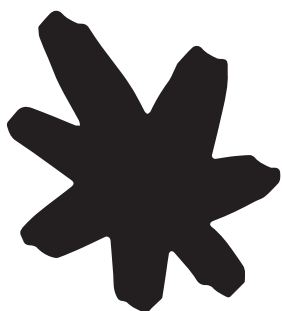


in
my humble
opinion.

my
so-called
life

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A Toaster or Something

Angela Chase was supposed to have a white lob — that’s what *My So-Called Life* writer Winnie Holzman wanted: “albino white.” “I may have seen a girl on the street, I really don’t know,” she says. “I guess it just occurred to me that ‘Wow, that’s out there.’” But the set hairdresser convinced her not to do it. She said it would ruin Claire Danes’s hair, a natural dirty blond, and suggested arterial red instead. That meant every time Danes showered, she looked like “a murderess.” And in a sense she was. Angela’s red dye killed her past. A milk-colored mop might have been ideal as a symbol of her innocence — and, as a blank slate, a perfect metaphor for a girl searching for her identity — but it would have turned her into a specter floating seamlessly through her so-called life, the same way she always had. But red? Red is the color of revolution.

In her very first voice-over, Angela explains that, at 15, she is done with her old life. “Things were getting to me,” she says, peering out from two peanut-colored curtains of hair. “Just how people are, how they always expect you to be a certain way.” A subsequent scene in the pilot has her staring wide-eyed at her own reflection as a newly dyed blood-colored hank drips over her shoulder. “School is a battlefield, for your heart,” she says. “So when Rayanne Graff told me my hair was holding me back, I had to listen. ’Cause she wasn’t just talking about my hair. She was talking about my life.” By changing her hair, by taking control of it, she is taking control of that life, the life her parents and her teachers and the world have been dictating for her. The red signals her search for her own persona — a bright new one beyond her inheritance — even though she’s not entirely sure what it is yet. As she tries to find out, *Crimson Glow* illuminates her way.

Angela Chase appeared on ABC for the first time on August 25, 1994. She was nothing like her contemporaries, most notably hair-flipping cheerleader Kelly Kapowski and designer uber-bitch Brenda Walsh. Both *Saved by the Bell* (1989–1993) and *Beverly Hills, 90210* (1990–2000) were glossy, brightly colored celebrations of Hollywoodized teen life. These “adolescents” always looked amazing and were amazingly popular and lived in amazing houses with amazing parents and went to amazing parties and dated amazing guys and it was all so exciting! And when the music turned sober, these beautiful young things preached from their gilded screens about safe sex and just saying no. Even the ostensibly real

teens in Canada's *Degrassi* franchise were contrived. With no sheen whatsoever (the show even excluded contemporary cultural references in an attempt to avoid becoming dated — it didn't work), the original CBC trilogy used a documentary-like aesthetic to shoot a Toronto school's frayed halls, filled with average-looking kids with average homes. But the show's unwavering devotion to social issues, ranging from alcoholism to suicide to homophobia to anorexia, made it seem more like a series of thinly disguised public service announcements than entertainment.

If anything, Angela is the double-x answer to *The Wonder Years*' Kevin Arnold, narrating her own search for personhood. The idea for *MSCL* actually predated the Fred Savage nostalgia-roman. Marshall Herskovitz and Ed Zwick conceived *MSCL* back in the '70s while they were working on ABC's *Family*, a drama co-starring Kristy McNichol as a girl named Buddy. "Marshall and Ed would think of ideas for this teenage girl character," Holzman says, "like she lied to her parents or she experiments with cigarette smoking, or whatever it was — and the showrunner would come back to them and say, 'That's not our Buddy.'" So they decided, "Let's do a teenage girl but make her super authentic like everything we couldn't do on *Family*." Though they were sidelined by their next show, *thirtysomething*, once it ended in 1991, they brought the idea to Holzman, one of its writers. She's the one who conjured Angela Chase, the Pittsburgh adolescent with the very un-amazing life, and surrounded her with an equally relatable entourage — best friends Rayanne Graff and Rickie Vasquez, crush Jordan

Catalano, ex-BFF Sharon Cherski, neighbor Brian Krakow. Sure, social issues came up, but, as in real life, they weaved through the narrative, never didactically, but as mere fragments of a multi-faceted existence that often went unresolved. “I wanted [Angela] to be given her due as a human being and as someone to be respected and allowed her own complexities,” Holzman says. “I felt that way about every character.”

