoms of various kinds. In the pop music world specifically, one can find many similar dynamics in both Taylor Swift's fandom and K-pop (Korean pop music) fandom,[49] to name just two examples. In short, all of these chapters – and the case studies contained within them – are intended to offer a framework that can apply flexibly to a variety of serial narratives and audiences. The examples that I have chosen are therefore not uniquely suited to my argument, and instead they hopefully point toward interesting possibilities for engaging with other texts beyond those discussed here.

[49] Michelle Cho, "3 Ways that BTS and Its Fans Are Redefining Liveness," *Flow*, 29 May 2018, www.flowjournal.org/2018/05/bts-and-its-fans/. Accessed 14 August 2020.

Chapter 1 : "Everybody's Secrets": Sensation Fiction, Serial Gaps, and Unspoken Knowledge

Approximately two-thirds of the way through Wilkie Collins' serial novel *No Name* (1862-3)[50], its central character, Magdalen Vanstone, finds herself contemplating two possible futures: marriage or suicide. As she does so, she looks over an unfinished confessional letter that she has written to her sister Norah. Magdalen, the narrative, and the reader each pause on this document; Magdalen re-reads it thrice. As the reader eventually learns, this draft of her letter ends with the assertion, "I have hidden nothing…The end I have toiled for, at such terrible cost to myself, is an end which I must reach or die….There are now two journeys for me to choose between [i.e. marriage or death]," followed by a "blank space."[51] Magdalen eventually finishes writing the letter, filling the blank space with the confirmation that she has chosen death over marriage. In some respects, this letter echoes the reading experience produced by nineteenth-century serial novels – novels initially published in parts in a weekly or monthly periodical – of which *No Name* is one. As with a serial, Magdalen reaches a "blank space" upon which she must pause, re-reading and reconsidering, before offering new information or answering a question (such as "which option will she choose?").

The temporality of this passage and its relationship to knowledge, however, is actually fairly complicated. For instance, the scene actually begins with Magdalen reading a confession in a newspaper of an unnamed murderer who had just been hanged, which ends with the words "I

[50] Publication dates throughout will correspond to the work's first complete serial run, unless otherwise indicated.
[51] *No Name* (Oxford, 2008), 496.

have no more to say." This confession leaves a "distinct impression" on Magdalen's mind, and it is in that context that Magdalen re-reads her own confession to Norah, the text of which Magdalen has already written, but which the reader does not yet have access to. It is only later in the scene, once Magdalen is ready to fill in the "blank space" with her decision, that the reader is given part of the text of the letter that Magdalen has been re-reading, and which I have quoted above. Magdalen's assertion that "I have hidden nothing" therefore both predates her reading of the newspaper confession (because she had written the letter earlier in time), and echoes it, because the reader only reads it after the newspaper confession. The murderer's confession therefore both confirms and foreshadows the results of Magdalen's own confession, and suggests a similar relationship between hiding nothing and finality.

In addition to the "blank space" at the end of Magdalen's letter acting analogously to the "blank space" of a serial gap, then, there is also a similar gap between the text of the newspaper confession and the text of Magdalen's letter. This gap is filled by nebulous mental "impressions" and a "vision" of the anonymous murderer that draws her toward the laudanum that she has purchased in preparation for her possible suicide attempt. In other words, this gap occurs between two seemingly unrelated texts, where Magdalen's acts of reading, re-reading, and experiencing "impressions" build a continuous narrative, with a cause-and-effect relationship that extends from an anonymous murderer's confession and death to her own.

But of course, Magdalen does not actually go through with her resolution to commit suicide. Repetition, foreshadowing, and readerly knowledge prove themselves to be unstable predictors. They both *do* and *do not* help the reader understand what will happen to Magdalen. Similarly, this passage promises certain forms of closure – revelations of information that "hide nothing" and a repeated insistence on "the end" – that it almost immediately resists, both by

reconfiguring “the end” as in fact another “journey,” and also by continually vacillating between these two “ends,” both here and throughout the rest of the novel.

This above passage is therefore both a representation and a minor example of what I have termed “precarious knowing.” Precarious knowing is both a kind of inference where audiences know narrative secrets (i.e. where “nothing” is “hidden”) without having been told them directly. It is also a provisional belief, based on prior narrative experiences, in predictable but uncertain future narrative outcomes. And lastly, precarious knowing refers to the feeling of knowing a character. These three definitions – one of which emphasizes knowledge, one of which emphasizes serial time, and one of which emphasizes feeling and character – are interrelated, as the above example briefly but illustratively suggests. The contents of Magdalen’s letter are both known (by the reader and by Magdalen) and unstated. That lack of initial articulation, together with the gap between serial parts (or between texts that will become serial parts, as in the newspaper and the letter), creates the conditions for a reader to stitch those parts together. They create continuity (and in some cases linear causality) by drawing out the parallels, repetitions, echoes, or links between two fragments of text. In other words, and the ghost or “vision” of one text leads the reader – in this case, Magdalen – toward the next, in part by using prior knowledge of the letter’s contents to read and interpret the letter itself. Lastly, these serial acts of reading create connections between, for instance, the unnamed murderer and Magdalen, or between Magdalen and the novel reader who has moved alongside Magdalen from the newspaper article to her letter, and in so doing, believes they know what she will choose and why. In this case, the reader would be mistaken, because again, Magdalen abruptly makes another choice. Precarious knowing is therefore *actually* precarious: the reader isn’t always right, which is not the same as the reader having been successfully tricked. For instance, the same reader might both understand

the newspaper article's foreshadowing, and also simultaneously conclude that Magdalen probably will not commit suicide, no matter what she vows in her letter to Norah, because there is still a third of the book to go. The precarity of the reader's knowledge allows for multiple beliefs – some of which are contradictory – to be happening simultaneously.

This complicating of the link between closure and disclosure runs through both *No Name* as well as another nineteenth-century serial sensation novel, Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1861-2), and in fact is characteristic of all the failed secrecy narratives that I engage with in this dissertation. By emphasizing the role of precarious knowing in how and why readers are compelled to keep reading sensation novels, this chapter specifically offers a complication to accounts of sensation fiction reading that emphasize curiosity and suspense, or the strategic withholding of knowledge until the novel's conclusion (i.e. an inverse relationship between secrecy and closure).

Sensation novels were a genre of serial fiction popularized in the early 1860s by Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, Collins' *The Woman in White* (1859-60), and Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1860-1). The genre's popularity faded in the 1870s, although its influence radiated outward into other genres of popular fiction including, for example, the detective story, the adventure story, and the scientific romance.[52] The genre shares a constellation of common themes and narrative devices, including a focus on bigamy, murder, and duplicitous female characters; and a concern about characters' true identities that often involves repetition or character doubling.[53]

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[52] Graham Law, *Serializing Fiction in the Victorian Press* (Palgrave, 2000).
[53] For an overview, see Daniel Hack, "Sensation Novel," *The Oxford Encyclopedia of British Literature,* edited by David Scott Kastan (Oxford UP, 2006); or Pykett, *The Nineteenth Century Sensation Novel*.

They are also commonly described as "novels with a secret" because a central mystery often drives the narrative, the answer to which is withheld from the reader until the end. These novels are therefore highly suspenseful, compelling readers to buy the next serial part and keep reading until the end, in order to learn the truth that awaits them. For instance, in an unsigned review in the *North British Review*, Alexander Smith writes about *The Woman in White*: "The passion of curiosity is appealed to at the commencement [of the novel], and so strongly is it roused that it carries one through to the close. The reader may dislike the book, despise the form of art of which it is an example, but, once started, he is certain to go on with it."[54] Smith here describes resenting the pull of suspense; reports a sense that his reading experience is not fully under his control (i.e. that he is being "carried"); and lastly, establishes a clear disconnect between the feeling of reading and the artistic merit of the book (i.e. the novel can successfully compel him even as he "despises" it). While each of these reactions are put in rather extreme terms here, they are characteristic of nineteenth-century critical responses to Collins' novels, and to sensation novels more generally. Even when reviewers praise them, they tend to emphasize that these novels are puzzles, "written to meet an ephemeral demand, aspiring only to an ephemeral existence" and using "rapid and ephemeral methods of awakening the interest of their readers."[55] Other reviewers describe being compelled or carried, and their attention "enchained"[56] by sensation novels. In short, a successful (but not necessarily artistic) sensation novel draws the reader in with a mystery at its beginning, and does not let them go until the end. Only once the reader knows the answer to the puzzle can they detach themselves from the novel.

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[54] In the same review, Smith also writes of *No Name* that "the book enchains you, but you detest it while it enchains," "Novels and Novelists of the Day," *The North British Review*, February 1863, 184.
[55] "Sensation Novels," *The Quarterly Review*, April 1863, 485.
[56] "Miss Braddon's Novels," *Dublin University Magazine*, April 1870, 441.

At the same time as reviewers insist upon the importance of the "secret," they often point out that both *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret* give up those secrets fairly early. About *Lady Audley's Secret*, for instance, the *London Review* notes that "however great a secret it may have been to the *dramatis personae*, it is certainly none at all to the reader. On the contrary, the bigamy, and all the other little frailties to which the bigamy leads, are quite apparent from the very first."[57] As I will argue in this chapter, this reviewer is not just a lucky guesser or a particularly astute reader. Instead, *Lady Audley's Secret*'s lack of secrecy is a textual characteristic that is built into both its structure and its narratorial style "from the very first." Similarly, after the popularity of the puzzling *Woman in White*, Collins wrote explicitly in an 1862 preface to *No Name* that, in contrast to his earlier novel:

> The only Secret contained in this book, is revealed midway in the first volume. From that point, all the main events of the story are purposely foreshadowed, before they take place – my present design being to rouse the reader's interest in following the train of circumstances by which these foreseen events are brought about.[58]

As I noted above, suspense in *No Name* coexists easily with the idea that characters and the narrator have "hidden nothing" from the other characters and the reader.

No Name seems at first to thematize a suspenseful serial structure. One way that narratives in general can cultivate suspense, as Marie-Laure Ryan has noted, is to start with a range of possible events that narrow over time. As these possible narrative futures are winnowed down, the reader feels the suspense more intensely.[59] In *No Name*, Magdalen begins the novel as an indulged daughter with significant financial and social resources. After she discovers that she and her sister Norah are illegitimate children, her paths forward become significantly narrower,

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[57] "The Last Sensation Novel," *The London Review*, 29 Nov 1862, 481.
[58] *No Name,* 6.
[59] *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2*, 101-2.

culminating in what she sees as a final choice between death and a marriage that will allow her to recover her lost inheritance. But as I have suggested above, this suspenseful narrowing of choices is ultimately revealed to be illusory: Magdalen reverses her decision several times, while later, her marriage fails to bring the resolution she expects, and lastly, Norah's parallel plot serves as a constant reminder to the reader that other options for Magdalen do in fact exist beyond the two that she has identified. In other words, this narrowing down of Magdalen's options is a false assumption on her part, and is presented as such by the text.

The following chapter tracks the way in which *No Name*, as well as Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1861-2), works to complicate the narrative linearity upon which the "novel with a secret" model of sensation fiction is based. Both texts are invested on the level of content with either tacitly communicating or outright stating their "secrets" early in the narrative. This chapter investigates the structural, formal, and narrative strategies that work alongside this commitment to anti-secrecy. In particular, I argue that *No Name*, through its strange and lopsided structure, and its insistence on noting precise units of time while also undercutting the meaningfulness of that information, disrupts simple understandings of serial time. *Lady Audley's Secret*, in turn, communicates its "secrets" mainly through implicature and disavowal. Rather than either stating information outright or alluding to its existence, the narrator of *Lady Audley's Secret* in fact continually offers alternate explanations for characters' behavior outright, even as the reader infers that these explanations are untrue. Both these novels therefore reconfigure what constitutes suspenseful serial form, not necessarily by abandoning formal conventions entirely, but instead by holding them in constant tension with alternate possibilities for understanding the temporalities of serial reading.

This chapter intervenes in a scholarly conversation about the relationship between sympathy and suspense in nineteenth-century novels, in part by shifting away from both terms. Both sympathy and suspense can be described as narrative feelings based in serial temporalities of knowledge, and particularly in linearity and cyclicality. At a basic, definitional level, serial fiction is often described as "a continuing story over an extended period of time with enforced interruptions."[60] In practice, this structure creates a dual temporality to serial fiction: linearity and repetition/cyclicality. This dual structure refers both to the narrative and to its method of delivery. On a narrative level, serial plots often balance forward momentum and delayed closure with returns to the familiar.[61] Similarly, a serial novel proceeds through time in numbered segments, at regular intervals corresponding to the publishing schedule of its periodical (daily, weekly, monthly, etc). At the same time, this regular publishing schedule produces an experience of cyclicality. For example, a reader might return every Saturday to the same text. Nineteenth century periodicals also bolster this feeling of return and repetition by repeating their paratextual material and basic organization from issue to issue. For example, *No Name* was initially published serially in Dickens' *All the Year Round*, and held the same position on the first page each week, introduced by the same header: "No Name. By the Author of 'The Woman in White,' &c." In short, every serial balances these two elements – linearity and cyclicality – in both its story and its transmission, but serials manage this balance differently depending on various factors, including their generic and formal conventions, etc.

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[60] Hughes and Lund, *The Victorian Serial*, 1.
[61] See for example, Jennifer Hayward's *Consuming Pleasures*: *Active Audiences and Serial Fictions from Dickens to Soap Opera* (UP of Kentucky, 1997).

Scholarship on sensation fiction has tended to emphasize linearity, particularly as it relates to suspense.[62] Nicholas Daly for instance characterizes sensation fiction as a "punctual genre," its popularity tied to the modernization and standardization of time in the nineteenth century and depending on "accurate time-keeping and scrupulous attention to the calendar."[63] This attention to precise time coexists, in accounts of sensation fiction, with a focus on the future, and with what Anna Maria Jones characterizes as "a fantasy of knowingness in which suspense and uncertainty anticipate the pleasures of revelation and explanation."[64] As Erica Haugtvedt has argued, suspense is "always future oriented," which contrasts with sympathy, a connection between reader and characters that is "formed laboriously through the narrative unfolding."[65] In other words, while both sympathy and suspense work through an interplay of knowing and not knowing, suspense looks ahead toward multiple narrative possibilities, while sympathy dwells in a slow, continuous, and singular present. Precarious knowing, in contrast to both of these, involves the creation and maintenance of an audience's relationship with, sympathy for, or sense of intimacy with a text and its characters via multiple, simultaneous provisional narratives that do not necessarily narrow over time.

Caroline Levine offers a different affective understanding of suspense, arguing that being held in a state of not-knowing becomes a pleasurable kind of anxiety. [66] It allows readers to grapple with the fact that their beliefs and expectations may not match up to the world. The

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[62] Significant exceptions include scholarship on the experience of "sensation" itself, particularly readings of *The Woman in White* that focus on the temporality of Walter's first meeting with Anne Catherick, which *feels* meaningful in the moment but only *becomes* meaningful in retrospect. See, for instance, Ann Cvetkovich, *Mixed Feelings* (Rutgers UP, 1992), 81-85; Rachel Ablow, "Good Vibrations," *NOVEL*, vol. 37, no. 1/2, Fall 2003 – Spring 2004.
[63] Nicholas Daly, "Railway Novels," *ELH*, vol. 66, no. 2, 1999, 473.
[64] Anna Maria Jones, *Problem Novels* (Ohio State UP, 2007), 5.
[65] Erica Haugtvedt, "The Sympathy of Suspense," *Victorian Periodicals Review*. vol. 49, no. 1, 2016, 151.
[66] *The Serious Pleasures of Suspense*.

suspense of realism is tied for Levine to the experimental method, while realism itself can therefore be defined primarily by how readers acquire knowledge. Again, the key to understanding suspense becomes an uncertainty regarding the future, and therefore an uncertainty regarding truth. What the following chapter seeks to discuss, in contrast, is the possibility for suspense when there is no such uncertainty, and when the reader is not so resolutely oriented toward a future of narrative closure.

This chapter is both grounded in the particularities of nineteenth-century sensation fiction – their narrative strategies, models of publication, and reception contexts – while also gesturing toward the way that this framework of "precarious knowing" might apply to other enigma-driven serial narratives, and to television in particular. By emphasizing what readers or viewers *know* as a formal property of these serial mysteries, in addition to or instead of emphasizing what they do *not* know, "precarious knowing" offers an alternative way to conceive of the interconnection between secrecy, knowledge, and readerly intimacy.

Blank Spaces: No Name *and Serial Waiting*

While *No Name*, by authorial decree, has no secrets and therefore does not involve the same temporalities of suspense as a puzzle novel like *The Woman in White*, much of *No Name* does involve processes of waiting. Waiting and deferral are central to both its plot and its prose. After the abrupt death of both their parents, sisters Magdalen and Norah Vanstone learn that they are illegitimate children and are therefore disinherited. Norah accepts her newfound poverty and becomes a governess, while Magdalen seeks to recover her fortune from the selfish, weak-willed cousin who inherited the Vanstone estate in her stead. Planning to seduce Noel Vanstone under an assumed identity, Magdalen enlists the help of the opportunistic Captain Wragge, who

engages in a battle of wits with Noel Vanstone's loyal housekeeper. Although Magdelen does marry Noel, he establishes a secret trust that bestows his estate on someone else, prompting Magdalen to disguise herself as a servant to search for the document outlining the terms of the new trust. Magdalen does not ultimately succeed at recovering the Vanstone fortune. Instead, Norah unknowingly marries the man who has inherited it, while Magdalen nearly dies of a fever until she's nursed slowly back to health by a convenient sea captain.

No Name first appeared serially on the first page of Charles Dickens' weekly periodical *All the Year Round*, running for forty-five weeks from March 1862 to January 1863. It was later published in three volumes in December of 1862, and in a one-volume edition in 1864. Although most parts of the serial version of *No Name* were comprised of single chapters, approximately a third of the parts had no one-to-one correspondence between part and chapter (i.e. the part contained either multiple chapters or segments of a chapter). There is therefore no automatic link between the novel's chapter structure and the segments into which the serial would have been divided in *All the Year Round*. Similarly, Collins structured the novel into eight "scenes" of radically different lengths, and then included sections "Between the Scenes," comprised of either letters sent between characters or notes written by characters. Chapter numbers restart at the beginning of each new "scene." The interrelationship of *No Name*'s content and serial structure therefore becomes somewhat complicated.

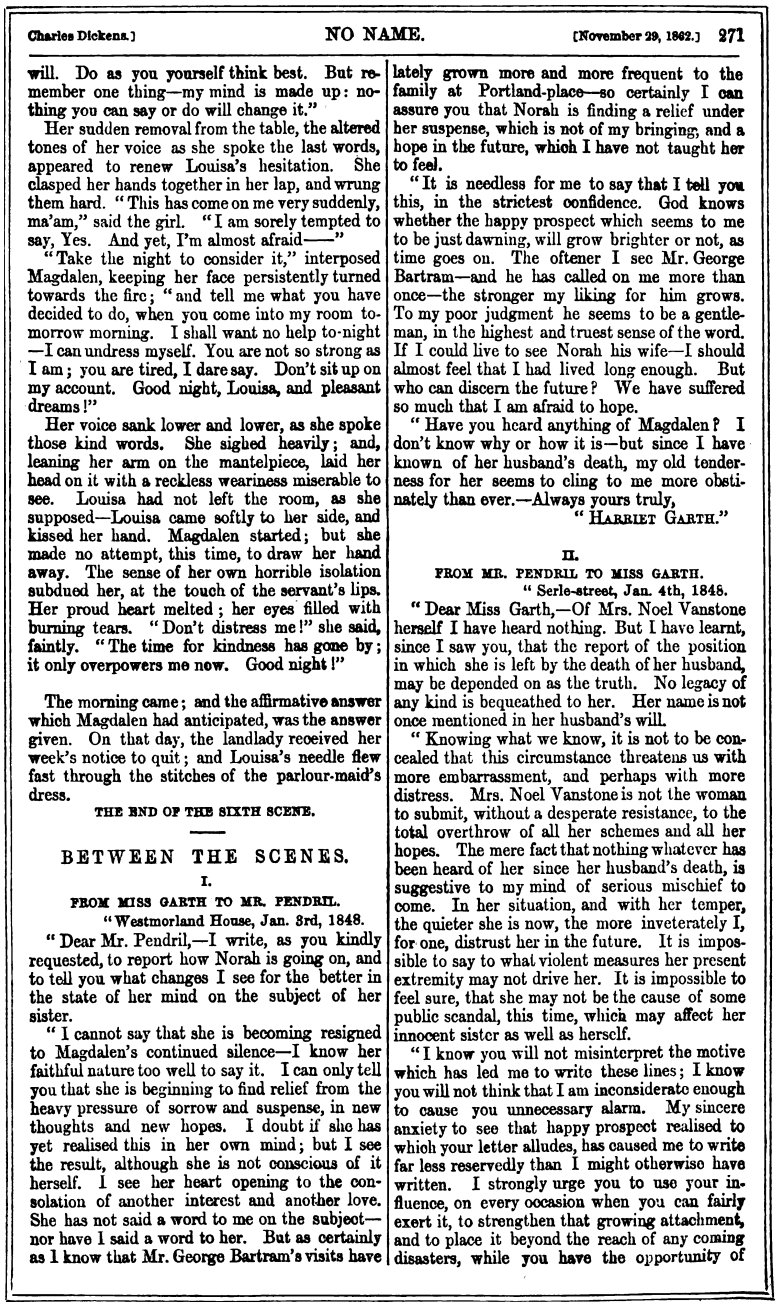
When it comes to these eight numbered "scenes" in particular, there is a tension between the progressive movement of numbering itself, and the fact that this numbering restarts at every new scene. We could think of this as akin to a kind of serial "linearity plus cyclicality," except that the wildly different lengths of the scenes resist this interpretation. For example, one scene is fifteen chapters long and another is two chapters long; any cycle we could imagine would

therefore need to be extremely irregular. The appearance of the "Between the Scenes" sections in *All the Year Round* is equally asymmetrical. One might expect that these sections would be set off as their own distinct parts, or perhaps that they would appear systematically at the beginning or end of a part. In reality, however, out of seven "Between the Scenes" sections, four were their own distinct parts, while the other three had a more complicated structure. Two "Between the Scenes" were broken up to span two different serial parts, while also including the first chapter of the next scene. The sixth scene was short enough that its two chapters and its "Between the Scenes" section all fit into a single part. The "Between the Scenes" sections' unstable position in the serial suggests that these narrative breaks do not correspond in any obvious way to the publication breaks afforded by a serialized novel. The three-volume version of *No Name* similarly breaks halfway through the Fourth Scene, rather than at the beginning or ending of a scene. In whatever form one reads *No Name*, the effect is a kind of narrative syncopation, in which the internal structure of the novel almost aggressively refuses to match up with the structure of its publishing form. By being so out-of-sync, *No Name* has the potential to disrupt our understanding of a serial as composed primarily of linear narrative movement and cyclical segmentation of parts.

Rather than interpreting the scene structure of *No Name* through the lens of seriality, scholars frequently note that Collins was writing with an eye toward adaptation for the stage.[67] It is nevertheless suggestive that Collins' interest in preserving dramatic unity of place – by dividing the novel into scenes based on Magdalen's location -- ends up creating irregularity in the amount of physical space the pieces of the novel take up on the page. The letters in the "Between the Scenes" have headers and signatures that produce more blank space on the page at

[67] See for example, Virginia Blain's introduction to the 1986 Oxford World's Classic edition of *No Name*.

irregular intervals, a fact that seems particularly significant given that *All the Year Round* was not illustrated. That is, the typographical novelty of having "Between the Scenes" sections every few chapters may serve to visually interrupt the flow of text, in a manner similar to (although perhaps not as appealing as) illustrations (see Figure 1). The unity of the text is again disrupted, perhaps to more fully register its materiality.



Charles Dickens.] NO NAME. [November 29, 1862.] 271

will. Do as you yourself think best. But remember one thing—my mind is made up: nothing you can say or do will change it."

Her sudden removal from the table, the altered tones of her voice as she spoke the last words, appeared to renew Louisa's hesitation. She clasped her hands together in her lap, and wrung them hard. "This has come on me very suddenly, ma'am," said the girl. "I am sorely tempted to say, Yes. And yet, I'm almost afraid——"

"Take the night to consider it," interposed Magdalen, keeping her face persistently turned towards the fire; "and tell me what you have decided to do, when you come into my room to-morrow morning. I shall want no help to-night—I can undress myself. You are not so strong as I am; you are tired, I dare say. Don't sit up on my account. Good night, Louisa, and pleasant dreams!"

Her voice sank lower and lower, as she spoke those kind words. She sighed heavily; and, leaning her arm on the mantelpiece, laid her head on it with a reckless weariness miserable to see. Louisa had not left the room, as she supposed—Louisa came softly to her side, and kissed her hand. Magdalen started; but she made no attempt, this time, to draw her hand away. The sense of her own horrible isolation subdued her, at the touch of the servant's lips. Her proud heart melted; her eyes filled with burning tears. "Don't distress me!" she said, faintly. "The time for kindness has gone by; it only overpowers me now. Good night!"

The morning came; and the affirmative answer which Magdalen had anticipated, was the answer given. On that day, the landlady received her week's notice to quit; and Louisa's needle flew fast through the stitches of the parlour-maid's dress.

THE END OF THE SIXTH SCENE.

BETWEEN THE SCENES.

I.

FROM MISS GARTH TO MR. PENDRIL.

"Westmorland House, Jan. 3rd, 1848.

"Dear Mr. Pendril,—I write, as you kindly requested, to report how Norah is going on, and to tell you what changes I see for the better in the state of her mind on the subject of her sister.

"I cannot say that she is becoming resigned to Magdalen's continued silence—I know her faithful nature too well to say it. I can only tell you that she is beginning to find relief from the heavy pressure of sorrow and suspense, in new thoughts and new hopes. I doubt if she has yet realised this in her own mind; but I see the result, although she is not conscious of it herself. I see her heart opening to the consolation of another interest and another love. She has not said a word to me on the subject—nor have I said a word to her. But as certainly as I know that Mr. George Bartram's visits have lately grown more and more frequent to the family at Portland-place—so certainly I can assure you that Norah is finding a relief under her suspense, which is not of my bringing, and a hope in the future, which I have not taught her to feel.

"It is needless for me to say that I tell you this, in the strictest confidence. God knows whether the happy prospect which seems to me to be just dawning, will grow brighter or not, as time goes on. The oftener I see Mr. George Bartram—and he has called on me more than once—the stronger my liking for him grows. To my poor judgment he seems to be a gentleman, in the highest and truest sense of the word. If I could live to see Norah his wife—I should almost feel that I had lived long enough. But who can discern the future? We have suffered so much that I am afraid to hope.

"Have you heard anything of Magdalen? I don't know why or how it is—but since I have known of her husband's death, my old tenderness for her seems to cling to me more obstinately than ever.—Always yours truly,

"HARRIET GARTH."

II.

FROM MR. PENDRIL TO MISS GARTH.

"Serle-street, Jan. 4th, 1848.

"Dear Miss Garth,—Of Mrs. Noel Vanstone herself I have heard nothing. But I have learnt, since I saw you, that the report of the position in which she is left by the death of her husband, may be depended on as the truth. No legacy of any kind is bequeathed to her. Her name is not once mentioned in her husband's will.

"Knowing what we know, it is not to be concealed that this circumstance threatens us with more embarrassment, and perhaps with more distress. Mrs. Noel Vanstone is not the woman to submit, without a desperate resistance, to the total overthrow of all her schemes and all her hopes. The mere fact that nothing whatever has been heard of her since her husband's death, is suggestive to my mind of serious mischief to come. In her situation, and with her temper, the quieter she is now, the more inveterately I, for one, distrust her in the future. It is impossible to say to what violent measures her present extremity may not drive her. It is impossible to feel sure, that she may not be the cause of some public scandal, this time, which may affect her innocent sister as well as herself.

"I know you will not misinterpret the motive which has led me to write these lines; I know you will not think that I am inconsiderate enough to cause you unnecessary alarm. My sincere anxiety to see that happy prospect realised to which your letter alludes, has caused me to write far less reservedly than I might otherwise have written. I strongly urge you to use your influence, on every occasion when you can fairly exert it, to strengthen that growing attachment, and to place it beyond the reach of any coming disasters, while you have the opportunity of

Figure 1: *No Name*, end of "Sixth Scene" and beginning of "Between the Scenes," in *All the Year Round*, vol. 8, 29 Nov 1862, p. 271

The heading that accompanies the "Between the Scenes" letters in the three-volume and single-volume editions -- "Progress of the story through the post" -- was added after the serial edition in *All the Year Round*. This may seem like a minor editorial point, but it supports the idea that readers of the serial would have a less grounded sense of where these letters came from, and would have less explicit signaling that these "Between the Scenes" interludes were meant to "progress the story." So again, what becomes loosened in the serial edition in particular is this sense of a forward-moving narrative. It is possible that for Collins, disruption to continuity is itself the point. For example, Collins is even inconsistent about the way in which he signals narrative breaks within a chapter. For the most part, gaps in the novel's narration, signals that time had passed, or changes in perspective were represented with a blank line space. Occasionally, however, Collins demarcated this change more visibly with a series of asterisks. This is a choice that carries through from the serial edition to the single-volume edition: the asterisks appear in the same places in both. There is no clear narrative choice for demarcating some narrative breaks with blank space and some with asterisks. What this switch heightens instead is this sense of narrative syncopation. Even within a chapter, the continuity between sections of the narrative will occasionally get disrupted, but without any discernible pattern to that disruption.

Throughout the novel, the content of the narrative is equally attendant to these questions of the temporality of serial fiction. The narrator's attention to the precise timing of narrative events is so ubiquitous as to be almost overwhelming. A return to Magdalen's letter-reading, however, opens up the possibility of a much more complicated temporal and emotional structure for the reading, and rereading, of serial fiction. Much like the serial reading to which it alludes,

Magdalen's reading co-occurs with a precise temporal structure. The passage, which I glossed in the first few pages of this chapter, unfolds in the following manner:

> It was midnight; and there was no sign yet of the captain's return.
>
> She took from the writing-case the long letter which she had written to Norah, and slowly read it through. The letter quieted her. When she reached the blank space left at the end, she hurriedly turned back, and began it over again.
>
> One o'clock struck from the church clock; and still the captain never appeared.
>
> She read the letter for the second time; she turned back obstinately, despairingly; and began it for the third time. As she once more reached the last page, she looked at her watch. It was a quarter to two.[68]

Magdalen reads her letter thrice, repetitively returning to the "blank space" at the end of her letter. Specific markers of time -- "midnight," "One o'clock," and "a quarter to two" -- bracket these rereadings. The passage's paragraph structure suggests that her reading is literally taking place within temporal gaps, in that these numerical markers introduce and conclude each of the two paragraphs narrating Magdalen's reading. More abstractly, while the narrator does register time passing at specific intervals, these intervals only partially match up with Magdalen's reading process. For example, she is somewhere in the middle of her second read-through when the clock strikes one, and there is no temporal marker to register the moment she starts the letter for the third time. Similarly, rather than familiarizing herself with the contents of the letter over time, Magdalen's first run through the letter is slow and soothing. The second and third readings seem to go faster, and Magdalen now is "obstinate" and "despairing." Time-keeping in this passage, then, seems on one level to be what structures and authorizes Magdalen's reading, even as, on another level, it completely fails to track with its pace, beginnings, or endings.

After finishing her letter to Norah and vowing to kill herself rather than marry Noel Vanstone, Magdalen somewhat whimsically decides instead to base her decision on the number

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[68] *No Name,* 495.

of ships that sail past her window in a half-hour period. If an odd number of ships appears, she will kill herself. If an even number appears, she will marry Noel Vanstone. In the end, eight ships pass by, the same number as there are scenes in *No Name*. While it may be a coincidence that the number of ships continuing Magdalen's existence is equal to the number of scenes continuing the novel's existence, Magdalen's experience of counting the ships also in several ways parallels the reader's experience with *No Name*'s serial structure:

> The first came [...] An interval -- and the second followed, with the third close after it. Another interval, longer and longer drawn out -- and nothing passed. She looked at her watch. Twelve minutes; and three ships. Three.
>
> The fourth came [...] The interval followed; a long interval once more. Then the next vessel passed, darkest and nearest of all. Five. The next uneven number -- Five.
>
> She looked at her watch again. Nineteen minutes; and five ships. Twenty minutes. Twenty-one, two, three -- and no sixth vessel. Twenty-four; and the sixth came by. Twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight; and the next uneven number -- the fatal Seven -- glided into view. Two minutes to the end of the half-hour. And seven ships.[69]

On a narrative level, this passage is fairly conventional in its elongation of time to create suspense. The first five ships do not take up nearly the same narrative space as the last two, and the count-down teases the reader with the possibility of knowing Magdalen's fate while continuing to withhold it. Narratively, then, Collins is not doing anything particularly unexpected for an author of sensation fiction.

What this passage also represents, however, is an interplay between steady linear time and Magdalen's subjective experience of time. As with Magdalen's reading of the letter discussed above, the boats are separated by "intervals" that may be felt as long or short, but which aren't fully incorporated into a numerical temporal structure, even though Magdalen has access to her watch the entire time. For example, the reader -- and seemingly Magdalen as well --

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[69] *Ibid.,* 499-500.

has no way of knowing exactly when the first, second, or third ships passed. Again, as with the narration of Magdalen's letter-reading, the space between temporal markers is filled by Magdalen's encounters with signifying objects (the letter, the ships), but these encounters do not take place on a clear time-line, and also cannot be fully represented within the narrative. That is, Collins' repetition of the word "interval" to describe these moments carries a refusal to afford narrative space to Magdalen's experience of waiting. Telling time and narration therefore become linked in this scene (and in the novel as a whole), but significantly, I would argue that serial reading becomes imagined as both outside time and partially outside narration as well.

