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Afterword

Rereading *Seinfeld* after *Curb Your Enthusiasm*

Larry and Jerry handled the network restrictions brilliantly on *Seinfeld*. Those restrictions forced them to be really creative just to get around them. Look at what they got away with by using phrases like “Master of your domain” or “Not that there’s anything wrong with that.” But *Curb* is pure, undiluted Larry David.

—Robert Wiede

Six years after *Seinfeld* went off the air on the Peacock Network, its sitcoms lives on.¹ At the time of writing, DVDs for Seasons One through Four are available—among the best yet produced for any television series, and *Seinfeld* fans can watch their show just about any day of the week in syndication, where, as Epstein, Rogers, and Reeves demonstrate in their essay in this volume, the series continues to be a powerful commodity, a daily habit in millions of households. (As we write, it is possible in middle Tennessee to watch no less than four random episodes a day, two on Nashville’s Fox affiliate, two on Ted Turner’s TBS superstation.) And subscribers to HBO are also able to periodically revisit the *Seinfeld* sitcoms: *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, the Emmy-award winning verité-style comedy about the misadventures of *Seinfeld* cocreator Larry David, carries on the tradition. Its next season will be its fifth.

Like *Seinfeld*, *Curb* concerns the life of a real comic—Larry David this time, not Jerry Seinfeld—and his friends, which in *Curb* include both real (Richard Lewis, Ted Danson, Mel Brooks) and imaginary characters. As in *Seinfeld*, in each episode a series of seemingly unrelated situations (this time in the life of a single individual), usually caused by David’s utter lack of tact or complete unwillingness to compromise, customarily result in a final moment of sheer degradation

for its comic antihero. Unlike *Seinfeld*, however, it is not carefully scripted. Working from a scenario, its actors improvise each scene, resulting in the series' signature "fly on the wall" documentary feel.² Being on HBO, and offered in only ten installments a season, it may not be TV, and Jerry Seinfeld has had no hand in it, but the far more profane, far more ribald, far more adult, laugh-trackless *Curb* provides many of the same satisfactions as *Seinfeld*. *Curb* is certainly no spin-off; unless we count Larry David himself—the inspiration for George on *Seinfeld*—it has no recurring characters.³ In *Curb*'s second season Jason Alexander and Julia Louis-Dreyfus do appear, but as themselves, and both of their careers are suffering from having been on *Seinfeld*. Alexander in particular is sick and tired of "the George thing"—of being mistaken for "the idiot, the smuck" he once played—and lists some of the disgusting things he did on the show: stealing a tape from an answering machine ("The Phone Message," 2004), being part of a masturbation contest ("The Contest," 4010), eating an éclair out of a trash can ["The Gymnast," 6006]. Larry David, taking the complaints personally, responds to each with the protestation "But I did that!" ("The Car Salesman," *Curb*, 2001).

In "The Grand Opening," the final episode of Season Three of *Curb*, the new restaurant in which Larry is an investor finally opens. All season long, the partners have had difficulty hiring a chef (one had been fired by the bald Larry for wearing a toupee) and have been forced at the last minute to hire a new one who, as they discover too late, suffers from Tourette's syndrome, spewing streams of profanity without provocation or warning. At the grand opening, all is going well when, as expected, the chef's extreme profanity shocks the packed house. Not knowing what to do, Larry improvises, responding with his own string of vulgarities. Others join in, even Larry's father-in-law, and the air is filled with the bleppable, and since this is not TV but HBO, the obscene chorus rings out loud and clear. As the episode and the season end, the camera pulls in for a close-up of a satisfied David, his arms folded confidently across his chest, an atypical look of triumph on his face. It is one of television's most magical moments, but it could never have happened on *Seinfeld*.⁴ (In "The Shrimp Incident" [2004] from *Curb*'s second season, Julia Louis-Dreyfus, *Seinfeld*'s Elaine, announces her desire to appear on an HBO program so she can say the word "fuck," an expletive never uttered on NBC.)

The fourth-season *Curb* episode that aired while this afterword was being written ("The Weatherman," 4004) nevertheless exhibited multiple jokes and situations immediately recognizable as *Seinfeldian* in origin. Larry injures his back while attempting to urinate sitting down in the middle of the night; on *Seinfeld* George is a "stall man," scared of urinals ("The Note," 3001—written by David). Larry has a suede jacket ruined by the adhesive on a name badge; on *Seinfeld*

Jerry's suede jacket is ruined by snow ("The Jacket," 2003—cowritten by David). Larry's reluctance to wear a name badge itself recalls Jerry's unwillingness to have his photo displayed in the lobby of his apartment building ("The Kiss Hello," 6015—cowritten by David), as well as Lloyd Braun's politically disastrous plan to have all New Yorkers wear name tags ("The Non-Fat Yogurt," 5007—written by David). Nearly every mercifully laugh-trackless *Curb* episode reminds the attentive viewer of *Seinfeld's* ancestor text.

