Curb Your Enthusiasm (HBO). Season 6, 2007. Shown from left: Jeff Garlin, Larry David. *Photo courtesy of Photofest.*

Negotiating Jewishness:

Curb Your Enthusiasm and the Schlemiel Tradition

By David Gillota

Abstract: Larry David's persona in *Curb Your Enthusiasm* serves as a contemporary manifestation of the schlemiel from Yiddish culture. Although David keeps the essential aspects of the schlemiel intact, he adapts them to twenty-first-century America. David's schlemiel persona reflects the uneasiness many Jewish people feel about their place in multicultural America.

Keywords: Curb Your Enthusiasm, Larry David, Jewish humor, Jewish identity, schlemiel

The 1990s saw a surprising proliferation of television series with Jewish protagonists, a fact made all the more apparent by the relative scarcity of Jewish television characters in the history of television.[1] Most critics agree that the unexpected success of the sitcom *Seinfeld* (1989–98) signaled to producers that television audiences had at last become receptive to Jewish people onscreen, and in the wake of *Seinfeld* there arose a large number of comedy series featuring urban and usually middle- to upper-middle-class Jewish characters, most notably *The Nanny* (1993–99), *Friends* (1994–2004), *Dharma and Greg* (1997–2002), and *Will & Grace* (1998–2006). On most of these so-called Jewish television shows, however, the Jewishness of the protagonists is rarely dealt with explicitly; rather, it is referred to in passing, assumed by a character's or actor's last name, or subtly alluded to through cultural winks and nudges for audience members who are "in the know." *Friends* is a prime example: siblings Ross and Monica Geller were conceived by the show's creators as "half Jewish," and this is reinforced by the choice of Jewish actor Elliot Gould to play their father (Brook 124–25). Their Jewish identity is confronted overtly in only one episode when Ross attempts to explain the story of Chanukah to his son. But the episode sidesteps a genuine exploration of Jewish heritage, for Ross dresses as a giant armadillo to make the story more exciting, and he is repeatedly interrupted by his gentile friends Chandler and Joey, who are dressed as Santa Claus and Superman ("The One with the Holiday Armadillo"). The Jewish identity of *Friends*'s Rachel Green is even more subtle and is apparent only through cultural codes: in the first season, she is a stereotypical Jewish American princess (JAP) who relies too heavily on her father's credit cards, and in later episodes that flashback to her teenage years, she sports a telltale stereotypically Semitic nose.

Even *Seinfeld*, the apparent flagship of Jewish television, has an uneasy relationship with Jewishness as such. Worried about the show being "too Jewish," producers at NBC stipulated that only the main character Jerry could be identified as Jewish, hence Jerry's neurotic and seemingly Jewish best friend George was given the Italian surname Costanza (Zurawik 201–06). And although a handful of episodes center on Jerry's Jewishness—most notably, one that features Jerry complaining that his dentist converted to Judaism for the sole purpose of telling Jewish jokes—it is typically treated as an annoying burden rather than an important aspect of Jerry's identity ("The Yada Yada"). Vincent Brook asserts that "[t]here is *no place* for traditional Jewishness in the hedonistic *Seinfeld* world" (105) and goes on to note that Jerry's "possessive investment in whiteness" bars him from viewing his Jewishness as an ethnic identity (114). Without religion *or* ethnicity, *Seinfeld*'s Jewish features become superficial, limited to Jerry's last name, his home in New York City, and his stereotypically overbearing Jewish family.

Unlike *Seinfeld* and the many series that it influenced, the HBO series *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000–) confronts Jewishness head on. Created by and starring *Seinfeld* co-creator Larry David, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* is perhaps, as Simcha Weinstein notes, "one of the most openly Jewish comedy series ever" (27). Not only does the show feature scores of openly Jewish actors playing openly Jewish characters and have a distinctly "Jewish style" of humor, but its content, featuring the comic misadventures of wealthy TV mogul Larry David (as himself), often focuses on the minutiae of contemporary Jewish life in America. Entire episodes revolve around Jewish holidays or rituals (such as "The Seder" and "The Bat Mitzvah"), and many of the show's storylines explicitly raise questions about how Jews should worship, behave, and interact with non-Jews. As Michele Byers and Rosaline Krieger explain, Jewishness on *Curb* "is invoked in ways that invite even the neophyte viewer to recognize its Jewish content" (283). *Curb* additionally invites *non*neophyte viewers to look more deeply at the ways that the larger history of Jewish culture, both in Europe and in the United States, helps to form the show's structures and themes. In particular, Larry David's onscreen persona serves as a contemporary manifestation of the schlemiel figure from Yiddish folklore and literature.[2] Although David keeps the most essential aspects of the schlemiel intact, he adapts them to twenty-first-century American culture. David's schlemiel persona attempts to reassert the seemingly assimilated, successful American Jew as a cultural other.[3] In doing so, the series critiques reductive attitudes toward race, religion, and other forms of difference and reflects an uneasiness that many contemporary American Jews feel about their own ethnic identity.