While Magdalen's plotting of the boats on a timeline becomes more precise as the passage continues, the idea of "intervals" disrupted by boat sightings also suggests that Magdalen's experience of time is structured simultaneously by her watch and by the boats themselves. As with the parts of a serial narrative, the appearance of a boat becomes both an event in its own right and a partial iteration of a whole (i.e. the full number of boats that will ultimately appear in thirty minutes). We could imagine Magdalen's boat-sightings, therefore, as beats on a narrative strand with gaps in between. Significantly, however, these beats appear at random intervals. Rather than producing the impression that narrative significance occurs on a periodical's schedule, therefore, the narrator's careful attention to numeric time ultimately heightens the disconnect between calendar time and "narrative" time. As with the structure *of No Name* as a whole, Magdalen's boat-sightings jostle unevenly against the regularly spaced temporality that it ostensibly seems to uphold. While Magdalen and the reader are therefore linked by their shared experience of the suspense of waiting for the ships, at a more structural level, they are both also united in their shared experience of temporal uncertainty in serial form,

while readers become united with the author-figure of Collins in their shared awareness of the rules of novel-plotting.

As I have discussed above, serial fiction's deferral of closure is often imagined theoretically as a withholding of knowledge. While Magdalen questions whether the appearance of eight ships was providence or chance, the outcome of the serial novel is certainly always structured by an author. What Magdalen's experience with the ships highlights, however, is the way in which the process of reaching the end of the serial is nevertheless marked by randomness. The appearance of Ship #8 may have been foreordained by Collins and perhaps foreseen by the reader as well, but Magdalen's (and the reader's) process of reaching Ship #8 is, crucially, a temporally messy one.

Collins – well-known for his meticulously constructed plots, doubling, and cyclicality – has created in *No Name* a narrative that resists the meticulous, cyclical form of seriality at almost every structural level. While Magdalen's reading of her suicide note and the ships provides a very small textual correlate to this larger structure, it is illustrative of the way in which Collins might imagine a reader negotiating his serial work. As discussed above, theorists of seriality have noted the way in which serial works are structured and facilitated by gaps in the reading timeline that allow for comprehension and communal interpretation.[70] What is significant about *No Name*, therefore, is that it attempts to structurally and narratively engage with these gaps, as well as registers a possible temporal uncertainty at the heart of the serial reading experience. I suggest in short that the heightened focus on timekeeping in *No Name* may be suggesting the exact opposite. That is, *No Name* may register precise time but it does not seem to adhere to it.

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[70] For a partial overview, see Catherine Delafield, *Serialization and the Novel in Mid-Victorian Magazines* (Routledge, 2015). See also Mark W. Turner, "Periodical Time in the Nineteenth Century," *Media History*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2002, 183-196.

Not only does the novel suggest that the significant work of reading may occur within temporal and textual gaps, but it also seems to suggest that these gaps, rather than appearing at regularly scheduled intervals between bouts of content, seem to establish their own temporal structure altogether, one that co-occurs with standardized time, but works outside it.

The Monster at the End of This Book: Serialized Silence in Lady Audley's Secret

As I have suggested above, the experience of reading a sensation novel can be summed up, according to most critics, by a three-step process: first, the novel introduces its central "secret;" second, the reader advances through the narrative out of a desire to learn the withheld secret; and third, her curiosity is eventually satisfied. The smoothness of this imagined reading experience almost immediately falls apart in practice. For one thing, *Lady Audley's Secret* first appeared in the weekly magazine *Robin Goodfellow* in the summer of 1861, but the magazine folded after thirteen issues, the last of which included the eighteenth chapter of the novel. After about four months, in January/February 1862, the novel was serialized, this time in twelve parts and starting again with the first chapter, in the monthly *Sixpennny Magazine*. It was therefore not until May/June of 1862 that any new content was actually published. The first three-volume edition was published in October 1862, just before the novel finished its serial run in *Sixpenny Magazine*. It was then serialized again in the weekly *London Journal* in twenty-two parts, beginning in March of 1863. The publication history of *Lady Audley's Secret* is therefore – characteristically for nineteenth-century publishing – filled with uncertain futures, restarts, and uneven repetitions. Furthermore, on a narrative level, the reader of *Lady Audley's Secret* has access to most of the secrets of the novel almost from its beginning. While some of the answers to the novel's central questions may not be explicitly articulated until the end of the novel, and

others may not be explicitly articulated at all, the characters themselves (and to some extent, the narrator) do communicate the answers to each other through veiled allusions and seeming non sequiturs. The novel therefore establishes a reading method that encourages readers to infer information from strategic silences, and that binds readers to the characters and to the narrator in mutual unspeaking possession of the novel's secrets.

As an example of this inferential reading method at work, consider the following passage, which comes at arguably one of the most suspenseful moments of the novel. Robert Audley -- protagonist, erstwhile lawyer, and aspiring detective -- has been investigating the disappearance of his friend George Talboys. He suspects his aunt, Lady Audley, of being George Talboys' wife who bigamously re-married after Talboys left England to make his fortune in Australia. Robert further suspects Lady Audley of murdering Talboys to protect her secret identity, and Lady Audley knows that Robert is actively working to prove it. This exchange between Lady Audley and her servant Phoebe takes place at the inn in which Robert is sleeping, soon before the room next to Robert's catches on fire:

> "In which room does Mr Audley sleep?"
> There was something so irrelevant in this question that Phoebe Marks stared aghast at her mistress before she answered it.[71]

In this moment, Phoebe has no knowledge of Lady Audley's plans, but a few pages later, it is the loose repetition of the above phrasing that prompts her to suspect Lady Audley of setting the fire deliberately to kill Robert. Namely, Phoebe worries that "'there's Mr Audley asleep --'" and then "stopped suddenly at the mention of Robert's name" before exclaiming: "'Say it's not true, my

[71] Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret* (Oxford, 2012), 247.

lady.'"[72] Although Phoebe does not understand the full significance of Lady Audley's earlier question until this later moment, it clearly makes an initial impression on her.

What is so unsettling about this irrelevant question? Critics might argue that it is the primary work of the detective to taxonomically divide information into "relevant" and "not relevant" categories, to elevate some seemingly "trivial" details to the realm of significance while confirming that others are trivial after all.[73] Emily King argues, for example, that *Lady Audley's Secret* mounts a critique of symptomatic reading, particularly through the figure of Robert Audley. Her ultimate goal is to offer a reparative reading of the novel, one that "slows down the process of reading in its attention to the language of the text."[74] In order to make this argument, King claims that the novel establishes Robert as a symptomatic reader *par excellence* – chasing down circumstantial evidence in order to incorporate seemingly insignificant details into a totalizing explanatory structure – only to reveal the failures of such investigatory work. For King, the novel's narrative gaps serve to make this failure apparent. She specifically notes a moment where Lady Audley makes allusions about rather than accusations against Robert, arguing that "Lady Audley's moments of hesitation and silence connote an open space of possibility. From the perspective of the paranoid reader, these gaps indict Robert all the more precisely because of what is left unsaid. Paranoid reading operates on the level of insinuation."[75] King further claims that the text withholds information from the reader in a similar manner, and suggests that the novel therefore dissuades the reader from relying on symptomatic interpretive strategies to make meaning.

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[72] *Ibid*., 277.
[73] See, for example, D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (U of California P, 1988).
[74] "Reconsidering Reparation," *Pacific Coast Philology*. vol. 43, 2008, 65.
[75] "Reconsidering Reparation," 59.

As with Robert's accusations of Lady Audley -- of which Robert is so certain but which King argues would fall apart in a courtroom – D.A. Miller, discussing *The Woman in White*, argues that Collins's reader makes:

> what by the ordinary rules of evidence are comparably tenuous assumptions of his own. We can't know, just because Sir Percival's men are watching Somebody, and Walter may be being watched, that Walter is that Somebody, and yet we are convinced that we do know this....Our judgments are often informed by no better than the silliest folk wisdom.[76]

Miller further claims, "Like the characters who figure him, the reader becomes -- what a judge is never supposed to be -- paranoid. From trifles and common coincidences, he suspiciously infers a complicated structure of persecution, an elaborately totalizing 'plot.'"[77] King and Miller are linked by their shared suspicion of suspicion: their assertion that sensation novels trick the reader into employing unreasonable or pernicious interpretive methods. Both these arguments start from what seems like an interrogable premise: that certainty is the reader's goal. Or as King phrases it, "Though readers might have their suspicions, the text fails to reward their interpretive efforts."[78] Significantly, King frames the text's withholding of answers as a failure.

We could easily read Lady Audley's above question to Phoebe as offering an example of this process at work. It may seem trivial now, but with more information, both the reader and Phoebe will classify it properly as significant. Perhaps Phoebe's horror at its irrelevance, then, is merely a premonition of later relevance.[79] But then again, Lady Audley's question is not just irrelevant, it is "so irrelevant." The phrasing involves an odd juxtaposition of excess and lack, especially if we consider that "relevant" or "not relevant" is usually a binary categorization.

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[76] *The Novel and the Police*, 159-60.
[77] *Ibid*., 160.
[78] "Reconsidering Reparation," 60.
[79] See Ann Cvetkovich's *Mixed Feelings* for a discussion of exactly this type of premonitory affect in the context of *The Woman in White*.

Already, this passage seems to cast doubt on any taxonomizing urges we may have. If we look more closely at its context, this passage calls into even greater question our usual critical methods for interpreting "irrelevant" details in nineteenth century novels. First, while Phoebe terms Lady Audley's question "irrelevant," neither she nor the narrator behaves as though it is. We have already seen that Phoebe becomes "aghast" at its utterance, while the narrator has been dropping massive hints that Lady Audley plans to burn down the inn and murder Robert. By the time Lady Audley asks her "irrelevant" question, the reader can be quite confident about what it means: she does not, in fact, require any additional revelation in order to correctly interpret it.

Significantly, if the reader *did* require such revelation, she would be disappointed, because the reader never actually gets direct confirmation that Lady Audley set the fire deliberately at all. After Lady Audley leaves Phoebe, the narrator describes her entering an upstairs room of the inn and smiling at the fabric that decorates a looking-glass. As the narrator notes, "She had reason, perhaps, to smile, remembering the costly elegance of her own apartments; but there was something in that sardonic smile that seemed to have a deeper meaning."[80] The narrator then explains that Lady Audley was "obliged to place the flaming tallow candle very close to the lace furbelows about the glass, so close that the starched muslin seemed to draw the flame towards it by some power of attraction in its fragile tissue." The actual moment of fire-setting, however, is represented in the text by a space. There is a line break, represented in the *London Journal* as four dots, and the narration resumes with Lady Audley coming back down the stairs. While Phoebe and Robert each independently accuse Lady Audley of setting the fire, she never actually confirms it, and neither does the narrator. Instead, the

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[80] *Lady Audley's Secret,* 275.

events of the fire and Lady Audley's role in them are both a literal and figurative blank space -- an absence at the heart of these narrated events.

The narrator even displays an uncertainty about Lady Audley's motives that are at odds with the reader's own expectations. In the above passage, the narrator's ability to describe seems to falter when it comes to Lady Audley's motivation, and the narrator instead hedges her bets with words like "perhaps" and "seemed" when discussing Lady Audley's reasons for smiling. Similarly, the narrator offers two opposing explanations for her smile, and while the reader probably accepts that there is a "deeper meaning" to it, the "costly elegance" explanation is technically equally plausible. As with the pre-Raphaelite painting of Lady Audley earlier in the novel -- which at one moment seems totally benign, and at another seems to reveal a "beautiful fiend" -- the narrator derives two competing interpretations of Lady Audley's character from the same piece of evidence, each "so like and yet so unlike" the actual woman.[81] The narrator's uncertainty seems all the more striking in the context of the next few lines, in which the narrator goes to almost absurd lengths to deflect responsibility for the fire away from Lady Audley. The passive voice of "was obliged" suggests that she had little choice about her candle placement and contrasts markedly with the active position of the muslin, which apparently has a "power of attraction" to "draw the flame" closer to it. Again, the particular significance of this narratorial abdication of authority is not that it happens, but that the narrator's own uncertainty is at such odds with the reader's.[82] Furthermore, the narrator's uncertainty is not registered through silence,

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[81] *Ibid*., 65.

[82] Pykett argues that a non-omniscient narrator is characteristic of the sensational genre. She further notes, "Without this helping hand, and in the absence of all the facts of the case, the reader is left to make provisional moral judgements as the narrative unfolds. The result is a considerable degree of moral ambiguity" (*The Nineteenth-Century Sensation Novel*, 6). Pykett's interpretation of the role of the uncertain narrator therefore may conflict with my own.

or through the inability to articulate an explanation for these characters' actions, but instead through the articulation of another, perfectly plausible version of events.

There is certainly something secretive -- or at least extremely coy -- about the narrator of Lady *Audley's Secret* refusing the reader the truth about the inn fire. Simultaneously, it becomes increasingly difficult to support any reading of the text except one that assumes Lady Audley set that fire. The above conversation is one example of a narrative strategy that reoccurs constantly throughout the novel, in which the narrator reports conversations between characters or observations about characters that seem utterly unmotivated on the surface, until they are interpreted in the context of information that the reader can infer, but cannot explicitly confirm. Because the reader does, in some sense, know this information, however, these moments seem to resist an explanation of the text's suspenseful effects that rests primarily on a reader's desire to know. For example, in the following exchange, Lady Audley asks her maid Phoebe what she had done that morning, and Phoebe replies:

> "I have been altering the blue dress. It is rather dark on this side of the house, so I took it up to my own room, and worked at the window."
>
> The girl was leaving the room as she spoke, but she turned round and looked at Lady Audley as if waiting for further orders.
>
> Lucy looked up at the same moment, and the eyes of the two women met.
>
> "Phoebe Marks," said my lady, throwing herself into an easy chair, and trifling with the wild flowers in her lap, "you are a good industrious girl, and while I live and am prosperous you shall never want a firm friend or a twenty-pound note."[83]

At first glance, this conversation seems completely trivial. Once it is situated within its narrative context, however, it begins to take on a slightly different shape. A few lines before the quoted dialogue, the reader has learned that George Talboys went looking for Lady Audley on the grounds of Audley Court, and that Lady Audley has returned from a walk claiming not to have

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[83] *Lady Audley's Secret*, 72-3.

seen him. In the next chapter, aptly titled "Missing," Robert Audley discovers that Talboys has actually disappeared. In the middle of these significant, plot-laden events, the narrator pauses to offer this fragment of a conversation about a blue dress. Furthermore, this exchange between Lady Audley and her maid actually concludes the chapter, giving it a kind of narrative emphasis that on the surface, it does not seem to deserve.[84]

I would contend that despite Lady Audley and Phoebe's focus on trivial things -- or perhaps because of it – it is possible for the reader to draw several conclusions from this conversation that do have a significant bearing on the larger question of Talboys' disappearance.[85] First, Phoebe's reference to the window invokes the narrator's heavy emphasis George Talboys' and Lucy Audley's movements in the garden. Phoebe and Lucy's exchange of looks further supports the idea that Phoebe's comment contained important subtext, and in this context, Lucy's seeming non-sequitur about the twenty-pound note now takes on a new valence. Without Lucy, Phoebe, or the narrator alluding to this possibility in the slightest, the reader could draw the relatively well-supported conclusion that Phoebe has seen something incriminating out the window and that Lucy is buying her silence.

We can see two forms that narratorial uncertainty takes in the above passage: first, in the description of Phoebe turning "as if waiting for further orders," and second, in the description of Lucy Audley "throwing herself into an easy chair, and trifling with the wild flowers in her lap." Both phrases seem initially designed to misdirect the reader. In the second instance, the narrator works primarily to distract: the word "trifling" seems like a subtle signal of the unimportance of

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[84] Although this exchange does conclude Chapter Nine, both *Robin Goodfellow* and the *Sixpenny Magazine* ran more than one chapter in this part. In neither of these periodicals did this conversation between Phoebe and Lady Audley actually conclude a part. In the *London Journal*, it did.

[85] Whether readers of the novel actually put the above reading strategies into practice is an open question that is not currently in the scope of this chapter.

this conversation between Phoebe and Lady Audley. In the first instance, if we work off the above reading of the scene, we know that Phoebe is not turning around to wait for further orders, but instead to communicate her knowledge of George Talboys' murder silently to Lady Audley. The narrator here does not allow Phoebe's gesture to speak for itself, but instead offers a (likely incorrect) explanation. By starting the phrase with "as if," the narrator indicates some level of doubt which subtly suggests that the otherwise totally reasonable explanation is not in fact the right one. That is, the narrator implies that Phoebe does not turn to wait for further orders. Instead, she turns in a way that looks *very similar to* waiting for further orders.

Again, the narrator's obfuscation here does not necessarily work to populate the narrative with false clues to distract from the real ones, or force the reader to wait until the end of the novel to distinguish between them. As I have suggested, the false and real clues are totally distinguishable, even upon first reading. The effect instead is to populate this narrative with multiple versions of each character – the suspicious and the non-suspicious – which serves to equalize relationship between the characters, the narrator, and the reader. To take a higher-stakes example, consider an early conversation that occurs between Robert and Lady Audley. The two characters start by discussing a series of inconsequential things, namely the cigar that Robert is smoking and the scene that Lady Audley is painting. Robert asks what the narrator terms a "careless" question, although his eyes are "fixed intently" on Lady Audley. He makes a reference to her extremely advantageous marriage to Sir Michael Audley, and the narrator registers Lucy's response: "The small brush fell from her hand, and blotted out the peasant's face under a widening circle of crimson lake." Robert, meanwhile, is described as focused upon his cigar, and

indeed the next thing he does is make a comment about how to select them.[86] The effect of this scene is to reveal consequential details but to preserve some sort of plausible deniability.

Both Robert and the narrator engage in the same tactics, and the effect on both Lady Audley and the reader is similar. Like Robert, the narrator switches between innocent, trivial descriptions and signals of deeper meaning. The narrator almost seems to take her cues from Robert: the closer Robert gets to accusing Lady Audley of George Talboys' murder, the closer the narrator comes to doing the same. After all, Lady Audley is described as obliterating a man's identity under a pool of red paint. The narrator has truly foregone subtlety at this point. It is significant, then, that everyone involved in this scene -- Robert, Lucy, narrator, reader -- understands what Robert is accusing Lucy of, even as it is never directly stated, and even though it is bracketed by a discussion about cigars. It would be difficult to argue that the reader is meant to be fooled by Robert's ostensible "carelessness." Certainly by the end of the scene, when the tension between Robert and Lady Audley has gotten so overwhelming that Lady Audley faints, the reader would have to be very unobservant indeed to miss the subtext of their conversation. Even a reader who skipped past the import of the above exchange between Phoebe and Lucy would be hard-pressed to ignore a fainting spell.

D. A. Miller might call the type of reasoning I've outlined above "no better than the silliest folk wisdom,"[87] and perhaps it is. Nevertheless, the fact that text encourages the reader to "know" the secrets of the novel almost from the beginning has profound implications for how we imagine suspense to work in this novel. In the case of the above passage, the reader could conceivably reason out the solution to the mystery of Talboys' disappearance before most

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[86] *Lady Audley's Secret*, 104-5.
[87] *The Novel and the Police*, 160.

characters even realize that he has gone missing, and with three hundred pages of the novel left to go. The reader is neither excluded from knowledge, nor does the "gap" around these conversations' unspoken assumptions leave the reader completely free to let her imagination run wild. Instead, the secrets of the novel are silently known and silently shared. In the above passage, and in the myriad others that populate the novel, the reader has the option to become initiated herself into the novel's silent secret-keeping. This passage, and others like it, posits a model of discovery that is relational rather than hierarchical. Knowing or not knowing does not necessarily translate to power or mastery, but instead facilitates relationships between characters, the narrator, and the reader.

This dynamic becomes even more evident in a later passage, in which Lady Audley references a man who is tormenting her, and Phoebe claims to know who she means. Lady Audley responds: "'my secrets are everybody's secrets. You know all about it, no doubt.'"[88] Phoebe then asks a series of questions about the man -- "The person is a gentleman, is he not....A gentleman who came to the Castle Inn" -- and Lady Audley confirms Phoebe's assumption each time. They are both clearly discussing Robert, but even after Phoebe has tested her suspicions several times, neither identifies this man as Robert. The "secret" of Robert's identity is shared between Lucy and Phoebe, and they both know that the other knows, but they are still unwilling to articulate it directly. Similarly, "my secrets are everybody's secrets" is a rather striking assertion in a book titled *Lady Audley's Secret*, and which is taken so often to be about the uncovering of secrets. Lady Audley correctly believes that her secrets are generally known and collectively owned, but significantly, this does not prevent them from being termed "secrets." Instead, her subsequent conversation with Phoebe suggests that what makes a piece of

[88] *Lady Audley's Secret,* 256.

information secret is less dependent on whether it is known or not known, and more dependent on whether it is stated or unstated. This results, in effect, in an empty space at the heart of every piece of knowledge: Phoebe and Lucy are willing to circle around what they know, and by engaging in this verbal circling, they effectively define the terms of what they know, but they never pinpoint it directly.

Until this point, my discussion of the novel has centered primarily around characters whose function in the novel is arguably to withhold knowledge, namely Lady Audley and her servant. Even as Lady Audley's secrets are "everybody's," one could still argue that Lady Audley and Phoebe's verbal circling do not necessarily represent the novel's final conclusions on secrets and secret-keeping. I would therefore like to turn my attention to Robert Audley's investigation into Lady Audley. Throughout the novel, Robert's behavior with respect to suspicion and certainty remains fairly consistent. He acts on his suspicions -- he treats them as fact for all intents and purposes -- but is consumed nevertheless throughout the novel with discovering the very truth that he already knows.[89] This approach is highlighted in a conversation Robert has with Dr Mosgrave, whom he has called in to diagnose Lady Audley with madness based on Robert's belief that she has killed George Talboys and attempted to kill him. Mosgrave pushes Robert to tell him the full truth, and Robert argues, "'I have already told you, Dr Mosgrave, that I do not know.'" To which Dr Mosgrave responds: "'but your face has told me

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[89] Other characters, such as Sir Michael Audley, take the opposite approach. For all intents and purposes, Sir Michael knows the truth about Lady Audley, but refuses to actually hear it, going so far as to state about Lady Audley's confession, "'I may not have heard the end; but I have heard enough'" (312-3), and to ask Robert to act on his behalf for Lady Audley's care, as Sir Michael never even wants to hear her name again. Characters' repeated assurances that they do not need to hear the story of Lady Audley's actions -- even as novel proceeds regardless -- does begin to sound somewhat disingenuous. What I hope this chapter suggests, however, is the value of taking these assurances seriously. The characters who claim they "don't need to know" may be articulating more legitimate possible position for the reader than a suspicious reading of these claims would suggest.

what you would have withheld from me; it has told me that you *suspect*!'"[90] Robert here attempts to dismiss the power of suspicion, and as Emily King notes, Mosgrave does ultimately conclude that Robert's suspicions would not sway a jury. Even so, Mosgrave contends that Robert's suspicions are highly relevant. Indeed, he argues that they make up "half [Lady Audley's] story."[91] This exchange, therefore, suggests that even as Robert has an urge to privilege absolute certainty and legal proof over "story" and suspicion, the novel attempts to balance these competing approaches.

It is possible to read the end of the novel -- in which it is revealed that although Lady Audley did push George Talboys down the well, he did not actually die -- as a check on the type of inferential reading that the characters had successfully employed up until this point. Indeed, Robert almost does not learn that Talboys is still alive: he is so convinced that he knows the full truth that when Luke Marks offers to confess something to him, Robert asserts that "you can tell me nothing which I do not know" and further argues, "You had better keep silence to the end."[92] Robert, of course, is proven wrong. Talboys' miraculous survival, which defies the assumptions of every character in the novel as well as, I would argue, the reader herself, at first seems to point to the dangers of "keep[ing] silence" and inferring truth without an elaborate, confessional disclosure. There is, however, a major flaw in this reading of the novel, namely that Robert's false confidence in his own knowledge derives *from* Lady Audley's elaborate, confessional disclosure. Indeed, even in his conversation with Luke Marks, where Robert experiences firsthand the danger of assuming knowledge, he still interrupts Luke's narration with the

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[90] *Lady Audley's Secret*, 322, original italics.
[91] *Ibid.,* 322.
[92] *Ibid*., 353.

assurance that "'I know the rest.'"[93] When Robert reencounters George Talboys, Talboys similarly assumes, "'The man who found me there told you the rest,'" meaning Luke. And Robert answers, "'yes, he told me all.'"[94] Even the narrator gets in on these assumptions, noting to the reader: "We know how much Robert had to tell"[95] in order to gloss over the conversation. These passages at first seem fairly contradictory, while weakening any check on inferential reading that the novel might be supposed to be making. Instead, characters' and the novel's assurances that we "know all," even without absolute proof, is more consistent with a continued privileging of the inferential model of reading that the novel has been developing throughout.

Robert repeatedly makes recourse to metaphors of narrative advancement that privilege linearity: a "chain of evidence"[96] leading to the truth about Lady Audley, a mysterious "hand" that draws him forward, a path that Robert reluctantly follows. Robert directly articulates his investigative method multiple times throughout the novel, in passages that could be lifted from any detective story, from Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone* (1868) to a CBS police procedural:

> Circumstantial evidence...that wonderful fabric which is built out of straws collected at every point of the compass, and which is yet strong enough to hang a man. Upon what infinitesimal trifles may sometimes hang the whole secret of some wicked mystery, inexplicable heretofore to the wisest upon the earth! A scrap of paper; a shred of some torn garment; the button off a coat; a word dropped incautiously from the over-cautious lips of guilt; the fragment of a letter; the shutting or opening of a door; a shadow on a window-blind; the accuracy of a moment; a thousand circumstances so slight as to be forgotten by the criminal, but links of steel in the wonderful chain forged by the science of the detective officer.[97]

Robert here works through several different metaphors for the kind of structure that "circumstantial evidence" is capable of building, from a woven fabric, to a circular noose, and

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[93] *Ibid*., 366.
[94] *Ibid*., 378.
[95] *Ibid*., 377.
[96] *Ibid*., 217.
[97] *Ibid*., 107.

finally to the chain. He then concludes the chapter with yet one more metaphor. After delivering the above treatise to Lady Audley, he concludes grimly, "'The radius grows narrower day by day.'"[98] Robert's mix of metaphors each suggests a different, but slightly complicated view of the linear narrative of the truth that can be made available through the "science of the detective officer." Significantly, many of these metaphors -- the noose, the radius, even the chain -- share an underlying structure. Each involve a distinct, circular border that surrounds empty space. While each of these can narrow or widen this central gap, they cannot totally eliminate it. Similarly, as Emily King notes, Robert cannot be truly certain about any of the conclusions he draws from circumstantial evidence; he can only suspect.

On one level, this chain seems like a heavy metaphor for a certain theory of serial reading, with the beats on the chain correspond to serial parts separated by gaps in publication time, all creating the sense that this chain leads us forward to an unknown conclusion. Indeed, narratologists often use the "chain" metaphor when discussing the events of a story.[99] Furthermore, the narrator often reaches for similar kinds of narrative metaphors when discussing Robert's own investigation. For example, Robert "thought of how great a leaf had been torn out of his life, now that the dark story of George Talboys was finished. What had he to do next?"[100] His search for information about Talboys' disappearance here becomes figured as a story that Robert is living. Similarly, Robert first attempts to make sense of George Talboys' disappearance by constructing a list of events, numbered in chronological order, all of which the

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[98] *Ibid*., 107.
[99] See also Sean O'Sullivan for uses of this chain metaphor in reference to contemporary serial television. O'Sullivan's contention that "the beats of television serve differing narrative purposes simultaneously, as links in a narrative chain (or story) and as distinct agents colliding with beats from other chains" is particularly suggestive given my argument here, "Broken on Purpose," *StoryWorlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies,* vol. 2, no. 1, 2010, 63.
[100] *Lady Audley's Secret,* 336.

novel has already represented for the reader.[101] The narrator further notes that writing the list involved "frequent pauses for reflection, alterations, and erasures."[102] This list initially reinforces the association between Robert's "chain of evidence" investigative method and serial reading. Like the parts of serial novel, the list is a numbered narration of events, and Robert's experience of writing it corresponds roughly to the experience of reading a serial: brief bursts of content followed by pauses. Furthermore, Robert is directly repeating events and details that the reader has already experienced once in serial novel form.

As the novel continues, Robert's investigative method becomes no less linked with novel-reading, but it does become markedly less linear. Indeed, as the long "circumstantial evidence" passage above suggests, an investigation must start by seeking evidence from "every point of the compass." For example, in the course of about twenty pages, the temporal complexity of Robert's investigation grows dramatically. First, he decides: "'I must trace the life of my uncle's wife backwards, minutely and carefully, from this night to a period of six years ago.'"[103] Although this strategy of moving backward in time represents a break from his forward-moving list-writing, it does still has the same basic linear structure. Robert later decides: "'I must begin at the other end-- I must begin at the other end, and discover the history of Helen Talboys from the hour of George's departure until the day of the funeral in the churchyard at Ventnor.'"[104] Robert's investigative path is therefore forward-moving once more, although starting further back in time than either his initial list or his investigation into Lady Audley. The repetition of the line "I must begin at the other end" lightly ironizes the progress (or lack thereof)

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[101] *Ibid*., 90-91.
[102] *Ibid*., 91.
[103] *Ibid*., 188.
[104] *Ibid*., 205.

of Robert's investigative timeline: just as Robert promises to "begin" an investigation that he has already started -- the outcome or "end" of which he already suspects -- he must apparently decide to "begin" twice before he can actually do it.[105] Robert's last assertion comes a few pages later: "'I have traced the histories of Lucy Graham and Helen Talboys to a vanishing point.'"[106] Rather than connecting these stories into a single chain, Robert has found himself with two parallel lines that meet infinitely far away. After this last assertion, any linearity to Robert's investigation splinters altogether. He attempts to decide on his next course of action, listing potential avenues for his investigation and repeatedly wondering "Shall I..." before discarding each possibility.[107] What this passage suggests is that Robert may move just as effectively in several likely directions. While he does ultimately make a choice, the repetitive structure of the phrase "shall I" serves to equalize these options. There is no longer one path, but multiple branching possibilities.[108]

Although Robert Audley works to uncover the truth about Lady Audley's past and George Talboys' disappearance, his progress along the "chain of evidence" is marked by reluctance and guilt. Robert frequently notes that he is unwilling to discover information that will hurt his family, but that he feels compelled alternately by fate, by his friendship with George Talboys, and by George's sister Clara. It would be very easy to read this reluctance suspiciously. As Ann Cvetkovich notes, Robert's disavowal of agency can serve to displace responsibility for

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[105] Note that the repetition does not seem to be a fleeting typographical error: it appears as quoted in the third edition, which includes Braddon's revisions and which serves as the text for the *London Journal* serialization and all volume editions.
[106] *Ibid*., 214.
[107] *Ibid*., 216.
[108] Just as each run of *Lady Audley's Secret* was slightly different, literally beginning again by moving from the weekly *Robin Goodfellow* to the monthly *Sixpenny Magazine*, which divided its parts differently and had one less chapter than the three-volume edition. Both the *Sixpenny Magazine* and the *London Journal* subdivided chapters, although they each chose different chapters to divide.

the results of his investigation.[109] For Cvetkovich, Robert's actions -- and his anxieties surrounding them -- pertain primarily to the relationship between family, desire, and the work of detection. But as with Magdalen's repetitive letter-reading in *No Name*, Robert's method of detection seems to transform into a method of serial reading and writing. As I have suggested, while following the chain once it is constructed may be a linear endeavor, Robert has revealed the process of constructing the chain to be far more fraught.

Conclusion

The London Review, in a somewhat anxious discussion of *No Name*, describes the feeling of reading the novel thus:

> so cleverly is one piece of the story dovetailed into another, so fortunate are the conjunctures which rescue the whole at the moment when it is falling to pieces, so cogent a chain of circumstantial evidence is drawn around it, that, though we feel it lies outside the pale of belief, it is extremely difficult to lay one's finger on the precise point where the confines of possibility are transgressed, and the common laws of likelihood obtrusively violated.[110]

Leaving aside the review's criticisms of *No Name*, the language with which this passage lodges its complaint is a familiar one. The image conjured by this review is once again one in which a chain of evidence encircles a vague gap. The plot itself is described as well-constructed; it fits together seamlessly, with a precision that appears in stark contrast to an inarticulable, nearly inaccessible feeling that the reader has while reading. Although this reviewer imagines the chain and the imprecise "point" as in opposition to one another, what we have seen in both *No Name* and *Lady Audley's Secret* is the "precarious knowing" created by each text's serial structure works precisely through the interdependency of this "chain" and the imprecision of feeling.

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[109] Cvetkovich, *Mixed Feelings*, 61.
[110] "No Name," review of *No Name*, by Wilkie Collins, *The London Review*, 10 January 1863, 46.

Between *No Name*'s multiple temporal structures and *Lady Audley's Secret*'s inferential reading method – its circling around blank spaces both metaphorical and literal in the narrative through its articulation of wrong information – what results are serial and inferential "gaps" that are in fact totally full of feeling and information. What the chain metaphor offers then is a sense that what is spoken and constructed within these novels – by characters and the author alike – acts almost as a border around a significant idea or piece of information. That is, the importance of information is not signified either by stating it, or by concealing it, but instead by offering multiple alternatives to it. What *No Name* and *Lady Audley's Secret* attempt to represent, then, are forms of reading that take place in the gaps between the parts of a serial narrative, and in the gap between knowing and knowing *for sure*. These ways of reading do not necessarily rely on a forward-looking, information-withholding form of suspense to maintain readers' interests. As Magdalen Vanstone says to Norah in the last pages of *No Name*: "The end I dreamed of has come. Nothing is changed, but the position I once thought we might hold towards each other."[111] In other words, issues of secrecy and suspense – waiting for an unknown "end" – become transformed into questions of one's "position" in relation to others. The terms of this transformation – and the question of what might bind readers to a serial if not the desire to know – constitute the focus of the next chapter.

[111] *No Name*, 737.

Chapter 2 : "Mystery Solved": Secrets, Procedural Characters, and Friendship on CBS's *Elementary*

When one searches the streaming service Hulu for the CBS crime procedural and contemporary Sherlock Holmes adaptation *Elementary* (2012-2019), its thumbnail description reads: "Mystery solved. Cozy up with this reimagining of Holmes and Watson starring Jonny Lee Miller and Lucy Liu." While the accuracy of show descriptions on streaming sites can be questionable, this caption in particular reflects two common understandings about what draws viewers to crime procedurals.[112] First, that the show will not only offer up mysteries, but will also solve them; and second, that this process feels "cozy" or comfortable. This description therefore offers an expectation of narrative closure that it links to specific audience affects.