But the DVDs and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* do much more than perpetuate the *Seinfeld* legacy: they enable, even require, a rereading of *Seinfeld*, a wandering about in its seemingly familiar terrain already encouraged and facilitated by the accelerated revisiting of a series' text that syndication (and now DVDs) enables. We should not simply assume that *Seinfeld* in its original airing, *Seinfeld* in syndication, *Seinfeld* on DVD, and *Seinfeld* after *Curb* are the same series. In an important essay on "Audience-Oriented Criticism and Television," Robert C. Allen outlines the many ways in which the "reader-response criticism" of critics like Wolfgang Iser may be imported into the interpretation of TV texts. "[A]ny narrative form involves the reader's—or viewer's—movement through the text, from one sentence, shot, or scene to the next," Allen explains. "Because narratives unfold in time (reading time or screen time), as viewers or readers we are always poised between the *textual geography* we have already wandered across and that we have yet to cover." This wandering gives rise to a perpetual "tension between what we have learned from the text and what we anticipate finding." Question are answered and new ones asked, Allen explains, by "[e]ach sentence of a literary narrative or each shot of a television narrative."

Each new "block" of text we cover provides us with a new vantage point from which to regard the landscape of the text thus far, while at the same time it causes us to speculate as to what lies around the next textual corner. Hence our viewpoint constantly "wanders" backward and forward across the text. (105–106)

Exploring the "textual geography" of *Seinfeld* in in the more random travel of syndication, or surveying via the much more systematic trek provided by DVDs, moving back and forth through episodes visited (and revisited and revisited . . .) at random, "re-connoitering" (if you will) the series, we see things differently.

Watching very early episodes, for example, we may be shocked to find Jerry, George, and Kramer (in particular) not themselves—out of character (Jerry too kind, George too confident, Kramer too doofus and not enough hipster). Such reconnoitering may well have begun with *Seinfeld's* finale. Many *Seinfeld* veterans

found themselves a bit taken aback by the David-authored one hour episode in which a Massachusetts jury sends the “New York Four” to prison for violating a Good Samaritan Law after listening to a chorus of accusers, from Babu Bhatt (“He’s a very bad man!”) to Mabel Choate (mugged by Jerry in order to steal a marble rye).⁵ Somehow, the week after week laughter induced during *Seinfeld*’s original run had mesmerized, making fans unwilling to realize what horrible people Jerry, George, Elaine, and Kramer really were. With the *Seinfeld* text now complete, it was time to begin rereading *Seinfeld*.

Rereading *Seinfeld* after *Curb* alters the original in additional ways. For example, its obnoxious laugh track (if *Seinfeld*’s laugh track was one of Jerry’s girlfriend’s, he would have dumped it as more detested than “Elmer Fudd sitting on a juicer” [“The Bubble Boy,” 4006]) becomes all the more intolerable once we have experienced the democratic humor of *Curb*, a series that allows us to decide for ourselves what is funny. And it is difficult not to conclude that Larry David’s collaboration in the creation of the earlier program may have been underappreciated.⁶ Post-*Curb* *Seinfeld* seems more scatological, more sex-obsessed, more concerned with race, more politically incorrect, more Davidesque.

Jerry Seinfeld’s patented stand-up comedy, his “shallow, fairly obvious observations” (“The Serenity Now,” 9003) about everyday things, was famous for its uncharacteristic-for-its-time lack of profanity. (In the documentary *Comedian* [2002], which follows Seinfeld and a much younger comic as they struggle to make it—or remake it in Seinfeld’s case—in the comedy clubs, he comes across as a modest, basically sweet guy—not surprising in a film he executive-produced—who swears only offstage.) In his best-selling *SeinLanguage* (1993), we even find him making the following endearing observation:

Friends are the DNA of society. They are the basic building blocks of life. If you have a couple of good ones, treasure them like gold. There’s nothing better. Ever look at that MCI ad they have, “Friends and Family”? Who do they mention first? Your friends help you carry the big weight in life. That big burden we’ve all got called, “What the hell am I doing?” (51)

It is impossible, is it not, to imagine Larry David saying any such thing, in or out of persona. Such an avowal might serve as the mission statement for *Seinfeld* imitator and heir *Friends*, which ended a ten-year run on NBC in the spring of 2004, but on neither *Seinfeld* or *Curb* could any character utter such platitudes with a straight face. Indeed, in “The Serenity Now” (9003) we are given an-under-the-spell-of-a-former girlfriend Jerry, encouraged to get in touch with his feelings,

who temporarily believes such things, telling freaked-out George and oblivious-as-usual Kramer that he loves them and even proposing to Elaine, and all his friends, and the audience as well, immediately take him to have lost his mind.