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Larry David and the Schlemiel Hero

Jewish suffering notoriously breeds Jewish humor. Sarah Blacher Cohen describes the humor of the persecuted Eastern European Jews as one "in which laughter and trembling were inextricably mingled" (2). The figure of the luckless schlemiel perhaps best represents this humor. The schlemiel is a stock character in Yiddish folklore and literature, but, like so many European Jews, he has migrated to—and been transformed by—the United States.[4] Although some scholars suggest that the schlemiel figure can be traced back to the Old Testament, he is most often seen as a product of the Yiddish speaking shtetls, or small villages, of Eastern Europe, and his earliest progenitors in Yiddish literature appear in the nineteenth-century works of S. Y. Abramovich and Sholem Aleichem.[5] Isaac Bashevis Singer is probably most responsible for bringing the schlemiel figure to the attention of Western readers in his short story "Gimpel the Fool" and in a number of children's stories about a gullible man named Schlemiel from the mythical village of Chelm.

The simplest—and narrowest—definition of the schlemiel is of one whose actions inevitably cause his own downfall. As Sanford Pinsker explains, "the more he attempts, the greater seem his chances for comic failure" (*Schlemiel* 6).[6] As a character seemingly predestined for trouble, the schlemiel served as a stand-in for the Jewish people as a whole, especially in the shtetl, where chances for economic or political gain were seemingly impossible. Pinsker asserts that the shtetl Jews "saw the schlemiel's ineptitude as an extended metaphor for their socioeconomic plight" (*Schlemiel* 13). In *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero*, Ruth Wisse expands on this concept, arguing that the Jew-as-schlemiel is more than a simple buffoon but rather is a heroic figure of resistance whose failure serves as a viable alternative to the values of the dominant cultural framework. Wisse, thus, redefines the schlemiel in terms that highlight his transgressive features:

> Outrageous and absurd as his innocence may be by the normal guidelines of political reality, the Jew is simply rational within the context of ideal humanism. He is a fool, seriously—maybe even fatally—out of step with the actual march of events. Yet the impulse . . . of schlemiel literature in general, is to use this comical stance as a stage from which to challenge the political and philosophic status quo. (3)

In Eastern Europe, where anti-Semitic pogroms regularly threatened the Jews' safety, the schlemiel's ability to challenge the status quo was immediately clear: his failure and weakness provided a direct commentary on the violence around him. In the United States, where the threat of violence was largely diminished, the schlemiel continued to thrive throughout much of the twentieth century through his ability to destabilize American myths. For instance, in early Woody Allen films such as *Bananas* (1971) and *Sleeper* (1973), Allen portrays a weak, passive schlemiel who unwittingly becomes embroiled in violent revolutions. Allen's feeble persona undermines the American action hero in all of his manifestations. And in the novels of Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and, to a certain extent, Philip Roth, the schlemiel often appears as a crude, insecure, self-deprecating intellectual whose misadventures mock the apparent self-righteousness of stereotypical WASP gentility.

In recent years, however, the schlemiel figure in American culture has been seemingly drained of his transgressive potential. Characters like Ross Geller on *Friends*, Joel Fleischman on *Northern Exposure* (1990–95), or Gaylord Focker in the *Meet the Parents* films (2000 and 2004) certainly owe a debt to the schlemiel tradition, but despite their comic bungling, these men ultimately represent a cultural ideal of the sensitive, liberal, educated, contemporary male. Considering the same definition from Wisse provided above, Daniel Iskovitz asserts that what he calls "Hollywood's 'new schlemiels,'" usually portrayed by actors such as Ben Stiller, Jason Biggs, or Adam Sandler, "do not challenge the status quo, they *embody* it" (245). The schlemiel's movement into mainstream

American culture reflects the fact that in contemporary America, Jews are no longer collectively suffering, and the memory of Jewish oppression—as well as the Jews' sense of themselves as a minority group—has, for many, become distant enough that it no longer preoccupies Jewish cultural productions.[7] It becomes clear, then, that to survive as a relevant countercultural figure, the schlemiel must adapt to the contemporary environment. Larry David constructs just such a schlemiel: one that is neither a nostalgic throwback to an inaccessible Jewish past nor absorbed into the dominant framework.