Specifically, solving a mystery becomes imagined here as an initial condition of the show. The mystery is understood to be solved at the onset of the description – at the moment that it is named *as* a mystery at all. Solving a mystery is therefore both an event that *will* happen on the show, if one watches it, and also an event that has *already* happened ("solved," in the past tense). This doubled temporality – an expectation of closure that in this instance becomes almost like closure itself – comes about in part because the genre of the television crime procedural is both formulaic and familiar. A viewer can watch an episode of a show like *Elementary* already

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[112] In this chapter, I will use genre descriptors such as "crime procedurals" and "detective shows" fairly interchangeably. I use "procedural" to refer broadly to shows that solve at least one crime per episode, regardless of who solves them and how. The term "procedural" helpfully brings the routines of episodic television together with the routines of detecting, whether those routines are carried out by consultants, scientists, mavericks, or everyman cops. For a counterargument, see Eddy Von Mueller, "The police procedural in literature and on television," *The Cambridge Companion to American Crime Fiction*, edited by Catherine Ross Nickerson (Cambridge UP, 2010).

knowing that the mystery will be solved, because they have doubtless already watched many episodes of other programs with narrative structures like *Elementary*'s. To reiterate this point, one could argue that *Elementary*'s mysteries have already been solved in a viewer's mind because other similar mysteries have been solved elsewhere. *Elementary*'s status as a Sherlock Holmes "reimagining" – as a repetition of a well-known text – could also contribute to this feeling of familiarity and comfortable pleasure. The Hulu description suggests in short that all these assurances of familiar closure are what enable viewers to "cozy up" to *Elementary* anxiety-free.

The following chapter will interrogate and complicate these paired inferences, that the expectation of closure and comfort are what primarily draws viewers to crime shows like *Elementary*, and by extension, to formulaic television series in general. In both scholarship and popular accounts of media, there tends to be an assumption that known, anticipated, or familiar narratives give viewers a feeling of control and keep them safe from anything too challenging. Many of the narrative repetitions I discuss throughout this dissertation – from the episodic television series (versus the serial); to narrative formulas and genre fiction; to adaptations, tropes, and cyclicality; to viewing practices like re-watching and being "spoiled" – could all be grouped under the descriptor "cozy." More "complex" narratives in contrast, particularly those that deploy the element of surprise, are imagined to force viewers to think harder. I discuss the assumptions that often underlie judgments about narrative complexity in more detail in Chapter Three. In this chapter, I focus on the kinds of audience experiences that narrative familiarity might afford beyond coziness.

In order to get at the possibilities inherent in familiarity, this chapter engages with a middle ground between not knowing and familiarity: the process of becoming familiar.

"Becoming familiar" in the context of this chapter refers to the intertwined process of both learning the rules and conventions that govern a particular text (in this case, *Elementary*), and also forging connections with its characters. Becoming familiar – or getting to know – is a repetitive, serial process. It is one that I argue is not fully captured by either the figure of the enigma (where audiences try to work out a mystery that is eventually revealed), nor by the notion of accumulation (where information or repetitions add up until something feels familiar or known). Instead, I argue that "precarious knowing" accounts for this middle ground, through the nonlinear temporality that I referenced above, of an expectation based on a convention or repetition.

Elementary is particularly suited to serve as an entry point into this discussion. As a Sherlock Holmes adaptation that premiered on CBS two years after the BBC's acclaimed *Sherlock*, it immediately drew accusations of unoriginality.[113] Its twenty-four episodes per season and procedural format contrasted visibly with *Sherlock*'s three episodes per series and what Matt Hills has dubbed its elevation of the specialized knowledge of producer-fans such as creators Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss.[114] *Elementary* is therefore, in a sense, imagined to be doubly boring: a repetition of an already existing Sherlock Holmes adaptation, and another in a long line of similar CBS crime procedurals. Its main claim for uniqueness came from its gender- and racebending casting of Lucy Liu as Joan Watson, a sober companion hired by Sherlock's father to monitor his sobriety after his release from a rehab facility in New York. As Sarah

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[113] Matt Zoller Seitz for instance called the pilot of *Elementary* "more brain candy from CBS's vending machine," and compared it unfavorably to *Sherlock*; "Seitz on *Elementary*: The Game Is *Aflat*," *Vulture*, 27 Sept 2012, www.vulture.com/2012/09/tv-review-sherlock.html.

[114] Matt Hills, "*Sherlock*'s Epistemological Economy and the Value of "Fan" Knowledge: How Producer-Fans Play the (Great) Game of Fandom," *Sherlock and Transmedia Fandom*, edited by Louisa Ellen Stein and Kristina Busse (McFarland, 2012).

Kornfield has noted, even this difference serves to situate *Elementary* more firmly within a lineage of procedurals such as *The X-Files*, *Bones*, etc. that involve a partnership of male and female detectives, one of whom is logical and the other of whom is emotional.[115] While *Elementary*'s Sherlock and Joan do not quite fit this pattern (Sherlock often emphasizes the role of intuition in detecting, and though Joan starts the series in a more caregiving role, she decides in the first season that she's not necessarily suited to it), *Elementary* ends up looking pretty similar to other shows of its genre.

Detective fiction like *Elementary* is often described as comprised of formulas and familiar, often binary narrative structures, and it is in part this imagined invisibility of form that makes it seem like such an effective vehicle for reflecting or normalizing conservative ideologies of gender, race, neoliberalism, the criminal justice system, etc.[116] Procedural television narratives may not seem at first to reward the sustained close reading of a more complex, surprising, or genre-mixing televisual text. One goal of the following chapter is therefore to suggest the possible purchase of textual analyses of boring forms. As Amanda Ann Klein and R. Barton Palmer note, the prevalence of repetitive forms in popular fiction "are obviously not generated by some simple desire on the part of viewers to consume the same object over and over again. The 'same thing' that the viewer sees time and time again is always different from the 'same

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[115] Sarah Kornfield, "Re-Solving Crimes: A Cycle of TV Detective Partnerships," *Cycles, Sequels, Spin-Offs, Remakes, and Reboots: Multiplicities in Film and Television*, edited by Amanda Ann Klein and R. Barton Palmer (U Texas Press, 2016).

[116] See, for example: *New Perspectives on Detective Fiction*, edited by Casey A. Cothran and Mercy Cannon (Routledge, 2016); Maureen T. Reddy, *Traces, Codes, and Clues: Reading Race in Crime Fiction* (Rutgers UP, 2003); Julie D'Acci, *Defining Women: Television and the Case of* Cagney & Lacey (UNC Press, 1994); Sujata Moorti and Lisa Cuklanz's *All-American TV Crime Drama: Feminism and Identity Politics in* Law & Order: Special Victims Unit (I.B. Tauris, 2017); Heather Duerre Humann's *Gender Bending Detective Fiction* (McFarland, 2017). Specific to *Elementary*, see *Gender and the Modern Sherlock Holmes*, edited by Nadine Farghaly (McFarland, 2015).

things' that precede and follow it."[117] This commonsense point ultimately opens up a lot of space to consider the affects of repetition beyond a feeling of sameness, or familiarity, or comfort, or "coziness."

As I argue in the following chapter, the repetitions at work in procedurals are more multidimensional than this figure of the steady accumulation of "mysteries solved" suggests. Similarly, the middle of a mystery is not necessarily intertwined with the suspenseful expectation of eventual closure. In the following discussion of *Elementary*, I specifically draw a distinction between narrative resolution (the mystery being solved) and viewerly closure in order to offer a more nuanced picture of the impact of repetition and familiarity on a viewer over time. The first two sections of the chapter examine the impact of *Elementary*'s shared secrets, repeated failures, and an emphasis on non-suspenseful waiting as alternate models of both repetition and duration. Ultimately, I argue that these three elements, each of which describes a particular relationship between time and knowledge, together contribute to a model of character grounded in "friendship," and particularly in the idea that already knowing someone's secrets (rather than the act of sharing itself) can cultivate trust between characters, and can build a relationship between characters and the audience. I trace *Elementary*'s definition of friendship throughout the chapter – and focus directly on the subject in the third section – because of its value in formulating both how characters develop, and how audiences relate to them over time.

Scholars of character have long sought to explain the potential contradiction between what characters *are* (textual artifacts) and how they *feel* (like real people).[118] In general, I have noticed four common theoretical trends in describing what a reader or viewer might feel for and

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[117] "Introduction," *Cycles, Sequels, Spin-Offs, Remakes, and Reboots*, 3-4.
[118] See Alex Woloch's introduction to *The One vs. The Many* (Princeton UP, 2004) for a particularly clear outline of these theoretical debates.

about a character, and which tend to transcend specific texts or disciplines: identification, love, curiosity, and parasociality. Each of these kinds of relationships has a temporality associated with them, one that produces and is produced by the feeling in question. Identification refers to seeing oneself in a character or imaginatively merging with that character, tends to be linked to the experience of immersion, and is framed as a temporary effect.[119] Love is often associated with familiarity and "going steady" (to use Deidre Lynch's metaphor),[120] or in other words, with a kind of fannish accumulation of knowledge, time spent, number of re-reads, etc.[121] Cognitive theorists of character focus on curiosity, or on enigma-driven models of character: on a reader or viewer's desire to know or understand a character. Serial suspense often aligns particularly well with this motivation.[122]

Lastly, "parasociality" is defined briefly as "intimacy at a distance."[123] Most commonly used in fan studies and media studies research,[124] the term refers to the feeling of friendship for a character or public figure that an audience member does not actually know personally. This "distance" or gap is central to how parasociality works, in that an audience member can only imaginatively interact with this character and so cannot actually impact them. Parasociality is

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[119] For an overview of these terms as used in the field of media psychology, see Jonathan Cohen, "Mediated Relationships and Social Life: Current Research on Fandom, Parasocial Relationships, and Identification," *Media and Social Life*, edited by Mary Beth Oliver and Arthur A. Raney (Routledge, 2014).
[120] Lynch, *Loving Literature*.
[121] Roberta Pearson argues that this model of character is particularly suited to television, and to the procedural in particular, which privileges character elaboration and "accumulation" over "development;" "Anatomising Gilbert Grissom: The Structure and Function of the Televisual Character," *Reading CSI*, edited by Michael Allen (I.B. Tauris, 2007).
[122] Drawing on Blakey Vermeule's work on character in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels (*Why Do We Care About Literary Character?*), Jason Mittell argues that "complex" serial characters allow viewers to practice "mind reading" and to hypothesize about what characters are thinking, a stance toward character that, as Mittell notes, often places significant importance on the end of a story to "pay off" the audience's theorizing; "Character," *Complex TV*.
[123] Donald Horton and Richard R. Wohl, "Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction Observations on Intimacy at a Distance," *Psychiatry*, vol. 19, no. 3, 1956, 215-229.
[124] But see Elaine Auyoung's *When Fiction Feels Real* for a discussion of parasociality in the context of novel theory.

therefore often framed as safer or lower risk than in-person relationships, where the individual does not have as much control over the terms of the relationship.[125] As the term's originators describe it, temporally parasociality is "a kind of growth without development, for the one-sided nature of the connection precludes a progressive and mutual reformulation of its values and aims."[126] On the surface, parasociality therefore seems particularly suited to describing the temporal relationship between audience members and serial procedural characters, where a sense of familiarity created by a repetition without "development," alongside this psychological distance, may offer audiences the feeling that fictional characters are our friends. That is, we might "cozy up" with our good pals Holmes and Watson just as much as we "cozy up" with the mysteries they solve. And perhaps it seems self-evident that a parasocial relationship with a fictional character carries less risk than a friendship with a real person.

I deliberately use "friendship" rather than a term like "parasociality" in this chapter for several reasons. First, I want to shift focus away from this notion of safety and non-reciprocality. Second, and relatedly, I think that a term like "friendship" does a better job of accommodating more complex relationship structures, dynamics, and systems than "parasociality," which carries the connotation of a private, imagined, one-on-one relationship.[127] "Friendship networks," for instance, feels more intuitive than "parasocial networks." Similarly, while this chapter examines "friendship" as a textual construct, "friendship" better accommodates the blurry boundaries of fandom. For instance, a fan might feel a sense of "parasocial" friendship toward Sherlock

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[125] Auyoung, *When Fiction Feels Real*, 112; See also: Marie-Laure Ryan's discussion in *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2* of the feeling of immersion within a fictional world from which you have "nothing to fear" (69).
[126] Horton and Wohl, 216-17.
[127] Matt Hills levels similar criticisms against the term "parasociality," noting particularly in the context of interactions with celebrities on social media, that "parasociality" imagines a false binary between the social and the parasocial, and insufficiently accounts for the "multisocial;" "From Para-social to Multisocial Interaction: Theorizing Material/Digital Fandom and Celebrity," *A Companion to Celebrity*, edited by P. David Marshall and Sean Redmond (Wiley & Sons, 2015).

Holmes, as they inhabit a fan community with real friends, and as they write fanfiction representing and refiguring the "friendship" of Holmes, Watson, and other characters. All of these types of friendship, furthermore, feed back into that fan's understanding of the serial text. And lastly, while "friendship" might feel a bit cute as a term at first, friendships – like any interpersonal relationship – can be quite difficult, fraught, or painful, and the terms of a friendship might change drastically over time. "Friendship" as a framework for one's relationship to texts and characters therefore implies a risk of conflict, as well as connotations of process and change over time.

"Friendship" therefore aligns in particular with a systems theory of character and narrative. A systems theory of narrative, as defined by Judith Roof, implies that "at any given point in what we regard as a story, every possibility coexists as a knowable set of selections."[128] This definition of narrative therefore pushes back against the narrowing temporality of something like suspense. What I find particularly helpful about this framework is the idea that knowing the rules of a repetitive narrative system makes its myriad possibilities, its flexibility, *more* visible. Indeed, Roof ultimately defines "narrative" overall as precisely this imaginative engagement with infinite possibilities.[129] This formulation of the audience's relationship to narrative knowledge and rules – as a network of shared, partial plenitude – is, I would argue, a more abstract echo of the kind of secret-sharing that takes place on a show like *Elementary*. My understanding of "friendship" is one that carries this sense of unlimited, shifting textual possibilities, in that "friendship" suggests a network of constantly shifting relationships between characters and audience members.

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[128] Judith Roof, "Out of the bind: from structure to system in popular narratives." *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions*, edited by Robyn Warhol and Susan S. Lanser (Ohio State UP, 2015), 55.
[129] *Ibid*., 56.

"Friendship" can also help to clarify the terms of intertextual relationships, particularly in the context of seriality. Specifically, "friendship" might point toward the similarities in, for example, watching Episode 47 of the long-running *Elementary*, or watching another in a long line of Sherlock Holmes adaptations, or reading another Sherlock Holmes fanwork among thousands. While the relationship between episodes of *Elementary* is "textual," and the relationship between Sherlock Holmes adaptations is "intertextual," the feelings of intimacy, repetitions, and duration for any individual audience member seem similar in all these cases. In other words, just as a hypothetical viewer has a longstanding sense of connection with a show like *Elementary*, a Sherlock Holmes fan has a longstanding sense of connection with Sherlock Holmes texts (which is subtly different than having a sense of connection to the transfictional character of Sherlock Holmes; see also being a "Jane Austen fan," which is slightly different from, but encompasses, being a fan of Jane Austen the person, Elizabeth Bennet the character, or *Emma* the text).

As a structure of textual intimacy that de-emphasizes closure (at what point in the narrating of a friendship could you fade to black?), friendship privileges non-progressive change over time, and a shifting (but again, not necessarily steady) relationship between knowledge and feeling. A systems view of character suggests that the character development that a viewer has internalized may have happened in a different permutation of the text. For instance, a viewer might have caught random episodes as they aired on CBS and be building their understanding of character from those alone, or they may be drawing on past episodes to form their understanding of character even when the text of these different episodes are unconcerned with narrative continuity, or they might be thinking of a different Sherlock Holmes adaptation entirely. To the viewer in those circumstances, it may feel as though this character development has both

happened and not happened, in the same way that a shared secret is both told and not told. Again, character exists as a range of possibilities, where viewers are the only actual holders, interpreters, and writers of the text that produces the characters they see and respond to. Furthermore, as I will argue through the rest of this chapter, *Elementary* specifically suggests that friendship inheres in the gaps between knowing and telling. It also brings to the surface these networks of shared unspoken knowledge, and through its integration of "friendship plots" and the highly formulaic "mystery plots," connects the kinds of relationships built by shared knowledge to the implicit knowledge that audiences might have about, for example, the rules of a genre or form.

Shared Secrets

One common description of the procedural's combination of formula and mystery is that it offers a kind of "weak suspense" that emphasizes viewer comfort and mastery, in contrast to a seasons-long, "strong suspense" mystery that keeps viewers guessing over a longer span of time. When watching a crime procedural, one might be curious about how any individual mystery will get solved, but it's almost impossible to watch a bunch of these episodes without learning enough of the unspoken rules of the form to predict the murderer-of-the-week before they are revealed. For instance, well-known guest actors are almost always guilty of something. There is just no way two-time Tony Award-winning actress Sutton Foster showed up in an episode of *Elementary* only to point investigators in the direction of a clue before going on her way; I refuse to believe Sutton Foster gets out of bed in the morning for anything less than five minutes in Interrogation Room 2.[130] In addition, smaller discoveries and investigative leaps are often

[130] Foster appears in "Absconded," *Elementary*, season 3, episode 23, CBS, 7 May 2015, *Hulu*, www.hulu.com/watch/01aee021-7c95-41ee-9ccb-dc9cf939ac79.

forecasted clearly enough that one can see them coming. This combination of low cognitive effort and high satisfaction is often described as a particular appeal of the form for viewers.[131]

This focus on a program's level and duration of suspense only represents one particular lens through which to understand procedurals like *Elementary*, and, I would argue, at least partially misses the point. In my first chapter, I argued that knowledge of the "secrets" of nineteenth-century sensation fiction represented not a failure of suspense, but rather an engagement with the conditions of seriality as a form. The anticipation of having one's assumptions confirmed can often be a suspicious gesture, predicated upon a desire to control one's environment through superior knowledge and leading to guilt-by-insinuation. I argued however that the distinction novels such as *Lady Audley's Secret* highlight, between storytelling and shared knowing, brings to the surface the different pieces of "reading" that might take place during a serial novel's text and gaps. Like with *Lady Audley's Secret*, "known secrets" are overwhelmingly common on *Elementary*. Whereas *Lady Audley's Secret* involves a continued refusal to articulate "secrets" that everyone nevertheless knows, *Elementary* involves instead a continual insistence upon articulating and re-articulating those secrets. On one level, these somewhat opposing relationships to narrating collective knowledge make structural sense. *Lady Audley's Secret*, a serial, withholds information until the novel's end. *Elementary*, a formulaic crime procedural on American network television, repeats information. But just as *Lady Audley's Secret*'s relationship to mystery and seriality becomes strange when read in the context of its unspoken knowledge, so too does *Elementary*'s relationship to repetition and episodic form become strange when read in the context of its spoken knowledge.

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[131] See for instance: Michele Byers and Val Marie Johnson, "*CSI* as Neoliberalism: An Introduction" *The CSI Effect,* edited by Byers and Johnson (Lanham, 2009).

Like many procedurals, *Elementary* intersperses the unraveling of its mystery-of-the-week with scenes that deal in some way with the main characters' emotions, anxieties, and quotidian difficulties. As I will demonstrate, "known secrets" between characters are extremely common on *Elementary* within these quotidian plots (in contrast to the secret being between the show and the viewer in the context of the mystery plot). As I will argue, by thematizing the question of secret-keeping in the realm of the interpersonal and the quotidian, *Elementary* in particular, and procedurals in general, ultimately suggests a unity between the relationships amongst the show's group of characters and the formal relationship between viewer and show as one dyad in a larger genre and adaptation network. For example, the secret that structures the first few episodes of the show is that Sherlock is an addict in recovery, and that Joan is his sober companion. Together, they conceal this information – the fundamental structure of their relationship – from the NYPD for whom Sherlock consults. In the fourth episode, Sherlock's friend and boss, Captain Gregson (Aidan Quinn), reveals that he's known all along. He cites two specific moments from prior episodes that revealed the information to him, unbeknownst to either the other characters or to the viewer. In the first instance, Gregson observed discrepancies in something Sherlock said, and silently unraveled a lie. In the second, Gregson asked Sherlock out for a drink, and Sherlock turned him down. Gregson explains that he interpreted this rejection as Sherlock not being "ready to talk about it." Gregson frames his silence about Sherlock's secret around two different relationships to knowledge: one investigative and the other confessional. It is in "talking about it" that these characters do experience a form of risk or uncertainty. For instance, Gregson has to guess at when Sherlock might be "ready," relying on silent and ambiguous cues that, as it turns out, he has misinterpreted.[132]

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[132] "The Rat Race," *Elementary*, season 1, episode 4, CBSI, 25 Oct 2012, *Hulu*, www.hulu.com/watch/385510b7-

Throughout this episode, "talking about it" becomes conceptually and temporally detached from learning or knowing "about it." The episode begins with Joan revealing to Gregson that she is Sherlock's sober companion; Sherlock is missing and she's worried he might have relapsed. The episode then jumps back to two days before, to fill in the events that led to Sherlock's disappearance. The second-to-last scene of the episode involves Sherlock talking to Gregson, essentially re-confessing what Joan has already told him. It is at this point that Gregson confesses he already knows. The reveal of Sherlock's secret in this episode therefore relies on the repetitions and reversals of three separate confessions in order to fully manifest: Joan's, then Sherlock's, then Gregson's. The time spent on Sherlock's second confession, for instance, does not offer the viewer any new information, since at that point everyone involved – Sherlock, Gregson, the viewer – know that Sherlock knows that Gregson knows that Sherlock is an addict. What it does instead, then, is to transform through repetition the temporality of the televisual criminal confession, from a single "It was me!" moment of closure, into a slow circulation of a piece of information through a network of characters.[133]

The repetitions and revisions that occur within this single episode are paralleled by this revision, in Episode 4, of the meaning of the two scenes between Sherlock and Gregson from prior episodes. These moments, spread out amongst several episodes, in some sense unfold serially and linearly. One could frame them as raising and subsequently answering questions: How much does Gregson know about Joan and Sherlock's relationship? Does he suspect they are lying? When will he find out the truth? Alternatively, one could frame the progression of these

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[133] This is reminiscent of Robert Allen's description of the way that information circulates repetitively on soap operas: how the information circulates, and to whom, becomes laden with what he terms "paradigmatic" meaning; *Speaking of Soap Operas* (UNC Press, 1985).

scenes as a slow accumulation of moments that foreground or reinforce aspects of Gregson's, Sherlock's, and Joan's characters. I can imagine viewers for whom either or both explanations are true. There may be viewers who ask themselves the above set of questions, and for whom Gregson's confirmation now feels like a "pay off" of their attention to subtle clues. There may also be viewers who mentally compile scenes that evoke characterological patterns. But *Elementary* also offers viewers a third way of formulating the relationship between time and knowledge, in addition to the pay-off and the accumulative: one that depends primarily on the way in which this knowledge circulates. Specifically, knowledge in this example becomes spread across time, first as silent learning, then as a series of partial, failed, or repeated confessions (Sherlock not being ready, Joan confessing for Sherlock), and only finally as a confession that pushes or transforms the boundaries of the characters' and the viewers' collective knowledge (Gregson revealing that he knew all along).

In this way, this set of encounters between Joan, Sherlock, and Gregson mirror the conditions of a viewer re-encountering a familiar genre or formula, or watching an adaptation. As we see above, this re-encountering may on one level happen "serially," but that does not mean it happens evenly, progressively, or linearly. As I discussed above, the revelation of this first main "secret" of *Elementary* is marked by temporal revisions, one result of which is to diffuse dyadic knowledge (the secret that Joan and Sherlock share) amongst all three characters. This pattern of articulation and confession recurs throughout *Elementary*'s friendship plots in various forms. In other examples, it often includes more of an initial rejection or pivot. For instance, either Joan or Sherlock will notice and name what the other is feeling; the other character will deny it, sometimes offering another, competing explanation for their behavior; in a subsequent scene near the end of the episode, Joan or Sherlock will reinitiate the conversation,

admit that the first interpretation is probably correct, and offer some further context or explanation, essentially rearticulating the story in their own words. One effect of this formula, in true detective fiction fashion, is to suggest that feelings *can* be observed and identified in this fashion, by someone other than the person feeling them. By consistently using a pattern that resembles the accusation-confession model of the crime plots to model friendship, these scenes might propose in part that emotions themselves are subject to detection – another kind of crime to be solved.

However, as I have suggested above, the extended or repetitive form of these "confessions," and their continual deployment in situations where everyone involved knows the information that is in some sense being "confessed," seems excessive or redundant if demonstrating the detective's superior knowledge over others is in fact the goal. In an episode partway through season three,[134] Sherlock finds a manuscript that Joan had written and then tried to delete, titled *The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes*, which is incidentally also the title of one of Conan Doyle's short story collections. Joan's book therefore takes on the characteristics of a known secret: simultaneously existing, not existing, and existing twice. That is, one can imagine this manuscript as a rewriting of *Elementary*'s episodes, which are themselves (very loose) rewritings of Conan Doyle's stories. It is also a document that Joan has created and then silenced via its deletion. Sherlock's recovery of the manuscript leaves it aptly in a still-unspoken middle ground, in that he ultimately refuses to read it – to be told something *by* Joan without Joan's permission – but his knowledge of its existence has ramifications for their relationship, both in this episode and later in the show when the topic of the manuscript arises again.

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[134] "Rip Off," *Elementary*, season 3, episode 5, CBS, 27 Nov 2014, *Hulu*, www.hulu.com/watch/ac232e0f-4e78-49f2-8043-ad15c2e894b2.

The characters' discussions of this "secret" manuscript follow patterns similar to the ones I've outlined above. Sherlock's student Kitty interrupts a discussion about their case-of-the-week to state that she knows why he hasn't read the book. Sherlock replies that he hasn't had time, and Kitty retorts, "You're afraid." Here, Kitty and Sherlock both articulate competing explanations for Sherlock's actions, where Kitty is certain that her explanation is the truth. After a gap in time, Sherlock reveals that he was either lying or wrong about himself before, and accepts Kitty's story as the right one. Or rather, he admits that Kitty wasn't "entirely wrong about Watson," which is not entirely the same thing as being right. That is, while Sherlock accepts Kitty's interpretation, his phrasing suggests that his true feelings cannot "entirely" be contained by Kitty's summary. There is more to tell – something Sherlock feels or must explain that Kitty did not, or could not, know. Again, the actual discussion about knowledge, that characters claimed to already have, ends up complicating (without rejecting) what they believed they knew.

Kitty theorizes that Sherlock is afraid of reading Joan's judgment of him – of having her true, secret opinion of him revealed. And at the beginning of Sherlock and Kitty's argument, he refuses to accept that Joan may have kept a secret from him in the form of this manuscript, claiming, "Watson and I had no secrets during her time here," which as Kitty points out, has been rendered demonstrably untrue by the manuscript's very existence. One of the lessons of this episode for Sherlock, then, is that his first, imagined model of friendship – one in which there are "no secrets" at all – is a flawed one that he must revise. But neither does this episode propose that friends are fundamentally unknowable to each other. Instead, the revision of friendship that this episode begins to formulate exists in a kind of middle ground, where friends share a knowledge of the other's secrets, but do not necessarily share the secrets themselves (which would render them no longer secrets). Another way of articulating this is to say that friends in

Elementary might be familiar to each other without being known by each other, where "familiarity" becomes something like a map of where gaps in knowledge can be found.

This model of friendship and knowledge (or lack thereof) is inextricably tied in this example to issues of storytelling. Early in the episode, Kitty argues that Joan "has a right to make record of her work and her stories." Sherlock counters, "Interesting title for her stories. *The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes*." Kitty here frames one's "work and stories" as intertwined, while Sherlock implies that only stories centering yourself or your name are really yours. But by the end of the episode, after admitting that Kitty is "not entirely wrong," Sherlock continues, "She does have the right to tell her own stories. I may have felt some mild trepidation about subjecting myself to her full appraisal." Here, as Sherlock articulates, "her own stories" are defined in part by Joan's observations or "appraisal" of the people around her, including Sherlock. Sherlock's revision of his beliefs about what constitutes one's "own stories" therefore mirrors the revision of his beliefs about his and Joan's friendship, and the secrets that might exist between them. In addition, for Kitty, Joan's "own stories" are about her detective work, while for Sherlock, Joan's "own stories" are about the two of them. In other words, Kitty and Sherlock are offering slightly different understandings of observation. Joan's observations as a detective (their "casebook"), and her observations as a friend of Sherlock's, are intertwined but not precisely the same. And lastly, Joan's "own stories" have already been quite literally written by someone else in 1927; it is an open question therefore whether these stories titled with the name *Sherlock Holmes* are even about *this* Sherlock Holmes at all. Each of these ways of understanding one's "own stories" and one's own secrets, therefore, rely on what is in fact a network of others in the form of colleagues, friends, and texts.

This raises several questions about trust, methods of acquiring information, and time, and echoes one kind of imagined relationship between a television show and a viewer. In an earlier episode, for instance, Sherlock tells Joan, "I'm trying to say that I trust you," to which she replies, "By telling me things I already figured out?"[135] For Joan here, trust and friendship – intimacy— is connected to a reveal of information that is new to the listener. If the listener has "already figured out" that information (in this case, about a character's past, but one could also substitute "a plot twist" or any other kind of narrative information), it becomes less valuable. This also resonates with Joan's status, at least in the first few seasons of the show, as Sherlock student: in pedagogy, friendship, and serial narratives, Joan suggests, information works best when it's transferred deliberately from someone who has "figured it out" to someone who hasn't. Sherlock in contrast offers an alternative to, and then replaces, this model of knowledge exchange with one based on shared knowledge as trust.

The show returns at the end of the episode to Sherlock's assertion that "telling [someone] things [they] already figured out" is a form of trust. Over the course of the episode, Joan discovers the existence of a woman named Irene whom Sherlock was in love with. She tells Sherlock, "I know about Irene. I want you to tell me about her." By the end of the episode, then, Joan's own position has flipped, suggesting an awareness that "telling" can be less about transmitting information, and more about registering and making explicit the knowledge that already exists. Rather than coopting or asserting mastery over another's emotion's or story – as the other examples in this section may risk doing – Sherlock and Joan here register more

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[135] "Flight Risk," *Elementary*, season 1, episode 6, CBS, 8 Nov 2012, *Hulu*, www.hulu.com/watch/c8481ff8-0696-4789-b7a9-1426a9d0c799.

explicitly the way in which prior knowledge, and the acknowledgement that one holds such knowledge, can open up opportunities for telling and trust that would not otherwise exist.

Expanding this idea outward to the repetitions and knowledge assumed by viewers of genre television may require a re-imagining of what means to be a "participatory audience." That is, the kinds of audience activity required to already have known is perhaps inherently less visible than audience activities such as investigation, poaching, or transformation. The kind of formula that I've described above, in which secrets are known and then potentially repeated, and in which, as part of this repetition, characters accept or acknowledge a truth they had previously denied, offers a framework for registering in a broader sense the silent work of self-discovery or of changing one's mind. One final effect of constantly staging secrets that everyone already knows is, very practically, that it has to be explained less or that characters' reactions of surprise and confusion can be diffused by the passage of time. That is, it makes for more efficient storytelling, working opposite to the kind of long, paradigmatic exchanges that characterize soap operas. The result of this efficiency however is that the viewer is often witnessing the second scene: *not* the moment of discovery or realization, but its later rehearsal. Detective procedurals like *Elementary* are therefore always looking backward to a conversation that has happened in a commercial break, or a realization that happened internally. "Knowing" here happens in a serial story's gaps, while its narration becomes a way to talk around, return to, or recover those moments.

The Rhythms of Non-Suspenseful Waiting

In general, the relationship between linearity and cyclicality on more episodic television programs like detective shows are described as "flexi-narratives,"[136] in which some plotlines are closed week-by-week, while others (either a long-term, overarching mystery or plotlines having to do with characters' relationships) operate as longer-term arcs. But the way these often work – and *Elementary* is no exception – is that the investigators run through a series of inaccurate explanations and false suspects before ultimately hitting on the right ones. The most obvious explanation for this structure is that it keeps audiences guessing about what really happened. As a byproduct, this structure frames mystery-of-the-week detection less as a linear path from clue-to-clue, and instead as more cyclical or repetitive in nature. More specifically, the mysteries on these shows become less about questions that get progressively better answered, and more about a series of "failed" stories. By extension, this way of framing detection and mystery-solving reframes how we might understand the "closure" of the answered mystery at the end of each episode.

To explain what I mean, I will map out the mystery of the week on a typical episode of *Elementary*, "Down Where the Dead Delight."[137] The episode begins with the morgue blowing up; the investigative team suspects that someone planted a bomb in a body to destroy evidence. Joan and Gregson start by suggesting to the lawyer for a drug cartel that his client planted the bomb. The lawyer asks Joan and Gregson to "imagine" an alternate scenario where his client would have no reason to bomb the morgue. Gregson notes, "That's an awfully specific hypothetical," and the lawyer retorts, "Then let's not call it a hypothetical. Let's call it a fact."

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[136] A term coined by Robin Nelson in *TV Drama in Transition: Forms, Values and Cultural Change* (Macmillan, 1997).
[137] "Down Where the Dead Delight," *Elementary*, season 4, episode 11, CBS, 4 Feb 2016, *Hulu*, www.hulu.com/watch/827cbfe5-52ce-49bb-8bf0-a7ca066959c4.

Although the lawyer ultimately offers corroborating evidence for his version of events, this step is treated almost like an afterthought; the majority of the conversation is spent "imagining" a story that becomes framed as progressively more real – more factual – as it is elaborated upon. The investigators move on to a different theory, and eventually they arrive at the ex-boyfriend of a woman named Janet. Although Joan presents her belief in the ex-boyfriend's guilt as a fact, she has actually gleaned this information from a discussion with another suspect, and the story of the case that the investigators have constructed falls apart when Janet's boyfriend presents the alternative story that they were still together. Then they interrogate a man, Toby, who was stalking Janet. They lay out a thorough explanation for how and why he killed her; he offers alternate explanations for every point they raise. Finally, he reveals that he actually has an alibi for both murders. For some reason, suspects on this show always wait until they've had a prolonged back-and-forth with the investigators before suddenly realizing that they actually have an alibi. This may seem rather contrived, to allow an entertaining interrogation scene to play out and perhaps also to increase suspense, but the result is to privilege as the main subject of the scene these encounters between stories, while the evidence that would prove or disprove guilt is usually framed as an abrupt method of transition, once the stories have been told.