Human beings are hard to find on TV — ambiguity was rare on primetime in the '90s and continues to be even now. But on *MSCL*, not having the answer was allowed, nay encouraged. In the pilot, Angela is asked why she is quitting yearbook and she says, with irritation, “I don’t know why.” To allow for uncertainty is a hallmark of maturity. The inability to easily categorize ourselves is what makes us human, and, according to Holzman, it is one of the main components of *MSCL*. (“Why’re you like this?” Jordan asks Angela in “Life of Brian.” “Like what?” she responds. “Like how you are?”) It is also a main component of feminism, which, in Tavi Gevinson’s words, “is not a rulebook but a discussion, a conversation, a process.” In fact, the founder of the teen feminist mag *Rookie* delivered a TEDx Talk in 2012 called “Still Figuring It Out,” in which she discussed *Rookie*’s encouragement of equivocation. “The point is not to give girls the answers and not even give them permission to find the answers themselves,” she said, “but hopefully inspire them to understand that they can give themselves that permission, they can ask their own questions, find their own answer.” Because one answer does not exist. “Women are complicated, women are multi-faceted,” Gevinson said. “Not

because women are crazy but because people are crazy and women happen to be people.” She noted that “teenagers are especially contradictory”¹ but she only really saw that reflected on television in *Freaks and Geeks*’ Lindsay Weir and *MSCL*’s Angela Chase. The latter is particularly ambivalent, often contemplating one thing and doing another. “What I was thinking, as, like, a New Year’s resolution, is to stop getting so caught up in my own thoughts, ’cause I’m, like, way too introspective, I think,” she says in “Resolutions.” “But what if not thinking turns me into this really shallow person? I better rethink this becoming less introspective thing.”

Angela’s thoughts, her life, filled a hole in the market. Holzman knew the Hollywood stereotypes around her and created a show within them. “I would try to almost have them and then bust people out of them,” she says. She took the one-dimensional, gave it complexity, and in so doing produced one of the first feminist teen series. *MSCL* never once uses the F-word, but at the moment third-wave feminists in the real world were questioning the traditions surrounding gender, sexuality, class, and race, *MSCL* was doing the same thing on TV. In a neat parallel with the movement, the show’s teen protagonists personify powerlessness in the face of authority. While Angela and her friends attempt to establish independence, they constantly knock against the rules established generations before them.

¹ As Nomy Lamm wrote in “It’s a Big Fat Revolution” in the formative third-wave collection, *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation* (1995): “My contradictions can coexist, cuz they exist inside of me, and I’m not gonna simplify them so that they fit into the linear, analytical pattern that I know they’re supposed to.”

There is, however, one historical figure Angela's creators pledged whole-hearted allegiance to: Holden Caulfield. Describing the show's title as "Salingeresque," Matt Zoller Seitz wrote in an oft-quoted review in the *New York Times* that *My So-Called Life* "showcases the most sophisticated use of the unreliable narrator ever seen in network drama." Like Holden's narration in *Catcher in the Rye*, Angela's, he wrote, "shows how teenagers try to control their chaotic inner lives by naming things, defining them, generalizing about them, even when they don't really understand what they're going through." The results tend to be unintentionally funny. "We barely talked, so when we did, it came out sounding really meaningful," Angela narrates in "Self-Esteem" before announcing out loud: "There's a tiny leaf in your hair." In "Life of Brian," she claims to respect Jordan Catalano for operating under the mantra of "whatever happens, happens," but when Brian Krakow uses the same expression, she claims it's "the stupidest thing" she's ever heard. These are the sorts of inconsistencies that are not uncommon in everyday life, but their complexity often inspires Hollywood neglect. The narrator is traditionally considered the authority, the one with objectivity — their word is the last word, and it's never wrong. *MSCL* operates under no such pretenses. Its creators force us to live through Angela's contradictions with her — when she is wrong, when she is right, when she is both and neither — because it is through her voice-over, through her particular perspective, that we experience everything on-screen. "Diaries are records of emotional rather than factual memory, and Angela's narration is unreliable because

she's recording subjective experiences rather than objective truths,"² writes Caryn Murphy in "It Only Got Teenage Girls" in the critical essay collection *Dear Angela: Remembering My So-Called Life*. "The viewer is often privy to information that Angela either doesn't know or doesn't want to see, which helps to establish her as a 'realistic' adolescent."