At first glance, Larry may seem like an unlikely candidate for either a schlemiel or a hero. As the creator of *Seinfeld*, Larry is obviously successful financially, and for five and a half of the show's first six seasons, he is married to an attractive gentile woman, an often-perceived symbol of success for Jewish American men. And aside from a handful of business ventures that he never seems to take seriously, Larry's days are spent mostly in leisure: playing golf, kibitzing with his manager Jeff Green, and complaining about his relatively few social obligations. But it is through those social obligations that Larry becomes a schlemiel. In nearly every episode, Larry finds himself in sharp opposition to his social milieu. At times, this conflict is because of his failure—or refusal—to follow unwritten social guidelines, and at other times it is because someone else has not adhered to Larry's own conception of propriety. Under both circumstances, the result is usually the same: a series of minor events coincide to turn Larry into a social pariah. What begins as a relatively minor transgression becomes transformed in the public eye into a serious crime. Throughout the show's history, for example, Larry has been accused—sometimes on multiple occasions—of racism, homophobia, pedophilia, and bestiality. While Larry is innocent of these major transgressions, it is usually his own actions that lead to the misunderstanding.

In this sense, Larry adheres to the most basic definition of the schlemiel as one whose own ineptitude brings about failure. But unlike the other "new schlemiels" in American popular culture, there is very little about Larry that we could call "ideal." He is both antiheroic and anti-intellectual; he is insensitive to the emotions of his friends and family; he is anti-romantic to the extent that he answers the phone while having sex with his wife ("The Larry David Sandwich"); and he acts shockingly inappropriate in social situations. But as a true schlemiel, Larry's failure serves as a direct challenge to the status quo and encourages viewers to question the myriad unwritten rules that we follow in our everyday lives. In many cases, these social critiques feel like they could be left over material from *Seinfeld*, such as Larry's confrontation with a "sample abuser" who tries too many flavors at the ice cream shop before making a decision ("The Ida Funkhouser Roadside Memorial"). But there are also many episodes that challenge the guidelines and attitudes for more substantive topics like class, religion, sexual orientation, and race. *Curb* explores the position of the successful American Jew in relation to these cultural hot topics. In this way, Larry emerges as a contemporary avatar of the classic Yiddish schlemiel. Whereas the schlemiel of Eastern Europe encountered problems that mostly affected Eastern European Jews (such as anti-Semitism and economic survival), Larry encounters problems that affect contemporary middle- to upper-class American Jews, namely, Jewish assimilation, secularism, intermarriage, and, as all of these suggest, the Jews' precarious ethnic identity in an increasingly multicultural environment.

Historically, Jews have occupied a peculiar position in the American landscape, standing somewhere in the middle of the white/other or white/black dichotomy. Karen Brodkin argues that Jewish Americans have "a kind of double vision that comes from racial middleness: an experience of marginality vis-à-vis whiteness, and an experience of whiteness and belonging vis-à-vis blackness" (2). The result, for Brodkin, is a sort of "off-white" ethnoracial identity (1). Of course, the further into the twentieth century one goes, the

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whiter the public image of the Jewish people becomes. After World War II, Jews migrated in large groups to the American suburbs and began receiving the nose jobs and medical degrees that are today the stereotypical hallmarks of assimilated American Judaism. This integration partially accounts for the move toward the cultural center that the schlemiel has made in so many recent American productions. Not all American Jews, though, are happy with this image of undifferentiated whiteness. Jewish historian Eric L. Goldstein asserts that many contemporary Jews

> do not feel the kind of freedom whiteness is *supposed* to offer—the freedom to be utterly unselfconscious about one's cultural or ethnic background. In fact, many Jews at the turn of the twenty-first century seem particularly conscious of the way that being seen as white delegitimizes their claim to difference as Jews. (236)

On *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, Larry's schlemiel persona reflects this ethnic anxiety felt by many successful American Jews. Larry is clearly uncomfortable with his perceived position as a wealthy white male in the United States. In the pilot episode, for example, he admits to his manager that he has "a tendency to nod to black people" to let them know that he is not "one of the bad ones" (*Larry David: Curb Your Enthusiasm*). At the same time, however, Larry fully enjoys the advantages that go along with his position as a rich white man. His favorite activity, after all, is golf. By frequently asserting his Jewish identity, Larry attempts to remain a distinct cultural other without giving up his privileged social status. On *Curb*, this struggle plays itself out in two key, often overlapping, ways. First, Larry uses his Jewishness to strategically distance himself from mainstream white culture, which for Larry translates into white Christian culture. And second, he forges unexpected connections with marginalized groups and other alienated individuals, thereby reaffirming his own outsider status. But since Larry is a schlemiel, both attempts typically end in Larry's failure and/or public humiliation. Larry's status as a schlemiel thus critiques upper-class white liberals, both Jew and gentile, for hypocritical and close-minded attitudes toward minority groups, despite their claims of being "progressive" and "open." It also suggests the impossibility for contemporary Jews to simultaneously maintain their privileged status in American culture and claim ethnic difference from that culture.