The Improv in New York City, early seventies. A young stand-up comedian onstage, not telling any jokes. Silent, standing still, staring at the audience, scanning the group from left to right. After a few seconds of perusal, he shakes his head in a dismissive fashion and, just before he makes an abrupt exit, says, “Fuck you.”⁷

Scores of anecdotes such as this one, some apocryphal, surround the early days of Larry David, whose pervasive neuroses became legendary in the comedy industry. His tacit rejection of the crowd as a stand-up comedian—“you people,” he would say—often garnered feelings of embarrassment, nervousness, and anger from audience members. But not so with the in-crowd, the “Larry David cognoscenti . . . the other stand-ups who are sitting at the bar *plotzing*, tears streaming down their faces” (Oppenheimer 233). He was the guy to see, the ultimate comic’s comic.⁸

Strange as his onstage behavior was, David’s antics offstage were even more peculiar. Complimented three nights in a row by a fellow comedian, David’s reaction was a searching glare and the question. “What’s with all the nice-guy shit?” So insecure is David that, ultimately, life becomes an act. As he has said: “If [Nazi war criminal] Mengele gave me a compliment, we could’ve been friends. ‘Larry, your hair looks very good today.’ ‘Oh, really? Thank you, Dr. Mengele!’” (Thompson 2).⁹ We are unwelcome guests in David’s world, a world where nothing is sacred, and if you can’t take a joke, you can get the hell out.

Both Howard Gruber (“Breakaway Minds”) and Nora John-Steiner have argued that the nature of collaboration may well be the final frontier in understanding creativity. These pages are not likely to contribute much to that important task, but reconnoitering *Seinfeld* after *Curb* we should be better able to render onto Jerry the things that are Jerry’s and onto Larry the things that are Larry’s.

Scatology, Sex, and the Bodily Canon

The humiliations in question are often physical: the show has tirelessly enlisted body parts, bodily fluids, disgusting personal habits, diseases, and medical operations into its scenarios, as if the comedy of the lower body were necessary to keep in balance all that disembodied verbal riffing.

—Geoffrey O’Brien, “The Republic of *Seinfeld*”

In a multi-episode development in Season Three of *Curb* (“Crazy Eyez Killa,” “Mary, Joseph, and Larry” [3008, 3009]), Larry David gets a pubic hair stuck in his throat after performing cunnilingus on his wife. (It is finally dislodged after he gets in a fight with the man playing Joseph in a manger scene after Larry comments on how hot the Virgin Mary is.) In “The Doll” (2007) a small girl walks in on Larry while he is urinating. In “The Nanny” (3004), Larry inappropriately comments on the large penis of a young boy. In “The Weatherman” (4004), Larry may or may not have become aroused while a dog nuzzles his groin (in the subsequent episode [“The Five Wood,” 4005], the dog bites his penis while he sits on the toilet). *Curb*’s notoriously edgy (perhaps over the edge?) humor often concerns bodily functions.

For most of its history television has been ruled by Mikhail Bakhtin’s “bodily canon.” “Wherever men laugh and curse, particularly in a familiar environment, their speech is filled with bodily images,” Bakhtin insists in *Rabelais and His World*. But since the Renaissance a repressive, authoritarian “bodily canon” has censored the human body and its “grotesque expressiveness.” The bodily canon, according to Bakhtin, has a not-so-hidden agenda. It demands that all bodily orifices must be closed, allows no mergers of the body with the external world, insists that all signs of inner life processes and bodily functions (farting, belching, vomiting) be hidden or repressed, finds evidence of fecundation and pregnancy suspect, seeks to eliminate all protrusions and deformities.¹⁰

Jack Paar momentarily quit *The Tonight Show* in the early sixties because he was not allowed to tell a joke about a toilet (delicately called a WC). When Archie Bunker merely flushed a toilet, off-screen but audibly, in an episode of *All in the Family* (“New Year’s Wedding,” aired on January 5, 1976), television history was made. Neither before nor since (with the exception of potty-mouthed cable shows like *Ren and Stimpy*, *Beavis and Butthead*, and *South Park*) has television been scatologically inclined, and though more prominent than the scatological, sexuality has not found all that much free expression on TV before the coming of cable.¹¹

On *Seinfeld* the bodily canon is clearly a player. Has there ever been a more “anal” character than Jerry?¹² He gargles six times a day (“The Dog,” 3004), is appalled when chef Poppie fails to wash his hands before fixing his meal (“The Pie,” 5015), and is so grossed out by a girlfriend whose toothbrush has fallen in the toilet that he can no longer bring himself to kiss her (“The Pothole,” 8016).¹³ And yet the scatological on *Seinfeld* seems ever present; Bakhtin’s grotesque body is always in danger of erupting.

George admits to fantasizing about having sex with a giant woman. It’s his “life’s ambition” (“The Boyfriend,” 3017).

Vomit figures prominently: Jerry keeps track of his vomit streak (In “The Dinner Party” [5013] it ends after fourteen years [1980–94]); Kramer vomits all over Susan in “The Pitch” (4003) and again in “The Gum” (7010).

Elaine is grossly embarrassed by an exposed nipple on her Christmas card photo (“The Pick,” 4012).