The real Claire Danes was all of 13 years old when she auditioned for *MSCL*. Winnie Holzman had written a pilot that was meant to capture "a naked quality, not a person but a feeling of freedom and bondage, shyness and fearlessness," which the young actress perfectly embodied. At her audition in 1992, Danes, Holzman recalled years later in the *New Yorker*, "was sexy and not sexy, free and bound up, open and closed, funny and frighteningly serious." Writer John Lahr, who spoke to Holzman for the magazine in 2013, defined Danes's acting as "a combination of thoughtfulness and impulsiveness" and what better way to describe Angela Chase? "I don't think I've ever played a character who was having such a parallel experience," Danes said in an interview for the DVD collection *My So-Called Life: The Complete Series*. She filmed the pilot in early 1993 and ABC first mentioned *MSCL* to the *Times* in April, calling it the "anti-90210." There was talk of a midseason pickup, but, Herskovitz said, "they don't really have a place for it." The network took almost a year to find one, and in May 1994 it was announced that *MSCL* would appear that fall on Thursdays at 8 p.m. By that time, Danes was 15 like her character. "Angela and

² This recalls a line from Jennifer DiMarco's essay "Word Warrior" from *Listen Up*, in which she describes her diary as "a place where the truth could be my own."

I were the same age, so we could dance around each other,” she told the *New Yorker*. “Sometimes I would have an experience and then it would be articulated in the show. Other times, I would play it out, then experience it personally later.” Both she and her character took themselves seriously, but they also felt repressed by the line they toed. “I remember being so relieved that I had an opportunity to voice my complaints about my time at school so perfectly and so eloquently,” Danes said, “with the right amount of rage and humor.”

But she couldn't have done it without Holzman, and Holzman couldn't have done it without her. “We gave birth to each other,” the writer told Lahr. “I was looking at someone who literally could do anything, and so I could too.” Timing did, however, play a pivotal role. If Holzman had auditioned an older Danes, their meeting might not have been so serendipitous. It was that fleeting elixir of adolescent energy that synergistically bonded Claire Danes and Angela Chase. The result? The pinnacle of Danes's acting career, the sole instance in which she and her character would be so fluidly continuous, imbuing her with a rare power (at any age, let alone 13): the ability to shape the show around her. Because Danes was underage, she could only spend a small amount of time on set, which translated to a limited amount of time viewers could spend with Angela. If she were hired, it would mean changing the focus of the show to include her family (uptight mother Patty, indecisive dad Graham, bratty sister Danielle) and friends. And so it changed: Danes, at 13, dictated the production of an entire TV series — she was that good.

Bringing her in meant chucking out the show's initial diary concept. When Holzman was originally hired by Herskovitz and Zwick, *MSCL* was supposed to unfurl around a teenager's journal. Holzman consequently began by writing a diary in a voice that captured the "sense memories" she had formed as a teenager (a theater geek in high school, she used the Stanislavski method). Though the idea was eventually dropped, some of her entries bubbled back up in the form of Angela's voice-overs. And the show's epistolary foundation is enforced by numerous allusions to Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl*, including the juxtaposition of Angela's face with that of the young Dutch writer who recorded her experience hiding from the Nazis as a 13- to 15-year-old (eerily, the same age span as actress Claire Danes when she played Angela Chase). "She says, 'I,'" a teacher reminds Angela's class of Anne Frank (and us of Angela) in the pilot. Thus Angela thinks of Frank as "lucky," because her agency, her "I," is what Angela aspires to — even when Angela's in the room, her parents often speak of her in the third person. At the end of *MSCL*'s first episode, Angela even characterizes Frank, who eventually died in the camps, as liberated: "She was hiding. But in this other way she wasn't. She'd, like, stopped hiding. She was free." Frank had committed the ultimate political act — transcending confinement by freeing herself within the pages of her diary. Though feminist critic Katha Pollitt argued that "'the personal is political' did not mean that personal testimony, impressions, and feelings are all you need to make a political argument," in *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*, the seminal introduction to third-wave feminism,

Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards qualified this: “It may not be all you need, but testimony is where feminism starts.” And it is where *MSCL* starts too. “I am a feminist, they are feminists,” Holzman says of Herskovitz and Zwick, “so there’s no doubt that there’s a feminism at work in the idea for the show and in the DNA of the show.”