"There's Nothing Worse than Jews with Trees"

A large part of Larry's schlemiel predicament stems from the ambivalence that he displays toward both Jewishness and mainstream white Christian culture. Strictly speaking, Larry is not what one would call a "good Jew." He does not keep kosher, he rarely attends synagogue, and he is married to a gentile woman. Around other Jews, he has little patience for discussions of ethnic solidarity or allusions to Jewish suffering. For instance, in the season 2 episode "Trick or Treat," Larry is accosted on the street by a Jewish man who overhears him whistling a refrain from Wagner. Explaining that Wagner was "Hitler's favorite composer," the man goes on to accuse Larry of being a "self-hating Jew." Larry dismisses the man's claim, responding that while he might indeed hate himself, it is not because he is Jewish. At the end of the episode, in one of Larry's rare moments of triumph, he appears on the man's lawn, leading a full orchestra in a performance of the same Wagner tune he had whistled earlier. As the man wakes up and looks out his window in horror, Larry gives him a mock tip-of-the-hat gesture as the orchestra plays on. The gesture sends a message similar to the often-cited declaration in Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* when the adolescent Alex Portnoy screams to his Jewish parents to "stick your suffering heritage up your suffering ass—*I happen also to be a human being!*" (76). Like Portnoy, Larry, here, adamantly refuses to have his identity circumscribed by religious or ethnic categories. As a seemingly assimilated American, he places the "I" above the "we."

But when Larry is not confronted with politically zealous Jews, his attitude toward Jewishness is drastically different. In fact, around Christians or even other lax Jews like himself, Larry may assert his Jewish identity just as vehemently as he denies it in "Trick or Treat." Larry posits his Jewishness most forcefully in his interactions with his Christian wife Cheryl and her family. Larry's impulse to enact Jewishness around his in-laws highlights his struggle to maintain his otherness even while he is an active member of a Christian family. In the season 4 episode "The Christ Nail," for example, symbols of Christianity and Judaism are used to represent Larry's competing familial allegiances. In the beginning of the episode, Larry tells his handyman (a Mexican American ironically named Jesus) to hang a mezuzah on the doorpost because his father will be visiting. Cheryl's father, who is also visiting, happens to be proudly wearing around his neck a small "Christ nail" that he bought from the Web site for Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). When Jesus neglects to hang the mezuzah, and as his father's car pulls up in front of the house, Larry, in a moment of panic, rips the "Christ nail" from around the neck of his sleeping father-in-law and uses it to affix the mezuzah to the doorpost. The moment clearly favors Jewish symbols over Christian ones. David drains the "Christ nail" of

any symbolic import by actually using it as a nail, while keeping the religious aspect of the mezuzah intact, which is emphasized when Larry's father touches it and kisses his hand as he enters the house. In this scene, however, the cards were already stacked against the Christian symbol. The mezuzah has been affixed to Jewish doorposts for centuries, but the "Christ nail" is a commercial tie-in to a recent Hollywood movie. Furthermore, the alleged anti-Semitism of both *The Passion of the Christ* and Mel Gibson adds another layer of irony—and defiance—to Larry's appropriation of the nail for his own ends. Here, Larry succeeds in being the dutiful Jewish son in the eyes of his father, but he remains a schlemiel because to do so he must alienate himself from his wife and her family. It is clear that Larry cannot make both families happy. To maintain his Jewishness, he must distance himself from his Christian in-laws.

The third season episode "Mary, Joseph, and Larry" also tackles religious icons and highlights Larry's inability to live at peace with his Christian in-laws. The episode takes place during Christmas time, and Cheryl wants a Christmas tree because her parents and sister are visiting. Larry is immediately uneasy: "I'm a Jew. Having a tree in the house might be bad luck . . . My Guy . . . might think I'm switching or something." And he later exclaims that "there's nothing worse than Jews with trees!" Despite Larry's concern that his "Guy"—meaning God—might think he is changing faiths, Larry's problem with a Christmas tree is more cultural than religious. At Christmas, the overwhelming presence of the Christian majority is more apparent than during the rest of the year: Christmas carols are pumped through mall speakers, Christmas specials dominate network programming, and red and green lights are ablaze throughout the streets. Owning a tree suggests that one is a part of—and even embraces—this cultural majority. But, despite his marriage, Larry is uneasy with the prospect of entering this Christian mainstream, and he uses his Jewish identity in an attempt to remain separate and other.