Ultimately, the investigators conclude that Toby's father killed Janet, but they have no proof of it – just the surety afforded by a very compelling story. As Sherlock notes: "I normally have a voracious appetite for proof, but in this case, I don't think we need any." Although Sherlock frames this trivialization of proof as an aberration – and indeed, for someone named Sherlock Holmes, you'd think it would be – as I've suggested, it's actually fairly characteristic of the way the show narrates detection. The investigators end up lying to Toby's father, telling him that Toby is going to be arrested for Janet's murder after all, until the father blurts out, "I did

this. I killed Janet" as dramatic music underscores his confession. Both the clichéd dialogue and the music here gesture toward the idea of confession-as-revelation only to undermine it, since the audience is well-aware that Toby's father's confession comes as no revelation at all, but instead as a more actionable repetition of the story that the investigators have already told each other. In other words, in each episode of *Elementary*, the investigators lay out the steps of the crime, but to conclude, the mystery often requires a confession like that of Toby's father. One could see this necessity as offering a form of closure to the mystery by creating certainty. It is tempting to read the above episode summary as a kind of fantasy of investigation and the judicial system where an innocent person always has some concrete proof to demonstrate their innocence, and where investigators can go around imposing accusatory stories on people until a suspect proves they cannot be guilty. But I would like to focus less on what this formula means discursively for crime solving, and more on what it means as a way of understanding episodic storytelling. As I've suggested above, this necessity for a confession often arises because Sherlock Holmes and his fellow investigators have constructed a plausible narrative that they cannot necessarily prove. That is, the certainty offered by a confession highlights the *uncertainty* of detection. So much of the process of investigation on *Elementary* involves the characters offering stories up to either be accepted or rejected; the truth of a crime is imagined to be propositional and repetitive.

This formula is so engrained into the show that any returning viewer can safely assume that the investigators will run through a series of false beliefs or narratives of the crime. There will be a series of suspects that investigators confront with a story that the audience already knows will be wrong in some way. The question these episodes raise is therefore not only "what will Sherlock and Joan – and by extension, the viewer – learn?" This might be the perspective of

a viewer who wants to be surprised by the ending of a mystery. For other viewers, however, the questions raised might in fact be more like: "how will Sherlock and Joan be wrong *this time*?"[138]

This question, asked about the episodic murder-of-the-week, also resonates outward into the more serial or friendship-based plots. For instance, one theme that the procedural seems particularly suited to tackle, because of its cyclical nature, is maintenance. Maintenance could be framed as the continual, episodic upkeep of a crime-free community, or it could be framed in more quotidian ways. In an episode midway through the third season, Sherlock confesses to Joan that the "process of maintaining my sobriety" is "repetitive and it's relentless, and above all, it's tedious." He adds: "now, two years [sober], I find myself asking: 'Is this it?' My sobriety is simply a grind. It's just a leaky faucet that requires constant maintenance, and in return offers only not to drip." Joan reminds him, "You have your work, you have me, you're *alive*." Joan here positions Sherlock's work and their friendship in opposition to the repetitive maintenance of his sobriety, to which Sherlock responds: "I've told myself that many times, so many times that it has become unmoored from all meaning. Odd. I used to imagine a relapse would be the climax to some grand drama. Now I think that if I were to use drugs again, it would in fact be an anti-climax."[139] Sherlock puts his continued sobriety in narrative terms. One way of paraphrasing his difficulty is that he thought he was in a short-season serial – a television-novel – and instead found that he was in a series. After all, what better description is there for the myriad crime

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[138] This question resonates with – but I don't think is quite the same as – Jason Mittell's "operational aesthetic," which he describes as complex television's tendency to provoke similar kinds of "how" questions; *Complex TV*. In terms of crime procedurals, Nichola Dobson has described *CSI* as "in many ways a "How Dunnit" rather than a "Who Dunnit;"" "Generic Difference and Innovation in *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*" *The CSI Effect*, edited by Michele Byers and Val Marie Johnson (Lexington, 2009), 84. For both Mittell and Dobson, these "how" questions center around how a character or a show might accomplish something difficult, rather than, as I want to highlight, how they repeatedly fail.

[139] "The Eternity Injection," *Elementary*, season 3, episode 9, CBS, 8 Jan 2015, *Hulu*, www.hulu.com/watch/d3a46faa-6397-48a9-a744-681da68a4ce6.

procedurals on television than "repetitive and relentless?"[140] One question *Elementary* addresses, then, is how to recover. And this seems to be a question particularly suited to the episodic, not the serial, form.

The within-episode cyclical structure and uneasy closure of the mystery plots intermixes with the "maintenance" of the serial plots, resulting in *Elementary* having a kind of braided serial structure. The conversations that characters have about their emotions and relationships, as we've seen above, tend to follow a claim-rejection-acceptance structure, such that characters offer different angles on, or reiterations of, a given topic over the course of several scenes, interspersed (often quite abruptly) with advances in the case. This structure mirrors that of the interrogations and confessions of the mystery plots, just slowed down such that a conversation that might last one scene in the mystery plot lasts a full episode in the friendship plot.

The way that these two plot levels get integrated tends to be through waiting. As Joan and Sherlock sit in the lobby of a suspect's office, waiting for them to agree to a meeting, or surveil a suspect, or wait for the NYPD to get back to them on a case detail, or sift laboriously through records, they tend to check in with each other emotionally. Indeed, this pattern is so well established that it is noticeable when it breaks. In a third season episode, as Joan and Sherlock wait for someone to arrive at a library, there is an awkward silence that ends when Sherlock blurts out "how are you?" Joan is nonplussed, and Sherlock points out that usually she fills "these moments" with dialogue. She shuts him down, and the table once again descends into

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[140] When Sherlock *does* relapse at the end of this season, it *is* a climax to a grand drama, but one that aptly enough has been manufactured for him deliberately by a former friend-turned-enemy. And interestingly, this character pushes Sherlock to relapse in part by forcing him to return to the spaces and memories that Sherlock associates with his addiction.

uncomfortable silence.[141] Joan's refusal to talk in this moment disrupts both the implied norms of her friendship with Sherlock, and also, by extension, the implied norms of the show. The conversations that take place in these scenes of waiting end up framing the activity of waiting as both crucial to one's psychological health, and also as a foundational building block for the audience to understand these fictional characters. The gaps in the case allow for character-based plots, while the time it takes a character to process the emotional conversations they've just had, to come to a new conclusion or change their mind – that is, the gaps in explicit dialogue that allow for internal processing and change – are filled with the events of the mystery plot.

This interplay offers a form of non-suspenseful waiting. That is, we might think of an enforced period of waiting before a new revelation to be crucial to the suspense created by an unsolved mystery, particularly a serial mystery. Gaps, in this model of seriality, draw out a mystery in order to build suspense, to make the audience even more eager to finally receive answers to the questions that they've presumably spent the intervening minutes speculating on. In this instance, however, waiting – gaps in the pursuit of answers – is what becomes itself compelling.[142] Rather than gaps, waiting, and suspense all working together to facilitate an audience's engagement over time with a serial story, in the case of *Elementary*, it's flipped. It is within the context of "waiting" that the show's most serial plotlines get elaborated – plotlines that establish character and relationship continuity, that address season-long questions, or that engage with show-long themes such as "loneliness" or "community-building" – such that "waiting" becomes a vehicle of serial elaboration rather than the space between serial parts.

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[141] "One Watson, One Holmes," *Elementary*, season 3, episode 19, CBS, 9 April 2015, *Hulu*, www.hulu.com/watch/5e35c79e-09f9-4b8b-aba5-20727ba5b556.

[142] I am sure that some viewers are primarily watching these sorts of shows for the mystery, and find the relationship conversations distracting – a true "gap" in the plots they are following – but the show itself doesn't frame them this way.

Furthermore, the intrusion of the mystery plot is often framed as exactly that: as an intrusion or interruption to this ongoing conversation. Regardless of how specific audience members feel, then, the show itself stages waiting as where the important scenes of the show take place. It is the very thing that characters and the audience are supposedly waiting *for* that in actuality serves as an unwelcome bracket to the pleasurable, engaging, or therapeutic activity of waiting itself. Lastly, this emphasis on how much waiting takes places in the interstitial moments of a case frames the work of detection as, on some level, long and boring – as laborious. *Elementary* reverses what we might think would be the serial temporality of waiting versus solving, and in so doing, it also complicates what it means to have a work/life balance, a concept that ends up mapping on to the balance between mystery and friendship plots.

At first glance, it looks as though *Elementary* – in true Sherlock Holmes fashion – privileges "the work" (not a coincidence that this euphemism for detecting retains shades of both working and a work of art) over everything else. Joan's first job as a sober companion means that her work is very literally to live Sherlock's life along with him – to stay in his house, to go where he goes – and one source of conflict and discussion throughout the series is the extent to which Joan has or wants a life of her own, away from *both* the New York City brownstone and the profession that they share. That is, home and work are imagined by Joan and Sherlock as one and the same. But the careful balance that we've already seen maintained between mystery plot and friendship plot suggests another way to understand the relationship between work and life.

Specifically, despite Joan and Sherlock's frequent emphasis on how much work it takes to be a detective, the primary way in which the show frames their job is as a "calling." For instance, they emphasize across the show how *unmotivated* they are by money or credit in exchange for their work. They are instead motivated by puzzles at first, and as the show goes on,

by the chance to spend time with each other. In contrast, as I've suggested above, the show often frames the experience of living as itself laborious. What results is an understanding of work/life balance as, once again, flipped. It is not the case that one's work is one's life, nor is it the case that characters have strict lines of demarcation between work and life, but instead the show proposes a way of understanding work and life as intertwined, held in literal balance through the careful allotment of the show's time and attention to one, and then to the other. *Elementary* uses its formal structures of repetition to emphasize maintenance and the long-term work of changing and becoming. The show toggles ambiguously between these two definitions of "work," as "capitalist labor" and also "effort." *Elementary*'s language of work positions itself within – and partially reinforces – a capitalist system where "passion" and "friendship" become framed increasingly in economic terms, but it also emphasizes maintaining life under those conditions.

Finding One's Way Through Friendship

The result of all of the above – *Elementary*'s continual return to "known secrets" as a form of trust, and its distribution of characters to help with the difficulties of both work and life – is an emphasis on serial gaps, on the distinction between knowing and articulating, and on the affective structure of a friendship network, as three intertwined, non-suspenseful ways of resisting narrative closure. These three characteristics work on slightly different levels – the highly formal, the distance between viewer and program, and the characterological or affective – but ultimately work together here on *Elementary*, and on other procedurals. This section focuses primarily on the implications of "friendship" for an understanding of serial character. How are character situated, both within the works and lives that comprise the narrative, and also amidst other formal properties of the televisual text? As the above sections have suggested, one way in

which characters on *Elementary* discover who they "really" are is through the repetitive pattern of negation and acceptance, in conversation with another character who knows them.

One problem of character that *Elementary* continually, almost obsessively, stages therefore is that of character uniqueness. On the one hand, its very status as a Sherlock Holmes adaptation suggests that *Elementary* will come down on the side of some characters being more unique than others. Holmes is of course, famously, categorically different and more brilliant than any other person, save perhaps for Moriarty. Similarly, it is a commonplace at this point for a detective to be figured as both the protector of a community – such as the nation for instance – and also in some way contaminated by the criminality that he battles, such that he must also stand alone outside the very community he protects, whether spatially, interpersonally, or mentally.

Indeed, the possibility that Holmes *might* have an equal in Moriarty – that there might be another person similar to him – is a source of much anxiety in the Holmes stories, from the original "Adventure of the Final Problem" (1893), where Holmes and Moriarty's inability to gain an advantage over the other on the Reichenbach Falls leads (temporarily at least) to their simultaneous deaths; to the contemporary BBC adaptation of *Sherlock* (2010), in which Moriarty demands that Sherlock acknowledges their mutual superiority; to *Elementary*, where Natalie Dormer's Jamie Moriarty insists upon the same. In the original Holmes stories, Holmes' eventual difference from Moriarty is framed as a superiority of cleverness and luck. In *Sherlock*, his difference is framed as a choice he makes to remain "on the side of the angels." In *Elementary*, Sherlock's own uniqueness (and, by extension, Jamie's) is in fact continually undermined. When Sherlock threatens a murderer, for instance, the murderer scoffingly echoes a line from the original Holmes stories: "You might want the world to believe you're an automaton. A

calculating machine. But you and I know better."[143] The claim of Watson-as-narrator in Conan Doyle's story, that Holmes is so brilliant he becomes practically inhuman, is raised here specifically to dismiss it. This is accomplished in part perhaps by invoking the constant doubling of Holmes himself as an adapted character, but also by another claim to shared knowledge: another secret that two people already know.

Similarly, in a fifth season episode, Joan discovers that Sherlock has stopped going to sobriety meetings (never named explicitly, but essentially Narcotics Anonymous). He complains that the meetings are boring, to which Joan retorts: "You think that being smarter makes you different. Don't you think other people get bored at meetings, too? It was one of the most common things I used to talk about with my clients. Everyone gets bored at meetings. It doesn't make you different, it makes you typical."[144] Very directly here, Joan reframes Sherlock's most unique characteristic (his intellect) as itself offering proof of his typicality. Her larger point is that Sherlock's typicality grants him access to a specific support network. That is, Joan is articulating the widened scope of people to whom Sherlock can relate, from criminals and Moriarty, to Joan herself, until it encompasses all addicts. Here, the question of what constitutes a character – that blend of individualism and typicality – becomes thematized.

Sherlock's primary difference from Moriarty in fact depends on Sherlock's awareness of his own typicality in the face of Moriarty's refusal to acknowledge it.[145] In a first season episode that begins the process of introducing *Elementary*'s version of Moriarty, that introduction is

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[143] "Bella," *Elementary*, season 3, episode 4, CBS, 20 Nov 2014, *Hulu*, www.hulu.com/watch/da54044a-73f2-4853-83cd-c8f34d964f1e.
[144] "How the Sausage Is Made," *Elementary*, season 5, episode 8, CBS, 27 Nov 2016, *Hulu*, www.hulu.com/watch/30fef52f-340b-436d-9169-d8e72b78059c.
[145] Note, for example, that in BBC's *Sherlock*, Sherlock's full quote to Moriarty is in fact: "I may be on the side of the angels, but don't think for one second that I am one;" "The Reichenbach Fall," *Sherlock*, season 2, episode 3, BBC, 15 Jan 2012, *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/watch/70229983. That is, versions of Sherlock Holmes may align themselves precariously with other, more "typical" people without necessarily accepting their own typicality.

accomplished via language from the original Sherlock Holmes stories. First, on a phone call with Sherlock and Joan, Moriarty explains:

> Consider me a spider. I sit motionless at the center of my web. That web has a thousand radiations and I know well every quiver of each of them. I do little myself. I only plan. My agents are numerous and splendidly organized. If there is a crime to be done, a paper to be abstracted, a house to be rifled, a man to be removed, the word is passed to me. The matter is planned and carried out.

And second, in a slightly later scene, Joan notes that Sherlock is willing to "talk about what happened" to his murdered girlfriend Irene Adler, "but you never talk about who she was." Sherlock replies:

> She was difficult to explain. And I mean that as a compliment. She was American….She was an exquisite painter. She made her living restoring Renaissance paintings for art museums. She traveled extensively because of her work. She was highly intelligent. Optimistic about the human condition….I usually consider it a sign of stupidity, but with Irene, it seemed almost convincing. She was, to me, the woman. To me, she eclipsed and predominated all of her gender.[146]

In both of these instances, characters assert their uniqueness (or the uniqueness of their lovers) by setting themselves apart from a mass of similar, unnamed "others." Moriarty's claim to centrality, for example, relies on the seamless working of an entire "web" of anonymous subordinates. Moriarty has perfect knowledge of this system, and it is through his privileged position at the "center," as the one who "know[s] well," that frees him from having to act himself, while also transforming his employees into bodies without consciousness or agency of their own. What Moriarty's uniqueness also enables by the end of this speech is a shift into the passive voice. Not only do the people who might "pass word" become elided on a semantic level, but so too does Moriarty as an individual with partial perspective. Action becomes so

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[146] "Risk Management," *Elementary*, season 1, episode 22, CBS, 9 May 2013, *Hulu*, www.hulu.com/watch/1bce8c34-1d10-41dc-8fc2-b34c6ede515a.

subordinated to his complete knowledge of the system that he controls, that things are automatically "planned and carried out."

Irene, by contrast, starts in the realm of the general and becomes more specific over time, described first by nationality, then by profession, then by internal characteristics such as intelligence. Sherlock's very insistence on Irene's uniqueness as "the woman" is precisely because she is "usual." It is therefore perhaps significant that Irene's profession is that of an art restorer: again, she becomes unique in part by copying, by aligning herself precisely with a past vision. In the original Sherlock Holmes stories that contain each of these passages, they were originally narrated in the third person. The first Moriarty passage is an almost direct quote from a description of Moriarty that Holmes gives Watson in the Conan Doyle story "The Final Problem." Similarly, Sherlock's description of Irene in *Elementary* echoes Watson's comment in "A Scandal in Bohemia" (1891): "To Sherlock Holmes she is always *the* woman." While the Irene passage technically involves Sherlock describing her in the third person, his repeated emphasis on "to me" changes the passage's original language into a statement that is less about Irene, and more about Sherlock and how he specifically perceives her. Uniqueness therefore becomes subjective and relational.

Moriarty here imagines himself to be unique because he subordinates others into his own consciousness. Irene is unique because she *could* be like others but Sherlock feels that she is not. That is, one character works via proliferation and the other works by closing down comparisons; one inhabits the role of the villainous mastermind and the other the heterosexual love interest/murdered backstory. The clarity of these characters' positions within the structures or tropes of detective fiction is tied closely to their own claims to uniqueness. However, in the next episode, Moriarty and Irene are revealed to have been the same person all along. Her place in the

structure of the detective story becomes troubled and to some extent irreconcilable.[147] But these passages' very status as quotations already starts to complicate their paired emphasis on the uniqueness of the characters they describe. That is, this use of quotation emphasizes and reminds the viewer that these characters are adapted versions of others.[148] One way of reading this use of quotation is to emphasize that very connection between these characters and their "originals." For instance, one could argue that this reliance on quoting, in this particular episode, represents a claim to authenticity on the part of *Elementary* – an attempt to create a unity or continuity between original and adaptation, past and present. In the context of the rest of the show's emphasis on repetition and doubling as constitutive of character, however, I read this use of original Sherlock Holmes quotations as suggesting the impossibility of character uniqueness.

In one of the final moments of the season, Sherlock and Joan successfully capture Moriarty, in part by encouraging Moriarty's belief that she and Sherlock are both special, in contrast to everyone else. Joan is the one who successfully tricks Moriarty, and Sherlock concludes: "You said there was only one person in the world who could surprise you. Turns out there's two."[149] The movement in this episode is therefore from one kind of doubling to another. That is, Moriarty's claim is that she and Sherlock are alike, in part because Sherlock is capable of surprising her. In the final moments of the episode, Sherlock reveals that he and Joan are truly the ones who are alike, but he does this not necessarily by excluding Moriarty from their new dyad but by bringing Joan in. That is, Sherlock is like Moriarty because he can surprise her, and

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[147] In later episodes, Sherlock receives and saves letters that Moriarty writes him. Reading these letters is described as a way to better understand Moriarty, but it proves to be fairly unsuccessful.
[148] While it's unclear whether every *Elementary* viewer recognized these quotations *as* quotations, they are relatively recognizable as quotes go. The Moriarty quote in particular sounds weird enough (what does it mean to "abstract a paper" in this context?) that a viewer might infer it's a quote even if they don't recognize it.
[149] "Heroine," *Elementary*, season 1, episode 24, CBS, 16 May 2013, *Hulu*, www.hulu.com/watch/fefec251-ae2a-4a8e-9733-50266d18d718.

by extension, Joan is also like Moriarty because she, like Sherlock, can surprise her. The character doublings move outward in unpredictable ways.

When *Elementary* asks "who is a character?" therefore, the show is in a sense really asking: "who is that character like?" That very question is not one that can be conclusively answered, because the seriality of the program makes every potential similarity or doubling unstable. It is perhaps the process of shifting from one point of view to another, from one plot to another, or from one doppelganger to another, that constitutes televisual character.

The episodes at the end of the first season rush serially toward the conclusion of the season-long "arc," addressing the dual questions of what happened to Sherlock's former girlfriend, Irene Adler, and the identity of the elusive Moriarty. Before these mysteries are solved, however, Moriarty sends Sherlock and Joan to solve the case of a man, Daren Sutter, who had recently killed the person he thought was responsible for the years-old murder of his sister Leah.[150] Sutter claims to have seen his sister's killer fleeing, and to have "recognized him immediately," even after twenty-two years. Over the course of the episode, Joan and Sherlock learn that the murdered man was innocent, and furthermore, that Sutter had not been the one to see his sister's killer at all. Instead, his now-wife had been the person who'd actually been present on the night of the murder. She, in turn, had claimed to recognize an innocent man in order to give Sutter "closure." In a very concrete sense, then, this episode pushes back against the conventions of *Elementary* and the procedural genre. While one crime is solved – one murderer discovered and caught – Leah's murder remains unsolved, and the characters' desire for closure through violence is denied.

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[150] "Risk Management."

This episode resists narrative closure, beyond this thematization of the risks of emotional closure, in a more generalizable way. Specifically, as with the doublings of main characters such as Moriarty, Irene, Sherlock, and Joan, this episode sets up a series of smaller-scale structural parallels between characters that it then proceeds to complicate. Sutter insists on the uniqueness of both the recollection of the past (his own memory) and also the individual who could have killed Leah, and both are revealed to be a false claim to the unique – to be in fact doubled. That is, clear timelines, or clear narrative cause-and-effect relationships between past and present, become complicated the more characters get involved; a type of complication that doesn't necessarily get resolved when mystery does, or when the episode ends. For instance, the doppelganger relationship between Sutter and Sherlock – both seek to track down a man they are certain killed a woman they love, but Sutter is able to act where Sherlock isn't – is proven over the course of the episode to be a false one, as Sutter's own clear sense of roles each person is meant to play in the story of his sister's murder become unstable, as Joan asserts her own claim to be similar to Sherlock, and as it is discovered at the end of the episodes that Irene isn't even dead. The ramifications of Sherlock and Sutter's failed doppelgang-ing, then, radiate outward from the mystery-of-the-week plot to produce the ever-shifting process of alignment that consume Sherlock, Joan, and Moriarty over the next several episodes.

Elementary stages this process explicitly in an episode titled "One Watson, One Holmes," which refers to Sherlock's fear that his and Joan's partnership only works when they are different, complementary people, and that due to a past trauma, Joan is becoming too much like him. Sherlock says: ""Friendship," I've come to believe, is more accurately defined as two people moving towards the best aspects of one another. It is a relationship of mutual benefit, mutual gain." Joan counters, "I am not turning myself into you, I am finding my way through my

situation…This is where I am right now, and this is how I need to be," emphasizing both the malleability, provisionality, and specific temporality of what Sherlock is framing as fairly stable (albeit changeable) character traits. That is, Sherlock is framing character, here and in the above quote, as a progressive – one could say accumulative – move of two people steadily and gradually becoming more alike. But as Joan suggests here, that accumulative model of character might look similar to, but is not in fact identical to, a temporal model of character that she names "finding one's way through." And, in fact, Sherlock concludes their conversation on this topic by clarifying that "I am not a better person because of a lack of connection. So I think the healthy thing is for you *not* to move in my direction. In fact, quite the opposite." In other words, he undercuts the accumulative model of friendship he just proposed. We can see that the temporality of this definition of friendship becomes complicated almost instantly, the moment one acquires more than one friend. Friendship here becomes a formal figure of a lack of closure, often staging itself (as with *Elementary*'s refusal to afford Irene Adler a stable space in the narrative to the point of refusing to allow her to exist) in opposition to heteronormative closure. Serial or episodic narratives stage their definition of character and their own necessary lack of closure as ultimately one and the same.

Conclusion

In Chapter One, I used the framework of "precarious knowing" to elaborate upon the relationship a reader might have to a serial text with one central mystery, question, or "secret" that is unspoken, but which a reader precariously knows to be true. Both Collins' and Braddon's choices *not* to withhold that secret until the end of the novel were often described by critics as failures of plotting, in contrast to what I argue this shared knowledge *successfully* achieves,

which is to deploy implicature serially to position the alongside the participants in this mystery, its cover-up, and its resolution. I argued that, because readers can easily know or guess the solution to the mystery, the experience of reading these sensation novels cannot be universally described as one of waiting in suspense to know.

In Chapter Two, I turned to the dynamics that I partially bracketed in Chapter One: failure and waiting. Specifically, I used the framework of "precarious knowing" to illuminate, not a single known "secret," but the repetitive process of knowing (and failing to know) a serial sequence of secrets. This repetitive process, I argue, produces formally what I term "friendship," or a non-hierarchical and non-privileged intimacy between networks of viewers and characters, that is produced by neither the acquiring of knowledge of these characters as unique individuals, or by the accumulation of time spent with them, but instead by the very process of serially shifting position within the network. As characters move between getting to know each other and repetitively failing to know each other, *actual* conclusive knowledge remains elusive.

An illustrative example of this dynamic conveniently presented itself recently, when Arthur Conan Doyle's estate sued Netflix in relation to an upcoming Sherlock Holmes adaptation, *Enola Holmes.* Current United States copyright law only covers the ten last Sherlock Holmes stories, i.e. those published after 1923. The rest are in the public domain. Conan Doyle's estate argued in this most recent lawsuit that *Enola Holmes* relies for its characterization of Sherlock Holmes on characteristics that only exist in those last ten stories, namely his sense of "human connection and empathy."[151] In other words, Conan Doyle's estate is trying to litigate where serial character is located, and they are specifically advocating for the idea that character

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[151] Quoted in Adi Robertson, "Arthur Conan Doyle's estate sues Netflix for giving Sherlock Holmes too many feelings," *The Verge*, 25 June 2020, www.theverge.com/2020/6/25/21302942/netflix-enola-holmes-sherlock-arthur-conan-doyle-estate-lawsuit-copyright-infringement.

traits are located textually in a particular place (in this case, at the end of the series) that one can point to.

While I suppose we will never know what the history of Sherlock Holmes adaptations and fandom would look like without those ten final stories, readers have of course traditionally been *extremely* willing to read Holmes in the early stories as emotionally connected to Watson, for instance. In 2020, after over a century of Sherlock Holmes adaptations and interpretations, it feels obvious that Holmes forms emotional connections, whatever he may claim in those early stories, as the incredulous articles covering this lawsuit point out. This very feeling of obviousness rests in part on the foundation of Sherlock Holmes's long, multiply authored, transfictional history. Interpretation and the intimacy of serial "friendship," in other words, are mutually constituitive, in a way that a construct like parasociality does not necessarily account for. This serial interpretive intimacy might be difficult to see on the level of the individual, but fan communities can serve to amplify and systematize those acts of serial interpretation and their consequences. When an individual reader interprets the character of Sherlock Holmes as empathetic, and then reads subsequent serial stories through that lens, they are doing something – small and local as it is – to that character. When many readers interpret Sherlock Holmes as empathetic, and read adaptations and fanfiction that only reinforce that characterization, the character itself changes over time. Regardless of the outcome of this lawsuit, such a serial character cannot be so easily narrowed back down to a single version of itself.

Chapter 3 : Imagined Economies: Suspense, Spoilers, and the Payoffs of Contemporary Television Serials

Keeping that Homeland *Going?*

Scholars often describe one of the appeals of seriality as its fantasy of endlessness.[152] The beneficiaries of this imagined endlessness are both the consumers and producers of serial narratives: audiences get more of the stories and characters they enjoy, while creators maximize profits by keeping audiences returning for as long as possible.[153] To end is therefore to fail. Under this framework, the mutual benefits that consumers and producers might receive from the continuation of a beloved serial often become imagined as a mutual responsibility to keep it going. This mandate of endlessness, and this impression that ending is failure, contribute to a system whereby fans of a show feel bound to work for its continuation through fan campaigns, social media activity, and offering fanworks up for promotional purposes.[154] At the same time, as

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[152] For example, scholars commonly use the phrase "endlessly deferred narrative" to describe serials, whether they are discussing seriality in general (see: Jonathan Bignell, *An Introduction to Television Studies,* Routledge, 2004); particular genres such as the soap opera (see: Robert Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas*) and the cult show (see: Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures*); or audience practices (Jordan Lavender-Smith, for example, has written about viewers engaging with "puzzle" shows through "endless engagement with the archive" of old episodes (56); "'It's Not Unknown': The Loose- and Dead-End Afterlives of *Battlestar Galactica* and *Lost*," *Time in Television Narrative: Exploring Temporality in Twenty-First Century Programming*, edited by Melissa Ames, UP of Mississippi, 2012). Fan scholars also tend to describe fans as motivated by a basic desire for "more" content set in the fictional worlds they love.

[153] For scholarship that specifically tackles this dynamic, see Jason Mittell, *Complex TV*; Frank Kelleter, "Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality."

[154] For instance, see: Mel Stanfill, *Exploiting Fandom* (U of Iowa Press, 2019); Mark Andrejevic, "Watching Television Without Pity: The Productivity of Online Fans," *Television & New Media* vol. 9, no. 1, Jan 2008. Of course, fans also engage in this labor for other reasons, most notably a basic desire to see more episodes of the show in question, and a desire to engage with others about a text that they love. In addition, many fans express satisfaction when a beloved show ends at what they perceive to be the right time. See Rebecca Williams, *Post-Object Fandom* (Bloomsbury, 2015) for more on how fans process the endings of beloved texts.

Vulture writer Alyssa Rosenberg notes about the Showtime spy drama *Homeland* (2011-2020), sometimes the narrative choices that "seem[] like the best possible dramatic option at any given moment…are in conflict with show's basic mandate to keep on going."[155] Here, familiar discursive tensions over defining a serial as art or commerce get framed as a matter of continuation versus closure. Even as a serial's ending implies in some ways a fatal failure to continue to attract audiences, this "mandate to keep on going" also becomes positioned as inherently inartistic.[156] A serial audience's desire for closure, by extension, becomes imagined as more metatextual and critical – as signaling their ability to identify that "best possible dramatic option."

At the same time, viewers who consume "spoilers" – information about a narrative that reveals plot details ahead of time – are sometimes framed as needing too much closure, or needing closure that occurs too soon. For instance, one surveyed viewer of the serial television drama *Lost* (ABC 2004-2010) compared fans who consume spoilers to "kids on Christmas Eve who sneak a look at their presents."[157] Fans who consume spoilers are further described as unable to stand the suspense of waiting to experience narrative events in their proper order, or of needing the "comfort" of known outcomes. The temporality of spoilers, therefore, is an odd mix of shortcut and repetition. A viewer first learns information too fast, and then must experience it

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[155] Alyssa Rosenberg, "*Homeland* Recap: The Most Wanted Man in the World," *Vulture,* 9 Dec 2013, www.vulture.com/2013/12/homeland-recap-brody-in-iran-assassination.html/.

[156] This way of framing closure appears both in scholarly contexts and popular discussions of television, but one extremely illustrative example is the common perception among *Lost* viewers that the show was declining in quality until producers Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse convinced ABC to set an end-date for the show. This negotiation has become mythologized, not only as rescuing *Lost* specifically, but also as precipitating a revolution in television storytelling by modeling an alternative to the presumption of endlessness on American network television. See for instance Adam Chitwood's recent interview with Damon Lindelof; "Exclusive: Damon Lindelof on the Original 3-Season Plan for 'Lost' and the Negotiation to End the Series," *Collider*, 30 June 2020, collider.com/damon-lindelof-lost-original-ending-plan.

[157] Jonathan Gray and Jason Mittell, "Speculation on Spoilers: *Lost* Fandom, Narrative Consumption and Rethinking Textuality." *Particip@tions* vol. 4, no. 1, 2007.

again later. In both the case of "endless" seriality and spoiler consumption – even though they might seem like exact opposites – repetition of narrative information becomes discursively linked with a kind of failure to be on time, questionable artistic impulses, and comfort. By looking at repetitions that are both too fast and too slow – first through a discussion of *Homeland*, a television show that critics agreed had gone on too long, and second through a discussion of spoilers in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), which campaigned aggressively to limit their circulation – this chapter explores the consequences of conflating a serial audience's desire for eventual narrative closure with the sophistication of their viewing strategies.

In this chapter, I focus in particular on the temporal language used by the audience population of professional television and media critics, particularly those who wrote episode-by-episode reviews for entertainment websites like *The A.V. Club* and *Vulture*. I foreground critics' responses to serial texts specifically because they offer a consistent record of audience members' experience of watching *Homeland* over time, and because the evaluative language conventions of television criticism foregrounds questions of whether any given narrative choice feels effective or ineffective, which are precisely the kinds of judgments about serial media that I am interested in unpacking further. In particular, I trace three assumptions through television and media criticism about *Homeland* and the MCU: first, that a serial has a responsibility to answer questions and offer solutions to its mysteries. Second, that a serial's performance of this responsibility plays a large part in designating it a narrative success or failure. And third, that thoughtful, responsible audiences must force themselves to wait in suspense for these inevitable answers.

This intertwining of endlessness versus closure, as well as allusions to a show's and audiences' twinned responsibilities, is demonstrated aptly in the following interview that Willa Paskin conducted with actor Mandy Patinkin, about his decision to leave the CBS crime procedural *Criminal Minds* (2005-2020) to instead star on *Homeland*. Patinkin explains, "I thought [*Criminal Minds*] was something very different. I never thought they were going to kill and rape all these women every night, every day, week after week, year after year."[158] Here, Patinkin directly links the shocking destructiveness of a show like *Criminal Minds* to its formal structures. As an episodic procedural (like Chapter Two's *Elementary*), *Criminal Minds* is imagined to be both repetitive and endless, to tell the same violent story "year after year." Patinkin goes on to say, "Audiences all over the world use [crime procedurals] as their bedtime story. This isn't what you need to be dreaming about." The repetitive rhythms of the television series become so habitual – part of audiences' domestic rituals "every night" – that they literally become unconscious, infiltrating even our dreams.