The year before *MSCL* started shooting, a 22-year-old university student named Rebecca Walker coined the term “third wave” in *Ms.* magazine. Her call-to-arms was spurred on by attorney Anita Hill, who had accused Clarence Thomas, her supervisor at the U.S. Department of Education and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, of sexual harassment. “Can a woman’s voice, a woman’s sense of self-worth and injustice, challenge a structure predicated upon the subjugation of our gender?” Walker inquired. “Anita Hill’s testimony threatened to do that and more.” But ultimately it didn’t. Ultimately, Hill’s credibility was questioned — the length of time it took her to come forward, her continued contact with Thomas — and the man she attempted to fell enjoyed a cushioned landing on the Supreme Court. Her testimony wasn’t enough. “Thomas’s confirmation, the ultimate rally of support for the male paradigm of harassment, sends a clear message to women: ‘Shut up! Even if you speak, we will not listen,’” Walker wrote. “I will not be silenced.”

Though feminism is traditionally defined as equality for both sexes in social, political, and economic spheres,³ Walker

³ Feminists tend to prefer bell hooks’s definition: “Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression.”

adapted it to her generation. This was no longer the first-wave suffragettes (they went out in the '20s) or the second-wave women's libbers (they lasted into the '80s), this was what the *Times* had prematurely deemed the "postfeminist era." "To be a feminist is to integrate an ideology of equality and female empowerment into the very fiber of my life," Walker wrote in response to the *Times*. And this didn't just apply to women anymore, it applied to girls too. According to *Manifesta*, psychologist Carol Gilligan helped usher in the girls' movement by stressing the importance of surfacing young women's interior monologues. In the prologue to her 1990 book *Making Connections*, Gilligan wrote that she was "changing a tradition by including girls' voices." And the riot grrrls picked up where she left off. The young punk feminists from the Northwestern U.S. reclaimed epithets like "slut" and "bitch" and empowered teens with music and art and zines. Bratmobile coined "riot grrrl" in one of these zines, and in another written by Bikini Kill's Kathleen Hanna in 1991, the riot grrrl manifesto exposed "racism, able-bodieism, ageism, speciesism, classism, thinism, sexism, anti-Semitism, and heterosexism." Meanwhile, Baumgardner and Richards and their Third Wave *Manifesta* called "to liberate adolescents from slut-bashing, listless educators, sexual harassment, and bullying at school, as well as violence in all walks of life, and the silence that hangs over adolescents' heads, often keeping them isolated, lonely, and indifferent to the world."

MSCL broke this silence on a much larger scale than activists and academia. As a primetime TV show, it was accessible to

a wider audience, like the riot grrrls' music, but, unlike the riot grrrls, it delivered the message through actual teenagers. If the third wave encouraged girls to speak up, Angela Chase was their spokeswoman. Even her name itself, Angela, is derived from the Greek word for "messenger of God." She is the chosen one. Her voice echoes through Pennsylvania's Liberty High School, through her own home, through that of her best friend Rayanne Graff, through Rickie Vasquez's head, through Jordan Catalano's heart, through Brian Krakow's everything. Whether it is her actual voice or the one inside her or the one written down, we hear it all, it all has value. The show even used a separate tack for filming Claire Danes in voice-over, a wide lens focused on her face to give the impression of intimacy. It was "a psychic space around her so we're inside her experience," according to one of the producers. But even outside her head, in the final scene of the pilot, the camera and the cast whirl around Angela. She is the center of this universe.

In *MSCL*'s very first scene, Angela looks directly at the viewer and says, "Um, excuse me." Her first words are an apology despite having done nothing wrong. This is the old Angela, the one who accepts the world she has been dealt, the girl at the beginning of "The Fable":

Once upon a time there lived a girl. She slept in a lovely little cottage made of gingerbread and candy. She was always asleep. One morning she woke up, and the candy had mold on it. Her father blew her a kiss and the house fell down. She realized she was lost. She found herself walking

*down a crowded street. But the people were made of paper.
Like paper dolls. She blew everyone a kiss goodbye and
watched as they blew away.*

This is Angela Chase's portrait of her awakening, which appears in "The Substitute" in her school magazine, the *Liberty Lit*. The gingerbread-and-candy cottage houses the "good" girl, a sweet girl who works on yearbook, whose best friend is the daughter of her mom's best friend, whose warm (in color, even) suburban two-parent family is equally pleasant. It's a life without edge, one with simple rules — about friends, about family, about the world — that are followed without question. It's a wholesome existence in which the chaste Chases fit perfectly. Except there's something off about it. At the brink of adulthood, Angela suddenly realizes that her life is so precariously unidimensional that one kiss could dismantle the whole thing. "It just seems like you agree to have a certain personality or something, for no reason, just to make things easier for everyone," she says in the pilot. "But when you think about it, I mean, how do you know it's even you?"