This insistence on cultural separation becomes evident when Larry refuses to take part in his in-laws' Christmas celebrations despite receiving frequent invitations to decorate the tree and sing carols. If he wants it, Larry has a clear path to complete cultural assimilation, and Cheryl and her family go to pains to include him, but Larry remains aloof and at times becomes almost hostile. Cheryl's mother, while decorating the tree, asks Larry what he bought Cheryl for Christmas, and he replies, "I think I'm gonna give her my grandfather's *tallis*." The snide remark is lost on Cheryl's mother, who merely smiles when Larry explains that a *tallis* (a Jewish prayer shawl) is "like a scarf," but the implication of Larry's comment is clear. The *tallis* serves as an ironic counterpoint to the Christmas tree, and Larry compares the awkwardness of draping his Christian wife in one to having the tree thrust into his living room. As we have seen, however, Larry is not particularly religious, and under normal circumstances he would never bring up a *tallis* in conversation, but here he invokes it as a strategic means of distancing himself from the Christmas festivities that surround him. When Larry feels affronted by Christianity, he lashes out with Jewishness.

Larry's ignorance of and disdain for Christian culture does not come without a price; by the end of the episode, he leads himself into failure and humiliation. This process begins on Christmas Eve when Larry eats some cookies that are meant to represent the nativity scene for Cheryl and her family. Larry protests that he thought they were animal cookies, causing Cheryl's sister to scream, "Jesus Christ is not an animal!" Larry yells back, "I thought he was a monkey." The comment, and perhaps its connotation of Darwinism, sends the family into a fit of anger. In an attempt to make it up to them, Larry locates a troupe of actors that performs the nativity scene at local churches, and he convinces them, for the price of $500 and lunch, to perform on his lawn when Cheryl and her family return from church. The plan backfires; when the actors begin setting up their scene, Larry makes an inappropriate comment to "Joseph" about "Mary's" body. "Joseph" is offended and begins to leave. Larry tries to stop him, and the two fall to the ground and begin wrestling. When Cheryl and her family arrive home from church, rather than finding a peaceful manger scene on the lawn, they find Larry rolling in the dirt, fighting with Joseph, while Mary, the wise men, and the rest of the company look on in stunned disbelief. Although this outcome was not Larry's intention, the moment of comic violence embodies the hostility that he has been feeling against Christmas during the entire episode. Larry is not only separate from Christian culture; he appears to violently oppose it. The price of his opposition is that he becomes an outsider even in his own house.

"The Christ Nail" and "Mary, Joseph, and Larry" both hint that Larry's struggles with Christian culture stem in large part from his decision to marry a gentile. Larry tries to keep his marriage separate from his ethnic identity, but the season 2 episode "The Baptism" suggests that such compartmentalization is impossible and that a mixed marriage has repercussions felt by both families.

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2 episode "The Baptism" suggests that such compartmentalization is impossible and that a mixed marriage has repercussions felt by both families. Here, Larry's dismissal of Christian culture ultimately wrecks his sister-in-law's engagement. Cheryl's sister plans to marry a Jewish man who will convert to Christianity—through a baptism ritual—the day before the wedding. Larry is puzzled by the conversion, telling Cheryl, "You guys come to our side; we don't go to your side. Jews don't convert." Later, he is even more antagonistic, asking Cheryl "why do Christians take everything so personally with Christ? . . . Not only do you have to worship him; you want everybody to." As in "Mary, Joseph, and Larry," Larry's aggression toward Christianity early in the episode "accidentally" manifests itself later on. Larry and Cheryl arrive to the baptism late, and from the top of a hill overlooking a lake, Larry sees one man dunking another, who appears to be struggling. Larry runs down the hill yelling for them to stop, and the baptism is interrupted. The potential groom rethinks his decision to convert, and the wedding is called off. Cheryl's family accuses Larry of deliberately sabotaging the baptism because he "didn't want to lose a Jew," but Larry maintains that he thought the baptism was actually a man being drowned. When a Jewish member of the groom's family privately pulls Larry aside and applauds him for preventing the conversion, however, Larry cannot resist being seen as a hero, and says that he "felt something needed to be done." It is clear, though, that Larry's reaction stems more from his flattered ego than from any genuine sense of Jewish solidarity.