In the next section of his interview, Patinkin contrasts the violence of *Criminal Minds* with *Homeland*, which, he asserts, "asks why there's a need for violence in the first place." The implication here is that *Homeland*'s question-driven approach to serial narrative might prompt audiences to think, to interrogate a presumed status quo, and to form their own conclusions about society's "need for violence" and what to do about it. And again, this more cognitive and ethical approach to television-watching is contrasted directly with series television's thoughtless dreaming. But Patinkin's interviewer, Willa Paskin, goes on to advise: "Just don't expect easy answers. Patinkin hasn't even pestered his show's creators for info on whether [his character]

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[158] "*Homeland*'s Mandy Patinkin on His Bad Old TV Show and His Great New One," *Vulture*, 20 Sept 2012, www.vulture.com/2012/09/mandy-patinkin-on-his-tv-career-old-and-new.html.

Saul is really a good guy." Almost immediately, then, the show's capacity to ask broad questions like "why there's a need for violence" shift rhetorically into specific plot questions that will presumably get answered eventually, even if the process won't be "easy." *Homeland*'s creators know the truth, after all, even if Patinkin and the audience do not.

What is the difference between a viewer of *Criminal Minds* wondering if the newest murder suspect will turn out to be "a good guy," and a viewer of *Homeland* wondering about Saul's loyalties? The difference lies primarily in the duration of viewers' wondering. The suspense of *Criminal Minds*' mysteries seems to Patinkin like a thoughtless form of suspense in part because it is repetitive and might go on forever, while the suspense of *Homeland* seems thoughtful and difficult in part because it is drawn out over many episodes, but will ultimately reach a conclusion. Accounts of seriality that emphasize the appeal of suspense – whether for the sake of intellectual play,[159] as an ethical orientation,[160] or as a strategic inducement to continue consuming narrative products[161] -- often highlight seriality's unique capacity for cultivating, over the long-term, this expectation of future resolution. And again, the suggestion that this kind of suspense – the withholding of "easy answers" – is built into *Homeland*'s serial form produces the further implication that there are inherently more and less appropriate ways to engage with this show. As Patinkin advises:

> If you've never seen [*Homeland*] before, don't go to the library and turn to the last pages…It's a true serial, not a procedural. It's cumulative, and you will negatively impact your experience if you cheat. People who sell it, they don't give a shit how you watch, but I *do* give a shit, and I want you to watch it the way that it was designed.

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[159] Examples include Jason Mittell, *Complex TV*; Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately* (NYU Press, 2010).
[160] Caroline Levine, *The Serious Pleasures of Suspense*.
[161] Frank Kelleter, "Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality."

In addition to the implication that a "true serial" is more literary than a procedural, this quote offers a brief insight into the creating and viewing processes that Patinkin imagines best suit a show like *Homeland*. Paskin's admonishment not to "expect easy answers" and the revelation that Patinkin himself doesn't want to know future plot information ahead of time becomes here a more direct admonishment to the *Homeland* viewer not to "cheat," i.e. not to consume spoilers. This use of economic language to describe the experience of the narrative gets picked up again in the next sentence, where Patinkin contrasts the "people who sell" television with the people who create and care about it, which of course enables Patinkin to distance himself from the "selling" of television.

As I argue throughout this chapter, the narrative economics that Patinkin references here – the idea that spoilers are "cheating," for example, or similarly, that viewers can expect narrative "payoff" and feel that a plot choice is "unearned," etc – becomes a key mechanism for effecting that distancing. Just as the questions *Homeland* asks about the nature of violence become in practice answerable questions about plot and character, references to the actual economics of television-making and -viewing become subsumed by the notion of narrative economics as a formal and metaphorical structure. And one participates fully and virtuously in this narrative economy primarily by eschewing spoilers. Take, for example, the conclusion of Paskin's interview with Patinkin, in which she relates an encounter Patinkin had with Bill Clinton: "the former president told him he loves *Homeland* and had watched it the right way: in a two-day binge. "As I'm leaving," Patinkin says, "President [Clinton] shouts to me at the door, 'Mandy, keep that *Homeland* going.' I went, 'You too. You too, my friend.'"" I suspect Paskin's use of the phrase "watched it the right way" is at least partially tongue-in-cheek, but it comes in the context of an interview that does uphold the point of view that there's a right way, and a

wrong way, to watch serials. Even as Clinton advises Patinkin to "keep that *Homeland* going" as an endless serial, good viewers are nevertheless advised to treat the show as if it were a single, unified object to watch all at once. And in so doing – in watching *Homeland* "the right way" – these viewers too can participate in guiding the nation.[162]

Contained within this single interview, then, we can see many of the intertwined dynamics that I will trace throughout this chapter. First, an equation of repetitive narrative structures with thoughtlessness on the part of both a serial and its audience, which contrasts with the implied thoughtfulness of suspense. Second, the way that economic metaphors, used to represent the above dynamic, encourage an audience to associate this cognitive characteristic – thoughtfulness – with a process of waiting for answers to be provided. Third, how this then shades into particular moralizations around the consumption of spoilers, and how the language of "failure" helps to produce the ideal, virtuous serial temporality that critics imagine. Fourth, how these cognitive questions of narrative comprehension come to stand in for more abstract, ethical, or political questions. And fifth, how everything I've just discussed becomes naturalized as fundamentally more serial than other kinds of serial narrative.

Homeland is a useful example to demonstrate these above ideas, in part because of the precarious position that it holds in hierarchies of televisual taste.[163] In general, *Homeland*'s first season was highly praised. It focused on a CIA agent, Carrie Mathison (Claire Danes) who was convinced that a recovered US prisoner of war, Nicholas Brody (Damian Lewis) had actually

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[162] Press about *Homeland* frequently alluded, as it does here, to a list of American politicians like Clinton and Barack Obama who enjoyed the show, a PR move that makes a claim both for *Homeland*'s accuracy and as I'll argue, for the larger political stakes of consuming the kind of serial narrative that *Homeland* purports to be.

[163] For example, *Homeland* aired on a premium cable channel that is not HBO. Its showrunners also used to write for the Fox thriller *24*, which links *Homeland* back to the realm of the popular, but as Emily Nussbaum argues, also "acts as an apology" for some of *24*'s "terrible ideas;" ""Homeland": The Antidote for "24,"" *The New Yorker*, 29 Nov 2011, www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/homeland-the-antidote-for-24.

been turned by terrorists during his time in captivity. Carrie became increasingly obsessed by the mystery of Brody's loyalties, going to extreme lengths to surveil him, as the viewer – equally ignorant about Brody's true motivations – both watches Brody, and watches Carrie watching Brody. But by the first few episodes of its third season, entertainment journalists were writing headlines like "Why Is 'Homeland' So Bad?"[164] By this point, the mysteries surrounding Brody have been mostly solved, Carrie and Brody had started a relationship, and Brody had been forced to go on the run. Critical viewers expressed an overwhelming sense that *Homeland* had not lived up to its initial promise, and in expressing this disappointment, they make explicit what they believe a show like *Homeland* is promising to do – or, put once again in terms of economic metaphors, the contract they imagine a show like *Homeland* to be striking with its viewers. Critics tended to start *Homeland* with the hope of narrative "payoff," which shifts into a concern about "diminishing returns" and a sense that the show was becoming "too cheap," all of which eventually resulted in accusations of the show "cheating" viewers and "not earning" its narrative choices. At each of these moments, the other television shows to which critics compared *Homeland* also shifted, from prestige cable dramas such as *Breaking Bad* and *The Sopranos,* to seemingly failed prestige experiments like *The Killing*, and finally to network genre television – particularly *24* and *Criminal Minds* – and the soap opera. By tracing the way these comparisons shift over the course of a single show, we can better pinpoint both how television critics conceptualize "good" and "bad" television, as encompassing particular storytelling methods that individual shows might adopt at various times, but also how they conceptualize an imagined

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[164] Donovan Longo, "Why Is 'Homeland' So Bad?", *The L.A. Times,* 22 Oct 2013, www.latintimes.com/why-homeland-so-bad-season-3-showtimes-normally-so-good-series-has-left-us-less-thrilled-132195.

audience of serial narratives as inherently motivated by narrative experiences like suspense, to which these shows may or may not effectively cater.

This chapter traces the way that contemporary serials and their audiences conceptualize suspense through three main sections. First, I gesture briefly toward the way that the nineteenth century, and particularly the serial-writing strategies of Charles Dickens, becomes deployed to signal a serial's quality. Then, I will move to a discussion of reviews of *Homeland*'s first few seasons. My argument in this section is in short that economic metaphors for serial-watching come to stand in for economic or structural analysis. To be clear, I am not arguing that television critics have made up this system of interlocking economic metaphors (or even that economic and structural analysis should be a critic's job at all), but instead, I am using television criticism as a source of the general metaphor patterns that appear in our collective everyday language about serials, and what that language might elide. The last section of this chapter focuses on spoilers, by looking at the discourses about spoilers that circulated immediately before and after the Marvel Cinematic Universe's penultimate film, *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018). The MCU both came to stand in for a more general online "spoiler culture," even as its own relationship to spoilers was often thoroughly contradictory. In short, this chapter will look at the terms of both sides of an imagined serial "contract," starting with what temporalities of knowledge serials are imagined to owe to their audiences, and ending with what kinds of behaviors audiences are imagined to owe in return.

The Nineteenth-Century Mystery-Box

From 1999, when the HBO mob show *The Sopranos* premiered, to its finale in 2007, comparing television shows to Charles Dickens had swiftly become something of a cliché.[165] *The Wire* (HBO 2002-2008) is probably the television show most frequently subject to these types of comparisons,[166] but it is by no means the only one. Television creators and critics often imagine Dickens to be built into the DNA of contemporary serial storytelling techniques. David Lavery for example sees a Dickensian influence on late-1990s and early 2000s television shows as wide-ranging as *Heroes* (NBC 2006-2010), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (WB/UPN 1997-2003), *Deadwood* (HBO 2004-2006), and *Lost*.[167] David Lavery ultimately concludes that Dickens is "the precursor, the patriarch" of complex, long-term television narratives writ large. *Lost*'s producer, Carlton Cuse, has also framed Dickens as a source of televisual innovation. He described *Lost* as "unlike almost any show before it," before going on to explain that "we struggled to find similar models of storytelling in TV, so we turned instead to literature," and to Dickens in particular.[168]

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[165] Before *The Sopranos*, critics did compare television shows to Dickens, usually to bolster their assertions that particular television shows were innovating with serial form in unprecedented ways. See for example Joyce Carol Oates' 1985 assertion in *TV Guide* that *Hill Street Blues* was "Dickensian in its superb character studies, its energy, its variety; above all, its audacity;" "Why *Hill Street Blues* Is Irresistible," *TV Guide*, 1 June 1985, p. 5, quoted in *Television's Second Golden Age*, 59. See also Charles McGrath's *New York Times* article, "The Prime-Time Novel," 22 Oct 1995, www.nytimes.com/1995/10/22/magazine/the-prime-time-novel-the-triumph-of-the-prime-time-novel.html.

[166] See, for example: Noah Berlatsky, "'The Wire' Was Really a Victorian Novel," *The Atlantic*, 10 Sept 2012, www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/09/the-wire-was-really-a-victorian-novel/261164/. Alternatively, see: Laura Miller, ""The Wire" is NOT like Dickens," *Salon*, 13 Sept 2012, www.salon.com/2012/09/13/the_wire_is_not_like_dickens/. For a discussion of *The Wire*-as-melodrama, see: Linda Williams, "How The Wire Is, and Isn't, "Dickensian"" *The Huffington Post*, 2 July 2014, www.huffpost.com/entry/the-wire-dickens_b_5549385. There is also a significant body of scholarship discussing *The Wire* in the context of nineteenth-century novels, including Caroline Levine, *Forms*; Liz Maynes-Aminzade, "You're Part of Something Bigger: Macrorealist TV," *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*, issue 63, April 2013; Fredric Jameson, "Realism and Utopia in *The Wire*," *Criticism*, vol. 52, no. 3-4, Summer/Fall 2010.

[167] David Lavery, "Lost and Long-Term Television Narrative." *Electronic Book Review*, 22 March 2011, www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/firstperson/long-term

[168] "Happy Birthday, Charles Dickens!" *The Daily Beast*, 7 Feb 2012, www.thedailybeast.com/happy-birthday-charles-dickens-lost-ncis-big-love-veep-writers-on-his-legacy.

For Cuse and others, Dickensian "models" are tied directly to the potential for novelty in post-2000 television. As the novelist Mohsin Hamid notes in response to the question of whether "Golden Age" television shows are "the new novels": "Television is not the new novel. Television is the old novel."[169] Hamid's argument is that as television takes over what he sees as the novel's main functions, the novel becomes freer to innovate formally. Hamid draws implicitly on André Bazin's theory of media, which describes the replacement of one medium for another as an inevitable consequence of art's evolution toward greater and greater realism.[170] While scholars and critics have discussed for years the way that certain television shows or genres might be particularly "literary" or "novelistic,"[171] what I want to flag here is the way that comparisons to Dickens again bolster this more general account of large-scale, inexorable narrative development. To produce or consume serial television that does *not* look "Dickensian" therefore means not only that it's bad television, but also that such television must represent a detour in this highly naturalized history of serial storytelling from Dickens to the present.

Television writers and critics attribute the cliffhanger in particular to Dickens. For example, Cuse asserts, "The main way [Dickens] sustained his audience's interest in his ongoing story was by ending each chapter with cliffhangers. We completely stole that model. In fact, I think no writer is more responsible for the influencing existence of cliffhangers in film."[172]

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[169] Adam Kirsch and Mohsin Hamid, "Are the New 'Golden Age' TV Shows the New Novels?" *The New York Times,* 25 Feb 2014, www.nytimes.com/2014/03/02/books/review/are-the-new-golden-age-tv-shows-the-new-novels.html.

[170] While Hamid doesn't cite Bazin by name, he quotes the writer Sheila Heti describing "what happened with painting when photography came into being more than a hundred years ago," which seems like an unmistakable reference to "The Ontology of the Photographic Image." Even if this was not a deliberate reference, it still serves to position this imagined substitution of television for the novel as part of a long, progressive history of various media replacing each other.

[171] See for some illustrative examples: Robert J. Thompson, *Television's Second Golden Age*; Greg Metcalf, *The DVD Novel* (Praeger. 2012); and practically any scholarly discussion of *The Wire.*

[172] Cuse, "Happy Birthday, Charles Dickens!"

Emily Nussbaum, writing a history and defense of the cliffhanger for *The New Yorker*, similarly cites Dickens as one of the device's popularizers.[173]

The cliffhanger and suspense have also become such ubiquitous devices for understanding television seriality that even those shows that we might imagine to encourage other types of viewing become read through the lens of mystery-driven waiting. For example, the television critic Jen Chaney includes the NBC domestic melodrama *This Is Us* within a category of "mystery-box shows," a term that *Lost* creator J. J. Abrams coined to discuss shows where "mystery [is] more important than knowledge." Comparing *This Is Us* to more obvious "mystery-box shows" like *Lost, The Leftovers, Twin Peaks*, and *Westworld*, Chaney notes that while *This is Us* is a "warm and fuzzy melodramatic Hallmark card of a show," it "definitely loves to slowly peel its onions. Withholding key information and administering it in small drops is one of the reasons *This Is Us* has become appointment television for so many."[174] As I will discuss later in this chapter, suspense and waiting become imagined as characteristics of effective seriality in general – they are specifically why *This Is Us* is "appointment television" week-to-week – even when "mystery-boxes" might feel generically inappropriate.

In the next section of this chapter, I will turn to the kinds of narrative structures and thematic concerns that feel "plausible" on American contemporary television. As such, I started this chapter with Dickens in part to gesture toward the way that in contemporary discussions of seriality, its history is imagined as a hereditary and patriarchal one. If Dickens is both the parent of contemporary television, and also the wellspring of its creativity, it impacts the kinds of serial

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[173] Emily Nussbaum, "Tune in Next Week," *The New Yorker*, 30 July 2012, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/07/30/tune-in-next-week.
[174] Jen Chaney, "*This Is Us* and *The Good Place* Signal a New Era for the Mystery-Box Show," *Vulture,* 5 Oct 2017, www.vulture.com/2017/10/this-is-us-the-good-place-mystery-box-shows.html.

structures that are imagined to be plausible or effective. Flattening all of nineteenth-century serial novels into Dickensian cliffhangers also narrows down the range of possible serial structures that feel possible now, as well as the kinds of audiences who might find these serials enjoyable.

The Plausible and the Familiar

Echoing Patinkin's framework, but differing on whether *Homeland* should be categorized as a serious drama or as a quasi-*Criminal Minds*, television critic Price Peterson argues that Season Four of *Homeland* "prizes comfortable familiarity over plausibility,"[175] and later, asserts that "we're getting into *Criminal Minds* levels of implausibility here."[176] The characteristic of "the plausible" has a long history in literary studies and particularly in studies of nineteenth-century realism, where "plausible" plots and characters have come to distinguish realist conventions from the romance, the gothic, "unmotivated" characters,[177] etc.[178] Plausibility, as Gerard Genette notes, is "the formal principle of respect for the norm,"[179] although, of course, this definition raises the question of who is defining these norms and how.

Describing a crime procedural like *Criminal Minds* as "implausible," then, positions it as both anti-realist and as one instantiation of a genre that uses recognizable, repetitive storytelling to explore the fantastic. All of which perhaps seems self-evident. Again, the series rhythms of a

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[175] Price Peterson, "*Homeland* Recap: In Love and War on Terror," *Vulture*, 13 Oct 2014, www.vulture.com/2014/10/homeland-recap-season-4-shalwar-kameez.html.
[176] Price Peterson, "*Homeland* Recap: You Bet Your Asset," *Vulture*, 27 Oct 2014, www.vulture.com/2014/10/homeland-recap-season-4-about-a-boy.html.
[177] Nancy K. Miller, "Emphasis Added: Plots and Plausibilites in Women's Fiction," PMLA 96.1, 1981, 36.
[178] April Alliston includes "plausibility," roughly synonymous with "probability" and "verisimilitude," as a distinguishing factor between realist novels and histories or romances; "Female Quixotism and the Novel: Character and Plausibility, Honesty and Fidelity," *The Eighteenth-Century*, 52.3-4, Fall/Winter 2011.
[179] Quoted in Miller, "Emphasis Added," 36.

procedural become framed as vaguely ridiculous if enjoyable, while plausibility by its very nature requires a kind of clear-eyed assessment of one's everyday reality. As much as "what is plausible" often seems like an obvious quality – something you just *know* – what differentiates it from familiarity is primarily an individual's act of judgment, versus a more passive kind of habituation. The plausible at least in theory is something that an individual must discern, while the familiar is something they feel, even if both are drawing from the same evidence source (i.e., what that individual can extrapolate based on what she experiences regularly). In a sense, a judgment of plausibility requires a kind of familiarity and also the disavowal of the imagined formal and affective implications of familiarity. Labeling a television show as "plausible," then, is labeling it as something that *feels* thoughtful rather than comfortable, where the distinction that separates those two feelings actually rests on their temporal structures. As we will see in the following section, the feeling of thoughtfulness requires closure, while the feeling of familiarity does not.

We can see this clearly with a show like *Homeland*, which always seems in danger of sliding irrevocably into "comfortable familiarity," implausibility, and melodrama the longer it goes on. For example, the culture writer Spencer Kornhaber notes about *Homeland*'s Season Three finale that a character:

> makes a bizarrely perceptive speech to Carrie about her own motivations, saying she'd done everything she'd done for Brody's sake….The greater mission—making sure that the timeline of American traumas that *Homeland*'s title sequence recaps each week doesn't get longer—has receded. This show, we're told in a clearer way than ever before, is a soap opera. That's fine, to a point. Again and again, *Homeland* has seemed interested in bigger issues and yet has declined to really engage with them.[180]

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[180] Spencer Kornhaber, "*Homeland* Season 3's Very Sad Happy Ending," *The Atlantic*, 13 Dec 2013, www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/12/-em-homeland-em-season-3s-very-sad-happy-ending/282378/.

I don't want to put undue pressure on Kornhaber's phrasing, here, but I do want to note the way that he frames engaging with "bigger issues" as something with an endpoint: a timeline that shouldn't get longer. The show is at its most soap operatic, in contrast, when it is "again and again" returning to the realm of the personal. According to Kornhaber, at the end of the season: "The melodramatic elements—baby, love interest, the Brody family—are whisked away. Season Four, it seems, might mainly consist of watching Carrie do the work she's so good at, in the Middle East. Could *Homeland* finally become the juicy, serious, Obama-era spy drama it has always promised it could be?" Kornhaber suggests that we know too much now about Carrie's motivations. The timeline of traumas is too long. We turn, "again and again," to the realm of the personal. The "melodramatic elements" accumulate, listed offhandedly as though "baby" and "love interest" are obviously just new iterations of the same basic thing. The damning evidence of melodrama continues to pile up, thankfully disappearing just as easily, even as "serious" storytelling must "work" effortfully to and for a particular end.

The link between genres like the melodrama or the soap opera and domesticity, femininity, and frivolity has been discussed at length elsewhere, but what I would like to highlight here is the way this quote connects these gendered genre conventions to a particular experience of the temporality of serial viewing. In grounding Carrie's motivations – "everything she'd done for Brody's sake" – in the excesses of the personal, Kornhaber implies by extension that they are excessively knowable. And one doesn't have to think, in a sense, if one already knows. The "serious" "drama," in contrast, gets framed through the language of a question, and described as a promise that must eventually come due.

In contrast to the implausibly knowable motivations of a melodramatic character, characters in a serious drama get imagined themselves as questions. For example, Emily

VanDerWerff says while discussing *Homeland*'s enigmatic possible terrorist, Nick Brody: "(In its use of ambiguity, it reminds me of the current season of *Breaking Bad*, actually.) After all, part of the fun of watching a show like this is trying to figure out what Tony Soprano or Walter White is up to." VanDerWerff's comparison between *Homeland* and prestige dramas like *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad,* therefore, depends not just the fact that they all involve central, morally ambiguous white male characters, but crucially, that one of the "fun" tasks assigned to prestige drama audiences is to "figure [them] out." Even when a show is organized less around a central mystery than *Homeland* is, ambiguous or conflicted characters become themselves opportunities for audience investigation, imagined to be fun in part because they hold out a promise of eventual certainty. Plausible, mysterious characters – the most extreme version of which is an antihero like Tony Soprano or Walter White – therefore imply a particular kind of narrative temporality and audience experience, one that's predicated on moving from not-knowing to knowing, while also never knowing *too much*.

Because character growth, narrative advancement, and an audience's own growing knowledge are linked together by this amorphous quality of the "plausible," they seem to be linked by the mechanics of good seriality itself, such that we cannot have one without the others. For example, Emily VanDerWerff praises *Homeland* with the observation, "The show is building up a nice rhythm of spacing out the big reveals with lots of intimately observed character detail, and even if it's not always predictable about where the big reveals will fall, it's very good about spacing them out just well enough that the thing doesn't turn into *24*, with twists piled on top of twists."[181] The problem as expressed here – what makes "bad TV" bad – is one of pacing,

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[181] Emily VanDerWerff, "*Homeland*: Achilles Heel," *The A.V. Club*, 20 Nov 2011, tv.avclub.com/homeland-achilles-heel-1798170579

repetition, and accumulation. VanDerWerff here describes *Homeland* as having a classic serial rhythm, with its interplay and "spacing out" of plot and character information. The rhythm of *24*, with its unceasing "piling," becomes by contrast less serial. Or, as VanDerWerff repeats later, a particular episode "reaffirms the show's commitment to adult storytelling—not just piling twists on top of twists."[182] Similarly, one commenter on the *A.V. Club* refers to the first season of *Homeland* as "the thinking person's 24."[183] And we can see, for example in Emily Nussbaum's description of *Homeland* as an "antidote to a show [*24*] that was a propaganda arm for the Iraq war," in part because *Homeland* "feels surprisingly grounded in the world we live in,"[184] the way that these distinctions between *24* and *Homeland*, which rest on linking cognitive sophistication with the temporality of the "plausible," can make watching a well-paced show feel like political work.

Again, these narrative characteristics of plausibility versus familiarity become aligned with both the audience characteristics of thought versus thoughtlessness/feeling, and the temporal characteristics of growth versus accumulation. As we have seen, this determination of whether something feels plausible or familiar is key to understanding its relationship to time, genre, and form. Repetition is framed as one narrative mechanism that creates a feeling of "comfortable familiarity" over time, while Caroline Levine has argued that suspense, for example, asks an audience to evaluate the plausibility of various narrative outcomes, in order to try to predict what will come to pass.[185] Under these terms, then, we might contrast repetition –

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[182] VanDerWerff, "*Homeland*: "Crossfire,"" *The A.V. Club*, 27 Nov 2011, tv.avclub.com/homeland-crossfire-1798170631
[183] Eolith, Comment on "*Homeland*'s ambitious third season doesn't deserve the backlash," *The A.V. Club*, 13 Dec 2013, 1:23 a.m., tv.avclub.com/1807546469.
[184] Nussbaum, ""Homeland": The Antidote for "24.""
[185] See: Caroline Levine, "Victorian Realism," *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, edited by Deirdre David, 2nd edition (Cambridge UP, 2012).

with all its concomitant affective and generic implications – with something like waiting to know.

Waiting for Closure

In contrast to the "piling" structure of a show like *24* or *Criminal Minds,* Emily VanDerWerff, discussing *Homeland*'s pilot, lays out the show's logic thus:

> We're watching the screen, like Carrie, to see if we can ascertain just what's going on with Brody. And even though we always have slightly more information than her, it's never enough, and it never will *be* enough, not until we get that final, conclusive bit of proof. The series is so much more allusive than definitive, always careful to suggest things might be happening without outright confirming them, that it finds a nice space where it can confirm some things but leave us ever more confused and concerned about where all of this is going.[186]

As with the sensation novel, VanDerWerff describes the experience of watching *Homeland* involves a desire to discover the truth of a single character's past, and to uncover a secret that the audience and other characters might suspect, but still feel compelled to prove. Or, as Joe Reid writes in his discussion of *Homeland*'s pilot, the mystery of Brody's loyalty is "the question mark at the center" of the show.[187] And just as with *The Woman in White*, the success or failure of this investigation is entirely out of the audience's control: the decision to provide "that final, conclusive bit of proof" of whether or not Brody is secretly a terrorist lies with the show's creators. Narrative devices like allusion and ambiguity become similarly framed as methods for prolonging the viewer's investigation, but in this passage, VanDerWerff does treat answers as ultimately knowable. The care *Homeland* must take to only "suggest," the implication that it

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[186] Erik Adams and Emily VanDerWerff, "*Homeland: Homeland*," *The A.V. Club*, 2 Oct 2011, tv.avclub.com/homeland-homeland-1798169813.
[187] Joe Reid, "*Homeland* Recap: Brody Came Home with a Mission," *Vulture,* 3 Oct 2011, www.vulture.com/2011/10/homeland_recap_brody_came_home.html

"can confirm" where it wants to, and finally the confidence that "all of this is going" somewhere – all of this phrasing gives the impression of a show with an imagined narrative destination.

VanDerWerff and others position this process of audience questioning and investigation as something the show itself must cultivate and guide, rather than something audience members themselves have agency over. Echoing Paskin's assertion above that *Homeland* refuses "easy answers," VanDerWerff says of the show's first few episodes: "This is just good, fun TV, with a sober undercurrent designed to provoke thoughtfulness and debate…it asks what cost the War on Terror has been to our humanity, and it never says there are any easy answers."[188] But again, these "sober," debatable questions about the U.S.'s waging of the War on Terror end up slipping into answerable questions about a single character's motivations.[189] Erik Adams notes as part of the same review that *Homeland*'s "bait-and-switch techniques and refusal to give us any definitive answers could prove tiresome six or seven episodes in, but in these early goings, they're a thrilling bit of fun—which isn't a word you'd expect to associate with a War On Terror drama. I'm eager to see how the remaining episodes play out, but…the mystery surrounding Brody doesn't seem sustainable past these first 12 episodes." Here, the show's lack of "definitive answers" is linked pretty clearly to the question of Brody's loyalties, and interestingly, subtly distanced from the show's meditations on the War on Terror. Upending a viewer's expectations and offering ambiguity is framed as a "thrilling" device, one that might provide a viewer with a particular experience for a time, but which can't last.

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[188] Adams and VanDerWerff, "*Homeland: Homeland.*"
[189] Note that I'm definitely not trying to discount the way that narratives can use the register of character and motivation to engage with whatever "sober undercurrents" it chooses, but instead that in these critical discussions of *Homeland*, the directionality gets flipped.

While the idea of a narrative being "thrilling" has been met with suspicion from nineteenth-century critics of sensation fiction and contemporary media critics alike – because it's so often contrasted with slow, thoughtful narrative strategies – being thrilled and having fun are here marked off by particular time limits. So again, the promise of answers and narrative closure becomes used as a protective mechanism, allowing audience members to be more passive – to experience thrills, to wait for episodes to "play out" – while still distancing them from viewers like Patinkin's imagined *Criminal Minds* audiences, endlessly stuck dreaming of murder. The serial viewing process that this passage outlines is one that therefore must eventually shift from questions to answers, and where whatever energy is put into contemplating the mystery of Brody can only be "sustained" by a solution. As VanDerWerff asserts in a review of a later episode, "it's a relief to watch a show that is just so certain of itself and what it wants to be."[190] Again, there's the implication both that a show's own certainty eases a burden for its audience, and that although the show may be asking its audience questions without "easy answers," it has a clear sense of its own process for getting to those answers, while the audience only has to wait long enough and it will receive them too.

We can see in later *Homeland* reviews an even more explicit link between critics' desires to be given narrative information and a valuing of narrative closure, in part through their anxiety about the imagined repetitions and excesses of narrative withholding. For example, VanDerWerff argues: "On the one hand, it's always nice to have a show where the writers are very good at guiding the audience in particular ways. It's nice to be fooled…But it's also nice to

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[190] Emily VanDerWerff, "*Homeland*: Blind Spot," *The A.V. Club*, 30 Oct 2011, tv.avclub.com/homeland-blind-spot-1798170232

have some base level of reality that we can rely on to always be present."[191] VanDerWerff here positions being "guided" and being able to "rely" on certain constants as vaguely opposite tendencies, but both suggest a desire for a show to uphold an initial compact of trust, to validate its audience's belief that the show's creators are in firm, steady control. The problem as framed by VanDerWerff therefore is not necessarily a problem with being "fooled," but instead, as we see in the next part of the passage, a problem with the show's process of doling out the information a viewer feels like they have "bought." She argues in the same review: "while it's often a thrill to feel like you *don't* know what you think you know, there also comes a point where those reversals have diminishing returns." Interestingly, a show's withholding of information is not necessarily positioned as a general lack, but in fact more as a problem of excess. The issue seems to arise when a show offers its viewer too many reversals, flooding the market with them, so to speak.

Joe Reid implies a similar critique when discussing the midpoint of *Homeland*'s first season. He writes:

> Looks like *Homeland* isn't wasting any time addressing some of the tantalizing ambiguities it's been establishing. This is probably a good thing for a show with such a blaring central mystery….it's important that the smaller questions that crop up during the season aren't all similarly pushed off to some big reveal that would then need to answer more questions than one reveal could.[192]

What I want to note again is not just the implication that a serial should accommodate rather than frustrate a viewer's desire to know, but also the account this passage gives of the process of revealing knowledge. Just like the structure of a serial, information is doled out fairly regularly in pieces over time. The problem of deferring those answers is once again, not framed as a

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[191] VanDerWerff, "*Homeland*: "Achilles Heel.""

[192] "*Homeland* Recap: Sex, Lies, and Surveillance Tape," *Vulture*, 11 Nov 2011, www.vulture.com/2011/11/homeland-recap-sex-lies-and-surveillance-tape.html

problem of lack – for example, of viewers having to wait too long. The worry instead is that questions will build up, and that the inevitable "reveal" will become too big to be sustainable. In this instance, Reid concludes that *Homeland* avoids such an eventuality. Instead, what happens according to Reid is that the show addresses "two particular audience suspicions," a resolution that he refers to as a "payoff." That is, the audience's sense of suspicion or suspense is framed as an investment that deserves informational returns. One *A.V. Club* commenter, referring to the same twist that so bothered Rosenberg, compares *Homeland* to *Glee*, specifying, "I'm talking about the writer's cheap tactics, like the way they bullshitted the audience with Carrie and Saul's secret plan….big dramatic moments mean nothing if they're not earned."[193] Again, we see that viewers' anxieties about not getting the knowledge that was implicitly promised becomes framed in economic terms, although the satisfaction of the "payoff" has shifted to worries about narratives becoming too "cheap."

Similarly, Alyssa Rosenberg complains about a Season Four plot twist: "Getting Saul and Carrie back together isn't really about anything other than the fact that people like to see Carrie beg for Saul's affection and Saul alternate between patting Carrie and delivering deadly accurate assessments of her character."[194] Watching two characters enact a familiar relationship dynamic might be something viewers "like," but has no real content – isn't "about anything." Rosenberg notes that a rift between Carrie and Saul could have prompted them to reflect on their own culpability for some of the show's events, but "the twist means the show is cheating us of those ideas, and Saul and Carrie of accountability and character growth." Here, the language of

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[193] J.P. McPickleshitter, Comment on "*Homeland*'s ambitious third season didn't deserve the backlash," *The A.V. Club*, 13 Dec 2013, 1:23 a.m, tv.avclub.com/1807548357.
[194] Alyssa Rosenberg, "Why Did *Homeland*'s Twist Feel Like a Cheat?" *Vulture*, 21 Oct 2013, www.vulture.com/2013/10/homeland-twist-season-3-carrie-saul-cheat.html.

"cheating" gets deployed to produce an understanding of serial storytelling whereby an audience's access to ideas is imagined to be controlled by the show, and to be tied to how effectively the show offers narratives of characters' "growth."

In general, then, what we've seen in this section is that what we might call "unbounded seriality" gets equated with narrative accumulation, thoughtlessness and a refusal to properly earn something. The promise of bounded seriality – by which I mean the closure implicitly promised by suspense – becomes associated with narratives of steady growth and the earning of narrative information through cognitive effort. While the language that critics have used to express this dichotomy has certainly been loaded with proscriptive valences (and with assumptions about how "audiences" overall experience narratives of suspense), those proscriptions have mostly been targeted at television shows themselves. It's risky, these critics have implied as well as outright argued, to be too implausible, melodramatic, paced too fast or repetitively, to not ask the audience enough questions or to give them answers at the wrong time, to be too easy, or too "cheap" – to, in general, not be worth what these critics believe audiences are owed for the amount of work they've put into the narrative. In this next section, I will turn briefly to one element of how critics frame this audience work as taking place. Specifically, I will look at one way that audiences might also "cheat," and abdicate their own responsibility to the narrative and other audience members, by consuming spoilers.