Calvin Klein finds Kramer’s buttocks “sublime” (“The Pick,” 4012).

Jerry loses a supermodel girlfriend when she thinks she sees him picking his nose, which leads to a spirited discussion with George as to what exactly constitutes nose picking (“The Pick,” 4012).

Elaine meets an elderly woman (once Gandhi’s mistress) with a huge goiter that looks like a “second head” (“The Old Man,” 4017).

Jerry’s car is attacked by “BBO” (Beyond Body Odor), “The Beast,” a stench so bad he encourages, at episode’s end, a thief to steal the car (“The Smelly Car,” 4020).

Toilet paper is a recurring character: George discourses on it fatuously (it’s one of his favorite subjects¹⁴), and Elaine can’t convince a woman in an adjoining stall to “spare a square” (“The Stall,” 5012).

A hair ruins a cinnamon babka (“The Dinner Party,” 5013).

Cleavage is a dangerous thing: when George stares at NBC exec Russell Dalrymple’s daughter’s breasts, the result is termination of *The Jerry Show*; when Dalrymple, in turn, stares at Elaine’s purposely displayed bosom, his obsession leads to his death at sea (“The Shoes,” 4015; “The Pilot,” 4022).

A woman has a name that rhymes with a female body part, but “Delores” ditches Jerry when he can’t remember it (“The Junior Mint,” 4019).

Bras figure prominently: George interviews for a job as a bra salesman (after receiving instruction from his father on cup sizes, construction, etc.) (“The Sniffing Accountant,” 5004); the “braless wonder” Sue Ellen Mischke walks down the street wearing a bra as a top (and causing traffic accidents) (“The Caddy,” 7012); Kramer and Frank Costanza develop a bra for “man boobs”: “the Bro” or “the Manssiere” (“The Doorman,” 6016).

Kramer stops wearing underwear so that his “boys” may be free and “out there” (and his sperm cell count will increase) (“The Chinese Woman,” 6004). Jerry and Elaine recoil in horror at the thought that only a “thin layer of gabardine” separates them from Kramer’s genitals.

Jerry is arrested for urinating in a parking garage at a shopping mall (“The Parking Garage,” 3006); George gets in trouble for urinating in the shower at his health club (“The Wife” 5017); restaurateur Poppie twice ruins sofas due to incontinence (“The Couch,” 6005; “The Doorman,” 6016).

Jerry has to shave off his chest hair to satisfy a “hairless freak” girlfriend (“The Muffin Tops,” 8021).

Not surprisingly for a show about four single, serial-dating New Yorkers, *Seinfeld*'s subject matter often involves sex, where its (bodily) function as both text and subtext made the series a prime candidate for the wrath of Religious Right media watchdogs.¹⁵

His privacy destroyed due to a parental visit (“The Raincoats,” 5019), Jerry is desperate to have sex with his girlfriend Rachel because he is so “backed up” (this leads to their famous make-out session at *Schindler's List*).

When in “The Sponge” (7009), she learns that the Today sponge contraceptive has been discontinued, Elaine begins to fanatically hoard them, buying out the entire stock of one pharmacy and making careful decisions about whether or not potential lovers are in fact “spongeworthy.” One man who does pass her rigorous pre-sex interview is deemed not worthy of a repeat performance the following morning. In the same episode, we learn, though Jerry does not, that his altruistic girlfriend, whose goodness is a turnoff—“I mean, she’s giving and caring and genuinely concerned about the welfare of others,” Jerry confesses to George. “I can’t be with someone like that! . . . You can’t have sex with someone you admire.”—is also hoarding the sponge.

In “The Fusilli Jerry” (6019) Jerry’s patented sexual maneuver becomes a contested and much-sought technique when it is ripped off by Elaine’s lover Puddy, and George seeks, with great difficulty, to master it as well. Before he resorts to crib notes written on his hand, George’s girlfriend describes his *modus operandi* in one of the strangest, most disturbing lines ever uttered on network television: “It feels like aliens poking at my body.”

In “The Blood” (9004), George, anxious to unite all the things he loves into one, combines “food and sex into one disgusting uncontrollable urge.”

Appalled even at his own shallowness for dating a beautiful woman he despises, Jerry describes his dilemma as being “like my brain . . . facing my penis in a chess game. And I’m letting him win (“The Nose Job,” 3009), a face-off we get to see in a dream sequence.

Condoms have at least two cameos. The ubiquitous (but never seen) Bob Sacamano gives Kramer a defective case of them, which almost results in George’s “boys” truly “swimming” (“The Fix-Up,” 3016); George leaves a prophylactic wrapper on his parents’ bed (“The Cigar Store Indian,” 5010).