Larry's moment of heroism in the episode is short-lived, for soon the Jews and Christians begin insulting each other, and the room erupts into conflict: the Jews (including the groom-to-be) stand on one side saying that they "resent the [Christians'] recruitment" and the Christians are on the other side arguing that "being a Christian is a wonderful thing." Only Larry stands in the middle, unsuccessfully attempting to alleviate the religious hostility. The episode emerges as an extremely cynical commentary on intermarriage. Rather than mixed marriages bridging two cultures and religions, "The Baptism" suggests that (unless one side is willing to convert), it only deepens the rift. Within the rift itself, we find Larry: the image of him standing between the fighting Jews and Christians, claiming neither group as his own even though he is the direct cause of the conflict, illustrates his schlemiel predicament. In his desire to maintain the privileges of a wealthy white man (not the least of which is being married to a *shiksa)* and remain an ethnically distinct Jew, he fully succeeds at neither. In a room where people are actively and openly choosing ethnic and religious sides, Larry is stuck.

"Your Last Name Is Black? That's Like if My Last Name Was Jew."

One way that Larry may become unstuck is through his interactions with other cultural and ethnic groups. We see this in the opening scene of the season 3 episode "Krazee-Eyez Killa." The episode begins at an outdoor barbecue, and Larry, as usual, neglects socializing. Eventually, though, he finds himself in conversation with an African American hip-hop artist named Krazee-Eyez Killa. Krazee-Eyez asks Larry for advice on a song he has written and proceeds to rap the lyrics for him. Larry, skeptical at first, smiles appreciatively and gives Krazee-Eyez feedback. The two men clearly like each other, and this is driven home when Krazee-Eyez says, "You my dog. You my nigger." Larry replies, "I am your nigger, absolutely." The moment, in which Larry rhetorically claims black identity, epitomizes *Curb*'s method of suggesting Larry's outsider status through his identification with minority groups, alienated individuals, and various cultural outcasts. While this discussion will focus specifically on Larry's frequent interactions with African Americans, it should be noted that Larry forms similar unexpected friendships with a large number of marginalized groups, including gays and lesbians, Native Americans, and the physically or mentally disabled. Since Larry is a schlemiel, of course, those unique relationships usually result in him being humiliated or ostracized within his own community of wealthy whites and assimilated Jews. Larry's schlemiel position, therefore, not only suggests his tenuous relationship with his own community, but also critiques that community's often hypocritical attitudes toward marginalized groups.

It is significant that Larry often defines his outsider status through interactions with African Americans, because Jews and blacks have a long and complex history of identification and conflict. Cheryl Lynn Greenberg explains that "Blacks and Jews have been neighbors, competitors, allies, and antagonists, linked in the minds of bigots, mid-century progressives, and each other" (7). More specifically, Jewish Americans have often constructed their own ethnic identity in relation to African Americans. Michael Rogin argues that during the early twentieth century, Eastern Europeans, and Jews in particular, dressed in blackface as a means of participating in the discrimination against blacks and thus assuring their own claim to white identity: "by joining structural domination to cultural desire, [blackface] turned Europeans into Americans" (12). In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, however, the reverse is taking place. Goldstein explains that many contemporary Jews "have turned to the African American community in unprecedented ways in order to validate their own minority consciousness" (212). *Curb* is a prime example of this process: Larry often inserts himself into African American culture in an attempt to remain distinct from mainstream white America.

In the season 4 episode "The Car Pool Lane," for example, Larry hires an African American prostitute named Monena to ride with him to a baseball game so that he can use the HOV lane. Monena demands that she attend the game too, and what begins as an exploitative economic situation develops into an unexpected friendship. Larry and Monena end up at Larry's father's house smoking marijuana together to help the elder David's glaucoma. Here, there is a terrific moment when Monena attempts to teach Larry's father how to use African

Curb Your Enthusiasm (HBO) Season 2, 2001. Shown: L–R: Richard Lewis (as himself), Larry David (as himself), Shaquille O'Neal (as himself, on floor), Joel McKinnon Miller (as Dr. Craig Wiggins). *Photo courtesy of Photofest.*

American slang. He proclaims that he is now speaking "Yiddish Ebonics," thus drawing a direct connection between Jews and blacks. Larry also uses his relationship with Monena to distance himself from white Christians. At the baseball game, Larry runs into two white men who are in charge of admissions at an elite, right-wing, WASP country club that Larry and Cheryl had been trying to get into after Larry got kicked out of their own Jewish-friendly club. In the previous episode, Larry even attempted to pass as a WASP himself to impress the two men. But when Larry sees them at the baseball game, he abandons all attempts to assimilate, aligning himself with the outsider Monena instead. Larry looks up at the stereotypically stuffy WASPs and says, "you ever looking for a good blow job at a reasonable rate, she's your gal." Monena, sitting beside Larry, smiles enthusiastically.