What is a Spoiler?

The first two thirds of this chapter argued that when talking about the experience of reading or watching serials, audience members use economic and contractual metaphors that easily substitute for economic or ethical analysis. Serial narratives are imagined to owe

audiences both the withholding of and the eventual payoff of information, i.e. the transformation of suspenseful waiting into some form of closure. Serials can fail, in contrast, when they become "familiar," repetitive, or excessive. The last third of this chapter delves into the other side of this imagined contractual relationship: what are audiences imagined to owe? To whom are they imagined to owe it (to a creator, to the text itself, to themselves, and/or to other audience members)? And lastly, when and how might audiences fail to meet their imagined obligations?

Audience members' anxieties and arguments about spoilers – learning or sharing information about narrative events ahead of time – gets to the heart of all of the above questions. The issue of spoiling a narrative suggests both that there is a proper way (and, specifically, that there is a proper order and temporality) to consume serial narratives, and also reveals that audience members do routinely violate these assumptions. In other words, audience members frequently "fail" to remain unspoiled, violating their own contract with a narrative. Perhaps more importantly, audience members often spoil *each other*. This action is often framed as a betrayal of a viewing community,[195] as disrespectful of others,[196] and as abdicating one's duty to ensure that others have as pure and intense an affective experience as possible.[197] This language of injustice and theft put author, story, and other readers on same plane.

Prior to this section, I have mainly framed the relationship between audience and serial text as occurring between a single, theoretical audience member and a textual construct (which is itself multidimensional, and might incorporate characters, the narrator, an imagined creator, etc).

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[195] Benjamin Brojakowski. "Spoiler Alert: Understanding Television Enjoyment in the Social Media Era," *Television, Social Media, and Fan Culture*, edited by Alison F. Slade, Amber J. Narro, and Dedria Givens-Carroll (Lexington, 2015).
[196] Michael Z. Newman, "Spoilers," *Zigzigger*, 13 March 2008, zigzigger.blogspot.com/2008/03/spoilers-cui-bono.html.
[197] Bridget Kies, "'I Should Have Seen It Coming': Spoiler Culture, Marathon Screenings, and Affective Responses to *The Force Awakens*," *Disney's Star Wars*, edited by William Proctor and Richard McCulloch (U of Iowa Press, 2019).

As I move into a discussion of spoilers – and into the final chapter's discussion of One Direction fans – I am now also expanding my model of the audience/text relationship to extend to audience communities beyond a single reader or viewer.

In contemporary journalism and online discussions of media, spoiler alerts have become a ubiquitous presence, as are debates about what should and should not be spoiled, what should and should not constitute a spoiler, and how much time has passed before spoilers become acceptable. In general, a "spoiler" refers to plot information that someone consumes before they've had a chance to read, watch, or listen to the story in question. But even that seemingly simple definition contains a lot of room for interpretation, especially when trying to scale that personal definition (plot information *someone* consumes) up to general behavioral norms for when and how to discuss plot information publicly. At different points in time, these questions and definitions shift. Before a story is released publicly, a "spoiler" usually refers to plot information gained illicitly – such as a leaked script or rumors – but some audience members avoid any promotional materials at all, including commercials, interviews, set photographs, etc. Others consider "spoilers" to be details that are technically public, but weren't necessarily revealed in the context of a promotional campaign, such as cast details or shooting locations that might strongly imply a direction to the narrative without outright "spoiling" it. Still others might consider it "spoiling" to discuss a story that has been released in one country already, but not yet in another. Most people would not call it a spoiler to say that the Titanic sinks in the movie *Titanic* (1997), but they might consider it a spoiler to say that Jack dies. But they would probably also argue that there should be no expectation of staying *unspoiled* for that plot point. Why not? Is it because *Titanic* is over a decade old? Or because the fact that Jack dies circulated so widely

in popular culture? How old – or how culturally ubiquitous – does something have to become before it loses its anti-spoiler protections?

This section will primarily focus on a third category of "spoiler," the one in which, for example, a television episode has aired recently, but not everyone has watched it.[198] This category might be hardest to apply any general rules to, because individuals are moving in idiosyncratic paths through those "pre-release" and "cultural ubiquity" states described above, not to mention that audience members are likely to be using simultaneous online platforms with different temporal norms and expectations. Some audience members go so far as to log off all their social media accounts (such as Facebook, Tumblr, and Twitter) until they've had a chance to see a heavily anticipated film or episode of television, for fear they might inadvertently come across spoilers. Others rely on "spoiler warnings" at the top of articles or social media posts to flag a discussion that presumes audience members who've already seen the media object in question. For example, one online write-up of an episode of the television show *Halt and Catch Fire* introduced its recap with the assertion that "*No one who reads reviews before watching an episode of TV deserves a spoiler warning, but SPOILERS*."[199] This sentence reflects some key tensions around negotiating spoilers. While the warning is in some ways obvious – a quick reminder that plot summaries are often components of contemporary television reviews – the suggestion that some readers are more or less "deserving" adds a judgmental valence to this simple statement of fact. And, as the writer implies with the rather disgruntled capitalization of "SPOILERS," a spoiler warning comes almost built in to an author's claims that spoiler

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[198] This kind of spoiler therefore relies on the availability of asynchronous methods of distribution, and specifically, a presumption that audiences are using them (aka DVR or streaming platforms like Hulu).
[199] Dennis Perkins, "*Halt and Catch Fire* finds its heart, and breaks ours," *The A.V. Club*, 30 Sept 2017, www.avclub.com/halt-and-catch-fire-finds-its-heart-and-breaks-ours-1819024959 (original italics).

warnings shouldn't apply. What these two pieces add up to, then, is the association of spoiler warnings with a kind of inevitable failure around both watching television and writing about television. Both the writer and his readers have failed to live up to the no-spoiler-warnings-necessary standard that he has set for them, the writer by failing to leave off a spoiler warning he feels is unnecessary, and readers for potentially being the type of people who read reviews before watching episodes.

In an attempt to define and standardize its practices, entertainment media site *Vulture* published "official statutes of limitations" on when to publish spoilers,[200] at the same time that some media scholars were critiquing *Vulture* on their blogs for essentially upholding a disrespectful serial temporality, by inappropriately publishing too many spoilers. Michael Newman argued, for example, "The one with the spoiler has the potential to influence someone else's experience of a narrative. Thus the warning of a spoiler to come is a courtesy, a gesture of respect."[201] *Vulture*'s comfort with spoiling, he argued further, was symptomatic of its complicity with a television industry that cares primarily about standardizing viewing. That is, publishing television episode spoilers soon after that episode airs forces audiences to watch television on a broadcast schedule in order to stay caught up, rather than allowing them to watch television on one's own individual schedule, as if it were "like book reading or cinemagoing." Spoilers – or the possibility that sites like *Vulture* might conventionalize the revealing of plot information before audiences have experienced the narrative – becomes antithetical in Newman's account to an experience of television-viewing that consumes it as if it were a singular art object. If, as Newman suggests, "Technology has freed the viewer (well, some of us

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[200] Dan Kois, "Spoilers: The Official Vulture Statutes of Limitations," *Vulture*, 13 March 2008, www.vulture.com/2008/03/spoilers_the_official_vulture.html.
[201] Michael Z. Newman, "Spoilers."

viewers, anyway) from the shackles of the broadcast schedule," it seems that those spoiled/spoiling viewers (and anyone who couldn't pay for a DVR?) are tragically doomed by their own terrible viewing choices. Avoiding spoilers in this context becomes, as it did for Patinkin above, both a way to extend courtesy and an explicitly anti-capitalist move, one that is enacted via both formal asynchronicity and a "respect" for the individual choice to consume television on one's own schedule.

The question of when to spoil a serial story, then, becomes implicated in a larger anxiety about the extent to which serial narratives and their audiences are inherently subject to capitalist rhythms. Newman and others who resist being spoiled hold out the possibility of an anti-capitalist model of seriality, one that rests somehow on the freedom to choose to wait for answers. Or, put another way, the freedom to choose who will reveal to you the ending of a story: the show's creator or a *Vulture* writer. A neoliberal respect for free choice in consuming narratives "unspoiled" here stands in for resistance against media industries' power, in part by shifting responsibility back to viewers. This slippage therefore works similarly to the critics discussed above whose metaphors of "earning," "paying off," offering "diminishing returns," or becoming too "cheap" serve to distance particular shows – and themselves as viewers of those shows – from their status as commodities.

When we turn to television reviews, this anti-spoiler proscription is subtler, but what remains is a sense that avoiding spoilers is a responsibility to those viewers who are trying to consume television the right way. Consider this passage, about *Homeland*'s pilot:

> it's going to be hard to write about this show and stay out of spoiler territory. There are just so many expertly woven layers of subterfuge and secrecy going on that a) it's hard not to want to talk about them—if only to parse them out, and b) I doubt we've only seen a sliver of the *Homeland* puzzle so far. To even say (in the vaguest terms) that there's a huge, set-your-mouth-agape reveal at the end of the pilot feels like a betrayal to interested

> viewers who want to go into *Homeland* with zero expectations and no prior knowledge of the plot points.[202]

As with the sensation novels of Chapter One, the necessity to stay away from *Homeland* spoilers gets tied to a complex "woven" plot: to secrets and puzzles that should best be considered in their entirety, rather than as mere "slivers" of a whole. Similarly, however desperately viewers may "want" to "parse [the plot] out," even the smallest spoiler "feels like a betrayal," not of the creator or the story, but of other viewers. And like the *Halt and Catch Fire* reviewer above, withholding spoilers becomes imagined as an ideal that television critics might fail to live up to. Any articulation about the narrative at all already feels like a betrayal.

Joe Reid expands from Adams' implication that some "interested viewers" might want to be totally surprised by even the very fact that there's something surprising set to happen – but maybe not all viewers feel that way – to argue that "misdirection" is in fact "the prime objective" of much contemporary television.[203] If a show's primary responsibility is to misdirect and defy viewers' expectations with respect to plot, it is true that revealing things ahead of time probably *does* ruin it. But what this model of television-plotting and viewing rests on, again, is a presumption that the default way to watch television is to let oneself be misdirected, to try but fail to understand a television show's plot, even as this abdication of viewerly control becomes imagined as a particularly intellectually and ethically superior approach to engaging with television narratives.

Spoilers in the Marvel Cinematic Universe

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[202] Erik Adams and Emily VanDerWerff, "*Homeland: Homeland.*"
[203] Joe Reid, "*Homeland* Recap: Brody Came Home With a Mission."

In the following section, I delve into a specific example about how the tension around spoilers manifests in practice. Specifically, this section takes up how "knowing" and the process of knowing (in the context of spoilers) is understood by audiences, critics, and creators or the wider entertainment industry, and furthermore, how the dynamics of "precarious knowing" become susceptible to misinterpretation or manipulation by all these various groups. In May 2019, two serial narratives concluded that had each had massive cultural impacts in the United States and internationally: the Marvel Cinematic Universe's Avengers film series known as "The Infinity Saga" (adaptations based on Marvel comics), and HBO's fantasy television series *Game of Thrones* (an adaptation of George R.R. Martin's book series *A Song of Ice and Fire*).[204] Both serials spanned years – the Marvel Cinematic Universe (or "MCU") began in earnest with *Iron Man* in 2008 and *Game of Thrones* premiered in 2011 – and both had cultivated a wide and devoted viewer base. In addition, while in production both serials acted particularly aggressively and publicly to deter audience members from sharing spoilers. Marvel Studios created social media campaigns to discourage spoilers, and sometimes refused to share full scripts with actors;[205] *Game of Thrones* reportedly used "drone killers" to disable any drones sent to take photographs or gather information about the final season.[206] This coincidence of timing provoked many direct comparisons in media and cultural criticism, one result of which was that the MCU and *Game of Thrones*' spoiler policies together came to stand in for a more generalized popular attitude toward spoilers known as "spoiler culture."

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[204] It is particularly interesting that both these serials came to stand in for this anti-spoiler sentiment, because both are adaptations, and are built on preexisting bases of audience knowledge (either Marvel Comics or the *Song of Ice and Fire* books, which the MCU and *Game of Thrones* both drew upon when developing narrative arcs).
[205] Sonia Rao, "A brief history of the insane precautions Marvel has taken to avoid movie spoilers from getting out," *Washington Post*, 19 April 2019, www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2019/04/19/brief-history-insane-precautions-marvel-has-taken-avoid-movie-spoilers-getting-out/.
[206] James Hibberd, "*Game of Thrones* Used a 'Drone Killer' to Prevent Final Season Spoilers," *Entertainment Weekly*, 10 Oct 2018, ew.com/tv/2018/10/10/game-of-thrones-drone-killer/.

Spoiler culture refers in short to the normalization of avoiding spoilers in discussions about media, and in particular, to the normalization of criticizing others for deliberately or inadvertently spoiling people. Spoiler culture depends specifically on the conflict between audiences who are interested in spoilers – or in gathering and sharing information about media objects – and those who are not. "Spoiler culture" therefore exists specifically because these cultural norms are in fact unsettled and difficult to control. Furthermore, rather than being some freewheeling conflict between audience populations, both entertainment journalists and media corporations have significant vested interests in respectively expanding or limiting norms governing how and when coverage of media objects should circulate, and who should control the dissemination of information about texts.[207]

These two serials' relationships to spoilers are particularly notable because both, at different points, seem to have failed to effectively manage their dynamics of suspense, surprise, and repetition, at least according to media critics. The *Game of Thrones* finale received criticism for being so invested in surprising viewers and producing "twists" that it became confusing and unsatisfying.[208] The Infinity Saga's penultimate film, *Avengers: Infinity War*, suffered from the opposite problem. Critics expressed frustration that what seemed at first like a shocking, "twist" ending (where half the characters were killed in the last few moments of the film) would in fact lead to a predictable outcome (somehow, these characters would come back to life in the next

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[207] Culture and media critics have offered many arguments against "spoiler culture" for these reasons. For instance: James Whitbrook, "This Was the Decade That Spoiler Culture Changed Everything," *io9*, 5 Dec 2019, io9.gizmodo.com/this-was-the-decade-that-spoiler-culture-changed-everyt-1838626676.
[208] Jennifer Ouellette, "Here is our super spoiler-y review of the *Game of Thrones* series finale," *Ars Technica*, 20 May 2019, arstechnica.com/gaming/2019/05/here-is-our-super-spoiler-y-review-of-the-game-of-thrones-series-finale/.

film). One critic for instance called the MCU "the art of endless stasis,"[209] arguing that it had become a serial without any coherent sense of character stakes or narrative change. The *Infinity War* ending is therefore useful to examine in the context of this chapter, because it is a moment when the logics of the repetitive, "endless" serial comes up against the logics of "spoiler culture," or the management of audience behavior for the purpose of preserving surprise.[210]

To give a brief bit of context on the ending of *Infinity War*: it was the first half of a two-part finale to the "Infinity Saga" arc, with *Avengers: Endgame* set to be released at the same time next year. It involved characters from the previous eighteen films – many of whom had already encountered each other in prior films, but some of whom had not – working together to stop a powerful villain, Thanos, from acquiring the power to instantaneously murder half of the universe's population. In the final moments of *Infinity War*, the Avengers and their allies fail, and Thanos "snaps" half the series' main characters into dust. And roll credits.

The dynamics of expectation and surprise at work in this "twist" ending are somewhat complicated. From the above three-sentence summary alone, it is probably clear that the characters who died during *Infinity War* were returning in some form in *Endgame*. Indeed, most audience members and critics assumed that these characters would not stay dead permanently. This assumption was based both in the conventions of superhero comics (where nobody ever stays dead for long) and the conventions of serial media, where transformations of a serial's premise and narrative status quo (what Jason Mittell has called "reboots") tend to happen at the

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[209] Film Crit Hulk, "'Avengers: Infinity War' and Marvel's Endless Endgame," *Observer*, 30 April 2018, observer.com/2018/04/avengers-infinity-war-movie-and-marvels-endless-endgame/.
[210] And like *Homeland*, the MCU has occupied a fraught place in hierarchies of media taste (although certainly a more influential one), rising and falling in critical estimation with every new movie, and depending on the critic, coming to stand in for both the best and worst impulses of popular serial media and franchises.

end of serial arcs, rather than in the middle (although not always).[211] The awareness that these characters probably weren't dead was therefore dependent on an understanding of the Marvel Cinematic Universe as a serial narrative, where the end of this film was still taking place in the middle of the story, rather than as an episodic film series. Lastly, many audience members drew on extradiegetic information about Marvel Studios' future film plans, specifically citing the recent success of the film *Black Panther* as an economic incentive to bring its main character, T'Challa, back from the dead.[212] The ending of *Infinity War* was therefore technically a cliffhanger, but that cliffhanger was created through an accumulation of character deaths, or repetitive finality, and depended on audiences' implicit, precarious certainty that these characters would not be dead in the future (otherwise, the ending of *Infinity War* would only be tragic, and not also suspenseful). In other words, the efficacy of *Infinity War*'s ending in cultivating suspense depended on being spoiled: in both more explicit ways (using information like the schedule of future Marvel Studios films, and later, *Endgame* production information), and in more implicit ways (awareness of the narrative conventions guiding this story).

Many critics considered this ending to be a failure precisely because of how obvious it seemed that these characters were not truly dead. As *New York Times* film critic A.O. Scott argued, "There will always be more, which limits both the possibility of surprise and the intensity of feeling that any single episode can deliver. At the end of "Infinity War" you don't need to tell yourself that it's only a movie, because it isn't a movie. It's a piece of matter in a

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[211] *Complex TV*, 47.
[212] Justice Namaste, Jason Parham, Adam Rogers, and Angela Watercutter, "We Need to Talk About the Ending of *Avengers: Infinity War*," *Wired*, 1 May 2018, www.wired.com/story/avengers-infinity-war-discussion/.

post-cinematic universe."[213] Scott's frustration with the "limits" of filmic seriality was a common reaction, both to the seeming ubiquity of film franchises like the Marvel Cinematic Universe, and to *Infinity War* in particular. Specifically, Scott articulates a series of associations that have recurred throughout this dissertation: that the promise of "more" reduces one's ability to be surprised, that the chance of surprise is connected implicitly to "intensity of feeling" in a general sense, and lastly, that these characteristics make for bad, or not real, art ("matter" rather than "film"). The ending of *Infinity War* failed, in a filmic sense, because it was too impermanent. In some sense, it was too serial. To put the issue into the contractual terms explored earlier in this chapter, it promised a permanence that it had no intention of following through on.

The ending of *Infinity War* is therefore an instance of both "precarious knowing," as well as suggesting the terms under which precarious knowing is often rendered invisible in critical discussions of serial media. As Kalie Hale-Stern noted succinctly in *The Mary Sue*: "The knowledge that these characters will be returning *eventually* did not stop some of those [deaths] from hurting a lot."[214] It was exactly this feeling of "hurting a lot" that critics tended to de-emphasize or distrust, precisely because knowledge of the future seemed to render this feeling pointless. As with *Elementary*'s repetitive failures, *Infinity War* and the MCU more broadly is narratively serial, but character change does not always build continuously over time. Instead, major themes of the MCU include the repetitive reliving of one's fears, re-experiencing failure, and, of course, returning from the dead. In other words, death in the MCU is cyclical and

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[213] A. O. Scott, "Does the Ending of 'Avengers: Infinity War' Spoil Itself?" *The New York Times*, 30 April 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/04/30/movies/avengers-infinity-war-ending.html.
[214] Kalia Hale-Stern, "The Most Emotionally Devastating *Infinity War* Deaths," *The Mary Sue*, 30 April 2018, www.themarysue.com/devastating-infinity-war-deaths/.

inescapable; the impermanence of death is less of a triumph and more of a new opportunity to die again (or to watch a character die again).

Narratively, then, the MCU is highly repetitive and predictable. But n the context of *Infinity War* and *Endgame* – as with many other contemporary works of fiction – refraining from spoiling others became such an important concern that it became framed as an ethical responsibility. For instance, the Disney-owned Marvel Studios PR campaign for the release of *Avengers: Infinity War* revolved heavily around the idea of spoilers. They popularized the Twitter hashtag #ThanosDemandsYourSilence (Thanos being the name of the main villain of the film), and press junket interviews with members of the cast revolved jokingly around journalists' attempts to coax spoilers out of tight-lipped actors.

What seems significant about the *Infinity War* press tour are the presumptions about viewers and spoilers that it had to rest upon in order to successfully advertise the film. First, that having an "unspoiled" viewing experience is an inherent good, but second, that viewers are likely to fail to uphold this imagined ideal. Indeed, if we consider the immediate aftermath of the film's release, that was exactly what happened. Contemporary media critics acknowledged their mandate not to spoil, while also publishing reviews with headlines such as: "Is Thanos Right About Killing People In 'Avengers: Infinity War'?"[215]; "The Most Emotionally Devastating *Infinity War* Deaths;"[216] and "What Should We Make of *Infinity War*'s Shocking Ending?"[217] All of these articles were published less than a week after the movie premiered,

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[215] JV Chamary, "Is Thanos Right About Killing People In 'Avengers: Infinity War'?", *Forbes*, 30 April 2018, www.forbes.com/sites/jvchamary/2018/04/30/avengers-infinity-war-overpopulation/.
[216] Kalia Hale-Stern, "The Most Emotionally Devastating *Infinity War* Deaths."
[217] Dana Stevens, Jonathan L. Fischer, and Forrest Wickman, "What Should We Make of *Infinity War*'s Shocking Ending?", *Slate*, 1 May 2018, slate.com/culture/2018/04/avengers-infinity-wars-ending-and-more-reviewed-spoilers.html.

some on the same day, even as readers predictably complained about spoilers in the headlines.[218] At the same time, the ending of *Infinity War* was most legible in the context of what could be considered "spoilers" about the future.

So why launch a #ThanosDemandsYourSilence campaign, and why did audiences find it so charmingly effective? One possibility lies in the particular relationship with viewers that it builds. The anti-spoiler campaign, like any good PSA campaign, produced the impression that we're all in this together, we're all invested in the film's success, and we all have a role to play in creating it. Notably, it is through "silence" that viewers are framed as best able to participate in serial storytelling. But unlike with the instances of precarious knowing that I have discussed in this dissertation – including in *Infinity War* itself – the silence in question is not understood to be shared between creator/text/character and audience. In a sense, #ThanosDemandsYourSilence created an illusion of precarious knowing – or a sharing of narrative power through mutual silence – that is not in fact shared equally. In the case of *Infnity War* specifically, there is a strange disconnect between how the serial is working textually, and the kind of viewer behavior that is being explicitly solicited. The "no spoilers" mandate imagines a communal responsibility for maintaining capitalist seriality, in part by de-emphasizing and flattening the communal construction of serial form.[219]

Conclusion

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[218] Michael Phillips, "The 'Infinity War' question: Is alluding to a new movie's controversial end over the spoiler line?" *Chicago Tribune*, 25 April 2018, www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/movies/ct-mov-movie-spoilers-avengers-0427-story.html.
[219] In keeping with work on "fan labor," including for instance Stanfill's *Exploiting Fandom*.

In response to the sense of disillusionment or disappointment that *Homeland* viewers and critics often expressed throughout this chapter – this sense that they were not receiving what they deserved narratively – it might be easy to adopt an attitude of almost fatalistic inevitability. After all, if we imagine seriality as characterized by an "endless middle," driven by central questions for as long as possible, but which must nevertheless end, it *does* feel rather inevitable that this end would fail to satisfy. And in the face of this inevitable sense of disappointment when narratives end badly, the appeal of narrative structures that foreground repetition might also seem reasonable, as attempts to hold on to comfort, familiarity, and stability for as long as possible. But if, as we've seen, this understanding of serial repetition is produced in part to bolster the legitimacy of suspense-based television narratives (truly, the *Bleak Houses* of our time!), it may be worth reexamining the kind of narrative work that repetitive forms, viewing practices, and fan activities might do.

In short, the metaphors that govern the formal structures of contemporary serial television end up foregrounding a model of television-watching that rests on the imagined intellectual and ethical value of asking questions – an activity which also becomes framed as audience labor that deserves specific narrative remuneration, and which also results in the flattening out of different kinds of questions. Asking a question like "what happens next?" becomes made equivalent to asking a question like "What complicity do American citizens share in the producing the violence of the War on Terror?" through the dual meaning of that phrase "difficult questions," and through the defining of asking questions as primarily a cognitive process that basically works the same regardless of input.

The result of framing question-asking as an inherently ethical and cognitively sophisticated act is that formal structures that encourage and support other methods of television-

viewing become equally ethically suspect. Seriality in its most anxiety-provoking form can seem like capitalism run amok: as an endless, regulated, and habitual accumulation of content. A critical system of reading serials that privileges the formal limits of closure therefore serves a way to impose limits on serial viewers' own fraught participation in these imagined narrative economies. Again, by adopting the language of earning, payoffs, and working for information rather than self-indulgently luxuriating in spoilers, viewers seem to be reaching for a model of ethical narrative consumption under capitalism, but it's an ethics that, discursively, excludes the majority of television viewers, television-viewing practices built on affect, and any viewers who cannot access the technologies, platforms, and channels that are most likely to host these types of complex serial narratives.

Chapter 4 : "Hotel Rooms and New Tattoos": The Seriality of One Direction

On May 30th 2014, a star was born. At a concert performed by the boy band One Direction, a fan threw a rainbow Build-a-Bear onto the stage. A week later, the same bear had reappeared, secured to the arena's sound booth with black duct tape. For weeks, the bear appeared at One Direction concerts and even, briefly, had a Twitter account. Fans dubbed him "Rainbow Bondage Bear" ("RBB" for short), due to his duct-taped costume's appearance (see Figures 2-4).[220]

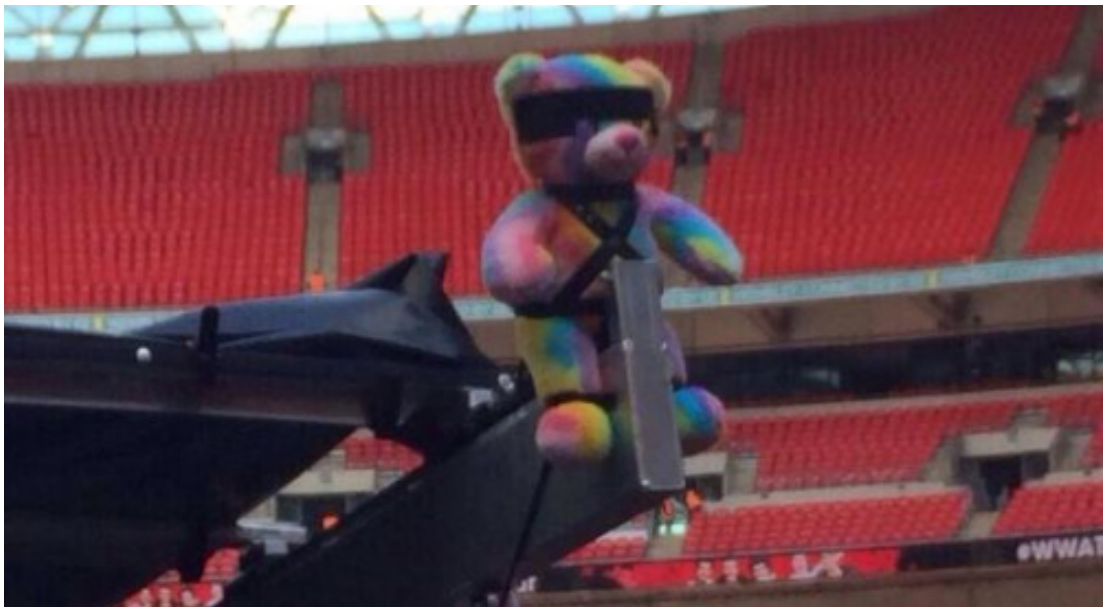

Figure 2: RBB's first appearance in London, 6 June 2014

[220] All images are from the fansite rbbsbbofficial.com.

Figure 4: RBB surrounded by John Waters and Divine references in Baltimore, 8 August 2015

Figure 3: Four bears (one for each One Direction member) recreating the opening of Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody" video, posted to Twitter on 21 December 2015

When One Direction launched their stadium tour in 2015, RBB and a smaller bear companion ("SBB") both followed, amidst a different tableau at nearly every concert. The bears' costumes and props became increasingly elaborate as the tour continued, integrating objects referencing the members of One Direction, fan theories and in-jokes, queer entertainers, and celebrities with conflicted relationships to fame, including those who'd had famous conflicts within the industry or with the media.[221] In Baltimore, RBB rode a pink flamingo (which fans took as homage to the John Waters film), while SBB perched atop a vinyl sleeve of Divine's 1987 single "Little Baby." On Twitter, RBB, SBB, and two additional bears posed for a photo recreating the opening of Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody" music video. In Newcastle, RBB spun on a pink salon chair, which had been automated to revolve in place, as he read the autobiography of English-Irish drag performer Danny La Rue. But eventually, the tour ended, One Direction went on hiatus, and RBB vanished just as mysteriously as he had arrived, his last tweet a February 1st 2016 birthday message for band member Harry Styles. To this day, nobody affiliated with the band has claimed definitive responsibility for RBB. His meteoric rise – and fall – remains a fandom legend that may forever go unsolved.

The story of Rainbow Bondage Bear is, in one sense, the story of a beloved tour mascot for a band that had risen to unexpected international fame after their third-place finish on the British reality show *The X Factor* in 2010. It is also the story of a fan community skilled in consuming serial narratives, who adeptly and sometimes surprisingly applied methods of textual analysis common to shows like *Sherlock*, *Lost*, or *Pretty Little Liars* to the mysteries of contemporary celebrity culture, where this "text's" creator and purpose were both technically

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[221] Frequent RBB references included, for example, Freddie Mercury and Queen, Judy Garland, and George Michael.

unknown. Fans' skill with close reading, their willingness to experiment with multiple narrative possibilities,[222] their awareness of their own vulnerability to manipulation,[223] and their familiarity with narratives that unfold installment-by-installment – serial narratives – all served them in good stead when it came to reading RBB.

At RBB's height in late 2015, he was appearing in concerts in a new configuration every few days, interspersed with tweeted images and changes to his Twitter profile. In other words, existed as a sequence of images and symbols that appeared at regular intervals, structured temporally by the rhythms of a concert tour schedule with supplemental updates on Twitter. RBB became both a character in a serial story and the form of the serial story itself, with fans supplying the narrative elements that created continuity between appearances. They tracked down props, researched the queer entertainers that RBB cited, and pulled together aspects of RBB's multiple appearances that seemed connected. Fans also interpreted certain props as suggesting a connection between each One Direction member and a particular bear. Harry Styles was quickly associated with RBB, while band-mate Louis Tomlinson was linked to SBB.[224] By working to unpack RBB's details and implied meanings – by collectively constructing a method of reading that could make sense of him – fans in fact wrote a story about the band that was capable both of holding multiple, possibly contradictory "versions" of One Direction at once (human and bear alike), and of developing an affective connection with all of them.

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[222] See, for example: Abigail Derecho, "Archontic Literature;" Francesca Coppa, "Writing Bodies in Space," *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (U of Iowa Press, 2014).
[223] Work on television spoilers often discusses the false spoilers that creators might leak deliberately to mislead fans. See: Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* (NYU Press, 2006); Jonathan Gray and Jason Mittell, "Speculation on Spoilers;" Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately*.
[224] Two other bears, seen above in the "Bohemian Rhapsody" photo, appeared only rarely, but were generally considered to stand in for Liam Payne and Niall Horan. Zayn Malik, the fifth member of One Direction, left the band in March 2015 and therefore missed RBB at his height.

In other words, the One Direction fans who were invested in tracking RBB's appearances and meanings were engaging in the serial practice of "precarious knowing" that I have been developing throughout this dissertation. In this chapter, I apply this strategy of "precarious knowing" to a seemingly non-serial non-text: namely, to the combination of concert schedules, celebrity personae, fan texts, and bear avatars that comprise the story of the members of One Direction. One purpose of this chapter is therefore to demonstrate how an audience-driven understanding of serial form – developed in the prior three chapters – offers theoretical tools that can be applied productively to new objects, such as to a boy band and its fans.

One Direction (often abbreviated as 1D) is an English-Irish boy band formed on the British reality talent show *The X Factor* in 2010. As the story goes, the five original members -- Harry Styles, Louis Tomlinson, Niall Horan, Liam Payne, and Zayn Malik – auditioned for *The X Factor* as solo artists and had therefore never met each other before. Producers told them they were being cut from the competition, before bringing them back and giving them an alternative: they could unite into a band and compete in the "Groups" category. This entire suspenseful reversal was, naturally, filmed and aired on the show. In 2015, Malik abruptly left the band via a cryptic announcement on Facebook. In early 2016, the four remaining members went on "hiatus," and each member began releasing solo music, which Styles and Horan each toured in 2017-2018.

From its very moment of inception, then, One Direction has been extremely visible on screens and on social media, a fact that some argue has contributed to the band's massive success. On the microblogging site Tumblr, One Direction was inescapable. For instance, Tumblr publishes the topics most frequently discussed on the site each year. Between 2013-2016, One Direction was one of the top three bands of the year, and band-members Harry Styles and Louis

Tomlinson were similarly a top three "ship" (a fandom term for a relationship, usually understood to be romantic, between characters or real people).[225] But despite being a massive force among fans and in fandom spaces, One Direction has received comparatively little attention from fan scholars.[226] The existing scholarship has focused in particular on pushing back against stereotypes of female boy band fans,[227] interrogating the ethics and practices of "real person fiction" (abbreviated as RPF, sometimes also known as "real person slash" or RPS),[228] discussion One Direction fan activism,[229] and exploring the dynamics of artificiality and authenticity that are so characteristic of boy bands and so compelling to their fans.[230]

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[225] For comparison's sake, most other popular ships on Tumblr involve fictional television characters (including, for example, Dean Winchester/Castiel on the show *Supernatural*, John Watson/Sherlock Holmes on the show *Sherlock*, and Clarke/Lexa on *The 100*), but not all of them. The second-most popular ship in 2015 was comprised of two YouTube celebrities.