Pornography is frequently mentioned. Jerry and Elaine talk themselves into having sex again, combining “this” and “that,” after watching the “naked channel” on TV; George has gone so far as to imagine a possible screen name: Buck

Naked (“The Outing,” 4016), should he become a porn star; dentist Tim Whatley runs an adults-only office that features *Penthouse* as reading material in the waiting room (“The Jimmy,” 6017); in “The Butter Shave” (9001) a mustachioed George admits to “feeling like an out-of-work porn star”; Jerry cruelly suggests that his nemesis Sally Weaver deserves a downward career spiral that entails “years of rejections and failures till she’s spit out the bottom of the porn industry” (“The Cartoon,” 9013); when George tries to convince Jerry of reasons to have a computer, porn comes to mind (“The Serenity Now,” 9003).¹⁶

Masturbation plays an unprecedented role for a network television show. Inspired by a *Glamour* magazine, George gets caught masturbating by his mother, who ends up in the hospital (“The Contest,” 4010), leading to the four engaging in an infamous contest to see who can be “master of [his/her] domain” and go the longest without “gratifying themselves” (facing certain death in the near plane crash of the series finale, George admits he cheated) [“Finale,” 9021–9022]]. As an aspiring hand model himself, George learns of a legendary figure in the field whose failure to master his domain ruined his career (“The Puffy Shirt,” 5002). On *Seinfeld* even the animal world masturbates. When Kramer insults a chimpanzee, the zookeeper complains that it has “curtailed his autoerotic activities” (“The Face Painter,” 6021).

And all this rampant mono- and hetero-sexuality is routinely subverted by prominent “homosociality,” as Di Mattia (in this volume) and Gantz have so clearly demonstrated. But neither gives credit to the theory Jerry articulates in “The Beard” (6014) in order to explain why heterosexuals cannot convert members of the other team:

Jerry: Not conversion. You’re thinking conversion?

Elaine: Well it did occur to me.

Jerry: You think you can get him to just change teams? He’s not going to suddenly switch sides. Forget about it.

Elaine: Why? Is it irrevocable?

Jerry: Because when you join that team it’s not a whim. He likes his team. He’s set with that team.

Elaine: We’ve got a good team.

Jerry: Yeah, we do. We do have a good team.

Elaine: Why can’t he play for us?

Jerry: They’re only comfortable with their equipment.

Although she temporarily proves Jerry’s theory wrong, the conversion fails, and now Elaine is ready to theorize:

Jerry: He went back? What do you mean he went back?

Elaine: He went back.

Jerry: I don't understand it. You were having such a great time, the sex, the shopping.

Elaine: Well here's the thing. Being a woman, I only really have access to the, uh . . . equipment, what, thirty, forty-five minutes a week. And that's in a good week. How can I be expected to have the same expertise as people who own this equipment, and have access to it twenty-four hours a day, their entire lives?

Jerry: You can't. That's why they lose very few players.

Prior to the imposition of the bodily canon, Bakhtin was convinced, our species experienced embodiment as “a point of transition in a life eternally renewed, the inexhaustible vessel of death and conception” (335–36). Such a mindset—which Bakhtin calls “carnavalesque”—made the scatological celebratory. With its circus-evoking theme music and occasionally joyful profanity (in episodes like “The Grand Opening”), *Curb* sometimes seems Rabelaisian. Needless to say, we find little or no sign of the carnivalesque in “*Seinfeld's* humor noir.”¹⁷

Race

The thing about eating the black-and-white cookie, Elaine, is you want to get some black and some white in each bite. Nothing mixes better than vanilla and chocolate And yet somehow racial harmony eludes us. If people would only look to the cookie, all our problems would be solved.

—Jerry in “The Dinner Party” (5013)

“You my Caucasian?”

—Crazy-Eyez Killah (“Crazy-Eyez Killah,” *Curb Your Enthusiasm* [3007])

In “Affirmative Action” (*Curb Your Enthusiasm*, 1009), Larry David is walking with his friend Richard Lewis when an African American man runs by. When Lewis introduces the jogger as his dermatologist, Larry, “trying too hard to be affable,” makes what he thinks is a joke, mock questioning Lewis's choice of doctors: “Even with the whole affirmative action thing?” The doctor is very insulted. “I tend to say stupid things to black people sometimes,” Larry explains in defense after the doctor angrily departs. Later, on the way to the restroom in a restaurant, he runs into a drunken African American woman who he failed to hire for a part in David's post-*Seinfeld* movie *Sour Grapes*. She castigates “Mr. Larry David” for his racism. As proof of her charge she cites the complete absence of black people

on *Seinfeld*. As luck (and *Curb*'s signature convoluted plotting) would have it, Larry is forced to take Cheryl to the dermatologist's house for urgent medical attention. Before a gathering of black people, he manages not to say anything stupid for a change and has won the group over with his apology, when out of the restroom appears the actress who had accosted Larry earlier. His cover is blown.