The scene is significant not only because Larry openly chooses the company of an African American instead of white Christians, but also because the men are the gatekeepers at an exclusionary country club. Resorts of this sort are notorious for their bigotry, and Neal Gabler notes how in the early years of the Hollywood film industry, the "least veiled anti-Semitism was reserved for such social clubs," inspiring Jewish film producers to create Hillcrest, a club for wealthy Hollywood Jews (273). The episode invokes this history of prejudice, and in his turning toward Monena, Larry (after some deliberation) takes the side of the oppressed. It is important to remember, however, that the only reason Larry had even applied to the WASP country club is because he was expelled from the one for Jews (for not cleaning his locker). That Larry is banned from both clubs suggests that in contemporary Hollywood, wealthy Jews are not all that different from wealthy white Christians. Both groups are elitist and exclusionary; thus, Larry turns to an African American prostitute to maintain a sem-

blance of his outsider status. Of course, even this situation is layered with irony, for Monena is with Larry only because he is paying her, and despite their brief friendship, it is clear that Larry does not fit in her world any more—and probably less—than he does in that of the bigoted country club Christians.

"Krazee-Eyez Killa" and "The Car Pool Lane" both prefigure the more sustained treatment of Jewish/black relations that occurs throughout the ten episodes of season 6, in which Larry literally becomes a member of an African American family allegorically named the Blacks. In the opening episode of the season, Cheryl and Larry take in the Blacks, who have been displaced by a Katrinaesque hurricane. Larry is not happy about the idea of bringing a family of strangers into his house, but Cheryl—whose activism is mocked in various episodes—insists. The family consists of Loretta Black, her two children, and Loretta's aunt, called Auntie Ray. In a later episode, Loretta's brother Leon also moves in. When Larry first meets the family, he is immediately fascinated by their last name: "Now let me get this straight; your last name is Black? . . . That's like if my last name was Jew, like Larry Jew." After an awkward pause, in which the Blacks look both puzzled and offended, Larry goes on to explain: "'Cause I'm Jewish. . . . Don't you see? You're black; I'm Jewish!" ("Meet the Blacks"). Larry's statements are politically incorrect, especially considering that he has just met the family, but it is important that Larry does not hypothesize the name "Larry White." By drawing a parallel between his own Jewishness and the Blacks' blackness, Larry not only rhetorically connects Jewish and African American identity, but he sidesteps the easy white/black dichotomy through which race in America is so often constructed.

Throughout the rest of the season, Larry repeatedly offends the family with his outlandish behavior. He gets an erection while hugging Auntie Ray, and he even uses the "n word" in their presence—although he is only telling a story in which someone else had used it ("The N Word"). The Blacks are appalled by Larry's antics, but unlike his own community, they ultimately look past each transgression. It is unclear whether the Blacks accept Larry back into their fold only because it suits their financial needs, but Larry himself seems to genuinely enjoy the Blacks' company and begins to play a large role in their family. He drives the children to school, sets aside space in the yard for Auntie Ray to make a garden, and even conspires with the Blacks to use a more comfortable, nonrecycled toilet paper behind Cheryl's back. Larry forms a particularly strong bond with Loretta's brother Leon, and there are multiple episodes that suggest a symbolic kinship between the two. They carry identical cell phones, for instance, and in "The Rat Dog" they unknowingly answer each other's phones for most of the episode, ruining important calls for each other. In "The Anonymous Donor," Larry loses a baseball jersey at the dry cleaners, and Leon steals two of the same jerseys off of men walking down the street. We later see Larry and Leon sitting on the couch, wearing the identical shirts, happily playing a game of cards. The moment further suggests Larry's identification with the Blacks, for the two appear to mirror each other.

A little over halfway through the season, Cheryl leaves Larry (paralleling Larry David's real-life divorce from wife Laurie David), and Larry's relationship with the Blacks becomes even stronger. When Cheryl leaves, she takes Larry's entire social network with her: there is even a running gag in which various people tell Larry that they cannot see him because they are "going with Cheryl" ("The TiVo Guy"). Friends will not talk to him, restaurants will not seat him, and he is not on the guest list at parties and fundraisers. All Larry has left is his manager Jeff and the Blacks. In the last episode of the season, Larry must attend the bat mitzvah for Jeff's daughter. Cheryl will be there, as will the entire social network that abandoned him. To make matters worse, there is an obscene, false rumor circulating about Larry and a gerbil. Larry brings Loretta Black with him so as to not face such hostility alone.