[226] Some exceptions include: Hannah McCann and Clare Southerton, "Repetitions of Desire: Queering the One Direction Fangirl," *Girlhood Studies*, vol. 12, no. 1, Spring 2019; Helena Louise Dare-Edwards, "'Shipping bullshit': Twitter rumours, fan/celebrity interaction and questions of authenticity," *Celebrity Studies*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2014; Lisa Donlan, "From < mrsniall-horan-until-the-end> to <keepingupwith1d>: Online usernames and identity in the One Direction fandom," *Journal of Fandom Studies*, vol. 5, no. 3, Sept 2017.

[227] See: Bethan Jones, William Proctor, and Daisy Asquith, "Spotlight On: *Crazy About One Direction*," *Seeing Fans*, edited by Lucy Bennet and Paul Booth (Bloomsbury, 2016).

[228] Emily E. Roach, "The homoerotics of the boyband, queerbaiting and RPF in pop music fandoms," *Journal of Fandom Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2, June 2018; V. Arrow, "Real Person(a) Fiction," *Fic: Why Fanfiction is Taking Over the World*, edited by Anne Jamison (Smart Pop, 2013); Ksenia Korobkova, "1D on Wattpad," *Affinity Online*, edited by Mizuko Ito et al. (NYU Press, 2019).

[229] Bri Mattia, "Rainbow Direction and Fan-Based Citizenship Performance" *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 28. 2018; Rachel O'Leary Carmona, "How One Direction Prepared Young Women for the Revolution," *Transformative Works and Cultures,* no. 32, 2020; Allyson Gross "To Wave a Flag: Identification, #BlackLivesMatter, and Populism in Harry Styles Fandom," *Transformative Works and Cultures,* no. 32, 2020.

[230] For instance, Kristina Busse argues that RPF writers are particularly invested in using fanfiction to work through questions of authenticity and identity on the part of both celebrities and fans. She focuses specifically on popslash writers, a term that refers to fanfiction written about the boy bands of the early 2000s, namely the Backstreet Boys and *NSYNC. Busse argues: "The questions of truth and reality are central in popslash writing, which consciously fictionalizes a reality that itself is already performed and choreographed. Unlike much of the tabloid press, which purports to tell the 'truth', popslashers consciously declare their writing to be fictional and clearly separate their stories from rumors." In other words, Busse argues that by working in the realm of the fictional, RPF writers place themselves outside the scope of truth claims in order to explore and interrogate the boundaries of what constitutes "the truth" or "a lie"; "'I'm jealous of the fake me': postmodern subjectivity and identity construction in boy band fan fiction," *Framing Celebrity: New Directions in Celebrity Culture*, edited by Su Holmes and Sean Redmond (Routledge, 2006), 256.

This chapter will draw on material from both One Direction itself (2010-2016), and from the subsequent careers of its individual members, with a particular focus on Harry Styles' 2017-2018 international tour "Harry Styles – Live on Tour" (or "HSLOT"). In order to discuss One Direction and its fandom in a comprehensive way, I look at four overlapping textual categories that together contribute to the serial narrative of One Direction:

1. Celebrity art, which includes the music itself, performances, tour design, fashion, etc.
2. Celebrity media, which includes media *by* celebrities (social media, artist statements, branding, websites, etc), *about* celebrities (celebrity journalism), and *of* celebrities (paparazzi and fan photos).
3. Fan media, which includes all non-fictional fan creations and discussions. These texts might adhere closely to a celebrity's media and art (excerpts or analysis of a recent celebrity profile, or fashion archives that track down the clothes that a celebrity is seen wearing), or might be fairly distanced from any specific celebrity content (for example, a fan's reflections on how they feel about that celebrity, fan art, jokes and memes, or collections of images that evoke a particular "mood").
4. Fan fiction, which includes all fictional representations of a celebrity, although for the purposes of this chapter, I will focus primarily on fanfiction specifically located on the site An Archive of Our Own (AO3).

All of these textual fragments work together to co-produce One Direction as experienced or "read" by fans, and there is also overlap between these categories.[231] Furthermore, they all exist

[231] Obviously, art and fiction are also media. I separate out these categories, not to reinforce any value judgment that elevates "real" art over its commercial paratexts, but in order to better argue the opposite. Each of these categories, which might seem divisible by various means – by fictional versus non-fictional, authentic versus artificial, commercial versus fan-made – can in fact all be understood as pieces of the same serial narrative. I am therefore

within and co-produce intersecting industrial and legal systems.[232] Any One Direction narrative is therefore constantly being constructed by various author and audience populations with vastly different and often competing goals, investments, understandings, and access to power. The following chapter is organized first, into four sections that correspond to the four textual categories above, and followed by two case studies that bring the temporalities and constructions of the characters of One Direction together. Specifically, I will return to the example of Rainbow Bondage Bear, before discussing fans' co-creation of the lyrics of one of the songs, "Medicine," that Harry Styles performed on a recent tour.

As befits a band whose media image has been constructed very deliberately and who also offered unprecedented social media access to fans, fan conspiracy theories in reference to the band also abound. They span from the relatively inconsequential – fans' joking skepticism that Liam Payne's childhood kidney problems had spontaneously healed themselves as he claims[233] – to the more elaborate and serious. For example, when Zayn Malik left the band mid-tour in 2015, many fans argued that the departure was a publicity stunt, and that he would eventually return (which, sadly, has not yet happened). Fans also "ship" members of the band with every other member, and with other celebrities. Fans' commitment to these ships ranges from the casual, to enjoying them in fanfiction, to genuinely believing that the band members are hiding secret relationships. The biggest shipping theory in the One Direction universe is the belief that Harry

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building on work by Jonathan Gray in *Show Sold Separately* and others on the way that paratexts produce textual meaning, but I am focusing specifically on how these dynamics between text and paratext produce serial form. I am also drawing on work by Richard Dyer on the texts that construct a celebrity's "star image" (i.e. in *Stars,* BFI, 1998).

[232] British and American record labels and the music industry, celebrity and entertainment journalism, social media corporations, national and international copyright law, etc.

[233] @LiamPayne. "Just been for an ultrasound on my kidney turns out its fixed form when I was a baby!!! :o so now I have two :) #weirdnewsoftheday." *Twitter*. 7 Aug 2012, 10:23am, twitter.com/liampayne/status/232889653299138561.

Styles and Louis Tomlinson (referenced previously in this chapter as the humans upon whom RBB and SBB are understood to be based) are secretly in love. In fan circles, the two of them together are known by the portmanteau of "Larry." Whether a fan believes in these relationships or not, the ship and the fan practices that have surrounded it were unavoidable parts of the One Direction fan experience, particularly on Tumblr.[234]

The focus of this chapter is not necessarily on Larry, or on fans who believe in Larry or any other of the numerous One Direction theories that circulate on the Internet. Instead, it is on the serial forms and temporalities that encourage, to use Jason Mittell's term, "forensic fandoms" around One Direction,[235] alongside and intersecting with other kinds of One Direction fan investments. While many fans are certainly uninterested in, or remain unaware of, the manufactured nature of One Direction and the possibility that the band is keeping secrets, others have made these discussions central to their fan experience (even as they also share photos of the band, read and write fanfiction, create fan art, make signs to hold at concerts, etc). My goal here is therefore not to offer an exhaustive accounting of One Direction, One Direction fans, or One Direction fan theories, but instead to explore certain One Direction fan practices as limit cases for what serial narratives might look like.

In this chapter, some of the threads that I pick up include: first, the way that the different temporalities – and particularly different interplays of repetition and continuity – of a tour, social media platforms, and fanfiction archives intersect to create serial narratives. Second, the way that

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[234] While it is very difficult to count fans in general, the most immediately telling indicator of the scope of the Larry fandom is the fact that an affectionate tweet from Tomlinson to Styles has been retweeted over 2.6 million times, making it the fifth-most retweeted tweet as of July 2020.

[235] Mittell is referring specifically to fandoms that arise around serialized, complex televisual narratives like *Lost*, which encourage fans to "dig deeper" and sift through the narrative's hidden clues to solve mysteries; "Forensic Fandom and the Drillable Text," *Spreadable Media*, edited by Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, spreadablemedia.org/essays/mittell/index.html#.XwZ3XGpKjdQ.

these shifting temporalities produce shifting constructions of the fictional and the authentic (which are not necessarily in contrast), i.e. of serial character. And lastly, how these serial narratives unfold in spaces: individual and communal, physical and digital, live and not live. Especially when these threads are brought together, they suggest the way that fans both fill in and also make more visible the narrative gaps that produce serial temporality, character, and space. Furthermore, fans of One Direction are self-consciously aware of the ways that these serial narratives might register what becomes hidden or elided by the capitalist construct of "the boy band" - namely labor, negative affects, and queerness – without necessarily unearthing some absolute and more authentic truth. In short, what fans are practicing is a form of "precarious knowing," a term which I argue better captures the relationship between knowledge and intimacy cultivated by One Direction and their fans, beyond concepts such as parasociality, identification with celebrities, or even a sense of in-group versus out-group access to knowledge. This chapter also particularly explores the idea that serial repetition is invitational: that it creates opportunities for both community and chaotic contestation in equal measure.

Tour Seriality - Time and Community

The first, but by no means the most important, temporal structure that produces the narrative of "One Direction" is, of course, the serial structure of the tour. A musician's tour schedule bears several similarities to a serial schedule, given that it involves regular performances interspersed with breaks. The schedule is not usually regular (a musician may play two nights in a row in New York, for instance, and then take two days off before playing a single night in Philadelphia), but a fan who is following the entire tour digitally can easily get into a habit of checking social media at the same time every night for new concert content. This content

includes fan reports, photos, videos, and often several unauthorized livestreams. Following a concert tour therefore works much like "appointment viewing" in the context of television,[236] and particularly echoes the social media conversations that occur while "co-viewing" television with others using a second screen.[237] Additionally, in the context of nineteenth-century theater, Lauren Eriks Cline argues for reproductions and narratives of a performance to be thought of as components of the "live" performance (where "liveness" implies a more distributed, process-oriented, repetitive, and precarious temporality), rather than as "records of past liveness."[238] In defining One Direction's tour performances as "serial media," I am therefore also defining their "live" performances as constituted by these digital fan records – both textual and visual – in addition to the specific in-person events in the concert arena. One Direction tours are serial, I argue, because of a combination of their overall temporal framework (the tour schedule itself), fans' serial behavior (the habits of viewing they cultivate), and the tour's serial feeling (its sense of narrative or continuity).[239]

While it may certainly be apparent that One Direction's tour schedule is *repetitive*, it may be less clear how this repetition becomes serial. And indeed, it may *not* be experienced serially for many fans (or for any casual One Direction concertgoer). Even if one grants that many fans are engaging with each performance nightly, and that the tour is set up to assume or accommodate such fan behavior, a series of concerts might still seem intuitively to be more purely repetitive than properly serial. The setlist, choreography, and even the general format of

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[236] While this is true of many popular musicians' tours, it is perhaps notable that One Direction started on a reality show, i.e. they originated on serial television.
[237] See for instance: Apryl Williams & Vanessa Gonlin "I got all my sisters with me (on Black Twitter)," *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 20, no. 7, 2017.
[238] Lauren Eriks Cline, "Epistolary Liveness."
[239] This section focuses primarily on that last characteristic. I will discuss fans' serial behavior, especially on Tumblr, in a later section.

the "unscripted" stage patter generally stays the same across performances. While the next several sections will discuss in more detail all the ways that One Direction fans create narrative continuity, there are also many simpler examples of the members of One Direction themselves assuming or accommodating the continuity of the tour, mostly in the form of jokes that escalated as the tour continued, or call-and-response moments that required the audience to know how to fill in the blanks (for instance, one recurring joke was Harry Styles' continual insistence that "this is a family show," to which the audience would shout back, "or is it?"). In short, the structure of tour is set up to accommodate a communal construction of serial continuity.

Celebrity Journalism and the Work of Character

Part of One Direction's brand has been built on the promise of unmediated access to "the boys," as the band members are called by fans, and as such, evidence for fans' theories may come from an almost limitless number of sources. They turn to taped interviews, reports of fan interactions, concert footage shot on cellphones, paparazzi photos, music lyrics, analysis of the meanings behind the band's tattoos etc. In contrast, fans tend to be suspicious of the boys' Twitter accounts, for example, as well as most print articles; they take for granted that celebrities' Twitter accounts can be run by others and that quotes can be fed to celebrity journalists by publicists. Fans look for moments where the band members appear to behave in ways that contradict their public personae, as well as moments where the publicized narratives about the band members and One Direction overall appear to break down. In general, many One Direction fans are highly attuned to the constructed nature of celebrity and the way that the symbiotic relationship between celebrities and the tabloid press shapes the impressions of the band that fans receive.

Furthermore, Tumblr's emphasis on stories constructed by images, gifs, and visual juxtaposition – and Tumblr fandom's ethics of sourcing images[240] – aligns particularly well with the evidence-gathering methods of fans. Just as Tumblr users see multiple instantiations of the same content, "spoken" by multiple people, so too do fans conceptualize "One Direction" as collectively and ambivalently authored.[241] Similarly, it is much easier to conceptualize an image versus a text as accommodating multiple creators (at the very least, a photograph involves both a photographer and a subject). In general, scholars have discussed RPF and boy band fans as relatively aware, but anxious, responders to a postmodern dissolution of authenticity and identity.[242] When the reality of an image – and the authenticity or intimacy it might offer to fans – becomes a question that fans don't feel they can conclusively answer, and when that image can simultaneously serve for fans as an indicator of a constructed yet "authentic" narrative, it starts to complicate the above portrait of anxious RPF fans, and suggest a relationship toward truth or authenticity reflective of "precarious knowing."

In addition, when fans read celebrity narratives, versus wholly fictional narratives, it requires the added step of deciding what material is included within this narrative in the first place. Even with transmedia narratives, or narratives with otherwise complicated textual boundaries, the categorical distinction between fictional and non-fictional is a useful way to

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[240] Essentially, it's considered rude and unethical to remove the links to the original source of a Tumblr post before you reblog it, or to repost art and gifs without crediting the artist. For more information on Tumblr etiquette, see the "Tumblr" entry on Fanlore; fanlore.org/wiki/Tumblr.

[241] Note that this model of authorship works contrasts with traditional accounts of "cult" fandoms -- which scholars have linked to the growth of powerful "auteur" figures in television -- or even with scholars' accounts of spoiler fandoms, where fans work collectively with or against a structuring authority who knows the answers that fans desire and sometimes actively seeks to mislead them. See for example: Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures*.

[242] Kristina Busse for example argues that popslashers are striving to believe in the possibility of a stable, innate identity, even as their status as savvy readers means they have to acknowledge the performativity of celebrity identity ("'I'm Jealous of the Fake Me,'" 265-6).

organize what should and should not be considered "text."[243] In the case of One Direction, anything can theoretically become part of their story because it all comes from the same source material: reality.[244]

One way of creating useable boundaries between "part of the text" and "not part of the text" in the case of One Direction is to reintroduce ideas of narrative and fictionality back into the fan experience. Fans might understand three different narratives to be at work simultaneously with any given piece of One Direction-related text, each of which are, to varying degrees, fictional: a story told by various people in power in the music industry (whether those people include the band's managers, label executives, etc), a story told by the boys themselves, and a story told by fans. The "official" story of One Direction is most often tied to the tabloid press and official avenues of communication involving the band (including, for example, the band's Twitter and Instagram accounts, some social media accounts of people affiliated with the band, etc). The story told "by the boys" takes place over multiple media, from song lyrics, to the meaning of their tattoos, to statements of dissatisfaction with their public images, label, and working conditions (ranging from the ambiguous to the quite direct), to their clothing choices, to Rainbow Bondage Bear himself. The stories told by fans include speculations and "headcanons," i.e. ideas that individual fans choose to believe "in their own heads," rather than because they believe these ideas are truly canonical, along with more explicitly fictional material like fanfiction.

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[243] Transmedia texts and fandoms do offer significant complications to this boundary. For example, actors on *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* respond in character to questions asked by real fans on YouTube. The Norwegian show *SKAM* has committed even further to verisimilitude by creating elaborate social media accounts for its high school characters. For the most part, fans understand that this content *is* fictional. This effect is therefore still qualitatively different than the experience of reading texts in a real person fandom.

[244] Abigail De Kosnik similarly discusses the phenomenon of Internet archives so vast that the only possible experience of the archive is idiosyncratic rather than institutionally constructed; *Rogue Archives* (MIT Press, 2016).

The reading methods required to make sense of these simultaneous narrative strands are quite complex, in part because fans must first construct the narratives – or construct the boundaries of the narratives – that they are reading, and *then* proceed to read them. One goal of these reading and narrating practices is an investment in making the machinery of celebrity image-creation visible *within* the fandom. This is tied to the reading issues discussed in the paragraphs above, in that fans' investments in the constructed nature of the band's personae is intimately interrelated with fans' observations about how particular narratives about celebrities are created and maintained.

While many fans are very invested in what's "real" or "honest," they tie these discussions of celebrity realism specifically to the question of what can be considered "work" and "not work" for a celebrity. For instance, when Harry Styles stops for a fan photo on the street, many fans understand the photo through at least three interrelated frameworks: plot, character, and work. Among the information that fans might glean from such a photo is the fact that Styles was present in a particular place at a stated time. A second way of reading this fan photo is to take it as evidence that Styles is a nice person who is willing to stop for fans and who treats them kindly. That is, this photo is legible both as evidence of what Styles is doing and of his character.

Fans lastly discuss such a photo as evidence of Styles "working," even when such a fan encounter seems spontaneous. This reflects back on and destabilizes the above two premises – that Styles was present, and that he is generous with his time – so that identifying and understanding Styles' "work" becomes integral to how fans understand the plot and character that is being constructed simultaneously by everyone invested in promoting his brand, by himself, and by his fans. Especially if this location or photographic content is significant – if he was photographed near a significant location, with particular friends, or in a city that contradicts

other available information about his travel plans – it becomes akin to a plot detail. What that plot detail means, and crucially, *whose* plot is being forwarded, is subject to debate. For example, if Styles was photographed near a studio, fans might speculate that he is recording new music. Alternatively, if a tabloid like *The Sun* releases an article stating that Styles is in London, even as he stops for a fan photo in New York, fans might speculate about the source of the discrepancy. Is it a mistake, or a deliberate attempt at misdirection? Is there other evidence, either in *The Sun* article or in the photo itself, to privilege one way of reading versus another? And if one of these pieces of evidence is an attempt to mislead, what is its purpose? At the same time, Styles really *was* where the photo was taken, and fans really *do* think he's nice, because he consistently performs niceness. The idea that Styles was "working" therefore opens up new questions and avenues of debate for fans, without necessarily foreclosing the original conclusions. In other words, most of the time, given any particular piece of evidence, fans conclude that they probably can't know the answers to their questions with any certainty, but this local uncertainty does not necessarily imply that fans feel any global uncertainty about their broader conclusions or the stories that they confidently tell.

What the theoretical framework of "precarious knowing" suggests is that fans' overall certainty does not necessarily outweigh or cancel out the fact that each piece of these stories are built through a process of repetitively registering ambiguity, via uncertainties that go fully unresolved. The formal characteristics of this kind of serial storytelling means that certainty and uncertainty coexist in a shifting relationship where one never fully wins out.

What does this coexistence afford? For one thing, all the members of One Direction, and Harry Styles in particular, are known for dodging concrete answers to interview questions. When asked about the meaning of one of One Direction's songs, called "Olivia," Styles said: "Is Olivia

even a person? Is Olivia an emotion? Is she a place? We don't know."[245] Rather than becoming frustrated by Styles' insistent refusal to foreclose audience interpretation about *anything*, fans mostly found this answer funny. As Allyson Gross has noted, Styles' refusal to be specific allows him as an "empty signifier" which fans can interpret as they like.[246] I also want to add to this explanation the idea that fans are aware and often take pleasure in Styles' very inscrutability, and not because it gives them opportunities to fill in the blanks themselves, but because it allows them to hold space for "Olivia" as simultaneously about a person, emotion, or place. While much of One Direction is mysterious to fans, Styles' joking inscrutability invites fans in to the joke of refusing to choose between possibilities.[247]

One could think of this as a way to *register* a celebrity's private life without necessarily *representing* it. Another thing that fans are doing here by denaturalizing these types of images and pointing to their multiply authored nature, is pointing to the work – on the part of many different people – that goes into constructing celebrity narratives. This is also a way to render visible some of the invisible structures that fans are acting within, by making them part of the story. Fans take something framed as an authentic expression of a kind of neoliberal personal agency (like a tweet or a photo on Instagram), and by deconstructing it, call into question the authenticity and agency that these media afford. And as I will discuss below, the seriality of Tumblr becomes crucial to how these temporalities of working get understood.

Tumblr Temporalities

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[245] "One Direction en 40 Global Show," uploaded by LOS40, YouTube, Dec. 7, 2015, youtu.be/xJwNxjcVzGU.
[246] Allyson Gross, "To Wave a Flag."
[247] See also Alice Marwick and danah boyd's work on celebrity Twitter accounts, and the pleasure that followers might receive from being uncertain whether celebrities are being authentic or performing; "To See and Be Seen: Celebrity Practice on Twitter," *Convergence*, vol 17, no. 2, 2011, 144.

While online fan activity is located in many different, overlapping digital spaces and on many different social media platforms, this chapter focuses specifically on Tumblr. In many respects, fans on Tumblr behave like much fans in other social media spaces, but Tumblr is also unique in several key ways. First, while most celebrities have Twitter, Instagram, and other social media accounts that fans can engage with directly, most celebrities are not on Tumblr. The "fourth wall" of fandom, separating creators or celebrities from fans, therefore remains mostly intact on Tumblr, in a way that it doesn't on other social media sites. There is an expectation among fans on Tumblr that they are *not* communicating directly with celebrities, and that celebrities can more easily avoid seeing content about themselves that they would prefer not to see. One consequence of this fourth wall in the context of real person fandoms – like the One Direction fandom – is that it further distances fans from a celebrity, and I would argue, further fictionalizes them. If Twitter, for instance, is characterized by a leveling assumption where any user can talk to any other user, including famous ones, and possibly get a reply back, Tumblr is assumed to be more inscrutable. Alexander Cho, for instance, has noted that Tumblr resists the "default publicness" of many social media sites, which has made it a particularly compelling space for queer users, among others.[248] Celebrity content also circulates on Tumblr alongside and interspersed with content about fictional fandoms. On Tumblr, Harry Styles is more like Wonder Woman or Luke Skywalker than he is like me. On Twitter, he and I both have accounts and navigate the site in essentially the same way structurally, even though he has a blue checkmark, many more followers, and probably a social media manager, while I definitely do not. In the context of One Direction, this means that while fans of the band were ubiquitous on most social

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[248] "Default Publicness: Queer Youth of Color, Social Media, and Being Outed by the Machine," *New Media & Society*, 2017.

media sites, and while fans of One Direction probably existed in greater *numbers* on Twitter, fans on Tumblr have a unique relationship – produced structurally by the platform and its temporalities – to practices of fan narrativizing and the production of One Direction as serial characters.[249]

Tumblr was founded as a microblogging site in 2007, and in the past ten years has become a prominent online space for hosting fans, fan discussions, and fan art.[250] The site has a set of byzantine and often contradictory norms surrounding its use. Like many other social media sites (like Twitter or Facebook), Tumblr has separate spaces for the content a user herself posts (called a "blog"), and the content produced by everyone the user follows (called a "dashboard" or "dash"). In addition, a user can search a specific content "tag," to see what all other users – not only the users she follows or knows -- have posted about that topic.

For the purposes of this project, I'm going to focus primarily on users' own blogs and their dashes, in part because it is the material that users have the most opportunity to curate. In general, users search a tag to get a broad overview of a topic, perhaps because they are newly interested in a fandom, character, or topic. Once a user has gotten more familiar with a given fan community, or curated their dash to best represent the kind of content they want to see, they might not spend a lot of time searching tags. Again, this is similar to a microblogging site like Twitter, where users follow accounts whose content they want to see on their Twitter feed, but might still search specific hashtags to find a wider range of reactions to emerging topics.

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[249] Crucially, fans often have multiple social media and fan accounts on various platforms. While different platforms have different cultures and norms that users uphold, there is also significant overlap across platforms. Similarly, content from Twitter, Tumblr etc often gets reposted and recirculated on the other sites. So any definitive statement about "Tumblr fans" or "Twitter fans" is an inherent simplification, even as there are also real differences between these sites.

[250] It has also been steadily waning in popularity, particularly after Tumblr's controversial decision to ban "not safe for work" adult content in December 2018.

When a Tumblr user scrolls through their dashboard, they see the posts of other users they follow in chronological order of posting, starting with the most recent. On Tumblr, to a much greater degree than on many other social media platforms, the majority of posts are "reblogs" from other people rather than original content. The original poster may not be someone a user follows, but if one of the blogs they *do* follow reblogs it, a user might then reblog that post from them. The absolute count of the number of people who have reblogged or "liked" a post appears in its bottom-left corner. Therefore, most posts take wending paths to appear on a user's dash, and may appear more than once if multiple people they follow have reblogged it. The consequence of this structure is that a user often sees the same posts reblogged over and over again. It's very common, especially when a big event has happened in a fandom, to see for example, the same photo of Louis Tomlinson many, *many* times in a row. This has led users and critics of Tumblr to argue that the site amplifies extremes. My goal here isn't necessarily to engage in that debate, but instead to draw attention to the consequences of seeing a repeated photo, tagged differently by different users each time it is encountered. There is an interplay of similarity and difference being enacted over time through a user's engagement with discrete units of content (i.e. posts), but any forward narrative momentum of this kind of interplay is extremely complicated almost to the point of nonexistence.

This lack of forward-moving linearity is further complicated by the fact that users engage with posts on their dash by going backwards in time and then circling back around to a more recent moment in time. To clarify, since users see the most recent post at the top of their dash, the longer they spend scrolling through, the older the posts and the further back in time they see. This often means that users are seeing reactions to a fandom event before they see the event itself, or posts of agreement and disagreement about a topic before the original opinion post. At a

certain point, a user will refresh their dashboard, which brings them to a *new* most recent post, and they consequently lose their place amongst the older posts.

To make this discussion of temporality even more complicated is the fact that users don't only (or even mostly) reblog posts referencing recent fandom events alone. Scrolling through your dash, therefore, might mean you see in succession: a gif from Harry Styles' most recent concert (with a blogger's comments in their tags), a photo from One Direction's tenure on *The X Factor* several years ago (again, with commentary tags), another user's written opinions on the decisions that Niall Horan's PR company have made in the past few months, and a post titled "Louis and Football" with a series of photos of Louis Tomlinson playing soccer organized in a random chronology.[251] While not all of these images will be recognizable to every fan – and as Akane Kanai has argued about gifs, many serve as detachable units of meaning regardless of their original context[252] – the shared mythology of the fandom, fans' motivations to become conversant with group history and norms,[253] and Tumblr's structural emphasis on repetition all ensure that many fans will have a fairly robust sense of temporal context for *many* of the images they see, even as they are viewed wildly out of chronological order in practice. In other words, for fans on Tumblr, past and present coexist along various legible temporal vectors: time is neither linear, nor is it flattened into a constant present.

While users might experience fandom events on their dashes backwards when they're experiencing them in real time, if a fan is looking for information on past events, they can be

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[251] Other types of posts include, for example, posts advertising fanfiction, an artist's fan art, small "drabbles" or short works of fanfiction, a collection of images around a theme like "Louis as a Slytherin," and "headcanon" posts that straddle the line between real and fictional. For example: "Which zoo exhibit do you think each of the boys likes best?" Similarly, one might see a lot of content from different fandoms, non-fandom content (like aesthetic posts, political posts, or personal posts), etc.
[252] Akane Kanai, "Jennifer Lawrence, Remixed," *Celebrity Studies*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2015.
[253] See: De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives*, 140.

found in forward-moving chronological order, in the form of "masterposts" and via some archival blogs. Masterposts are essentially compilation posts surrounding a theme, and can therefore take various forms, but helpfully for new or confused fans, one type of masterpost is a timeline that places significant fandom events in order, usually with links to original sources. Fans often organize these timelines to tell a particular story, or to reveal connections between seemingly unrelated details. Masterposts therefore serve an archival purpose, but unlike with a site like a wiki, they have a specific linear structure. Some fans are also known to have more standardized or helpful tags than others, and many fans do at least have a rudimentary organizing system. These organizational tags coexist easily in the same post with more expressive tags signaling how fans feel about the content they've reblogged.[254] Tumblr users' tagging and masterpost-creating practices are simultaneously archival, narrative, and affective. Fandom on Tumblr therefore incorporates mixed media, mixed fictionality, and mixed temporalities, all at once.

Fanfiction and the Temporality of Character

Much like the fan practices of Tumblr, fanfiction is a serial medium housed in several central online archives. One of these, Archive of Our Own (AO3), is user-created and–maintained, and individual stories in the archive are organized through a "folksonomy" system.[255] As Tumblr does, AO3 allows users themselves almost total freedom to generate the tags that will classify their content, although stories on AO3 are posted and tagged by authors, rather than

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[254] See: Louisa Ellen Stein, *Millennial Fandom*, 158.
[255] "Archive FAQ," *Archive of Our Own*, archiveofourown.org/faq. For more information, see: Fiesler, Morris, and Bruckman's "An Archive of their Own," *CHI'16: Proceedings of the ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 7-12 May 2016.

reblogged by other users. Fanfiction temporalities on AO3 are irregularly serial. For instance, some authors upload stories all at once, while others upload story chapters as they finish them, which may take anywhere from a week to several years. Readers also may engage serially with fanfiction on the archive. Fanfiction is also repetitive, with strong norms around genre and form, even as fans technically have the freedom to follow or break narrative rules at will. In addition to readers' implicit narrative expectations, stories are also frequently spoiled in the tags (i.e. the user-created metadata at the top of each archive entry). Fanfiction therefore shares many temporal characteristics with a genre like the television procedural, and like procedurals, it is often described as a comfortable and low-risk form that can continue on endlessly.[256]

Story tags on Archive of Our Own often group themselves into several categories, although again, users are free to add whatever tags they want to their stories. There are extremely conventionalized and non-specific genre markers based on tone or mood, like "Angst" and "Fluff." There are equally conventionalized genre markers based on plot, like "Break Up," "Getting Back Together," "Slow Burn," and "Happy Ending." These tags do some work to signal the kind of story this will be, including some of its initial premises and how it will end. The characters might be broken up at the beginning, but the reader knows that at some point, they will get back together and be happy. "Slow Burn" specifically indicates the duration of plot. It suggests this happy ending will take a long time to occur: the sexual tension or romance between characters will literally be on a "slow burn" rather than boil over immediately. Tagging and spoilers on AO3 can therefore forecast not only the story's plot, but also what that plot will feel like temporally and affectively.

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[256] To be clear, this assessment of fanfiction's form and the affects it encourages sits alongside descriptions of fanfiction as "transformative," both to their source texts and to readers' and writers' sense of identity and community.

Most definitions of fanfiction emphasize its production context (i.e. that it involves writing for free about pre-existing characters), its relationship to a source text (i.e. the notion that it "fills in gaps" left by an original story), and/or its work of representation (i.e. that it's a form popular with queer, female media audiences, and often involves writing white queer romance into texts).[257] All of these definitions are true to an extent, but in this section I will highlight two interrelated formal aspects of fanfiction: first, its emphasis on "emotional continuity"; and second, its foundation on multiple points-of-view.

The term "emotional continuity" comes a very well-travelled Tumblr post titled "On Fanfic & Emotional Continuity," in which fanfiction writer Foz Meadows argues that what makes a piece of writing "fanfiction," formally, is its emphasis on "emotional continuity." As Meadows defines it:

> emotional continuity is mistakenly viewed as a synonym for static characterisation, and therefore held anathema: if the character(s) don't change, then where's the story? But emotional continuity isn't anti-change; it's pro-context.…Emotional continuity requires a close reading, not just of the letter of the canon [a fan term for an original text], but its spirit - the beats between the dialogue; the implications never overtly stated, but which must logically occur off-screen.…Fanfic embraces the gaps in the narrative, the gracenotes in characterisation that the original story glosses, forgets or simply doesn't find time for.[258]

This definition of "emotional continuity" might seem straightforward, but I want to tease apart, first, the idea of "finding time," and second, the notion of close reading a text's "spirit." When fans and fan scholars talk about fanfiction as "filling in gaps," there is often a slippage between filling in emotional gaps, as suggested above, and filling in the temporal gaps created by serial

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[257] See: Anne Jamison, "Why Fic?" *Fic: Why Fanfiction is Taking Over the World* (Smart Pop, 2013).
[258] Foz Meadows, "On Fanfic & Emotional Continuity," *Tumblr*, 6 June 2016, fozmeadows.tumblr.com/post/145492719966/on-fanfic-emotional-continuity. This post from 2016 currently has over 58,500 notes on Tumblr, including additions, commentaries, and elaborations by other users, suggesting that this way of describing the affordance of fanfiction as a genre or a form fits with the experiences of fic readers and writers.

fiction. Fanfiction – and fan practices more broadly - are sometimes imagined as temporally supplemental, as something to do while waiting for a new episode of television, for example. And while some of this language appears in the above passage, the idea of "finding time for" characters also suggests that fanfiction is drawing upon, but ultimately refiguring, the rhythms of serial media for its own purposes (rather than remaining within a serial framework).

Ultimately, what Meadows calls "continuity" is built in practice on discontinuous repetitions and re-imaginings. That is, this sense of character continuity is built upon the premise that a fanfiction reader and/or writer is engaging with many different stories – of different lengths, with different authors, taking place in different universes, with different narrative "rules," with different points of view on the characters, etc – that often also rehearse central tropes or preoccupations of the fandom at large. A fanfiction reader who reads a thousand different ways that Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson might have met on *The X Factor* is not exactly "rereading" that first meeting; or if they are, they are "rereading" in a manner that emphasizes difference. This meeting, furthermore, while it did really happen, has been wholly constructed in the collective One Direction fan imagination by these multiple fictional and quasi-fictional versions of the event.