Larry's "Affirmative Action" nemesis's charges could not have been news to *Seinfeld*'s cocreator. During its original run and frequently since, *Seinfeld* was chided for its obliviousness to matters of race.¹⁸ Rereading *Seinfeld*, however, the complaint seems less justifiable. Reconnoitering, we note that in fact, minor characters on *Seinfeld* represent a wide variety of minorities: Jackie Chiles, the ambulance-chasing lawyer who took on two of Kramer's litigation schemes (against big tobacco and big coffee), only to be frustrated, and who represents the New York Four in their finale trial (while sleeping with the enemy) is African American, as is George's front-office nemesis Morgan (the one who looks like Sugar Ray Leonard). So, too, are the exterminator who George tries to pass off as an old friend in order to impress Morgan ("The Diplomat Club," 6020); the NYU dean who takes away Kramerica Industries' intern ("The Voice," 9002); the family George imposes himself upon so he can see *Breakfast at Tiffany's* ("The Couch," 6005); the no-nonsense manager of Monk's, who threatens to confiscate Jerry's personal maple syrup ("The Wife," 5017) and promises to make George into his "own personal hand puppet" ("The Soup," 6007); the woman Kramer is dating and her family in "The Wife"; the tough custodial supervisor who bosses Elaine around during her flounder-acquiring sojourn in a broom closet ("The Pothole," 8016); the oddly named homeless shelter employee Rebecca DeMornay ("The Muffin Tops," 8021; "The Bookstore," 9017); the chairless security guard in a clothing store whom George insists on helping ("The Maestro," 7003). Many of these individuals—Morgan, Rebecca DeMornay, the NYU Dean—are in positions of power over the gang. When Grandpa gets a look at black-faced Kramer (who fell asleep in the tanning parlor) in the closing shot of "The Wife," his concluding assessment is one almost all of *Seinfeld*'s African Americans seem justified in making about our four: "I see a damn fool!"

Seinfeld also gives us Hispanic busboys ("The Busboy," 2012); Chinese mailmen ("The Cigar Store Indian," 5010) and delivery boys ("The Tape," 3008; "The Virgin," 4009); a Native American ("The Cigar Store Indian," 5010); Dominicans who roll their blintzes too tight ("The English Patient," 8017); Cubans ("The Cheever Letters," 4007); Puerto Ricans ("The Soup Nazi," 7006; "The Puerto Rican Day," 9020); a Pakistani ("The Café," 3007; "The Visa," 4014); Arabs ("The Smelly Car," 4020); and a Mexican ("The Little Jerry," 8011).

More than one episode foregrounds race as an issue. In “The Cigar Store Indian” (5010), for example, Jerry, interested in a Native American woman whom he offends when he gives Elaine a tasteless, racist present, finds himself unable to open his mouth without sounding like a racist. Needing directions to a Chinese restaurant, he asks a mailman who turns out to be Chinese and is offended:

Jerry: Uh, excuse me, you must know where the Chinese restaurant is around here.
 Mailman: Why must I know? Because I’m Chinese? You think I know where all the Chinese restaurants are? Oh, ask honorable Chinaman for rocation of lestaulant.

Words and phrases like “reservation” and “Indian-giver” suddenly become problematic.

In “The Diplomat’s Club” (6020) a conniving George, anxious to make himself look better at work, tries to convince Morgan not only that he is deeply concerned with minority issues but even that he has black friends.¹⁹ Eating lunch with “The Exterminator,” George shows he can at least talk the talk of “color blindness”:

Carl: Do I know you?
 George: Yeah, sure, we met at Jerry Seinfeld’s apartment. When you fumigated for fleas over there.
 Carl: Seinfeld . . . Oh yeah, funny white guy, right?
 George: Jerry? Yes, I suppose he is white. You know, I never really thought about it. I don’t see people in terms of color.

In an intriguing final season episode (“The Wizard,” 9015), Jerry’s suggestion that the guy Elaine is dating is black comes as a shock to her (and to George, who thinks he “looks Irish”) and sets off a series of schemes in which she tries to determine his actual ethnicity (he is Caucasian).

We certainly do not mean to suggest *Seinfeld*, ever committed to the “marvelous shallowness” of farce (O’Brien), was interested in scoring points as an equal opportunity employer. Albert Auster’s remark (see above) that “If the series did have one strong point in its dealings with race, it was with the embarrassment and uneasiness that middle-class whites often feel about the issue” seems quite accurate and perfectly in keeping with the thesis of Jeff Hitchcock in *Lifting the White Veil* that the typical American may not be racist so much as clueless when faced with issues of race. *Seinfeld* takes place in a predominantly white world in which its chief characters simply do not feel comfortable with race or know the proper way to behave in a multiracial society. A perfect example of the gang’s awkwardness can be found in “The Wizard.” When, following Jerry, George, and Elaine’s

initial discussion at Monk's of Darryl's race, a black waitress appears at their table, each fumbles to lay down a more generous than usual guilt-alleviating tip.