Who Angela is is indistinguishable from how she sounds. Her voice is her source of power. It's all she really has, and it's what gives shape to her existence, and thus the show itself. Angela's voice is so distinct that when she and Rayanne break up, Rayanne can no longer bear to hear her friend's old expressions. "Don't say, 'In my humble opinion,'" she tells Rickie in "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities." "That's Angela talk. That's how Angela Chase talks. What are you trying to do,

depress me?” Angela’s voice is an emotional barometer. When she is around Jordan Catalano, she cannot control it. “If only there was a button somewhere that I could just push to force me to stop talking,” she says. And when she’s angry, she clams up, weaponizing her silence the way only a teenager is allowed. When her best friend betrays her and then calls out to her, she doesn’t answer (“When you call someone’s name, like, kind of loud and they don’t hear you? It makes you feel really lonely,” Angela says prophetically in “Betrayal”). When Jordan babbles an incoherent apology, she simply stares. But it’s her choice. Like Rebecca Walker, she will not be silenced by anyone but herself. So when her principal attempts to shut her, and her classmates, up in “The Substitute” by shutting down the *Liberty Lit*, she does anything but. And when she fights with Jordan in the last episode, it’s through her words. In a recurring dream, Angela confronts him after he betrays her, screaming with so much power that her face contorts into a grimace. She doesn’t hit him; she doesn’t need to, her voice packs enough of a punch.⁴ “Then I wake up,” she says. “The storm of words still pounds through my body.”

It’s a line worthy of Vic Racine, *MSCL’s* response to *Dead Poets Society*, whose sign-off is “question everything.”⁵ The substitute specifically steers Angela and her friends away from “false, fake, boring, synthetic, bogus” non-expression toward

4 Ellen Neuborne writes in the *Listen Up* essay “Imagine My Surprise,” “listen for the jerk who will tell you to lower your voice. Tell him to get used to the noise. The next generation is coming.”

5 bell hooks would love Vic. Her 1994 book *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* promoted collaborative learning over authoritarian rule.

a more emotive form. “I want anger. I want honesty. I want nakedness,” he says in the aptly named “The Substitute.” “What you feel like saying, write it down instead.” He’s the perfect teacher for a diarist manqué; no wonder Angela tells her parents, “He’s an adult I can look up to, finally.” While her mom and dad fought for civil rights in the ’60s and ostensibly want her to stand up for her own, their values have become more conservative with age (a recurring theme among characters in the on-screen universes of Zwick and Herskovitz). Now they are more concerned with their daughter getting suspended than freeing her mind. Vic is not. Vic talks the talk and walks the walk to the point that he encourages Angela to actually walk out on school. He wears one white sock and one black, he chews toothpicks, and he inspires his entire class to follow suit, turning them into his own personal quasi-cult. He even throws out their old work (literally, out the window), which is met with criticism from Angela, who has not quite shrugged off her parents’ beliefs early in the episode. “I did it to clear the slate. I did it to wake you up,” Vic explains. “I did it to do something, to find you. And now, guess what, here you are, wide awake in front of me.”

Angela’s awakening equates to finding her own voice, which leads to her supporting others to find theirs, her version of political engagement. Thus, Angela’s self-expression is a form of activism, like *MSCL* itself. It is particularly symbolic that Angela risks suspension for the first time to fight censorship by publishing the *Liberty Lit* and with it the “naked” voices of the students that the principal deems “unacceptable.” “I mean, what

is the point of school if you can't say what you're thinking," she tells her parents. "You told me to pick my battles. Well, this is it. It may not be a war protest or a civil rights demonstration, but it's all I've got." But if this — giving the voiceless a voice, the invisible visibility — is not a political act, then what is? Like its feminist predecessors, *MSCL* makes the personal political, turning a teen girl's internal life and the nuances of her existence (and that of her family and friends) into something worth fighting for. School may be a battlefield for your heart, but it is a battlefield for your identity too. And the ultimate triumph — after 19 episodes of war — is nothing more than who you are. "People always say you should be yourself, like yourself is this definite thing, like a toaster, or something. Like you can know what it is," Angela says in voice-over in "Pressure." "But every so often, I'll have, like, a moment, where being myself, and my life right where I am is, like, enough."

And it was more than enough for everyone else. She was only 15 years old, but Angela Chase didn't just start her own revolution. Without her, there would be no Buffy Summers, no Veronica Mars, no Felicity Porter — and her influence continues to this day. As Claire Danes herself said almost 20 years later as CIA agent Carrie Mathison in *Homeland*, "Sit the fuck down! I'm not finished."