At the bat mitzvah, which resembles the notorious "sweet sixteen" parties that rich whites throw for their daughters, Larry is ostracized by the guests, and Loretta is simply ignored. In a room full of assimilated Jews and white Christians, both Larry and Loretta are clearly outsiders. Throughout the series, we have seen Larry unsuccessfully attempt to balance his Jewish identity and his marriage to a white Christian. Now both sides of the struggle have abandoned him. For in siding with Cheryl and dismissing Loretta, the Jewish guests affirm their own claim to assimilated white identity. Larry has no community of his own left, so he turns to the Blacks. In the final scene, Larry fully embraces his outsider status and asks Loretta to dance. The song, "You Don't Know Me" is sung by R&B artist John Legend and provides an ironic juxtaposition as Larry and Loretta forge a connection on the dance floor. As they dance, both viewers and guests at the bat mitzvah become aware of a romantic connection. From here the camera cuts to Larry and Loretta waking up in bed together as Loretta's children run into the room and jump on the bed. What follows is a hilarious montage of Larry and the Blacks living as a family in Los Angeles: going to the movies, attending soccer games, and arguing with the neighbors. The final image of the episode, and the season, is a card with a photograph of Larry and the family that reads, "Happy Holidays from Larry and the Blacks."

In joining his life with the Blacks, Larry seems to take an active and personal role in African American culture. The Blacks, victims of both a natural disaster and the government's neglect, represent the legacy of racism against African Americans, especially when we take into account the allegorical nature of their name. By becoming a "Black" himself, Larry claims this legacy as his own. But since this union between Larry and the Blacks takes place at a bat mitzvah, it is clear that Larry's rhetorical "blackness" is inextricably entwined with his Jewishness. Larry does not fall for Loretta until he brings her to a Jewish ceremony at which he is ostracized. In his relationship with Cheryl, Larry continuously felt the need to assert his Jewish identity as a means of avoiding cultural assimilation. His relationship

with Loretta and the Blacks, however, only reaffirms his outsider status. Larry asserts his Jewish identity by symbolically becoming black.[8]

Despite the apparent victory, this ending underscores Larry's position as a contemporary American schlemiel. Larry is unable to adhere to the values of his own community of wealthy whites and assimilated Jews to the extent that that community literally expels him. But as in Wisse's definition of the schlemiel, this failure provides a stance from which the show can "challenge the political and philosophic status quo" (3). *Curb* challenges the worldview of wealthy white liberals (Jew and gentile alike) by suggesting their inability to forge human connections with the oppressed groups to whom they are so happy to give money. This is emphasized by the fact that when Cheryl leaves Larry, she also leaves the Blacks. At the same time, Larry's schlemiel persona highlights the predicament of contemporary American Jews who wish to maintain all of the privileges of white identity even while they attempt to claim difference from that identity. That Larry finds a home—however briefly—with the Blacks seems to suggest that the only way contemporary American Jews can remain a distinct cultural minority is to disown themselves from white identity all together.

NOTES

1. For a comprehensive history of Jewish characters on American television, see Zurawik; Brook.

2. A small number of critics have observed, in passing, Larry's resemblance to the schlemiel, but an extended exploration has yet to be offered. Byers and Krieger observe that Larry is "both a schlemiel and a schlimazl. That is, he both attracts and causes trouble" (280). Weinstein asserts that "[w]hen Larry, the *schlemiel*, spills his soup, it always lands on Richard [Lewis], the *schlemazel* [sic]" (42). And Pinsker writes that *Curb* "makes it clear, week after week, that an annoyingly funny millionaire curmudgeon can also be a schlemiel" ("Future").

3. Throughout this article, "Larry David" or simply "David" refers to the writer and creator of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, whereas "Larry" refers to the fictional persona that David portrays on the show.

4. The gender specific language here is deliberate, for all critical discussions of the schlemiel (to my knowledge) focus on a male character, and the schlemiel is typically discussed as a figure that subverts traditional versions of masculinity.

5. See Pinsker, *Schlemiel* ch. 1 for a detailed exploration of the schlemiel's origins.

6. The *schlimazl*, in contrast, suffers misfortunes through no fault of his own.

7. Some contemporary Jewish American artists have responded to this phenomenon by either looking at Jewish life outside of the United States or by imagining Jewish suffering in an alternate history. In *The Ministry of Special Cases* (2007), Nathan Englander considers the precarious position of Jews in 1976 Argentina, and in Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (2007) and Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2004), twentieth-century Jewish history is rewritten.

8. In the first few episodes of season 7 (the most recent to date), Larry's romantic relationship with Loretta Black dissolves. However, Larry maintains his friendship with Leon throughout the entire season.

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