Jerry Seinfeld confessed in a *Playboy* interview that the series had always planned to do an episode in which Elaine finds herself lost in Harlem but abandoned the idea because they simply could not get the tone right (cited in Zura-wik). *Seinfeld* may at times have pondered "look[ing] to the cookie," Jerry's exemplary baked good (see the epigraph to this section), but we would do well to remember that actually ingesting this symbol of racial harmony causes him to lose his cookies, putting to an end his much-bragged-about 14-year "vomit streak." "I think I got David Duke and Fahrikan down there," he admits to Elaine, his dream of just getting along upset.

Political Incorrectness and Irreverence

Like comedy through the ages, they say the unsayable, do the undoable, as they casually ignore sanctioned morality and recognized correctness.

—John Docker

In an interview with Ricky Gervais, star of the BBC America cult hit *The Office*, on National Public Radio's *Weekend Morning Edition*, the series' lead tells Lianne Hansen that his notoriously edgy show does have its limits. *The Office*, he insisted, would never go for laughs at the expense of the disabled. The same cannot be said of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. "Everything is fair game for *Curb*," we read on the HBO Website. In "The Group" (1010) Larry accompanies a friend to an incest survivors group and finds it laughable. In "The Special Section" (3006) Larry uses his mother's death as an all-purpose pity-inducing way to get what he wants (including sex with his wife, Cheryl). In "The Corpse-Sniffing Dog" (3007), Larry gets a young girl drunk (accidentally) in order to secure her agreement to give up her dog. In "The Five Wood" (4005), he steals his own golf club back from the coffin of a dead man at a funeral.

Long before *Curb's* irreverence, *Seinfeld* was already triumphantly politically incorrect, playing all sorts of out-of-bounds subjects for a laugh. The elderly are depicted as mean and cantankerous ("The Old Man," 4017) or completely imbecilic ("The English Patient," 8017). Jerry hits on a beautiful woman whose husband has attempted suicide ("The Suicide," 3015).²⁰ George is concerned about his girlfriend's possible bulimia because he resents buying her expensive dinners that end up in the toilet ("The Switch," 6011). George pretends to be handicapped in order to have access to a special bathroom at his new employer's ("The

Voice,” 9002) and even starts using a motorized wheelchair (“The Serenity Now,” 9003). Under the influence of Novocain, Kramer is mistaken as mentally retarded and honored at a banquet, serenaded by the Velvet Fog (“The Jimmy,” 6017). Elaine breaks up with a sexually attractive mover because he is opposed to abortion (“The Couch,” 6005).

Several episodes are outright sacrilegious. In the final scene of “The Face Painter” (6021), Elaine is mistaken as the Virgin Mary by a deranged priest who earlier had thought New Jersey Devils’ hockey fan Puddy was the devil. Jerry visits a confessional to complain about dentist Tim Whatley’s conversion to Judaism so he can practice Jewish humor:

Priest: And this offends you as a Jewish person.

Jerry: No, it offends me as a comedian. (“The Yada Yada,” 8019)

When “Triangle Boy” (“The Junior Mint,” 4019) recovers from his surgery, even his doctor thinks it might have been the result of divine intervention (“I have no medical evidence to back me up, but something happened during the operation that staved off that infection. Something beyond science. Something perhaps from above . . .”), but it was in fact not God’s work but a Junior Mint that Kramer accidentally dropped into the patient’s open chest cavity while watching the surgery.

Finale

“We’re people—real TV people.”

Jerry Seinfeld, introducing the
100-episode-clip show of *Seinfeld*

In a Season Five episode of *The Simpsons* called “Homer Loves Flanders,” a series of circumstances lead to Homer becoming close friends with his pious nerd neighbor Ned Flanders. At the end of the episode, with typical *Simpsons* self-referentiality, Lisa and Bart argue about what this departure from the laws of the sitcosmos of the show (and the very genre itself) might mean for its future. As “real TV people” who watch the tube more than perhaps any characters before on the medium, the Simpson children well know that the sitcom formula dictates restoration of the status quo at the end of an episode:

Bart: I don’t get it, Lis. You said everything would be back to normal, but Homer and Flanders are still friends.

Lisa: Yeah. Maybe this means the end of our wacky adventures.

As if on cue, Homer and Ned begin to fight. Relieved that order has been restored, Bart and Lisa breathe a sigh of relief, and the episode ends.

Seinfeld was never as self-aware as *The Simpsons*, TV's all-time most meta-series, but it had its moments. Consider, for example, Jerry Seinfeld's out-of-persona direct-address introduction of the clip show that preceded *Seinfeld's* final episode:

Oh, hello. Nine years, seems like a long time doesn't it? It is, and we've packed a lot in, the four of us—it seems like every week a whole new set of problems would just crop up outta nowhere . . . except for summer, where nothing seemed to happen for months at a time. Anyway, the point is over the last nine years . . .

Now the problems are never-ending. Every weekday and Sundays too, at least ten weeks a year when *Curb* is in season, every night for those with the DVDs, *Seinfeld's* sitcomosmos is open for exploration, ready for reconnoitering, and, part of popular culture and part of us, not likely to be exhausted any time soon.