I also find productive Meadows' allusion to close reading the "spirit" of a text. Fanfiction offers a very concrete written record of what is invisible in a text, but what *feels* present to audiences nonetheless. As such, it seems like a useful archive of, among other things, how fiction feels. Fanfiction therefore points toward the multiple, distributed, collective, and context-dependent ways in which a fictional character might feel real. Or, to rephrase what Foz Meadows noted above: many fans are close-reading feelings, and that is what, to them, constitutes "the text." In addition, what any given fan is left with after reading fanfiction about One Direction are

multiple different "characters," each attached slightly differently to what that fan believes to be real about the band members. Fanfiction characters, then, could be said to exist as the sum of all different "alternative universe" versions of themselves, *as* these versions unfold over time for every fanfiction reader. Textual intimacy and "friendship" with a character – one's sense of character "continuity" – depend, therefore, on one's awareness of the partiality of one's own point-of-view about that character.

Case Study 1: The Return of Rainbow Bondage Bear

I briefly to the Rainbow Bondage Bear to explore one set of intersecting possibilities for the purpose that certain fans imagine these stories about One Direction – constructed on all the platforms discussed above – being put to. The story of One Direction's official narrative, for instance, links an impulse to obscure together with neoliberal ethics of work. Through RBB and his three other ursine friends, the story of the members of One Direction does the opposite. In other words, he merges a method of representing larger systems with the specific character details that proliferate once fans believe he's linked to the members of One Direction, and he accomplishes this by using the familiar structures of serial narrative.

Consider, for example, the site that one fan created to keep track of RBB's appearances (Figures 5-6).[259] Even just in the layout of this site, there are resonances between RBB's concert appearances and a serial structure. There is a semi-regular pacing of new content, visually reminiscent here of the thumbnail views of a television season on Netflix, Hulu, etc. Each appearance, or "episode," of RBB's story involves the interplay of new and familiar, with fans

[259] Figure 5 is located at beccasafan.github.io/rbb/concerts/. Figure 6 is located at beccasafan.github.io/rbb//concerts/2015/08/detroit/.

cataloguing and tracing recurring objects, references, and themes across multiple appearances.

So if RBB was part of a serial story, what story or stories did he tell?

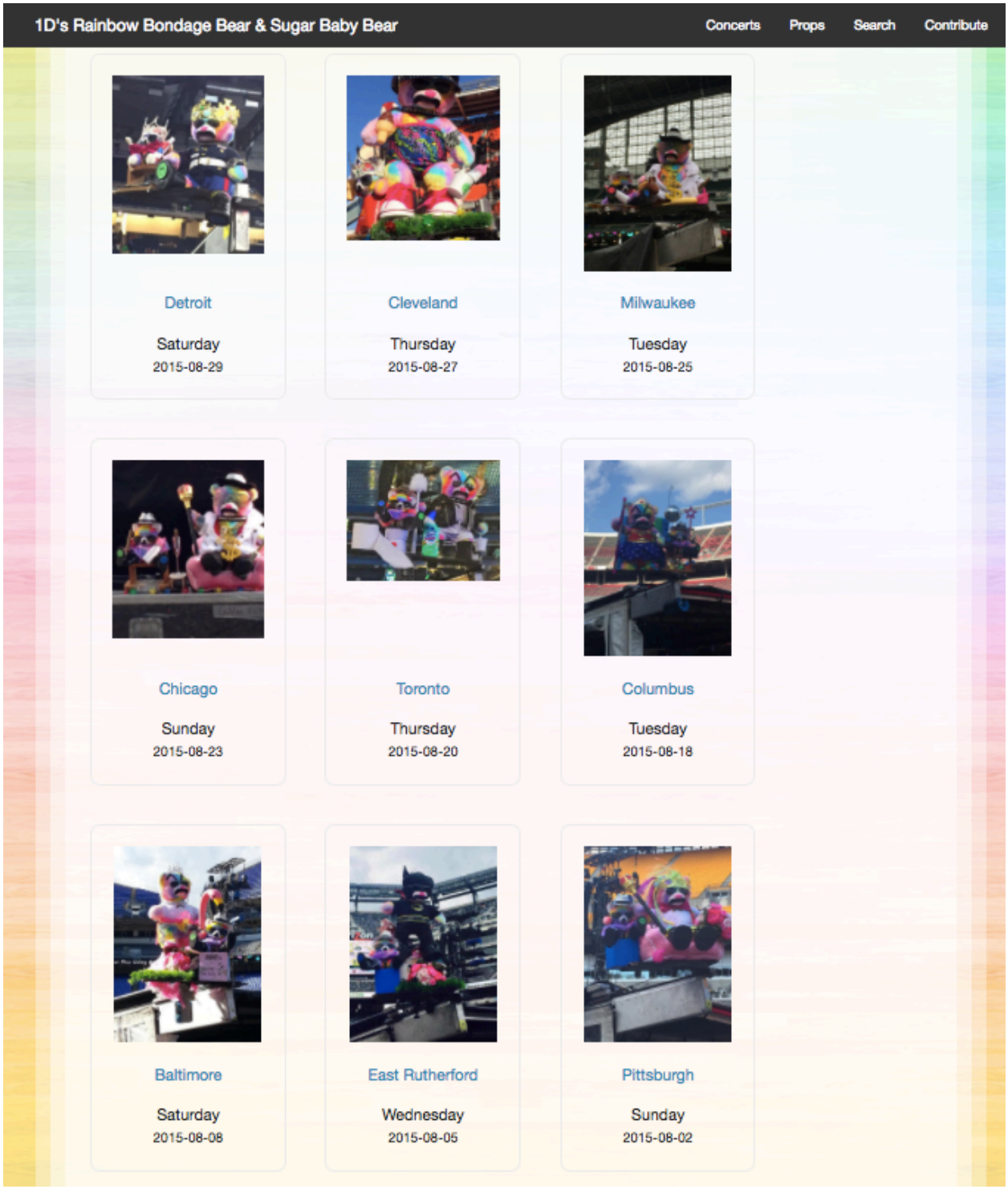

Figure 5: Sequence of RBB's appearances in August 2015

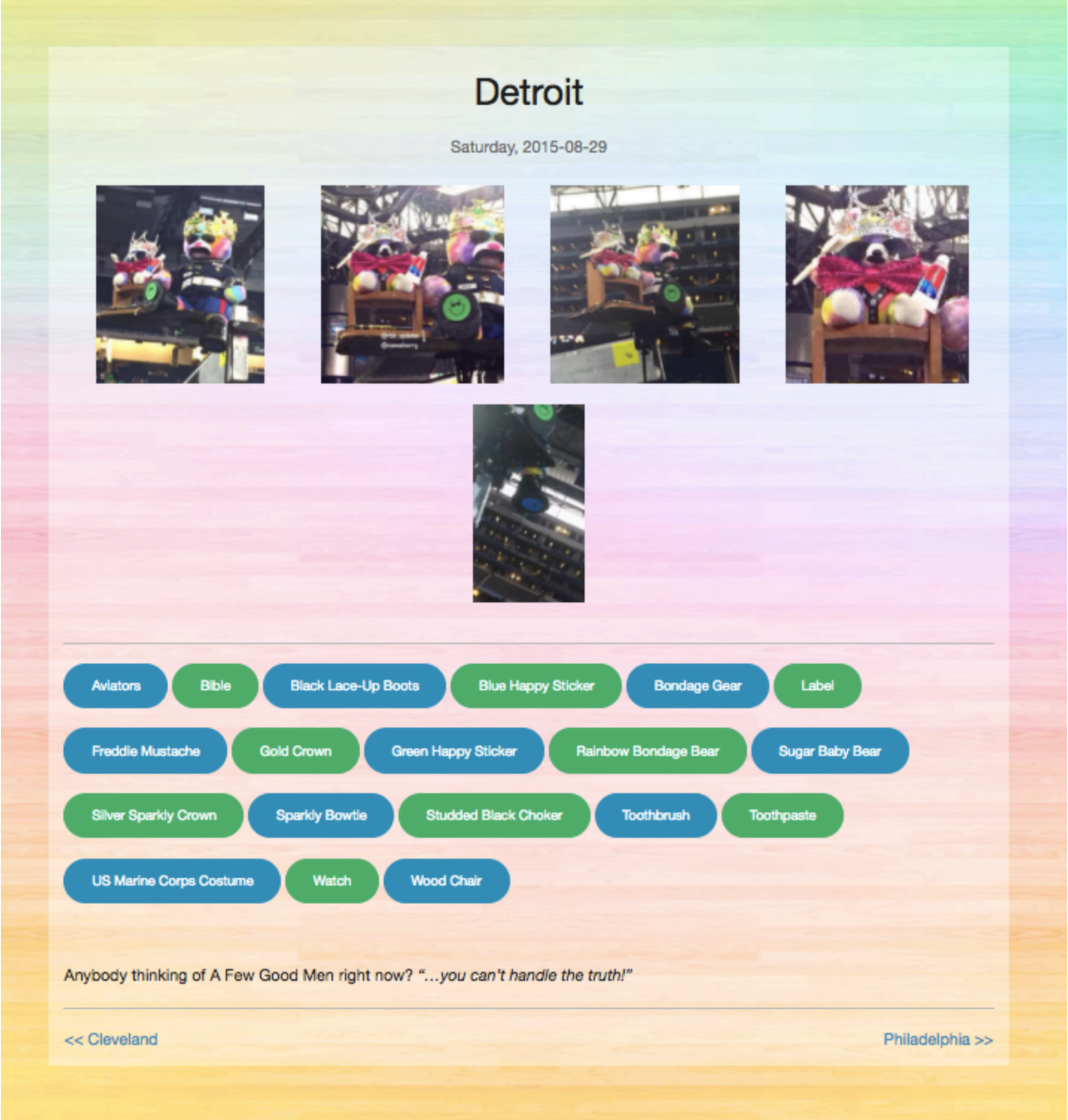

Figure 6: Entry for RBB's appearance in Detroit, 29 August 2015

With RBB, fans took the interpretive methods that scholars usually consider as applied to "plot" questions such as "what will happen next?" or "what is the solution to a mystery?" and instead applied them to character questions such as: "What are these singers like? How are they

feeling? Under what otherwise invisible industrial constraints do they find themselves, and with whom do they feel solidarity?" Through a slow accumulation of details across multiple concerts, RBB started to become allied in fans' minds with one of the members of One Direction -- Harry Styles – while his frequent companion "SBB" became allied with Styles' band-mate Louis Tomlinson. Fans may have considered these connections relatively tenuous at first, but the links connecting RBB and SBB to Styles and Tomlinson solidified as the tour went on, and as the bears kept appearing with the same visual references to Styles and Tomlinson. Any example I could offer will seem thoroughly opaque to a non-fan: for example, why would RBB being pictured with a banana tie him to Harry Styles, or a skateboard signal Louis Tomlinson? If you've been a One Direction fan for years however – or if you've seen the Tumblr "masterposts" that other fans have helpfully compiled to guide you through fandom history – you might recall the running joke of Harry Styles' reputed love of bananas, or that one of Louis Tomlinson's first tattoos was a skateboard. If these connections still sound tenuous, that reaction actually furthers my point, which is that fans are so immersed in these details – in this type of reading – that these types of narrative connections are most available to those who have been watching Harry Styles eat bananas onstage for years. That is, the story of RBB is most legible as a long, repetitive, and detailed one.

Unlike fans who are attempting to discover the winner of *Survivor* or solve the mysteries of *Lost*, One Direction's unstable relationship to its own fictionality encourages fans to see celebrity – and the terms of their own relationship to it – as itself a mystery to be investigated. Affect rather than plot is the object under fans' magnifying glasses. More specifically, fans are investigating the possibilities and pitfalls of affect as a language through which performers and fans – especially LGBTQ+ fans – can communicate, particularly as a way to make visible the

systemic constraints and contradictions of laboring and/or being fan within contemporary media industries.

RBB's own silent, serial narrative – and the methods that fans used to write the serial narrative that would make RBB's readable – offers a particularly vivid example of how fans' attempts to negotiate the combined real/fake/fictional characters of One Direction produces these affective narratives. For example, in response to the spinning salon chair in Newcastle, "beccasafan" – the creator of a website that archived all of RBB and SBB's appearances – noted:

> Fandom speculation has pointed out that the chair goes in circles, ie, it revolves. Revolution? Or perhaps referencing the spin cycle and [Harry Styles'] tweet about laundry? Another thought by spinning around, RBB sees everything. A nod to the boys being aware of what the fandom is talking about? We've seen before that the 4th wall doesn't exist. Another possibility is that by spinning around, everyone at the arena is able to see RBB fully, rather than only those he initially faces.[260]

Beccasafan here posits possible connotations of a revolving chair, while also referencing prior RBB details, and crucially, the actions and intentions of One Direction themselves. By this point, it was commonly accepted among RBB analysts that RBB was meant to represent Styles, and it was similarly believed that One Direction's four members – Styles, Tomlinson, Liam Payne, and Niall Horan – did exert some level of control over the bears. The bears were therefore believed to reference and provide insight into the band, and even on occasion transmit messages from them. Even now, whenever Styles or Tomlinson do anything particularly sneaky – evading an uncomfortable interview question, penning a cryptic Tweet, or seeming to offer subtle nods to the fandom – fans bring up their presumed identities as RBB and SBB. That is, Styles and Tomlinson easily take on the personae of RBB and SBB and vice versa. But as we see in the

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[260] beccasafan, "Newcastle 1," *1D's Rainbow Bondage Bear & Sugar Baby Bear*, 25 Oct 2015, beccasafan.github.io/rbb//concerts/2015/10/newcastle-1/.

passage above, RBB simultaneously adopts for fans an agentic, quasi-independent identity. It is RBB, not necessarily Styles, who "sees everything."

It is therefore not the case that RBB is different from Styles because one is fictional and one is real, or because one is subsumed under the identity of other. By appearing consistently in the very spaces – arenas and stadiums – in which Styles, Tomlinson, Payne, and Horan are themselves most fully encountered as embodied individuals, RBB establishes himself as physically distinct from any of the band members, equally capable of seeing and being seen. But like a fluffy Dorian Gray, the realer RBB feels, the more questions he raises about the characteristics of the band. In the passage above, for example, beccasafan references the "4th wall," a theatrical term that establishes the action of a play as occurring in a separate, imaginary universe from its audience. Its use here suggests an association between the concert stage and a theater stage, and between One Direction and actors performing fiction. beccasafan does reject the presence of the fourth wall, but it is in part *because* RBB seems capable of traversing and dismantling its boundaries in ways that the band perhaps cannot.

Similarly, if one were to look carefully at the photos of RBB provided above, one might notice blue and green smiley face stickers on RBB's feet. These stickers changed frequently to express either happiness, sadness, or anger. The emotions of these stickers stood in stark contrast to the emotions performed by the band in interviews and on stage, where they tended to enact a slightly chaotic but earnest form of niceness. The stickers offered in counterpoint a series of variable, somewhat inconsistent, often negative emotions that necessarily called into question the band's simultaneous performances of energetic affability. Perhaps RBB's fans – many of whom were LGBTQ+ women – identified with these oblique gestures toward an anger that One Direction could not feel publicly. Fans also articulated explicitly in Tumblr posts, via their

investigations into the band's signaled but unspoken emotions, the possible causes and contexts of these shared, formerly unarticulable feelings. In the context of the rest of RBB's ambiguities and clues, these stickers framed celebrity and fan affect as a deliberately propositional, communicative, and communal act that requires substantial effort – through fans' Tumblr investigations – to access.[261] That is, RBB and One Direction fans emphasize the elements of affect that are most strategic, serial, and spread across multiple platforms.

What RBB and his fans together developed was essentially a queer (and closeted) serial historiography. As I've noted above, RBB and SBB frequently highlighted LGBTQ+ entertainers in their tableaux, most of whom lived in the recent past, many of whom were closeted, and some of whom had a particular local connection to the places through which the band was traveling. Fans considered RBB a kind of pedagogue in these moments, pointing fans toward historical figures whom fans would research before circulating and discussing their findings on sites like Tumblr. That is, RBB made visible a web of formerly invisible relationships between One Direction's performances of heterosexuality, the queer "characters" of the band as written by fans, fans themselves, and queer performers of the past. Through his own serially silent performances, RBB brought these groups – diffused through space, time, and shades of fictionality – into communication with each other.

RBB is a particularly visible manifestation of the multiple identities – and types of fictionality – that are already contained within a celebrity like Harry Styles. If a stuffed bear can exist in such ambiguous relation to Styles, and if his relationship to Styles can take so much

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[261] Louisa Ellen Stein discusses a similar kind of relationship in *Millennial Fandom* between online fan communities what she calls "feels culture." For Stein, "emotion fuels fan transformative creativity" (156); what I am suggesting is that affect is not just a driver of creativity, but also provides a structure and objective that allows fans to understand their disparate fan practices as connected parts of a narrative.

work for fans to unpack, how much more work must it take for fans to negotiate the character "Harry Styles" as he is written in fanfiction, by fans, by journalists, by himself, etc? The conditions that enable fans to tell simultaneous stories of different versions of Harry Styles through the intersection of seriality with live space, comprise the focus of the next section.

Case Study 2: "Medicine" and Serial Gaps

Whether it was deliberate or not, "Harry Styles – Live on Tour," Harry Styles' 2017-2018 post-One Direction tour, effectively drew and built upon the methods of understanding and engaging with the band that fans had developed during the One Direction days. I am therefore engaging mostly with Styles as a solo artist in this section, not because it represents something markedly different from One Direction, but because the strategies that fans formulated for engaging with One Direction actually became more settled as time went on. In particular, both Styles' celebrity persona and "Harry Styles – Live on Tour" (or "HSLOT") demonstrate a kind of selective illegibility.

To demonstrate this, I will narrow in on one song from the tour in particular. It is called "Medicine," and it was debuted on tour (i.e. it was not on any album). In fact, a studio recording of this song does not currently exist, so it is only preserved on fan recordings uploaded to sites like YouTube, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, etc. At the same time, fans have uploaded recordings that correspond to every stop on Styles' tour. A lot of fans were invested in finding and saving those recordings every night so that the fandom would have that complete record. So the song both felt very live and ephemeral, and is also preserved multiply: by multiple people, and in that "Medicine" as a text is comprised of the sum of its performances, every few days, across several months.

As with One Direction, HSLOT carried an expectation that fans around the world would be consuming each concert online, almost as it happened, and this expectation was also built into the way the tour was designed. One simple example of this involves Styles' wardrobe. He would wear a different, elaborate outfit on stage at each performance, and as the tour stylist – Harry Lambert – explained in a recent interview, "When I worked on Harry's 2018 tour, we created a full wardrobe of fantastical stage wear, with the specific aim of keeping the audience eager to know what he would wear each night."[262] Since the audience itself is obviously different every night, that feeling of eagerness and suspense that Styles and Lambert were trying to cultivate obviously depended on images of the outfits circulating online. So when Lambert talks about the "audience," he's referring to the people standing in the arena, and also the people simultaneously checking Tumblr for concert updates. In other words, not only does "Harry Styles – Live on Tour" feel like a repetitive, cyclical object, but it also does have an element of linearity and suspense that comprises a particularly serial combination. Which brings me back to the song "Medicine," and particularly, the way that its serial form intersects with the song's actual contents.

When Styles debuted the song, the entertainment media framed "Medicine" in their headlines as a "bisexual anthem."[263] A *Hollywood Life* headline asked more specifically, "Is Harry Styles Bisexual? Fans Believe He Addresses Sexuality In New Song 'Medicine.'"[264] Many of Styles' fans did discuss "Medicine" as a "bi anthem" on social media, and a lot of his fans do

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[262] @harry_lambert. "Notes On Camp – Elle UK." *Twitter*. 8 March 2019. twitter.com/harry__lambert/status/1104011333081747456.
[263] Stephen Daw, "Fans React to Harry Styles' New Song 'Medicine' & Call It a 'Bisexual Anthem,'" *Billboard*, 15 March 2018, www.billboard.com/articles/news/pride/8247572/harry-styles-bisexual-medicine-fans-react.
[264] Robyn Merrett, "Is Harry Styles Bisexual? Fans Believe He Addresses Sexuality In New Song 'Medicine,'" *Hollywood Life*, 14 March 2018, hollywoodlife.com/2018/03/14/harry-styles-bisexual-new-song-medicine-evidence/.

think that Styles himself is queer. These headlines, however, frame as a surprising twist what fans have either always believed – or still do not believe, depending on the fan – regardless of the lyrics of "Medicine." The language of "fans believe" in these headlines serves as a kind of rhetorical hedge, because Styles is notoriously cagy about labeling his sexuality in the media even as he sings "bi anthems" in arenas. In other words, when a celebrity engages publicly with sexuality in ways that don't fit into the framework of "coming out," this engagement gets displaced rhetorically onto fans. In fact, for fans, "Medicine" wasn't necessarily about Styles "coming out" at all, but was more like the middle chapter of a years-long serial story that Styles and his fans have been co-constructing, predicated in part on a refusal to be legible.

In the context of "Medicine," this co-construction plays out quite literally. Again, there is no studio recording of this song, and importantly, there are also no official lyrics. This has led to a lot of debate and contestation over what the lyrics actually are, particularly in the section that engages most explicitly with Styles' possible bisexuality, which also happens to be the section that listeners have struggled most to parse. Recordings are often visually fuzzy, hard to hear, from varying distances and angles, and filled with the sounds of the audience inhabiting the space. A fan may have to watch multiple fan-filmed videos of the same event, if they want to actually parse what happened on stage that night, and it is within that context that fans consume and share these "Medicine" videos. But one possible version of the most contested lyrics is: "The boys and the girls are in/ I mess around with him [or them]/ And I'm okay with it./ I'm coming down, I figured out I kinda like it/ And when I sleep I'm gonna dream of how you –". That last line ends in a long pause. With this pause, Styles uses his own fandom very strategically to maintain a sense of intimacy, or community, through this refusal to explain. He pauses for the duration of this missing word – leaving a space for it – suggesting that there *is* a word to be sung,

but that it's going deliberately unarticulated. So the incomplete rhyme creates a feeling of being unfinished or suspended. Fans in turn began filling that space with their shouted completions of the line. In later performances, Styles would sometimes acknowledge these fan lyrics with various silent facial expressions or gestures that reacted ambiguously to fans' guesses.

Interestingly, what Styles specifically refuses to articulate, and what he invites a crowd of people to articulate instead, is what would seem like a fairly personal "dream." While in a sense, he's giving over control of what we might consider personal information to a larger public – he's asking an audience to tell him how he dreamed – in effect he's speaking specifically to a fairly circumscribed community of fans who already know the song, and its status within the fandom as a "bisexual anthem." This has the implicit effect of excluding a more general public (and particularly the entertainment media) from these ongoing collaborative conversations about, and performances of, queerness.

While it's not unusual for musicians to do call-and-responses, or let the audience sing, the effect of it here is that – to simplify a lot – in a song in the first-person about bisexuality and queer desire, Styles is inviting fans to not just sing the song but to co-write it as well. In specifically *excluding* the entertainment media from writing a story about his sexuality, and just as specifically *including* fans in the writing of that same story, Styles frames his sexuality as something he's sharing in certain kinds of public spaces – and with a certain community – but not others.

Fans and Styles are co-creating a song like "Medicine" via three intersecting temporal structures: the live concert, as experienced in person; the concert experienced by fans who do not have tickets to that particular concert but are still engaging with it live, through fan uploads and commentary on sites like YouTube, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, etc; and, thirdly, repetitive

reblogging on Tumblr, Twitter, etc, that makes visible the continuities and connections between the concerts. It's these three types of time that together produce "Harry Styles – Live on Tour" as a serial narrative text, written on and through social media. In terms of the co-writing of "Medicine," fans and audiences are using this combination of rhetorical space, embodied concert space, and digital space to create the song. In other words, serial form is intimately intertwined here with the temporalities of digital platforms and queer community-building. Crucially, in this case, it is the platform characteristics and the queer community-building that produce the narrative form, and not vice versa.

"All I know at the end of the day": Conclusion

By considering One Direction and its fandom as a serial text, the goals of this chapter were to expand what serial continuity might look like, and to consider the way that different spaces – physical and virtual – contribute different temporal structures that nevertheless produce an overall serial narrative, even as these narratives are also grounded in the specifics of form, platform, audience, and general context. While in some respects, One Direction works like other transmedia narratives[265] - which are usually sprawling storyworlds that are distributed across multiple platforms – my focus on seriality emphasizes the regular temporal rhythms (albeit complex ones) of the narrative of One Direction. Furthermore, the narrative of One Direction is one that any individual audience member *can* explore with partial independence, but it is *built* collectively. In other words, while seriality does happen in and through texts, audiences together create serial narratives. Furthermore, the strands of simultaneous serial narratives that fans construct in stadiums, on Tumblr, on Archive of Our Own, and elsewhere, all work together to

[265] Marie-Laure Ryan, "Transmedia Narratology and Transmedia Storytelling," *Artnodes,* 18, 2016.

produce stories about One Direction that are most meaningful when they register and leave open the gaps in time, knowledge, and intimacy that fans themselves are experiencing.

Conclusion: Precarious Comfort

Mind the Gaps situates itself within approaches to form that balance an account of form as a cultural phenomenon with its stability and portability across time, place, and medium. In order to grapple with this apparent difficulty or contradiction, this project has both defined seriality as an audience-generated construct, and also, instead of focusing on audience behavior per se, has emphasized counterfactuals; alternate universes; behaving *as if* rather than behaving *as*; belief and "knowing" rather than holding conclusive knowledge; and shared contexts that may be implied rather than stated outright. One of my goals in developing the idea of "precarious knowing" was in fact to formulate a theoretical construct for discussing serial narratives that started from the premise that audience members engage with serial narratives – and seriality in general – differently depending on both their identities and their prior experiences with serial media. This is a fairly obvious statement, which, as I have argued through this dissertation, is also a formal assertion – one that theories of serial form can and should center. I understood form as the potential for form, or as the potential for an audience to have a relationship with form, rather than as any categorical definition.

By developing a formal account of seriality that took into account how audiences *might* read texts, I was looking for alternatives to two main understandings of form. First, to an

understanding of form as detached from, or as imposed upon, audiences.[266] Second, to an understanding of form as a bottom-up construct that can be understood empirically by studying how audiences *do* engage with texts.[267] The former often reproduces a hierarchical logic that positions form, or aesthetics, as a neutral construct to which audience populations, non-canonical creators, or scholars of identity react. The latter risks becoming either too specific, or of generalizing from unique audience populations. It also might privilege audience members about which there is documented evidence – audiences that tend to be the most aligned with, or able to safely negotiate, industrial structures.[268]

While there are myriad benefits to pursuing each of these approaches to form regardless, I developed the framework of "precarious knowing" as one way to theorize how audiences might create serial form that takes into account *both* that form's portability *and* its non-universality or non-neutrality. In the dissertation up until now, I have also tended to emphasize the pleasurable aspects of "precarious knowing" for an audience, and to emphasize audience agency in producing forms. Similarly, I have argued that "precarious knowing" is a collective formal construct, rather than one between text and individual. In describing this framework, I have tended to imagine audiences (especially in Chapter Four) with shared, or at least mutually legible, reading strategies, investments, and goals, many of which are sometimes tacitly

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[266] This approach does not necessarily imply that audiences are powerless; they can accept or reject texts, and play some role in the widespread adoption of formal innovations, but ultimately in this understanding, audiences' role is to receive form.
[267] Included in this category might be some cognitive approaches to narrative form, or the psychology of aesthetics.
[268] This statement is still true even as social media and the Internet in general has enabled audiences to become more visible to both researchers and each other. See: Mel Stanfill, *Exploiting Fandom*, for the way that media industries structure seemingly free – in both senses of the word – fan behavior. See: Abigail De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives*, for a discussion of the precarious position of digital archives and the invisible labor it takes to maintain them. For a discussion of the way that Black fans and fan scholarship are made invisible in fan communities and white academic histories of fandom, see: See: Rebecca Wanzo, "African American acafandom and other strangers," *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 20, 2015.

communicated. This imagined audience is therefore always itself precarious (at constant risk of misunderstanding one another or dissolution), fairly small in numbers relative to a general audience, and often positioned as outsiders to that general audience in terms of behavioral norms, shared context, or identity. This imagined audience also might be *itself* imagined by an audience member in question – a precarious belief that others out there are reading like them, before those others are found. "Precarious knowing" is therefore not the strategy of a utopian community that always lives in harmony. In some cases through this project, I read texts in a way that ran contrary to certain strands of common wisdom or common sense, and not because I thought such an approach necessarily captured what the majority of audience members were *really* doing with these texts. Instead, I was motivated in part by exploring the way that reading "against the grain" might also, itself, be a formal reading strategy and indeed might produce form.

The consequences of taking form as a universal given are particularly apparent in the field of nineteenth-century literature. Scholars of Victorian literature, and particularly of the English realist novel, have long argued that Victorian scholarship's attachment to, not just "the canon," but to the formal construct of "realism" itself, reinforces a center/periphery model of nineteenth-century literature that is based in imperial logics. As Elaine Freedgood has recently argued, scholarly assumptions about the "formal coherence" of nineteenth-century English realist novels positions English realism as the site of form, to and from which other literary traditions aspire or depart.[269] The imagined stability of the nineteenth-century English novel's form makes it difficult both to engage with its fundamental weirdness and discontinuities, and to engage with

[269] Elaine Freedgood, *Worlds Enough* (Princeton UP, 2019), xii.

the forms of non-canonical, non-white, or non-English novels.[270] One possible response to the historical elisions and exclusions of formalism (among many others) is what Alicia Mireles Christoff calls "relationality," meaning an attention to the relational in the form of Victorian novels through an emphasis on these novels' relations with seemingly distant texts (in Christoff's case, twentieth-century British psychoanalytic theory). Christoff's approach opens up how we might understand the form of Victorian novels by framing novel-reading as "shared thought, affect, and psychic experience"[271] rather than as an individual encounter with a stable text, and by framing the relationship between texts as "like the prongs of a tuning fork set ringing."[272] In other words, centering the relationality of form renders it unstable, difficult to define fully, and also as inherently transformed by its resonances with others (both texts and readers).

At the same time, as audience and fan scholars have noted, focusing on the relational in texts, or on the community around texts, is not inherently an antidote to the exclusions of formalism. In fandom in particular, fans speaking about fandom often emphasize its "transformative works," its inclusivity, a broadening of the representation available in traditional media, and its strong sense of community. As with nineteenth-century English realism, this implied set of universal characteristics in fanworks, and sense of a universal fan community, works to obscure racism in fandom in particular. If fandom is defined as a diverse, inclusive, and "transformative" space, any form of critique by fans of color – or any fannish interests that are somehow misaligned with the practices of mainstream fandom – become by definition, outside

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[270] In a more popular context, see my brief discussion in Chapter Three of invocations of Charles Dickens in discussions of contemporary televisual form. References to Dickens often work as general invocations of white male greatness and canonicity, but more specifically, references to Dickens in the context of television worked to make formal innovation writ large a white, male phenomenon.
[271] Alicia Mireles Christoff, *Novel Relations* (Princeton UP, 2020), 5.
[272] Christoff, *Novel Relations*, 6.

of fandom.[273] Rukmini Pande has coined the term "fandom killjoy" (drawing on Sara Ahmed's term "feminist killjoy") to describe the experience of consistently being framed as an outsider who "brings unwanted drama" to a community rather than as being herself a part of that community.[274]

Pande further addresses the notion that fan spaces are "safe" spaces of escapism for fans (and thus discussions of racism are inappropriately reintroducing "the real world"). She notes that for many of the nonwhite fans who participated in her interviews, "the escape relies not on switching off but on finding like-minded fans – not just in terms of fannish texts but also in terms of not being able to discuss problematic aspects of fandom's safe spaces."[275] In other words, a universalized notion of "escape" – through either escapist texts or communities that invite an audience to "switch off" – promote the disengagement of white audiences from certain kinds of critical thinking about texts, but also (even in fandoms that ostensibly prioritize community) from the responsibilities of inclusive community-building. In contrast, "escape" for nonwhite audiences might require specific textual and community-building strategies.

If a central topic of this dissertation has been the interrelation of community and form, notions like "escape," "safety," and "comfort" all work in similar tautological and exclusionary ways in both domains. One of the goals of this dissertation has been to offer a theoretical alternative to the formal construct of "comfortable seriality," as it appears across time, disciplines, and media. Comfortable media, much like fandom or in some cases realism, manages to be simultaneously above and below critique: both silly (white) lady media, and also something

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[273] See for instance: Stitch, "What Fandom Racism Looks Like: Weaponized White Womanhood," *Stitch's Media Mix*, 22 Jan 2020, stitchmediamix.com/2020/01/22/weaponized-white-womanhood/.
[274] Rukmini Pande, *Squee From the Margins* (U of Iowa Press, 2018), 13.
[275] Pande, *Squee From the Margins*, 137.

either ideologically powerful or necessary for (white women's) escape and survival. Furthermore, the universalizing work done by "comfortable media" invokes both the "formal coherence" of nineteenth-century English realism and the "safe spaces" of fan communities. As Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy R. Wong have recently noted, the notion that "comfort" and "safety" are inherent properties of particular kinds of texts is a crucial way by which the whiteness of Victorian Studies – and fandom; and film, television, and media studies; etc – gets maintained.[276]

In this dissertation, I have often pushed back against any simple binary of complicated versus comfortable forms. In doing this, I am not suggesting that audiences do *not*, for instance, find watching *Law & Order: SVU* marathons, reading fanfiction, or rereading *Emma* to be comforting; or indeed, that they *should* not. I am not arguing that being either comfortable or uncomfortable is a universal good, or that crime procedurals are secretly more complex than we think, and therefore that they are totally wonderful.

I am arguing more specifically that codifying "comfort" (or indeed, "complexity") as a *formal* property of certain serial media results in the naturalizing of certain kinds of comfort, which most often means white audiences' comfort. Additionally, anyone who is *not* comfortable – particularly audiences of color – becomes positioned as engaging in a critique that is inherently not a matter of form. This practice also de-emphasizes or renders invisible the work – work like "precarious knowing" – that marginalized audiences might perform to engage with ambivalently or unevenly comfortable texts, forms, and audience communities. In short, one goal of my dissertation is to emphasize that as a matter of form, "comfortable" serials can equally reinforce

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[276] "Undisciplining Victorian Studies," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 10 July 2020, lareviewofbooks.org/article/undisciplining-victorian-studies/.

comfort, discomfort, or something in between: they do not inherently privilege one kind of affect. If, as I argued in my introduction, form is a process of form-*making* – and one that can center a non-universalized understanding of audience – this definition also centers in formalism the (precarious) work of inclusion, anti-racism, transformation, and making "comfortable" forms and spaces genuinely safe.

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