Notes

1. Television series occasionally do have afterlives outside of syndication. When *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* ended in May of 2003, fans of the “Buffyverse” found some consolation in the renewal of *Buffy* spinoff *Angel* and were heartened to learn that one of *Buffy's* most loved characters, the vampire Spike (James Marsters), would become a recurring character on television's only remaining Joss Whedon series. The “Whedonverse” would live on, at least for another year.

2. For more on *Curb's* unusual shooting method, see the interviews with Robert Weide on the HBO Website.

3. See Bill Wyman's comments on this exchange in his essay above.

4. Profanity did occasionally surface on *Seinfeld*. In “The Non-Fat Yogurt” (5007), recall, Jerry's swearing inspires a small boy to mimic him, but all the four-letter words are bleeped.

5. For an excellent analysis of the “cultural spectacle” of the *Seinfeld* finale, see Morreale.

6. By critical consensus, *Seinfeld* was in decline in its final two seasons—after, that is, Larry David left the show.

7. Alternate versions of this “myth” involve David simply walking offstage without ever having said a word, or simply shaking his head in utter disappointment (that the audience wasn't up to his standards) and saying “Never mind” upon leaving.

8. These descriptions are derived largely from Oppenheimer's unauthorized *Seinfeld* biography. However, a plethora of articles and interviews reveal the same information. Also see some of the opening interviews in *Larry David: Curb Your Enthusiasm*, Robert Weide's quasi-documentary, which served as the seed crystal for the HBO series.

9. This need for only complimentary criticism (even though that seems to freak him out a little), would make sense since David as a stand-up never dealt well with hecklers, or anyone not devoting their complete attention to his act. When people ordered drinks or went to the bathroom, he was often more comfortable yelling at them than simply ignoring them.

10. For another application of Bakhtin's concepts to the situation comedy, see Wexman in Morreale, ed., *Critiquing the Sitcom*.

11. See the chapter on "Sex" (27–45) in Schneider.

12. Our use of the term here is not strictly Freudian. We much prefer Ernest Becker's understanding of the term (in *Denial of Death*):

To say someone is "anal" means that someone is trying extra-hard to protect himself against the accidents of life and the danger of death, trying to use the symbols of culture as a sure means of triumph over natural mystery, trying to pass himself off as anything but an animal.

13. Elaine is certain Jerry's reticence is a troubling sign:

Elaine: Jerry, you have tendencies. They're always annoying, but they were just tendencies.

But now, if you can't kiss this girl, I'm afraid we're talking disorder.

Jerry: Disorder?

Elaine: And from disorder, you're a quirk or two away from full-on dementia.

14. Seeking to impress a new girlfriend in "The Face Painter" (6021), George holds forth: "Take toilet paper, for example. Do you realize that toilet paper has not changed in my lifetime? It's just paper on a cardboard roll, that's it. And in ten thousand years, it will still be exactly the same, because really, what else can they do?"

15. A search of L. Brent Bozell's Media Research Council Web site (<http://www.mediaresearch.org>) finds scores of references to *Seinfeld*, the epitome for Bozell not of "Must-See-TV" but of "Prurient Prime Time": a show that endorsed rampant sexuality, approved of lying, and discouraged marriage.

16. "Well," George explains, "I got just the thing to cheer you up. A computer! Huh? We can check porn and stock quotes."

17. This is the title of a somewhat valuable essay on *Seinfeld*'s dark humor by psychologists Irwin and Cara Hirsch. When the Hirsches take pity on the Bubble Boy—"George gets into a fight with the Bubble Boy, a child who lives in a sterile tent because of an immune disorder, and accidentally destroys his bubble, almost killing him" (123)—they seem oblivious, however, to the anti-PC, ironic humor of the episode (coauthored by Larry David and Larry Charles). In fact, the Bubble Boy is no child but a profane and crude adult who asks Susan Ross to take her top off.

18. Note Stratton's conclusion above: "*Seinfeld*'s concern with race is limited to ethnicity and the ambivalent status of Jewishness."

19. In a conversation with Jerry at Monk's, George reveals his deep concern for civil rights:

George: So you really think Morgan thinks I have a racial bias?

Jerry: Maybe.

George: This is so unfair. I would've marched on Selma if it was on Long Island.

Jerry: So you would've marched on Great Neck.

George: Absolutely. I still might. I always hated those women. They would never date me.

20. In “The Suicide’s” (3015) cruelly funny opening monologue, Jerry wonders how failed suicides deal with their disappointment:

The thing I don’t understand about the suicide person is the people who try and commit suicide, and for some reason they don’t die and that’s it. They stop trying. Why? Why don’t they just keep trying? What has changed? Is their life any better now? No. In fact it’s worse because now they’ve found out one more thing they stink at. Okay, that’s why these people don’t succeed in life to begin with. Because they give up too easy. I say, pills don’t work, try a rope. Car won’t start in the garage, get a tune up. You know what I mean? There’s nothing more rewarding than reaching a goal you have set for yourself.